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Abstract
Since this paper was first presented in a specific location and performative mode, it is appropriate to include traditional protocols. In accordance with Maori practice, therefore, I acknowledge the Wadiwadi people of the Wollongong region. I acknowledge those people and their ancestors, as the tangata whenua (people indigenous to this region) who, like many other indigenous groups, have witnessed the downside of Europe-based colonialism.
JO DIAMOND

He Korari Puawai: Postcolonial Raranga in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia

Dedicated to Toi Te Rito Maihi.

Since this paper was first presented in a specific location and performative mode, it is appropriate to include traditional protocols. In accordance with Maori practice, therefore, I acknowledge the Wadiwadi people of the Wollongong region. I acknowledge those people and their ancestors, as the tangata whenua (people indigenous to this region) who, like many other indigenous groups, have witnessed the downside of Europe-based colonialism.

In Aotearoa New Zealand there is a history of Maori women’s strident political activism against British colonialism that is encapsulated in the following statement:

Aotearoa is not a post-colonial society in either political or cultural terms; Aotearoa is not a post-colonial society in any terms. Every day Maori women confront colonial structures which have their roots very firmly planted in Britain. The term ‘postcolonialism’ contributes to the shifts and re-shaping of dominant discourses that espouse a false sense of neutrality whilst ensuring the maintenance of cultural dominance. (Johnson & Pihama 86)

This view is from Maori women scholars in the 1990s. For them I doubt that much has changed since then, though I also doubt that they have given up on that ‘whole way of struggle’ for redressing colonialist errors (Webster 39). I join their struggle to find viable and just alternatives to current injustices concerning Maori people, particularly women. In this paper I focus on raranga — Maori weaving that is multi-dimensional in technique, social context, meaning and metaphor.

Raranga is used as a generic term in this essay, mirroring its usage in common Ngapuhi’ speech. Raranga in this sense means weaving of any material, tangible and intangible. I use it here to describe all forms of Maori weaving ranging from the diagonal braiding usually found in kete (carry-alls and other bags) and whariki (mats) to tukutuku (wall panelling) and taniko (hand weaving with warp and weft strands of fibre).

The common denominator of these various techniques and outcomes of weaving, that in some instances are all incorporated into one object or article, is the use of fibre. This importance of fibre to raranga in Maori culture, is often transferred into a metaphorical reference and philosophical guideline for social interaction. For example, metaphorical reference to raranga materials and
techniques can be used in Maori whaikorero (speechmaking) to highlight the inter-relations of people where ‘strands’ such as legal constraints, aberrations and conformity to norms are described as an intrinsic feature of society’s untidy interwoven ‘fabric’. Indeed, such are the discourses around raranga — feminist, post-, anti- or neo-colonialist for example — that this essay is by nature inadequate. Nevertheless, I shall attempt to convey some main issues attached to raranga, not only in Aotearoa New Zealand but also in Australia. My position on postcolonialism supports the idea that political action can be ‘driven by the desire to restore the integrity of colonised peoples, and to create space for their institutions, practices, and values’ (Fleras & Spoonley 94). As a Maori woman, I elect to change the ‘their’ in this quotation to ‘our’.

However, the use of ‘our’ is problematic. Blanket assumptions that all Maori institutions, practices and values are somehow intrinsically rose-coloured and united are romantic and utopian. In a Maori world that reeks of male chauvinism, proud internal opposition exists alongside valiant wider efforts in Aotearoa New Zealand to attain equal footing within a colonialist hegemony. Maori culture survives in various forms, though somewhat tattered, following nineteenth-century European invasion. During my lifetime, though, there have been extensive legislative changes to improve the position of Maori life and culture. Some of the most notable began in the mid-1970s. The adoption of Aotearoa as an official name for the nation and the legal recognition of customary Maori land rights are two examples of many changes. Nonetheless, gender inequalities persist in Maori societies and elsewhere.

My focus, necessarily limited, is on the silence and violence inherent in raranga-based discourses. Raranga in itself is not silent or violent but it exists within and is intrinsically part of Maori culture where phallocentric attitudes and policies have continuously undermined and diminished its significance. For many Maori women, raranga has been effectively silenced by more dominant forms of (male) cultural production such as whakairo (woodcarving).

I could wax lyrical about raranga — its virtues, the beauty of its technique, its aesthetic and utilitarian qualities, its audible rhythm-in-making and other sensual qualities, our ability to hear it, to see it, to touch and smell almost taste it. I could talk about techniques for gathering raw materials, about the strength and versatility of this material. I could spend an extended period of time expounding the virtue of a particular kind of plant and its fibre. I could demonstrate how one fibre must be processed in a certain way before weaving. Nonetheless, as a student of raranga my efforts are outweighed by other Maori women such as my kaiako (teacher) the internationally recognised (though still too undersung) artist Toi Te Rito Maihi.

My artistic exploration began with my first visit to the marae called Kohewhata (near the town of Kaikohe in Northern Aotearoa New Zealand) where I first met Toi. In the accompanying photo [figure 1], Toi Maihi confers with Marokura
over raranga in February 2000. Note the multi-coloured whiri (braid) hanging in the upper centre foreground. This whiri symbolically refers to the weaving together of people and diverse forms of creativity. Created by Toi Maihi, it serves as inspiration for harmoniously interwoven social interaction and productivity.

Whilst I, as a Maori woman, produce this text on my own, I must pay homage to those many kairaranga (weavers) like Toi who maintain the art. In acknowledging them, my individualistic ‘I’ graduates into a more comfortable and appropriate, ‘we.’ ‘We’ will then continue by describing in detail the features of the ‘New Zealand monument’ on Anzac Parade in Australia’s national capital city, Canberra. Its references to raranga should not be missed.

The monument is a twin construction on the intersection of Anzac Parade and Commonwealth Avenue, Canberra. The Australian side of the monument is on the left and its Aotearoa New Zealand counterpart is on the right, corresponding to the two sides of Anzac Parade that a viewer, facing north, would see when standing between the ‘twins’ [see figures 2 and 3]. The monument’s shape represents a kete (a carry-bag made with raranga techniques) with ‘handles’ on opposite sides of the parade. Viewed from the south toward the War Memorial Museum, the right side ‘twin’ has paving designed by Toi. The twin on the left-hand side refers to Indigenous Australia and has paving designed by Daisy Nadjungdanga, an Indigenous Australian woman weaver of Maningrida (Northern Territory). These inter-cultural visual references symbolically link Maori people and Indigenous Australians. The designers commissioned the weaver’s
contributions to the paving, and the monument overall is a gift from Aotearoa New Zealand. Its official opening ceremony took place in 2001.

The same raranga-based techniques referred to in the monument have also contributed to a local Maori cultural performance group, Te Rere O Te Tarakakao in Canberra, and to the group’s pari (the women’s bodice) worn in performances. The construction of the pari incorporates green and gold woollen tapestry. This Australian version of the pari joins many others that have taniko (a form of raranga) origins and serve as another ‘text’ of Trans-Tasman raranga-based cultural interactions.

I must confess to my own temptation to elevate raranga and its Maori women practitioners above other representations and representatives of Maori culture. To do so is a counter-measure against the over-emphasis to date of male Maori cultural production. In protesting the sexism that marginalises raranga I am running against the fundamentalism that spearheads some Maori political action. There is a risk of being branded as a traitor by some people from a culture that I value highly. Equally, it is important to realise that the politics of one indigenous minority art practice discussed in a relatively safe academic environment are linked to wider, more dangerous, issues. I cannot, therefore, emphasise these rich women-based resources over and above a wider call for justice.
Thanks to my doctoral research, it is clear to me that the same enquiry that finds beauty and belonging also finds violence, pain, corruption, jealousy and, maybe even worse, apathy and complacency. In that home that I hold most dear, Aotearoa New Zealand, there are as many potential and real hotspots of oppression, violence, domination and persecution as there are opportunities for something safer, something better for us and our children. To better illustrate my reasoning, I refer the reader to the child in Carterton, Aotearoa New Zealand, who in the first year of my recent fieldwork was brutally raped and murdered while in the company of her family where she should have been safe. She had barely reached the age of two. She represents a monumental breakdown that impacts on all societies not just her own Maori community. Images from overseas of so-called anti-terrorism (that really only amounts to violence reacting against violence) show equally catastrophic effects on children. The interweaving of people that raranga-discourse expresses in a Maori or New Zealand context, offers hope against continuous and bloody conflict worldwide, but I would be selling out those kids — Maori, Afghani or any other — if I gave you all the beauty of raranga without the pain that stems from critical engagement with its practice and social context.

Raranga’s history of silence and violence is reflected in gender and power relations in all aspects of Maori culture, and indeed in the fact that the majority
of the world privileges men above, and to the overall detriment of, women and children. In the localised setting of the Maori marae, hierarchical structures exist. For example, there are managerial structures that decide upon the purchase, sale and display of items. They also direct building and maintenance projects and various social activities. Cultural meaning is affirmed, created, reaffirmed and re-created on this kind of basis. On the Kohewhata marae, the master carver, Alan Wihongi saw fit to make most executive decisions on the artwork though he was in council on occasion with his raranga counterpart, Toi Maihi. Whilst participating in raranga activities at Kohewhata, it was made clear to me and the other women present that on completing our first pieces we were permitted to enter the wharenui (main ‘meeting house’) and that this was a special privilege not usually afforded to women. In fact it was incumbent upon us to prevent other women from entering the house because, according to a belief whose origins are now obscure, women are liable to contaminate the tapu (sacredness) of a wharenui under construction. It is said that this ‘contamination’ can lead ultimately to its destruction. By complying with the prohibition we contributed to our own stigmatisation as contaminants. Yet as Toi Maihi pointed out: ‘How could we know how to weave our pieces if we are prevented from seeing where they would eventually fit into the wharenui?’ Hence Toi was able to argue for the whakawatea — the permission to enter the house earlier than usual.

Toi and other Maori women, who are an important part of and make a huge contribution to marae construction and function, must struggle in this way for equal footing with men. Maori (including marae-based) prohibitions extend to the issue of whether or not women weave when menstruating, but this issue has failed to attract extensive published critical engagement. Sometimes it is best to be silent about such matters. After all, how will anyone check without a blatant invasion of personal privacy? Critical engagement with gendered inequality is sometimes mooted on marae but it can meet fierce opposition from men wanting to preserve their mana (social status). Gendered inequality on marae therefore remains a continuously contested issue.

Some gender inequalities on marae have resulted from colonialist influences as well as traditional Maori beliefs. However, when we consider oral accounts that place strong outspoken tupuna whaea (female ancestors) within our family histories, some rules that privilege men, including those on marae, can be questioned. It is not, therefore, true that our struggle for equal rights on marae necessarily results from Western/colonialist influences that turn us away from our ‘true’ Maori culture.

Engagement with issues of cultural practice also relates to education systems. In Aotearoa New Zealand these systems range from predominantly Pakeha, to bi-lingual to predominantly Maori. They can include marae-based education programmes. In schools and on marae boys — particularly, though not only, those who are Maori — are trained and encouraged toward whaikorero
(speechmaking in Maori language). This reflects the cultural profile of Maori men in ceremony that is usually far higher than that of women, even though nowadays women can sometimes be called upon to have a say (some of this is actually well-meant tokenism). The type of reo Maori (language) encouraged for girls is different from boys’ language. Such educational characteristics are based on advice of Maori elders and other Maori people in decision-making positions which are still largely the preserve of men (Connell 148–76). Under similar hegemonic systems on marae, Maori girls are generally encouraged to waiata (sing) and karanga (call) for their men when visitors arrive on a marae and this arrangement can appear antiquated to many women who have gained extensive credit in a non-Maori educational system, regularly undertaking public speaking engagements. Boys are deterred from “girls” activities though they may prefer to undertake raranga rather than whaikorero and whakairo (woodcarving). I raise the question: “Is their apparent Maori masculinity enforced against their will, just as an ideal femininity is forced onto the girls?” Where is the justice here for girls or boys, if this is the case?

Having said that, it is statistically clear that the non-Maori system does little justice to the intelligence and potential of many young Maori people irrespective of their gender. As with many foreign introductions, including the cash marketplace, Maori people have ended up the most disadvantaged. Yet women and girls are in even more danger of being silenced within both marae and other school systems unless there is pedagogical change. The fullness of raranga teaching on the level I received can positively contribute to a new educational alternative; it is a teaching that does not privilege one group of people above another, regardless of their genitalia, creed, economic status and so on. Women and men must both take active part in this change.

Structural inequality also extends to the market place. It does not take a genius to see the commercial potential of raranga. In fact, it has been selling well for years and more recent innovations such as backpacks and flax flowers are hot on the market. The international tourist dollar is attracted as much as the domestic one. Commodities need not be good quality to sell and capitalist ventures can prevail over spiritual concerns such as those imbued into raranga items by Maori people.

Toi Maihi, for example, considers her raranga and other forms of creativity ranging from painting to writing, as taonga (things highly valued for their historical and spiritual power rather than their market value), thus privileging Maori cultural perspectives. Yet extensive experience has convinced her (and me) that raranga is not valued as highly as other taonga by Maori people and that patriarchal systems violate women by not fully acknowledging their knowledge and creativity. Equally, current commercial practices do not place raranga on an equal footing with other forms of Maori cultural production. Post-World War II economic and social changes saw raranga increasingly equated
with domestic ‘women’s work’, and professional ‘men’s work’ increased in social status in both Maori and Pakeha (‘white’) social circles. Raranga barely survived these ‘modern’ changes, being displaced and devalued by a European-based capitalist system. Its resurgence amongst Maori women practitioners is a relatively recent development and rides a tide of increasing assertion amongst Maori women of themselves and their creative talents. In this process, a Maori cultural holism has been promoted by kairaranga that seeks not only to preserve and replenish supplies of fibre but extends to concerted lobbying for cultural and environmental sustainability that opposes rampant commercialism.

The current market economy geared towards tourism designates raranga items as more valuable and therefore more expensive if they carry a certificate of authenticity. However, the purchaser does not necessarily see the mechanisms determining this certification. It is not always clear whether extensive consultation with appropriate Maori authorities to determine a ‘truly Maori item’ and its value has taken place, and market forces are more likely to determine its value and that of the culture it comes from. This is a most inadequate response given the rich and varied number of investments, beyond monetary gain, that kairaranga make with their cultural production. Increased visibility of raranga objects does not mean the defeat of power relations that perpetuate various modes of violence and silencing.

Exhibitions have only promoted raranga and kairaranga directly in the last few years, having previously expended more energy on promoting painting, whakairo and other ‘men’s work’ instead. Published literature about Maori art does not yet provide an in-depth engagement with kairaranga (weavers). Most literature talks about technique and omits other questions such as the identity and thoughts of the kairaranga, sometimes because a male author is not privy to such things. Thanks to the valuable efforts of a few, including an even smaller but growing number of Maori women, such as Toi Maihi, this situation is set to change.

I wish to end this short foray into a vast world of raranga-related discourse with one final reflection. The monument on Anzac Parade in Canberra bears an inscription that gives equal credit to both Toi Maihi and Alan Wihongi. Toi Maihi was in fact the paving’s sole designer. Here is a woman who is currently under commission for numerous projects including a work in Whangarei, the large town nearest where she lives. She lives in Kaikohe near a prison building-site and amongst others has actively campaigned against it on social, cultural and environmental grounds. Her artistic and teaching involvement and background is extensive, as is her community consciousness. Although she is not afraid to speak in public she has, in terms of the Anzac monument, been silenced in Australia by not being consulted prior to the plaque’s construction and unveiling. Her artistic talent and hard work has been muffled by a system that privileged a man over her, that allowed credit to be wrested from her and from raranga.
Nevertheless, Toi Maihi’s life’s work represents hope in the face of a kind of corruption and violence that is by no means the total and exclusive preserve of men. There is much for we people (of various genders and persuasions) who critically engage with raranga to weave, unravel and weave again. Our raranga (whether seen as postcolonial or not) is an act based on social conscience and consciousness. It is part of our Trans-Tasman and international educational imperative that involves rigorous and responsible analysis and critique. As the title of my essay He korari puawai (the flax flower blooms) attests, then and only then will the flax flower of raranga discourse reach its full maturity and recognition.

NOTES
1 A Maori iwi, or tribal group, of northern Aotearoa New Zealand to which I belong.
2 I am making an oblique reference here to the lake reed called kuta that can reach at least two metres in height and once gathered is dried for weaving into a variety of items. It is my current favourite amongst the fibres I am familiar with.

WORKS CITED