

East Timor: a pseudo-nation according to Dr George Quinn

Dr George Quinn, of the Australian National University, is to be congratulated on his recent refinement of the art of the *non sequitur*, as displayed in the 2 June edition of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, one of the Australian newspapers that refuses on principle to publish any explanation or defence of the national language policy of East Timor. The notion that East Timor is a **“naturally coherent nation”** is, according to this expert on things Indonesian, a **“myth”**.¹ Thanks to the current attempts to destroy the new state of Timor-Leste, Australians **“are now seeing how false”** is this myth which **“we need to dump from our thinking.”** Indeed (as the author had opined in a similar piece placed in the *Canberra Times* a few days earlier) **“as Australian troops fan out into the wild streets of Dili, we can best support them by refusing to allow the shallow, romantic myth of East Timor’s special identity and its primordial unity to blur our vision of what we are dealing with.”**²

So we East Timorese are not a distinct people; we are no nation. Who or what are we then? Well, Dr Quinn, writing from the tranquil avenues of Canberra and ever knowledgeable about us, informs his Australian readers that there is really nothing to distinguish us from our Indonesian neighbours. Absolutely nothing. And he has plenty of evidence to support his case. For instance, several of the indigenous languages of our country (including Tetum) are also spoken on the other side of the border in West Timor (though Quinn is wide of the mark in his claim that there are more native speakers of Tetum in Indonesia than in East Timor). Moreover, **“the neighbouring regions of Indonesia are mostly Christian and their grassroots lifestyle is remarkably similar to that of East Timor.”** Therefore, suggests the Australian National University’s leading authority on all things Timorese, we East Timorese are Indonesians. Of course Quinn is politically correct enough (East Timor being a political reality albeit for him a pathetic and

¹ “The legacy of Australian decisions is meltdown in Timor”

² “Divisions in Timorese society are far from new”

spurious one) not to use the ‘I-word’ in this connexion, but the reader can hardly conclude from the evidence that the writer considers us to be Comanches or Lebanese.

Now we would be the last to claim that Dr Quinn is wrong in averring that we share languages, religion and a general way of life with our neighbours in West Timor. In saying such things he is perfectly correct. The trouble is that when nationality is being discussed, pointing out such grass-roots similarities really has nothing to do with the price of kreteks. Indeed, the exact same argument, that of identical ethnicity, was employed by the Nazi propaganda machine in the occupied Netherlands to convince the unquestionably Germanic population of these countries that they are as German as the loyal citizens of the Third Reich. After all, Dutch is basically a Low German dialect and the Dutch people are historically a mere western extension of the Frisian and Saxon populations of northern Germany.

Unfortunately for the Nazis, the Dutch (apart from a few racist fascist collaborators) were not interested in hearing that they were Germans; as far as they were concerned, they were Dutch, and being Dutch and German are not the same thing. Why? Because two not-to-be-ignored phenomena, history and intellectual culture (as opposed to basic *material* culture), had centuries earlier transformed a corner of the Low German speech zone into a separate nation. Judged from a narrow ethnolinguistic criterion the Dutch are indeed Germans (i.e. West Teutons), but from the standpoint of identity, they are a distinct nation, what ethnologists term a *nation de volonté*.

Returning now to East Timor (a phoney nation only in Dr Quinn’s mind), we find an analogous situation. In the 16th century the Portuguese arrived in our island, ruled us, intermarried with us, catechized us and transformed our culture and our psychology. It is a fact of history that Portuguese influence in East Timor was much more profound than Dutch influence was in Indonesia, due to the differing colonialist ethics of the two powers in question: the Portuguese, like the French, were assimilationists; the Dutch shared with the British a more integrationist approach. By the mid 19th century, even the Malay language (whose currency would become the future determinant of ‘Indonesian’ identity) ceased to be spoken in East Timor, a fact to which contemporary writers from abroad bore witness; certainly the Indonesian spoken by the murderous Suhartoist troops who entered Dili in December 1975 was a foreign tongue to the East Timorese population.

The rivalry of the Dutch and the Portuguese in our island also split the original Tetum language into two varieties, one saturated with Portuguese words in the east and in Oecussi, the other a tributary of Malay in the west. Today Eastern Tetum

and Western Tetum are as different as Urdu and Hindi, which are fundamentally variants of a single Hindustani language, Urdu full of Arabic loanwords and Hindi heavily influenced by Sanskrit.

As a result of all these historical processes we East Timorese now differ as much from the West Timorese as Australians differ from the English, as Afrikaaners differ from the Dutch, as Croatians differ from Serbs, or as Malaysians differ from Indonesians. The world is full of similar examples of basic ethnicities split into distinct nations. Today an East Timorese ignorant of Indonesian (and it has been reliably estimated that not more than 40% of our population acquired more than a rudimentary knowledge of Indonesian during the recent occupation) would have the same difficulty making sense of a political article written in Western Tetum as a West Timorese would have trying to decipher our heavily Lusified literary medium.

The reality, then, is that in spite of an ancient supra-ethnic unity of the peoples of Timor, there are now all sorts of differences, both obvious and subtle, between the East Timorese and the West Timorese. Nationhood, you see, like human beings themselves, is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to primordial realities which centuries of history and cultural development have long since transformed. Unless George Quinn is completely incapable of understanding the East Timorese reality, the only other possibility is that he is indeed aware that the great factor of these differences, lying at the core of our national identity, are Portuguese language and culture, which would explain his anxiety to dismiss these pillars of our civilization as superficial influences.

Portuguese, by the way, is spoken by us in a distinct *local* variety, with its own pronunciation, grammatical peculiarities and vocabulary, no less unique than the English of Australia, yet we doubt that Quinn would accuse Australian English of having “shallow” roots in the neighbouring continent, or of being non-existent. As any linguist can tell you, languages without popular roots in a country do not develop lasting local varieties. In any case the fact, which no amount of wishful thinking can change, is that East Timor without its Portuguese heritage would cease to be itself, and become just another corner of Indonesia. Which is precisely why the occupying Indonesians strove so hard and failed so miserably to eradicate the Portuguese language from our daily lives between 1975 and 1999. And why the acolytes of Indonesian irredentism in Australia are seizing with alacrity the opportunity of our distress to kick their old can once again. We suspect that the Australian public, more discerning than these crude propagandists imagine, has already tired of the clanking and wonders whether this periodical ritual of kicking us while we are down is really in the best of taste.

Might we suggest that instead of increasing our difficulties by spreading disinformation about our identity, Dr Quinn be fully consistent with his own philosophy and devote his energies to persuading the people of the Netherlands to return to the bosom of Mother Germany? He might equally try convincing Anglo-Australians to forget their illusions of being a distinct people since they are nothing but transplanted Englishmen, and that the 'Pommies' whom they like to identify as aliens are a mere figment of their imagination.