

The Impact of New Media on Māori Culture and Belief Systems

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the transitional process of Maori communication systems from the traditional oral and iconic to the written processes of the colonising peoples. The combination of the knowledge economy (within the broad scope of “New Media”) and the increasing desire for establishment of cultural identity, have many implications, including the notions of networking, guardianship and self-determination.

This paper explores the overall impact of new media on Māori culture and belief systems and concludes that Māori culture has strong cultural bases that provide a framework for operating efficiently and successfully within the area of “New Media”. The transition to first, a written, then a technological system for transference of knowledge has not been without problems, but Māori are now in a transitional state and ready to participate in the global “knowledge economy”, to utilise this new media in a culturally safe and supportive way.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with a number of areas that are collectively identified as pertaining to Māori. However, it is important to qualify this term in the context of the ensuing discussion. The notion of Māori in this paper is not a universal one, but rather, depends on the unique cultural relationship the author experiences as a Māori. As part of the theme of cross-cultural interaction which is a central strand in this paper, the author feels it is culturally appropriate to provide whakapapa or genealogical details at this juncture.

Ko Ruth Lemon toku ingoa.

I te taha o toku papa, no Mangamuka ahau, ko Nga Puhi te iwi, ko Kohatutaka te hapu, ko Mataatua te waka, ko Tapapa te awa, ko Taniwha te maunga. Ko au te uri. I am Ruth Lemon. On my father's side, I am from Mangamuka in Northland. I relate to the river and mountain in the area as well as the genealogical ties that link me to family, extended family and the wider extended family. On my mothers' side, I am Celtic, belonging to the Hearn clan, and my mother's paternal side trace back to Hearn the hunter, the god of the forest.

The dichotomy between the concepts of knowledge and awareness, then needs to be taken into account - All the knowledge I possess everyone can acquire, but my heart is all my own (Goethe, quoted in Bartleby, 2001).

## 1. MÄORI PARTICIPATION IN “NEW MEDIA” – A SUMMARY

There is an increasing utilisation by Mäori of “New Media”, whether it is for the communication and expression of ideas, for educational purposes, for the transmission of knowledge, or for the purpose of networking. This paper will explore what traditional conceptualisations of the term “knowledge” embodied, looking briefly at the distinction between general knowledge and that which was considered sacred. It will then examine the gradual movement to the written modes of knowledge transference introduced by the Tauwiwi, or English and European settlers. Finally, it will look at what can be considered to be the negative and positive impacts that these shifts in the communication of knowledge have had in the present transitional period.

## 2. TRADITIONAL MÄORI CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

The story or account of Tane serves as a useful example of the manner in which traditional Mäori communities both contextualised and transferred knowledge. Before looking at the story of Tāne, it is important to understand that the stories were not for entertainment purposes, but rather, were deliberate constructs that enabled the taura or teacher to summarise in an easily understandable form a shared view of the world. In particular, many of these stories focussed on what reality was perceived to be, and the defined relationships between the Creator, the universe and humans. Legends epitomised the culture’s worldview, conceptualisations of what was regarded as actual, probable, possible or impossible (Marsden and Henare, 1992: 3).

In this particular story, Tāne, the god of the forest, separated his parents, Ranginui the Sky father and Papatuanuku, the Earth mother, to bring his brothers and sisters into the world of light. He then ascended the heavens by climbing the sacred vine. He traveled to the penultimate heaven where Rehua, the god of purification, sanctified Tāne to be able to ascend to the twelfth heaven, which was home to Io, the ultimate God. There, he obtained the three baskets, or pūtea wānanga, which contain all knowledge, secular, ritual and occult. He also received two stones. The first was a white stone named Hukatai, or Seafoam, representative of the pursuit of knowledge. The second was named Rehutai or Seaspray, representative of the integration of knowledge into self. From there, he descended to the seventh heaven, or the heaven of Great Learning, Whare Wānanga, where he was again purified after being in the intense presence of Io, the ultimate god. Tāne then took the baskets and the stones and placed them in Wharekura, a place of great learning, where they were safe-guarded against those who should not rightfully gain access to the knowledge.

This story reflects many of the traditional belief systems regarding knowledge and the sacred nature of learning. The first area of consideration, in the context of this paper, is the relationship of this legend to the notions of knowledge and wisdom.

Knowledge can be defined as ‘knowing about things; all a person knows; all that is known, a body of information’. Wisdom can be defined as ‘being wise, soundness of judgment’ while the definition of wise is as follows ‘showing soundness of judgment; having knowledge.’ Although knowledge and wisdom are related, they are different in nature. Marsden and Henare (1992: 7) refer to knowledge as a ‘thing of the head, an accumulation of facts’, whereas, wisdom ‘is a thing of the heart. It has its own thought processes. It is there that knowledge is integrated for this is the centre of one’s being.’ This is an important distinction for many Māori.

In the story of Tāne, the two stones are representative of matauranga Māori, or Māori learning. If you picture a canoe out at sea, the sea foam lifted by the paddles is indicative of the accumulation of facts, picked up along the way. This is Hukatai, the white stone, or the process of entering on a search for knowledge. However, Rehutai, or Seaspray describes the creation of a rainbow effect when the sun’s rays pierce the foam. This is seen as the integration of knowledge, or the symbolic process of illumination within which a set of unorganised facts synthesise into a united whole (Marsden and Henare, 1992: 4). This dualistic approach to knowledge, which integrates knowledge acquisition with elements of perception, is not only descriptive, but is also representative of a specific process and attitude towards knowledge.

The baskets or kete referred to in the legend each covered a distinct domain of learning. Te Kete Tüäuri, translates directly as ‘beyond in a world of darkness’. This basket contains prayers and ritual knowledge for the bettering of mankind. The next, Te Kete Tüätea, translates as ‘beyond space and time’ and contains occult knowledge, or that which could be used for evil. Finally, Te Kete Aronui, translates as ‘that before us’, or the natural world, and contains all secular knowledge, which can be used for good or evil, depending on the individual’s motives. The very fact that Tāne had to safeguard these treasures is suggestive of the deep-seated belief that knowledge is a very sacred thing, not to be taken lightly, or misused, but instead treasured and nurtured.

Māori knowledge or the learning process was perceived as difficult and dangerous. It was a lifelong process, where graduates of the whare wānanga would often continue to attend and reinforce their learning, or attempt to come to a deeper understanding for years after successfully becoming taura or teachers. This knowledge was guarded by sacred restrictions, but also held blessings for those who approached the learning sincerely and with dedication. Ka whakairohia ki te whare o te mahara. One could not study for a year and then stand and claim expertise, but learning took place by first watching and listening, then listening again until the learning was carved into the house of the mind (Marsden and Henare, 1992; Salmond, 1980: 248).

The meaning of wānanga, is ‘to discuss, to debate, to impart knowledge’. It was felt by Māori that if it was tika, or right, for an individual to gain knowledge, then they would possess the necessary skills to retain the knowledge whether it be in the form of haka, waiata or song, whakapapa or genealogy or whaikorero or speechmaking. So wānanga by itself relates solely to the oral transmission of knowledge. But, without Te Whe, or sound, that knowledge could not become anything more (Marsden and Henare, 1992: 5). Te Whe, or the seed word would need to be clothed by Kahu (or the fabric that makes up the natural world) and articulated, so that thought could be conceptualised or expressed in word. “Is it possible to think without words?” To the traditional Māori belief system, the answer to this question is, no.

When the settlers first introduced the written word to the Māori, there was a conflict of beliefs. This relates to the second theme of the paper: the gradual movement to written modes of knowledge transference, brought about by a growing European population in the country. Before, only masters could share knowledge with taura or students. Something that could be touched by the hand (paper) could represent through symbols everything that the master may have said or expressed. Could then, these symbols, be considered knowledge? European knowledge, or the concept of European methodologies of learning, perceived education as ‘open to all with the intelligence to understand’ (Salmond, 1980: 248). The bodies of knowledge were secular in nature. Generally the bodies of knowledge are seen as man-made, and were

thus, oft revisited for revision. The knowledge or unprocessed information sat in libraries where it was available for anyone who wanted to learn.

Māori quickly acknowledged the power of the written word and ‘sought to use the country’s education system to transmit understanding of the Maori language and culture’ (Salmond, 1980: 249). There were whakapapa books, or genealogies published, as well as, more recently, the publishing of traditional information within the Journal of the Polynesian Society.

There was therefore, an increase in the importance of media and of the educational system in the teaching of Māori language and more general traditional knowledge. With the Internet and new media comes a strong tool with which knowledge can be shared.

### 3. THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

The following section of this paper deals with the advent of the knowledge economy, and its relationship and impact on the traditional Māori patterns of knowledge acquisition that have just been discussed. The knowledge economy is said to have three main driving forces, these being: globalisation, information technology and shareholder value. According to the United Kingdom Department of Trade and Industry, 1998 ‘A knowledge-driven economy is one in which the generation and exploitation of knowledge play

the predominant part in the creation of wealth' (quoted in ITAG submission, 1999: 8).

Marshall McLuhan says that 'the more information there is to evaluate, the less one knows' (Bartleby, 2001). Before extolling the virtues of the knowledge economy and how Maori are utilising the field of New Media, it would be useful to emphasise some points outlined in an article for the Sydney Morning Herald, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2000, entitled How we work: wisdom wanting in the knowledge economy. This article discusses the paradoxical nature of the knowledge economy, said to be our only hope for the future. It looks at the elevated status of knowledge at a point in time when it is more easily accessible than ever before. People now suffer from "information overload" and "burnout". Even before getting to the computer there is an ocean of information. The newspaper contains more information than a typical person was exposed to during an entire lifetime 300 years ago.

There is reference to a warning from Montaigne about early signs of knowledge-mania in 16th-century France: 'The absurdity of our education: its end has not been to make us good and wise, but learned ... It has not taught us to seek virtue and to embrace wisdom ... We ought to find out not who understands most but who understands best.' One of the keys to successful utilisation of this new media is emphasising quality versus quantity.

The three frameworks – networking, guardianship and self-determination are useful tools with which the impact of New Media on Māori can be assessed.

#### a) Networking

Networking or whakawhanaungatanga is a traditional as well as a contemporary strength for Maori. The building of relationships through meetings and the strong word of mouth or know **how**, is an essential skill in the knowledge economy. An example of one of the projects the author is working on in Te Ara Poutama is relevant. The author is in the process of building an asynchronous Internet based Te Reo module. It will contain class readings and language comprehension exercises, an area for forum discussion and a collection of interactive Flash resources where students can both apply and practise their language skills. Last year, Pare Keiha, the Tumuaki or Dean, forwarded a copy of the Maori Culture e-zine<sup>2</sup>, which mentioned a pilot project in synchronous delivery of a Te Reo Maori course via the Internet. The group is based in Australia, so a quick visit to the Maori Culture website and an e-mail was sent to Catherine Karena. After some e-dialogue, the author participated in a couple of classes and Catherine Karena then visited New Zealand to discuss how her course can work in with the Te Ara Poutama project. By applying the principle of whakawhanaungatanga, each party will be enriching the other's work.

## b) Guardianship

Guardianship, or kaitiakitanga is a central philosophy, which is critically important to Māori. There is a concern that if information is freely shared, there can be misunderstandings or cultural misappropriation. This is true in any context however. Anything visible to others can be misused and the traditional sharing of knowledge held many safeguards and restrictions for this reason. The original notion of guardianship or kaitiakitanga contains an element of knowledge-withholding. Senior Ngati Porou figure of the twentieth century, Apirana Ngata, has said that the time is past for the hiding of Maori cultural treasures which run the risk of being lost... That knowledge should be stored in an open fashion, on bookshelves, for all who care to read and learn (quoted in Salmond, 1980: 251). The same seems to hold true for the Internet. While there are risks of misappropriation, there is also a greater flow with electronic communication. There was an incident in March 1996 where an article on Maori moko had an accompanying illustration of a preserved tattooed Maori head hanging on a meat hook. This association of the head, a very tapu or sacred object with a meathook, which is associated with food, was considered culturally offensive. After the author of the Moko article was informed he removed the picture (Smith, 1997).

Should there be this great concern over cultural safety? Each culture has a set of ideas about the right and wrong ways of doing things. I am Maori and, as such, do not want things that I hold dear to be denigrated. This is why I

advocate the sharing of information on the Internet. Usually, there is no intent to offend and any offense is as a result of a lack of understanding, which can be resolved through open communication.

### c) Self-Determination

Kaitiakitanga or guardianship is closely related to the third model which is that of arikitanga or self-determination. There is a strong emphasis on safeguarding or overseeing the accuracy and appropriateness of cultural transmission of knowledge. There is also the need to be responsible for sharing our information. The power to overcome misunderstandings and to have some control over the transmission of knowledge is based on accurate and appropriate information. A good example of a group that are attempting to exercise arikitanga is that of the Maori Internet Society, founded by Ross Himona and chaired by Karaitiana Taiuru<sup>3</sup>. They are in the process of putting a petition to IsocNZ (the Internet Society of NZ) with regards to adding a .maori.nz second level domain. Now, NZ is the only country in the world currently to recognise an indigenous people in a second level domain, however, the defined community of interest for the .iwi.nz domain is currently a traditional Maori tribe, mandated by the local Iwi Authority<sup>4</sup>. This definition is small enough to exclude the majority of Maori. It could be argued that there should be two options here – first, for IsocNZ to expand on the original definition, so that more Maori groups and organisations can utilise the domain. The second is that the petition is passed, when the Maori Internet Society

submits it to IsocNZ, which will mean that a minimum of 70% will have to be in favour.

This would mean that the domain could be "inclusive" – open to all websites owned by Maori and non-Maori sites which address Maori issues in good faith.

Cleve Barlow says that ‘Language is the vehicle by which thoughts, customs, desires, hopes, frustrations, history, mythology, prayers, dreams and knowledge are communicated from one person to another. It has been said that a people without their own language have no power or unique identity.’ In another initiative which reflects quite clearly, the issue of arikitanga for Maori is the group of linguists and programmers who are planning to start work on a Maori language version of Netscape.<sup>5</sup> It is recognised that in order to adhere to the principle of self-determination, it is necessary to strengthen the language and increase the number of avenues where it can be applied or used.

Also, under the framework of arikitanga lies the issue of access. ITAG or the Info Tech Advisory Group, in their September 1999 submission refer to the fact that there is a rapidly growing repository of Maori information available on the Internet, but that the majority accessing this information are academic non-Maori for research purposes. In America, there are two projects worthy of note.

First, the Star Schools Project was set up to help both rural and poor schools hire and retain qualified teachers in mathematics, the physical sciences, and foreign languages at the high school level. It funds multi-year projects that use ICT to bring outstanding teachers of those subjects to schools that had previously been unable to offer such courses to their students.

Second, the Universal Services Fund **was** set up as a result of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. It was created to make telecommunications services affordable for every school and library and would discount between 20% to 90% for telecommunications services, internal connections and Internet access. The exact amount depends on the number of disadvantaged students in a school or community.

Under the principle of arikitanga (and this principle, I believe holds true for all cultures disadvantaged economically) **the** disadvantaged should be aided by government at a policy level. Not handouts - focussing on the needs we have in NZ. There is a perceived skills shortage, but why increase skilled migrants and look at a quick-fix? Why not focus on the longer-term solution of providing opportunities and access for learning and knowledge / skills acquisition? Why not focus on education or transmission of knowledge to those already in Aotearoa as well as widening access to those who may otherwise give up on the pursuit of knowledge before really beginning?

#### 4) CONCLUSION

From Tāne to the whakapapa books, the Māori oral tradition was supplanted through the process of colonisation by the written word. A difficult process, filled with questions and challenges to existing cultural ideas about knowledge and its transference, Māori nonetheless managed to successfully engage with the power of the written word. The subsequent shift to the computer-mediated word (or knowledge transference via “New Media”), contains elements of both written and oral traditions, which, in turn, raises new questions culturally for Māori.

Maori people are in a state of wheiao, or a transitional state. We are in the process of advancing from one condition to another. The three frameworks – networking, guardianship and self-determination provide a strong cultural base from which Māori can operate in these “New Media”. There is a huge growth potential with the continued emphasis by Maori on networking or whakawhanaungatanga. With groups such as the Maori Internet Society, Te Wananga Ipurangi (or the pilot Te Reo project)<sup>6</sup>, Te Ara Poutama and other educational institutions pushing forward, I believe that the growth potential will be realised. We will move from te wheiao to Te Ao Marama, or the World of Light and Understanding.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.culture.co.nz/reo/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nzmis.org.nz>

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.isocnz.org.nz/dns/dns00policy.html> under the section headed Second Level Domains

<sup>5</sup> Detailed information about this initiative is available at the internet site for the New Zealand Maori Internet Society – <http://www.nzmis.org.nz>

<sup>6</sup> The pilot Te Reo course, headed by Catherine Karena and NetLearning. E-mail contact for further information is [catherine@mynetlearning.com.au](mailto:catherine@mynetlearning.com.au)

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