National Language Policy in the Philippines: A Comparative Study of the Education Status of "Colonial" and Indigenous Languages with Special Reference to Minority Tongues

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An Overview

The attempt to build monolingual states was often based upon the identification which many peoples had developed between the consciousness of being a separate national group and the native tongue. The language thus often became a symbol of its national identity and the core value of its culture. This link between cultural identity and language persists to this day, and is likely to continue in the future.

What is at question is not whether language may be regarded as the most important element of a given culture — indeed, its carrier and core value (Smolicz 1979, 1980) — but whether this identification between language and a cultural group requires in each instance the creation of a separate political entity for its protection and development. It should be possible for a number of linguistic groups to co-exist within the same political organism without fear that their cultural heritage is thereby threatened, and that the only recourse to ensure survival is to separate into yet another little state, however precarious its economic base or geographic position.

It is the contention of this paper that there is no intrinsic need for such a nexus between a language and a state. It therefore follows that attempts to artificially suppress minority languages through policies of assimilation, devaluation, reduction to a state of illiteracy, expulsion, or genocide are not only degrading of human dignity and morally unacceptable, but that they are also an invitation to separatism and an incitement to fragmentation into mini-states. The danger is that if this is not realized in time, needless suffering, discrimination, tension, and strife may be inflicted upon the whole population. This applies to the dominant group which attempts to achieve a monolingual state by imposing its own mother tongue upon all others, as well as to those minority groups which try to preserve their languages by adopting either a separatist or secessionist stance. In this kind of struggle, the culture-creative powers of a group are needlessly re-directed to culturally destructive pursuits that consume energies which could have been used to advance the languages and cultures of all concerned.

It is the principle underlying this paper that each state, in this case the Philippines, usually needs some kind of a national language that would act as a "lingua franca" for communication between all its citizens. This should not imply,
however, the disappearance of all alternative modes of verbal expression. On the contrary, people whose mother tongue is different from the national language should be given the opportunity to develop their first or native tongue. In such a multilingual setting community languages other than the national one would not be "secret" tongues, but "open" and available to interested individuals from other groups, including those from the group whose home language had been declared as national.

Linguistic pluralism for individuals, and diglossia or societal bilingualism for the state, have long been accepted in many parts of the world, and nowhere more perhaps than in Asia. But in other countries bilingualism (and especially biliteracy) is still looked upon with suspicion and may be discouraged through prohibitive or discriminatory regulations in the educational system and other organs of administration. This suspicion of bilingualism and the deeply engrained belief in a monolingual state can be observed in countries such as the United States, Australia, or Great Britain, which for long periods of their history have lived under the assumption that their citizens spoke but one native tongue, and that all other languages were "foreign", in that their use could only be justified by reference to interaction with outsiders or aliens. The idea of "community languages" other than English still finds little acceptance in such Anglo-Saxon-dominated societies, while in Germany, for example, 4.6 million "guest-workers" speak languages (such as Turkish, Italian, or Greek) which are inaccessible to "ordinary" German schoolchildren who are required to study "foreign" languages that have been officially defined as English or French. Some of the countries mentioned above have now acquired substantial linguistic minorities, caused by arrivals from the "New Commonwealth" in the U.K., or the flood of Latin Americans that have supplemented the "older" ethnics in the United States. Lack of sufficient recognition of the rights and aspirations of linguistic minorities may create for both of these countries serious "centrifugal" problems in the future. Australia also finds itself in this group, with a quarter of its population now drawn from non-English speaking backgrounds.

In Asia there has been a traditional recognition of multilingualism which many European states lack. This does not mean that Asia has been free of strife, which at times has been "internally generated", while at others it could be attributed to an unfortunate importation of the outdated nationalistic European model of a monolingual nation-state. It may be argued that some aspects of this belief in the need for one national language as a symbol of national independence may now be found in the Philippines, as that country makes strides to free itself from the former "colonial" tongues — Spanish (now almost phasing itself out of existence) and English (still used in many domains, such as higher education and scientific training in the schools). In their efforts to establish Pilipino as the national tongue, the authorities appear to have placed the emphasis almost entirely on the Pilipino-English balance; the other languages of the Philippines (spoken daily by almost two thirds of the population) are being completely lost from sight.

Language Policies in the Philippines

In the Philippines the process of educational transmission is particularly hampered by the linguistic confusion involving the entire Filipino educational system. In this