



Academic-Māori-Woman: The impossible may take a little longer

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Academic-Māori-Woman: The impossible may take a little longer

This year's Waitangi Day, 6 February 2021, saw the revival of a favourite zombie in New Zealand politics when Judith Collins, the leader of the Opposition, complained about not getting a chance to speak during the formalities, calling out Māori culture as sexist i.e. unlawful and backward. Only days earlier, after 25 years of waiting, hearings had finally begun for the 'urgent' Mana Wahine claim against the Crown, lodged with the Waitangi Tribunal in July 1993. At the same time, in several places around the country, Māori academics are in public conflict with their employer institutions, and as would be expected, Māori women academics are among those leading these actions. This editorial digs below the surface to identify and briefly sketch the common ground that draws together these various topical threads.

Māori culture is not sexist; colonization is

Māori traditions make no reference to men holding dominant positions over women, instead portraying male and female energy (mana) in dynamic equilibrium. Indigenous Māori reality contains an inherent gender balance in the union of Ranginui (sky father deity) and Papatūānuku (earth mother deity), from which arises the natural world inhabited by humankind. According to scientific record, the 'lo cult' was 'discovered' in the late 1800s, at a time when Christian missionaries and European cultural influences had long since made deep incursions into Māori society and thinking (Hanson, 1989). This 'invented' tradition overlaid a supreme male spiritual Being, named Io, across the original Indigenous Māori atua (deities) and cosmogenic narratives. Over time, Māori as well as Pākehā began to accept the authenticity of this re-making of Indigenous Māori cosmogeny after the image of Christianity. The Io tradition is an important example of the larger, sustained attack perpetrated by Western colonization on Māori thought and philosophy (Stewart, 2020).

Colonization of Māori discourse has been as damaging to Māori interests as the overt, physical aspects of colonization. Some of the colonizing forces in corrupting traditional Māori ideas, including ideas about gender, include: the imposition of Christianity and suppression of Māori beliefs; the enforcement of legal marriage and outlawing of Māori marriages; illegitimate alienation from traditional homelands – including taking the lands of Māori soldiers while they were overseas fighting in WWII; rapid urbanization post-WWII, which changed the Māori population from mainly rural to mainly urban within one generation; and the adoption of the mainstream norms of the nuclear family—the 'white picket fence' mentality, placing people in ideal consumer units for enslavement to global capital.

The colonizing, patriarchal makeover of Māori concepts about women involved corrupting the significant pair of concepts, tapu (restricted, set apart) and noa (common, ordinary). First, the traditional meanings of these two words were vastly altered by the Christian influence. Second, ethnographers failed to understand how tapu applied to all humans and all life, instead interpreting tapu and noa as a hierarchical binary and mutually exclusive dichotomy. Entirely predictably, men were labelled as tapu and women as noa (Mikaere & Kahukiwa, 2017).

But the narrative disjunctions caused by such Eurocentric devaluation of women as inferior in Māori traditions entailed a need for “tortuous reasoning [whereby] the meaning of tapu miraculously changed from sacredness to uncleanness in the context of menstruation and childbirth” (p. 89). The colonial ethnographers missed or mistook the symbolism of “raw female sexual energy” in Māori cosmogeny, reflected in how they observed tapu and noa operating around them. These colonizing Western distortions of Māori philosophy:

- minimised the womb symbolism of Te Kore [the nothingness] and Te Pō [the night];
- cancelled out the gender balance inherent in the union of Papa [earth mother deity] and Rangi [sky father deity] by inventing a supreme male god as the creator;
- characterised Hineahuone [first woman] as a passive receptacle for the male seed, rendering her sexual energy invisible and ignoring the pivotal role played by Papa in the creation of humankind;
- retold the Māui stories in ways that marginalised his kuia [female elders]; and
- characterised as evil and destructive the supreme strength of Hinenuitepō [goddess of death], which fitted in nicely with biblical notions of woman being responsible for sin.

(Adapted from Mikaere & Kahukiwa, 2017, p. 89)

Concepts related to female sexuality, such as *whare tangata* (literally, house of man, i.e. womb), *awa atua* (literally, godly river, i.e. menstruation), and *whenua* (meaning both afterbirth and land) demonstrate the high regard in which female energy as *mana wahine* is held, in traditional Māori views of the world (Murphy, 2013). Conceptual corruption of Māori philosophy is part of the process by which *tikanga Māori* becomes infected by White Patriarchy, contributing to the pathology of being Māori today.

Within these colonizing processes, Māori women have been subject to multiple enduring and intersecting disadvantages (Irwin, 1992). As women of colour, Māori women have been subject to centuries of oppression, enduring a triple dose of racist, sexist and socioeconomic subjugation (Smith, 1992). Māori women academics have developed *Mana Wahine* theory (Pihama, 2001) as a *Kaupapa Māori* form of feminism (Smith, 1997) to resist the “lethal combination” of White Patriarchy (Mikaere & Kahukiwa, 2017, p. 121).

Sexism and the Crown: The *Mana Wahine* claim

Despite the obvious importance in social history of the generations of Māori women who have led Māori activism and initiatives of all kinds, including the protest movement, there remains a harsh discrepancy in the treatment of Māori women by the state that can only be attributed to sexism, laid over racism. An incident in the early 1990s when a high-profile *kuia* (female elder) was deleted from the shortlist for appointment to the Treaty of Waitangi Fisheries Commission catalysed the 1993 lodgement of the *Mana Wahine* claim against the Crown with the Waitangi Tribunal, the hearings for which, as noted above, began just before Waitangi Day 2021. Despite being ‘urgent’ it took over 25 years for the claim to be “formally initiated” on 20 December 2018, following which panel members were appointed on 7 August 2019 (Waitangi, 2020). Mikaere recounts:

The Crown’s response to the filing of the *Mana Wahine* claim was particularly instructive as to its assumption of power to define the role of Māori women. The then Minister of Māori Affairs, Doug Kidd, immediately insisted that the lack of status accorded Māori women was not of the Crown’s making at all but rather the result of Māori men oppressing Māori women. In other words, in the Crown’s estimation, it is Māori society’s attitude towards Māori women that renders them subservient. (Mikaere & Kahukiwa, 2017, p. 124)

In other words, first the Crown uses its weapons of colonization to destroy Māori kinggroup structures and symbolic systems, and remodel Māori narratives as degraded forms of Christian doctrine; then it colludes with Māori men, appealing to their colonized sides to recruit them in

united efforts to exclude Māori women from official state-Māori relationships and representation. When challenged by Māori women, such as in the case of the Mana Wahine claim, the Crown (as represented by the Minister) points the finger of blame at Māori men. It is a specious but politically effective argument and illustrates the workings of the ‘reputation’ among Pākehā of Māori culture as ‘sexist’ in the everyday sense of male-dominated.

The issue of speaking rights on the marae

As shown by Waitangi Day this year, there is plenty of media mileage in the Pākehā claim that the marae “is a sexist institution” and the “role of women on marae has been used as an example of women being made powerless by Māori males” (Smith, 1992, p. 40). But such claims are often made on the basis of limited knowledge. False impressions may also be gained from seeing Māori culture operating in non-traditional contexts, including the welcoming of politicians to Waitangi. Attempts to incorporate aspects of Māori culture such as pōwhiri into contemporary contexts easily descend to ‘box-ticking’ (Mazer & Papesch, 2010) including rigid rules for things like dress code and seating plans—and who gets to speak when. All such matters are ultimately directed by the principles of tapu and noa; a point that seems to have been drowned out in the media commentary.

Kathie Irwin (1992) uses Māori feminist theory to analyse the issue of the speaking rights of women on the marae, which she describes as “one of the most misunderstood and abused contemporary issues of our culture and time” and “one of the classic cases of cross-cultural misunderstanding” (Irwin, 1992, p. 8). Misunderstanding starts with the dual meanings of ‘marae’ which can refer either to the whole Māori community complex, or the open space, temporarily imbued with ceremonial significance, between hosts and visitors during a pōwhiri. There is also variation between marae customs as practised by different iwi groups around the country. Irwin spells out the illogic of the feminist challenge to marae customs:

At the heart of the matter is the assertion that men whaikōrero, that women don’t, and that this is an example of sexism, of the denial of women’s rights. Here, the principle of equal rights is being argued in the context where male behaviour is used as the norm against which female behaviour is judged. Women weren’t doing exactly what the men did, therefore what they were doing *didn’t count, in its own right*. These feminists are proposing that Māori society and culture should adopt the very use of male behaviour which they would not accept for themselves, as a norm for judging female behaviour. (Irwin, 1992, p. 10, emphasis in original)

Serious consequences of such cultural misunderstandings occur when Māori women are denied jobs “[f]rom school teaching to university professorial positions [and] at all levels of the public service because ‘they can’t speak on marae’” (Irwin, 1992, p. 18).

Māori Women in the Academy: Double or nothing

The current status of Māori women academics in universities and tertiary education appears to have improved little, if at all, compared to the experiences Irwin documented from the 1980s (Irwin, 2000). Overall, the situation for academics has continued to decline, with funding becoming ever tighter, while for Māori academics the challenges in the institutional environment remain as formidable as ever (McAllister et al., 2019). A Māori scholar in a mainstream academic job holds a paradoxical, doubled position—held to the same standards of performance as their non-Māori peers, while also being seen as responsible for single-handedly fulfilling their department’s expectations in relation to Māori.

Irwin reflects that some academics would hate to think that she spoke for them, as an example of how Māori academics will always be seen by some of their peers as outsiders or imposters. When another university offered her a job, her employer university, where she had struggled for years against deadweights of resistance and unfair treatment, made her an offer they assumed she could not refuse: “I was just a commodity, and people were haggling over my

price and trying to trade with me, playing with my life" (Irwin, 2000, p. 267). She turned the offer down, taking her 'wounded heart and grieving soul' and moving on to greener pastures.

Negative workplace experiences for Māori academics are widely reported (Kidman & Chu, 2017; McAllister et al., 2019), the few exceptions being those who have Māori line managers. A Māori academic can either move from job to job, in pursuit of a less hostile environment, or develop an exceedingly thick skin as armour against the onslaught of slights and micro-aggressions that are simply inevitable in such a bastion of White Patriarchy as the academy. A third option for Māori women in the academy is to choose the margins (Smith, 2015); to exploit the cracks and clefts of academic life (Kidman & Chu, 2017), particularly in the universities of today, which are large, complex organisations. Informal collaborations and collegial friendships with other Māori women and men in one's university are particularly valuable. That the identity of 'Māori woman scientist' is an 'impossible fiction' due to the incommensurable historical constructions of its component parts (McKinley, 2005) is a worst-case scenario, but in principle applies to 'Māori woman academic' more generally. Given that this is the case, the substantial contributions made by Māori women in the academy must be recognised as all the more remarkable. Tēnā tātou katoa.

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