



# IN BARCELONA I FOUND LOVE FOR MY MOTHER TONGUE

by nino gonzales

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[gonzales.nino@gmail.com](mailto:gonzales.nino@gmail.com)



# **In Barcelona I Found Love (for my Mother Tongue)**

by Nino Gonzales

It is August once again, *Buwan ng Wika*, when one cannot escape questions of language and identity. For a Cebuano, it's a complex question, a tug-of-war between several languages and several identities. On one side, you have the Cebuano language, which evokes loyalties as old as myth and as strong as blood. At the same time, you feel a bit uneasy having such strong loyalties amidst this month-long extravaganza of nationalism, as if you're marching against the beat of the republic. You feel even more uneasy with such little insular sentiments amidst the urbane, English-speaking world of global business, technology and opportunity.

So it's a bit ironic that I learned to love my mother tongue—my *local* language—in Barcelona, a very global and cosmopolitan city. There I saw the love story between the city of Barcelona and its language, Catalan. Barcelona shows how language revival can be achieved, and how to go beyond the petty antagonisms that commonly go with language politics.

Barcelona is a special place for a Cebuano, because telling its story is almost like telling the story of Cebu. The Catalans have been speaking their language for centuries. But when the boundaries of nation-states were drawn, they ended up belonging to one with a different national language, Spanish, which they insist on calling Castellano.

However, they had much greater challenges than Cebu. For several decades in the last century, Catalan was prohibited in all public

offices and schools. Parents were even forbidden from naming their children with Catalan names like Joan, Jaume or Jordi—names had to be “authentic” Spanish ones like Juan, Jaime or Jorge. The worst that Cebuanos could complain of is that singing the national anthem in Cebuano is against the law (which is nevertheless openly disregarded), or that most Cebuanos never get taught their mother tongue in school. And if you name your kid “Lapu-Lapu Gandhi Beckham M. Apelido,” you won't be punished, although you should be.

Yet Catalan is now thriving. There are almost 6,000 books published in the Catalan language every year, around 12% of the total published in Spain. Ads in Barcelona use Catalan. Catalan is taught and is used for instruction up to the university level in Barcelona schools. And today, there are probably as many Jordis in Barcelona as there are Niños in Cebu.

How did Catalan go from an “illegal” language to its current state of vigor? And what can Cebu learn from this experience? In case you're feeling geeky, there's a scholarly book by Daniele Conversi entitled *The Basques, the Catalans, and Spain*. It traces the roots of the successes and failures of the struggle for recognition of the two strongest non-Castilian language groups in Spain, the Basques and the Catalans.

However, if you walk the streets of Barcelona, visit its museums and talk to its people, you could plainly see the answers. One factor must be the success of homegrown Catalan businesses. Another is clearly their strong sense of identity, shown in their support for their artists and their language. The third is something less tangible, but is something that you could see

in both Barcelona and Cebu—a certain openness or outwardness in their collective mindsets.

Barcelona families would probably agree when I say that they are the most entrepreneurial in Spain. Being a coastal city, Barcelona has always been a center of commerce. This is probably the reason behind the deeply-rooted business culture of Catalans. Apparently, they also have a reputation for stinginess, which only increased my endearment for the city. One day, I was toured by four guys from the residence hall I was staying in. One of them, Marc, was Catalan. As we were walking, we saw a tiny coin on the pavement. The three non-Catalans told Marc, in that affectionately insulting manner one has with close friends, to drop to his knees and scramble for the coin, “because,” they told him, “you are Catalan.”

Perhaps this stinginess just shows that Catalans know where to put their money. Support for artists is very tangible in Barcelona; you see it all over the city. Gaudí, Dalí, Picasso—they are honored in Barcelona the way Manny Pacquiao is honored in the Philippines. Each of them had patrons—private wealth and popular following—which enabled them to pursue their artistic visions.

The best example of this is Antoni Gaudí's La Sagrada Familia, which unfailingly appears in Barcelona's tourist brochures the way the Magellan's Cross appears in Cebu's. This immense church is the most audacious expression of faith I've seen in architecture. While Gothic spires express the medieval sense of the glory and order of a universe ordained toward God, La Sagrada Familia—which grows, swirls and bubbles upward like

a concrete forest of living, breathing organisms—seems to celebrate and emulate God's own artistry and architecture as seen in nature.

The construction of La Sagrada Familia started in 1882. Gaudí died on 1926, leaving the church unfinished. The construction continues, and 2026 is its targeted completion date, a hundred years after the death of its architect. La Sagrada Familia is a Catalan artist's expression of the Catholic faith. What made that expression possible, long after the death of the artist, has been the patronage of the people of Barcelona and beyond, Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

La Sagrada Familia answered my questions about the *usefulness* of Cebuano in this globalized world. Or more accurately, it questioned my questions. Questioning the usefulness of my mother tongue is like questioning the usefulness of La Sagrada Familia. It is like questioning the usefulness of a Raymund Fernandez sculpture or a Celso Pepito painting. These are not tools you use to further your career. These are ends in themselves, made possible by your professional success. Likewise, Cebuano is not a mere tool for progress. Resplendent Cebuano will be the greatest reward earned from the success of Cebu and the greater Cebuano world.

La Sagrada Familia is just one example of the symbiosis of business, art, and the expression and growth of a people's culture. Like La Sagrada Familia, the Catalan language also flourished in the material and cultural wealth of Barcelona. In an essay entitled *Resplendent Catalan: What Money Can Buy?*, linguist Anthony Pym writes: “So is Catalan really a model for other stateless languages? More exactly, can contemporary

language revival be achieved by money alone, or even money plus sharp political skill? The answer must clearly depend on very specific combinations of factors.”

This is why I find the Barcelona experience so interesting. If there is another city which fulfills the “very specific combination of factors” that Pym requires, it is Cebu. Even the cultural shortchanging experienced by both cities had identical strategies.

According to Conversi, “While the attempts to crush Euskara were openly aimed at its eradication, the anti-Catalan polity included a supplementary strategy of 'dialectisation': that is, the authorities tried to promote the view that Catalan was a mere dialect, a sub-variety of Spanish.” Sounds familiar?

More than similar challenges, it is shared mindsets that make Barcelona a model for Cebu. Resil Mojares, in the book *Cebu: More Than an Island*, observes that being a “narrow, elongated island of coastal settlements, Cebu is turned outwards, more oriented to the sea and places beyond it than to mountains and the hinterland.” The same could be said for the coastal city of Barcelona. Furthermore, Conversi says that “Catalans had a 'bourgeois' ethos tied to small family enterprises,” while Mojares notes that Cebu has a “merchantman culture.”

This openness, I think, is what prevents contempt for other languages and for outsiders, contempt that stems from excessive nationalism. Pulitzer prize winner James Michener has a book entitled *Iberia*. It's a bit outdated but it still gives a good introduction to the varied cultures of Spain. In the chapter on Barcelona, he relates a conversation with Dr. Poal, a Catalan. Michener asks about separatism. Dr. Poal

answers: *“We must integrate fully with Spain, and everyone I know is eager to do so. But I would lie if I did not say that I feel more Catalan than anyone else in this room or perhaps in all Barcelona. My heart throbs to the rhythm of this land. [...] But politically our future rests in being a creative part of Spain. God, how the rest of Spain needs us!”* He explains the roots of their openness: *“Because we are so mixed in our heritage we are not narrow-minded little provincials. We have a bigness of spirit . . . a singing of the heart.”*

In the end, Barcelona's love for Catalan art and language showed me how to love my own mother tongue, Cebuano. And its mindset of openness, which is likewise part of my Cebuano heritage, freed me from my complexities with other languages.

I realized that I had conflicting loyalties because I was thinking like a politician. When one politician supports his language, other politicians see it as a threat to theirs. In the world of politics, there can only be one winner, and language is just one of the many weapons to gain power, a weapon to be used or discarded as convenient.

In the world of art, the beauty of language is an end in itself. When a Cebuano poet speaks of the beauty of the Cebuano language, the Tagalog poet understands perfectly. Because she feels the same for the Tagalog language.

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