



An Ethnolinguistic Profile of Bangru: The Lesser-Known Language Community of Arunachal Pradesh, India

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to present an ethnolinguistic profile of Bangru, the lesser-known language spoken mainly in 15 Bangru villages of the Sarli circle of the Kurung Kumey district in Arunachal Pradesh. Bangru language may be included in the Tibeto-Burman language family, though no evidence is available on its language affiliation. It is different from the languages of Nyishi and Puroik tribes residing in the same district, though they have social and cultural close affinities among them. However, while the Bangru language has been largely influenced by the Nyishi and it is used very much a mixed form of speech at present. But it would not be wrong to opine that the Bangru language is remarkably pure. Due to a prolonged and intense language contact with the Nyishi and Puroik languages, Bangru reflects remarkable changes in the linguistic structures. The status of the language shows serious signs of endangerment.

Introduction

Bangru, an assumed sub-tribe of Nyishi, inhabit the Sarli Circle, an administrative circle of former Lower Subansiri District, now part of the Kurung Kumey District; they live in what may be called as the “Ultima Thule of the Kurung Kumey District” (Ramya, 2011: 16). Since time immemorial, they have met their subsistence requirements through mixed economic activities like agriculture (Jhum and Settled), hunting, fishing, gathering and other subsistence activities. Isolated in their remote, inhospitable, and high-mountain environment, the Bangrus have had to find practical solutions to such basic problems as dearth of arable land for cultivation, lack of sufficient water for irrigation, and escalating population pressure on resources. The construction of terraces and traditional irrigation channels, a ritual complex that ensured the optimal use of seasonal conditions and limited time and space, and a system of communal and private land ownership that applied to this high-altitude region, were just some of the Bangrus’ solutions to these problems.

With the formation of the Kurung Kumey District on 16th April, 2001, and the opening of all-weather link road from Koloriang, a district headquarter, in the first decade of 21st century i.e. 2000s A.D., which ended the region’s centuries of relative isolation, the Bangrus have found themselves confronted with new and unprecedented social, economic, and political circumstances. The effects of these conditions include alterations in land-use patterns, cropping, and the erosion of

ecologically sound institutions for the management of resources and the coordination of a complex set of subsistence activities.

Like most of the tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, the history on the origin and migration of the Bangru is vague and documentarily absent for lack of written script culture. There is no earlier reference made to these people documenting their histories, customs and traditions which are very unique. Non-documentation is due to the fact that no scholar has ever paid a visit to the land of Bangrus, who inhabit one of the most remotest and inaccessible regions of Arunachal Pradesh (Ramya, 2012a). What little is known about the history of their origin and migration comes from their oral tradition which are well profound among the tribals across the world.

The Bangru believe they migrated to the present habitat in the Sarli circle of the Kurung Kumey district through Neto-Nello Puko, a place where they believe they were dropped down from *Ludlu* (Sky/Heaven) by *Aneya-Ju* (Mother Sun). Unlike many tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, they traced their origin directly from the *Ju* (Sun). It is to be noted here that within the Bangru there are two factions/clans i.e. the general Bangru (the Phujoju and Milliju and other minor groups) and the Sape who believe in a different route of origin and migration. According to the legend among the first group, over the course of time, the Bangrus moved to areas nowadays called Sarli from a place called Neto-Nello Puko. According to some of the respondents, earlier the word *Ju* implied the Mother Sun, their ancestor whose name was suffixed to every clan name. Accordingly, they were identified as 'Phujoju' (Pisa), 'Milliju' (Milli), 'Malloju' (Mallo), Tagangju (Tagang), etc. But, with the course of time, this '*Ju*' suffix was gradually dropped from use and in contemporary situation only the clan names remain such as Pisa, Milli, Mallo, Tagang, etc. (Ramya, 2011, 2012b).

According to Bangru mythology, thousands of years ago the Bangru migrated somewhere from Tibet and set up their home in the place that we now call Sarli and in its adjoining areas. The Bangrus prefer to call themselves 'Taju-Bangru', although they are known as a sub-tribe of the Nyishi to the outsiders. Indeed, it is not ascertained as to when Bangrus have entered in the present area; the most popular belief is that Bangru have migrated from Tibet, although there is no historical evidence to support it. They believe that there is another branch of Bangrus, they call Wadu-Bangru¹, who supposedly moved along a western route i.e. the present East and West Kameng districts. Hence, the Aka and Miji (Sajolang) tribes' descendants came under the Wadu-Bangru branch. To prove this, they gave an example by comparing their Phujoju and Milliju clans with the Miji's (Sajolang) Rijiju and Khonjuju.

On the other hand, the second group i.e. the Sape clan traced their migration route from a place called Jiila-Ralla. This group is considered to be a late entrant in the present region, come to help the first group during a warfare period. These people believe they are the descendants of the Memba and Khamba who migrated eastwards i.e. to the present-day Mechuka and Tuting regions of West and Upper Siang respectively. Here it is pertinent to note that the two groups have different migratory routes with different ancestral history. But, after reaching and settling in the present region, both groups speak the same language and follow the same customs and traditions, though with little variations.

Bangru is one of the less-known indigenous linguistic groups in Arunachal Pradesh pertaining to the Mongoloid sub-branch of Tibeto-Burman community, with their language, culture, tradition and a distinct life style. The word 'Bangru' refers to both the people and the language they speak. However,

1 There shows no evidence that the Aka and Miji and the Memba and Khamba are related. The information is entirely in accordance with the informants' narrations.

there is no available information and evidences to show the precise meaning of the word.

The Bangru language is also one of the minority languages existing in Arunachal Pradesh. Two dialects, the General Bangru and the Sape varieties, are mutually intelligible, and may legitimately be referred to as belonging to the identical language. Of the two Bangru dialects, the General Bangru group has the greater number of speakers.

Demography

The Bangru are about 1,023² (39.35%) out of approximately 2,600 persons in the Sarli circle, and presently dwell in one administrative centre i.e. Sarli Town and in more than 15 circle villages in the Kurung Kumey district. Although there is no separate Census record on this community, however, according to the data gathered, the Bangru account for about 1.14% of the total population of the Kurung Kumey district. The present Bangru population in Sarli Circle is alphabetically presented in the following table.

Table 1: Distribution of Bangru Population in Different Villages

Villages	Total Population	Male	Female
Bala	10	5	5
Lee	64	36	28
Lichila (Lower)	72	32	40
Lichila (Upper)	54	29	25
Machane	65	35	30
Milli	102	45	57
Molo	22	12	10
Nade	12	5	7
Namju	33	18	15
Palo	30	11	19
Rerung	1	1	0
Sape	152	75	77
Sarli Town	306	134	172
Sate	28	7	21
Wabia	66	24	42
Walu	6	2	4
Total	1023	471	552

Source: The Electoral Registration Office, Koloriang.

The above table indicates the strength of the Bangrus, one of the largest Tibeto-Burman language groups in the the Kurung Kumey district according to mother tongue. The focal point here is the number of mother tongue speakers of the Bangru language. Most people in the study area claim Bangru as their first language making Bangru the second largest Tibeto-Burman language in the district next to Nyishi. However, the matter of fact is that a significant number of people from this tribal group also speak the Nyishi language/dialect as their mother tongue. Broadly, the hub areas of Bangru encompasses about 15 villages surrounding the Sarli circle.

² This is in accordance with the recent revised electoral rolls carried out in January 2011 comprising people of 18 years of age and above. No separate population statistic for the Bangrus is available yet.

Ethnography

Settlement Patterns and Housing

A Bangru settlement is small in terms of its size and population. As per my field records, the total population of the Bangru villages varied between 6-306 people, the highest being the population of 306 people observed at Sarli Town, while the lowest is 6 people in Walu village. This is because a person was living with his Nyishi relatives in the village. However, a typical Bangru settlement usually consists of 50 to 100 populations. Each of these small settlements are inhabited by about 10-20 households and are known as Neye (village); moreover, 5-10 hamlets on a particular hill are combined under a village name.

The typical Bangru settlement is characterized by a sparse distribution lacking a regular arrangement, since the houses are distributed unevenly in the settlement area, and constructed wherever a place is available. Traditional households in a Bangru settlement are thatched and uniform in their structure. However, with the passage of time, such traditional thatched houses have been/being replaced with modern day's CGI sheets (tin sheets) to whom people deem more comfortable and secure to use. When the sons separate from their parents usually after marriage, they construct another house adjacent to their parent's house. If there is no space available, they may construct it at some other place nearby.

Social Organisation

Bangru society is patriarchal with a distinctive character of tribal endogamy and clan exogamy social system. We have already noted that the Bangru tribe is divided into five clans, and each clan into a few minor clans. Bangrus' tradition is unanimous in talking of five clans although the number of sub-clans differs. The Bangrus accept the rule of the clan system and the myths, which form its background, are a key to the understanding of almost everything that is distinctive in their way of life. Violation of tribal endogamy and clan exogamy are crimes in the Bangru society and those who break these rules are dealt with exemplary penalties. The fundamental and primary feature of social organisation is represented in every Bangru village. The presence of different clans in a village demonstrates obviously the democratic character of Bangru society.

The Bangrus constitute a well-defined and homogeneous group of people. Although their villages are scattered over a wide area, the Bangru people everywhere speak the same language and follow the same customs, have the same traditions, beliefs, rites, and ceremonies. Such small differences as they present from place to place are hardly greater than those between villagers of adjoining regions. They are all bound together by a common sentiment for the tribal name, reputation, tradition, and customs. At least five Bangrus clans, each with a distinctive name, are recognised. The word Neye, which appears in the names of each group, means village or settlement, and it seems probable that these five clans represent the 15 original Bangru villages viz. Bala, Lee, Lichila (Lower), Lichila (Upper), Machane, Milli, Molo, Nade, Namju, Palo, Rerung, Sape, Sarli Town, Sate, Wabia and Walu which contained the whole Bangru population.

Religion

The belief system and ritual practices play an extremely important part in the religious life of the Bangrus. There is a well-defined belief in certain supernatural beings able to influence for good or for evil the destinies of the living. Their religious beliefs and practices have a basic similarity with those of their neighbouring tribes like the Nyishi and the Puroik. Like other tribes, they have also developed myths about the creation, the Sun and the Moon, the origin of man and the coming of death. Their concept of the soul, which they call Arey, is that a separation of the soul and the body takes place at the time of death.

The traditional Bangru religion is called *Donyi-Polo* or *Donyi-Poloism*. They believe that some trees, stones and hills are the abodes of the spirits. Like all animistic religions, that of the Bangrus consists of the belief in a multitude of beneficent and malevolent spirits, to some is attributed the creation of the world, to the others the control of natural phenomena, and the destinies of man from birth to death are governed by a host of deities whose anger must be appeased by sacrifice through a ritual ceremonies.

The field statistics of this study show that the Bangru follow two religions, that is Donyi-Poloism and Christianity. Among the total Bangru population of 1023, the ones that follow the two religions as mentioned above are 739 and 284 respectively. Though the shamanic elements have also been found with greater significance in the Bangru religion, they identify themselves with the Nyishi religious tradition.

There are three main *Kawaye* (ritual specialists), that is the *Nyokii* or *Jiiri-Kawaye*, the *Butey-Kawaye* and the *Bunyo-Kawaye* in Bangru religious practices. They have their distinctive areas of operations in the interpretation and construction of the cosmological world as well as in the practical performances of their ritual practices. The first *Kawaye* order is the one who is gifted with extraordinary spiritual power, who could predict impending threats, cure epidemic, detects theft, heal broken bones, cure dog and snake bite, etc. The second *Kawaye* order is the one who deals with the highest form of rituals or sacrifices. The third order is the one who deals with the normal illnesses. However, it may be noted that the *Kawaye* (priests) do not occupy a distinguished position in the society, as there is not a distinct class or status for them. But by virtue of their yeoman services, they are always honoured, respected and acknowledged in the society (Rikam, 2005: 29).

Ethnicity and Language

Arunachal Pradesh is a multiethnic and multilingual state, which shelters various tribal communities and languages, such as the Bangru. The word 'Bangru' denotes both the Bangru tribal community and the language they speak. In this case, it can be said 'one tribe, one language'. That is to say, there is one-to-one relation between Bangru ethnicity and Bangru language - both are denoted by single term 'BANGRU' (Ramya, 2012a).

The Bangru Language Area

The Bangru native speakers comprise of 1.14% or 1023 people. The field data of the study clearly shows that the majority of the Bangru native speakers live in the three villages of the Sarli circle in the Kurung Kumey district, that is Sarli (306), Sape (152) and Milli (102). On the other hand, the least number of Bangru native speakers live in Rerung (1), Walu (6), Bala (10) and Nade (12) villages in the south-western part of the Sarli circle.

The Bangru language is known under several names such as 'Taju-Bangru', 'Wadu-Bangru', 'Phujoju', 'Milliju', 'Tagangju', and 'Malloju' within the Bangru community. Of these words, 'Taju-Bangru', 'Wadu-Bangru', 'Phujoju', 'Milliju', 'Tagangju', and 'Malloju' stand for 'Bangru sound' or 'Bangru speech' or 'Bangru voice', that is to say the 'Bangru Language' (Ramya, 2012a).

The linguistic zone where the Bangru language is used is the northern part of the hilly region of the Kurung Kumey district, mainly comprising the adjacent villages of the Sarli circle (Ramya, 2012c). According to the field study, Bangrus are found to have high degree of language loyalty, i.e. 93.72%.

Most Bangrus, wherever they are scattered, employ their own mother tongue, even outside of the villages and circles viz. Koloriang, Damin, Parsi-Parlo, Sangram and Nyapin circles of the Kurung Kumey district, and other districts such as the Lower Subansiri and the Papum Pare (Ramya, 2012b).

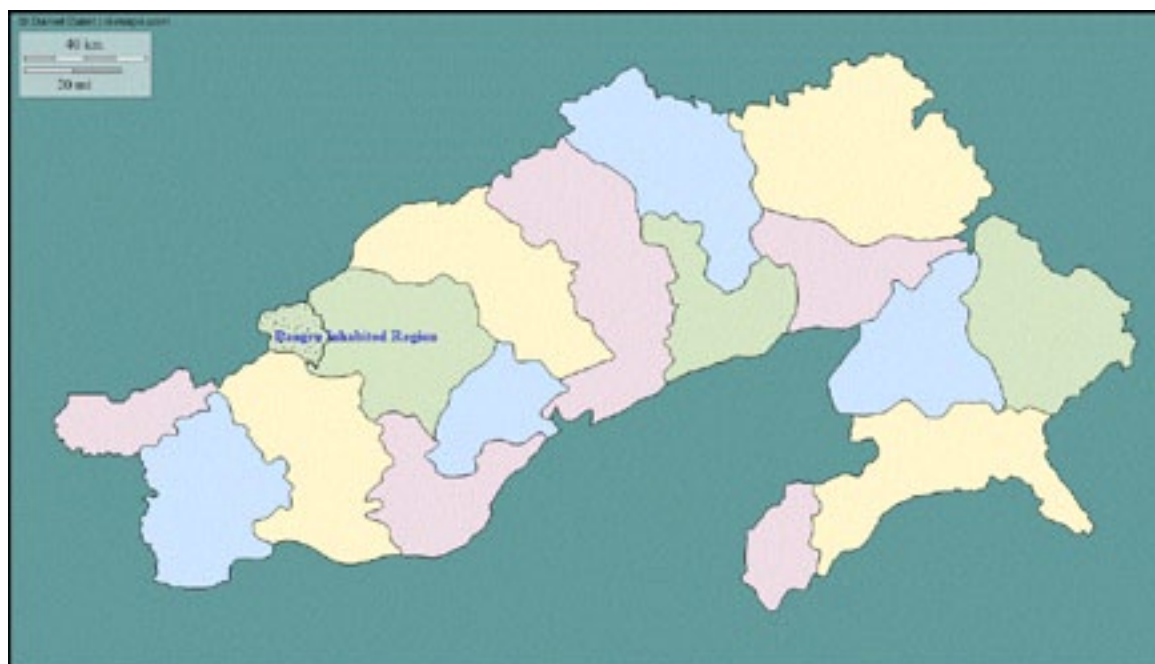


Fig. 1: Map of Arunachal Pradesh Showing Bangru Inhabited Region.

Genetic Affiliation

Bangru is an unclassified linguistic group which was earlier included in the Upper Assam language group of the Tibeto-Burman language family, though no evidence is available on its language affiliation. It is different from the languages of the Nyishi and the Puroik, but the three groups show a socially and culturally very close affinity among each other. However, it is worth noting that the Bangru language has been largely influenced by Nyishi and as a result changes have occurred in the internal reconstruction of Bangru speech forms. Due to intermingle of the Nyishi, Bangru and Puroik languages there reflects some affinities in their verbal communication. But it would not be wrong to opine that the language of Bangru is, all considered, remarkably pure. There is no reason to put the Bangru language into some linguistic diverse group and subgroups, since no specific study on linguistic affiliation of the Bangru language has been done, so far.

Sociolinguistic Situation

Domains of Language Use

For the purpose of the study, a sample of 100 respondents was taken to discern the sociolinguistic situation of the Bangru language. Both the Bangru and Nyishi languages are often used in daily life communication by the Bangrus in the study area, since people use the Nyishi language to communicate with speakers of other languages like Nyishi and Puroik. Nyishi is also used when a group of friends belonging to the above mentioned languages pays them a visit.

Table 2: *Language Used Most Frequently (in %)*

Purposes	Bangru	Nyishi	Bangru and Nyishi	Total
Counting	70	30	0	100
Singing	25	75	0	100
Joking	50	15	35	100
Bargaining/Marketing	55	45	5	100
Storytelling	50	15	35	100
Discussing/Debate	45	10	45	100
Talking to Household Members	35	10	55	100
Abusing	90	5	5	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2017.

The above table shows the use of language for different purposes. The Bangru language is mostly used in counting, bargaining and abusing, whereas the Nyishi is used mostly in singing. Both Bangru and Nyishi are used in joking, storytelling and talking to household members.

Table 3: *The Domains of Language Use (in %)*

Domains	Bangru	Nyishi	Bangru and Nyishi	Total
Telling Stories to Children	70	30	0	100
Singing at Home	70	20	10	100
Talking to Playmates	55	45	5	100
Talking to Household Member	50	15	35	100
In Marriage Invitations	45	45	10	100
In Dreaming Descriptions	35	10	55	100
In Family Gathering	90	5	5	100
In Public Meeting	10	85	5	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2011.

The above table shows that the Bangru language is used mostly in telling stories to children, singing at home and in family gathering. Nyishi is used mainly in public meetings. Bangru and Nyishi are altogether used mostly in talking to household members and in the descriptions of dreams. When writing letters to relatives either English or Hindi is preferred and when telephoning relatives the Bangru and Nyishi languages are used by all respondents.

Language Endangerment

Bangru may be considered an endangered language, since no effort has been made yet by government and indigenous institutions to preserve and promote it, though the people of the Bangru community are highly motivated and positive. The status of language endangerment is shown in the following table and figure.

Table 4: *The Status of Language Endangerment in Bangru Community (in %)*

<i>Language Status</i>	<i>Percentage of Language Status</i>
Potentially Endangered	15
Endangered	55
Don't Know	30
Total	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2011.

Figure 2: The Status of Language Endangerment.

The above table and figure show that 15% of the respondents feel that the Bangru language is potentially endangered and most of the respondents i.e. 55% feels that it is endangered. On the other hand, 30% of the respondents have no idea about the endangerment of the Bangru language.

The Reasons for Language Endangerment

The reasons for the endangerment of the Bangru language may due to the following:

- The Bangrus live in a multilingual setting comprising languages such as Nyishi, Puroik, Hindi, and English, of which Nyishi is the most influential. The pressure of the majority languages has forced them to shift from Bangru to Nyishi.
- They shifted to Nyishi because it is abundantly spoken locally, on the other hand, they shifted to Hindi because it is lingua franca in Arunachal Pradesh. They shifted to English because it is the medium of instruction at school, and it is a language that can provide jobs in the future.

Another reason is inter-marriage. There is an inter-village or inter-tribal marriage system because the people in the same village generally have blood relations. When a Bangru-speaking boy from a Bangru speaking village marries a non-Bangru speaking girl from another village, he has to give up speaking this language because the wife does not speak it and their children also do not speak it. Similarly, when a girl marries a boy from another village she has to go to her husband's house where she does not find any speaker of her language and gives up speaking it and her children also do not acquire it.

No remarkable attempts for the promotion and protection of the language were made in the past and the same situation is also present nowadays.

Bangru is used in very limited domains: it is not used in education, mass media, and wider communication.

Code Mixing

Most of the speakers (80% in the sample), generally switch to other languages while speaking their language; while 20% answered that they do not switch into another languages. This is because the appropriate words and phrases are easily available for objects and ideas in other languages. Sometimes it is easy to talk on certain topics in other languages. Some people think that mixing words from other languages will not spoil the beauty and purity of their language, and make the Bangru language more intelligible.

Multilingualism and Language Attitude

The Bangru language exists within the context of a national language of India, Hindi, which may also be considered as the lingua franca of the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh. All schools available to Bangru children use English as a medium, and as education levels rise, so does bilingualism among the people in the district and the state. As mentioned above, there are a few exclusively Bangru villages where children are exposed to other languages early on in life, particularly the national language. However, this does not mean that everyone is proficiently bilingual. Both testing and sketchy

information show that many, if not, most rural Bangru children are monolingual until school age. But of course, few children gain real bilingual proficiency until they complete five years of schooling i.e. primary level of schooling. Many Bangru village women are also essentially monolingual.

While the Bangru people have historically held a status of unknown ethnic group in Arunachal Pradesh, there is a growing sense of tribal pride among Bangru speakers. Even in the town/urban centres, they speak their language openly and without apology in almost any informal setting, although, if able, they will switch to the Hindi, the lingua franca if joined by a non-Bangru person.

According to the data collected from the field, the Bangrus use Nyishi, Hindi, Assamese and others as their second language. Among the sample of 100 respondents in the current study, the second language for 64 people is Nyishi; 11 people speak Hindi; 18 people speak Assamese; and 7 people speak Puroik.

This provides the sociolinguistic scenario of adopting the different second languages by the Bangru peoples as per the diverse social linguistic setting in the diverse geographical setting of the Kurung Kumey district.

Language Preservation, Communication, and Vivacity/Vitality

The concern of language feasibility is an imperative one for any minority language in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, taken into account its complex multi-lingual and multiethnic context. Although it is one of the state's less-known, smallest linguistic communities, the number of Bangru speakers is actually on the rise, from the existing 1,023 native speakers (this accounts only for those who has an age group of more than 18 years old). Further, many people of other tribal groups like Nyishi and Puroik now speak the Bangru language. However, there is an urgent need of the constitution in the state of Arunachal Pradesh which could bring new freedom and enthusiasm for language development. This will pave the way for more freedom and enthusiasm for native languages to be used in local administrations, and it would be safe to assume that the Bangru language will have great vivacity in the future course.

The communication and use of the Bangru language from old generation to the young is not so discouraging in comparison with the other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Still the young generations in the Bangru community employ their own mother tongue. Yet, it should be noted that high levels of adeptness in a second language throughout the entire community do not necessarily indicate lesser vitality of the mother tongue, and the probabilities are very high for Bangru to linger actively in use for very a long time.

Conclusion

The Sarli circle of Kurung Kumey district is the only place where the Bangru language is spoken in day-to-day life. It is also spoken in the Damin circle by a few speakers. There remain young people in villages that know the language to some extent but do not use it in daily lives. The Bangru language has been completely marginalised by the Lingua Franca, Hindi and a neighbouring language, Nyishi. The fact that most of the speakers are bilingual, that transmission from one generation to another has been somehow discontinued and it is used only in a limited domains of natural conversations justify

the notion that Bangru is at the verge of extinction.

But, till now Bangru speakers seem to be very loyal towards their language and willing to preserve it. They are eager to make their children learn their own language along with Nyishi and other languages. Until there is a ray of hope for the revitalization of the language as there are schools in Bangru villages in which there are around 80-90 percent of Bangru students. If a multilingual education is introduced in these schools, the future generations of Bangru will preserve and speak their language along with English, Hindi and Nyishi.

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