

Language Preservation and Māori: A Musical Perspective

By Robert Wiremu

“Humanity today is facing a massive extinction: languages are disappearing at an unprecedented pace. And when that happens, a unique vision of the world is lost. With every language that dies we lose an enormous cultural heritage; the understanding of how humans relate to the world around us; scientific, medical and botanical knowledge; and most importantly, we lose the expression of communities’ humor, love and life. In short, we lose the testimony of centuries of life.”¹

To a young and inexperienced, classically trained musician, the practice of Māori kai-tito waiata (songwriters) borrowing from western music seemed illicit, rule-breaking, taboo. Appropriation, which is defined as “the taking or use of another culture involving a power differential, in which the powerful appropriate from the subordinate people,”² is not usually seen in a positive light; it’s awkward at best and

at worst can elicit a fierce response. However, in her article “Why we need to pause before claiming cultural appropriation,” Ash Sarkar explains: “The appropriation debate peddles a comforting lie that there’s such thing as a stable and authentic connection to culture that can remain intact after the seismic interruptions of colonialism and migration.”³

The questions then arise. Can appropriation be positive? Can the apparent benefits outweigh the negatives? Western music faces similar questions. Is it appropriation or artistic theft? Appropriation or cultural pastiche? Appropriation or valid arrangement? Appropriation or differential homage? If we extrapolate from our second quotation at the start, appropriation is when members of a powerful (often first-world) culture exploit those of a subordinate (often third- or fourth-world) culture, with negligible benefit to the latter. According to this definition, appropriation cannot be committed by third- or fourth-world parties against first-world groups, but we

will return to this. In the meantime, we should look at a highly publicized example of alleged appropriation, albeit one that appears to have had a positive outcome.

A legal dispute arose over the German band Enigma’s use of a song sample by two aboriginal Taiwanese singers in the band’s (ironically named) song “Return to Innocence.” Enigma saw the song reach number one in four countries and the top ten in six others. Producer Michael Cretu claimed that he believed the sample was in the public domain, while the original singers, Difang and Igay Duana (Chinese name Kuo), were initially unaware of this use of their recording. Enigma denied them any recompense, forcing them into litigation. Eventually the case was settled out of court for an undisclosed amount, and all further releases of the song were credited, with royalties, to the Duanas.

Another example of appropriation, and a very high-profile one in the New Zealand context, has not been resolved so cleanly. The All Blacks, the national rugby team, are

famous not only for their winning record but also for the “haka” they chant before every game. It begins somewhat ominously with the words “Ka mate! Ka mate!” (To die! To die!). It was composed in about 1820 by the great chieftain Te Rauparaha as part of a longer chant⁴ that makes the context clearer, but despite its universal familiarity amongst New Zealanders, few would know what it means or even who wrote it. Worse, the haka’s popularity has led to its unsanctioned performance all around the world, notably by young expatriates in the UK who use it during their annual ANZAC (World War veterans) pub-crawl and by other international sports teams, often in parody!

According to the All Blacks website, “Many sports teams and individuals travelling from New Zealand overseas tend to have the haka ‘Ka mate’ as part of their programme. The sports team that has given the haka the greatest exposure overseas has been the All Blacks, who perform it before their matches. It has become a distinctive feature of the All Blacks.”⁵ This may be true, but it was used by the team for nearly a century years without the consent of Te Rauparaha’s Ngati Toa tribe who owned it or, more correctly, were its guardians. The All Blacks first performance of the chant was before a match against Scotland in 1905, but it was not until the mid-2000s that Ngati Toa reached out and offered a formal arrangement between themselves and New Zealand Rugby. Incidentally, the first attempt by Ngati Toa to trademark “Ka mate” was refused in 1988, and the Intellectual

Property Office has since declined every application. Ngati Toa says their aim is acknowledgement, not restriction or commercial gain. This is appropriation *writ large* with text, meaning authorship, “ownership,” and cultural significance all neglected or deliberately ignored. Some Māori composers have contributed to the preservation of their language by means of *reverse* appropriation through the adaptation of Western melodies to new Māori texts.

An Endangered Language

The Māori language (known in New Zealand as “te reo Māori” or just “te reo”) has had a problematic history since colonization. Language transmits knowledge, history, and culture. Loss of language means loss of all these.⁶ This is particularly true of cultures that are orally transmitted and have no written record. Māori knowledge, history, and culture were all transmitted orally; they were not recorded in writing until the late 1700s. Māori language preservation is crucial in preserving all three of these human constructions, and music—globally and locally—is one of the most important vehicles for their preservation.

The Endangered Languages Project (ELP) defines the Māori language as endangered.⁷ Statistics from the 2013 New Zealand Census show that most fluent Māori-speakers are sixty-five or older. Of 600,000 people who identify as Māori, just 127,000 speak te reo either as their first or second language. For the next fifteen years or so, the statistics offer worsening projections. However, the

ELP also identifies a shift from a focus just on church and *marae* (the traditional meeting place for a tribe or extended family) for language preservation to educational facilities, and projections of decline are in stark contrast to a swing toward revitalization in recent times. Adult learning classes for Pākehā (European New Zealanders) and Māori have waiting lists for te reo courses,⁸ and news announcers on radio and television use Māori greetings regularly. Unfortunately, the census will no longer monitor Māori language proficiency indicators.

As the urbanization of the mid-twentieth century brought many more Māori and Pākehā into close proximity, the speaking of te reo was often discouraged. Policies to prevent its use in schools were implemented, and corporal punishment against children who spoke it (even in the playground) was widely administered. Māori themselves began to question the relevance of te reo in a Pākehā-dominated world; some Māori leaders even advocated for the full adoption of western culture and the English language at the expense of their own. By 1980, fluency in their own language, and the sense of pride that would have accompanied it, had been denied to entire generations of Māori people.⁹

In 1982, Kōhanga Reo (language nests) were introduced, with the purpose of immersing infants in te reo prior to attending primary school. Kura Kaupapa Māori (language immersion schools that included secondary school programs) appeared in 1989. This has provided a full schooling plan for linguistic and cul-

tural continuity and has brought a decided improvement in attitudes to te reo, certainly among Māori and to an extent in the wider community. (These initiatives are in stark contrast to the native schools of the early twentieth century, which can be regarded as assimilation institutions, even though they were considered unduly important by native communities; often the school principal was the most politically powerful person in such places.)

While Pākehā acceptance of te reo has warmed noticeably, there are still areas in which the European majority is tone-deaf. Many places in New Zealand have retained their traditional Māori names, while other names have been lost or memorialized only in historical records. However, the names that continue to exist are very often subject to unintentional or deliberate mispronunciation by non-speakers, which can render them unrecognizable to those who speak the language. Despite the status of te reo as one of the two official spoken languages of New Zealand, it is incomprehensible to many Māori that its pronunciation is problematic for most New Zealanders, especially since it was first transcribed phonetically by English speakers and is entirely consistent in the pronunciation of its vowels and consonants.

Early attempts at transcribing the Māori language date back to Captain James Cook's journals of 1769, but it wasn't until 1815 that missionary Thomas Kendall, with the support of chiefs Hongi Hika and Titore, made efforts to discern a vocabulary and grammar. However, it was the work of another missionary, Rever-

end William Williams, that gained primacy with his Māori Dictionary of 1844.¹⁰ Williams's volume was an impressive achievement for its time, but it is remarkable that it took 150 years (during which time scholarship had, of course, advanced considerably) for the first such work by Māori scholars to appear: the 1993 *English-Māori Dictionary* by H. M. Hgata and his son, Whai.

The simplest defence of reverse appropriation as a method of language preservation is survival. Te reo Māori is not likely to be adopted globally, or even nationally, and will therefore remain a marginal language. With 417 languages on the verge of extinction (according to UNESCO's *Atlas of Languages in Danger of Disappearing*), the supremacy of the major languages (Man-

Glossary of Māori Terms

Māori: Ordinary, normal, plain, usual, common, natural, indigenous

Kai-tito waiata: Composer

- "kai" as a prefix indicates the person doing an action
- "tito" is to create, fabricate, and compose
- "waiata" can be used as a verb and/or as a noun for "singing" or "song"

Marae: the traditional communal space of the family/subtribe/tribe with buildings for meeting, eating and cooking, food storage, and sleeping

Kohanga reo: Language nest, pre-school level

Kohanga: nest

Reo: language

Kura Kaupapa Māori: Māori Immersion School

- "Kura" is a transliteration of the English "school"
- "Kaupapa" is agenda, topic, policy
- "Māori" is indigenous

Haka: posture dance

Ngati Maniapoto: a tribe in the Tainui Confederation of Tribes in the western central region of the North Island

Waikato: a western central region of the North Island

darin, English, Hindi, Spanish, and Arabic) increases. The predicament of *te reo* is unsurprising: language and culture are organic, the Māori language is not useful economically, and there are too few Māori to have a significant effect on global markers of success. Consequent rejection of the language by Māori themselves because of its perceived lack of relevance is virtually its death knell.

Perhaps the greatest boost to the health of *te reo* Māori, at least within the wider New Zealand setting, came from an unexpected source. New Zealand has two national anthems: “God save the Queen,” which is shared throughout the British Commonwealth, and “God Defend New Zealand.” The latter anthem, the only one still regularly performed, is very much of colonial origin—it came from a poem by Irish immigrant Thomas Bracken, with a hymn-like tune later composed for it by Australian-born John Joseph Woods. Even its translation into Māori was done by English-born Thomas Henry Smith, a judge in the Native Land Court.

For most of its life, “God Defend New Zealand” was sung only in English, with the Māori verse (not a direct translation) occasionally appended. Perhaps the first time this was reversed in public was when the NZ National Youth Choir performed the anthem with its Māori verse first at their 1982 recital in London’s Wembley Concert Hall with Kiri Te Kanawa. For reasons no doubt familiar to choral readers, this was not widely publicised. Seventeen years later, before an All Blacks match at Twickenham (also in London),

Māori pop singer Hinewehi Mohi also swapped the verse order. The reaction was immediate and intense. Debate raged in the community and the media; Mohi was targeted as a troublemaker and subjected to bullying and threats of physical violence. Eventually the *furor* died down, and today Hinewehi Mohi’s version has become the norm.¹¹

While this may not quite be an example of reverse appropriation, it is clear evidence of how a tune important to the colonial majority can be used as a vehicle to popularise, and perhaps help preserve, the indigenous language. Recently, the twentieth anniversary of that controversial event was celebrated with the release of an album of New Zealand pop classics performed in the Māori language by the original bands and singers, some of whom are not Māori and do not speak *te reo*. New Zealand seemed to have healed that 1999 wound and indeed transformed it into something positive. Most Kiwis now sing the first verse of the anthem with gusto, and all under the age of about forty know it by heart.

In Māori traditional thinking, one belongs to one’s creative work as much as the creative work belongs to its creator; it is like belonging to a place as opposed to owning it. In cases where the individual creator is anonymous or where the creative work has been made corporately, attribution is assigned to the collective. Creativity of all sorts is considered sacred (or “*tapu*,” from which we get the English word *taboo*). Creativity is rooted in the “divinity” of the person and is therefore considered a deified product. This can include artis-

tic products such as poetry, painting, and carving, and the act of performing, as in singing, playing instruments, and dancing. It also includes the preparation and sharing of food. What may be strange to non-Māori is that this concept of divinity can also extend to children as the most sacred creative product of all. Such products and activities elevate the *mana* (dignity) of the producer/performer and the recipient/audience, through sharing and inspiration. Creativity is a corporate concept.

This might be seen as “having it both ways”: that members of a third-world culture or colonized people object to having their culture misappropriated and yet are prepared to justify their own borrowings on the grounds that art is communal property. We can, however, return here to our original definition of appropriation, which presupposes that any act of appropriation must happen within the context of a power imbalance. The use of the term reverse appropriation would, therefore, imply that it confers some benefit on the less powerful party. Such a context outcome might generally be perceived as positive, even in the first world, given that it is more likely to promote greater third/fourth-world self-determination, monetisation, creative ownership, cultural expansion, and potential for collaboration.

A practice that certainly could be termed reverse appropriation is the way Māori composers have contributed to the preservation of their language through the adaptation of Western popular songs to newly composed Māori texts. Bradford Haami defines this process in his

book *Ka mau te wehi: Taking haka to the world*: “The art of adaptation by kai-tito waiata [composers] was the skill of knowing how to fit an old song or tune to new settings to impress an audience; there was no such thing as copyright. Paraire Tomoana, Kingi Tahiwai, Tuini Ngawai, Ngoi Pewhairangi, Tommy Taurima, Bill Kerekere, and various known and unknown collectives adapted foreign songs and tunes from their era, either translating them into Māori or rewriting the words to create new songs which would appeal to the people.”¹²

Compositions

Clement Scott’s “Swiss Cradle Song” (published in Australia by W.H. Paling¹³ in 1913) was originally written as a piano solo. It became a song with words, called “Pō atarau,” when the boys of Te Aute College in New Zealand’s Hawkes Bay sang it as a farewell to fellow students and graduates departing for war in 1914 and 1915, although the source of the Māori lyrics has been lost. Originally a cradle song in 4/4, it was transformed into a sad waltz in 3/4 and was given an English translation by Maewa Kaihau, who also altered the tune slightly and added another Māori version. Because of its global success following the release of recordings by Gracie Fields, Bing Crosby and many others in its best-known version, “Now is the hour (when we must say goodbye),” “Pō atarau” has enjoyed consistent popularity, particularly among New Zealanders. It is worth remembering, however, that its complex history includes the fact

that it was reverse-appropriated but also that it alluded to the sacrifice of many Māori for a distant war in a place that had no cultural historical significance for them.

Another song in similar vein, though with a less involved backstory, is “Arohaina mai” (“Show compassion”). In 1940, composer Tuini Ngawai was asked by the prominent New Zealand statesman Sir Apirana Ngata to write a song for families to sing at the dock as more young men sailed off to yet another European war. As its tune, she chose George Gershwin’s “Love Walked In” from *The Goldwyn Follies* for its familiarity, immediate appeal, and aptness of mood. Gershwin’s original was about driving away shadows and unspoken love; the lyrics here asked for a blessing of protection over the young soldiers. The song became the unofficial anthem of the country’s 28th (Māori) Battalion and remains popular today.


In her “E te hokowhitu a Tu,” Tuini Ngawai adapted not a film song this time but a chart-topper, Glenn Miller’s “In the mood” of 1940. This song exhorts the young men to bravery when fighting for God, King, and Country in a war that, again, may have seemed unconnected to them. The main section glorifies the 140-strong troupe of the War God, Tu, and tells them that success relies heavily on their ability to stay united. An additional verse commemorates the fallen hero Moana-nui-a-Kiwa Ngarimu, whose posthumous award of the highest military honor, the Victoria Cross, gave great pride to all Māori and provided a model of citizenship to other Māori men. On

the other hand, “hokowhitu” (the number 140 in the song) is a relic of a now archaic numbering system based on 20. (Hoko means “a score” or 20, and “whitu” 7, so “hokowhitu” is 20x7.) The dominance of the Western decimal system would have subsumed this pre-colonial form had it not been for songs like this.

Conclusion

The more examples we study of such borrowings, the more it becomes clear that there was never an intention to offend the original composer or to consider them a *quid pro quo* in retaliation for colonization. But whatever a particular writer’s motives were at the time of composition, the results have been mostly positive: the preservation of certain language patterns and words, the retention of significant historical and institutional knowledge, the promotion of te reo within the wider community. We will never know how much of the language had already been lost and of the knowledge, history, and culture that went along with it, but songs undoubtedly helped halt the slide.

Kai-tito waiata like Ngawai, Pewhairangi, Taurima, Tahiwai and others used familiar pop songs as hooks and film soundtracks to appeal to younger Māori to keep their performance groups going. They used the most readily available and plentiful resources, “western” songs—the music that just happened to be popular in an increasingly marginalized minority. Māori culture had been systematically isolated, the language was stagnating, and pride in being

Māori was waning in the face of aggressive modernisation. All these had to evolve to survive. To date, music has played its part. 

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Video Resources

gf1001 (June 19, 2010) Gracie Fields Now Is The Hour 1947 (The Original) [video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jeVIIapgT0w>

Howard Morrison Quartet – Topic (September 26, 2017) Po Atarau - Now Is The Hour [video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzQgyBzNi6E>

Members of the 28 Māori Battalion—Topic (March 17, 2015) Arohaina Mai [video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCaUpdp2w8Q>

GoldenAgeMovies (May 7, 2011) Kenny Baker sings Love walked in (1938) [video file]. Retrieved <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Wkbu12-cU>

Howard Morrison Quartet – Topic (September 26, 2017) E Te Hokowhiti [video file]> Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMIknVHerm8>

Орлин Вълчев (July 5, 2014) The Glenn Miller Orchestra -- (1941) In the Mood [High Quality Enhanced Sound] [video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vOUYry_5Nw

Ridpath, Ian (Feb 23, 2019) Wow!!! te reo Māori rendition of Bohemian Rhapsody [video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKCrrTuYnmU>

NOTES

¹ “The Endangered Languages Project,” accessed January 10, 2020, www.endangeredlanguages.com/about/.

² *What is Music of Fourth World*; “Appropriation vs. Reverse Appropriation” (April 18, 2011), accessed January 10, 2020, <https://esquible.wordpress.com/2011/04/18/appropriation-vs-reverse-appropriation/>

³ Ash Sarkar, “Why we need to pause before claiming cultural appropriation,” in *The Guardian* (April 2019).

⁴ “New Zealand in History,” accessed January 10, 2020, <http://history-nz.org/rauparaha.html>.

⁵ All Blacks; “The Haka,” <https://www.allblacks.com/the-haka/>

⁶ For more information on Endangered Languages, visit: <http://www.endangeredlanguages.com>

⁷ *Endangered Languages Project*, “Language metadata” <http://www.endangeredlanguages.com/lang/3571>

⁸ Te Aniwa Hurihanganui, “Hundreds on wait-lists for beginner reo classes,” RNZ (February 28, 2018),

accessed January 20, 2020. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manukorihi/351351/hundreds-on-wait-lists-for-beginner-reo-classes>

⁹ NZ History, “Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori – Māori Language Week,” accessed January 10, 2020, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/maori-language-week/history-of-the-maori-language>.

¹⁰ “Māori Language,” from *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, ed. A. H. McLintock, originally published in 1966. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/1966/Māori-language> (accessed 29 Nov 2019).

¹¹ Lana Andelane, NewsHub, “‘It caused a sensation’: Hinewehi Mohi reflects on singing national anthem in Māori,” October 9, 2019; accessed January 20, 2020, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2019/09/it-caused-a-sensation-hinewehi-mohi-reflects-on-singing-national-anthem-in-m-ori.html>.

¹² Bradford Haami, “Ka mau te wehi: taking haka to the world, Bub and Nen’s story,” published by The Ngāpo and Pimia Wehi Whanau Trust (2013).

¹³ Language historian Max Cryer notes that Paling created the pseudonym Clement Scott but refused to reveal his real identity. In 2000, family of the late Albert Saunders sued Paling for failure to acknowledge Albert’s 300+ contributions, and particularly the “Swiss Cradle Song”—unsuccessfully, as it turned out. However, the Australian National Library now holds a copy of “Now is the Hour,” “composed by A.B. Saunders.”