

AN OVERVIEW OF  
THE INTENTION OF THE PHILIPPINE STATE  
TO HARM OUR LANGUAGES

*Defenders of the Indigenous Languages of the Archipelago*

## (I) NATIONAL AND PROVINCIAL LANGUAGE POLICY

The national and provincial language policy: Only Filipino is the national language, with English as an official language, yet other countries in recent years (Ethiopia, Uganda, South Africa, etc) have made multiple native languages official. Many more political entities (regions, provinces, autonomous territories, and even municipalities) around the world have made their main languages co-official with whatever national languages already recognized in the country, such as the Basque, Galician, and Catalan regions of Spain; the Sindh Province of Pakistan; the Fryslan Province of Netherlands; the constituent country of Wales within the UK; the Nunavut Territory of Canada; the Xinjiang and Tibet autonomous units of China; several municipalities of Norway/Sweden; and many more.

In the Philippines, the main languages have not been made into national languages nor have they yet been promoted to co-official languages by smaller government units. The activity going on in La Union province to formally incorporate Ilokano in various sectors alongside Tagalog and English is a refreshing change in an otherwise stagnant climate for government-led language sponsorship in other parts of the country.

Meanwhile, unfortunately, the vast majority of pamphlets, tarpaulins, reports etc. sent from the various national departments to the regions are in English or Tagalog, and very, very rarely in the respective regional or local languages. It is ironic that one can go on the Department of Health website in Hawaii and find important documents on anthrax, asthma, and other diseases available in Tagalog and Ilokano, but yet the same cannot be said right here in the Philippines, the very country where these language are native and have many more speakers.

## (II) NATIONAL ANTHEM

It has been made a criminal offense to sing the national anthem (or say the Pledge to the flag) in another language other than Filipino according to the Flag and Heraldic Code, even if it is a native Philippine language. Is this not against (a) the constitutionally-guaranteed freedom of expression? (the Constitution, by the way, should take precedence over a congressional act like the Flag Code); (b) the rights of indigenous people to preserve and develop their languages and cultures provided in the Constitution and the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (Most indigenous groups had no say over the matter of the Philippine Republic's creation, and then we turn around and force them to sing about how much they love this country, in a language which they might not understand and have very little historical significance to them?) (c) the very goals of said Flag Code, which is supposed to foster national pride and unity.

Maybe I'm crazy, but I think I could express my love for my country more authentically in the tongue that is closest to my heart, the one I best understand, the one my mother whispered to me while on her breast, the one I make love and dream in. Especially if there were not the threat of my

being imprisoned for one year or fined 20,000 pesos. I don't know of another country that makes it a crime to sing its anthem in all but one of its own languages (which actually are recognized as “auxiliary official languages” in the Constitution! What a sham!). Several individuals, groups, and provinces have attempted to sing variations of the national anthem, but have always met the same death by the National Historical Commission, citing the Flag and Heraldic Code. Some congressman, I pray, will someday have the courage to move to amend the law so as to decriminalize it, to provide a process where translations can be formally reviewed and approved, or at least provide exceptions (such as indigenous groups, informal settings, in privacy, etc) where variations are acceptable. The law also leads to the absurd situation where singing the original Spanish version of the national anthem is not allowed.

### (III) EDUCATION POLICY

Our languages have been largely excluded from education for over 100 years. Apart from the brief phase of using the vernacular in Grade 1 and Grade 2 between the 1956 and 1974, they have not been formally incorporated in the educational system as media of instruction or even as subjects. Moreover, it was common practice to punish or fine a student for speaking in the local language; even now, signs saying “English only” abound, and teachers rampantly scold their students for not speaking English or Filipino in the provinces. By the way, Rep. Magtanggol Gunigundo, author for the MTBMLE bill says that this practice violates the Constitutional rights of children to freedom of expression, and the school authorities and DepEd officials concerned could be brought to the courts. So, if any one is aware of actual instances of these practices, please bring them to the attention of Rep. Gunigundo.

The majority (70%) of Filipinos have never been formally taught their native languages, and hence do not know their proper spelling, grammar, and deeper vocabulary. Similarly, most Filipinos have never read a book in their native language, as there are few people who can properly write them and a similarly pathetic number who can comfortably read. It is not that the languages are somehow inadequate, it is mostly that our access to and instruction of them are limited.

Meanwhile, South Africa lets their school divisions choose what languages they want to use as MOI, Spain has different MOIs depending on region, Taiwan teaches their mother tongues as language subjects, Singapore streams pupils into different language schools based on ethnicity, India requires all students to learn the local language, the national language, and English, Malaysia gives parents the choice to enter their children into national schools (where they use the national language) or vernacular schools (where they use the local language), and many more examples that give more flexibility and choice than the Philippine system, which remains extremely centralized and homogenous for such a diverse country.

#### (IV) COMMERCE

National franchises such as Jollibees, McDonalds, SM, and others don't adjust their operations in different parts of the country according to language. It's a one-size-fits-all approach with the signs, ads, and menus all being in English and/or Tagalog. While this is probably a matter of efficiency and economy, some things could be changed at no cost. For example, in many parts of the country (especially Luzon) the staff will only communicate with the customer in English or Tagalog. It has been noted that in Pampanga if you speak Kapampangan to the staff, or Pangasinense in Pangasinan, or Ilokano in other northern provinces, the staff by default reply in English or Tagalog. When you ask them why, they tell you that (a) they either feel shy because their boss is around, or (b) that they've been explicitly told to speak only in English or Tagalog.

Many managers and owners of outlets in the Provinces are not locals but rather from NCR, and try to impose their language preferences on their staff. This may or may not be an officially endorsed policy of the overall company, but since instances of this kind of linguistic discrimination are common (and once again against the freedom of expression in our Bill of Rights), headquarters should properly train their managers and staff to respect the linguistic rights of each other and especially their customers. Does it not also make business sense to make a customer feel as comfortable as possible and respond, when possible, in the language he or she chooses to communicate in? If a cashier knows the local language, and a customer uses it, I see no reason for the cashier not to respectfully entertain the customer's language preference, rather than implicitly degrading the customer by responding in a more "prestigious" language. Note that in Canada, they have big signs at airports and railway stations saying "We will serve you in the language of your choice/ *Nous vous servions dans la langue de votre choix.*"

Unfortunately, most training for these establishments occurs in Manila, and the scenario of a customer walking in and speaking a different language besides Tagalog or English is simply not dealt with. When preparing the codigo or script of what staff should say behind the counter, these companies should also prepare ones for the main local language in addition to the English and Tagalog versions..

#### (V) MEDIA

It is illuminating to compare the media picture of the Philippines with India. Like the Philippines, India is a developing country, it has a high population density, was colonized by an English-speaking power, received independence at about the same time, and is highly multilingual. But they went very different directions in language policy, and this is reflected in their media landscape. There are over 500 TV channels covering all major languages of India. The largest national network, Doordarshan, runs a 3-tier broadcasting system (national, regional, local) and has an additional 10 regional language satellite channels broadcast internationally. There are cinema and music industries in 11 different Indian languages. Seven languages are represented by the top 10 circulating newspapers in the country.

Now while it is true that India's population is much greater than the Philippines, and therefore have greater power in numbers to help sustain media in different languages, the most important factor is the climate for the use and development of such languages. If a group is virtually illiterate in their own language, a large print circulation in that language cannot be sustained no matter how big the population is. Cebuano, with over 20 million speakers is a case in point. But Indians are generally not illiterate in their native languages. 33 languages are used as media of instruction across the country at the primary level, 21 in secondary, and 18 above this level! The national government furthermore aids the adaptation of its languages to new technologies through the Technology Development in Indian Languages program, so whenever a new web service, computer program, speech recognition software, etc comes out, it is swiftly applied to 26 official "Scheduled" languages. The Indian parliament has repeatedly added new Scheduled languages to its Constitution, and has plans to add a dozen or so more.

If Philippine media networks say, "Oh, there's no market for media in other languages besides Tagalog" or "they're not profitable," there are several answers to this. (a) No major television network has ever made a serious and sustained effort to patronize the other languages beyond the odd half an hour broadcast. No dedicated channels, cartoons, quality-dubbed movies, music channels, etc. So how can they be sure if it hasn't really been tried properly? (b) And if they are not sustainable, that's not surprising! It's hard to cater to languages that are excluded from education, government, technology, and suffer from low reputations and low literacy. (c) In other countries, like Wales, New Zealand, Morocco, and Turkey, television in minority languages which are not profitable are bankrolled by governments in order to ensure that different ethnic groups have access to these important services. If the Philippine government cared about the diversification of its media, it could find a way, through sponsorship, incentives, mutual benefit agreements with the major companies, or just by simply requesting.

Even if no dramatic changes were undertaken, Philippine media conglomerates could at least establish some protocols for respectful treatment of different groups. For example, if a reporter is interviewing someone, he or she should ask what language he would like to be interviewed in (as the BBC do), and if it's different from Tagalog or English, it's up to the multibillion dollar broadcaster to dub or subtitle the interview if it wishes. Secondly, insulting and racist (Tagalista) content such as found in the movie *Sakal Sakali Saklolo* should be discouraged. And adverts should be allowed to be submitted in any language---after all, the client is paying so he should be able to dictate the language, not ABS-CBN (which was the problem Gov. Osmena came across a few years ago). In ABS-CBN's *Pinoy Big Brother*, Princess Lieza Manzon was admonished not to speak in Cebuano to her provincemate, Paul Jake. Fortunately, Manzon once worked as an interpreter in Japan and replied they could always hire an interpreter. An interpreter was hired, Princess spoke in Cebuano. Nevertheless, she decided to quit the show not long after. Also, Manila-based media have the habit of using the Visayan term for a young woman, *Inday*, as an ignorant domestic maid.

## (VI) INTERNET

This is the subject of a lot of recent interest. For reasons not entirely clear, the Google and Facebook localization teams for the Philippines have not created website versions for other Philippine languages. This is especially strange given that, (a) there are many Google and Facebook services for languages with fewer speakers (and even no native speakers, like Latin or Pirate(?)); (b) the Philippine regional languages technically enjoy constitutional status as auxiliary official languages, and many regional languages with equivalent status around the world have already been given Google search portals and Facebook versions; (c) the Philippine regional languages are used by millions of people everyday, have established literatures, are used in regional broadcasts of national television (albeit short ones) and most AM radio, and are finally being prepared for use in primary education yet some languages in other countries that are much less established and have not penetrated the same number of societal domains already have Google and Facebook support.

There are at least three possible reasons for this:

(a) One theory for this language gap might be that most of the employees in Google's localization team originate from NCR, are not speakers of regional languages, and thus do not see support for them as urgent.

(b) Another reason might come down to semantic miscommunication. Google says to their Filipino team, "Right people, we're going to roll out Google for the Philippine languages so as to localize our services. What languages exist in the Philippines?" The Filipinos, accustomed through Jacobinist brainwashing since childhood to refer to English and Filipino as languages while the others as dialects, respond, English and Filipino. Google then instructs them to proceed and make the search portal in English and Filipino. This is a likely scenario since hardly anyone besides professors of linguistics know that the "dialects" are in fact independent languages, and I guess the typical employee is a nerdy comp sci graduate and not anyone familiar with Philippine languages.

(c) The third theory is that these internet companies are only willing to support languages as far as the national government in question is concerned. Given the relative low support, recognition, and inclusion of Philippine languages in national policy and procedures, the concomitant support by these global companies is similarly weak.

Whatever the reason is, someone should bring these deficiencies to their attention.

## (VII) KOMISYON SA WIKANG FILIPINO

The Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino was set up to fulfill the provision in the Constitution that says, "The Congress shall establish a national language commission composed of representatives of various regions and disciplines which shall undertake, coordinate, and promote researches for the development, propagation, and preservation of Filipino and other languages" (Article XIV, Section 9). Will someone tell me exactly what the KWF has done for the "other languages"? Have they tried to rectify the marginalization our languages face across all the sectors listed above? Have they critically examined the constitutionality of the Flag and Heraldic Code? No. Along with the

National Historical Commission, they are among its biggest supporters! Have they coordinated with the commercial sector to encourage language-friendly policies? No. Have they asked ABS-CBN, GMA, and TV5 for better representation of other languages? No. Have they researched how Facebook and Google may become more multilingual in the Philippines and taken action? No. And why have they remained so silent about the MTB-MLE movement? If you really want to “develop, propagate, and preserve” languages, education seems like an obvious place to start.

Instead, it seems like they are trying to do the exact opposite. The one KWF commissioner who seemed to finally take note of the other half of KWF's mandate, Dr. Ricardo Nolasco, was swiftly removed and replaced with the traditional type, the kind who serves the other languages with a token translation here or there. It is revealing that the KWF has often spoken in avid favor of legislation to make our educational system entirely or almost entirely Filipino (such as the Estrada bill that recently came out). It is also revealing that pretty much only 1 out of 5 divisions of the KWF is dedicated to other Philippine languages. I would finally also advise people to read their annual report and budget and witness to what extent they are actually developing our native languages. They seem to be hostage to years of Jacobinist nationalist indoctrination - one country, one people, one language.

#### (VIII) SOCIAL CLIMATE

Not including all the aforementioned language inadequacies systemic in the policies and actions of government, corporations, media, and other sectors, there is a major information void among the public. Probably 99% of Filipinos are not aware that most Philippine languages are threatened, what the conditions and ramifications of language death are, what are the implications (pros and cons) of a multilingual society, what other countries have done to safeguard their languages (and the corollary, what the Philippine has not done so far), what linguistic rights individuals and communities are afforded based on existing national and international law, and what they can do to secure those rights. Heck, we are still calling our languages “dialects” after 100 years, as if they were all slight modifications of the same language! My point is, any attempt to fix the institutional problems concerning language will run up against massive amounts of misinformation, misguided preconceptions, or simple lack of knowledge on the pertinent issues. The public is largely in the dark, probably because our educational system has not cared about our linguistic diversity in either a practical way (using our languages in the classroom), nor in a theoretical way (issues of language appearing in curriculum content). The lack of information, apathy, or downright distaste for our native languages persist when the deprived students proceed to government, media, and other sectors, in which the chance that they are likely to care, never mind think of, policy changes to rectify the situation is next to nil.

Regardless of one's views on whether we should be doing more to exercise our linguistic rights; whether we should push for English, Filipino, our mother tongues, or some sort of combination; and how to approach the language reforms we seek, everyone would benefit from more information. Right now, our language future is at risk of being decided by a few ideologues, Tagalog media giants, and congressmen eager to create legislation reflecting their specific views on such matters. They, for the most part, grew up in the same information-starved environment that we

all did when it comes to language rights, services, and pluralism so it worries me substantially that they are also the ones to decide our media of instruction in school and other policies that affect our languages. One positive movement towards addressing the widespread information hole is the recent proliferation of conferences on MTB-MLE, cultural and linguistic democracy, etc. Awareness and exchange of ideas is the first step towards any reform.

## (IX) INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The Philippines did sign and ratify the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 29.1 (c) of the Convention provides among other things that the "States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living; the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;"

Further, Article 30 of the Convention provides that in "those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language."

In submitting Compliance Reports to UNICEF, Philippine authorities generally claim compliance since the Constitution provides in Section 7, Article XIV that the regional languages are auxiliary official languages and auxiliary languages of instruction. This is duplicitous and intellectually dishonest. Indeed, while Section 3 (g) of RA 7104, the law creating the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino defines auxiliary language thus: "refers to a particular language, spoken in certain places, which supports or helps the national and/or official languages in their assigned functions", neither the auxiliary languages provisions of the Constitution nor the definition in RA 7104 have been made operational. It is all lip service. How can this be considered as compliance?

## (X) RECOGNIZE, RESPECT AND ACTIVELY PROMOTE OUR CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY - UNITY IN DIVERSITY

This is best summarized in what Sionil F. Jose wrote in his column: Light at the end of the tunnel HINDSIGHT on his interview with Gibo Teodoro (The Philippine Star).

Sionil F. Jose: "Some two decades ago, James Fallows of the Atlantic Monthly postulated that our "damaged culture" hinders our development. If culture both as anthropological and aesthetic concept is a factor in the building of a nation, how will you handle it?"



Gibo Teodoro: "I believe that the effort to disregard the rich cultural diversity of our country led to a lot of damage. The single language, single ideology line of nation-building has not been a positive development for our country. It has bred bigotry and division. I believe that we must accept that we are diverse. We are an archipelago, for heaven's sake. We must encourage that diversity and teach each other what we are, so that a culture of tolerance and respect evolves. Even the contributions of our colonizers such as languages, both Spanish and English, must be appreciated and their use enhanced. The world itself because of increasing interconnections is getting increasingly culturally aware. We should be the same in our own country."

## (XI) LITERARY DEVELOPMENT

This is partly the fault of all the legislation pertinent to language and the way they have been implemented in our civil society. These laws resulted in the exclusion of Visayan literature from the literary development of the country, English and Tagalog having been canonized as the legitimate representatives of the country's literary life. This has succeeded in dampening creativity in our Visayan languages (and all other Philippine languages labeled as regional or provincial). Luckily for Cebuano it has always had writers of calibre who refused to be silenced and drawn into viewing their native tongue as secondary and have continued writing despite the lack of publication opportunities.

It may appear that the NCCA has undertaken affirmative action to encourage writing in the languages, but inevitably this affirmative action hardly remedies the yawning gap in literary development between Cebuano and the primate languages. Literature in the primate languages are ensconced in academe. Until recently, Cebuano is disallowed in the classrooms and is deemed unsuitable for intellectual discussions. Local publishers are almost non-existent, and readers prefer reading American whodunnits than buying a book by local authors, especially those in Cebuano. Cebuanos can do a lot to reverse this situation. Many young people have taken up writing in the native language, but their experience of the native language is for the great part inadequate--for lack of deep immersion in the language itself (there are not so many books to read in Cebuano), so that they practically have to re-create the language itself from their own immersions in it. Whatever they are doing is worth doing. Cebuanos must re-learn to appreciate the deeper and finer usage of the native language. They must be willing to invest in the publication of local works--Sunstar Superbalita and Bisaya may be commended for this. And we must re-learn to read in our own language.

CIVILIZED COUNTRIES  
HAVE EITHER MANY NATIONAL LANGUAGE  
OR NONE AT ALL

Canada almost split because of language issues. Czechoslovakia did split into Czech Republic and Slovakia. So did Pakistan split into Bangladesh and Pakistan because of ultranationalists in Islamabad who imposed Urdu as the sole national language among the Bengali speakers Of West Bengal. Sri Lanka had a 25-year civil war as the majority Sinhalese ignoring the minority Tamils, imposed Sinhalese as the only language in the country. Unfortunately for them, the Tamils lost the war when they resorted to terrorism and assassinated an Indian Prime Minister. That was biting the hand that fed them. Belgium prevented a break up by going federal and explicitly recognizing language communities and dropping French as the only national language (use of French was a vestige of the Jacobinist ideology of French Revolution, one country, one people, one people). Spain prevented a break up by giving quasi federal powers to its regions now called "autonomous communities" with powers clearly delineated between the autonomous communities and the center in the Spanish Constitution. The regional languages were made co-official languages with Spanish. The Constitution recognized the various nationalities, making Spain a country of many nations. This debunked the old theory of the nation-state.

The Constitution of India now recognizes 23 languages, spoken in different parts the country, namely Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Meitei, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. Hindi is a official language of the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttaranchal, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and the National Capital Territory of Delhi. Tamil is a official language of Tamil\_Nadu, Puducherry and Andamon Nicobar Islands. English is the co-official language of the Indian Union, and each of the several states mentioned above may also have another co-official language

South Africa has eleven official languages. They are Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Sotho, Swazi, Tswana, Tsonga, Venda, Xhosa and Zulu. Fewer than one percent of South Africans speak a first language other than an official one. Most South Africans can speak more than one language. Prior to 1994, South Africa had only two official languages, English and Afrikaans. There is no national language.

**Compiled from the postings of Manny, Firth and Merlie:**

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/DILA/message/23912>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/DILA/message/23910>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/DILA/message/23948>