

Grassroots language action and legislature for Sonsorolese¹

Vasiliki Vita

675802@soas.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0002-7913-5869

Abstract

As more and more linguists are shifting towards recognising and documenting linguistic ecosystems, multilingual, and/or translanguaging practices (Di Carlo, Ojong Diba, & Good 2021), the question remains as to how these practices are navigated and represented at the policy level. The Young Historians of Sonsorol (YH) are a youth group focusing on the preservation of the Sonsorolese language and culture in the Republic of Palau. Sonsorolese is a language in the Republic of Palau, spoken in the Outer Islands of the Republic, Sonsorol, Fanna, Pulo Anna, and Merir, and only has official status within the State of Sonsorol. This paper aims to answer the following questions: How did speakers of the Sonsorolese assert their linguistic human rights at the policy level during the youth-led language documentation and maintenance initiative (Vita et al. 2023)? What was the role of the initiative? I answer these questions by discussing a) volunteer and general audience’s reactions to the activities and Sonsorolese languages, b) the impact of youth initiatives on the State Legislature within the timeframe of October 2022 to January 2023 and of the 11th Regular Session of the Sonsorol State Legislature in January 2023; and c) its potential implications concerning language variation within the State of Sonsorol. The process involves YH engaging in meta-documentation (Austin 2013), and in particular sociolinguistic documentation (Childs, Good & Mitchell 2014), as well as with policymakers and, finally, YH sharing results in various ways and environments following local norms and practices.

Keywords: Language documentation, language policy and planning, meta-documentation, Sonsorolese, Micronesia

1. Introducing²

“*Emohō*³ [good] ask some questions that you can keep for, I really like this cause you gonna like make a document for this and can keep for a long time”, “and I don't know who's going to learn [to] cause everybody here and only one go down”. “I want to make my own document; I will go to Sonsorol and then start”. (sn_sb_dec_09_22)⁴

*Laturi Matalō*⁵ of the *Dongosarō*⁶ municipality was excited to speak about his duties as one of the chiefs of Sonsorol when we asked for an interview. Our wayfinding journey takes us to the

¹ A first draft of this paper was presented at BAAL SIG Language Policy and Planning Conference at SOAS, University of London in June 2023. I would like to thank Julia Sallabank, Candide Simard, Tom Jelpke, Dean Terry, Lazarus Okurut, the two anonymous reviewers, and the audience at my presentation for their comments and suggestions on earlier drafts. All remaining mistakes are my own.

² The active verbs in the titles are used to emphasise agency (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech 2021) in the processes of language policy and planning described in this paper.

³ The spelling for the local names used in this paper is based on results from Vita & Pedro (2021) and after meetings and workshops with YH in October 2022 and March 2024.

⁴ You can find some of the recordings cited here at our Endangered Languages Archive collection (Vita et al. 2023)

⁵ The chief responsible for welcoming arrivals on the island.

⁶ Local name for Sonsorol island.

*Farauri State Government.*⁷ Here, we mainly interacted with the municipalities and *Fani Hahori Farau*,⁸ where we learnt about the local political structure and its history and more about how decisions are made.

Table 1. The purposes, goals, and duties of The Young Historians of Sonsorol State | Wonoula Lei Hatinapa Ri Faruya

Purposes	Goals/Duties	
	Short-term	Long-term
To collect and preserve the history (culture, custom, heritage, etc.) of Sonsorol State (Dongosaro, Fanna, Puro, and Melieli) for every youth of every generation.	To document and to collect data (pictures, videos, documents, etc.) through research and interviews.	To publish Sonsorol history book for youth.
To help educate Sonsorol State Youth about our culture, our customs, and our heritage.	Present collected data to the youth through forums, seminars, and/or workshops.	To publish children’s story book with illustrations.
To create programmes that will provide the teaching of our traditions, customs, and history.	To record the family tree for every hamlet, clans, and island. To conduct Youth Cultural Projects on our islands on Summer Trips or whenever possible	To build our own museum to store, preserve, and display our collections such as history books, story books, pictures, audio recordings, and artefacts, and many more that contribute to our history. To publish Sonsorol history book for youth.

When I use “we,” I refer to the Young Historians of Sonsorol (YH, Table 1), a youth group in the Republic of Palau, as no work presented here was done on my own. Our journey is one that “cannot be viewed as belonging to any one person, and wayfinding is never done on one’s own” (Iosefo, Harris & Holman Jones 2020: 21). Wayfinding is a form of critical autoethnography, “an embodied, practical, adaptive, and relationally driven practise, ... [that] calls on researchers to immerse themselves in journeys of discovery and transformation that value [indigenous] cultural knowledges and acknowledge [their] blind spots” (Iosefo, Harris & Holman Jones 2020: 23). This critical autoethnographic framework entails self-reflection for the westerner to navigate the Pacific, declining “the hegemony of ‘official’ and objective knowledge by telling stories that are located, engaged” (Iosefo, Harris & Holman Jones 2020: 21) and in alliance with others.

The discussion of the journeys here is from my perspective as a non-indigenous volunteer working with the group for the past six years (see also Vita & Pedro 2021). This means that the

⁷ Sonsorol State Government.

⁸ Sonsorol State Legislature.

evaluation of research findings here comes from my inherently western perspective. I started my journey under a western definition of volunteering, that is, “engaging in activities that benefit someone or something else such as a person, organisation, or cause” (Estes et al. 2023: 2) in order to “give back” (Woodbury 2011) to the speakers who helped me with my MA dissertation (Vita 2020). Currently, engaging with Pacific research protocols (Smith 2012), I learn and un-learn how to be an ally (Davis et al. 2022) in a more holistic community engagement and community-centred approach (Estes et al. 2023) as part of the *wari*,⁹ following Sonsorolese values of respect and relationships.

The active verbs in the headings also represent our participation in various aspects of social life in Koror, Palau, where many speakers of Sonsorolese currently live (Walda-Mandel 2016), within the timeline of October 2022 to January 2023. This timeline coincides with a YH initiative funded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) (Vita et al. 2023; Vita, Nestor & Marino 2023). Documentation of community engagement occurred through surveys (Childs, Good & Mitchell 2014), semi-structured interviews (Skinner 2012), participant observation (Shah 2017), and visual ethnography (Pink 2013). Austin (2013) calls this process ‘meta-documentation’, particularly in relation to language documentation initiatives. Considering there are limited descriptions of practices that connect the results of grassroots language (meta-)documentation work and how they may influence language policy processes,¹⁰ I follow Estes et al. (2023) and frame the action of meta-documenting as part of a more holistic approach where the documentary linguist is actively participating in community (or volunteering), leading to wider impact, from individual wellbeing to democratic participation. By focusing on the specific YH language documentation initiative and its impact on the speech community, the paper aims to answer the following questions:

- How did speakers of Sonsorolese assert their linguistic human rights at the policy level?
- What was the role of the youth-led language documentation and maintenance initiative in doing so?

⁹ Vehicle.

¹⁰ An exception might be Sallabank’s research (Sallabank 2010; Sallabank 2012; Sallabank & King 2022).

2. Wayfinding...

2.1 *Beluu er a Belau*¹¹



Figure 1. Map of Palau (Available at: http://www.vidiani.com/maps/maps_of_australia_and_oceania/maps_of_palau/large_detailed_political_map_of_palau_with_cities_and_airports.jpg)

The Republic of Palau is a small archipelago nation in Micronesia in the Philippines Sea (Figures 1 & 2). It became independent from the United States in 1994, and its population does not exceed 17000 (Matsumoto 2020). Nowadays, it comprises 16 states, 14 of which are considered ethnically similar. Only the two outer states of Hatohobei and Sonsorol, in the Southwest area of the Republic, are diverse. The State of Sonsorol comprises the islands of *Dongosarô* (or Sonsorol), *Fannâ* (Fanna), *Melieli* (or Merir) and *Ppurô* (or Pulo Anna). Each island has its own traditional council headed by a chief who is supported by advisors. The titles of the chiefs and their advisors vary depending on the island. Currently, there are around 20 people who live on Sonsorol, around 15 on Pulo Anna, 2 on Fanna, and none on Merir.

¹¹ Republic of Palau

Inhabitants move back and forth from the islands to Koror, one of the bigger islands of Palau, to acquire resources, such as food and gas, and to see family members. Trips to and from the islands occur every three months.¹²

The national language is Palauan (ISO 639-2 pau), but both English and Palauan have official status. That is, official texts and administrative issues are conducted in English, while Palauan is used in everyday, informal, and local contexts, exemplifying arguably a case of diglossia (Britain & Matsumoto 2015). The Republic has had a diverse history of language policies with diglossic situations starting with Palauan-Japanese (Matsumoto 2020) transitioning to Palauan-English when the country became a Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, which the United States administered on behalf of the United Nations from 1947 to 1978. The Republic still relies heavily on US funding, with its economy focusing on the tourism industry, with visitors coming primarily from Japan and China.

Matsumoto (2020) states that in the last twenty years, there have been changes in both national and family language policies in Palau. In the past, only elite Palauan families primarily used English. However, nowadays, more and more Palauans are increasingly using English to raise their children, particularly in urban Koror. This has led to increasing worries about the status of Palauan, leading to the creation of the Palauan Language Commission in 2009 to preserve, standardise, and encourage the use of the local language. Matsumoto (2020) suggests that corpus planning might not be enough to preserve Palauan. On the contrary, local policymakers should focus on status and prestige planning by politicians and celebrities.¹³

2.2 Sonsorolese languages

Sonsorolese is a nuclear Micronesian language belonging to the Chuukic dialectal continuum of western Micronesia, different from Palauan (van den Berg 2014; Tibbetts 2019). According to Eberhard, Simons & Fennig (2021), there are less than 400 speakers of Sonsorolese.¹⁴ In the past, the islands were densely populated, but for economic and environmental reasons (e.g., typhoons), their inhabitants migrated to the bigger islands of Palau and specifically the Echang hamlet in Koror. This has led to the emergence of a vibrant community in Koror where islanders mix Sonsorolese, Tobian, English, and Palauan. Tibbetts (2019: 7), when discussing Tobian people and their connection to their island, mentions that they were accepted by Palauans, even if that was in the form of a minority community, engaging in a "dually fluid society" between Palau and their home island of Hatohobei. Walda-Mandel (2016) also speaks of the Sonsorolese as having "their home island on them at all times: an internalised home away from home," 'carrying' values, history, and identity, with language being an important aspect of Sonsorolese identity both in migration and on their islands.

¹² See Walda-Mandel (2016) for a more detailed description.

¹³ See also Okayama (2015) for an analysis of language policy and planning for Palauan.

¹⁴ There is no census data regarding this, or the exact numbers of speakers per regions around the world. Furthermore, there is currently no study regarding competency levels.



Figure 2. Map of Palau with a focus on Sonsorol (Available at: <https://www.worldatlas.com/maps/palau>)

Sonsorolese youth have expressed the desire to document and transmit traditional knowledge and heritage, leading to the creation of YH. Despite the official status of Sonsorolese in the state of Sonsorol, its official use remains arguably symbolic, as it is mainly used for announcements and invitations only. Official documents are written in English (Taborosi et al. n.d.). Speakers still use the language in the community, but there are concerns about language shift.¹⁵ YH, being a group aiming at documenting and teaching Sonsorolese history, culture, and tradition, are not a language-only focused group. Daphne Nestor (Vita & Nestor 2023), the vice-chairwoman of the group, notes that:

“We’re trying to capture the language through our research and documentation of the Sonsorolese culture, custom, and heritage. To learn the culture is how we plan to preserve the language of Sonsorolese”.

3. Documenting...

3.1 endangered languages

Languages are ideological constructions, historically tied to the nation-state of the nineteenth century, associated with particular national, territorial, and social groups (Romaine 2006). Multilingualism nowadays no longer views languages as separate bounded entities (Ndhlovu & Makalela 2021), but rather as resources employed by social actors to achieve communicative

¹⁵ I discuss narratives of endangerment in my upcoming PhD thesis.

goals (Blackledge & Creese 2017; Heller 2007). Multilingual language policies change language environments, creating ideological and implementation spaces for a diversity of languages (Hornberger 2002). In the context of endangered languages, multilingual policies can encourage people to re-imagine (Achebe 2019) their languages with confidence, pride, and self-esteem (Soria 2015).

The field of language documentation has long included individual researchers who reached out to communities in order to elicit language data for linguistic descriptions.¹⁶ However, nowadays more and more communities wish to not only be included in language documentation projects symbolically, but also to reinforce ownership of their own linguistic heritage, with aims that are quite different to those of linguists. Usually, community aims focus on the creation of pedagogical and maintenance materials (Grenoble, Rice & Richards 2008). For this reason, more and more language documentation projects are collaborative, and a call for more applied linguists to be involved has been extended (Dobrin & Schwartz 2016; Leonard & Haynes 2010; Fitzgerald 2020; Leonard 2012).

Theorisations of what makes a language “worthy” of documentation, how languages are described and discussed, and its products constitute other forms of colonisation (Leonard 2018). The current shifts in the field aim to change different aspects of the practise, one of them being representations of the language(s), the people who claim it/them, and their political sovereignty. Arguably, one way of practically doing so for western researchers is by appreciating and respectfully engaging not only with the language(s) and speakers, but the culture itself by recognising and acknowledging one’s epistemological orientation (Iosefo, Harris & Holman Jones 2020). Another way could be by engaging in meta-documentation (Austin 2013) and sociolinguistic documentation (Childs, Good & Mitchell 2014), documenting relationships, attitudes, and ideologies towards the languages and the documentation process itself.

3.2 following the YH way

Working with YH and considering the importance of relationships, respect, and adaptability, we tried to involve everyone in our language documentation activities, and this was YH’s desire from the beginning. We created teams of volunteers, me included, with local team leaders and invited three advisors who throughout the process provided guidance, support, and promotion of our activities. The advisors are active members of the community: a *Fani Hahori Farau* legislator and education specialist, a local businesswoman, and a nurse whose mother is the eldest woman in the community. We also worked with volunteers who live in *Dongosarô*, and communications happened via the *Farauri State Government* radio.

¹⁶ See Crippen & Robinson (2013) for a defense of the "lone wolf" model in language documentation.



Figure 3. Jayten Andrew, Jerry Ngiraremiang, Chelsea Pedro & Isaac Theodore talking about *hosô* and evaluating their praxis (sn_hs_nov_21_22).

Participants in our activities included *Farauri State Government* officers and workers (Figure 4), *Sonsorolese* elders, *Sonsorolese* youth aged 11–45 (Figure 3), traditional island chiefs, *Fani Hahori Farau*, local parishioners, businesspeople, and islanders on *Dongosarô*, such as teachers, nurses, fishermen, road and ground workers, as well as, people in *Echang* who do not identify as *Sonsorolese*, but self-report that speak or understand the languages to an extent. Participation occurred at different degrees and modalities, with some having contributed words for the dictionary database, others their knowledge of traditional practices (Figure 4), and others sharing their opinions about their languages and their future both in person and online.

Around 200 speakers of *Sonsorolese* currently live in *Koror*. Approximately 100 of them shared their opinions and ideas about their languages with us in the form of a survey and semi-structured ethnographic interviews. An adaptation of the Third National Indigenous Languages Survey found on the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) website was used.¹⁷ Snowball sampling, interviewing as many speakers as possible during the timeline of my fieldwork, was implemented. Speakers' opinions are presented with direct quotes.¹⁸ Thematic analysis of the data so far has shown that participants in our activities and the village in *Koror* agree that using *Sonsorolese* languages is closely related to the

¹⁷ I discuss limitations of the tool used for data collection in my upcoming PhD thesis with similar findings discussed in Di Carlo (2023). The data is currently not anonymised and cannot be shared as the analysis is still in progress.

¹⁸ Quotes, especially those coming from written responses to the survey, have not been edited.

preservation of Sonsorolese cultures, their sense of pride as a unique people, and their sense of belonging in their surroundings.¹⁹



Figure 4. Lucy Pedro working on the WeSay dictionary database at the *Farauri State Government* office (sn_dc_jun_28_23).

4. Impacting...

4.1 individuals in terms of...

The idea that languages and cultures exist outside holistic interwoven networks as separate, bounded entities is a result and effort of the colonial system, and counterintuitive for many speakers (Pennycook 2023). In the Pacific, this manifests in a narrow functionalist view where tradition, cultural renaissance, agency, tribal wisdom, and grassroots solutions are taglines for developmentalists and educationists (Quanchi 2004). “Programmes” usually do not include remote villages and outer islands. Indigenous epistemologies, and by extension languages and cultures, are situated in their own context – a collection of entities that pass the knowledge from one generation to the next, with practices for this constantly changing. Ideas and definitions about culture, custom/kastom (Akin 2004), identity, and tradition are dichotomised instead of being accepted as fluid.

4.1.1 culture

Trans-indigeneity recognises the cultural connections of indigenous peoples to specific places, while highlighting the importance of relationships, not only of islanders who speak the same language, but also across Oceania. Pacific languages enable exploration, celebration, and

¹⁹ Terms such as culture, pride and belongingness used for the impact at this level are not defined. Apart from culture, which was used in the prompt of the Likert scale, the other two terms were identified during thematic analysis of responses.

deepening of relationships through which cultural identity is constructed, strengthening connections (Kennedy 2019), and ensuring wellbeing by increasing self-confidence and a sense of belonging (Matika et al. 2021). In Palau as well, Soaladaob (2010) notes that Palauan knowledge—language, culture, and custom, is connected to practice and participation, with identities being connected to it and, by extension active, engaged, and involved. For our participants, as well, Sonsorolese cultures cannot survive without Sonsorolese languages (Figure 5).

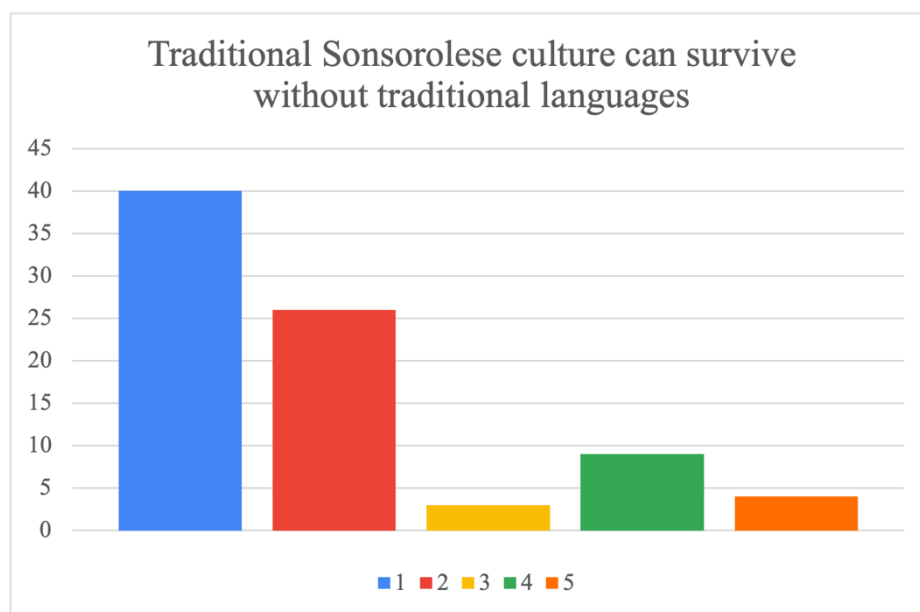


Figure 5. Traditional Sonsorolese culture can survive without traditional languages.²⁰

Sonsorolese languages and cultures seem interconnected “because you have to know the language so you can understand the culture and everything.” Culture seems to be strongly connected to respect and in

“the way we speak there is custom and culture. The way you were raised we choose that we are a different people by speaking a language. There is respect in the language how we use it the way we address talking to other people and how we behave in community, so I think the language really expresses the culture”.

Walda-Mandel (2016: 106) also notes that for speakers of Sonsorolese, respect manifests “in the bowed down posture when a younger one passes an older Sonsorolese, as well as when in discourses or debates the younger ones do not talk back to the older ones and instead usually are quiet”.²¹ For ethnic Palauans, respect, sharing, cooperation, and participation in social life are central parts of what it means to be Palauan (Soaladaob 2010). For speakers of Sonsorolese, “our language tells us who we are and where we came from”.

4.1.2 pride

“The use of my traditional language us my identity and I am proud and happy to acknowledge my character as an individual from a small island and I take pride in it :P”.

²⁰ In all Figures 1 signifies Strongly Disagree and 5 Strongly Agree.

²¹ Henne-Ochoa (2018) discusses how it is important to consider aspects of communication like the one presented here when engaging in language revitalisation and maintenance.

Respect, relationships, and participation are all elements of the Sonsorolese cultural identity (Walda-Mandel 2016) manifest through language and impact speakers' wellbeing (Figure 6). When asked how speakers of Sonsorolese feel when they speak their language, self-confidence and pride come up repeatedly: “deep down, I would feel great because I am confident and proud where I came from.” Not only that, but “I feel proud I have a language I can speak that is other than English.” Multilingualism is recognised and seen as a positive attribute emphasising the importance of trans-indigeneity in relationships not only of islanders who speak the same language but also across Oceania and globally (Kennedy 2019), with a speaker noting, “It’s more like a pride and proud to speak many languages.” In short, “knowing your heritage, culture, and traditions affects your wellbeing, [and] gives you a sense of belonging and pride.”

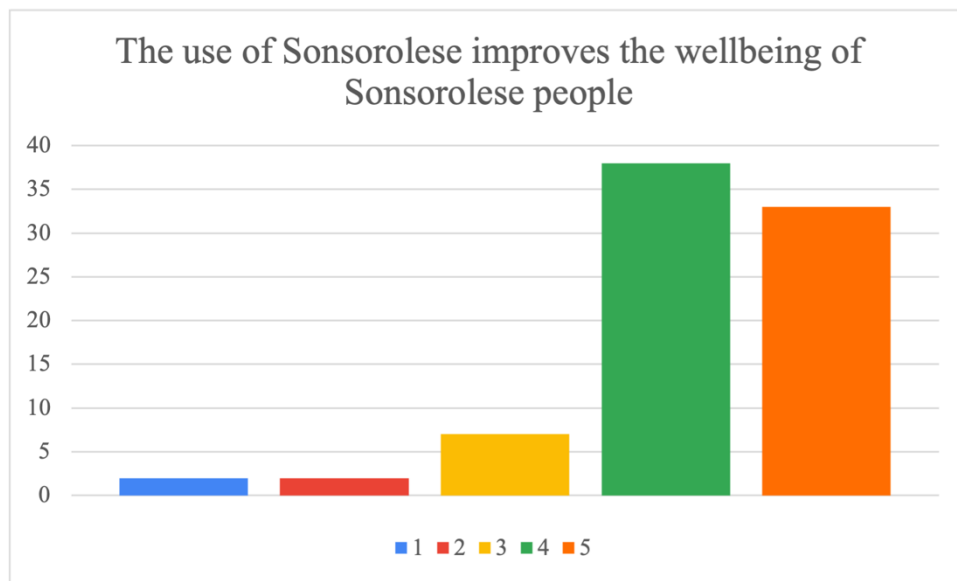


Figure 6. The use of Sonsorolese improves the wellbeing of Sonsorolese people.

4.1.3 belongingness

“Language and culture is the identity of people that makes them unique. That uniqueness and sense of belonging and respect is important for the security of individuals. Such feeling can mean emotional, mental and spiritual health for individuals in the group. The weight of meaning behind one’s language is much different than hearing the same meaning in other languages. Therefore, the expression of thoughts and feelings is better expressed and communicated through one’s own language”.

Language, culture, wellbeing, belongingness, pride, and their connection to the land of the Sonsorolese are other examples of interwoven networks of inseparable, boundless entities that traverse locations and time (Walda-Mandel 2016), evidence of perseverance and resilience (Thomas, Mitchell & Arseneau 2016).

Relationships are important, not only with individuals, but also with the land. “[Speaking Sonsorolese] gives me a strong sense of belonging, as in a close relationship in a family. Our traditional language certainly identifies us as a unique community of people.” Language and multilingualism, as mentioned in 4.1.2., are seen as important for establishing and maintaining meaningful connections with a variety of people. Speakers highlight the connection between language and land with “I feel like I’m truly from there, like you belong there,” with evidence

supporting the benefits of speaking and learning the language by reconnecting with the natural environment where it grew from (Hermes et al., 2021; Schick, 2022; Willie, 2021).

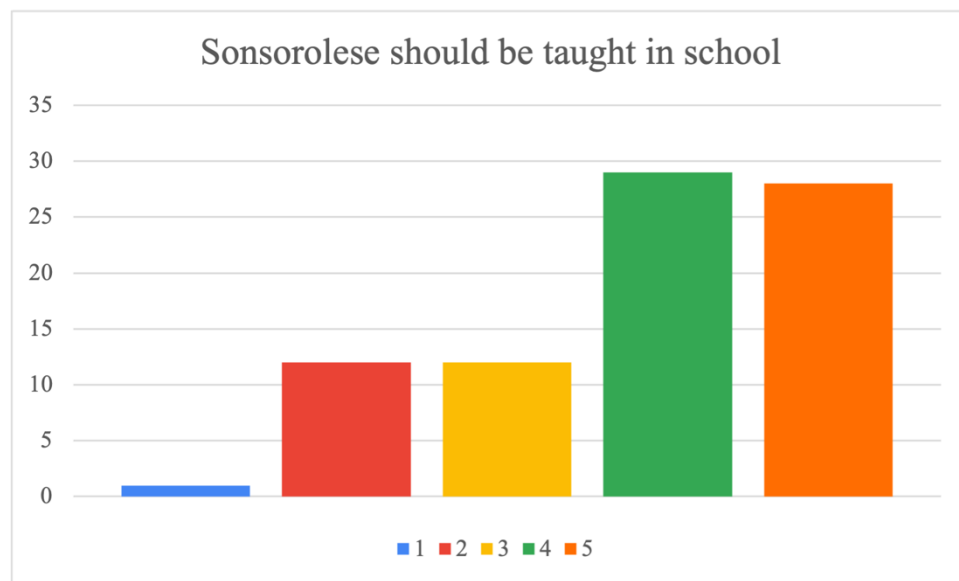


Figure 7. Sonsorolese should be taught in school.

At the same time, views on this are conflicted. Although many speakers agree that Sonsorolese should be taught in school (Figure 7), the location and who should learn them are controversial.²²

“I don’t know if it really has to be. I don’t know. I like it to be taught in a school setting, but I don’t know if we should really like make it in school. I don’t know... I want it to be taught but cause I’m thinking like... because if it’s in school it’s gonna require other non-speaking... you know like... without like... not necessarily a descent of these islands to learn it. And maybe that’s OK or maybe it’s not OK for parents or other people. But I think for me my focus is for the people of these islands that it stays with us. Because I think when it... my fear is... that it goes and then it becomes something else. I don’t know”.

Although many speakers of Sonsorolese are proud of speaking multiple languages and being able to connect with many people (Walda-Mandel 2016), there is hesitation for other people to learn Sonsorolese through schooling against their will. Thus, it is acceptable to teach the languages.

“In our schools in Sonsorol, then yeah, but in, you know, in Koror and other school I don't think there's a need to for other people to learn the language cause you know Sonsorolese is not Palau's national language”.

These ideologies perhaps are a result of the influence of different power interrelations, whether that is, colonial powers with the enforcement of schooling in general, and Japanese and later English learning in particular, enforced on Palauans and Sonsorolese through the various language policies, to more recently the enforcement of Palauan in the school system (Okayama 2015). Currently, it might be difficult to influence national policy in Palau, but what about

²² I do not unpack tensions regarding opposing views about teaching Sonsorolese in schools in this paper. My upcoming PhD thesis deals with this in detail.

locally? Would it be possible to translate these feelings and ideologies documented from our activities with YH into concrete actions asserting Sonsorolese language rights?

4.2 the state and...

To communicate our findings, both from the sociolinguistic documentation, and meta-documentation we organised events where we showcased our work (sn_fys_feb_11_23 and sn_cd_mar_18_23), discussed them with family and friends at night after work,²³ in meetings with our advisors, and attended sessions of *Fani Hahori Farau* concerning language, culture, education, and island development (sn_leg_jan_03_22 and sn_leg_jan_09_22). *Fani Hahori Farau* is responsible for monitoring and supporting all aspects of the political structure of the *Farauri State Government*, with the local municipalities falling under the *Farauri State Government*, which works with the National Government. Regarding language, Article XIII, Section 1 (1983) notes that

“English and Sonsorolese (the dialect spoken on each island in Sonsorol State) are the official languages of the State. The English and Sonsorolese versions of this Constitution shall be equally authoritative; in case of conflict, the English version shall prevail”.

4.2.1 *Fani Hahori Farau*

In the *Farauri State Government*, there is no pressure to adopt one variety over the other, as everybody recognises that they are all changing. On the contrary, there is pressure for solidarity when Southwest Islands-related topics are discussed,²⁴ and being clear about the languages of the *Farauri State Government* having the name Sonsorolese over Echangese. That is, the languages are related to the physical spaces of the islands of the *Farauri State Government*, much as they are for other Palauans as well (Soaladaob 2010). These ideas might be representative of Western dichotomies of “us versus them,” or as expressed by many participants, “we have our language, they have their own”.²⁵ Despite that, speakers of Sonsorolese learn Palauan at school (Matsumoto 2020), and through intermarriage, increasing numbers of Palauans are learning Sonsorolese (Walda-Mandel 2016).

In July 2022, *Fani Hahori Farau* proposed SS-Bill-No.-10-18. SS-Bill-No.-10-18 focuses on celebrating and showcasing the cultures of the islands of the *Farauri State Government*, perhaps constituting efforts for maintenance and preservation with symbolic value rather than revitalisation with use in mind (Figure 8). However, there seems to be a desire for the promotion and preservation of what is described as the ‘beneficial aspects. Arguably, this relates to the topics documented and events organised by YH, considering that when SS-Bill-No.-10-18 was to be signed, YH was invited to assist with the organisation of the first Sonsorol State Cultural Day in 2024 (Figure 10).

The final version of SS-Bill-No.-10-18 (Figure 9) was proposed in January 2023. In this version, after the amendments, there seem to be specific activities and celebrations, including songs, teachings of cultural taboos, dances, and fishing competitions. Language is not specifically mentioned; however, it is a central element in all of them (see Nestor’s comment in 2.2.). Teaching, learning, performing, and celebrating happen in the context where the

²³ Walda-Mandel (2016) also discusses this practise.

²⁴ See Walda-Mandel (2016) for a discussion on the interaction of different peoples in Echang.

²⁵ See Chikasha & Beukes (2021) for similar findings in Zimbabwe with the division being one of the motivations for reclamation.

languages developed (Hermes et al., 2021). This is an example of grassroots language initiatives directly influencing language policies, with the speech community taking ownership of which aspects are to be revitalised, maintained, and celebrated.

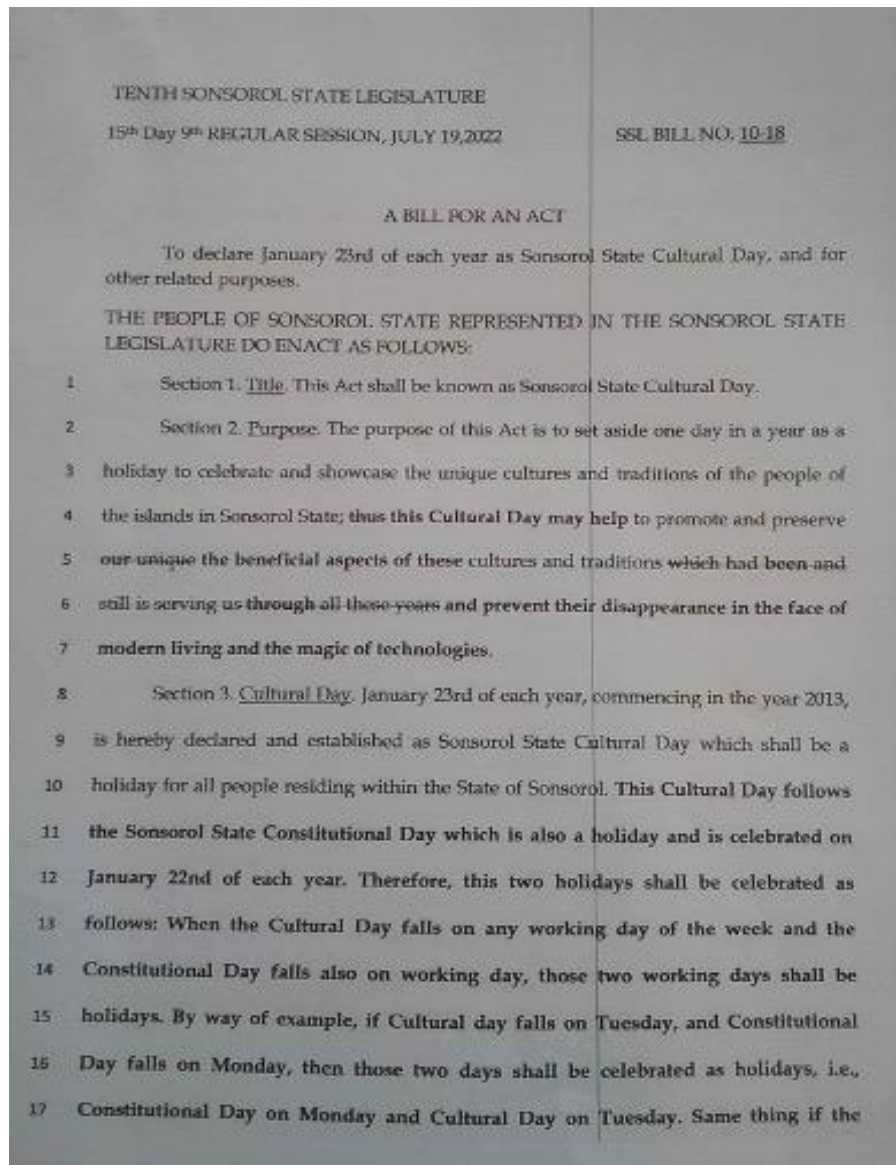


Figure 8. SS-Bill-No.-10-18.

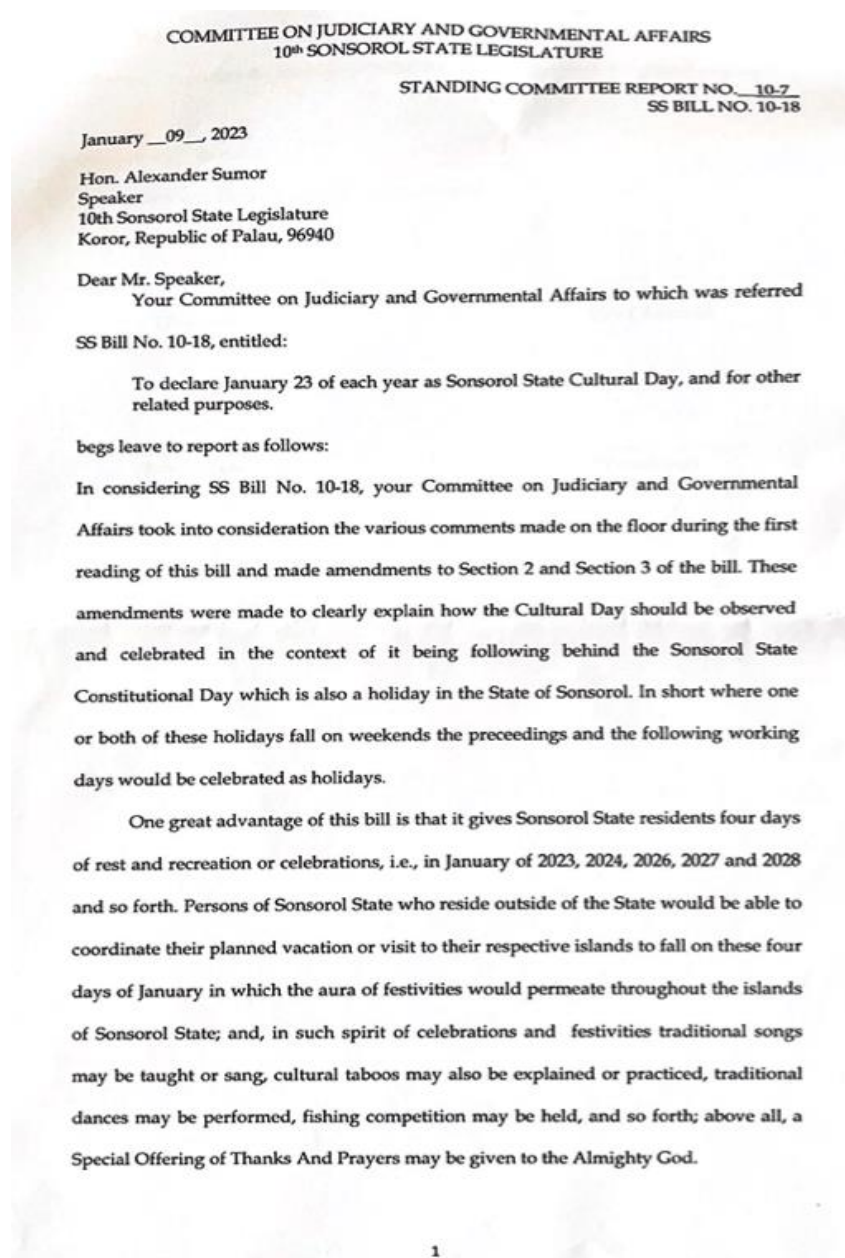


Figure 9. Final SS-Bill-No.-10-18.

4.2.2 re-representations of language

Various studies from psychology and life sciences (Zavaleta-Cortijo et al. 2023; Watson et al. 2022; Thomas, Mitchell & Arseneau 2016) underline the connection between language, culture, and resilience. Results from the COVID-19 pandemic show that indigenous holistic approaches and practices that consider humans and their sociocultural environment by understanding and honouring relations, original languages, and ceremonies are more effective at facing health crises, the climate crisis, and achieving sustainable development. Leonard (2018) underlines that it is a common way for speech community members to define ‘language’ in reference to culture. By involving as many individuals in our activities within the language ecology (Mühlhäusler 2000), speakers and non-speakers, they, and by extension we, shared the language practices and attitudes with the audiences most concerned (4.2.). By showcasing the younger generation’s desire to preserve language, culture, pride, and their sense of belongingness by documenting them and working with a policymaker as an advisor, led to the

voting of a policy that promotes and celebrates the Sonsorolese islands' cultures and Sonsorolese peoples' sovereignty over representations of their languages.



Figure 10. Team Habwang Leader, Legislature Speaker, Team Bwirihi Leader, Sonsorol State Governor, and Legislator (from left to right) signing SS-Bill-No.-10-18 on the 40th *Farauri State Constitution Day*.

Instead of limiting representations of a language, particularly when its representations are a 30-hour audio and video documentation project, we tried to avoid them becoming representations of the people who claim it, and by extension also of their political sovereignty (Leonard 2018). For example, although the initial funding proposal focused on the variety spoken on Sonsorol Island, while documenting speakers of other varieties, they requested to participate, eventually switching the title of our project to Sonsorolese rather than just *Ramari Dongosarô*.²⁶ Daphne Nestor shared that we should not talk about Sonsorolese as Echangese, which is the name of the hamlet many speakers reside in Koror, because this further promotes the ideology that Sonsorolese is a lesser dialect of Palauan that Palauans do not understand, rather than a completely different language (Vita & Nestor 2023).

Political sovereignty in the case of SS-Bill-No.-10-18 seems to be exercised by facing misrepresentation of Sonsorolese languages and cultures that are either seen as one, that is, the variety spoken on Sonsorol island, or as a dialect of Palauan spoken in the Echang hamlet in Koror. These misrepresentations are arguably the result of internal dichotomies that arise because of Western structures (Romaine 2006), in this case, bringing the four islands together under the political umbrella of *Farauri State*. By celebrating the cultures and traditions of the Sonsorol islands, SS-Bill-No.-10-18 celebrates the diversity, the same diversity that is also

²⁶ See Oda (2007) about differences between the *Ramari Dongosarô* and *Ramari Ppur*. You can also find annotations from both varieties on Vita et al. (2023). Elizabeth Urieriwao Yangowemau uses *Ramari Ppur*.

represented in YH's initiatives,²⁷ rather than a homogeneous Sonsorolese identity²⁸ that is assumed because of the hybrid²⁹ political structure of *Farauri State Government*. It is also worth mentioning that SS-Bill-No.-10-18 represents not only the multilingual ideologies of Sonsorolese speakers, but also does not deal with education policy specifically, being considerate of speakers' conflicting ideologies about schooling once again. At the same time, SS-Bill-No.-10-18 is a representation of the Sonsorolese interwoven network where languages are not seen as bounded, separate entities (Pennycook 2023), but rather as parts of a network of culture, practices, performances, education, relationships, and nature.³⁰

5. Discussing holistic language documentation

In our journeys, we travelled in various settings: islands in the Pacific, offices, fields, gymnasiums, houses, the Internet, and many people speaking many languages joined us (Figure 11). Recent developments in documentary linguistics aim to recognise these networks and work within them in various ways. Relationships can be documented through sociolinguistic documentation of the linguistic ecology (Childs, Good & Mitchell 2014; Mühlhäusler 2000). This is oftentimes not central in language documentation projects, and the means used are inadequate. However, by learning about relationships,³¹ practitioners³² can identify the various goals speakers might have for their languages individually and how they are connected to each other, in an effort to conduct language documentation ethically (Dobrin & Schwartz 2016). Although it is not recommended for linguists to engage with local political institutions as it is seen as social work rather than linguistic work (Cameron et al. 1993), in the Sonsorolese case, it would have been difficult to create an accurate language documentation record without actively participating in community life as a YH volunteer, or involving individuals who occupy political roles. Despite the criticisms of collaborative work, especially in terms of evaluation (Crippen & Robinson 2013), it is more and more accepted that collaborative language documentation initiatives are impactful, especially for language maintenance (Fitzgerald 2020).

²⁷ Results from Vita & Pedro (2021) highlight that many speakers of Sonsorolese disagree with a standardisation of all varieties and would prefer recognition of the various languages of the islands.

²⁸ Walda-Mandel (2016) discusses the multiplicity, fluidity, and adaptability of Sonsorolese identities in Palau and the world.

²⁹ Here by hybrid, I mean a combination of western and indigenous structure (see Quanchi (2004) for a discussion on this).

³⁰ Discussing how policy may shape on-island use at this point is arguably irrelevant considering that the focus of this paper is on the impact the documentation initiative has had on policy and not of the policy on language use. This bill is recent and has not yet been implemented in any way to discuss enduring impact. Regardless, it would be interesting to follow its impact on language use considering that for some scholars working in Micronesia (Okayama 2015; Kupferman 2013; Soaladaob 2010), language policies implemented through schooling have been tools in further colonising the region in recent times, especially after the 60s.

³¹ By relationships, I refer not only to relationships between individuals, but also “relationship” to the land, in the Sonsorolese case, the island that speakers identify with (see Good (2018) for a brief discussion of this).

³² I use the word practitioners here to describe anyone that might get involved in language documentation activities.

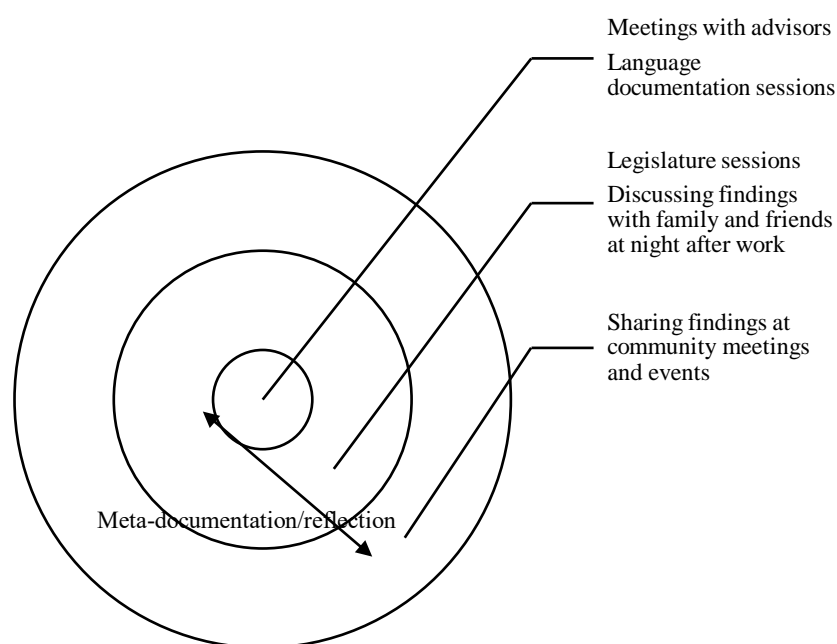


Figure 11. Representation of YH interactions

By conducting meta-documentation (Austin 2013), we managed to engage with participants holistically (Estes et al. 2023); a) navigating conflicting desires and ideologies about Sonsorolese; b) involving as many speakers as possible (Leonard & Haynes 2010), as well as c) non-speakers (Davis et al. 2022); d) both in the context where the languages developed (Hermes et al. 2021), but also e) in the various environments that speakers find themselves. By engaging holistically through documentation of relationships, language practices, attitudes, and ideologies and sharing those with speakers, we a) shed light on speakers' desires for their languages and how these could potentially translate to action (Oduor 2023; Charity 2008) and democratic participation (4.2.), and b) impact speakers' self-confidence and wellbeing (4.1.).

6. Concluding

In conclusion, using Wayfinding (Iosefo, Jones & Harris 2020), I present the impact of our initiative documenting and preserving Sonsorolese cultures and languages with the Young Historians of Sonsorol (YH) at the policy level and show how speakers of Sonsorolese asserted their linguistic human rights at the policy level, and the role of the youth-led language documentation and maintenance initiative in doing so. I started by introducing *Beluu er a Belau* and the languages of *Farauri State* (2.). Then, I shared our workflow with YH and how it relates to recent developments in documentary linguistics (3.). Local impact includes feelings of pride and belongingness when speaking Sonsorolese languages and a connection between languages and cultures (4.1.). After sharing these opinions with policymakers, SS-Bill-No.-10-18 was passed, re-representing the Sonsorolese languages, leading to an impact in terms of democratic participation (4.2.). I finally discussed how we holistically engaged (Estes et al. 2023) in language documentation by consciously including regular meta-documentation (Austin 2013) in our workflow (5).

Once again, in relation to the questions I set to answer, to assert Sonsorolese linguistic rights, first, speakers, and particularly YH, engaged in meta-documentation, surveying and identifying speech community attitudes and desires while documenting Sonsorolese languages. Everyone was involved in making recordings, and I interviewed speakers about their attitudes and desires,

dividing the work among YH team members. Second, we engaged with a variety of stakeholders, including policymakers as advisors, language consultants, and supporters (3.2.). To navigate these relationships, we followed local values of respect and relationships. This meant sharing our findings in community meetings and events, at night after work when chatting with family and friends, and attending legislature sessions concerning language, culture, education, and island development (4.2.). This engagement that was initiated because of the language documentation project led to access to more speakers that hold specific types of knowledge (e.g., sn_ey_dec_13_22, sn_sb_dec_09_22, sn_hs_nov_21_22), working directly with potential users of the materials produced (i.e., teachers, sn_dc_jun_28_23), and re-representations of language (4.2.2.). This engagement also led to potential plans for further using the materials produced, that is, as part of Cultural Day activities (4.2.1. and sn_leg_jan_03_22).

Going back to 4.1.3., currently it might be difficult to engage with national policy in Palau, primarily because of the ambivalent desires of speakers of Sonsorolese about their languages, but that is not impossible. Palauans' ideologies and attitudes towards Southwest Islanders' languages are changing (Walda-Mandel 2016), while our work has reached national agencies that are interested in supporting it further (sn_bchp_jan_08_24 and sn_plc_jan_08_24). Thus, at least in our case, engaging in meta-documentation led to a) the identification of more meaningful ways of engaging in language documentation initiatives that can have a wider impact, from individual well-being (4.1.2., 4.1.3.) to democratic participation (4.2.1.), and b) new theories of language (4.1.1., 4.2.2.) (Good 2018). It is understandable that engaging in meta-documentation adds to the work of the documentary linguist, and it could be argued that it is only possible when speaker numbers are small, but is this not another argument for collaboration?

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