



Some notes on Venezuela identity

ESTEBAN EMILIO MOSONYI

ESCUELA DE ANTROPOLOGÍA, FACULTAD DE CIENCIAS ECONÓMICAS Y SOCIALES, UNIVERSIDAD CENTRAL DE VENEZUELA, CARACAS, DISTRITO CAPITAL, VENEZUELA
CORREO ELECTRÓNICO: EEMOSONYI@GMAIL.COM

My dear ladies and gentlemen, respectable audience:

It is very nigh for me, a real pleasure, to be here, in this beautiful country, en order to meet each other, to know reciprocally one another and discuss our problems more profoundly, perhaps for the fears the times in our history. Venezuela and Trinidad are brotherly countries and I affirm that without complexes and preventions of any kind. In other settings this could be a sheer commonplace but now the conditions are quite different. We are living in a new epoch with its current, much more recent challenges.

Well, what is then this new scenery that offers us such an interesting change to bring forward non-conventional initiatives on different topics? This is un good cuestion and it is also one of the reasons for my visiting the lovely landscape of Trinidad. Mankind is benning now to live a new era of universal diversity. We envisage a highly important historical transformation that embraces several realms: biodiversity, sociodiversity, linguistic diversity, among others. For example, this same year 2008 is being consecrated to the world's languages (ONU, 2007), all of them without exception, languages with a great many speakers or only a few ones, scoping to detain to the disappearing during this same century.

Bet, let's turn back to our main topic. Just a short time ago UNESCO succeeded in approving a document called "Univer-

sal Declaration of Cultural Diversity” (UNESCO, 2001), which has been signed by most of the members countries. From now on, diversity –with its synonyms such as difference, variability and so on– will be protected and appreciated in the whole world, at least legally. The same is happening in every country and nation of the world.

Only some years ago, if you wanted to affirm that between the peoples of the Venezuela and Trinidad exists something like a brotherhood, you had to make the following statement: we are absolutely identical, resembling each other in every respect; there is no difference at all between us, we are just like two drops of water. If that happened not to be so, we would be nothing to each other, only a couple of mutual strangers. It is also equally important to observe and to claim emphatically: at that time cultures as such, the specific characteristics of different peoples did not seem to exist at all or they were only of minimal relevancy. Everything was reduced to strictly economical and geopolitical problems and interests, especially in the decidedly neoliberal last two decades of the past millennium. It seemed also necessary to underrate the language differences. If people in a certain country spoke English, Spanish, Dutch or if they were clearly plurilingual, that was not considered a significant factor, it was even better to hide the linguistic situation as part of an undesired culturalism.

Fortunately enough today things are quite different. Diversity is coming to the proscenium, to the foreground. We can now even assure that we resemble each other inasmuch we are so different, intrinsically and also compared to each other and with other peoples. Well, our peoples of Trinidad and Venezuela –we might name Guyana, Suriname, Curaçao as well– are indeed very similar in some respects and details and entirely different in many other ways, but before and above everything we share a brotherhood, we are bound to be solidary with one another, we have to collaborate in order to achieve our common purposes. Diversity is beautiful and it constitutes a highly significant feature in trying to be successful in our mutual efforts to make our friendship as perfect as possible.

Only a short time ago, the President of our Republic, Commander Hugo Chávez Frías, included in his Proposal of Constitu-

tional Reform the very important Article N° 100 (Chávez, 2007), which I will transcribe in my own English translation:

“The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is a historical product of the confluence of various cultures; wherefore our State recognizes the diversity of its expressions and appraises the value of our Indigenous, European and African roots that originated our great South American nation. The popular cultures, the cultures of the Indigenous, Eurodescendant and Afrodescendant peoples, constitutive of our Venezuelan identity, enjoy a special attention, inasmuch as interculturality is recognized and respected under the principle of the equality of cultures. The Law will establish incentives and simulate persons, institutions and communities to promote, foster, develop and finance cultural plans, programs and activities in our country, and those on Venezuelan culture in foreign countries. Our state will guarantee to cultural workers their incorporation to the System of Social Security, that may allow them a dignified quality of life based on a public recognition”. (Article 100. La República Bolivariana de Venezuela es el resultado histórico de la confluencia de múltiples culturas, por ello el Estado reconoce la diversidad de sus expresiones y valora las raíces indígenas, europeas y africanas que dieron origen a nuestra Gran Nación Suramericana. Las culturas populares de pueblos indígenas, de los eurodescendientes y de los afrodescendientes, constitutivas de la venezolanidad, gozan de atención especial, reconociéndose y respetándose la interculturalidad bajo el principio de igualdad de las culturas. La ley establecerá incentivos y estímulos para las personas, organizaciones sociales, instituciones y comunidades que promuevan, apoyen, desarrollen o financien planes, proyectos, programas y actividades culturales en el país, así como la cultura venezolana en el exterior. El Estado garantizará a los trabajadores y trabajadoras culturales su incorporación al Sistema de Seguridad Social que les permita una vida digna, reconociendo las particularidades del quehacer cultural, de conformidad con la ley).

As it is well known, the whole Proposal was disapproved in the Referendum of December 2, 2007. But many people still believe –I, myself, among them– that is particular Article, perhaps with some minor changes should be included in our *Cartha Magna* or, alternatively, in some other area of our legislation. At any rate, this text would signal an important step forwards for Venezuelan cultural policies and exercises a powerful effect on an international scale. The wording of the text is still not definitive, but even in its current aspect it makes an impression of seriousness, solidity and deliberation. The formerly called Afrodescendant roots –*raíces afrodescendientes* in Spanish– have been already co-

rected to “African roots”. I find, personally, the expression “confluence of various cultures” rather inexact, “confluencia de varias culturas” in Spanish. When we speak of confluence, we mean that different cultures will finally unify themselves at a common place of encounter.

We have arrived here to an interesting point, from which the discussion of a weyword, the mestization could begin (Ribeiro, 1970). Why precisely mestization? I believe with a certain basis, that the conceptual complex of “mestization”, the prototype of “mestizo people”, may be very attractive, but it is incapable to explain a lot of issues this concept has been invented for. I would like to be wholly explicit on this point. Mestization, racial o sociocultural mixture, do exist abundantly in the world and specially in our Continent, South America and the Caribbean. In almost all our countries, mestizos are a clear majority: I am going even farther. The Amerindian people have been mestizised, has heavily participated in an enormous and universal hypermestizing. Notwithstanding, the real problem is clearly another one.

The motto of mestization has been very badly used in every excolonial country of America. I have had a long expertise on it in countries of Hispanic and Portuguese antecedents. In these States, mestization has acquired the meaning of europeanization, wherefrom that of whitewashing. Our continent would be a big melting pot, in which several macro-ethnicities –white, brown, black, yellow and other populations– have come together only for blending with each other, until no difference remains to subsist.

We could thus speak of westernization through the supermestization, the ethnical, cultural and racial mixture of all peoples coming to America. We certainly know know that also in chemistry the total intermingling of colors leads directly to the white color as a final product. One could possibly say that the mestization, in one way or another, creates something new; that is true, but we must be careful. Following this radical sense of mestization –that of some ideologists like Darcy Ribeiro, Aguirre Beltrán, Vasconcelos or Uslar Pietri– we could only arrive at a unique and exclusive culture, that is to say a Eurocentric megaculture with some of its

varieties. And this is the opposite of any form a diversity, it is something destined to annihilate every kind of sociodiversity.

However, when there is anybody criticizing something, he or she must as well propose an alternative, because sheer criticism always sounds empty. That is the reason why I feel obliged to manifest my own point of view. After all, these new ideas are not exclusively mine, although I have made my contributions and I shall follow up. The most important issue is that we have begun to understand the real meaning of diversity. Almost each country of the world has undersigned, through its delegates, the UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity, with just a very few exceptions. So we can make sure that nowadays the respect to difference and promotion of cultural diversity have become a world-wide policy.

This will also remain the basement of my argumentation. Venezuela, too, has signed the Declaration on Diversity. Moreover, our country recognizes now as it had never before, according to the Bolivarian Constitution of 1999 (República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 1999), the existence, the collective rights, the cultures, the specific identities, of course the own languages of approximately 35 Indian peoples. The Article N° 100 the President's proposal for the Constitutional Reform would signify a progressive pace –a very first one indeed– towards the recognition of some rights of the Afrodescendants. This same Article mentions also other cultural formations, as those of European origin and the so-called popular cultures, in view of the fact that the word folklore sounds now somewhat old-fashioned and pejorative. To sum up, there appears the equivalence and the same ranking of every culture and each cultural reality, that jointly constitute the Venezuelan nationality, without any kind of discrimination. Consequently, these democratic and horizontal relations among different cultures, cultural workers and cultural creations appoint towards a genuine and sincere interculturality, which is a beautiful and valuable purpose for the whole world's improvement.

I have just now alluded to something pertaining to our theme, and that is our heritage of more or less 35 native Indian languages currently existing in Venezuela (Mosonyi, Barbella & Caula., 2003). This is an extraordinary legacy coming from remote

times but full of unceasing vitality. It has only been in the last twenty years, that mankind began to fight against the excessive mortality of languages spoken on this Planet were completely useless, they had no value at all, they were only a handicap for everybody, a mere remnant of times forlorn. Today we know perfectly well that this not true; that the languages of mankind, individually considered, represent a very valuable treasure that must be perpetuated as wholly active and usable expressive systems. It is already a fact that the current year of 2008 is dedicated to the world's language, receiving the name of "year of the mother tongue" or "year of the languages of the world". Moreover, the salvation of thousands of minorized languages, of language diversity as such, will shape one of the chief tasks and challenges of this whole century.

Precisely in some former lines of this lecture I made an allusion to the languages of Venezuelan Indians. These approximately 35 speech systems, jointly with the peoples speaking them, belong to a relatively small number of language families, not very different from those found in the Caribbean Island, coastal countries and regions. Trinidad had in the near past also a Karib and an Arawak population that persist in the memory of present day communities, while coastal Guyana, Suriname and French Guyana preserve an important Amerindian component of the both families: Arawak, particularly Lokono, and Karib, particularly Kariña communities of four countries –Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname and French Guyana– who can understand quite well each other and enjoy a growing ethnic solidarity.

Coincidentally, enough in our country, Venezuela, the two –quantitatively not qualitatively– main families are the Arawak and the Karib peoples. Arawak peoples are the Wayuu, Añu, Kurripako, Piapoko, Baniva, Baré, Warekena and Aruako. The Karib family is represented by the Kariña, Pemón, Akawayo, Chaima-Kumanagoto, Yukpa, Japreira, Yekuana, Yavarana, Mpoyo, Eñepá. Independent from any affiliation until now are the Warao, Yanonami, Sanemá, Piaroa, Jivi, Puinave, Pumé and some more peoples in our country. All these names account for a great wealth of sociodiversity and linguodiversity in Venezuela. Until a few decades ago, all these peoples were oppressed, persecuted, their

cultures underestimated and discriminated against. Even nowadays many of these important problems still persist with considerable gravity, but Venezuelan State and its present government have undertaken serious initiatives to improve the situation of the Indian peoples (Mosonyi, 2006a). Some are now beginning to enjoy a real bilingual and intercultural education. Many of them are starting to manifest a powerful feeling of collective identity which enhances political, social and cultural participation on a national and internacional nivel without losing their roots or jeopardizing their specificity or sacrificing anything of their contribution to social and human diversity.

In this sequence of ideas, many Venezuelan Afrodescendants too have preserved a strong sentiment of cultural identity, comparable to that of our Amerindian or Indigenous peoples (Mosonyi, 2002; Istúriz, 2006). As it is generally know, this Afrovenezuelan self-consciousness does not attain the degree observable in their Caribbean pairs, as in Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Jamaica, for instance (Mosonyi, 2006b). Nor do we possess and extremely original Afrodescendant culture like that of the Surinamese Saramaca. Even thus Venezuelan's Afrodescendant peoples have made a considerable effort to organize themselves, to fortify their communities, to reinforce their internal and external participation in sociopolitical issues, always emphasizing their specificity within the conglomerated of the Venezuelan nation. In this historical moment, the Indigenuos and Afrodescendant communities are the leaders in the process of shaping the real cultural diversity of our country, without omitting or underestimating other contribution. There exist some Afrodescendant communities in Eastern Venezuela which have preserved, not without serious difficulties, some linguistic varieties of Creolo French and English.

After this short description, it is time to review the problem of cultural mestization. Above all other considerations, it is clear that mestization do exist as such –both biological and cultural– independently of our own subjective interpretations. But we must make sure that mestization is not nor needs to be a universal, total and absolute equalization of everything that subsists inasmuch as social and cultural phenomena. Contrariwise, even the

most radical of blendings may freely lead to multiple results. Thus a Venezuelan or Brazilian mestizo is not at all similar to one of Suriname or Costa Rica. Also within Venezuela there are significant differences between East-Venezuelan and a West-Venezuelan criollo or creole. But this is not the whole thing either. Parallel with the typically mestizos, there are also considerable amount of less mestizised peoples and communities, as for example an aboriginal American Indians and very many descendants of African and Asian peoples and ethnics communities –through the Caribbean universe– who continue attached to their sociocultural specificities and identities, although they are never nor ought to be chemically pure. Both purism and fundamentalism are dangerous extremes to be avoided, lest having to be exposed to several forms of fanaticism. Diversity is incredibly beautiful and humanely attractive, but it necessitates of certain equilibrium and an overwhelming doses of tolerance and interculturality. Through a real cross-cultural dialogue mankind turns out to be diverse, within its unity and solidarity, as the word itself appoints to. There is definitely no contradiction between “one” and “multiple”, between oneness and diversity. Both are fundamental for our universal poly-dialectics.

Now, before proceeding to examine some additional aspects of Article 100 of the proposed Constitutional Reforms, I guess to have sufficient arguments to recommend the wording “creative and interactive presence and coexistence of different cultures” or anything similar to it, at a substitute for “confluence of various cultures”, currently stated. I am sure there was no spurious intention in the legislator’s mind by the use of this latter formulation. But still I think that the new option I am proposing shows several serious advantages.

Let’s profit this opportunity to discuss very briefly some other positive aspects of Article 100. Though some ultraconservative Venezuelan intellectuals express the opinion that this Article does not seem to value properly the European cultural contribution, in my perspective it does not happen to be so. It does not overlook European and other cultures, but puts a special emphasis on our American and Afriocan heritages, in order to include all of them,

after hundreds and hundreds of year of exclusion, discrimination, underestimation and racism. Notwithstanding, we do not claim for the intrusion of any sort of inverted racism either.

The Article in question has also the virtue of deconstructing the myth of America's discovery by Columbus and other European conquerors. Its textual wording states clearly: "our Indigenous, European and Afrodescendant roots", wherein the Indigenous peoples are the first to be mentioned. And this corresponds to historical truth. The continuous streams of Amerindian ancestors arrived to the American continent many thousands of years before the European navigators, and they had already developed a huge number of cultures, with all their diversity and multiplicity. Neither were the Gallic territories, that is to say the Galliae, the present-day country of the contemporary French people, ever discovered by the Roman Julius Caesar, nor Commodore Matthew Perry was the discoverer of Japan or anything of the sort.

Another point to highlight is the official recognition of cultural workers to our different cultures in our whole country, without the discrimination. By means of this Article, the true connoisseurs and creative artists belonging to the several ethnocultures will also enjoy a much stronger material and moral support, aiming at the reinforcement of all such activities and initiatives. This one is a most interesting aspect of diversity, pluralism and interculturalism on behalf of the eternally dominated and for a very long time excluded layers of mankind.

Now, at last, in order to conclude for the moment being this synopsis, I shall call the attention to the fact that the whole performance and execution of all this highly complex programming of diversity and interculturality –proceeding from the Article N° 100– will oblige us to a gigantic and almost systematic mobilization. Many people believe still quite easily –with an extremely naivety– that sheer voluntarism may be sufficient to modify things making them more perfect, including the creation of new realities. Other persons suppose that interculturality within a genuine diversity might be reduced to a relatively light libretto: some artistic presentations and picturesque fairs and festivals, eventual publication of popular booklets and pamphlets, always

on the surface like bad swimmers. Our proposal has nothing to do with this conception. To mention only one example, language planning for indigenous peoples, their efficient study and teaching, their actual officialization, their mass-mediatic use, their commercial and institutional employment united to the finding of new fields of application, their revival from critical and terminal situations: all these numerous occupations consume unaccountable resources and painstaking dedication. Now, let's list to my recital of three short samples of these languages.

In order to finish these brief introductory words, I wish to take the liberty of offering three paragraphs of texts written in three very different Indigenous –that is to say Amerindian– languages of Venezuela: Kariña, of the Karib family, belonging to our States of Anzoátegui, Monagas, Bolívar and Sucre, also widely spoken in Guyana and Suriname (Bjord Castillo & Mosonyi, 2001); Warao, spoken in the neighborhood of Trinidad en the Delta of the Orinoco River, that belongs to no known linguistic family being just independent; and, finally, one short extract in another Arawak language, The Baré of our State Amazonas, which was on the verge of disappearing, but their last speakers are rescuing it and giving it a new life. We can now be certain that it will not die. Languages are too valuable to deserve dying, to be so simply condemned to death. So are also cultures they must live for ever defying any menace of extinction. No culture is primitive nor archaic; all of them have their assigned place in the realm of world diversity.

Our languages are beautiful. They have the enchantment of our human articulatory organs converted into musical instruments producing their peculiar melodies, phonetic sonorities, intermingled with the everlasting beauty and harmony of the conceptual ideational framework and emotional contents, making every utterance a real masterpiece of poetry and intrinsic eloquence and elegance. I am reproducing previously my English translation of each text, to conclude with their transcription in the original languages.

Kariña: One day there was a party there upstairs in the house of God. One could already see those animals that went to heaven: the vultures, masters of the clouds.

Porooro, the Frog, was tremendously eager to go to party, because he liked to sing and to sing until getting hoarse. But he couldn't find his way to go there, because he needed to ascend flying as far as the clouds, where the house of God was located.

Warao: We, the Warao people, have our own language. We speak in it in order to understand one another. When we hear our mother tongue our heart rejoices, our heart gets merry; by means of our language we greet our relatives, we say beautiful words and we sing; by means of our language we fall in love and we pronounce our enchantments; by means of our language our parents teach us how to work.

Baré: We are the Baré people. We want to see how our culture keeps growing. Our Baré elders are asking: where are we going, brothers and sisters? The Baré don't want to abandon their villages. We want to return to our settlements. We want to speak our language. Our God, the great Pulunamínali, is our father. We have also the beautiful and fragrant princess Puméyawa. A new daybreak is come, brothers and sisters, it is our times to come to life again.

Kariña: O'vin veedu aamudaakoyon piyejta aamu tuwayee mooe nuje, Yojsó attüpuo. Ya'rooro voonetoonopooko mojkaaro animmiaarekon, nujsenaaka tootonon Kaaputaka; Kuruumükon piejko eemukon. Poroorute romo'nopooko tütörü saanorü maa-ro piyejta'va, tuwaaretaarü apookurummue tuwayyüke tanaj-sakeepürü'warooro. Ootuwaara tütörü anuupütüjate, kaapu'wa tootopo vayyüke tariiruñne, Yojsó attü vaññopootopo'va.

Warao: Oko waraotuma ka ribu ja. Ka ribu dibuya ori noko-kitane. Warao ka ribu isia dibuyaja nokokore ka kobe ekei tia, ka kobe doró tia; ka ribu isia ka warao bajukaya waraya, obonobita waraya, dokotu waraya, ka ribu isia ori yamaretaya, ka ribu isia marejoa waraya, ka ribu isia monikata nome nakaya, ka ribu isia ka rimatuma yaotakitane ka inaminabuya.

Baré: Wíni balénu. Wajísani ayadán asidubán wakulutúrani bekjé. Miyalínu balénu imadáni aweitáte wajáwaka wálaja? Balénu jéna ijísa pimáda mebíneje kujú. Wíni akudubáni adawátina wabíneje útei. Wíni ajisáni wachéleka bále. Wadekáni Diosú Pulunamínali kumáleje, ikúnu wayákale; Puméyawa, mawínu, puméni. Yajanéina wíni, wálaja; éjen, yajanéinaba.

REFERENCES

- Biord Castillo, Horacio y Jorge C. Mosonyi (Col.). 2001. *Kariñas. Caribes ante el siglo XXI*. Caracas: Operadora Cerro Negro.
- Chávez Frías, Hugo Rafael. 2007. *Propuesta de Reforma Constitucional. Proyecto presentado ante la Asamblea Nacional de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela*. Caracas, 15 de agosto de 2007.
- Istúriz, Aristóbulo. 2006. *Hacia una sociedad multiétnica y pluricultural. Colección Temas de hoy. El día de afrovenezolanidad y José Leonardo Chirino*. Caracas: Ministerio de Comunicación e Información.
- Mosonyi, Esteban Emilio. 2002. *Aportes lingüísticos de las sociedades afroamericanas. Tierra negra*. Caracas: ExxonMobil de Venezuela, S.A.
- _____. 2006a. *Aspectos de la génesis de la Educación Intercultural Bilingüe para los pueblos indígenas de Venezuela*. Caracas: Ministerio de Educación y Deporte.
- _____. 2006b. *Reflexiones críticas en torno al Caribe*. Caracas: Ministerio de Educación y Deporte.
- Mosonyi, Esteban Emilio; Arelis Barbella y Silvana Caula. 2003. *Situación de las lenguas indígenas de Venezuela*. Caracas: Casa Nacional de las Letras Andrés Bello-Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural.
- ONU. 2007. *Proclamación del 2008 como Año Internacional de las Lenguas*. Asamblea General de Naciones Unidas. New York, 17 de mayo de 2007.
- República Bolivariana de Venezuela. 1999. *Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela*. Publicada en Gaceta Oficial Extraordinaria Nº 5.453 de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela. Caracas, 24 de marzo de 2000.
- Ribeiro, Darcy. 1970. *El proceso civilizatorio*. Caracas: Ediciones de la Biblioteca-UCV.
- UNESCO. 2001. *Declaración Universal de la Conferencia General de la UNESCO*. París, 2 de noviembre de 2001.