

# INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES: Literary Freedom and the Opportunity to Exist

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We come together on a common subject in this Congress, which is language. With the conference theme, “Speaking in Tongues: Literary Freedom and the Indigenous Languages,” which is, of course, made to coincide with the United Nations’ declaration of 2019 as the “International Year of Indigenous Languages,” we come face to face with the many issues that confront our common indigenous and intangible cultural heritage, more specifically, our indigenous language.

At around this time last year, the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (KWF), or the Commission of the National Language, which I head, was preparing for one of its international conferences. The three-day conference was on Language Endangerment, which was also in anticipation of this year’s UN Year of Indigenous Languages. It was held in October 2018 at the National Museum of the Philippines under the theme, “Sustaining Languages, Sustaining the World.” Language and linguistic scholars from several parts of the world took part in the conference.

Paraphrasing Abraham Lincoln, all languages may have been created equal. But in our world today, a few languages are regarded as more superior than other languages. A few are dominant while more than 90% are dominated. That is why language endangerment or even language death is a reality facing many cultures and languages in the world today. As late as six years ago, the UNESCO reported that 43% of the world’s 6,000 languages were at the risk of extinction. The threat can come in many forms—from contact with other languages to language shift to dwindling speaker populations. As one axiom of language endangerment goes, “The language dies when the last speaker dies.

As part of my personal advocacy as concurrent chairman of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, I have initiated its redirection and refocusing towards intangible cultural heritage, beyond reinforcing the NCCA's existing programs as the functioning council for the arts of the country. As defined by UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage covers, among other things, language and literature, and literature includes indigenous oral and unwritten tradition. The Philippines has, as a matter of fact, more than 50 folk epics that await documentation, transcription, as well as serious study by our literary scholars and anthropologists.

Now, come to think of it, all languages are indigenous, including English. If we take indigenous to mean simply "native." But not all languages are created equal, despite Geoffrey Chaucer. Renowned as the greatest poet of all time, Chaucer is said to have had no regard for the superiority of any language. That is how he got into the frontline, so to speak, of "developing" the English language. His *Canterbury Tales*, as we know it now—and a little bit later, Shakespeare and his verse drama and sonnets—extricated early English from being the tongue of the poor and lowly, to becoming a formal and written language of poetry, narrative and theater. Thus, English came to be spoken and read by the British royalty and elite, who use to scoff at it and only knew Latin or French.

Surely it would be hard to imagine what language we'd be using now in this conference if there were neither *Troilus and Cressida* nor the 24 stories of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Which again leads me back to a nagging question under our theme. What threatens indigenous languages, and as a corollary, what limits their literary freedom? My immediate response would be as mundane as the lack of opportunity to be read as well as to get published.

That languages may have been created equal may be true in an Edenic setting. But we all know that the contemporary world is a practical Tower of Babel where languages compete for dominance or superiority, or even basic recognition and respectability. Indigenous languages and their presumed literary freedom are restricted, not only by a foreign language-dominated literary industry but by the mere fact that they are "born" with an already dwindling number of speakers.

The "language shirt" we referred to earlier means that the indigenous speakers are compelled to learn and speak the most immediate dominant language in order to survive in the geographic setting of that language. That is,

to survive in the economic setup and context, not even to speak of the literary context. For example, many of our Agta populations always assume that they must learn the language of the nearest dominant population area in order to live and survive among them. In Tarlac, that is either Tagalog or Ilocano. In Bikol, that is Legazpi or Naga Bikol.

On this basis, all indigenous languages which are used by their bearers are only threatened or endangered by the more dominant language spoken by the bigger number of users.

Only about three percent (3%) of international languages, such as English, French, Chinese, Russian and Spanish or Italian dominate world communications. Thus, all other languages are deprived of the chance to fully develop, even as they constantly lose native speakers to those languages. This means that the native speakers would rather write or speak in the dominant languages of the world.

Indigenous languages always have limited audiences as well as limited opportunities for translation. In our own country, when academics study indigenous languages and their literature, they invariably prefer to use English for their scholarship. Foreigners, therefore, benefit first, before the local and Filipino audiences. This is because our scholars either have never exerted the effort to learn and write in the native languages they study, or they just prefer using English.

Again, indigenous languages have limited opportunities to be known or recognized internationally. In using English as the language of scholarship, our scholars use mainly the norms and standards from the West, or those invented and formulated by Western literary criticism or anthropology and the other social sciences. All the culture, history, experiences and knowledge in the local or indigenous languages, and all the native symbolic and metaphorical systems are examined through the lenses of the West.

For example I always have taken issue with how the native themes and motifs in our folk tales are treated. These are invariably compared to, or studied with reference to, models from the West. They are never recognized as authentic or original, but are simply categorized or set aside as “variants” of Western models such as those of the Grimm brothers or Aesop.

Also on this basis, there is a built-in limitation and difficulty in publishing indigenous literature by the native writer. Thus, any writer would think twice about writing or publishing his own work in Tawali or Isneg.

Still, we are currently and gradually witnessing works being published in Kinaray-a. And there is a resurgence of Cebuano and Bisaya writing; while the Bikolanos have experienced quite recently a renaissance in writing and publishing even bilingually and trilingually. We are also aware of the literary prizes that serve to encourage Bikol writing, such as the Arejola Literary Contest and the Premyo Valledor for the Bikol novel.

But these examples are exceptions rather than the rule. The prevailing condition of disincentive for indigenous languages remains: a lack of opportunity for publication, coupled with the lack of translators, or if there are translators, these are focused on translating in the international language.

As an advocate of Filipino and our native languages and from my vantage point as head of the sole government agency for the development of the national language, my first view of literary freedom and the indigenous languages in the country is immediately related to the opportunity to exist.

We must come to the realization that a systematic reversal of our use and study of our indigenous languages and literatures must start first with ourselves, and on through our educational setup and structure, and our very own recognition of the existence of our collective soul.

Thank you.