LITERACY, WRITING SYSTEMS, AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE PACIFIC

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Literacy is almost always considered to be a positive force. Most developmental theorists believe it to be a necessary step in order for economic development to take place. It is perhaps not so simple. Using Pacific Island nations as a case study, it is clear that literacy, which is very high there, has not produced sustainable development. An argument is made that the introduction of literacy, with an alien writing system, may have been a hindrance to economic prosperity. Sejong the Great is presented as an excellent example of what could/should have been done.

Introduction

Six hundred years ago, Sejong the Great introduced a new writing system in Korea to replace the Chinese script that Koreans had been using. Although it took two hundred years to take root, it greatly encouraged literacy and general education all over the country. Some credit Han-gul’s scientific design and ease of learning as reasons for Korea’s development as one of the world’s great civilizations and most literate countries. Certainly part of Korea’s development is due to this writing system, which vastly simplified the Chinese script previously in use. It is not difficult to credit increased literacy with greatly assisting Korea’s development — especially after the system achieved widespread use earlier this century. In fact, most development theorists consider written literacy to be a major component necessary for development. Jack Goody figures prominently (1968, 1977, 1986, 1987) among contemporary scholars who continue to maintain that written literacy plays a crucial role in bringing about positive fundamental changes in the structure of societies. After observing the course of development in Pacific island nations, however, we find reason to question the assumption that written literacy always brings about positive changes in a society.

If we compare the history of written literacy and economic development in Korea with that of Pacific island nations, the contrast is striking. Korea, under King Sejong’s direction, adopted a writing system developed internally to replace one that had been imposed from the outside. Korea was already a society with a written language, and while literacy was not common, it was indeed a written form of literacy, not an oral form. Until 300 years ago, on the other hand, written literacy was unknown in the Pacific — there were no writing systems of any kind. When the written word arrived in the islands, it was imposed from the outside, displacing the existing oral traditions and introducing an entirely new form
of literacy — written. These two scenarios include considerable differences and require us to reevaluate the effect of literacy on development, at least within the Pacific islands themselves.

The Islands and the introduction of literacy

Pacific island nations vary substantially in terms of size, population, political structure, and level of economic development. Although the land area of each island is usually very small, the overall region encompassing all of the islands and the intervening ocean actually covers a major portion of the globe (Attachment 1). Island types include continental land masses, such as Papua New Guinea (PNG), as well as small atoll archipelagoes, as are found in Kiribati. Island populations range from the four million people of PNG to tiny Niue’s 3,000. Approximately 25,000 islands are grouped into the three broad cultural areas of Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia, and further divided into twenty-five smaller socio-political entities. Natural resources are unevenly distributed, providing some islands with significant forests, phosphate deposits, gold deposits, and productive farmland, while leaving others to deal with agricultural conditions that require intensive efforts just to grow basic fruits and vegetables. Politically, the island nations of the Pacific lag behind their Asian neighbors, primarily because most of the Pacific islands have attained greater degrees of political independence only during the past fifty-five years (Myers 1995).

There is no evidence to indicate that literate societies existed in the Pacific prior to European contact (Besnier 1995). At the time of Cook’s voyages to the Pacific, oral traditions were relied upon to convey the past to future generations. The first introduction of literacy — taken broadly as the ability to communicate by reading and writing — in the Pacific islands was in Micronesia.1 Catholic missionaries from the Philippines went to the Mariana Islands in the late 17th century to establish a church, bringing with them their Bibles and their alphabet. This early introduction of literacy via Southeast Asia was not typical of other parts of the Pacific, however.

Literacy came to most of the Pacific islands in the 1800s when Protestant missionary activity flourished, most notably in Polynesia. At the time, mass literacy was thought to be an exclusive feature of Western life. From a Western perspective, the advantages of written literacy far outweighed the disadvantages. In fact, from the missionaries’ point of view, there were no disadvantages. It was clear to them that writing enabled its users to keep permanent records that could be subjected to critical scrutiny, in contrast to orally transmitted information, which was considered inherently ephemeral and unreliable. Writing, they believed, could give rise to standards of historical verifiability and long-distance communication (in terms of time as well as space). They claimed that written text is less context-dependent than a comparable spoken text, and that memory was enhanced in significant ways, as it made possible the rigorous and perfect recall of lengthy texts (all preserved in writing), compared to the imprecise, pattern-driven memory of pre-literate individuals. The transformation of the islands from societies that depended on oral traditions to places where literacy was valued represented a
fundamental and lasting change. In most island cultures the validation of knowledge previously hinged upon its being passed orally and selectively from one generation to another. Literacy contributed to a gradual ‘cultural erosion’ (Topping 1992) as reading and writing was taught to everyone, not just to a chosen few, and what was written down was available for all who could read. This detracted from the power of the chiefs, who no longer had a corner on verbal speech acts or were unique in knowing the history of the people. Literacy influenced both the pace and path of cultural change as knowledge began to spread to the masses.

Because literacy was introduced by outsiders, as opposed to being initiated by local rulers, native languages were not given their own script but instead given the alphabet (Roman) of an outside language (English, Spanish, or French) (Nakanishi 1980). The introduction of literacy was not seen as an addition to the local traditions of orality but as a replacement for it. This was done in the larger context of replacing much of local culture, especially religion, with western forms, believing that this would promote social and economic development. By replacing oral traditions with an outsider-based writing system, the cultures were changed in ways that must be taken into account in any discussion of development.

The relationships among culture, oral traditions, literacy, and development are both simple and complex. It is clear that the oral tradition is an important part of Pacific island culture, but it declined with the advent of written literacy. That form of literacy was introduced by outsiders and accepted by locals believing that it would expand and enrich the quality of life as well as promote civilization and economic development. Yet, today the Pacific islands still lag behind much of the world in terms of sustainable development. Why? Part of the answer lies in the decline of oral literacy.

Literary statistics

Rates of literacy in the Pacific are some of the highest in the world (Attachment 2). Tonga, for example, boasts of 100% literacy. Unfortunately, considerable uncertainty surrounds the measurement of literacy rates. By definition, literacy rates measure the proportion of the adult population who can read and write, but methods of measurement differ among countries. Data on adult literacy are usually collected from the national censuses, but such data are often self-reported and of doubtful accuracy. The UNESCO criterion of whether a person can ‘with understanding both read and write a short, simple statement on his everyday life’ provides a useful working definition, but those who can pass such a test are not necessarily functionally literate in the sense of being able to make productive use of literacy skills. Many developing countries (and this is particularly true of Melanesia) contain a number of groups speaking a wide variety of dialects or languages, and an adult who is literate in the local dialect may not be literate in the national language. In Fiji and the Marshall Islands, for example, a person is only considered to be literate if he or she has completed at least four years of primary school. While this removes the risk of inflated rates of self-reporting, it still
leaves open the question of whether four years of primary school is sufficient to produce functional literacy and it takes little account of the fact that many children attend school on an irregular basis. In the Solomon Islands, a special survey in 1991 by the National Literacy Committee found that, while 47% of respondents claimed the ability to read and write in Pidgin, only 15% were considered literate in Pidgin when tested by the Committee. Similarly, 44% claimed literacy in English, but when tested, only 28% could be counted as literate in English. These measurement difficulties mean that inter-country comparisons of literacy rates need to be treated very cautiously. The apparently superior record of one country may reflect little more than its particular method of measurement (UNDP 1994). However, using any method of measurement, it is clear that the campaign for literacy in the Pacific has been very successful in raising literacy awareness in the sense that the people want to be literate and often report they are even when they are not.

Ignoring the place of oral literacy

At the time of the introduction of literacy no one seems to have given any consideration to the possible ill effects of literacy's success over the oral tradition, but they should have. Now, one might think that our ideas about literacy's drawbacks are a recent phenomenon, and that no one had yet written anything about the drawbacks of literacy. This is not the case, however. There is a great caution presented in classical western literature which the missionaries should have remembered. No one less than Plato himself had written persuasively about oral versus written literacy.

At the end of one of the dialogues of Plato, called Phaedrus, Socrates discusses with Phaedrus the comparative merits of speech and writing as vehicles for the communication of truth:

They say that there dwelt at Naucratis in Egypt one of the old gods of that country, to whom the bird they call Ibis was sacred, and the name of the god himself was Theuth. Among his inventions were number and calculation and geometry and astronomy, not to speak of various kinds of draughts and dice, and, above all, writing. The king of the whole country at that time was Thamus, who lived in the great city of Upper Egypt which the Greeks call Egyptian Thebes; the name they give to Thamus is Ammon. To him came Theuth and exhibited his inventions, claiming that they ought to be made known to the Egyptians in general. Ammon inquired into the use of each of them, and as Theuth went through them, Ammon expressed approval or disapproval, according as he judged Theuth’s claims to be well or ill founded. It would take too long to go through all that Ammon is reported to have said for and against each of Theuth’s inventions. But when it came to writing, Theuth declared: ‘Here is an accomplishment, my lord the king, which will improve both the wisdom and the memory of the Egyptians. I have discovered a sure receipt for memory and wisdom.’ ‘Theuth, my paragon of inventors,’ replied the king, ‘the discoverer of an art is not the
best judge of the good or harm which will accrue to those who practice it. So it is in this case; you who are the father of writing, have out of fondness for your offspring attributed to it quite the opposite of its real function. Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on writing to bring things to remembrance by external signs instead of on their own internal resources. What you have discovered is a receipt for recollection, not for memory. And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality: they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant. And because they are filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom they will be a burden to society'.

Plato was writing this at a time when Greece had attained a high level of literacy, but he has Socrates assert the importance of the spoken word. He chose, in fact, to write his philosophical dialectic in dialogue form (i.e., in a form which imitates speech). If this account had been remembered by those westerners who were attempting to replace the oral traditions by literacy, they might instead have sought to complement orality with literacy.

Even without an effective memory of Plato’s works, if the educators promoting literacy had paid closer attention to the way the people’s leaders responded to the concept of literacy, they would have made major adjustments. We have a record by John Martin 1817 depicting William Mariner’s account of the introduction of literacy in the Tonga Islands.

In the early 1800s, William Mariner — who was a prisoner of the King of Tonga at the time — had written a letter in English ‘with a solution of gunpowder and a little mucilage for ink, on some paper which one of the natives had had a long time in his possession’. He had meant this letter for any ship captain that landed in Tonga, advising them to prefer Ha’apai to the island of Tongatapu for taking on supplies of food and water (Martin 1991):

advising, at the same time, not to suffer many of the natives to be on board at once, lest they should meet with the same fate as the Port au Prince; but, if possible, to make some chiefs prisoners, and keep them hostages, till Mr. Mariner and his companions were delivered up.

The letter had been given to one of the chiefs to keep and deliver when the opportunity arose. Finau, the powerful warrior king, was told about this letter and he sent for it (Martin 1991):

When it was put into his hands, he looked at it on all sides; but not being able to make any thing of it, he gave it to Jeremiah Higgins, who was at hand, and ordered him to say what it meant. Mr. Mariner was not present. Higgins took the letter, and translating part of it into the Tonga language, judiciously represented it to be merely a request to any English captain that might arrive to interfere with Finow for the liberty of Mr. Mariner and his countrymen; stating, that they had been
kindly treated by the natives, but, nevertheless, wished to return, if possible to their native country. This was not indeed the true substance of the letter, but it was what was least likely to give offense; and the chief accordingly remarked, that it was very natural for these poor fellows to wish to go back to their native country and friends.

This mode of communicating sentiments was an inexplicable puzzle to Finow; he took the letter again and examined it, but it afforded him no information. He considered the matter a little within himself; but his thoughts reflected no light upon the subject. At length he sent for Mr. Mariner, and desired him to write down something; the latter asked what he would choose to have written; he replied, put down me; he accordingly wrote ‘Feenow’ (spelling it after the strict English orthography); the chief then sent for another Englishman who had not been present, and commanded Mr. Mariner to turn his back and look the other way, he gave the man the paper, and desired him to tell what that was: he accordingly pronounced aloud the name of the king, upon which Finow snatched the paper from his hand, and with astonishment, looked at it, turned it round and examined it in all directions; at length he exclaimed ‘This is neither like myself, nor anybody else! Where are my legs? How do you know it to be I?’ and then, without stopping for an attempt at an explanation, he impatiently ordered Mr. Mariner to write something else, and thus employed him for three or four hours in putting down the names of different persons, places, and things, and making the other man read them. This afforded extraordinary diversion to Finow, and to all the women and men present, particularly as he now and then whispered a little love anecdote, which was strictly written down, and audibly read by the other, not a little to the confusion of one or other of the ladies present. It was all taken in good humor, however, for curiosity and astonishment were the prevailing passions. How their names and circumstances could be communicated through so mysterious a channel, was altogether past their comprehension. Finow had long ago formed his opinion of books and papers, and this as much resembled witchcraft as anything he had ever seen or heard of. Mr. Mariner in vain attempted to explain. He had yet too slender a knowledge of their language to make himself clearly understood: and, indeed, it would not have been an easy matter to have explained the composition of elementary sounds, and of arbitrary signs expressive of them, to a people whose minds were already formed to other modes of thinking, and whose language had few expressions but what concerned the ordinary affairs of life. Finow, at length, though he had got a notion of it, and explained to those about him that it was very possible to put down a mark or sign of something that had been seen both by the writer and reader, and which should be mutually understood by them; but Mr. Mariner immediately informed him, that he could write down anything that he had never seen. The king directly whispered to him to put Too-goo Ahoo (the king of Tonga, whom he and Toobo Nuha had assassi-
nated many years before Mr. Mariner’s arrival). This was accordingly done, and the other read it. Finow was yet more astonished. He then desired him to write ‘Tarky,’ (the chief of the garrison of Bea, whom Mr. Mariner and his companions had not yet seen; this chief was blind in one eye). When ‘Tarky’ was read, Finow inquired whether he was blind or not. This was putting writing to an unfair test! And Mr. Mariner told him, that he had only written down the sign standing for the sounds of his name, and not for the description of his person. He was then ordered in a whisper to write, ‘Tarky, blind in his left eye,’ which was done, and read by the other man to the increased astonishment of everybody. Mr. Mariner then told him that, in several parts of the world, messages were sent to great distances through the same medium, and being folded and fastened up, the bearer could know nothing of the contents; and that the histories of whole nations were thus handed down to posterity, without spoiling by being kept (as he chose to express himself). Finow acknowledged this to be a most noble invention, but added, that it would not at all do for the Tonga Islands; that there would be nothing but disturbances and conspiracies, and he should not be sure of his life, perhaps, another month. He said, however, jocularly, that he should like to know it himself, and for all the women to know it, that he might make love with less risk of discovery, and not so much chance of incurring the vengeance of their husbands.

We are confident there were encounters like this all over the Pacific with similar emotions of wonder expressed at what writing was capable of communicating just as there were inaccurate perceptions of what it was able to do.

Mariner made judgments about the limitations of the indigenous language system, even though he acknowledges his own poor understanding of it. It is revealing that he notes that the native mind had been formed by other modes of thinking. This is in itself a key realization worthy of exploration in the context of an oral culture, but he seems to have thought little more about it. The idea that written literacy develops in people an ENTIRELY DIFFERENT WAY OF THINKING AND PERCEIVING than does oral literacy did not impress itself upon the early explorers and missionaries.

Consider the example of what Finau expected of writing. He wanted writing to function as icon. When the word ‘Finau’ was written, he thought it would have to be like himself. In some way, from his point of view, the writing should become him, person/flesh to be made word. Finau expected that when Mariner wrote Takay’s name, this would include the detail that Takay was blind in the left eye. Symbol in this mode of perception would be instantiation, not abstraction. The symbolized becomes (comes to be within) the symbol. This perception is an important component of word in oral cultures. A person’s name makes present the identity of that person, and by sounding the name one can have influence over that person. The uttered word is something that is living, energized, real, active, with power. It is complete and all-encompassing, not abstract and partially accurate; it is real, not symbolic.
The literate concept of word, on the other hand, is not quite like that. Mariner had trouble trying to make Finau understand the written word as the symbol of what was sounded and the connection between symbol and sound. A written word is just a symbol, a phonetic pronunciation — it carries no innate meaning, although if writer and reader are both familiar with the word then a complex picture can be created by a single word. The bottom line, however, is common experience, without which the word carries no meaning. It would have been helpful perhaps if Mariner had remembered that ‘word’ in Latin is *verbum* which is derived from a root meaning ‘to speak’ — a spoken word represents life, a written word only the pronunciation. Spoken words are, by nature, very closely linked to experience, context, and reality. Mariner himself did not understand what Walter Ong (1982) refers to as the linking of orality to ‘the human lifeworld’:

In the absence of elaborate analytic categories that depend on writing to structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience, oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings. A chirographic (writing) culture and even more a typographic (print) culture can distance and in a way denature even the human, itemizing such things as the names of leaders and political divisions in an abstract, neural list entirely devoid of a human action context.

There should have been a genuine concern on the part of Mariner and those like him to account for the arts of the people, the richness of their language system, and the threat of erasing these inadvertently through a literacy program, but there was not. They assumed that literacy was best for the social development of the people and for the economic development of every country.

**Prior research and implications**

According to Pio Manoa 1995, the importance of oral traditions in Pacific societies was lessened significantly by literacy. Schools were designed and have been maintained to promote written literacy and through literacy ‘civilization’. The written word (silent, visual) becomes the real word. The primary oral culture, with its own way of organizing and communicating knowledge, information, and values, was replaced with a different system by the technology of writing. There was a fundamental conflict between the oral tradition (e.g., chant), which is how the chiefs made their claims to power, and written literacy, which gave all people the ability to learn and know. It soon happened that if one did not know the alphabet, or did not know how to read or write, then one was considered ignorant no matter how skilled he or she was in the verbal world. There was no longer great power in the spoken word. Instead, people had to learn and use the written system provided, in the process altering their society: their perception of knowledge, the value of their old ways, the way they expressed themselves, the meaning of words, even the way they thought.
The old oral traditions found no place in the newly-imposed concept of sustainable development. This may be a major reason why economic development has been painfully slow in most of the Pacific and why all Pacific island nations are presently aid-dependent. The methods, styles, and measurements of economic development have all been imposed from the outside. There is no room for indigenous priorities, oral traditions, or non-Western modes of thought. This promotes an 'us versus them' mentality that supports a Marxist core-periphery, north-south view of development. Traditional developmental theories are not broad enough when it comes to the Pacific islands.

Traditional developmental theorists concern themselves only with economic and environmental factors, but Sitiveni Halapua’s 1996 definition of sustainable development includes culture as one of the seven important dimensions. According to Halapua — who focuses on sustainable development in the Pacific islands — those seven dimensions are economic growth, population, environment, technology, culture, government, and international relations. One cannot ignore any of the seven, or else development cannot be sustained. The Pacific island nation that ignores culture will eventually become a shell of its former self, lacking the solid center that culture and traditions provide. Pacific islanders, therefore, will eventually realize the importance of culture. This appears to be an accurate assessment of the situation in the Pacific islands today. In a survey taken at the East-West Center of sixteen Pacific island leaders from eight Pacific island countries, all but one of them volunteered ‘culture’ as a necessary factor for sustainable development. This was hardly an all-encompassing survey, but it does suggest that Halapua’s conclusions have merit.

Let us pause to restate our argument. If we acknowledge that:

a) oral traditions have been an important aspect of Pacific island culture;
b) literacy was imposed as a replacement for oral traditions;
c) anything that weakens oral traditions weakens culture; and
d) culture is an essential part of development, as Halapua suggests;

then we have to recognize that written literacy, by weakening the value of oral traditions, may have been detrimental to, rather than instrumental for, sustainable development in the Pacific.

Conclusion

If it is accepted that literacy as developed in the Pacific has been a hindrance to development, what should be done? Surely the answer is not to try to reduce literacy, but to place it instead in its proper context within an oral world. People are more productive when they are comfortable with their environment. Fostering an environment that both respects and allows room for the legacy of oral literacy is one way of creating a positive environment. People are less productive when they feel that their efforts are destroying an old way of life. People will not embrace economic development if that development erases their way of life, their history, their identity.
What is needed today are Pacific island leaders who have the energy and courage of Sejong the Great to convince others that the written/printed word is not necessarily superior to oral word. To believe that is to confuse the instrument — the technology of writing — with the word itself. If oral traditions are indeed humanizing agents (Ong 1967, 1971, 1977), as we agree they are, then it is necessary to revitalize those traditions. Literacy in the Pacific will be richer and more fulfilling when it takes the oral traditions more fully into account. Pacific islanders need to develop their literate muscles with the help of their oral cultures and values. An interest in orality as a regenerative factor is at the same time an interest in orature which has been overlooked and unheard by most researchers, scholars, anthropologists, missionaries, and colonial civil servants. A creative program by Pacific leaders which explores the oral heritage of the area must be developed to enrich the literate lives of Pacific islanders. To see this orature/oral literature becoming reinstated by a genuine interest in verbal art events will enhance the desirability of a writing system and perhaps be a key to social and economic development throughout the Pacific.

NOTE

1 The standard definition of literacy is one of written communication. In this article we wish to distinguish between standard literacy (referred to here as ‘written literacy’ or just ‘literacy’) and a type of literacy that is oral in form (either ‘oral literacy’ or ‘orality’). We distinguish between the two because both require the development of certain mental skills. Oral literacy is not merely the ability to speak, but the ability to engage in the oral traditions of these island cultures — chant, oral history, etc. It would be inaccurate to assume that the ability to use these oral forms of communication is not in and of itself a type of literacy, given the skills necessary to master them and the power derived from their mastery.

REFERENCES


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