

Pacific Rim Studies

Understanding the Pacific Islander



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Hia ou ra ta ma hia la fá: Owning Rotuman Education

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This article gives an overview of informal education in Rotuman with an emphasis on the impact culture plays in the educational process. The purpose of this article is to closely examine the construction of informal education in Rotuma and the Pacific Islands and the ways in which informal education empowers Rotuman and Pacific Island students. Rotuma is officially part of the Republic of Fiji and, like the rest of the Pacific Islands, has to deal with dynamic economic and cultural shifts. These shifts demand that education and policy makers have a new mind-set toward reinforcing traditional education.

Background

Rotuma is a volcanic island of approximately forty-three square kilometers located at twelve degrees south latitude and 177 degrees east longitude. Rotuma lies approximately 465 kilometers north of Fiji and has been politically part of Fiji since 1881.¹ Rotuma lies at the crossroads of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia. The population is about 2,800 (1998 Population Census) and is mainly Polynesian with cultural and genetic influences from Samoa, Tonga, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Wallis and Futuna, and Fiji.²

In Rotuma, informal education begins at an early age through teaching at home by parents and extended family. *Hia ou ra ta ma hia la fá* is a profound Rotuman proverb among the elders; it literally means “if you step on a branch with intentions to break it, then be sure to break it.” The moral behind this proverb is that you should give your best effort in learning to be a Rotuman.

The primary role of informal education in traditional Rotuman society was to transmit the fundamental values and beliefs (*aga faka Rotuma*) to the younger generation. This was done by the elders (*mafua*) who held a wealth of knowledge about genealogies and ceremonies and were virtual walking, talking libraries.³ This brought about balance on the island because informal education helped the Rotumans identify and solve problems within their own cultural framework. The advent of formal education, which accompanied missionaries to Rotuma and the Pacific, established a new framework for learning.⁴

Today, formal education is a highly sought after commodity that helps individuals, communities, and nations cope with new uncertainties in the face of technology and modernization. However, one thing is obvious: creativity and open-mindedness are necessary components for incorporating informal education into the curriculum, which will be key for the future social survival of Pacific Islanders.⁵

The perspectives of Pacific Island and Rotuman scholars are important in order to stimulate thinking on the latent contributions of Pacific Island knowledge to the total body of knowledge that underpins Pacific Island educational systems. A few Pacific Island and Rotuman scholars have demonstrated how tradition and modernity can be synthesized and together can address aspects of Pacific cultures that in some cases proves a hindrance to educational attainment.⁶ Although some scholars have advocated this synergistic approach, in this article I argue that there remains a dearth of sound research on Pacific Island education and indigenous Pacific Island studies that needs to be conducted. The curricular issues surrounding the integration of indigenous knowledge within the formal education structure and system is an important topic of discussion that this article will not address. While some may see this article as a way to suit Rotuman needs, it is hoped that others will view it as a contribution to a new educational context wherein Pacific Islanders educate themselves and their young without giving way to neocolonialism.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study follows a postmodernist, ethnographic methodological approach, a perspective that seeks to understand the social and historical transformation of society and consciousness in the modern world. According to Michael Peters, postmodernism is an umbrella term that includes anti-foundationalist writings in philosophy and the social sciences. This perspective rejects the ingrained assumptions of Enlightenment rationality and traditional Western epistemology and the supposedly secure representations of reality these modes of thought engender. (Enlightenment philosophy was also a tool for global exploration and imperialism in the Pacific Islands). Postmodernism also rejects Georg Hegel's ahistorical state of absolute knowledge and resigns itself to the impossibility of a historical, transcendental, or self-authenticating version of truth. This perspective addresses the question of how informal education can empower Rotuman and Pacific Island children with a non-Western epistemology. In their book *Understanding Curriculum*, William Pinar, William M. Reynolds, Patrick Slattery, and Peter M. Taubman strongly support this notion of empowerment through informal education. I used this postmodernist ethnographic approach to study the people of Rotuma to avoid applying a Eurocentric approach to a study of Pacific Island epistemology.

Informal Education in Rotuma

In 2003, I interviewed Aisea Aitu in the Rotuman village of Malhaha.⁷ Aitu, a retired school administrator and teacher, was a statesman in Rotuman society and

a close relative.⁸ He passed away last year at his home in Malhaha. In the interview, he spoke frequently about how the rising generation generally lacked an interest in traditional Rotuman knowledge and ways. When he was younger, Aitu had been selected as one of two students from Rotuma to attend Lelean memorial school in Fiji. At the time it was an honor to go to Fiji for formal education. He told me that before he left for school his father sat him down on a mat and said, while pointing to the mat, “*Aisea ou la rako se Suva ae la se maomaoakia se ós aga faka Rotuma*”—his father told him not to forget his identity, his *fuagri*, and his Rotumanness.⁹

This Rotumanness Aitu’s father asked him not to forget referred to the education he received while being reared on Rotuma. Education to Pacific Islanders was a way of life and not a piece of paper indicating how learned you were. Aitu’s educational and other related achievements stemmed from his ability to align his Rotuman informal education with his formal education.

Elizabeth K. Inia, another important Rotuman, still lives on the island of Rotuma and is trying to teach the young what it means to be Rotuman.¹⁰ Inia went to Fiji in 1940 for further schooling, already equipped with the skills that were essential for Rotuman women to have.¹¹ These skills were based on working the land and sea and understanding one’s culture for survival. Inia has also successfully published literature on Rotumans and their culture.

The lives of Aitu and Inia illustrate how Pacific Island societies had their own educational systems, which existed long before European colonialists and missionaries introduced schools or formal education. Prior to this introduction, education in Pacific societies was mainly informal and geared toward cultural survival and continuity. This focus also allowed for cultural adaptability during the colonial period.

Learning is not an alien concept to Pacific Islanders. Before the introduction of formal schooling in the 1830s, learning in the Pacific Islands came largely through observation, listening, and imitating others (mainly adults) who already had the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for living and surviving in society.¹² Specific skills and knowledge were taught to the appropriate people when the need arose. For example, boys were taught skills of navigation and warfare, and both boys and girls were taught different types of crafts and performing arts.

Learning was, in fact, a sacred ingredient of Pacific Island life. According to Fijian educator Unaisi Nabobo, the Fijian word *yalomatua* is said to reflect maturity and a spirit and sacredness of being.¹³ Before colonial powers introduced formal education, education was a considered sacred process of learning that pertained to one’s growth as a Pacific Islander.

The new education for Pacific Islanders introduced by colonial rule meant that students faced the conflicting demands of the Western school curriculum and those of their home cultures. The purposes, content, and processes of formal schooling often conflicted with those of indigenous education.¹⁴ Informal education took place on the ocean as well as the land—experience-based learning. This stood in sharp contrast to

most formal education scenarios, where teachers had students in a classroom look at a blackboard with writing on it.

Today, this conflict continues in the Pacific Islands and among many minority communities in the U.S. and throughout the world. Today's global curriculum in many societies is generally not astute enough to identify and incorporate different educational epistemologies.¹⁵

Konai Helu Thaman explains the dilemma that cultures face when an informal emphasis comes in contact with a curriculum dictated by formal education:

The rush to globalize education and sell it in the global marketplace further fuels this trend (to make education a commodity for sale rather than learning) today. However, in most countries, we know that access to the sites of power, whether it be law, media or education, lies with privileged groups; in developed countries, they are usually male, white and middle-class; in developing countries, they are usually male, middle-class, and western educated.¹⁶

Children of the Pacific Islands face the challenge of learning from a world-view that is globally dictated. The ways in which Pacific Islanders create meaning and structure and construct reality are sometimes contradictory to the global curriculum. Traditional values do not always find roots in formal education's power structures. Students' underachievement in schools across the Pacific speaks to the consequences of a globally dictated educational system. In part, underachievement exists because of the cultural gap between the expectations of school curricula and the expectations of the cultures in which students are socialized. Curricula often reflect the value structures and policies of those in power.¹⁷ These hegemonic policies favor the powerful and the agenda they bring to the table in the name of educational progress.

Furthermore, the formal educational field has continued to de-emphasize the values underpinning indigenous education. Thus, Pacific Islanders must to remember and apply the wisdom Aitu received from his father to use his Rotuman learning to enhance his Western education and not forgot his fuagri.

Pacific Islanders cannot wait for the global curriculum to change; we need to incorporate our Pacific Island education alongside global curriculum for our benefit. For instance, Anapesi and Tevita Kai'ili give an example of bridging informal education with formal education. They state:

In pondering our childhood and upbringing in America, we are reminded of the many ways the Tongan language was taught and reinforced in our home. We are awakened to memories of our grandfather Tonga, sitting across from us listening intently as we attempted to translate a story we had just read in English into the Tongan language. We were encouraged to read out loud in Tongan. Our grandparents would correct our enunciation and grammatical ordering of the Tongan words. There was a sense of sanctity associated with the Tongan language as we observed the way our grandparents cherished our native tongue.¹⁸

The essence of learning Tongan for the Kai'ili siblings in the sanctity of this time, space, and place brings a connectedness to their fuagri. As Aitu's father had done, grandfather Tonga sitting across from his grandchildren reinforced the connectedness of the sacred mat and its *mana*. Michael Somare, the former prime minister of Papua New Guinea, reiterates this point that in essence the Pacific Islanders learn in their familiar environment, this sacred place, for Pacific Islanders space is sacred and connects you to your cultural foundational roots. As Pacific Islanders, it is pertinent that we weave our own sacred mats that complement both our Pacific educational values and that of the global curriculum.

Frank Fisher points out that in order to cater to informal, traditional education the curriculum should be broadened to include marginalized or subjugated knowledge areas, thus giving intercultural studies and language education a more prominent place. This would challenge the existing hierarchical structure of knowledge and add to student motivation and enjoyment. Including literature in intercultural studies would involve redefining the meaning of texts and reestablishing the relationship between the written and the unwritten. This unwritten philosophy is what Aitu's father and the Kai'ilis' grandfather were able to convey to the younger generation.

Manulani Meyer, a professor at the University of Hawaii in Hilo, refers to the ability to bridge formal and informal education as mending the rift between the mind and the body, a rift that Rene Descartes¹⁹ believed must exist if knowledge was ever to be trusted.²⁰ For Pacific Islanders, knowledge percolates both in mind and body, and we need to heal this rift and no longer fall into the trap of predictable empiricism, which would have us ignore the richly textured experiences of our *Kupuna*,²¹ *Aumakua*,²² and natural world.²³

Ana Taufé'ulungaki of the University of the South Pacific envisions this percolation happening through reverting back to the unwritten, where one's fuagri gives meaning to one's identity. She posits:

We need a vision of development that clearly spells out the kinds of societies we wish for ourselves and our children, and such a vision, to me, cannot be better informed than by the fundamental core values of our cultures, which I believe have not changed significantly despite the enormous changes in our material and knowledge culture and in our political, economic and social institutions.²⁴

There is indeed a need for Pacific Islanders to revert back to the core values of our cultures. Only then can we preserve our identity and progress in this global world. We need to deconstruct and decolonize²⁵ our mind-set²⁶ from imposed concepts that pay little or no attention to the advantages of indigenous knowledge within our cultures.

To do this, Pacific Islanders need to own our education and understand our epistemology. Melani Anae reminds us that there is a myth we have internalized: the belief that scientific inquiry is neutral and that it is the superior way of acquiring knowledge.²⁷ We need to create a space that does not make scientific inquiry the only

legitimate epistemology. Currently, scientific inquiry is often erroneously thought of as a series of normative techniques in statistics, testing, or observation that are independent of social and philosophical context. Far from being neutral, scientific inquiry is a human activity that involves biases, hopes, values, and social human baggage, just as other epistemologies are rooted in culture.

To overcome this myth, there needs to be pragmatic inroads made into integrating Pacific Islander knowledge within the official knowledge system that educational institutions often guard quite tightly. Here the perspectives of Pacific Islands scholars will be important in order to stimulate thinking on the possible contributions of Pacific Islanders to the total knowledge system in schools. Pacific Islands scholars ought to demonstrate how tradition and modernity can be synthesized and address those aspects of Pacific culture that some see as a hindrance to doing well in school. There needs to be much more research done on Pacific Islander epistemology. However, this should not delay the immediate inclusion of local language and literature in the curriculum.²⁸

Meyer posits that in the formal classroom a great deal can be learned about the Pacific Islander worldview through language. The learning and pedagogic benefits are obvious. For students, this experience would open a portal that would greatly empower their learning. Such a study would allow students to move away from textbook orientation and recognize oral discourse as having status in learning alongside reading and writing.

Teachers should grasp the pedagogical value of this combination of Pacific Island and Western inquiry because such a combination will have an effect on student incentive and motivation.²⁹ Furthermore, this combination should reinforce the understanding of how different knowledge systems are interrelated and highlight the significance that everyday life has in learning. When this form of engagement with the environment leads to excellence in teaching, production of resource material, or publication, the contribution of both students and teachers should be appropriately acknowledged.

Pluralism emerges as a commonsense approach to multiculturalism and universality because it focuses on diversity, common humanity, pride in one's heritage, and the democratic rights of all citizens.³⁰ In terms of education, pluralism advocates a cultural literacy that facilitates communication with culturally diverse communities and subcultures, including minorities. Learning the language, culture, and knowledge systems of others will promote social harmony and universal integration.³¹

In Western epistemology, according to Frank Fischer, justification of ideal constructions—for example, Plato's idea of a republic, Hobbes's argument of civil peace and social unity through a commonwealth, or Marx's communist society, along with their respective moral principles—is established if they pass the test of generalization. Meyer disagrees with this concept of Western philosophy, that generalization is the way to find ideal constructivism. She believes that specificity leads to universality. In her words:

“E aloha aku, aloha aina, aloha ohana, aloha olelo, aloha kanaka i na auao kakou, ma ka paepae ike mo omehau Hawaii.” Our enlightening will come grounded in our cultural wisdom, through our spirituality, love of homeland, family, language and community. Our enlightening is to understand our identity to understand universal.³²

In philosophical terms, pluralism does not mean just coexistence and tolerance, but recognizing that difference is valuable and that it is a basis for further understanding. This in turn can lead to freedom, the freedom and decolonization of the mind-set in owning one’s own education and future. Pluralism does not regard knowledge and reality as permanent or fixed. Cultures are continuously changing, and identities, both individual and collective, are constantly being reinvented—culture’s ability to adapt creatively is its beauty. The plural world is full of possibilities, alternatives, and answers. The extreme opposite of pluralism is the narrow view that there is only one reality, one truth, and one ideology that explains our diverse existence. A great deal of ethnocentrism emanates from such a perspective.

Cultural pluralism is, in essence, an optimistic view that the universe is full of possibilities in which human beings and societies are in the process of being made and remade. Pluralism articulates a vision of multiculturalism that is acceptable to a range of individuals and groups. (One shortcoming of cultural universalism/pluralism, as Meyer points out, is that it does not sufficiently question the issues of power relations centered amid class and gender biases in society, the causes of poverty, or oppression and violence. In fact, pluralism has a tendency to exoticize and fetishize differences to a point where potency in specificity are lost.)

Ropate Qalo uses the words *subsistence mindset*, which means the synthesizing of cultural values with contemporary avenues of success. The addition of traditional knowledge with contemporary formal education would provide a fine balance in the education of a Pacific Island child between formal and informal education. An axiom historians could use to create this fine balance is provided by E.H. Carr: “The past is intelligible to us in the light of the present; and we can fully understand the present only in the light of the past.”³³

Brig Lal discusses a curriculum that accommodates this discourse between the past and present. This curriculum would invent a language that links education to social justice and social cohesiveness. The learners would be educated for freedom and independence on the one hand and for partnership and interdependence on the other.³⁴

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that many of the subjects studied in the present Pacific Island curriculum are either in part or in general foreign to the experiences of many students, especially rural students.³⁵ Even those who succeed in school do not necessarily acquire a real understanding or leave school feeling that learning could be a lifelong activity. The education system does not produce critical thinkers or problem solvers.

Paulo Freire proposes a set of important elements in curriculum development that pursues a community-based, self-sufficient educational approach. This approach is a correction to systems that were imposed on less developed countries through colonialism. In order to cater to a range of talents and interests, the curriculum should be broadened to include the marginalized or subjugated knowledge areas, including intercultural studies and languages. This broadening would include learning one's indigenous language, history, dances, and chants that pertain to one's culture.

Conclusion

Discussions are needed on a new multidimensional educational discourse, one that will view schooling as an opportunity for providing the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values required for life in a democratic, multicultural society and for comprehending the larger world. Such a discourse will assume that there is a plurality of knowledge and promote pluralistic viewpoints on matters relating to culture, religion, and moral values. It will not place pragmatic concerns over the spiritual and moral needs of society. No system of knowledge will be privileged, and it will need to avoid finality or closure, stressing instead ongoing inquiry and dialogue.

Finally, learning for Pacific Islanders in the institutionalized school setting should "reflect the life pulse of home where learning is an act of making connections."³⁶ Pacific Islanders hold that the key to understanding leads to the freedom that Meyer addresses in her ten steps:

1. Get rid of the belief, I mean really get rid of it, that we are somehow inferior.
2. Find out why you love the ocean but rarely swim in it or fish from it.
3. Remember your favorite teacher.
4. Learn from land and not simply about land.
5. Understand that words have *mana*.
6. Question your belief of what education can do.
7. Question your role in education.
8. Wonder about the role of *aloha* in your children's education.
9. Expect more rigor.
10. Understand the idea of epistemology.

These ten steps are motivational tools that will influence and empower Pacific Island education in the twenty-first century; primarily, they will lead Pacific Islanders toward owning a Pacific epistemology.

Much as it was for the Pacific Islanders of old, who sailed back and forth, cutting through the mighty waves, the ocean is a powerful symbol of both success and obstacles in the twenty-first century. Pacific Islanders face challenges whose outcomes depend on our confidence in our own framework for success. It is empowering for our children to know that their ancestors were equipped with survival skills that rivaled the Vikings, that they navigated across the largest body of water skillfully and confidently, knowing both where they were and where they were going.³⁷ Thus,

it is pertinent that we teach our children skills to navigate through the twenty-first century like their ancestors of old.

Ward and Webb affirm how Pacific Islanders today can weave their sacred mats with the conviction of owning their educational endeavors and sailing with confidence into the twenty-first century. They posit:

We accept that the risks and dangers of the sea which seem to weigh heavily in the minds of continental men are not given such emphasis by island navigators today. And we may surmise that a western Pacific islander in the past might well sail east or south or north in search of new land, confident in the belief that, as usual, islands would rise over the horizon to meet him.³⁸

We need to navigate our future between the interwoven mat of formal and informal education. Only then will the islands of opportunity rise up to meet us over the horizon. The future of education for Pacific Islanders depends on how closely we give heed to the wisdom of our traditional teachers—grandparents (*mafuas*)—and how close we are to our foundational roots (*fuagri*).

NOTES

1. Fatiaki, A., ed. *Rotuma Hanua Pumue/Precious Land*, Suva, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1991; Howard, A. *Learning to be Rotuman: Enculturation in the South Pacific*, New York, Teachers College Press, 1970.
2. Fatiaki.
3. Howard, A.; Inia, E. K. *Kato'aga: Rotuman Ceremonies*, Suva, Institute for Pacific Studies, 2001.
4. Howard, A.
5. Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York, Continuum, 1971; Hemara, W. *Maori Pedagogies: A View from the Literature*, Wellington, The New Zealand Council for Education Research, 2001.
6. Freire; Hemara; Meyer, M. A. *Ho'oulu: Our Time of Becoming*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2003; Qalo, R. *Subsistence Mindset: Small Business, A Study of a Fijian Family*, Suva, University of the South Pacific, 1997.
7. I am a Rotuman and belong to a *fuagri* from my mother's side. *Fuagri* literally means "the foundation of a house," and in Rotuman society the foundation of a house represents where your ancestors come from, and this becomes your clan and your identity. The *fuagris* have names to them. The family clan I belong to in Rotuma is *kor fo'ou* (this clan name means "new village" or "settlement") from Lopta and the *fuagri vai* in the village of Malhaha. *Fuagri* is viewed as a sacred place that defines who you are and gives a metaphysical sense of belonging. When I was first told about my *fuagri*, I felt like there were eyes looking at me from the past and acknowledging my presence and vice versa.
8. My relation to Aitu is through one of my ancestors named Fikimarea, who lived in the village of Malhaha. We come from the same *fuagri*.
9. Hereniko, V. *Woven Gods: Female Clowns and Powers in Rotuma*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1995. Hereniko posits that Rotuman mats are woven gods imbued with *mana* (power) and knowledge woven sacredly and are a symbolism of one's Rotuman identity.
10. Howard.
11. Inia.

12. Thaman, K. H. "Towards a New Pedagogy: Pacific Cultures in Higher Education," *Local Knowledge and Wisdom in Higher Education*, ed. G. R. Teasdale and Z. M. Rhea, New York, Pergamon Press, 2000, pp. 43–50.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Howard; Meyer; Thaman, K. H. *Interfacing Global and Indigenous Knowledge for Improved Learning*, Paper presented at the UNESCO Conference, Bangkok, 11–15 Dec 2001.
15. Crow, G. M. "Reconceptualizing the School Administrator's Role: Socialization at Mid-Career," *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 4(2), 1993, pp. 131–52.
16. Thaman, K. H. "Towards a New Pedagogy: Pacific Cultures in Higher Education," in *Local Knowledge and Wisdom in Higher Education*, ed. G. R. Teasdale & Z. M. Rhea, New York, Pergamon Press, 2000, p. 7.
17. Thaman, 2000.
18. Kai'ili, Apapes and Tevita. *Can We Become Tongans without Speaking Tongan?*, Retrieved 3 August 2006, from <http://planet-tonga.com/articles/tongan-lang.shtml>, 2003, p. 25.
19. Anthony, K. *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy*, New York, Garland, 1987. From an individualist point of view Descartes talks about the independent domain of the thinking subject ("the realm of the thinking subject"), or the rational soul, whose being is fundamentally other than that of the world. According to Heidegger, this distinction was already present in the Greek metaphysics. The world is understood as a domain limited by time and space that functions as a mechanical system and which reason understands by the apprehension of underlying principles of cause that link the elements of the world together.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Family or personal god, deified ancestors.
22. Grandparent ancestor, a person of one's grandparents' generation.
23. Meyer.
24. Anae, M., E. Cox, D. Mara, S. Wendt, and C. Finau. *Pacifika Educational Research Guidelines, Final Report*, Auckland, University of Auckland, 2001, p. 21.
25. In the decolonizing mind-set, deconstruction is part of a much larger intent: taking apart the story, revealing the underlying texts, and giving voice to things that help people to improve their current conditions.
26. Olssen, M., J. Codd, and A. Oneill. *Educational Policy: Globalization, Citizenship, and Democracy*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, 2004. In many of his lyrics, Bob (Robert Nesta) Marley used examples of liberalism that focused on the African diasporas in the West. In the lyrics to his famous "Redemption Song," Marley addresses this concept: "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery none but ourselves can free our minds." None but the individual can create his or her destiny, and we cannot blame people for our loss. We as individuals are pivotal architects of own destinies.
27. Anae.
28. Lal, B., T. Vakatora, and P.S. Reeves. *Fiji in Transition*, vol. 1, Suva, University of the South Pacific, 1997.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Harding, S. *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Epistemology*, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1998
31. Lal.
32. Meyer.
33. Qalo, p. 49.
34. Lal.

35. *Ibid.*
36. Meyer, pp. 7–9.
37. Anae, p. 21; Kai'ili; Meyer; Olssen, Codd, and Oneill; Qalo; Thaman.
38. Levison, M., R. Ward, and J.W. Webb. *The Settlement of Polynesia*, Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Press, 1973, p. 17.

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