

## MAORI WOMEN RESEARCHING OURSELVES

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This essay, originally titled “Maori Women and Research: Researching Ourselves,” was the closing keynote address at a Student Symposium organized by the Maori and Psychology Research Unit at the University of Waikato, Hamilton in August 1999. Most of the people attending were Maori and female, and I spoke to, for, and about us. The speech was transcribed from an oral address with transparencies, and has been revised here for this publication.

*Tui, tui, tui tuia....*

*Weave the magic, weave the story, weave together...*

THE TITLE OF MY PRESENTATION TODAY is *Maori Women and Research: Researching Ourselves*. Rather than look at the huge perceptual challenge of being a researcher of whatever ethnicity working on Maori women’s issues, I thought I would focus on Maori women as researchers researching ourselves. So I ask, what does research mean for us as Maori people? I found a statement made by Te Rangi Hiroa to his friend Sir Apirana Ngata in February 1931:

*Kua mutu te wa kia Te Peehi ma, kua riro ma taua, ma te Maori, taua korero* (The time for Best is over; we as Maori should take responsibility for researching our world for ourselves.)

It is left to us to straighten up what has been written by our *pakeha* (non-Maori person of European descent) pioneers. This was written in 1931, and described what was happening two or three generations ago. Yet ironically,

for whatever their reasons or motives, the pakeha continues to pioneer. Or plunder, depending on how one sees it. And their output is “authoritative” and prolific. So what do we do about it? How do we deal with these pioneers? We can only do that by producing our own work. But how?

At a conference on Maori research at Massey University in 1998, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs offered a workshop for Maori women doing research. It was cancelled at the last minute, leaving one and a half hours to fill. I offered to facilitate a discussion session. It was challenging and difficult and also immensely exhilarating; with between sixty and eighty women wandering in and out while Waimarie Nikora recorded their comments on the whiteboard and Karyn Kee transcribed these to her PowerBook. Some of these comments form the basis of this paper; and to you all I am sincerely grateful. I will now discuss some of the questions raised and also cover many others of my own.

### **Being Maori and Being Female**

The first issue is being female and being Maori and what all that means. What are we? Who defines us? How do we fit into our communities? Why are we reminded constantly that we must always be humble? Why are we told to be feminine? Does a city-born Maori woman have the same hassles as a rural one? How do traditional protocol issues and expectations influence our behavior, and our choices? Why are we often silent, particularly in my tribal area, Te Arawa? Does being voiceless have advantages? Like, if we’re not noticed we can get on with the real work? Now what exactly does that mean in the context of doing research, and the type of issues and realities that Maori women researchers have to cope with? And what about age differences and the interaction between generations? How does a twenty-one-year-old starting out on her first self-directed study approach a *kuia* (elderly woman, grandmother)? How does she make herself trusted? How does she convince these *kuia* that she is worthy of their information? What does she do? Especially when she is told, “*Kaore te kumara e korero mo tona nei reka.*” (The sweet potato does not talk about how tasty it is.) If you can’t bite it, how will you know?

### **The Roles of Women in the Maori World**

From there we come to the whole idea of rights and roles of women within the *hapu* (clan or subtribe; also means pregnant) and tribal environments. The daughter of the matriarch who sits on the *marae* (ceremonial space of

community plaza) and organizes things for the community is seen as someone who could be really important one day. Does this mean she gets more attention than someone whose mother is an urban factory hand? How do you deal with that contrast? Does one woman have more value than the other in the eyes of the community? Or are they seen in different ways? Does age make any difference? If you wore a skirt instead of trousers to that first crucial encounter, would that be better? If you need a *pae arahi* (guide, mentor) to introduce you, should it be an older close relation? What happens if that person misrepresents you? How do you choose the right one? Does a *pae arahi* make access easier? Similarly, there is the issue of Maori men having greater access because they are men and their questions may be received with more bemused tolerance; because what they are doing is serious *mahi* (labor, work), they can never be a *nuisance asking questions*. Or seen as *just hanging around being nosy*. Males are expected to ask questions, and have them answered, because they are men.

By doing what we are doing, we are perceived to be transcending our femaleness, our *wharetangata* (womb, also a metaphor for women), our biological destiny. We are daring to move beyond it. And when we realize how incredibly important and exciting the work can be, how vital to the *iwi* (tribe), that makes it all worthwhile. It makes the pain almost bearable, because after the process is the outcome; which is good. I urge you to think about that.

### Maori Women in the Academy

Such relativities and relationships also occur between academic women. Many of us have been hurt by watching a pakeha female researcher visit our old people, spend hours or even days with them, and then go back to the office with all the data and write it up, while the very same people whom we have been trying to get around and squeeze even the tiniest morsel of information out of won't talk to us. What do you do about things like that and where does that put you in relation to the pakeha researcher? What does that sort of reality do to relationships within academia? It does a lot of damage. It causes a lot of pain. It slows down our work, and sometimes even stops it.

This problem engages us all. I recommend a book called *Sister Girl* by Jackie Huggins, an aboriginal historian, which talks about her struggle to be engaged and recognized as a valid voice. Similar voices may be heard in Pacific history; notable examples are Lilikalā Kame'eiehiwa and Haunani-Kay Trask and their work in the Hawaiian context. Other native women scholars and women of color record their experiences in anthologies edited by Anzaldúa, Silvera, and Camper, and bell hooks consistently and aggressively confronts the academy in her many works. Here in Aotearoa, there is a growing canon, with such writers as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Leonie Pihama,

Kathy Irwin, and contributors to the periodical *Te Pua*, a scholarly vehicle for Maori women commentators. Tuhiwai Smith pays particular attention to *kaupapa* (agenda) Maori research as a paradigm, and I urge you to check this out, if you haven't already. With each other, we address these issues of exclusion and control, and we attempt to resolve them by discussion and strategic coalitions.

And often we judge, or monitor, ourselves. What will Maori accept from or do about other Maori women? Do we have an image of ourselves that we do not like or that we find hard to deal with or that makes our research project or our expectation of it more difficult than it actually is? What do you do if you do not fit into the ideal or the expected image of what a Maori woman is, or how she should behave? Or even, how she should look, dress, speak, and present? To what extent are we hard on ourselves and each other? Is some sort of self policing part of our being women, being Maori, being Maori women?

### Tapu and the Nature of Prohibition

Much of this concerns *tapu* and the nature of prohibition. How many of us were told by our *kuia* or *koroua* (elderly man, grandfather): *Oh, I can't tell you that, it's tapu*. And then you find out from another *kuia* that, *They didn't know anyway; they're just saying that because they don't know!* So you end up in this really comic bind of wanting to prove something but you cannot because of your respect for elders. You know that the information is there but whom do you go to? Here is a personal and rather fraught example. In my own thesis research I approached two of my uncles. One—a master carver—said to me, “If you go and see him I'm not going to talk to you, waste my time.” And the other one, who was an arts administrator, said to me, “That man's not local. He's not from around here. You mustn't go and talk to him. He doesn't know anything about our *whakairo* (carving, wood sculpture, ornamentation). He might give you funny ideas.” Because I was doing research on tourism and *whakairo*, both views were essential. And so here I was with one uncle saying I won't talk to you if you talk to him, and the other saying you go anywhere near him and that's it!

This was crazy. I did not know what to do. My supervisors weren't much help. I checked with the uncles' families, talked to my aunts and my cousins, who helped me out. When one uncle was gone I went to see the other one, and when that *koroua* was home but the other one had gone away on a trip then I talked to him. Because I was based miles away (actually in Hawai'i!) and not living at home, I got away with it. I don't know if I could do that now! And I would certainly never recommend that my students do that, either!

Tapu is also about prohibition. One salient and ongoing issue for women is *mate marama* (menstruation). This is particularly crucial in areas of museum research or research related to matters of *wairua* (spirit, spirituality).

What can we ask? When is an appropriate time to raise it? How can we keep ourselves safe, our participants safe, and the information safe? Is it about pollution, and do we pollute what we are doing? Is there an actual, inherent, risk? To us? To our work? To our participants? How do we deal with this one?

In feminist and Wiccan scholarship, such concerns become empowering and celebratory. For Maori, they become somewhat restrictive and difficult. Here is a telling and immediate example. I was asked to bring ten or so photographic slides of Ta Moko, people with ornamented skin, to this symposium. I wanted a small container, instead of a clunky carousel. So I was in the bathroom and I saw this! (At this point, speaker flourishes a small, sturdy 35-mm slide-sized cardboard box discreetly labeled “Carefree.”) Immediate confusion. *It is so practical! The slides fit perfectly! Oh Ngahuaia, just forget it.* And that is a classic example. I know that most of my pakeha woman colleagues would have no problem.

Yet for me, through its association, that small box simply could not contain images of people with Ta Moko, particularly slide images of ancestral portraits. Convenience gave way to cultural imperatives.

What was interesting too was my reaction. Despite tourism, and guiding and dancing for overseas guests, as young girls in Ohinemutu village, we were brought up with a very clear indication of what was right with regard to things like *mate marama*, things like the biological reality of our being female. We were taught how to get in and out of an open air mineral bath and not reveal a thing, though we were quite naked. We were taught about respect by older women; our mothers, grandmothers, aunts. And now, we ask, how does this affect our ability to do research as females? Are there pathways that are closed to us? Are there certain aspects of knowledge that will be beyond our reach because we are women? Are there particular elements within the Maori conceptual reality and research arena that are not for us to investigate?

This is an ongoing concern for all of us Maori women doing research. Are there things we are not allowed to do? Places we should not explore? Does this affect all of us, or just those with a traditional upbringing, or who wish to assert a traditional upbringing?

Again I reflect on my own journey. A curatorial position came up in a provincial museum—my own hometown. As I thought of applying, I was told by the kaumatua involved in the interview process, “Don’t bother, girl. It is wrong for women to touch our *taonga* [treasure, valued object or idea].

We will not have it.” He then explained to me very carefully that it was *unseemly* for women to be engaged in certain types of museum work, *because they bleed*. Choking on the blood of rage and disbelief, I withdrew. A few months later a similar vacancy occurred in another city, and I was successful. And I must note here that the paramount chief of that region is a wise and utterly inspiring woman, who honored me with her discreet support and encouragement.

### Knowing the Knowledge Keepers

Incidents like this raise the question of access to knowledge in the Maori world. Why are the knowledge keepers there at all? In whose interests are they being protective? What rights do they have to restrict or retain access? Who owns what we want? Whom is it for? Here we have issues, not only of intellectual property, but in the Maori context, of *kaitiakitanga* and *whakapapa* (genealogy). We need to consider arguments put up by people like Moana Jackson, Charles Royal, and various other Maori researchers that only those who are of a particular descent line should have access to the information related to that descent line. This is an exciting area, fraught with challenges to the sensitive researcher. On the one hand, we have the universal scholars who say we are all human beings and knowledge belongs to everybody and we should all get into it and enjoy it and work at it for the betterment of humankind. On the other hand, we have this discriminating and consciously protective environment that says that only those who are *uri* or descendants of the knowledge makers can determine the future of this knowledge.

I think that is a dynamic that we are going to see more and more, not just within the mainstream but also within the Maori Academy, particularly with the growing muscularity of *wananga* (place of advanced learning). It is going to be really exciting. I see it as a challenge. I know that there will be blood on the floor and on the marae. It will require passion and perhaps a little craziness to take on these issues. But it will be worth it. This is what being an academic is about.

There are interesting questions here about the control of knowledge. Do the people who control the knowledge need to maintain some version—their version—of *mana* (authority, power, charisma)? Is it about *mana*? Are *mana* and *matauranga* (knowledge) synonymous? What is the relationship between what you know and who you are? Foucault and others have drawn attention to the link between knowledge and power. But within the Maori context, issues of knowledge and of power can be complex indeed. As I have already noted, there is an issue of restrictions on the information given to Maori women.

Growing up in Te Arawa in the fifties, I remember that the ones who were regarded as the keepers of the correct record were the elderly women. If an orator incorrectly recited whakapapa, if he made an error in his *tauparapara* (introductory recitation in oratory), certain women—an aunt, an elder sister, his wife—would gently correct him. That was their right. If he persisted, or reacted adversely to a woman's counsel, they would humiliate him. This was effected by much louder verbal interruption, or by starting a full-throated *pao*, or dynamic chant, with other *kuia*. Such a right indicated that they, too, had the knowledge and the training. This convention is rare today, particularly in the Waiariki region where it was once so pronounced. So, what has happened? What is going on? How has what was once regarded as an essential female role been allowed to discontinue, to effectively fade away? Is this about language? Or does this reflect the diminishing perception of the male/female roles as complementary, and the reinforcement of a more male-centered power base to which women make no active contribution? And what does this say about the development of Maori knowledge—*matauranga Maori*—for future generations? What does this mean?

### **Matauranga Maori: Maori Knowledge**

*Matauranga Maori* is one of the issues here. In the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth, much compiling of Maori knowledge was done by people like Grey, Best, and all those others whose information came from Maori sources. For example, if you consider Grey's material, much of that was done by Maihi Te Rangikaheke, and the Maori text is substantively different from the English. Much has been lost in the translation, or shameless bowdlerization, of the *koroua's* words. One fine example is the story of Hinemoa and Tutanekai. We are continually reminded that this is the greatest romance of all time, which is why it is such a popular tourist tale, presented in song, dance, and active storytelling. Hinemoa defied her parents, and swam the midnight waters of the lake to win her flute-playing beloved, Tutanekai. Yet people overlook some critical elements. *She* swam to him. *She* took the initiative. He was much more interested in Tiki, his comely male companion, so to get Tutanekai's attention, in Rangikaheke's version, Hinemoa masqueraded as a man. She presented herself with a male voice and sent Tutanekai's friend back up to him and then lured him down as a male, not as a woman. That story offers an intriguing perspective on sexuality and gender roles in the ancient Maori world; yet we are left with a quaintly colorful telling of the "Great Maori Romance." I bet that is the first time most of you have ever heard the other version, but if you look at the original text

in Maori, it is there. And there are others waiting for someone else to decode them, to rediscover their true form.

And we need to ask this question, too—were these narratives restricted? Were they coded, only to be truly known and then reinterpreted by the few? What versions were given to the pakeha recorder? Who made those first Maori-to-English translations? Did our old people censor or rearrange material, and do they continue to do so? Is there still a sense that knowing this information may perhaps be threatening to us? Can knowledge be dangerous? Consider for example, whakapapa, land ownership or the location of *wahi tapu* (sacred place) and *urupa* (cemetery, burial site). If it is dangerous, then who is at risk? Should certain ideas remain secret to a particular family or hapu? I deliberately refer here to *ideas*, not to facts like the whereabouts of paru for dyeing flax fiber, or which landmarks indicate the best fishing spots at sea. I am discussing ideas that may be menacing. Yet we cannot afford to lose them. These are the questions that perplex us every day as Maori researchers, as young Maori in the Academy.

### ***Te Reo Maori: The Language***

Another important issue to address here today is Te Reo Maori, a knowledge of the language. How much do we miss out on through our own *kuwaretanga* (ignorance)—simply by the fact of where and when we were born, and the misguided goodwill or deluded protectiveness of those to whom we were born? Is it important to be fluent in Te Reo or to have Te Reo as your primary tongue to get the very essence of the information conveyed? Dr. Miria Simpson, writing in her preface to the history of the Maori Women's Welfare League, *Te Timatanga Tatou Tatou*, for which she was the Maori language interviewer and editor, offers a lucid insight about language—the language used during the sixty-six interviews.

The aim here is to preserve that frankness...

Swinging back and forth between Maori and English, the *talk* comes *straight off the page*, complete with here and there the inevitable repetition and the occasional slip of the tongue....

With little imagination, the reader becomes aware of the differences in the thought process when “thinking Maori” changes suddenly to “thinking English” and back again. Is it a conscious change?

....like lightning....it eludes me.

Imagine what it does to second language speakers or to other conscientious punters! I think that's all I'll say on that.



### Challenges for Maori Women in the Academy

What about the loneliness and the challenge of being an active researcher? Life as a Maori woman academic can often be lonely. It goes with the territory. It is a challenge, and it is hard because so much of the time you are isolated, or you feel isolated from your family and significant others, unless, of course, your work involves them, and that raises its own questions. A common question is how do you cope if you leave your partner behind? What if you get the better grades or higher honors? What happens to the man? I think that too is a really interesting question, and for many of us I know it's a very painful one, because not only are the children involved in the process of Mum getting a degree, but the husband or partner is as well. What becomes of him or her? How do they cope? In the process there is a risk of the researcher falling over, and of the project falling over too.

At the discussion group mentioned earlier, all the women said  
Oh, you just get up again ... you just get up again and you keep going. You get up again. You get on and you do it. You just don't sit around wondering about why you're doing it and whom you're doing it for, but you look at your own values and your motivation and you get up there and you do it and you complete it. You have to.

It is about endurance. It is about courage. It is about taking risks. It is about being mad enough to go out there, put your head on the block and follow your dreams. Just keep doing it because it is fun and it is, I think, not a thankless exercise but in many ways a great and exciting one.

Difficulties also occur in the institutional environments in which many of us choose to take those first scary steps into the Academy. Everdina Fuli writes in "Wanaia e Koe te iti Kahurangi":

The library was another area I was terrified of using. I remember standing in line waiting to be issued a book by the librarian. I was totally ignored by the librarian and made to feel embarrassed while the Pakeha male student behind me asked to be served. That incident sent me home crying and feeling whakama. It took me a while to return to the library, let alone to attempt to use the library to its fullest capacity. The humiliation suffered made me feel both utterly disempowered and abused racially.

Everdina kept going. After her cry, she came back and gained her first two degrees, and is now working full time as a researcher.

### Conflicting Expectations

My final theme is conflicting expectations and what happens when our people realize our research skills may be useful to the whanau, hapu, or iwi. For most of us there's a sense of affirmation, of reward. *We're recognized. Hey, they know we're here . . . . Oh, I can now give my skills back to the community,* and the next thing this happens. The relations or their appointee will turn around and say

*Wait on, you've got to do this and this and this. Go and see this one and don't talk to that one, she's all wrong, and I want you back at seven o'clock tomorrow to do the Xeroxing and pick up the key from Uncle So-and-so but don't tell him what you'll be doing, you just get that key. That's my job to tell him and I'll be in later on.*

You end up with various pressures, but it is part of the belongingness, of belonging to the iwi, of having the experience and the joyous affirmation of giving back. This is, I think, a huge part of the reason that we undertake study programs and pursue degrees in the disciplines of social science. It is another way of helping—with specialist skills and acquired knowledge. It nurtures the community in its own way.

But within the iwi context, one must learn never to push oneself forward, particularly if you are a woman. You have to know your place. You must not be seen to be aggressive. You have got to wait to be invited. And if an alpha male pushes in front of you, well, he gets the goodies first, or exhausts the source, or tires out the elderly participant, and that is that. For if you sit back with a PhD or Masters and wait to be invited, all the boys with BAs will score the jobs, or muscle in and write their essays en route. This becomes a real issue for women in the Maori world. How many of us have seen guys who have not even completed their degrees get the jobs at home? It becomes a very cruel and ironic situation, because you know you should be pleased for them, but you also want to say, *Hey, but I've got a BA Honors (or a graduate diploma, or a Masters). What about me?*

Another difficulty is that the whanau assumes that because you are at varsity, you have got loads of time. *You just go to school, you know. So Mummy gets sick? Hey, you come home and look after her. Or, Okay, somebody has to take a child to the doctor in Auckland. You do it. You're just at school. You're the girl, too. It's your role, you know that.* And along with pressures like that, there is also among some of us and our families the idea that you are doing it for yourself, that study is actually very selfish. So that when you are asked to do things for the whanau you should be grateful they're

taking notice of you. It can seem very mean-hearted and inappropriate to assert yourself. Not Maori. And who wants to be seen as behaving like a pakeha?

Political protest and radical activism have been part of the western tertiary learning environment for centuries. For many of us, it is an integral element of the varsity experience. Combined with the flax roots initiatives on the home front, many graduates find themselves considering the various approaches to social change and benefit for the iwi. One wonders what is more effective long term—radical protest and immediacy with the iwi, or maintaining one's corporate or professional identity and working at that elevated level? Can we work effectively both ways? For many of us this becomes a real issue. My resolution is that we are all different, and we choose carefully what we do, and whatever we do we must be good at. But often that too becomes political or subject to the whims of the funding machine. It also relates to who gets noticed and who doesn't, and what gets noticed and what doesn't. And we end up trapped by the fable of the sweet potato, that tasty *kumara*, all over again.

We frequently get asked what we are doing, and how does it make things better for Maori. How do you best explain a research project to your immediate whanau or to the people whom you most want to get involved? We have seen some very good examples of those types of processes today, in the presentations. They are there and we have enjoyed them; their next step is with the iwi.

### ***He Taniko: Borders and Conclusions***

And now I come to the end of my presentation, to the hem of the garment I have woven with you. Figuratively, He Taniko: borders and conclusions. Taniko is a plaiting/weaving technique of multiple colored strands. Originally, it was brought from the Otherworld by Niwareka, the faerie wife of the mortal human Mataora, who acquired the art of Ta Moko, engraving skin, from her father Uetonga. So both these creative traditions are entwined. Taniko, however, is unique to the Maori world. No other culture and no other known society on the planet does taniko, only Maori. I think this is quite wonderful. It gives us a place in world art history. But it also, I think, explains and manifests in a very elegant way the metaphor of knowledge, the metaphor of gathering strands, the metaphor of creating and lending and, ultimately, producing something of beauty, of color, of impact.

Taniko was used as a border on *kaitaka* or draped chiefly garments of very finely processed flax. Taniko formed the front panels and the lower hems, not the collars that we see in Gottfried Lindauer's painting of nineteenth-century

kuia and kaumatua. These images were actually constructed. They were not real. Maori never wore the hems of their garments up around their chins. But Lindauer thought it looked better that way, and our old people were very accommodating models, so they tipped the kaitaka upside down and sat there with the hems around their chins thinking, *this Pakeha is very strange*. So now we have this amazing example of misinformation coming to us a hundred years later and many of our own new designers think that the taniko should be worn shoulder high, whereas traditionally, it should be down around the feet.

Which ever way up, taniko is about bordering so we come to the idea of bordering conclusions, and the principal conclusion that I'd like to offer you for today is that, as all of the presentations revealed, we should take heart. We should not give up. Whatever may happen, particularly to us as women, we must keep going. We must not lose our motivation. We must not slacken our discipline. We must hang in there. Because research is also about following our dreams. About achieving what we want, for our children, for ourselves, for those yet to come. The papers presented at this symposium reflect those dreams, and also reveal how the words exchanged between those two koroua six decades ago are in the process of being realized. Keep going. Continue to produce your work. And do it well, as best you can. And never ever stop dreaming, questioning, wondering.

So I conclude with the words of a great twentieth-century visionary, scholar, composer, and inspirational leader, Te Puea Herangi.

*Te ohonga ake I oku moemoea, Ko te puawaitanga o te whakaaro*  
(I awake from my dreams; and they blossom into ideas, they are realized).

*Kia ora tatou katoa.*

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