



Nena Bugarin Eslao Benton
1940-2007

Nena Benton died in May 2007, after a long battle with cancer. For the previous decade she had been a consultant anthropologist, directing her family consultancy company, Alta Vista Pacifica Ltd. She had most recently been a consultant on anthropological issues for the research programme on “Laws and Institutions for Aotearoa / New Zealand”, based at Te Mātāhauariki Institute of the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. For several years prior to that she had been involved with a special programme of the Institute, recording and analysing the views of prominent Māori experts on customary law as they had experienced it in practice in Māori communities. An account which she wrote of this programme appeared as a chapter in a book published in 2006 [*].

Nena was born in Alcala, Pangasinan, a year before the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. She was the fourth of ten children. Early in life she realised that by the time she came along, her parents had been longing for a boy, so she took an active interest in boyish things, helping her father to assemble radios and stereos to supplement his meagre income as a school principal, and soldering batteries together to run them. She was also determined to succeed in school, realising that education was the surest avenue of escape from poverty. She graduated Valedictorian of the Alcala Provincial High School in 1956. This entitled her to free tuition at the prestigious University of the Philippines in Manila, but by that time her parents had exhausted their financial resources in helping to educate their older children, and instead Nena went to Mindanao to live with one of her aunts and attended the Notre Dame of Marbel College in South Cotabato. She graduated Bachelor of Arts, summa cum laude, majoring in mathematics and chemistry, and also completed the academic requirements for a Bachelor of Science in Education.

After graduating, she was appointed to a position at the Notre Dame of Jolo College, in Sulu, a predominantly Moslem province in the Southern Philippines. While there she encountered some anthropologists from the Ateneo de Manila, who were greatly impressed by her perceptive comments as she accompanied them on their expedition. The following year she was given a scholarship to attend the University of the Philippines and after passing the qualifying examinations was enrolled in the School of Engineering. The Jesuits got wind of this, however, and persuaded her to abandon engineering and enroll in the Ateneo Graduate School to study anthropology instead. She then obtained an East West Centre Scholarship, and graduated Master of Arts in anthropology from the University of Hawaii in 1964. She spent the next two years back at the Ateneo, teaching and involved in two major social science research programmes, one looking at the impact of the American Peace Corps on Philippine rural communities, and the other of the impact of urbanization on migrants from other parts of the Philippines to

Manila. In 1966 she was awarded an International Development Fellowship which would have enabled her to study or do research at the American university of her choice. She decided to return to Hawaii and study for a PhD in anthropology. Her intention was to study the impact of exile on the culture and values of Philippine workers on the sugar cane plantations. However, she was persuaded to use the data on urbanization which she had already collected in Manila instead, so after passing all the qualifying examinations and defending her dissertation proposal (which she managed with distinction) she could complete her doctoral work expeditiously.

At this point her academic career was disrupted by a completely unexpected development. The person who had decided despite her great charm and sociability to devote herself to scholarship and perhaps join an order of lay missionaries, happened to become friendly with a fellow student who had other plans for her. They were married on the 8th of September, 1967, in Hanalei, Kauai, and at the time of her death were looking forward to celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary.

After her marriage, Nena continued working on her Manila data, but wanted to do further research as she was not satisfied that the questions she was most interested in had been adequately explored, although her advisors wanted her simply to write up what she had already collected so that she could be awarded the degree. Meanwhile, in the middle of 1968, her husband had been given leave from his own scholarship to work on a project preparing language materials – lessons, a dictionary, and a reference grammar of the Pangasinan language – for the University. They left for the Philippines in October, and spent much of the following year with Nena's family. Their first son was born in May, 1969. Nena did manage to do a lot of work on her thesis, but her work was disrupted by a request that she and her husband spend a year in Sulu, setting up a graduate programme in social sciences for secondary school teachers for a consortium of universities in the Southern Philippines.

In 1971 they returned to Hawaii, and towards the end of that year moved to New Zealand where her husband had been offered a position at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, to set up a research unit focused on issues of concern to Māori. Because of her expertise in planning and undertaking large-scale social science surveys, Nena was persuaded to put her dissertation on the back burner while they launched the survey of the use of the Māori language in North Island households and communities, which was to have a seminal influence on the revitalization of the language and its statutory recognition as an official language of New Zealand in 1987. Nena acted as planner, logistics expert, and mentor to the many students working on this project over the next ten years, on the fieldwork and then on writing up and disseminating the results. Most unfortunately, her dissertation was never completed and the doctorate which she most definitely had earned was never awarded. Nevertheless she did make her mark through her work on language revival, with the Suzuki music movement, and then as a pioneer researcher and writer on the recognition of prior learning.

During the 1990s she wrote several major reports, three books, and edited two others, wrote numerous articles, was awarded a Churchill Fellowship, and in 2000 coordinated an international conference, becoming a world authority on the subject. During this period she was appointed to the national Catholic commission on justice, peace and development, something which she was passionately concerned about. Related to this were her ongoing involvement in researching and writing about sustainable development and the value and importance of listening carefully to what the marginalized had to say about their needs and aspirations. She had a major role in a University of Auckland multidisciplinary research project on well-being and disparity in the Greater Auckland area, taking responsibility for coordinating the ethnographic work. Nonetheless, she managed to combine all this with her practical work in planting gardens wherever her family lived, and implementing permaculture-based planting on their farmlet after they moved to the Waikato region at the end of 1996. Throughout all this time, despite her impressive accomplishments in other fields, Nena always put her family first, truly a devoted wife and mother while at the same time an accomplished scholar, a supportive friend and mentor, and a gracious hostess. At the time of her death she was a member of the International and Indigenous Advisory Panels of Terralingua, a member of the University of Auckland's Centre for Continuing Education Advisory Group, an active member of the Waikato Branch of the NZ Tree Crops Association and had recently retired as a consultant to the University of Waikato's research programme on Laws and Institutions for Aotearoa.

Nena truly practised and embodied the virtue of *manaaki* (generosity of spirit incorporating mutual respect), always respecting the divine spark in fellow human beings, and thus helping many people she encountered to recognize what Gerard Manley Hopkins described as the "immortal diamond" within themselves, revealing and enhancing it with the reflected light from the diamond that was herself. As a Māori saying puts it,

Ko te rangatiratanga o te wahine nei, he atawhai ki nga tangata.
"The nobility of this woman lies in her concern for the people"

NOTE

[*] "Towards a More Inclusive Jurisprudence for Aotearoa: Te Pū Wānanga 1999-2003", in *Conversing with the Ancestors: Concepts and Institutions in Māori Customary Law* (ed. R. A. Benton). Hamilton: Te Mātāhauariki Institute, University of Waikato, 2006.