

Critical Pedagogy and Indigenous/Minority Language Rights

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Kosraean high school students video Truman Wakuk telling a story about flying fish and Itu Utwe (the Planet Jupiter) for the Kosrae Night Sky Book and CD .

Background:

The island of Kosrae is the easternmost state in the Federated States of Micronesia. It has a population of approximately 8,000 living on island and another 2,000 living and working on Guam, in Hawaii and the US mainland, as well as serving in the US armed forces. Kosraeans have their own language and culture, which they wish to maintain and enrich. However, the knowledge base of teacher education comes from US benchmark standards, many of which have been imposed by the US under the Compact of Free Association. This serves, intentionally or otherwise, to devalue traditional ways of knowing, cultural values and belief systems. It also results in highly assimilative educational practices that favor English as the language of “advancement” and exacerbate language shift (LS). In 2001, for example, the FSM National Language conference warned that “a realignment of values to combat forces such as individualism, pragmatism and materialism is needed to address language shift.” (p. 20).

Questions for Consideration and Discussion:

1. What is the responsibility of former colonizing powers (Spain, Germany, Japan and the US in the case of Kosrae), in helping to preserve and enrich the language and culture?
2. What can local people do to overcome this legacy, and where should funding come from?
3. What kinds of decolonizing methodologies can be used to recreate ones culture, history and traditions?
4. How can Pacific Island and other indigenous peoples interact with exploited workers from First World nations in this process (particularly given the fact that many islanders are now included in these numbers as migrant laborers)?

In order to help reverse LS, Kosrae DOE and SIT began a community-based project in 2001 to produce first language literacy materials. An early problem was how to train members of the community to develop curricula (e.g., dictionaries, oral histories, etc.), which could be used in the schools. There was a strong bias within DOE for training in linguistics. Some members of DOE, however, felt that more could be gained by training in ethnography and critical pedagogy whereby students, teachers and members of the community at large could share in developing a critical understanding of the sociohistorical causes of LS, and take action to transform the situation. As the project developed, the following questions emerged:

The Children's Picture Dictionary: How can Kosraean second and third graders draw and write their own picture dictionary? How can such a dictionary, with pictures about their daily lives and funny sentences, reflect some of the deeper issues concerning our language and culture? How can the use of three languages in the dictionary – Kosraean (as our language), English (as the primary medium of instruction in our schools), and Japanese (as the colonial language of our grandparents and an elective in high school) – support our traditions of cooperative, intergenerational learning?

The Kosraean Junior Dictionary: How can Kosraean college students with no training in linguistics, write a 1,500-word dictionary of their language? How should they compile the entries? What should they do about the fact that Kosraean has no words for parts of speech? How should they deal with issues of standardized/non-standardized spelling? How can pictures be used to reflect Kosraean values and the importance of Kosraean culture? What questions and activities can be included that will encourage reflection about who we are, where we come from and where we want to go?

The Kosrae Night Sky Book and CD: Between 1840-1880 western disease reduced our population from a current estimate of around 30,000 to a mere 300. Tremendous amounts of traditional knowledge and language were wiped out, including deep-sea navigational skills and the names of the constellations. Received history takes little responsibility for this. It underestimates pre-contact population at between 1,500-7,000, evades responsibility for the epidemic, says almost nothing about loss of TEK and language, but touts the conversation to Christianity that resulted from it. Why? What new Kosraean names can we give to our constellations? What sramsram can we make?

New Sramsram from and for our Elders: On Kosrae, traditional knowledge, including TEK is devalued. You can't get a job with it in Honolulu. Ecologists, marine biologists and other outside experts aren't interested; they have their own Western categories of "science-speak," not sramsram. And marketing indigenous "spirituality" hasn't caught on yet. How can we save our knowledge, our language and our human treasures without turning them into eco-tourist freak shows? Without letting them be co-opted?

Our Goddess Sinlaku: Before Christianization, our Deity was female. Her name was Sinlaku. Our clans were matrilineal, women were equal, respected, and they played a vital role in society. After Christianization/colonization, our families became patriarchal. Today, there is alcoholism, domestic violence, greed, possession, coercion, and especially among young men, increasing suicide. When Silanku left our islands after the coming of a stronger god, she went to Yap. Before leaving, she told us that she would return when the full moon turned dark. Is it time? How should we prepare? What sramsram can we share, even in our churches, about this?

The Kosrae Language and Culture Website: How can a homepage be best used to maintain and enrich our language and culture? How can it be used to make sramsram with our brothers and sisters, aunties and uncles living off island?

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