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Mata Pasifika as Critique

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ABSTRACT
This paper reflects on some issues arising from the supervision of Pasifika research and the interface between Pacific and non-Pacific forms of knowledge and understanding. Acknowledging that there is always a risk of appropriating Pasifika research (to neo-liberal or Marxist) formulae, the challenge for educators is to think through the implications of different ways of knowing, beyond the set pieces of higher education research, to making an impact on the educational experiences of participants in the research and educational processes, including the students, parents, teachers and researchers, by using the research to alter personal, institutional, and policy environments . This paper investigates a way of understanding 'mata Pasifika' in the higher education setting.

Introduction:

Clearly Pasifika research, which concerns itself with the heart, the eye or the forefront, the cutting edge of research is important research. The theme of the *3rd Critiquing Pasifika Education Conference @ the University 2011* (Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand) was 'Mata Pasifika: indigenous and migrant education (IME)' with a sub-question: 'What makes a good teacher of indigenous and migrant students?' This question provoked some reflection in me, and a rethinking of the question away from the distance between teacher and student that the question implies, and towards a more organic, creative matter of relationship between the persons involved in education—teacher, student, and the institutions represented by each partner in this relationship—university, school, family, village.

Research education is, at the same time, enquiry, experience, learning and teaching. At present, for historical and demographic reasons, it is more likely that postgraduate Pasifika researchers will have a European supervisor than a Pasifika one. How does a *palagi*[1] teacher contribute to the *mata* of the matter? Is the role of the palagi to lance the boil, to pluck the unripe fruit, or to wave a knife around in front of people? These are among the various possible meanings of *mata*, but I think it is something somewhat different. The teacher clearly has to support and encourage groundbreaking Pasifika research from the students, but also to learn from them, and the best way to learn is to use the ideas one learns in one's work. So to be a good supervisor, one also should be actively thinking alongside the students about the impact of Pasifika ideas on the total range of interests that make up a research portfolio. In my case I take up my position as philosopher and researcher as well as teacher, to explain how important the ideas of *fa'a Samoa*,[2] or Tongan philosophy or Cook Islands cultural thought are, at the forefront, *o le mata*, of philosophical thought.

There are now very few countries which are entirely homogeneous: most countries contain a mixture of cultures, but the willingness of the larger, or hegemonic group—not always the same thing—to accommodate or engage with minority people is not to be taken for granted. In Austria, for instance the Slovenian minority is recognised in the constitution as having full rights of citizenship, but 65 years later those in the minority do not yet have the vote. In New Zealand, for all its faults, *te tiriti*[3] and the activists who have endeavoured to make *te tiriti* a reality, or a form of reality, have irrevocably changed the social landscape to the extent that European thought cannot simply go on as usual in New Zealand, but has to engage with the thinking of people whose philosophical backgrounds are radically different from the western tradition. It is true that we make it as hard as possible for people who are not *palagi* to own, acknowledge and use their own intellectual histories. But the point of engagement, the '*mata*' between the two, the rough front edges of intellectual engagement is a very fruitful ground. In this paper I explore some issues in the background to the engagement of 'palagi', (or 'European') and 'Pasifika' thought.

The mata

The history of European engagement with Pasifika thought is generally not a happy one. The confluence of extremely rapid technological development with Christian notions of a hierarchy of beings, in mediaeval times called The Great Chain of Being, and in the twentieth century re-coded as Darwinian evolutionism have had the unpleasant consequences, which, whether aware or unaware, we all live with. So confident have Europeans become, of being 'right' that they have ignored or subverted Pasifika ways of knowing, or replaced them, to the best of their abilities, with Christian or positivist, scientific, or other European ways of thinking. The Churches, the education systems of the Pacific Islands, the attempts to impose democracy of a kind recognisable to American/ European tradition, the law systems, the adoption of money and a 'modern' economy—all these systems and institutions represent the confidence of people, whether sailors, explorers, missionaries, the IMF, the World Bank, or school teachers, in that they 'knew' how to do it, and that the 'how' should be drawn from European not Pasifika tradition. In the nineteenth century the predominant metaphor was religious, in the twentieth century, economic. But the upshot is the same, and it is not by accident, since many of the characteristics of modern economics, like the belief in the 'invisible Hand' of the market, are drawn ultimately from Christian theology (Devine, 2004). The belief in progress, in the significance of the future, the always-delayed arrival of the promised prosperity, the hierarchy of the chosen (rich) versus the marginalised poor, the castigation of the unsuccessful or insufficiently faithful, the insistence on a single Truth, a single way of thinking and doing—all these are characteristics of European religion and neo-classical European economics.

Given this onslaught it is a testament to the power of Pasifika thinking that it survives, and that it has adapted European forms in many cases to its own ends. It is not possible to ignore European thought as it is so pervasive. In her excellent book, *Where we once belonged* (1999), Sia Fiegel explores a number of the possible subject positions that people in Samoa might adopt in relation to Europeanness or to Samoanness. Fiegel spares nobody: all positions are subjected to the most rigorous critique. One of the saddest is her character 'Siniva' who shows that to totally reject European thought and return to the original ways of thinking and doing is a dead end, literally, since Siniva's attempts to revive a purist kind of fa'a Samoa lead her to rejection, ridicule and eventually, suicide.

Part of my interest is in the other side of the story: it is a common story that Samoan and Tonga and the Cooks have had to learn and adapt, adopt or reject European thought. What happens when the opposite occurs, when palagi actually, seriously, think about Pasifika ways of being, thinking, and knowing?

Philosophical contradictions

What happens in this case is that Europeans undertake a serious form of Pasifika education that can take many forms, of course. There are many Europeans in the Islands, as there are in New Zealand who have adapted very comfortably to Pasifika or Māori ways of life, often through intermarriage. Their children cross both worlds. But in these cases the degree of integration of ideas is personal and idiosyncratic. What forms might theoretical engagement take? This engagement between European and the Pacific might be conceptualised in terms of three models: the Pakeha Māori, the scientist of the Margaret Mead type, and the researcher along the lines that John Dewey envisaged.

The Pakeha Māori of Maning's day (Maning, 1863) was usually a sailor who had by luck or design come into a Māori village, often welcomed as an authority on a language with high commercial appeal, and as a source of information on lucrative or politically advantageous ways of doing things. Some Pakeha Māori took on the thinking as well as the language and the moko. Some high status Pakeha who had roles as interpreters and authorities on Māori practice became so immersed in the culture that their descendents are in fact Māori. Others regarded their sojourn in Māori society as temporary phase of their lives. I am sure there are equivalents in the Tonga, Samoa and Cook Islands.

So, there are people who take on the culture in its entirety and those who take it on only as an instrumental means to survive a certain set of circumstances; and there are undoubtedly an infinite number of intermediate positions. These positions are the counterpart of the hybrid positions available to contemporary Pasifika people, who may choose the extent to which at any one time they will identify themselves with the culture. Homi Bhabha's (2004) notion of hybridity, which allows for an infinite range of subject positions: a person can be situated on a continuum between being totally Samoan, or Tongan—born in the Pacific, never left, speaks no other language—and being totally integrated into cosmopolitan life, speaking perhaps a range of languages, and living in international cities. Deleuze's (1998) description of a person as 'nomad': always reinventing themselves to some extent as they meet new influences and find new responses to the conditions of their lives¸ also expresses some of the complexity of migrant life although his view applies to all people. Both of these ideas together create a picture of the person as never being entirely captured by a single description of themselves, always in the process of becoming something else, as a result of both decision and social context. In a certain context a notion of the essence of Tonganness or of fa'a Samoa is a political necessity, but it is only one, even an important one of the lines of structure, which make people what they are: exigency is just as important.

Margaret Mead's model was that the researcher goes into a community, embodying the 'scientist' a kind of disembodied, deculturated mind which soaked up information, translating it through analysis into a narrative, and then returned to its own homeland, presumably to a substantial promotion in the university. To be affected by the ideas of the researched was to 'go native', an unprofessional, unscientific response. That is a different way of engaging with the other from that of the Pakeha Māori. Indeed its core is a lack of engagement, a scientific dissociation. Margaret Mead went to Samoa to learn, but what she went to learn had nothing to do with Samoan society, and everything to do with current American issues (Mead, 1928). She went to find out, basically, if a more 'primitive' society also suffered from teenagers in the way Americans did: presumably if they did, then adolescence was inescapable, if they did not, then at some Darwinian point the fittest had got it wrong.

Dewey (1952) would reject this form of research as unethical. To him, the core of 'experience' or 'experiment' (which we nowadays call 'research') is that the person who undergoes the experience should be changed in some way. To me this is a more satisfactory model than that of Pakeha Māori or Margaret Mead (1928). It allows the researcher to be discriminating about what they accept or reject of both their culture of origin and the culture then are experiencing. And it goes some way to avoiding the problems inherent in engagement.

Mirrors as mischievous

In the European tradition, much of our thinking is conceived of as a series of opposites, as binaries. This is a concept well discussed by poststructuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. The terms 'European' and 'Pasifika' as I have used them here, can take on something of the characteristics of opposites, which is by no means the case, not least because we have now a couple of hundred years of combined history and interchange. However, the temptation to use binaries has strongly affected European intellectual engagement with the Pacific.

Consequently the European image of the Pacific has been of oppositions to European characteristics: pagans/not Christians; innocent/not experienced-worldly; sexual/not restrained-repressed, and so on. It is easy to see this tendency in the concept of the 'noble savage' which draws on these contrasts as well as on the Christian hierarchy I referred to earlier. Robert Louis Stevenson, Gauguin, almost the entire tourist industry of many nations are illustrations of the romanticisation of Pasifika people as, at the same time, morally superior (noble), and primitive, i.e. sexually available/physically unrestrained (savage). Sometimes these opposites may be positive, as when the Pacific is understood in terms of 'innocence', 'nobility', 'hospitality' etc, but these are always terms which imply some sort of lack in the original population: Pacific peoples are the implied commentary on the lack of innocence, or the lack of hospitality, or the lack of restraint embodying sexual freedom, in contemporary American/New Zealand/European society.

The European stereotypes of Pacific peoples contrast in sometimes very funny ways with Pacific stereotypes of themselves. Far from the Robert Louis Stevenson image of Samoans as generous, sexual, and so on, is the Samoan self-portrait of a stingy, politically-astute people—the Scotsmen of the Pacific. I can find no trace of this Samoan self-portrait in European images of Samoa or Samoans.

This is a story I have to tell myself, repeatedly, in order to frame my own picture, to limit and control my own desire to do precisely this: to use Pacific ways of thought as a counterweight to what I regard as undesirable tendencies in European thought.

The philosophic challenge

The issues here are enormously complex, and difficult to move beyond. The difficulty arises both because people believe, still, in the mirrored images, and because they contain sufficient truth or validity to be worth exploring. So for instance, there *are* large contrasts between European and Pasifika ways of thinking, and it is not honest or helpful to overemphasise the 'we are all the same' position. The community basis of Pacific activity is quite different in many respects to the individualism, which is, after 200 years of individualist, liberal thinking, now embedded in European thought and action. So exploring these differences is very fruitful, and casts light on both Pacific ways of being and thinking, and on European ways of being and thinking.

However, the interest in contrasts tends to blur all 'other' to Europeans into the same, a kind of morphology of otherness. It has been very interesting to me to see how Māori researchers, like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1998) and Russell Bishop (Bishop & Glyn, 2003) have been taken up with alacrity not just by the 'indigenous' Māori people for whom they wrote, but by a wide variety of non-indigenous, migrant peoples who share with Māori a sense of otherness to European and a resistance to European values. The rather strange consequence is that the Māori values embedded in Kaupapa Māori research principles have become, by default, the research principles for all non-European research—for instance see Denzin, Lincoln and Smith (2008). I think that, insofar as Kaupapa Māori research offers an ethics which challenges the scientific model—what we might call the Margaret Mead model—his is an enormous advance, but it is also important to remember the specificity of the cultures of different peoples and islands. For instance, one thing that Smith (1998) and Bishop (2003) do not address is the social hierarchy of Māori and Pacific societies, which takes very different form from place to place. Any researcher who does not take into account the royal family of Tonga

or the *matai*[4] and *tulafale*[5] system of Samoa, or the importance of the *faifeau*[6] and *faletua*[7] is likely to end up with an inadequate understanding of the context of their research. But, because Smith has not addressed this issue, she has to a large extent allowed, almost endorsed, the European sociological assumption that indigenous and migrant peoples correspond to the proletariat of romantic Marxism—an assumption which is fulsomely developed in Denzin, Lincoln and Smith's (2008) introduction to *The Handbook of Indigenous Research Methodologies*. The researcher who does not know in advance that there are very complex social relationships to be negotiated is going to come unstuck very quickly.

In making this point I do not want to be understood to be disparaging the use of critical theory or other Marxist research methodologies. In certain contexts they are inescapably appropriate. If we are to investigate Pasifika unemployment, or the experiences of school students I think that to use a critical theory or Marxist-based set of attitudes and techniques is most appropriate. But, once one moves into the family and village, then it is not so productive to stick to a rigid notion of class.

Similarly, it is not always helpful to use European notions of the appropriate divisions of knowledge. Conventional European university or school disciplines do not map directly onto non-European ways of knowing. Georgina Stewart (2007) has done very important work on this in her thesis on Kaupapa Māori Science, where she discusses at a conceptual level the difference between Matauranga Māori and Science as a school subject. The attempt to substitute school science with Matauranga Māori is to pay insufficient attention to the distinguishing characteristics of each of these forms of knowledge and to put students at a disadvantage by confusing the two (Stewart 2007).

The significance of a real engagement for practice

Questions of methodology do not constitute an issue which invites a solution: it seems to me that understanding the niceties of research is an ongoing project. What is important is that the researcher should be open to being changed by the research: this is Dewey's point (Dewey, 1952; Devine, 2010). If research is not an educative process for the researcher, then, unless it is purely statistic-gathering, it is not really worth doing. I think we are very fortunate that Pacific people generally, despite having been as exploited as Māori by academic researchers, are in general still hospitable to the researcher, regarding them as learners rather than as enemies. We must be careful not to change this perception: an ethical issue which is perhaps worth researching in its own right.

For Europeans such as myself there is enormous value in learning about Pacific ways of thinking and knowing because it is a commentary on the world we move in: we often say that a fish does not see the water it swims in, but to talk to a bird and swap ways of understanding our environments is to enable us to actually 'see' our water and our air. I have often included stories from the Pacific and from Māori to make a point in my own writing, because such stories illustrate the point, that there are different ways of understanding the world, in a more precise way than vast numbers of philosophic words.

The question arises then, as to why and perhaps, when, universities, as well as schools, will adopt a more inclusive approach to notions of knowledge and research. My own university aspires to be the 'university of choice' for Māori and Pacific students, but there is little evidence of consciousness in that claim that the nature of knowledge or research as espoused by the university will respond to the needs and knowledge of those students who choose to attend. Anne Hickling Hudson poses the challenges very well in terms of schools:

> One is the question of how to reorganise the education system so that all teachers would as a matter of course incorporate these elements of high quality intercultural education in their practice. The second asks how educators could be supported to go even beyond intercultural practice to address far more difficult postcolonial challenges, such as changing the very form and nature of the traditional school. (Hickling Hudson, 2003: 388).

We have to address these questions, and address them with great care. No one will thank us for an inadequate response. To change the nature and form of research is an ongoing process, but already well-begun. However, to some extent research, like science itself, remains a *palagi* concept, and will probably always carry traces of its own history in its assumptions and procedures.

A practical response is to encourage so far as possible the research of Pacific colleagues and students. Some students have been surprised to be directed away from the hot topics of the educational world back towards an understanding of the responses or actions of their own people. However, no one can get inside a community as can its own members, so the work our students do now achieves several things: it captures knowledge which may be becoming hard to access; it provides a platform from which future students may go further into the knowledge and understanding of their own people; it provides an alternative discourse to the neo-liberal, management-oriented research programmes fostered by the government and others; it takes the student themselves deeper into an understanding of their own attitudes and practices; and it provides an authentic way of developing critique and forward movement among the people themselves.

A critical basis for this work has been provided by Linita Manu'atu, and her seminal work on Tongan concepts, starting with *malie*[8] (Manu'atu, 2000; Manu'atu & Kepa, 2006, for example); also Timote Vaioleti (2006) on *i'lo* and *poto*; Byron Seuili (2005) on *mea alofa*[9]; Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (2001, 2002) on traditional economic organisation and ways of knowing, and others who have investigated important concepts of specific, named communities—Tonga, Samoan, Solomons, and made them available for reflection by others. The substance of much of this work is the careful description, often through linguistic analysis of concepts, the knowledge structures that support them, and the practices which are a logical consequence of social emanation of the concepts and structures they describe. However *critical* work requires the writer to engage beyond the descriptive with the political and ethical questions provoked by the analytics of the descriptive. If this is how it *is,* is this how it *should be*? Can the descriptive work of Pasifika research provide a more trenchant critique of current practices, both within Pasifika cultures and at the interface of *palagi* and Pasifika institutions?

Good examples of current work at the interface are provided by Lorraine Pau'uvale (2012) and Jeanne Pau'uvale Teisina (2011). Pau'uvale and Teisina are researching their own, Tongan communities with a view to being able to articulate Tongan views on the nature and evaluation of educational provision for their children in New Zealand; this is ground-breaking and vital work. While Teisina is most interested in the work and relationships of Tongan people involved in education, and honours their efforts and their philosophical positions, her research leads her directly to the difficult interface between the educational values of Tongan teachers and parents with those of the educational establishment. Pau'uvale takes on directly the interface with European assumptions and regulations which have an impact on Tongan teachers and students. In the work of these two young researchers the 'mata' of the engagement between *palagi* and Pasifika at the level of research is undertaken from the Pasifika side.

To end on an autobiographical note, work of this kind is only possible if one has an elementary knowledge of Pacific ways of thinking to start with, and for this, in my own case, I would like to acknowledge and thank the Samoan community of the Avondale Pacific Island Church (PIC) and particularly the 'Asi family whose *mea alofa* to me as a young woman, many years ago, has been the basis for this work.

Notes

1. *palagi,* non-Samoan (Samoan).
2. *fa'a Samoa*, the Samoan way of life (Samoan).

3. *te tiriti o Waitangi,* the Treaty of Waitangi 1840 (Māori).
4. *matai,* Chief (Samoan).
5. *tulafale,* chiefly orator (Samoan).
6. *faifeau,* pastor, minister (Samoan).
7. *faletua,* pastor's wife (Samoan).
8. *malie,* the process of developing interconnected energy flows and engagement between performers and audience (Manu'atu 2000) (Tongan).
9. *mea alofa,* Gift (Samoan).

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