

LATOIA SASA-TEPANIA

Waves of identity: Reflections on the terms “indigenous” and “indigeneity”



*Family painting.
Artist: Aunty Ramona Von Dincklage,
Village of Papasatua, Savai'i 1983.*

Introduction

Throughout my childhood upbringing, the term *Indigenous* was never once used in my household. I identify myself as a Samoa, Maori woman. If someone were to ask me of my birthplace, Aotearoa would be the first name I reply with before New Zealand.

My father, a proud Samoa man, who acknowledges his village of birth being Papasataua, Savaii born on the island of Samoa; is how he introduces himself. My beautiful

mother, who identifies herself as mana wahine born Manaia, Taranaki. A child of the Whakatutu, Tepania whanau line.

Both of my parents never used the terms Indigenous or indigeneity to introduce who they are, or as a sentence starter to explain their connection to land, sea or people.

In recent years, it has come to my attention the term *Indigenous*, is not only spoken often in and around my place of study; but also, printed several times within the tertiary provider's prospectus.

I begin to think; now is an excellent time to explore and look at the relevance, of the term concerning the New Zealand context, field of practice and I as a practitioner.

It is with hopes my findings and personal views, help you the reader, start to think and really look at the types of words people place on you.

After all, who likes being called names. Instead I, myself give the right to a name; then have a name give its power to define me.

Content

"Perhaps it is difficult to clearly articulate a definition of Indigeneity because we risk either demanding a refusal of real difference or paying attention to differences that might be a barrier to meaningful (or indeed any) engagement" (Somerville, 2010).

It is seen as though the term *Indigenous* or *Indigeneity* rests on the definition of a collective or group rights, which differ from my own.

McCormack (2011) points out, "...Frequent confront definitions which categorise them... as ethnic or racial formations." (p.285).

Merlan (2009), defines the term indigenous, as to distinguish between "native" and their "others."

Among definitions, Martinez Cobo, for the United Nations had made known; Indigenous groups, peoples, and nations as "those which have historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial civilizations that settled on their territories" (Merlan, 2009).

Now already, I begin to see how the definition alone of such words, are used to categorise and cause a divide within people. In the same way, Maaka & Fleras (2005) explains, Indigenous people are defined by this political, dogmatic dimension and its associations with challenge, governance, opposition, and transformation.

Indigenous people are compared to another as described by Somerville (2010), "Maori who are most often agreed as Indigenous are expected to most closely resemble other groups also understood as Indigenous." How was this statement determined?

An example I am most familiar with, which I feel is commonly used to articulate who are indigenous follows;

The Saami of Fenno-Scandinavia, Inuit of Canada and Siberia, and the Chin of Burma. The Jummas of Bangladesh, the Scheduled Tribes of India, the San people of Kalahari, Navaho in the American Southwest, Kansas of New Caledonia, the Jigalong of Australia, and the Yanomamo of Brazil and Venezuela. Each of these groups signifies an example of indigenous people. And are generally defined as breathing descendants of the original (pre-invasion) inhabitants of a land (Maaka & Fleras, 2005). If we are to use this definition for the term "indigenous" alone I am open to this.

My grandmother says,

"I have never heard the words indigenous or indigeneity before. Our family has never used these words to say who we are as Samoa people. If someone asks who I am, I am a Samoa lady. I will also say my village where I am from, Papasatua Savaii. I will explain who my mother and father is and their villages so others can make sense of who I am" (Leuilu'ai. F, personal communication, August 2018).

The statement also says, "Maori who are most often agreed as indigenous." How does one justify who is and who is not Maori and who are those who most often agree as indigenous? Is an ability to trace descent back to ancestors the defining element of identity? (Maaka & Fleras, 2005). Can New Zealanders decide for themselves their ethnicity, as the census has already pre-determined our identity as New Zealand Maori and not Maori as a stand-alone term? Is there a specific column in voting polls, census forms, and enrolment forms which have indigenous as something to tick by?

"...how can a term stand in both for the name of any Indigenous group as well as for the umbrella under which all Indigenous groups sit?" (Somerville, 2010).

Given the great diversity of the world and its people, from lifestyles and upbringing to cultural backgrounds, traditions and beliefs; trying to include the worlds

"Indigenous" people under a single definition would be difficult and problematic.

Somerville (2010) wrote, "Indigenous is used as a prescriptive rather than descriptive term" (p.666). The word feels like enforcement of a rule or method as opposed to a word which in turn gives service to the people it is defining.

I believe negative labels that do not represent a person or group well would make them feel less than they are. Through the creation of strong harmful and damaging stereotypes which are a powerful means of working out social control and a tool to influence identities can become quite problematic (Retzlaff, 2005).

I believe I am trying to find a definition for indigenous and indigeneity which has integrity and a good representation of myself and people. An interpretation which understands my people through our indigenous lenses, as opposed to something that is statistical, generalised and defeating or overpowering.

Within my readings, an explanation, definition of the word *indigenous*, in which I may be open to accepting at some level or degree. Merlan (2009) shows a way to understand the definition of Indigeneity as either "criterial" or "relational" and makes a clear distinction between the two.

What is meant by "criterial" is to advise some set of standards, measures or principles, conditions that enable identification of the indigenous as a global kind. By "relational," are meanings that emphasise grounding in connections to others. According to Gabrielle Scrimshaw on a TEDx (2013), public talk given, she explains "...the strength of who we are as an indigenous people, comes from the fact that we speak from the heart."

"Self-identification... is at the heart of indigenous identity" (Eversole, McNeish, & Cimadamore, 2005).

There seems to be much debate about the definition of Indigenous and indigeneity. But what I feel to be most important, is how I define the terms for myself.

My self-identification of indigenous and indigeneity comes not only with knowledge of background in connection to land, sea and people; but also, through the teachings of my mixed cultural upbringing. Identity is my foundation as it gives me solid grounding. Only then are you able to either correct, challenge and redefine other definitions which have been placed on you.

Thinking indigeneity

"Kiwi ingenuity" a common phrase used when it came to problem-solving from few resources, but also explained as, "... a quality dear to our national sense of self" (Pryor, 2011). I remember these words spoken by teachers, to praise my type of thinking, inventiveness, creativity, imagination, and ability to adapt and problem solve.

Before I move any further, first let us change the word from "*ingenuity*" to "*indigeneity*" for a well-suited word, in the context of my creative sense, or essence of my indigenous thinking, knowing and doing.

The more I begin to seek knowledge, the more aware of, who I am, why it is, I think the way I do and how it is I can create with a holistic worldview. "I begin to leave their space of self-definition" (Simpson, 2007).

As a child, I would watch the woman of my family very carefully when it came to creativity, and the ability to see things for much more than they were. I remember my mother telling me before my journey with Te Wananga,

"Do not create with your eyes. Create with the eyes of your ancestors... They have seen more and will show you more" (Tepania. J, personal communication, 2017).

There was something genuinely fascinating and rather remarkable about the spirit of thinking these women showed. For a moment in time, all else which surrounds them goes out of focus. The men of our family knew when to give the woman space for this. It is as though, you cannot reach them. Their level of thinking has gone into different realms in exploration.

There have been many times I have interrupted both my grandmother and my mother with my questions of curiosity. And I have been told by my father countless times, "Do not disturb your mother, she needs space to talk to your ancestors." I was always left puzzled. Who were these ancestors my father says mother is talking too? It was not until I was in my early adult years I came to understand.

Styres (2017) explains, Indigenous people continually live a dual or splintered presence but also goes on to say the belief's, wisdom of coming to know, coming to comprehend, or coming to awareness are embedded in ancient Indigenous knowledge.

It is said, Indigenous peoples all around the globe are looking for ways to de-colonise from within (Maaka & Fleras,

2005). By keeping this traditional way of thinking, the woman of my family has kept our indigenous thinking alive and well. I believe this type of thinking to be unique to indigenous people.

Reflecting on what my father said to me those many years ago a recent reading explains, presented scenes where life and living are to be celebrated where generative powers of the gods are to be encompassed and appreciated as gifts. All these reside in the full-bodied spirit-filled human being. (Fuamatu, et al., 2014).

The thinking behind having to make resources last with very few. How to create something from nothing brings me to scripture when God fed the five thousand with a few fish and five loaves of bread. My faith and belief in God, but also the indigenous survival thinking play hand in hand. Where Fuamatu, et al., (2014) describes “in order to survive in the world we develop an instinct.” In view of this (Filisi, 2018) says, “... God as the ancestor and progenitor of all living things that potentially bring about these connections in the Samoan indigenous religion.”

My grandmother in support of her views will always bring back a story from the Bible and stories of her upbringing to help us understand her thinking. She goes on to say,

“Remember the lord you’re God. He knows all and see’s all. His thinking is not our own and his ways are not our ways. I ask him to provide, protect and guide us because my faith leads me to believe he has everything looked after” (Leuluai. F, personal communication, 2018).

Knowing Indigeneity

Knowing and understanding my indigeneity has come through life lessons and practised values taught throughout my childhood upbringing. My family’s cultural practices of service tautua, also through religion, tradition, and creativity is my Indigeneity.

In our Maori family, the youngest of children and all mothers were served first when it came to Kai. In my Samoa fale, the elderly were served before anyone else. We knew it was disrespectful to wear shoes inside a house that was not our own and to remove before entering. It was seen as unhygienic to sit on tables because it is where food is served and seen as bad-mannered. Everyday bags were not allowed to be placed on top of dinner tables because most would have

probably been on the ground and is seen as dirty. At a time and still to this day, I do not look directly into the eyes of my Samoan elders for fear this may be understood as to direct and confrontational. These are indigenous teachings learned from marae visits, church gatherings and family fono, meetings. It is a knowing and still things I live by and practice today.

My Samoan fale, where food is a big thing in my family from preparation to quantity, display, and service. Food was to be prepared, washed and cooked by sunset every Friday evening. This was because my grandmother a strong woman of the Seventh Day Adventist faith believed; the Sabbath day was set apart for worship and no work of any sort was to be done on this day. The Sabbath day, Saturday; was specially set aside for worship and service alone to our lord and saviour. We needed to make sure there was enough food made to last over the next two days or by next sunset, but also had to make sure there was extra in case of visitors. We learned the importance of preparation, to serve, tautua, to be self-sufficient but also fa'aaloalo for our God and each other.

"Indigenous knowledge is unique to culture or society. It is the basis for agriculture, food preparation, education and learning, environmental management" (Hoppers, 2002). Fuamatu, et al., (2014) explains, "The maturing season of the breadfruit tree would guide traditional Samoan horticulture. The planting of other food crops such as yams, taro, and bananas was organised to ensure they would be ready for harvest for the village all year round" I feel this shows indigenous knowledge and knowing when to prepare beforehand, ahead of time to serve a community, aiga out of alofa. I think this to be similar to my family's religious and cultural practice. This is indigenous knowledge.

I was taught only to take enough for what was needed. This was knowing there were other days to live for and to save, protect and preserve what crops, resources or produce we had. Nowadays you can go to groceries to buy food with an expiry date. Most of the time we waste and dispose of good food and then have to buy more produce which would amount to more money spending than more waste.

Our indigenous knowing and thinking would tell us to only pick just enough, cultivate what we need so there is plenty to go around and absolutely nothing goes to waste. As a child, my mother would always tell me, "Do not eat with

your eyes." This was my mother's way of saying, do not pile up your plate as the chances are you will not finish it. I love how it is explained herein Fuamatu et al., (2014) writes, "accepting while man can fish from the Moana, he only takes what he needs to live, knowing that he, the sea and the fish need fa'aaloalo for each other in order to survive." This to me is indigenous knowing, knowledge. It is something we know as our indigenous connection to Land, sea, and people.

I had recently completed a literature review which had me really pushing the boundaries. I chose to take a creative approach to a traditional westernised format. This meant using stories, talanoa of family members and pese, songs to enrich my korero.

Creativity is the unique and defining trait of our indigeneity (Wilson, n.d). As people of the land, the connection is made through mountain, rivers, land it is our being. As Rangiwai (2018) points out, "...matauranga Maori... is located in the Maori world in atua, tangata, whenua, maunga, awa, tupuna/tipuna, whanau, hapu, iwi, haponi, wairua, hinengaro, mauri, taonga, marae, whare and in all other Maori cultural concepts and spaces." What I feel he is saying is, indigenous knowledge is within the land, people and Stories Sea and sky which is our indigenous literature. It is our knowing.

Indigenous practicality

I had learned many of my skills as a kinesthetic learner, a practical learner. It has been my strength in creativity which I believe is my indigeneity. It helps me to make sense of many things in life.

As a life skills and values programme coordinator and music recording artist, both careers not only allow me to use my Indigenous skills set but also help me with pushing boundaries when it comes to delivery, strategy, performance and teaching programmes and workshops.

I will start with my most relevant example to date when being able to show you how I use my Indigeneity, in my practice.

The "*Leo model*" of practice. A model which I had created to underpin my knowledge of understanding; which cleverly uses a QR code with the accompaniment of my own vocals to show of the five features and how they interweave with one another. The surprise even for myself was being

able to use my indigenous practicality and creativity to create this.



“It felt natural to convey the Leo model through using the sound” (Sasa-Tepania, 2018). McNab.D (2013) research “In indigenous societies, oral traditions form the distinct ways of knowing and how knowledge is reproduced, preserved and conveyed from generation to generation” (as cited in Sasa-Tepania, 2018, pg. 391).

I introduced two indigenous models into my class setting. I had brought forth and presented a few models for my students to use in helping them make a connection to their identity or make sense of life.

I separated the class into two groups and within each group, the students are to pick apart the model given and explain their understanding. A safe space was created to be able to share stories, or experiences and speak comfortably about themselves.

An interesting model which speaks life in its definition for me is the "*Tautua a le Niu*" model created by (Filisi, 2018). Similar in its values to my own model, the Tautua a le Niu uses a whole tree as a visual aid “expressions and connections” (Filisi, 2018).

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Group one – Tautua a le Niu

Ulu – depicts shelter, protection and provision.

“My father is a strong man. He leads our family and someday I will take his place. I am the eldest son of 6 boys and 2 girls. My father teaches me to be strong in the faith, just like him. He is teaching me the way a man should always provide and keep safe his family by way of the lord.” (Maka. S, personal communication, August, 2018).

Trunk - signifies resilience and adaptation to thrive and survive.

“My grandmother with very little English language moved from Tonga to New Zealand when my mum was a little girl. My mother was young and stayed in the care of aunties most the time while grandma went to work. It was not easy, but she carried on for the love of a better life for her family. I am a trunk, resilient like my grandmother who never gave up in a world she did not understand.” (Tusani. L, personal communication, August, 2018).

The roots - represent a foundational connection to aiga, nuu, Atua and country.

“We are all connected one way or another. If you cut the roots from the trunk which give nutrients and food to grow, how will the tree grow to its full potential? If we separate the trunk from its head, how will we have shade from the hot sun, grow fruit? Just like me, you wouldn't separate or cut me into pieces otherwise... I would be dead like if you did that to the tree. (M, Brian. Personal communication, August, 2018).

Group two - Mana model

The second model used, was the “*Mana model*” created by, (Cuthers, 2018). As a class, we discussed what the model means to us which the class defined as, a model where each part works with each other to empower one other. “... for the betterment of the collective” (Cuthers, 2018).

“Whanau give me strength, without them I would be lost. We are close, and if one of us have a problem, it is a problem for the family. We solve together so we do not face alone” (Leo, T. personal communication, August, 2018).

"I always loved water since I was a baby. My mum let us play on the beach nearby our house when we were small and said we are children of the sea. Me and my family find peace near water, it helps us to relax and centre ourselves, so we can think clearer and make better choices. This is what tangata whenua means to me" (M, Rachel. personal communication. August, 2018).

These are a few examples of the use of my indigeneity and indigenous ideas, methods of teaching within my practice which work well with my students.

Conclusion

My blood is my indigenous connection to near and distant lands and people. My identity flows through the waves and tides of the ocean. My creative thinking, knowing and way of doing, is my indigeneity.



Ko Taranaki te maunga.

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