

Language, Identity, and Belonging: The Challenges of the “Lost Songhays” In Navigating Cultural Expectations



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ABSTRACT: In southern Mali, individuals of mixed Songhay heritage who lack proficiency in their family language are often labeled “Lost Songhays.” This study investigates how these Lost Songhays navigate their cultural identity and the social challenges associated with not speaking Songhay, especially within the dominant Bambara-speaking environment of Bamako. Based on interviews with 46 participants, the findings reveal that while 86% identify strongly as Songhay, their inability to speak the language results in social stigma and feelings of alienation. Participants report a deep sense of regret over not learning Songhay, and they often face community reminders of this gap, which reinforce feelings of exclusion. Despite these challenges, some participants attempt to learn the language, though many lack effective support. These findings suggest a need for Songhay parents in mixed-ethnic households to foster language retention to help future generations maintain their cultural ties.

KEYWORDS: Language identity, cultural belonging, Lost Songhays, community language norms, ethnic identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is more than just a means of communication; it is a powerful symbol of identity and belonging. Spolsky (1999) highlights that language plays a crucial role in shaping national and ethnic identities, serving as a vehicle for expressing culture, history, emotions, and values. For minority or marginalized groups, language can often become a point of conflict, particularly when the language spoken at home diverges from that of the larger community. In such cases, language reflects identity, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and where they feel they belong in society.

In Mali, the group known as the “Lost Songhays” exemplifies these challenges. Often from mixed ethnic backgrounds, the Lost Songhays typically cannot speak Songhay, their community language, which creates a sense of disconnection from their cultural roots. This study investigates how the Lost Songhays experience this disconnection and examines their attitudes toward both Bamanankan and the Songhay language, analyzing how language norms within the Songhay community shape their sense of belonging and identity.

The link between language and identity is a well-researched topic. Fishman (1991) emphasizes that language serves as a marker of group membership and a means of expressing cultural identity, but when linguistic norms align with dominant languages in society, they can alienate those who cannot conform. Edwards (2009) notes that such norms help define social boundaries and reinforce group cohesion, while Gumperz (1982) discusses the potential for social division when minority language speakers face expectations to adopt the dominant language. Among the Songhay, speaking the family language is viewed as essential to belonging, and failure to do so is often met with ridicule. These expectations contribute to the “Lost Songhays” identity, as they face social pressures to speak Songhay despite their limited ability to do so, especially in cases where mixed marriages and Bamanankan dominance complicate language maintenance.

The Songhay people of Mali have a rich cultural and linguistic heritage in which their language is central to identity. However, for Lost Songhays, the inability to speak their community language creates a sense of alienation. Studies like Heath’s (2006) on language dominance reveal that dominant language norms can lead to feelings of cultural dislocation. In a similar vein, Clyne (2003) and Holmes (2013) show how language shift is common in mixed marriages, where children often lose proficiency in their heritage language. This disconnection leaves many Lost Songhays feeling out of place within their community, highlighting the role language plays in social inclusion.

This study seeks to answer two main research questions:

- How does the Songhay community’s language norm affect the Lost Songhays?
- What attitudes do the Lost Songhays have toward their family language and their mother tongue?

Through these questions, this study aims to shed light on how language shapes identity, belonging, and social inclusion, especially for those navigating complex linguistic and cultural landscapes.

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Guided by the Sociolinguistic Identity Theory, this study examines how language helps construct individual and group identities, recognizing that language not only reflects social structures but also actively shapes self-perception and community interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). Furthermore, the concept of Language and Power (Fairclough, 1995) will be employed to analyze how the dominant language norms within the Songhay community impact the social position of the Lost Songhays, illustrating how language can either empower or exclude individuals based on their ability to conform to community expectations.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach to better understand the language and identity challenges faced by the Lost Songhays, a group dealing with language conflict. The study followed a descriptive research design to gather detailed personal stories, attitudes, and opinions about language use and cultural identity within this community.

2.1. Research Instrument

The main method of data collection was structured interviews, which were chosen to allow participants to freely share their experiences and views. The interview was divided into three sections, each focusing on a different part of the research questions:

- The first section collected basic demographic information, like age, gender, and community background. This data helped to understand how different groups might have different attitudes toward language.
- The second section included open-ended questions about participants’ personal experiences with language use in their families and communities. This section aimed to gather insights into how the language norms of their community have affected their sense of identity.
- The third section asked about participants’ views on Bamanankan (their mother tongue) and the main community language. The goal here was to learn about their emotional connections to these languages and how they value each one.

The interviews, conducted in Bamanankan to make it easier for participants to respond naturally, lasted between 10 to 15 minutes. With permission from the participants, the interviews were recorded on a mobile phone to ensure accurate data collection for later analysis.

2.2. Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed manually. The researcher looked for common themes and patterns related to identity, language use, and attitudes, to explore any relationships or differences in the responses.

2.3. Population

The study involved 46 participants, all of whom identified as ethnically mixed Songhay and had Bamanankan as their first language. These participants were chosen because they share the specific situation being studied: although they have Songhay heritage, they cannot speak the Songhay family language.

The group included both men and women, providing a balanced view across gender. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 38, allowing the study to explore different attitudes across generations. All participants had some level of formal education. Nineteen participants had higher education degrees, sixteen were currently attending university, and eleven were in high school. This variety of educational backgrounds helped the study examine how education might influence language attitudes and identity.

To protect the participants’ privacy, each person was given a code (Int1 to Int46) instead of using their real names, ensuring confidentiality during data collection and analysis. This method followed ethical research practices and respected the participants’ privacy.

3. RESULTS

The findings of this study shed light on the identity struggles and social challenges faced by the Lost Songhays, specifically regarding how they navigate their cultural identity and the attitudes of others towards them.

3.1. Self-Identification: Songhay or Bambara?

When asked, “How do you identify yourself—Songhay or Bambara?” participants’ responses varied, reflecting a range of confidence and clarity about their cultural identity. About 86% of participants identified as Songhay, which suggests a strong attachment to their heritage despite their inability to speak the language. These participants may express their Songhay identity through other cultural aspects, such as family traditions. This finding supports Spolsky’s (1999) idea that language is only one of several elements that form cultural identity.

Approximately 11% of participants identified as Bambara, which may reflect a sense of separation from Songhay culture. Reasons could include prolonged exposure to Bambara-speaking environments or a preference for associating with the dominant language and culture. Edwards (2009) argues that language choice often signals solidarity with a group, and identifying as Bambara may indicate integration into the larger community. Another 3% identified as “Bambara-Songhay,” expressing a hybrid identity due to their mixed heritage and cultural duality.

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3.2. Reactions from the Songhay Community

A significant finding of this study was the social challenges faced by Lost Songhays when interacting with native Songhay speakers. Many native speakers equate fluency in Songhay with cultural belonging, and Lost Songhays often face disbelief and negative reactions when they reveal they cannot speak the language. For instance, when asked why they could not speak Songhay, participants reported reactions like, “How is that possible?” This reaction underscores the perception within the Songhay community that language proficiency equates to cultural membership (Fishman, 1991).

Additionally, 40% of participants mentioned being mocked by people from other ethnic groups for their lack of Songhay fluency, contributing to feelings of alienation. A nickname commonly directed at Lost Songhays, “Gandjibôrô,” carries connotations of being culturally “lost” and underscores how language norms can serve as a social barrier. One participant recounted a job interview in which the interviewer expressed disappointment upon learning of the participant’s lack of fluency, highlighting how language expectations can extend to professional settings as well.

3.3. Impact of the Songhay Language Norm

The Songhay community’s emphasis on language fluency as a measure of belonging has profound emotional effects on the Lost Songhays. Many participants expressed feelings of regret and alienation due to their inability to speak Songhay, which limits their ability to connect with family members. Int27, for instance, expressed sadness at not being able to converse with their grandparents, noting that the language barrier created a sense of cultural and emotional distance.

The study also revealed that criticism from other community members for not speaking Songhay led to feelings of shame and embarrassment. For instance, Int5 admitted that he laughed off mocking comments but felt deeply hurt inside. This inner struggle reflects the psychological impact of being unable to meet community expectations, echoing Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004) findings on the emotional burden of social identity conflicts.

3.4. Efforts to Learn Songhay

Although the Lost Songhays face challenges with language fluency, nearly all participants expressed a desire to learn Songhay. However, participants noted that they received little support from their fathers in learning the language, which likely limited their early language exposure. A few participants attempted to learn Songhay from family members, friends, or private tutors, but these efforts did not result in fluency. Some of the Lost Songhays suggested that structured learning opportunities, such as language centers, could aid them in achieving fluency and reconnecting with their heritage.

3.5. Attitudes Towards Bamanankan and Songhay

Most participants (95%) regarded Songhay as their mother tongue, reflecting an emotional attachment to their heritage language despite their lack of proficiency. Notably, some participants described Bamanankan as a dominant force in their lives, demonstrating the complex nature of their identity, shaped by both their heritage language and the prevalent community language.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal several layers of cultural identity conflict and linguistic challenges that reflect broader sociolinguistic phenomena.

4.1. Identity Struggles in Mixed Language Environments

The Lost Songhays’ identity dilemma resonates with similar findings in multicultural contexts where speakers of heritage languages are unable to maintain fluency due to immersion in a dominant language environment. The mixed responses of identifying as Songhay, Bambara, or both echo Clyne’s (2003) study, which found that children in mixed-ethnicity families often align with the dominant language culture, causing shifts in self-identification. The varying degrees of self-identification among the Lost Songhays, some holding firmly to Songhay roots despite language loss, others embracing the majority Bambara identity, highlight the tension between heritage loyalty and the influence of a dominant linguistic culture.

4.2. Language as a Social Gatekeeper

The strong reactions from the Songhay community towards Lost Songhays’ language abilities reveal how language functions as a social gatekeeper, often regulating cultural membership. Gumperz’s (1982) work on language and social power explains this dynamic, suggesting that language creates visible boundaries that determine who belongs. For the Lost Songhays, the inability to speak Songhay results in their being viewed as outsiders, which parallels Holmes’ (2013) observation of language as a social gatekeeper in multilingual border communities.

4.3. Emotional and Social Costs of Language Norms

The internal conflict and emotional toll experienced by the Lost Songhays align with Heath’s (2006) findings that language expectations can lead to cultural disconnection, as seen in immigrant families struggling with language maintenance. This emotional impact is intensified by community expectations, as Lost Songhays feel pressured to meet language norms that they were not adequately equipped to achieve. Their desire to learn Songhay reflects a longing for acceptance and inclusion within their cultural group, an emotional response commonly seen in linguistic minorities (Pauwels, 2016).

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4.4. Efforts to Reclaim Heritage Language

The participants' attempts to learn Songhay, albeit without consistent success, suggest a need for more structured and supportive learning environments. Studies on heritage language maintenance, such as that by Igboanusi and Wolf (2010), indicate that young people from mixed ethnic backgrounds are more likely to retain their heritage language if they receive encouragement and resources for learning. In the case of the Lost Songhays, the lack of encouragement from their fathers and limited access to formal language education likely hindered their language acquisition, creating an unfulfilled need for cultural connection.

4.5. Attitudes Toward Dominant and Heritage Languages

Participants' preferences for Songhay over Bamanankan, despite the latter's prevalence in their lives, reflect the complexity of language identity. This preference aligns with Spolsky's (1999) perspective on heritage languages as central to self-perception and cultural loyalty, showing that for the Lost Songhays, language remains a vital link to their cultural roots. The tendency to view Songhay as a “soft” and preferred language, despite their fluency in Bamanankan, highlights an intrinsic connection to their heritage language, consistent with Trudgill and Hernández's (2007) findings on language loyalty in multilingual settings.

5. CONCLUSION

The stories shared by participants in this study show that, no matter their gender, age, or education, the Lost Songhays often face mockery for not being able to speak their family language, Songhay. Participants expressed feelings of regret and a strong desire to connect to their culture by learning Songhay, which they see as a way to reclaim their heritage. Most participants plan to learn the language, but the growing number of Lost Songhays points to a widening language gap that could be difficult to bridge, especially as this trend appears not only in mixed marriages but across different family backgrounds.

Similar to Heath's (2006) findings on cultural alienation among minority groups who lose their heritage language, this study confirms that language plays a crucial role in how people feel connected to their culture. This study's participants feel an emotional disconnect, much like those in Gumperz's (1982) work, who noted that communities often judge individuals who don't speak their family language, reinforcing their feelings of exclusion.

It is important to note that this study focused on Lost Songhays in Bamako, which may not fully represent the variety of experiences across Mali. Also, the data was gathered through self-reported interviews, which, while insightful, may not fully capture the broader social and cultural factors affecting language retention. Future studies could look at a larger, more geographically diverse sample of Lost Songhays, comparing regional differences and including individuals from purely Songhay backgrounds who may also struggle with language retention.

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