

# Māori symbolism - the enacted marae curriculum

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**Te Awemāpara, Ngāti Hinekura, Te Māhurehure familial connections**

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Symbolism and other metaphoric representations of aspects of Māori (Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa/New Zealand) culture such as whaikōrero (formal speaking), moemoeā (dreams), and whakataukī (proverbial sayings) has existed with Māori for generations. This paper examines Māori symbolism and its importance in Māori culture more specifically the maintenance, sustenance and transmission of our indigenous knowledge systems for generations to come. Traditional use of symbols is also explored through the contextual application of the marae (traditional Māori living complex) and how symbols exist in various parts of the marae. The enacted curriculum is also investigated looking at specific examples of how these symbols can enact both non-Māori and Māori formal curriculum areas.

## Symbolism

Symbolism as a part of an expressive culture operates on a number of levels and across a range of frequencies according to your perceptions and having deeper understandings of what is truly represented. These symbols appear as images, words, behaviours and actions function in different spaces and places with differing meanings. This depends heavily on context, that is they are culturally and contextually relevant. Much of the value is encoded in metaphor. Symbols stand for concepts that are often too complex to be stated directly in words (Womack, 2005). Furthermore, Womack cites social anthropologist Raymond Firth (Ibid) who writes “it is assumed that symbols communicate meanings at levels of reality not accessible through immediate experience or conceptual thought. These meanings are often complex and of different layers. In addition, because symbols convey multiple levels of meaning at the same time, they are multivocal (they speak with multiple vocals), polysemic (they have multiple levels of meaning) or multivalent (they make multiple appeals). (Ibid) Because symbols are often about how that particular symbol is interpreted it is not only about the intention of the symbol but also about how it is interpreted by the onlooker. The intention

and interpretation of symbols is a key factor of communication especially in a culture that relied heavily on oral and visual communication such as Māori. Pre-European contact, the Māori people of Aotearoa (New Zealand) relied heavily on oral and visual communication. There was no written language as we would discern it today. The written language included various methods of communication including oral, visual and spiritual. The written language would be better described as a visual language as there were no words (as we know words today) that were written, but there were other forms of knowledge and information transmission and heavy use of symbolism and metaphoric language. Māori symbolism is epitomised by the marae (communal living complex). The marae itself is a symbol of history and genealogy and continues to give Māori a sense of belonging. Symbolism was significantly represented in traditional means of learning and retaining history through the traditional house of learning, known as the whare wānanga.

### **Traditional education systems**

One of the oldest learning institutions in Māori history is that known as whare wānanga. Whare wānanga were held in order to preserve tribal lore and it was decided that this tribal lore including long conversed myth and ritual was taught to a certain number of young men of each generation. These men were given the task of transmitting the tribal lore to the young men. The subjects taught were classified as:

1. High-class ritual and other lore;
2. historical and other matters of less importance; and
3. the arts of black magic.

In some cases the whare wānanga were held in places that were of special relevance and or significance to the topic being learnt. In other instances the whare wānanga was but a name and a system; no special house bore the name, and the knowledge pertaining to it might be taught in the open air or in any house set apart for the purposes. There was a significant amount of ritual associated with whare wānanga and its participants. The related customs of these instructional courses included the scholars having to show that they had successfully memorised the matter taught through the whare wānanga. (Best, 1974) The memorisation of

this information and knowledge was aided by images, metaphors, figures of speech, chants and songs. Buck (1982) explains that in order for the elders to keep their own memories green, the old people in the evenings or early mornings sang through their repertoire of songs while reclining in the tribal meeting house (structure included in the marae complex) and the older children learned them so as to join in with the community singing.

According to Hemara (2000) the element of surprise was sometimes used to impress a particular piece of important information on a student's mind. The faux-anger state that was sometimes used was done so in order for students to trigger cognitive expansion and therefore, students would ask more questions. Whaikōrero (formal public, ritualistic speaking) were also used as a symbol to represent cultural expression of whānau (family), hapū (sub-tribe) and iwi (tribe) histories as well as political relationships and family links with each other and other iwi (Ibid). Whaikōrero (formal public, ritualistic speaking) was carried out on the marae (communal living complex) and children were exposed to the histories, genealogies, arts, politics rituals of their hapū (sub-tribe) and iwi (tribe) in a public arena. The children observed their elders behaviour and mimicked them. In this case the elders stand as not only a symbol of knowledge holders but are symbolic of the type of knowledge that they are transmitting. The forum in which these histories, tribal links and other relationships were explored and the related skills applied was through the traditional marae complex.

## **The marae**

The marae is a focal point for Māori where families and communities come together for various reasons. The marae is a local ceremonial centre, dedicated to the gatherings of Māori people and to the practice of traditional rituals. (Salmond, 1975). The marae complex usually consists of several buildings including a whare tūpuna (ancestral house; otherwise known as whare nui, whare tūpuna or whare whakairo), whare kai (dining hall), and whare paku (ablutions) at the very least. There are a number of views of what marae are and stand for. At one level Tauroa & Tauroa (2000) state that marae are places of refuge that provide facilities to enable us to continue with our way of life within the total structure of the Māori

world. They go on to say that we the Māori need our marae so that we may pray to God; rise tall in oratory, weep for our dead; house our guests; have our meetings, feasts, weddings and reunions; and sing and dance. The marae is an institution that has existed for many generations and will exist for many generations to come. It provides Māori with an opportunity to be one with our environment and to truly express ourselves in ways that are unique only to Māori of Aotearoa (New Zealand).

With all this in mind, marae are a powerful symbol for Māori living as Māori. It symbolises a connection to being Māori and it also represents the traditions, rituals, customs, protocols and ways of doing and being of those who have gone before us and those who will remain when we are gone.

The whare tīpuna (ancestral house) is conceptualised metaphorically as a human body, usually representing the eponymous ancestor of a tribe (Harrison, 1999). Harrison describes the whare tīpuna as follows: Beginning at the top of the house, the apex of the gable, attached to the tāhūhū (ridgepole) is the koruru (head). The maihi (bargeboards) are the arms, outstretched to welcome guests. The tāhūhū stands as the backbone and the heke (rafters) that fall off the tāhūhū are the ribs. The porch of the house is named the roro (brain). The kuwaha (mouth) or door is the symbolic entry where the spiritual and physical spheres meet and come together. The matapihi (window) is seen as the eye and the interior of the house is known as the koopu (womb). Those inside the house are then comforted by the embrace of that particular ancestor. The poupou (carved posts) that embellish the sides of the house depict distinguished descendants from the eponymous ancestor.

This paper examines the whare tīpuna and the whakairo (carvings) that adorn the ancestral house and details how these are symbolic of much more than what appears on the surface.

## The marae as a symbol

Symbolism occurs at various levels at, in and on the marae. This occurs in a range of forms including, whakairo (carved representations), waiata (song) and whaikōrero (formal public speaking).

More specifically, as one example, whakairo has many symbolic connotations especially inside the whare tīpuna. These carved representations surround those who are inside with tradition and history with their sheer presence, and symbolic representation of aspects that tradition and history that comes with each of the carved pieces. More often than not, the carved pieces that enliven the walls of the house represent ancestors who are directly connected to the eponymous ancestor that that particular house is named after. These poupou (carved figures) represent ancestors in the spiritual state and therefore were represented in abstract form. Harrison (1999) explains that “Ancestors, tribal atua (tribal Gods) mythical heroes and fabulous creatures are represented. Personification also plays a distinctive part. The feeling for departed ancestors is closely interwoven with carving because of the prestige bestowed on their descendants through their achievements.” The position of these ancestors in whare tīpuna all over Aotearoa (New Zealand) has been likened to the sculpted and painted ancestors found in castles and halls all around the world (Ibid). However, for Māori they represent the living present and future.

There are various surface patterns used in the carving of these poupou. More specifically surface patterns such as Raperape or Kirikiore, Ritorito or Puwerewere, Taratara ā Kae or Taowaru and Rauponga are symbolic of deeper meanings. Raperape are used as whakapapa (genealogy) symbols. They are used to imply whakapapa, or are used to identify whakapapa of that person. The general use of the Ritorito pattern was to denote priesthood in men and noble birth in women. The placement of these patterns on certain parts of the carved figure emphasised points of movement of the shoulders, buttocks and legs, therefore implying agility and speed of a youthful person. Taratara ā Kae denotes abundance and material wealth and is mainly found on food storage houses, where it symbolises abundance and

wealth in terms of food. Rauponga symbolises genealogy. The lines and placement of each line denotes genealogy and different generations (Harrison, 1999).

The use of these surface patterns and the application of their meanings provide a field for the introduction of mnemonics in sculpture to support the oral tradition of Māori. According to Harrison (1999) the symbols found in whakairo are:

1. Mnemonic: Something intended to assist the memory (for example, a diacritical mark).
2. Ideographic: A written or carved symbol that represents an idea or concept.
3. Calligraphic: Writing or painting of high aesthetic quality.
4. Hieroglyphic: A pictographic script in which the symbols or figures are conventionalised and have hidden meanings.
5. Diacritic: A mark or sign.

All of these concepts are applicable to whakairo in one way or another. Mnemonic application could occur in the learning of the art of carving to assist them with the names of the patterns or techniques that carvers use. The surface patterns mentioned above are ideographic in nature as they all represent further ideas and concepts. Carvings are calligraphic, hieroglyphic and diacritic in nature and form.

## **Enacting the marae curriculum**

Marae is a catalyst for the thinking and rethinking transformative education. This opens up the possibility for the thinking about the 'enacted marae curriculum'. A common question that is being asked in Māori educational circles in the adult learning arena in Aotearoa (New Zealand) is how we can incorporate more Māori knowledge into curriculum that is taught especially by wānanga (Post compulsory education with an indigenous Māori focus). I suggest that we explore the possibilities of using the traditional marae complex to enhance current curriculum activities which will move towards enhancing and therefore enacting current static curriculum.

In order for this to occur there are a number of issues that need to be considered and resolved. Firstly, essential components of Māori ways of being and doing need to be implemented in to the education system over a period of time. There needs to be a plan of how this will be integrated so as not to implement a tokenistic approach to appreciating indigenous knowledge. Penetito as cited in Tapine & Waiti (1997) supports this by stating that the education system needs a long term plan for Māori education, and it needs to include critical elements from Māoritanga (Māori ways of being and doing) over a long period of time. If they are injected into the system immediately without proper trial and error it will simply bastardise and misrepresent Māori knowledge and practices. People need to be able to build up a whole set of associations with this knowledge as they accumulate it. It is just as important for us as Māori as well as non-Māori to remember that Māori have the same potential, mental capacity, and ability to operate intellectually as any other group (Ibid). As with other indigenous cultures around the world Māori people has seen the dominant group impose its culture, values, knowledge and practices on Māori society, and this has had overwhelming effects upon generations of Māori and will continue to influence future generations. Penetito claims that Māori have been subject to this hegemony for so long that in many cases they find themselves in situations where they believe their knowledge, customs and practices are in some way inferior and less coherent than non-Māori culture, knowledge, customs and values. This belief is something that is learnt and observed. Those who are colonised learn to hate themselves, and it is something which is learned. They learn it from what they see of themselves through other peoples' eyes and what they hear from other peoples' mouths (Ibid). Self determination through education needs to occur first through a mind shift in Māori and non-Māori and place importance on our own voices and our own symbols to assist us in this endeavour. The agenda for returning intellectual coherence and moral force to Māori education involves Māori telling their own stories, creating their own images, listening to their own voices. It requires a return to the belief that we are no better or worse than any other group (Ibid).

Secondly, an important change needs to occur in learning environments. These learning environments need to be flexible enough to be able to accommodate educational changes. An important role for any learning environment is to prepare for the educational changes that are taking place. Where curriculum changes occur in traditional areas, these can be accommodated with reasonable facilities. However, where changes occur in new fields these

are not nearly as quickly or impressively effected (Harrison 1999). An awareness of cultural diversity is taking place in Aotearoa (New Zealand) education and programmes together with facilities for the projection of these changes are being developed and used by the authorities who realise that cultural diversity is a valuable resource which properly nurtured, contributes positively to the functioning of a cohesive society. Effective teaching about cultural influences on learning can best take place in an environment that reflects these values. Furthermore, it will help young people to be secure in their own culture on one hand, and to have contact and first hand knowledge with another if they so desire (Ibid). Above all the marae will provide a living example of the benefits to be gained from people of goodwill working together towards the achievement of a common goal.

The marae can assist in the achievement of this mind shift as well as the achievement of curriculum changes to reflect Māori values and knowledge systems that are supported by traditional symbols and imagery. For example, curriculum areas that can be taught using whakairo include mathematics (geometry, symmetry and measurement), science (for example. appropriate wood types, density testing, tree uses and lifecycles), technology (e.g. how to carve, identifying grains of the wood and appropriate tools for appropriate wood types and carving styles and techniques), te reo Māori (the Māori language) (for example learning genealogy, relevant terminology, traditional stories associated with and represented through carving) art (e.g. visual presentations of people, actions, genealogy, stories through carving), social studies (e.g. identifying connections between the chosen poupou and relevant tribe of the student, identifying different patterns or carving styles from different tribes). These are excellent examples of how Māori learning environments can accommodate non-Māori curriculum areas. In the same vein where Māori knowledge would be best taught using Maori learning environments that are enhanced by a myriad of supporting symbols presented in various forms including song, dance, art, story and formal speeches. These aspects make us unique from other indigenous and non-indigenous cultures around the world.

This paper has explained and highlighted that the marae is one of the oldest knowledge institutions in Māori culture and is currently underutilised in formal education settings. This paper invites the use of code and symbol through the enacted marae curriculum. Elements of the enacted marae curriculum would include a facilitator who has an understanding of the symbolism that exists throughout the marae and the application in different shapes and forms.



Other elements would also include the ability for participants to be able interact in both Māori and Pākehā worlds of education and contextual application in each. The potential of the enacted marae curriculum for Māori education is that the concept is applicable across different curriculum areas, ages, abilities, capabilities and levels of understanding.

Ultimately, this means that anything can be taught using the enacted marae curriculum and has the potential to encourage Māori students to operate to learn aspects of their education using traditional Māori methods and forms.

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