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Digital Technology: Contemporary methods for the Dissemination of Ancient Knowledge. The Use of Digital Technology in the Preservation of Māori Song

The Māori language is traditionally an exclusively oral language. Therefore, Māori knowledge, histories and traditions have been preserved and disseminated through the oral tradition. This rich Māori oral tradition has taken on many forms, including *waiata* and *haka*. *Waiata* and *haka* are traditional mediums for the transmission of knowledge including tribal history, politics, historical landmarks, genealogy and environmental knowledge while also acting as traditional forms of expression for the articulation of anger, hatred, sadness, love and desire. Traditionally Māori were well versed in their genealogies and tribal histories. This informed their composition style and content.

Waiata and *haka* are examples of Māori poetry and literature and have been likened to the archives of the Māori people, preserving important historical and cultural knowledge. In traditional Māori society these compositions would have acted as the 'newspapers' and perhaps even tribal philosophical doctrine of the time. Therefore, *waiata* and *haka* offer an alternative view of the history of Aotearoa/New Zealand to those that are based on mainstream Eurocentric history books and archives. *Waiata* and *haka* are also important for the survival of the Māori language and culture. In this sense, they are bound to Māori identity.

However, many of these *waiata* are being lost through time and with them, our knowledge base regarding the meaning behind the words. This is exaggerated by the fact that *waiata*

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contain the highest form of language utilising proverbs and figurative speech.

It is against this background, that Tāmata Toiere, an online digital repository, was created. The repository is free to access and aims to provide comprehensive information regarding *waiata* and *haka*. For each song, the site has the capacity to include the lyrics, a translation, an explanation of the context behind the composition and the reasons it was composed, detailed explanatory notes regarding the lyrics, a biography of the composer, an audio file, a video file, any photos of relevance, and a list of references for further study. The adoption of digital technology to preserve *waiata* and *haka* provides a tool that can aid the oral tradition. A digital repository of *waiata* and *haka* provides a national resource thus demonstrating the interface between recovering traditional knowledge and storing this through innovative technology especially for future generations.

Looking to the past, from the present

> The past is myself, my own history, the seed of my present thoughts, the mould of my present disposition (Stevenson 1898: 60).[1]

The past affects one's perceptions, moulds one's disposition, and affects one's actions (Tonkin 1995: 7). Māori view time as being cyclic. The Māori word for the 'past' or 'before' is *mua*, but it is also the word for 'front'. The Māori word for 'future' or 'time to come' is *muri*, which is also the word for 'behind'. Therefore, time 'past' is the time that came 'before'. According to a Māori world-view, the past lies before us.

Recalling history is political, particularly when the history of the coloniser is in opposition to the history of the colonised. Whilst Māori history is a comment on the past, it affects the present and the future of the *tangata whenua* of Aotearoa/New Zealand. According to Binney, 'The 'telling of history', whether it be oral or written, is not and never has been neutral. It is

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[1]   Robert Louis Stevenson, Scottish novelist, poet and travel writer. Spent much time in the Pacific, wrote about politics in the Pacific, friend of King Kalākaua of Hawai'i, died and buried in Samoa.

always the reflection of the priorities of the narrators and their perceptions of their world' (Binney 2001: 14).

World-view

Marsden states, 'the worldview lies at the very heart of the culture, touching, interacting with and strongly influencing every aspect of the culture' (Royal 2003: 56). Therefore, it is difficult to separate oneself from one's world-view, as it acts as a type of filter system.

According to a Māori world-view, the direction North is 'down' and South is 'up'. At first, the image of 'upside-down' Aotearoa/New Zealand can be quite confronting to people from outside of the Māori culture, as they are presented with something that goes against everything they have come to accept as the norm up until that point. This demonstrates the inherent nature of world-view.

A culture cannot be understood without reference to its world-view as this is the basis for core values. Jackson posits,

> ...each culture is unique, the behavior exhibited by its members has certain unique characteristics. No members of a culture can be understood in isolation from the cultural forces which shape them, and no culture can be understood unless account is taken of the attitudes, expectations, beliefs and values on which it is based (Jackson 1987: 25).

Preserving cultural knowledge through *waiata*

For a language such as English, that has an established written form, there is an emphasis on that written form for the preservation of culture and history. Historically, this has relegated aspects of spoken language such as song, poetry, proverb and idioms to the realm of entertainment. In an exclusively oral language, such as Māori, these aspects of spoken language have a dual purpose, which includes the preservation of history.

With the need to preserve cultural knowledge Māori have, for generations, used the tool of composing *waiata* and *haka*. The benefit of this particular form of preserving knowledge is that the element of entertainment surrounding *waiata* ensures that the succeeding generations are interested in learning them and committing the words to memory.

The Māori language has a dual purpose in the preservation of knowledge through *waiata*. Not only is the language essential for composing *waiata* that will survive for generations, but knowledge of the language must also be present for those succeeding generations to be able to understand the meaning of the words and the context in which the song was written. One cannot be articulate and eloquent, or make imaginative allusions to mythology and proverb, in a language that one does not speak. Notwithstanding the need to understand the intricacies and subtleties of a composition in order to fully grasp the meaning behind the words. This is why the biggest threat to *waiata* and *haka* has been and continues to be the decline in Māori language speakers since the colonisation of New Zealand.

The impact of colonisation on the Māori language

By 1979, only 139 years after the signing of The Treaty of Waitangi[2] (New Zealand's founding document), the loss of the Māori language was so great that it was believed that it would suffer language death (Walker 1990: 147-8). This can be attributed to colonisation and the State policy of assimilation which eroded the status of the language.

In 1900, over ninety per cent of Māori children started school with *te reo* Māori as their first language. However, by 1960 this had fallen to twenty-five per cent (Ka'ai-Oldman 1988: 24). By 1979, the loss of the Māori language was so great that it was believed that it would become extinct if nothing was done to save it (Walker 1990: 147-8). By 1984 the number of children entering primary school with Māori as their first language was most likely less than two per cent (Ka'ai-Oldman 1988: 24).

Further evidence of the success of colonial tools, such as language domination, can be found in the fact that New

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[2] The Treaty of Waitangi is the founding document of Aotearoa/New Zealand. It was established as a partnership between the British Crown and Māori as the Indigenous people. It was signed on the 6th of February 1840 and has been the focus of controversy ever since. This has stemmed from the fact that two versions of the Treaty were produced. The Māori text which was signed by both Māori and the Crown was translated from the English text by a non-Indigenous missionary. However, the translation was not at all a correct interpretation of the English text. It is the English text which has been used by the Crown as the definitive version and this is the cause of contention to this day between Māori and non-Māori.

Zealand is among the most monolingual countries in the world. It is estimated that ninety to ninety-five per cent of New Zealanders cannot speak any other language apart from English (Bell 1991: 66). This percentage is a lot greater than other primarily English speaking nations such as Britain, the United States of America, Canada, and Australia (Bell 1991: 66).

Ngā Mōteatea

Sensing the impact of language decline among Māori in the early twentieth century, Sir Apirana Ngata, a respected Māori scholar, politician and leader, along with other respected Māori repositories such as Pei Te Hurinui Jones, collected songs from around New Zealand and sought to preserve the stories behind the lyrics. The *Ngā Mōteatea* collection challenged the misconception that *waiata* were merely for entertainment.

It shows incredible foresight that Ngata and Jones sought to archive these songs, as the majority certainly would have been lost through time, had they not. Ancient chants and songs that had survived generations were wiped out within a relatively short period of time as a direct result of cultural assimilation and language decline.

The *Ngā Mōteatea* collection represents the pinnacle of the written record pertaining to *waiata*. This is due not only to the number of *waiata* collected, but the comprehensive nature of the collection. Each *waiata* is accompanied by an explanation regarding the context of its composition and detailed explanatory notes regarding the lyrics. One only has to look in *Ngā Mōteatea* to realise the vast knowledge contained within *waiata*. From the moment the series was printed it has been prized by Māori as it comprises the very best of Māori literature.

The only downfall of the *Ngā Mōteatea* collection is that it includes sound recordings for only some of the songs. At the time that Ngata and Jones were building the collection it was simply not an option to record all of the material. It is a great tragedy that one cannot hear the voices of the *tīpuna* who contributed to the *Ngā Mōteatea* collection, although compact discs of some of the songs have been included in the latest editions of *Ngā Mōteatea*.

The ability to adapt to changing circumstances

Whilst Māori have been described, by academics such as Mervyn McLean, as a conservative culture resistant to change, *tīpuna Māori* had a remarkable ability to adapt to new circumstances. This is a trait which has survived from the time of Polynesian explorers who were involved in 'an ongoing process of adaptation and cultural development in new and changing locations' (Howe 2003: 70). This is evident in that Māori ancestors were forced to adapt to New Zealand's colder and harsher environment on arrival from the warmer Pacific Islands.

Historically, Māori have been quick to adopt new technology and skills which they recognise can be of benefit to the advancement of their society. This is illustrated by Māori interest in literacy during the early period of the mission schools. These ancestors were quick to put their new skills to good use for the benefit of future generations. In the nineteenth century Māori wrote prolifically, adapting the oral arts for the press. This included documenting geneology, tribal histories, cultural protocols, and *waiata*. In addition to the many Māori manuscripts is the significant collection of Māori language newspapers. More than 40 Māori language newspapers were produced from the 1840s into the twentieth century (McRae 2004: 137). The newspapers include writings on political and social issues, letters to the editor, traditional eulogies and farewells in obituaries (McRae 2004:137).

Māori also utilised new technology to create recordings of *waiata*, at first by using Edison wax cylinders.

It is very apparent that Māori embraced new opportunities, such as literacy and the recording mechanisms, to ensure cultural continuity and the continued transmission of knowledge. The manuscripts and newspapers left behind are a rich source of Māori literature, particularly the information pertaining to *waiata*. The process of colonisation disrupted the cycle of oral tradition, knowledge transmission, and memory which had been operating in traditional Māori society. This disruption caused a devastating amount of Māori knowledge to be lost through time. The written word was available to Māori on the cusp of this loss, and therefore, symbolises the retention of a fraction of the knowledge which might have been lost.

While it is advocated that the oral tradition is essential to Māori cultural survival and that it should be defended and maintained, it is also viewed that Māori should utilise new

technology in order to preserve their traditions. Ngata and Jones were both motivated by the notion that it is imperative to the survival of Māori culture to ensure that Māori knowledge is preserved, which is evident when one looks at the quantity of information the two scholars collected and collated.

Tāmata Toiere

As part of my PhD research I developed a proposal for, and a template of, a digital repository for the preservation of *waiata* and *haka*. The primary objective of the site is to act as a national resource of *waiata* thus demonstrating the interface between recovering traditional knowledge and storing this through innovative technology for future generations.

The repository is primarily concerned with the preservation of knowledge and the celebration of identity and culture. When discussing his *Te Whanake* collection of Māori language resources, Moorfield states that the collection 'features narratives by well-known repositories of Māori knowledge across Aotearoa/New Zealand who saw the importance of the written word as a tool to aid in the survival of the Māori language, history and culture' (Moorfield 2006: 107). Comparisons could be drawn between the *Te Whanake* collection and a digital repository for the archiving of *waiata*. Traditionally, Māori did not learn their language from books, or their *waiata* from the internet. Both are non-traditional ways of helping to keep a language and a tradition alive. Many *waiata* have been lost, and many more could follow unless something is done to ensure their survival. According to Moorfield,

> The passing of people who do have a deep knowledge of their tribal culture, history and traditions is lamented, partly because with their death, so much of what they know is lost to Māoridom forever. To retain that knowledge for future generations is important (Moorfield 2006: 107).

Hana O'Regan proposes that *waiata* comprise a chronological map of *iwi* histories (O'Regan 2006: personal communication). Taking this notion and the concerns that several elders have for sustaining the quality of the language, a repository of *waiata* would also provide a chronological map

of the evolution of the Māori language and be a critical resource for second language learners to access language associated with their ancestors. Such a repository would also be a valuable resource for contemporary composers.

The repository not only provides a home for early *waiata*, it also stores contemporary *waiata* which are often composed and performed only once and invariably for competition. It is just as important to record the new oral literature – this is a form of publishing that not only acts as another resource of Māori knowledge and tradition, but also benefits composers who can reach a larger audience with their poetry.

The most important aspect of the repository is the section dedicated to the story behind the *waiata*, the reasons why it was composed and/or any explanatory notes. The inspiration for this section is drawn from the *Ngā Mōteatea* series. Full notes and explanations are needed in order that the many names and references included in the *waiata* are understood. The digital repository has the capability to use audio, visual and written recordings in order to provide a comprehensive experience of *waiata*.

The website itself has been constructed in a well-organised manner with a simple layout with the purpose of making it easy to use and navigate. This was of primary importance so as to make it as accessible as possible. The repository was also constructed with the view that it has a modern dynamic feel to appeal to users. The option of viewing the information in English or in *te reo Māori* is another key feature of the site.

The primary objectives of the site are:

- To preserve *waiata* and *haka* (especially compositions that have not been recorded elsewhere)
- To improve access of Māori to *waiata* and *haka*
- To provide a resource for learning and   another means for Māori to 'publish'
- And finally, to ensure Māori control of   Māori knowledge.

Summary and conclusions

The importance of preserving *waiata* is based on the importance of preserving Māori history. Historically, Māori have a tradition of adapting to changing circumstances by

adopting new skills and technology for the advancement of their people. This provides the basis for which it can be argued, that Māori should seek out any new methods available for the preservation and perpetuation of *waiata* and *haka*. Apirana Ngata and Pei Te Hurinui Jones accomplished this in their time by using the written word to preserve *waiata* in the *Ngā Mōteatea* series.

The *Ngā Mōteatea* collection has proven to be an invaluable resource for Māori as it is not merely a collection of *waiata* and *haka*, but also a source of history, culture and advanced language. It is hoped that the repository will continue in this tradition.

Memory is still the most important vessel for the survival of Māori culture and tradition. The digital repository is not intended to replace memory or the oral tradition. It is hoped that the digital repository will sit alongside oral tradition in a complementary way and act as a resource to supplement the continued oral traditions of Māori.

In *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*, Ngūgī wa Thiong'o posits to starve a people of its language is to kill a people's memory bank (Thiong'o 2009: 20). Tāmata Toiere is a tool for the revitalisation of the Māori language and the preservation of the Māori culture; a digital memory bank of indigenous Māori knowledge; an archive for future generations.

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