



KI ROTO I TE NGAHERE: REDUCING INEQUALITIES FOR RANGATAHI MĀORI IS A NATIONAL IMPERATIVE.

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Presented by Liletina Vaka and Kahu Kutia, and with the guidance of other Māori students in Wellington, this presentation will explore in some detail the social landscape of Aotearoa for young Māori. We will use the framework of the 'ngahere', a symbiotic system of relationships to understand the guide questions. What are the rights of a young Māori person in Aotearoa? And how can we sustainably develop their future? We will be exploring the politics of identity and recognition, the current state of progress, and the need for spaces that are autonomous and indigenous.

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*Ngahere: Bush, forest. An ecosystem.
Ngā Here. The ties, the bonds.*

There is a whakatauki that says 'Ka pū te ruha, ka hao te rangatahi. As an old net withers, another is remade. This saying speaks to the regeneration of society; the significance of passing the mantle to the young. Rangatahi Māori (young Māori) are the future of our culture, and must bear the burdens and the hardships of our tīpuna (ancestors). Unfortunately, like almost all indigenous cultures, Māori have been plagued with hardships and inequality.

This report is rooted in the upholding and honoring of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Violations of Te Tiriti must be afforded multifaceted analysis as they belong to a historical legacy of rights-erasing, serving to maintain the strong holds of inequality that persist. Persisting inequalities include "the diseases of poverty that reduce our quality of life and shorten our life expectancy, the internalized violence born of oppression, and the despair among young Maori shaped by an unemployment rate four times higher than the general population"(Mutu, 2015, 274; see also Jackson 2004; Smith 2012). Such facts are merely a surface reflection of the issues we face as a people, issues born of colonisation and the continuing hardships that face indigenous peoples.

Reducing the inequalities faced by rangatahi Māori must be a national imperative. In the ngahere we understand that if the indigenous plant thrives, the whole forest thrives. What rights should a young Māori person have? And how can we sustainably support the future for Māori? This question is imperative not only to one's sense of self, but to collectively building Aotearoa as one well-functioning eco-system; a ngāhere per se that sustainably and successfully supports individuals to succeed in a whole. The concept to understand is indigenous, and within the ngahere, our imperative is to recognise the complex and interwoven identities that make up the landscape.

In some parts of the world, more than 300 different plant types can be found within a space smaller than a rugby field (Terborgh 1992). Environments such as this don't only support an extensive plant ecosystem, but wider relationships of animals and land. Deforestation appears when those who are able to abuse their position, choose to, on the premise that land would be better served for economic profit. The national mindset must be altered. If society is to flourish, we must stop planting pine trees, and seek indigenous solutions, indigenous plants. We need to stop certain ideas of who we are and how we should grow, specifically those that are influenced by capitalism, colonisation, and a history of ingrained oppression.

Sustained alienation from culture is degrading of one's sense of self and belonging. A better understanding of the landscape and the history makes visible the silent stories of colonisation. Everyday, rangatahi face the complex and intersecting identity politics that govern how we interact, and are interacted with by the world. Understanding identity is a task that will present itself with a thousand questions. Who is asking? Who is answering? How and why do they identify and understand themselves. It is one of the most critical issues faced by rangatahi.

Tracey McIntosh (2005) spoke to the experience of identity and marginalisation. Māori identity as fixed, fluid, or forced. Our young people feel they are not brown enough, not fluent enough, too distant from the marae to engage culturally, but ostracised from mainstream society nonetheless.

"We need to be sensitive to the way identity articulations can exclude individuals who already have lives marked by exclusion. More critically, a focus solely on identity politics may blind us to the political-social-economic-structures that render the lives of too many to the margins" (Ibid, 217).

Identity is a minefield. Intersecting ideas of ethnicity, complicated further by elements of race, sexuality, socioeconomic status etc confront rangatahi on a day to day basis. In many instances, the results can be incredible, but such dynamics can also prove harmful. To be Māori today is to have a liminal existence. Those who are marginalised by ideas of being Māori live an even more liminal existence, which may lead directly to societal inequalities. As McIntosh summarises, so much of our daily association with Māori culture leads us towards issues such as unemployment, illness, poverty, and prison life.

For many, coming to grips with identity is a lifelong journey, one of healing through decolonisation. That which was colonised must be removed, and a culture that is beautiful and powerful must be remembered again. Moana Jackson (2016, 42) spoke to how the paradigm of society in Aotearoa today...

“is not designed to empower our mokopuna to be decolonised, to know that we are entitled to determine our own destiny and to make our own political and constitutional decisions”.

Decolonising mindsets is a mechanism currently only available to very specific groups. Māori have always and will continue to thrive and exemplify a powerful and exciting culture. Events such as 2017’s Matatini Festival in Ngāti Kahungunu show that the autonomous spaces we do currently have, function well. The point to understand however, is that such spaces are minimal, and far between. Meaning many Māori, especially in urban spaces, are being left behind. Narratives of forced identity are prevalent, especially amongst urban Māori. To quote Māori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012, 19):

“Imperialism frames the indigenous experience. It is part of our journey, our version of modernity... imperialism still hurts, still destroys, and is reforming itself constantly”.

How then, can we create solutions that fundamentally challenge ideas that threaten the social, ideological, psychological, and physical health of our people?

This is not only a right rangatahi Maori in Aotearoa are entitled to, but the answer to sustainably developing the future of all Maori to come. On reading Veronica Tawhai’s (2016) words on youth-led initiatives a piece I had read for an unrelated project came to mind:

“As with other elite-driven (top-down) strategies, development and policy experts tend to distrust the “masses”, believing that ordinary men and women are incapable of devising solutions to their problems and that only the experts have adequate problem-solving capabilities” (Hytrek & Zentgraf, 2008, 175).

Not only are initiatives for Maori drawn up by non-Maori, but with half our Maori population being under 23 years of age (Stats NZ, 2013) rangatahi Maori, with all their energy and liveliness, are ready to start expressing themselves and empowering each other- just as those before us were also ready. Engaging with us through meaningful long-term commitment to our ideas matched with material resources and on-going recognition of right to culture and language is what we need. With this will come the understanding of how culture shapes our initiatives in ways that define Pakeha models.

The things that makeup our country, like the telling of our history and the curriculum in our classrooms, maintain types of forced identities that many of us struggle to battle with. They continue to alienate us from our sense of self and each other. And they serve to erase our rights as rangatahi Maori. We have a right to exist in the rich diversity that we are. A landscape with a diverse sense of being will grow tall and strong with interwoven intricacies that not only support the plant life that make up the forest but lend

invaluable support to all that it encompasses- from the insects in the ground to the birds above the trees. If the aim is to reduce inequalities, point one must be to remove the weeds that poison and strip the ngahere of its wealth and vitality. What weeds poison our society, and reduce the wealth of our collective mindsets? How can we inform our youth of the rich legacy of their ancestors? Plans must be made to this nature, and towards a collective decision to make ourselves more aware of the structures in government and in society which inhibit growth. Our society is unsettled, and by that we mean there is a postcolonial gothic that leaves the landscape shivering. If we are to remain unsettled, let it be another kind; a society which seeks not to 'settle' the indigenous landscape, but rather to foster its indigenous growth, for the collective health of the entire eco-system.

We end this report by quoting...

“Despite the size of the task before us, tino rangatiratanga will only be achieved by our collective contributions. We must have the courage to remember the taonga of tipuna and the legacy of those who have gone before to reclaim and create spaces for self-belief as a people. It is in the spirit of a collective commitment to tino rangatiratanga that we hope [our reflections] will assist in the praxis needed if we are to improve our conditions, retain our knowledge and belief systems, our values and practices, our relationships with the natural and spiritual worlds, and most of all, our faith in each other” (Hutchings & Lee-Morgan, 2016, 14).

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