LE'O E PEAU: Towards Cultural and Cognitive Democracy in Development in Pacific Islands Communities

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ABSTRACT

During the past decade, much have been said about, and implemented in the name of, good governance, democracy and human rights in Pacific Islands Nations (PINs). External financial agencies are keen to provide assistance to PINs, and higher educational institutions and consulting agencies are keen to assist donors and island governments implement projects aimed at ‘reforms’ and ‘re-structuring’, fashionable activities in many parts of the Pacific region today. However, differences between the assumptions, value underpinnings and knowledge processes of the formal sector and those of most indigenous island populations have rarely been addressed, often leading to failure and frustrations on the part of helping agencies on one hand, and negative impact on Pacific peoples’ cultural identities and heritages on the other.

The paper will discuss the challenges that cultural and cognitive democracy poses for donor agencies as well as the Academy and makes a case for the acknowledgement and valuing of indigenous perspectives and knowledge in the discourse about islands in general and those in the South Pacific in particular. A case is made for a serious consideration of (Pacific) island people’s knowledge systems and their views of globalised concepts such as development education and environment as a necessary step towards achieving cultural and cognitive democracy in the development discourse.
Introduction

you say that you think
therefore you are
but thinking belongs
in the depths of the earth
we simply borrow
what we need to know

Fatatulou atu ki he ngaahi ha’a mei he tafa’aki kehekehe ‘o mamani kae ‘ata ke fakahoko e fatongia lea ko ‘eni. I greet you in my first language in order to emphasise the fact that English is a foreign language to most Pacific Island people who are the focus of this presentation. For thousands of years, Pacific Island communities communicated with one another using their own languages and following the dictates of their own cultures. More recently, however, foreign, initially European and later Asian languages and cultures have influenced their lives, especially the way they think and communicate with one another. Within this transformational process, Pacific peoples’ values and knowledge systems have been marginalized and silenced despite the fact that they have existed for millennia, and guided many communities in their struggle to survive the treacherous journeys that constantly threatened to destroy them and their societies. In this presentation, I argue that the knowledge systems of the indigenous people of the Pacific Islands must be recognized and protected because they are important for Pacific peoples collective survival and continuity.

Definitions

For my purposes, the term ‘indigenous people’ refers to ‘descendants of first people who identify with the land’, irrespective of whether they belong to minority or majority populations. I use the term ‘indigenous knowledge systems’ to refer to specific systems of knowledge and practice, developed and accumulated over generations within a particular cultural group and region, and may be unique to that group and region. (The National Academy of Sciences, 2001). This definition is inclusive of the processes and methods of knowledge creation and transmission, developed over thousands of years by indigenous peoples and emphasises technical insights and wisdom that are the result of careful observation and experimentation with natural as well as social phenomena. I distinguish between IKSs and Western knowledge systems (WKS) which are centred on scientific knowledge and normally generated by universities, governments, research centres and industry. (Kolawole, 2001:13). I prefer to use the label ‘indigenous knowledge’ rather than ‘traditional knowledge’ because the latter term sometimes has negative connotations.
Western and indigenous knowledge systems

WKS and IKS are different on contextual, substantive and methodological grounds. Although both systems involve rigorous observation, experimentation and validation, WKS often claim universality while IKS are specific to the cultures that own them. Moreover, while many Western scientists often perceive indigenous knowledge as a means of resolving development problems, indigenous people themselves see it as part of their overall culture and therefore important for their identities and consequently their survival as people (Dewes, 1993).

Pacific Island people have, until recently, taken their knowledge systems for granted. However, today many realise that much of their knowledge have been lost and more are in danger of disappearing. During the past three decades or so, a few, including myself, have become advocates of the use of Pacific indigenous and local knowledge to improve the outcomes of formal education and have begun the long journey of reclaiming and re-presenting our knowledge systems for the sake of our communities and future generations (Thaman, 1988; 1995; 2003a; Nabobo, 2001; 1993; Smith, 1999).

There are several reasons why we are doing this. Firstly, there are hundreds of vibrant indigenous cultures in the Pacific Island region today, most of which, as I mentioned earlier, have been around for at least 3000 years, some longer. Pacific knowledge systems, in my view, have a right to exist and contribute directly to and influence Pacific Island peoples’ education and development.

Secondly, we believe that Pacific indigenous knowledge is needed to validate and legitimise (modern) educational development activities in our Region, particularly in the eyes indigenous peoples and their communities.

Thirdly, aspects of indigenous knowledge systems must be incorporated into the curricula of Pacific schools and universities in order to help make formal education more relevant and meaningful for Pacific Island learners, many of whom find formal education irrelevant and meaningless (Taufe’ulungaki, 2002).

Fourthly, while in developed countries, the formal education curriculum is usually regarded as a selection of the best of their cultures, (Lawton, 1974), in most Pacific Island schools and institutions of higher learning, students are not required to learn about the best of their cultures; in fact many do not see the value of doing so.

Fifthly, valuing indigenous ways of knowing in Pacific Island communities, is bound to lead to mutually beneficial collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous groups might help improve their treatment of one another. This is particularly important in light of the UNESCO Commission on Education for the 21st century recommendations concerning the four pillars of learning, namely: learning to know; learning to do; learning to live together; and learning to be (Delores, 1996).

Sixthly, we believe that formal education institutions in Pacific Island Countries need to recognise the ownership and control of indigenous knowledge by indigenous peoples themselves and not necessarily by the Academy, or researchers or academics. This was in fact a major resolution of the 1992 Rarotonga Declaration, following a
UNESCO sub-regional seminar on Culture and Education in the Pacific (Teasdale and Teasdale, 1992).

Finally, many of us believe that our own Knowledge Systems are important in themselves and we need not apologise for recognising and emphasising them, in our work.

**Interest in indigenous knowledge**

Generally speaking, interest in indigenous knowledge systems especially by universities, is relatively recent. The early focus of most writers on IK was aimed at agricultural and rural development (Brokensha, Warren and Werner, 1980). Later IK came to be highlighted in two main areas, namely in health care, where diseases which orthodox medicine has been unable to cure, are treated with ‘ethno-medicine’; and in housing, where local materials were used in building heat resistant and durable homes in the tropics, helping conserve foreign currency and strengthening local industries.

Research on the use of IK have found that people normally pass through different stages namely: awareness, perception, motivation, evidence and utilisation. Others, as a result of their realisation of the importance of IK for modern development, have strongly recommended that IK be documented and preserved both in its place of origin as well as globally. However, others warn that such documentation could benefit more powerful centres of knowledge creation and preservation and would defeat the purpose of using IK to help the poor, the oppressed and the disadvantaged (Agrawal 1995).

In the area of education, indigenous knowledge became important in relation to concerns about the underachievement of indigenous students. Studies of IK in places such as Africa, Canada, Australia, New Zealand provided indigenous scholars with alternative conceptual frameworks with which to examine their new and acquired worldview, often framed and fixed by the colonial discourse of Cartesian and Newtonian dualism (Ntuli, 2002). In the Pacific Islands IK is seen as a new paradigm that is more congruent with indigenous students’ way of thinking because it emphasises complimentarity and interconnectedness rather than duality (Thaman, 1992).

Disconnectedness and duality are inherited features of Pacific education systems. They are often inadequate or inappropriate for dealing with the nature and profile of most Pacific indigenous communities and people mainly because the content as well as the processes of these systems tend to emphasise the social and cultural rhythms of settler and/or migrant communities, complete with conceptual structures and categories of thought. As many know, Pacific island education is extractive and students acquire knowledge, skills and values that do not allow them to easily fit back into their island communities, forcing them to seek work in places that are often situated in urban areas or overseas. Moreover, this situation has been accentuated with a dearth of Pacific Island university graduates and academics, who are willing to
seriously question their own fields of work or study in order to see how they could better provide better services for indigenous communities and the students they send to school. The result is often professional and vocational inefficiency, misuse and abuse of scarce resources. Indigenous educators are only now beginning to interrogate existing educational structures and are seeing how these have marginalised indigenous knowledge systems together with the people and communities who produced that knowledge (Thaman, 1995; Sanga, 2000).

This marginalisation is similar to that which is evident globally in the area of intellectual property rights. Here debates threaten to worsen the piracy of IK as well as the biological resources of indigenous people. Bio-piracy of IK is seen as a double theft in that it steals creativity and innovation and at the same time robs the owners of economic options in their everyday survival. Recently introduced intellectual property rights systems will undoubtedly result in privatising both physical and intellectual resources and the development of monopolising new technologies based on these (as in the development of Noni and Kava products for example). Bio-piracy, one writer suggests, is the result of a Western style intellectual property rights rather than the absence of such systems in poor countries that are bio-rich (Mshana, 2002).

When I first joined the University of the South Pacific (USP) some thirty years ago, I found the dominance of Western scientific traditions in teaching and research prevented the possibility of the development of indigenous, context-specific knowledge, emphasized by my culture. By the mid 1980s most of the member countries of USP had become independent. However, I found that the decolonisation process especially in the area of education consistently left unchallenged the models and content of curricula as well as the structures of formal educational institutions in Pacific Island Nation. References to IK were non-existent and limited to discussions about making modern development efficient and productive as mentioned earlier. This was unfortunate because IK was not only linked to better and more efficient development but also to the very identities and futures of Pacific Island people themselves (see also Crossman and Devisch, 2002).

In Australia and New Zealand for example, debates on IK had focused on the need for developing an indigenous-directed partnership approach to ongoing negotiations about recognising IK, the ownership of such knowledge, and developing protocols from an indigenous viewpoint. Indigenous people in these countries argue that IK is often categorised and determined through the perspectives of non-indigenous people who rationalise colonialism and more recently, globalisation. Today, an increasing number of indigenous scholars in both countries as well as in the Pacific Island Region, are more critically examining modern development paradigms. Previously the ‘objects’ of colonial analysis, they are now the ‘subjects’ who are ‘speaking back’ to the different layers of European constructions and definitions of IK (Pickett and Fatnowna, 2002).
Pacific interest in indigenous knowledge

My interest in IKS dates back to the early 1980s, when I decided to examine Tongan notions of learning, knowledge and wisdom and how these might be reflected in Tongan teachers’ perceptions of their role. Since then, a small but growing group of Pacific Island educators have researched and written about their own cultural values and knowledge systems, and emphasizing the need for development in general and educational development in particular, to center Pacific people and their cultures in discourses about and activities associated with Pacific Island development. Much of my work over the past ten years especially in relation to the UNESCO Chair, have focused on these concerns (see <http://www.usp.ac.fj/unesco_chair/>).

Three years ago, a group of Pacific islanders formed the Re-thinking Pacific Education Initiative, after an education Colloquium that was hosted jointly by our Institute of Education and Victoria University in Wellington, N.Z. on the theme “Re-thinking Pacific Education”. The Colloquium concluded that the two main reasons why, despite heavy investment in education, Pacific Island education systems were not delivering were: i) lack of ownership by Pacific people of formal education processes; and, ii) lack of a clearly articulated vision of the role of formal education in Pacific Island development. The main challenge was seen as the need to reconceptualise education in a way that will allow Pacific people to reclaim the ownership of the education process and allow them to articulate a Pacific vision for education.

This challenge is difficult to address because of the apparent vacuum that exist in the theorisation of Pacific IKS as well as Pacific perspectives on knowledge production, transfer and dissemination, a vacuum that exists in other areas such as politics, governance, economics, law, land, environment, and health. This is leading, in my view, to ever widening gaps between formal education institutions and the majority of Pacific Island people and communities everywhere. Furthermore, it is unhelpful when we are told that development rules and regulations are ‘universal’ and ‘legal’ and indigenous peoples’ ideas and norms are ‘cultural and illegal’.

I believe that it is time to re-think Pacific Island development and re-centre it on Pacific people, their values and knowledge systems. Many are familiar with examples of failed development initiatives, which were based on development models that were premised by Western, scientific, reductionist ideologies. These failed attempts in our Region have pushed many countries back to the end of the development queue, at the head of which is the Western, capitalist model of life (Esteva, 1992). Today the promise continues - that those who can imitate this model by undergoing reforms and restructuring will find a place at the banquet table and will be duly rewarded (Hoppers, 2002:viii).

For me, however, choosing to center my work of teaching and research on indigenous and local knowledge systems has had both positive and negative consequences. A positive outcome of course was the award of a UNESCO’s Chair in teacher education and culture in 1997, a move that caused some people in the Region to realise that Pacific cultures were important considerations at least in education. Improved students’ learning outcomes, better contextualised teaching and learning
and better motivation for indigenous students to theorise and write about their own ideas and practices have also been positive outcomes and are very encouraging. However, there continues to be real challenges as well, involving ideological, philosophical (methodological), and application issues and questions.

Studying IKS requires people to question and interrogate the ideology of rationality, the ideological basis for liberal and scientific knowledge, introduced and propagated by European colonisation and missionisation of various Pacific societies. This ideology continues to be perpetuated in and by our formal educational systems and structures. However, Pacific Island scholars need to acknowledge IKS in their thinking as well as in their practices, in order that they may re-center policies and practices on Pacific people, and re-claim and re-emphasise the vital link between Pacific cultures and their development, especially in education. Acknowledging IKS also means understanding the epistemological silencing of and continued indifference to indigenous cultures by many non-indigenous as well as indigenous people alike, and the on-going efforts by some to discourage exchange of ideas and methods about the role of IKS in addressing educational issues and problems.

The indifference of many Pacific scholars towards Pacific cultures and their IKSs, has resulted in a certain degree of cultural blindness that is evident in the practices of most of our formal national as well as regional institutions, particularly those determined to continue with the logic of Western cultures and their ideologies and epistemologies. Such arrogance is reflected in the view held by many that indigenous cultures are barriers to modern thinking and development, especially economic development. As such, IKS are marginalised and relegated to an inferior position, pushed to a so-called ‘informal sector’, for the interest of mostly not-so-serious scholars, NGOs, some students and women. This situation is bound to have serious consequences for Pacific peoples’ identity formation and human development, especially among those who live in towns and cities both in the Region and beyond.

Encouraging signs

There are, however, some encouraging signs from Western scientists and scholars to whom so many of us take our cues. Western scientists now talk about TEK (“Traditional Ecological Knowledge”) a system of knowledge that builds on generations of people living in close relationship with nature. In the area of climate change, for example, there is now recognition that “indigenous climate change assessments and observations” built on countless generations of knowledge, since time immemorial. Scientists also agree that TEK carries within itself systems of classifications and empirical observations about the local environment and a system of self - management that governs sustainable resource use. They also agree that the responsibility for and the carriers of TEK lie with the elders of indigenous communities and because TEK accumulates and adapts knowledge in a holistic manner scientists are now urging organisations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to validate TEK as a vehicle in the assessment, research and other scientific work on Climate Change. They also encourage similar recognition
worldwide in all environmental and resource-management work.” (Snowchange, 2002).

Some scientists have gone as far as arguing that IKS should be considered a form of science because indigenous medicines, farming practices, hunting techniques and use of fire require an intimate knowledge of natural ecology and biology. And to possess these forms of understanding involves expertise associated with observation, classification and comparison – essential features of sound scientific methodology (Higgins, 2000). This general acknowledgement of IK has largely been the result of an increasing flow of information from the South about the role of IK in agriculture, human and animal health care, the use and management of natural resources, rural development, education, and poverty alleviation.

**Iks in higher education**

In higher education, there are also some encouraging signs. Despite the fact that Western processes of knowledge analysis and transmission have continued to remain unchallenged, there is now a movement to reaffirm the significance of local knowledge and wisdom because of the need to rediscover these as a response to students’ under-achievement and the impact of globalisation. World attention on IK has been evident in international conferences, many sponsored by UNESCO, such as the 2000 PROAP/ACEID conference in Bangkok, which examined the interface between indigenous and global knowledge. Emphasised in these fora was the need to preserve multiple wisdoms in the Asia Pacific region, and mainstreaming IK in the work of international organisations such as UNESCO and the World Bank (World Bank, 1998).

The need to revalidate IKS is being approached in the Asia/Pacific region in particular, from an educational perspective. For example, Thailand, Vietnam, India and Indonesia are coming up with innovative new curricula and new approaches to the transfer of knowledge. The aim is to link local knowledge to global knowledge and the full recognition of IK. The incorporation of IK into higher education curricula is one way of recognising the importance of IK especially for indigenous students. But there remains a need to develop new methods (participatory, interdisciplinary research) to elicit and generate local knowledge, as well as innovative teaching methods that involve alternative forms of knowledge transfer, and to produce teaching materials that are adapted to local situations.

In our region, there is a growing demand for education systems that are tailored to local needs and with their own identities. The EU/NZ funded PRIDE Project is largely a response to this need. Furthermore, a sub-committee of our University Council in a recent a review of USP has stressed the need for USP to be more responsive to the needs and aspirations of Pacific communities. Clearly the pressure is growing for the right of Pacific communities to have more say in determining their future development.

Higher education has come to be viewed by many people as the means whereby the culturally diverse communities of Pacific Island communities can achieve the prizes offered in society. The establishment of institutions such as USP and UPNG
was seen as necessary for and compatible with modern global consumer economies. They together with staff and students within them have, over the years, continued to follow models and pathways set in other, mainly metropolitan universities. However, as mentioned earlier, some Pacific Island educators have joined the long process of re-claiming and re-thinking Pacific education in a serious attempt to weave something better and more meaningful for themselves as well as their students (see for example, Thaman, 1996; 1998; 2000; 2003; 2003a 2003b). It is interesting that many of those who are involved in this movement are mainly women:

Yesterday
I watched
your hands
weave a dream
across my memory
bringing order and texture
to that pile of voivoi
still there
filling the fale
that once was home

Re-thinking pacific education

The Rethinking of Pacific Education Initiative (RPEI) continue to be concerned with ensuring that Pacific values and knowledge systems underpin modern educational development and help to decolonise Pacific education as well as Pacific minds. This does not mean that colonial attitudes will die as a result; far from it. But it means that they are no longer tolerated because they undermine our confidence in our ability to do our own thing, to write or sing our own stories and to re-imagine themselves.

For me personally, teaching at the USP has been both an education as well as an art-form. In theorizing my own education I had drawn inspiration from both Western and Pacific indigenous epistemologies. My concept of education, known as *Kakala*, involves three major processes, namely *toli*, *tui* and *luva*. *Toli* is the gathering of the material need for making a *kakala* such as different types of flowers, leaves etc. This process requires knowledge of and experience in picking/gathering the appropriate materials at the right time and the right place; storing them in a cool and safe place in order to ensure freshness until they are ready to be made into a *kakala*. *Tui* refers to the actual making of a *kakala* requires special knowledge and skills of different types of *kakala* depending on the occasion and/or who is to wear the *kakala*. *Luva*, the giving away or presentation of a *kakala* to someone else symbolizes the deep values of *ofa* (compassion) and *faka’apa’apa* (respect) in Tongan culture in particular and in Polynesian traditions in general. There is a complex etiquette surrounding different *kakala* with some more significant than others, based on their histories and mythologies. However, different types of *kakala* are usually needed to make a ‘complete’ a beautiful garland (Thaman, 1992b)

*Kakala* is a useful, culturally meaningful indigenous philosophy and framework for Pacific education and development. It ensures cultural inclusivity and provides for
ownership of the development process. In the past ten years, I have been able to share *kakala* with colleagues in many parts of the Pacific region and elsewhere, and in sharing, we remind one another that we live in the Pacific and are of the Pacific. Through my UNESCO Chair work, I have also been able to extend this sharing to a wider Asia Pacific region where similar concepts exist in many Asian cultures.

**Conclusion**

As with most indigenous ideas, *Kakala* is an integrated and holistic philosophy and framework that combines professional and creative interests. *Kakala* is not only about knowledge and wisdom, but also about art and spirituality, aspects of life that are often missing from a lot of what we do in the Pacific Islands in the name of ‘education’ and ‘development’. But as most artists know, art gives people soul whether the ‘words’ are painted, carved, sung, spoken, written, filmed or performed. Some words need a brush; others a pen and still others movement, gesture and intonation. Art connects island people to the vast Pacific Ocean and to each other. However, it is their cultures that sustain and help define them and so they need to continue to look towards their cultures while they try and weave useful and fragrant *kakala* for their journey to the future.

*Come!*
*Take this kakala*
*Sacred symbol of our oneness*
*Tie it gently around you*
*Where it will remain fresh*
*In the nourishing flow*
*Only*
*the sky knows*

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