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Notes From The Field

Learning to Think in the Language of Strangers: Indigenous Education in a Colonized and Globalized Pacific

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Abstract

This notes from the field article is about my personal, educational, and professional journeys as an Indigenous woman living and working in the small island states of Oceania. My own story describes the struggles that continue today among many young Indigenous students, be they in school or in higher education institutions with structures and processes that do not take their cultural backgrounds or identities into consideration. The results are often damaging both to the students, as well as to the institutions themselves. However, in this work, I advocate for the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges in education, as I have for decades, and I interweave my sentiments with poetry that reflects my feelings and memories.

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My ancestral culture¹ is Tongan, and I continue to identify with Tongan culture even though I do not currently live in Tonga. Although Tonga was never directly colonized by Europeans, it has a longer history of schooling (early 19th century) compared to many other small Pacific Island Countries (PICs). This longer exposure to Western knowledge and value systems has had positive and negative effects, depending on one's vantage point. Tonga today is a country full of contradictions. It has more PhDs per head of population compared to many other countries, a fairly stable political structure (although this is now being questioned by a few), and increasing social and economic problems, manifested through drug-related offences, violence towards women and children, unemployment, and landlessness, to name a few. In this notes from the field article, I take the opportunity to share my personal and professional educational journeys. My experiences have provided the foundation and rationale for what I do today and what I have done as a teacher, writer, and researcher for more than four decades in the hope that learning and research might be more meaningful for my students, as well as empower them to acknowledge and value their cultural heritages, especially their knowledge and value systems, and most importantly, their languages. Throughout this article, I interweave my own poetry, which conveys my sentiments about the issues I describe while demonstrating my life as a scholar and artist.

Indigenous Educational Reflections

I received the education of a Tongan woman, not that of an American or Australian. My early education, almost exclusively through the medium of the Tongan language, was that of a member of a large extended family in a small Pacific Island kingdom. I later entered the

¹ In the context of this article, *culture* is defined as the way of life of a group of people, which includes their knowledge and value systems expressed in a shared language. The term *Indigenous people* refers to the people of the land who may constitute a minority population in their own countries (the UN definition) or majority population (my definition).

foreign cultures of New Zealand and the United States through their educational institutions and later through marriage. However, these new cultural systems and the insights they provided were very different from those of my own. I am therefore a product of what Horton (1976) calls a “closed and open predicament” because I operate sometimes in one system, and sometimes in the other. The results are often painful.

Your way
Objective
Analytic
Always doubting
The truth
Until proof comes
Slowly
Quietly
And it hurts

My way
Subjective
Gut-feeling like
Always sure
Of the truth
The proof
Is there
Waiting
And it hurts

(Thaman, 1987, p. 40)

A Report on Education for the 21st century, entitled *Learning: The Treasure Within*, commissioned by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and authored by the Frenchman Jacques Delors, identified four pillars of learning deemed necessary for living successfully in this century—learning to know; learning to do; learning to live together; and learning to be. I had the privilege of speaking on the last pillar at a UNESCO conference in Melbourne, Australia in 1998, where we concluded that in order for people to live successfully in this century, we would need to exercise independence and judgement combined with a stronger sense of personal responsibility for the attainment of common goals. Furthermore, we were reminded of the tensions that we need to overcome in relation to all four pillars, including

learning to be. Two tensions are of particular interest to this paper: the tension between the group and the individual, and the tension between traditions and modernity.

The four pillars of learning, including these tensions mentioned, reflect the compartmentalization of knowledge and understanding that characterize many Western European cultures and knowledge systems, making it difficult for those of us who identify with non-Western Indigenous cultures to fully comprehend, since our knowledge and value systems are more holistic, interconnected, experiential, and context-specific. The Delors Report, like most things that emanate from the Anglo-American world, makes certain assumptions about people and their cultures that are often problematic or simply wrong in the contexts of the Indigenous people of Oceania, most of whom have suffered immeasurable destruction and genocide and are now minorities in their own lands.

Elsewhere in Oceania, Indigenous people although majority populations in their various island nations are bounded by laws, regulations, policies, and practices developed for other people in other places but deemed appropriate for all societies and cultures. Most of these policies and plans including those related to education, have not taken into consideration Indigenous peoples' worldviews, knowledge and value systems, including their languages. As many of those who continue to live under the impacts of colonial rule, the prioritizing of the colonial language above those of Indigenous people is akin to being forced to speak the language of uninvited strangers. Goldsmith probably put it more directly, "There is no better way to destroy a people than to undermine their education system" (Goldsmith, 2009, p. 3). Consequently, most Indigenous peoples in Oceania live and work in societies that have been greatly influenced by different destructive forces, not least of which are those tied to colonialism and now globalization. These have brought about changes manifested in most aspects of their lives, particularly in relation to their education, religious beliefs, values, political orientations, sexual orientations, views of development, and indeed their views of themselves—meaning, who or what they are, or think they ought to be.

The high school that I attended in my own home country did not allow students to speak in their mother language, and all the teachers were foreigners. We were told that the reason for this was because the

school needed to prepare students for university study overseas. I was fortunate to be given a scholarship to continue my studies in New Zealand, where I was further alienated from the traditional education I received at home. Before schools were introduced to Pacific Island communities in the early part of the 19th century, (Indigenous) education was the joint responsibility of extended family members and the community. Through our education, we learn about our origins, history, our customs, traditions and languages, all of which were underpinned by shared values derived from our cultures. In Tonga, for example, these values included 'ofa, (compassion), faka'apa'apa, (respect), relationships (vaa), humility (loto to), mamahi' me'a, (loyalty), and spirituality (fakalaumalie),

The content of our Indigenous education was sourced from life itself and from a vibrant and dynamic epistemology that had existed for thousands of years. The learning process was mainly through observation, imitation, and participation in practical activities. Elders who had accumulated knowledge, skills, and values of our cultures were the main teachers using a shared language and in real life situations. Our teachers were expected to model the desired behavior or activity that was being taught and successful learning was judged through learners' appropriate behavior and performances. *One can say that Indigenous education occurred in an eco-cultural environment where learning was facilitated by those who themselves had already learned to know, to do, to live together and to be.*

My own cultural identity has evolved over the years as a result of growing up in Tonga, as well as living in other countries such as New Zealand, the U.S., and now Fiji. However, like many Indigenous persons, my ancestral culture continues to influence my worldview and my understanding of who I am together with what with my understanding of learning to know, to do, to live with others, and to be.

Story within a story

My personal identity journey has involved local, regional, and global maps. This journey is about identities imposed by colonialism and social science, internal and external negotiations, personal and collective histories, memories of different times and places, and of creating new

spaces and places as a response to changing times and issues in selected contexts. These have helped me to provide an experience-based backdrop to some of the conceptual maps that I frequently share with my students and colleagues, and that I hope may assist other Indigenous scholars and researchers in our various journeys towards seeking solutions to problems that we face in our modernized, and increasingly culturally neutralized situations.

For example, my story is a story within a story, like a basket within a basket: A story within the bigger basket that is Oceania in general, and Tongan culture in particular. A story that acknowledges the descent to earth of the Tongan diety, Tangaloa Atulolongongo, thousands of years ago, in the form of a kiu (plover), who, after finding a worm hiding inside the root of a vine on the island of 'Ata, in the Tongan group, pecked it into three pieces and thus created the first humans who he named, ko hai, ko au, ko momo. Later, Maui brought them wives from Pulumotu (the spirit world), and together they created the ancestors of the Tongan people.

Less than two hundred years ago, foreign missionaries arrived and established schools in various Pacific island communities. When they arrived, no one asked how Pacific people conceptualised their worlds, especially their notions of wisdom, learning, teaching, or knowledge or what values they emphasised. These foreigners introduced schools complete with European conceptual frameworks, sets of practices and values that were supposed to offer Indigenous people opportunities for enlightenment, civilisation, and later cash employment. The main aim of schools and the newly established religious bodies that introduced them was conversion of learners to a new religion and a new, supposedly better way of life, transforming Pacific peoples, their cultures and communities. The content of schooling was in the form of subjects, sourced from books, which contained what was considered worthwhile based on different (European) epistemologies and worldviews. Christian values provided the rationale for teaching and learning, and the teachers were foreign missionaries who had learned and transcribed the languages of the people. Learning was mainly through rote, as much of it did not relate to the real life experiences of learners' and was assessed through mainly written tests. Those who failed dropped out of school and did not proceed to the next level of learning. The assumption then, as it is now, was/is that whatever was deemed worthwhile to learn and to teach in Europe (or

more recently in the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand) was important for the livelihoods of Pacific people as well.

However, during the past three decades or so, and encouraged by the UN World Decade for Cultural Development (1987-1997), and more recently, the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), an increasing number of Pacific Indigenous scholars and researchers have been asking questions of their education systems, and some are trying to put their cultures back into the formal education process as a way of addressing the underperformance of Indigenous students together with the quality of school education in most parts of our region (Taufe'ulungaki, Pene & Benson, 2002;). The implications of this trend for all of us are quite serious because in some places, much of our cultural knowledge and values are no longer being transmitted to our young people; this is especially so in urbanized and/or foreign environments.

In most Pacific island contexts, the extended family, the church and the school remain important sites of identity formation for most Pacific Island people. These continue to influence the way they see the world as well as the way they see ourselves. For me, learning the values of my culture was important because they were crucial for maintaining peace and harmony among extended family members as well as the wider community. Furthermore, many of these core values are also emphasized in church, as well as the schools that religious bodies operate today and described by Tamihere (2014) in her doctoral study learning from the Kaliloa, which continue to be a way of re-claiming and ensuring the type of values education necessary for community cohesiveness and peace, in many troubled island contexts of Oceania today.

Intersecting Journeys: Beyond Tonga and Higher Education

When I left Tonga for New Zealand in the early 1960s, I knew who I was in relation to other people in my family, community and country. However, the all-girls' high school that I attended was predominantly pakeha (white). Staff and students did not know and did not care about where I came from or who I was. For some, I was the new girl who lived in the hostel where those boys who played rugby for Auckland Boys Grammar also lived. Many of my classmates had never met anyone from

Tonga, and most did not know the difference between Tonga and Rarotonga (in the Cook Islands). As one of only three Tongan girls in the whole school, I became quite self-conscious about the fact that I was different, that I did not speak their language or understand their culture

Epsom Girls Grammar gave me an opportunity to develop a personal identity. I remember an English assignment on the topic: ‘Who am I?’ Our English teacher advised us to ‘write about the person we wanted to be.’ When I got my marked assignment I was shocked at my grade, a C+. I had written about Tonga, where I grew up, my kainga (extended family) and how I fit into the wider kinship-based scheme of things. I said that I was in New Zealand on a government scholarship and wanted to do well at school so I could return home and be a useful person to my family and eventually my country as a high school teacher. That was who I wanted to be. At the end of my essay, my teacher wrote: “Konai, this is interesting but you should write down what YOU want to be rather than what the government or your parents want you to be. This is your chance to be whatever you want to be. It’s your chance to dream and decide who you want to become.” I did not understand what she meant but did not have the courage to ask her.

My best friend got an A+ on the same assignment. Some of the girls talked about her project—about how brave, honest, and creative she was. I felt confused, stupid, weak, and dishonest for writing about such boring, unoriginal stuff, about my desire to do well in school so that I could go home and be ‘aonga’ (useful) to my family and country. I also felt angry with the authorities in Tonga, for sending me to this country where I felt alone and alienated, with no one to advise me about how I should study or just how to be. I buried myself in my studies, determined to do well so I could go home as soon as possible. I also developed a way of talking to myself through writing down the things that bothered or saddened me. This seemed to work well especially in an environment such as the Tongan hostel (Atalanga) where, to have problems was seen as a sign of weakness and ignorance.

what was it you thought
when the moon swam out
of the sea
i thought i caught a glimpse of you

when was the first time
birds learned to fly
it was when i learned
to write

(Thaman, 1981:4, p. 4)

At university I felt lost, unable to relate to my lecturers, most of whom came to lecture and then disappeared, leaving the teaching to tutors and/or post-graduate students. I spent a lot of time in the university library, reading most of the recommended texts - something that was regarded negatively by some of my Tongan peers who thought that I was showing off and wanting to get ahead too much. At university. I felt conscious about being Tongan and after failing one subject in my first year, it was obvious to me that in order to succeed at university I needed to hang my cultural identity on the trees at Albert Park and forget who I was for a while. As for my aspirations of becoming a creative artist, the only art I learned at university was the art of forgetting.

a weekend in auckland
is good
for discovering again
old meeting places
in the park
hoping they have stories
to tell about the adventures
of a once youthful time

down under the magnolia trees
the bench which took the weight
of our first kiss
is still there
the fountain continues to beat
like an artificial heart
and the flowers continue to die
with each passing day

and there hovering high above
is the tower clock
now dwarfed by the reality
of its own time

its striking shadow a reminder
that the heart's best defence
at this time
is forgetting
(Thaman, 1999, p. 36)

At Teachers' College, I learned to be a teacher of pakeha school children. I was told to use positive reinforcement to develop their self-esteem, to bring out the individuality of the child, and help develop their potential. I felt unable to do all of these things, and for the first time, I realised why I was having so many problems learning both at school and at university. My high school teachers/lecturers were making wrong assumptions about the beliefs and background of many of their students and had not contextualised their teaching in order to make learning more meaningful for them. This awareness of my role as a teacher was to become the driving force for my creative writing that began seriously when I returned to Tonga and where I was told by school principal to teach English to Form 5 (Year 11) repeaters. I wanted to write about things that the students could understand and relate to before teaching them about English literature and its contexts. I later realised that the English did not invent poetry – that poetry was around us, and in us, and students needed to understand that. Later during my feminist days, I also wanted to show my students that one did not have to be male, white and dead, in order to be a (successful) poet.

America taught me to tolerate difference. As a graduate student, I enjoyed going to class and learning about learning. Working at the Geography Remote Sensing Lab (now called GIS), I learned to appreciate the role of new technologies especially in improving our knowledge about our environments. However, I found life to be impersonal in America, where many people did not seem to worry about their cultural identities; in fact, some of my friends prided themselves in telling me they did not have any cultural identities. "We are all Americans here," they said, "and you will be too eventually." I was impressed with their inclusiveness although I did not really understand what being American meant, because it was difficult for me to feel American.

Yet America impressed my uncle Malakai. He was an over-stayer who became an American citizen through marriage. He told me that he left Tonga because he felt suffocated by 'the culture;' that the nobles and

the church were too demanding and the government did not do enough for the people. My uncle loved being in America. He had a nice apartment, owned a big car and managed a petrol/gas station. His five children were all doing well in school, and two were playing football for their high schools. He was making more money a month than his brother was making in a year, teaching in a Methodist school back home. "I'm not going back there any time soon," he told me. "But when I die, I want to be buried there, next to my parents." "Why?" I asked. "You seem to like it here so much." "Yeah!" he said. "I like it here because the money is good. But people here care about you if you have money. Back home, people care about you because you are related to them; you are their blood." I thought about what he said and came to better understand what a well-known Tongan chief is reported to have said about how money made the palangi (foreigner) selfish. "So you're still a Tongan at heart then?" I asked. "Yeah," he said, "I'm an American citizen and there is my American passport. But here (he points to his heart), I am Tongan until 'sand cover my eyes.'" Tears streamed down his face, and for the first time, I understood what being Tongan was all about.

Indigenous Arts

Working at the regional University of the South Pacific (USP), that is owned by 12 small PICs, one of my self-assigned roles is to convince my students of the importance of understanding one's own culture in the struggle to understand the cultures of others. As a lecturer, I particularly identify with those who come from backgrounds that are very different from the culture of the university, those who find it difficult to communicate in English or who have trouble adapting to new ways of behaving, including those that emphasize independence and competitiveness, or being in your face with opinions of themselves or others, or of thinking that silence is a sign of ignorance rather than respect. For those students who come from more rural and traditional non-European/Western backgrounds with strong cultural identities, university can be a site of struggle and for learning, what Alex Dixon once called, *systematized selfishness*.

I am still working at USP, where I began my university teaching career. After 40 years with the School of Education, I am now at the USP

Oceania Centre for Arts, Culture and Pacific Studies. I work with staff and students who are dancers, singers, and fine artists as well as academics—most of whom regularly reaffirm their cultural identities, share their cultural resources with one another and with others in innovative ways. I have benefitted from sharing, learning, and valuing my students' cultural identities and knowledges. Through my teaching, research and creative writing, I share my stories with them as I do now, evidence of what the Rotuman artist and film maker Hereniko once wrote: "The Arts is important for Pacific peoples because they create a sense of identity" (1983, p. 7).

However, unlike the traditional artist of pre-contact times whose role was mainly ritualistic, and whose relationship to his society was essentially harmonious, modern artists are often in conflict with their societies. As modern people, we share common experiences arising out of our geography, colonial history, group orientation, religiousness, and the experience of formal education. Some of us are better known outside of our own countries mainly because we employ a foreign medium to express ourselves. For most of us, the conforming influence of modernity is already becoming apparent as many of us try to measure ourselves and our work against mainstream standards rather than the standards of our own cultures. But for me, it is difficult to be modern without giving in to mass culture and sameness, a culture that threatens to homogenize us in the name of globalization and a world economy that demands that the majority of the world's people need to suffer because the lifestyle of a few is not negotiable.

today your words are empty
sucking dry the brown dust
left by earth and sky
patches politely parched
with no water flowing
from the mountain top
scars burn on my soft skin
you've cut a piece of me away
leaving my bandaged heart
to endure the pain
of your tying me
to yourself

(Thaman, 1993, p. 7)

For many Indigenous people, our identities have been impacted by the demands of national and global cultures where people and institutions are supposed to be 'managed', ostensibly so that goals are achieved and people produce the goods and services that society needs. This managerial culture that characterises many higher education institutions in our world, legitimizes the global marketplace and financial speculation and glorifies new communication technologies. Many of our universities together with those who work in them, are struggling to survive in a corporatist, managerial and hooked-on-technology environment. Today, globalisation and conformity are fashionable whether one is working in a university, in a government department, or private corporation. In my struggle to make sense of what is happening around me, I find comfort in my identity as a student of culture and an expressive artist. I am grateful for learning about different cultures and different art forms, and I am also aware that canons of taste arise out of cultural conditioning, and if I say that I understand and feel the same about other people's cultures as they do, I would be deluding myself, just as I do not expect foreigners to see and feel the same about my culture.

Like many of my students, I had to study English literature for important exams. However, as a Tongan, I know that my artistic roots lie in an oral tradition where the storyteller creates an audience in a way a writer can only imagine. My Western education had taught me that a poem was a thing that was seen as separate from its creator. In my writing therefore, I try to create a synthesis of Tongan and English literature in order to create my own writing space. So for me a poem has to **sound** good, because it is in the joining together of the silences of words that a poem comes alive, as this poem about women and literacy tries to depict.

I have been out
On the reef
Looking for cowrie shells
But every rock has been turned
By those who went before me
I'm tired and disappointed
But I will go on searching

In case I find one looking
For a place to hide
(Thaman, 1981, p. 17)

My creative works inform my teaching and research, and vice versa.

Co-producing Indigenous knowledges

In my professional life, I continue to advocate for the use of Indigenous pedagogies as well as developing Pacific research frameworks, including the Kakala Research Framework, for the use of my research students. The Kakala Research Framework utilises the processes involved in making a garland (kakala) in my culture. Three main steps are needed, *toli* (gathering of the materials), *tui* (actual making of the garland) and *luva* (gifting of the garland to someone else depicting the values of love and respect). Two more steps were added after colleagues critiqued the framework: a beginning stage or *teu* (preparation) and an end stage, *malie/mafana* (monitoring and evaluation). The Kakala Research Framework has been successfully used by several Pacific and non-Pacific scholars and researchers, especially in the last decade or so (Johanssen Fua, 2009; Thaman, 1997; Thaman, 2017). Other frameworks have been developed by scholars from around the Pacific – including the Samoan *Fa’afaletui*, the Cook Islands *Tivaevae*, The Fijian *Vanua*, The Samoan *Fale Fono*, the Tongan *Manulua* and *Kaliloa*, and *Iluvatu*, to name a few. These are appropriate frames for researching Pacific issues and problems especially if they are used by people who understand their origins, as well as their appropriate applications and implications (for more information about the Kakala and other research frameworks see Peters, 2016).

Co-producing Indigenous knowledges and creating synergies between traditional and scientific knowledge is an important task of Indigenous scholars and teachers. The process of finding synthesis between Indigenous and Western knowledge and values has become an important approach for many of us in Oceania during the last four decades. I remember in my anthropology classes at the University of Auckland, reading the famous anthropologist Malinowski (1918) and how he described the Trobriand Islanders’ environmental knowledge as primitive and inferior. Later another anthropologist described Indigenous knowledges as magical and pre-logical rather than based on systematic,

empirically based observation (Levy-Bruhl, 1985). Both of these statements reflected part of the many 19th and 20th century paradigms that theorized and supported the supposed intellectual superiority of Europeans over all other human societies. However, in the latter part of the 20th century this view of Indigenous knowledges changed when ethno-biological studies ‘discovered’ the encyclopedic depths of Indigenous people’s knowledges of their environments, from agriculture, medicine, fisheries, navigation, to climate and weather. For example, community-based studies of agricultural resources in Tonga² and marine resources in Fiji³ have shown the incredible depth of traditional Indigenous knowledges that local rural women and men have for their culturally useful biodiversity and associated in-depth cultural knowledge (Thaman, 1976; Thaman, Fong & Balawa, 2008).

Indigenous knowledges are vital sources of our understanding of current issues in Oceania and the world, such as the movement to implement the 17 Sustainable Development Goals⁴ as a global plan to secure the planet’s future by 2030. But Indigenous knowledge is important in and of itself, especially for Indigenous people, although comparison between Western and Indigenous knowledges sometimes diminishes the importance of Indigenous knowledges when the latter is seen as unique, qualitative, and context specific, while Western knowledge is seen as open, generalizable, and universal. There is also an oft made suggestion that Indigenous knowledge systems are just mental maps of knowledge and beliefs, passed on through generations about the relationships of

² In Tonga, a 1971 in-depth community-based survey, during which over 100 agricultural bush allotment (averaging 7 acres in area) were mapped and all useful plants inventoried and identified, showed that Tongans had 12 staple root crops, 41 non-staple food and beverage crops, 40 fruit trees, 118 multi-purpose trees, and 124 multi-purpose non-tree plants (Thaman, 1976).

³ In Fiji, the results of a twelve-year community-based study of the marine resources of Vanua Navakavu (west of Suva), to assess the impact that the successful establishment and maintenance of a marine protected area have had on the local iqoliqoli (fishing ground), showed that the older men and women had 226 distinct names for 682 different species of finfish (which included 11 sharks, 7 rays and 21 eels), many of which were unknown to the younger generation. The same survey showed that they had names for 175 different gastropod shellfish, 56 bivalves, 175 crustaceans, and 42 echinoderms many of which had returned for the first time since the onset of overfishing some 40 years ago, and were not know to the current generation (Thaman, Fong & Balawa, 2008; Thaman, 2014).

⁴ For more information on the SDGs see: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org>

living things with one another and with their environments. This framing results in documenting knowledge about the natural world (most notably by non-Indigenous peoples) at the expense of other areas of knowledge such as educational ideas, politics, governance, arts and heritage, family and community leadership.

Indigenous and Western knowledges are important in their own right. Our culture connects us to the (Pacific) Ocean and to one another. We share our histories, our knowledges, imagination and our stories as we do in a variety of contexts, and it is our culture(s) that give us our identities. We express these in different ways—in our songs, dances, paintings, weaving, sculptures, stories, sports, and even in our silences. Some stories need a brush; others a pen and still others movement, gesture and intonation. Being a teacher who is also a creative artist has allowed me to share my knowledge and experiences with people outside of my own culture and national boundary, as I do now. As a teacher who is constantly learning, I also recognize the importance of education as the humanizing force and the value that drives the campaign for quality education that allows us to understand one another.

Come
Take this kakala
Symbol of our oneness
Tie it around you
Where it will grow
Nourished by the flow
Only the sky knows.
(Thaman, 1993, p. 23).

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