

## **Exploring 'Indigenous'**<sup>1</sup>

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This paper sketches briefly a draft and nascent theory of indigenous and indigenuity. The theory suggests that it is a feature of the human condition to exist in relationship with the environments in which we dwell - our environments 'speak into' human cultural manifestation in conscious and unconscious ways. Such an idea is not original or ground breaking, however, in the context of the development of indigenous peoples worldwide, it does offer the beginnings of an alternative way of thinking about indigenous and indigenuity. It presents an opportunity to discover something essential and fundamental within traditional indigenous knowledge that might be helpful as we grapple with life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The paper expresses an interest in developing a new vision for indigenuity.

The paper extends this view of human-environment relationship by suggesting that a 'formal indigenous culture' is one that is *conscious* in its relationship with *natural world environments*. So whilst a person and a community may - through natural maturation - become 'indigenous' to a built and urban environment and have that environment exert conscious and unconscious influences into the cultural productions and mindsets of those peoples, a 'formal indigenous culture' is one that is conscious to the articulation of natural world environments into the creativity of those peoples. Such a view of indigenuity is presented through a desire to fundamentally engage the world of our actual experience and to fashion a life-centred philosophy beyond the ideological contests concerning indigenuity that have been taking place for some time within the milieu of decolonisation.

In the past thirty years or more, our usual approach or view of the term indigenous has been dominated by a socio-cultural perspective arising from a history of colonisation. That is to say, our tendency has been to associate this term with a group of people rather than with a worldview, a set of values and a way of being in the world. This is not to say that there has been no discussion of 'indigenous worldviews', however it is to say that in

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using this term, our habit has been to associate it with populations of 'indigenous' peoples throughout the world who enjoy the status of 'indigeneity' due to the length of their tenure in a particular geographical location, a land. Many are therefore included in this definition such as the Aborigines of Australia, Native Americans, Africans and so on. Other groups include the Ainu of Japan and Swami of Lapland. Hence, our first approach to the concept of indigeneity is length of tenure in a given land.

However, this view of indigeneity and indigenous is often swamped through the collective experience and history of colonisation. Consequently, 'indigenous peoples' are usually minority populations within, often, Western democracies and/or wider and larger political, economic and socio-cultural arrangements. That is to say, indigenous peoples are usually marginalised in their own lands. Typically indigenous peoples possess a history of colonisation by, usually European, colonisers and today they possess both substantial knowledge about their experience of colonisation and fragments and elements of their traditional knowledge. Indigenous peoples are often 'at the bottom of the heap' and/or 'lie at the periphery' in the modern nations in which they can be found and it this history - and knowledge about this history - which tends to dominate our thinking about 'indigenous'.

Interestingly the English in England, the French in France, the Italians in Italy and so on, are not included in this definition of indigenous and indigeneity despite their time in their respective lands. This is because European peoples, such as the English, were the colonising peoples of the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. During those times, indigenous peoples were variously referred to as 'native' or 'aboriginal'. As a result of European expansion, so our orthodoxy continues, 'coloniser' and 'colonial power' are terms associated with, particularly, European power.

During the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'indigenous' was claimed by indigenous peoples as a way of 'talking back' or as an act of resistance against colonisation. 'Indigenous' became a rallying call for subjugated peoples and various agendas have been advanced to further the indigenous cause. See, for example, the Working Group on Indigenous Populations at the United Nations. Hence, the term 'indigenous' has arisen through a complex history of

cultural encounter and domination and its use as a tool of 'resistance' is widespread and well-known.

Alternative ways of thinking about 'indigenous' have been limited. Opportunities to draw from traditional knowledge bases of indigenous peoples - to inform a new/old philosophy of indiginity - have been few due to a general downturn in interest in traditional knowledge of this kind and a contemporary identity tension which bounds indigenous knowledge applications for the benefit of indigenous peoples only. In New Zealand, for example, many consider traditional Māori knowledge to be relevant and useful to Māori only. Some Māori argue vigorously in this direction asserting that *mātauranga Māori* is no one else's business.

My interest has been to explore a possible epistemology of indiginity, one that sees indiginity as a dimension of human experience and grounded in a feature of the human condition. My suggestion is that an alternative approach is possible and I would like to highlight the difference between a philosophy of 'indiginity' on the basis of a relationship with natural world environments and 'indiginity and indigenous' as concepts of resistance.

My interest lies with attempting to fashion a philosophy of indiginity that arises from our relationship to the natural world - a philosophy that asserts that we ought to have a good relationship with the natural environments in which we dwell. In developing an alternative view of indiginity, I do not wish to detract from the important work taking place throughout the world to achieve retribution for past wrongdoings in countries throughout the world and to achieve social-justice for 'indigenous' peoples. Genuine grievance and injustices must be addressed in a genuine manner. I also acknowledge that the traditional knowledge bases of indigenous peoples is properly the 'business' of those peoples. However, I would suggest that although traditional indigenous knowledge arose and arises within particular cultural, social and environmental settings and conditions, lying at the heart of traditional indigenous knowledge are responses to ubiquitous human questions, issues and experiences.

I would like to offer an alternative view of indigenous and indiginity that makes great use of the traditional knowledge and worldviews of 'indigenous' peoples. This is so that we may find an alternative and creative avenue for

our intellectual and spiritual energies, and traditional knowledge and that these precious resources may not be spent on 'resisting' alone. I would like to scope out an additional thread to our contemporary cultural activity through positioning cultural resistance and retention within a larger paradigm of cultural creativity - using our cultures to creatively engage the world at large.

### **Length of tenure, nature of culture**

There is a deeper reason, I think, as to why the European peoples named may not be included in a definition of indigenous (although, of course, it is not for me to say). Length of tenure within a particular geographic area is not enough, it would seem, to be an 'indigenous people'. Rather, what a people do in that measure of time and space is equally important. Whilst a conscious and unconscious correspondence between ourselves and the environments we inhabit is a feature of the human condition everywhere, what distinguishes an indigenous culture is that it is particular and conscious in its relationship with the natural world.

An indigenous culture seeks to find expression for the natural world in the activities of the culture. People are conceptualised as a child of the natural world - not an adjunct to it. The circumstances of life are approached through learnings derived from the natural world. The natural world is considered the best teacher, the embodiment of wisdom. A formal indigenous culture is one that is particular in its articulation of the features of the natural world into the activities of the culture.

Some will argue, however, that European cultures are want to find expression for the natural world in human cultural expression. There is the 'rose' of England, the maple leaf of Canada and so on. However, others will also point out the 'park and garden' culture of Europe and the complete domination of certain environments and the decimation of whole ecosystems through urbanisation (not only in Europe of course). Hence, one could argue that the English in England<sup>2</sup> are not indigenous, despite their tenure in that

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<sup>2</sup> 'The English in England, the French in France' and so on, can in themselves be 'reductive formulae' suggesting that all who are English, for example, share the same views, have the same experiences, behave in the same way. Whilst national unifying symbols, such as 'Englishness' do have their place, we should be mindful of the vast diversity that

land, because of the *attitude* ascendant in that culture - in contrast to that held by conventional indigenous cultures.

On the other hand, however, we could also argue that all peoples are indigenous anyway in the sense that we can not help but remain in a deep and often unconscious correspondence with the worlds in which we dwell. I would suggest that it is a feature of the human condition to be in relationship with our everyday world and that at times we are conscious of this relationship, and seek to give expression to it, and at other times we are not.

What distinguishes, I think, a *formal* indigenous culture is the *conscious* articulation of this relationship with the *natural world*. In this way whilst a degree of indigenuity might be found in all cultures, it is the *conscious articulation of the relationship with the natural world* that distinguishes a formal indigenous culture. Here is a small example taken from my own Māori background. When one finds the need to identify oneself (it is bad etiquette for one to speak about oneself), there are many ways to do this, including the use of a tribal *pepeha* (expression) which in mentioning a mountain, a river and an ancestor contiguously identifies the individual. Here is the well-known Ngāti Tūwharetoa example:

Ko Tongariro te maunga  
Ko Taupō te moana  
Ko Te Heuheu te tangata  
Tongariro is the mountain  
Taupō is the waterway  
Te Heuheu is the man

### **Toward a new/old theory of Indigenuity**

Let me summarise the ideas to this point.

*It is a feature of the human condition to be in a natural correspondence with the environments in which we dwell. We could call this a 'natural indigenuity'.*

It seems to me that we humans are naturally indigenous to the environments and localities in which we dwell. We spontaneously and organically respond to our environments and become an echo or an image of them.

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often exists within the populations to which these kinds of identity conceptions are applied. See discussion below.

*The environments in which we dwell are complex*

The environments in which we dwell today are a complex combination of natural world environments, built and urban environments, linguistic, cultural, social, economic and so on. Hence, our relationships with our environments are complex and are made more so through the degree of change that takes place in our world today.

*There are varying degrees of 'articulation' of environment in human consciousness, society and culture*

Because humans are in a natural correspondence with the environments in which we dwell, environment affects human consciousness and culture in conscious and unconscious ways. Further, the degree of conscious 'articulation' is variable from society to society, culture to culture, individual to individual.

*A 'Formal Indigenous Culture' is deliberate and conscious to the expression of natural environments into human society and culture.*

Whilst we can say it is part of the human condition to be in a natural correspondence with the environments in which we dwell (and these environments are complex) and that there are varying degrees of unconscious and conscious 'articulations' of this correspondence, a formal indigenous culture is one that is particular and deliberate in this articulation of the *natural world* in its activities of a culture. This deliberate articulation is often based upon a veneration of the natural world.

Here then are four introductory ideas contributory to a new/old theory of indigenous and indigenuity. Whilst statements about the relationship between indigenous cultures and the environment have been made on many occasions and in many settings, often these statements have again been motivated and conceived within a milieu of decolonisation. The worse excesses of these kinds of statements have been ideological hinting at the superiority of 'indigenous' cultures because of the veneration of the natural world that is a feature of 'indigenous' cultures in history.

Others have argued that 'indigenous' cultures were or might have been just as exploitative of the natural world and its resources if they were 'bright' or 'intelligent' enough to have discovered superior technologies and overcame their

primitive animism. Some, they assert, exploited the natural world anyway making a mockery of their spiritual-environmental testimonies! I hope that the reader will sense my desire to get outside of this ideological one-upmanship and find some kind of common humanistic ground.

### **Indigenous of the Future not of the Past**

The preceding passages have briefly sketched out a view of indigeneity that arises from an aspect of the human condition. In presenting this view - and I stress these ideas are in embryonic form - some might argue that my interest is to reconstruct some kind of historical indigenous worldview. Further, that the motivation in presenting this view is, again, a desire to secure a degree of power for colonised indigenous communities, like Māori in New Zealand. This accusation might be levelled at me as a long time researcher of traditional Māori knowledge or *mātauranga Māori*. In response, I would like to offer comments in two areas, both concerned with envisaging an indigeneity of the future rather than reconstructing an indigeneity of the past.

The first comment relates to a desire to conduct this discussion, if possible, outside of our current orthodoxies relating to identity. I am not interested in defending one population gathered under the banner of one identity against another community likewise situated. Furthermore, I am not interested in deciding who is indigenous and who is not by setting up an orthodoxy upon which some might rise and others might fall. Edward Said writes:

For those of us who by force of circumstance actually live the pluri-cultural life (Said's is Islam and the West)... it is incumbent upon us to complicate and/or dismantle the reductive formulae and abstract but potent kind of thought that leads the mind away from concrete human history and experience and into the realms of ideological fiction, metaphysical confrontation, and collective passion.<sup>3</sup>

This search for a new indigeneity is not about defending 'indigenous peoples' but it does include a desire to engage the world of our actual experience utilising certain aspects of the traditional knowledge of those 'indigenous

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<sup>3</sup> *Orientalism*, The 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, by Edward Said, p. xxiii. Vintage Books, 2003.

peoples'. It includes the exploration of the creative potential of 'indigenous peoples and knowledge' as a contribution to humankind everywhere as well as an investigation of humankind's relationship with the natural environment wherever humans maybe found.

My thought is that 'indigenous' used as a text of resistance may well be such a 'reductive formulae' and as such, the sense of constraint and inflexibility that surrounds the term used in this way can lead the mind away to the ideology presently mentioned. I think there is a need to deconstruct our assumptions about identity to discover if they are indeed 'reductive formulae'. Said's examples are those large conceptions of identity, such as 'The West' or 'Islam', which are used everywhere often with little critical assessment. These identity conceptions are reductive in the sense that they fail to represent the diversity - of experience, thought and values - that exists within populations to which these grand schemes are commonly applied. They are also difficult in the way they suggest boundaries - a boundary must exist - but in not offering us any thoughts about why the boundaries should exist and where they can be found or described.

Writing in *Orientalism*, Said discusses the complex and energetic ways Europe has constructed its view of the Orient in the concept entitled 'orientalism'. Among many things, Said shows how European scholars working in orientalism assisted and were complicit in European expansion and colonisation of such places as the Middle East. These scholars thus became associated with colonial power. Along the way, Said warns against 'terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like "America", "the West", or "Islam" and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse."<sup>4</sup> I mention this point for a milder but no less effective orthodoxy exists in New Zealand - and I suggest in many countries - in relation to its 'indigenous' population called 'Māori'. That is to say, 'Māori' can, at times, be a 'reductive formulae', the difference here is that we Māori use it about ourselves and for certain clear and unclear purposes. The boundary setting and reduction is evidenced either by non-Māori who dismiss anything arising from the Māori world as of little relevance to them, or by some Māori who narrowly assert

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. xxviii.

that anything that is 'Māori' is for Māori alone. There are deeper reasons as well, which I can not go into here.

I hope that we can conduct a discussion about indiginity outside of such urgencies and eccentricities not devaluing for an instant the difficult realities that some indigenous peoples do face as they emerge from a history of colonisation. Such a discussion can offer a creative outlet for indigenous peoples and as a way of finding a place in our world.

My second comment concerns the nature of the philosophy itself. There are very substantial reasons as to why some kind of return to an indiginity of the past is both unadvisable and impossible. Richard Tarnas is an American philosopher who has written on the history of philosophy and knowledge. His key work is *The Passion of the Western Mind* which was published in 1991. After delivering a virtuoso rendition of the history of western philosophy and thought, Tarnas begins to summarise some key ideas of what he suggests is a paradigm to come. He discusses a 'participatory epistemology' in which the human mind achieves a 'radical kinship with the cosmos'. Tarnas is searching for a new paradigm which seeks to overcome critical anxieties and tensions in post-modern western life. One such difficulty is the relationship between the human mind and the natural world and his writing edges toward a view which:

...reflects the human mind's pivotal role as vehicle of the universe's unfolding meaning.<sup>5</sup>

He continues with the following statement which feels deeply 'indigenous' in atmosphere and style:

The human spirit does not merely prescribe nature's phenomenal order; rather, the spirit of nature brings its own order through the human mind when that mind is employing its full complement of faculties - intellectual, volitional, emotional, sensory, imaginative, aesthetic, epiphanic. In such knowledge, the human mind "lives into" the creative activity of nature. Then the world speaks its meaning through human consciousness. Then human language itself can be

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<sup>5</sup> *The Passion of the Western Mind*, by Richard Tarnas, p. 437. Ballantine Books, New York, 1991.

recognized as rooted in deeper reality, as reflecting the universe's unfolding meaning. Through human intellect, in all its personal individuality, contingency, and struggle, the world's evolving thought-content achieves conscious articulation.<sup>6</sup>

Tarnas argues passionately (excuse the pun) that there is another way of thinking and experiencing that we have yet to discover and whose broad features are presented here. This does not suggest a reversal or a regression but rather a moving forward to a new way. (At another point he warns us against such a regression.) These comments are presented as another fragment contributory to our discussion concerning an indigenous paradigm to come.

Additionally, there are very substantial reasons as to why a 'regression' is both unadvisable and impossible. These arise from our need to engage the world of our actual experience. This is a critical matter facing mātauranga Māori in that our knowledge today of traditional Māori knowledge is fragmentary and concerns a world in history. For example, the nature of the world reflected and imaged in *mōteatea* (chanted song poetry) represents, on the whole, the forested New Zealand landscape prior to the arrival of pastoral farming. Hence, a 'way' forward for mātauranga Māori is to discover within it certain ideas, perspectives and ideas that assist us in our contemporary experience.

### **Turning to Life**

Let me conclude by saying that another way of looking at indigenuity - perhaps the most important way - is to consider the interior journey one, as a maturing individual, must take within oneself to find some kind of ground or centre within. I see this as an indigenous journey, the finding of one's authentic centre. I am not sure if the Nobel prize winning Chinese author, Gao Xingjian, had similar thoughts in mind, however, I find the following words from *Soul Mountain* helpful:

I was taught that life was the source of literature, that literature had to be faithful to life, faithful to real life. My mistake was that I had alienated myself from life and ended up turning my back on real life. Life is not the same as manifestations of life. Real life, or in other words the basic substance of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 435

life, should be the former not the latter. I had gone against real life because I was stringing together life's manifestations, so of course I wasn't able to accurately portray life and in the end only succeeded in distorting reality.<sup>7</sup>

Another way of saying this is by invoking Rev. Māori Marsden's thoughts on 'authentic being' arising from some kind of 'centre':

A truly educated person is not one who knows a bit about everything, or everything about something, but one who is truly in touch with his centre. He will be in no doubt about his convictions, about his view on the meaning and purpose of life, and his own life will show a sureness of touch that stems from inner clarity. This is true wisdom.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> From *Soul Mountain*, p. 12, by Gao Xingjian. Flamingo 2001.

<sup>8</sup> From *The Woven Universe: Selected Writings of Rev. Māori Marsden*, edited by Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal. Estate of Rev. Māori Marsden 2003.