

Ka whawhai tonu mātou: The interminable problem of knowing others

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Two events from the archives

Two scenes recur in my writing and in my thinking at the moment. There are many more such scenes; but these two are useful enough for my purposes today. Both scenes appear in books about our history; one more prominently than the other.

It is barely noted in any book, but at least one historian makes passing mention of a dramatic event on the beach at Rangihoua in the Bay of Islands, in December 1814. The first group of Pakeha settlers had arrived in the Bay. These English people, led by the missionary Samuel Marsden, had been accompanied to New Zealand from Australia by several chiefs from the Bay of Islands area, including Korokoro and Ruatara. According to Marsden's Journal¹, on the morning a couple of days after their coming into the bay, the new arrivals were provided with a bit of "entertainment" in the form of a "mock battle" apparently planned by the chiefs.

The chief Korokoro arrived alongside their ship, accompanied by about ten canoes filled with nearly 200 warriors in magnificent dress; after some pleasantries, Marsden and his companion John Nicholas, and the settlers, were invited into Korokoro's large canoe and were raced to the shore. Up a nearby valley were about two hundred more (male and female) warriors, of Ruatara's tribe, also impressively dressed in red ochre. As the canoes landed, those arriving and those on the land engaged in a spectacular, and frightening engagement with weapons, much noise and rushing back and forth.

¹ John Rawson Elder, ed., *The Letters and Journals of Samuel Marsden 1765-1838* (Dunedin: Coulls Somerville Wilkie and A. H. Reed, 1932), 92.

Marsden and Nicholas² refer in their Journals to this “sham fight” – which they found quite frightening, and where they “found it impossible to keep up”³ along the beach. [For those of you interested, Rangihoua, also known as Oihi, is near Te Tii].

The next day, another dramatic, though rather less vigorous, event occurred, again recorded by both Marsden and Nicholas. Near the scene of the previous day's commotion, Marsden delivered a sermon; he spoke about the gospel at some length to three or four hundred people (presumably those who had taken part in the previous day's fight). The chief of local area, Ruatara, had on his own volition arranged the event, and had erected a small stage on which Marsden could stand. Marsden could not speak in Maori, and the audience could not understand English. We know from Marsden's journal that Ruatara translated. (Ruatara could speak reasonably good English due to his prior experience as a sailor on European ships and a period of time living with Marsden in Australia). At the end of proceedings, during which the crowd were kept in order by Korokoro and Hongi Hika (dressed in regimental uniforms they had picked up in Australia), the people rose in a great *haka* – in joyful gratitude, concluded Nicholas for “the solemn spectacle they had witnessed”⁴. Marsden recorded that the first sermon had been preached on New Zealand soil⁵, and this is how many remember the event today – as we can see from the captions to these paintings made in the 1960s to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the first sermon. A concrete monument called Marsden's Cross now marks the spot.

These little stories appear simply to *describe* two events that happened: a mock fight and a sermon.

² John Liddiard Nicholas, *Narrative of a Voyage to New Zealand, Performed in the Years 1814 and 1815, in Company with the Rev. Samuel Marsden, Principal Chaplain of New South Wales*, vol. 1 (London: Printed for James Black and Son, 1817), 193-200.

³ Nicholas, *Narrative of a Voyage to New Zealand*, vol 1, 179

⁴ Nicholas, *Narrative of a Voyage to New Zealand*, vol 1, 206.

⁵ A mass was celebrated by the Catholic chaplain on de Surville's ship in 1769 – technically the first religious service in NZ.

Critique

I want to assert that *there was no fight* and *there was no sermon*, and indeed *there were no missionaries* at these events. In saying this, I would appear to be challenging reality, described by the evidence in the archives. After all, these were eye-witness accounts – faithfully and in detail recorded by Marsden and Nicholas, who were there.

If we take my assertion that *there was no sermon* seriously, without any argument just for the moment, there is clearly an ontological problem (at least, there is clearly a problem with my view of reality): either the material events of the sermon and the fight happened, *or* they did not; missionaries were present, *or* they were not.

I want to equivocate: I raise the possibility – I mean, the *impossibility* – that these events I have described *did* take place and that they *did not*.

Within the contradiction of '*x and not-x*', as some philosophers might put it, resides impossibility, and interminability (or irresolvability).

I am fascinated by these states – when *things do not add up* and *when they could never add up*. When they *cannot* and *could not* 'make sense'. That is, when we cannot settle on something. Being unsettled, being disconcerted, is the generative ground for new ideas...

... I'll get defensive for a moment: I know some of my Education colleagues will be suspicious of my preoccupation with something that appears both negative and not practical. They will suggest that my interest in theory, and more particularly in '*impossibility*', is merely an abstract (not to mention depressing) *distraction* from a more legitimate and concrete educational concern. That is, concern with the 'hard reality' of studying, and improving, 'teaching and learning processes' ... particularly when Maori education achievement statistics are so alarming.

My response to my colleagues' worry about my so-called distraction is emphatic. The interminable tension between incompatible ideas fascinates me as an educationist because – *far from being an irrelevancy* – this tension is central to the problem of teaching and learning.

It may seem a paradox, but 'x and not-x' – of *impossibility* in the way the world is – is, I think, central to the ongoing *educational relationships* between Māori and Pākehā. And ultimately, it is in strong, positive, engaged *relationships*, more than in a set of statistically-significant 'best practices', that I believe education has / can have real purchase.

Title of the lecture

I realise I have snuck away from my startling and contradictory claims about historical events involving Samuel Marsden and Ruatara – I promise I will return to these.

First, I want to make a clarification, and then explain the title of this lecture.

Here is my clarification: Although I use the term *Māori* here, I actually refer to 'Māori-as-Māori' which seems now to be an indispensable phrase, because it enables Māori to appear in our discussion as Professor Mason Durie demands: '*as Māori*' and not just as "diverse New Zealanders", or "people with a Māori background".

This is not a trivial point.

Consider the difference in these questions: 'can Māori do better from the education system?' compared with 'can Māori-as-Māori do better from the education system?' These questions suggest quite different responses. Taking my lead from Professor Durie, I am most attentive to the second question – it is a deeply difficult but important question for all of us interested in Education.

That was a clarification; now the title of my lecture. It was going to be ‘Beyond the Missionary Position’, but it ended up the more po-faced, and perhaps enigmatic, ‘*Ka whawhai tonu mātou*: the interminable problem of knowing others’.

As you might have guessed, I took part of the title from Professor Ranginui Walker’s popular book (first published in 1990) which is entitled *Ka Whawhai Tonu Mātou: Struggle Without End*. Ranginui Walker in turn took a phrase attributed to the chief Rewi Maniapoto when in 1864 he led a resistance against the invasion of the Waikato by government troops. When called on by the troops to surrender at a place called Orakau, Rewi is said to have retorted: “ka whawhai tonu matou, ake ake ake” – [that is: “we will fight on against you for ever and ever”]⁶.

Whether or not Rewi did in fact utter these words at this time, the phrase has come for many to name the *orientation* of Māori-as-Maori towards Pākehā. This pose of struggle, as Ranginui Walker suggests, is *interminable* – without end: *ake ake ake*.

Interminability

Many people – particularly Pākehā, and many Māori – find this interminability, this apparent *endlessness*, hopeless and alarming. It suggests that there *is inevitably* a conflict, and that there is to be no resolution, no happy ending, no ‘getting over it’, and no positive research report, at the end of it!

Especially to us in Education, the idea of interminable struggle is anathema. We like a good ending / resolution. Education as a field is obsessed with locating the problems for which we believe *redemptive solutions* can be found. We have always been rather good at finding what I’d call ‘problem-solutions’ [problems and solutions that suggest each other] like: reaching one’s potential, effective teaching, measurable learning outcomes, equal opportunities

⁶ Manuka Henare, “Maniapoto, Rewi Manga ? – 1894,” in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, www.dnzb.govt.nz/ (updated June 22, 2007).

The ‘problem-solution’ orientation is particularly marked with regard to Māori educational achievement. At every opportunity, we learn about ‘Māori achievement’ as a problem, a *comprehensible* problem, *solvable* by best practices and the reformed attitudes of teachers.

After expensive research investigations we typically come more-or-less to the conclusion that: “*good* teaching leads to *good* learning outcomes” or “*effective* teaching leads to *better* achievement”. These marvellously *banal* sentiments are so common these days we barely notice their circular self-referentiality!

Now if we have an education system so focused on solving the problem of Māori achievement (and we have to remember that this is a focus of Pākehā *and* Māori educationists) – in the face of this apparent determination to ‘make things better’, why should many Maori take up a posture of interminable struggle?

As a Pākehā, I cannot answer this question from any sort of ‘Māori’ perspective, of course. I can, however, pose the question a little differently, taking Ranginui’s book title seriously:

what is interminable – that is, what is insoluble, impossible, ceaseless, unending, incessant – about the *educational relationship* between Pākehā and Māori-as-Māori?

And how might Pakeha take seriously and respond positively to Rewi Maniopoto and Ranginui Walker’s apparent invitation to an endless struggle?

As a way of responding to this, I return to the scenes on the beach about which I was trying to make some ontological trouble earlier.

Back to the beach with different stories

[I must here acknowledge again the role of my Ngati Porou co-researcher Dr Kuni Jenkins, and Ngapuhi scholar Professor Pat Hohepa in the development of this argument. *Tēna korua, aku rangatira; tena ano koe, e Kuni*]

I provocatively asserted that *there was no fight*. Let's see there, in the vigorous movement on the beach, a *pōwhiri* or *waka taki*: a choreographed and deeply pedagogical event in which the people of the area greeted and established a relationship with the new arrivals, and the chiefs began to signal the possible place of the settlers amongst the people, and within the chiefs' plans for their *hapū*. In its simplest terms, the *pōwhiri* took the arrivals into the *hapū*, to be protected and developed as useful allies and friends.

Then the sermon. *There was no sermon*. There was a political meeting, again organised and choreographed by the leading chiefs of the area, within which Ruatara got to speak about the strangers now coming to live permanently – at his behest – in this place. Remember, Marsden, preaching from St Luke, *did not speak te reo Māori*, and the people aside from Ruatara, and one or two others, *did not understand English*.

We do not know what Ruatara said, but it is highly improbable that he attempted a translation of the words of St Luke [“*Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy ...*”]. It is far more likely that he made a heartfelt speech about why he had brought these people here, what he had seen in Australia and how this group were powerful and a source of good things, including horses and wheat [Ruatara was particularly interested in agriculture]. He may have mentioned his plans for a European-style school, and the teacher who had arrived amongst the settlers. Ruatara would probably also have talked about the Pakehas' anxieties about the infamous incident a few years before when many Pakeha from the ship the *Boyd* were killed in the nearby harbour of Whangaroa. He would have insisted that the people must be good to the new arrivals.

While the haka would certainly have respected Marsden's chiefly status as denoted by the previous day's *pōwhiri*, it was likely to have been an expression of the status - the

danger and importance – of the situation led by Ruatara, and the people's (at least contingent) support of Ruatara's leadership, including his decision to invite these people to live permanently within the body of the *iwi*.

In other words, at this first significant hui held between Maori and Pakeha, organised by Maori, Marsden's talk was *te kiinaki o te whaikorero o Ruatara*. Rather than Ruatara simply helping Marsden, we can see Marsden as *Ruatara's* unwitting assistant, as Ruatara persuaded the people to accept *his* futuristic plans.

So... here's the impossibility: we have two very different sets of material events apparently occurring at the same time.

On the one hand, there is a *fight* and a *sermon* determined by Marsden's needs and authority (these events are recorded in the archives);
on the other, a *powhiri* and a social-political *hui* determined and arranged largely by Ruatara (the archives do not record *these* events).

Only a social construction of reality?

“So what?” you might say, “we learned this in ‘Social Construction of Reality 101’! There are simply *different readings* to be taken of the events – a Māori reading and a Pākehā reading (there was a sermon if you look at it *this* way, and a hui if you look at it *another* way)... Interesting, perhaps, as an example of problems with cross-cultural understanding, but not *that* important. And *not* an indication of impossibility or interminability. Cross-cultural communication mix-ups and confusions *can* be solved if we work together and engage in dialogue”.

My argument is that if we take this view – in the standard interpretivist and relativist fashion – that there are two possible readings of these historical events and we ought to be familiar with *both* in order to get the 'whole picture', or to 'identify difference and multiplicity in order to resolve these' – if we take this kind of popular *inclusive*

view / to reach a settlement – we *miss*, indeed, we *avoid* some extremely significant points.

Deep incompatibility

If we examine the different accounts closely, we find not just *difference* but a *deep incompatibility* in the meanings of the events.

The two readings *cannot* merely sit together in some 'rounded out, multiply-layered' picture of bi-cultural reality, as liberal interpretivists might have it. They offer *entirely contrary* accounts of
what is going on,
who is present,
who is making decisions, and
who has authority.

- A *sham fight* is an entertaining performance for the amusement of the arrivals; it indicates *their* power and authority; the play-fighters' primary desire is to please the audience by their amusing antics. No particular relationship is established.

A *powhiri* on the other hand, is a vigorous manifestation of *the people's and chiefs'* authority and *mana*, where the new arrivals necessarily act in relation to the *tangata whenua*. The flow of power runs through all the people present as they establish their new relationship, which encompasses them all.

- What about the sermon? A *sermon* is the *provision* and *reception* of the word and authority of god. *Missionaries* (or preachers) are present, doing this work. A *haka* at the end of a sermon is a signal of a recognition of and receptivity to the message...

On the other hand, an acclaimed *political speech* as part of a hui is an *assertion* of the word and authority of a man and his ancestry and position. A responsive *haka* is a manifestation of his influence and the significance of the situation. There are *no missionaries* here at the *hui*; the main Pakeha speaker – in this case, Marsden – merely represents the people who have come to engage with us, and give us access to some useful things.

In other words,

- The fight/sermon [Pakeha] story reinforces the idea that assimilation and colonisation of Maori has started, and that Pakeha authority is recognised, even accepted, and becoming established.
- The powhiri/hui [Maori] story suggests that *Maori* authority is beginning to be imposed upon the new arrivals, and that assimilation of Pakeha into Maori society has started; this approach does not assert any pre-story of colonisation – rather, a struggle to engage with Pakeha has begun.

If we are to *abandon* the idea that we can find the ‘truth’ here about *what was actually happening* in December 1814, and if we *cannot* place the two contrary realities *alongside each other* in a ‘rich bicultural understanding’, or ‘a celebration of diversity’, what then becomes possible?

Interminable tension – but necessary

All that becomes possible is a tension. Contradictory and irreconcilable realities sit **in interminable tension** with the other. And in the *tension* between contradictory realities is the *ake ake ake*, the endless struggle – to know, to read, to understand, to work with, *to engage with*, others.

If I return to my previous question, and the posture of endless struggle taken by many Maori in relation to so-called mainstream education:

“what is interminable about the educational relationship between Pākehā and Māori-as-Māori?

... it is the struggle that *forms in the contradictions* between the various realities and practices that express who we are.

Of course, to recognise the contradictions, to see that some things may be incomprehensible and not mutually-resolvable, is an inherent part of the struggle.

And this struggle is what is most difficult, and most interesting, about the educational relationship between Pakeha and Maori-as-Maori. The struggle – if we can engage in it – is both positive and *necessary*.

[By struggle, I do not mean a *battle* in which someone must ‘win’, and where some get worn out. I understand the idea of ‘struggle’ as difficult, but positive and energised engagement, where each is taken seriously].

Without the struggle, things are not looking so good. Let me explain this provocative remark.

Resistance to the idea of struggle

A bit of reassurance first: Before we all throw up our hands in despair, or resistance to the idea of embracing an endless struggle, it is important to realise that I am *not* suggesting we *give up* on optimism, practical solutions, 'effective teaching', 'best practice', progress and happy endings in Education.

Quite the contrary. Optimism, redemption and solutions are the *necessary fantasies* of educationists; those fantasies motivate our getting up in the morning, they are our carrots... we are like donkeys chasing carrots on sticks.

We do not need to be despairing donkeys. We become *intelligent* (or less despairing) donkeys when we know that the carrot *is always / will always be / is inevitably out of reach*, at the same time recognising that its very out-of-reach-ness is *necessary* to keep us moving forward.

I am not sure I want to push the donkey analogy.

How else to get a bit happy about an endless struggle? Why might I assert that there is much to be gained from a struggle?

The necessary struggle / relationship

In *ka whawhai tonu mātou* we are *engaged* in a relationship. This has to be seen positively, given it *is engagement*; it is not *dis-engagement*. To struggle with another is to give active and proper *attention* to the other, to *relate* to the other. Even as an enemy you are *hoariri* or *hoa whawhai* – an angry 'friend': one with whom it is worth engaging, someone with whom you have a *relationship* of struggle.

Ake ake ake makes the engagement or relationship *permanent*; this must be like a marriage of *some* sort! (and not a divorce)

...and avoidance [1]

Many, however, seek to avoid, suppress or subvert the necessary struggle. This strategy is taken up in different ways by Maori and Pakeha ... An example of Pakeha subversion, with which some of us are familiar, was the 'voting out' of the practice of karakia at the beginning of Education Faculty meetings this year, by small majority of Pākehā staff, on the grounds that the karakia was a 'religious' event in a secular environment.

Whatever the arguments, the *effect* of such a democratic ruling is to remove the tension which is lived out, however weakly or inadequately, in the small moment of the *karakia*.

In the Faculty meeting with no karakia, the triumph of the desire to *resolve something interminably difficult* means only that we no longer need to experience the uncomfortable and contradictory realities that would otherwise confront us at that moment. In my view, we risk something important – not simply Maori goodwill which is important enough, but when pakeha ‘comfort’ is victorious, we all lose an opportunity to remain within a *relationship* of struggle.

...and avoidance [2]

The struggle – the relationship – is avoided, particularly by Pakeha, in other ways.

We might return again to Ruatara and Marsden for an illustration which remains resonant.

In the fight and sermon scenes, Pakeha were physically present. But they were *not in a struggle*, or an *engaged reciprocal relationship* with Maori; the eyewitness writers, at least, expressed no real curiosity about the social importance of the events in which they were participating, nor did they seek to learn from the people. They had come with some important information and goods they sought to impart to Maori, and which they believed would be good for Maori. Marsden, in his speech, assumed Maori needed and wanted what he had to say; he did not appear to enquire from Ruatara what he had said, substantially, to the hui.

All this is unsurprising perhaps, because Marsden and his people were at a fight and a sermon. They were not at a powhiri and a hui. And *this* may be explained by Marsden being an English church-man of his time, confident about the certainty of his own truths and desires. We should not expect anything else of Marsden, perhaps.

But is it possible to ask, almost two hundred years later:

are Maori still waiting for a positive response from Pakeha to that first powhiri, to the invitation for ongoing engagement in a reciprocal relationship?

Or are Pakeha still largely *unable* to see or to understand the *powhiri*, or to participate in it properly and positively? The first Pakeha teacher and the other settlers were welcomed by Ruatara and the other chiefs, to provide, through a close, engaged *relationship*, an enrichment of their world. But the teachers – as we might gather from ambivalent Maori involvement in schooling ever since – have not been able to *hear* or properly respond to Ruatara’s original desires. The arrivals’ ears were filled with their own words and messages, and certainties, as well as their anxieties.

To what extent does this remain the case now?

We might say that Ruatara and the other chiefs and their people (from the groups now called Ngapuhi, Ngati Rehia, Ngati Hine) were struggling towards a relationship with Pakeha on that first day, and that Maori have been engaged in that rather one-sided struggle ever since.

The interesting question, of course, is: have Maori been *attempting* to struggle with Pakeha, while Pakeha largely refused to be engaging in a relationship of struggle, but have been busy with forms of colonisation, and with ‘doing good things’ for Maori?

- Should we [Pakeha *and* Maori] merely continue to assume the great Pakeha story of arrival and subsequent colonisation, a story that includes the *sham fight* and the *sermon*?
- Or might we consider more positively the implications of an interminable struggle as the basis of Maori [educational] engagement with Pakeha, a story that foregrounds the *powhiri* and the *hui*?

It is in the irresolvable *tension* between such *contradictory positions* and arguments about our relationship where thought and practice get interesting, as well as difficult, and where new thinking and practice arise in education.

I said at the beginning that the two scenes of the fight and the sermon are only two of the many we could have used to illustrate these ideas. Kuni and I continue to work at other scenes in our writing, in order to bring Maori reality to the fore. In doing this,

we seek to *enable* ... to establish ... a tension which, in the absence of a Maori account, cannot exist.

The sham fight and the sermon, on the one hand, and the powhiri and the hui on the other, I think offer deeply evocative metaphors for the interminable and generative tensions between us.

The sham fight and the sermon, of course, can be found in our written stories about ourselves; the powhiri and the hui can not...yet.

Nō reira, ka mutu ahau i te korero. Tena koutou ...