

# The voice on the postcolonial stage

Macanese or *Macaense*, regarded as the ‘sunset creole’ people of Macau, comprise a mere 5% of the ex-colony’s population. This article offers insight into the cultural, political and structural changes, within the postcolonial context, of *Dóci Papiáçam di Macau* – the sole theatre group performing in a ‘critically endangered’ creole language: *Patuá*.

Maria Elisabela Larrea Y Eusébio



IN ONE ROOM, a middle-aged and well-dressed man murmurs his lines while animatedly waving his hands in the air. His serious expression portends the determination and importance he invests in his endeavor. In another room, a mirror reflects a brush stroke on an actor’s face, who sits still in her chair while checking carefully that her makeup is applied perfectly. Laughter echoes along the hallway. One can always find a joke around the corner, or someone gulping down a *chilicote*<sup>1</sup> while avoiding the crumbs that fall on his costume. The backstage amplifier transmits an announcement by the director in Portuguese, Cantonese, and English. Representing different generations and ethnicities, the actors and crew speak various languages yet achieve the rapport of an extended family.

The Macanese, an epithet for the mestizo individuals who resulted from intermarriage among the Portuguese colonizers and their ostensible Chinese subjects, are Macau’s indigenous Eurasian residents. However, not quite an ethnic group and not exactly a nationality, the actual definition of Macanese is notoriously ambiguous. Generally having an element of Portuguese heredity, they are a bilingual (or even trilingual) cultural group, fluent mostly in Portuguese, Cantonese and/or English. The Macanese traditionally distinguished themselves from other ethnic communities through their specific combination of religious customs, gastronomy and a Portuguese-based creole language, *Patuá*.

This language of Macao was first borrowed from *papiá cristang* of Malacca and then later influenced by Cantonese, English and Spanish elements, and particularly by the Indian Canarim, a language of Goa.<sup>2</sup> Known also as *lingua nhonha* [women’s language] and *papiá Cristã di Macau* [Christian Language of Macau],<sup>3</sup> learning this language requires some level of group belongingness and knowledge passed down orally across generations. Today spoken fluently by only a handful of people, *Patuá* has been enlisted as a ‘critically endangered’ language by UNESCO.

## The Macanese in Macau

Though the Macanese comprise only 5% of the local Macau population, the overwhelming majority of the Macanese population is actually outside of Macau and scattered around the world, in the United States, Australia, Canada, Portugal and Brazil. Two major *Macanese diaspora* events contributed to this dispersion. The first was the *123 incident* in Macau, a state turmoil in 1966 resulting from a deadly confrontation between Portuguese authorities and Chinese locals that created political instability for the Macanese, and resulted in their emigration. The second diaspora was prompted

by the signing of the Sino-Luso Joint Declaration in 1987, declaring that Macau’s days under Portuguese administration were numbered. Preliminary statistics show that prior to the handover of the territory, the number of Macanese in Macau topped over 11,000, whereas in 2001, the number of residents with Portuguese descent dropped to around 7,000.<sup>4</sup> These two major phases of ethnic identity crisis gave rise to the establishment of a number of *Casas de Macau* (i.e., Macanese associations) around the world. In 1993, the first *Encontro Das Comunidades Macaenses* with over 600 representatives of Macanese clubs and associations worldwide, gathered in Macau with the aim of reinforcing the group’s cultural identity and preparing the Macanese community for the transformation of sovereignty. Since then, the *Encontro* would be held every three years, where the Macanese community members indulge in *Patuá* plays, parties, and traditional cuisine.

Macau, a small territory that initially held just 8 km<sup>2</sup> of land-mass situated at the estuary of the Pearl River at Southern China, has been a site of contact, communication, and controversy between the East and the West for over four centuries; in the past two decades it has been transformed into an international city of glamour and prosperity. With the establishment of the Macau S.A.R. government in 1999, the preference for official languages and cultural manifestations shifted to that of the new administrative powers. Once claimed to be the true ‘sons of Macau’ who aimed to integrate themselves culturally with the colonial population, the Macanese are now facing *cultural infusion* from the ex-colonized. Pushed to the periphery of the public sector and coveted government positions, the Macanese who once sought affiliation with Portugal are now ironically being considered for possible enlisting as the 57th officially-recognized ethnic group of Greater China. Although the Macau S.A.R. government aims to promote Macau as a place of harmony among diverse cultures, national identification and pedagogical strategies have subsequently shifted to more overt identification with People’s Republic of China. Meanwhile, the Macanese have proclaimed the importance of their existence by presenting themselves as the ‘difference’ Macau possesses after the handover, compared to other Chinese cities, through the iconic creole image of their Eurasian culture.

## The revival of *Patuá* theatre

*Dóci Papiáçam di Macau*, literally the Sweet Language of Macau, is a theatrical company largely composed of amateur thespians from the Macanese community. It is the sole theatre group using this endangered language in theatrical performances, or *recitas*, with themes including social and political criticism, and gossip and folk-tales that circulate throughout the daily

Above: Theatrical piece *Qui Pandalhada*, performed by various generations of Macanese actors, 2011. (Photo courtesy of Leonor Rosário)

discourse of the Macanese community. In 2012, the *Patuá* theatre was included in the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Macau, marking its importance on the global platform.

Having been in the audience of this annual performance since 2001, and a member of the backstage crew of *Dóci Papiáçam di Macau* since 2007, I have been an active participant-observer in the group. My own cultural identity as a Macanese with Chinese, Portuguese, and Basque heritage has facilitated my interest and involvement. The core membership of the group remains restricted to Macanese, yet in recent years, the company has further incorporated the use of Chinese and Portuguese language in their performances, extending their collaboration with local theatrical groups, and performing not only with Macanese amateurs, but also Chinese and Portuguese individuals.

I first watched Dóci’s performances at the Cultural Centre of Macau in 2001 when my parents brought me along to the show. My mother, a fourth-generation Macanese, wanted to savor her childhood memories that these performances evoked – a reminder of her grandmother’s language as well as the colonial era that was filled with Macanese and Portuguese tones. Only at that moment did I realize that I actually understood the language, without having heard it spoken explicitly before. It was then that I came to know certain phrases or words that my Macanese relatives spoke were actually *Patuá* and not formal Portuguese.

I first approached the group as a documentary filmmaker.<sup>5</sup> Though I was greeted with friendly smiles, I knew I was being observed. Finally, the *question* came up in *Patuá*, “Vós sãm fila di quem?” (Who are you the daughter of?). This was the open door allowing me into the group. The ambiguous boundaries that delineate Macanese identity are often formed by tracing the family histories of its members. I immediately identified myself and they were able to connect their family ties to mine. However, it was not until the following year when I became a member of the backstage crew did I receive the ‘family-like’ treatment. Once I joined the group sarcastic comments became more pronounced, since to be one of *us*, one needs to know how to joke around and not take it personally, i.e., like many families do. Alfredo Ritchie, an actor in the theatre group since 2001, recalls his first encounter of *Patuá* at the age of six, characterizing it as “a means of communication between *amigas* [female friends] and it is always about jokes, in a jolly atmosphere and manner, between people that were closely acquainted. But despite that, in those times, *Patuá* was not outspoken.”<sup>6</sup>



## Cultural contexts and functions of the creole theatre

Over the next few years, I realized the importance these performances had on the Macanese community, especially at the time of the transition of sovereignty. Language is a crucial component of identity construction. During the colonial era, many Macanese discarded their creole accents in hopes of aligning themselves with the colonial power. They imagined that speaking pure Portuguese would provide access to a higher social rank and positions of power.

Maria, a fourth-generation descendent of a local-born Macanese, only heard *Patuá* from her grandmother, who passed away when she was 10 years old. She expressed that in her parents' era, i.e., the 1950s, Macanese men needed to serve in the military for two years. The leading military ranks belonged to Portuguese of little education but much influence; thus the Macanese, comparatively 'smarter' as Maria puts it, would be abused and deliberately sneered at if they did not speak perfect Portuguese. "I believe they suffered a lot in that era, thus our generation were forced to abandon *Patuá* and acquire pure Portuguese, to get rid of the creole *sutaque* [accent]. However, now we are desperate, we want to grab back our own creole language. We are no longer under the Portuguese administration, so no one is here to criticize our accents. Although we are now a Chinese special administrative region, we are not Chinese, we are Macanese. And *Patuá* is ours; it belongs to us, Macanese. So we are now joining together, taking every opportunity to learn from each other the little *Patuá* that we recall. We are like kids now, learning a language, our language, the language that belongs to the Macanese, *Patuá*."

The *Patuá* thus served as a vital source of identity and community. Miguel de Senna Fernandes, director of the *Dóci Papiçám di Macau*, who co-authored with Alan Baxter the first book that documented the vocabulary and expressions of *Patuá*, said that the creole theatre was originally part of the carnival manifestations, where the hierarchically subordinated language allowed Macanese to entertain and express their dissatisfaction with social issues. "If people wanted to critique the government or sarcastically comment on someone, they would use *Patuá* to do so. The reason is that *Patuá* was spoken by the lower class people, and thus, the criticisms and the contents are from their perspective. [...] This is actually people's voice, to raise the awareness of various social issues."<sup>7</sup>

In my doctoral thesis project, I am interested in the ways the Macanese utilize the theatrical stage as a 'third space' to mediate collective historical memories. The performances of *Dóci Papiçám di Macau* are now incorporated as part of the government-administrated *Macau Arts Festival*. To present Macau as the 'world of difference', the distinct Macanese culture has been commodified to enhance the city's international tourism image. At the same time, the stage still allows the Macanese to express their views about the changes they have confronted after the shift of Macau's sovereignty from Portugal to China. Through the display of their ethnic identity, they redefine themselves, both culturally and socially.

### Theatrical themes

I have transcribed video recordings of some *Patuá* performances: one performance in 1993, prior to the handover, *Olá Písidente* [See the President] and another in 2011, after the handover, *Qui Pandalhada* [What Pandamonium]. These performances offer various insights in the presentational structures, the choice of language used by the master of ceremony, the ratio of creole language to other languages within the performance, the body languages, and in particular, the topics and themes included in the performances.

Although these two performances were highlighted for in-depth analysis, I have also analyzed the emergent themes of all of the performances between 1993 and 2011. In the years prior to the handover, cultural attributes and themes relating to the nation of Portugal are most obvious; for instance *Olá Písidente* (1993) commented on the Portuguese president, Portuguese consulate and Governor of Macau; *Mano Beto Vai Saiong* [Big brother go to Portugal] (1994) dealt with issues of Macanese immigrating to Portugal; and *Saiong Têra Galante* [Portugal, the great land] (1996), is a story set in Portugal that featured Macanese immigrants who, despite their loyalty and longing to the *motherland*, would find themselves estranged by the locals and thus realize that their roots were in Macau. Yet, after the handover, issues concerning the nation of Portugal are absent and stories have been comparatively more localized. Family encounters such as *Pápi tá ferado* [Father is screwed] (2000) and *Mama-sogra Já Chega* [Mother-in-law is arriving] (2003) were prevalent, as well as stories dealing with local social issues including health care, discussed in *Cuza Dotôr* [What's up Doc] (2007); the gambling industry in *Sorti Dóci* [Sweet Luck] (2008); legal and political issues portrayed in *Letrado Chapado* [Right, Mr. Counselor] (2009); and finally the administrative, political and social issues discussed in *Qui Pandalhada* [What Pandamonium] (2011).

In the colonial era, the Macanese were hierarchically subordinate to the Portuguese but enjoyed superior social status when compared with the Chinese. Yet, in the plays of the postcolonial era, the Macanese are portrayed as clearly subordinate to the Chinese. One example would be in *Cuza Dotôr* (2007), set at a fictional hospital in Macau, with Macanese characters who must answer to Chinese authorities who are portrayed in distinct outfits and pronounced accents. Another example would be that of *Qui Pandalhada* (2011), which was set in a fictional casino that uses China's national emblem – the Panda – as their mascot. In one scene, the main characters Duarte, Martinho and Calito were to serve the American CEO of the casino and a Chinese government official, submissively suffering their excessive and abusive demands.

When I analyzed the two respective performances, *Olá Písidente* (1993) and *Qui Pandalhada* (2011), I noticed various shifts of performance patterns. First, there was a change in language patterns. In *Olá Písidente* (1993), 99% of the lines were delivered in *Patuá* whereas only 1% included Cantonese and Portuguese. The difference in the 2011 performance, was pronounced, with 61% of the dialogue in *Patuá*, and the rest in English (26%), Portuguese (2%), Chinese (10%) and others (1%).

Second, the themes or subjects of the plays have also shifted from the inclusion of Portugal to specifically local matters. The fact of decreased positional powers is fundamental to the status quo of the minority in the transitional period, thus in the last years of the colonial era, there were fears of loss of identity and social status. After the Sino-Portuguese Joint Declaration was signed, many Macanese realized that they 'could claim no collective existence in the law'.<sup>8</sup> The question of national belongingness raised much anxiety and fear. The Macanese sang the Portuguese anthem as their anthem, raised the Portuguese flag as *their* flag, yet they identified Macau as *their* land. Though they were entitled to Portuguese nationality and a Portuguese passport, when the time came, as their land no longer flew *their* flag, fears of *their* future increased. In *Olá Písidente* (1993), the existential problematic of Macanese subjectivity in relation to Portugal was broached:

Actor: "I have a relative who lived in America for 20 years. That day, he went to the Portuguese consulate to renew his passport. That stupid guy from the consulate said to him that he couldn't get it. [...] He told him he's Macau Filo [son of Macau], he said can't. He told him his father and mother had Portuguese names, he said can't. [...] He told him he went to the military to serve Portuguese, he said can't. [...] I really don't understand, for our whole lives, we learnt to admire the red and green flag (Portuguese flag). Sing the national anthem, if we are not Portuguese, not Chinese, then who are we?"<sup>9</sup>

In the postcolonial era, plays concentrated on current local social issues. In *Qui Pandalhada* (2011), themes included civil workers' attitudes, importation of foreign labor by casinos as well as the effects of a new cultural imperialism in Macau. There were also comments about how life for the Macanese was harder today but at the same time, stressing that the Macanese are vital for the continuity of Macau's prosperity as they still serve their traditional role as the 'middleman' or bridge between the East and the West. Negative influences resulting from the drastic increase of numbers of mainland Chinese in Macau were included in the plays as well. One example was the *milk powder scandal*, when Chinese flocked to Macau in the wake of a contaminated baby formula scandal on the mainland to buy imported milk powder in the city, creating a scarce supply for local consumption.

### Patuá in the new millennium

As a creole language, *Patuá*, had various functions in the colonial era. It served as a key to class distinctions, where people who spoke the creole or 'broken Portuguese', were regarded as less educated and lower class. The *recitas*, prior to the establishment of the theatre groups, functioned as a means of expressing discontent and sarcasm that were restricted by social conventions. With the change in Macau's sovereignty, the functions of *Patuá* plays have been diversified and strengthened. They possess historical value and allow the creoles to trace their origins and reinforce their cultural roots. *Patuá* plays also function as an annual reunion site for the community to gather, reinforcing the existence of their creole identity. The theatrical performances also serve as a means of cultural identification for the Macanese community in the new administrative environment, allowing them to present their identity to the other.

*Patuá* and the contents of *recitas* were built upon folktales and daily lives of the Macanese community in the colonial era; however, as globalization leads to dilution of traditional practices, as well as an identity crisis that followed the termination of Portuguese administration, the meanings of *recitas* have evolved to experience, where the importance of the contents are taken over by sentiments and identity reinforcements. But the symbolic value of *Patuá* for the Macanese community persists. As Miguel de Senna Fernandes suggests, "The significance of *Patuá* drama is to express Macanese state of mind. For instance, in what language do we think? This is significant to our cultural identity, what we think or speak. If we have to use a language to represent ourselves, it will definitely be *Patuá*, our Creole language."<sup>10</sup>

**Maria Elisabela Larrea Y Eusébio is production director and anchor of a television program produced by the Macau Education and Youth Affairs Bureau. She is currently working on a PhD degree in the Department of Communication, University of Macau. (elisabelalarrea@gmail.com)**

Below: Two young Macanese getting ready for their performance of *Sorti Dóci*, 2007. (Photo courtesy of Elisabela Larrea)



### Notes

- Chilicote* is a Macanese snack made of minced pork and enclosed with flour wrappers in a half moon shape.
- Amaro, A. 1994. 'Sons and Daughters of the Soil: the first decade of Luso Chinese Diplomacy', *Review of Culture 20* (2nd series English Edition). Instituto Cultural of Macau.
- Senna Fernandes, M. and Baxter, A. 2004. *Maquista Chapado: vocabulary and expressions in Macao's Portuguese Creole*. Macau: Cultural Institution of Macau.
- Larrea, E. 2008. *Macanese in the global network: a study of post-colonial Macanese cultural identity performance*. Master thesis, Department of Communication. University of Macau.
- Between the years 2007-2008, I produced a documentary film illustrating some of the social practices by the Macanese, *Filhos da Terra* (Sons of the Land). This documentary is an attempt to capture festive moments and emotional sentiments of the Macanese in the new millennium.
- Translated by researcher, interview with Alfredo Ritchie, 12-04-2011
- Translated by researcher, interview with Miguel de Senna Fernandes, 15-03-2011
- Clayton, C. 2010. *Sovereignty at the Edge: Macau and the Question of Chineseness*. Harvard University Asia Centre.
- Translated by researcher from transcript of *Olá Písidente* (1993).
- Larrea, 2008.