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Te Reo Maori: Maori language and the struggle to survive

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ABSTRACT
The deadly effects of colonial policies and practices have left us, as Maori, with a legacy of on-going struggle, to protect and to maintain control over our own cultural definition and authenticity; who we are, what we believe, what we value and what we practice. We are confronted daily with the contradiction of being strangers in our own land. It is a contradiction which many Maori live and deal with in the course of their every day activities and experiences. Our model of being bicultural and bilingual, espouses the notion of two cultures existing side by side (yet independently) in our heads. This perception ignores the reality that for the most part, one of these 'cultures' actually exists within the parameters of the other and that for Maori culture to maintain its independent 'sovereignty', a struggle which has political (as well as psychological) ramifications is involved. This paper examines some of the processes by which Maori have struggled to preserve their cultural authenticity and cultural sovereignty despite the powerful counteractive influence of colonisation.

The deadly effects of colonial policies and practices have left us, as Maori, with a legacy of on-going struggle, to protect and to maintain control over our own cultural definition and authenticity; who we are, what we believe, what we value and what we practice. We are confronted daily with the contradiction of being strangers in our own land. It is a contradiction which many Maori live and deal with in the course of their every day activities and experiences[1]. Our model of being bicultural and bilingual, espouses the notion of two cultures existing side by side (yet independently) in our heads. This perception ignores the reality that for the most part, one of these 'cultures' actually exists within the parameters of the other and that for Maori culture to maintain its independent 'sovereignty', a struggle which has political (as well as psychological) ramifications is involved. This paper examines some of the processes by which Maori have struggled to preserve their cultural authenticity and cultural sovereignty despite the powerful counteractive influence of colonisation.

While it has been argued that colonisation has had a devastating impact upon Maori culture, language and knowledge,[2] it is also already evident, that Maori people have resisted total assimilation. A crucial site where resistance has occurred is in the contestation over the boundaries which define Maori cultural distinctiveness. Colonial interests have defined Maori people through a series of labels and stereotypes, they have determined which beliefs and practices are worthy of preservation and have also determined what form that this 'preservation' will take: oral history is redefined as myth and legend, tohunga (specialists) as witchdoctors, incantations as song and dance. These 'artifacts' of cultural reality are torn from the cultural roots in which their meanings are based and are relocated within the separate realms of Pakeha society. Material objects are incarcerated in Museums, the language consigned to the field of linguistics, beliefs reduced to the ideological domain of the Church and myths are watered down to become merely childrens' stories.

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The potent combination of Pakeha defined 'scientific evidence' and historical amnesia validates the authenticity of selected cultural relics. Resistance to dominant definition has taken Maori people through a series of strategic positions in defense of their culture; survival and consolidation, reconstruction and contestation. This paper examines these resistance positions through an analysis of the politics related to Maori language revival and survival.

Colonisation: Language is a private activity

In its early phase the colonisation of New Zealand was concerned with the establishment of economic and political control. These controls were effected through the use of political, military, educational and ideological forces. Highly visible Maori political and economic structures were either systematically destroyed or forced outside the main-stream public arena. Many preferred cultural practices and rituals came to be carried out in the private domain of the Maori family. The definition of public practice became synonymous with dominant Pakeha structures and relations, conversely, private practice became associated with subordinate Maori structures and relations. It was within the 'private' domain that many Maori social activities, such as the use of Maori language, continued to be practised and sustained.

Through the processes of colonisation various 'domains' of Maori society were invaded, subverted or rendered 'harmless'. The domains were seen as impediments to the establishment of colonial power structures. Hence, tribal structures and hierarchies came to be perceived as dangerous. Notions which affected the possession and use of resources, for example, concepts concerning land, were also portrayed as being primitive and therefore harmful. The mythology which supported this perception and sanctioned the use of a political solution to the 'problem' was that these cultural beliefs and practices were not so much an impediment to Pakeha people, but were to be seen and believed as ultimately an impediment to the development of Maori people themselves[3].

The outcome of this assimilationist drive was that the boundaries which defined the culture and the identity of the people belonging to the culture, were driven - back into an increasingly confined area; the home, the Marae and some small communities (if they were Sufficiently rural and isolated). The more restricted, disconnected and private this domain became the more difficult it was to maintain a distinct and overt or public cultural identity. Once it became 'accepted' that - Maori people could practise their culture at home or at the Marae, away from the view of Pakeha people, it also became part of a wider belief that culture was a private activity and had nothing to do with what happened in schools, Government or local bodies, business or any other 'public' activity. What was acceptable in public came to be synonymous with what being a New Zealander meant, anything else we believed or did was only 'okay behind closed doors'. A consequence of such beliefs about 'culture' was that they not only entrapped the definition of Maori cultural identity but also prevented the development of any other cultural identity because they excluded almost all social or public activities.

For Maori people however, an unforeseen consequence of the segregation of cultural practice into an essentially private realm was that it created a breathing space within which some preferred practices could be nurtured and reconstructed. Once Maori communities had become more settled and permanent, either in rural areas or in the urban centres to which many had shifted, in the 1950's and 1960's many preferred cultural practices could be carried out in a more stable environment and be reconnected to the wider set of Maori beliefs and practices. Maori people were able to re-establish cultural markers and put themselves into a position whereby they could extend the boundaries which defined the culture. The development of urban Marae, of Maori church congregations and of other communities based on mutual needs and interests rather than strict kinship ties began to extend outward into areas where they became increasingly visible and therefore 'public'. Urban Maori communities for example began applying for Council approval to

build Marae, much to the horror of local people who could only envisage Marae as a place for drunken parties. It has taken one Council twenty years to change a by-law so that a Marae can be built.

Schooling: Language is a punishable act

When schooling began under the missionaries in 1816, Maori was the language of learning and teaching. Missionaries and other Pakeha here at the time learned to speak Maori as a matter of survival. However missionaries had a vested interest in mastering the language and committing it to a written form. Christian thoughts and behaviours needed to be worked into the fabric of daily life and the language provided a direct access to the way Maori people thought and behaved. It became the means by which conversion to Christianity could take place at both a spiritual and intellectual level. Early mission schools operated in an economic and political context in which Maori were the dominant group. Maori language was secure and was regarded, by missionaries at least, as being less of a barrier to Christian behaviour than some other elements of the culture. Therefore at this early stage in the colonisation process Maori language was considered to be of secondary importance as a target for change compared to other social mores and structures, for example, concern to change 'barbaric' practices such as skin 'mutilation' (tattooing), carving of pagan and sexually explicit images; the curbing of 'loose' morals.

The security of Maori language was directly weakened by the involvement of secular interests (in the form of a colonial administration) when subsidies were granted to mission schools on the provision that their instruction was in English. This overt relationship between schooling and colonisation was enhanced further by the changing political and economic context. Mass settlement by English speaking immigrants and the subsequent pressure for land which resulted, quickly changed the active role Maori language had as the language of commerce and trade, politics and debate, ritual and domestic life. Maori commercial activity which thrived up to the 1860's plummeted after the Land Wars and was marginalised away from the increasing business activity and interests which were being pursued by the settlers[4]. Whereas prior to the Land Wars Maori people and the way they did things helped sustain Pakeha settlement, that relationship changed as settlers took over economic and political control.

After the Land Wars, Government involvement in schooling, through subsidies to Church schools and through its own Native School system (which had been established in 1867) meant that education became the means for furthering the settler defined agenda for Maori people[5]. These agenda focussed on the complete assimilation of Maori social structures and of Maori belief systems, attitudes and behaviours. While English became the only language of instruction Maori language was marginalised to the private domain of Maori children's homes and in many cases a became punishable act within the public domain of Pakeha schooling. The generation of Maori who recall being punished for speaking Maori language at school are still alive; their testimonies suggest that the use of physical violence as a way of removing the 'debilitating' influence of Maori language was still practised as recently as the 1950's[6].

If all that was happening at the time was that children were being taught to read, write and speak English and were still able to speak Maori at home, Maori language may have continued as a strong language of communication. However to believe this is to be unaware of the powerful dynamics which were occurring outside school life and which were disrupting Maori social stability to the point of near destruction. Legislation and the establishment of the Native Land Court set about a wholesale forced restructuring of tribal land holdings so that land could be acquired more easily by settlers. A commercial system had effectively captured and entrapped Maori individuals who attended Court sittings for days on end, to the point where by the time they had gained individual title of the land they were forced to sell it to the storekeeper to pay their debts[7]. Health problems, in the form of epidemics further weakened the population[8]. For those people who had

moved close to Pakeha settlements to gain access to economic benefits there was little 'benefit' because they were kept on the margins of townships with limited access to sanitation and good housing. Those Maori who lived in isolated rural settlements had even less access to the 'benefits' which colonisation was purported to give.

The significance of these collective pressures on Maori language was that it in order for it to continue to flourish it needed to function in a context where it was used and valued. Such a context was determined by economic and political structures, given that it is power which gives life status and meaning to a language. Maori people no longer had that power after the 1860's and the group which did hold political and economic power locked-out Maori language from all of the structures which would have given it life. This lock-out was supported by the schooling system.

Resistance as survival and consolidation

Maori language did not however disappear. Its resistance to extinction was nurtured in the very places which kept Maori society on the margins of Pakeha New Zealand. Communities which were isolated were able to sustain the language as the main language of communication. Other Maori institutions such as the Marae sometimes provided the only context in which Maori was spoken. These isolated pockets of resistance provided sustenance which kept the language alive but in many ways it also imprisoned the language within more and more confined and defined contexts. This affected the way the language came to be perceived not just by Pakeha but by Maori as well. It became a language of ritual, nostalgia and song, used by few, and in restricted settings.

Sir Apirana Ngata is often quoted as a Maori leader who saw clearly the advantages that fluency in English gave Maori people. His advice to a young girl to grasp the benefits of the Pakeha world is frequently used as justification for denying that Maori language be used at all. What is overlooked is that he also accepted that the Maori aspects of life were also fundamental to well-being. Apirana Ngata was also the person who was most responsible for ensuring that Maori language became a subject to be taught at University level[9]. His collection of a written body of literature, Nga Moteatea, enabled Maori to be given the status of a language which could be taught -in an institution such as the University of New Zealand. It is doubtful whether leaders such as Ngata would have envisaged let alone desired a situation in which Maori language would no longer be spoken.

The disruptions of world wars and the subsequent migration of Maori to urban centres continued the process of destabilisation of social structures and of the language which linked those structures to people, their beliefs, values and attitudes. Unlike non-Maori families, Maori parents and children were forced to choose between their cultural beliefs and economic survival. Schooling gave access to the benefits of the Pakeha world but the price meant having to come to terms with a major contradiction; to become educated was to become Pakeha. This contradiction and a host of others were rationalised by some powerful mythologies which were used to support the concept of education as being something which was owned by the Pakeha and which had to be taken without question. Schools became places which enabled people to become 'equal', they were there for all children to avail themselves of without favour or prejudice. The early projection of school as the agency for nurturing and sustaining Pakeha beliefs and practices was forgotten as people came to see schools as a part of every day life, a life which had no cultural roots of its own, it was just there, a fact, fixed and above scrutiny. This was the accepted view when in the late 1960's a generation of Maori people who had been educated in this system came to the view that schooling had actively denied them access to their own culture and language and had not in fact delivered the promises which it had held out to Maori. Even when Maori parents had stopped speaking Maori to their children and had taken on the behaviour of Pakeha people there was still no success in sight.

By the 1960's the momentous impact of over a hundred years of contact and involvement with the Pakeha world had seen Maori people lurch from one crisis to another, from one policy initiative to another. The 1960's was a time of relative stability and peace for Maori, they were still raw and

reactive but settled and in a position to consolidate cultural practice and begin the process of reconnecting the people with the culture, of turning cultural artifacts back into meaningful 'taonga tuku iho' (gifts handed down from the ancestors) and of renegotiating and reclaiming the past. Maori language was emerging as an issue which was central to this process[10].

One of the few pieces of educational research which gave Maori people a focus on a problem of interest to them was the work carried out by Richard Benton[11]. Benton, using young Maori assistants, set out to find who still spoke Maori and where these people were located. His research confined the suspicion held by many Maori that the language was in danger of extinction. Although still spoken in isolated communities, the fact that most of the Maori population now lived in urban centres and was a young population suggested that unless something radical was done the language would soon die. This research came at a time when Maori people were becoming more vocal about a whole range of issues, including Maori language.

Resistance as reconstruction and contestation

The wave of political activism which absorbed the energy and intellects of students and young people around the world in the 1960' s and 1970' s was manifested in Maori politics by the emergence of a number of radical groups who were prepared not only to contest issues in the domain of Pakeha politics and debate, but also to contest the definitions of Maori culture within the Maori world[12]. A consequence of the consolidation of Maori resources in restricted settings was that it restricted access to many Maori people as well, particularly young people and women. This has led some writers to interpret such developments as being either a contemporary form of traditional hierarchical elitism or the power plays of an emerging Maori middle class[13]. However there have been many examples of occasions where the ability to Korero Maori (speak Maori) has cut across all other conventions such as tuakana - teina relationships (older - younger), and traditional hierarchies.

The next phase of resistance continued to involve Maori people in the dual tasks of reconstruction of the culture and contestation of its boundaries over a number of sites which lay within what was once considered to be Te Ao Pakeha (the Pakeha world). These sites included not just schooling but also health structures, community service agencies, literature, the media and all Government social and economic policies. What schooling did was draw together the energies of a united range of Maori interests: the Kaumatua and Pakeke who were fluent in the language, young parents who were articulate and who were living through the consequences of an education system which had failed them, Maori teachers who had become disillusioned with the system, and the mokopuna or grandchildren whose future was at stake.

In 1977 the Department of Education agreed to the establishment of a bilingual programme to be taught at Ruatoki, a community which still had Maori as its first language. It was considered for a time an isolated programme based on the special circumstances of its community. For most other communities who were faced with the task of influencing their local schools there was a rising sense of urgency and frustration at the time it was taking to change the policy of schools and teachers who were entrenched in the belief that schools were not about culture. By the early 1980's the Maori community had become focussed on the survival of the language in a way which united a wide range of Maori interest groups. Out of this unity of purpose came the idea of Te Kohanga Reo (the language nest). Te Kohanga Reo rapidly grew throughout the country as Maori parents saw its potential for validating the language within a structure which recognised and affirmed Maori beliefs and practices Te Kohanga Reo was a place for babies and pre-schoolers who with their parents and elders could hear the language being used constantly. It was believed that immersion in the language would produce fluent speakers of Maori. Te Kohanga Reo also became a symbol of what Maori people could do on their own without having to put themselves into the often demeaning position of trying to influence local schools, local prejudices and deep seated antagonism to Maori things.

The development of Te Kohanga Reo represents a significant phase in Maori education. Prior to this time various Government policies were aimed at either assimilating Maori cultural beliefs and practices or at preserving those elements of the culture defined as being more 'attractive' through a process of integration. These policies regarded Maori culture as being constantly problematic, the source of all or most of the educational difficulties Maori children were encountering at school. Te Kohanga Reo represented a major turning point for Maori perceptions and attitudes about education, for a number of reasons. Firstly, Te Kohanga Reo reasserted in a visible way the validity of Maori language, tikanga and akonga. Secondly it provided a focus for the proactive involvement of Maori whanau in the educational development of their children. It also provided an educational 'structure' at the local level in particular, which re-empowered the 'whanau' as a legitimate decision-making body, with both the power and the responsibility to make meaningful choices and decisions over what children should learn, how they should learn and who should be helping them to learn. It validated the 'traditional' role of the kaumatua or elders as active participants in the educational process, not just as repositories of tribal knowledge but as teachers who could model the language, and other forms of cultural practices and behaviour. Te Kohanga Reo was seen, especially by Maori as one of the few educational responses to Maori aspirations which was designed to prevent failure before it happened. Unlike most programmes initiated by state educational structures Te Kohanga Reo tapped into Maori aspirations, needs and existing structures with a programme that accepted Maori people for what they were, where they were at (in terms of their own culture), and that had a vision towards which they could head, with their Maoriness intact.

The establishment of Te Kohanga Reo brought about a predicted demand for Maori language to be used as the medium for instruction at both primary and secondary schools, This has brought various responses which have been generally considered to be too slow moving for the parents of Te Kohanga Reo children. A tension has emerged between what is perceived as Maori radicalism and the notion of schools as being culturally neutral. It is yet another contradiction that Maori parents who become active in education on their own terms are perceived as a threat because dominant group interests can not relinquish 'ownership' of what education and schooling is about. Previously, Taha Maori programmes had been touted as yet another initiative to make Maori people feel good about education. Bilingual schools meanwhile were being set up to meet the needs of a select group of communities who could prove that Maori language was still the main mode of communication. The Government had a set of responses prepared for Te Kohanga Reo children. The wider Maori community had been activated with a claim to the Waitangi Tribunal by the Kai Whakapumau Ki Te Reo Society. Debates over the Maori Language Bill and over issues related to television broadcasting and the Curriculum Review.

By 1987 the children who had been immersed in the Te Kohanga Reo for the full five years were ready for entry into the school system. School had already become the major site on which Maori language was being contested. This has been exposed also by the findings of the Waitangi Tribunal related to Te Reo Maori which were highly critical of the role played by the Education Department[14]. However, the emergence of a group of children who had been deliberately immersed in Maori language and practice brought into play a different set of arguments. The new arguments presented by Te Kohanga Reo parents were focussed on the following areas:

i. the right to continue learning in the language (as opposed to learning the language.)
ii. the right to attend a school which reflected in all its structures the concepts embodied in Te Kohanga Reo.
iii. the right to make decisions over what children should be learning, how they should learn and from whom they should learn.

It is these more fundamental issues related to the nature and purpose of education which the Kura Kaupapa Maori response is beginning to contest[15]. Kura Kaupapa Maori (schools based on a Maori philosophy) are an attempt to transmit a reconnected and authentic culture to its children. Total immersion in the language gives access to forms of knowledge. Making decisions about knowledge

gives greater control over curriculum. Constructing a school and classroom that reflects Maori values and social structures creates 'new' pedagogical relationships and management structures.

Maori language is still in a critical period in terms of its survival and maintenance. However, moving the struggle to survive away from the private domain of Te Ao Maori (the Maori world) and onto the sites of Te Ao Pakeha (the Pakeha world) represents a significant shift in the resistance positioning. Schools as sites for the contestation of Maori language survival have provided a specific focus around which a -range of Maori interests have assembled. The issue of survival of the language has provided a sense of urgency and led to a range of desperate responses. It is out of this context that Maori language resistance as a conscious and deliberate movement driven by a set of clearly articulated arguments and uncompromising actions, which have become manifest in the emergence of Kaupapa Maori schooling.

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