


# Chapter 13

## From Riverbanks to Academia: An Autoethnographic Journey Through Brunei's Endangered Belait Language

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### ABSTRACT

*Brunei's Belait language, with fewer than 200 speakers, faces critical endangerment from socio-political pressures and transmission breakdown. This autoethnographic study employs decolonising principles, utilising reflexive journaling, community conversations, and family documents to address methodological gaps in heritage language research. Findings demonstrate that language fieldwork transforms the researcher's identity and community relationships, requiring a sustained commitment beyond formal timelines. Emotional engagement provides methodological insights whilst presenting analytical challenges. The research establishes frameworks for indigenous scholars, demonstrating that autoethnographic approaches capture the therapeutic dimensions of preservation and identity transformation, necessitating reconceptualised academic structures that value community engagement and incorporate cultural, emotional, and relational dimensions alongside linguistic analysis.*

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-4212-2.ch013

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## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of language endangerment goes beyond simple linguistic loss, including the decline of cultural knowledge systems, traditional ecological wisdom, and community identity markers (Crystal, 2002). Bromham et al., (2022) demonstrate that global predictors of language endangerment include socio-political pressures, limited institutional support, and reduced functional domains for minority languages. Within the Brunei context, Martin (1995) documented language shift patterns amongst the Belait community, revealing that over 90% of ethnically Belait parents interviewed reported using Brunei Malay rather than Belait as the primary language of communication with their children. Contemporary research on the Belait language reveals complex sociolinguistic dynamics influencing language maintenance and loss. Zulkiflee and Suhaimi (2025) identify intra-marriage patterns as crucial factors in language preservation, while mixed marriages accelerate shifts towards dominant languages. Educational policies prioritising Malay and English instruction further marginalise Belait, limiting its functional domains to informal family contexts and cultural ceremonies. Economic influences, particularly increased labour migration, contribute to preferences for dominant languages in professional settings. This ultimately reduces the perceived value of preserving heritage language skills.

Autoethnography, as conceptualised by Ellis et al., (2011), represents a qualitative research methodology that situates personal experience within broader cultural, social, and political contexts. This approach enables researchers to examine the intersection between individual narratives and collective cultural phenomena, offering unique insights into the lived realities of language endangerment (Keles, 2022). Within linguistic anthropology and endangered language documentation, autoethnographic methods provide opportunities for reflexive examination of the researcher's positionality, ethical responsibilities, and the emotional dimensions of linguistic fieldwork (Poulos, 2021). The application of autoethnographic methodology to indigenous language research addresses critical concerns regarding extractive research practices and the need for more collaborative, community-centred approaches (Russell-Mundine, 2012). Nilson (2016) emphasises the importance of researcher reflexivity in indigenous research contexts, arguing that sustained self-awareness of processes and positionality enhances both ethical practice and research validity.

This methodological framework aligns with decolonising research paradigms that prioritise indigenous epistemologies and challenge Western-centric knowledge production systems (Smith, 2012). Hence, this autoethnographic study examines the multifaceted journey of conducting linguistic research within one's heritage community, specifically focusing on the Belait language of Brunei Darussalam. The primary objectives encompass: (1) analysing the emotional and ethical dimensions of insider-outsider research dynamics, (2) evaluating the transformative potential

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