

## Healing East Timor through language understanding

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### ***back to the Holocene***

When we peer through the thin film of language policies and politics in East Timor, we can see clearly through to hundreds of ages of human interaction, and we are given a wider perspective on current issues. Geographically, Timor belongs in the *Nusantara* archipelago with Indonesia. Politically and culturally, the relationship is going through a time of tension and regret. Nevertheless, the shared stories of the region extend over such a vast period, that the last half-decade, indeed the last half century, and in fact even the last 400 years are almost a blink in the long story of human habitation across geological ages.

The history of European colonialism is written in the suite of language issues which confront all the islands in the regions. But there is a much older history etched into those languages. We can travel back beyond the time before Europeans sailed to these islands, into layers of history which eventually take us to geological time. We know about the mid Holocene geological period, of about 5000 years ago, when land-bridges joined New Guinea to Australia, and Tasmania to mainland Australia. In the north, this time was marked by a mother island, which encompassed the modern separate islands of Timor, Moa, Luang and Leti, and more than 20 others. Linguists know they were joined because the languages are closely related and because of common literary practice and references. The name given to the ancient language which they all once spoke is proto-Luangic-Kisaric.

Language records history, as much in Australian indigenous languages as in Timor. Linguists and archaeologists in Australia accept that

..... there has probably always been some contact between Northern Australia and its South-East Asian neighbours, which continues to the present day [Bowdler 1997: 25-26]

but they describe an 'intensification' in the mid Holocene geological period, when new tools appeared, new cooking and art styles took hold, and the new animal, the dog, arrived.

at the end of the last Glacial, Australian societies displayed a flexible pattern of relationships between people and the land, perhaps associated with belief in non-localised spiritual agencies of the sort known today in western Arnhem Land as Mimi, or in the Kimberleys as Ngandjala Ngandjala. With increased rainfall after the Glacial, people spread out from refuge areas into regions abandoned during the peak of aridity. Simultaneously, as the post-Glacial sea-levels rose, people were displaced southward from the low-lying land between Australia and New Guinea. At about 5000 BP, when the sea-level finally stabilised, a transformation of relationships between people and the land seems to have taken place along the north coast... The simplest model might conceive of two refuge areas during the last Glacial, the south-east [home of geometric art] and the north-coast [home of large silhouettes]. [Layton 2003:384]

Just as Aboriginal rock art and linguistic evidence combine to recreate the story of Australian indigenous peoples, so the oral traditions and the geological evidence match up to recount the fascinating story of the Timor region. Stories shared in these islands lament the destruction of the Mother continent of *Luang*, which once encompassed Timor and the smaller islands of the SouthWest Moluccan islands [SWM], located at latitude 8, longitude 126-130. The 30 islands are made up of the Leti, Damar and Babar archipelagos. Sitting north of Timor, Wetar and Liran islands form the largest set. The northern sea, the enclosed Ombai-Wetar Straits [*Tasi-Feto*] is regarded as the Mother sea. [Gunn 2000]

The complementary island clans, who have existed from ancient times right up until today, of the 'boatowners' and the 'landowners', still recount the traditional stories of how the destruction of the Motherland happened because of a forbidden fight between the kinsmen [Van Engelenhoven and Hajek 2000:121]. The ceremonial language uses

'lexical parallelism'. This is where an item is named in two different versions. English uses this technique in formal language too, and for the same reasons. After the Norman Invasion in 1066, many English people became bilingual in French and English. The ancient language of the law and the church show the remnants of this time, with matched phrases such as *law* and *order*, *acknowledge* and *bewail*, *sin* and *temptation*, *love* and *charity*, *foes* and *enemies*, *wrath* and *indignation*, *confirm* and *strengthen*, *goods* and *chattels*, where the French or Latin term is set alongside the English word. This eases understanding, and also acts as a sign of communities joining together to agree on how to manage things. When we hear such pairs in English, we recognise them as traditional sets. In Timor such sets would be called *Ktunu* and they serve three purposes:

- focus on the central message of the text
- indication of historiographic truth
- confirmation of the narrator's erudition

[Van Engelenhoven and Hajek 2000:117]

Just telling the stories is considered a dangerous activity, because of the danger of renewing the fighting and disaster. Therefore only certain people can be storytellers, and they come from the 'treasurer house' of the boat-owner clan. They are empowered with this treasure, this resource of the special expert language and rhetorical procedure to avert harm. English speakers are familiar with similar limited rights to dangerous story-telling, which restricts speaking in court to the special clan of barristers, who understand and exchange ideas in the special language of the law.

Here are some *ktunu* which happen to match English sets, taken from the Suru-Ainaro community, using the Mambai vernacular [De Araujo E Corte-Real B 2000:31]

| <b>Mambai oral tradition</b> | <b>English collocations</b> |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| siak nor bana                | brave and courageous        |
| kode nor klao                | for better or worse         |
| um nor ap                    | home and hearth             |

|          |                            |
|----------|----------------------------|
| ukun/bad | rule of law, law and order |
|----------|----------------------------|

We can savour the antiquity of our English sets, and we relish hearing them in the works of Shakespeare, enjoying the 400 years of tradition. But the SWM sets are ten times that age, being up to 4000 years old. This compares with stories about the great flood in the Bible and other ancient scripts in the Middle East. The Mambai sets, from the proto-Luangic-Kisaric source, are as old as the Egyptian hieroglyphics in the pyramids, and just as important to world history.

### ***the roll-call of languages in East Timor***

#### **the special place of Tetum**

So far we have been dealing with the indigenous languages of the archipelago. These languages form a distinct set in the regional families of languages, which include what is widely referred to as Malay and to the official language of Indonesia. Malay has always been a lingua franca in the archipelago, and the Indonesian government encouraged a centrally standardised variety. Speakers in the region have also used Dutch as a lingua franca, and now English has arrived as another powerful language to supplant indigenous languages.

But this is not the full roll-call of languages which are available to Timorese speakers. Tetum is the contact language which served as an ancillary link for the islands who shared languages in the Luangic-Kisaric group. Tetum –speaking traders have, through the ages, played an important part in retaining the links and traditional alliances between the communities which share origin myths tracing their ancestors to a distant point in the eastern archipelago. While there has been a reduction in the quality of this contact, the bonds go deep and are likely to endure. This is a major reason for supporting the establishment of the Tetum language in Timor Leste as a pivot point for the curation of cultural heritage.

Tetum Prasa is classified as a creole, with its basis in Tetun, one of the indigenous languages of the proto-Luangic-Kisaric group [Ethnologue.com].

traders from Luang and Leti will be able to speak Tetum, the major contact vernacular along most of East Timor's northern coast. [Van Engelenhoven and Hajek 2000:115]

Trading or contact languages which are spoken as first languages move out of the simple structures which characterise their formation stages, and develop into complete human languages, capable of expressing every complexity of human thought. The creole status means that such languages take their place alongside every other official language in the world. There is no league table of sophistication or inherent goodness in the world's languages. Anyone can use Tetum as readily as they use English or German, Mandarin or Arabic, Hebrew or Greek. Having a written literature is no passport to superiority in terms of language capability. Every language is as fully equipped as every other language to exchange human ideas. And the oral rhetorical traditions of the *ktunu* explored above are considered as truthful a record of spiritual and intellectual interaction, as the Gospels and the works of Shakespeare.

Creoles are capable of transmitting complex cultural interrelationships from their contributing languages through to the new shared tongue. When the Anglo-Saxons were first exposed to Christianity, they warmed to the abstract notion of the God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit, compared it to what they already understood, and labelled it *three-ness*. Later on after the Norman Conquest, English Christians began to call this concept by its Latin name, the Trinity. The concept had not changed, and neither had the understanding of the people. It doesn't matter what you call it. Language is a tool we use to import new ideas, and to transport old ideas into new cultural contexts. So too, Tetum has taken not only words, but concepts from Luangic-Kisaric and Portuguese and Malay and tucked them away into its grammar.

We tend to think of creoles as a feature of the European imperial influence in the region, but it is best to regard the suite of languages used by the island peoples as a the linguistic repertoire which they control in the same way that they have always used their entire linguistic potential. Monolingualism is a relatively recent invention which serves the needs of gatekeepers. The natural human condition is to be multilingual. A corollary of the myth of monolingualism is the myth of the language monolith. Languages in themselves are no more worthy of reverence than wineglasses. They are the sites of human cultural interaction. They are abstract

potentials which afford possibilities for interaction. They contain records of all the other interactions which have taken place, and are purpose designed slick machines for transmitting the wisdom of the ages, not only in vocabulary, but more safely, and less exposed to danger of interference, in the grammar.

That's because it is supposed to be helpful if you have access to the way your greatgrandparents did things, to the way that the environment of your region works, to the seasons, the birds, the tides, the births and deaths. But the moment that all starts to become irrelevant, the moment it is a burden around your neck, the moment you are tempted to sacrifice anything for the cause of a language, that's the time to take a breath and reassess.

### **Timor's language issues**

So we come at last to the daily issues of language choice in Timor Leste. It seems that there is considerable controversy surrounding Article 13 of the new constitution. Article 13 provides for two co-official languages alongside the other 'working languages' of Indonesian and English. Portuguese and Tetum are designated as the languages for official business. Eccles [2000:24] suggested that Makasai might have been recognised as representative of the indigenous languages we have been discussing.

Experience with both soft and hard power determined the need to relegate English and Bahasa Indonesia to 'working languages' status. If English became an official language, multinational workers and companies would be advantaged over locals, and provide the last straw to prevent any recovery in local self-determination. Replacing Bahasa Indonesia with Tetum and Portuguese gave preference to local people with long term family associations. Portuguese recognised the church as the de facto provider of comfort and support during the years of struggle, and Tetum not only has all the advantages we have discussed so far, but is required to represent the indigenous language component.

The government is justifiably confident that the multilingual Timorese people are capable of rapid and flexible language adjustments, but perhaps there are two other factors to take into account, both related to the monolingualism of the people the

Timorese interact with. The first is the tradability of the language treasures, and the second is the obstacles which language provides to monolingual international workers.

### **tradability**

A multilingual nation must find it hard to appreciate how monolingual nations view the acquisition of languages. It is considered such a difficult accomplishment, that even Australian year 12 students are not required to take another language for entry to university. This is rather out of step with the rest of the world and certainly unusual in the region. Singaporeans have to be trilingual to get any sort of decent job. Every Singaporean you are likely to meet speaks and writes fluently in at least three of the four languages, English, Mandarin, Tamil and Bahasa Malaysia. Thus the Timorese must find it hard to recognise the commercial value of their linguistic resources. The four working and official languages which they all speak, together with the endangered indigenous languages which have so much to teach us about grammatical theory, and the range of local creoles which hold so much of the world's history, are a great drawcard. Academics and tourists, historians and highly educated language exchange visitors, can all be enticed by such linguistic wealth. What Australians lack, the Timorese have. Such a commodity can be traded.

We might balk at the commodification of cultural resources. Perhaps marketing will constitute neo-colonialism and exploitation, denigration and destruction of the cultural capital. But we return to the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Is their three-ness in any way diminished by turning them into the Trinity? Did Christianity lose its soul when it was transmitted by the marketing machine of the Roman Empire?

In order to make something out of the linguistic treasury, conservation and marketing are needed. The conservation of the linguistic resources needs to be prioritised in management of the economy. The Timor-Lorosa'e language policy can be hailed as a bold statement of trust in the importance of the resources, but some provision needs to be made to conserve the whole range and complex diversity of languages.

The rest of the world will help. This is where the marketing comes in. How can people know what is there unless they are informed about it? Here is an opportunity

for business partnerships with companies who can market Timorese culture and linguistic treasures to a huge audience, generate enthusiasm and a welcome for Timorese perspectives, and create resilience and strength for the new nation. Such strength cannot be negotiated through diplomacy nor won by military force. It cannot be either provided or destroyed by powerful neighbours. It has resilience and resonance. It will speak to peoples with the same sorts of values all over the world.

Timorese history and language treasure belongs to the whole world, and everybody has a stake in it. People will help if the marketing is done effectively. However, although Timor's language policy is enlightened, it seems to be under threat in PR terms, not losing the propaganda fight exactly, but risking goodwill with intellectually aggressive and implacable commentary. The job needs to be delivered to people who know how to do proper marketing. Such people are to be found in the companies which have ventured to participate in the restoration of the infrastructure of the new nation, but they find linguistic obstacles in their way.

### ***obstacle removal***

The co-official languages, the 'working languages' and the milieu the people have to work in do not match up. Newcomers become frustrated at the logistics of trying to communicate in Portuguese and Tetum, when Bahasa Melayu [the language which used to be referred to as Indonesian] is the language people actually speak, and English is the language the newcomers speak. Because English is the global lingua franca, people from all over the world presume that English is the natural choice in international situations. When it comes to sorting out difficult physical and operational circumstances, the theory of linguistic imperialism does not seem as useful as using a language which will get the job done. There is a difference between crafting national language policy for the long term, and the business of attracting support and help.

The English Language, regardless of what one thinks of linguistic imperialism, cannot be ignored, for it is the tool of communication with the entire world. [Eccles 2000:26]



The days of thinking that the English language is the vehicle of linguistic imperialism are almost over. If you have a world which is linked in all technical respects, you might as well have it linked in a language as well. English does not belong to England any more. Nor does it belong to the United States. It belongs to the world. Native speakers are now outnumbered by speakers who have learned English as a second language [Jenkins 2003]. This has implications for the kind of language English is to become. The majority of speakers will not refer back to the way Londoners speak, or the way New Yorkers speak, or the Sydneysiders for that matter. An international form is on its way. English as an International Language [EIL], or English as a Lingua Franca [ELF] is predicted to sound like a mixture of Scottish and Chinese.

The decline of the native speaker in numerical terms is likely to be associated with changing ideas about the centrality of the native speaker to norms of usage.... As English takes on a role as a global lingua franca and as 'speech communities' redefine themselves as cross-border affiliation groups rather than as geographic groups in national boundaries.... an increasing number of fluent speakers of English ... do not conform to the traditional definition of L2 speaker. [Graddol 1999:67]

So a national language policy has to find a place for English. It is a tool of international interaction. It is no good suggesting that the Timorese workforce can somehow attain proficiency without help. The decision makers of the country are speaking English. That privilege needs to be extended to everyone else.

It is obvious that there will need to be a good knowledge of English amongst academics, politicians, diplomats and amongst some people involved in business. Australia should have an important role to play in the teaching of English, whether by hosting East Timorese students in Australian institutions or by sending teachers to East Timor. [Eccles 2000:26]

With the English language issue, the implication has been that the choice of English would push out other languages. However, with the inevitability of EIL, the powerful groups are going to be not the ones who are confined to English, but those speaking two or more languages. Multilingual Timor is poised for polyglot power.

Which brings us to the issue of Malay or Bahasa Melayu. Like it or not, this is the old and favorite lingua franca of the region, a language that will take you from Kuala Lumpur to Darwin and Canberra, a language that Timorese speakers are proficient in. Nobody 'owns' it, anymore than they 'own' English. Speaking this language does not have to be stigmatised in the new nation. It can be used, as many erstwhile imperial languages are, to 'write-back' to the former oppressor of the sadness and suffering. In fact writing in, speaking out, building on, maintaining and enhancing the high level of proficiency in this language means that Timor can offer language services to Australians learning for their school and employment qualifications. Many Australian students travel in the region now as an attractive substitute for sitting in a classroom to study for their exams.

Similarly, just as Australians and other English-speaking tourists go to Vanuatu to study French, they can be welcomed to Timor for Portuguese studies.

### ***conserving***

The concern is that foregrounding the powerful languages like English and Bahasa Melayu will lead to language shift and death for Tetum, the creoles and indigenous languages we met at the start of the paper.

The answer to this dilemma is that the heritage must protect rather than endanger its speakers in this period of struggle for survival.

The best way to maintain endangered languages is to have people speak them for the full range of community activities. In order to do this, you have to acknowledge the concept of multilingualism, promote it, market it. Don't leave it to chance. Don't leave the international workers confused about policy. Welcome whichever lingua francas are spoken, acknowledge the place of English, and proactively market the whole range of linguistic diversity as a commodity. Make the young people proud of their multilingualism by showing them that it is a commodity, and that it is worth money to them. If we don't, the languages will die. Let them love their languages, and do all this as a pleasure. Don't impose such a grim regime that they turn their backs on it and learn to hate it. If the young people find that conserving the old languages is taking up so much of their energy that they cannot survive, they may have to put survival first,

and reach for English as their passport to jobs and flexibility. The alternative is to commodify, market and sell the linguistic treasure. But the good thing is that, as we saw, multilingualism is natural, and is like physical exercise. The more you do it, the better you perform. Having multilingualism as a tradable commodity is like having breathing as a tradable commodity.

Timor's young people of the second millennium are no less capable than those old timers who tucked the wisdom into the Luangic-Kisaric languages, who shared the words, who used them in times of trouble to build new kinds of lives and societies. And the linguistic behaviours which emerge and are passed onto their grandchildren in the 2050s are just as beautiful and meaningful as those of 5000 years ago.

How can we help? By floating their talents on the market in multilingualism, and by trusting the young people to choose what they need to survive in the world they have to live in. In the last analysis, physical survival is what all heritage and art and culture are all about. Let them do what they have to do.

## **resources**

Ethnologue.com

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