

Tradition, Education and Literary Environment*

Pio Manoa

Oh stoneage child, why do you lie dreaming
Of dreams and thoughts of your ancestors
Why? Oh why do you continue clinging,
To way and life of your ancestor?

What sort of wealth did he possess for you,
And his knowledge of ability?
None but worthless heathen rubbish for sure,
Is now the cause of stupidity

Leave all your heathen rubbish and behold,
An atomic-age and restless man,
Has come from land unknown just to unfold,
Way of life not as child but as man.

(from A.P. Allan Natachee's "What Ancestral Wealth and Knowledge?")¹

The above piece is taken from a poem by a Papuan and was written at least 28 years ago. The poem questions the wisdom and usefulness of anything our ancestors had to offer. What the ancestors had to offer, their beliefs and their skills, are dismissed as heathen rubbish and the cause of stupidity.

The attitude expressed has cropped up wherever modern education and modern ways of doing things have been introduced. It cropped up here in Fiji, when the Christian missionaries and educators first came among us, and there have been subsequent reinforcements of the attitude. But there have always been voices, and sometimes hands, raised against changes into the new ways. These people somehow sensed dangers in the changes, somehow sensed a threat to the wholeness or the integrity of their way of life. Because the forces of change overwhelmed or overran the country, these resisting voices became whimpers in the wilderness. Then, strangely enough, the tide began to turn. People finding themselves tossed here and there felt unable to find a foothold, found it difficult, if not impossible, to be whole again. Then began the urge for reassessment and reconstruction.

*Based on a talk given on Radio Fiji, Suva, Fiji, August 1978.

The attempt to be whole again found expression in the struggle for political independence. It found expression in the yearning for education. But somehow political independence and education did not quite meet the deeper need for wholeness. Elements of the education system were seen to be irrelevant so people demanded a relevant education, one that addressed itself to local people and their needs. And so, various energies and talents were harnessed for the cause.

Hand in hand with this political and educational reconstruction, was a recognition that somehow our traditional cultures needed to be preserved or conserved. This recognition implied that our ancestors did have something to offer. Various people and various bodies in our society are now pressing for the conservation of their traditional cultures, for many reasons. It seems to me however that the present urge for cultural conservation will result largely in a kind of museum culture, an item of display for people to look at or study as a relic of the past. I do not question the value of such an effort, but what I want to ask is, "Can anything more be done?" I want to suggest that we can go beyond a museum culture, and we must go beyond it if we want to have a more integrated approach to traditional culture, if we want values from the traditional culture to live again in us. This would call for creative adaptations.

There is of course a natural way of adapting traditional culture, a natural process of change in which certain values live on. What I want to suggest is that we revive and adapt certain other cultural values that may have been overlooked or misunderstood or actively tossed out in the general process of change. One of these is the educational value of traditional or oral literature. The idea of oral literature may seem strange to some of us since we have normally associated literature with the written word. But it will become less strange the moment we realise that the same basic process is at work. Only the medium of transmission differs.

A friend of mine once said to me, "It's a pity that we Fijians don't have any poetry, any literature." I asked him, "Have you heard the lament of women at a funeral? Haven't you heard people composing instant songs as comment on behaviour they are observing or as a reply to a comment? They are reacting in song and that is what poetry is basically about. Or take the more elaborate compositions of the meke and all its variety and rhythms. These compositions were not committed to the memory of the written word or the memory of the tape recorder, but to the human

memory and then were handed on by word of mouth.”

That friend of mine is perhaps representative of many whose traditional past, at least the literary part of it, no longer lives in them. Their educational environment has lost a traditional cultural value and has thus lost an educational value that accrued from a traditional literary environment. Traditional Fijian culture, to take an example, offered an education through its literature, through its songs, chants, incantations, through its myths and legends. The process began in infancy, as the infant lay in its nurse's arms and heard lullabies. As the baby sat up, it was encouraged to move in rhythm to a song, and learnt the use of its hands through song. And as it learnt to walk, it heard more songs. At a later stage, it played and chanted game songs, and watched and listened to the adults perform the loftier meke which it would some day be called upon to take part in. The process continued to the grave, and besides the songs there were story sessions, a variety of stories for a variety of occasions.

One of the obvious educational values in this literary environment, was the sensitivity to language that a person acquired through exposure and participation. The creative adaptation that I'm suggesting we make, can be in this area. There will have to be the adaptation from the oral to the written literature as well as the adaptation from the vernacular to English which has become the important language in our modern education. I do not think that the written medium should take over from the oral medium altogether. They ought perhaps to be complementary. Nor do I want to suggest that English take over from the vernacular completely. Literature should be encouraged whether it can in Fijian, Hindi, English or any of our other languages. But since English is the medium of instruction in the schools, some thought ought to be given to the adaptation of our oral literature to English, so that we can once more pursue our education in a literary environment.

But people can argue that our present environment is already a literary one. Now it is true that there is considerable exposure to what may be classed as literature in our society and this exposure is to various channels of communication. Yet it must be admitted that this exposure hasn't really produced the kind of sensitivity to language and the refinement of emotions that a literary environment is capable of producing. That the present educational environment lacks an adequate literary component is abundantly clear from current research on performance in English throughout the South Pacific. Let me quote two

paragraphs from a draft proposal to develop children's literature in the region:

It is a regrettable fact that no children's literature exists in English for South Pacific children. There are children's books available in libraries and bookshops, but most are written for European children and usually contain strange settings and much unfamiliar vocabulary.

In other English speaking countries with developed education systems, children are usually well endowed with an indigenous literature written by local authors. In addition, they have access to the substantial literature of other countries with similar values and lifestyles. For Pacific children, this is not the case.²

Those remarks are based on the finding that there is a direct connection between an appropriate and adequate exposure to literature and language competence. And here one might suggest that two approaches meet. One is the approach based on the remarks that I've just quoted; the other is the approach from traditional culture. Both recognise the importance of, and the need for, a vital and accessible literary environment. Both would recognise that literature is an indispensable component of education.

It is regrettable therefore that in the rush for a modern education, little thought was given to creative adaptations of our traditions. Perhaps our internal urge for wholeness may help us to be wiser.

Notes

1. Natachee, Allan A.P. (1951) 'What Ancestral Wealth and Knowledge?' *Oceania*, Vol 22, No. 2 Dec. 1951.
2. Elley, Warwick et al. A draft proposal to develop children's literature in the USP region. (Unpublished).