



**Literacy, Emotion, and Authority: Reading and Writing on a Polynesian Atoll.** Niko Besnier. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 234 pp.

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Prior to the appearance of *Literacy, Emotion, and Authority: Reading and Writing on a Polynesian Atoll*, Niko Besnier's ethnographic work on Nukulaelae had already attained a significant place in the emerging field of sociocultural approaches to language and literacy. The book integrates a good part of Besnier's Nukulaelae work into a carefully developed argument. (Nukulaelae atoll is part of the island group and nation of Tuvalu, formerly known as the Ellice Islands.) As it is written, the book serves both as a specific and fascinating case study and as a concise introduction to a sociocultural and practice-based approach to literacy--or, better put, not *literacy*, but different *literacies* situated in multiple social, political, economic, and cultural contexts.

Sociocultural approaches to literacy, drawing on a variety of disciplines, research traditions, and tools of inquiry, argue that literacy is *situated* in two core ways (James P. Gee, *Social Linguistics*, London: Taylor & Francis, 1996). First, writing and reading are *social practices* that have no "essential" or transcendent meanings, but take on specific meanings and values and have various effects only as they simultaneously construct and are constructed within specific contexts. *Context* here means both what people take the situations within which they communicate to be and mean, and how they actively seek to make these situations be and mean certain things to themselves and others. Second, writing and reading are never "stand alone" practices; rather, they always and everywhere dynamically interact with oral language and other sign systems, with ways of thinking, acting, interacting, believing, feeling, and valuing, as well as with various objects, tools, technologies, times, and spaces. Thus the meanings and values of reading and writing practices arise through the ways in which these practices orchestrate and are orchestrated by all this "other stuff." Besnier's book illustrates, in concrete detail, both these core points while at the same time demonstrating how literacy, from this perspective, can serve as a way into understanding the complexities of a specific culture and the relationships, across time and space, among cultures.

Chapter 1 is a short sketch of anthropological perspectives on literacy, arguing against simplistic dichotomies such as orality versus literacy or restricted versus full literacy. Besnier argues for an "ideological" approach to literacy (B. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984)--one in which literacy practices always carry context-specific cognitive, affective, and value-laden meanings



with implications for the distribution of power, status, or other social goods. Chapters 2 and 3 set the overall context for the later chapters in terms of the history, ethnography, and overall literacy practices of the island. Chapters 4 through 8 are the heart of the book. Chapters 4 and 5 look at the complex relationships between affect and letter writing. Although literacy was first introduced for religious purposes by missionaries, islanders have proactively created a literacy practice around letters in which the flow and exchange of affect is intimately related to economic ties of reciprocity and other cultural values and practices. Chapters 6 and 7 look at the writing and subsequent oral delivery of sermons by lay preachers (mostly, but not always, men). Here, Besnier investigates how this literacy practice constitutes a distinctive way of defining "personhood"--in this religious context, an individualistic sense of selfhood--and shows how it relates, in complex sociopolitical ways, to the notions of personhood defined by other cultural practices, practices defining more communal and egalitarian senses of self. Besnier also takes up here issues of knowledge and power, the relationship of the written text to the oral performance, the need to bracket and control religious authority in a society that elsewhere values skepticism toward authority and egalitarianism, and the role of sermons in limiting the power and control of women. Chapter 8 moves from these event-based studies to a comparative ethnographic study of the full array of Nukulaelae literacy practices. Here, Besnier discusses the situated and complex relationships of literacy to hegemony and domination, on the one hand, and to equality and social leveling, on the other. This chapter contains a particularly good discussion of the workings of gender in regard to these issues.

In the end, Besnier's book deeply illuminates the intimate relationships between language and culture, literacy and orality, meaning and context, thinking and feeling, domination and resistance, submission and agency, and language and social identity. While his work makes a distinctive contribution to Polynesian studies and ethnography, it also constitutes an important theoretical statement--and paradigmatic example--for the interdisciplinary field of sociocultural literacy studies.

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