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BORDER CROSSING KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS: A PNG TEACHER'S AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

MEDI RETA

School of Education, James Cook University,
Townsville, Queensland, 4811, Australia

■ Abstract

Narratives have always been integral to Indigenous knowledge transfer. In this autoethnography the author shares her border crossings between her Indigenous knowledge systems and the often dominant Western knowledge system. Pertinent to these experiences are the stark contrasts that exist between the two knowledge systems and their educational goals. This paper opens up space for conversation amongst those educators who are keen to learn and enhance their teaching and learning experiences in schools, particularly of those students whose cultural background differs from their own.

■ Grandma and home

I loved the evening best. Just before I went to sleep, I would lie beside my grandmother and ask her to tell me a story. My favourite was about the two brothers who went fishing and how the coconut tree came to being as my grandmother would begin:

“Long long time ago on an island lived two brothers. They loved fishing and everyday they went out to sea to fish. One day something strange happened. When they were out in the deep, deep ocean, a shark came and wanted to attack them. Attempting to fan off the shark from attacking them, the elder brother told his young brother to paddle while he cut the fish they had caught to give to the shark, all the time hurrying his younger brother to paddle faster to shore. The younger brother tried his best to get them to shore but his little hands could not get him there quickly enough. Noticing that the fish they had caught could not sustain them any longer, the elder brother told his younger brother another thing. ‘Listen, if this fish runs out and we have not reached the shore; we will be his next meal. I don’t want both of us to be, you have to cut me up and give me to the shark. Keep the head and bury me in the sand on the beach. Come and check my head everyday. One day you will find a plant growing. That plant and its fruits will sustain you on the island’. The young brother did as his brother had told him to do. Years later, that plant became the first coconut tree. Today the coconut has the head of the boy. On it you will find something that looks like human eyes, the nose, and the mouth. There is no ear because the ears were cut and given to the shark, too. The tree is a very useful plant to island people”. Before grandmother finished I would be sound asleep on her lap. I always slept with her. In the morning, and the days that came after I remembered that story.

I grew up in the decade when Papua New Guinea (PNG) gained its independence from Australia. Home was a small village out of Rabaul town on the island of New Britain. Life was not dramatic, but was fun and full of other children to play with. We always shared most things we had, from a guava fruit to a marble. My learning in those early years took place everywhere; near the rivers, in the gardens, during festivities, under a starry moonlit night, or near the fire with other adults and children from the village. The best parts of those times in the village were during moonlit nights when we children used to play games. It was also during those times that my grandmother or

my aunt would sit us down and tell us stories. They were fun and full of laughter but sometimes there were sombre moments when the story was sad. We would go away thinking and asking questions about the characters in the stories. I was known for asking a lot of questions that my aunt, my mother or my grandmother did not always welcome. Some things we just accepted and never questioned. I went away to attend primary school at the age of six in 1974, the year before PNG gained independence. In those days the village councillor was strict in making sure that all the children who had come of age should be at school. He visited each household to make sure that those of us who should be at school were at school.

■ Learning the integrity of relationship

The extended family was at the heart of village life. I grew up in a big family of eight. My mother taught us about the will to work hard despite the odds. My father was mentally ill but mother was there nurturing us since I was three. Dad's mental illness was so violent that he was hospitalised for the most part while we were growing up. I saw him for the first time when I was in Year 7, a torn, worn out and lonely man who needed care and love. His condition prevented us from going closer to him, although we wanted to. The need to get to know him and be a part of his life remained a distant hope because of the isolation his situation created. We children could never really have the opportunity to understand him, although the elder children had the benefit of sharing a bit of him before his illness. His inability to raise us has made me see the world differently. His condition prevented him from performing his role fully as a father to us and husband to my mother. At the same time his condition helped to form my values, attitudes and beliefs about people with disabilities and their access to psychological, social, economic and other forms of support. There was no appropriate facility at that time to cater for his condition. The social security that my grandmother and a few maternal uncles provided for us during those unstable years substituted for the absence of a father. Although his absence affected us psychologically, the social security that the extended family provided was strong enough to keep us going and enabled us to strive towards achieving our goals in life.

Relationships within a community are important. I felt I was able to draw support from my maternal relatives most of the time. The stories I heard, like the one grandma used to tell us, embedded within me a strong sense of responsibility to others; that of care, love for my siblings and concern for others' wellbeing. My relationships taught me to appreciate the supportive social environment where many people are able to offer support in times of need. I remember one week being in several homes while trying to avoid

Dad when he came looking for us to hurt us. I had that fear when I should have loved him. I feared him the most and it bothered me for years.

Respect was a virtue, as well as humility, in the village. I now think that humility was a by-product of respect. Anyone not showing humility was labelled as arrogant, and not belonging to my community. It was customary for people to have certain ways of addressing others in certain relationships. The manner of address in these situations implied moral obligations, the ethical nature and legality of such relationships. Close cousins or in-laws rarely conversed out of respect for the relationship that existed between them and its significance. I remember the feeling of awkwardness when I first addressed my first cousin brother using a word of my mother tongue which means two people. The manner of addressing people this way, gave the appropriate weighting to the relationship being observed. It also implied the amount of respect we had to show in such relationships. I felt my cousins were special and significant in a particular way, and this kind of address barred any romantic relationships between them and I because of these close relationships. I respected these ties and never once thought that I should violate them and befriend any of my cousins. I went away to school with these values in mind.

Respect means addressing people appropriately without calling names. As a respect signifier, names of certain people are seldom called except referred to as aunt, grandmother or uncle. I seldom call my aunts by their first names but only refer to them as aunts. They are important and their seniority demands a high level of respect from me and my other siblings.

Respect also requires certain actions. When my mother was talking we would not talk or argue with her. We had to respect her. When people were sitting down I was told not to walk in front of them. Walking in front was disrespectful. As a little girl I came to accept most of these things without questioning. This was how my society wanted us to be, respectful of the elders and others around us. Submission to those in authority was a norm and anyone who was not in line with that was reprimanded.

Shaming people in public was a punitive measure, and those whose behaviours were found to be beyond what was considered the normal got the stare of the whole community. Family meetings included my maternal uncle and aunt who also had a role in disciplining us if we disobeyed any of the rules. Spanking was common and acceptable for children who misbehaved. Today, this is regarded as corporal punishment in schools.

As I sadly witness the occurrence of incest and adultery while those fundamental and core elements of my village community are shaken to the roots I ask: where, how and why we have allowed these things to happen. Our communities had legal systems upon which the actions of village community members were

judged. These systems created stability, respect, peace and harmony amongst community members.

My experiences are supportive of an existing society that developed over centuries; belief, value and knowledge systems that were functional and fundamental to its members. These systems were whole, valid, and important in directing the course of life for members in particular societies like mine. Bridges et al. state that "to ignore Indigenous philosophical resources ... is to cut contemporary development from its roots ... and more pragmatically, to set aside a resource which ... has a continuing capacity to inform educational development" (2004, p. 533). Unlocking and unravelling narratives in village communities like grandma's story is a positive step in embracing, meriting, and valuing the role that oral history has in today's conventional education.

A social security network founded on the extended family is the heart, brain and ear for traditional families. From the extended family, comes the socio-economic and political control mechanism. The political structure upon which the family is organised, either through the father or the mother blood lineage, controls how decisions are made within the family. These decisions dictate how economic gains within the family, such as ownership of land, are shared among members. Among these decisions, are important social responsibilities expected of each member. Pertinent to social responsibilities is identity formation during which the young are socialised and schooled in the ways in which they are expected to conduct themselves in family circles and within the broader society. To this end, social responsibilities are gender and age specific, in some instances depending on the seniority of members. The extended family embraces not only the "normal" immediate and "extended" family but also the invalids, widows and orphans. It is inclusive of aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins and even in-laws. Social support systems such as those needed for the mentally ill are taken care of by the family. Care for the sick and disabled is an important element of the family. Care encompasses a responsibility to and taking care of others in the absence of others. It is not something that is taught, but it is a value that is taken up immediately as the need arises.

Women play not only significant roles in the upbringing of the children but as the backbone and anchor of the family clan and society. Their role in the family is pivotal. Women sustain the family in the absence of male members and are entrusted with the same male responsibilities. They work hard and are strong willed. Women make sure that children and other adults are taken care of. They become the custodians of the family's norms, values and beliefs and the catalyst for care, responsibility and respect that they instil in the minds and characters of the young. Responsibility to others, as taken up by my grandmother and mother, is in itself a sense of

empowerment. Social security is strong where there is a strong family network. Social security mechanisms in Indigenous communities provide for the care, support and love that would otherwise be a cost to families in developed countries.

Learning the values, beliefs, norms and skills required for living in Indigenous societies is contextualised. It is holistic and embraces all aspects of the context in which the learning takes place. Indigenous education connects community members and values each member as significant parts of a tight social cohesive system. The young growing up within this context learn to appreciate other members and work towards maintaining this social cohesion.

Social connections that humans have with others play pivotal roles in individuals' lives and the learning process for each member of society. In my village setting, my elders and the older siblings became my teachers. They knew the content I needed to learn. Learning was selective in certain areas depending on whether something was of sacred status or for public knowledge. Such distinctions of what should and should not be taught were a way of sanctioning knowledge from abuse. The taboo on questioning of the elders who taught us in certain knowledge areas meant that knowledge was already validated before it was imparted. Elders were authorities and therefore their status alone provided by their lifelong experiences and other initiation rites gave them the status of possessing and validating knowledge. Knowledge in that sense was not discovered, it was already there and imparted to the young as deemed appropriate by custom and the elders. Knowledge making and validation was and is within the social context of Indigenous societies.

Socialising children within a society of respect and humility ensures that stability and harmony are maintained. Respect of the elders and those in authority requires young members to submit to authority with humility. Humility is a virtue and is highly valued. Respect as a way of maintaining social order within a society means that the proper way of relating to other people is ensured. Failure to do so results in punitive measures by the elders. Addressing people in certain ways maintains the integrity of relationships and sanctions those that are not appropriate according to societal rules. Maintaining these relationships is important and sacred. Respect means being quiet in social gatherings and unquestioning in discussions of issues particularly when elders are discussing community issues. Acceptance of decisions without question signifies respect. This and others are part of an existing Indigenous knowledge and value system.

■ Indigenous education and knowledge systems

Smith (1999) states that the term "Indigenous" is problematic because it is a collective term that is used

to refer to distinct populations. Such terms as "Natives", "First Nations" or "Aboriginal" have been used to refer to Indigenous people. The term "Indigenous people" internationalises experiences, struggles and issues that different colonised people have experienced. Here Indigenous refers to those who are native to a particular context, who through their existence within that context, share some commonalities but have undergone colonial experience.

Indigenous knowledge systems are pedagogical tools for Indigenous societies, the same way as Western European knowledge is. Adeyemi and Adeyinka (2002) for example, define the foundations for traditional/Indigenous African education as that of; preparationism, functionalism, communalism, perennialism and holism. Indigenous societies rely on these knowledge systems in foregrounding the learning experiences of their young members and preparing them for life in society.

Indigenous knowledge can also aid in current global development issues. The complexity of current global challenges demands a collective effort. The education field faces much the same challenges and requires alternative ways of attending to these challenges. Gorjestani (2000) of the World Bank writes of Indigenous knowledge as fourfold in its function. First, Indigenous knowledge provides Indigenous people with decision-making and problem-solving skills. Such a function problematises external agencies' development agendas in Indigenous communities and begs a collaborative approach that incorporates Indigenous communities' views on issues affecting them because they also have the necessary knowledge and skills in relation to their local context. Secondly Indigenous knowledge makes an important contribution to global development knowledge. For a long time, Western and European discourses have dominated development agenda. Incorporating Indigenous knowledge with global development knowledge, adds depth and breadth to what currently exists and works towards a more socially just society and creates an equal partnership in the contribution to such a task. Thirdly, Indigenous knowledge systems are endangered and the risk of them becoming extinct is real. It is therefore imperative that Indigenous knowledge is included in the educational field to preserve its continuity and that the current and future generations have the right to this knowledge. Fourthly, Indigenous knowledge is relevant to the development process which for a long time has been under utilised. The world including non-Indigenous communities can benefit if Indigenous knowledge systems are optimised.

Semali and Kincheloe (1999) believe "in the transformative power of Indigenous knowledge, the ways that such knowledge can be used to foster empowerment and justice in a variety of social contexts" (1999, p. 15). Knowledge is life and knowledge is power. Knowledge is operationalised to sustain one's

existence within a particular environment/context. Knowledge is created and recreated over generations for society's continuity. Dei states that Indigenous knowledge "encapsulates the common-good-sense ideas and cultural knowledges of local peoples concerning the everyday realities of living" (2002, p. 5). He further asserts that this knowledge is based on "cognitive understandings and interpretations of the social, physical and spiritual worlds" (2002, p. 5). Castellano (2002) extends this analysis by identifying three broad aspects of Aboriginal knowledge which are relevant to all Indigenous knowledges: traditional knowledge, empirical knowledge and revealed knowledge (cited in Dei, 2002, p. 6). Traditional knowledge is knowledge which is intergenerational and passed on by community elders. Most Indigenous societies communicate knowledge orally through stories, legends, song and dance, lullabies and genealogies (Dei, 2002; Houston, 2007; Nabobo-Baba, 2006). Genealogies trace historical knowledge about a particular group of people in a community. This historical knowledge is vital for any Indigenous group's connection to a land/country and internal or external relationships with other groups. Traditional knowledge also includes laws that govern peoples' behaviour patterns within society. Narakobi (1989, pp. 62-94), for example, discusses values that are vital in sustaining his Sepik society. These values include affinity, honour, respect, discipline, trust, sharing, doing good, balance, people's immortality and sympathy. Nabobo-Baba (2006) also discusses similar values that are vital for her Indigenous Fijian community, including silence which has multiple meanings.

Empirical knowledge is knowledge which is based on observations of the surrounding environment such as the land, sea and their relation to culture and society. Empirical knowledge is grounded in the ability to use particular aspects of the natural and cultural environment to sustain peoples' daily lives within his particular context. Empirical knowledge may also be identified as practical, requiring the skills for particular tools to carry on daily life. Medicinal knowledge for example in many Indigenous societies is empirical knowledge because it is gained through people's knowledge of particular plants and their locality within his environment.

Revealed knowledge is informed by dreams, visions and intuition. In some societies, this revealed knowledge is only accessible through the rite of passage into a particular group. The "Haus Tambran" for example, for male initiates in the Sepik area and the "Dukduk" society for the male Tolais of East New Britain, both in Papua New Guinea, are examples of passages for revealed knowledge. Initiation rites are holistic passages where the initiates not only gain revealed knowledge but also traditional and empirical knowledge. Initiates learn about things that they may use within the environment for their daily survival

needs as well as the traditional knowledge that elder male initiates give to them. Initiation rites may be seen as a holistic process where all spheres of people's survival needs within their particular environment are revealed and learnt. Teachers, who are male elders, make sure that all initiates acquire the necessary skills, wisdom and knowledge during the initiation period. It is only after these initiation rites that young males may be pronounced as "man" because they have acquired the required knowledge and skills that Castellano (2002) refers to.

Identification of Indigenous knowledge systems in this way highlights the notion that they are holistic, relational and encompass a person's totality including his spiritual, cultural, physical, political, economic and social wellbeing. Indigenous knowledge connects Indigenous people to their historical past, present and their future. Through visions and dreams that the initiate has come to inherit through the cultural practices described above, certain members gain the gift of visions, dreams and intuition. Humans then, through these mediums, are spiritual beings alive but coexisting with the spirits in the spiritual realm through these revealed connections. In relation to the wisdom provided by authors acknowledged here, this autoethnography seeks to unfold from a personal perspective how my Indigenous knowledge has been utilised in the different phases of Western education that I have gone through.

■ Why autoethnography?

The growing realisation of multiple worldviews about reality has called into question conventional thoughts such as positivism Denzin (cited in Reed-Danahay, 1997) and encourages a look at alternative ways of presenting the world. Autoethnography is a process of constructing a portrait of self. It situates self within a cultural context, moving in and out through one's own experiences. In this autoethnography I utilise my own Indigenous knowledge system as an entry point by exposing my educational experiences through an autoethnographic journey. My journey is purposive in that in this journey I expose the issues and contradictions within conventional and traditional education, as I search to understand myself within the education system. At the same time I seek to affirm and acknowledge my own traditional Tolai education system as valid and useful for the population it serves.

Smith (1999, p. 3) warns that there is a "valid fear among Indigenous people about further loss of intellectual and cultural knowledges". It is in the direction of affirming and decolonising knowledge within conventional education, and protecting Indigenous knowledge, that this autoethnography is written.

■ Moving from community to competition

"Who is going to win?" an individual enthusiastic supporter screams. The rest respond, "Dima!"

"Give me a D",

'D!' everyone choruses.

"Give me an I".

"I!"

"Give me an M".

"M!"

"Give me an A".

"A!"

"Who is the best?"

"Dima!"

"Who is winning?"

"Dima!" The sun is hot and the athletics race is on. Kids in red, blue, green and yellow are belting out their voices in unison as their housemates come home through the finishing line. This is the day they have been practising for. Teachers are also dressed in their house colours. Not all take part but everyone is in the spirit of the game. Although some of us are quite competent in athletics, we all go because we are expected to be there and support our competitors.

On the notice boards, the ends of test results are pinned up from Year 7 right through to Year 10. Girls' marks are separated from the boys to show gender difference in achievement. At recess we all rush to the notice board to see which class has the highest average or the highest marks for the test. There is stiff competition among the four Year 10 classes as well as the three junior classes. I am sitting in the classroom, looking at my mark after our test papers have been returned by our maths teacher. He looks very happy and congratulates me for doing well. Fortunately, I had scored the highest mark for the test. The bell rings and everyone rushes to see the notice board. This is also the last test that will determine our grades for the third assessment results. A few minutes after our teacher leaves for morning tea, the boys from 10C come over to see our results. They ask Harry, "Who got the highest mark?" Mark answers back, "I don't know, not me. Must be Peter or Danny". Peter and Danny are the other two smart boys in my class. They leave in search of Peter and Danny. I make my way out to join my girlfriends. Their search ends with the knowledge that it is neither of the boys who scores the highest mark or the highest grade for the whole assessment period. I return from the school market munching peanuts with Brenda my best friend. We head back to our seats and then in no time, the 10C boys return. Medi, they begin, did you get the highest mark? I reply, "No". "Then who?" they insist, "It's from this class and it's a girl. We have seen it at the back", they continue. "Come on tell us, it's you, isn't it?" "If it is me, what will you do to me?" I ask them back.

"So it's you then?" they say coming closer to me. I feel the tension and it's not nice. Brenda looks at

me and remains very quiet. They look at me and say, "That is your Distinction one, we shall see you next assessment period!" They leave. I breathe a sigh of relief with Brenda.

"They can try. We are going to beat them again next semester", Brenda and I giggle.

At the end of Year 10, the school, overall, did extremely well, being recognised as one of the top 10 high schools in the country. We went our separate ways. Seven of us ended up in the same national high school in one of the provinces. There we became close and more caring for each other because we were far from home.

■ Dislocation and isolation

I found high school to be both fun at times and challenging. I missed home but so did other students. I was able to build another group that I could identify with, from my own area, my classmates or those who shared the same interest such as sport or those that I could easily relate to. Many times we laughed like most teenagers do, but we always respected the teachers no matter what. My school mates and particularly my classmates were mostly from the same province, but some were from other provinces of the country. We were all there seven days a week; work, eat, school and play. Those were the activities of boarding school. We were taught to work and work. We would wake up at 5:30 am and clean around the dormitory and cut grass with our bare hands using grass knives. We hated it at first but we soon got used to it. And when I look back, I really liked the disciplined life we lived; although at times it was harsh, it was not that bad. I had my fun times with my friends with whom I keep close contact to this day. As I look back on my education in this phase of my life, I am now struck by differing emphases in social knowledge and relationships.

■ Individuality as against communality

Secondary education was a critical phase for me as I started questioning many things that I had come to accept in my traditional culture. I went to a coeducational government boarding school. Here I felt a sense of independence and maturity. Secondary education gave me the opportunity to extend my knowledge about the world around me and appreciate its diversity as I mingled with other students and teachers from other parts of the province, the country and other parts of the world. It was alien in the sense that the pervading atmosphere encouraged individualistic values and self recognition rather than the communal sense of belonging that my culture aspired to instil in youngsters.

The physical distance between home and school gave me a sense of independence. I made decisions about how I should carry myself in school. I was an

individual in a class of other students from other communities different from mine. At the same time, I could appreciate belonging to my village better here than I could when I was in my village. Certainly I identified myself as belonging to my particular village, and saw myself as a representative of that village, but I also identified myself now as a new member of another group; the Western school community.

■ Competitiveness

High school was more competitive than primary school in the village. This was good in that it drove my desire to do my best. This was something I never took very seriously at home or in primary school. Competitiveness has never been an important part of our culture. However, high school education taught me that to survive in the modern world one had to be competitive. Such foreign values began to disrupt my community's values and beliefs about sharing and caring for one another as a means to survival.

Eventually my education further set me apart from the rest of my peers in the village, and most from my high school, because my intellectual ability enabled me to continue where others were not able to. I went off to senior high school as part of the top five percent of students in the country. Others in the next tier were sent to technical, teachers' or nursing colleges, while the remainder who did not gain the grades returned to the village to start their adult life. In this way the school's grading system separated students into categories of different ability levels according to tests and examination performances. This system was quite unlike the system back home in my village where everyone needed to learn a repertoire of skills regardless of their ability, because all would need them to survive in the context of the village.

The display of marks on the notice board came with its moments – pride and joy for those who did very well, and defeat and uselessness for those who did not do so well. Each student dealt with these public displays differently. Some became much quieter as they hid away in their little corners. It was very competitive and we studied hard to better other classes' averages, or to score the highest marks in a test and be the top student or class in a particular subject. The class results for every test set showed clearly who was on top of the class and who was at the very bottom. I realised that this competitiveness was creating a feeling of achievement or failure that was not present in the village. I could see the anxiety of those who felt inadequate in the subjects – looks of confusion, unanswered questions and fear of giving the wrong answer.

■ Categorisation

Ranking and scoring would continue in later life as the intellectual few at the top gained more power

and access to the modern economy, and those at the bottom became less powerful. A student's position in the school determined their standing in a changing PNG society later in life. There was never any time or remedial work available for the slower learners. Being one of the "bright" students, I tried to help a few classmates who were struggling through subjects that they found difficult. It was frustrating at times, and most chose to go into their shells and remain silent. Unlike silence in the village, those who did not speak out in class were labelled "dumb" by the teachers, among other derogatory names. I remember one teacher writing on our forehead "D" or "C" for criminal or dangerous criminal if we did not answer his questions correctly. Such were the negative school experiences that caused a few students to leave school.

■ Language

There was a great deal of expectation from our English teachers that we should acquire the English language. The school rule was for English to be spoken at all times. If we were caught speaking our own mother tongue we ended up in Saturday punishment. The punishment was tough, such as uprooting a tree from its roots using spades. To avoid this, everyone tried their best to speak English. Our writing had to be to the standard set by our teachers. The school gave little thought to helping those children who found it difficult in articulating English. We sat two different English examinations in Year 10. English was the major subject that determined our access to future educational opportunities. Potential employers looked at these examination marks on the certificates when considering whether to employ a youth or not.

In the village I was used to being spanked when I was caught doing something wrong. I did not question this in high school and accepted it as an appropriate correction for me. There were occasions however, that I thought were abusive and that I thought were not right, but the other girls and I felt we should not report the teacher for fear of being severely punished by the teacher concerned. In one case, one of our science teachers became overly close, and was touching female students. For a lot of us, his behaviour diminished our interest in the subject.

Trust in relationships could not be assumed in the way that it was in the village. I recall in Year 8, a teacher telling us to write about what we dreamed of doing when we left school. I wrote of becoming a teachers' college lecturer, and being responsible for training teachers. She later read this to another class, resulting in much teasing for me later on. This disturbed me, and would lead me to question the value of trust, integrity, and confidentiality if this was the kind of treatment I gained from people I thought I could look up to. It led me to re-evaluate my understanding of respect that I had learned in the village. I thought that perhaps I

could train teachers how and why they should treat children better than the treatment I had received as a student. I later brought this challenge to the trainee teachers in teachers' college where I worked for two and half years.

■ Dislocation and isolation

Gradual distancing from the village community starts the day a child enters a primary school. Authority shifts and responsibility formation within the school structures invalidate the family roles, the longer the child is absent from constant family ties. The school teacher becomes the new authority over the child. Authority is rendered invisible for the village elder or the family member once the child enters school. The invisibility of the family and other community members works towards undermining the value of Indigenous education. Western education strives to educate the child to become part of the market economy, to be a producer who must compete within a world of specific resources to be successful as a person. On the other hand, traditional Indigenous education embraces the child and makes them feel like valued members of society who must value others and work with others in order to live together as a community.

Problems can arise from the different goals of the two knowledge systems; particularly when there is less recognition of Indigenous education. McNamara (1976, p. 67) observed that "parents and community members have complained bitterly about young educated adolescents in the village who are trouble makers because they no longer wanted the old way of life; and yet their education has not fitted them for a new life". The observations made here are common to a lot of Indigenous people as they struggle with a growing divide between what they claim to be their "authentic" being and what they adopt in an alienating culture. Two African writers share the same sentiment I felt in these words "Then I went to school, a colonial school, and this harmony was broken. The language of education was no longer the language of my culture". (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999, p. 9). The cultural alienation children felt was evident where colonisation was, and the use of a foreign language that my friends and I used in school was at times intimidating.

■ Myself as a teacher

I went back to my old high school to teach in 1998. Some things had changed. Girls were separated from the boys. I was told the first day I walked into the staff room that the staff believed that girls were so inferior that they could only do well if they are separated from the boys. What a whole bag of rubbish, I thought to myself. The headmaster was a former colleague who I had taught with in the first high school I was posted too.

"Medi", the headmaster tells me, "I am giving you 10B to take for English". They are one of the two girls' Grade 10 classes. On the way out, the social science teacher approached me and warned me.

"Good luck! That's the worst class. I hope you get something out of them".

"So what have you been doing with them to help them?" I responded, feeling frustrated already over the derogatory comments being passed about the class. Yet it made me determined to prove to these teachers and particularly to the girls that they were the best. The bell rang and it was time to begin the first lesson. I enter the class and everyone stands up, all nicely dressed in green skirts and yellow shirts. It was the same uniform I had worn as a student back then 15 years before. I smile at them, greet them and tell them to sit down. Some of them had heard that I was an ex-student of the school. I introduce myself and tell them what used to happen. I feel a sense of ease.

"So tell me", I ask them, "when did this policy of separating boys from girls begin?" The class captain stood up and told me.

"Huh miss, it began some years ago. The staff decided that we should be separated because we girls don't do as well as the boys".

"Oh, is that so?" I ask them back. "Yes Miss" a few of them, all talking at the same time, tell me.

"That's what the teachers think. We are dumb, that's why they say B for BONG" (local word for dumb).

"Interesting", I comment getting really angry and trying to conceal it as much as I can. After they finish I ask them back, "So what do you think about the teachers' comments?"

They remain quiet for a while and then the class captain replies, "Miss, we are not dumb!" sounding very emphatic.

Mixed emotions start welling up in me. I remember similar comments, like these 15 years ago. They had not changed much. I tell them to all stand up and tell them about a pledge to ourselves. Tell yourself this, "I am the best of the best in anything I do. I have faith in myself and I can do anything I am capable of doing. I believe in myself! I am a smart girl!" I tell them to sit down. Then I tell them, again, how I, as a girl in this same school, made it out of here successfully and believe that they can also do it because I did. I tell them again, "I believe that you are very brilliant girls. Each of you has something beautiful and special in you and is great at doing something. Grow to discover that in you and you will love what you can do with that ability".

The year ended. Examination results were received. The school could have got over 20 failures particularly from 10B but it did not happen. We did well in English. In the final Grade 10 results, the school overall ended up with one "fail" only in the school. Come to think of it, it was not 10 BONG after all. They showed that they had the ability.

■ Crossing borders

I found myself as a teacher, sometimes very confrontational, mainly because of some of the negative experiences I had as a student myself. Most times it was fun, fulfilling and building connections with me through my students. I found myself retracing my childhood days through the woods when I wanted to tell them a story about life in the village. At times I found the competitiveness of school years a present challenge for them to overcome and make them strong.

My cultural roots were my anchor. They gave me a well of educational treasures, rich in important values that I could draw from and share with my students. I had been there before them. I could choose to present them as good or bad. I had the upper hand of doing that to them. I could mould them or destroy them with my very words. My sense of belonging and identity within my own cultural group gave me strength and a goal in life. This sense of belonging gave me an understanding of myself in the context of my students, to feel with them and hear them as they spoke. I was at home with them and I was able to counsel them because I had been there before. I could read them, I could feel them and I could hear them. The ability to cross between the three worlds – a villager, a student and a teacher was enabled by my willingness to be open but also critical of what I should take onboard for my own learning and teaching. It was not always easy, but I could only try to do my best as I did with my friends and students.

■ Self as a cultural being

Culture has multiple definitions. None of them is wrong or right. I adopt here Kroeber and Kluckhohn's definition of culture which states that:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, and on the other as conditioning elements of further action (1954, p. 357).

I utilise this definition to deconstruct my Western influences and reconstruct my Indigenous Tolai culture as I find my place and meaning within it. I belong to the Tolai culture – an ethnic group on the island of New Britain in PNG. Within this group I also belong to the Marmar, a totem through which I trace my matrilineal lineage. Drilling even further down my "vunatarai" is a "Vunatarai Tirara". The "vunatarai"

shares a common root called the "madapai", the piece of land upon which the umbilical cords of my clan's first ancestral beings were buried, and upon which the clan's future offspring can retrace their roots. The land in which this umbilical cord of the first ancestor was buried and the blood through, its burial are important cultural signifiers to the "self". From these come one's identity, one's sense of belonging, one's social network and the cultural artefacts that are used to express these connections. Land is a fundamental component of an Indigenous culture and is the nucleus for most Papua New Guinean societies as it is for other Indigenous people such as Indigenous Australians, New Zealand Maoris, and many African nations, (Houston, 2007; Smith, 1999; Dei, 2002; Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). The Indigenous person is connected first to others, the land, the history, the culture and the spirituality. From these connections, I become a part of a community, a people, a culture, and a society. My social context and sense of belonging to a community is strengthened and acknowledged as one of them and not me.

■ Conclusion

Reed-Danahay (1997) defines autoethnography as "a self narrative that places the self within a social context" and as both "a method and a text". She further articulates this by stating that autoethnography "foregrounds the multiple nature of selfhood and opens up new ways of writing about social life" (1997, p. 3). The borders I crossed in the different educational stages revealed my multiple nature of selfhood that is not "self indulgent" as Sparkes (2002, p. 213) argues but is reflexive and also critical of a past. This reflexivity raises one's consciousness in an attempt to find one's self, identity and place in life.

My autoethnography is socially located within an Indigenous PNG culture where I find my roots and identity. This identity formation greatly influenced the later years of my Western education journey. I have attempted to expose the conditionality and vulnerability of my own social and cultural identity formation, as a basis from which I confront and deal with daily issues. My own vulnerability mirrors that of Indigenous children confronted with a different knowledge system, I hope. The child and student identities have been acknowledged and utilised as a way of harnessing my pedagogical approaches in schools and my understanding of my own students' vulnerability as those I share about my 10B class.

On a broader level, the experiences also bring to the fore the debate on the marginalisation of Indigenous people, education and knowledge systems. Mine has not been entirely different from those of other Indigenous people elsewhere. Our colonial experiences may have been felt differently in our specific contexts but they certainly changed our Indigenous ways of life. There is merit in Indigenous

education that warrants a reconceptualisation of its place within conventional education. As Mecedo succinctly puts it:

It is only through the decolonisation of our minds, if not our hearts, that we begin to develop the necessary political clarity to reject the enslavement of a colonial discourse that creates a false dichotomy between Western and Indigenous knowledge. It is through the decolonisation of our minds and the development of political clarity that we cease to embrace the notion of Western vs Indigenous knowledge, so as to speak of human knowledge. It is only through the decolonisation of our hearts that we can begin to humanise the meaning and usefulness of indigeneity (cited in Semali & Kincheloe, 1999, p. xv)

Indigenous education and knowledge systems are valid, relevant, functional and fundamental to Indigenous people. They provide a bedrock for Indigenous students learning that have potential to be optimised in conventional education settings. Dialogues on how this might be done are needed amongst educators.

Grandma's story like similar stories from other Indigenous societies provides a rich repertoire of knowledge, traditional wisdom and values. Examining the story closely, one finds the meaning of the coconut tree. First, the coconut tree signifies a locality and an important resource for sustaining a people's livelihood on the island. Second, it also signifies an important aspect of the society's history and its spirituality that connects the dead brother and the present generation. In the story also, the calamity faced by island dwellers in the sea voyages and what they must confront in real life is made obvious through the brothers' fishing trip.

Metaphorically the voyage and sacrifice signifies important sacrifices certain Indigenous people have made in the modernisation process by foregoing certain values that have been consumed by a modernising shark-colonialism. So too is the deep, comforting and strong bond between the two brothers; strong enough for one to sacrifice his life for the other. The decision made by the elder brother to sacrifice his life for the sake of his younger brother signifies the depth of love and concern such a relationship displays. This is the bond that Indigenous people have with each other, a bond stronger than anything else, that of relating to one another in a human way that values people.

Perhaps the decolonisation of the heart and mind that resonates in Mecedo's words, I hope, will resonate in the minds of educators as they work towards providing a just and conducive learning environment that is more humane for their learners, in the spirit that the elder brother had for his younger sibling. I hope that my paper has alluded to Mecedo's advice and that it opens up a conversation about and for

education in Papua New Guinea and those who seek to understand the cultural tensions that children of different ethnic backgrounds experience as they enter the Western formal school context.

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■ About the author

Medi Reta is a Tolai woman of New Britain Island in Papua New Guinea. She taught both as teacher and teacher trainer before joining the National Research Institute in Port Moresby. She gained a Masters of Education from the University of New South Wales in 1998 and is currently pursuing doctoral studies at James Cook University.