

New Expressions of Indigeneity through Whare Tapere¹

Te Ahukaramū
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For some decades now, the reorganisation and ‘development’ of indigenous peoples throughout the world has been taking place. The rights of indigenous peoples are widely asserted both within the nations in which indigenous peoples can be found as well as in international bodies such as the United Nations. ‘Indigenous development’ (an imperfect term) is a globally significant phenomenon involving millions of people and communities. It is a hugely diverse activity which seeks to address the needs of those communities as well as their opportunities. As indigenous communities are often the poor of the countries in which they live, indigenous development is inextricably linked to the alleviation of poverty, the overcoming of oppression and the general desire to secure social justice for those communities. Much has been achieved and much remains to be done.

A critical principle of indigenous development, at least in the New Zealand situation, is the need for this to be led by indigenous peoples ourselves. Years of government driven policy has led to a vast wastage of resources. No longer are Māori happy to be mere observers and passive recipients of policy interventions designed by those who do not belong to those communities. Māori people seek *mana motuhake*, or independence and *tino rangatiratanga*, the ability for us to enact certain indigenous principles in the management of our affairs not just for our benefit but in the management of New Zealand overall.

In 2010, our research centre at the University of Auckland, *Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga*³, described four ‘horizons’ of indigenous development. The first

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horizon relates to addressing needs and problems facing Māori communities. The second horizon concerns the desire to seize upon and yield opportunities and possibilities arising in Māori communities. The third concerns building relationships and collaborations with other indigenous communities and indigenous scholars throughout the world.

The fourth and most experimental horizon is the notion of the new 'indigeneity' constructed and expressed within the conscious and informed experience of 21st century life. This new indigeneity, to be led by indigenous peoples, seeks to uplift *the* foundational principle of all formal indigenous cultures and worldviews and experiment with its application in the world today. This principle concerns the unification of humankind with the earth, with the cosmos, the desire to sustain a kinship based, creative and mutually enhancing relationships with natural world environments. This is the key idea found in all indigenous cultures.

In this paper, I will discuss my personal research and creative work relating to the *whare tapere*, traditional Māori tribal 'houses' of storytelling, dance, music, games and other entertainments. I will show how the establishment of the modern version of the whare tapere represents a movement across all four horizons of indigenous development as we have described them. The paper will conclude on a number of points concerning how this notion of indigeneity is being explored within certain approaches to performance and the design of performance spaces.

Briefly, the modern whare tapere began by addressing certain cultural needs – the need to revitalize the Māori language, for example, and to preserve cultural knowledge particularly as this relates to performing arts. As the recovery of this fragmentary traditional knowledge proceeded, new opportunities too began to arise - such as the creation of new perfumes, clothing, music, dance, accoutrements for performance and much more. These opportunities are based upon fragments of knowledge recovered through research into the historical

³ See www.maramatanga.ac.nz

whare tapere. Relationships with other indigenous peoples began to emerge too via a recognition of the whare tapere as a Polynesian institution where versions of our mythologies, for example, can be found. Finally, the modern whare tapere has emerged also as a process of 'indigenising' – of, firstly, reindigenising our own people back into the places, geographies and sites of significance to our histories, identities and cultures. Secondly, this process has also suggested to us that a kinship based connection and relationship with natural world environments is something that might be meaningful and significant to all peoples. This is very experimental and our work is by no means complete. Much remains to be done.

Whare Tapere

Whare Tapere were pre-European Māori village 'houses' and events of entertainment and amusements of various kinds. They included storytelling, songs and singing, dance and dancing, musical instruments, puppets and many games. Here is an extract from the founding myth of the whare tapere, the story of Tinirau and Kae:

...ka hui tera iwi ki te matakitaki, ka ahiahi ka ka te ahi ki te whare o Kae, ka hui te tangata ki roto, ka ki, ko tetehi taha i te manuhiri, ko to Kae moenga kei te take o te poutokomanawa, ka whakakitea nga mahi a Raukauri i reira, te haka, te waiata, te putorino, te koauau, te tokere, te ti ringaringa, te ti rakau, te pākuru, te papaki, te porotiti⁴

... the people gathered to observe (the performances). Evening came and a fire was lit in Kae's house. Everyone gathered. At one side the visitors sat and Kae took his customary position at the base of the central post of the house. Then Raukauri and her troupe performed – they danced, sang songs, played the long and short flutes, castanets, they performed hand games, stick games, played a wooden instrument which sat in the mouth, clapping and the whizzer...

⁴ From a 1852 manuscript of stories and traditions dictated by Te Rangihaeata of Ngāti Toarangatira to Mātene Te Whiwhi of Ngāti Toarangatira and Ngāti Raukawa. See Te Rangihaeata 1852, Auckland Library, Grey Māori Manuscripts, GNZMMSS 46

In some instances, buildings were erected for these purposes, however, on most occasions, where tapere activities took place in existing buildings or at any venue where people could comfortably gather to enjoy themselves. This could be at the base of a tree, around a bonfire or upon clear ground.

The where tapere appears regularly in tribal histories and traditions, as they were often the venue where important tribal founders met and fell in love. Perhaps the most famous love story of the Māori world – the story of Hinemoa and Tūtānekai – is a story in which where tapere appear. Later, when missionaries, British emissaries and whalers began to arrive in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the 18th and 19th century, their diaries were often filled with descriptions of the various festive activities of the locals. Later, they began to publish these descriptions as in this 1807 example by a man called John Savage:

Their songs to the rising and setting sun, are peculiarly well adapted to express their feelings. On the rising of the sun the air is cheerful, the arms are spread out as a token of welcome, and the whole action denotes a great degree of unmixed joy; while on the contrary, his setting is regretted in tones of a most mournful nature; the head is bowed down in a melancholy manner, and every other action denotes their sorrow for his departure. The song to the moon is of a grave and melancholy nature, apparently expressive of awe and adoration...⁵

Following the colonisation of New Zealand in the nineteenth century, however, where tapere were abandoned and fell into disuse. This followed the movement away from traditional pā villages and into the newly established townships. The movement away from traditional villages represented both a physical displacement and, most importantly, a movement away from the pre-European, pre-Christian worldview. The institutions – expressions of the traditional worldview – were abandoned and new arrangements took their place. Of course,

⁵ Savage, John: *Some Account of New Zealand*, Murray and Constable, London 1807, pp. 80-83

the ability of the tribes of the 19th and early 20th centuries to establish and sustain new institutions was severely curtailed by colonization.

A creative activity that did emerge in the late 19th century was the Māori concert party. Formed within the experience of poverty, following the widespread alienation of tribes from their lands through conflicts and confiscations, the Māori concert party was an important way of fostering tribal identity and cohesion and as a way to gather resources for tribal building projects. By the end of the 19th century, European, particularly British influences upon Māori culture was substantial so the Māori concert party of the time included introduced instruments, such as the trumpet, banjo and violin, and traditional song chanting was displaced by introduced melodies.

In the period from approximately 1930 to 1960, these influences continued and the use by Māori composers of borrowed melodies for Māori language songs became very popular. This remains the case today. The Māori concert party is the precursor of the modern day *kapa haka*. Whilst some aspects of the *kapa haka* can be sourced in the pre-European *whare tapere* – such as the *kapa* itself, performing standing in rows – overall the modern *kapa haka* is a product of 20th century experience, knowledge and sensibilities (as all creativity is a product of its time).

It was in approximately 1980 that there began a deeper investigation into traditional Māori performing arts. It was at this time that new work began on the rediscovery of *taonga pūoro*, our traditional Māori musical instruments. These had fallen greatly into disuse and by the 1970s, there was only a handful people alive who still played or had some knowledge of these instruments. Since 1980 there has been a tremendous revival in the making and performing of these instruments and they represent a greatly distinctive feature of New Zealand music making today.

The rediscovery of *taonga pūoro* anticipates, of course, the rediscovery of the entire institution of performing arts called the *whare tapere*. In 1994, I

commenced my doctoral research on the whare tapere which, like taonga pūoro, fell into disuse. A large amount of fragmentary information and knowledge, however, still remains and this is being utilized in contemporary creative practice. In 1998, I completed my doctoral study and in 2004, I founded Ōrotokare: Art, Story, Motion Trust as a vehicle to advance the ideas in my doctoral study and to generally establish the modern whare tapere. We achieved this in 2010 and have now convened two whare tapere. (A third whare tapere will take place this summer.)

In establishing the modern whare tapere, we observe a number of ideas and principles:

- No whare tapere tradition actually exists, hence, our work is largely a work of creation rather than sustaining an existing tradition
- Our creativity, however, is guided as much as possible by what we can discover about the whare tapere in history
- The existing fragments of knowledge about the whare tapere in history retain 'creative potential' – they are able to be used in contemporary creative practice
- Our goal is not merely to create contributions to existing theatre and performing arts forms but to create a movement, an institution a particular philosophy and practice of performance based upon what we can find in these historical fragments
- Ultimately, the whare tapere is not merely a venue for performing arts or theatre but a vehicle to give expression to certain key ideas about life, to give expression to a worldview (as all institutions are).

These are some of the key ideas that we have been mindful of during the development of the modern whare tapere.

Indigeneity and the Whare Tapere

During the course of our researches, we have continually returned to the theme of indigeneity. For example, when I was convenor of a masterate programme in

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traditional Māori knowledge at our tribal college, I arrived at the point of asking, “finally, what really beats at the heart of our traditional knowledge? What is it fundamentally really all about?” There is a long answer to this question, however, in summary, our traditional knowledge and traditional institutions were constructed upon the idea that humankind is born from the earth, that we live within a set of kinship relationships with all life, particularly with the earth and her bounty. We dwell within ‘the woven universe’, within the web of existence and no part of the whole is comprehensively autonomous. The purpose of life is to live within this intricate web of relationships and to become a conduit for the energies of life, to enable these energies to rise and fall within us. These briefly are the key ideas within indigenous worldviews. It was natural for these ideas to be in our thinking during the establishment and construction of our whare tapere.

Whakaahua

A second motivation to explore indigeneity within the whare tapere arose when we explored the meaning of some key literary traditions relating to performance. One of the fragments that we have discovered is the following:

Ko Hineruhi koe, nāna i tū te ata hāpara

You are Hineruhi, the one who brings about the dawn

When a woman rises to perform in the whare tapere and her performance has reached a certain quality, this expression is used – you are Hineruhi, the one who brings the dawn. Hineruhi is a deity found at dawn. Her dance is the sparkle of light that rises from the dew in the morning. When light is reflected from the dew, this is what is said to be the dance of Hineruhi. This sparkle of light can also be seen emanating from the eyes of a beautiful woman. Hence, we have coined the expression, “Hineruhi eyes”.

The key idea is that the performer *is* Hineruhi. She does not merely represent Hineruhi. It is not that she is reminiscent of Hineruhi but rather she is Hineruhi herself come to form in the dancer. The woman has been transformed into this

deity. And because this deity is an element from the natural world (as indigenous deities tend to be), this represents an indigenizing process, the unification of the human person with the natural world.

Hineruhi's companion is the masculine Tānerore, another deity from the natural world who also relates to the behavior of light. The dance of Tānerore is the shimmering, rising air on a very hot day. His dance rises up through the body and a small remnant of this dance can still be seen in contemporary kapa haka, the quivering of the hands. Again the idea here is that the male dancer has become this deity rather than merely 'dancing' the dance of Tānerore.

We have uplifted the term 'whakaahua' meaning 'to come to be, to come to form' for the process by which the performer fulfills the intent of these expressions – that of transforming themselves into an indigenous deity of this kind through performance.

Te Ao Mārama

A third area which has lead us to think about the 'indigenous' nature of our activities relates to the creation of performance spaces. In 2009, we had decided to locate our whare tapere upon my family's tribal lands. There were numerous reasons for this including the availability of land for our project and that the land itself as the centre of my tribal community. When time came to look more precisely at the venue for performance we arrived at the site chosen because of its acoustic possibilities. In designing the performance area, we were guided by the idea "let the land decide what the performance space will be".

What transpired was an island revealed in the earth, what we call a *motu*. It emerged by digging our way in a certain direction and folding back the earth according to contours that were already present in the land. We dug again in the other direction and in time the motu emerged. To that point, we really did not have any preconceived idea about what the performance space should look like, however, once we had alighted upon the idea of an island in the earth, we knew this was the right idea.

The motu recalls the island in the story of Tinirau and Kae, the founding myth of the whare tapere tradition. This story takes place on islands and tells of the enmity between warring islanders. It also reminds me that the whare tapere is a Polynesian *island* institution. Finally, it reminds me that Aotearoa-New Zealand itself is a series of large Pacific Islands.

Another key aspect of this motu stage is the way it frames yet not frames the performance. Unlike the proscenium arch of European theatre, and its 'framing' of life, the motu performance area reinforces the sky as the roof of the 'theatre', the earth as its floor. In this way, life itself is its own theatre. And yet the motu does achieve some demarcation of space. The word itself expresses this meaning as motu means 'broken away'. So whilst the motu performance area is of the world, and seeks to underline this, it nonetheless does create its own 'space'

The New Indigeneity

As we see in both these examples of the transformation of the dancer and the revelation of performance spaces, we have been prompted to think about indigenous principles as the basis of our activities. It has challenged us to think how we can bring forth these ideas found in our traditional knowledge into our contemporary experience. The new indigeneity is constructed upon the founding principle of formal indigenous worldviews – that of a kinship based, creative participation and relationship with natural world environments. Indigenous worldviews seek unification between the human person and the earth based upon the view that we are children of the earth. We dwell within the web of life and are part of the whole.

The challenge of the new indigeneity is to explore how these ideas might be understood, expressed and experienced in the context of the 21st century. The new indigeneity must not be constructed as an ideology with little or no sensitivity of the features of contemporary experience. Rather it must throw itself into the fray of life and feel itself transformed and vivified positively yet

with fidelity and commitment to these founding principles. Understanding indigeneity within the post-modern 21st century world is the challenge.

The opportunity of the new indigeneity relates to the possibility of defining and orientating indigeneity 'outside' or perhaps 'above' the politics of ethnicity and culture. Rather than constructing indigeneity as 'resistance', as 'speaking back' to colonization (as legitimate and understandable as this is), the new movement seeks to ground indigeneity not in decolonization but rather in this critical and founding principle of formal indigenous worldviews and cultures - unification with the earth.

Once grounded in this principle, and its attendant implications, we now see the relevance and value of this idea to all people not just indigenous peoples. For us indigenous peoples it challenges us to recentre, to reground, to 'reindigenise' our culture and action back into our lands, places and sites of significance, to reindigenise ourselves. For so-called non-indigenous peoples, it serves to reawaken, challenge and consider the problematic relationship all humankind now has with natural world environments and the planet as a whole. We can agree that there is a major problem in this relationship and indigeneity, at least a new kind of indigeneity, may represent a potential response to this problem. We are very much at the beginning of this kind of thinking that will require leadership and a generosity of spirit from all, indigenous peoples included, to be brought about.

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