

Survival and Susuami: A Ten Year Perspective

Geoff P. Smith
PNG University of Technology

0. Introduction

The Upper Watut area of Morobe Province has been well known to anthropologists for many years. Blackwood (1939) gives some details of the ethnography of the area based on fieldwork carried out in the 1930's and 40's. A more detailed edited ethnography based on her field notes appeared in 1978. More popular accounts of life in the area based on government patrols appear in Simpson (1965) and Sinclair (1966). All of the above publications use the popular term "Kukukuku" to refer to the people of the area, although this is now considered offensive by a considerable proportion of the population, and the term "Angan" is preferred (Lloyd 1973:97).

Angan family languages have been extensively investigated, especially by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, and the most up to date account of Angan family relationships appears in Lloyd 1973. The Angan family extends across the borders of Morobe to the Gulf and Eastern Highlands Provinces, and there are estimated to be a total of some 65,000 speakers. The Angan family is classified as a member of the Trans-New Guinea Phylum of Non-Austronesian (Papuan) languages (Wurm 1975:299).

In Smith (1990), the Susuami language of the Upper Watut was brought to the attention of linguists. This language was first noticed during a survey of Morobe counting systems in 1978 (Smith 1988). It is spoken by some of the population of Manki village and settlements of surrounding the Sei-Watut Rural Progress Society and Watut Local Government Council some 15 kilometres from Bulolo towards Aseki. On the basis of cognate comparisons with

basic vocabulary lists published in Lloyd (1973) it was concluded that Susuami is an Angan language. Its closest relative would appear to be the Kamasa language spoken some 50 kilometres to the north-west by a few people in Katsiong refugee village. The dominant language in the area where Susuami is spoken is Angaataha, spoken mainly in the Langimar Valley to the west (McElhanon 1984). Other languages spoken include Tok Pisin and Hamtai.

Susuami informants gave the following account of the settlement history of these villages. The present settlement at Manki was created out of a mixture of groups. Around 1920, the old Susuami village further downstream from Manki was moved on government instructions to avoid constant warfare with Buang people. Susuami people and Angaataha speaking ancestors of the present Manki residents from the settlement of Narakia were merged in this new settlement close to Bulolo, called *epanwainam chakwa* by the Susuami. This was later moved to the present site of the composite Manki village to make way for forestry developments. In the more distant past, the ancestors of the Susuami were said to come from a place called *Pompilanda* up in the ranges in the Langimar area.

1. The Susuami language in 1980

A brief census of Susuami speakers in 1980 revealed fewer than 50 speakers. In Manki village, there were approximately 30 speakers, but out of 14 households containing Susuami-speaking adults, no fewer than 11 included marriage partners from other language groups. Most or all of the Susuami-speaking adults appeared to be fluent in Angaataha. In the settlements on the main Aseki road, there are two separate clusters of Susuami-speaking households, one near the Watut Bridge, and the other in an area on the Bulolo side of the settlement known locally as "Council," the site of the Watut Local Government Council. In the Watut Bridge settlement there were six households containing Susuami speakers, of which three had both partners speaking Susuami. In the Council cluster of four households with Susuami speakers, only one had both partners speaking the language. Thus in only 7 households in the total area containing Susuami speakers were both marriage partners native speakers.

Non-Susuami-speaking affines appeared reluctant to learn the language, an exercise which

was perceived as difficult and futile. Susuami was even referred to disparagingly as *Tok masalai*, “devil talk” by one man. Only one Hamtai-speaking wife appeared to have successfully mastered the language and used it regularly with her children. In spite of exhortation by parents, children of mixed language marriages appeared to show a preference for the use of Angaataha and especially Tok Pisin after early childhood.

According to the oldest Susuami informant, Nkwenggyor, the Susuami community comprised six clans some two generations ago. Only three clans now remain, known as Abanku, Koroko and Amakamo. The population is said to have declined sharply due to an epidemic of dysentery around the late 50’s, and many others are reported to have died as a result of fighting or sorcery. Angaataha speakers are mainly from the Tantia and Narakia clans.

According to informants in 1980, clans are exogamous in Manki and the surrounding area, i.e. marriage partners must be taken from outside the clan. This conflicts with Blackwood’s (1978) findings that the Manki inhabitants are “lacking any exogamous descent groups” (p110) and “descent groups play little part in residence or marriage” (p. 107). However, the accuracy of this statement is open to question in the absence of any detailed information to support it. Fisher (1936) confirms the existence of exogamous patrilineal descent groups, and it is assumed here that this is the correct interpretation.

Since one Susuami clan (Abanku) was larger than the others, and considering the constraints imposed by the need for exogamy, many of the contemporary generation of Susuami speakers probably had little choice but to marry speakers of other languages. As a result, in the majority of households where Susuami was spoken in 1980, other languages were also in regular use.

All Susuami speakers also spoke other languages, i.e. the language community was “swamped,” to use Laycock’s expression (1979:92). In addition, there was no residentially discrete Susuami-speaking oasis in which speakers could take refuge. Laycock cites a similar case of a swamped minority language, Moraori of Irian Jaya, spoken by 40 or so speakers in the early 1950’s, which now appears not to be spoken at all, and is pessimistic about the chances of survival of languages in this situation (1979:94) :

“... it requires special circumstances - sufficient numbers and a strong sense of linguistic identity would seem to be crucial - for the smaller language to be maintained at all... Small swamped languages would seem to be doomed...”

It remained to be seen if such a fate awaited the Susuami language.

2. The Susuami language in 1990

Returning to Susuami in 1990, I was saddened to find that my five main informants from previous visits, Nkwenggyor, Nana, Gandang, Girisa and Daniel had all died. The language situation was equally depressing. In the main Susuami settlement at Manki, only two speakers appeared to remain, one woman married to an Agaataha speaker, and an old man. A younger man temporarily living there also claimed to know the language. None of the children were said to speak Susuami, and the main language of choice was Tok Pisin. A smaller settlement close to Manki known as Komio had recently been established. Four Susuami-speakers were living here, a man and his wife, father and sister. Both the sister and father were married to spouses from Aseki, and both communicated with them in Tok Pisin. None of the children could speak Susuami or even understand much. Even the children of the two Susuami speakers did not speak any of the language.

In the settlements near the main road, three Susuami-speaking men had houses in the area near the Watut bridge known as Kamapanda. All were married to speakers of Angaataha or Hamtai. One Susuami-speaking woman was married to a Sepik man. Two Susuami-speaking women were married to Aseki men in a separate settlement near the river. In the “Council” area on the Bulolo side of the village, referred to as Kunyiتراتre, one Susuami speaking couple and their two sons and two daughters had houses. The sons and daughters were all married to speakers of other languages.

Thus, in the entire Susuami-speaking community, there were only two households where both marriage partners spoke Susuami, and in these, the children had failed to acquire the language. Other speakers were all living in households where other languages dominated.

3. Prospects for survival

The prognosis for Susuami, gloomy in 1980, now seems desperate. Children of Susuami speakers are failing to achieve more than a passive acquisition of the language. As adult

Susuami-speakers die, this understanding is likely to atrophy in the absence of continued input. Such passive understanding as there is among young people would seem to be confined to those very few households where both parents use the language.

According to Laycock's definition of swamping, all speakers of a language are bilingual in other languages (1979:93). A swamped community could still, however, use its language almost exclusively if there were a discrete settlement consisting mainly of people for whom this was the preferred language. In the Susuami community this is not the case. Only in one or two households is Susuami the preferred language of choice. The settlement history of these villages, involving coalescence of disparate groups into a single residential community, appears to be the main source of problems for the minority language speakers. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that such a sequence of events has doomed the language to extinction.

There is a deep sadness on the part of surviving speakers who realise that their language is not being transmitted and is likely to die with their generation. I could not offer much in response to their pleas for help to keep the language alive, apart from indicating the possibility of a vernacular literacy programme, even though this would not guarantee effective transmission to the next generation. Such a programme would require some training and other input from outside the community, and sustained effort and motivation on the part of the few surviving speakers if it were to succeed.

References

- Blackwood, Beatrice. 1939. Life on the Upper Watut, New Guinea. *Geographical Journal* 94(1):11-28.
- _____. 1978. *The Kukukuku of the Upper Watut*. Oxford Monograph Series, no. 2. Pitt Rivers Museum.
- Fisher, N.H. 1936. Amongst the Kukukukus. *Wokabout* 2(7):13-19.
- Laycock, D.C. 1979. Multilingualism, linguistic boundaries and unsolved problems in Papua New Guinea. In *New Guinea and neighbouring areas: A sociolinguistic laboratory*, ed. S.A. Wurm. The Hague: Mouton.
- Lloyd, R.G. 1973. The Angan language family. In *The linguistic situation in the Gulf*

District and adjacent areas, Papua New Guinea, ed. K. Franklin, 33-110. Pacific Linguistics C-26. Canberra: Australian National University.

McElhanon, K.A. 1984. *A linguistic field guide to the Morobe Province Papua New Guinea*. Pacific Linguistics D-57. Canberra: Australian National University.

Simpson, Colin. 1965. *Plumes and arrows: Inside New Guinea*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

Sinclair, J.P. 1966. *Behind the ranges: Patrolling in New Guinea*. Melbourne: University Press

Smith, Geoff P. 1988. Morobe counting systems. In *Papers in New Guinea Linguistics*, no. 26, 1-132. Pacific Linguistics A-76. Canberra: Australian National University.

Smith, Geoff P. 1990. *Susuami: An Angan language of the Upper Watut Valley, Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea*. Department of Language and Communication Studies Departmental Report, no. 18. Lae, Papua New Guinea: University of Technology.

Wurm, S.A. (ed). 1975. *Papuan languages and the New Guinea linguistic scene*. Vol. 1 of *New Guinea area languages and language study*. Pacific Linguistics C-40. Canberra: Australian National University.

Received 17 April 1991

Revised 28 June 1991

Language Department,
University of Technology,
Private Mail Bag,
Lae, PAPUA NEW GUINEA