

Handling Ethnicities and/or Securing Cultural Diversities: Indigenous and Global Views on Maintaining Traditional Knowledge

ERICH KASTEN

Introduction

The foreseen loss of most of the languages in the world in the near future—widely debated since the beginning of the 1990s (Hale 1992a,b; Krauss 1992)—is part of the even more far-reaching endangerment of traditional cultural knowledge, as, for example, among the native peoples in the North. More recently, the loss of cultural diversity has even been compared with the loss of biological diversity (Maffi 1996). As such, in the longer perspective it is seen as a threat to the very survival of humankind. It is clear, therefore, that the maintenance of cultural diversity transcends mere aesthetic value. It has a decisive role to play in human history itself. Cultural diversity is obviously both the result of innovations and the precondition for further innovation. It has always allowed humans to adapt to changing situations. Because of this, there is a global responsibility to maintain, or if need be, create, an appropriate environment such that cultural diversity can thrive, as it has done—until recently—throughout human history.

In recent years, these global concerns have been more openly acknowledged, as, for example, in the Unesco World Heritage program. It began with a primary focus on nature preservation, and later extended to the protection of cultural monuments of special significance. The program's current initiatives, however, go so far as securing the continuance of living cultural traditions, which are seen to be of unique value for future generations. Although protection under Unesco World Heritage status may be granted only in certain cases, the message is clear, and it points in the right direction. It reflects changing attitudes on the part of public and international organizations towards the maintenance of endangered cultural traditions, particularly those of native peoples. Over the past two or three decades, this actually became an important issue in the political process of the circumpolar North. At least in western countries, fundamental rights and responsibilities have been trans-

ferred from state authorities to local and native governments. This allows them to decide for themselves about their future education and the extent to which it builds on their own cultural past (RCAP 1997; Collis 1990). With previous external pressures easing up, globalization has brought in its wake new mechanisms and new communication technologies. These are not always a blessing for native communities seeking to maintain their particular cultural traditions and identities, but sometimes they can be turned to advantage (see Habeck in this volume).

In the past, assimilation to mainstream culture was often perceived as the easiest option, and it may have brought distinct benefits. Today, however, with cultural revitalization taking place among most native peoples of the North, many are clearly choosing to underline their cultural diversity, instead of playing it down. We should not ignore further work on social, political and economic environments that favor the maintenance of particular cultural traditions in native communities in the North (see Bobaljik in this volume). Particular attention should be directed, however, towards the process of cultural transmission itself—if it meets its objectives—and, if not, towards how it could be improved.

Bicultural Education: An Option to Maintain Endangered Traditional Cultural Knowledge

Bicultural education should be understood not as a dichotomic, but as an integrative approach. It permits us to combine native cultural content with so-called modern knowledge in the school curriculum and teaching materials, and in education within the family as well. While native content is needed to provide young people with important traditional knowledge and values for their survival under natural and social environments specific to the North, modern knowledge prepares them to utilize more academic or international knowledge as well, and to secure and enhance their future lives. We are referring, here, among other things, to their efficient management of territorial resources under world market conditions, and to the organization of their destinies as independent peoples. Through such a well-balanced education, students should be given a variety of options that will later allow them to decide, according to their individual talents and inclinations, the direction and cultural orientation of their lives. It should be clear that bicultural edu-

cation, if conceptualized and organized well, may help native communities to cope with present and future challenges. This will be most successful if it is based on well-established ethnic or local identities and on maintaining links to the cultural past of the respective peoples.

Bicultural education is not a new phenomenon. Even in the former Soviet North during the first years after the Revolution, and during a later period since the 70s, native cultural content was given considerable attention in education and relevant teaching materials (see Pikunova in this volume). The question, however, is why these programs so clearly failed to halt, or at least slow down, the rapid loss of traditional knowledge. Asinovski (1986) points out, for example, the declining use of the Itelmen language as early as the mid-80s. The causes of this failure have been discussed with reference to the Itelmen and other native peoples in Kamchatka in Golovko (1993), and relevant former Itelmen educational policies are summarized in Kasten (1998a). Still, since we are far from having satisfactory solutions to these problems, some of the following considerations might be useful. They evolved from studies in native community attitudes towards the maintenance of traditional culture in western Kamchatka, and from the collaborative work with native experts and ethnolinguists on Itelmen teaching materials.

Experiences with the Conceptualization of New Itelmen Teaching Materials in Kamchatka

One of the basic problems in traditional culture maintenance is to increase the prestige of native content in the school curriculum for the students and to make it attractive to them. Young students, when they reach adulthood, face choices. These choices, however, are often based on false premises. This is especially true when youths are exposed, through the media, to the specific lures of modern lifestyles. In many cases, these have no relevance for mastering life in their local context. In such situations, it is important to break the often predominant association in their minds between native cultural knowledge and backwardness. This has always been a silent or overt element in former Soviet and western ideology, and is still difficult to overcome today. What makes such information attractive to the younger generation, however irrelevant it may be, is often simply the fact that it is presented by means of modern technology, which is associated with “progress” of some kind. Here

it is important that traditional cultural content be transmitted in a similar way, as for example by computerized teaching materials on CD-ROM (Dürr and Kasten 1998, see Dürr in this volume).

We have emphasized the link between traditional cultural knowledge and communication with the outside by integrating into the new Itelmen applied dictionary, which has references to local environmental themes and cultural traditions (Khaloimova et al., n.d.), a similarly structured English dictionary. While learning English as the foreign language for international communication, students are at the same time reminded of the vocabulary in their own language and its specific cultural context. Such a dictionary, based on native linguistic and cultural content, is long overdue. It is particularly useful in light of the increasing transnational contacts between native peoples of the North Pacific Rim on the Russian and American sides. It is on such issues that these peoples have the most to share when they get together.

In addition to native language maintenance, other traditional knowledge should also be included, or given a more prominent place, in any native curriculum and in bicultural education. Here, the serious threat to traditional environmental knowledge should receive our particular attention. Its rapid loss within only the last generation or two can be documented for the Itelmen (Chernyagina 1998), which may well also be true for most other native peoples of the Russian North. In the American North, however, native interests and traditional environmental knowledge have been increasingly acknowledged and applied in international nature conservation and sustainable development programs (Kasten 1996a); in the future, this will most likely be the case in Kamchatka as well (Kasten 1998b). Such educational materials allow native peoples to contribute, with self-esteem and pride in their own cultural tradition, to future-oriented and prestigious international programs. The necessary link between traditional and modern knowledge is then, in turn, emphasized. To this end, a German nature protection organization was persuaded to produce precisely such information brochures in the various native languages of Kamchatka. These are soon being used in the native community schools of the area (Kasten et al. 1996).

Another fundamental question, albeit one that seldom receives sufficient attention, is why community members are striving to maintain their cultural heritage, or at least part of it? In particular, what educational methods and specific content best appeal to, or meet the needs and expectations of, the given community? Our study of the use of the Itelmen language, for example,

has shown that it is unlikely ever to function again as the most common means of communication, nor do most of the people want it to. This is not only because speech competence among the older people is already too fragmentary, or because of the pronounced multi-ethnic or multi-national composition of their communities. But those who want to maintain or revitalize the Itelmen language will do so, first and foremost, as an expression of their unique ethnicity. In addition, its dialect varieties serve as an expression of even more specific local identities and ties to the places they or their families came from before the resettlements of the 50s and 60s occurred.

These considerations hint at why previous language programs and teaching materials have had little success even in slowing down the process of language death. In this particular case, and probably elsewhere, most of the people were neither willing nor able to identify with the highly standardized primers of the 1980s. These school books had little specific Itelmen cultural content. Not many Itelmen community members considered the language “theirs”, as some elders have put it, because its local varieties were (in fact, had to be) left aside, in accordance with the official guidelines of that time.

This brings us to another key question: To what degree should a language be expanded to encompass modern situations—as for example by including or emphasizing new vocabulary—even when such functions may not be requested by community members for their traditional language? For many of these people, this may rob the language of much of its specific cultural content, which is often precisely the motivation to maintain it. This is certainly a controversial issue; many argue that a language can only be kept alive if it enjoys the prestige of being used on official occasions, such as in dealing with state bureaucracies or in legislation (Aikio 1990: 386ff; Dorais 1990: 255ff). This may be true for the more stable native languages; for others, however, the only chance of maintaining them, or at least part of them, is in a more fragmentary form by means of more limited use in certain situations. For these peoples, the special prestige of using their language derives from its cultural load, whereas as a means of general communication it may not be able to compete with Russian or English in any case. In fact, an artificially or overly modernized native language can mean, in the words of Wurm (1991: 11), the “pseudo-death” of the language. To repeat the point, this example shows that native language programs should not be designed according to a generalized model. They have to be directed towards those functions for which the community members would like to see the language used and

maintained, and on which they should be consulted in advance.

As seen from the above, there is an obvious need for community-based efforts to create appropriate native education curricula and teaching materials. To this end it is crucial to get as many community members as possible involved in this process and, in the end, to make them identify with the aims and contents of these programs and books. This was our intention in allowing several successive preliminary editions of the primer to circulate in the community for comments, improvements, and additions before it went into print in its final form (Kasten 1998a).

There is the risk of another kind of standardization and alienation of cultural content in the curriculum. This is when it does not sufficiently reflect the actual complex cultural “profile” of the community at a given time. Particularly in the Russian North, this is shaped by the differing native traditions of the various ethnic groups who closely interact with each other in their new settlements (Kasten 1997). Thus, in the native curriculum, the pronounced “hybrid” character of evolving new native cultures should be reflected. This acknowledges the contributions of the various respective populations involved in this process, rather than singling out any particular ones. Most importantly, by defining the given cultural tradition according to its multiple ethnic sources, a cultural dynamic is kept alive. This may give rise to new cultural expressions, which may lead to new cultural varieties and even, in the end, to new cultures themselves. Such cultural processes have clearly taken place in the past among northern Itelmen groups living in the area around Sedanka. Their language and culture have been gradually differentiating from southern Itelmen variants because of the close interactions of these groups with neighboring Koryak populations. This might have led, at some point, to the “birth” of a separate language of its own. But these natural processes were brought to an end with the cultural and demographic transformations that accompanied the influx of foreign populations from the central parts of Russia since the 18th century. On the other hand, these gave rise to similar evolving linguistic and cultural diversities which can be noticed for the Kamchadals, the distinctive ethnic group of mixed Russian-Itelmen descent who live along the Kamchatka river in the central part of the peninsula, and, in more recent times, for native peoples in Chukotka (see Vakhtin in this volume).

Certainly, it is difficult, and in many cases impossible, to include and reflect all linguistic variants in native language text books. The very transmission of

a language in its written form entails standardization and takes away from it particular qualities needed to further develop itself. However, a reasonable and workable compromise should be strived for, one that includes as many cultural and speech variants as possible, and with which most of the people can identify themselves. If done properly, important cultural processes will not be blocked unintentionally by native school curricula and teaching materials themselves, at least not to the degree as often the case in the past.

Another key issue is to mobilize the intellectual resources in native communities for traditional language and culture maintenance. Experience has shown, when it comes to the transmission of traditional cultural knowledge, that it may not be enough to focus on school programs alone. For the most part, especially with reference to important traditional values, this can be done adequately only within the family. To this end, the so-called elders should be given back much of the responsibility for the upbringing of children, especially in the very early years. In earlier times, they were the key educators, overseeing enculturation into traditional native societies in the North. This is especially relevant in situations, frequently seen nowadays, where the present parents' generation has suffered the most from traditional language and culture loss during residential school education, and from subsequent education policies. Although it would take considerable effort, native activists, who plead for cultural revitalization, could provide a good example to other community members by bringing in more native cultural content when teaching their own children and using the native language more themselves. In many cases this might require them to improve or even re-learn their language. This is possible, however, if key members of that generation are serious about it. We ourselves recently witnessed such a change in First Nation Indian communities on the Pacific Northwest, where certain adults had become more competent in their languages than on visits 10 years ago.

Especially with regard to language maintenance, it is important that the child be exposed to its native language as much as possible in its very first years. Here, a major problem is that much of the language children are exposed to at home comes from TV, often in the form of poorly dubbed American soap operas, frequently with an English soundtrack in the background. Understandably, the native language is then often considered by students as too difficult to learn (see Bobaljik in this volume) when it is taught virtually as a foreign language, starting in kindergarten and grade school. Consequently, the teaching materials which we have been producing are not

only aimed at use in school classes, but are methodically directed towards older generations as well and, in particular, towards the elders. Obviously, the given book (Khaloimova et al. 1996) makes a valuable contribution because it encourages elders to enter into a dialogue with children in their very early years about issues of traditional local culture. This takes place when they show and explain to the children the drawings in the book, use the words in Itelmen which are given with them, and recall and recount familiar situations in connection with these illustrations. Thus, the more these materials are conceptualized to make them appealing to older generations as well, the more they will be used in such a way. Among the themes that evoke strong responses, by elders, for example, are maps and place names of traditional territories and abandoned villages, which stimulate important memories (cf Koester 1997). Here again, it is clear how crucial it is to include local cultural content in teaching materials and text books. This gets as much of the community as possible—as well as the different generations—involved in the process of traditional language and culture maintenance.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that great efforts have been made in native education, mainly by native experts. And there have been great achievements in accordance with, or despite, the official guidelines of the late Soviet years. Future teaching materials can build on these foundations. To deal appropriately with some of the deficiencies in native education, and, one hopes, to overcome them, two key points should be repeated.

First, the collaboration on Itelmen teaching materials, which has been between scholars with international experience (anthropologists and ethnolinguists) and a native academic (native linguist and educator), should include and encourage the involvement of additional native experts, particularly elders, who are still bearers of traditional knowledge. They should be more than mere “informants”, but participants in a well-structured, on-going dialogue on native programs and their contents. The contribution and the advice of elders and other community members representing different families, ethnic populations or factions should be elicited and highlighted. This would permit the community as a whole to identify more closely with its specific bicultural education programs and initiatives.

Second, beyond the local context, efforts have to be directed towards the wider public, local governments and the world community. All should work to create favorable external conditions for maintaining endangered cultural knowledge and allocating sufficient financial support, where it is needed. It should be made clear that, beyond securing and establishing the necessary identities of individual peoples and local communities in the North, there are also important global responsibilities involved. Maintaining the future of human existence, as discussed above, is a matter for all of us.

Let us move outward, again, from the community viewpoint, and return to the global perspective on traditional language and culture maintenance. And let us derive some more general orientations for future research on these issues from what was said above. In our opinion, there should be a shift in focus from the mere causes of the “death” of traditional languages and cultures. Instead, we should be more concerned to secure or create favorable conditions for “rediversification”, which has—according to Bobaljik and Pensalfini (1997: 15ff)—slowed down in a world with written standards and formal educational norms, that is, for the “birth” of new linguistic and cultural diversities. It is the latter which is one of the most important processes in human history and which, clearly, has been seriously impeded in recent times. Let us hope that bicultural education—properly conceptualized and used—can contribute to reversing this alarming trend.

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