

## *Reflections*

# **New Zealand's broadcasting model as a colonial construct: A personal reflection**

Haunui Royal

### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, Haunui Royal reflects on his professional career as a filmmaker in 1980s and 1990s Aotearoa New Zealand committed to directing and producing kaupapa Māori documentaries for public television.

### **KEYWORDS**

Te whaioranga, kaupapa Māori documentary, Māori media workers

## **Introduction**

The New Zealand Public Broadcasting Corporation (NZBC) was founded in 1962, instituted into law in 1976, and modelled directly on the United Kingdom's British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). When I began at Television New Zealand (TVNZ) in the mid-1980s, it was a commonly held view in the workplace that the BBC was the exemplar of public broadcasting, the pinnacle for New Zealand broadcasting to aspire to. I felt this social belief was indicative of a type of cultural insecurity in which Pākeha culture needed to be validated as having its roots in the United Kingdom.

The dominant culture of the 1980s did not value Māori topics as an area of public interest deserving of broadcasting coverage. Public television operated as a closed shop and only a handful of Māori people were on-screen personalities or employed as programming and technical staff. Māori and Pasifika programming was largely scheduled on Sundays, filling in low-rating, commercial free slots. Broadcasting in the 80s, like all public sectors at that time, was about to experience enormous change in the following decade and Māori people were strategically positioning themselves to take

advantage of these changes. Maori education academic, Graham Smith, aptly described this period in twentieth century Māori history (Smith, 2003, pp. 1-2).

*The 'real' revolution of the 1980's was a shift in mindset of large numbers of Māori people – a shift away from waiting for things to be done to them, to doing things for themselves; a shift away from an emphasis on reactive politics to and an emphasis on being more proactive; a shift from negative motivation to positive motivation. ...These ways of thinking illustrate a reawakening of the Māori imagination that had been stifled and diminished by colonization processes.*

The “shift in mindset” essentially laid the groundwork for the following decade of developing “the Māori imagination” in all sectors of society (Smith, 2003, pp. 1-2). Elsewhere, I have referred to this period as te whaioranga – the recovery (Royal, 2019). This paper therefore contextualises my thinking around the late twentieth century decades of Māori recovery.

Written in a narrative format, I reflect on my experiences of the challenges Māori people faced during the 1980s to 1990s with reference to my work in the Aotearoa screen and television industry. My perspective on the concept and practice of te whaioranga has been shaped by two positions that I have worked in. Firstly, as a media specialist employed within the state broadcasting system, and secondly, as an independent filmmaker. Whilst working independently, my personal focus shifted to creating kaupapa Māori documentaries exploring how Māori communities were recovering their cultural knowledge and natural resources.

## Nature of public broadcasting

As far back as the 1970s, the late Huirangi Waikerepuru who was an iwi leader of Taranaki identified broadcasting as a critical tool in the battle to revitalize te reo me ngā tikanga Māori. However, it was not until 1986 that public broadcasting saw Ripeka Evans

employed as a Māori advisor to Julian Mounter, the chief executive officer for Television New Zealand (TVNZ). In the mid-1980s, I became a trainee producer and director recruited to a TVNZ scheme called Kimihia, which was funded by the Department of Māori Affairs and overseen by Ripkeka Evans. It enabled fifty Māori trainees to receive work placement within the technical and administrative areas of the television industry. In hindsight, the push to increase Māori staff within TVNZ did not come from the public broadcasting service itself. Rather, it was Māori Affairs leading the initiative to meet the aspirations of Māori people to acquire the necessary skills for developing and screening Māori content to Māori audiences.



*Figure 1. Waitangi commemorations, 1988.*

Arguably, the Kimihia scheme was designed to integrate Māori media workers into a Pākehā dominated industry driven by Pākehā tastes and interests. By this, success in the programme was measured by the ability of the Māori trainee to adapt to the Pākehā work environment. Māori trainees like myself quickly learnt that Māori success

meant something quite different: that is, to quietly subvert the unequal power structure in order to maintain one's cultural integrity.

Illustrating this point is my memory of the opening of the Aotearoa Traditional Māori Performing Arts Festival in 1988, which was hosted by Ngā Puhi at Waitangi. At this event, I attended as a trainee whose role was to observe a TVNZ team comprised of Māori and Pākehā media workers. During the opening powhiri, one member of a manuhiri ope reacted to the wero. He chased and physically attacked the kaiwero. Right before our eyes was a vivid reminder of how tikanga Māori should never be taken as merely ceremonial, and that underpinning the symbolism of the wero lay the physical enactment of ihi and wehi present in the tribal encounters. This one-off moment was captured on camera by a TVNZ cameraman.

Immediately after the event, the TVNZ news team wanted to screen the footage on national television. I witnessed the handful of Māori staff instantly reacted with genuine concern that the wero would be broadcast without a clear explanation given to viewers of the tikanga that puts the incident in its proper context. The result, as Māori staff saw it, would be the public dissemination of a simplistic and negative view of tikanga Māori to a general audience. Māori staff had a brief, in-house discussion among themselves. When the news producers went to edit the footage, the tapes had disappeared. A little while later, some Māori newsroom journalists discovered the misplaced footage. The story was aired on TVNZ with an appropriate interpretation of the event narrated from a Māori perspective.

During my time at TVNZ, it was well known that some of the younger employees had been purposefully recruited because of their family or collegial connections to personnel working at the state broadcaster. Despite the privileged position that Pākehā employees had assumed since the inception of the government-owned television company, when restructuring and staffing cuts ensued towards the end of the 1990s, I along with other Māori trainees were told that Māori media workers were the lucky ones because we would be looked after by the company. Such lop-sided power conversations reminded me of the saying that when all you have experienced is privilege then equality looks like oppression.

This was my personal experience as TVNZ underwent large-scale restructuring and decentralising. When I gained a much coveted role directing music programmes, one person remarked that it was because I was Māori and had a Māori name. I felt an undertone of unspoken resentment working on mainstream shows at the national television service. It took six months of labouring at menial tasks, working long shifts, and making quality content before I managed to gain a measure of social acceptance from Pākēha peers. A number of Māori staff had expressed that Māori programming was poorly resourced. I was not fully cognizant of how under-resourced Māori programming actually was until I worked on a co-production project between the Māori department at TVNZ and Avalon's Rock Unit.

My personal recollection of not being provided with adequate resources was that in 1989, I was asked to direct a thirty-minute episode of *Koha* on the Flying Youth concert in Tauranga. I was also asked to make a shorter episode for mainstream audiences as part of the music show *CV*, which had replaced *Radio with Pictures*. I flew from Wellington to Tauranga with a cinematographer, Renaud Maire, who was renowned for his cinematic skill and highly respected in the screen and television industry. When I got to Tauranga, Maire was reassigned by the producer of *Koha* to work with him, and I was assigned the *Koha* camera operator.



*Figure 2. Koha motif.*

When I spoke to the *Koha* team about how unresponsive and difficult I found the *Koha* camera operator to work with, I was told that the TVNZ Māori department had complained on numerous occasions about his work. Despite this, he was repeatedly

assigned to the Māori programming department because he had a Māori wife. In all honesty, no other department would work with this particular camera operator, and so he was fobbed off to the Māori staff. While editing the footage, I found the content was largely unusable. What I came to appreciate was the way that the Māori department produced quality content in spite of the predicament of poor resourcing and technical support.

## Independent filmmaking

By the end of the 1980s, the New Zealand Broadcasting Commission (NZBC) model had evolved. Entering into the 1990s, the NZBC became the autonomous crown entity, New Zealand On Air, which adopted a licence-and-fee system for television programming. This was to be a commercial structure partly driven by the launch of a third television channel, TV3. Leading into a new decision-making process, some programming strands were moved to an external funding model. Openings emerged for independent Māori filmmakers to bid for funding. NZ On Air's overarching strategy was for television to reflect the cultural heritage of Aotearoa New Zealand. On the upside, funds would become more readily available for Māori media workers. But the downside was that Māori content producers now had a highly competitive system to navigate through, TVNZ, TV3, and NZ On Air.

While transitioning towards a commercially-driven structure for television broadcasting, documentaries created by a kaupapa Māori approach were not commissioned for primetime slots on TVNZ or TV3. In 1992, I worked with the Māori musician, Moana Maniapoto, to produce content for younger viewers, I learned that her band, The Moa Hunters, had befriended the American band, The Neville Brothers, when the latter was performing in Auckland. As a result, Moana and the Moa Hunters had been invited to attend the jazz festival in The Neville Brothers' hometown of New Orleans. I felt this could be a perfect example of Māori storytelling on-screen with sufficient commercial viability to be appealing to mainstream broadcasters. The Neville Brothers 1989 album, *Yellow Moon*, had proven to be a commercial success with the lead singer,

Aaron Neville, teaming up with female vocalist, Linda Rondstadt, to produce a worldwide hit, 'Dont Know Much.'

TV3 supported the proposal and NZ On Air agreed to fund a documentary on the musical and cultural exchange of Moana and the Moa Hunters and the New Orleans music scene. We arrived in New Orleans to be greeted by a traditional New Orleans jazz band. Delighted by the filming early in the shoot, as the trip progressed, opportunities to film The Neville Brothers were slim. I pestered The Moa Hunters manager, Willie Jackson, to see if we could film with The Neville Brothers. But the media environment in the United States was far stricter than New Zealand, as permits were required for public venues. A skill that I picked up was fast talking to officials and security guards to allow the crew to film.



*Figure 3. Moana Maniapoto with Cyril and Art Neville.*

Although I had concerns about the limited filming occasions we had with The Neville Brothers, the documentary pitch was the musical and cultural exchange between Māori musicians and the musical traditions of New Orleans. When it came time to head

home, I felt confident that we had collected adequate footage. Returning to New Zealand, I found out the TV3 programmer had left the organisation. During the editing process, I was told that the channel wanted most of the Māori material removed and instead, a firm focus on The Neville Brothers. This was not the film I had shot and the editing turned into a nightmare. It was my first independent documentary and not being able to deliver my first a film would kill my career. I worried Māori documentary filmmaking was over for me before I had even started. After multiple re-edits, I had a film that was radically different from the one I had intended to create. The best footage was cut up and tossed on the editing floor because it did not feature The Neville Brothers.

What I learned was a lesson on the unpredictability of the media environment. It could be an unsafe space for Māori filmmakers to operate in when considering that our collective aspirational values are driven by a personal sense of tending to the tastes and interests of Māori audiences. I am not alone in being a Māori filmmaker who has first-hand experience of being put in a difficult position. This very experience taught me to steer clear of projects that could possibly undermine a Māori director's role in respect to the social responsibility we carry to serve the wider Māori community. A number of other Māori documentary makers during this period tried, like me, to navigate safe passage through the system. Projects would often stall at the editing stage because the narrative structure would not fit the commercial template of the commissioner. As a result, documentaries could end up buried in the television schedule, with some not seeing the light of day. Worse still, there were occasions when Māori directors lost heart in their work and as a consequence, the industry lost budding talent.

## **Kaupapa Māori documentary**

With the establishment of NZ On Air, the funding channels were removed from the direct control of broadcasters. Hence, with growing political pressure from the Māori Language Commission, Te Taura Whiri i Te Reo, and the organisation, Ngā Kaiwhakapūmau i Te Reo, who lodged a Waitangi Tribunal claim for the Māori language,

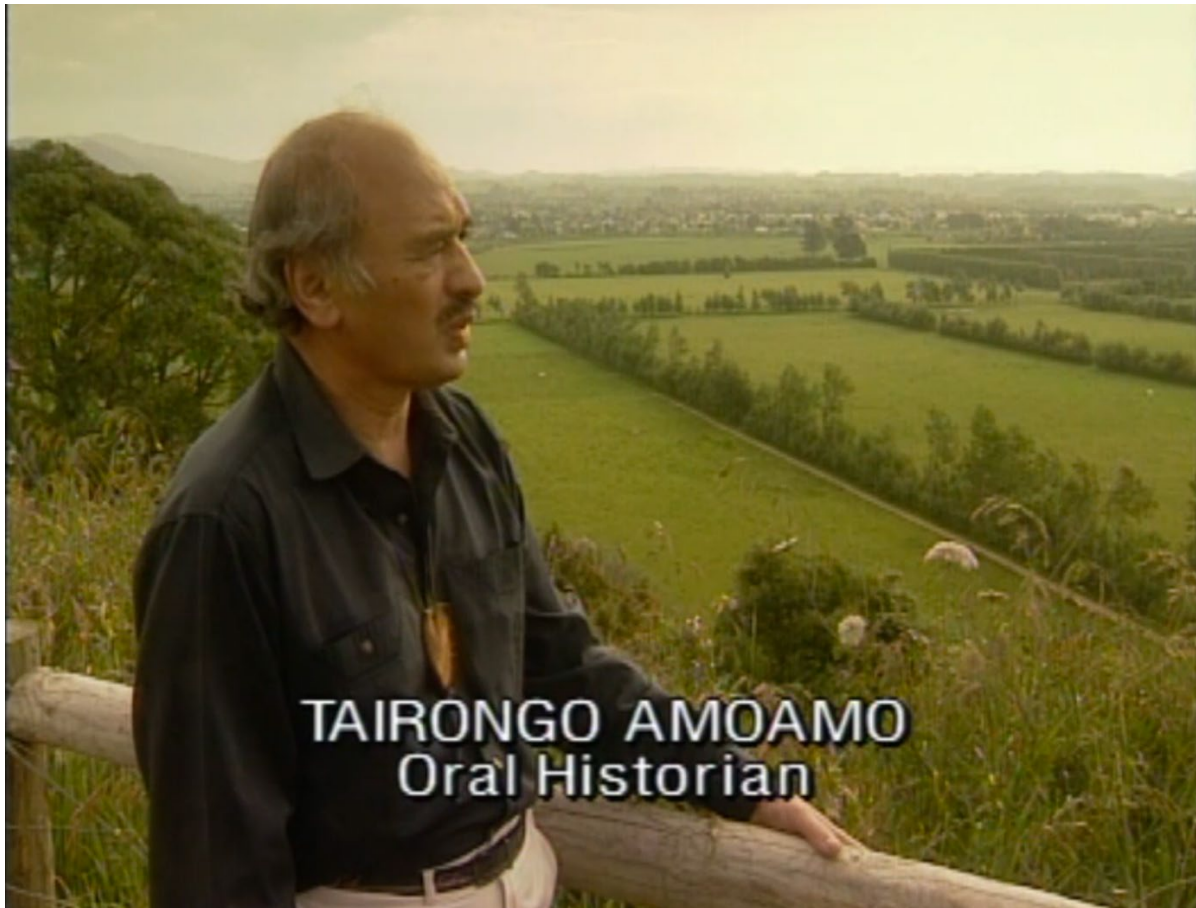


the shift towards broadcasting Māori content and topics in primetime television was accelerated. In the 1990s, pressure was therefore placed on NZ On Air to commission Māori content, alongside a stipulation that Māori personnel must be recruited for key roles as creative specialists. This meant that television commissioners were now expected to address the level of Māori content screened on television, whether they wanted to or not. The requirement to have Māori content included in programming schedules was, in many ways, a game-changer creating an opening for Māori producers to get a foot in the industry door.



*Figure 4. Interviewing Amster Reedy, Ta Moko, 1994, Whangara Marae.*

In terms of my professional career and commitment to kaupapa Māori documentary filmmaking, I gained valuable experience from this “shift in mindset” within the Aotearoa screen and television industry (Smith, 2003, p. 1). Producers were putting my name in their project proposals and broadcasters were warming up to pitches for kaupapa Māori documentaries. In 1996, Ninox Films asked if I would direct *One Land, Two People*, a TV3 documentary about Te Whakatōhea iwi and their Waitangi tribunal claim. The film had received funding and the background research had been completed. I had whakapapa ties to Te Whakatōhea and this presented a great opportunity to learn more about this side of my whānau. I met with two senior historians of the tribe, Tairongo Amoamo and Ranginui Walker, to organise interview shoots. Both expressed enthusiasm for their people’s story to be told on-screen.



*Figure 5. Tairongo Amoamo interview, One Land Two People, 1996.*

When we were preparing to travel to Opōtiki for filming, I was invited to a meeting with a Te Whakatōhea tribal member, Tuwhakairiora Williams. Tu was apprehensive about how the documentary would be publically received: the tribunal claim was riddled with tribal politics and factional disagreements. He asked outright that we do not make the film. I was not aware of the internal tensions within Te Whakatōhea, and at this stage of pre-filming, Ninox Films wanted to push through. The funding had been disbursed and the company could not retrieve lost monies if they bailed out.

In an interview with Judge Christian Whata, he observed that the Crown process for Waitangi Tribunal claimants pitted Māori against Māori, whānau against whānau, with the winners being the legal firms who would be paid irrespective of the outcome. Ranginui Walker and Tairongo Amoamo's support gave me some comfort, despite Te Whakatōhea's in-house fighting. When we arrived at Te Whakatōhea Trust Board to film,

instantly the meeting was polarized. Half of the trustees would not be filmed and exited the meeting.

We had no intention of focusing on internal divisions. But the harsh reality was that our crew was situated amidst the conflict by virtue of being there to film. The various factions and their leaders understood the power of the mass media to sway public opinion. The two unresolved questions exacerbating the conflict were clear. Firstly, who had the mandate to negotiate a claim for Te Whakatōhea? Secondly, should the Te Whakatōhea claim should be submitted to the Waitangi Tribunal, or submitted for direct negotiation with the Crown? My position as a Māori director was to present the historical narrative where there was a general consensus among the tribe for the reason that there was, and still is, genuine validity in Te Whakatōhea grievances.

TV3 was satisfied with the documentary because of the audience ratings. The documentary was nominated for best New Zealand documentary at the New Zealand Television Awards. Intriguingly, the documentary was screened on television the same week as the 1996 New Zealand general election. Perhaps it had some wider impact, as one of the key interviewees was Te Whakatōhea claims manager, Tuariki Delamere. Delamere was also one of the New Zealand First Party candidates whose party collectively won seventeen seats in parliament, making New Zealand First the strongest minority party in the House. Some months later, the Crown settlement with Te Whakatōhea was taken to Opōtiki to be signed. The fractures witnessed while filming had not been fixed. The iwi rejected the settlement and to this day, Te Whakatōhea has yet to receive reparation for historical land confiscations and continuing grievances.

## Concluding thoughts

Reflecting on my experiences as a Māori filmmaker, the idea of Māori people and Māori history being a homogeneous construct is a myth propagated by mass media. But it is a myth with specific origins in the New Zealand broadcasting model as a colonial construct. Although ngā iwi Māori might share overlapping oral histories, it does not altogether mean that their historical experiences of the colonial era are the same. The

ways in which an iwi, a tribe, a people ancestrally bound to a specific landed territory, have experienced and collectively made sense of their people's colonial encounter has resulted in differing tribal perspectives.



*Figure 6. ANZAC Day Programming Māori Television.*

Such a homogenized view of Māori people and Māori history has had a significant effect on the way in which Māori productions are made, framed, and marketed to the public. This remains the single most challenge for Māori storytellers of the screen: that is, how to realise the diversity and difference among Māori people and express that diversity in storytelling styles. One impression that comes to mind is my role in overseeing the ANZAC programming on Whakaata Māori, formerly known as Māori Television. A single narrative that prevailed was the concept of 'the price of citizenship,' and how fighting in the world wars of the twentieth century was taken as a duty for Māori soldiers under the principle of partnership taken from the Treaty of Waitangi (Warbrick, 2021). This theme resonated strongly with historians from the East Coast tribes of Aotearoa because it was penned by Tā Apirana Ngata. Although I had uncles who were soldiers in the 28th Māori Battalion rifle companies A and B, I felt concerned how that approach provided little context about opposition to conscription by Te Puea Hērangi, a prominent female leader of the Waikato tribes. For ngā iwi who suffered largescale raupatu with millions of acres of land confiscated, the notion that there was another price to pay could be interpreted as objectionable.

The strength of the media, specifically in my specialist field of Māori documentary filmmaking, is that it creates a process and an output which stimulates discussion, debate, and a variety of viewpoints. Here, I have shared my observations of the challenges for Māori media specialists employed by television broadcasters or working independently. Undoubtedly, more changes have taken effect throughout the national broadcasting system in Aotearoa since I began my filmmaking career as a trainee in the mid-1980s. Outside the scope of this narrative then, lies a new field to be reflected on by younger generations of Māori filmmakers engaged in the world of digital technology and internet media. New technologies, I believe, have provided new opportunities as well as new challenges for the revitalization of te reo me ngā tikanga Māori.

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## About the author

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