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Indigenous Knowledge and Academic Imperialism

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Growing up in Rotuma, I was never taught Rotuman history from a textbook. Nor was I ever tested on how much I had learned and whether I could remember the facts and dates when important events were supposed to have happened. When I reached secondary school and later went to university, I found myself having to study history, largely the history of the British Empire, and had a difficult time remembering historical information that did not seem to have any relevance to me whatsoever. But I was good at "cramming" and somehow always managed to pass these history tests, although if you had asked me for the same information a month or so after the examination, I would have had a hard time remembering. None of my history teachers knew how to make history come alive and I never did find out why facts about who did what to whom and on what date were so important.

This chapter examines my love-hate relationship with the discipline of history as defined and taught by Western academics. My hope is that such scrutiny will lead to a better understanding of some of my reservations; I hope also to stimulate discussion that will enhance the teaching and learning of Pacific history. I begin with the ways in which Rotumans acquired knowledge of their past, followed by a critique of academic practices that work against the emergence of an indigenous historiography. I conclude with some thoughts on how the discipline of history could be made more meaningful and relevant to indigenous people. In a number of places where academic practices are discussed, the term *scholars* refers to historians, anthropologists, and other social scientists.

My earliest experience with Rotuman history came in the form of fictional stories called *hanuju* that my father used to tell me when I was growing up. Some of these stories have come to be labeled myths

and legends by westerners, the implication being that they are not true stories. Other stories, I learned later in life, were fairy tales that he had picked up in Fiji where he spent some time. With hindsight, it seems easy to tell by the setting of the stories, the images and symbols, and the names of characters whether they were Rotuman or foreign.
Irrespective of their place of origin, these stories were used by my father as avenues for teaching his children human values he wanted us to embrace.

Dates were never important in my father's stories; if they were mentioned at all, it was in the general category of "long ago." Some of these stories were based on historical events-such as battles fought between religious factions in the 1870s-but the focus was always specific to place and characters: where the action took place, who were the main players, what was the order of events, and what were the consequences of their actions. My father was a good storyteller who knew how to engage my emotions, and I was often moved to tears by his stories, many of which were about cruelty, kindness, fairness, generosity, obedience, or tyranny. As I grew older, I realized that some of his stories about ghosts and disobedient children were intended to frighten his children so we would go to sleep or remain in the house at night.

Then there were stories that could be labeled gossip. These were about people who were living then: where their ancestors came from, why they looked or behaved in a certain way, and the possible reasons for their good or bad fortune. These stories were often told when men or women got together to perform certain functions, such as weaving mats, preparing food for a wedding, clearing plantations, or sitting around waiting for arrivals or departures. Some stories were malicious in intent, particularly if they were whispered in secret and were about illicit affairs, real or imagined. Rotumans also reveled in humorous tales, usually at other people's expense, but sometimes at their own.

More prevalent than oral narratives in day-to-day interaction were dance and song. As repositories of the past and present, dance and song were performed as part of rituals, ceremonies, or other public events, and therefore were more reliable sources than stories that were shared informally and confined mainly to families or small groups. Songs could be about anything: migrations, the underworld, genealogies, loved ones who had passed away, unrequited love, the beauty of the island, or important people, events, and places. Some

songs were nonsensical but reflected the Rotuman sense of humor Choreographed and performed, either as part of a *tautoga* (traditional mass dance involving men and women) or part of a *fara* (singing and dancing troupe) during the period Rotumans call *av manea* (time to play), song and dance displays often occurred when young people traveled around the island during the Christmas season (see Hereniko 1995). Many of these songs were well known, their lyrics reminding Rotumans about the past; sometimes they dealt with the present and imminent future.

Theatrical enactments were also arenas for communicating historical information. Dramatic sketches, usually no longer than thirty minutes, were often performed by village or church groups. A dancing troupe might perform a number of songs and dances, with a theatrical item added on at the end. Such a piece might be a retelling of a myth or legend, or about a contemporary issue, or perhaps a scene from the Bible. These performances were usually unscripted, rehearsed beforehand, and intended to entertain. However, they often contained valuable information about historical events that had shaped and continue to influence the social and cultural life of the island and its people.

The natural world had its own constellation of proverbs and sayings that captured the special natures of plants, animals, and birds, some of which are extinct today. I heard these words of wisdom during important speeches, sermons on Sundays, and sometimes in the course of everyday conversations. The metaphors and allusions were better known to the older and wiser folks, but by listening carefully to the contexts in which they were used, I could often figure out the meanings of these proverbs (see Howard and RenseI1991).

Certain peculiarities in the physical environment, names of people, places, birds, animals, genealogies of chiefly families, and anecdotes of personal experiences gave credence to historical narratives in much the same way that Western scholars use footnotes as evidence. Over time historical narratives evolved into differing versions of the same story, not all of which contained the same elements or emphasized the same details. Some of these conflicting accounts resulted in disputes that were usually resolved sooner or later. Rotumans understood competing versions to be politically motivated but were usually prepared to let the more persuasive orator win, believing that the ancestral spirits would punish anyone who was dishonest.

The stars, the moon, the sunset, the behavior of birds and animals,

the blossoming of certain flowers, and the direction of the wind (to mention only a few) communicated messages for human beings. No doubt these messages were based on proven patterns over many years. For example, very hot dry spells during December and January might be interpreted as signs of a developing hurricane. When low-flying frigate birds were seen flying toward the west, Rotumans would begin reinforcing the roofs of their houses and preparing for a storm. Incidents of rats devouring pillows were taken as a sign of imminent death, a ring around the moon signaled the time for harvesting sea urchins, and so on.

The early period of contact with Europeans is humorously captured in what Rotumans call *te samuga*. Each clan theoretically had a *te samuga* that derived from a stupid or humorous act committed by their ancestors. One clan, for example, was *fun pan rau* (tobacco fryers) because on encountering tobacco for the first time, their ancestors thought it could be fried as food and did so. The *hao peskete* (biscuit planters) clan was supposed to have planted biscuits, which they wrongly assumed grew on trees. My clan's *te samuga* is a *rais* (rice eaters), because some Chinese blood from my mother's side was supposed to have made us impure. At weddings, the *han maneak su* (woman who plays the wedding), who is chosen by the bride's relatives, may be heard announcing the *te samuga* of the groom's relatives.

Occasionally I have heard an exchange of *te samuga* at an informal gathering (such as during card games or a beach picnic) accompanied by mock anger and peals of laughter. In this way, family history was imparted and perpetuated. This social institution was also a cultural way of deflating pomposity and ensuring humility among the inhabitants.

Knowledge about custom and tradition was communicated during ceremonies and rituals, such as during a wedding or a funeral. Observers carefully watched how things were done and stored the information in their memory for future use. Sometimes there was controversy over correct protocol or the accuracy of certain procedures or Customs. When conflict arose, the views of knowledgeable elders were consulted and obeyed. Sometimes the parties concerned might simply agree to disagree, because there was no uniform and compulsory form that was enforceable for the whole island. At one time, the Rotuman Council, the island's governing body, tried to standardize procedures for important ceremonies but was met with

resistance and because there was no consensus, the idea was abandoned.

As in other parts of Polynesia, poetry contained historical information that was not always understood by the general public, largely because it used archaic expressions, metaphors, and figures of speech. There were two forms, one, *fakpeje*, was performed during public ceremonies when kava (piper methysticum) was presented. Like the lyrics of songs, *fakpeje* often made references to historical events and important chiefs or kings. The second kind of poetry, *teme*, was chanted at secret gatherings held by male elders in the evenings. These poems concealed special knowledge about the group's history and identity. Today, probably only a few individuals are left who can remember snatches of *teme*; the nightly gatherings for recitation have also ceased.

Dreams also played a more prominent part in Rotuman life when I was growing up than they do now. When a relative said that a dead ancestor carne to him or her and imparted certain information about the past (or present or future), it was taken seriously. The dead were never far away, and it was common then to hear individuals talk about having seen the ghost of a dead relative at such and such a place. Certain haunting grounds were close to the village. Sometimes the names of dead ancestors were invoked during rituals to act on someone's behalf. Of course, the missionaries frowned on practices that honored the dead; nonetheless, dead ancestors were often seen as more readily accessible than the Christian god, and many Rotumans secretly courted their favors even as they publicly declared their Christian affiliation.

All the various contexts mentioned are important sources for knowing about the Rotuman past and present (see also Plant 1977b; Churchward 1940; Gardiner 1898; Howard 1985). Although I have focused on Rotuma, other Pacific societies share these sources (and more) to varying degrees, depending on the extent of colonization and missionary influence. Yet, when I read historical accounts by Western scholars about the Pacific, I am often surprised by the lack of serious analyses of these sources, particularly the oral narratives and performance. There are some notable exceptions, but they are few in number and unlikely to destabilize the status quo (for examples, see Howard 1985; White 1991; Nero 1992; Mitchell 1992).

Chief among the reasons for pushing indigenous sources of knowledge to the margins is the process of colonization, particularly the usurpation of oral narratives by the dominant culture's narrative fiction: fairy tales, myths and legends, short stories, novels, and biblical

stories. The school and church are institutions that work hand in hand to colonize the mind. As native people were taught to read and write, they paid less and less attention to oratory. This process, which Ruperaki Petaia has likened to being kidnaped and Albert Wendt has called "whitefication," radically altered islanders' perceptions of themselves. When I went to school and learned to read and write, I came to value English fairy tales, Greek mythology, and biblical narratives more than my father's *hanuju*. Later in high school and university, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Shakespeare, and Ibsen became my models as the importance of Roruman *hanuju* faded into the background. Only in recent years have I been wise and brave enough to realize the significance of these stories to my identity and well-being as a Roruman. To have been able to write a dissertation that displaced the stories of my colonizers and replaced them with those of my ancestors has been the most gratifying experience for me as a scholar. Decolonizing the mind, however, is not easy, and in my case has only just begun. I know students, either in metropolitan universities or at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, who are still struggling to find their island voices.

When I was made head of the English Department of a Methodist school in Fiji in 1984, I decided to introduce Pacific literature to my students and encouraged other teachers to do likewise. I was excited about this shift in orientation, and so were my students and some of the staff, who found much that they could identify with in the poetry of Konai Thaman (1980, 1981) or the short stories from the Pacific published in *Lali* (Wendt 1980)Å\until one day, when the gatekeeper of English literature in this school, an elderly teacher from England with strong Christian convictions, marched into the library where I was reading and shouted at me: "You are employed to teach English literature, which means literature written by the English!" Why was this well-meaning European so upset that I should teach Pacific Island students the stories of their own people? I found this difficult to understand until I read Edward Said. "The power to narrate," he wrote, "or to block other narratives from forming or emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (1993:xiii). Fortunately, progress is being made in the Pacific regarding the restoration of indigenous stories to their proper place in the curriculum, although the belief still lingers among many expatriates and some locals that Pacific fiction or poetry is unworthy of the label "literature."

The ways in which schools, colleges, and universities value the written word over and above oratory is another cause for concern. When the mode of teaching or testing is primarily in the written form, indigenous ways of being are marginalized. Many island students fail not because they are stupid, but because the formal education system works against indigenous ways of learning or evaluating knowledge. I have often wondered why those students who excel at singing, dancing, composing, telling stories, and so on are rarely given the option of being tested in one or more of these modes. Does this have anything to do with the fact that although Western education has been operative in Fiji for more than a hundred years, the system has produced only a handful of Ph.D. graduates?

Furthermore, the written word has undermined the fluidity of indigenous history. Oratory allowed for debate and negotiation. On the other hand, the written word fixes the truth. Genealogies, land titles, customary practices, secret rituals, disputes, religious beliefs (and so on) that were previously embedded in social relations are no longer subject to change or modification. An example from Rotuma should make this point clearer. For many years, a plot of land was under the jurisdiction of a certain family (I shall call A). They would cut copra from it, graze their cows on it, and plant on it. But recently, it was discovered that according to the written records kept by the district officer at the government station on the island, the land belonged to a different clan (I shall call B). This knowledge came as a surprise to both A and B. When 1 was on the island in 1992, I was told by B that in spite of the written record, her clan does not feel that the land belongs to them because it has been in Ns care for so long. On the other hand, A feels bad that her family has "stolen" someone else's land all these years and does not want to have anything to do with it anymore. Both sides are uncertain about the veracity of the written record, although in Rotuma, as in most places around the world, it carries more authority than the oral word. Rotumans, like many other Polynesians, believe the land has "eyes and teeth" and is capable of wreaking havoc in the lives of those who engage in deceitful schemes. In this instance, the written word fixed the "truth," and the response of both parties was to leave the plot of land alone in order to ward off any bad luck. If things had been left in the realm of oratory, jurisdiction over the land in question could have been discussed and resolved satisfactorily to both parties.

Besides undermining oratory, the written word encourages the view

that there is but *one* truth, and this truth can be discovered through rigorous research. Since the written word is more reliable than oratory, so the argument goes, the historian who has access to all the written sources and can interpret them accurately can find that one truth. Anyone who thinks that "truth comes from a multiplicity of sources and perspectives" (Katz 1993:366) is therefore a threat to this school of thought, as evident in the next example.

In a speech given in 1993 by Eric Hobsbawm at the Central European University in Budapest, entitled "The New Threat to History," he made a number of points pertinent to the concerns of this chapter. According to him, the ability to distinguish between fact and fiction is fundamental for a historian (1993:63). He went on to say that contemporary novelists who base their plots on recorded reality are "fudging the border between historical fact and fiction" (62), implying that there is a difference between the two. He claimed that there is nothing unambiguous about the fact that Elvis Presley is dead. Maybe so, but this is dull history indeed if this is all that matters to the historian.

By focusing on external reality, historians marginalized emotional truth, which is the essence of literature, oral or written. A Fijian elder has put it this way: "People [outside researchers] do not understand the unseen, which is the reality of our lives; they do not realize its power. They look only at the seen, which is illusion" (Katz 1993:294). The more important question therefore is not whether Elvis Presley is dead, but how he died, where he died, his motivations for taking his life (if indeed it was a suicide), and the impact of his death on his family and the music world. These are questions that history texts do not answer because their focus is on when and how certain events took place rather than the emotional landscape of the individuals responsible for those events. On the other hand, novelists are concerned with the unseen as well as the seen and, if they are good at their craft, give better insights into history in its totality than social scientific accounts in textbooks.

Hobsbawm also charged those engaged in identity politics with "attempts to replace history by myth and invention" (1993:64). He Wrote that the responsibility of historians is to "stand aside from the passions of identity politics" and to tell the truth even if it makes them unpopular (63). The problem with his advice is the false premise that there is only one truth. Like Epeli Hau'ofa, I believe truth to be "flexible and negotiable" (Hau'ofa, this volume). Also, certain ques-

tions must be asked before deciding whether one's truth should be made public. What kind of truth? Whose truth? Will the truth favor the colonizer, the colonized, men, women, or perhaps an elite minority among the natives? These are difficult questions that a "feeling" historian must address.

Another thorny question that has to be considered is: Do outsiders have the right to speak for and about Pacific Islanders? I was brought up to believe that the right to speak in public is not God-given. In certain contexts, only the chiefs or men could speak. In matters to do with women, the men remained quiet. On the other hand, westerners seem to think they have the right to express opinions (sometimes labeled truths) about cultures that are not their own in such a way that they appear to know it from the inside out. Most seem to think they have the right to speak about anything and everything; many even think they have the right to coerce natives to divulge secrets about their cultures to them (see Osorio 1995:12). I have been in numerous situations where natives sit and listen while white academics discuss and analyze their cultures and people in an objectified fashion. Challenges have been made by incensed natives about the right of outsiders to speak for them, yet the practice still continues, particularly in institutions of higher learning. It is time for Western scholars to realize that legitimacy, or the right to speak, has always been an issue for Pacific Islanders, who do not necessarily believe in the First Amendment. The least that outsiders can do, if they wish to speak as though they were some authority on Pacific societies, is to invite indigenous Pacific Islanders, whenever possible, to share the space with them, either as copresenters or as discussants or respondents. Not to do so is to perpetuate unequal power relations between colonizer and colonized.

Gone is the time when nonnative scholars can afford the luxury of an intellectual debate with each other about native issues and ignore the native perspectives. Yet recently we have the Sahlins (1995)-Obeyesekere (1992) squabble: an American from the University of Chicago and a Sri Lankan from Princeton University, each claiming to own the truth. The American claims that Native Hawaiians believed that Captain Cook was the fertility God Lono; the Sri Lankan claims that the Hawaiians were not that stupid; the American has written another hefty tome to consolidate his original stance. What next, I wonder. Native Hawaiians stand by and watch as two foreigners fight

over "fodder" that does not even belong to them. This struggle for the "truth" evokes the title of Kame'eleihiwa's book Native Land and Foreign Desires (1992). Both Sahlins and Obeyesekere say their ultimate desire is that native voices be heard, but how can we hear those voices when they are screaming at each other so loudly?

In recent years, particularly in relation to scholarship about Hawai'i, native professors are challenging interpretations of their history and culture by non-Hawaiian scholars such as Marshall Sahlins, Jocelyn Linnekin, and Roger Keesing. On the whole, the works of these three scholars are highly regarded by their peers. The Keesing-Trask controversy is well known, and I will merely refer readers to the sources in the bibliography (Keesing 1989a, 1991; Trask 1991, 1993). A more recent example is the Sahlins-Kame'eleihiwa-Dening discord.

Marshall Sahlins is perhaps the best-known anthropologist in Pacific studies, one whose writing and research I have valued in the past. Greg Dening, author of that remarkable book Islands and Beaches (and whose humble attitude to writing and research I admire), wrote in a review forum of Kirch and Sahlins' Anahulu (1992), that Sahlins' contributions to Pacific studies are "brilliant" (1994:212) and the man himself a "genius" (213). Dening sang of the "state-of-the-art scholarship" of these two authors and asserted that they "make a reference point by which all scholars who follow them in Pacific studies must measure themselves" (212). His "review" was immediately followed by the remarks of Lilikala Kame'eleihiwa, historian and professor in the Center for Hawaiian Studies at the University of Hawai'i, who debunked a number of key points in Sahlins' interpretations (Kame'eleihiwa 1994a). By the end of her review, Sahlins' contribution was no longer the "reference point" that Dening claimed it to be, but bad advice from a "knowledgeable" foreigner about a culture not his own, and therefore to be rejected. How can two responses by two respected scholars-one an outsider, the other an insider-be so different? How does one account for these opposing reactions to the same work? Does the outsider have the right to engage in and publish research that portrays native people in a negative light? Do studies of Cook's death, by their very nature and focus, inevitably objectify or reduce Hawaiians, thus perpetuating racism and racial stereotypes?

Certain conventions in academia also foster an imperial approach

to Pacific studies. First is the reverence given to theory and theorists by some in the humanities and social sciences. Theory that is appropriate illuminates; when this happens, we are better informed and the quest for knowledge is advanced. However, many scholars tend to use theories that have originated in the West to understand the unfamiliar. When this happens, the local situation is subsumed under mainstream paradigms as academics who theorize in this manner end up talking to each other rather than to the people about whom they are writing. Theory, in such instances, becomes an intellectual game that has little bearing on the realities of the native lifestyles (see also Meleisea 1987:144).

Theory ought to be informed by practice, by which I mean a commitment to the well-being of those being researched (see also Murphy 1992). Giroux and McLaren referred to this as a "struggle in the interests of greater human freedom and emancipation" (1991:162). Without such involvement with the concerns of the local population, theory serves only the needs of the researcher, and sometimes the dominant culture that he or she usually represents. It will no longer do to claim "objectivity" or "impartiality" in the name of academic integrity. The researcher in the Pacific who is not committed to empowering the native people as they struggle to transform social injustices and inequalities is, ultimately, an agent of the status quo.

The scholarly practice that says that the first to publish certain facts or information about a culture has "ownership" over that material ensures that knowledge that belonged to indigenous people, like their land in many cases, is slowly appropriated by the colonizers. It does not matter that indigenous people have owned certain secrets or principles about their cultures since time immemorial. If a native reveals certain knowledge to a researcher, who publishes it in a book or journal, the researcher is the one cited in the works of other academics. Until Western scholars are taught to cite their oral sources of information in much the same way they acknowledge written sources, and until academics are willing to admit that much of what they know about Pacific societies is common knowledge to the elders of these cultures, they will continue to pass off as their own what is really native property (see Bennett 1987, who cites her oral sources).

The focus on written sources in academic research marginalized the importance of performance to Pacific cultures. Dance, drama, public rituals, and ceremonies communicate multiple messages about a cul-

ture simultaneously. These messages, however, are not overt, and often go unnoticed by academics, who are more adept at reading between the lines on a page than reading the messages implicit in the kinds of costumes being worn, the way space is negotiated, the arrangement of dancers, the hand, feet, and facial movements, and other elements of performance that embody a culture's aesthetics and values. Now that more and more Pacific Islanders are moving into film and video to comment on their societies, scholars will need to learn how to "read" nonprint media if they are to gain a better understanding of the contemporary Pacific.

The tendency to write in an aloof, detached, and jargonistic style is a smoke screen that disguises academic biases, ignorance, and insecurity. Many monographs or books specialize in sentences that are long, polysyllabic, tangled, and obscure. The implication is that if the author is not understood, then the reader cannot be smart enough.
Fortunately, native scholarsÅ\such as Hau'ofa, Trask, and WendtÅ\are secure enough not to play "protective camouflage." If all Pacific scholars pledged to write clearly about their research findings and their motivations for doing research in the Pacific, Pacific studies would no longer be the monopoly of a privileged elite minority.

Knowledgeable as they are, outsiders can never truly know what it is like to be a Samoan, a Papua New Guinean, or a Marshallese (see also Osorio 1995:13). As Wendt has written: "They [outsiders] must not pretend they can write from inside us" (1987:89). This is good advice, because history has shown that neither Margaret Mead nor Derek Freeman really knew how the "natives" think. I would like to see more books like De Vita's The Humbled Anthropologist (1990), where scholars may be encountered without their masks. Unfortunately, most ethnographies and histories hide the biases and limitations of the authors so well that they appear to contain "the truth, and nothing but the truth." Hau'ofa astutely summed up the response of Pacific Islanders when they come across this superior attitude by the outsider, whether in personal encounters or in monographs: "We often accede to things just to stop being bombarded, and then go ahead and do what we want to do anyway" (in this volume).

Sometimes native scholars like to claim that they know their people better than foreign scholars by mere virtue of their being insiders. I wish this were always the case. But common sense tells me that if I have been away from Rotuma for a decade, then I must be a

decade out of tune. The foreign anthropologist who has recently returned from the "field" is likely to have a more accurate picture than I of the present situation there. Yet there are certain matters, largely to do with intuition, emotion, and sensibility, that the outsider may never fully grasp, for these are things in the realm of the unseen, acquired through early socialization in the formative years, and perhaps inherent in the Rotuman gene pool. As a friend has said of the outsider who visits a place for a while: "Just because you went into a garage, that doesn't make you into a car!" The result of all this is a complex picture of insiders and outsiders, depending on who we are talking about, how well they are integrated into the native community, and their ability to empathize with the native population.

Similarly, I cannot claim to know what happened in Rotuma on a certain date a hundred years ago simply because I am a native Rotuman. On the other hand, Professor Alan Howard, an anthropologist who has studied my culture for more than thirty years, and who has a copy of just about everything published about Rotumans as well as his field notes over the years, may be in a better position to answer such a question. It all depends on the kind of research being carried out. In most cases, however, there is much to be gained by collaboration, on equal terms, between the white scholar and the native person.

In one of the few research projects on indigenous practices and beliefs among Pacific Islanders that I find exemplary, Richard Katz elaborated on the need for a collaborative approach between the researcher and the researched: "The people who share their lives to make research possible must exercise that power and control in these areas. It is up to them to make known their wishes in regard to the uses and goals of that research. As a precondition to hearing their agenda, we must insist that the one-way 'coercive' process of research change into a two-way process that is entered into freely. We can then commit ourselves to devoting as much energy to giving as historically has been devoted to takingÅ\and more" (1993:367).

Katz rightly asserted that all research is political. Scholars-native or otherwiseÅ\must therefore examine their motives every time they publish their research findings, review or endorse a book by another academic, or write or say things about Pacific peoples and cultures that might be used to justify oppression, in whatever form, by those in power. This is not a time for purely academic pursuits. Whenever

those of us who teach or carry out research in the Pacific promote and foster academic practices that are imperialistic in design, we become agents of a power structure that is oppressive and lacking in a social conscience.

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