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“How High Is Your RQ?”: Is Te Reo Māori The New Blood Quantum?

“Are you part-Māori?” “How much Māori blood do you have?” “S/he is only one sixteenth Māori so not really Māori” “You’re one quarter Māori?! Wow you don’t look it” “I can tell you have something in you – it’s your eyes that give it away” and “But there aren’t any full-blooded Māori left anyway” are comments many of us have heard, and some of us may have made, as we grapple with this complex and intricate thing called ‘identity’. The archaic notion of defining who is (or who is not) Māori based on a mathematical formula, whereby (we think) we are supposed to divide the number of generations since our tūpuna (ancestors) were ‘full-blooded’ by the number of marriages with people who are non-Māori in order to determine who is a ‘real Māori’ (or not), thankfully is no longer accepted practice in Aotearoa New Zealand – although, sadly, the same cannot be said for our Indigenous counterparts elsewhere. That isn’t to say that comments like those mentioned above aren’t still made – and for the most part, we don’t believe those who ask these questions are intending to cause harm; rather they are perhaps being made in order to satisfy a genuine curiosity about another person’s identity.

There is a plethora of research on identity, and indeed on Māori identity specifically, which is further evidence of our curiosity about identity – and perhaps also evidence of our human need to define and demarcate virtually everything we encounter. Mason Durie has stated numerous times that living ‘as Māori’ means having access to te ao Māori – which includes language, culture, tikanga (protocols) and resources. It is generally accepted that te reo Māori (the Māori language) holds a central place in the discourse on Māori identity – and rightly so. But is it the only indicator or measure? Clearly, language

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provides a portal into a culture and a way of viewing the world. Language is more than grammar and vocabulary – it is a vehicle through which culture can be expressed, and it provides an insight into a complex ecosystem of thought, histories, and realities. But is language the only way one’s culture and identity can be expressed? Is language the defining factor in the question of self-identification and identity? Is te reo Māori the sole key that opens the door and gives access to the exclusive ‘Members Only’ club of – in this case – te iwi Māori (the Māori nation)?

Many of us are familiar with the history of colonisation in this country, and the colonial ideology and policies that led to the suppression of te reo Māori in our schools. Generations of children were banned from speaking their language; they were denied the right to hear and speak te reo Māori, which led to a disruption in the intergenerational transfer of the language. As a result, many of us have had to learn te reo Māori as second language learners, with varying degrees of success in acquiring the language. Others, for example, have been fortunate enough to have attended Māori medium schools, and consequently might be defined as ‘fluent’ in the language. Some have taken different pathways in seeking to recover te reo Māori; many have yet to embark on that journey, but express a desire to do so. Recently, in numerous professional and social settings, we have encountered an idea where it is suggested that those of us who are not ‘fluent’ in te reo Māori are somehow ‘less Māori’ (or indeed in one instance it was suggested “not Māori”) than those who are freely able to converse in the language. This led to us ponder the following: “Is te reo Māori the new blood quantum?”

Statements like: “She says she is Māori but she can’t speak it [spoken in a tone inferring that this makes this person somehow less Māori]” “Hey you’re Māori – what’s the Māori word for ____?” “There is a pōwhiri this morning and we need you to speak” “Can you bless the kai?” How many of us have had our identity as Māori assessed and shaken by questions such as these – often from non-Māori friends and colleagues – where, again, no harm is usually intended, but great discomfort, embarrassment, and even shame, may result? And how about the reactions from our comrades in te iwi Māori to those who, as a result of the colonial need to put an end to te reo Māori, do not speak the language? Are we as Māori going to follow a pathway that leads to division – one that could be described as neo-colonial in that it may create a binary notion of what it means to be Māori? For generations, Māori have endured having

our identity measured and defined for us by non-Māori using parameters like blood quantum. In contemporary times, many Māori are having their identity measured and defined for them by their own – using the parameter of ‘reo quantum’ (skill in te reo Māori). If reo quantum – or RQ (with the pervading question being: “How high is your RQ?”) – was to be the one true marker of a person’s identity then what of non-Māori who are fluent in te reo? Are they automatically Māori? Are we going to insist that te reo Māori is indeed the key that opens the door to the ‘Members (Māori) Only’ club? Or are we going to take a more inclusive approach – one that recognises that Māori identity is a complex and multi-faceted construct, which is emergent, self-defined, constantly shifting, and always evolving?