Kapampangan: A Problem of Identity, Language and Culture

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Abstract:

For most outsiders, the Philippine archipelago is inhabited by a homogenous group of people known as Filipinos who speak a common language called Filipino. Hardly anyone has ever heard of the name Kapampangan. Numbering only two million in a population of 98 million, they are deemed hardly worth writing about in any of the Philippines' official travel guides, ads and brochures. Though appearing insignificant in numbers, the Kapampangan ethnolinguistic group has so far produced the most number of presidents in the Philippine Republic, namely, Diosdado Macapagal, Corazon Cojuanco Aquino, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and the current president Benigno Aquino III. Four Kapampangans have appeared in Philippine official banknotes, namely Jose Abad Santos, Diosdado Macapagal, Benigno Aquino, Jr. and Corazon Cojuanco Aquino. Throughout the more than 300 years of Spanish occupation, colonial administrators, chroniclers and European adventurers who visited these shores wrote volumes about the Kapampangan people and their significant contributions. These documents are available in the major libraries and archives in Spain and the Philippines. Kapampangans have been recorded to dominate the civil, religious and military administration of the islands throughout the Spanish colonial period (Santiago, 2001). They were treated like honorary Spaniards and were granted favours and special privileges usually reserved for the Spanish colonial masters (Henson, 1965; Corpuz, 1989 and Santiago, 1990). The 20th century saw the Kapampangan people become a thorn to the Philippine Republic for many decades. The Kapampangan homeland became the cradle of Communist leaders and a hotbed of the Communist rebellion. From the 1930s to the 1980s, the Kapampangan people were viewed by a number of politicians as enemies of the republic and at times presented unfavourably by the Philippine media. Historian John A. Larkin (1972) has noted how the Kapampangan people, despite their small numbers, managed to influence and alter the course of Philippine politics throughout the ages and chose them as the subject of his dissertation on Philippine history. Philippine historians however continue to belittle the Kapampangan people as an insignificant ethnic group because of their small population. In fact, the Department of Education has for a long time neglected to include the Kapampangan people and their contributions in any of the official Philippine history textbooks, except for a passing mention that they fought on the side of the Spaniards, and later the Americans, in the struggle for Philippine independence. This is further compounded by the fact that the Kapampangan language was for decades suppressed in schools within the Kapampangan homeland. Kapampangan children are penalized every time they spoke their language in the classrooms. As a result, the Philippines has created generations of demoralized Kapampangans who are ignorant of their history, unmindful of their heritage and ashamed of their identity. Many Kapampangan speakers have switched to speaking Filipino. Kapampangan parents have for twenty years now been raising their kids to speak Filipino instead of their native Kapampangan language.

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