LANGUAGE VARIATION AS ISSUE TO THE NEGROS ISLAND REGION

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Language variation within the island of Negros has geographic and historico-political reasons. The extent of the areas where the Ilonggo and Cebuano languages were spoken was not the past basis for the political division of Negros Island into Oriental and Occidental. The current changes in its geographic conditions, however, favor spatial movements and cultural contacts. This paper outlines the argument for the one-island region against the issue of language differences which was a convenient reason to resist the proposal. Instead, it asserts that cultural understanding and cooperation as needed in development work should be seen as other valid goals for the merger of the two provinces being situated in one island.

Keywords: *Language variation, cultural isolation and division, geographic division, Negros Island Region, Visayan*

Introduction

Several studies reveal interesting perspectives on how language variations or differences result to success or failure in social interaction. Some of the issues include how immigrants can integrate into their newly adopted country (Fisher 2012), withstand role conflict and ambiguity in the workplace (Madera et al.), and relate with a diversity of people (Preston 2013), one of the reasons for which is the absence of a common language. Generally, people engaged in international trading prefer to deal with people with whom they have a common language to hasten their transactions (Lohmann 2011). In some instances, tensions erupt with the indigenous settlers who want to secure their entitlements to certain resources, particularly when new settlers

are perceived as threats and more aggressive. This perception must have been historically produced and politically reinforced.

I postulate that there are mixed results of historical and political administrative decisions imposed by geography in Negros which left strong cultural marks on affected people of divergent linguistic backgrounds. These cultural marks, which are also termed as stereotypes, are either positive or negative and influence the quality of interactions or encounters between and among these people (Giles and Noels 1998), given the absence of processes or opportunities for serious engagement that may erase biases and prejudices. Stereotypes are generalizations "about a group of people in which identical characteristics are assigned to virtually all members of the group, regardless of actual variation among the members" (Aronson et al.1997:G-10). These characteristics generally identify one group from the other and can have complementary effects, such as promoting alliances in the pursuit of certain interlocal or political goals.

In other instances, however, language variation, reinforced by negative stereotypes, can be a barrier for groups of people to be united when urgency demands for collaborative engagement. The latter, as a consequence, is more ironic and least expected when the people involved are located on one island and there are no longer any issues of geographical barriers to transportation and communication. The people I am referring to here are those from the two provinces in Negros Island. The proposed creation of one island region for Negros Occidental and Negros Oriental was thought of in 1988. Actual efforts to realize it, however, started in 1994 (Hinojas 2014). It was only on 29 May 2015 that President Benigno Aquino III signed Executive Order 183 creating the Negros Island Region and assigned it as Region XVIII (Monzon & Escaño 2015). Negros Occidental was formerly part of Region VI, together with the provinces in Panay composed of Iloilo, Capiz, Antique, and Aklan, while Negros Oriental was with Region VII composed of the island provinces of Cebu, Bohol, and Siquijor (Figure 1).

The regional capitals in the past that Negros Oriental and Negros Occidental officials and constituencies had to engage with, respectively, were Cebu City and Iloilo City. These cities were also among the earliest Spanish settlements in the Philippines. With the creation of the Negros Island Region, 14 regional offices are to be temporarily assigned in Bacolod City and 16 in Dumaguete City until a common regional center or capital is already established somewhere between Kabankalan City and Mabinay. The regional offices are expected to open on 1 October 2015 and be fully operational on 1 January 2016 (*Sun Star* 2015). The merger of the two provinces under one administrative region this time has revived its past structure, although as one

island province, in order to move forward as one rather than to put the other behind because of peace and order problem.

Historically, according to Cleope (2014), there was actually only one political unit in Negros Island until the assigned priests petitioned for its division to effect better administration because the Oriental side of the island was isolated, stagnated and neglected from the center of power in Bacolod. The Oriental side was subjected to several piratical attacks from Mindanao and presumably also from neighboring islands in the Visayas (see also Peterson 2003). A royal decree was issued on 25 October 1989 that established Negros Oriental as a separate political unit and it was eventually declared as a separate province on 1 January 1890.

Figure 1. The Negros Island Region showing Ilonggo-speaking (in black) and the Cebuano-speaking (in grey) areas relative to their adjacent provinces.

But the two provinces unified after the revolutionaries crushed Spanish control of the island in 1898 with the declaration of the Federal Republic of Negros on 27 November 1898 through the initiative of the Occidental leaders. It was short-lived or never formally took off because the American military government took control of the island on 10 December 1898. Negros Oriental and Occidental became two regular provinces on 1 May 1901 which were eventually put under different regions mentioned earlier on 24 September 1972 when Martial Law was declared (Cleope 2014). Thus the

current initiative led by the incumbent Negros Occidental Gov. Alfredo Marañon, Jr. to create a one-island region is just a sequel of the political fusion and diffusion history of Negros Island that started with the Spanish colonization of the country.

The natural division of Negros Oriental and Occidental due to rugged mountain terrain and thick forest was made stronger by the political division that had isolated one from the other. Presently, however, better roads and regular transportation have made travel easier and faster across the mountains leading to both sides of the island without necessarily going around compared in the past. As a "test" to the proposed creation of the Negros Island Region, the Negros Island Development Plan (NIDP) was drafted in 1996 to implement integrated development programs and projects for the two provinces (Hinojas 2014).[1]

So after 20 years with no promise of one island region in the offing, the Negros Occidental leaders became more aggressive about the proposal which aims "to ensure the cohesive development and growth of both provinces" (Gomez 2015) with development agenda, funds, facilities, and services that are solely intended or designed for the island. In the past, the Occidental leaders had taken the initiatives for this purpose while their counterparts in Negros Oriental were evidently divided over this matter since the beginning due to a complexity of reasons, including the disadvantages (Espina 2014; Flores 1999; Gallarde 2014). Briefly, the opposition to the merger says that it is not necessary, beneficial, and practical to the people of Negros Oriental (Arbon 2015).

One of the major arguments of certain sectors in Negros Oriental for their opposition to the one Negros Island Region proposal, which is the concern of this paper, is the perceived language barrier. During a consultation meeting in Bacolod City in the presence of Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) Secretary Mar Roxas, Negros Oriental Governor Roel Degamo "insisted on speaking in the Cebuano dialect [sic], adding that the language barrier between the Cebuanos and the Ilonggos is one thing that makes the people of Negros Oriental hesitant to embrace the one-island region concept" (Pal 2014). Cebuano and Ilonggo are categorized as two distinct major languages of the Philippines by linguists. However, they are commonly perceived by locals in Negros as variants of "Bisaya" or the "Visayan" language.

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[1] I have neither read nor heard any evaluation of the results of that collaborative engagement concerning the feasibility of success and sustainability to justify or negate the creation of the Negros Island Region.

The variation in language is exacerbated by stereotypes against the people of each province. The Ilonggos are described as *tikalon* ('boastful'), perhaps because of the tone and more aggressive manner of how they talk, while the Cebuano-speaking eastern people are labeled *udong* ('ignorant') or *buki* ('from the mountain'), which refers to the way they dress (see also Manalo 2013 for the geographic basis of the bias and prejudice). Such stereotypes give rise to more related stereotypes, like the perception that the Ilonggos feel superior and dominant which may be expressions of their aggressiveness while their counterpart on the other side of the island are passive and humble who are less inclined to gamble or pursue some decisions of which they are not sure of the results. These may be positive traits of Negros Oriental people which can also become negative depending on how these are interpreted.

The political contexts

In this section, I elucidate the complexity of reasons behind the linguistic variation between the eastern and western sides of Negros Island, and consider if this is indeed a real or just an imagined barrier for achieving a one Negros Island region. This exercise is regardless of the perceived economic consequences of the merger of the two provinces into one region, and if whether or not it is going to be developmentally beneficial particularly for Negros Oriental which is geographically, politically, and economically smaller than Negros Occidental (Gomez 2015), or if it is simply to serve the interests of the landed politicians in Negros Occidental as suspected by the National Democratic Front (Ellera 2015, *Visayan Daily Star* 2015). Records show that Negros Oriental consistently belongs to the top ten poorest provinces in the country (2006, 2009, and 2012). Specifically, in 2012 it had a higher poverty incidence (45.30%) compared to Negros Occidental (26.20%) based on the report of NSCB (2013).

My position is that cultural division, in general, and linguistic variation, in particular, has to be viewed as both cause and effect of the various modalities of isolation that separated the two provinces in the past and even at present. The two languages in the same island and other perceived cultural differences are the issues that compounded the on-going debate between political leaders in Negros Oriental. Why is there a language variation between the provinces of Negros Occidental and Oriental when these are located in the same island?

Nature-given conditions for geographic division are no longer barriers between adjacent or neighboring people that are now less isolated from one another given improvements in roads, transport, and communications. Are

there other reasons behind the anti-one island region sentiment? These reasons could be about power and domination which was demonstrated in the past and are feared to recur in the future with regards to what province and political or economic group would control the resources intended for the common development in the island (see also Cleope 2014, Manalo 2013). Meanwhile, the current contending groups in Negros Oriental in the "one Negros Island Region debate" apparently come from rival political parties despite the claim that this should not be viewed as a political issue.

Understanding geography and language in Negros

Negros[2] is the fourth largest island in the Philippines. It comes next to Samar Island which is composed of provinces all belonging to Region 8, along with the provinces that comprise Leyte Island. Note, however, that Samar Island and parts of northern Leyte speak Waray while the population of the southern part of Leyte speak Cebuano. Leyte, thus, is a province that is home to two linguistic groups (see also Hinojas 2014).

The foregoing discussion also illustrates why the eastern side of Negros Island shares Cebuano with central Visayan provinces, while the western side of the island shares Ilonggo with western Visayan provinces. The sea that separates Negros Island from Panay Island and Cebu Island was not an obstacle for coastal people to freely move to or from these islands (Peterson 2003). This proximity explains why the population in the northeastern part of Negros Island—which is politically part of Negros Occidental—is Cebuano-speaking (Figure 1). Theoretically, migration and other forms of cultural contacts between accessible places result to linguistic fusion and this explains the similarities and differences in languages in Negros Island with other Visayan islands (Hutterer 1982).

While there was cultural isolation of the majority of people in either side of Negros Island from each other, those residing along the coastal boundaries of the two provinces demonstrate cultural similarities. Basay and Bayawan

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[2] Negros got its name from the "small black people" the Spaniards saw and called "Negritos" as reported by the chronicler Antonio Pigafetta during their initial exploration of the island (Blair & Robertson 33:199). The Negrito population in Negros Island are now scattered in the mountains of Bais City and Mabinay in Negros Oriental and in Calatrava and Isabela in Negros Occidental. They have totally abandoned their traditional economies of gathering, hunting and *kaingin* (slash and burn) farming because of the complete alteration of the forest environment of the island. They survive now through sedentary farming and wage labor in sugarcane farms and other menial jobs available in the community (see Oracion 1984).

City in the southwestern section of Negros Oriental, in particular, have good proportions of their respective population that can understand and speak Ilonggo. In fact, long-time residents, locally called *tumandok* (see also Zayas 1994), or those who grew up in the two southwestern places of Negros Oriental have their roots from or relatives in Panay Island. This must be the same situation in Mabinay, a mountain municipality of Negros Oriental and is centrally located between the two provinces, which drew in migrant farmers from the lowlands after World War II when its forest areas were opened up by the operation of big logging companies. These upland migrants were former sugarcane workers from Cebu Island during the introduction and boom of the sugar industry in Negros Oriental in middle of the 19th century (Oracion 1984, Rodriguez 1983).

The politics of geographic division

Clearly, the cultural division between Negros Oriental and Occidental was a long effect of the geographic division that has been reinforced by historico-political events that shaped the present state of the two provinces. The division is believed to have been an effective strategy to handle the development and security problems haunting the southern part of the province. But this division as historico-cultural fact cannot be attributed forever as a major factor that makes impossible the creation of one region out of the two provinces if ever the actual benefits outweigh the costs. As already shown earlier, the linguistic differences between northern and southern Leyte must have not created communication problems in addressing development issues and challenges. They belong to the same region, so why cannot Negros Oriental and Occidental make it happen too? Development planning and implementation may be more convenient and responsive to the conditions in the island.

Historically, the language variation of the two Negros provinces was due to the strategic political administrative division imposed in order to forcefully counter and keep slave-raiding attacks only in this part of the island facing Mindanao. It was a better political strategy to protect the northern part of the island because it was more developed and with a flourishing sugarcane industry. Making Dumaguete the political capital in the southern end of Negros Island had secured and freed Bacolod officials from the burdens to handle problems very far from the capital. The stories of persistent slave-raiding attacks in the south did not only scare the northern people to come and live in southern Negros, these had also discouraged the investors to pour in money into businesses and agricultural projects in this part of the island. This was aside from the fact that the Oriental side has

limited plain areas good for sugarcane plantation,except in Bais which has remained at present as a major sugar producer in the province (Hutterer 1982).

The absence of trading transactions and movement of labor from both sides of the island, aside from the problem of accessibility due to poor road networks, expectedly limits significant interactions which determine the present sociocultural landscapes. The long history of physical and cultural isolation of the two provinces from each other nurtured distinct languages, especially inland. But the language differences were actually inconsistently used as basis for political division because the population of the northeastern part of Negros Occidental also speaks Cebuano (Figure 1). The division was obviously more economic and was about power because the plainer areas that were favorable for sugarcane plantation went to Negros Occidental. Bacolod, being the center of the government at that time, had all the political advantage to accumulate resources for its own disposal. As Cleope (2014:3) has written:

> A look at the map of Negros shows a somewhat strange boundary line used in the division of the island. It would have seemed logical to draw a straight line from the north to south in the center of the island to give credence to the word eastern and western divisions. An analysis of the boundaries reveals, however, that using the mountain range in the center originating from Mt. Canlaon down to the south *placed all the fertile flat lands in the Occidental side, and the mountainous rugged strips punctuated by narrow flat coastlines in the Oriental side of the island*. (emphasis added)

Mistrust expressed as language barrier

This historical event ushered in cultural division in the past that must have nurtured the feeling of mistrust of some Negros Oriental political leaders and business people towards the political leaders of Negros Occidental. They now manifest this feeling in their initial opposition to the one Negros Island region being pushed by the latter. And pointing to language differences as a barrier for merger is just one of the convenient tools to express such feeling of political mistrust harbored by the Cebuano-speaking population of Negros Oriental towards the perceived domineering and aggressive Ilonggos (see Padilla 2014). But if this sentiment is a product of cultural transmission or conditioning, this could also be culturally deconstructed from the consciousness of the young through cultural contacts and development cooperation. Allowing the merger of the two provinces into one region for

development reason will open up more cultural borrowings and cultural integration.

I think directly asking the Negros Oriental people, who are in contact with or who will be engaging with the Negros Occidental people, will provide a better idea of their sentiments and apprehensions about language variation as barrier to the merger. In an independent opinion poll that I conducted in Negros Oriental, the results show that out of the randomly selected 120 respondents, wherein 93 percent have "pure" Cebuano-speaking households, 41 percent disagree that linguistic variation is going to be a problem. In contrast, 37 percent foresee as a problem, while 22 percent are undecided or uncertain of what the results would be after the merger. Specifically, the respondents from upland barangays, particularly from Congressional Districts I and III that are geographically closer to Negros Occidental, disagree that language variation is a barrier (Oracion 2014).

After almost a year, Gov. Degamo had finally shown signs of his support for the Negros Island Region after the visit on 21 April 2015 of Sec. Roxas to consult with various sectors in Dumaguete City about this issue. A week later, Gov. Marañon also came to personally invite Gov. Degamo to an event in Bacolod City with Pres. Aquino as the guest of honor. It was also an opportunity for them to discuss as governors some pressing issues around the merger.

In that brief meeting, Gov. Degamo reiterated his position that the merger should secure the interests of the people of Negros Oriental through some "safety nets" in the implementing rules and regulations (IRR). But there was no discussion about language variation as a barrier during the first meeting of the Technical Working Group headed by the two governors and presided by Sec. Roxas on 19 June 2015 in the central office of the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG). This suggests that it was not an issue at all but was a convenient reason for expressing mistrust to Negros Occidental leaders that is appealing to the emotions of the people of Negros Oriental.

Conclusion

Variation in language is not a major reason for two geographically adjacent political units not to merge into one region, more so when situated in the same island and if feasible, by all indicators, for purposes of enhancing a unified growth and development. The merger need not result to the imposition of cultural identity and political sovereignty of one over the other. Historically, the distribution of the Ilonggo-speaking population on the

western side of Negros Island and the Cebuano-speaking population on the eastern side was a result of cultural isolation or separation due to geographical barriers. There was no quarrel at that time, but this had nurtured later prejudices and stereotyping.

The rugged mountain ranges that naturally divided the two provinces had made cultural contacts impossible by land in the past; crossing the seas, was more convenient which made them more culturally engaged with the neighboring islands of Panay and Cebu. The cultural separation of the Cebuanos and the Ilonggos was reinforced by political division, which conveniently utilized geographical features as bases, to address administrative and security problems, favoring the northern part of the territory.

If the development benefits of the merger will be greater than the costs, and if it ensures the poor have enough share of the opportunity to improve their living conditions, particularly on the Oriental side, this initiative may potentially have benefits not only for socioeconomic, environmental, and security reasons but likewise for long-term cultural effects. Two potential measures of cultural benefits of the merger would be the ability between residents of each province to understand one another and the reduction in stereotyping that had caused tensions in the past and even at present.

A shared cultural mindset that Negros Oriental and Negros Occidental are one will inspire the pursuit of mutually agreed development agenda given common resources but with complementing human capital. This suggests that opening up of opportunities for frequent interethnic contacts will facilitate appreciation of each other's language which will result to cultural understanding and development cooperation.

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