

## I SNEEZE - THEREFORE I LIVE!

### THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET ON THE MAORI CULTURE

#### Article for 'EarthWatch'

(not yet edited)

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*"After food, shelter and reproduction, there is culture. For whatever reason, we strive for cultural survival - in the face of physical threat, we fight; in the face of colonisation, we redefine, reclaim; in the face of information technology, we position ourselves so that we and everyone else can know we are distinct - and that is survival also... Ake, ake, ake tonu atu..."<sup>[1]</sup>*

Two hundred years ago, English missionaries arrived in Aotearoa<sup>[2]</sup>, an isolated island nation deep in the South Pacific. They brought bibles, pens and paper, and thus, for the indigenous people, one of the first great encounters with European technology; namely, the written word.

Over decades, Maori<sup>[3]</sup> were fought, colonised and assimilated into the imported culture of the new residents. The written works of the English scholars and others became a key source, and in some cases the only source, of history and knowledge about our people. Indigenous peoples worldwide share this common experience - where their stories have been told and manipulated by others, only to be reduced to fantasy, novelty, myth and untruth. Maori knowledge was validated, discarded or modified to suit an English international strategy of colonisation. In essence, the English were attempting to master the New World by conquering both geography *and* knowledge systems.

The traditions that would have safeguarded future knowledge have dwindled through a deliberate and almost successful removal of our language. The passing down of knowledge to new generations through oral traditions has become a privilege and rarity for many tribal groups. The enormous loss of land to the immigrants and the undermining of our social and cultural systems resulted in mass dislocation, isolation and separation from ancestral knowledge. This has

led to a disproportionate and negative impact on almost all aspects of life for Maori, including health, education, employment, housing, crime, abuse and of course technological capacity. We have become vulnerable to ill-fitting and imported belief systems that have not proven to be beneficial for the ongoing well being of our people.

However, our culture is still tenuously alive and recent attempts to actively promote our knowledge have resulted in a resurgence of a collective and focussed strategy for reclamation<sup>[4]</sup>. As we remove the layers of invented and misinterpreted histories, we are rediscovering who we are and deciding more about our future.

So what does that have to do with the Internet? The Internet acts as a catalyst for a chaotic and greedy information "grab" at a rate that humanity has never experienced. To various degrees, any technology travels a slow road of availability, firstly to highly developed communities and finally, if at all, to communities that are overwhelmed by basic survival issues.

For Maori, the control of information on the Internet is not quite within reach. Maori are under-represented in all professional technology fields and are less likely to have access to the infrastructure necessary to participate fully. Government databases still collect abundant data about Maori with no pre-determined purpose. This data is analysed and published with little regard for context or benefit to Maori. Instead, Maori are subjected to statistical research findings from these databanks that continue to reinforce the most negative stereotypes. The Internet now enables the sharing of data across organisational and governmental databases that ensures that the technology still happens 'at' Maori.

There is excitement and activity at one level for Maori through ad hoc Internet projects that support *tinio rangatiratanga*<sup>[5]</sup>. However, other organisations and our government are building multi-million dollar Internet based systems and websites that record and manipulate information about Maori with astounding speed. It is not surprising that the Internet can symbolise a disadvantage for a culture that is at risk of further decline, and whose experience of information technology is the reinforced perception of failure.

Because others have control, the Internet has become a modern, exciting and rapid tool for further colonisation. This, I believe, is not part of a deliberate conspiracy for technological colonisation but is a by-product of it. Once again, we are experiencing a significant impact on our knowledge. There is a real threat again to have our stories and histories told by others who have no stake in its integrity or survival. Without the benefit of hindsight, this is not so easily seen. However, history leaves us with relevant lessons. The potential to prevent further pillaging of our culture exists only when Maori are able to participate in the decisions about the technology. This is progressing at a slow pace but is possible when we have the necessary level of skill capacity and infrastructure. By reaching mastery of the technology, we can also be vigilant about how others are using it. We will also need to influence governmental policies and laws so that they support concepts of protection, ownership, access and use that go beyond limited western

perceptions and law. For example, the current laws of this nation and of the world are not conducive to perceptions about guardianship that are practiced by many indigenous peoples. The frivolous treatment of cultural knowledge is consistent with that of the physical environment.

Recently, we are attempting to develop mechanisms for governance that will protect cultural matters, collective privacy and ownership, and lead to more Maori participation in Internet based projects. Maori must be seated at the decision-making table and our contributions recognised as valid and adding value.

The Internet can contribute to our cultural survival as long as our cultural contexts are maintained. For example, the Internet can support our languages, images, concepts, histories, politics and development. It can sustain our choice to define and redefine, and to grow and change as we choose. The Internet may have a similar impact to that of the written word. However, the written word did not destroy our culture. In some cases, it preserved it. Beyond the bookshelves and computer networks are day to day living. The Internet is still just a tool and it will not replace the 'breath of life' that is intricately woven into our world. The land, sea, and mountains are the manifestations and reflections of our culture that technology will never completely mirror. There is life and there is death... Tihei mauri ora<sup>[6]</sup>!

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<sup>[1]</sup> Forever and ever into the distant realms of time...

<sup>[2]</sup> Renamed by the immigrants and now commonly known as New Zealand.

<sup>[3]</sup> Maori is a collective term that was created to include all tribal groups.

<sup>[4]</sup> There are a number of programmes to reclaim language and dialects, cultural protocols, land, and spiritual belief systems. For example the Te Kohanga Reo (the language nest) programme has successfully introduced the Maori language to pre-school children leading to a growth of total language immersion education up to university level.

<sup>[5]</sup> Control over ones destiny that can include education, development and political autonomy.

<sup>[6]</sup> I sneeze – therefore I live! A phrase often used to announce one's existence.