

# LANGUAGE OBSOLESCENCE IN MOROBE PROVINCE, PAPUA NEW GUINEA: TWO CONTRASTING CASE STUDIES

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at prospects for the survival of two small languages in Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea. It is based on a brief survey of language change currently taking place in these languages. The first is Susuami, spoken in two settlements in the Upper Watut Valley near Bulolo, and the second is Musom, spoken in a village and two settlements near Lae – see map. Susuami belongs to the Non-Austronesian Angan Family, while Musom is an Austronesian language belonging to the Busu subgroup of the Markham group of the Huon Gulf Family (Holzknecht 1988). The language communities are analogous in some respects: they are of similar size and both contain a mixture of speakers of a variety of languages. However, they differ in the degree to which Susuami and Musom are being retained in their respective communities. This appears to be due not to any inherent differences between Austronesian and Non-Austronesian languages, but to a number of social and demographic factors.

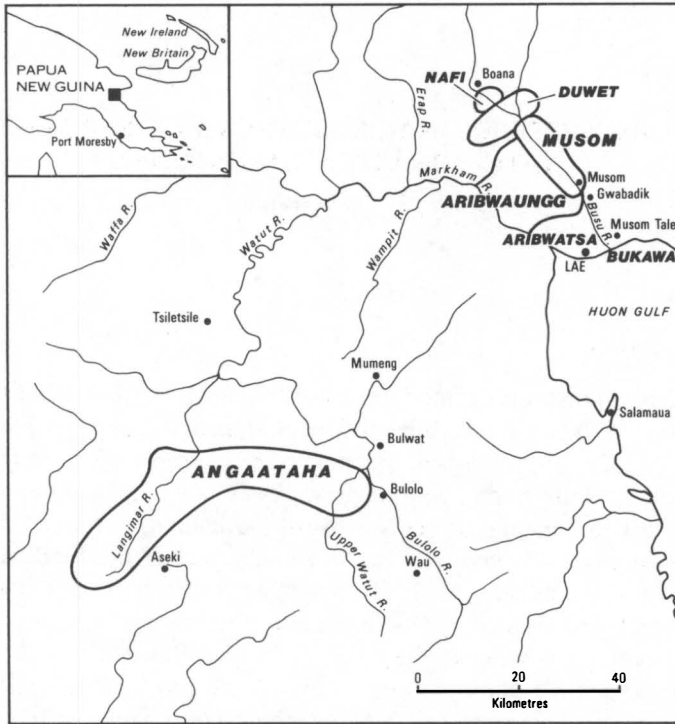
## 2. SUSUAMI

The Susuami language is spoken in the Upper Watut Valley outside Bulolo. It is an enclave within the Eastern part of the Angaataha-speaking area and is a member of the Non-Austronesian Angan language family. In two previous papers (Smith 1990, 1992), an account of the decline of the Susuami language was presented. In Smith (1990) attention was drawn to the existence of the language, which had previously been overlooked by fieldworkers. When the first information was recorded in 1979 the language was spoken by about fifty people in the village of Manki and the 'Co-op' and 'Council' settlements surrounding the site of the now defunct Watut-Sei Rural Progress Society a few kilometres outside Bulolo. On the basis of cognate comparisons with word lists of other Angan family languages published in Lloyd (1973), it seems evident that Susuami is an Angan language, probably most closely related to the dying Kamasa language which is spoken by a few people in Katsiong refugee village near Menyamya (McElhanon 1984:29).

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THE ANGAATAHA AND MUSOM LANGUAGE AREAS

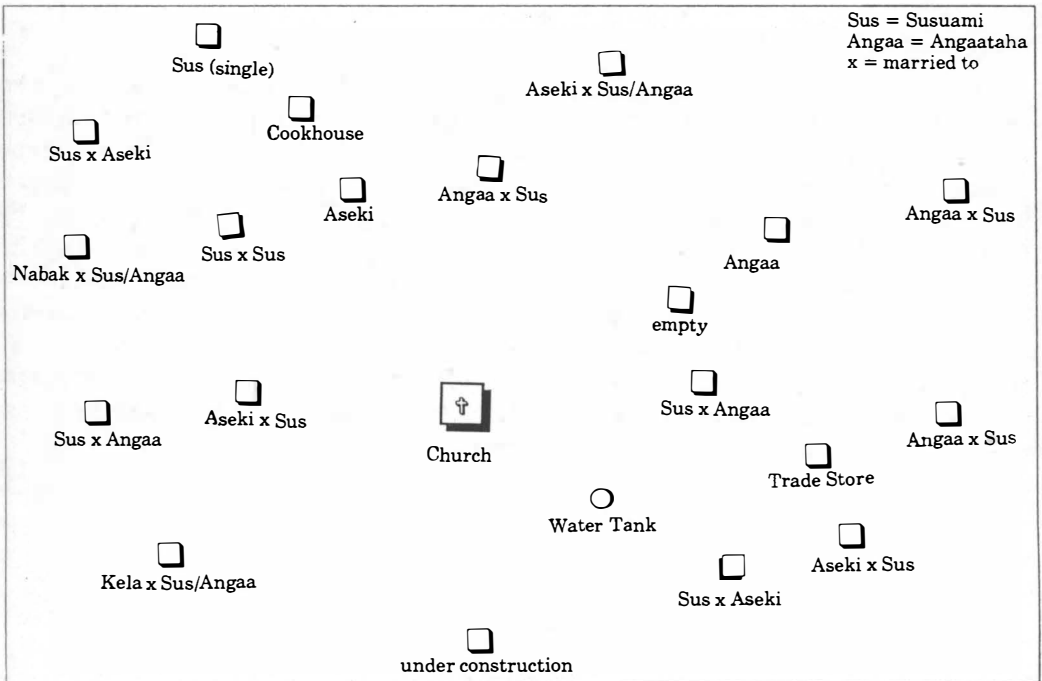


FIGURE 1: LANGUAGES OF MANKI HOUSEHOLDS

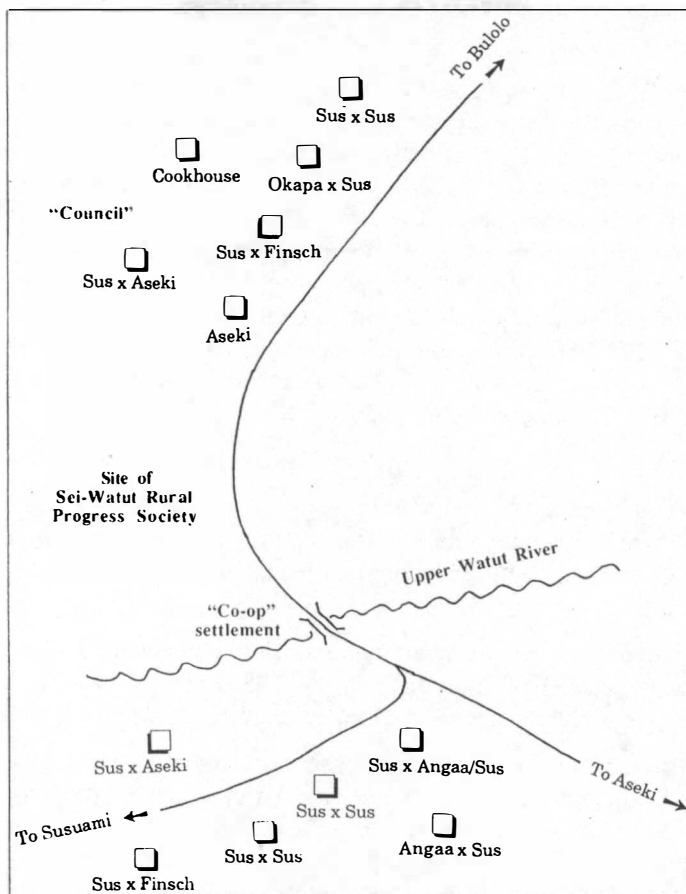


FIGURE 2: LANGUAGES OF SUSUAMI HOUSEHOLDS IN THE CO-OPERATIVE AND COUNCIL SETTLEMENTS

Manki village was the field base of the anthropologist Beatrice Blackwood in the 1930s and 1940s, but she did not record the presence of the Susuami language in her 1978 monograph. It appears that the present settlement known as Manki is located several kilometres from Blackwood's base, which was higher on the range towards Bulolo. Even in 1936 Blackwood (1978:8) notes that the Manki settlement was an artificial amalgamation of two separate groups for administrative convenience. One spoke Langimar and the other 'Kiapou' (Hamtai). In the present settlement known as Manki, the majority of inhabitants (from Old Manki) speak the Langimar (Angaataha) language, while Susuami-speakers were incorporated into the settlement from a former village further down the Watut River.

In 1980 a census of Susuami speakers and the languages spoken in their households was conducted (Smith 1990). A number of interesting observations emerged from this. Firstly, Manki village showed extreme multilingualism, with some inhabitants using up to four, five or six languages on various occasions. The dominant languages were Angaataha and Tok Pisin, with a sizable minority speaking Hamtai. In addition, marriage partners from other language groups in Morobe and further afield were represented. Primary school children

were now all taught in English, after an abortive attempt to establish a Yabêm-medium mission school in the 1950s.

Secondly, nearly all Susuami speakers were living in households where one marriage partner was not primarily a Susuami speaker. Languages spoken in the households of the Susuami-speaking area are shown in detail in Figures 1 and 2. It can be seen that out of a population of some fifty speakers, there were only seven households where both parents were native speakers of the language. The effect of these factors on transmission of Susuami to children appeared to be substantial. While young children talked with their parents in the language, older children failed to use it in playgroups. In spite of admonition or stronger censure by parents, these children showed an overwhelming preference for Angaataha and especially Tok Pisin. Parents complained that their children, who understood Susuami, would only reply in Tok Pisin. This is similar to the "dual-lingualism" described by Lincoln (1975). Such individuals are not likely to transmit the language to the next generation.

To use Laycock's (1979:92) terminology the Susuami language is in a "swamp" situation:

A swamp situation occurs when a language has virtually no monolingual speakers - that is, all adult members of the community speak two languages, one of which is restricted to that community, and one which is spoken by a larger community.

Such swamped languages are considered by Laycock to be in acute danger. The forty or so Moraori language-speakers of Irian Jaya in the 1950s are given as an example (p.94). Swamped by surrounding languages, the Moraori language now appears to be extinct.

All Susuami speakers also knew other languages; in particular the language was swamped by Angaataha. In this situation, the language must be considered to be vulnerable. An additional hazard was the fact that there was no residential community where Susuami was the preferred language. There was no oasis into which Susuami speakers could retreat to speak the language undisturbed, as is the case with some other single-village languages. The largest residentially discrete units of Susuami speakers were clusters of two and three households within a larger settlement.

Attitudes to Susuami by non-Susuami speakers were at best equivocal. There was a marked reluctance on the part of affines to make what was perceived as a massive and futile effort to learn a language not likely to be of much use. In a settlement with an already confusing constellation of languages, it seems that the demands of coping with multilingual communication were exerting severe pressure on the smallest of the languages. The Susuami speakers themselves were not in a position to insist on the use of their language in the community. Having been forcibly merged with another group, the small minority of Susuami were dominated by speakers of other languages.

Considering the above factors, the prognosis for Susuami in 1980 appeared to be gloomy. A follow-up survey ten years later showed that this pessimism was not unjustified (Smith 1992). In Manki and the surrounding settlements in late 1990, only fifteen people could be found who claimed to speak the language. Many of the older speakers had died, and children were failing to acquire more than a passive understanding. Such acquisition as existed among young people appeared to be confined to the two remaining households where both parents were native speakers. Even in these households, parents lamented the fact that their children could understand a little, but would not speak the language. All other speakers were immersed in a social environment where other languages dominated. Considering the

rate of decline it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the language is doomed to die with the present generation of adult speakers.

### 3. MUSOM

Musom is the dominant language spoken in a single village some twenty-five kilometres north-west of Lae. A minority of Musom speakers are also living in the settlements of Gwabadik and Musom Tale. The former settlement is about fifteen kilometres inland from Lae, shared with speakers of Nabak and Mesem (Momolili) from villages further inland. Musom Tale is near the coast east of Lae, and Musom speakers live in close association with speakers of other languages, especially Bukawa. The number of Musom speakers is estimated to be 231 (McElhanon 1984:20).

Although Musom is a small language, it is surrounded by a number of similar languages of the Busu sub-group. Aribwaungg (Yalu), spoken in Yalu village and Nambom (also known as Sirak or Nafi) spoken in Banzain village, are very closely related. The languages are even claimed to be identical by some informants, although independent linguistic observation does not support this (McElhanon 1984; Holzkecht 1988). In addition, the Duwet (Guwot) language of four neighbouring inland villages is closely related. Holzkecht (1988:70) claims that Musom shares many linguistic features with the Aribwatsa language, now virtually extinct.

Like Manki, Musom village is multilingual. Nearly everyone speaks Tok Pisin and the Nabak and Duwet languages of neighbouring villages appear to be well known by many. The language used by the Lutheran mission in the area, Yabêm, is also well known. In contrast to the Susuami settlements, however, in Musom village the majority of households include married couples who both have Musom as their first and preferred language. Nevertheless, there were still a considerable number of non-Musom speaking marriage partners living there. A census in 1990 showed that out of twenty-nine households in the village, sixteen were occupied only by Musom speakers, while thirteen contained marriage partners of different languages. Constraints of exogamy dictate that a considerable number of marriage partners will have to be found from other language groups.

In the two settlements containing a minority of Musom-speakers, the Musom language is swamped in a way not unlike Susuami. However, in Musom village, in spite of the influx of outsiders, the Musom language seemed to be in a relatively healthy position. Communication with children is normally in Musom. Perhaps more importantly, affines appeared to be successful in learning the language. Of the thirteen households containing affines not of Musom origin from areas including other parts of the Morobe, Eastern Highlands, Sepik and East New Britain Provinces, at least half appeared to be fluent in Musom and use it regularly with children. This may be related to attitudes towards affines in Musom. Only marriage partners are welcome to reside in the village - their unattached relatives are not permitted to settle there. There is a pride in the language and identity of the village, and an ideology that newcomers must adapt to village norms of language and culture. Musom speakers are optimistic that the language is alive and well and not under threat of extinction.

In spite of Musom speakers' confidence in the language's viability, however, there are some ominous signs that the process of decline may be under way. A look at the size and number of the separate exogamous clans in the village shows that the number of Musom-

speaking marriage partners available to other Musom speakers is strictly limited. It is now apparent that most future marriages of Musom speakers will be with speakers of other languages. This is likely to have a profound affect on the number of children growing up fluent in Musom.

Some parents observed that children had a habit of replying in Tok Pisin when addressed in Musom. Although this was remarked on as a curiosity rather than a cause for alarm, it does suggest that the younger generation may not be such successful agents for the transmission of Musom as their parents. Tok Pisin is very widely spoken, and is now used frequently in church services in addition to Yabêm, formerly used exclusively for mission purposes. Tok Pisin is the automatic choice when addressing visiting non-Musom speakers, and appears to be increasingly popular in children's playgroups. A road to Lae has led to frequent visits to the city, especially to sell food in the market and visit the hospital, and this has no doubt increased the currency of Tok Pisin. The Tok Pisin spoken by young people is increasingly that of fluent first language speakers similar to the urban residents of Lae, rather than a second language with a marginal role.

Such factors, combined with the 'English-only' policy in the local primary school suggest that the onset of decline of a language may precede villagers' perception of its declining health and viability. In the absence of some effort to maintain the language, it is not impossible that a terminal degeneration may not be more than two generations away.

#### 4. FUTURE PROSPECTS

Predictions concerning the fate of Susuami and Musom (and many other minority languages in the country) involve a certain amount of conjecture dependent on various unknown factors. One of these is the possibility of conscious intervention to preserve or maintain the languages. A number of such activities are widespread in Papua New Guinea. The Summer Institute of Linguistics has translation teams in twenty or so Morobe languages and many others in different provinces. In many parts of the country linguists carry out field work leading to descriptions of grammars or sociolinguistic phenomena.

Apart from Holzkecht's comparative study of Markham languages (1988) no detailed work has been carried out for either Musom or Susuami. For neither language has the grammar been described or translation of religious tracts attempted; in fact there is no written material whatsoever in either language. No plans to begin work are currently being considered by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. More linguistic work could provide a stimulus for maintenance of the languages.

However, all of the above refer to efforts from outside the community. A more promising prospect would be an initiative from within the community, relying on internal resources, and with minimal input from outside advisers. One such activity which has had some very encouraging results in Papua New Guinea is the establishment of vernacular literacy programmes. Although the main aim of such schemes is the promotion of literacy, it could also be a powerful agent for maintenance of minority languages such as those described in this paper. Detailed advice on how to set up such programmes is contained in Stringer and Faraclas's comprehensive guidebook (1987), and schemes can be self-sustaining given sufficient motivation.

In the case of Susuami this is unlikely to happen in the absence of a determined and sustained effort on the part of the adult speakers. There may be additional problems with

lack of support or active discouragement from others in the community. In the case of Musom the introduction of a vernacular literacy programme would seem both possible and highly desirable. There is a primary school on the outskirts of the village with a multilingual intake from Musom, Gawam and some villages further afield. Like most other community schools this one uses English as its medium of instruction. A preschool vernacular literacy programme could achieve the multiple aims of improving literacy skills, transmitting traditional cultural values and maintaining a language rapidly being swamped by others.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Susuami and Musom languages both appear to be in danger of submersion and obsolescence. While Susuami's decline is at an advanced stage, danger signals about Musom are perhaps more evident to an outside observer than to its own speakers. It is recommended that speakers of such threatened minority languages engage in vernacular literacy programmes, both for language maintenance and the more obvious literacy skills they promote.

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