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Prospects for the Expansion of Language Policies in the Bangsamoro Education Code

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, the Bangsamoro Parliament passed a legislation concerning the establishment of an education system that specifically caters to the learners of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. It defines where the Arabic language will be used for in 'Madaris' (Islamic educational institutions), who are qualified Arabic teachers, the general curriculum structure of the Bangsamoro public school system, and a mention of the non-Muslim Indigenous Peoples' language and culture in their education system. Considering the Islamic orientation of the Bangsamoro education system within the overall Philippine education framework, the Bangsamoro Education Code primarily focuses on the Arabic, English, and Filipino languages as the primary linguistic requirements for educators, administrators, and mediums of instruction in the schools. The mother tongue of the learners is also an option as a medium of instruction in their educational linguistic landscape. However, existing studies found that Bangsamoro students struggle with the Arabic and English languages. Moreover, non-Muslim Indigenous Peoples are severely marginalized as there are no existing studies that could include them in the discourses. Grounded in applied linguistic and policy studies, this review article mentioned legislation in triangulation with existing linguistic studies on the region and developed prospective ways improve and expand the Bangsamoro Education Code.

Keywords: *Applied linguistics, Bangsamoro, Language policy, Philippines, Public policy.*

In 2019, the newly established Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) parliament passed a legislation concerning the establishment of an education system that specifically caters to the learners of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Due to the 800 years of Islamic presence in the region, its close proximity and historical linkages with predominantly Muslim-dominated populations of Malaysia and Indonesia, the area of what is known now as the BARMM has been involved in various forms of conflict. As the region is heading to an era of peace and reconciliation with the government of the Republic of the Philippines, it is undergoing a transition with the goal of establishing an autonomous regional government mainly catering to the multilingual and multicultural population of the predominantly Muslim area. According to the Bangsamoro Commission for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage (2022), there are 13 languages, they are:

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Meranaw, Maguindanaon, Iranun, Yakan, Tausug, Sama, Badjao, Jama Mapun, Kagan/Kalagan, Kalibugan, Sangil, Molbog, and Palawanon spoken by the Muslim population, 3 languages spoken by the non-Muslim Mindanao Indigenous Peoples living the region, and Arabic to be learned by the Muslim students. English, Filipino, Cebuano, and Hiligaynon are also widely spoken as lingua franca with the minority Christian settlers.

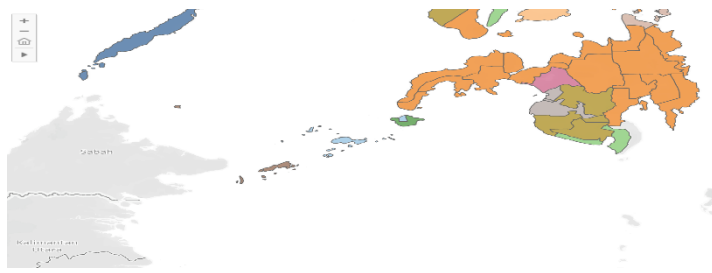


Figure 1. The Mindanao Archipelago in Southern Philippines near Sabah, Malaysia and Kalimantan Utara, Indonesia (Translators Without Borders 2022)

As of this writing, only the law aptly named Bangsamoro Education Code of 2021 (Bangsamoro Parliament 2021) has been made available to the public, with the specific implementing rules and regulations (IRR) still being developed by the regional government's Ministry of Basic, Higher, and Technical Education (MBHTE). Considering that the educational governance in the region is still at its infancy, there is still room for a more comprehensive academic discussion on the development of its language policies. As such, this article reviewed the mentioned legislation in triangulation with existing linguistic studies done on the region and come up with prospective relevant inclusions in the law's IRR. In particular, this piece is focusing on both the needs of the Bangsamoro learners and the challenges that the non-Muslim Mindanao Indigenous Peoples regarding heritage language maintenance.

The Peoples of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region

BARMM was specifically named after the Bangsamoro, a collective identity 13 Muslim ethnolinguistic groups that were historically developed separately from the rest of the Philippine archipelago due to their consistent resistance against the colonization of Spain, the United States, and the post-war independent government of the Republic of the Philippines (Kapahi & Tañada 2018). Four of the largest Bangsamoro group populations are the Maguindanaon, Maranao, Samal, and Tausug peoples. They, along with the other Bangsamoro groups and non-Muslim Indigenous Peoples of Mindanao, were steadily resolute in maintaining their heritage, culture, and traditions despite the forcibly interference of colonial governments and Christian settlers from Northern and Central Philippines (Federspiel 1998).

Candelaria (2020) discussed that socio-political and economic power were bestowed to the Christian majority population of the Republic of the Philippines. As they settled in the lands of the Bangsamoro and the non-Muslim Mindanao Indigenous Peoples, conflict erupted which led to the establishment of Muslim separatist groups such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and, later, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Throughout the years, the groups have been in continuous peace negotiations with the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) to settle the separatist armed conflict, and in 2018 passed the Bangsamoro Organic Law that ended the war as its transitional government that included people appointed by both the GRP and the MILF – the BTA Parliament. This was in accordance with the Framework Agreement on Bangsamoro (Sabillo 2014) and its annex on power sharing following nine years of negotiations that successfully-ended the peace talks between the two parties on October 15, 2012, in Malaysia (Calonzo 2012).

In the middle of all this infighting are the non-Muslim Indigenous Peoples living in the region, which are the Teduray, Lambangian, and Manobo (Bangsamoro Commission for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage 2022). They are known to be living in the highlands of Mindanao as their ancestral lands were sequestered by the American colonial government for the resettlements of Christian Filipinos from the North and Central Philippines (Simons 2021). As the population of mainland Mindanao were eventually dominated by the Christian settlers and the Bangsamoro peoples, the non-Muslim Indigenous Peoples experienced the greatest socio-political, economic, cultural, and linguistic displacements as they had to adjust to the changing systems brought upon by the then armed conflict in the region (Esperitu 2017). Therefore, they had to adjust to the ways of the Muslim and Christian peoples at the expense of the cultural and linguistic identities.

Introductory Language Policy in the Bangsamoro Education Code

The 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines recognizes Filipino and English as the official languages of the country (the Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, 2022). In addition, it also recognizes the existence of Bangsamoro languages, Arabic, and other Philippine languages in the development of the Philippine national language. The Commission on the Filipino language was also mandated by the Philippine national government to preserve and document the 130 indigenous languages in the country that were not considered to be major languages but are still part of the ethnolinguistic identity of its speakers (Teves 2021).

As the Bangsamoro regional government is still on transitional leadership, the proposed Bangsamoro State Constitution (Mindanao Development Authority 2018) still has no specific statutes regarding the cultural and linguistic policies of the region. At present, only the Bangsamoro Education Code of 2021 is the official piece of legislation which explicitly mentioned proposed language policies that will be implemented to their population. In the mentioned law, the word 'language' was mentioned 27 times, with 17 of those mainly referring to the Arabic language – a foreign language but essential for Islamic education in the country.

For a summary, the language-related content of the Bangsamoro Education Code (Bangsamoro Parliament 2021) defines where the Arabic language will be used for (e.g., Islamic studies and Arabic literacy) in *Madaris* (Islamic educational institutions), who are qualified Arabic teachers, the general curriculum structure of the Bangsamoro public school system, and one mention of the non-Muslim Indigenous Peoples' language and culture in their education system. As such, it can be observed that the prominence of Arabic in the planned education system is due to its linkage to Islamic education.

Considering the Islamic orientation of the Bangsamoro education system within the overall Philippine education framework, the Bangsamoro Education Code primarily focuses on the Arabic, English, and Filipino languages as the primary linguistic requirements for educators, administrators, and mediums of instruction in the schools. The mother tongue of the learners was also made to be the primary medium of instruction from Grades 1 to 3 and is an option starting Grade 4. This means that Maguindanaon, Maranaw, Samal, and Tausug, among other languages will be part of the educational linguistic landscape of the students. The law also explicitly states that they will be issuing addition rules regarding the use of mediums of instruction and learning in the basic education system of the region.

Empirical Language Studies on the Bangsamoro Region

The Bangsamoro region is a relatively unexplored area when it comes to language studies as they have been minoritized by the Christianized peoples of the Philippines and in Mindanao, specifically. As of this writing, there were only two published journal articles that investigated the linguistic situation of the Bangsamoro people. Both of which will be discussed in this section.

The first study was done by Ponce and Lucas (2021) on the language attitudes of learners and their parents regarding the languages used in the Bangsamoro context. Out of the 5 learner-parent pairs, three of them were Bangsamoro, specifically Maguindanaon, Maranaw, and Iranun. They found that in home, educational, and work settings, the respondents used Tagalog as a lingua franca in the linguistically diverse context of the Bangsamoro region. While the study participants mentioned that they were proud of the mother languages, they only use it sometimes and just in the home setting. The researchers implicated that continued use and preference toward Tagalog in the long run could affect the implementation of a mother tongue-based multilingual education system in the region.

In the phenomenological study of Udat and Kunso (2021), they found that Grade 9 Bangsamoro learners are struggling in learning the Arabic and English languages due to the phonological, morphological, and syntactical differences of the said languages from their mother tongue and Tagalog. As such, this made them receptive toward the multilingual nature of their education. It is important to note in this paper that there are no published studies on the linguistic situation and attitudes of the non-Muslim Indigenous Peoples in the region.

Challenges in the Present Education Code

In the triangulation of the past two sections, it is significant for us to point out that a focus on Arabic and English language education could hamper in the overall learning experience of the students, including in Islamic studies. The domination of English in the education system is possible to expand to the Bangsamoro region, considering that the overall framework is still largely based in the colonially developed Philippine education system (Lorente 2013). Additionally, the continued use and preference toward Tagalog are seen to be a threat to the maintenance of Bangsamoro languages by the younger generations (Ponce & Lucas, 2021). It is also vital to for this article to mention that the non-Muslim Indigenous Peoples -Teduray, Lambangian and Manobo- are severely marginalized as they must maintain their heritage languages for their cultures to survive, but also navigate a linguistic landscape that is primarily based on the needs of the Bangsamoro. To emphasize, aside from their first language, they also must learn a Bangsamoro language, Tagalog, and English for the to be able to navigate in the sociocultural contexts of the region.

To conclude, The Bangsamoro Education Code aims to establish a multilingual education system for the population of BARMM. This consists of the use and teaching of the mother language, Filipino, English, and Arabic (for Muslims) in the school setting. Existing studies revealed that students from the Bangsamoro region are struggling on learning Arabic and English due to its distant linguistic features from the Philippine languages they are used to speaking growing up. Moreover, there is also a noticeable and alarming preferences toward Tagalog as a lingua franca as researchers see it as a risk in mother tongue language maintenance. In addition, discourses on the non-Muslim Indigenous Peoples are almost non-existent aside from the mention of a *tribal university system*. This can be a manifestation of the greater minoritization experienced by the non-Muslim Indigenous Peoples in the region.

As the linguistic and education policies of the Bangsamoro government are still in its infancy, there is a lot of space for the region's leaders to develop inclusive, comprehensive, and integrated policies. There is a necessity for such an initiative to apply lenses from the fields of applied linguistics and public policy studies to implement such an initiative (Bianco 2000; Block 2017). Hence, the researchers developed the following recommendations that are grounded in the applied discourses of the mentioned academic fields. First, there should be a multisectoral consultation with the teachers, students, and parents regarding the development of an integrated multilingual basic education curriculum wherein all languages (e.g., Arabic, English, Filipino, mother languages) will be systematically taught. Their perspectives and experiential learnings in the initial implementation of the educational system could be utilized in the decision-making process when it comes to devising the implementing rules and regulations for the Bangsamoro Education Code.

Second, it must be ensured that studies regarding the linguistic situation and attitudes of non-Muslim Indigenous Peoples are done so that the empirical data can be utilized in the development of provisions for the said ethnolinguistic groups in the Bangsamoro Education Code. It is important that the Schools of Living Traditions and schools utilize their mother languages as mediums of instruction so that it can be maintained in their communities. Language maintenance is a necessary step in cultural preservation (Trudgill 1991; Maffi 2000).

Third, to combat the low attitudes of the people regarding their mother language, it would be imperative to make Maguindanaon, Maranaw, Samal, Tausug, and other Bangsamoro languages as mediums of instruction and academic discourse in the overall education system – from kindergarten to graduate school. This will make the Bangsamoro classrooms more inclusive and accepting to students who may be struggling with the use of English. Lastly, this venture will also result into the intellectualization of Bangsamoro languages, bringing further pride towards the Bangsamoro identity.

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