

## Beneath the discontinuity...

***Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines: Exploring Inscriptions of Islanders in Western Systems of Thought***

**By Martin Nakata**

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### **Reviewed by Robert Kenny**

The Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait Islands of 1898 is one of the landmarks in the development of modern anthropology. Until this point the great anthropologists of Britain, such as E. B. Tylor and James Frazer, typically stayed at home, and relied on correspondents to supply them with the information from which they formulated their theories. There had been works produced from the field, often by 'amateurs' or missionaries, such as R. H. Codrington, Lorimar Fison and A.W. Howitt, but these were primarily seen as raw material for the great 'armchair' theorists back home in Britain. The notable exception had been Baldwin Spencer's field trips to central Australia in the company of the Alice Springs postmaster Francis Gillen a few years earlier. But Spencer was based in Australia, and the Cambridge expedition, along with the contemporaneous expedition to northern America directed from the USA by Franz Boas, marked the beginning of what would become the norm of anthropological practice: practitioners of the discipline spending time in 'the field' to gather material directly to support their theories.

The expedition had been initiated by Alfred Cort Haddon, who had trained as a Darwinian zoologist before taking up a position in anthropology at Cambridge. Haddon led the expedition but its most important member, in some senses its co-leader was W. H. R. Rivers, a Cambridge neurologist and psychologist who had trained in experimental psychology in Jena, Germany, and had been a student of the British neurologist John Hughlings Jackson. Rivers recruited his two favorite psychology students to the expedition, C. S. Myers and William McDougall. Also on the expedition were the linguist S. H. Ray, the pathologist C. G. Seligman, and a photographer, Anthony Wilkin. The 'field trip'—the term was invented by Haddon—itself lasted seven months. It produced over six volumes of reports published between 1901 and 1935 and it established Rivers as one of the founding fathers of modern anthropology.

The expedition features prominently in Martin Nakata's *Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Disciplines*—a work that subjects 'Western' disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics and psychology to uncomfortable scrutiny. Detailed descriptions of the methods, intentions, findings and—most importantly—the

premises of the members of the expedition take up five of the seven chapters of Part One, almost half the book. Only the first short chapter deals with early missionary activity in the islands, and the section's last chapter gives a short history of the premises and assumptions behind colonial administrative, church and commercial actions in the Islands over the past century or so.

Given—as Nakata himself points out—that the anthropologists stayed a short time and had little direct impact on the Islanders, while the missionaries and others came to stay and radically affect life in the Islands, the space devoted to the expedition of 1898 seems at first glance disproportionate. However, a central purpose of Nakata's book is to expose how much particular disciplines, particularly anthropology, represent knowledge systems which have imposed 'inscriptions' upon Islanders in a way that continues to influence policies and actions in the Torres Strait Islands and towards indigenous peoples in general.

Among other positions, Nakata holds the Chair of Australian Indigenous Education at the University of Technology Sydney. He has published extensively on issues related to Indigenous education. He is a Torres Strait Islander. He is thus placed in a position where he is confronted with a great reality. His own knowledge crosses from Islander experience to the 'Western' disciplines. He carries this experience into a context—that of education practice and policy—in which the problems of indigenous and settler-migrant Australians rise are critically present. Part Two of his book examines how these contemporary practices are informed by some of the disciplinary premises exposed in Part One. In the last part of the book, Nakata proposes some innovative theoretical approaches to deal with the difficulties he has identified earlier.

Because Nakata is writing as a Torres Strait Islander and as an educationalist educated within the disciplines of the 'Western' knowledge systems, his book is as personal as it is theoretical. Indeed, Nakata recounts how he was prompted to write when, as a mature-age undergraduate, he was told that he was not really Islander enough because he did not conform to the Western idea (1) of an Islander. That experience made him acutely aware that even among 'sympathetic' outsiders, his viewpoint was not simply misunderstood but ignored. Nakata decided to examine the 'inscriptions' of Islander that lay behind such a proposition: 'My task then was to know how such a knowledge system created a position for Islanders through which we have all come to view Islanders and their problems. Only then could I, a Torres Strait Islander, understand why my view point was never understood and how I could go about changing this situation' (11). This is why he devotes so much space to the 1898 expedition.

One aspect of the Cambridge Expedition that is evident in Nakata's detailing of it is how predominant psychologists were among its members. The psychologists themselves were informed by evolutionist ideas which had become increasingly important to the emerging discipline of psychology in the late nineteenth century.

River's mentor, Hughlings Jackson, under the influence by Herbert Spencer's evolutionism, had proposed that mental disorders such as aphasia could be understood as results of a reversal of evolution. Thus, to study 'less evolved' peoples was to gain insight into the development of the brain and its pathology. Proponents of evolutionary anthropology confidently asserted that to study 'primitive' peoples was to glimpse the past of man. Rivers and the rest of the Cambridge expedition carried such views with them when they travelled across the seas to the Torres Strait. Although Rivers would, a few years later, abandon this evolutionist model—which represented other cultures in terms of necessarily different stages of development—and would adopt a 'diffusionist' model which proposed that differences and similarities of culture were to be explained by the spread of ideas and technology.

One result of the evolutionist position was to view 'primitive' peoples as representing the 'childhood of man' and thus to understand indigenous peoples as akin to children. Such a position had great influence on educational policies towards that helped to limit the rights of, indigenous peoples throughout the world. Nakata's detailing of the suppositions behind the Cambridge Expedition helps us understand the attitudes that framed so much of the regulatory policies that continue up to the middle of the twentieth century.

It is taken as a given, particularly from within the 'disciplines', that between the condescending evolutionist ideas of the nineteenth century and today's practices there lies a fundamental conceptual discontinuity. Difference is no longer seen as signifying inequality and thus as something which will disappear when and if 'the primitive' reaches the level of the 'modern'. Now it is seen as indicating a 'separate but equal' identity. One outcome of this ideological shift is the development of regulatory policies that aim to preserve difference. But it is Nakata's point in Part Two of the *Disciplining the Savages*, and in the book overall, that this discontinuity can be over stated. If you step away far enough—and far enough for Nakata is to look from the position of an Islander—you can see some fundamental continuities from the nineteenth century to the present. Nowhere is this more evident than in the approaches to education policy towards Islanders over the past thirty years. The recognition that Islander difference is no indicator of inability has meant a major shift for the better in policy, but the emphasis on difference continues the 'inscribing' of who an Islander is by outsider disciplines. As Nakata puts it: 'We are not content with being subjected as 'Other' to everybody else' (162).

The overemphasis on preserving Islander difference works to deny much of the present reality of Islander existence and restricts Islander ambition and hopes. It is not that Nakata does not believe in the importance of Islander identity—he most adamantly does—but he argues that what must be recognized in that identity is that present social relations and life views of Islanders have changed

in response to over a hundred years of colonization and as a result of choices made by Islanders themselves in response to these irrevocable intrusions. Change has not simply come from above, from administrators, churches and commercial interests.

Two areas in education become pertinent sites for Nakata's exposition of these problems. One is the issue of language: In which language do you teach? and how do you teach language? Nakata dismisses the easy dichotomy between 'oral' and 'literate': 'Little is made of the fact that locating students within 'oral tradition' narrows down their presence in history to 'something' that is 'not' part of the literate traditions, and as separate and apart from the complex world of negotiating colliding historical trajectories over the past two hundred years' (172). The dichotomy repeats the all too easy separation of 'traditional' from 'modern': 'The oral and literate world are not separate but entwined ... and continue to evolve as traditions and artefacts of our engagements with each other; we all continue to live in times where there are oral traditions'. Teaching in Islander languages rightly preserves those languages, but Islanders want from education, and have wanted so for two hundred years, a means of negotiating with the 'white world' that continues to control so much of their lives. Learning English becomes not a denial of Islander-ness but a potent tool. This is a predicament not easily resolved. Nakata proposes no easy solution to the problem but argues for an approach that recognizes the complexities and reality of the situation.

The other concept that Nakata contends is that of 'culture'. Culture is the corner stone of the equal but different paradigm. Preserving culture has become a major function in much policy towards indigenous peoples. In these policies, what needs to be stemmed more than anything is the erosion' of culture. But, as Nakata puts it, erosion 'is a metaphor that begins from the perception of culture as a foundational and potentially static entity' which 'covers over the notion of culture as constantly changing' (179). The emphasis on culture draws activity away from confronting both political and educational realities: 'the recognition of 'difference' can amount to a resignation to 'difference' and thus:

As a disciplinary concept, culture has become a mode to identify with a position to assert rights, a guide to develop a future; and yet to conform with the cultural identity as an apolitical, ahistorical, docile subject of the past, the Islanders give up their standpoint on the material realities confronting their own situation. This is because culture constitutes simultaneously the premise where the Islanders can be disciplined, divided and marginalized. (180)

It is in this discussion of culture that the purpose of Nakata's concentration of the Cambridge Expedition becomes evident. Much present day policy still springs from the theories of Western disciplines rather than from the lived experience

of the Islanders. By placing at the beginning of this work a detailed expose over that expedition Nakata prepares us to recognize the continuities that mark the influence of the disciplines: 'Islanders have not essentially changed from inferior beings to equals, or from savages to culturally different people; the thinking around them has constituted them to cohere with the evolution of changes in a Western order of things' (196).

What Nakata proposes—and this takes up the third part of his book—is a theoretical framework which can 'take more account of Islander experience' and of the complex terrain of experiencing the various Western and indigenous 'knowledges'. He proposes a recognition that Islanders live in a 'Cultural Interface' where not only West meets Islander but that Islanders themselves can represent a great variety of experience and understandings. Nakata then further suggests a working towards an 'Islander Standpoint Theory' based on the Feminist Standpoint Theory proposed by Sandra Harding in the 1990s, which he hopes 'can help unravel and untangle ourselves from the conditions that delimit who, what or how we can or can't be, to help see ourselves with some charge of the everyday, and to help understand our varied responses to the colonial world' (217).

Nakata's book is of first importance in the current debate over policies towards indigenous education. It is a product of the cultural interface that Nakata describes and is an important contribution from a scholar and activist who is eminently qualified. Personally, I still came away with a sense that the material on the Cambridge Expedition, valuable as a reflection on the history of anthropology, could have been truncated in this context without losing its value. On the other hand, the issues raised in the second and third parts of the book could have been much expanded and a more direct line drawn between the disciplinary premises of then and now. Nakata importantly recognises how problematic the concept of culture is and the importance of understanding indigenous experience as more of a question of deprivation of political power than of cultural erosion. It would have been good if there had been space for Nakata to include more recent concepts (rather than a call to the worn and very Western ideas of Michel Foucault). Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), for instance, takes some of the points Nakata raises beyond the Western/Indigenous binary. Nevertheless, this is a book that all interested in the issues of culture and education should read.

In the last paragraph of the book, Nakata writes that we live in 'a world premised on difference'. Surely it is this premise that needs to be challenged. Is it not a premise that itself grows from the 'Western' disciplines, particularly anthropology? This is not to deny difference, nor to wish for a more homogenized world. But it is to challenge the idea that difference is the fundamental concept mediating our encounters with one another. As long as we make difference our

existential foundation, and not our shared humanity, we create walls not interfaces.

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