

LANGUAGE CONTACT IN THE VISAYAS THE CASE OF ATI ETHNO-PHARMACOLOGY

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1. Introduction

The essence of this paper¹ is captured in the two bottles called *birhen-birhen* 'virgin (Mary)-like'. On visual examination, the small bottle contains the image of the crucified Christ, while the bigger bottle has the image of the Virgin Mary. Besides these images, both bottles contain rocks, shells, roots, and barks immersed in oil. Collectively referred to as *herbal* (< English 'herbal') or simply, herbal medicine, I shall refer to these materials technically as *materia medica* in this paper.

This report deals essentially with lexical borrowings and, in a larger context, with cultural borrowings. Aspects of language contact are manifested in the lexical items used to refer to the different items in the *materia medica* peddled by the Ati to other ethnolinguistic groups in the Visayas, Central Philippines (Map 1).

2. Background of the study

This paper is a result of an on-going research, which began in May 2000 among the Ati, an ethnolinguistic group (EG) of itinerant peddlers who sell native herbal medicine, amulets, etc. This collection or 'bag' of objects that they carry contains the healing system that encapsulates the long time contact among the various EGs in central Philippines. This paper argues that EG identities are blurred as a result of the EGs' belief and patronage of the efficacy of Ati remedies, and that this interaction represents the complexity involved in the language contact of the various EGs in one cultural area, the Visayas.

This preliminary analysis is based on the data set obtained from two keys Ati peddlers from Cebu which will be used as the main data together with those gathered from

Sibulan, Dumaguete and Iloilo. This data set represents one “spread” of healing materials laid-out (Plate 1) on sidewalks. The details of this data set are as follows: local name(s), scientific and/or English names, language(s) used, uses, and preparation (Table 1).

2. Language contact: EG situation and the Atis of central Philippines

There are more than one hundred EGs scattered all over the Philippine archipelago. Filipino linguist (Paz 1996) theorizes that EGs must have belonged to different cultures in the past, but through migration and trade their cultural differences have become blurred. As a result, ethnic identities continue to be associated with their mother tongues. This is the reason why linguists prefer to label the various cultural communities in the Philippines as EGs.

The situation in the Visayan Islands of central Philippines illustrates how EGs use various languages when interacting with other EGs. The natives, speakers of a mother tongue from these islands, collectively identify themselves as Bisaya. The Bisaya are composed of several EGs – Sebwano, Waray, Ilonggo, Masbatenyo, Kapulnon, Romblomanon, Ati, Bukidnon, and Magahat – who speak, in addition to their mother tongue, at least either one of the two regional lingua francas, Sebwano for those in eastern Visayas and Ilonggo/Hiligaynon for those in western Visayas, and Filipino, the national lingua franca which is constantly enriched by the vocabulary of its speakers. The majority are coastal dwellers who practice fishing, farming and trading, as well as artisan activities like pottery, weaving, blacksmithing, and recycling industrial products for their local needs. The Bisaya are the major clients of the Ati healing system.

For the past three decades the intensification of trade and commerce, as well as the availability of reliable transport system, enhanced the exchange among the already mobile Bisayan population. Consequently, language contact among the islanders increased with more vigor and intensity. The result of this contact gave rise to the increase in loan words, here in the domain of ethno-pharmacology, as well as in

trilingualism of Ati ambulant peddlers. Besides their native tongue, Inati, the Atis are conversant in Ilonggo/Hiligaynon and/or in Sebwano, the lingua francas of the region.

The Ati or Ata, an EG who live in central Philippines, have Negroid features. In the past they were found mainly in the islands of Panay and Negros, however, in the last three decades of the 20th century, they have been seen in the urban centers of the neighboring islands peddling herbal medicine and amulets. Their traditional subsistence is by hunting and seasonal slash and burn agriculture. During planting and harvesting seasons they also work as farm helpers to other EGs such as the Sebwanos and the Ilonggos. At present there are very few of them (less than one percent) who own the land where their houses are situated.

In my own survey between May 2000 and April 2001, and from the data of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, the Ati refer to themselves as Ati, Ata (Mascuñana 1997) or Antiki depending on where they come. They number about 9,680 or 1,913 households/families living together in settlements that range from of 5 to 15 households in their non-traditional homelands such as Cebu, Bohol, Leyte, Samar, Biliran, Camotes, Siquijor, Carabao, Boracay, Romblon, and Tablas².

3. Ethno-pharmacology, knowledge and power

What is referred to here as ethno-pharmacology is that body of knowledge which deals with the well being of people and the alleviation of human suffering through the use of the traditional remedies of the Atis in the context of person-society-nature-supernatural relationships (Worseley 1983:315-48). This body of knowledge is enriched through the dynamic interaction between the Atis and the other EGs who patronize them.

The Ati and the Bisayan healing systems have a common belief in healing, i.e. the person, society, nature and the supernatural are all interrelated. The sources of human ailments are framed on these relationships. Knowledge of the Ati healing system, like that of the Bisaya (Arens 1956, 1957, 1971; Hart 1978; Lieban 1967; Mascuñana, et. al., 1998;

Tiston 1983) is socially distributed among fellow Atis in the process of a person's life cycle. Children also participate in the gathering and the assembling of healing materials, as well as in the peddling of the products at a certain age. But part of the knowledge belongs to the "specialists". The *Maaram* 'the knowledgeable one' (Magos 1992) or the *siruhanos* (< Spanish *cirujano* 'surgeon') have spiritual powers through privileges given to them by supernatural beings, or as rewards for the long period of apprenticeship with their parents who are themselves endowed with "power". In simple terms, knowledge would include the activity of gathering herbal materials, minerals and rocks, or the knowledge of medicinal ingredients of nature. Power is concretized in the possession of *mutya* 'magical stone' or magical prayers (Seki 1996).

3.1 Materia Medica

Materia medica is the prototype of all medicines, which addresses the illness of people. Medicines can alter the state of ill health for better, or for worse, as in the case of sorcery. The data taken from two Ati informants from Cebu illustrates a cross-section of the range of materials that are being peddled to a non-Ati population (Plate 1 and Table 1). These can be differentiated into four types based on their functions or uses. These types of materia medica address: (a) body aches and pains caused by the entry of cold air into the body, (b) the need for protection against harm from environmental spirits and other persons through sorcery, (c) luck in one's business, trade, job hunting, friendship, and prosperity for one's household, and (d) simple itches of the skin, dog bites, etc. The basic ingredients used in types (a) and (d) are roots, barks and seeds of medicinal plants. These are either boiled and drunk, or rubbed (with oil) on the affected parts of the body. On the other hand, types (b) and (c) consist of stones and minerals gathered from caves, outcroppings on hillsides, or seashells and corals. These are immersed in oil, placed either in bottles or assembled in plastic tubes to be worn as bracelets, or are placed in plastic containers and wrapped in red cloth to be tied around the waist or pinned on one's clothes.