



COMPARING THE SITUATION OF LANGUAGE POLICY CHANGE IN ETHIOPIA AND GUATEMALA. THE CASES OF OROMO AND MAYA

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Abstract

In this paper I compare the experiences of the Maya in Guatemala and the Oromos in Ethiopia of the situation of language policy change. I am interested in the real internal power shift and international support that seem to be the requirements for a complete change in language policy.

Guatemala and Ethiopia share similarities but they also have great differences. Both are among the poorest of their continents, both are multilingual and multiethnic nations. Both have a marginalised and minoritised ethnic group, or a nation, inside the nationstate.

The 22 Maya languages form the majority of the indigenous languages of Guatemala, the other two indigenous languages are Garifuna and Xinca (according to the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas, ALMG). The estimates of the Maya population are between 45 -60 % of the 11 million inhabitants of Guatemala depending on the source. Despite the linguistic and cultural differences one identifies herself/himself as being a Maya.

Oromos are estimated up to 30 million, 26-28 million living in Ethiopia. Oromos speak the six different Oromo languages that are quite close one another. Despite the linguistic, cultural and tribal differences one identifies herself/himself as being an Oromo.

Both countries receive foreign aid from all over the world and Ethiopia depends on aid. Guatemala has received a lot of support for its education reform and bilingual education projects after the peace treaties in 1996, for example. A lot of the aid is name tagged for the indigenous people and so the Maya will receive it. The international aid organizations realized that the Maya are marginalized in many ways and that social, economic and educational support are all equally needed. Ethiopia receives also a lot of aid but it doesn't seem to reach Oromia and Oromo schools. Aid directed to the Oromos is coming from Oromo support groups or from small NGO's. While the Mayas have had international recognition, the Oromos fight for freedom is unknown and largely without support. However, the Ethiopian constitution grants since 1994 Oromo official in Oromia. The Maya project for the officialization of the languages ended in 1998 referendum.

The problematics of language policy and language planning are complex and linked strongly with the historical, social and cultural developments of the nation-state and its power structures. Where Guatemala was conquered and colonised, Ethiopia remained always independent (despite the Italian occupation years 1935-1940). The history as well as the structure of Ethiopian society has been marked by the Amhara rule.

The adoption of a new policy that promotes or recognizes linguistic rights or officialization of the minority languages or minoritised and marginalised languages needs or depends on 1) a strong movement of the language group in question 2) an (ie. intellectual) elite to lead the nationalist movement 3) evidence of at



least some language planning, 4) human and material resources, but above all 5) a clear power shift in the internal politics. The cases of the Maya and the Oromo can be seen as examples of this.

Language policy changed in Ethiopia radically in the year 1991 when first the Oromo Liberation Front OLF declared free Oromia and the transitional government declared all languages official in Ethiopia in their largely ethnically limited regions. Oromo language planning that had been carried out outside Ethiopia and as an underground intellectual work inside the country, bursted out rapidly with great enthusiasm in Oromia, which had become the largest region of Ethiopia, uniting 12 of the old 14 provinces. In one year large amount of people became literate in Oromo, or Oromifa, as everybody who knew how to read and write became a teacher spontaneously. The Latin alphabet had been chosen just before and it seemed easy to learn to read and write. Books that had been printed in Germany and Sweden arrived rapidly to the reach of the learners. Elementary schools started teaching in Oromo the same year in many places in western and southwestern Oromia and later it was established that grades 1-8 were taught in Oromo and the 9-12 graders received Oromifa classes while they were taught still in English. Amazingly books were available and planning had been carried out despite the fact that until 1990 it was prohibited and dangerous to show interest in Oromo culture and language.

In the Ethiopian example, very roughly presented here, the central difference to the Latin American countries is that a real power shift took place. The Amhara institution fell down with the power collapse of Mengistu Haile Mariam's run. The joint revolutionary liberation army that was formed of the different liberation armies of Ethiopia was by definition a movement that sought ethnic and linguistic rights, true change of language policy within the power shift. Oromos had been marginalised and discriminated as were also the other nations during the Haile Selassie era and the Dergue years. The language policy change was a deliberate goal in the ethnic liberation struggle. Despite the failures of the Tigray government and current injustices of the Ethiopian internal politics towards the Oromos, the linguistic rights and language planning achieved in the early 1990's are still a reality and a historical event. In fact, the language rights are the only rights that the Oromos have left from the liberation fight and the transitional year's promises. The language and cultural rights seem to have been also the most important issues for the Oromo Liberation Front OLF in the year 1991. It concentrated so much in the education reforms and language policy and planning issues that it forgot completely the internal quest for national power. Because of harassment, the OLF boycotted the parliamentary elections in 1992 with the result that it was named as an outlaw by the TPLF, Tigray People's Liberation Front, which had taken over the leadership of the Ethiopian Liberation Movement. OLF became an enemy of the new government and was then replaced by the OPDO, Oromo People's Democratic Organization, created by the TPLF and often accused as being a puppet party as it is unable to protect the interests and rights of the Oromos. The nationalist attitude that was interpreted as hostility towards the government in the Dergue years, is today surprisingly interpreted the same way.

The new language policy in Oromia manifests itself best in education. Teaching is done in Oromo for 1-8 and grades 9-12 receive Oromo classes. Amhara and English are taught as second languages. Depending on the school, books are found and teachers are qualified. There is lack of Oromo teachers for the upper grades and of literature as language planning and publishing has slowed down. Oromo newspapers and magazines that were born in 1991 have been closed down. However, radio has news and other programs still in Oromo. In Oromia everybody speaks Oromo and the signs of shops and names of places are in Oromo. Children are given Oromo names and names of towns have been changed into Oromo names. In Addis Abeba which is traditional Amhara area and historical power centre there is a negative attitude towards the Oromos and speaking Oromo and pressure towards language shift exists there.

Guatemala's long civil war ended finally with the final peace treaty signing in 1996. Before that in 1995 had been signed a treaty called Acuerdo sobre Identidad y Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas. The aim of the treaty was to stop the marginalization and discrimination of the Mayas with the other indigenous people of Guatemala. The treaty promised officialization of the languages, education reforms, recognition of cultural rights and a constitution change.

During the civil war, especially in the 1980's, the violence was directed towards the Maya villages. Even though the Maya population experienced many atrocities during the long civil war and we can speak about genocide in certain areas the war was not an ethnic war, Mayas did not have a liberation army, they were not active participants of the war but civilians. Mayas became to the negotiation table relatively late with the civil sector. URNG, the united revolutionary army of Guatemala who represented also the civil



sector in the peace treaties, was not the winner of the war, and actually there was no clear winner of the long war. Peace was needed and wanted by all. The peace treaties were successful and the treaty of Derechos de los pueblos indígenas indicated great changes to the language policy and education sector. Subsequently a proposal of the officialization of the indigenous languages based on linguistic, territorial and technical criteria was drawn and the process of education reform, Reforma Educativa, got started. However, a real power shift never occurred.

Despite the strong Maya movement, an intellectual elite that led the movement and successful planning that had been carried out for years, financial resources and international support in the education reforms and civil society, the change of the language policy was impossible to plant in 1998. The power relations had stayed the same, power was not shared. The Maya sector continued alone negotiating and planning the new language policy and in the society there was hardly any support or understanding of a language policy change i.e. What would the officialization of the indigenous languages really mean.

In 1998 referendum of the constitutional reforms Guatemalans voted no for the officialization and for the other constitutional reforms ordered in the peace treaties. Education reform became the only battlefield where the language policy changes were to be seen. The case of officialization was hurried and the Maya sector had to focus on the possibilities that were left: Participate with full power in the education reform. The education reform and civil society support are recongnized in the international development co-operation and the Mayan communities continue having international support and the new language policy and attitude of protection and promotion of the minority languages of Guatemala as well.

Ethnic and linguistic discrimination means exclusion from the social and economic participation and opportunities. Foreign funding for a government that exercises ethnic or linguistic favouritism and discrimination, supports and further increases injustice, societal instability and ethnic hostility. Therefore foreign relations continue to be important after the internal power shift, as the aid can also increase injustice and promote instability in society. In Ethiopia today the aid seems to be unjustly divided inside the country and there are hardly any possibilities for the Oromos to participate in the discussion or decision making on development. Oromo majority is discriminated in the national power apparatus and freedom of speech does not exist.

While Internet and other modern technology functions in the privileged region, in Tigray, in Oromia the first wireless communication, the road network, is in poorer condition than ever in 20 years. The telephonenumber lines that were pulled a year or two ago to Wollega, the western part of Oromia, tend to unfunction when political instability is expected. The government kills students in Oromia, arrests them and prohibits young Oromos entering to certain faculties of the university. In fact, the argument of unjust aiding is very difficult to prove and whether the TPLF led government underdevelops Oromia on purpose, but the fact that these questions can not be raised in Ethiopia without becoming an OLF supporter and being punished is proved much easier by the government attacks on secondary schools in Oromia. The linguistic rights that are guaranteed in the constitution are attacked by other laws, decrees and practices. International relations in the form of research but also in the form of thoroughly thought aiding could support the Oromos to meet with the linguistic rights and language policy promised in the constitution. International relations could be important in protecting human rights.