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TOPIC: 'Literacy as Control of Knowledge'

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LITERACY AS CONTROL OF KNOWLEDGE

'... sectors of metropolitan societies [see] the Third World as the incarnation of evil, the primitive, the devil, sin and sloth - in sum, as historically unviable without the director societies. [Hence] the impulse to "save" the "demon-possessed" Third World,

"educating it" and "correcting its thinking" [becomes an urgent mission] to the director societies' [who adopt] their own criteria [to preach their salvation]. The expansionist interests of the director societies are implicit in such notions. These societies can never relate to the Third World as partners, since partnership presupposes equals, no matter how different the equal parties may be, and can never be established between parties antagonistic to each other.

Thus 'salvation' of the Third World by the director societies can only mean domination.'

(Freire, 1985 : 57)

While Freire is speaking almost a hundred and seventy years later after the beginnings of Maori literacy, his views and theories on the cultural nature and power of literacy in conjunction with the Third World experience seem to reflect many important issues surrounding the first Maori literacy experiences. I was prompted by some studies I had been doing of mid-19th century Maori manuscripts to discover more about Maori writing and how a print culture was introduced into an essentially oral culture. In searching through New Zealand archival materials I had expected that I might find the earliest of print texts being written by Maori 'scholars' in Maori. I was surprised to find that the earliest known Maori manuscripts were in fact written in English! I was even more surprised to find that the 'oldest' Maori manuscript known and kept in the archives was written by Hongi Hika.

Who was Hongi Hika? In Maori history Hongi Hika is notorious to many iwi. He was the Napoleon Bonaparte of Maori history, marauding, pillaging, murdering and terrorising many iwi throughout the North Island of New Zealand. He was assisted in his task by his 'friend' Thomas Kendall who had helped him with the acquisition of guns and an English sailing vessel. In Pakeha history, Hongi Hika was welcomed to England as "King of New Zealand" The Creevey Papers in 1820 made much of Hongi's visit to London and his visit to the Palace.(reported in Binney,1968) . The first mission station at Rangihoua, Bay of Islands was built in 1814, under the protection of Hongi Hika's chieftainship and on lands he had 'given' to them to operate from. From the writings of early Pakeha missionaries, travellers and migrants, any discussions about Hongi imply that they both feared and lacked respect for him. Embodied within their writing they portray Hongi Hika's historical image as being "the evil, the devil, sin and sloth". His deeds of tyranny did leave a huge scar on Maori society but in hindsight it is fair to say that Pakeha were relatively safe from Hongi's reign of terror. Hongi

was a key figure to assisting Pakeha to lay the foundations of colonisation by annihilating any opposition and resistance that might have come from other Maori.

In so far as Hongi's attempts at literacy there are in the Hocken Library, Dunedin, archival collections, to be found a few pages of manuscript whereon Hongi Hika has written letters of the Greek alphabet,. The manuscripts contain lines of repeated letters of the alphabet in sequence eg. a line of j's, a line of k's. The letters are legible, a uniform height and reasonably neat. which were taught to him by Thomas Kendall (Binney, 1965). At the top of one of the Hongi manuscript pages are written in fading ink, the words "Written by Shunghee, Chief of New Zealand".. I assume the written inset was done by Thomas Kendall as the style of writing is very different to Hongi's hand. 'Shunghee' and 'E'nogni' are versions of the spelling of Hongi Hika's name that appear in the texts of missionary and colonial writings from the mid-19th century.

The objectives of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in London, were more than about Christian evangelism. Hongi's alphabet manuscripts show the extent of their objectives as being inclusive of ideological beliefs that print literacy could be successfully used as a powerful agency to assist in the process to "save" the "demon-possessed" barbaric Maori world. Through print literacy, the missionaries believed Maori could be "educated" and their thinking could be corrected. The use of letters not found in the present Maori orthography clearly indicate the cultural and social bias of their objectives - to teach in English.

The danger of such a choice for Maori was that their control was superseded over what knowledge they might have included to ensure the survival of their culture. Whatever the language of the curriculum, the culture of that language will dominate in determining what knowledge is valid and legitimate. Missionaries regarded the whole process of educating Maori society as largely the means to bring about the 'civilisation' of Maori society (Binney, 1965). Until they were 'civilised' Maori people could not hope to called Christian. Binney's observation that:

'the initial purpose [of the missionaries] was that of interference with Maori society, based on very questionable ideas of the connection between Christianity and civilisation.'

and her further comment about the missionary Kendall:

'like all early missionaries, [he] remained unable to distinguish between the essentials of Christianity and the conventions of Georgian England'

(Binney, 1968 : 74)

The models of 'civilising' the Maori were largely British models. The CMS in London was very influential in what was conducted in the mission field of New Zealand. In order to keep faith with their sponsors back in England, missionaries copied or reproduced what was happening in England at the time. Their orders came from England usually via the Australian missions as to how 'best' to deal with 'civilising' natives. Thus it can be clearly established that the director society controlled and determined what kind of developments would take place within Maori society.

Graff (1987 : 260) described the 19th century as a key century for literacy. His assessment of the era was that there was a strong relationship between the spread of industrialisation, commercial development, migration, technological advances, aspects of social change and literacy. It is evident from the messages of the Maori manuscript texts alone, without dealing with the mass of literature from the missionary writers and the plethora of English writings of that era, that Maori society was being forced to deal with and comply with major social change through the agency of literacy.

Any suggestion that Maori society was able to compete on an equal footing with the "director society" would be a naivete. Maori society entered the arena of British imperialism very much as underlings, unable to compete and were regarded by British society as illiterate. According to Freire the fundamental themes of literacy as measured in the country of Sao Tome observed principles such as:

"comprehension of the work process and the productive act in its complexity, ways to organise and develop production, the need for technical training (which is not reduced to a narrow, alienating specialisation), comprehension of culture and its role, not only in the process of liberation, but also in national reconstruction, problems of cultural identity, whose defence should not mean the ingenuous rejection of other cultures' contributions."

(Freire, 1987 : 67)

These themes do not place the processes of reading and writing as being central to the themes of literacy. They are merely tools which assist in the political, social and cultural processes of literacy. Within the Maori literacy experiences many of these principles were attempted or were addressed to some degree, for them and by them. However control over the processes was limited because the knowledge and skill needed were emanating from another cultural source, not their own. Hence Maori can be deemed to have understood the process and engaged in it. Their frustrated progress can only be put down to being subordinated by others in control of the literacy process. The history of their training can be seen to have been narrowly confined to certain skills, they have generally not been found to be the organisers, but rather have been organised by others seeking to dominate and control. Conflicting tensions have emerged among Maori since the arrival of the Pakeha as to whether Maori culture was worthwhile. These have been seen in the colonised attitudes of 'educated' Maori who prefer Pakeha technology and knowledge to believing that it is possible to name the world from within the bastions of Maori culture.

Ivan Illich's (19) description of the 'banking concept' whereby the person or group are empty vessels needing to be 'filled' A similar description is also to be found in Freire (1985) with the ideas and skills of the teachers (who in the Maori case were mostly British missionaries). Control of what they were to be taught, of what was to be 'banked' in their body, mind and soul, rested in the hands of their teachers. Their

teachers were newcomers to Aotearoa and had very little idea of Maori knowledge. When they did begin to make progress with understanding Maori traditions, customs and practises the missionaries quickly dismissed these under all sorts of guises eg. idolatry, paganism, witchcraft, work of the devil, demonic worship and a host of other labels. These can be seen as the points of "antagonism" which seemingly occurred in conjunction with the point of contact and at the point of determining the kind of relationship that might exist between Maori society and the director society. In dismissing Maori beliefs and practises, the director society signalled their intent to dominate and control the relationship between the two groups.

With these parameters governing their social relationships cultural subjugation of Maori society by British directors was the ultimate objective. How useful was it for example, for Maori society to have within their learning curriculum their technological information on star tracking for sea navigation or weather forecasting? Likely arguments precluding such inclusions

might have been that the method was seen as very primitive and that compasses were more accurate and readily available from British manufacturers. How useful would teaching about the Maori social order be? Missionaries regarded most of that order to be sinful and slothful - especially Maori marriage!

Henry Williams has numerous entries in his journals about the unenlightened state of existence of Maori society. His own commitment to the greater value and worth of the missionary can be measured in this statement (which is typical of a multitude of his pronouncements)

"1831: Sunday, 30 October...(at Rotorua)

Hoisted a sheet for a flag, as a signal for Sunday -the first ever kept in this quarter. At seven o'clock, am., assembled the natives in a long house, as it was beginning to rain. Before service commenced, the boys brought their papers for me to hear them their letters, and asked what they were to learn next. After service, I addressed the natives on the necessity of a new birth, which brought on an interesting and important conversation among the chiefs. Assembled the youths for catechism. All the natives of the pa came, and appeared delighted. They afterwards repeated their letters. At five o'clock we held evening service, when I spoke of the fall of man, and his salvation by Christ, the Light of the World. This must have been an astonishing day to these natives. Many things have been heard today, surprising to their savage ears. May the Lord bless and sanctify the same to them!"

(Williams, H in Rosevear, W 1960 : 3)

Henry Williams believed in his mission. The great numbers of Maori who came to hear him reinforced his belief in the rightness of his practice. He went even so far as to believe that it was ordained by God because of its 'rightness'. "Educating" and "correcting [Maori] thinking" as his journal entry seems to indicate was part of his enlightening role - bringing Christ, the Light of World to the Maori via the agency of literacy - by hearing and teaching them their letters.

It can be seen from this journal entry that real knowledge and therefore real learning for Maori came only from the director society. What they were to be taught was determined by the

director society, via missionaries, a British interpretation of "educating" in moral, social, political and religious values. The alphabet Maori 'boys' learned from the missionaries, seemed harmless enough but behind it lay the power of British of control, British knowledge, British culture.

The transformation of Maori society by the invalidation of Maori knowledge and customs in order to make it a British literate technocratic outpost can hardly be regarded as the 'salvation' of the Maori race or even of having been a 'civilising' influence. What were Maori "saved" from? Maori, in their 'barbaric' state owned 66 million acres, two-thirds of which was virgin bush that teemed with insect, reptile and bird life when the first missionary literacy programmes began. One hundred and seventy odd years after an intensively English schooled history, Maori own less than 2 million acres. Who owns the other 64 million acres, now almost depleted of virgin bush, native insects, reptile and bird life? Such ownership now rests with many descendants of the early British migrants who are, under present New Zealand government control, off-selling these lands to Asian and American consortiums.

Relationships of equals ought to have produced more equitable outcomes than this. Policies of imperialism, assimilation, capitalism, colonisation have all been mechanisms used to dominate Maori society. Being educated in missionary terms was equivalent to be civilised. It was also a prerequisite of the missionary programme for being Christian.

Thus links of the control of knowledge through literacy are evident in the missionary period of education for Maori. The lengths that missionaries went to in order to influence and control Maori thinking are present in this letter which I discovered during my research

Madeley Aug 20th 1818

Dear Sir

Mr Bickersteth I very ... Some of the words on the aged manuscript are difficult to decipher.

Context might suggest the word here is 'glad' to see at Madeley. Hope Mr Pratt and all

... Word could be 'are" quite well. I been visit Wellington. Mr Eyton took me, and

Teeterree Teeterree's name is I think Titere. Binney (1968) discusses whether his

name might have been Titore also. In the missionary accounts, Henry Williams has

dealings with a paramount chief, Titore, who came from the North Auckland area.

Binney is of the opinion, which I also support, that they were not one and the

same person. Within the manuscript records and microfilm data, there was reference to Tuai going missing for two or three days while in Madeley. He was

found weeping inconsolably on the grave of his friend whom I presume was

Titere.

The claim was that death resulted from TB. , and Mr Hall to free school the boys quite happy. Say

lesson with boys two times a day: all so pleased, me stick peacock feather in my head. Mr Eyton took me see glass blow: Teeterree blew a bottle, and Tooi blew a bottle: very much pleased to glass blow.

Mr Eyton took me to Hawxtone, so many ... Word might be 'hills' and so many tree, one

place no light, go under ground in dark, afraid I tumble down on my

head. Mr Hall read me Mr Pratt's letter, I very much obliged, and thank you for pray for me. I hope I please the Lord learn book a little very hard to learn, I do with ... Word might be 'friend' or 'help' but my head no remember,

tomorrow morning all go ... Word might be 'try' again. I shall be glad to go my own

country in the autumn before the cold weather. The cold weather no agree with me. I go to my bed at night and my heart sorry for sin before God. I kneel down and pray God make my heart quite good. When I go home I tell my countrymen of the true God New Zealand God all nonsense. I so pleased I can say the Lords Prayer, and am beginning to learn the commandments.

I very sorry Mr Mortimer sick, hope please the Lord, he soon be better. Please give my respects to all his friends. I thank you and am,

Dear Sir,

Your

obedient servant

Thomas Tooi Thomas Tooi was the name

given to 'Tuai' while he was in Madeley, Shropshire, England. In Aotearoa he would probably only have been known as Tuai. Sometimes in the historical literature his name appears also as 'Tui'.

From the manuscript significant features are obvious about the cultural nature of what Tuai (Tooi) and Titere (Teeterree) were being taught. I assume that the school the boys attended was an Anglican Free Day

school for boys, in a working class area in Shropshire. Literacy levels for the

county at that time were very low in comparison to the rest of the Britain.

I

think they boarded with a clergyman, Rev George Mortimer and his family while

they were there. Also indicated is the level of indoctrination and cultural domination being imposed on both of them through their education. Needing a Christian name -"Thomas" and surname "Tooi" (which was really his first name) is a cultural imposition. The way adults, especially teachers, are addressed by status titles eg, Mr Bickersteth, Mr Eyton, demonstrate the class hierarchy between teacher and student. The teacher knows

the important knowledge and so is the authority. Teaching is therefore authoritative, knowledgeable and powerful work. Therefore the teacher in the eyes of the students is seen as a high status person who controls important knowledge, who gives them access to knowledge in the special ways set up for classrooms in schools.

Tuai's description of saying the lesson twice, of going to a free school, of struggling with the reading process but finding his "head no remember", of needing Divine intervention to assist with the impossible task of reading, emphasise the difference between the learner and the teacher. The learner struggles while the teacher sets the tasks. The learner knows very little while the teacher knows everything. The learner has faith that the teacher will guide him to true knowledge and enlightenment, the teacher is unsure of the ability of the learner to reach a high level of knowing. Yet both seem to willingly engage in the process of education knowing of the potential risk each party takes. The teacher's control over what the learner's programme will include safeguards the teacher's dominant position. Therefore to presuppose that there might be an equal partnership of opposites ie. between teachers and learners, is to erroneously believe that

education from a time of being schooled is empowering for both parties.

What then has being literate to do with being educated? Are they not one and the same process? Gramsci:

"viewed literacy as both a concept and a social practice that must be linked historically to configurations of knowledge and power, on the one hand, and the political and cultural struggle on the other over language and experience on the other"

(Gramsci, 1987 : 1)

Looking at the process of literacy in this light, analysing Tuai's description of their schooling experiences would show that the configuration of their power over the knowledge they were receiving in their education, was limited. They had no control over English, the language of instruction. At the time of writing the manuscript, Tuai confesses that unless the Lord helps him a little "very hard to learn" to read and that Mr Hall Mr Hall was one of the teachers at Madeley, who spent time with Tuai and Titere, from what I can gather in the manuscript file. has to read his letters to him. So the major skills needed viz. reading and speaking English, in the literate process were lacking. Presumably the same was true for Titere. So lack of control over

the social and cultural practices of literacy would have meant limited access to knowledge and information for both of them. Their literacy experiences in this early stage, because of the cultural barriers of language limit their breadth and scope of knowledge about English society. In so doing, Tuai and Titere will have no control over English culture. If Mr Hall had been unwilling to read Tuai's correspondence to him, Tuai would have remained unaware of the message that Mr Pratt Mr Pratt was the Secretary of the Church Missionary Society in London, whose organisation presumably sponsored Tuai's and Titere's education at Madeley.

He was probably keeping track of their progress and encouraging them to keep

trying. had sent him.

The configuration of Tuai's power and knowledge was dwarfed by the cultural barriers he was trying to surmount.

While it is obvious from the manuscript that Tuai and Titere both really enjoyed their trip to the glass factory and were able to do some glass blowing one could not say they had gained a measure of the increasing strength and skill sufficient to claim real knowledge about glass blowing. They would not return to New Zealand with the ability to produce glass. Their knowledge about it and the acquisition of the necessary resources to produce it were simply insufficient and inadequate from the 'training' they had received.

In Giroux's terms the knowledge that Tuai and Titere were receiving were merely the result of:

"words, structure and style [that were used in the teaching programme to] reveal unintentional truths that contain fleeting images of a different society"

(Giroux, 1984 : 30)

How could they hope to reproduce what they were seeing back in New Zealand? They would have had to spend many more years in Britain learning the glass trade skills. Similarly their trip to the mines in Hawxtone. There were not the developed mines in New Zealand to even think of iron smelting. Like the glass trade they would have had to remain in Britain for ten to fifteen years at least to gain the engineering skills necessary to produce any one of the heavy industrial products they were sent to Britain to learn about. The engineering plants necessary for any kind of production would have had to be brought in from places like Britain or Europe.

In reality neither Tuai nor Titere could be regarded as being fully literate. Even after two years of struggling trying to 'make sense of the world' (Freire, 1985) they found themselves in they were not able to critically assess the 'truth' of their situation. Their reactions can be measured in terms of the role of the illiterate whereby:

'the patient ... submits himself passively to a process in which he cannot intervene'

(Freire, 1985 : 42)

The effort by missionaries to 'educate' and 'correct their thinking' are teaching interventions that dominate and subordinate the learner who can only passively receive the input from that. All of the thinking and feeling that Tuai expresses in his letter eg. as he goes to the mine and is afraid he might "tumble down on his head" or his joy about going home to escape the cold, tell of the degree of human struggle to be free of the constraints that bind him in the school. Trying to get full meaning and to relate that to his own cultural world emphasises the dilemma of his struggle. Breaking the codes of reading and writing are important to him in his struggle. He is happy about being at the school and believes that Divine intervention will assist him in the decoding of the messages in print.

Fleeting experiences would result in fleeting memories and fleeting images. That is all that can be expected of the brief two year crash course of English teaching that Tuai had. While that would have had a major impact on his memory his knowledge and concepts of how British material culture was structured and operated would be limited. The teaching intervention was not sustained long enough to be of benefit to the second language learner.

The praxis of the teachers involved, had spent time affirming their own history, their own values, their own views of legitimating certain social, educational, political and technological functions that Tuai and Titere had been overwhelmed by it all. Tuai in the end announces that "when I go home I tell all my countrymen of the true God. New Zealand God all nonsense"! So through the process of the education he was offered it was as Freire commented a process of cultural domination which was opposed to dialogue and served to domesticate him (Freire, 1985 : 85). Tuai believed in the superiority of the British God and

that his own God was all nonsense. That is quite a leap in transformation, brought about by his literacy experiences.

His educators as the possessors of knowledge had filled him like an "empty vessel" with the (deposit) idea that his cultural beliefs were worthless, evil, pagan. Tuai accepts the teaching, does not challenge the information, and therefore is unable to resist the authoritarian imposition of other doctrines over him at the risk of sacrificing his own cultural beliefs. He remains passive and is therefore domesticated and readily compliant to the will of the new culture.

Very little opportunity was given to Tuai and Titere to practice their own cultural beliefs and knowledge in the alien situation of England. They had to suppress their own history and images of their own social background in order to try to absorb the new knowledge being presented to them. British hegemony, their ideologies and practices dominated the teaching and learning that Tuai and Titere engaged in.

The lithograph proclaiming Tuai as a failure while in Britain where he had spent nearly two years learning to speak English, to read and write, demonstrates the idea that these three functions of literacy are complete entities in themselves. That such entities are in themselves empowering agencies. Therefore it is quite 'reasonably' assumed by the proclamation, that Tuai should return to Aotearoa/New Zealand and teach Maori society how to speak English, how to pray in English, and then build an industrial complex! That would seem to be a fair return for the ninety five pounds sponsorship he and Titere had between them to pay for their education.

To engage in such a view is to ignore the political context of literacy. If Tuai been actively able to engage in the literacy process, had been fully able to comprehend his situation, had been encouraged to dialogue with his teachers as an equal, he would have 'transcended the domesticating educational practice' (Freire, 1985 : 104) and been 'liberated' in his return home to make transformations to Maori society. Instead Tuai was trapped by his lack of 'critical consciousness' and was technically 'politically illiterate' (ibid)

The events of history for Maori society have shown that Freire's claim of Third World never being able to relate as equals with director societies, is borne out. Maori society at the time had very little way of knowing how capitalist society with all of the complex structures that are bound up within it, worked. A relationship of equals has therefore been impossible. The director society assumed dominance at the outset, recognising that the other partner could not compete in the same field of pursuit. Maintaining that position of dominance in Aotearoa/New Zealand was easy once the relationship started.

Over the past one hundred and seventy years of literacy programmes, the only times that Maori were in control of their learning and their literacy was when the print was in Maori and the mission schools became Maori schools. The height of that era was between the decades 1826 - 1855. Once the hard line was put

that English had to be the medium of instruction, political and social control shifted from Maori quarters to those of the Pakeha. That control has remained there. Maori language in the 1990's is all but dead.

The struggle by a conscientised sector of Maori society to "save" the last vestiges of the Maori language is gaining a ground swell of support from within several quarters of New Zealand society. Many involved in the movement are unaware of this struggle having links to the politics of literacy. Their disillusionment with the negative indices that record Maori performance with such data as: highest illiteracy rates in New Zealand are suffered mostly by Maori, highest levels of unemployment are in Maori communities, highest imprisonment rates are Maori, poorest physical and mental health are suffered by Maori, has created the energy to set up their own way of educating themselves. Some attempts within the education system tried to address Maori demands for Maori language teaching in schools, but most of these programmes did not go far enough and rested with the goodwill of Pakeha to sustain and maintain the impetus of such programmes. No training was set aside for teachers or resources developed to assist in the teaching.

Maori initiatives were stepped up during the 1980's, so that in the mid 1990's the spread of Kohanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Maori have made significant inroads into controlling what knowledge Maori learners will have access to. Maori see this struggle as related to "saving" the Maori language and "correcting the thinking of Maori" about their world views of history and social and educational advancement. Yet if one examines the issues surrounding political literacy, the Maori struggle is basically the same struggle as the struggle against illiteracy. The kind of benefits Maori want from their education are that same as those demanded by other minority groups throughout the world, that is universal literacy for their society, which will guarantee them a sound basis for economic, social and cultural development both at a national and individual level.

The loss of mother tongue status by most Maori was not in the past seen by Maori as linked to the problems of illiteracy. Yet in viewing the UNESCO development programmes on literacy and the status of minority languages, the Maori experience has evidence from their history to show that denial of their mother tongue as

a valid means of transferring knowledge, was instigated as deliberate policy. That was the nature of the 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 19) suffered by Maori in their education. In terms of human rights under the UN Charter the abuse to Maori have been:

as a minority group Maori have been "denied access to education in its mother tongue, if that language is downgraded, denied recognition, ridiculed, or perceived as inferior, if (as in some areas of the world) that language is actively suppressed and those who speak it are persecuted, then a minority group is significantly disadvantaged and its human rights are being abused."

(Phillips, Alan, in Skutnabb, 1990 : 5)

All of these abuses have been part of the Maori experience in the history of New Zealand education since the arrival of the

missionaries. It is therefore not surprising to find the low levels of power and control over their literacy experiences. Therefore knowledge that would have allowed full participation in the wider society was not transferred to Maori in the way that being truly literate would have permitted.

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