

# Language policy and local literature in the Philippines<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*Multilingualism is a complex phenomenon and is sometimes considered a problem to national unity and ultimately, political control. A language carries with it a culture, social knowledge, and a community. The presence of many languages in a single country obviously implies many cultures, many loyalties, and many communities. Multilingualism may invite not only ethnic animosities but also ethnic wars. The political survival of a multiethnic nation clearly depends on the creation of social coherence among its peoples. In these situations, a good language policy should generate such coherence. However, a multilingual nation's desire for national coherence becomes complicated when its colonial experiences pervade the national consciousness. Long after they have left the country, the colonizers' cultural attitudes, traditions and loyalties may remain among the formerly colonized. In some cases, the colonized legitimize the colonizers' language as the national language and in the process, subordinate their more dominant local languages. Language policies, which by their nature affect both educational and administrative systems, may give rise to a gamut of social, economic and political inequalities. Speakers of local languages become marginalized from political participation. Since they do not speak the colonizer's language, work opportunities for them are limited to manual and menial tasks. The colonizer's language creates a political and economic divide between the privileged and marginalized classes. Local culture is devalued; local literatures may be lost.*

*This paper examines the influence of Philippine language policy on local literatures, particularly literature written in Waray, a language spoken in the eastern region of the Visayas. It will first provide an overview of Philippine language policy and look into the effects of the policy on Waray literature, language loyalty, Waray writers' responses, and literary production. Data for this paper were gathered from existing literature, surveys, and personal experiences.*

## **The language environment and Philippine language policy**

The Philippines has experienced several shifts in language policy as the government has had to confront the challenge of unifying a nation whose people speak over one hundred languages<sup>2</sup>—eight of them major languages. Early in the history of Philippine governance, particularly prior to the American colonial period, administrators paid less attention to language policy since they were more interested in wresting power from the Spanish colonizers. It was not until 1935 that the Philippine government started to look seriously at the language situation. However, because the Constitution did not explicitly stipulate a *common* language—chosen from among the country's local or indigenous languages—that would serve as the national language, efforts to develop a language policy were indecisive. The fundamental law retained English and Spanish as the country's official languages. In 1943, the government began developing Tagalog, one of the major local languages, and propagating it as the national language by having it taught as a subject in the secondary curriculum.

The growing anti-Western mood in the sixties, increasing student dissatisfaction with English-medium education and escalating nationalist sentiment in the early seventies triggered student unrest, forcing the government to reexamine its position in relation to education and language policy. The aftermath of this widespread unrest was a government program designed to promote a national language and a nationalist consciousness in the educational system. The government was clearly in

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<sup>2</sup> McFarland, 1996

need of a cultural project that would unite the nation. In 1972, the imposition of Martial Law generated public fear, silencing the more restive areas in the country and in the year that followed, Pres. Ferdinand Marcos called for the ratification of a constitution that would confer on him enormous political power. One provision of that constitution was the adoption of a national language called Filipino. The Filipino language was envisioned as a universal language that would grow out of the mix of several Philippine languages. Since the general perception was that the national language did not yet exist, the government declared English and Filipino—actually Tagalog—the official and de facto national languages.

It was easy to make changes in the educational system under Martial Law. All it took was a presidential decree or an executive order. In 1974, an order from the Department of Education, Culture and Sports was issued to set a bilingual education scheme in place. Informed by findings from a language survey, the policy was received with mixed feelings by teachers and students from the different regions of the country. The department order mandated that English would be the medium of instruction in science and mathematics and that Filipino or Tagalog would be the medium of instruction in all other subjects in elementary and secondary levels. Nevertheless, the bilingual education scheme flourished and became instrumental in perpetuating and circulating the myths and legends about Marcos' leadership.

The EDSA Revolution in 1986 ended the Marcos regime and catapulted into power the first woman president, Corazon Aquino, who restored democratic institutions through a new constitution.. In no uncertain terms, the constitution declared Filipino (Tagalog) as the national language and reiterated the position of English as an official language of the country. As before, both were to serve as languages of instruction. Today this policy has succeeded not only in generating widespread use of Filipino (Tagalog) as the medium of communication among citizens speaking different languages, but also in maintaining English as the medium of communication in government and business.

### **Writing local literature: Language loyalty and the Waray writer**

Literature written in Waray is essentially poetry and drama. Its development took two directions. Poetry flourished with the publication of local newspapers while drama grew with the celebration of town fiestas. The drama was usually written by a local playwright upon the request of the *hermano* or mayor and was presented on the feast day.

In the early 1900s, the Philippines was undergoing a political transition, a shift in power after Spain ceded the country to America. Although the Spanish colonizers were already gone, local newspapers still carried Spanish names like *La Voz de Leyte*, *El Heraldo de Leyte*, *Noli Me Tangere*, *El Liberal*, and *El Obrero* and were written mostly in Spanish. While the colonial Philippine government favored the use of English and Spanish as the official languages of the country, local writers sustained their writing by continually using Waray and Spanish in the local papers. They realized that their Spanish education alienated them from their own people, and so there grew among them a kind of cultural nationalism.

### **The Church and local literature**

The Roman Catholic Church played a great role in the efflorescence of Waray poetry. It regularly published periodicals in two of its large dioceses in Samar and Leyte. One of these periodicals, *Eco de Samar y Leyte*, produced by the Archdiocese of Catbalogan, Samar, had sections in Spanish and Waray. In *Eco*, Spanish was used in news reports about the diocese, gospels and stories. Waray was employed in writing local news, poetry and stories. The poetry published in *Eco* was mostly occasional, moralistic, and religious in theme. In like manner, the stories, which were serialized, tended to be sentimental and didactic. The dominant poet in this periodical was Andicula who wrote a series of didactic, satirical and humorous, poetry in Waray, which functioned as social commentaries.

*An Lantawan*, the other Church periodical, published by the Archdiocese of Palo, appeared in the 1930s. This periodical was six pages, four of which were devoted to reports and religious essays in Spanish. Two pages were used for poetry and stories in Waray. Inasmuch as it was also a Church publication, much of its written material tended to be moralistic and religious. The stories, likewise serialized, were melodramatic and sentimental. It is in this periodical that some of the best poems in Waray were published. These poems were mainly satirical and humorous and were written by three *ilustrados* or well-educated elite, namely Eduardo Makabenta, Iuminado Lucente, and Casiano Trinchera, all of whom had their education in Manila.

Three factors explain the growth of literature in Waray during the first three decades of the 1900s. First, the Catholic Church encouraged it through its publications. Secondly, the local writers felt alienated by their Spanish education and thus wrote in Waray to communicate to the larger milieu. Thirdly, cultural sub-nationalism and language loyalty motivated writers to write in their ethnic mother tongue. The moralistic stance of the Roman Catholic Church heavily influenced the literary writing in Waray and much of the literature published during the period was heavily didactic and full of religious fervor.

### **Anglicization and literary production**

The establishment of a free public school system under colonial rule in the Philippines drew large numbers of people who were eager to study. To put an end to Filipino resistance, American teachers trained Filipinos to become good citizens. They taught them English, writing and arithmetic. The increasing importance of English as a de facto national language, beginning in the 1900s, had so alarmed the local writers that they organized themselves into the *Sanghiran San Binisaya* which became an association of writers, political leaders and businessmen. The objective of the *Sanghiran* was to propagate the use of Waray and to preserve and enrich the language.<sup>3</sup> The writers, particularly Trinchera, Makabenta and Lucente, wrote poetry that riled their compatriots who showed disdain for Waray and instead used English or Tagalog (the national language) to communicate.

Local writers were not threatened by the use of Spanish because the language was slowly falling into disfavor. Their advocacy was for the Waray as a people to go back to their cultural roots and show pride in their own language. In the poem “Bakit” (Why), Trinchera complains about the Waray who, after staying for some time in Manila, refuse to speak in Waray, preferring to use Tagalog when they return:

In Manila, they use a lot of *bakit*.  
It is both a joy and a pain.  
What irks me is that those who have been to Manila  
Do not speak our own language once they return.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, in “Tukas Kamo Han Kalo” (Take Off Your Hats) Makabenta reveals his utter repugnance for the Waray who, with little education, speaks pidgin English which he cannot understand.

Since I was very curious  
I walked beside the man  
and nodded to him.  
I said, Excuse me, Mister.

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<sup>3</sup> Ma. Luz C. Vilches, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Casiano Trinchera, 1924, page 32.

Eh, wat? Mister?  
Ay yam sadyen sawsaw  
Of Cosmopolitan, di member of lawgaw  
Ay yam mor important dan armi kapitan,  
Ay yam di goteher en di nasabangan.<sup>5</sup>

During the same period, Lucente, a major Waray playwright, wrote plays, presented in town fiestas, where he ridiculed town folks who spoke in halting Spanish and English. He attacked the Waray who adopted American ways. He conveyed his abhorrence for these two languages by making his characters—illiterate town folks—speak these languages to show the audience how hilarious it was to use them. Let us take the case of the female character in “Up Limit Pati An Gugma” (Off Limits, Even Love), Duyak, who complains to an American soldier about what has happened to her home after the Second World War:

Wan day before you land her al the typhoon  
Destroyed by our aur banana. Now dat you  
are her sam of aur plant run over by di Tank;  
also di land occupied bay di army destroyed  
bay di bulduser laid haus, coconut and oder  
trees fruit.<sup>6</sup>

By the second quarter of the 1900s, the appearance of the first local English newspapers in Leyte, namely *Leyte News* and *The Leader*, were indications of the gradual acceptance of English among the Waray. As a counter measure to the spread of English, Waray writers published newspapers in Waray. Casiano Trinchera published and edited *Haguishis* while playwright Iuminado Lucente published *Mahagnaw*.<sup>7</sup> At about the same time, poems in English began to appear in the pages of *An Lantawan*. The writers did not feel threatened by the policy on Tagalog as the national language because the latter had not yet taken a dominant position in Philippine education and mass media.

New writers writing poetry in English started to fill the pages of local newspapers. The new poems in English were romantic and occasional. They were stilted and imitative of early written American poetry. Nevertheless, the American poetry served as material for learning English. Despite the political pressure to shift to English, writers like Francisco Alvarado, Iuminado Lucente, Eduardo Makabenta and Casiano Trinchera tenaciously held on to their ethnic mother tongue and continued to write poetry in Waray.

There was also renewed zeal for writing Waray plays. Staging of the *hadi-hadi* or *kumedia* persisted with each holding of town fiestas. The *hadi-hadi* was a long drawn out play that depicted warring Muslim and Christian kingdoms. In central towns of Leyte and Samar, the *zarzuela*, plays performed with songs, were likewise staged in town plazas. As a literary form, the plays grew in the hands of Norberto Romualdez Sr., Alfonso Cinco, Iuminado Lucente, Francisco Alvarado, Emilio Andrada Sr., Pedro Acerden, Margarita Nonato and Moning Fuentes.<sup>8</sup> Until the 1940s, poetry and drama remained the bulwark of literary production in Waray.

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<sup>5</sup> Eduardo Makabenta, 1939, page 8. The excerpt is an English translation of the original.

<sup>6</sup> Iuminado Lucente, 1947, page 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ceferino B. Montejo, 1937.

<sup>8</sup> Clarita C. Filipinas, 1991. pp.32-90.

### **Closing a speech community's mind and the onset of cultural amnesia**

The widespread acceptance of English in the 1950s did not augur well for Waray literature. A survey of the newspapers published between the mid-1950s and the early 1970s indicates the growing dominance of English. The result was a gradual displacement of Waray from the pages of newspapers and the growing disinterest in literary production in Waray. More and more local newspapers devoted many pages to English with a page or two to Waray.<sup>9</sup> In an effort to drum up interest in the Waray section of these newspapers, the editors reprinted the poems of Iluminado Lucente, Vicente I. de Veyra, and Eduardo Makabenta but this tactic failed to stimulate local writers to write in Waray. By mid-1970s, weekly and monthly periodicals were publishing only in English. The increasing commercialization of the newspapers, the shift to English and the characteristic short-lived existence of these papers struck a final blow to Waray poetry.

Waray drama met a similar fate. The onslaught of Hollywood movies had affected greatly the interest of people in local play productions. The high cost of stage production discouraged people from putting on plays. As presentations of plays in town fiestas started to slacken, the writing of plays also declined. Today local plays are no longer written and presented in town fiestas. What have taken their place as entertainment fare are beauty pageants, games of luck, cockfights and Ferris wheels.

From the 1960s to the early 1990s there was a long hiatus in the production of Waray literature. Newspapers and town fiestas no longer served as venues for poetry and drama. The literary landscape was bleak. Writing in Waray became more of a private passion of the writer whose works never got published. If ever a poet's works were recited or read it was in connection with an occasional town contest or celebration. At the time, English had become so dominant that it had taken every controlling domain of society: government administration, education, science and technology, business, mass media, and international relations.<sup>10</sup> During those years, writing a poem or short story in English that got published in national magazines was considered a feat. This was so because English was and still is considered a prestige language. People used English as the measure of one's education and social behavior. Local writers who wrote during this period were usually educated in English and American literature in the university. They read only Shakespeare, Yeats, Faulkner, Hemingway and Auden. They spurned the literature in Waray since the latter could not live up to their Western expectations. What made it even sadder was that they later became teachers of English and English literature in the universities and colleges. Their attitudes and values were reproduced in young people who no longer knew their cultural and literary heritage. This loss of cultural memory among young Waray speakers is even worse today because they do not know their own Waray cultural history. They know more about Luzon-based history and American culture.

### **The national language and cultural inferiority**

As noted above, within this same period, two years after then-President Marcos' imposition of Martial Law in the country, the Department of Education, Culture and Sports issued a department order placing the educational system under a bilingual education scheme. English was to become the medium of instruction for science and mathematics, and Filipino (Tagalog) the medium of instruction for all other subjects in the elementary and secondary levels. The order marked the expanded role of the national language in the Filipino education system. This same bilingual policy was reinstalled after the Marcos' dictatorship ended and with the political ascension of Corazon Aquino to the Philippine presidency. Under the bilingual education scheme, Filipino (Tagalog) formed part of the cultural project on the development of a nationalist consciousness.

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<sup>9</sup> See extant copies of *The Vanguard*, *An Tingog*, *Leyte Samar Gintigi-an*, *Leyte Record*, *The Crusader*, *Midweek Report*, *The Courier*, *The Leyte Post*, *The Newsrecorder*, *Eastern Dispatch* and *An Sulo* available at the Leyte-Samar Museum of the Liceo del Verbo Divini, Tacloban City.

<sup>10</sup> Bonifacio P. Sibayan, 1995.

At present, elementary and secondary students do not only study Filipino (Tagalog) as a distinct subject but also use it as a medium for all other subjects that deal with civics. In a recent study on the relationship between education, language policy and cultural marginalization, high school graduates who speak Waray revealed that studying Filipino or Tagalog constantly reminded them that they were different, that Tagalog speakers in Luzon were culturally superior, and that as non-Tagalog speakers, they were inferior.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, the nationalist consciousness project has worked against its very objective. Instead it has heightened ethnic differences and caused feelings of cultural inferiority for the non-Tagalog speaker, at least among the Waray. These findings have a number of implications for literary production in Waray. Since the Waray think they are inferior in relation to the Tagalog speaker, they also think the Waray language a low prestige language. Also, inasmuch as Waray is perceived as a low prestige language, it is thus not worth using in creating a Waray literature.

### **Reviving interest in local literature and new writing**

At present, after more than thirty years of silence, new writing in Waray is being produced, spurred not by any government order or language policy but by writers Waray academics who conduct writers' workshops in which they teach the craft of poetry and fiction. So far new poetry is being written. Unlike the poetry composed during the time of Lucente, Trinchera, and Makabenta, the new works are subtle and compact, metaphorical and experimental. This renewed effort to write in Waray has been an offshoot of a recent move by Philippine writers in English to write poetry and fiction in their respective ethnic mother tongues.

Early in the 1990s, the government's Commission on Higher Education issued a policy that requires the study of Philippine literature from the regions as a separate subject at the university or college level. Although this effort is a token act, it is a commendable measure for it allows speakers of local languages to study their own literatures and relearn the values and knowledge of their own cultures. The policy has generated a new audience for local literatures. Within this purview, the young Waray generation will at last have a chance to appreciate their own culture and literature, and use their language with pride.

Writers of the "New People's Army" are also writing new poetry. Largely hortatory, the poems are propagandistic and didactic. The poets describe their lives in the mountains, the military encounters and their aspirations for the country. New poetry is likewise being produced for radio stations in Leyte and Samar that hold daily poetry contests. Aired over the radio, the poems or *radio siday* are written mainly by ordinary people—farmers, elementary school teachers, lawyers, high school students and housewives. Occasional and didactic, and lacking a sense of humor, their poems talk about corruption in government, destruction of the environment and other social concerns.

### **Conclusion**

Philippine language policy, since its inception, has favored the English language. By legislating English in the controlling domains, policies have marginalized Philippine languages. Even with the aid of legislation, Filipino/Tagalog, the national language, has assumed secondary status in terms of prestige. Despite its widespread acceptance, Filipino has not succeeded in displacing English in the controlling domains. In the case of Waray, the policy has marginalized the language, the people and their literature. It has made speakers of Waray look at their own language with disdain. The policy has discouraged local writers from using Waray in their works. It has encouraged the educated Waray speakers to write creatively in English because of the many opportunities for publishing in that language. In short, the policy has left Waray literature in doldrums.

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<sup>11</sup> Victorio N. Sugbo, unpublished paper.

If there is renewed writing in Waray at present it is due to the efforts of a persistent few in the academe who wish to restore the vibrancy of the literary landscape in Leyte and Samar. Their persistence has been rewarded as there are new young writers writing new works in Waray. The propagandistic poetry of the revolutionary army and the occasional didactic radio siday have added zest to the production of Waray literature.

Philippine language policy has greatly affected literary production in Waray. It has contained literary writing in Waray to poetry. There are three locales where Waray poetry is being produced – the academe, the radio network, and the revolutionary movement. In the academe, the new works are occasionally read in public poetry reading sessions. In the radio network, poems are being composed daily by ordinary people to earn money from the contests. In the revolutionary movement, poetry is being written as a means to keep the revolutionary spirit alive

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