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Teacher capacities for working towards peace and sustainable development

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Teacher
capacities

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of values and beliefs rooted in “non-Western” cultures in implementing global education initiatives such as education for sustainable development (ESD) at the regional and local levels. This is because many of these initiatives are often derived from “Western” cultures and values. Also to reaffirm the importance for educators to respect and use local and indigenous ways of life and knowledge systems in order to make teaching and learning more relevant and meaningful for Pacific students; and to advocate for the development of teachers’ capacities to better contextualize their teaching and create more culturally inclusive learning environments.

Design/methodology/approach – Informed by the findings of her research on cultural values, educational ideas and teachers’ role perception in Tonga, plus her work as the UNESCO Chair in Teacher Education and Culture at the University of South Pacific, the author presents her reflections on the need to further enhance teachers and teacher educators in the Pacific region.

Findings – The findings suggests that teacher education programmes that are designed to cultivate teachers’ cultural competence may better contribute to making Pacific education more relevant and effective.

Originality/value – The ESD discourse often attaches importance to traditional and indigenous knowledge, but there is limited literature discussing how and for what purposes indigenous ways of knowing should be integrated into teacher education. This paper challenges the neglect of teachers in the international education reform discourses; points out the vital role of teachers in facilitating educational reforms, and contributes understanding of the types of teacher capacities higher education needs to foster for peace and sustainability through the case of the Pacific region.

Keywords Pacific region, Teachers, Education, Sustainable development, Peace, Culture

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

We are almost at the end of UN decade for a culture of peace and non-violence, and the middle of the UN decade for education for sustainable development (DESD). These and other related UN instruments reflect the longings of all concerned people for a world that is peaceful and sustainable. It is in this context that UNESCO calls for a comprehensive system of education and training for all groups of people at all levels and forms of education. Education for peace and sustainable development needs to be holistic and participatory, focusing on peace and non-violence, human rights, democracy, tolerance, international and intercultural understanding, as well as cultural and linguistic diversity.

As educators, we can appropriately ask the question: how can teachers and those responsible for their education help educate for peace and sustainable development? Because educational and other initiatives that emanate from the international community often assume the acceptance of a Western view of knowledge and value



systems, it is necessary for me to re-phrase the question in order to contextualize it for the majority of people who live in the Pacific Islands. The question that I need to ask is: how do Pacific people conceptualise peace and sustainable development, and what kind of teacher is needed to educate future generations towards peaceful and sustainable societies?

Pacific values and beliefs

My view of teachers and their education is influenced by values and beliefs that are rooted in many of the cultures, which currently inhabit the Pacific Ocean. These cultures had, over millennia, developed their own ways of life and knowledge systems, which have helped them to survive despite efforts by others to obliterate and render them unsustainable through colonial and other unpeaceful acts. In most Pacific Island societies and cultures today, the notion of “peace” is not necessarily equated to a situation “without violent conflict” (although that was important in ancient times) but rather to a sense of well being, growth and oneness with others. In this context, peace is something that is the outward expression of appropriate interpersonal and inter-group relationships, known in Polynesian societies as *vaa/wah*. Today positive *vaa* or its equivalent, is often seen as a pre-condition to peaceful co-existence and sustainable development (Thaman, 2002).

Recently, in many Pacific Island Nations, it is important for educators to understand the way Pacific peoples conceptualize peace and sustainable development mainly because, as mentioned earlier, the values that underpin many global education initiatives have largely been derived from Western cultures and not from the cultures of Pacific peoples. In my view, understanding the similarities as well as the differences among those values, is necessary for successful teaching and learning. This is particularly significant given that conceptual analyses of Pacific indigenous educational ideas reveal values and systems of learning and teaching that are different from that which underpin schooling and which many Pacific island students find irrelevant and meaningless (Thaman, 2003).

In my culture, for example, the main purpose of learning is to gain knowledge and understanding, considered important for cultural survival and continuity – the Tongan equivalent of sustainable living. The educated person is one who is *poto* – who knows what to do and does it well. *Poto* is achieved through the appropriate and beneficial use of *‘ilo*, the appropriate combination of knowledge, understanding and values, acquired through *ako* or learning. *Poto* may be translated as wisdom and experience, and has intellectual, emotional and spiritual connotations (Thaman, 1988). Similar notions exist in other Pacific cultures. In Fijian, the closest equivalent of *poto* is *yalomatua* or *yalovuku*, which refers to the culmination of learning or *vuli*, aimed at the acquisition of useful knowledge skills and values *kila ka* (Nabobo, 2003). In Kiribati, it is *wanawana*, a term that has a strong element of responsibility (Teaero, 2003). Among the Lengo people of Solomon Islands, a person of wisdom is *manatha*; s/he is a person who, through *nanau* (learning) obtains *ligana* (wisdom), considered a necessary condition for surviving and sustainability in Lengo society (Vatamana, 1997).

Relationships: a core Pacific value

A core value of indigenous education is “relationship”: among people and between people and nature. An important outcome of indigenous education is therefore

knowledge and understanding of how people are related to one another, together with associated responsibilities and obligations. Relationships define persons as well as groups and their acknowledgement and nurturance ensure peace within and among groups. Relationships are important because they are central to personal as well as group identities and they provide the frameworks for appropriate behaviour and performance. Wealth is often defined by one's relationships with others, and a person is often regarded *masiva* or poor because s/he has strained relationships with others. (Taufeulungaki, 2004). Learning about one's relationships and associated responsibilities and obligations constitute a major part of the curriculum of indigenous education. This ensures that learning is relevant and meaningful for learners and education (worthwhile learning) is directly related to cultural survival, sustainability and continuity. In many parts of Oceania today, relationships continue to be emphasized by people who still value collective as well as individual rights and behaviour. This is not to deny the importance of the individual; rather it is to emphasise the fact that relationships define persons as well as communities and in order for teachers to play a role in educating for peace and sustainable development, they will need to understand the importance of relationships in the teaching/learning process.

The work of the UNESCO Chair in teacher education and culture at the University of the South Pacific (USP), assumes the vital role that culture plays in the education of Pacific teachers and students. It acknowledges the fact that the expectations of schools often conflict with the expectations of the home cultures of the majority of students (and teachers), creating what Little (1995) refers to as the "cultural gap". This means that in educating teachers for culturally diverse situations, we need to ensure that they understand where the learners are coming from and create culturally inclusive learning environments for students by better contextualizing their work.

An important part of the teacher education programs at USP is an attempt to re-orient teacher trainees as well as in-service teachers towards the contribution of Pacific cultures to improved teaching and learning. This has not been easy as many Pacific schools as well as teachers do not adequately acknowledge the existence let alone the potential contribution of indigenous education to ensuring relevance in the school curriculum. This is particularly the case in urban schools rather than rural ones where people continue to follow the dictates of traditions and elders and specialist teachers impart important knowledge, skills and values using a variety of means including myths, legends, dance, poetry, songs, proverbs and rituals. Through observation, listening, imitation, participation and some direct instruction, young people obtain the necessary knowledge, skills and values of their cultures, elders, from adults and sometimes their peers. Learning is practical and directly related to shared values and beliefs. For example, in my own country important values include those of: *'ofa* (compassion), *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *feveikotai'aki* (reciprocity), *tauhivaha'a* (nurturing inter-personal relations), and *fakama'uma'u* (restraint behaviour). The achievement of *poto* (wisdom) continue to be measured against these values, through people's performance and behaviour in different social contexts.

Relationships and the educated person

Poto persons in my culture know their relationships, social responsibilities and obligations. Failure to maintain positive relationships and/or contribute to one's group's responsibilities to another group, is an indicator of failure to learn and therefore reflect

negatively on those responsible for teaching, namely parents and other community elders. Knowing and maintaining good inter-personal relationships are often measured in terms of how well people maintain positive relationships, a process often referred to as *tauhi vaha'a* (protecting interpersonal space or *vaa* mentioned earlier). *Tauhi vaha'a* is central to peaceful and sustainable livelihoods and minimises inter-personal and inter-group conflicts. Thus, *tauhi vaha'a* is a core value of traditional Tongan education and underpins much of informal education today.

Unfortunately *tauhivaha'a* (protecting relationships), like other indigenous values, is not always emphasised in the classroom, where learning is abstract and decontextualized and mostly unrelated to students' cultural realities. Moreover, school learning continues to emphasise children's intellectual development, where critical thinking is perceived as private and independent of will, and mastery of the environment a desirable feature of mental functions. This contradicts the notion of nature as an integral part of indigenous cultures where people are obliged to respect and protect their relationships with nature and with one another (Serpell, 1993, p. 77). If school learning in the Pacific continues along its current path, peace and sustainable development will be difficult to achieve.

Changing the school culture is a mammoth task, but perhaps a good start could be made by focusing on teachers and those who train them and emphasising the concept of *vaa* – nurturing positive relationships and social responsibility. Building positive relationships needs to be a major goal of teacher education in the Pacific. The way teachers perceive and carry out their work is directly related to their beliefs and values which influence their notions of what education is, and their role in that process. Teachers need to be encouraged to ask the question: "What are we doing and why?" Their answers would help provide a clearer picture of their role as teachers and whether they are moral agents or simply labourers in the schools in their respective countries. It is also important that teachers be encouraged to continuously reflect upon their work and to try and locate themselves in various contexts, be these personal, communal or professional.

Moral and epistemological dilemmas

Irrespective of whatever contexts Pacific teachers find themselves in, they are bound to face moral as well as epistemological dilemmas. Like the majority of their students, teachers often have to face the same conflicting emphases of the education that they are supposed to deliver in formal educational institutions, and the education, which they received as members of particular cultural groups. The cultural groups to which Pacific teachers belong and with which they continue to identify, are made up of people who share similar cultural histories, often sustained and maintained by their own epistemologies and way of seeing the world as well as their place in that world. Each cultural group has developed particular knowledge and value systems, which form the bases of the education of group members for the purpose of cultural continuity, maintenance and sustainability.

We know of course that cultures change and in Pacific Island Countries, the interaction of colonialism and its modern manifestation, globalisation had transformed not only the structures of many Pacific cultures but also the way members of cultural groups see themselves and others. The degree with which this transforming process influences the way teachers think and see the world would depend on their ability

to clarify for themselves the difference between their received wisdom (from their formal, mainly Western education) and the wisdom of the cultures in which they were socialised and from which they continue to learn. For teacher educators, understanding such a difference is important because they are preparing people to be agents of this transformation, whether they are aware of it or not, as formal education in the Pacific continues to be about change, and teachers in particular, are trained to change students – to add to their knowledge, to develop new skills and to inculcate new attitudes and values.

Culture is therefore central to the education of teachers. Culture defines particular ways of being and behaving as well as ways of knowing, knowledge and wisdom and how these are passed on and/or communicated to others. In this context the work of Lawton (1974) is relevant particularly his definition of curriculum as “a selection of the best of a culture the transmission of which is so important that it is not left to chance but to specially prepared people – teachers”. A question that needs to be asked therefore is: As a teacher (or teacher educator) in your country today, what selection of whose culture are you responsible for transmitting to your students?” In my view, much of the un-peaceful contexts and situations which characterise our region today largely reflects the failure of many of our education systems to consider the school as a site for the transmission of cultures, and the mistaken belief that the school curriculum as well as teaching are value-free.

The teacher education curriculum

Pacific education systems have been more than indifferent to the best of Pacific cultures ever since schooling became important. Thomas and Postlethwaite (1984, p. 25) noticed the difference between schooling and indigenous education and wrote that:

Both the methods and content of indigenous islanders' education prior to the intrusions of Westerners in the 19th century were vastly different from those introduced with the formal school and since then the two modes of education have continued in parallel and often came into conflict.

In 1997 the Pacific Association of Teacher Educators in collaboration with the UNESCO Chair, conducted a survey of the teacher education curriculum in nine teacher education programs to find out the extent to which Pacific values and knowledge systems were used to inform or was incorporated into the curriculum of college courses. The results of the survey were expected to be used, among other things, to:

- enhance the interest in Pacific cultures as an important pedagogical tool as well as an important field of educational study;
- create awareness among teacher educators of the importance of education for cultural development;
- assist in the development of formal and non-formal educational materials that may empower teacher educators by enhancing their ability to better contextualize their own teaching; and
- serve as a catalyst for identifying local educators who might be interested in carrying out research and cultural analyses in their own communities, particularly in relation to gathering information about traditional knowledge systems as well as different learning and teaching styles.

The survey results confirmed our observations. Less than 20 per cent of college staff reported contextualizing the content of their courses and only 10 per cent of lecturers reported deriving the content of their courses from Pacific cultures, and these were mainly in the (vernacular) language and culture areas. Furthermore, first year courses in three colleges derived less than 30 per cent of course content from Pacific cultures and knowledge systems. There was also widespread belief among many college staff and academics that discipline-based knowledge and skills were somehow culture-free and universal. This lack of Pacific content in the teacher education curriculum was not surprising given the subject orientation of Pacific school curricula, particularly at high school levels.

Towards cultural democracy in teacher education

The need to develop teachers' cultural competence as well as knowledge and understanding of Pacific cultures and societies meant that focus must shift from teachers to teacher educators. In order to improve teacher quality, it was necessary to improve the quality and qualifications of teacher educators. As a way of assisting in the professional development of teacher educators, a series of Teacher Education Modules began in 1998. These modules were aimed at assisting teacher educators in the regional teachers' colleges, to better contextualize their work. Six modules were published in 2000 and are still used by many college lecturers as well as trainees at the USP.

Soon after the launch of the Teacher Education Modules, a Pacific education symposium was held in Fiji in 2001 to address the continuing deterioration in the quality of education in schools throughout the region. Symposium participants concluded that two main factors were responsible for the problem: the absence of a vision about what education can do for the region's people and the lack of ownership by Pacific peoples of their education systems due to the fact that Pacific curricula continued to reflect the values and ideals of colonising and now globalising cultures of Europe, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, rather than Pacific cultures (Taufe'ulungaki, 2000). Furthermore, the school as well as the educational bureaucracy of which it is a part, had continued to rely on notions of universalism and objectivity, fiercely promoting individual merit and competitive attitudes while Pacific indigenous and vernacular education systems rely on specific contexts and subjectivity and value human relationships and collective effort (Thaman, 1988, 2003). A Pacific academic referring to the situation in Solomon Islands (a troubled nation at the time of the symposium) had earlier reported that the extent to which the school in his country represented the multiple cultures of his nation was minimal as the officially sanctioned values were those of a foreign school structure, curriculum and teaching profession (Sanga, 2000). At best, one can safely say that schooling in many parts of Oceania offer a few fortunate people access to the modern, monetised sector; at worst, it is a recipe for cultural conflicts and disasters, the destruction of many children's self confidence and morale, as well as the marginalisation of local and indigenous knowledge systems of the very people and communities who send children to school. An increasing number of Pacific Island educators are coming to the realisation that perhaps it is time to look to their own cultures for solutions to Pacific teaching and learning problems.

The 2001 Symposium resolved that Pacific cultures needed to be the contexts in which conversations about the role of the teacher in educating for peace and sustainable development need to be situated and understood. It is in these contexts

that teachers as well as learners continue to face the conflicting demands and emphases between their formal education and those of their home cultures; between the individualist values of schools and the marketplace and the socially oriented cultural values of their own (Pacific) communities (Little, 1995, p. 778). Such conflicts often result in misunderstandings that, if not addressed, will lead to un-peaceful and conflict-ridden relationships, and occasionally physical violence.

Today in our schools and universities, the situation is worsening as the global market ideology pervades our people's lives and our work (or loss of work) and is changing even its most ardent opposers. Education is increasingly seen now a commodity to be sold rather than something that is provided by governments for the common good. In the Pacific region, neighbouring countries such as New Zealand and Australia do not hide the fact that they need to be more proactive in marketing their educational services to others, especially in the Asia Pacific region, making issues of globalised curricula, cross-cultural transfer and appropriate teaching and learning strategies more critical than ever. At an Asia Pacific UNESCO/GATS seminar held in Seoul in April 2005, questions were asked about what and/or whose knowledge was being taught in schools and universities in the Asia Pacific region as governments enthusiastically embrace market-driven economies and educational development. There is also evidence that globalisation and modernisation have actually accentuated structural violence against the poor majorities of our region, creating structural injustices that undermine people's opportunities to meet basic needs including the education of their children (Toh Swee-Hin, 2001).

Within the current globalising context Pacific teachers more than ever, need skills and capacities with which to mediate the interface between different cultural and knowledge systems, meanings and values that exist in the educational institutions in which they work, and at the same time use strategies that emphasises participatory, equitable, culturally appropriate, critically empowering and ecologically sustainable strategies and further develop critical understanding of the differences and similarities among the many cultural perspectives that exist within their schools and communities. Teachers also need to have the capacity of integrating the different cultures that have contributed to their own personal development and philosophies.

Neglect of teachers

Teacher educators on the other hand need to help develop these capacities among trainees. However, addressing trainees unmet needs and challenges has not been easy, due partly to the fact that the global picture in relation to teacher education has been less than clear. During the curriculum reform years of the 1970s and 1980s, Pacific teachers were seen mainly as a hindrance to rather than a help in implementing reforms. Some even believed that new curricula needed to be "teacher proof" so that students could learn in spite of their teachers. More than three decades and many failed curriculum development projects later, most Pacific governments as well as foreign aid organizations and their technical experts are now saying that teachers and their education are important for the success of usually externally funded curriculum and other educational reforms.

Despite many countries' endorsement of the 1966 Geneva Recommendation on the Status of Teachers, many educational reform movements in developing nations, including in the Pacific, continue to ignore teachers, reinforcing the belief that

educational systems could be changed without having to deal with teachers. The 1995 World Bank Education Sector Review of Six Key Options for reforming education systems, for example, did not even mention teachers, their selection or training. Neglecting teachers had largely resulted in their relegation to an inferior role, both in relation to their working conditions and from the viewpoint of teaching itself, forcing many potential teachers to opt for other careers. However, there are some positive signs. For example, a report on teacher training for the promotion of peace, human rights and international understanding was produced as part of the 44th session of the International Conference on Education held in Geneva in 1994. Two years later the Joint ILO/UNESCO Committee of Experts on the Recommendation Concerning the Status of Teachers passed a recommendation declaring that, "teachers deserve ongoing attention as their status and conditions of work continue to deteriorate worldwide". And in 1996 the Delores Report, *Education for the Twenty First Century: Learning the Treasure Within* devoted a whole chapter to teachers. Entitled, *Teachers: In Search of New Perspectives*, the authors warn that countries who wish to improve the quality of education must first improve the recruitment, training, social status and working conditions of their teachers.

It is this recognition of the vital role of teachers in facilitating educational reforms in general and educating for peace and sustainable development in particular that underpins the work of teacher educators at the USP. Focusing on teacher education from early childhood to tertiary, our University is assisting its 12 member countries to meet their human resource needs within the context of their own cultures. Teacher education is high on members countries' priority lists as they work towards meeting international educational obligations such as those relating to education for all, millennium development goals, the UN decade for literacy) and the UNDESD. The emphasis on teachers and their education is also reflected in the work of the UNESCO Chair since its establishment in 1998.

Teachers and teacher educators have been our main target groups. Through teacher education we hope to prepare teachers who have the capacity to create culturally inclusive learning environments and better contextualize their teaching in order to achieve improved learning outcomes. Culturally inclusive curriculum and research are also part of our advocacy and a regional workshop of culturally inclusive curriculum recently saw curriculum planners from around the Pacific, including Maori and Australian aboriginal educators, come together to evaluate the extent to which the school curriculum in their respective nations reflects the values and knowledge systems of Pacific cultures rather than colonial and/or metropolitan cultures. A major part of this workshop focused on researching and incorporating elements of Pacific cultures and knowledge systems in the curriculum of teacher education in the hope that future generations of Pacific peoples would know and appreciate their heritages as well as those of others and thereby contribute more effectively to intercultural understanding, tolerance and peace.

In most activities that target teachers at our university, the emphasis has been to acknowledge and value Pacific cultures and knowledge systems, especially the importance of inter-personal relationships, and the nurturance of such relationships through emphasizing respect, compassion, tolerance and restrained behaviour (Thaman, 1988, 2001). We also encourage the use of indigenous and traditional communication techniques not only in teaching but also in research. These techniques,

such as “*talanoa*”, emphasise dialogue and consensus, and are participatory and creative. Finally, we encourage critical analyses and self-assessment and welcome constructive criticism. Through improved understanding of their own as well as others’ cultures, we hope to enhance our teachers and students’ commitment not only to peace and inter-cultural understanding but also to sustainable living.

In much of our work, we face some challenges. Lack of resources, both human and financial; lack of overt institutional support; and, indifference of others who tend to see cultural literacy and inter-cultural education as wishy-washy and a possible drain on resources which they need for their own research and activities. For me personally, working in the area of culture and education has been fulfilling. I had realised quite early in my career, that in a culturally diverse region such as ours, there was a need to move towards cultural and cognitive democracy in our work in curriculum development and teacher education. In order to do this we needed to include Pacific content and pedagogies in school and university curricula and help develop Pacific philosophies of teaching and research that are sourced from the cultures of our students and the communities that send them to university.

Personal philosophy of teaching and research

I end this paper with a brief summary of my own personal philosophy of teaching and research, symbolised in the Tongan metaphor of *kakala*, and underpins the work of the UNESCO Chair. Developed in the early 1990s it is used by Pacific researchers and scholars in Tonga as well as in New Zealand. The development of personal philosophies of teaching is a major goal of both my undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, where students are expected to look towards their own cultural source for inspiration. The assumption being that if teachers have strong cultural identities, has compassion for their students, and value human relationships, they will be more likely to work towards improved contextualization of new concepts and competencies which they are expected to teach.

Sourced from my own (Tongan) culture, *kakala* refers to fragrant flowers woven together to make a garland, and has many equivalent concepts in Oceania such as *lei* (Hawaii), *hei* (Cook Islands) or *salusalu* (Fiji). There exist, in Tonga and elsewhere, etiquette and mythology associated with *kakala* making. *Kakala* embodies physical, social and spiritual elements and reflects the integrated nature of indigenous epistemologies and knowledge systems.

There are three major processes associated with *Kakala*: *tolu*, *tui* and *luva*. *Tolu* is the collection and selection of flowers and other plant material that are required for making a *kakala*; this would depend not only on the occasion but also on the person(s) for whom a *kakala* is being made. It will also depend on the availability of the materials themselves. *Tui* is the making or weaving of a *kakala*. The time taken to do this would also depend on the complexity and intricacies of the flowers and the type of *kakala* being made. In Tonga, flowers are ranked according to their cultural importance with the *heilala* having pride of place because of the mythology associated with it. *Luva* is the final process and is about giving the *kakala* away to someone else as a sign of peace, love and respect. *Kakala* provides me with a philosophy as well as a methodology of teaching and research that is rooted in my culture but has equivalents in others. *Kakala* requires me to utilise knowledge from global as well as Pacific (indigenous) cultures in order to weave something that is meaningful and culturally

appropriate for my students. This is important because, teaching in my view, is essentially autobiographic: as teachers, we give of ourselves when we share our knowledge, skills and values with our students. If this is motivated by compassion, a commitment to peaceful and harmonious relationships, and respect for one another's cultures, then sharing will lead to wisdom and sustainable relationships.

Teacher education for peace and sustainable development is essentially about developing people who can make a difference in the school. In order to be able to teach about peace, one needs to be at peace with oneself (Curle, 1971). The message is clear: teachers need to model the skills and values that they are teaching. This is actually what the Pacific conception of the teacher is: a role model from whom students can learn about how to behave in appropriate ways. In this regard, I end with a poem, inspired by the educational ideas of Adam Curle, the Foundation Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford, a peace-maker and a mentor. A sharing identity as opposed to a belonging identity is a precondition for teaching about peace, he emphasised. And if we were to add sustainable development to this, it becomes clear that the teacher will need to model a life of sustainable living and not merely teach about it. A sharing identity requires the nurturing of positive relationships, of good *vaa*. In my view, a sharing identity is a pre-condition to educating for peace and sustainable development in Oceania. This is an orientation that we need to inculcate among teachers of the future:

today we come together
to read and sing of peace
lay aside our differences
rise and greet the breeze

there's no need to explain
define or defend our theme
question our ancestors
about their silent dreams
no need to blame the rain or pain
for crying on the phone
no need to ask how far the tide
will come to meet our bones

when all is said and done
you'll have to give up soon
the things that make you what you are
the things you think you own
a spouse a house
a child a friend
the land your customs
even the pain

for when you're left with nothing
only wings to lift you up
you'll see how fast your soul is trembling
freedom's trapped in a cup
seize it now hold it tight
have no fear you're there
let me whisper no I'll shout
peace is in the air

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