

01 Sweet Ancient Portuguese – Macanese Native Dialect Interview with Miguel de Senna Fernandes

To preserve a language is unlike to collect a book: after you finish reading a book you can place it in the closet. Instead of we must turn Native Dialect into a kind of living language uttered from the mouth and make it accepted widely and used by the public.

-Miguel de Senna Fernandes

Miguel de Senna Fernandes, who is a full-time lawyer, is the President of Macanese Association. He is also a playwright, director and stage manager of Native Dialect Modern Drama Group. Miguel Senna Fernandes is a founding member of the Native Dialect Modern Drama Group in the year 1993. Since the inception of this modern drama group, he wrote a series of drama works for the annual Native Dialect drama. This annual Native Dialect drama has become a prominent and regular program in the Macao Arts Festival. This issue of [Chat Centre] specially interviewed Miguel Senna Fernandes:

In recent decades, Miguel Senna Fernandes was a pivotal figure in the preservation and promotion of the Native Dialect. The Macanese Native Dialect Modern Drama Group is burdened with the major works for the promotion of Native Dialect. Every year the group performs a humorous drama which depicts Macau's unique life style.

So what is Native Dialect?

In fact, there is no single definition for Native Dialect. In linguistics it is so called Creole Portuguese. I shall define it as a kind of ancient language used by Portuguese descendants, because it has the historical background of the era of Grand Sea Discovery. In the era of Grand Sea Discovery, there were Portuguese settlers in every corner of the world. Soon there appeared a unique language created from the fusion of local dialect with the Portuguese language in these places. Native Dialect probably originated in the 17th century, after the Portuguese occupied Malacca for the first time and entered into South China Sea area for navigation. In the course, they arrived at Macao and regarded it as a strategic site. Since then, they began long years of settled life in this territory.

Whether it was on the customs, or values, and cultural traditions, there existed lots of differences between them and the local community. Therefore, the Portuguese made a series of adjustments to adapt themselves to the environment. They thrived, contacted and communicated with the local people in the same piece of land. Native Dialect was probably formed in Macao to meet the need of communication. In the year 2000, Native Dialect was categorized in «The World's Endangered Language Atlas». It was an endangered language used by about 50 people only. Since then, a lot of works and efforts were carried out non-stop to rescue and save Native Dialect. Recently I heard people talking about the possibility of declaring Native Dialect as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) "Intangible Cultural Heritage". What is the progress of this declaration?

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Still no submission was made. It was planned before, but Native Dialect does not yet meet the list of requirements of UNESCO. The road ahead is still very long. With the assistance of University of Macao, the Native Dialect grammar rules were formulated and the preparation works for the Native Dialect reporting makes a step forward, but still it is far from success. In regards to this the Macanese Association is re-developing promotional strategy to UNESCO and Macao. For that we need to draw up new plans for advertising and promotion to the public. It is because to preserve a language is unlike to collect a book: after you finish reading a book, you can place it in the closet. Instead, we must change the native dialect into a kind of living language, uttered from the mouth and make it accepted widely and used by the public. What is the use of speaking Native Dialect? Is it that speaking Native Dialect can enhance a person's status and attract people to learn? What are the advantages of speaking Native Dialect in our daily life? These are some questions raised by people. We shall make use of the possible solutions to these problems for our future planning and it is the practical meaning for preserving Native Dialect.

What are the useful ways to preserve Native Dialect?

We shall preserve Native Dialect in the form of theatre play continuously. Each year, the Macao Native Dialect Modern Drama Group will perform one Native Dialect drama. The fact is that it is the most efficient promotional way and it attracts young people to meet and exchange idea.

Does modern drama attract a large number of young people?

Yes! The use of modern audio-visual and multimedia tools often attracts a large group of promising young people to watch the performances and adds a new impetus to performances.

In addition, your group also has choir music show in Native Dialect. Will this mode continue?

Right! This is another project. It will be continued and carried forward. It makes me happy that there are some people, including young and middle-aged people, who together with me use native dialect for to write script or compose song. They share some of my job responsibilities.

In the anniversary activity of the Macanese Native Dialect Modern Drama Group, it was said that they planned to produce a Native Dialect film shot in Macao and performed by local actors. Will this plan be implemented soon?

This is my dream and all people's dream. But it seems still far away because it will involve a lot of human resources, technical factors and logistical problems. The quality demand of people involved and things is high and we are not well prepared yet. Maybe it can be done in future. Now we can tell you another very meaningful plan "One minute of Native Dialect". We plan to launch a series of video clips. We are preparing the contents and ideas and the purpose is to bring Native Dialect in among people's daily conversation.

Thank you very much for the interview, I wish the success of your plan.

Below, we introduce a few sentences of daily Native Dialect to the readers:

After the Native Dialect are Portuguese translation
Lingu di gente antigo di Macau
A língua da gente antiga de Macau
Macao old folks' general language

Lo desaparece tamen. Qui saiam!
Vai desaparecer também. Que pena!
It is going to disappear. What a pity!

Nga dia, mas quanto ano
Um dia daqui a alguns anos
The day will come, after a few years.

Quiança lô priguntá co pai-mai
Criança perguntará aos pais
Children will ask their parents.

Qui cuza să afinal
O que é afinal
Finally what is it?

Dóci papiacam di Macau?
A "língua doce" de Macau?
Sweet Macanese dialect?

Nuno Capela
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