

**Addressing a Troubling Subtextual Metaphor in the
Human Rights Discourse: A Challenge for Fijian Civic
Education**

Scott Graham

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. (Preamble, Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

...That every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote for these rights and freedoms... (Article 26 (2), Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

These two statements serve as the primary rationale for educating people about their inherent human rights in all countries around the world. In Fiji, a significant amount of time, money and energy is currently being spent on the development of a nation-wide civic education programme which includes human rights education initiatives. In 2003, the UNDP multi-country office in Fiji (hereafter UNDP Fiji) and the Government of Fiji sponsored a research report titled "Baseline study on attitudes and understanding of democratic governance and civic education needs in Fiji" (hereafter 2003 Fijian Baseline Study). This report advances a series of insightful research findings and corresponding recommendations with respect to producing and maintaining a civic education programme that is organised around human rights principles and is in harmony with pre-existing civic education programmes in Fiji. Similar to most UN-sponsored reports on civic education that emphasise the importance of human rights education, the 2003 Fijian Baseline Study (Part I, Executive Summary) includes, among other things, an ideological focus which "must be geared towards balanced and all rounded critical thinking and awareness" and at the same time provide instruction about human rights concepts, human rights advocacy and their relation to the functioning of a democratic state.

Since I believe that the integration of instruction on critical thinking skills and human rights is an excellent development in civic education in Fiji, I will devote this paper to proposing a challenge to civic education in Fiji which, if embraced, would completely commit the *modus operandi* of Fijian civic education to its ideological focus. To advance my proposition, I first of all employ a social constructivist lens to look at how the human rights discourse has been socially constructed over time by a select group and, furthermore, to situate UNDP Fiji and the Fiji Government as collaborators in the social construction of the human rights discourse. Second, I conduct a discourse analysis of what are, for my purposes, a set of useful reports and recommendations that were produced by a variety of UN organisations and which contribute to the human rights education discourse in particular. The third part of my analysis consists of a discussion of a troubling subtextual metaphor described by Makau Mutua as the “savages, victims, savior” metaphor (hereafter the SVS metaphor) which he suggests functions in both the human rights discourse in general, as well as in the capillary human rights education discourses. I conclude by arguing that the ideological focus of civic education in Fiji, as is the case with all UN-supported education programmes with an emphasis on human rights education initiatives, is silent about critically examining the troubling subtextual SVS metaphor in the human rights discourse. I propose that, since civic education instructional designers and educators in Fiji continue to refine civic education and especially the human rights education initiatives within the civic education framework, they are uniquely positioned to address this pressing issue in the human rights discourse.

The social constructivist lens and the human rights discourse

In order to arrive at an understanding of the troubling subtextual metaphor in the human rights discourse, it is useful to consider how the human rights discourse has been and continues to be produced. As a general category, the human rights discourse consists of a plenitude of specific interrelated categorisations which are each stitched together by multiple policy and concept papers, conversations, declarations, contestations and refutations. Like most discourses, it has developed slowly over time. How this development is understood is contingent on the frame of interpretation that

one employs. The social constructivist frame enables us to see that all parts of the human rights discourse have been and continue to be authored by a select collection of individuals and organisations.

To say that the human rights discourse, and the goal towards which it strives, is socially constructed implies that ideas “in respect to human rights are created and re-created, and instantiated by human rights actors in particular socio-historical settings and conditions” (Stammers 1999). In other words, the human rights discourse as a social construction means that all parts of the discourse, such as particular reports on human rights activity, general policy frameworks, critical analyses of reports and policies, as well as the proposed techniques for deploying this knowledge, are all constructed through selective appropriations of the manifold social actions between human rights actors of past and present.

According to Mutua (1996:589), the authors of the human rights discourse can be divided into four classifications:

conventional doctrinists, who are mostly, though not exclusively, human rights activists; conceptualizers, mostly senior Western academics who systematize human rights discourse; multiculturalists or pluralists, who are mainly non-Western; and instrumentalists or political strategists, who are Western states and Western dominated inter-governmental organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank.

Thus, the human rights discourse has been and continues to be assembled and circulated, not necessarily because every person is equal in dignity and rights, but instead because certain collections of individuals and organisations agree that particular social/economic/cultural/political/civil conditions must be in place for life to be worthy of a human being. This agreement, according to Donnelly (2003:14), is rooted in a shared moral vision of human nature which, he argues, has also been socially constructed.

Donnelly (*ibid.*) argues that the human rights discourse is “rooted in a substantive vision of [woman’s] man’s moral nature” and that the state and society guided by human rights “play a major role in realizing that nature.” He remarks that this vision of woman’s/man’s moral nature is a social construct, which is to say that it is not ontologically prior to social interaction but is rather a “social project” (*ibid.*:15) designed and propelled through activity related, at least partly, to the human rights discourse. In Donnelly’s

view, the realisation of a deeper human moral reality requires a unique relationship between the moral vision of human nature, human rights principles and all practices related to social/economic/cultural/political/civil life (*ibid.*). He asserts that this relationship must be dialectical, which is to say that human rights must shape “political society, so as to shape human beings, so as to realize the possibilities of human nature, which provide the basis for these rights in the first place” (*ibid.*:16).

An integral aspect of this dialectical process is education. Political society cannot be shaped in a democratic form that is respectful of human rights unless human rights knowledge is deployed and integrated into the activity comprising human relations of every kind. All branches of the United Nations, as well as all member states such as UNDP Fiji and the Government of Fiji, are, in their own respect, major proponents of the human rights discourse and share the responsibility for producing and transforming the conceptual framework in which human rights education is conducted. In order to understand why UNDP Fiji’s and the Fiji Government’s recommendation for human rights education initiatives are structured as they are, it is useful to briefly consider the historical developments of a few major ideological constructs in the UN-supported human rights education discourse that preceded the *2003 Fijian Baseline Study*.

Mapping the major ideological constructs of UN human rights education

In this section, I will trace the major ideological constructions, enlargements and refinements of human rights education (hereafter HRE) that have come through the collaborating hands of UN organisations and UN member states, starting with the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and ending with the *2003 Fijian Baseline Study*. For several decades, the UN has funded meetings/conferences which bring together the public, UN representatives, representatives from non-governmental organisations, member state representatives and the general public to engage in discussions on human rights education. The outcomes of these meetings are generally recorded in a document or set of documents and are often used as one of many resources for human rights education initiatives. There are six documents in particular that I will attend to that, when mapped in conjunction,

highlight how UN organisations like UNESCO and UNDP in collaboration with member states and NGOs have constructed a distinctive ideological focus for HRE.

As constituting a human right itself, the origin of HRE can be traced back to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948. Read in the context of the preamble and Article 26 of the Declaration, HRE has a global orientation of “producing true citizens of the world, imbued with civil virtues of respect for pluralism, peace, dignity, and rights” (Baxi 1997:143) Thus, from its inception, HRE has not been solely conceived as a mechanism for transmitting information about human rights to individuals and groups. Article 29 supports this assertion by declaring that HRE aims to facilitate the “free and full development” of the human personality insofar as the individual becomes capable of claiming her/his human rights as well as fulfilling her/his duties to the community: local, regional, national and global” (ibid:145).

These broad formulations of what HRE is supposed to do were further enlarged and refined by the hands of UNESCO in 1974. In the 1974 report by UNESCO titled *The International Practical Guide for the Implementation of the Recommendation Concerning Education for International Understanding, Cooperation and Peace and Education Relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, the definition of HRE is enlarged through the proclamation that HRE is a lifelong process and implies the entirety of social life, or in other words “the whole of people’s personal capacities, attitudes, aptitudes and knowledge”(UNESCO 1974). Aims for HRE are also established in *The 1974 Recommendation*, each aim promoting “international understanding,” “cooperation,” and “peace,” which are all considered as “an indivisible whole...uniting concerns of friendly relations between people and states” and of “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (ibid.). In *The 1974 Recommendation*, HRE is often subsumed under the rubric of “international education” and therein emerges as entailing, among other notions: intellectual and emotional development; a sense of responsibility and of solidarity with less privileged groups (*ibid.* Article 5); meaningful opportunities for active civic training (*ibid.* Article 13); and the development of inter-cultural understanding between members of diverse cultural groups (*ibid.* Article 17).

Departing from the stipulations set out for HRE in *The 1974 Recommendation*, (and a series of subsequent associated documents since

1974) the *World Plan of Action on Education for Human Rights and Democracy* as conceived in Montreal in 1993 builds a set of new concepts into the framework for HRE while confirming the themes from old enumerations. *The Montreal Plan* once again establishes the concept of 'lifelong learning' as the mantelpiece of HRE while adding new target groups to the framework for HRE, namely defenders of democracy as well as the victims of human rights violations (UNESCO 1993).

Another salient feature of *The Montreal Plan* is that, unlike other policy documents on HRE, it offers three major criteria according to which the success of any HRE project can be evaluated. According to *The Montreal Plan*, an HRE project is successful when it changes "conduct leading to a denial of rights," creates a climate of "respect for all rights," and transforms the civil society in "a peaceful manner [through a] participatory model" (*ibid.*). Furthermore, *The Montreal Plan* proclaims that these aims can be more easily realised if HRE is successful at enhancing "the universality of human rights by rooting these rights in different cultural traditions," which was not explicitly stated in any of the other previous documents, although it was certainly implied. In short, *The Montreal Plan* constructs HRE as a means of democratising all societies while prescribing how HRE is to be evaluated, and furthermore innovates HRE by focusing its efforts toward victims of human rights violations.

Building upon *The Montreal Plan* (1993), as well as the statements relating to HRE in *The Universal Declaration* (1948) and *The 1974 Recommendations, The Vienna Declaration on Human Rights* (1994) reaffirms the pre-existing edifices in the ideological focus of HRE and innovates HRE in at least one noteworthy way. It is Section D, Part II and paragraphs 33-36 in Part I, that declare what is the new significant edifice in the ideological focus of HRE. *The Vienna Declaration's* major contribution to the HRE policy is an emphasis on HRE as a gender-specific project, one that emphasises the "human rights needs of women." In comparison to *The Montreal Plan*, which simply focused HRE efforts on an undefined victim of human rights violations, *The Vienna Declaration* refines this notion of victim by proclaiming that women are most often the victims of human rights violations and therefore should be a major target group for HRE.

As Baxi observes, *The Vienna Declaration's* formulation is noteworthy because it invites the suspension of the dichotomy between "rights" and

“needs”, signaling a significant transmutation in the human rights lexicon. Further, Baxi observes that this attempt within the human rights discourse to transmute needs into rights has important implications for HRE pedagogies in that they must address the particular needs that pertain to information, to opportunities for the exercise of rights, “to modalities and instrumentalities in the identification of violations of human rights, and to public discourse that may contest state/society assertions that either no right exists or, if it does, no violation can be said to have occurred” (Baxi 1997:148).

In contrast to the aforementioned documents, *The Draft Plan of Action for the United Nations Decade of Human Rights Education (1995-2005)* offers the most imaginative and refined formulation of HRE. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of *The Draft Plan* is its discussion on the general guiding principles of HRE. In Part Two, *The Draft Plan* suggests that HRE ought to create the “broadest possible awareness and understanding of all the norms, concepts and values” of the human rights instruments. Also of note in *The Draft Plan* is the push on HRE to move from the universal to the particular, from the abstract to the concrete. In paragraph four, *The Draft Plan* proclaims that effective HRE shall seek to centre the teachings around the learners by engaging them in “dialogue about the ways and means of transforming human rights from the expression of abstract norms to the reality of their social, economic, cultural and political conditions.” Furthermore, *The Draft Plan* indicates that HRE projects should cut across hierarchies of formal/non-formal education systems, age and gender and thereby reach into dimensions beyond those affiliated with the state. Such an indication becomes clear in light of paragraph three which builds into HRE the provisions for “equal participation of women and men of all age groups and all sectors of society both in formal learning...and non-formal learning through institutions of civil society, the family and the mass media.” By emphasising that HRE ought to expand its *modus operandi* to reach into all sectors of society, the UN succeeds at paving a way, at least an abstract way, through which HRE can be grafted onto any part of a given socio-historical context.

This imaginative formulation of the scope and purpose of HRE in *The Draft Plan* has been employed in conceptualising some of the recommendations for Fiji’s civic education in the *2003 Fijian Baseline Study*. In Part 8 of the report, there are several articulations about the importance of involving HRE in the civic education programme in such a manner that it is

neither abstract nor static (Part 8.13), that it relates to every aspect of society (Part 8.18), is gender-friendly (Part 8.11), and moreover is a learner-centered project (Part 8.19). It is clear that the *2003 Fijian Baseline Study*, as well as the other aforementioned UN recommendations for HRE, does not encourage an inert form of HRE, but instead advocates a form of HRE that is constituted with general guiding principles that are supposed to suit the given needs of any given context, and consequently can change, at least in part, according to the context in which it is operative.

In light of the foregoing analysis of HRE, it is useful to note that, since HRE is an evolving educational initiative, it is possible to conceive of HRE as having undergone transformations by way of a three-part process of production, deployment and circulation/expansion. The discourse is produced by the United Nations organisations, member states, international non-governmental organisations and mainly (but not strictly) senior western academics; it is deployed through journals, reports, education project recommendations, policies, media; it is circulated through the power relations which comprise the net-like organisation of the major human rights knowledge producers and deployers, and it is expanded by way of innovating the techniques of producing human rights knowledge and the methods of deploying human rights knowledge so as to affect those people who have not yet been affected by the discourse.

UNDP Fiji, the Government of Fiji and all other individuals and organisations in Fiji who are contributing their efforts to the advancement of a nation-wide civic education programme that emphasises human rights education are all collaborators in the production, deployment and circulation/expansion of the human rights discourse, and are thereby perfectly positioned to further refine what constitutes a human rights education initiative. Next, I propose an item to be considered for integration into the nation-wide civic education programme in Fiji.

A troubling subtextual metaphor in the human rights discourse

The current discourse on human rights and human rights education is big on praise and small on critical examination of the subtextual metaphors implied in it as a universal project. It is for this reason that the work of Makau Mutua is important to consider when conceptualising human rights

education initiatives. Mutua argues that concealed within the phraseology of the human rights discourse is a damning metaphor. He names this metaphor the “savages-victims-saviors construction” or the SVS metaphor, and explains it in terms of a “three dimensional compound in which each dimension is a metaphor in itself” (Mutua 2001:202).

Mutua argues that the human rights story typically presents the state as the classic savage, who is bent on the unjust treatment of its citizens (*ibid.*). While the savage in the human rights story is played by other bodies aside from the state, it is the state that is often depicted as the main savage, one that “expresses itself through illiberal, anti-democratic, or other authoritarian culture” (*ibid:*203). The second dimension of the metaphor connotes the fact of a victim as well as the idea of victimhood: “A human being whose dignity and worth have been violated by the savage is the victim” (*ibid:* 204). Finally, the informant of universal truth, the saviour or the human rights advocacy collaborators, “the good angels who protect, vindicate, civilize, and safeguard comprises the third dimension” (*ibid:* 204). In the human rights discourse, the promise of the saviour is freedom from the barbarism of the savage state and its oppressive traditional practices. This promise is fulfilled, at least partly, by transforming society through the education of human rights principles and the application of these principles to every human relation.

So why is the SVS metaphor troubling? Well, it is troubling for two interrelated reasons. First, when we talk about human rights education initiatives using Mutua’s language, we can conceive of the HRE discourse as situated within the historical continuum of the colonial project in which agents are relegated to superior and subordinate positions by way of using imported criteria to make such determinations. That is not to say that HRE is an extension of the colonial project per se, but rather that it contains traces of colonial ideology, namely the classification scheme of “savages-victims-saviors.” Mutua remarks that this metaphor is damning because it represents the “arrogant and biased rhetoric” which permeated colonial thought. He goes on to say that the SVS metaphor promotes a “Eurocentric ideal” to transform non-western cultures into western or Eurocentric prototypes, or in other words to create “inferior clones, in effect dumb copies of the original” (*ibid:*205).

The second reason why it is troubling is because it is not addressed, let alone critically examined, in any UN sponsored documents related to HRE

initiatives, including the *2003 Fijian Baseline Study*. If we agree that this metaphor, or some version of this metaphor, is concealed in the phraseology pertaining to human rights and HRE initiatives, then we have reason to wave a cautionary flag for all those who design and conduct human rights education projects, especially those who do so under the auspices of the UN. The UN's version of HRE is troubling because it does not make any provisions for self-criticality, nor does it recognise the kind of disturbing European rhetoric that the human rights discourse espouses. It is not sensitive to the presence of the subtextual SVS metaphor, nor is it disposed to being sensitive.

A challenge for Fiji's civic education

In sum, UN-sponsored recommendations for HRE initiatives are constrained to include only proclamations that encourage the development of rights-bearing subjects who are critical of social/political/economic/cultural/civic conditions related to human rights violations, but not proclamations that invite HRE participants to be critical of the western ideological underpinnings of human rights concepts and HRE initiatives. In light of the fact that the very same ideological constructs inherent to the human rights discourse are, at least partly, implied in colonial ideology, we have reason to think that the absence of provisions for critical examinations in UN-endorsed HRE invites particular aspects of colonial ideology to hide within the framework of UN recommendations for HRE, and the human rights discourse at large. If we consider the human misery that has resulted from the colonial legacy, and if we agree that parts of the ideology that underpin such a legacy exists in the human rights discourse, then teaching human rights knowledge without also teaching students to think critically about the indwelling Eurocentric ideologies becomes a dangerous undertaking.

If Fiji's civic education instructional designers and educators choose to address the troubling subtextual metaphor of the human rights discourse, they would succeed at truly advocating "all rounded critical thinking" insofar as the human rights discourse itself would not be exempt from critical inquiry. However, a question that such an assertion begs is: Would not such a critical approach to the design and implementation of human rights education projects undercut the very purpose of HRE? If we consider that human rights education

projects are ordinarily designed and implemented in multiple stages over a period of time, then it is possible to integrate a critical component into the project at a latter stage in the process without undercutting the initial transmissions of information about the relevancy of the United Nations international human rights instruments. A thorough educational experience with human rights concepts ought not only include learning about what human rights are and how they can be realised; it should also include several opportunities for the individuals in question to engage in critical discussion about the ideological underpinnings of such concepts and the legacy of troubling silences about such ideological underpinnings in UN-supported HRE documents. In closing, to not invite students of human rights concepts into critical inquiry about the SVS subtextual metaphor and other related ideological underpinnings is to risk producing HRE initiatives that are dangerously close to being a form of indoctrination.

Bibliography

- Baseline Study on Attitudes and Understanding of Democratic Governance and Civic Education Needs in Fiji – A joint UNDP and Government of Fiji project, May 2003.
- Baxi, Upendra (1997). “Human rights education: The promise of the third millennium?” in George J. Andreopoulos and Richard Pierre Claude (eds.) *Human rights education for the twenty-first century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Donnelly, Jack (2003). *Universal human rights in theory and practice*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Mutua, Makau wa (1996). “The ideology of human rights” *Va. J. Int’l L.* vol. 36.
- Mutua, Makau wa (2001). “Savages, victims and saviors: The human rights metaphor” *Harvard international law journal*, vol.42.
- Stammers, Neil (1999). “Social movements and the social construction of human rights” *Human rights quarterly*, vol.21, no.4.
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).
- UNESCO (1974) *The International Practical Guide for the Implementation of the Recommendation Concerning Education for International Understanding, Cooperation and Peace and Education Relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*. (1974).

Directions: Journal of Educational Studies Vol. 25 Nos 1 & 2 June & Dec. 2003

UNESCO 1993 *The UNESCO World Plan of Action on Education for Human Rights and Democracy*. (Montreal Canada, March 8-11, 1993).

The Draft Plan of Action for the United Nations Decade of Human Rights Education: 1995-2005.

UNESCO (1974). Article 1(a) of *The international practical guide for the implementation of the recommendation concerning education for international understanding, cooperation and peace and education relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms*. To access online see: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/0010_66/106627e.pdf