

Rethinking the Role of Universities at the Millenium

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The eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries may well be remembered by future Pacific historians as an era of imposition and extraction. Missionaries imposed alien religious beliefs and practices while forbidding ancient rituals; traders imposed a commercial economy based on money and created a demand for foreign goods; colonial governments imposed taxes, laws protecting their own interests, and an education system that virtually ignored the vast wealth of indigenous knowledge. This is not to say that these impositions were universally resisted, or even resented, by the indigenous people. Some embraced radical change, or at least some aspects of it, with enthusiasm. But it is clear that until recently the colonizers paid little attention to indigenous aspirations and views, particularly when they deviated from the colonizers' own.

The past three centuries were also an era of extraction. Sandalwood was extracted from Hawai'i, phosphate from Nauru, gold from Fiji. From everywhere artifacts were taken from their living contexts or from the earth, bones were taken from their gravesites, and indigenous knowledge was gleaned from the minds of knowledgeable men and women. It is this latter form of extraction I would like to address today--the recording, archiving, and publishing of indigenous knowledge by anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, folklorists, linguists, ethnomusicologists, and a variety of other scholars and curiosity seekers.

What happened to this vast array of stolen goods? Perhaps "stolen goods" is too harsh a concept, but it is at least as appropriate as the judgment made by European ship captains who complained about Pacific Islanders "stealing" artifacts from their vessels. In both instances there was a lack of understanding, of both the processes of exchange, and the value of commodities (artifacts, knowledge, and ancestral bones included), to the other. At any rate, artifacts and bones ended up in museums or in private collections, indigenous knowledge ended up in archives or in scholarly publications. They were treated as precious "objects"--objects that, after being

filtered through the theoretical lenses of western scholars, would shed light on the nature of human diversity, on the human condition. They were also precious because they provided substantive rationale for western institutions such as museums, archives, and universities to expand their activities. For scholars who trafficked in extracted goods, they provided career paths, tenure, and promotion.

I do not seek to fix blame, nor do I wish to condemn these activities as lacking justification. Along with other anthropologists, I, too, believed the mission of seeking insights into the human condition and of using these insights to attack western ethnocentrism to be an honorable undertaking, justifying the collection and interpretation of indigenous knowledge. I have to admit that I am as guilty as others who have trafficked in knowledge extracted from Pacific peoples. It is less the extraction itself than the unseemly way in which this knowledge has been withheld from the communities that provided it that I wish to reproach.

Let me provide an example from Hawai'i documented by Amy Ku'uleialoha Stillman, an anthropologist of Hawaiian ancestry at the University of Michigan. Dr. Stillman notes that prior to the 1970s, much of the hula being performed was of the westernized "modern" type, while knowledge of older styles of hula were held by a small group of elderly masters. The cultural resurgence that gained impetus in the 1970s stirred renewed interest in ancient forms of the hula, and many elderly masters taught their repertoire to a new generation of teachers and students, thus ensuring its continuity in practice.

However, while the hula community knew of the existence of archival collections of poetic repertoire, the specific contents of those archival collections was not known, owing to circumstances of institutionalization. While some collections of poetic repertoire for hula passed into the care of the territorial archives (now Hawaii State Archives), the vast majority of materials went into the holdings of the Bishop Museum. Once they passed into the care of Bishop Museum they were subject to institutionalized management, which was constrained by limited financial and staff resources. Thus, for decades, the traditional poetic repertoire languished in near-obscure; and over time, their contents became separated from the hula

community. Cataloging was minimal and did not enable exploration in the archival collections; patrons had to know about the existence of particular pieces of repertoire in order to inquire about them. There was no subject index, and some sources were not included at all. As Stillman notes, the museum appeared to the Hawaiian community an institution with locked secrets.

The poetic repertoire long institutionalized in Bishop Museum took on renewed value in the context of the cultural resurgence that has gained impetus since the 1970s. In many ways, though, the meanings for contemporary performers and audiences are not the same as those this repertoire held at the time of their creation. As a result of their long separation from the community of living performers, the poetic hula repertoire being resurrected from archival sources today are brought back into circulation within vastly altered social and historical circumstances, and their original meanings have been obscured.

This example could be multiplied a thousand fold were we to consider the full range of Pacific societies. Indigenous knowledge was extracted from “informants,” transcribed in an alien language, filtered through often esoteric theoretical language unintelligible to the average European or American layman, let alone the indigenous people who produced it, and published in obscure academic journals and books that languished in university libraries. The whole process was one of alienation -- alienation of knowledge from its source, alienation of scholarship from non-academic communities, alienation from living traditions, from life itself.

As anyone familiar with contemporary scholarship can attest, such processes still dominate academia to a great extent. But a new awareness has been developing among Pacific scholars in recent years, an awareness of the need to be inclusive of the communities we study and serve rather than excluding them by resorting to our own pedantic tribal discourse. Hopefully the 21st century will be characterized by a collaborative partnership between western scholars and indigenous Pacific peoples--a partnership that will aim to preserve traditional knowledge and to make it accessible to the communities that produced it.

Accessibility needs to be enhanced in several ways. First of all, scholars should be encouraged to write in ways that are comprehensible to a general public instead of resorting to esoteric jargon that mystifies all but a select few. They should also be encouraged to assist indigenous scholars to record and publish cultural knowledge that they wish to preserve and pass on, and to do so in a language easily understood by the indigenous people.

Collaborations have taken place in the past, usually with the credit misappropriated by western scholars. For example, Mary Kawena Pukui's wonderful account of *The Polynesian Family System in Ka'u, Hawai'i* was published with E.S.C. Handy as first author, when he was primarily the scribe and she the author. This practice has been common in academic circles and conveys a great deal about western cultural imperialism over the past three centuries. The underlying message is that indigenous knowledge can only be legitimized and worth publishing if it bears the stamp of a western scholar. The complicity of western academic institutions in this practice is a sad commentary on our notion of a university. The ethnocentrism of this perspective must be eliminated if universities are to become truly universal in their approach to knowledge.

In a reversal of this practice, the Institute of Pacific Studies at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji recently republished a collection of legends from the island of Rotuma, with the Rotuman who supplied the stories, Mesulama Titifanua, as primary author and the missionary-linguist C.M. Churchward as second author. The original publication, some 60 years ago, only listed Churchward as author.

But I would like to take this a step further. I would like to see university scholars assisting Pacific Islanders to preserve and disseminate indigenous knowledge with more regard for the service they can provide than for the prestige they might gain in academia. I know this is asking much since the structure of rewards in academia places a premium on impressing one's colleagues with one's erudition; service to communities is of lesser value in the quest for tenure and promotion. This needs to change if a true partnership is to develop between western universities and Pacific communities.

In the latter part of my career I found myself having to make a choice in commitments. On the one hand was the possibility of consolidating ties to the profession of anthropology by publishing theoretically sophisticated treatises based on my long experience as a teacher and researcher; on the other hand was the opportunity to shift my allegiance to the island community I have been studying over the past 40 years--the Rotuman community.

Rotuma is a small isolated island some 300 miles north of Fiji. Although culturally and linguistically distinct it was made part of the Colony of Fiji in 1881 for the convenience of the British overlords. After Fiji became independent in 1970, Rotuma became part of the nation of Fiji. Like most Polynesians, Rotumans are a peripatetic people and have migrated to urban areas in Fiji, to Australia and New Zealand, Hawai'i, the U.S. mainland, Europe, and elsewhere, so that now approximately four-fifths of all Rotumans live abroad. I mention this because the community I have chosen to serve is global--a scattered array of enclaves who share in common ties to a little island in the Pacific Ocean.

How do I serve this transnational community? Primarily in two ways. First, I have worked with a revered Rotuman elder, Mrs Elisapeti Inia, to record and publish the indigenous knowledge she wants to disseminate to future generations of Rotumans, wherever they may be. The Institute for Pacific Studies at the University of the South Pacific--a godsend for Pacific authors-- has thus far published two books that resulted from our collaboration: a book of Rotuman proverbs and a new Rotuman dictionary. We are currently engaged in producing another volume, this one detailing Rotuman ceremonies. The books are published with Mrs Inia as author; I am the scribe who helps to record her knowledge, the one who asks questions that helps bring implicit knowledge to consciousness, the co-editor (along with my wife, Jan Rensel) who helps to organize her information for publication. Mrs Inia believes that without such assistance the knowledge she has accumulated over her lifetime might be lost when she, and her cohort of elders, passes on.

The second way I serve the global Rotuman community is by maintaining a website that I created in 1997. The website provides a place in cyberspace where Rotumans everywhere (except on the island itself, ironically) can get news and information about events on the island and from Rotuman enclaves around the world. They can find friends and relatives on the Rotuman Register and can post messages on a bulletin board, or enter a chat room that serves the community. The site includes an interactive Rotuman-English dictionary, recipes for preparing Rotuman dishes, a Rotuman Humor Page, and much more. It also serves as a site for repatriating historical materials that have been archived in western institutions or hidden in obscure publications. To make these materials available I have scanned hundreds of pages of text and posted them on the website. Now contemporary Rotumans can access many, if not most, of the documents germane to their history as a people. There's much more to be done, and I intend to continue to develop the site until I can transfer it to a Rotuman willing to take it on.

I was able to follow my heart and choose service to the global Rotuman community over commitment to academia because I was a tenured full professor, so I had nothing to lose but prestige within my profession. But I shouldn't have had to make such a choice, nor should young scholars be pressured to play competitive games of "look at how very bright I am" to insure their careers. The motto of "publish or perish" needs to be replaced with something like, "serve cultural communities so that their wisdom will not perish."

What I am suggesting is that universities must make choices also. They can continue to justify esoteric scholarship produced for a privileged few--the so-called community of scholars--or they can take steps to eliminate the boundaries between our institutions and the broader communities we are capable of serving. This would require expanding our notions of what constitutes valuable knowledge--knowledge worth transmitting. It would mean incorporating indigenous knowledge into our curricula and giving it the legitimacy we afford knowledge derived from our own cultural traditions of science and research. It would require embracing indigenous peoples as colleagues rather than treating them as informants.

The technology is in place; electronic media, including the internet, provides the means for expanding community boundaries without limit. Despite reactionary backlash from cultural jingoists, recognition of the value of cultural diversity is probably stronger now than at any other time in history, and the coming millenium provides the psychological stimulus for new beginnings. So the time is ripe for universities to reassess their priorities.

The University of Hawai'i at Hilo is particularly well placed to reverse the relations of imposition and extraction that have characterized the past three centuries. It already has a core faculty who culturally sensitive and are dedicated to providing service. I am therefore confident, that under the visionary leadership of Chancellor Tseng, the University of Hawai'i at Hilo will demonstrate, as the new millenium begins, that a university can be as great for the services it provides as for the quality of its scholarship.