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# He Mokopirirākau: Cliff Curtis

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### **Abstract**

Mokopirirākau are native New Zealand forest geckos that metamorphosise their appearance to blend with the environment as a survival mechanism. A well-known human mokopirirākau is Te Arawa's Cliff Curtis. Arguably the world's most successful Māori screen actor, for more than twenty years, he has maintained a Hollywood 'calling card' by convincingly transfiguring himself into an array of ethnic characters: Arab to Hispanic to African-American to . . .

Here in Aotearoa, we can see that Curtis's long career in performance started when he was a school-boy, in kapa haka. Even now, he participates in an annual maurakau wānanga on Mokōia Island, and he has recently turned to competitive kapa haka at regional level with Ngāti Rongomai. Kapa haka is one of Curtis' longest practiced performance disciplines; it underscores his film performances and lends them power.

With the increased popularity of Māori-centred film and the rise of Māori TV, more kaihaka – like Curtis – are transitioning to careers on-screen. This paper asks: what power do kaihaka performers carry with them from the kapa haka stage to the screen? That is, how do they too become mokopirirākau? Further, how might the knowledge gained from kapa haka act as a scaffolding for a framework for analysing characters and performances? How could such a framework also serve to structure critical thinking both about Māori performance about non-Māori roles performed by Māori? Indeed how might a kapa

haka based analytical framework provoke new ways of thinking about performances by and for non-Māori?

## Introduction

*Kia kōrero te katoa o te tinana* (the whole body must speak)

**met•a•morphose•** (mèttə-mór-fōz, - fōss) *v.* -phosed, -phosing, -phoses. *tr.* 1. To transform, as by sorcery: “*His eyes turned blood-shot, and he was metamorphosed into a raging fiend.*” (Jack London). 2. To cause to change in form, structure, or character; subject to metamorphosis or metamorphism. – *intr.* To be change or transformed by or as it by metamorphosis or metamorphism. [French *metamorphoser*, from *metamorphose*, transformation, from METAMORPHOSIS].

**moko•piri•rākau** (mor-kor-piddy-daa-ka-u) *n.*  
moko = reptile + piri = join/cling + rākau = trees

Mokopirākau are reptiles, native to Aotearoa. When in a relaxed mode, miniscule light-reflective crystals beneath the creature’s epidermis are compacted together. But when frightened or angry, the crystals move apart, causing colour change. Mokopirākau metamorphosize to blend in with the hues of their environment, to evade predators who seek their next morsel in the forest. Such dexterity means mokopirākau are physically present yet visually absent, mistaken for leaves, trees, and the roots of shrubs. Seamlessly adapting into various sets or onto a stage is the ultimate objective of the performer. Actors emulate the mokopirākau by merging with a vast array of settings, so not to detract the viewer away from their ‘suture’

– a term borrowed by film studies from medicine to describe how viewers who are ‘stitched-in’ to a film’s narrative and a most coveted characteristic of Hollywood cinema. Like mokopirirākau, an actor may not survive in the dense coppices that are the performance industries should roles be poorly executed. However, where screen actors diverge from mokopirirākau is that they must speak, which is a most revealing sign of an actor’s successful metamorphosis into a character outside their patoi.

A well-known screen mokopirirākau is Te Arawa’s Cliff Curtis, arguably the world’s most successful Māori screen actor. Curtis’ long career in performance started when he was a school-boy, in kapa haka. Even now, he participates in an annual para whakawai, a dedicated mau rakau wānanga on Mokōia Island co-ordinated by Te Arawa’s expert in mau rākau, Mohi Mita. Curtis has also recently turned to competitive kapa haka at regional level with Ngāti Rongomai/Pikikōtuku, thus coming full-circle, back to his performance roots. In this paper, I contend that kapa haka underscores Curtis’ film performances and lends them power.

With the increased popularity of Māori-centred film and the rise of Māori TV, more kaihaka – like Curtis – are transitioning to careers on-screen and are also working as writers and directors. This paper asks: what power do kaihaka performers carry with them from the kapa haka stage to the screen? That is, how do they, too, become mokopirirākau? Further, how might the knowledge gained from kapa haka act as a scaffolding, a framework for analysing characters and performances? How could such a framework also serve to structure critical thinking both about Māori performance about non-Māori roles performed by Māori? Indeed, how might a kapa haka based analytical framework provoke new ways of thinking about performances?

At this point, I need to make plain that I am not a performance or theatre scholar; my area of expertise is in New Zealand film studies, in particular, New Zealand films that

feature Māori characters. More specifically, my work concentrates on challenging the status quo of New Zealand film studies to be inclusive of Māori, by designing and developing mātauranga Māori and mātauranga-ā-iwi based tools. The long-term objective is to ensure Māori film students have a site of commencement within the rubrics of the film studies discipline. Thus, I am approaching this paper as a film scholar, and as a competitive kaihaka, and attempt to bring them together through Te Kete Aronui and mahi-toi. In this paper I develop the mahi-toi film analysis tool that I am currently thinking through. It is neither complete, nor perfect.

### **Theoretical frameworks**

When I commenced post-graduate studies, I was recommended two theoretical trajectories upon which to build a recognisable framework: post-colonial theory and Kaupapa Māori theory. Influenced by the work of Franz Fanon, Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) proffered contrapuntalism (p. 59), also known as 'polyphony' (multiple sounds/voices) and borrowed from musical composition that use compound melodic trajectories that can stand alone, but are entwined to create a more sophisticated listening experience.<sup>1</sup> Said, a Julliard Music School trained classical pianist, used contrapuntalism as a close analysis tool of texts to expose the invisible imperialistic views of some Western authors who set their stories in exotic locales but ignored the racial injustices experienced by the indigenous people to create romantic milieus.

For instance, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* based in Antigua, flittingly mentions the African servants who worked on the sugar plantation where the novel is set, but slavery is

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<sup>1</sup> Polyphony was particularly in popular compositions by Johann Sebastian Bach and others in the Baroque period, but it infrequently used in contemporary composition.

blurred into the ‘blackground’<sup>2</sup> of the central white protagonist’s love story. A contrapuntal reading of a classic British novel such as *Mansfield Park* highlights that marginalised communities should not simply be blurred into the unfocused spaces in the frame. Although I do aim to expose and examine colonisation in film as Said does in comparative literature, he does so across cultures whereas my main objective is to construct a distinct whānau/hapū response-based analysis of Māori characters in New Zealand films. Thus I follow a monophonic pattern of reading films rather than Said’s polyphonic.

I also found Kaupapa Māori theory restricting for the required analysis. Essentially, Kaupapa Māori is a theoretical ‘space-maker’ where Māori scholars can satiate the rubrics of a particular discipline and the Māori community. Ultimately, Kaupapa Māori meets all Māori scholars irrespective of where they are at. A fundamental component of Kaupapa Māori theory is ‘being Māori’ (Smith, 1997, 1996, 1995, 1992; Pihama, 2001) which presents a number of other challenges. One crucial challenge is that Kaupapa Māori is not a framework used by either of my predominant hapū (Ngāi Taiwhakāea, Ngāti Kawa) or on our respective marae. Therefore, aside from those of us who are tertiary educated, it is not a familiar trajectory amongst the whānau who continue to generously contribute to my work. Rather, we exercise through our diverse whānau and hapū tikanga, some of which intersects with Kaupapa Māori, but most of which doesn’t. In film analysis, a reading across Māori social organisations and relatability to content and a level of ‘knowing’ is necessary when engaging in close reading of cinematic texts.

Film analysis pivots on the close reading of produced art, another rationale for looking beyond Post-Colonial and Kaupapa Māori theories. Dissatisfied, I looked to the arts for a more appropriate theoretical support structure, and Te Kete

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Blackground’ was coined by Cliff Curtis in an interview for *Mana Magazine* with Wena Harawira and Dale Husband to describe his role in Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (1993).

Aronui emerged as the most logical commencement site. Tina Fraser's (2009) understanding of Te Kete Aronui says it contains the "physical realm that can be seen, heard, felt, touched and tasted," (p. 44). To identify the senses as contents of Te Kete Aronui extends it outside the most popular and simple notion of 'the arts.' Timoti Kāretu (2008) expands Te Kete Aronui to include deep thought. He says:

It is the kete of the intellectual and the philosophers... and the philosophers of the Māori world were equally poets and philosophers anywhere [...] The body of language is being added to constantly with new compositions of haka, waiata, waiata-ā-ringa and poi, as well as short stories, the odd novel and play, and articles on various topics. (p. 88)

Itemising Fraser and Kāretū's contents of Te Kete Aronui is incredibly important, particularly in terms of why it is necessary to veer from post-colonial and Kaupapa Māori theories when considering the arts. Consequently, I pared Te Kete Aronui back to explore reading film through mahi-toi.

The mahi-toi tool materialised from an exploration of the labour intensive tāniko weaving process which I paralleled with the equally arduous film-making process. Important links between the tāniko and film-making production processes met at Te Kete Aronui and mahi-toi, and more specifically the pre-production, production and post-production phases in both arts.

Unlike Kaupapa Māori, mahi-toi is well-known to both my hapū because of the production process of starting something from scratch and completing it. For instance, each of us 'do' a small part within the scheme of a wider project whether it be working in the wharekai or wharenuī during a large kaupapa, baking rewena or fried bread, making poi, piupiu or maro, or when preparing for a kapa haka competition, all of which follow

specific – and infallible – systems. But mahi-toi is most renowned in arts production.

### **Mahi-toi – Kapa haka**

The systematic pre-production, production and post-production phases are indeed true of kapa haka. In competitive kapa haka terms, the pre-production phase of kapa haka is where a cohort or ‘core group’ of kaumātua/kuia, leaders, key performers, and composers engage in wānanga to discuss the forthcoming season, to organise the practice schedule back from the performance date and to identify when necessary milestones are to be achieved. (These hui have been known to be scheduled a year prior to the competition.) It is also a time to discuss and identify the theme, concepts, and kaupapa, to explore funding opportunities, and to sketch out waiata and haka compositions, envision actions, and to roughly tabulate choreography accordingly. A robust and well organised pre-production process sets the kapa in good stead for a smooth production phase.

The kapa haka production process is essentially the addition of people to the vision: the recruitment of kaihaka and the agonising selection process, recruiting appropriate guitarists, and a loyal and available support whānau/ringawera, who – altogether – breathe the bracket to life. In this phase, the strength or fragility of the team, their commitment to the kaupapa, leadership, structures and rōpu dynamics, new compositions, actions, and choreography are tested constantly, and returned to the overarching vision. Lastly, the post-production phase is performance day where all of the work culminates on stage, and later on television. It includes all of the last preparations of the kapa to get to the stage. The group’s commitment and efforts compound into the performance, followed by the anguish of waiting for the adjudication process, and the exhalation relief by the team

following the end of the performance after a long and intense campaign.

Although this brief appears a bulletpoint-like summary of the long and strenuous competitive kapa haka production process, doing so underlines the potential for considering arts and arts production via Te Kete Aronui and mahi-toi as a possible framework for analysis of performance on film. In this paper, I will focus primarily on pre-production, because in Cliff Curtis' performance praxis it is well-known amongst those who have directed him and worked alongside him, that the rigorous pre-production phase is his forte. Observably, a robust pre-production phase in all mahi-toi is necessary for a production phase to occur with efficiency.

The mahi-toi production process shows the level of physical, mental and spiritual work, commitment, and organisation, necessary for an effective kapa haka campaign. A very small proportion of the produced bracket is a consequence of 'nature' or natural abilities. The intense repetition of sequences, honing of poi hits, toe points, head flicks, words and harmonies, to the place where all flow through the kaihaka naturally is a more genuine account of sharpening one's skills than the notion of natural ability.

What does the discussion about natural ability say about mokopirākau then, and how do they differ from 'normal' screen actors? Cliff Curtis remains an avid exponent in mau rākau, and is one of the many Te Arawa descendants who attends the para whakawai on Mokoia Island every year. There, potential warriors learn specific style of utilising weaponry, and ideologies, theories and beliefs (Mātāmua, 2013). They are also exposed to:

Other values... such as history, whakapapa, tikanga, self-respect and self-worth, a team ethos, discipline, physical fitness and a respect for the environmental fauna and wildlife. The kaupapa

that is followed is that of the Te Arawa people (as cited in Mātāmua, p. 199).

Mau rakau and haka, as disciplines, lend power to the kaihaka/mokopirirākau because it imbues performers with a strength of self as a significant, despite small, part of something bigger: one's team, hapū and iwi, and the taiao. However, a fundamental element is the tū, the way one stands, holds and readies themselves from the moments prior to the call of the kaitātaki/kaihautū, ready to defend/perform.<sup>3</sup>

### **From Cocoa to Kaihaka**

Kaihaka were prominent in early New Zealand film history. Pioneer NZ filmmaker Rudall Hayward alleged that whilst in New Zealand producing his 'Māori' triptych (*How Chief Te Ponga Won His Bride*, *Hinemoa* and *Loved By a Māori Chieftess* (sic), all 1912), veteran French director Georges Méliès initially refused to trust the eponymous character in his version of *Hinemoa* to a non-actor Māori woman. Rather, he preferred to 'brown-up' his professional actor wife using cocoa (Babington, 2007). On review of the footage though, Méliès realised it was no good. In a one-hundred-and-eighty degree turn, he chose to recruit Reverend Bennett's multitalented local kapa haka team/choir, and was stunned by the results. In letters to his son, Méliès gushed that "The Māoris (sic) are born actors" and that unlike the professional actors he had cast, they took very few takes, were natural on screen, and in his opinion "knock[ed] all the other natives... endways" (Babington, 2007, p. 34). He compared Maata Horomona, a kaihaka cast as Hinemoa, to veteran British actor Mildred Bracken:

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<sup>3</sup> Tū needs a much more in depth discussion, which I would like to embark on in the future.

While it was necessary to drum things into Mildred in order for her to understand what she should do, I only had to explain very slowly to Martha [Maata] what I wanted from her and she would immediately do it with a natural grace that you will notice in her acting (Melies as cited in Babington, p. 35).

Méliès sent the professional European acting troupe who had accompanied him throughout the Pacific back to France, surplus to requirements, an admission of sorts that non-actor kaihaka had essentially outperformed professional actors. For the remaining of the silent era, Māori were filmmakers' 'natives of choice'. Redundant as a cosmetic, the cocoa was returned to the pantry where it belongs.

Flash-forward eighty years. Cliff Curtis' life as a performer began in schoolboy kapa haka, and he remains a faithful kaihaka, particularly to mau rākau, which has supplemented his illustrious acting career. Clearly, haka is an important identificatory marker and source of nourishment to which he returns whilst he resides in the United States. Curtis recently turned back to kapa haka at the Te Arawa Regionals kapa haka competition where he stood for Ngāti Rongomai/Pikikōtuku, and helped the hapū to earn their first stand on the 2015 Te Matatini stage. The discipline of kapa haka is a pivotal part of Curtis' performance practice from which he can be seen to obtain power on film as on stage.

During high school, Curtis was a two-time national rock'n'roll dance champion, and he is also remembered by high-school teachers as a gifted carver and weaver. As a mahi-toi practitioner for most of his life, he knows what it is to transform a block of wood or strips of harakeke, and to see it take shape through the various stages of production through to a taonga. When presented with a script, Curtis is able to give a convincing physical presence, voice and gesture to any role because he follows a specific process that has been built upon this early education.

It gives him a distinctive set of skills, a culturally specific sense of discipline regardless of his character's identification(s), and a certain confidence. In a recent interview, Curtis was asked "Is there a nationality you couldn't play?" to which he replied, "Nah" (Black, 2016). Contrary to the experience of Méliès and his contemporaries, with Curtis it is cheaper for directors to fly mokopirirākau such as Curtis to a set in another continent than to cast a local non-actor. Curtis' has played "device" or minor characters (Curtis as cited in Agnew, 2003) who may only be required for two or three scenes. Regardless of how much a character he portrays appears on screen, directors have noted that Curtis' "consummate professional" attitude is to commit the same level of concentration to all his roles, irrespective of the character's ethnicity (Ward, as cited in Wilson, 2006).

In an interview, long-time talent agent Robert Bruce claimed Curtis is a self-motivated perfectionist who teaches himself accents and long passages of various languages by ear (Wilson, 2002). Curtis follows a very strict pre-production characterisation wānanga, where he concentrates on connecting with the wairua and engaging all of his senses. Bruce shared his observations of Curtis at the time he was earmarked for the part of Bob Marley in the early 2000s. He claimed that immediately prior to the audition, Curtis isolated himself away with not-so-much as a VCR and a monitor on which he watched footage of Marley's concerts and interviews to capture gestural idiosyncrasies, reactions and responses to people, and to memorise the icon's reggae lean. He rehearsed and repeated Marley's dance moves until they were natural and flawless. He listened to Marley, attuning his ear to the thick Jamaican accent, the various vocal inflections, cadence, and timbre in his voice. Soon enough, Curtis was able to speak as Marley, navigating his mouth and glottis around the various required tones without seeming contrived, developing his vocal performance in the same way that a kaihaka learns to oscillate between singing and haka sounds. During his Bob

Marley wānanga, Curtis' appearance changed. He lost all of his body-fat, allowed his facial-hair to grow, and dreaded his hair to visually resemble Marley. When Curtis emerged from isolation, "he was Marley," according to Bruce (Wilson, 2002).

It's believed that wairua lives past death (Mead, 2003, p. 54). When performing kapa haka, kaihaka essentially revive our tūpuna and/or kaitiaki by breathing through their nostrils. Fundamentally though, the only measure of when wairua is present in a performance, is when one's own wairua is stirred. Mead (1984) says that wairua performances:

[Fill] one with awe (wehi) so that the spine tingles, one's body hair may straighten up, and the whole body trembles with excitement... There is authority (wana) in the performance – class, integrity, confidence, and unquestioned competence. (p. 24)

When wairua is present, the energising values – ihi, wehi and wana – imbue the performer *and* the viewer. A literal translation of 'wairua' is two waters, and it exposes a key insight into a person's water – their spirit, soul, or quintessence – searching for the water in another living being. Thus wairua is when those two waters collide, but there is no evidence of the collision except through a feeling. During each wānanga stage Curtis, then, essentially allows for his wai to connect with the wai of the character.

### **From Mokoia to South L.A.**

A brief scene/character analysis of one of Curtis' device characters here can serve to demonstrate the powerful connections between Curtis as kaihaka and Curtis the film actor. I've selected the ironically named 'Smiley' in Antoine Fuqua's *Training Day* (2001), because the Mexican/American urban LA bandido is, for the most part, a polar-opposite to Curtis' actual āhua. In addition, the role shows a level of

controlled aggression that is a required for haka. *Training Day* is a day-in-the-life of new father Jake Hoyt's (Ethan Hawke) orientation day at the Narcotics division of the LAPD, mentored by the legendary yet crooked Detective Alonzo Harris (Denzel Washington). Jake learns early on that the high-rolling Alonzo has been shielded by his badge for many years, as his dealings with the criminal underworld are unconcealed in the community he services. After a day of dodgy home visits in the suburbs, Alonzo takes Jake to the home of a protected informant whom he claims to be helping. They are met – but not greeted – at the door by a straight-faced, unfazed Smiley who receives them into his kitchen, and takes the gifted homewares, and a wad of cash from Alonzo. Unbeknownst to Jake, Alonzo departs, awkwardly leaving him with Smiley, Sniper (Raymond Cruz) and Moreno (Noel Guglielmi). Jake reacts to the lewd comments made by his hosts, provoking Smiley into attack mode. He forces Jake to the ground, kicking him swiftly in the stomach, while stating he has the right “to be beetch slapped” for hitting him in the mouth in his own home, then restrains Jake in his own police handcuffs. Sniper and Moreno drag Jake, face down, to the bathroom, and force him, head down into the tub, held by his legs. Smiley grabs his sawn-off shotgun, and shoves it into the cheek of Jake, who pleads for his life, as a new father to a little girl, trying to appeal to the father in Smiley. Conveniently, Moreno empties Jake's pockets, and reveals the pink and red wallet of Smiley's baby cousin Letty (Samantha Becker), who Jake gallantly saved from a probable rape in MacArthur Park earlier that day. Smiley calls Letty to validate Jake's story, then hands Jake a towel to clean himself up, lest he make a mess on his floor, and he's released.

The close analysis of the character of Smiley reveals the level of preparation required for a convincing portrayal. For the voice, Curtis forms a baritone level, continuous rasp which he keeps calm and balanced throughout the scene's entirety, with the exception of a momentary haka blast he utilises when accusing Jake of lying about Letty's potential rape. The accent he

espouses has consistent ‘ee’s and rolled ‘r’s and he engages Sniper and Moreno with Latino slang such as ‘vato,’ ‘orms’ and ‘ese,’ speaking in indeterminate Spanish under his breath. When Jake is dragged into the tub, Smiley’s dialogue is recognisably slurred: ‘glorse dee dore, ees go’ be lou’ (“close the door, it’s going to be loud”). Curtis’ body is strewn with bandido signifiers; he wears a handle-bar moustache, and his short hair is slicked back to blend in well with the Sniper and Moreno, who wear LA streetwear ensembles of a similar style. But most obviously, Smiley is more controlled than his comrades. Although silently ambivalent, he holds himself equally with authority and condescension leering over Jake, at the ready to attack at any moment. Smiley punches his own hands in preparation to kill, despite preferring to use a gun. He reaches for the gun, as Curtis might for his beloved taiaha and with the same command, and stamps Jake’s cheek with the barrel. He stands at the ready, as if in ‘kia mau.’ And throughout the scene, he sniffs, flinches and squeaks through his teeth as a means of conveying the gestures of a complete character, with idiosyncrasies, as kaihaka do to animate the characters they bring to life in their various items.

### **Conclusion**

It has been my aim in this paper to explore mahi-toi as a distinct framework to better understand Māori screen acting and Māori performance. Because Cliff Curtis began in kapa haka, I examined his practice, particularly his pre-production routine, as an exemplar or template for how kaihaka could emulate his transition from stage, to the screen, and back to the stage as a kind of performance methodology. This still requires further thought and development. However, as was my objective, I have presented the bare scaffolding for what could be a mātauranga Māori-based tool in the future, moving Māori performers and performance scholars constantly forward, off the stage and onto the screen, and vice versa.

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discipline, by encouraging the use of mahi-toi as theoretical, practical, and visual frameworks. In her spare time Jani composes and performs competitive kapahaka (Ngāi Taiwhakaea), and she is a diligent kapahaka and netball māmā at Te Kura o Te Pāroa, thanks to her 12-year-old daughter, Grace.