

# Indigenous voices indigenous symbols

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This 2009 edition is the third in a series of three journals focussing on the theme: indigenous voices. The 2007 Indigenous voices journal presented papers based on interviews completed with indigenous women and men in Hawai'i, North America, New Zealand, Australia and Canada. The call for papers had encouraged the growing community of indigenous writers and researchers to use research interviews that had been completed for various projects and to draw from those interviews the visions which indigenous peoples have for the future. The 2007 journal was the result.

At the WINHEC meeting at Chaminade University in Hawai'i in September 2007, delegates asked for the theme for the 2008 journal to focus on indigenous places after memorable keynote addresses which challenged delegates to reflect on the importance of place and location, of rivers, mountains and coastal settlements. Delegates were treated to presentations about not only geographical locations but places spiritual and cultural places of importance. Delegates and friends of WINHEC again took up the challenge and this resulted in the 2008 journal being launched at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2008 in which eight writers addressed the theme of place. The tradition continued and at La Trobe University there was a suggestion that the theme of symbols and symbolism be explored in the 2009 journal and the editorial board responded to the call. Early in 2009 they called for papers for this journal, the theme being: indigenous symbols.

Symbols and symbolism are powerful to indigenous peoples throughout the world. The clothing and costumes that delegates wear to the opening and closing ceremonies often represent long held traditions and reflect the places in which we dwell, climatic difference, practicality and preference. The gifts that are shared by indigenous peoples at various

gatherings are symbolic of place, values, what is precious to us and our beliefs. They represent our handcrafts, skills, and knowledge, they reflect colours which are symbolic to us, jewellery we wear, adornments and musical instruments, songs we sing, language we use.

In Hawai'i in 2007, all delegates received kukui nut lei on arrival at the conference venue, Chaminade University. The kukui nut had many uses in times gone by: the oil being used for healing. The lei were symbolic of the hospitality of Hawai'i, respect for visitors and they represented wellness. The hospitality was also reinforced by the meals provided, the entertainment, the sharing of knowledge, the venue and the people who cared for the visitors during the annual meeting.

At La Trobe University in 2008, the Sixth Annual Meeting of WINHEC was hosted by Gary Thomas, Executive Director, Equity and Student Support Services. The WINHEC website records:

Gary and his fantastic team of staff and students provided a seamless flow of hospitality allowing the approximately 80 participants to enjoy three days of inspirational presentations and workshops from leaders of Indigenous higher education across WINHEC's eight member nations. The serious work of the forum was enhanced by the stunning cultural experiences provided by the hosts during ceremonial and truly wonderful evening events.

There was much that was truly symbolic in Australia: hospitality towards other indigenous peoples is highly valued and appreciated. The new Executive group from the Sámi University College presented gifts which were symbolic of their place. One of the gifts they gave to others was a small bag made of reindeer skin. I learned of how precious the reindeer is to the Sámi people, how reindeer herders are special people and how the reindeer is a precious gift to give to small children on special occasions. It is far removed from many Pacific Island and warm coastal communities that delegates were from.

These are examples of how our behaviour towards other peoples represents our values and beliefs, the way in which we provide hospitality to others reflects our own values and our appreciation of those who are our visitors. There is no doubt that when indigenous peoples

gather we recognise each other's values and appreciate them and the gifts we exchange serve reminders long after we have each returned to our home nations. .

The papers in this edition represent indigenous symbols. They contribute to the growing body of indigenous knowledge that this journal promotes. Hohaia Collier's paper introduces the symbol of the new year – Matariki. Matariki is the appearance of the Pleiades, a group of stars whose appearance marked the new year. In New Zealand they appear in the sky in the month of June, hence June is the Māori New Year. In recent times Matariki has gained some importance and acknowledgement within Aotearoa New Zealand. Matariki was a time to undertake particular activities and many of these are described by Hohaia Collier. He in turn, attributes his own gathering of knowledge to his parents and an uncle whose teachings remain with him today. One of the reviewers of Hohaia's paper, Peter Hanohano from Hawai'i was stimulated to write a poetic response to Hohaia. It is reprinted in part, as it demonstrates how our imagination is stimulated by the reflections of our colleagues and about how this journal presents the world views of indigenous peoples and provides opportunities to share these with each other:

The astral and celestial bodies that you describe, indeed, regulate the rhythms of life and all that lives. Their rising and setting are symbols that guide and determine our own life cycles. As you described the importance of Matariki in the customary practices of planting and harvesting in the life of your whānau, I was struck by how your uncle's life was symbolic of the remembering, restoring and regenerating of these practices in your life and the lives of your siblings. Now, you and your siblings carry on these same practices and teachings in the lives of your respective children. Thus, for me, Matariki represents not just the regulation and timing of these practices, but more importantly, now Matariki is a reminder of the great legacy left to you and your family, because of your uncle. And in time, the rising and setting of Matariki will serve as a reminder to your children and their children about the great teachings and time spent with you in doing these same practices. Thus, the cycle represented by the symbol of Matariki is alive and lives on in those most important to you.

So, what I experienced in reading your essay was:

Symbols as circles – for Indigenous people, symbols, including those in the heavens, serve as a reminder of the great Circle of Life, and how all things are related and connected. Because you took the time to be with and learn from your uncle, the circle continues. There are many Indigenous people who are not so fortunate. We have to remember them, and stories such as yours give us all hope to reconnect to the Circle of Life that belongs to each of us respectively.

Symbols as stories – in the symbols, we find the stories. In the stories, we find meaning. Meaning gives reason for life.

Or put another way:

No symbols, no stories. No stories, no meaning. No meaning, no life. Symbols as self – because there is meaning, there is life. Meaning gives us reason to live a good life. In living the good life, we find ourselves. We find the good life in living for others. Celestial bodies, such as the moon, sun and stars are reflections of our ancestors, whose wondrous deeds and memories are forever etched in the constellations that make up the Indigenous skies. They give meaning to our lives today, and serve to remind us of the great legacy that is ours to remember and perpetuate. They are not mere figments of an imaginary or distant past, but burn brightly to remind us of our true identity and relationship to Sky Father and Earth Mother. They give foundation to our place/standing in this universe.

My heartfelt thanks, Hohaia, for sharing these precious moments and teachings from your learned uncle, and may the embers continue to burn brighter in your life and the life of your whenua.

Mahalo nui (many thanks),

Peter.

In reading this I was struck by how much we have in common, how our beliefs and values unite us and how our differences are often less important than those things that we share. We can celebrate difference and marvel at our individuality while also celebrating those lessons of our ancestors.

Linda LeGarde Grover's paper deals with the way in which the Windigo is presented in Ojibwe prose and poetry. The Windigo is a symbol which is variously explored by Ojibwe writers. Indigenous peoples will identify with the ways in which those from the Spirit world assist parents to caution their children and perhaps to follow traditional ways. Māori people will think about taniwhā when they read about the Windigo, others will recognise these spirits and the role they play in our lives and in the raising of our children. The paper concludes with verse written by Linda LeGarde Grover, complete with symbolism.

Jamie Lambert's paper, Māori Symbolism – the enacted curriculum, explores images, words, behaviours and actions that communicate layers and levels of meaning in the Māori world.

She reminds us that symbols are interpreted as well as have specific meaning for individuals or groups. Jamie Lambert's paper builds on Turoa Royal's paper in the 2008 journal which described the marae as the resource centre of the Māori world. The marae is also a powerful symbol of place, of home, of belonging, of tradition and provides a link between today, yesteryear and the future.

Patricia Quijada and Elizabeth Murakami-Ramalho from the University of Texas, present the frustrations of American Indian youth who feel that their efforts and their desire to complete their High School education are not supported sensitively by their teachers and by the School that they attend. Most distressing are the young people's perceptions that their teachers 'don't care'. It is a story of frustration for all who read it. The research undertaken by the writers found that the young students want to do their best for their parents and families and for themselves. They acknowledge that they have responsibilities to themselves and to the School but there are family obligations which they cannot overlook. Their expressions of frustration that the School is unable to deal with these is symbolic of the Education system's inability to address the issues in ways that are more creative and more innovative than sending intelligent young people to the cafeteria for an in-school suspension. It reminded me of publicity given to Wellington High School in New Zealand in 2007 when a research project conducted by Massey University's Sleep/Wake Research Centre investigated teenagers' sleep habits. It found that teenagers have different sleep patterns. In response, the High School (of over 1100 students) restructured the timetable and experimented with a later start for senior pupils. They were invited to sleep later and to start classes at 10.15 a.m. rather than at 8.30 a.m. Initial results found that the students were more rested and their school performance improved immediately. Lateness to school ceased immediately. We can learn from others around the world and find creative ways of dealing with issues. Flexible options can be tested and tried.

Gunvor Gottorm from the Sámi peoples has presented an argument which challenges the ways in which Sámi craft, *duodji*, is viewed and constructed in crafts and art theory. She indicates that there are difficulties when the language, *duodji*, is abandoned and the word, craft, replaces it. It makes it particularly difficult to assess Sámi craft from the point of view of art. She introduces new perspectives to the overall discussion on Sámi craft. This raises

issues for all indigenous peoples who deal with key concepts and symbols which are lost in translation.

The final paper records the journey that WINHEC has taken to develop its international accreditation. It describes the rationale for and implementation of the WINHEC accreditation system which has developed since the creation of WINHEC's Accreditation Authority in 2003. The paper is important as it is highly symbolic of the contribution to Indigenous self-determination in higher education. This journal is a forum in which the journey and key developments in WINHEC should be recorded. Ray Barnhardt's record of this development is a significant contribution to the journal and the story of WINHEC.

The Editorial team has this year, been challenged to work with more speed than usual. This is a result of the Annual Meeting moving back to the northern hemisphere in August 2009 after a December meeting in Australia in 2008. The call for papers was heeded in 2009 and nearly a dozen papers were submitted, some are still in various stages of development. We are grateful to the writers who have been able to meet our deadlines this year and invite more WINHEC members and friends to note the calls for papers in the future. We have sent all the papers for review to our editorial team and to experts from outside the editorial team. They were asked to comment on whether the papers a) contribute to indigenous knowledge b) are suitable for an international audience c) address the journal theme and d) are of a suitable length and presentation. My thanks go to the Editorial Board. It is a pleasure to work with a team who are responsive, encouraging, timely and professional.