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## Explorations of the term ‘Indigenous’

*‘E kore au e ngaro He kākano i ruia mai i Rangiatea  
For I shall not perish, but as a seed sent forth from Rangiatea I  
shall flourish.’*

### **Introduction**

I am an Indigenous Practitioner, but I am still on a journey to discover what that truly means. Our struggle as Māori in Aotearoa, as a colonised people, has created a raft of inter-generational issues that we are still feeling and dealing with. For me growing up, it has been hard to fully embrace my “taha Māori”. Although I went to a Māori high-school, and my whanau identified strongly with our Māori heritage, outside these spaces, “being pakeha” offered advantages I would never have received had I looked Māori. It is only in the past 15 or so years that I have truly come to understand the power, resilience, love and grace of te ao Māori. And here I find myself, challenged to position myself in this world, and therefore to be able to define what it means to be Indigenous.

On the surface the word Indigenous seems self-evident, but I actually need to understand its significance, its use in both local and global contexts, and how it impacts how we do what we do. It appears to me as if we go through decades where a particular set of words become the every-day buzzwords. Over the past couple of years, I have often said to people that I work with, that while innovation is the buzzword of this decade, indigenous will be the buzzword of the next decade. What I mean by this is that I can see the word indigenous being used and commercialised by western organisations and systems, with little or no regard to the true understanding of what it means to be indigenous. We only need to google “cultural appropriation” to see examples of this in practice. While I only have anecdotal evidence of this trend, living in a world that straddles both digital innovation and kaupapa Māori, I believe this to be true. In this position paper, I will explore the meanings of the words indigenous and indigeneity, and look at how they are used

by various organisations around the world. I will define what indigenous means in my practice, and why I believe it is important for us, as Māori, to own the use of Indigenous and Indigeneity in Aotearoa.

### **Who is Indigenous?**

In the past two months, my masters class at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa has talked extensively about the definition of the words indigenous and indigeneity. Much of that discussion looked at questions such as, who is indigenous, and when did a people, such as Māori, become indigenous. The Online Etymology Dictionary describes the origin of Indigenous as “from Late Latin *indigenus* "born in a country, native," (*Etymology Dictionary - Indigenous,* n.d.). The online dictionary *Dictionary.com* defines indigenous as “originating in and characteristic of a particular region or country; native” (*Dictionary.com - Indigenous,* n.d.) and it describes the origins of the word as being “Latin *indigen(a)* native, original inhabitant”.

While at first glance, these definitions may seem fine, upon reflection, they don’t always hold true for all peoples around the globe. While it does support a simplified history of Māori people being the direct descendants of East Polynesian voyagers (King, 2003, Chapter 4), we know that “Maori generally did not view themselves as ‘Maori’, a single race and culture, even after the word Maori had come into common usage from about halfway through the nineteenth century.” (King, 2003 Kindle Locations 3003-3004). Looking at Native American populations from Canada to the southern tip of Chile, studies show that there were at least three migrations originating in Asia. DNA analysis shows that “later streams of Asian migration mixed with the First Americans they encountered after they arrived in North America” (UCL, 2012). Does this then allow immigrant populations such as Europeans to start calling themselves indigenous to Aotearoa?

I have looked at how organisations that identify as indigenous see themselves. Using Google, I searched for the word Indigenous where the URL (Uniform Resource Locator or web address) had to end in a .ORG signifying that it was an organisation. I took both the vision and mission statements from 16 organisations, disregarding any words that identified a specific people or location. Then I ran these through a Word Cloud Generator to identify trends in the



What I saw in these results was a trend to positive and proactive words, but also words that highlighted struggle.

The positive words I identified include:

- Building, Future, Respects, Wisdom, Permanent, Communities, Resource, Culture, Collective

The proactive words I identified include:

- Awareness, Development, Training, Promote, Security, Action, Participation, Action, Awaken, Wisdom

I was also able to identify words that suggest some of the struggles that these organisations work to overcome including:

- Equality, Rights, Knowledge Protection, Environmental, Cultural, Lands, Justice, Health

### **Understanding Indigeneity**

The more I have learned, the more my understanding of indigeneity has changed, especially in relation to indigenous knowledge production. I have found as many exceptions to definitions of the word indigenous, as I have seen attempts to define it, for example, having a connection to ancestral land could exclude those who have been raised in an urban environment. In his chapter *Revisiting the question of the ‘Indigenous’*, George Dei states that “All definitions are limited and it is crucial that we focus on issues and questions rather than search for neat definitions” (Dei, 2011, p. 23). Dei talks of an African saying “It is not what you are called that is important, it is what you respond to that is important” In the educational YouTube channel *Hot Mess* by PBS (Public Broadcasting Service US), they state “there’s no official definition of Indigenous” (*Hot Mess* (PBS), 2018, 58 Seconds). They instead looked to communities that defined themselves as indigenous while researching knowledge that could help with climate change.

I have looked to Māori definitions of Indigenous. In 2007 Linda Smith said “Indigenous peoples can be defined as the assembly of those who have witnessed, been excluded from, and have survived modernity and imperialism” (L. T. Smith, 2007, p. 114). She goes on “They are minorities in territories and states over which they once held sovereignty” (L. T. Smith, 2007, p. 114). This definition highlights the

struggle and loss, with no outlook of hope. While it can be seen as applicable to Māori, we have to look at the time it was written. In the 11 years since its publication we have seen a huge move forward in the recognition of Māori kaupapa, language and rights, and I believe it is time we started to look at our indigeneity in a new, positive light, that is resistive of western paradigms.

Like it or not, indigenous and indigeneity are being used around the world by all kinds of people and organisations. Even without specifically using the term “Indigenous”, concepts that share what could be considered as indigenous knowledge, are being packaged up in western frameworks. Systems such as ‘Design Thinking’ which at face value talk about being human centred, are mostly being used to solve business problems, while generating income for those who profess to be the experts. One could argue that Indigenous people have been “design thinkers” for millennia. I believe, as Māori in Aotearoa, we must own our definition of indigenous in order to safeguard its use by external institutions, for the purposes of furthering that their own agendas. As George Dei states, “the use of the term Indigenous is about political reclamation and self-definition to challenge Eurocentric dominance.” (Dei, 2011, p. 23)

There is a real danger of not reclaiming Indigeneity as highlighted by the Martínez Cobo Study of the Problem of Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations (Martínez Cobo, 1982b). Chapter V is a comprehensive look at how indigeneity is defined across the world, and highlights the issues when indigeneity is defined by the coloniser. Examples of this are the legal designations of Indians in the United States that dictates where they must live, requires tribal memberships, and a ‘Blood Quota’ of at least 25% Indian descent. (Martínez Cobo, 1982a, p. 13). This definition controls who is able to receive basic services by the Federal Government. Martínez Cobo highlights the adaptation by the World Council of Indigenous Peoples of five principles, one of which is “the right to define what is an indigenous person be reserved for indigenous people themselves” (Martínez Cobo, 1982a, p. 5). This principle calls out definitions such as the Queensland Aboriginal Act 1971 as artificial.

**Reclaiming Indigeneity: Māori Perspectives**

There are numerous examples of Māori academics using the word Indigenous to describe Māori, or Māori knowledge such as Leonie Pihama in describing Kaupapa Māori Theory as “an indigenous theoretical framework” (Pihama, Tiakiwai, & Southey, 2015, p. 7). Here the connection between Māori and indigenous is implicit. This link between Indigenous and Kaupapa Māori theory is also strongly made by Graham Hingangaroa Smith (G. Smith, 2003). Smith looks at the influence of colonisation on our indigeneity, and our struggle for Māori to free themselves “from under the influence of the reproductive forces of dominant society” (Smith, 2003). The effect of these reproductive forces changed our notion of indigeneity, and resulted in hegemony. We became merely ‘natives’, and became caught up in colonisation processes “perpetrated by 'Maori' against 'ourselves'” (Smith, 2003)

The counter to this has come in the form of a critical conscientisation by Māori, as a revolution of transformation. Smith (2003) argues:

This calls for a 'freeing-up' of the indigenous imagination and thinking given that one of the important elements of colonization is the diminishment of the indigenous ability to actually imagine freedom or a utopian vision free of the oppressor. Thus a critical element in the 'revolution' has to be the struggle for our minds - the freeing of the indigenous mind from the grip of dominant hegemony.

Smith highlights six critical areas of struggle in assisting indigenous communities and people in this transformation. These included “A need to understand and respond to the struggle for the Academy; to reclaim the validity and legitimacy of our own language, knowledge and culture” and “A need to understand and respond to the 'politics of distraction'; to move beyond being kept busy and engaged with liberal strategies” (Smith, 2003)

This critical conscientisation is about Māori reclaiming control of their own destiny and in self-defining what it means to be Māori, to be Indigenous. It's about a shift in the balance of power, a shift from asking for self-determination to the realisation of our own power of self-actualisation. As Smith states “These ways of thinking illustrate a

reawakening of the Maori imagination that had been stifled and diminished by colonization processes” (2003).

### **What do we call ourselves?**

So, if we are to take back control and determine our own descriptions and definitions, and what terminology do we consider appropriate to us, as Māori? I believe in Aotearoa, we have a completely appropriate and simple definition for Indigenous, which is ‘Tangata Whenua’. The term tangata whenua neatly connects us to the land as the first inhabitants of Aotearoa, and informs us of our rights, roles and responsibilities to the land, to the environment, and to each other through tikanga. Te Aka Online Māori Dictionary defines tangata whenua as “local people, hosts, indigenous people” (Moorfield, 2003) . In Te Ara - The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, Royal describes tangata whenua as “literally, people of the land – are those who have authority in a particular place.” (Royal, 2007). He goes on to say that “This is based on their deep relationship with that place, through their births and their ancestors’ births.” (Royal, 2007). Tariana Turia said "by using the term Māori we just become another one of the ethnic groups in this country, and we're not." (NZ Herald, 2003) suggesting that we use tangata whenua instead of Māori. She states "We have constitutional status as tangata whenua" (NZ Herald, 2003). “Tangata whenua was one of the first terms to be used consistently in legislation and is now one of the most commonly used Māori terms in legislation” (Magallanes, 2011) so we also have legal precedence for its use. More importantly for me, we can see the importance of our relationship and connection to the land in some of our whakatauki, such as “Toi tu te kupu, toi tu te mana, toi tu te whenua”

This is reported to have been said by Tinirau o Whanganui (unknown date) and was a plea to Māori to retain our culture for without language, mana or land, we would be lost. Land features have also been strong identifiers for Māori, for example: “Waikato taniwha rau, he piko he taniwha, he piko he taniwha” where the geographic features of the Waikato river give authority and identity to Waikato Māori.

**My indigenous identity**

And how do I identify as Tangata Whenua? The understanding that we need not look to Western sources to define Indigenous and Indigeneity has been a revelation to me in my learning journey. In fact, I believe trying to find a single definition for Indigenous in how it relates to people is fruitless. What will be true for Māori, may not be totally true for other ethnic groups. Even within Te ao Māori, there may be differences, just as there are tribal differences in stories and histories. Not being from a particular locale should also not limit anyone from defining their practice as indigenous, even though they may not be indigenous to that land. Everyone will have their own definition as it relates to them and their practice. So if we cannot create a single definition of indigenous, do we need to define it at all?

Yes, we must. Having reclaimed our indigeneity from the coloniser, from schooling systems that punished us for speaking our language, from unjust confiscations and theft of our land, from the racist policies of successive governments, I believe strongly that our naming of ourselves as indigenous, as tangata and mana whenua, as Māori, is about our tino rangatiratanga

Ko Motupohue te Maunga  
 Waitaki te Awa  
 Takitimu te Waka  
 Kai Tahu te Iwi  
 Ruahikihiki te hapu  
 Te Rau Aroha te Marae  
 Tuhawaiiki te Tangata  
 Ko Kane Milne toku ingoa

I situate myself as tangata whenua, as Māori. My whānau strongly identify as Tangata Whenua first. My schooling has been predominantly Māori based, and I have chosen to work in Māori settings. I am also bringing up my daughter to be exposed to her Māori world, reo and whakapapa as equally as she is to her pakeha. I base my practice on tikanga Māori working predominantly with Māori or Pasifika people, and in Māori and Pasifika communities. I am an Indigenous practitioner, and I am in the practice of Indigenous knowledge creation.



## **Conclusion**

Indigenous knowledges are living and breathing in the present; they change and adapt to emerging situations. However, the basic principles of such knowledges (e. g., the interface of culture, Nature and society, the connections of the physical and metaphysical worlds, and spirituality as the bedrock of such knowledge systems) remain intact. (Dei, 2016).

The above quote by George Dei helped me to see that indigenous knowledge can be new knowledge. Indigenous knowledge does not exclude Western knowledge or other forms of knowledge. Most importantly, Indigenous knowledge is not just about the past. As indigenous people, we hold the knowledge of our tupuna, our indigeneity is anchored to this understanding. It’s ours. We are the kaitiaki, the guardians of the knowledge. We practice it in our tikanga. We perpetuate it in our choice for our tamariki. It grows and evolves along with our own learning and knowledge. We continually create it, and recreate it. In order to do that in ways that are indigenous we first have to understand our own identity as Maori, not in relation to the coloniser’s positioning of us, but in terms of our own position as tangata whenua – people of this land. To me, that’s what being Indigenous means.

***Whaungarongaro te tangata toitū te whenua***

*As man disappears from sight, the land remains*

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