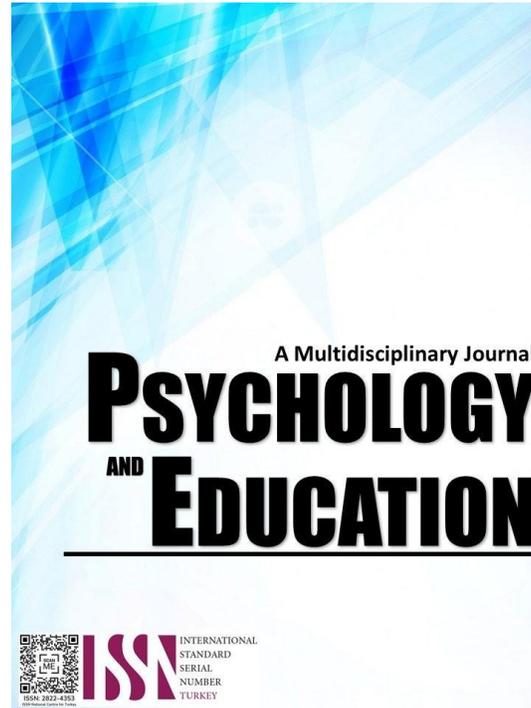


FROM WORDS TO LEGAL ARTIFACTS: A FORENSIC LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF SETTLEMENT AGREEMENTS IN SULTAN KUDARAT



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From Words to Legal Artifacts: A Forensic Linguistic Analysis of Settlement Agreements in Sultan Kudarat

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Abstract

This study explored the legal domain of Maguindanaon settlement agreements to uncover how language constructs and legitimizes authority, codifies obligations, and enacts validation practices within community-based legal discourse. Guided by the lens of forensic linguistics through Critical Discourse Analysis, the study explored 51 authentic settlement documents encompassing land, marriage, and financial disputes. Findings revealed that the agreements linguistically legitimize jurisdictional authority by invoking recognized institutions such as barangay councils, Islamic courts, and revolutionary or military leaders, whose presence transforms texts into performative acts of governance. The terms and conditions, meanwhile, delineate obligations, remedies, and sanctions through direct, measurable, and culturally resonant language that balances state legality with moral responsibility. These clauses encode fairness, transparency, and reconciliation, transforming social norms into enforceable legal commitments. Finally, validation and evidentiary practices such as signatures, witnessing, recordkeeping, and the inclusion of official seals discursively transform oral understandings into binding artifacts. The interplay of linguistic authority, moral endorsement, and documentary proof demonstrates how Maguindanaon legal culture harmonizes customary law, Islamic jurisprudence, and state mechanisms. Overall, the study underscores the role of language as both a medium and a mechanism of justice, revealing that Maguindanaon settlement agreements are not merely records of resolution but performative texts that enact law, legitimacy, and communal harmony.

Keywords: *Maguindanaon settlement agreements, linguistic legitimacy, customary law, forensic linguistics, critical discourse analysis*

Introduction

Conflict resolution in indigenous and local communities is not merely a legal procedure but also a linguistic and cultural performance that legitimizes authority, sustains social harmony, and affirms moral order. In Maguindanaon society, settlement agreements serve as binding instruments that reconcile disputes through the integration of customary norms, Islamic law, and state mechanisms (Pendatun, 2019; Rood, 2020). However, despite their social and cultural importance, these agreements have received limited academic attention from a linguistic perspective. Understanding how language operates to confer authority, stipulate obligations, and validate legality is crucial for appreciating the unique hybrid justice system that thrives in Maguindanaon communities (Gibbons, 2003; Heffer, 2013).

International research has long emphasized the intersection between language and legal legitimacy. For instance, Gibbons (2003) argues that legal discourse constructs power relations by embedding institutional authority in linguistic form, demonstrating how law and language mutually reinforce legitimacy in multicultural contexts. Similarly, Tiersma (2008) highlights the performative nature of legal language, asserting that legal texts do not simply describe actions but enact them through linguistic precision. In a related study, Heffer (2013) found that courtroom language functions as a site of authority construction, where formalized speech acts transform spoken commitments into binding legal outcomes.

At the national level, Filipino scholars have examined the interaction of customary and formal justice systems, though primarily from sociological and legal perspectives. Rood (2020) observed that hybrid legal systems in Mindanao blend customary law, Islamic jurisprudence, and state authority to maintain peace in conflict-affected areas. Tuazon (2017) emphasized that barangay justice mechanisms operate as both administrative and cultural institutions, reflecting the nation's commitment to localized, community-driven governance. Meanwhile, Pailagao (2021) explored how linguistic mediation in barangay proceedings reinforces social relationships while resolving disputes.

Within the local context of Sultan Kudarat and the broader Maguindanaon community, existing research tends to focus on peacebuilding, cultural resilience, and religious leadership rather than the linguistic construction of legal legitimacy. Pendatun (2019) documented how Maguindanaon elders and religious figures mediate conflicts through oral negotiation and moral persuasion, emphasizing the importance of cultural protocols. Abdulrahman (2022) examined settlement rituals in Ligawasan, noting how symbolic acts such as handshakes and collective prayers accompany the signing of agreements, thereby embedding spirituality in the legal process. Guialal (2023), meanwhile, highlighted the pragmatic role of language in Shariah-based arbitration, where Arabic and Maguindanaon terminologies coexist to convey authority and divine sanction.

These studies affirm the cultural richness of Maguindanaon justice practices but leave unaddressed how written settlement agreements linguistically perform legitimacy, obligation, and validation (Abdulrahman, 2022; Guialal, 2023; Pendatun, 2019). Given these scholarly gaps, this study aims to examine the linguistic dimensions of Maguindanaon settlement agreements, focusing on how language legitimizes jurisdictional authority, encodes obligations and sanctions, and validates agreements as legally binding artifacts.

Analyzing settlement documents from Sultan Kudarat, this research seeks to uncover how linguistic structures, cultural norms, and legal practices converge to produce a hybrid discourse of justice. Ultimately, the study aspires to contribute to forensic linguistics and legal anthropology by demonstrating that in Maguindanaon society, the law is not merely written; it is performed through language, tradition, and communal participation.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions, which investigated how language constructs authority, obligation, and validation within Maguindanaon settlement agreements:

1. How do the settlement agreements linguistically legitimize jurisdictional authority?
2. In what ways do the terms and conditions encompass obligations, remedies, and sanctions in settlement agreements?
3. What validation and evidentiary practices are discursively mobilized to transform agreements into legally binding artifacts?

Literature Review

The linguistic legitimization of jurisdictional authority in settlement agreements has been a focal point of several studies that explore how legal documents construct and sustain institutional power. Legal texts often employ headings, titles, and official identifiers such as court names or mediation bodies to establish the legitimacy of the process and the authority presiding over it. Scholars argue that these textual features not only introduce the document but also perform a powerful legal function by situating it within a recognized system of justice (Chalkidis, Bommarito, & Aletras, 2021).

Likewise, the use of declarative formulations and institutional references marks the transition from interpersonal negotiation to legally sanctioned agreement (Williams & Tessuto, 2013). As Nuessel (2016) observes, such transformations from oral to written discourse ensure that the document is recognized not only as a record but as a performative act that invokes legal authority.

Beyond establishing authority, settlement agreements also encode obligations, remedies, and sanctions through their terms and conditions. These sections often articulate the expectations and responsibilities of each party while specifying the consequences of noncompliance. In the Philippine legal context, Dizon (2020) highlights how contract law integrates express and implied obligations that mirror moral and customary values, reflecting a balance between legality and equity. Similarly, Rañosa-Madrurnio and Martin (2023) emphasize that Philippine legal documents frequently blend formal legal terms with moral undertones, thereby linking obligation with communal accountability. In global contexts, Putnam (2010) demonstrates that negotiation discourse routinely employs conditional clauses and temporal markers that signal remedial steps, emphasizing restoration rather than punishment.

The transformation of agreements into legally binding artifacts depends heavily on validation and evidentiary practices embedded within the text. These may include signatures, witness attestations, and documentation of time and place, all of which function as linguistic and semiotic markers of authenticity. Nakamura (2006) explains that such structural components are central to the performativity of legal texts, transforming them into binding evidence rather than mere records of intent. Rañosa-Madrurnio and Martin (2023) further note that Philippine practices often rely on signatures and witness names as visual representations of consent, making them critical to enforceability. Likewise, Williams and Tessuto (2013) contend that attachments such as property maps or receipts serve a dual purpose, providing both evidentiary support and symbolic legitimacy.

International studies reinforce the idea that legal discourse employs a consistent set of linguistic strategies to construct legitimacy, define obligations, and ensure evidentiary validity. Chalkidis et al. (2021) demonstrate that across jurisdictions, fixed linguistic formulas serve as indicators of institutional recognition, while Nuessel (2016) highlights that the shift from oral to written legal genres embeds these markers in culturally specific forms. Putnam's (2010) comparative analysis supports this by illustrating how the structure of terms and remedies is influenced by socio-legal norms, showing that obligations are framed differently depending on community expectations and cultural notions of justice. Together, these studies affirm the global significance of linguistic forms in constructing and legitimizing authority within legal texts.

In the Philippine context, researchers have explored the intersection between language, law, and local governance, shedding light on how community-based dispute resolution aligns with national legal frameworks. Dizon (2020) provides a doctrinal overview of how contracts in the Philippines interpret obligations and unfair terms, offering a foundation for understanding settlement agreements. Similarly, Rañosa-Madrurnio and Martin (2023) document how linguistic variation and pragmatics shape the construction of legitimacy in Filipino legal and judicial writing. Complementing these, Pailagao (2021) examines how barangay mediation proceedings use culturally grounded discourse strategies, such as invoking respect and kinship to assert the legitimacy of local authority and maintain social harmony.

In indigenous and Islamic contexts, studies reveal that linguistic and ritual practices play a crucial role in validating agreements. Abdulrahman (2022) notes that in Maguindanaon communities, settlement rituals involve religious figures and elders, who serve as linguistic and moral guarantors of the agreement's legitimacy. Similarly, Guialal (2023) finds that local Shariah arbitration integrates Islamic legal terminology and indigenous expressions to affirm both religious and customary authority. Pendatun (2019) emphasizes that while oral mediation and symbolic acts dominate, little attention has been paid to how written texts encode such authority

linguistically. These studies collectively underscore the coexistence of oral, written, and ritual forms of legitimacy in local dispute settlements.

Despite these valuable contributions, a notable research gap remains regarding the systematic linguistic analysis of Maguindanaon settlement agreements. Existing studies highlight the presence of authority markers, obligation clauses, and validation practices, but do not examine how these elements interact within written Maguindanaon texts. There is a lack of research exploring how jurisdictional authority is linguistically legitimized, how obligations and sanctions are expressed in culturally specific ways, and how evidentiary mechanisms are discursively represented to make agreements binding. This study addresses that gap by examining Maguindanaon settlement agreements through a linguistic and forensic lens, focusing on their pragmatic, structural, and cultural dimensions to illuminate how language operates as a tool of law and legitimacy.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using the lens of forensic linguistics to examine the linguistic dimensions of Maguindanaon settlement agreements. Forensic linguistics, as defined by Coulthard and Johnson (2017), investigates how language functions within legal contexts to construct, validate, and enforce meaning. Through this framework, the study sought to uncover how linguistic structures and discourse strategies legitimize authority, articulate obligations, and establish evidentiary credibility in settlement agreements. The qualitative design allowed for an in-depth, interpretive understanding of the texts, emphasizing context, meaning-making, and the socio-legal functions of language within Maguindanaon legal discourse.

Procedure

The corpus of the study consisted of 51 settlement agreements collected from various communities and barangay offices in Sultan Kudarat, Philippines. These documents were categorized into three types based on their subject matter: land disputes (SA-LD), marriage settlements (SA-MS), and financial agreements (SA-FA), each assigned specific numerical codes for identification and analysis (e.g., SA-LD1 to SA-LD17). The selection followed purposive sampling to ensure representativeness of different dispute contexts, linguistic patterns, and procedural forms. Each document was examined in both its original Maguindanaon text and official English translation, providing a comprehensive basis for linguistic and cultural comparison.

Data Analysis

The data analysis of this study, guided by the lens of forensic linguistics through Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), focused on examining how language constructs power, responsibility, and legitimacy within Maguindanaon settlement agreements. Through a detailed linguistic and discourse-based examination, the study analyzed the textual and pragmatic features that legitimize jurisdictional authority, including the use of institutional titles, performative verbs, and formulaic expressions signaling legal power. It also explored how the terms and conditions encode obligations, remedies, and sanctions through modality, directive acts, and prescriptive structures that enforce compliance and accountability among parties. Furthermore, the analysis identified discursive strategies of validation and evidentiary practices that transform these documents into legally binding artifacts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the research process. Permission to access and analyze the settlement agreements was obtained from relevant local authorities and community leaders, ensuring transparency and cultural sensitivity. All personal identifiers were anonymized to protect confidentiality, and sensitive legal details were carefully redacted. The research adhered to the ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and non-maleficence as outlined by the American Anthropological Association (AAA, 2012). Furthermore, cultural protocols within Maguindanaon communities were honored, acknowledging the sacred and communal value of settlement documents as instruments of peace and reconciliation.

Results and Discussion

Settlement Agreements Linguistically Legitimizing Jurisdictional Authority

The settlement agreements among Maguindanaon communities linguistically legitimize jurisdictional authority by foregrounding the presence and power of recognized leaders, institutions, and mediating bodies at the very outset of each document. The opening lines, titles, and headings are not mere formalities; instead, they perform the linguistic act of declaring legitimate oversight, anchoring the agreement within a recognized legal or customary order. For instance, headings such as "MORO ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONT, Office of the Brgy. Chairman, Malasin, Lambayong Sultan Kudarat (SA-LS16)" explicitly establish the authority under which the agreement is made. This textual positioning signals to readers and participants that the document is both sanctioned and binding. The linguistic framing thus performs a declarative act, embedding legitimacy in the very structure of the agreement by invoking authoritative bodies like barangay councils, religious leaders, or Shariah courts.

The dominance of barangay officials in land, marriage, and financial settlements reflects how linguistic choices encode both state and local authority. Phrases such as "dalem opisina na Kagawad..." (at the house of Barangay Councilor) situate the mediation within a

hybrid legal domain where the barangay acts as both an agent of the Philippine state and a custodian of indigenous customs. These linguistic constructions blend legal and cultural registers, thereby positioning barangay officials as legitimate arbiters of justice. The repetition of official titles, venue references, and witnessing formulas across settlements constructs a legal narrative that aligns local governance with national frameworks. In doing so, the texts affirm the barangay's role as the foundational unit of both administrative governance and moral order, thus linguistically encoding the coexistence of statutory and customary authority.

Beyond the barangay, the inclusion of revolutionary and military figures such as MILF commanders or 106th Battalion officers introduces another layer of jurisdictional legitimacy. Their presence in documents like SA-LS1 reflects the adaptive nature of Maguindanaon legal discourse in post-conflict contexts. Phrases identifying “Witnesses: 106th Battalion Commander, Deputy Battalion Commander” linguistically merge revolutionary and communal authority, producing what Ty and Bibon-Ruiz describe as adaptive legal hybridity. The use of such titles confers stability and social trust upon the agreement, ensuring compliance through moral and security influence. The textual invocation of military and MILF authorities thus extends jurisdiction beyond formal governance, embedding it within networks of social power and historical legitimacy unique to Maguindanaon society.

Similarly, religious and customary authorities are legitimized through the invocation of Islamic legal institutions and respected elders. The explicit reference to “MAHKAMAH SHARIAH, Ligawasan Province, Camp Rajamuda (SA-LS15)” marks the settlement as being under the spiritual and legal domain of Islamic jurisprudence. This reference not only authenticates the decision as legally binding but also spiritually sanctioned. Meanwhile, expressions such as “Taman sa napagayunan no mga kamal endo pinirman nilan...” (approved by the elders and signed by them) linguistically highlight the moral and communal endorsement of the agreement. The elders' consent transforms the settlement into a socially binding text, legitimized through collective wisdom and historical continuity. Hence, the intertextual use of Islamic and customary language reinforces multi-layered jurisdictional authority that transcends the secular boundaries of the state.

Marriage and financial settlements further demonstrate how linguistic markers of jurisdiction structure social legitimacy. In these documents, the recurrent use of institutional identifiers such as “Office of the BO Chairman, MILF, Malasin Lambayong, SK Daguma Province (SA-MS8)” coupled with the enumeration of witnesses, dates, and venues, provides textual evidence of due process and transparency. The inclusion of barangay officials, parents, and elders as signatories, as in “Niyaba a napsadan na pinirman ni... sa nia ba a gay November 25, 2023...”, constitutes a linguistic performance of collective agreement. This public witnessing transforms private conflict into communal resolution, embedding accountability within both language and social practice. Such formalized phrasing and listing of participants linguistically institutionalize fairness, transparency, and mutual recognition, which are core principles that underpin the legitimacy of local governance.

Finally, across all types of settlements, the linguistic structure itself functions as a legitimizing mechanism. Recurrent formulas such as naming of officials, venues, and witnesses operate as performative speech acts that authorize, validate, and enforce social order. Each document reflects a layered jurisdictional ecosystem where authority is shared, negotiated, and codified through language. The settlements' linguistic strategies, such as the declarative openings, formulaic witnessing statements, and explicit references to institutions, encode a social contract that bridges law, religion, and culture. By doing so, Maguindanaon settlement agreements do not merely describe authority; they perform it. Through their linguistic form, they enact legitimacy, ensuring that the authority to mediate, decide, and enforce is visibly and textually grounded within both the legal and moral fabric of the community.

Terms and Conditions Encompassing Obligations, Remedies, and Sanctions in Settlement Agreements

The terms and conditions in Maguindanaon settlement agreements function as the backbone of legal and social order, articulating the specific obligations, remedies, and sanctions that govern community relations. These provisions are linguistically structured to ensure clarity, fairness, and compliance, allowing agreements to serve as both legal documents and moral contracts. Across land, marriage, and financial settlements, the terms are expressed in direct and culturally resonant language, ensuring that all parties understand their duties and the consequences of noncompliance. The specificity of phrasing, detailing payments, sharing ratios, and time frames, underscores the seriousness and enforceability of each obligation. For instance, in SA-LS17, the clause “each time (Name Withheld) harvests, he will give one-fourth of the yield to the landowner” demonstrates how clear and measurable commitments serve to prevent disputes and foster equitable relationships.

In land settlement agreements, the terms and conditions encompass a wide range of obligations that ensure both economic balance and social stability. Clauses on harvest sharing, land redemption, and boundary demarcation embody not only legal logic but also a deep respect for community customs. Agreements often include flexible provisions to accommodate environmental and economic changes, such as redemption clauses allowing for objection-free land recovery during the harvest season, as in SA-LS9. This linguistic framing embeds fairness and adaptability within the text, reflecting a moral and practical understanding of justice. Similarly, exclusionary clauses that bar descendants from making future claims, as found in SA-LS4, function as preventive remedies designed to safeguard long-term peace and stability. These conditions illustrate that the Maguindanaon conception of obligation is both intergenerational and restorative, ensuring that legal clarity today prevents social tension tomorrow.

The structure of terms and conditions in marriage settlements highlights how obligations and sanctions are integrated to preserve both moral order and familial harmony. Monetary penalties, behavioral stipulations, and reconciliation periods are central features that

regulate marital conduct and provide remedies for violations. In SA-MS1, for example, the penalty clause requiring a payment of ₱120,000 before reconciliation exemplifies the use of financial sanctions as both deterrent and restorative justice. Other agreements, such as SA-MS3, introduce conditional separation periods, granting spouses up to 100 days to reconcile before dissolution, emphasizing the rehabilitative function of the settlement. These linguistic formulations present marriage not merely as a private union but as a socially governed institution subject to community oversight and moral accountability. By incorporating both punitive and reconciliatory measures, the texts balance the dual goals of maintaining social order and promoting forgiveness.

Obligations within marriage settlements extend beyond the couple to include continuing duties such as child support, remittances, and property division. These provisions embody forward-looking remedies that anticipate future conflicts and regulate post-separation responsibilities. Clauses like “The elders agreed that she must send remittances to her husband if she goes abroad” (SA-MS2) linguistically establish a continuing duty, showing that Maguindanaon agreements are not confined to present disputes but also govern future conduct. Furthermore, the pledging of tangible assets like land or motorcycles as collateral in SA-MS17 reinforces compliance by attaching material consequences to moral obligations. These textual elements merge legal precision with social values, ensuring that remedies are not only enforceable but also culturally meaningful.

In financial settlement agreements, the terms and conditions reveal a sophisticated system of debt regulation rooted in Islamic ethics and communal trust. Payment schedules, non-interest clauses, and voluntary debt reductions (zakat or sadaqah) exemplify how Maguindanaon settlements balance justice with compassion. Phrases such as “He will repay in five monthly installments of ₱30,000.00... No interest shall be added” (SA-FO1) reflect adherence to Shariah principles while ensuring economic accountability. Default remedies are also clearly articulated, often mandating arbitration by elders or barangay officials. In SA-FO11, for instance, debt repayment through ten sacks of rice annually demonstrates how in-kind arrangements provide culturally appropriate solutions. These terms reinforce the community’s role in ensuring compliance while embedding forgiveness and moral accountability as central tenets of financial justice.

Across all types of settlement agreements, the linguistic encoding of obligations, remedies, and sanctions reveals a deep interconnection between law, culture, and morality. The texts demonstrate that enforcement in Maguindanaon communities is not solely reliant on punitive mechanisms but also on social cohesion, honor, and collective responsibility. The inclusion of review dates, as in SA-LS13, and the consistent presence of witnesses and elders in validating agreements exemplify this relational approach to justice. Through explicit terms, adaptive clauses, and moral sanctions, the agreements function as living legal instruments that evolve with community needs. Ultimately, the language of these settlements transforms obligation into commitment, remedy into reconciliation, and sanction into social balance, ensuring that justice is not only administered but also harmoniously sustained within the Maguindanaon cultural and legal landscape.

Validation and Evidentiary Practices that are Discursively Mobilized to Transform Agreements into Legally Binding Artifacts

The validation and evidentiary practices found in Maguindanaon settlement agreements demonstrate how language, documentation, and ritualized witnessing collectively transform oral understandings into legally binding artifacts. These practices do not merely confirm authenticity; they enact it. Through deliberate linguistic, procedural, and symbolic choices such as signatures, official seals, communal witnessing, and recordkeeping, each agreement moves from the realm of verbal negotiation to that of written law. Validation, therefore, functions as both a performative and evidentiary process: it asserts that an agreement has been reached and simultaneously transforms that assertion into an enforceable truth. The phrase “So bala na I meter bali kano niyaba a ligla na witness so mga kamal (SA-LS16)” (“The elders witnessed this agreement”) captures how witnessing performs a legitimizing function, embedding the authority of elders directly into the textual fabric of the document.

A defining feature of these agreements is the consistent inclusion of multiple witnesses representing diverse sources of authority, such as elders (kamal), barangay officials, military or revolutionary commanders, and religious leaders. This plural witnessing structure serves both legal and cultural purposes. In SA-LS9, for instance, signatures from a barangay councilor, a commander, and a secretary establish a hybrid form of validation that merges state, customary, and moral authority. Such inclusivity illustrates how Maguindanaon legal discourse privileges communal validation over purely institutional authority. The act of witnessing becomes a collective guarantee of truth and fairness, where legal legitimacy is inseparable from social endorsement. This process reaffirms that the authority of an agreement derives not merely from its written form, but from the moral weight of the community figures who witness and sanction it.

The inclusion of official signatures, indicated by the recurrent phrase “pinirman nilan” (they signed), is another discursive mechanism of validation. The act of signing transforms oral commitment into visual proof, marking the culmination of consensus and mutual consent. In SA-LS5, the signatures of the buyer, seller, and witnesses serve as concrete evidence that the agreement was made voluntarily and without coercion. Beyond its procedural role, signing also performs a symbolic speech act that seals the transaction in the eyes of both God and the community. The performative force of the signature bridges two worlds, the formal legal system and Maguindanaon customary law, showing how the written word operates as an enduring marker of both faith and legality.

The role of barangay officials in validation extends beyond bureaucratic endorsement; it institutionalizes local justice. In SA-LS6, the barangay chairman and secretary are listed not only as facilitators but as official endorsers of the agreement. Their inclusion embeds the settlement within the framework of Philippine local governance, aligning community-based justice with state recognition. The use

of the barangay blotter, a formal record of complaints and settlements, further strengthens the evidentiary chain. Entries such as “Napayun so nyaba a blotter na naitala sa opisina na barangay (SA-LS3)” (“The complaint was entered in the barangay blotter before the agreement”) transform disputes from oral accounts into traceable legal events. This procedural feature institutionalizes community justice, producing written evidence that bridges oral tradition and formal legal administration.

Formal documentation, such as tax declarations, land titles, receipts, and sketch maps, serves as material proof that reinforces the textual authority of the agreements. In SA-LS15, for instance, the inclusion of a “Sketch Plan a Lot No. 1328... nakalibet lon na Lot No. 1330, 1332, 1335...” (“Sketch plan of Lot No. 1328 surrounded by Lots 1330, 1332, 1335”) visually anchors ownership claims within spatial and legal boundaries. Similarly, receipts and affidavits, some dating back decades, provide historical continuity that strengthens a party’s claim. These textual artifacts convert personal memory into documentary evidence, ensuring that justice is not merely asserted but archived. Through this blend of written and visual documentation, the settlements achieve what legal anthropologists describe as “textual durability,” the transformation of temporary oral commitments into permanent public records.

In marriage and financial settlements, validation practices acquire even more profound social and moral significance. The signatures of barangay officials, elders, and both disputing parties confirm mutual consent and ensure communal accountability. In SA-MS1, the line “Pantag kanu wat ana tamok na naipusan den. Taman sa nakapirma silan dwa...” (“Both parties were requested to sign as evidence of their separation...”) demonstrates how signing functions as the ultimate marker of decision and closure. Material evidence such as collateral or dowries, “Su lawas na tamok a (30,000) thirty thousand pesos... sa satiman a motor a XRM (SA-MS17),” extends validation from the textual to the tangible, making obligation and proof inseparable. Similarly, in financial agreements like SA-FO1 and SA-FO12, the detailed specification of payment terms, penalties, and forgiveness clauses (*sadaqah*) transforms moral promises into codified commitments. These textual details act as both proof and performance of sincerity, aligning legal obligation with religious and ethical virtue.

Finally, the formal recording of settlements in barangay logbooks or community archives provides institutional continuity and collective memory. Entries such as “So niaba a tanod na pinagayunan nilan dua taman sa nakasaksi so mga kamal...” (SA-FO4) (“This receipt was mutually agreed upon by both parties in the presence of barangay officials and witnesses”) ensure that every agreement becomes part of the community’s legal history. The act of recordkeeping transforms private reconciliation into a public event, lending permanence to justice and making it retrievable for future reference. The presence of multiple signatures, official stamps, and witness lists converts these records into documentary artifacts that bear both legal and cultural weight.

Taken together, these validation and evidentiary practices reveal that Maguindanaon settlement agreements derive their legal power not from external courts but from a layered system of communal validation, documentary rigor, and moral credibility. Witnessing, signing, recordkeeping, and attaching supporting documents are not mere procedural acts; they are discursive performances that construct legality through language, symbolism, and participation. Each signature, statement, and record serves as a microcosm of collective trust, transforming the transient spoken word into a durable and enforceable social contract. Through these practices, Maguindanaon communities demonstrate a hybrid legal culture in which oral traditions, Islamic ethics, and bureaucratic documentation converge to produce settlements that are not only legally binding but socially sacred.

Santos (2023) explains that in local Filipino governance, textual markers such as titles and institutional headers serve as linguistic tools that assert legal legitimacy and command compliance. In the Maguindanaon settlement agreements, phrases like “Moro Islamic Liberation Front, Office of the Brgy. Chairman” demonstrate this linguistic framing by situating the text within a structure of recognized power. Similarly, García and Luzón (2022) argue that hybrid governance documents achieve legitimacy by embedding multiple sources of authority through naming and declarative constructions. This linguistic configuration in the Maguindanaon texts illustrates the convergence of barangay, religious, and customary actors within a single discursive framework. Through these linguistic strategies, the agreements negotiate legitimacy across statutory, customary, and religious systems, creating a dynamic interplay between language and institutional recognition.

The concept of layered legitimacy is further demonstrated in the role of barangay officials who act as both mediators and enforcers of community norms. Yusingco (2022) notes that barangay assemblies employ language that conveys administrative authority and moral leadership, emphasizing their central role in dispute resolution. This aligns with the Maguindanaon expression “dalem opisina na Kagawad” (at the house of the Barangay Councilor), which situates the settlement process within a hybrid institutional and communal space. Tabuga (2023) supports this observation by explaining that barangay resolutions often adopt formal legal idioms to enhance their perceived authority. In the Maguindanaon corpus, the frequent invocation of barangay titles and venues strengthens the association between governance and customary law. Consequently, barangay officials emerge as linguistic mediators who bridge the formal state structure and traditional community authority.

Authority in Maguindanaon settlements also extends beyond civilian governance to include revolutionary and military figures. Van Wessel and Bakker (2023) observe that in post-conflict communities, references to military or security actors lend symbolic stability and reinforce the enforcement capacity of governance documents. This phenomenon is reflected in settlement agreements that identify MILF commanders or battalion officers as witnesses or facilitators. Their inclusion provides coercive legitimacy and signals that the agreement is supported by institutions capable of ensuring compliance. Rahman and Ali (2023) further argue that religious and military participation in legal discourse creates a fusion of spiritual and administrative authority, strengthening communal trust in the process.

In this way, Maguindanaon settlement agreements embody a form of hybrid governance where revolutionary, state, and religious institutions interact through linguistic expression.

The invocation of religious and customary authority serves as an additional layer of legitimization in these documents. Hasanah and Zaman (2022) explain that the reference to Shariah institutions in Southeast Asian adjudication elevates the spiritual weight of a document, granting it both divine and juridical authority. The phrase “MAHKAMAH SHARIAH ... Camp Rajamuda (SA-LS15)” exemplifies how Maguindanaon settlements are linguistically aligned with Islamic law. Ullah and Farooq (2023) add that mentions of elders and traditional rituals function as moral validators, ensuring that customary authority remains embedded within legal texts. Expressions such as “pinirman nilan” (signed by elders) indicate communal endorsement and moral accountability. Through this integration of religious and cultural language, the settlements acquire both legal and ethical legitimacy, reinforcing social cohesion within the Maguindanaon community.

The same linguistic strategies are observed in marriage and financial settlement cases. Kessing and Moye (2020) argue that the inclusion of multiple signatories, such as spouses, parents, and elders, extends the scope of accountability and strengthens the social enforceability of agreements. This collective witnessing practice is evident in Maguindanaon marriage settlements, where the involvement of barangay officials and family members provides both moral and institutional reinforcement. Nyamu-Musembi and Cornwall (2021) emphasize that adaptive customary law achieves flexibility and legitimacy by incorporating conditional clauses that reflect mutual obligations. In financial agreements, clauses that specify payment terms or debt forgiveness represent this adaptability, enabling the document to function simultaneously as a legal contract and a moral commitment. These linguistic performances highlight how Maguindanaon settlements combine structure and empathy in upholding justice.

García and Luzón (2022) conclude that legal texts in pluralistic societies act as performative instruments of authority. Rather than merely recording agreements, they enact legitimacy through formalized language and ritualized structure. The Maguindanaon settlement agreements exemplify this performativity through consistent naming conventions, witness listings, and references to institutional oversight. Van Wessel and Bakker (2023) assert that in fragile governance zones, legitimacy depends on overlapping signals of authority, including religious, customary, and coercive cues. The Maguindanaon settlements linguistically embody these layers, transforming the text into an act of governance that enforces order, trust, and social continuity. In this way, linguistic structure serves not only as a record of resolution but also as a living manifestation of jurisdictional authority.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that Maguindanaon settlement agreements linguistically legitimize jurisdictional authority through the deliberate invocation of recognized leaders, institutions, and governing bodies within their textual form. The consistent use of declarative openings, official titles, and institutional identifiers, such as barangay councils, MILF offices, and Shariah courts, serves not merely as formal components but as performative acts of legitimacy. By foregrounding these authorities at the beginning of each document, the texts linguistically assert that the agreements are made under lawful and recognized supervision, thereby transforming written words into instruments of legitimate governance and social order.

Furthermore, it can be concluded that the language of the agreements positions barangay officials, elders, and community leaders as central agents of authority, bridging the divide between state law and indigenous custom. Their repeated inclusion as facilitators and witnesses not only affirms their administrative role but also embodies the moral and cultural legitimacy that sustains community justice. The agreements’ linguistic structure reflects a hybrid legal culture in which official designations and communal validation coexist, showing that authority among Maguindanaon communities is both institutional and participatory. This textual pattern ensures that every settlement is perceived as valid, binding, and socially accountable within both formal and customary systems.

Lastly, it can be concluded that integrating religious and military authorities into the linguistic fabric of the agreements further extends their jurisdictional legitimacy. References to Islamic institutions, spiritual leaders, and security figures such as MILF commanders or battalion officers reinforce the moral and social weight of each settlement. These linguistic inclusions illustrate a dynamic and adaptive legal system where faith, governance, and communal trust converge. Thus, Maguindanaon settlement agreements not only document authority but also perform it through language, ensuring that jurisdictional power is legitimized across legal, cultural, and spiritual dimensions.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the linguistic, legal, and cultural integrity of Maguindanaon settlement agreements:

Local governance bodies, including barangay councils and customary leaders, should develop standardized linguistic templates for settlement agreements that accurately reflect jurisdictional authority. This will help preserve Maguindanaon cultural authenticity while ensuring the documents remain legally valid within both customary and state frameworks. Mediators and community leaders should undergo training in legal writing and translation to ensure clarity, precision, and cultural appropriateness in settlement terms. Such training would promote fairness, transparency, and compliance, minimizing disputes that arise from vague or misinterpreted provisions.

Barangay offices and Shariah courts should institutionalize systematic recordkeeping and archiving of validated settlement agreements. A centralized repository would enhance legal accountability and preserve these vital documents as part of the Maguindanaon

community's cultural and legal heritage. Language plays a crucial role in legitimizing authority and maintaining justice within Maguindanaon communities. Understanding its pragmatic and cultural dimensions enables policymakers and legal practitioners to craft inclusive and context-sensitive frameworks that harmonize customary law, Islamic jurisprudence, and state regulations. Future researchers should undertake comparative analyses involving settlement agreements from other ethnolinguistic communities in Mindanao. This will broaden the understanding of how linguistic structures shape legal legitimacy across diverse cultural contexts, contributing to the advancement of forensic and sociolinguistic research in the Philippines.

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