

Conference Paper

Restoring “*Wuon*” to Preserve Maybrat Language and Culture

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Abstract

Wuon, is an initiation rite and a traditional education system found to survive since Maybrat people settled in the central region of the Bird’s Head peninsula of Papua Land. The initiation prepares Maybrat younger men to live mature life. It has a school building (*kaWuon*), principal (*Wuon pam*), courses (*po*), and tutors (*Wuon emos*). Courses range from healing methods, holding rituals and life skills as a student will be a mature man. All courses are taken in a full one year program by all students from the fresh year (*apit masu*) to their graduation (*Wuon tena*). During the school year only Maybrat is spoken in the school area. This is so, since some terms or expressions can only be used and taught there regarding certain traditions or rituals. At school, one should pass first level before moving to the next level. When the school program is finished, the fresh graduates (*Wuon tena*) join a graduation ceremony to welcome them into adulthood. As alumni (*rae haria*) they are responsible to keep this tradition through generation. The rite has potentially passed down Maybrat cultural and intellectual heritages to the younger generations. Today, this unique school system has gradually been abandoned as have precious teachings and rituals. This paper describes *Wuon* as both an initiation rite and a school system for Maybrat people. It also presents different faces *Wuon* contribute to Maybrat language and culture preservations and some strategies for preservation of this unique education system.

Keywords: restore, wuon, preserve, maybrat, language, culture

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1. Introduction

UNESCO reported recently that there are over 6500 languages in the world and 2498 languages are dying out, carrying with them the cultural and intellectual heritage. Papuan languages share 264 languages or 4.3% of the world languages. Of this number, many linguistics reports or studies have alarmed about potential decrease of speakers of Papuan languages. Loosing speakers of Papuan languages will instantly bring the lost of Papuan and intellectual heritage. One of Papuan languages which could face such decrease in the future is Maybrat.

As a language, Maybrat is spoken in the central area of the Bird’s head with approximately 22,000 speakers (Brown, 1991), yet this number may continue to decrease steadily. It has previously been classified into West Papuan Phylum (Voorhoeve 1987, cited in Dol, 2000). It is spoken by four major tribal groups: Ayamaru, Aitinyo, Ayfat,

Madik, and Karoon who inhabit inland regions of Bird's head peninsula that stretches from east Kamundan river bank to Sun and Waban in West then from the north of the mountain foot of Tambrauw to Lake Ayamaru in the south (Heriyanto, 2003). Although these tribal groups spoke the same language, to some degree they are different in dialects either morphologically, phonologically, even lexically.

As an ethnic group, Maybrat comprises five tribal groups: Aifat, Aitinyo, Ayamaru, Madik, and Karoon. These tribal groups typically share some types of cultures in many ways. In the past Maybrat people lived from food gathering yet many of them had farms and raised stocks mostly for domestic consumptions. Kain Timur is popularly used throughout these regions as a gift brought by a groom to a bride's family some-way as compensation for taking away the bride from her family. They traditionally believe that the universe is created by a mystical power and human were created and breathed to life by a supreme being. To Maybrat people, everyone who dies will go to a particular place or another mystical universe. Maybrat people believe also that broken relations with the nature and mystical power would lead to devastation and destruction in society. Beside its educational nature, *Wuon* is a rite to heal this broken relation or to maintain such relation.

Today, there are a number of shifts in the way they live out their life and culture. As time passes many of them leave these regions pursuing their better lives mostly for economic reasons. Many of today's generations have left the regions in order to get better education and jobs. For these reasons, somehow, many of them start to leave their culture and reluctant to speak Maybrat. It is hardly seen that a Maybrat couple who live in towns or cities would prefer to speak Maybrat at home rather than in Bahasa Indonesia. Certainly, the cultural and intellectual heritage hidden within the language would gradually disappear. In the mean time, older generations of Maybrat start to disappear without a chance to carry on the traditions, knowledge, or know-how.

Wuon was and has been a potential instrument for Maybrat people to carry on the culture. It is an initiation rite that functions to pass on indigenous traditions, knowledge and know-how which all can work out well through indigenous language. Fishman (1996) states language is the people's mind, spirit, and soul. What Maybrat people believe and perceive is represented through the forms and works of their culture. *Wuon* is a representation of their cultural and intellectual heritage. The recent *Wuon* ever recorded was in 2007 in Aisa, East Aifat. Since then I haven't heard of any plans to carry out such event.

This paper presents a glimpse of the preliminary study on the *Wuon* as a basis to preserve both language and the culture of Maybrat. The paper starts with overview of the Maybrat as a language and culture. Then it portrays *Wuon* initiation itself and how it works preserving the language and culture. The discussion on *Wuon* is mainly based on Baru (1999) gained from interviews with former *uwon* or *rae Wuon* with some modifications and up dates based on an interview I did with a former *Wuon* Demianus Turot (55) who joined the rite in 1982. Meanwhile, some biographical and cultural background information stated in this paper is based on my knowledge as a native Maybrat.

2. *Wuon*

Wuon is an initiation rite the people have passed through generations. It is a type of tradition which seeks truth of relationship with the nature and others. The people have long conserved the belief that there is a creator of the universe (Siwa & Mafif). They also believe that there is a supreme power which brings lives and all existence to the people (Yefun).

It is also a rite for educational purpose that prepares people in a transition to another or new forms of life or from a state of immature/insecure to a state of mature/secure life as Arnold van Gennep puts "rites the passage" (cited in Turner, 1987). It is a way the people preserve archaic values and traditions through traditional type of education to younger generations. The initiation rite serves to teach younger generations to behave and regain attitudes in order to maintain decent relations in the society and with the spiritual worlds.

This tradition is found to survive even before introduction of any religion to the regions.

Similar to other initiation rites, *Wuon* has several sessions or stages. *Wuon* initiation process is divided into three stages: Stage one (pre-orientation), stage two (orientation), and stage three (education/training). The following summarizes three stages in *Wuon* rite based on an interview with three *rae heria* (tutors) conducted by Baru (1999).

3. *Wuon* Preserves Maybrat Language and Culture

Wuon an initiation rite which serves as a way the people maintain relations with the nature and to educate the younger generations to keep on the traditions and local wisdom going. Since these objectives are substantial for the society, *Wuon* plays important role in preserving the language and culture. The people's traditions, rituals, procession, and different types of cults are transmitted through Maybrat language. The following are how *Wuon* potential to preserve Maybrat language and culture.

3.1. Initial Stage (Pre-Orientation Stage)

At the initial stage, a meeting is held where a leader is chosen from all instructors or tutors or former *Wuon*. The meeting then gathered community and prospective *Wuon* of age 7-18 or 20. After prospective *Wuon* are recruited they are given some advice then they are sent back to their parents or community for more advice.

3.2. Medial Stage (Orientation, Education and Training Stage)

At stage two, a prospective *Wuon* is brought into a particular gate near the initiation area and he would be left alone. At the gate, no one or family members were allowed to enter the gate. A mysterious figure (*khosfre*) would come and take the prospective *Wuon* in a state of mystical realm. From this moment, the prospective *Wuon* went

through physical tortures through which they were tied, beaten and kicked and put under consciousness. They were then swallowed entirely and vomited to be a new man like a baby who knows nothing and weak. At this point the 'new born' *Wuon* gradually regain consciousness where some *rae Wuon* welcomed them with cheers, laughter, joy and happiness. They are then ready to learn mystical world and world or natural secrets. To be able to enter this phase the prospectus need to show rejection to physical body by fasting for several days. Failure to comply with certain requirements at this level will face certain consequences such as sickness even death.

Following these torturing stage, the prospective received trainings which consists of skills, morality, and witchcrafts. After a series of education and training, the last session of this stage is presentations of sacred items, wisdom, and activities/rituals.

3.3. Final Stage (Homecoming Stage)

This is the stage where the *Wuon* (participants) are prepared to be sent back to their family and community. The first step started when *Wuon* graduates were decorated with various ornaments such as colorful beads, red crest cockatoo feathers and bird of paradise feathers while carrying with them arrow and bow and *noken*. The next step is these new *rae Wuon* were held in a procession and marched down to meet the community and families of the new *rae Wuon*. The community and families in response to the procession, welcome the coming home of the new *rae Wuon* with songs and dances (*msuah posuah, sker, simisie, mengkau*). To express and share the joy and happiness, the families and community of the new *rae Wuon* usually have great feast which usually held for a week. Everybody was invited including neighboring villages in the feast where many pigs were slaughtered and prepared to be eaten while drinking local liquor (*sageru*).

3.4. Language Preservation

Natural language use in the entire *Wuon* process facilitates Maybrat language acquisition. *Wuon* preserves Maybrat language in a way that all *Wuon* processes are held in Maybrat language. The Instructors/Tutors (*Wuonemos*) have to speak Maybrat to guide or instruct the students (*apit masu, Wuon tena, Wuon*) and students will only speak the same language anytime they are allowed to in its rules. Maybrat only is applied totally in the community of *Wuon* retain and keep all rituals in the realm of what has been passed down yet different types of cults and practices work in the language. Even certain expressions are very sacred that can only used within the *Wuon* community and classified to everyone who is not *rae Wuon* or *Wuon* (participant). Having such nature both protects and flourish use of Maybrat from any other types of intrusions.

Besides, *Wuon* creates a speech community and every ritual or procession creates its own speech events. The speakers, *Wuonemos*, would speak in a certain way to transfer knowledge and traditions (*po, powatum, potekyef, pofit*) through certain rituals. Some rituals and procession in *Wuon*, to some degree, even are very sacred and deals with animistic deities that require existence of supernatural beings for which these rituals

is strictly forbidden or taboo to spell out (*posnuk*) because that would bring about fatal consequences to the life of the entire community (Baru, 1999).

Each ritual or procession create a speech event where speakers share certain registers and jargons for example when it comes to tutors showing how to read or use spells. Linguistically, certain registers or jargons are created and used when each speakers share the linguistic norms and environment (*speaking what to whom in where*). The way *rae Wuon* speak would be different from the way lay people (*rae sae*) say things for certain topics and situations which create a particular variation or social dialect (Meechan & Rees-Miller, 2005).

3.5. Culture Preservation

Each member of a society or community makes up cultural values and traditions which shape the way they think and behave which is different to other culture. All these traits cannot survive unless each member of the society value their own culture and make efforts to carry on them. To Maybrat people *Wuon* has played significant role in maintaining Maybrat culture. It has contributed considerably in the succession of Maybrat tradition, values, know-how and items to this date. All those components of the culture may still be found in the region because this rite has been systematically organized and maintained. Such fact is the result of the people's appreciation of the local heritage which have been passed down through generations through this unique rite.

Indigenous education is common to most culture around the world and has been proved to successfully maintain culture of specific community where indigenous language plays vital role in it (UNESCO Press Release HR/4674, May 21, 2003). *Wuon* is a unique kind of traditional education and plays vital role in educating Maybrat people of its cultural and intellectual heritage. It resembles the nature of an education institution or school. It has a school building (*kaWuon*), principal (*Wuon pam*), courses (*po*), and tutors (*Wuon emos*). The students range from teenagers to adult. All school processes begins with an orientation where school officials (*rae uwon, uwon emos*) train the prospective students and meet parents, family or community of new participants (*Wuon tena*). Courses/classes range from healing methods, holding rituals/reading spells and life skills as a student will be a mature man. All courses are taken in a full one year program by all students from the fresh year (*apit masu*) to their graduation (*Wuon tena*). During the school year only Maybrat is spoken in the school area. This is so, since some terms or expressions can only be used and taught there regarding certain traditions or rituals. At school, one should pass first level before moving to the next level. When the school program is finished, the fresh graduates (*Wuon tena*) join a graduation ceremony to welcome them into adulthood. As alumni (*rae haria*) they are responsible to keep this tradition through generation where some become tutors at the school while others teach and be patron to the younger community in social life.

Civilization of this decent society has survived through *Wuon's* teachings of characters and life skills. Every member of Maybrat community is geared and hoped to show and maintain good relations with the nature and members of society. The relations

with the nature are realized through certain rituals and know-how and supernatural works that restore relations between spiritual world and profane world. Moreover, the relation with other members of society is maintained through well-mannered characters and good deeds.

Maybrat people have long realized that long life and happiness can only be achieved if each member of the society shows good relations with the nature, spiritual world, and other members of society. Traditionally, they believe that there is a supernatural power that has created the nature. To Maybrat people, the mythological figures, *Siwa* and *Mafif*, represent this belief. *Siwa* specifically has the main role in cosmic creation. *Yefun*, representation of God, is traditionally believed as a mystical being with the highest power that created human beings and bring lives to them (Heriyanto, 2003). For all these beliefs, Maybrat people seek the truth of good relation through ritual celebration of *Wuon*.

Today, as the fast-growing development and innovation within modernization grip every corner of the people's live, this unique tradition as well as the language start to loose its track. Protecting Papuan people as proclaimed on October 30, 2015 by Papuan Traditional Assembly (MRP) should take into account of Papuan language and culture. Language and culture are closely related to each other. All Papuan cultural and intellectual heritages have been passed down through oral traditions where local languages in Papua are the vehicle. Language is the most usable tool to socialize culture within a society (Ilić, 2004). There should be decisive efforts or "a set of strategies" (Kaplan, 1998, p.427) for preservation of Papuan culture and language, particularly Maybrat language and culture.

4. Strategies to Preserve Maybrat Language and Culture

Having deep concern of the imminent great danger of loosing language and culture, efforts have to be made to save Papuan people by saving the languages and the cultures. The following are some ways we can do to preserve Maybrat language and culture.

1. Revitalizing and socializing *Wuon* to wider public through cultural festivals. Like what other local governments in Papua have started (e.g. Jayapura), the government should plan and regulate sociocultural events e.g. cultural festival or arts and dances performances/competitions, to promote Maybrat culture where *Wuon* can repetitively be reintroduced.
2. Designing standard curriculum for *Wuon* rite. *Wuon* is one of the greatest cultural and intellectual heritage granted to Maybrat people which set foundation of modern school. Yet, no written documents have been made to run the school process, neither in traditional design nor today's curricula. In order to keep the records of the unique indigenous school, a curriculum should be set up for all educational processes in *Wuon*.
3. Pursuing legislation on Maybrat language and culture preservation

Preservation of Maybrat language and culture is inextricably separated from language and cultural planning and policy. Our awareness of the danger of losing the language and culture should also be a great concern of Maybrat government to design and impose legislation on Maybrat language and culture preservation. One way is to identify potential language and cultural problems e.g. decreasing number of speakers, by which government policy on language is imposed.

4. Keeping good records of language and culture

Efforts to preserve the language and different components of Maybrat can be realized through comprehensive studies on any aspects or components of Maybrat language and culture. These works should be followed by establishing good records or data bank for the language and culture which later can be used for preservation and educational purposes in the future. Use of computers, CD ROMs, the Internet, Audio and Video files can be used to capture language and culture for future generations.

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