

# (RE) SHAPING AND (RE) ARTICULATING TRADITIONAL ECONOMY

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## ABSTRACT

Native peoples participation in modern and post-modern practices is often viewed as outside of what is considered traditional and therefore, when choosing to participate, questions around authenticity rise.

But many of the Kai Tahu people of Southern New Zealand would argue against this. Generations of *whanau* (family) have participated in traditional practices of food gathering, particularly with the *Titi* (muttonbird) harvest. Elements of this have evolved. These have been managed through the adoption and adaptation of new technologies by the *whanau* involved in the practice.

Underpinning all this are core concepts that inform practice: concepts centered around identity politics. While the 'what' and the 'how' of practice may change, the basic concepts remain stable.

Practices such as altered political economies, alternative transactional economies, and electronic art; all play their part in how the Kai Tahu people define themselves as traditional, at the same time being active agents for change.

## Introduction

New Zealand is a nation at the bottom of the world. It comprises principally of two main islands with many small outlying islands. It is often described as a very young country and the last country on earth to be settled.

The indigenous peoples, now known collectively as Maori, arrived in New Zealand from Eastern Polynesia over a thousand years ago and settled in various parts of the country. They consist of many distinct groups, structuring themselves, socially and politically as *Iwi* (tribes). They often share geographic boundaries and certain understandings regarding creation stories and associated customs but consider themselves to be independent socio-political entities, akin to Clans in the Scottish high and lowlands or even nations, if we were to consider the North American experience. The *Iwi* that this story refers to is known as Kai Tahu.

## Kai Tahu Economic Theory

Kai Tahu economies, pre-European contact, were based primarily on a migratory hunter-gatherer system that relied on sets of social norms and controls or political economies.

One of the corner stone philosophies is *whakapapa* (genealogy). Broadly speaking this describes the ancestry of individuals as a part of an interlinked history that includes the genetic profile as well as socio-political interconnectivity of individuals to groups and of groups to each other. It refers to relationships that bind people, places and events, which in turn underpin understandings around actions, rights (rites), and responsibilities. These are not based on an ideal of race, but around the construct of lineage and familial connection.

The concept of *whakapapa* is central to Kai Tahu understandings of identity as part of a larger narrative that stems from creation stories<sup>i</sup>. The creation stories of our ancestors, tell of the innate connection of people and the environment both being progeny of the relationship between the land and the sky<sup>ii</sup>. This builds the base for the eco-political connection from which a related set of rights and obligations arise.

These can be articulated as *Mana Whenua* (integrity of the land). Often the term *takata* (people) *whenua* (land) is used literally to describe the people of the land. The (now) common, and widely accepted articulation of this concept in referring to people with a relationship to a particular geographic area is *mana whenua*. This provides acknowledgement of the responsibility to ensure that the *Mana*, the integrity<sup>iii</sup> of people and land stay intact. As an extension on *whakapapa*, *mana whenua* relies on significant connectivity between people and landscape. This relies also on mutually beneficial relationship between the two, which can be articulated as *ahi kaa* (*ahi*, fire and *kaa* burning).

This metaphor is used to articulate the undisturbed connection that people have to a certain geographic area. This connection goes on through time so long as the metaphorical fires are kept burning. Once those fires are extinguished or left to die on their own, then the individual or group no longer has access to that area or the resources that are held there.

An interpretation of this could be economic and cultural sustainability. 'Resources', tangible (economic), and intangible (cultural) need to be maintained with a view to sustain people here and in the future. People sustain the land and land feeds the people. This leads to food harvesting concepts like *mahika kai* (food gathering), which culminate in trading and feasting traditions *kaihaikai*.

As a specific concept, *kaihaikai* is often used to describe a feast where members of different *hapu* (sub-tribes) come together to share the specialty food of the area. It can also include the economy of trading food and/or related

products between *whanau* (families) and *hapu*. This trading allowed for a variety in diet as well as the building and subsequent strengthening of relationships. In the days prior to contact with Europeans and the introduction of an agrarian cash economy, *kaihawkai* the trading economy as well as understanding of the interconnectedness that the notion of *mana whenua* depended on.

### Mixed Marriage People

New Zealand was 'discovered' and charted by Europeans in the mid 1600s by the Dutch, but it wasn't until the 1770's, with the arrival of the English through Captain James Cook, that a period of sustained European contact and colonization occurred.

The first wave of this, particularly in the Southern regions, was an economic colonization via the global sealing industry. This started in earnest in the 1790s, with a number of ships making contact with Kai Tahu, particularly on the South/South-Western coastline

One of the peculiarities of this industry was its shore-based nature. Gangs of *takata pora*<sup>iv</sup> (people of the boats) would be dropped off in remote areas or islands to be picked up again, at times after two to four months. Occasionally ships would go missing at sea and gangs would be left for extended periods of time<sup>v</sup>. During this time, the European sealers would interact with the native population<sup>vi</sup>. There are individual stories of these interactions<sup>vii</sup> and by the 1820's, mixed 'marriage'<sup>viii</sup> communities started to arise such as that on *Whenua Hou*<sup>ix</sup> Island<sup>x</sup>. As opposed to some stories of colonization, 'mixed blood'<sup>xi</sup> marriages and offspring were viewed as a strategic advantage by Kai Tahu. This was due to the perception of *whakapapa* (genealogy) being the key to self-identification, and that by having shared *whakapapa* individuals and their families enjoyed the rights and privileges of both lineages. While the island itself is now a wildlife sanctuary, the progeny of these marriages still live in the area today<sup>xii</sup>.

The sealing industry in New Zealand collapsed by the 1830's and was replaced with shore-based whaling. This saw the eventual disintegration of 'satellite' sealing communities like that on *Whenua Hou* and the establishment of other 'European' influenced townships. These townships were located on the site of *hau kaika*, Kai Tahu villages and at first were reliant on the inhabitant native communities for labor and food<sup>xiii</sup>.

Both of these sets of communities became what Richard White (1991) would term, the "Middle Ground<sup>xiv</sup>": not European and not native, out of which came new systems of meaning and exchange. Kai Tahu, and conversely their visitors, was interacting with new knowledges, rituals, and ideals.

The native economy, both transactional and political, was changing. The adoption of technologies such as pigs, potatoes, and whaleboats<sup>xv</sup> by Kai Tahu had seen a shift from reliance purely on the seasonal hunter-gatherer, to more

permanent settlement in and around these townships. The model of *kaihawkai* (trading food) was supplemented by cash economy and land became viewed as a commodity. Kai Tahu enjoyed the opportunities and threats of the new world. This is not to say that there was a wholesale movement away from traditional *mahika kai* (food gathering). Many practices were continued, for example the collection of *titi* (muttonbird). This will be expanded on later.

In 1840 New Zealand's 'founding document' the Treaty of Waitangi was signed. This legitimized the processes of colonization by formalizing a relationship with the British sovereign and allowed for mass migration and settlement from Europe, especially but not exclusively, from Britain. The result of this was a change in the balance of population, and subsequently power, in New Zealand. This power differential resulted in the systematic alienation of Maori from the economic base and the destabilization of culture and language.

This time in New Zealand history reflects many similar colonizer/aboriginal encounters. But the retelling of these national narratives can the regional responses to change. In this instance, the 'Northern' Maori experience of this era differs significantly from that of the 'Southern', Kai Tahu<sup>xvi</sup>. The northern was a story of conquest and the forceful removal from land by the agents of the state. These agents included native conscripts from other tribes, co-opted partially by the promise of favor from the settler forces of the time. This along with other mechanisms of colonization led to a general feeling of mistrust between natives and colonizers and added to the historic ill feeling between *Iwi* (tribes).

The early interaction between the *takata pora* (people of the boats) and Kai Tahu meant that by 1840 the south had a considerable percentage of population that were "half-caste" or mixed breed. The question of 'what race' was therefore answered with 'which whakapapa'. This is where we will turn back to the practice of *mahika kai* (food gathering), and in particular, the *titi* (mutton bird) harvest.

### Traditional Harvest

*Titi* are harvested off two distinct groups of islands south of the mainland. The most remote being 8 hours by boat. The rights, and obligations to participate in this economy are reliant on *whakapapa*, if your family has associations (*ahi kaa*) with an area, then you have the rights of sustainable access to the resources of that area (*mana whenua*).

Our family has had constant contact with a particular area on a particular island. Like many *Kai Tahu whanau* (families), ours' largely live an urbanized lifestyle, and we are keen adopters (and adapters) of technology. For two months of the year, we persist with our continuous contact with the last remaining parts our pre-historic economy, the harvesting and trading of *Titi* (mutton bird). These two months spent on small off shore islands form the core of our self-identity and quite often our economy. The remaining time on the mainland, can often be perceived as the 'alternative' economy.

As long as I remember, the trip to the 'Island' was a year round preoccupation building materials, lengths of timber, old doors and windows, sheets of corrugated iron were hunted and collected. In February and early March, the final details were put in place and the week before the 15th of March,<sup>xvii</sup> was engaged with packing the stores and getting everything for the right tide on the night of the 14th.

This preoccupation was not isolated to our whanau. Many others in the South filled in the other 42 weeks in the year with mundane tasks (occupation on the mainland) that allowed for the annual harvest. Some would only work in seasonal occupations that would allow time for the harvest. This pattern is in itself, a continuation of older practices around the seasonality of tasks.

Technology has changed the practice over time. From travelling in double-hulled *waka* (canoes) to clinker rowing boats to diesel motor boats and now helicopters. Birds were once preserved in their own fat; this was superseded when sealers brought with them the practice of salting, and now many 'birders'<sup>xviii</sup> use generators to run freezers. The deliberate adoption (and adaption) of these types technologies, by us and for us, has kept our traditional practices current, relevant and authentic.

A conversation with a cousin displayed the importance of the Titi islands on his self-identification. On the Island he made the statement to me "... Down here I'm a billionaire, I wouldn't even sell this for a billion dollars! I'm a 'Birder'. That's what I am"<sup>xix</sup>.

This was a profound statement. My cousin and many like him don't speak the Maori language, don't do *karakia* (ritualistic prayer) in the morning or live in a house surrounded by carvings. But he has a very strong sense of identity that is informed by the landscape of the Island and the practices that have been headed down to him through *whanau* and *whakapapa*.

## Electronic Art

Contemporary Kai Tahu artists such as Rachael Rakena and Simon Kaan are involved in the harvest and collection of narrative and use electronic media that allow for other of our *whanau* (families) to participate in practices that they may have been alienated from. They also invite people to virtually share in the philosophy of *kaihaikai*, ritualistic sharing of food. The essential text of their work is around native peoples and their undisturbed connection to landscape and identity, engaging in and with technology to (re)shape and (re)articulate traditional economies. In doing so guaranteeing participation in the future of tradition making that is informed by traditional practice, using all the tools of modernity.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> See Tau, T. (2001). The Death of Knowledge: Ghosts on the Plain. *New Zealand Journal of History*, 35, 2.

<sup>ii</sup> This is told in the Rakinui (Skyfather)/ Papatuanuku (Earthmother) creation story.

<sup>iii</sup> This is my understanding of the term Mana. Dictionary definitions see mana as being pride or prestige but these terms merely touch the surface of this concept

<sup>iv</sup> This was our name for those that came on the boats.

<sup>v</sup> One story tells of a gang dropped on Solanders Island in 1808 and not retrieved until May 1813! McNab, R. (1907). *Murihiku*. William Smith Printer, Invercargill Pg. 150

<sup>vi</sup> For example Begg, A.C. and N.C. Begg. (1979) *The World of John Boulton*. Wellington.

<sup>vii</sup> See "Jimmy The Boy" in McNab (1907)

<sup>viii</sup> The concept of marriage could be debated here. However there is evidence of Maori women living with European sealers. Several of these were to be recognized as marriages by the church.

<sup>ix</sup> Whenua Hou literally translates to New Land.

<sup>x</sup> This was a community established especially for the families of those relationships noted above.

<sup>xi</sup> See Raibmon, P. (2005). *Authentic Indians*. Duke University Press.

<sup>xii</sup> The progeny of Wharetutu and sealer George Newton numbers well over 5000 today! Anderson, A. Newton, Wharetutu Anne- Biography, from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara-The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 1 – Sept- 10

<sup>xiii</sup> Kai Tahu farms, based on the new technologies of the agrarian economy, were supplying potatoes and pork to the whaling ships and a growing export trade.

<sup>xiv</sup> White, R. (1991). *The Middle Ground: Indian Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650 – 1815*. Cambridge press. New York.

<sup>xv</sup> This comment comes from Tipene O'Regan Hocken Lecture University of Otago, May 2002

<sup>xvi</sup> The writer can see the irony of arguing a homogenizing national narrative in favor of a semi-homogenizing North-South divide.

<sup>xvii</sup> This is a self-imposed regulation. The Islands are managed by committee elected by the beneficiaries who hold the whakapapa.

<sup>xviii</sup> A term used to describe members people who participate in the harvest.

<sup>xix</sup> Personal communication.