

CALA 2019 Conference on Asian Linguistic Anthropology

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Language Revitalization and Representation

A question that keeps returning to my mind is to what degree the recognition and vitalization of minority cultures and languages could have prevented interethnic conflicts before a point of no return has been reached.

In Asia the partition of India and later Pakistan is held to have its roots in the linguistic aspects of culture. Likewise, in Sri Lanka the Sinhala Only act of 1956 led to the peaceful protests by the Tamils outside the Government complex. The protesters were then met by Singhalese counter-protests with 150 Tamils killed during the ensuing events leading up to a bloody civil war. In Myanmar the persecution of Rohingya culture has likewise recently taken a heavy toll. And in Thailand a recommendation by the National Reconciliation Commission aiming at revising the Thai-centric school curriculum through making the local Pattani-Malay Jawi a working language of the region has not been implemented.

A conference on Asian Linguistic Anthropology in an ASEAN nation aiming at the revitalization and representation of minority cultural expressions such as the CALA 2019 thus seemed long overdue. Presided over by the Secretary of State of the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts H.R. Chuch Phoeum and hosted

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by the Pannasastra University of Cambodia the conference was opened on January 23 in Siem Reap by the Conference Chair, Chancellor of the PUC Dr. Sam-Ang Sam.

Emphasizing the role of an anthropological approach to the preservation of culture and language, the conference organizers underlined the necessity to make a reflexive focus on cultural origins in times when “new mobilities, new textual modes, and new technologies have pervaded Asian regions, affecting communications, structuring life worlds” alongside exploring how “Asian languages and identities have become an increasingly concentrated nexus for new representations of global knowledge, globalization and global identities.”

Announcing the special purpose of creating networks for the protection of endangered Asian languages the Secretary in his Keynote Address gave an initial overview of the Khmer language and the impact of globalization, and like other speakers outlining a program for preservation of minority languages.

On the background of the increasingly threatened tribal languages and cultures in the ASEAN nations many presentations pointed to research and activism in their own region aimed at implementing policies of preservation through vitalization, while others were involved with studying programs of upholding languages among the replaced and immigrant population groups.

Realizing the steadily increasing urbanization globally and not least in the Southeast Asian nations presenters also addressed language interaction or trans-languaging in the city across physical and social space. City planners and managers will have to consider ways for better communication in increasingly diverse city settings.

Responding to the wave of globalization, voices from the academic communities in conclusion likewise emphasized the necessity of empowering youth for living in a pluri-lingual and pluri-cultural world through an educational program for intercultural citizenship.

See Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL)