Indigenous Knowledge in Teacher Training for Native Literacy Programs

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For some of us, education has not been a luxury of preference but one that is badly tainted by rejection in school and academic disappointment.

—Mere Kepa, Maori (2005: 8)

No one can deny that our cultures have been eroded and our languages lost, that most of our communities subsist in a state of abject economic dependency, that our governments are weak and that white encroachment on our lands continues. We can, of course, choose to ignore these realities and simply accede to the dissolution of our cultures and nations. Or we can commit ourselves to a different past, one that honours the memory of those who have sacrificed, fought, and died to preserve the integrity of our nations. This path, the opposite of the one we are on now, leads to a renewed political and social life based on our natural traditions.

—Taiake Alfred, Kanien' Kehaka (1999: xii)

Academia has often been a hotbed of racism because scholars are taught to pretend that they can observe phenomena objectively. In fact they observe data through culturally prescribed categories that restrict the possible answers and understandings to a predetermined few selections. With Western thought primarily a binary, yes/no method of determining truth, so much data is excluded, and so limited are the possible answers that Western knowledge might be regarded as a mere classification system devoid of valid conclusions.


What is more important than what alternatives indigenous peoples offer the world is what alternatives indigenous peoples offer each other. The strategies that work for one community may well work for another.

—Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Maori (2001: 105)

This paper critically examines issues of Native language literacy in teacher education, curriculum development, policy and planning within the social, cultural and political contexts of indigenous knowledge systems. It is based on an ongoing cooperative project between the Kosrae State Department of Education (DOE), in Kosrae, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and Shonan Institute of Technology (SIT) in Fujisawa, Japan. Its purpose is to help maintain and enrich the Kosraean language, culture and knowledge-based systems, including traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). The project has been ongoing since 1999 with partial funding (2001–2004) from the Japan Ministry of Education and Science. Additional funding has come from SIT. In keeping with the belief that it is the responsibility of colonizing powers (Spain, Germany, Japan and the US, in the case of Kosrae) to finance indigenous language and culture projects, no FSM monies have been used. Likewise, in keeping with the belief that such programs should be community based rather than dictated from above or the outside, the authors of project materials are Kosraean students, teachers, and holders of TEK.

Key words: Kosrae, Micronesia, indigenous peoples, education, assimilation, linguistic and cultural genocide, linguistic human rights, language shift, language maintenance, indigenous knowledge, liberation pedagogy.

Introduction

Kosrae is a small island in Micronesia with a population of just under 9,000 and an additional 3,000–4,000 living off-island - mainly as migrant workers in Guam,
Hawaii and the US mainland, or in the US military at bases around the world and in war zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Kosraeans have their own language and culture, which they wish to maintain and enrich. However, the knowledge base of teacher education comes from US benchmark standards, many of which have been imposed by the US under the Compact of Free Association. This serves, intentionally or otherwise, to devalue traditional ways of knowing, cultural values and belief systems. It also results in highly assimilative educational practices that favor English as the language of “advancement” and exacerbate language shift (LS). In 2001, for example, the FSM National Language conference warned that “a realignment of values to combat forces such as individualism, pragmatism and materialism is needed to address language shift.” (p. 20).

In order to help reverse LS, Kosrae DOE and SIT began a community-based project in 2001 to produce first language literacy materials. An early problem was how to train members of the community to develop curricula (e.g., dictionaries, oral histories, etc.), which could be used in the schools. There was a strong bias within DOE for training in linguistics. Some members of DOE, however, felt that more could be gained by training in ethnography and critical pedagogy whereby students, teachers and members of the community at large could share in developing a critical understanding of the sociohistorical causes of LS, and take action to transform the situation.

Education as assimilation, colonization and genocide

Let us begin with a premise, which will frame the rest of this paper. The endeavor of compulsory/universal education worldwide has been one of assimilation to the interests of the ruling elites of nation states ever since its inception in the early 19th century. Furthermore, it is part and parcel of 500 years of colonization (today known as globalization) based on capitalist relations of production (i.e., the privatized use of land, resources and human labor to create profit).

While this process exploits oppressed peoples wherever it can find them—including workers in the industrialized world—it is particularly devastating to indigenous communities. From murder and enslavement (including incarceration in the name of “rule of law”), to theft of land, epidemics, health and social dysfunctions, to the Christianizing mission, boarding schools and education based on the standards of the colonizer, and on to development schemes replete with outside consultants and professional “experts,” the legacy of colonization continues today worldwide.

To better understand the role of education in this, we turn to the three parameters of colonization as defined by V. Y. Mudimbe (1988):

1. the domination of the physical space of another by the colonizer,
2. the reformation of the minds of the indigenous peoples of the dominated space, and
3. the integration of the local indigenous economic histories into the Western perspective. (p. 2)

According to Mudimbe, then, the physical domination of another’s space is only one aspect of colonization. The colonizer must also control the “hearts and minds” of those colonized. Glenn T. Morris, a Shawnee, refers to this as “colonization of the mind.” He writes:

Although the economic implications of colonization are critical, the discussion here is concerned primarily with the methods and mechanisms that have been, and continue to be utilized by the colonizing powers in convincing others that the colonizer’s signs, markers, and constructions of language are legitimate. This process of conversion is critical in the process of systems acceptance by members of the colonizing society. Perhaps of greater importance is the way the colonized internalize the colonizer’s language, soon accepting and adopting not only the superficial forms of the words but also the overt and implied meanings attached to them—in other words, the colonization of the mind. (2003: p. 125)

Through colonization of the mind, education continually strives to create/recreate malleable colonies and national work forces, which can also serve as cannon fodder for ruling economic interests during times of military expansion and conflict. Those who resist, as well as those who are simply not needed for the production of profit, are thrown into the trash bin of history/society. George E. Tinker (1993), an Osage/Cherokee, argues that having one’s mind colonized is actually a form of cultural (and we would add linguistic)
Cultural genocide can be defined as the effective destruction of a people by systematically or systemically (intentionally or unintentionally in order to achieve other goals) destroying, eroding, or undermining the integrity of the culture and system of values that defines a people and gives them life. First of all, it involves the destruction of those cultural structures of existence that give a people a sense of holistic and communal integrity. It does this by limiting a people’s freedom to practice their culture and to live out their lives in culturally appropriate patterns. It effectively destroys a people by eroding both their self-esteem and the interrelationships that bind them together as a community. (p. 6)

One result of this involves what Tinker and others refer to as self hate. People who have been through the boarding school experience (whether it be in the US or Russia or the Pacific, or anywhere), and/or those who have been colonized to believe that losing their mother language/culture is the only road to advancement, frequently manifest aspects of self-hate behaviour. Eduardo Duran (1995), a Native American psychologist, describes the psychological manifestation of this process as follows:

Once a group of people have been assaulted in a genocidal fashion, there are psychological ramifications. With the victim’s complete loss of power comes despair, and the psyche reacts by internalizing what appears to be genuine power—the power of the oppressor, which is merely a caricature of the power actually taken from Native... people. At this point, the self-worth of the individual and/or group has sunk to a level of despair tantamount to self-hatred. This self-hatred can be either internalized or externalized.

The above comments—all by indigenous peoples—invite us to look more closely at how education in today’s global economy may be a major actor in the continuing process of assimilation, colonization, cultural and linguistic genocide. To do that, we need first to reexamine our respective histories as they have been given to us.

Kosrae: a received history

Kosrae’s received history is exactly that: history “received” from the white man. It begins, not with us as Pacific islanders coming from low-lying atolls in the southeast to discover Kosrae more than 2,000 years ago, but with the coming of French and Russian ships at the close of the 18th century. It does not tell the story of Kosraean place, of who we are, of our values, of how we are connected and related to each other, to our island and our ocean.

Instead, our received history continues to be a 19th century examination of “primitive culture through a looking glass.” It includes de-contextualized lists of misunderstood and poorly transcribed names, cultural attributes and artifacts (many stolen); collections of engravings of local flora and fauna, thatched-roof houses, tattooed natives and bare-breasted women; or more recently, photographs of Christian natives in black suits and Victorian granny dresses, of Japanese Army officers and US Navy “liberators” in khaki uniforms, of short-sleeved American Trust Territory administrators, of young Kosraeans leaving for US colleges on scholarship, some returning to become teachers. It also includes photographs and records of some of these teachers as first generation politicians in the newly independent Federated States of Micronesia. And even more recently, our received history—largely in the form of local, national and regional media stories—blames us for our failure to overcome American dependence, for lack of transparency, accountability and good governance, for lack of development and for lagging behind in educational standards. It reminds us that education is the key to advancement in a highly individualistic and competitive global society and that parents and teachers must do more to promote it.

In an address to the 22nd Annual Pacific Educational Conference in Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands, earlier this year, David Cohen, US Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Interior Department, complained that many Pacific Islanders do not value education, and warned that:

We have a moral duty to educate our people about the importance of education. And if there are cultural barriers to doing so, then maybe we have to think about transforming the culture. (The Kaselehle Press, Vol. 5/19; p. 11)
Cohen also warned island educators that the United States would not tolerate waste and abuse of US taxpayer money for education. Here, he was referring to cuts in US funding for education under Phase II of the Compact of Free Association. These funds come with numerous strings attached which either require or encourage FSM to (1) purchase American textbooks in English as the medium of instruction; (2) develop US benchmark tests for all K12 curricula; (3) hire more foreigners to improve teaching; (4) develop certification standards/tests for local teachers; (5) introduce performance-based term contracts for local teachers; (6) contract with the Asian Development Bank for time management studies to ensure teacher quality performance and compliance; (7) develop teacher training/testing modules in linguistics for teachers of indigenous languages; (8) hire outside educational consultants to further ensure teacher quality excellence, and (9) conduct spot checks at schools nationwide to ensure compliance.

So this is our received history up to the present day. Whether we use that history to accept things as they are, change them as Secretary Cohen suggests, or create new and liberating histories, it is very much a question of how we connect our colonized past to our globalized present. According to Mander (1996), globalization involves “arguably the most fundamental redesign of the planet’s political and economic arrangements since at least the Industrial Revolution. Yet the profound implications of these fundamental changes have barely been exposed to serious public scrutiny or debate.” (p. 3). Instead, educational institutions, elected officials and the mass media offer up “utopian” descriptions of globalization as a “panacea for all”. Such lack of critical analyses, Mander argues, serve the interests of the leading advocates and beneficiaries of this new order. And for those concerned with indigenous language maintenance, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (1999) adds the following:

An active agent in killing languages faster than ever is...the triumphalist proclamation of the “free market system as The Global System for Ever...[But] if people are forced to shift their languages in order to gain economic benefits of the kind which are in fact bare necessities for basic survival, this is a violation of not only their economic human rights but also their linguistic human rights.

Education for liberation

How do we liberate ourselves? In A Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization, Howard Adams, a Canadian Metis, writes that in order to achieve true liberation, it is necessary to develop a counter-consciousness:

Without an indigenous consciousness, Indians, Metis, and Inuit peoples’ only claim to Aboriginality is race and heritage. This is not enough to achieve true liberation. To accomplish self-determination, we need more than racial pride. We must have Aboriginal nationalism, an understanding of the state’s capitalist ideology and its oppression, and, ultimately, a counter-consciousness. (1995: 45)

One way to develop such a consciousness is through story. Lee Francis, Laguna Pueblo, argues that young American Indians need to reclaim their identity by learning “the stories of the People. They need to learn, remember, and tell the ancient origin and migration stories, the stories that focus on Native values, attitudes and beliefs” as well as new stories which “incorporate the wisdom of the People” (2003: p. 79).

We Kosraeans also have story. We call it sramsram. A long time ago, our sramsram connected us to the universe. Then people died of foreign disease and the few remaining elders told sramsram about canoes which navigated the ocean, about trips to other islands, about the matrilineal clan system and equality among the sexes, about generosity and caring, about plants for medicinal and other purposes, and about respecting the environment. Slowly our sramsram changed to Christian stories about patriarchy and getting ahead and individual achievement. And today, many of our young people sramsram about cable television, video, sports games, soundblasters, Nike shoes, cars, life off-island, and “making it” in the US military.

Although much has been lost, students, teachers and community members from Kosrae are using both old and new sramsram to develop books, CDs, videos and other culturally liberating and meaningful curricula in collaboration with SIT computer media students. Such sramsram attempt to honor our traditions and allow us to understand that history—our reclaimed history—is not just about the past. It is also about re-
claiming our future. In developing or considering possible projects to reclaim that future, thoughts pertinent to teacher training also emerge. Here are a few:

**The Children’s Picture Dictionary:** How can Kosraean second and third graders draw and write their own picture dictionary? How can such a dictionary, with pictures about their daily lives and funny sentences, reflect some of the deeper issues concerning our language and culture? How can the use of three languages in the dictionary—Kosraean (as our language), English (as the primary medium of instruction in our schools), and Japanese (as the colonial language of our grandparents and an elective in high school)—support our traditions of cooperative, intergenerational learning?

**The Kosraean Junior Dictionary:** How can Kosraean college students with no training in linguistics, write a 1,500-word dictionary of their language? How should they compile the entries? What should they do about the fact that Kosraean has no words for parts of speech? Invent new ones? How should they deal with issues of standardized/non-standardized spelling? How can pictures be used to reflect Kosraean values and the importance of Kosraean culture? What questions and activities can be included that will encourage reflection about who we are, where we come from and where we want to go?

**The Kosrae Night Sky Book and CD:** Between 1840–1880 western disease reduced our population from a current estimate of around 30,000 to a mere 300. Tremendous amounts of traditional knowledge and language were wiped out, including deep-sea navigational skills and the names of the constellations. Received history takes little responsibility for this. It underestimates pre-contact population at between 1,500–7,000, evades responsibility for the epidemic, says almost nothing about loss of TEK and language, but touts the conversation to Christianity that resulted from it. Why? What new Kosraean names can we give to our constellations? What sramsram can we make?

**New Sramsram from and for our Elders:** On Kosrae, traditional knowledge, including TEK is devalued. You can’t get a job with it in Honolulu. Ecologists, marine biologists and other outside experts aren’t interested; they have their own Western categories of “science-speak,” not sramsram. And marketing indigenous “spirituality” hasn’t caught on yet. How can we save our knowledge, our language and our human treasures without turning them into eco-tourist freak shows? Without letting them be co-opted?

**Our Goddess Sinlaku:** Before Christianization, our Deity was female. Her name was Sinlaku. Our clans were matrilineal, women were equal, respected, and they played a vital role in society. After Christianization/colonization, our families became patriarchal. Today, there is алкоголизм, domestic violence, greed, possession, coercion, and especially among young men, increasing suicide. When Silanku left our islands after the coming of a stronger god, she went to Yap. Before leaving, she told us that she would return when the full moon turned dark. Is it time? How should we prepare? What sramsram can we share, even in our churches, about this?

**The Kosrae Language and Culture Website:** How can a homepage be best used to maintain and enrich our language and culture? How can it be used to make sramsram with our brothers and sisters, aunties and uncles living off island?

**Concluding remarks—where we go from here**

On Kosrae and many places in the world today, the forces of globalization are radically rupturing traditional cultural values and belief systems. This, in turn, is impacting on the ecosystem, on the traditional knowledge base, on the language, and on education, resulting in what we believe is linguistic and cultural genocide. In order to begin to overcome this situation, we believe that indigenous knowledges can play a vital role in reclaiming our identity. This must be a community effort in which students, teachers, holders of TEK and Kosraeans living both on-island and in Diaspora all participate.

Here, a key question is how teachers should be trained. While US benchmark standards are being imposed from above, there is still a great deal of indigenous knowledge that Kosraeans have taken care to collect, keep, and in the right circumstances, pass down. Examined critically in the context of globalization, and with the creation of new stories that respect the wisdom and knowledge of those who came before us, it may be possible to build new and liberating histories. We end with the following quote:

*Thus, when it comes to the act of genocide, I also know there can be no alternative to finding ways*
to fight for life. As long as there are those among us who believe in the old ways of seeing and being, there can be no surrender to genocide. Ever!

—Gabriel Horn (2003: 75)

Bibliography


