

WITH ELIZABETH RATA, Associate Professor in the School of Critical Studies in Education at the University of Auckland



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**Frontier Centre:** Can you please describe relations between New Zealand's Maori population and the non-Maori majority? Specifically, what has been the basic policy trajectory of government-Maori relations since the country's founding?

**Elizabeth Rata:** Any understanding of the relations between Maori and non-Maori needs to be placed within the longer historical context and to take into account the following: the huge range within both populations throughout the period of Contact from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. This range includes, within the Maori population, intense hostilities between tribes from the 1790s to the 1930s. These are known as the 'musket wars' or 'tribal wars' and frequently involved mass slaughter, cannibalism, and slavery. Indeed, one of the reasons tribal chiefs signed the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, whereby the British annexed New Zealand to the Empire, was to secure the protection of British law and put an end to the bloodshed. This greatly assisted slaves and people of low caste who were able to escape the 'tyranny of culture' and make new lives for themselves. For example, many young Maori men went to the gold fields of Victoria in Australia in the 1830s. It was the elite who had the most to lose by detribalisation. The idea held today that detribalisation is bad for people forgets that it was actually liberating for many ordinary people.

The intra-Maori differences continue to the present though in different forms. There are class differences; between the new tribal elite, the growing Maori middle class, and the impoverished Maori under-class, as well as differences between people on the basis of life-style and location. About one fifth of Maori now live in Australia while others live in many parts of the world. Within New Zealand, some live in the country, others in the towns and cities, some are wealthy, some are poor – all these differences matter to Maori as to any other group.

There has been inter-marriage between Maori and others from the early Contact period and all Maori have non-Maori ancestors. Inter-marriage continues and the majority of children who identify or are identified as Maori today have a parent who is non-Maori. This may include European or Pacific or Asian or a mix of all ancestries.

There is a huge range in terms of cultural identification. Some people acknowledge Maori ancestry but don't consider themselves to have a Maori cultural identity while others are deeply committed to a Maori cultural identity – these may include individuals with one Maori great-grandparent for example. Still others have been raised in a family that identifies strongly as Maori and has always done so regarding Maori as their primary and determining identity. Then there are those for whom a Maori identity has become increasingly important for a variety of reasons.

Just over half of the population who identify as Maori say that they are 'only' Maori. The others see themselves as mixed-ethnic. These people are more likely to be well-educated and young.

This complicated social reality means that the relations between Maori and non-Maori is better seen as a political one between the revived tribes and the government. Throughout the past two centuries the politics of ethnic categorisation has shifted from one of assimilation to integration to the current position. This is characterised by as assertive tribal politics from one section of the Maori population. (Not all Maori support re-tribalisation.) It is not possible to say that there is one Maori 'voice'. Nor has it ever been the case.

My analysis of the move by the revived tribes since the 1980s to claim large economic resources and constitutional recognition is that this is a process common to all emergent capitalist elites throughout history. The tribal elite differs from other emergent elites only in terms of the justifying ideology – one based on the idea of an essentialised ethnic group with an ongoing traditional culture. It is a necessary ideology because it allows the new corporate tribes to claim the inheritance of the past by emphasising continuity with that past. For that reason we are likely to see an increasing emphasis of 'culture' as a way to distinguish Maori from others.

**FC:** What has been the experience of treaty in the New Zealand historic context?

**ER:** The current treaty policy is based on the assumption that Maori is a discrete and distinctive ethnic/race category

with social, cultural and economic interests that should be recognised at the level of policy, and for some treaty partnership advocates, at a constitutional level. This approach can be traced to the re-interpretation of the Treaty of Waitangi from the 1980s. The 1840 Treaty of Waitangi was the instrument of annexation by which the British Government established sovereignty over New Zealand. It became the symbol of Maori cultural revivalism in the 1970s and the document of inheritance for an emerging Maori elite in the 1980s. The concept of a treaty 'partnership' was developed as recently as the mid-1980s. A 1987 Court of Appeal decision which likened the relationship between the tribes and the government to a partnership gave the concept widespread legitimacy, even though the Court had stated that the treaty established a relationship 'akin to a partnership' not that it was a partnership. However, from that decision, the 'partnership' discourse moved into governmental policy providing justification for various partnership models, especially in health and education. It is increasingly used as the justification for a partnership at a constitutional level.

The concept of Maori as a distinctive political category (in contrast to a socio-ethnic identity), is essential to contemporary Maori tribal politics because it 'creates' one of the partners in the Treaty partnership relationship. In other words, without the ethnic categorisation of Maori as members of the tribes that were recognised in a 1998 Court decision as the recipients of the Treaty historical grievance settlements, there could be no 'partner' to claim those settlements. This is despite the fact that the concept of a Treaty 'partnership' between the tribes and the government is inherently problematic.

According to Treaty legal scholar, David Round (2000), 'the word partner was ill-chosen. It is impossible to reconcile with the clear words – and surely principle – of the Treaty that Maori are subjects. Partnership has turned out to be an attractive idea, among Treaty claimants anyway' (Round, p. 657). In a more recent article, Round (2011) has developed this point further. 'If there were to be a partnership of Maori and the Crown, then by definition Maori could not be subjects of the Crown. One cannot be a partner and a subject at the same time. If there were to be a partnership of Maori and the Crown in the government of New Zealand, then it must follow logically that the only people who would be subjects would not be Maori – They would be partners – but rather non-Maori, who would be the subjects of the Crown and also the subjects of the Treaty partner who shares the Crown's authority' (Round, 2011, p. 538).

**FC: How have the Maori become the most impoverished and marginalized group within New Zealand society?**

**ER:** Not all Maori are impoverished and marginalised. Following the Second World War many Maori, like the population more generally, moved from rural to urban areas, moving first into a working class that was doing well in prosperous times, with some beginning the climb into the new professional class. Many of the leaders of the Maori revival from the 1960s and 1970s come from this emergent

professional group. Of those who entered the urban working class from the 1940s (though there had always been Maori in the category from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century operating as whalers and in forestry and road-making), a number fell into the under-class that was created by the neoliberal economic policies of the 1980s. Now they are the inter-generationally unemployed and unemployable.

They are much more likely than other Maori to describe themselves as 'Maori only, have low literacy, and have sub-cultural associations with benefit dependence, sole parenthood, early natality, drug and alcohol abuse, physical violence, and illegal cash-cropping' (Chapple, 2000, p. 115). Indeed, the high level of Maori child abuse, including cases leading to a child's death, involves families from this group.

The issue is how to explain the persistence of this group because how it is explained leads to ideas about a solution. For some, the problem is the result of detribalisation and lack of connections to Maori culture. Therefore the answer is to provide greater cultural contact. I disagree with this approach because I see 'culture' as the problem. By this I mean an essentialised Maori 'culture', one that locks people into beliefs about how they should live. It's the idea – that because I'm Maori I should think, live, and behave in a culturally prescribed way.

In a book I have written that is to be published in April by Routledge I address what happens when people are confined to the local world of culture. In the final chapter I say that

where there is no separation between the local communal group and society, the world is merely that group writ large. How can a common universal humanity be acknowledged? There is the world conceptualised on the basis of kin to whom only kin can belong and there is the world conceptualised on the basis of individuals who share a common humanity. The school's role is to enable this separation, not to enlarge the experiential world of the family.

The process of separating from the private world of the kin-group to the public world of the *demos* develops the dispositions of detachment, independence, and autonomy that are essential for conceptual thinking. In that act of separation, is the practice of abstraction, of thinking about one's experience in objective ways rather than always subjectively. Children who do not acquire the cognitive processes and dispositions of abstraction, that ability to separate from the subjective world of their own experience, are restricted from moving into the world of conceptual reasoning and, hence, from the world of educational achievement.

I consider that the cultural approach to schooling that is advocated for indigenous people throughout the world, not only in New Zealand, actually works against young people and contributes to educational failure.

**FC:** When it comes to education for the Maori specifically, what has been the government's historic policy response from the start to now? Walk us through the government's educational system for the Maori.

**ER:** The government's response has always been to acknowledge the diverse views amongst Maori. Many Maori in the 19<sup>th</sup> century wanted government schools and a nation-wide system of Native Schools was legislated in 1867. (In fact one of the arguments used by settlers for the comprehensive national system that was established in 1877 was the existence of the Native Schools.) A petition from some Maori chiefs in the 1870s asked that the education be in the English language. They were keen for their children to operate in the modern world.

There were other Maori, especially those who had had land confiscated following the Land Wars of the 1960s (where some Maori fought on the government's side) who did not want these schools. For that reason it was not made compulsory for Maori children to attend school until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The existence of the Native Schools alongside the mainstream system didn't lead to separate development mainly because settler children attended the Native Schools and because of the extent of inter-marriage. In addition there were a few church Maori boarding schools throughout the country.

The development of cultural-based early childhood centres (kohanga reo), schools (kura kaupapa Maori), tertiary institutions (whare wananga) and the promotion of Maori research methodologies and 'ways of knowing' in universities since the 1980s is part of wider Maori politics and biculturalism. (It should be noted that 'biculturalism' has several meanings. It sometimes is used to refer to the relationship between Maori and pakeha (ie settler-descendants) and at other times refers to that relationship between the tribes and the government. The kohanga and kura were established by Maori and some non-Maori. They have been funded by the government apart from a few years in the early establishment phase.

**FC:** In a nutshell, why have government educational policies towards the Maori failed?

**ER:** Educational policies haven't failed the children of the Maori tribal elite and the professional class. There are many Maori, who are committed to their children's educational success. Those who are failing are the group I refer to above – an underclass who fail for a number of reasons. Poverty is certainly a factor, but not the only one. There are other poor families in New Zealand (refugees and migrants in particular) whose children do not under-achieve. The sub-cultural factors associated with belonging to an underclass, those mentioned above, are certainly implicated in educational failure. Interestingly, Maori families are not supporting the kohanga as some did in the 1980s – there has been a significant drop in numbers in the past decade.

**FC:** In your research you have found that Maori tend to actually do better in schools that are not geared for the Maori but the general public. Why do you think this is?

**ER:** I don't say that Maori in mainstream schools do better than those in the kura. I say that we don't have the evidence to say one way or the other. There are not enough children in the kohanga and kura to be sure about this. However I do develop the argument, it's the one in the book 'The Politics of Knowledge in Education' I mention above to say that children who receive an education that limits them to a prescribed 'way of being' will fail. This is the case because they will not develop the ability to think in the objective, abstract ways that enable them to 'step outside the confines of their local world' and see the world from the perspectives of the academic disciplines.

**FC:** In your research you identified a large gap between the official line that Maori-culture oriented schools are doing well and are the way of the future versus the empirical data on actual student achievement. Can you walk us through this gap and why you think the New Zealand government's government maintains this official line despite the data?

**ER:** Many in politics and government today are part of the 'cultural turn' of the liberal-Left that I write about in a number of publications. That 'turn' from class to identity politics is known as biculturalism in New Zealand and multiculturalism in other liberal democracies. Despite the fact that the group of Maori for whom the treaty settlements and biculturalism in general was designed are more marginalised than in pre-bicultural period, this approach remains the orthodoxy. The reasons are complex but can be found in the particular circumstances of the new professional class – those children, often with working class parents, who became well-educated in the 1950s and 60s. They were well-educated in prosperous times, and committed to 'doing well by doing good'. That paradox is at the heart of their determined commitment to identity politics. It enables them to reject a class politics which would reveal their own relatively privileged status (still a source of guilt) but still be 'doing good'.

**FC:** Your research has found that young Maori males tend to be suffering the most within society and the Maori education system in general. Why do you think that is?

**ER:** It is the Maori males in that under-class not all Maori males. Many have experienced abuse as children. While there are various campaigns directed against the level of domestic violence in the homes that many of these young men come from with government agencies often involved as well, it is a deeply embedded way of life, one not helped by the excessive use of marijuana and alcohol.

**FC: To what extent is the breakdown of Maori communities and households driving the problems of Maori academic under-achievement?**

**ER:** All communities that have high levels of unemployment, domestic violence, and alcohol and drug problems combined with a lack of commitment to education have low educational achievement. It is not being Maori that is the cause. If it was, then all Maori would be failing and that is not the case.

**FC: You identify the New Zealand's policy of 're-tribalization' of Maori society as part of the problem. Why do you feel that is a problem? Is there a way, in your view, to balance Maori traditions with modernity?**

**ER:** The idea that there is the 'traditional' and the 'modern' with ethnic groups placed in the 'traditional' and others in the 'modern' is an approach that fails to recognise that we all live in the same world. Within all social groups, there are people, who, for various religious or cultural reasons choose to value the group's historical traditions and to identify strongly with the group.

However the very idea of being able to 'choose' in a modern idea. People in traditional societies don't have choice. Their lives are ascribed by their birth status, gender, caste, and age. The problem with the view 'traditional versus modern' is that if you are one of the 'traditional' you are incarcerated into an ahistorical timelessness. While others can be 'modern' – make choices, change their lives, have aspirations for a different future – all the advantages of living in the modern world, those cast in the role as 'traditional people' are confined to their prescribed roles. These are not just birth-ascribed, but controlled by beliefs about gender and age. It is a highly romanticised idea of the traditional life – which was 'nasty, brutish and short' for all our ancestors.

In fact, the revived tribes are modern economic corporations and modern social entities not traditional tribes. The use of traditional practices is to contribute to tribal politics. This is a politics that makes claims that are justified with reference to the past – so making the past visible in this way is strategically very important.

**FC: You mentioned that the modern Maori are quite urbanized. Does this affect the Maori education experience? How can it be used to help the Maori?**

**ER:** Maori and non-Maori live in the country, towns and cities of New Zealand – in families with their non-Maori partners and children, being part of wider families where members are of all ethnic heritages, occupations, and lifestyles. Some actively pursue being Maori, others do not, or only at times – this variety may even occur within one same family.

**FC: What, in your view, would the ideal policy remedy for Maori educational under-achievement?**

**ER:** Here is the final paragraph in my book 'The Politics of Knowledge in Education'. It sums up what I consider education should be for all children, regardless of ethnic identification and ancestry.

'Children are brought into these disciplinary ways of thinking at school. Acquiring conceptual knowledge and receiving practice in the symbolic codes of language, mathematics, music, and the arts and sciences doesn't happen as a result of everyday experiences. The ability to think conceptually and the symbolic tools needed to think in that way must be taught. For that reason teachers will remain at the centre of education, not as 'co-inquirers' but as those who teach the concepts and symbolic codes of disciplinary subjects. This knowledge enables students to think about what they have not experienced, to predict what they don't yet know, and to 'think about the unthinkable'. It is, or should be, the purpose of schools to teach this knowledge.' (Chapter 11, The Politics of Knowledge in Education)

References

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