

*Literacy, Emotion, and Authority: Reading and Writing on a Polynesian Atoll*, by Niko Besnier. *Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundations of Language* 17. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. ISBN 0-521-48087-6, xx + 234 pages, tables, maps, notes, photographs, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$54.95; paper, US\$19.95.

*Critical and Developmental Literacy*, edited by Otto Ignatius M S Nekitel, Steven Edmund Winduo, and Sakarepe Kamene. Port Moresby: University of Papua New Guinea Press, 1995. ISBN 9980-84-062-5, 195 pages, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, index. Paper, US\$26.00.

Literacy and its implications for Pacific societies are viewed from several perspectives in these two books. Both books describe literacy in sociolinguistic terms, both examine the society's web of communication domains, and both are critical of a view of literacy as some unmitigated good thing. Both of these books can be valuable resources for an understanding of the social implications of literacy education and of education in general; each is conceived and constructed in ways significantly different from the other, and subsequently each needs to be read differently and with different expectations.

Besnier's volume masterfully negotiates the complexities of textual analysis, meticulous contextualization of literacy practices within a framework of affiliated oral communication. He examines the communication domains on one Pacific atoll, to further understanding of literacy in its ethnographic

context and to suggest more ambitious methodologies for the study of the effects of literacy within societies.

His introduction is a helpful discussion of anthropological perspectives on literacy, highlighting the contrasts between older, more deterministic views, and more recent "ideological" models, to use Brian Street's terms. Even in the introduction, a reader will find that frequent reference to Besnier's extensive 495-item bibliography provides a helpful overview of the current literature of literacy. Besnier is a proponent of letting several approaches inform each other:

While many investigations of literacy in post industrial societies take an event-centered perspective, ethnographers of non-Western settings frequently attempt to describe literacy in those societies in one fell swoop. Considerably more detailed descriptions are thus available on particular literacy events in Western societies than in non-Western settings. In this book, I attempt to remedy this imbalance by approaching the ethnographic materials from both perspectives: I will first investigate various literacy events in detail, and then complement this investigation with a more general assessment of the similarities, differences and tensions across literacy practices and across the sociocultural and ideological dynamics with which they are associated. (12)

In pursuing these goals, Besnier describes the ethnographic and historical issues on Nukulaelae Atoll in the Tuvalu group, and surveys the linguistic contexts from his perspective as a visitor and researcher during several terms of varying length since 1979. Here he sets as one of his parameters that most of his study is devoted to lit-

eracy events conducted outside a pedagogical setting, thus clarifying that this book is not a discussion of literacy instruction or of literacy as viewed in a school context. This is an admirable achievement in light of his own observation that “it is very difficult to disentangle literacy from the development of education and religious conversion in the nineteenth-century historical records. The introducing agents considered reading, schooling, and Christianity to be three facets of the same evolutionary process towards modernity” (61). Some of the most insightful parts of this book are composed of such disentangling.

Of further interest, and likely to be of useful application to many other Pacific societies, is Besnier’s observation about the almost subversive reinvention of literacy for the Islanders’ own social purposes:

Nukulaelae Islanders are unlikely to ever have received instruction in letter writing, since literacy was brought to them for the sole purpose of reading the Bible. Yet they were clearly able to apply their newly acquired literacy skills to suit their own purposes and social designs, thus *empowering* the technology and giving it, from the beginning, a meaning that was related only remotely to the meaning that the agents of introduction intended it to have. . . . Nukulaelae experienced an efflorescence of literacy practices in the years following the introduction of the technology, and this efflorescence was the direct result of Nukulaelae peoples’ successful efforts to redefine literacy for their own benefit. Thus, contrary to the impression conveyed by missionary representations, where literacy is equated with Bible reading, a heterogeneous set of literacy practices emerged very early, and

islanders were hardly passive recipients of the new technology once it was introduced. (66)

The rest of the study indeed is focused on letter-writing, in which Besnier asserts his view that “letter writing is a means through which Nukulaelae Islanders display a particularly vulnerable and emotional facet of their personhood to their interactors, which they do not generally do in face-to-face interactions” (18), and sermon writing and performance, where Besnier demonstrates that “written sermons are embedded in a system of knowledge transmission; and they contribute to the sense of order that Islanders particularly value in religious contexts” (19).

His concluding chapter advances some interesting theoretical considerations, most notably his notion of indexically engendered literacy practices on Nukulaelae, and uses comparative issues of literacy roles in society.

The collection by Nekitel, Winduo, and Kamene, instead of making a sustained study of one society and literacy context as Besnier does, brings together a number of perspectives on the influences of literacy on Papua New Guinea societies. As the proceedings of a 1993 seminar at the University of Papua New Guinea, the collection comprises papers approaching literacy, education, and development from a number of perspectives and presuppositions, and using varied methodologies. Although it necessarily carries the unevenness and occasional disjuncture characteristic of all such collections, it suffers little from this. Many of the problems discussed here possess important affinities

to the issues explored in Besnier's study.

The essays are tied together well by several introductory chapters. Otto Nekitel provides a concise introduction to recent perspectives taken on Papua New Guinea literacy by the various entities, most notably the strides taken toward integrating indigenous language (*tok ples*) literacy into the national school system since a pathbreaking conference in 1987. Nekitel also discusses the importance of recent indigenous critiques of anthropological descriptions of Papua New Guinea cultures, thereby creating an effective introduction to Martin N Nakata's insightful deconstruction of early accounts of Torres Strait cultures. In a welcoming address, Joseph Sukwianomb defines critical literacy in broad terms, and calls for the establishment of an Institute of New Guinea Languages.

Ensuing papers explore the selection of language for initial literacy instruction, accompanied by a powerful critique of western missionaries' literacy practices (Moody), and an expansion on this criticism by Nicholas Faraclas. He describes the ways that "Critical Literacy in Papua New Guinea has rejected linear sequencing, in favour of an inclusive holistic approach that approximates traditional patterns of organizing human activities" (33). Willie Jonduo reports on an early evaluation of literacy programs that employ components of *tok ples* instruction, followed by four portraits of programs in three provinces, a study of a dictionary project, and a biography project.

This section is summarized by a

lucid discussion, "Literacy With/Without Roots," in which Sakarepe Keosai Kamene examines the dilemmas of the past and present efforts to encourage literacy in Papua New Guinea, organizing his comments and critique around kinds of communities: urban, rural, and village.

The rest of the collection is a group of papers focusing on planning and future developments. Many specifically target components of the national curriculum, such as chemistry, numeracy, and ecology, and others propose restructuring of school systems, increased training in telecommunications, and community development. Nekitel's essay proposes linguistics training as a way to build confidence in literacy workers, and suggests the founding of a national language academy to oversee language research and analysis. Winduo and Soaba follow with two papers concerning the writer's role in a changing society. Steven Winduo asserts that "the only way we can call ourselves literate is to be writers of our own lives, of our own identity and of our own destiny. We will not be literate if we allow all the ideas of dominant discourses to discriminate us, detour our thought patterns and replace our rich linguistic inheritance."

This book can be a valuable resource for researchers in the Pacific, as it documents the implementation of education policy in Papua New Guinea and shows the interlocking nature of a number of issues in development, linguistics, communications, and literacy.

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