

Promoting Pacific Literature in Pacific Schools¹

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Kidnapped

*I was six when
Mama was careless
She sent me to school
alone
five days a week*

*One day I was
kidnapped by a band
of Western philosophers
armed with glossy-pictured
textbooks and
registered reputations
'Holder of B.A.
and M.A. degrees'*

*I was held
in a classroom
guarded by Churchill and Garibaldi
pinned-up on one wall
and Hider and Mao dictating
from the other
Guevara pointed a revolution
at my brains
from his 'Guerilla Warfare'*

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*Each three-month term
they sent threats to
my Mama and Papa*

*Mama and Papa loved
their son and
paid ransom fees
each time
Mama and Papa grew
poorer and poorer
and my kidnappers grew
richer and richer
I grew whiter and whiter*

*On my release
fifteen years after
I was handed
(among loud applause
from fellow victims)
a piece of paper
to decorate my walls
certifying my release.*

by *Ruperake Petaia* (*Blue Rain*, U.S.P. Centre, Western Samoa and Mana Publications, 1980.)

Introduction

"Literature in English should be given pride of place alongside English Literature." (Honourable Sidek Saniff at Opening of the RELC Seminar on Exploring Language, Culture and Literature on 17/4/95)

"In general, students will most easily be attracted to works of literature in which they can quickly recognise a familiar background, preferably with characters somewhat similar to themselves or other people they know." (H.L.B. Moody, "Teaching Literature".)

"It is my hope that English department philosophies, goals, directions and leadership be expanded in ways that will provide greater opportunities for our students by establishing a strong foundation that

reflects Hawaiian values and culture - along with past, present and future concerns - rooted in oral traditions and native Hawaiian as well as indigenous Pacific Islands literature." (Hamasaki: 3, 1994.)

The use of Pacific poems, stories, plays and novels by Pacific writers has grown rapidly in Pacific schools in the last ten years. It is interesting and, I believe, valuable, to briefly trace the intellectual decolonisation which has occurred, particularly in Tonga and Western Samoa, and, to a lesser extent in Fiji, during this 10-year period. Fiji, however, is still very much suffering from a colonial hangover in its own literature classrooms!

This paper is presented at this Conference in the belief that

1. "Literature must, of course change" (and with it literature teaching), in the words of Kim Young Ok (1993). "Literature as a discipline has not been approached in scope and concept beyond that of Western ways of thinking. Is there no need for a literature that is not bound by that - for literature of and by Asian Peoples?" (ibid)
2. The Asian experience of literature teaching may very well parallel that of the Pacific region.
3. Pacific students must read, enjoy, and react to Pacific literature as a crucial aid to the development of a greater self-awareness and feeling of identity.
4. Pacific/Asian writers are better as role models for our students; it is more likely that our students will feel inspired to write creatively themselves if given the opportunity to study writers from their own or similar cultural backgrounds.

It is thus with great satisfaction that I can report the growing trend, as mentioned above, not only towards such study, but for the study to result in enjoyment, enrichment and just as important to many students and teachers, success in examinations resulting from more personalised responses.

History

A little history, however, is helpful to provide an understanding of the present. As no doubt occurred elsewhere in the colonised world, the language and literature of the colonial powers were used, either as indoctrination (a pessimistic interpretation) or as 'enlightenment' (a more optimistic but patronising perspective), throughout the English and French colonised countries of the Pacific.

As recently as the 1960s and 1970s, literature teaching involved the almost exclusive teaching of English literature (as opposed to literature in English, which may be by writers of any ethnic origin). A powerful driving force in several Pacific countries was the New Zealand Universities Entrance English prescription. This had a (30%) literature section, and involved prescribed texts, with Pacific works being very rarely prescribed. Typical of these texts were Shakespearean plays (a separate section), novels by Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy and Graham Greene, and the poetry of W.H. Auden and William Wordsworth!

Several of the English teachers, particularly at senior secondary (high school) level were expatriates, and naturally very few had any knowledge of (dare I say interest in) the growing body of Pacific literature, especially poetry, which was becoming available in the 1970s.

In addition, indigenous Pacific Island (including Indo-Fijian) teachers were equally handicapped in terms of teaching literature by writers from their own societies. They had only studied English literature at University, and thus felt more confident to teach it. Secondly, in personal communication they informed me (quite vehemently in some instances) that there was no Pacific literature worth teaching! Sad to say, this prejudice still exists among many Pacific Island teachers of English; however, it is one which is slowly losing ground, partly for the two following reasons:

1. Pacific literature courses are now taught in some universities our teachers study at - my own university, I am sorry to say, however, only has five degree level courses in which Pacific literature is taught, out of a total offering of eighteen

literature courses.

2. Because of the success of Pacific literature teaching in some countries of the region, which I will now review.

Freeing of prescriptions

The two examinations which still have a strong influence on literature teaching in our region now are the Fiji School Leaving Certificate (F.S.L.C.) and the Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate (P.S.S.C.) English examinations. Both are Form 6 (Year 12) examinations. The former is only taken in Fiji and the latter is taken by students in six other Pacific countries. The literature sections of both prescriptions allow schools/teachers to choose texts/works for study. The F.S.L.C., however, and somewhat unfortunately in my view, continues to provide lists of "recommended" works/authors/texts.

It is also sad, in my view to record that out of a total twelve recommended authors/texts, only one (a non-fiction work, *Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime* by Albert Maori Kiki of Papua New Guinea) is solely Pacific; one of the poetry anthologies contains some Pacific poems (20 out of 55), and one of the short story anthologies contains 4 Pacific stories out of a total of 15, and the drama section includes *Julius Caesar*, much to my dismay! A random sampling of 200 Fiji students' 1994 examination scripts reveals the following choices:

- **Novel:** 94 (47%) selected *The Old Man and the Sea* and 74 (37%) *Things Fall Apart*.
- **Short Story:** Over 50% used stories from 'Other Worlds' (which has 4/15 Pacific stories).
- **Poetry:** 50 students (25%) selected poems from *Possibilities* (20 out of 55 Pacific poems).
- **Drama:** 61 students (31%) selected *Julius Caesar*.

Generally speaking, therefore, very little Pacific literature is studied in Fiji. Teachers are strongly influenced, I feel, by the recommended texts and, indeed, the examination is weighted in favour of these texts.

It may be of interest at this point to note the results of a survey conducted in 1989 (Benson, 1989), which included asking a random sampling of Fiji Form 1-4 students which section of their whole English course they liked the most. They expressed a preference for an anthology of short stories by Pacific (mostly Fijian/Indo-Fijian) writers.

The major success story in my view is the number of students in the P.S.S.C. examination opting for questions in which they write about Pacific writers. An overwhelming majority, especially in Tonga, but also in Western Samoa, Kiribati, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, answer the poetry question, referring to poems by Tongan poet Konai Helu-Thaman. To a lesser degree, but still to a very encouraging level, there are significant numbers of answers referring to the following writers:

- **Albert Wendt** - a Western Samoan poet, short story writer and novelist.
- **Ruperake Petaia** - a Western Samoan poet.
- **Epeli Hau'ofa** - a Tongan poet, short story and non-fiction writer.
- **Vilsoni Hereniko** - a (Fiji) Rotuman playwright.

This trend was borne out by a survey of literature selection in a random sampling of 78 candidates sitting the 1994 PSSC Examination. The students had to write two literature essay answers from a selection of five genres. These five genres were: novel, short story, drama, poetry and non-fiction prose. A total of 74 out of the 156 essays (= 47%) were on a Pacific author; in addition, 39 of these 74 answers (= 52%) were on a Pacific poet.

I believe this data proves two important points, which are

1. Teachers and students in the four countries concerned are finding the study of Pacific literature both enjoyable and worth-while.
2. When given some freedom of choice, teachers are now opting in a significant way to teach writers from their own countries and/or region - a most encouraging trend in my view.

I now wish to cite a few samples of students' writing, which, I believe, reflect the value, to them and, generally, of studying writers whose cultural backgrounds are either identical, or very similar to their own.

Here, for example, is a Tongan girl writing in an examination, about two of Konai Helu-Thaman's poems:

Island Fire showed me that I had cultural values, I actually didn't know I had any.

I could see that much of the world was losing its cultural values in a sea of Americanisation.

Communist East Europe accepting any culture from the U.S.A., from MacDonaldis to their music, and losing traditions passed on for generations. When I thought of this I actually cared about it and felt a great sense of loss.

I was also worried for the islands of the Pacific to which it was aimed at. I could see that the culture of the west was tearing apart the culture of Polynesia. Families are being split up and are scattered all over the globe.

As for myself I was forced to take a look at my own culture. I found I listened to American music watched American movies and spoke American words. This in itself was fine but I had lost my own culture in the process and this was not good at all.

In *Quiet Pain*, by Konai Helu-Thaman, I found myself sympathising and associating with the person in the poem.

When I look at myself I saw a similar person. I saw a person who felt isolated and alone like the person in the poem. I find it hard to express my feelings in clear, precise words and because of this never really get close to anyone.

Quiet Pain and *Island Fire* both helped me recognise what I am and also my limitations. Konai Helu-Thaman effectively forced me to think about my values and how I felt about myself and others.

Another student, writing about a different poem by the same poet had this to say:

In "You, the choice of my parents", Konai is trying to give us the ideas of arranged marriage. That is, this poem is generally a protest against arranged marriage, a marriage which is arranged for convenience but not a result of love. This idea delights me because I have already seen this situation in our country and I already understand it."

I believe that the cited excerpts prove both the personal and the linguistic benefits accrued when students study literature which reflects their own societies.

Materials development: The Pacific literature broadsheet series

I believe quite strongly that the teacher's main task is curriculum implementation, rather than development. For this reason, the Institute of Education of the University of the South Pacific has developed and produced a variety of materials. To encourage teachers to teach local literature, with which their students can identify much more readily than English literature, a

Pacific Literature Broadsheet series has been initiated. The first such broadsheet, on the poetry of Konai Helu Thaman, was published in 1991, and has since been reprinted, as has the second, on the poetry of Albert Wendt. All four published so far have focussed on poetry. However, a fifth, on the plays of Vilsoni Hereniko, is now nearing the publication stage.

It is very gratifying to report that these broadsheets, and the support audio-tapes of two of the poets reading their poems, are now in quite widespread use in Tonga and Western Samoa and to a lesser extent in Fiji. There have also been good sales to a variety of institutions throughout our region and beyond - the Centre for Teaching Asia and the Pacific in Schools program of the East-West Center of the University of Hawai'i, for example, has recently shown strong interest in the series.

Conclusion

It is safe to say that, while barriers to the teaching of our own (Pacific) literature persist, significant progress has been made in the past ten years. More and more teachers are realising its value and importance, mostly owing to their students' enthusiastic response to the material.

After all, if it is important for children in England to study Chaucer, Stoppard, Shakespeare, W.H. Auden, William Wordsworth and Jane Austen, in order, among other goals, to better appreciate their own societies, surely it is equally crucial for Pacific Island and Asian children to benefit from the study of writers from their own societies.

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