

## **Māori cultural regeneration: Pūrākau as pedagogy**

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## Introduction

*She was an old, old woman. Everyone said she was crazy, she was off, she was mad. Everyone said that, right from the day she first came down from the spring. Saying who she was. But they were the crazy ones because they said she was up there, and they pointed at the moon. Up there, hanging on to a ngaio tree, up there, in the moon. They stretched fingers skyward in the night and chanted their story about Rona, in the moon. (Except from 'Rona' by Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, 2003, p. 17).*

'Rona', a spontaneous rendition told in te reo Māori (Māori language), was one of the first traditional pūrākau my daughter heard as a child. As a four year old, she learnt that Rona lived with the moon. She understood that Rona was a space traveller, and when the moon was full and bright, she could see Rona clutching to a ngaio tree and taha (calabash). Rona's entrapment on the moon serves to remind people of the power of atua (gods), if we should cause offence. In other versions, Rona is a heroine, courageously confronting the unknown in another world. Whatever the variations in the account, the story of 'Rona' is etched in our memory of who we are as Māori and how we understand the world we live in.

Pūrākau, such as 'Rona', continue to be a feature of our family's everyday talk as we struggle to sustain Māori language as a first language, and inculcate Māori cultural values, beliefs and worldviews to our children. Pūrākau range from stories about the creation of the world, people and the natural environment to historical events and particular incidents. Far from being considered as mere tales or 'myths and legends', pūrākau preserved ancestral knowledge, reflected our worldviews and portrayed the lives of our tupuna (ancestors) in creative, diverse and engaging ways. Telling pūrākau is not limited to traditional stories, but includes storying in our contemporary contexts.

In a research context, pūrākau too has purpose for Māori. The reclamation of pūrākau as a valid research method is part of a wider movement by indigenous people to advance 'decolonising methodologies' (L. T. Smith, 1999), in which cultural regeneration forms a central part of our educational goals. In Aotearoa New Zealand, kaupapa Māori theories

have created the platform to re-search and re-present our own stories in culturally inspired genres. Māori narratives, including pūrākau, offer huge pedagogical potential that can cut across the regulatory confines of time and space. Categories including age, gender, subject, institution, geographical and tribal boundaries may be mediated in the pursuit of pūrākau that encourages life-long learning and cultural development. A pūrākau approach to narrative research is an emerging conceptual framework; still largely experimental, this paper explores the pedagogical potential of a pūrākau method as a research tool in my current doctoral study about ako (Māori pedagogy) and Māori teachers.

## **Kaupapa Māori**

Kaupapa Māori recognises the exclusive nature of knowledge that has emerged from western ‘scientific’ positivist discourses, codified within ideologies such as imperialism and colonialism, has ‘named’, categorised, positioned Māori as the ‘other’. As an indigenous theoretical framework, kaupapa Māori has created the ‘space’ within realm of ‘research’ to centre Māori epistemological constructions of the world. Kaupapa Māori accepts Māori philosophies, concepts and practices as valid and legitimate (G. H. Smith, 1997), and offers the possibility to re-turn to Māori cultural traditions as the ‘taken for granted’ ideological assumptions that can guide our research processes.

Kaupapa Māori is premised on tino rangatiratanga (self determination) and the Treaty of Waitangi (Bishop, 1994; Jenkins & Ka'ai, 1994; Nepe, 1991; G. H. Smith, 1987, 1997). Māori cannot afford to wait to be ‘invited’ into the research academies, instead Kaupapa Māori asserts that we have the right to access our own Māori-based research processes. The reclamation of our language and culture, the process of decolonation and the struggle for tino rangatiratanga are all part of the transformative aspirations of Kaupapa Māori. In turn, Māori researchers seek ways in which to make transformative change in the wider framework of self-determination, decolonisation and social justice (Bishop, 1996; G. H. Smith, 1997; L. T. Smith, 1997). Kaupapa Māori provides a framework from which to

re-conceive of our social circumstances, our predicaments, and the multiple experiences of 'being Māori'.

Therefore, kaupapa Māori theory is not singular, fixed or prescriptive (Hoskins, 2001; Pihama, 2001). Māori researchers have already begun to develop other theoretical notions such as Aitanga (Jenkins, 2000), Mana Wahine (Pihama, 2001) and Pou (C. W. Smith, 2002) in order to connect with the complexity of diverse Māori lived realities. While the philosophies of kaupapa Māori theories continue to be refined for research, kaupapa Māori also promotes an exploration of the practical implications and complexities of methodological process such as access, ethics and accountability to our own Māori communities as both 'insiders' and 'outsiders'.

Kaupapa Māori provides the foundation for my wider research about ako, specifically the pedagogies of Māori teachers in 'mainstream' secondary schools. In addition, kaupapa Māori underpins a drive to explore the issue of research method, namely, the way in which a traditional genre of Māori narrative can inform the researching of ako. To contextualise the emergence of a pūrākau approach from kaupapa Māori beginnings, a brief explanation of the concept of ako, the topic of my doctoral thesis (work-in-progress), follows.

### **Ako (Māori pedagogy)**

Ako, most commonly understood as the process that involves 'to learn and to teach' (Pere, 1982), is a notion that derives from a Māori epistemological base. In traditional Māori society, knowledge was highly valued; it was seen as vital for the social, economic, political as well as spiritual sustenance of a *whānau* (family), *hapu* (sub-tribe) and *iwi* (tribe) groupings. The *mana* (power and prestige) of each group was dependent on the way in which the knowledge of each group was protected, developed and practiced. The way in which knowledge was transmitted was through the process of *ako*.

Given that knowledge was primarily to benefit the collective, *ako* in traditional *Māori* society was inclusive, co-operative, reciprocal and obligatory (Lee, 2005). Metge (1986) refers to the all-encompassing nature of *ako* as “education through exposure” (p. 3). She describes teaching and learning as “informal, semi-continuous, embedded in the ongoing life of the community, open and inclusive” (1986, p.3). The process of *ako* was constant, it did not operate in isolation to everyday *Māori* life, rather *ako* was integral in the creation, transmission, conceptualization, and articulation of *Māori* knowledge (Lee, 2005). *Ako* was largely determined by the interaction of *Māori* cultural notions that generated knowledge and understandings of being *Māori* within our *whanau*, *hapu*, *iwi* and *whakapapa* relationships. Not constrained by specific methods or techniques, *ako* was underpinned by the wider cultural practices and determined by the teacher-learner relationship, the context, the knowledge and resources of the group.

Today, *ako* refers to preferred *Māori* pedagogical concepts that may be derived from *Māori* traditional culture but are also heavily influenced by the socio-cultural contexts including the school environment (G. H. Smith, 1997). *Ako* encompasses both specific *Māori* teaching and learning methodologies as well as cultural notions that underpin pedagogical practices which are in turn grounded in specific contexts. Hence, *ako* may take a variety of forms, whether *Māori* teachers are teaching traditional *Māori waiata* (song) through utilizing aural skills only, or teaching students to use internet technologies, *ako* can function. In fact, wherever there are *Māori* teachers and/or learners *ako* is likely to operate.

This is not to say that all *Māori* teachers utilize *ako*, they may not be culturally competent, confident or connected in their *whakapapa* relationships. To assume that all *Māori* are linguistically and culturally able is to ignore the past (and continued) invasion of colonization of our land and people, and the subsequent fragmentation of our social, economic, political lives and cultural identity. *Māori* teachers are not a homogenous, standardized group of people, rather *Māori* teachers (like any other ethnic group) range from those *Māori* who with strong, secure cultural identities to insecure, culturally ignorant self-haters. To clarify the group of *Māori* teachers I am concerned with in this

study of ako (and refer to in this paper), are those teachers that are at the positive end of the spectrum, teachers who culturally identify as ‘being Māori’ and actively drawing on their cultural attributes in their ‘work’ at schools.

For these Māori teachers, aspects of ako are embedded in Māori teachers’ ‘work’. Their roles include teaching kapa haka; organizing whānau gatherings; attending local marae and hui; as well as establishing and interacting with students and their parents in kin-like relationships (Bloor, 1996; International Research Institute for Māori and Indigenous Education, 1999; Mitchell & Mitchell, 1993). A small body of existing literature about Māori secondary school teachers’ workload shows that on average Māori teachers not only work longer hours than their non-Māori colleagues (ibid.) but the nature of their work is different. Among other things, Māori teachers instigate Māori based activities; employ specific Māori customs, values and practices (such as pōwhiri) within the classroom practice and wider school activities; mediate racism; build self-esteem and; endeavour to make Māori students ‘feel good’ about ‘being Māori’ (Bloor, 1996; International Research Institute for Māori and Indigenous Education, 1999; Mitchell & Mitchell, 1993). Māori teachers engage in activities that explore with their students what and how it means to be Māori.

Māori teachers who employ ako, promote a holistic approach. They are not only concerned about advancing academic outcomes (one manifestation of *te taha hingengaro* – intellectual well-being), social skills (*taha whanau*) and sporting type achievements (one manifestation of *taha tinana* - physical well-being), but the *taha wairua* (spiritual) dimensions of their students. One of the key criticisms of ‘mainstream’ schools, apart from producing a long-standing ‘failure’ of Māori students of great disproportions, is the inability of schools to nurture ‘Māoriness’ of the children, in particular, their social, emotional and spiritual selves (Pere, 1982; G. H. Smith, 1987). Māori teachers, I argue, utilize ako to instil cultural knowledge, practices, values and world views. Despite the monoculturalism of most ‘mainstream’ schools, Māori teachers often employ pedagogical practices that supports a cultural regeneration for Māori learners, parents and their communities.

Herein lies the emergence of pūrākau as research method. Guided by kaupapa Māori pūrākau is proposed here as a tool to research ako, namely, the ways ‘being Māori’ is embedded in the pedagogical practices of the Māori teacher in ‘mainstream’ secondary school. In an effort to investigate, analyse, and theorise ako (aspects of which are difficult to ‘measure’), pūrākau becomes a powerful ‘decolonising methodology’ because it promotes Māori cultural and critical understandings of the worlds we live in.

## **Pūrākau**

Pūrākau refers to stories, one form of Māori narratives that originate from our oral literature traditions. Other narrative forms include moteatea (traditional song), whakapapa (geneologies), whaikorero (speechmaking) and whakatauki (proverbs) – each with their own categories, style, complex patterns and characteristics. Māori narratives were highly prized, carefully constructed and skilfully delivered. Pūrākau, often viewed as folklore (Dewes, 1975), an ‘ancient legend, myth’ or an ‘incredible story’ (Williams, 1985, p. 312), were not, however, considered as sheer fictional accounts, invented imaginings or mere talk.

The importance of pūrākau is emphasised in Māori language. It is not coincidental that the word pūrākau literally refers to the roots or the base (pū) of the tree (rākau), rather it is significant that ‘story telling’ derives its meaning in Māori language from words that relate to the trees and bush, since the imagery of trees often reflect our cultural understandings of social relationships, our inter-connectedness with each other and the natural environment. For instance, Wiremu Doherty (2002), a native speaker of Māori, and someone who grew up in the heartland of the Urewera ranges of the tribal lands of Tūhoe, explains that the word ‘ngāhere’ (bush) literally means the (nga) ties or binds (here). The ngāhere represents unity, all trees and vegetation originated from the same atua (god) were inter-related and often inter-dependent. In turn the word pūrākau, can be interpreted stories that represent the experiences, knowledge and teachings that form the

pu (base) from which the rakau need in order to grow, or even survive. The base of the tree is usually unseen, buried deep within the Papatuanuku (earth mother) the roots draws the water and nutrients it needs to provide strength and vitality in an effort to develop as well as protect, shelter and foster other trees growing in the ngahere.

Embedded in Māori language is the importance of ‘stories’ in Māori culture, it signals the way in which pūrākau were viewed as central in the connecting, nurturing, sustaining and flourishing of our people. The metaphoric interpretation of pūrākau as trees demonstrates a Māori understanding of stories, that while there is a base there may be many branches, versions or interpretations. A Chinese writer who has published Chinese women’s stories, Xinran (2003) says “when you walk into your memories, you are opening a door to the past; the road within has many branches and the route is different every time” (p. x). Despite the ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity of stories, pūrākau were firmly ‘grounded’ in experience and knowledge, and considered vital to our social, political and cultural development.

Although purākau derives from an oral tradition, it can continue to provide the stimulus to write, create and research in ways that are culturally responsive. Te Kapunga Dewes (1975) asserts that oral tradition can contribute to our present literary activities. He says,

The oral arts in Māori should provide continuity and inspiration for written literature. Far from being irrelevant, the traditional arts challenge us to create with artistic integrity and seriousness, in a manner relevant in contemporary experience and dimensions (Dewes, 1975, p. 54).

A purākau approach encourages Māori researchers to research in ways that not only takes into account cultural notions but also enables us to express our stories to convey our messages, embody our experiences and keeps our cultural notions in tact.

There is a raft of literature on the use of narrative based inquiry in education, in particular the style and merits of each method such as life-history (Goodson & Sikes, 2001), critical ethnography (McLaren, 1989), portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) as well as other indigenous explorations of story-telling (Archibald, 1997). While the proposed kaupapa Māori informed research method has also been influenced by this wider

literature on narrative-based research and falls within the qualitative paradigm, pūrākau provides some guiding tenets with regard to the portrayal, politics and provocation of the stories.

*The portrayal of pūrākau.*

Māori oral literature was considered an art form by the significance and virtue of its performance and delivery (Dewes, 1975). In the genre of pūrākau the portrayal of the story was all important too. According to Te Kapunga Dewes (1975) within the genre of pūrākau itself the rendition varied given the topic and audience, the styles could be quite diverse. The stories ranged from dramatic, spontaneous, and humorous to austere and serious (or a combination of these things). Pūrākau could arouse the imagination, inform and inspire, warn and persuade, maintain relationships, protocols, rituals and rules. As opposed to mere accounts of experiences, pūrākau were purposely crafted stories that appealed to the audience's aural, visual and emotive senses.

The potential for diverse portrayals of pūrākau type stories is immense, stories that draw on Māori language, concepts and narrative techniques, promotes us to write in creative and innovative ways. A pūrākau approach enables elements such as emotion, wairua and tension to be written into the text in appropriate and interesting ways. A pūrākau approach does not force an either-or response to auto-biographical, testimonio, oral-history, case-study type approaches, nor does it assume these methods have nothing to offer. I do not wish to promote an essentialist position, rather emphasise the importance of the way the stories are told. Portrayals of pūrākau may create what Aldama (2001) refers to as a 'hybridization of literary or writing practices' or 'crosscultural literary genres' (p. 77) in an effort to 'paint the picture' of the experience and engage with the audience culturally relevant ways,

This 'artistic' characteristic of pūrākau encourages us as Māori researchers following a pūrākau approach to narratives, to write in ways that creates interest, stimulates inquiry, relates to and engages people of the 'real world'. The portrayal of pūrākau is not only

about issues of textuality, that is how the stories should be written but moreover, the transfer of knowledge. Māori researchers often grapple with this tension, the need to reach the people for whom the research is intended for as well as those who will determine the ‘scholarly’ value of the work (Irwin, 1994; G. H. Smith, 1997). A purākau approach guides us to speak in a language that is not exclusive, but draws on our own ways of seeing, speaking and expressing ourselves in order to bring ‘to life’ the issues and complexities of our experiences that may be culture specific and local and/or more universal in nature.

### *The politics of pūrākau.*

The politics of pūrākau here draws attention to the purpose and power-relations embedded in the crafting of these stories. Traditionally story-telling was a communal activity, the storyteller was conscious that stories he/she was telling or retelling were not their own (although the way it was told may have been an individual act) or in isolation to other people or their environment. Rather the stories belonged collectively to the whānau, hapū or iwi and/or involved other people within whanau, hapu, iwi and whakapapa relationships. Therefore the story-teller had a responsibility to get the story ‘right’ otherwise it would be corrected (sometimes in a public arena) if they got it ‘wrong’. Issues of authenticity, accountability, and accuracy were usually moderated by the elders in public renditions of the story (Doherty, 2001).

A purākau approach easily aligns itself to the tenets of ethical research practice where the power relations embedded in research are brought to the fore. A pūrākau approach highlights the complexities of the researcher-participant relationships. In previous research projects where I had used an oral-history approach, I felt that the ambiguity of purporting that the researcher had conceded their ‘power’ by allowing the participant access to the written stories while confining, framing, silencing, and emphasising their words in particular ways (Lee, 1996). In contrast, a pūrākau approach clearly re-presents the story that belongs to the story-teller (as a member of whanau, hapu an iwi and/or

other groups such as institutions). While the participants' 'voice' is central and the story must always be authenticated by the original story-teller, Leonie Pihama (2001) points out, re-presentation is not merely a process of reproduction, the researchers ideologies, knowledge, subjectivities and politics are apparent. In effect, the researcher adds another branch to the rākau, a 'branch' that has space to be unique. Through literary techniques and the conscious use of 'voice', a purākau approach has the potential to hold and make explicit both layers of the participant's and researcher's meanings.

On a wider stage, a purākau method is advanced as a form of 'evidence' that extends notions of what counts as research, in doing so, it participates in decolonising western notions that indigenous oral traditions are simple expressions of a primitive culture. Similarly, other indigenous and ethnic 'minority' writers are telling their own stories through reclaiming and writing in their cultural story-telling traditions (Aldama, 2001; Archibald, 1997). Pūrākau is a highly political 'site' as it asserts our right to protect, develop and build on our ancestral ways of understanding, knowing, teaching and learning.

### *The provocation of pūrākau*

With its power to entertain and engage learners of all age groups, and protocols of ensuring authenticity, pūrākau was also highly provocative. Often, in response to questions, Māori kaumatua would tell a story, recite a whakatauki or waiata or even pose another question. The purpose of this form of teaching was to rouse deeper interest in learning itself. Pūrākau was one of these ways. Although often frustrating for the Māori learner today (as someone more familiar with explicit answers to specific questions), story telling gives meaning to Maori mores and lores, will provide depth to an idea, inspire and encourage or issue a caution, and can encourage not only a intellectual response, but can provoke emotional, spiritual, and physical reactions.

Like most stories, pūrākau allow multiple perspectives. Deeper understandings of the pūrākau may not emerge immediately, the relevance will vary according to the listener and their experience. Traditionally it may have been in adulthood that a person begins to

understand the underlying teachings of pūrākau she or he heard when they were young. To this end, one of the characteristics of a pūrākau method (and key tenets of ako), is to be thought provoking. A pūrākau approach may intentionally not be explicit in intent or deliver the ‘answers’, rather inspire the reader to continue to ponder and think more deeply about the issues and the story. Despite the style of the story, a pūrākau approach should provoke and engage the audience bring their own meanings and ‘readings’ of the story, these stories should stimulate reflective thinking. Subsequently, pūrākau was inherently pedagogical.

### **Ako and the pedagogy of pūrākau.**

Pūrākau is a genre of Māori literature that was a regular feature of daily life, closely connected with ako as a tool for teaching and learning. Although concerned with matters of portrayal and performance, pūrākau reflect worldviews, preserved historical events, illuminated the issues of the day and shared experiences of the people and place. Pūrākau provided a portraiture of the complexities of culture.

In relation to researching and rewriting the stories of Māori teachers, pūrākau seeks to give ‘voice’ to their experiences that are often unrecognized and unheard. It is an opportunity to highlight aspects of pedagogy that often sit on the periphery, such as the centrality of cultural knowledge, the importance of wairua, the complexities of working within whanau, hapu and iwi relations, and the challenges manifest of mostly monocultural ‘mainstream’ schools. A pūrākau method creates the opportunity to write about culture as well as write culture into the text. Pūrākau type stories that aim to ‘capture’ issues of ‘culture’ in pedagogical practice will provide insights to the experiences, risks and dilemmas of Māori teachers that are rarely explored in educational literature.

The present preoccupation in much of the New Zealand educational literature is ‘effective teaching’, is a case in point. With the aim to improve students’ achievement (in

particular, Māori educational outcomes) catalogues of techniques, strategies, principles, characteristics and profiles of ‘effective teachers’ have emerged. In the process, Māori teachers are silenced. ‘Effective teaching’ discourses has tended to subsume the ethnic and cultural background as well as all other diversities of the teacher, so the classroom practitioner appears as neutral, universal-type of professional. Simultaneously the push for ‘evidence based’ research, affords Māori teachers less of a chance to share their cultural stories, precisely because they are Māori (treated as a non-issue) and because they are ‘stories’ (large scale research such as randomised control trials are preferred). In this scenario, being a Māori teacher (as opposed to ‘someone who just happens to be Māori’ to use Kathy Irwin’s turn of phrase) is merely incidental. A pūrākau approach can challenge dominant discourses that continue to decenter our experiences, cultural notions and aspirations in ways that resonate and connect to our people.

While the topics or issues embedded in pūrākau stories are often explicitly pedagogical, implicit too is the ability to listen, interpret and make sense of the stories and more subtle messages. The pedagogy of pūrākau is not restricted to the knowledge presented in the stories, but also concerned with the dissemination of the knowledge itself. A pūrākau approach not only implores that the story-teller is not only skilled in the creating and delivery of the story but that the audience be attuned to listening and able to make meaning of the metaphors, analogies and representations. Pūrākau was one expression of ako, reliant upon the fusion of Māori cultural notions pūrākau provided pedagogical value. For many Māori, these are part of the essential cultural skills we need to teach and learn.

### *Conclusion*

Pūrākau connects with ako because teaching and learning is more than technical skills and stories are more than just the talk. Ako in ‘mainstream’ secondary schools is highly contextual, determined by the philosophies, knowledge, resources and strength of the Māori students, parents, whanau, teachers and the rigidity of the monocultural system. Ako cannot be reduced to only the ‘measurable’ characteristics, practices or strategies of

Māori teachers' practice, such an exclusive approach ignores the ways in which culture is embedded in and highly sought for in Māori education. A pūrākau method seeks to illuminate these aspects of ako that often go unnoticed in 'mainstream' educational settings, teaching and learning that is intended to advance Māori educational aspirations of cultural regeneration. Pūrākau proposes a life-long pedagogy that extends beyond the confines of the classroom and the grounds of an institute, it is part of a cultural reclamation and revitalisation movement by Māori people.

Kaupapa Māori theory has prepared the ground and created the conditions to ask the questions and frame the issues that are important to Māori, furthermore it allows explorations of a pūrākau method to Māori narratives to take root in new settings such as research and academic environments. A pūrākau method is still in an experimental stage, the characteristics described here do not form prescriptive or fixed categories. Rather this paper plants the seed of ways of thinking about the pedagogical potential of research method that is more culturally responsive, so that our contemporary stories will take root and spread, just like the stories of 'Rona' – who made it to the moon.

**Glossary**

ako	Māori pedagogy
hapu	sub-tribe
hui	gathering
iwi	tribe
mōteatea	traditional Māori song
ngāhere	bush
Papatuanuku	Earth Mother
powhiri	Māori welcome ceremony
pū	base or foundation
pūrākau	stories
rākau	trees
taha hinengaro	intellectual side
taha tinana	physical side
taha wairua	spiritual side
taha whānau	social side
tino rangatiratanga	self determination
whakapapa	genealogies
whaikōrero	speech making
whakatauki	proverbs
whānau	family

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