

BOOK REVIEWS

The Flight of the Amokura

(Oceanic Languages and Formal Education in the South Pacific)

Richard A. Benton

New Zealand Council for Educational Research, Wellington, NZ. 1981. 236 pp.
\$18.50.

For "a large percentage of the peoples of the world, speaking more than one language is a natural way of life with a variety of factors determining which language will be spoken on any particular occasion." (Peter Hornby, p.1). The people of the South and Central Pacific fall into the above category of people, though it is a moot point whether speaking two or more languages is a "natural way of life" in this part of the world. Moreover, in the context of the Pacific, it is often a world language like English or French that is the second language, and they often make strange bedfellows with the first. Indeed, contact with metropolitan languages, in general, and through education in particular, has produced stress upon the indigenous languages and now threatens to hasten cultural disintegration. It is little wonder that leaders and educationists in the Pacific voice their concern over the impact of a foreign language upon their cultural identity, and attempt to seek solutions that will minimise any negative effects that learning second language and learning in that language may have on the indigenous cultures. The considerations do not stop at cultural identities either; they also touch upon the important matter of national identity, particularly as independence has come to many of the countries only very recently.

It is a time in the Pacific for some intense soul-searching, a *quo vadis*, about the position of the indigenous languages vis-a-vis a language like English or French. How does one stop the erosion of competency in the mother tongue? Which language should a child's education begin in? Does one become better at a second language at the expense of the first? How can one strengthen and invigorate an indigneous language so that it can stand beside a metropolitan one and not feel like its country cousin?

It is timely that Richard Benton's book, **The Flight of the Amokura**, should become available to educationalists when there is such an interest in the fate of indigenous languages and their role in education.

The book sets out to look at "the fate of Oceanic languages in the formal educational systems of various Pacific Island nations, states and territories." (Preface). It further sets out to explore "the current status of [Oceanic] languages] in the schools, and wherever possible, the historical and social background to the contemporary state of affairs."

The Flight of the Amokura, therefore, is primarily a descriptive book about the state of indigenous languages spoken by peoples of Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia. It covers islands as far east as Easter Island, as far west as Papua New Guinea, as far north as Hawaii and the Trust Territories of the Pacific Islands, and as far south as New Zealand.

The coverage, unfortunately is not even, as the author points out. In the discussion on languages as much space is devoted to New Zealand as to all the other countries combined. For it is in New Zealand that "the debate over the educational status and value of the indigenous language has been most adequately documented ..."

In spite of this unevenness, there is much valuable information for the less informed readers in the sections dealing with countries other than New Zealand. Moreover, by dealing with the position of the Maori language in New Zealand quite thoroughly, the author is able to highlight some of the problems of bilingual education.

He does, though, sound a note of warning that "eventually each community has to work out its own priorities and decide how best to achieve those goals which it considers most important." (p.6). Bilingual educational policies formulated in other countries, while they are instructive, do not provide a blueprint for Pacific countries to follow.

A section of the book that should be of interest to all those involved in formulating educational policies in the Pacific is Part 5, which deals with the educational potential of Oceanic languages. The author begins this part of the book with a discussion of the 1974 Bilingual Education Conference which was held in Apia. This Conference provided a record of very valuable statements of official thought on the role of indigenous languages in Pacific Island education, but as was inevitable when countries with such diverse language needs got together, the Conference gave no clear endorsement to the concept of bilingual education in the sense of using two languages for teaching a subject matter.

Having dealt with the 1974 Conference, the author then looks at policies and future possibilities of bilingual education and looks at whether bilingualism would work in the Pacific. In the planning of a bilingual educational programme he points out the various factors that would have to be taken into account: linguistic, psychological, sociological, political, economic, religious and cultural, and educational. Taking all these factors into account and after discussing Fishman's 'predictor values' about the success of a bilingual educational programme, the author is cautious about the success of a

bilingual educational programme in the Pacific. Nevertheless, he maintains that "a fuller, more comprehensive bilingual education has much more exciting, and alarming, possibilities." (p.200)

Richard Benton has successfully avoided in **The Flight of the Amokura** a heavy reliance on linguistic and educational jargon. Where it has been unavoidable, it has been defined for the non-specialist reader. The result is a book that is eminently readable.

The presentation of the material allows easy reference. The content is fully and attractively set out, so that one can refer to a country or to a topic very readily.

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References

Peter A. Honby (Ed.), **Bilingualism**, Academic Press, New York, 1977.