The Protection and Revival of Cypriot Maronite Arabic

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Introduction

In November 2008, the Republic of Cyprus formally declared to the Council of Europe that it recognizes Cypriot Maronite Arabic (CMA) as a Minority Language within the meaning of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.* Though belated, this recognition is very welcome. It signifies, on the part of the government, a reversal of the discriminatory policy exercised thus far and a fulfillment of a pre-election promise to the Maronite community by President Christofias. Suffice to recall that the preceding government first denied the existence of a separate language and then—after the Council of Europe Committee of Experts strongly and urgently recommended recognition—rather than recognize suggested incorrectly in its 2nd Periodic Report (17 January 2008) that CMA 'is only spoken by elderly Maronites, who live in the village of Kormakitis', a village in the north of the island and beyond government control, seeking thus to limit the number of speakers and governmental responsibility as to its protection. The current declaration has lifted a flagrant injustice against the Cypriot Maronite community. Yet the recognition of CMA does not equal protection nor does it justify complacency. Recognition is only the beginning of a long and arduous process for the revival of this historic and seriously endangered Cypriot language (a rare mixture of Arabic and Aramaic). For such an effort to be successful it is important that the Declaration is combined with practical and effective measures targeting speakers and their descendants.

The government has announced its intention to do so. Its efforts should enjoy the assistance of all stakeholders, including community representatives and relevant NGOs as well as independent bodies with interest in cultural heritage protection, diversity promotion and human rights. Such assistance should be combined with on-going monitoring by local and international bodies and organizations of the process of the implementation of policies aiming to protect and revive CMA. It is therefore imperative that a public debate must now start about the way forward and the responsibilities of the different stakeholders.

Government Policy

In fulfilling its obligations and applying Part II of the Charter as it has declared, the government of the Republic of Cyprus must follow the principles and objectives stated in Article 7 of the Charter. Specifically, it should

(1) recognize the language as an expression of cultural wealth;
(2) respect the geographical area of the language;
(3) take resolute action to promote the language in order to safeguard it;
(4) facilitate and/or encourage the use of the language in speech and writing, in public and private life;
(5) maintain and develop links and cultural relations with different language groups in the State;
(6) provide for appropriate forms and means for the teaching and study of the language at all appropriate stages;
(7) provide for facilities enabling non-speakers of the language living in the area where it is used to learn it if they so desire;
(8) promote the study and research of the language at universities or equivalent institutions;
(9) promote appropriate types of transnational exchanges where the language is used in identical or similar form in two or more States.

To that extent, the government and particularly the Ministry of Education and Culture, must seek to develop in collaboration with the Maronite community a structural policy to protect and promote CMA. This should include, though not limited to:

• The strengthening of CMA teaching at the primary school of St Maron (the only Maronite school in the island) by making the language available during the morning sessions and not just as an extra-curriculum option in the afternoon as is currently the case.
• The launching of a feasibility study to check if more Maronite schools are needed. But, in any case, the government must ensure the provision of language support for primary level students who cannot join St Maron's school yet wish to learn CMA as well as for students at secondary level.

• The development of teaching manuals and general readings and literature in CMA and the provision of the required special training of teachers on language revival techniques.
• The promotion of language immersion camps for the intensive learning of CMA, and the establishment of Maronite cultural centres where CMA can be spoken, studied and put to literary and artistic use.

The government must also launch a vigorous CMA awareness campaign. Most Cypriots do not know that such a language exists and feel strange or even shocked when they hear CMA put to use by their colleagues or neighbours. To that end, the campaign should not simply frame CMA as a cultural curiosity in Cyprus but instead highlight the linguistic polymorphy of Cypriotness, which has never been simply Greek or Turkish. The campaign must also target Maronites, so that they can regain pride in a language that many (especially the younger generation) feel embarrassed to use in public, given that it singles them out as 'Arabs', 'non-Europeans', 'peasants' or halahoulides (barbaric or incomprehensible speakers).

The government should work closely with community representatives and NGOs to make the option of learning and using the language meaningful. This can include making CMA an advantage for public employment in specific posts, funding CMA-teaching institutions (including nurseries); funding CMA-promoting activities (publications, films, documentaries, etc); facilitating educational links and cultural exchanges with Lebanon; undertaking research on CMA and its status; facilitating links with similar minority groups elsewhere, such as the Sami and Hawaiian communities, where language revival projects have been successful.

Children at the CMA immersion camp organized in Kormakitis in August 2008 (photo, courtesy of Elias Zonias)

Actions across the Divide

Cooperation for the protection and revival of CMA must take place across the Cyprus divide. The Cyprus problem should not be allowed to become, yet again, an alibi for postponement or inaction, that is, adhering to the dominant rationale that there are greater or more urgent violations of human rights than need to be redressed first. The critical stage the language is in does not afford one the comfort of waiting for the settlement of the Cyprus problem. CMA is not and should not become a contentious issue between the Greek- and Turkish-Cypriot communities. The Turkish-Cypriot authorities and the Republic of Turkey currently have de facto control over the four Maronite villages in the northern part of the island (two of the villages, Asomatos and Ayia Marina, have been turned into military camps; in the other two, Kormakitis and Karpasha, a limited number of Maronites remained or recently returned). Turkey and the Turkish-Cypriot authorities bear responsibility in, at least, not impeding language revival efforts with respect to Maronites living in or visiting the north.

The village of Kormakiti is unique in that CMA has been spoken for centuries and is currently being used by the locals on a frequent daily basis. This village is an important natural site for the revival of the language and all Cypriot political sides and stakeholders must fully and unreservedly acknowledge the uniqueness of the place. To that end,

- Kormakitis must be designated a protected Cultural Heritage Zone. This is a crucial step to safeguard endangered cultural sites, as well as to prioritize initiatives of revival. Cultural Heritage Zones, such as those associated with the revival of Mayan languages in Mexico and Guatemala within native habitats, can provide useful precedents and examples of how to restore dignity and do justice to historical communities. There are already discussions under way for Kormakitis to become an EU NATURA 2000 site, and the two efforts can be combined. Specifically care must be taken so that Kormakitis is also transformed into a sustainable cultural area and not just a sustainable ecological park that may potentially—i.e., if done in isolation to cultural protection—undermine efforts that support communal return, revival and development.

- The village should be twinned to Kour in Lebanon (viewed by many Maronites in Lebanon and Cyprus to be the ancestral village of Kormakitians) as well as with Aramaic-speaking villages, like Maalula in Syria, where efforts of language revival are currently in place, such as the creation of a Language Institute, and with which exchanges can be established
- Displaying CMA in street signs and in shops in the village should be allowed and encouraged. Also it will be a mark of respect for the endangered local culture to restore the names of original toponyms in the wider Kormakits area and for this to be done also in CMA.
- Generally there should be no restrictions in novel attempts to use the language, such as in restaurant menus, performances, summer school curricula or in establishing CMA-exclusive zones.

CMA visibility will create a sense of pride for the community but also entice the interest of the visitor as to the linguistic and cultural distinctiveness of Kormakitis. More importantly, it will revive the interest of the children and youth for their ancestral language when they visit their village for holidays or immersion camps. The village can thus become a CMA nest or virtual classroom, where Maronite children and youth coming to the village do not only hear but are actually encouraged to read and use CMA.

A Technical Committee under the auspices of the United Nations should be established to undertake and supervize such a project in cooperation with the Maronite community. This should alleviate the fears of the Republic of Cyprus as stated in the recent Declaration of CMA recognition, which included a statement that any effort of revival at Kormakitis should be sensitive not to violate Article 5 of the Charter, and specifically that language revival efforts should not negate 'obligations under international law, including the principle of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of States.' There have been a number of examples of successful collaboration to protect or restore cultural heritage sites across the Buffer Zone (the most notable of which is the Nicosia Master Plan) and it is now important to move to protect not just tangible but also intangible Cypriot heritage as well as extend protection beyond 'Greek' and 'Turkish' sites and interest.

Cypriot Maronite Community

The Cypriot Maronite community itself bears a heavy responsibility. The non-governmental organizations Xki Fi Sanna ('Speak our Language') and Kermia Ztite, the Maronite Parliamentary Representative and a number of individuals within the Maronite community have already displayed extraordinary zeal and energy, by campaigning, lobbying and organizing immersion camps. But their efforts will have limited or no impact, unless existing speakers get organized and work actively to revive the language. Of course, it is important that individual Maronites should not be morally 'coerced' into language revival. But for those convinced of the significance of CMA protection and revival, the realization of active community involvement at all levels is paramount. To that end,

- Maronite speakers should systematically work within their family space to pass the language to their children. Experts point out that even limited exposure at an early age—when full exposure is not feasible—can considerably assist the learning of the language at primary or high school level.
- Revival efforts will be much enhanced if parents offer support for communal nurseries and playgrounds where children can be immersed in CMA early on. These nurseries and playgrounds could be run with the help of elders, who can use CMA in collaboration with professional nursery and support staff.

Many Maronites increasingly realize that the demise of CMA will progressively bring about the demise of their community as an ethno-cultural group, and avoiding this can be an added incentive. Indeed the existence of CMA provides the 'hard fact' that Cypriot Maronites are a national minority with a distinct ethnic identity, not merely a 'religious group' that is compelled to affiliate to either the Greek- or Turkish-Cypriot community as provided by Article 2 of the 1960 Cypriot Constitution. Note that this compulsion for the Cypriot minorities to ethnically affiliate violates the provisions of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, and as recently pointed out in the Resolution on Cyprus of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, this 'remain[s] problematic' and an 'issue of concern… notwithstanding the complex constitutional situation and current political context in Cyprus' (Resolution CM/ResCMN(2008)5, adopted 9 July 2008).

Conclusion

The recognition of CMA by the Republic of Cyprus has brought about renewed interest and hope for protecting this unique Cypriot and European language. The efforts of the community and committed officials in Cyprus and abroad should not be underestimated. But much remains to be done for these efforts to bear fruit. Time is certainly not on the side of this small endangered community and that is why measures need to be appropriate, precise and implemented effectively. Above all, the CMA question should not become either a party political issue or a bone of contention, including quarrels that those who promote its public use are displaying less national allegiance than those who do not. In short, all interested parties must build on this renewed interest and hope so as to make CMA revival possible, the Cypriot Maronite community viable, and the island of Cyprus culturally richer.

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