

Reflections on the life work of a distinguished Pacific educationist: ‘Ilaisa Futa ‘I Ha’angana Helu, 1934–2010

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Abstract: Towards the end of the gestation period of this MAI Review volume on Pasifika Education we learned with sadness that Futa Helu, founder and until recently director of the ‘Atenisi Institute in Tonga, had died. Professor Helu had close links with a number of New Zealand learning communities including the University of Auckland where he was appointed Visiting Professor in Pacific Studies and in Education a number of times in the 1980s and 1990s. He was well known to a number of the contributing writers to this volume. My own familiarity with the educational thought of Futa Helu, and its practical manifestation through ‘Atenisi, goes back to the mid-1980s. Since that time Futa and ‘Atenisi have provided both the inspiration and a constant reference point for my own work as an educationist. This brief reflection is offered as a tribute to a life well spent, to a colleague and friend notable for his wisdom, humanity, courage, entertaining company and dedication to the critical tradition of education.

Key words: education; indigenous knowledge; Tongan society and culture; Western cultural tradition

Futa as scholar and public intellectual

Over the past decades Futa Helu has been referred to frequently as Oceania’s pre-eminent intellectual, one who in his scholarly writing and educational practice upheld the importance of both indigenous knowledge and the Western critical tradition. He was widely acknowledged for the depth of his analysis of global political ecology as well as a profound knowledge and appreciation of Tongan society and culture. One of the most significant aspects of his academic work was the extent to which it effectively integrated matters pertaining to an Oceanic micro-state with those on the international stage, and particularly in how it demonstrated that this scholar’s love and respect for his homeland was undiminished (he would probably have argued, enhanced) by a thorough grounding in Western philosophies.

Futa’s writings cover a wide range of academic disciplines—anthropology, philosophy, political economy, education and linguistics to name a few (see, for example, Helu, 1999). This spirit of broad scholarship and the combination of scholarly discourse and storytelling that characterised his academic analyses worked well as a means of elaborating the various ways whereby people employ new circumstances in shaping their worlds. A most refreshing aspect of Futa’s writing was the matter-of-fact way in which he presented the articulation of such binarisms as global and local, tradition and modernity, and culture and development. While the complexities, conflicts and contradictions implicit within these binarisms are well recognised, his writings point to ways in which individuals and groups, in the practice of their everyday lives, accommodate and sometimes overcome them.

Another notable aspect of his scholarship was the seriousness with which he took the role of academic as critic and conscience, as contributor to the development of a strong civil society which, in his words, “... has the characteristic input of a watchdog function, the provision of

critiques, opposition and protest whenever State policy or Business influence threaten the rights of citizens, most importantly the right of equal access to social goods” (1999, p. 9). To quote from a collection of essays published in his honour, “[Futa] is a paradox: a deeply traditional man, steeped in Tongan culture, but also the most articulate, thoughtful and strident critic of Tongan society” (Campbell & Coxon, 2005, p. xii).

It was unsurprising given Futa’s philosophical approach that he should have been at the centre of political debate in Tonga for many years. Criticism in his view was not only an intellectual art, but an instrument for political challenge. As commented by a well known Tongan journalist at the time of Futa’s 70th birthday:

When Futa speaks, Tonga listens. Futa Helu is more than just a teacher who founded an educational institute. Futa Helu is himself an institution whose life and work have been the foundation cornerstone in the lives of so many people in the last 40 or more years. He is an icon that has become a significant part of the historical and social mosaic of Tongan society. Futa is the philosophical architect of the Human rights and Democracy Movement ...his incredible knowledge of Tongan history and culture make him one of the most authoritative voices on any matter pertaining to Tongan society Futa personifies the notion of the critical thinker, which is, for Tonga, a radical one and one lived out in his life and those of his students. (Campbell & Coxon, 2005, p. 13)

Futa as radical educationist

Futa's influence on and contribution to his own society and region was primarily through his work as a radical educationist. The reflections in this section draw on my experiences as a researcher, teacher and frequent visitor to the ‘Atenisi Institute since I was first introduced to his educational thought and practice in the mid-1980s. As part of my post-graduate study programme, I undertook library research on the notion of ‘relevance’ as used by education policy makers and administrators in relation to how education should be shaped to meet community ‘needs’. My particular interest in this stemmed from my work as a secondary teacher and junior school dean at a large Auckland school that enrolled many children belonging to Pacific migrant communities. I was concerned by the extent to which the school offered differential programmes of study to different groups of students and that this was patterned largely by ethnicity. Whereas a majority of Pacific and Māori students were channelled into classes offering what were deemed ‘relevant’ subjects, those more ‘useful’ and vocational, the students pursuing traditional academic programmes of learning tended to be Pākehā and middle-class.

At that stage I intended to pursue the questions surrounding this problem as research for a masters thesis through field study in selected Auckland schools. However, after coming across a paper published by Futa a few years earlier (Helu, 1981), which spelt out very clearly that this type of inequitable educational provision was well established in many Pacific countries and critiqued it most eloquently, I revisited this intention. The paper was written against a backdrop of Pacific-wide education debate about the purposes of education and its role within the wider socio-economic environment. The catch-cry of ‘relevance’ which had become central to the education discourse of the time was described by Futa as “a blatant injection of foreign ideology” that elevated economic needs as determinants of curriculum content: “With missionary zeal, educators, teaming up with big business, investors and other social groups with vested interests, convert students, parents, the whole populace to the relevance cause” (1981, p. 20). This doctrine, he said, was hinged on the premise of a society having a unity of interests whereas all that was being promoted were the specific interests of the powerful thus the utilitarian-vocational understanding of education informing these developments was exploitative education at its most effective. Thus, Futa maintained, the

relevance doctrine's attempts to deny Pacific peoples the critical apparatus with which they could view their own societies was non-educational and rendered them subject to political authoritarianism.

Futa argued that only an education that immerses students in the critical tradition of education would enable them “to see themselves in the correct perspective and in relation to the expectations of living in the modern world” (1981, p. 20). Furthermore, that such an education would be underpinned by the following characteristics:

- Education as intellectual, involving the development of systematic knowledge so learners can understand things the way they are.
- Education as critical, enabling learners to critically view all doctrines and policies which promote and protect certain interests.
- Education as a way-of-life, organizing learners around the acquisition of knowledge and critical understanding.
- Education as a social movement, upholding a critical tradition in which learners require an understanding of the social environment (Campbell & Coxon, 2005, p. 62).

This type of education, Futa proposed, was a necessary prerequisite to the attainment of an educated and active citizenry able to participate fully in a democratic society. As such it should be practiced within a learning community to which students from all social groups have access and in which they can all participate as equals.

I was excited and intrigued to learn that the ideas expressed in the paper had not remained at the level of the abstract, but had a practical manifestation through a small educational institution founded by Futa Helu in his homeland of Tonga. With the assistance of some fellow postgraduate students whom I had discovered were graduates of ‘Atenisi, I made contact with Futa and arranged to meet him while he was visiting Auckland. It was agreed that during the 1987 academic year I would undertake an ethnographic study of the ‘Atenisi Institute—which then comprised a secondary school, a small university and a foundation for the performing arts—while teaching part-time in the secondary school.

Critical education theory and economic reductionism

By the time I had met Futa, my initial interest in exploring educational provision for ethnic minority communities in New Zealand had led further into Critical Education theory and the research literature developed as the means of countering the ideologies shaping education policy and practice in the Western world at the time. Of interest were the then very recent writings expressing a growing concern at the economic rationality informing educational restructuring in the US and the UK—and soon to be replicated in New Zealand. Over the preceding decade, the view that education should be geared to economic needs came to dominate the mainstream of educational thought in these countries. Education became increasingly perceived and accepted as the means to an end, as explicitly about preparation for employment, with knowledge valued primarily for its marketability (Coxon, 2005, p. 61).

The writings of many critical education theorists responding to the entrenchment of market-led educational policies in these countries focused on the suppression of the critical tradition of education they implied (Coxon, 1992, p. 58). These critical writings urged educators to move beyond the “cul de sac of critique” and become involved in the development of educational alternatives “... that prepare people for democracy, [and] ... promote the acquisition of a critical attitude and social practices that allow students to view society with an analytical eye” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1986, p. 10, cited in Coxon, 1992, p. 58). Also identified was the need for an empowering and liberating pedagogy, one which would enable

subordinate social groups to “appropriate critically the best features of traditional education” (p. 58).

I wondered to what extent the ‘Atenisi Institute, a Tongan indigenous educational institution founded two decades previously, would provide the educational alternative called for by the Western educational theorists.

A critical education: The ‘Atenisi alternative

I discovered that the 'Atenisi Institute upheld a rigorous and coherent philosophy incorporating an educational position which explicitly opposed instrumentalism as the guiding principle for educational provision and practice. I also learned that ‘Atenisi’s policy of open entry meant that many of their students had been rejected by mainstream education providers as ‘non-academic’ and yet were generally succeeding academically at ‘Atenisi. And, given the extremely limited material resourcing of ‘Atenisi, of particular interest was what motivated the ‘Atenisi community members to continue in what was clearly a struggle to achieve their educational vision.

Origins and development

‘Atenisi’s origins lie in Futa’s response (shortly after his return to Tonga upon completion of his studies at Sydney University) to a request by a group of civil servants for help in improving their knowledge of English, mathematics and book-keeping. Thus in 1963 the ‘Atenisi night school, comprising 11 adult learners and Futa as teacher, began classes. It was called ‘Atenisi (the Tongan transliteration of Athens) in recognition of in recognition of education as a historical social movement that began in classical Greece. Soon more aspiring learners such as seamen and Ministry of Works’ technicians sought help; and classes in celestial navigation and electrical circuitry were set up and also taught by Futa.

Within a year the governing committee, formed by the original night school members and Futa, were approached by parents whose children were unable to access secondary education through the existing government and church systems. This was either because they had not achieved high enough marks in the end-of-primary examination or because the fees being charged were too high. Thus the ‘Atenisi High School was born and in 1966 ‘Atenisi was officially registered as a formal educational institution at the Premier’s Office with the designation ‘Institute of the People’. The first classrooms were small fale built in the traditional Tongan style and the first substantial classroom building was erected by parents, teachers and students in 1967 on the site leased from government; and where the ‘Atenisi campus is located today. In 1975 ‘Atenisi University was established and a two-year tertiary diploma programme was offered the following year, and in 1978 a four-year Bachelor of Arts programme enrolled its first students; this was the first university degree to be offered completely in Tonga. A period of consolidation and modest growth in the academic programmes followed until 1987 when the ‘Atenisi Foundation for the Performing Arts (AFPA) began.

‘Atenisi began with no assets, yet its existence on swamp land amidst all the apparent signs of poverty in very basic and minimally equipped buildings continues. That it exists at all is because of community members’ unflagging commitment to the ‘Atenisi vision and their untiring efforts to improve their physical environment by draining the swamp, building classrooms and even by making desks and chairs. Futa’s belief in open entry, especially to the poorest and most marginalised families in Tonga, required that minimal tuition fees be charged. ‘Atenisi has therefore depended on a range of fund-raising activities including socials, the sale of traditional oils and medicines, utilising an area of campus to grow seedlings for sale and, most significantly, regular concerts throughout Tonga and successful overseas concert tours by AFPA. Under the leadership of Futa and his eldest daughter, and

despite its humble material circumstances, AFPA soon developed into a strong creative force in the artistic life of Tonga.

Curriculum and pedagogy

‘Atenisi’s aim to produce critical thinkers was seen to require a classical curriculum which gave students a broad knowledge of the major fields of study through subjects such as literature, philosophy, language, history, maths, science, art history, expressive and performing arts, with a particular application to Tongan culture and society and within a learning environment that encouraged debate and enquiry.

At ‘Atenisi the teacher’s task was twofold; firstly, to enable the student (especially in the early secondary years) to systematically acquire a body of knowledge through the structured and orderly curriculum; and secondly, to develop in the students the ability to analyse that knowledge in a critical way. Futa attributed much of the academic success of ‘Atenisi high school students to the pedagogy informing his teachers’ interactions with learners in their classrooms. He encouraged a relaxed and informal teaching style in which ‘spoon-feeding’ information was avoided and learners were encouraged to question that which they did not understand or wished to challenge—this was significantly different to that prevalent elsewhere in Tonga. He also believed that for teachers to be able to engender critical thinking in their students they needed to be critical thinkers themselves and this required that they be also learners. Thus high school teachers were also enrolled in university classes. Teachers were not to consider themselves as absolute authorities in the learning situation, just better informed learners whose own learning could be advanced through the teaching process.

A notable aspect of ‘Atenisi’s pedagogy for more than four decades was the ongoing inspiration provided to both teachers and learners across all programmes and at every level by Futa himself. Until very recent years he continued to teach in both the high school and university. He actively monitored his teachers’ work by talking to students about what they are learning and do not understand. Where necessary he worked with teachers either individually or in small groups on ways to improve their practice. As an inspiring teacher himself, by encouraging reflection on their pedagogies teachers were usually able to catch on to both precept and technique.

The personal charisma, political adroitness and undisputed cultural knowledge that made Futa much sought after by Tongans from all walks of life had much to do with the University’s ability to enrol a viable number of students and provide the lecturing staff required to teach them. This was reflected in the confidence of parents in enrolling their school leaver children, especially their daughters, and the appreciation of many who had been in the workforce for a number of years of the opportunity to experience university life at a modest cost and without leaving Tonga. It was also reflected in the extent to which Futa was able to draw on his international networks to recruit university lecturers. Thus the university has always comprised a very cosmopolitan group over the years including German, Dutch, French, British, Indian, Japanese, North American, Australian and New Zealand as well as Tongan academics. For many of the foreign scholars, the opportunity to be part of Futa’s often exhilarating and always inspiring life work, as well as the opportunity to learn from him and enjoy the pleasure of his company, was reward enough.

Final reflections

With the permission of the writer and former ‘Atenisi teacher, Sefita Hao’uli , I have included an excerpt of his tribute to his relative and mentor as posted on the *Matangi Tonga* website:

Tonga quietly buried one of her most influential scholars and visionaries when they laid ‘Ilaisa Futa ‘I Ha'angana Helu to rest at Telekava cemetery in Nuku'alofa this week.

Quietly, that is, for someone who has had a prominent role in shaping Tongan society over the last half-century.

Futa, as he's known locally, may have been the founder of the ever-fledgling 'Atenisi Institute and University on the swampy western fringe of Nuku'alofa, but for those of us who came to know him well, he will forever be the scholars' scholar, the tutor to a nation, a mentor to the growing Tongan intelligentsia, an authority on Tongan arts culture, and a humble but courageous critic of Tonga's powerful elite.

His legacies are too numerous to list, such was the breadth of his personal interests and skills. But he will always be remembered as someone who not only enjoyed sharing his vast knowledge and experience, but he was witty and an entertaining story-teller as well. Simply put, Futa was enjoyable and sought after company at all levels of Tongan society. The majority of the academics from all over the world who came to lend struggling 'Atenisi Institute a helping hand may have done so for professional and altruistic reasons but, more often than not, they did so as personal favours for one they liked and admired. (Hao'uli, 2010)

Futa lived out his beliefs to the discomfort of some, the admiration of many, and the enlightenment of all. All aspects of 'Atenisi will continue to reflect this remarkable man's influence: his consistently upheld social, political and educational philosophies; his deep and diverse knowledge; his well-balanced and good-humoured attitude to life; his respect for all people no matter their status in society; his abiding love for his own culture. What is most important is that 'Atenisi should continue to work towards the realisation of Futa's belief that Tonga's future and integrity depend on all its citizens having the opportunity to participate in informed decision-making about their society's development. His legacy will live on.

'Oku fakafolau atu homau 'ofa ki he fanafotu 'i he ako mei he 'Otu Felenite

We bid farewell with the warmest love to the flagbearer for education from the Friendly Islands.

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