

Straying Beyond the Boundaries of Belief: Maori epistemologies inside the curriculum

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Introduction

According to Maori belief all things have a *mauri* or life aspect—a piece of writing or a speech therefore has its own *mauri*. As a writer of a paper I am engaged in the act of creation which stems from the way that I see creation occurring. Just as the carvers who carve the houses by ‘*hanga whare*’ (building houses) so too as Maori academics we build thoughts/feelings (*hanga whakaro*) and build discourses (*hanga korero*). I am not alone in this work, all my ancestors, past, present and future also have to—bear with me.

I want to begin this paper with two quotes. The first is written by a researcher who lived among Maori for many years, who slept, ate and was supposed to have children with Maori. He sought Maori who lived in isolated areas and he studied them for over twenty years, living among the people, learning the language and collecting their words, seeking their thoughts, feelings and what it was that made these people tick. He was to say after all that time:

We have never been allowed inside the palisades of Maori thought. (Elsdon
Best cited in Anderson, 1948, p. vii)

The second quote comes from the title of a painting by an artist and activist who has painted a large painting of Maori palisades and across the bottom of the work in large letters are the words:

TRESPASSERS WILL BE EATEN (Title of a painting of Maori palisades
by Tame Iti, 1997).

I use these quotes to signal that there are defended territories of encounter between Maori and those who seek to ‘understand’ us, and that these points are defended territories of knowledge as well as defended boundaries of encounter.

The discipline of philosophy has attracted very few Maori students. Very few Maori study inside the discipline of philosophy, let alone philosophy of education, yet clearly Maori DO philosophy all the time. Philosophy is strongly a part of the Maori Studies curriculum but it tends to be interwoven into the curriculum rather than seen as a separate subject. I only know of one place where Maori philosophy

is taught specifically as a subject and that is at Te Whare Wananga O Awanuiarangi¹ in Whakatane. As I have spoken to other Maori about this paper, the more that I have realised the urgency of beginning to make Maori philosophy more overt in our approaches to all aspects of the way we live our lives and the ways that we engage academic practice.

During the decades of the 1980s and 1990s there has been what various people have described as a renaissance, a revolution in Maori education. The focus and revival of Maori language and culture has been dramatic and rapid. Indeed the education system within Aotearoa is under challenge at many levels of organisation, curriculum and resourcing. Whilst Maori education initiatives continue to run ‘on the smell of an oily rag’ they are nevertheless prolific and doing much to strengthen Maori language and culture.

Within these decades we have been engaged in not only reviving Maori knowledge, we are also defending it, decolonising it and attempting to develop new frameworks to teach from. This is an ongoing process being undertaken by Maori educationalists all around the country.

I began University in 1989 during the time of ‘revival’ and took several papers in Maori Studies. During those years I had some very knowledgeable lecturers inside the University of Auckland and outside including Paki Harrison, Pat Hohepa, Ngahua Te Awekotuku and Bub Wehi who were able to not only impart knowledge about *te reo Maori* and the culture, but taught the philosophy behind the words of learning a language and who taught the conceptual thinking behind using even simple words. They spent much time as teachers getting you to understand that conceptual shifts were required in order for you to fully understand what they were saying. Even simple words such as ‘*mai*’ and ‘*atu*’,² which appear in English to be just ‘directional particles’, but nevertheless position you into the fold of the speaker, or position you into ‘degrees of otherness’ by subtle changes of use and tone. They are not only directional in terms of space but also in terms of time.

My Ph.D. research is on the history of Maori Studies here at the University of Auckland and this paper will speak to some of the concerns that I have on the positioning of Maori knowledge inside a university curriculum. Maori language and culture have been taught as specific subjects at the University of Auckland since the early 1950s, long before the activist struggles of the 1970s that saw the development of Women’s Studies, Black Studies and Native Studies in the USA and Canada.

My teaching and thesis research has required me to pursue a number of issues around the issues of Maori knowledge. And because I trained through sociology of education the questions of my research are of a fairly standard critical theorist type:

- What is Maori knowledge?
- If Maori language and culture have become taught within the boundaries of an academic discipline called Maori Studies, what was selected to be part of that discipline and what was left out?
- What counts as Maori Studies knowledge?
- Is Maori Studies a ‘real’ discipline?

- What constitutes a boundary and a structure in Western disciplines? How do we envisage boundary and structure in relation to our own knowledge?
- But also what *beliefs* are considered unacceptable within a university curriculum and what was left outside the gates when the language and culture began to be taught inside the university?

It is specifically this last question that I want to deal with here.

Colonising Epistemologies

From 1952, Maori language and culture began to be taught inside the university. Although missionaries and schooling had re-framed Maori knowledge, Maori knowledge was brought into the university under the umbrella of anthropology and Maori language teaching developed a linguistic focus over the next decade. In this process Maori language and knowledge were re-framed as knowledge *knowable from Western epistemologies*. This re-framing of Maori knowledge as knowable from Western epistemologies has been an increasing point of contention that has seen a reassertion of 'Maori space' within the education system during the 1980s and 1990s.³

I want to look at three beliefs that are implicit in Maori epistemologies, but were too challenging to be considered part of the overt Maori curriculum:

1. The view that everything in existence is connected and related.
2. The belief that all things are living.
3. The belief that unseen worlds can be mediated by the human. All those are called 'unseen' in English, they are 'seen' worlds in Maori.

The idea of *whakapapa* will give you some idea of how these ideas are implicit in Maori epistemologies. *Whakapapa*, which is usually translated as genealogy or descent, lays out Maori views of existence by showing the connections between states of existence, the human and natural world. It provides explanation for existence and also articulates the human role within that existence. Within *whakapapa* there are origins and explanations for trees, birds, parts of the human body, words and speaking, the cosmos, the gods, *karakia*, the moon, the wind and stones. All life is connected and interrelated. Appropriate behaviour is also indicated to all aspects of life within *whakapapa*.

It is misinterpreted when writers translate *whakapapa* as genealogy, for genealogy usually covers the human and in a lineal descent fashion. In actual fact *whakapapa* provides explanation for the interconnections to all things. *Whakapapa* was identified by early voyeurs of Maori life as being a central focus of study seeing *whakapapa* as critical to understanding 'kinship patterns' and 'ritual'.

The word *whakapapa* is both a verb and a noun, i.e. it is both an action and a state. *Whakapapa* is not just mapping the nature of existence, to *whakapapa* allows the speaker and listeners to negotiate the terrain of both seen and unseen existence. Paki Harrison, a renowned carver of Ngati Porou, talks about *karakia* being doorways that allow the person access to other realms. Doorways had guardians who could allow or deny access, e.g. *Hine-nui-te-Po*⁴ was often depicted over the doorway

of houses. Hence the importance of the doorway—*kuwaha* of the house. *Ruru* (owls) and *poiipoia* (bats) are considered to be some of the guardians of the spiritual realm, intermediaries between the living and the dead.

Words through *karakia*, *tauparapara*, *waiata*, *moteatea*⁵ were used to interrelate with aspects of *whakapapa*. Divinity was not a separate area, mediated by experts. *Karakia* were done by children, and there was the idea of coexistence not an existence of the lesser being struggling with the all-powerful malevolent gods. It was a coexistence that all participated in. Missionaries refashioned Maori epistemologies to fit into their concepts of God the Father as a separate existence and Maori knowledge was divided into upper heavenly knowledge and lower earthly knowledge—*te kauwae runga* and *te kauwae raro*.

Nowadays *whakapapa* is becoming more reconstructed as a means of identity—whereas it actually maps out the nature of existence.

These ideas of the interconnectedness of life, the belief that all things are living and that humans are active participants in mediating the seen and unseen worlds, were taken for granted by our ancestors and are common views held by numerous other peoples world-wide. In the processes of colonisation all these views were considered a nonsense by missionaries and other ethnographers of Maori. These ideas were ridiculed and regarded as primitive, irrational and unscientific. Today these ideas are regarded as fringe ideas held by ecologists, New Age believers, clairvoyants and mediums.⁶ The ecology and New Age movement have recently been criticised by Native American writers for appropriation and commodification of Native views of spirituality⁷.

This paper raises more issues than it can solve because although I am going to discuss these three beliefs, and the ways in which they have become hidden and why, I can only really begin the discussion. The ways in which beliefs become hidden and changed are complex, but I will make some specific points.

Matakite or Seers

Early missionaries were looking to find the native beliefs about 'religion' so that conversion would be made easier. But they also wanted to stamp out 'superstition'. Many missionaries record encounters of frustration when attempting to understand the Maori mind. Even missionaries who were sympathetic to Maori argued against Maori beliefs and some argued that the spirituality of Maori and Pakeha were actually one in the same, it was just a matter of translating the words and concepts accordingly.

Recorded in the footnotes of Rev. Richard Taylor's book who spent time among our *iwi*⁸ in Whanganui, and who is latterly considered a sympathetic missionary, are some of the encounters of frustration and disappointment that he felt with Maori. Taylor is seen as being one of the more sympathetic missionaries who came here in the nineteenth century. These encounters give insight into Taylor's frustration:

The matakite or seers pretend to do many supernatural things, and to cause their gods to appear at pleasure, but from my personal knowledge of

many of them, I am persuaded they are ventriloquists, and thus deceive the people though in some cases they may deceive themselves that the god is within them; generally though they are gross impostors who only seek gain or influence by their pretended powers. (Taylor, 1855, p. 43)

One morning a native came to me with a very long countenance, and said, that the Taupos were coming to fight against us, with a determination to put an end to 'waka pono' as the Christian religion is called. I enquired where he got the news from; he told me that a female called Erina had seen the enemy and upon further questioning him he said the 'Atua' (spirit) who was in love with her, had showed her the hostile party. I laughed at him and said that if that was all he knew about the Taupo I should not have much fear. I went to the woman however and said that I was sorry that she had been spreading such an idle tale; she said it was not her but the spirit who came to her. I inquired how did he inform you of what was coming to pass. She said he bid me hold out my hand, and he put a drop of blood in it, telling me to look attentively into it; I did so and I saw Te Heu Heu Herekiekie and several other Taupo Chiefs on one side, and on the other the church with you and the teachers standing before it. He told me it was a 'taua' or war party against the church. (ibid., p. 45)

Describing another incident Taylor spent time wrestling with the minds of Christian Maori whom he was trying to convert. In one encounter he asks a new Maori convert if a woman who speaks to atua (gods) is not instead a ventriloquist:

I asked my informant if he did not think the woman a ventriloquist? He said that it had not struck him before, but now he felt persuaded that she was. ... It is clear in this case just given that there is nothing said beyond what a cunning old woman might say, nothing to indicate superior intelligence; generally these ventriloquists are distinguished by their possessing a greater degree of shrewdness and acquaintance with what is going on, than their neighbours (ibid.)

Animate/Inanimate

Our beliefs about what is living have also been regarded as beyond belief in the colonial context. Recently at a High Court case trial to determine whether urban Maori groups could be considered an *iwi*⁹ or not there was a great deal of excitement in the court when Tamati Reedy, an elder of Ngati Porou was being cross examined. He was asked in the court whether *Ponaturi*, which are usually translated into English as 'fairy folk' were an *iwi*. I was sitting among the Maori audience which packed the court at the back. When this question came up everybody got excited in the audience. For Maori, *Ponaturi* are an *iwi*, they are a people. So one of Tamati's relations called out from the back 'of course they're an *iwi*, they speak Maori and they live in houses', but was a witness going to say so in a court of law which didn't believe in 'fairy folk' that *Ponaturi* are a people. When Tamati Reedy gave evidence

that the *Ponaturi* were definitely an *iwi*, it was one of the best moments in court because it showed that although some aspects of Maori could be translated, there were points of departure that put Maori into whole different ways of seeing the world. Of course we are not always brave enough to launch out there and say so when there has been a history of ridicule.

Maori talk to the dead quite often. Generally speaking though, this is either done in the Maori language or out of earshot of Pakeha. Most Maori will tell you that they feel the presence of *tupuna* more strongly at particular times. On formal occasions such as the opening of meeting houses, *tangi* and even in *karakia*, *tupuna* are called on directly through *karanga* and a whole myriad of ways. Their presence is recognised in the land in the fine misty rain and the tears that flow and the mountains and rivers. Western academia define talking to the dead or feeling as if guidance is coming from the dead as not rational.

Bodies and parts of bodies of ancestors are envisaged in the landscape so that a river can be an ancestor, fishing grounds can be envisaged as being placed on the different parts of a woman's body. There are numerous land formations that are male and female. The *Whare* (meeting house) was considered to be a human body, 'the veins, arteries and life blood of the ancestor', etc.

Coding Our Beliefs

Marae (meeting houses) at universities have been an important means of retaining the philosophical beliefs of Maori. But we also discuss our divergent philosophies in tea rooms. During colonisation we have developed quite complex codes to protect knowledge from appropriation including traditional sanctions. Particular knowledges are only appropriate in certain places. Often times Maori lecturers will tell you that they can only begin to teach you the language and culture and that you must return home to learn properly. This is another way that our philosophies have survived on the home front.

Recently I was having a discussion with an uncle of mine and I was telling him my understandings of the difference between the terms *mauri* and *wairua*. Both these terms are translated in English as 'life force' or 'spirit'. He let me speak and at the end of my long tortured explanation said, 'Are we speaking in the Maori world or the Pakeha world?' I said 'We are speaking in the Maori world'. He breathed a sigh of relief and then began his explanation. But long afterwards I was intrigued by the question, are we speaking in the Pakeha world or in the Maori world. He was very clear that even though we were discussing Maori beliefs that there was a Pakeha view on these beliefs and there was what Maori really thought. Later in the conversation he elaborated on this:

There are two things that make us different from Pakeha, we are descended from gods and we speak to our dead. (Kaumatua, Whanganui)

There are important issues here because we have coded our beliefs and we divide our talk into appropriate forums to speak and inappropriate forums to speak.

Our grandmother was well versed in *whakapapa*. But in her later years she was

interviewed by a Pakeha researcher. When she spoke to the researcher she selectively gave him *whakapapa* that went back to seven *waka*,¹⁰ although she knew that there were at least sixty-nine different *waka* that came here and there are many layers to *whakapapa* that expand into many realms. But she selectively told him what he would understand. For many years Pakeha have believed in the great fleet theory of seven *waka* coming in one migration to these shores. So she recounted our *whakapapa* from his level of understanding.

Coding our beliefs has been a survival strategy for beliefs seen as unpalatable in a Western context. What has occurred in universities considered to be the 'mind' of Western society and in a context where rational thought is considered to be at its apex?

Coding also happens in Maori language. *Marae* space is where our epistemologies can be spoken openly in Maori but it is usually within the format of 'formal ritual'. When switching to English, speakers can move into Western epistemologies and sometimes Maori will speak in Maori from our own world views. There can be complex ways of shifting in and out of epistemological territories.

Other indigenous writers have spoken of the difficulty in writing in the English language. One of these difficulties has been described as the feeling that 'English has no mother'. English does seem disconnected when examining it alongside Maori. Words and language have a *whakapapa*; they have very real effect for Maori, a physicality. There is no word in Maori that you cannot talk about for a week; there are oceans of difference between the word '*wai*' and the word 'water' yet they are considered in English to mean the same.

In the *iwi* court case that I mentioned earlier we saw the court's attempt to grasp the meaning of the word *iwi*. Maori witnesses attempted to articulate the depth of meaning, the changing nature of the meaning and the differences in world views that would explain the word *iwi*. For two weeks, evidence was given as witnesses spoke of the complexities. Maori witnesses constantly talked about the way that you cannot understand Maori words without understanding the context in which they are used, because the meaning can change dramatically in different contexts. This is not so in English. It was also pointed out that there were *iwi* variations to social structure and how *iwi* is more than a structure as it is also intimately connected to ideas of relationship, *whakapapa* and is also connected to place and *korero*. These are difficult matters to address in a court because courts do not accept multiple realities; only one version is the 'truth'.

It is our relationships to other indigenous peoples that are assisting us to theorise identities as colonised peoples. It is our interaction with other indigenous peoples and the sharing of experiences that is also giving us a stronger commitment to work from our own epistemological base in the university. It is extremely heartening to meet with and work with indigenous academics who understand immediately the relationship to *whakapapa*. It is becoming possible for us to validate each others' work. Of course we must also be careful not to homogenise our understandings in the process of encounter.

It is also important to examine the ways in which we talk. Maori narrative places importance on the connection of the *atua* and human. The idea of place is critical

to Maori narrative. Identity and place are intimately linked. Maori assess knowledge very often on a person's experience of that knowledge. Assessments of speakers by Maori is often made around the idea of whether or not you as a speaker are speaking from experience with a direct connection to the events that you are describing. This of course is one of the key criticisms of Maori academics.

As Maori teachers it is important, whether in English or in Maori, to be teaching from a knowledge base of our beliefs. If colonisation has caused views of creativity and creation to be anglicised and if the fundamental beliefs of Maori are gone, the language becomes merely the translation of an English script.

In these days of Maori language revival there is the assumption that by learning the *reo* (Maori language) we will automatically learn the philosophies and beliefs that underpin the language. It is heartening to see some writing coming forward that is beginning to look at Maori epistemologies such as the writings of Charles Royal and Takirirangi Smith, Rose Pere and others.

Usually when we know that we are going to vary outside of the bounds of belief according to Pakeha epistemologies, we start to premise our sentences with conditional statements such as '*According to our beliefs*'. '*In the Maori world we would say*', '*If we look at things the Maori way then*'. '*Our people believed that*'.

I have included some of those statements in this paper to indicate that like the palisades that I talked about earlier, they are there for a purpose and if I have a message here it is a very simple one, that the claims for separate space being made by Maori are claims that need to be heard and assisted. But there is also a challenge to Maori academics that we are to more strongly bring forward into our work and lived reality, the epistemologies that we so often put to one side as 'separate' spheres or relegate to formalised ritual.

Notes

1. A tribal tertiary institution.
2. *Mai* means towards the speaker and *atu* means away from the speaker, e.g. *haere atu* means go away (from me) and *haere mai* means come towards me.
3. The development of Maori space inside institutions and the development of *kohanga reo* and *kura kaupapa* schooling have seen the proliferation of spaces where there is space seen as 'for Maori' where Maori pedagogy and ways of seeing are taken for granted.
4. *Hine-nui-te-Po*—the guardian of the doorway between life and death.
5. Prayers, invocation, song, chant.
6. Colonisation causes complex patternings of relationships between the colonised and the coloniser. The coloniser can play the destroyer of 'beliefs' and then the discoverer of beliefs. The relationship between destruction and discovery is discussed by a number of indigenous writers who have observed the use of 'the earth is our mother' rhetoric to inspire the ecology movement (Grinde *et al.*, Churchill).
7. See the writings of M. Annette Jaimes, Ward Churchill, Vine Deloria and others.
8. *Iwi* means a tribe.
9. Usually translated simply as tribe but in this case there was a seeking of a legal recognition of status as a tribe so that Treaty settlement resources could be distributed to the 'urban tribes'.
10. Canoes.

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