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Who Holds the Power for Change?

Is the indigenisation of an organisation possible if we have not first acknowledged the machinery that has ensured and sustained Indigenous people, their thought, their ways and their world view, subjugated for another and considered less than if not of little or any value, and especially when we consider the realm of academia and education?

Maybe, before we consider the opportunity for indigenisation, we must first consider the question as to whether we can have meaningful engagement without first deconstructing the Master's house – but can we effectively do this with the same Master's tools that built it? In other words, can those who hold power be the ones who determine how and where and with whom this power should then be shared? Should this sharing be initiated by the same system that created disparity, or instead by those who were diminished because of it?

Who has the power to inculcate indigenisation into a dominant culture – the system and power that created the space between our worlds, or the people who have maintained their existence despite the historical and real power structures that continue to strip self-determination from indigenous communities to this day?

Linda Tuhiwai Smith said, "History is also about power."¹ In fact, she goes on to say that history is mostly about power. It is the story of the powerful and how they became powerful, and then how they used their power to keep themselves in positions in which they can continue to dominate others. It is because of this relationship with power, she suggests, that we, Indigenous communities, have been excluded, marginalised and 'Othered.'

In this paper I ask how, by engaging in indigenisation, we partake in the transformation of some service or idea, embracing key values and practices that may formerly have been overshadowed by colonisation. And how this will work to reclaim a voice and increase the influence of Indigenous people in education, employment and governance as a key outcome of indigenisation without addressing the inequity we all face first.

How do we measure that degree of indigenisation and cooperation? What are the parameters that are set so we can know that we have indigenised through meaningful engagement as an

organisation? And are we not just expending much time and energy on an exercise promoted by the same power that created the disparity in the first place, with the risk of tokenism as its output? How do we overcome the elephant in the room of power differential and ensure that this power differential does not position us as partners or place us at the same starting point? Smith suggests that we have in fact been excluded, marginalised and othered; if this is true, how then do we negotiate ideas of partnership and collaboration without first acknowledging questions of power, inequity and parity first?

Have we considered the possibility that indigenisation should instead be propelled from the ground up, and by those seeking a voice, those seeking a sharing of power and a share of time and space, and not from those who hold it, have captured and maintained it and then who at their behest decide to start a conversation on sharing the power base they have accumulated?

According to Smith, to understand the reach of imperialism and colonialism in the minds of those who have been victimised by it, as indigenous communities we must accept the compulsion to first decolonise our own minds, to recover ourselves, and to claim a space in which to develop a sense of what she calls “authentic humanity.” This is not and should never be the initiative of the coloniser; instead, as Smith suggests, it must come from those who have been colonised, and driven by their own desire to bring real change and real engagement.

Can I suggest, then, that it is not until we have a shared power base, a shared view of the world, a shared sense of *tino rangatiratanga* and self-determination and an impetus from the indigenous that we can even begin to realistically discuss the idea of indigenous thought, indigenous ideas and world views and how these things can then begin permeating the dominant white settler culture of New Zealand. Otherwise, do we take the risk of being complicit in just another tokenistic attempt to placate or, as Awatere described, create a country in which the values and beliefs of other cultures are tolerated only within a context of white Western superiority?²

How do we begin to even re-image and re-imagine collaboration and cohabitation that leads to a genuinely co-created culture with the best of both world views and technologies, with the hope that we can together create the integration of the ‘other’ and in so doing shape a new ‘normal’ without fully considering the context of our two separate realities and of our two separate imaginings?

Maybe this will happen when we are no longer the ‘other,’ no longer the marginalised, no longer just the ‘indigenous’ group, or the essentialism found in the *karakia*, the *kaumatua*, the *karanga*, the *haka*, or the cohort of outwardly physical symbols of partnership with Maori. The use of strategic essentialism has significant consequences for the development of indigenous education, and I argue with Gjerpe that the ideologies presented through strategic essentialism are not rooted in reality.³

According to Gjerpe, when a culture or people is essentialised, there is a (conscious or unconscious) process of choosing which cultural traits will be dominant; this invariably creates a dominant discourse that is not necessarily connected to the realities of the indigenous community. Sitting alongside this disconnect is the lack of acknowledgement of white male privilege suggested by Gray⁴ – New Zealanders need to understand their own whiteness and white privilege, accepting the role of whiteness and the need to acknowledge the privileges accessed simply through being white.

Smith captures this well when she asserts that history “is not important for indigenous peoples because a thousand accounts of the ‘truth’ will not alter the ‘fact’ that indigenous peoples are still marginal and do not possess the power to transform history into justice.”⁵ In making this statement she raises a poignant question. For those of us imbedded in indigenous communities, or like many of us walking in two worlds, how do we change the ‘truth’ perpetuated by the dominant culture about ourselves into facts that we determine and facts that free us from a ‘truth’ that deep down we always knew were lies? Lies perpetuated to subjugate land, language and labour, as well as to deny access to education and partnership, as opposed to our indigenous position of tiaki – caretaker and manager of these resources.

If we want to discuss indigenisation, then let us first be clear about who should be asking the question. If we want to talk about sharing and partnership, then can we be honest about who has the largest share and what equity could possibly look like, if equity is in fact our end goal? If we are going to discuss indigenisation as an organisation, then let’s be clear about who is driving that discussion, and what it will look like when it is measured. Maybe then we have a starting point, with our toes both firmly on the same line.

Nonetheless, and despite these obstacles, we can take heart from the words of Pasifika anthropologist and author Epeli Hau’ofa - that just as the sea is an open and ever-flowing reality, so our oceanic identity should transcend all forms of insularity⁶ – a strong plea that indigenous communities need to be openly searching, inventive and welcoming.

For despite the seemingly insurmountable obstacles faced centuries ago by our tupuna and by the vastness of Moana Nui O Kiva, we navigated it, sailed it and conquered it by embracing these same qualities of open-minded searching, inventiveness and welcome. And despite the vastness of our current ocean of disparity, colonisation and power differentials, we sail these oceans of thought, navigating the *va*, or the space between where we are and our imagined aspirations.

Unaisi Nabobo-Baba suggests a way which allows us to discuss issues like indigenisation, – because they are oceans of dialogue we have sailed before – by visualising a future where the indigenous knowledge, philosophies, values and cultures of Pacific peoples will infuse what students learn at all levels of education, university included.⁷ This process will include dialogue with those who now desire to partner with us, and sit at the table of understanding to bring change – change that can be understood as indigenising the dominant culture of the organisation.

It is because of our indigenous value base, and Te Ao Maori, our world view, that we are bound to the principles of collectivism and inclusiveness. If we are to foster the adoption of indigenous values and practices in our work and daily lives, then it is necessary to allow us as indigenous people to plot our own course about how this is done, to let us negotiate our own compass for navigation and our own methodology for engagement, so we can sit at the same table, and not be fed the *parapara* (scraps) from the Master’s table.

The tension between those who hold power and those who have long been subjugated by it cannot be ignored in any discussion of engagement with indigenous communities. As Mason Durie suggests, barriers can be reduced by ensuring that tertiary education institutions embrace indigenous world views so that pedagogies, research methodologies, campus facilities and academic staff can endorse cultural identity and inspire students.⁸

I am suggesting that these are the barriers that must be addressed, acknowledged and dismantled first – the barriers that are perpetuated by the dominant culture and are often invisible, though visible to those who are impinged by them. These issues are a necessary part of the discourse leading to real and thorough engagement by tertiary institutions and indigenous communities so that they can mutually influence each other.

The benefits that indigeneity bring to an organisation are real, transformative and credible, when done with a degree of consideration. Durie highlights this point when he emphasises that taking ethnic populations into account helps institutions achieve their mission of promoting academic advancement and the imperative of achieving diversity on campus; more importantly, he suggests that this engagement attends to long-term societal needs.⁹ Durie suggests that factoring indigeneity into an institution's goals and objectives may provide the vehicle for addressing wider social needs associated with indigenous populations and the nation they inhabit.

Thus indigeneity is critical for any tertiary organisation – as is engagement, but just as critical is the way that engagement is procured, how it is measured and by whom is it driven.

There is a *kama'atu* or Cook Islands Maori proverb that says “E tu'a pukuruva'a nui”¹⁰ – the breadfruit must be distributed properly. Its wider implication, and what is particularly relevant for this discussion, is that if we are to have meaningful indigenisation of an organisation, then we must understand the power of any inequity existing between the dominant culture and the indigenous community involved, and how the organisation intends to engage this inequity. Such inequity must first be discussed, understood and remedied in dialogue led by the indigenous community if it is to be truly meaningful and beneficial for all involved.

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1. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Zed Books, 2012).
2. Donna Awatere, *Maori Sovereignty* (Auckland: Broadsheet, 1984).
3. K K Gjerpe, "From Indigenous Education to Indigenising Mainstream Education," *FLEKS – Scandinavian Journal of Intercultural Theory and Practice*, 5:1 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.7577/fleks.2190>
4. C Gray, N Jaber and J Anglem, "Pakeha Identity and Whiteness: What does it Mean to be White?," *Sites: A Journal of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies*, 10:2 (2013), 82-106.
5. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 34.
6. Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).
7. Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, "Transformations from Within: Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative. The Development of a Movement for Social Justice and Equity," *The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 11:2 (2012), 82-97.
8. Mason Durie, "Towards Social Cohesion: The Indigenisation of Higher Education in New Zealand," paper presented at the Vice-chancellors' Forum, Kuala Lumpur, 15-19 June 2009; T Alfred, "Warrior Scholarship," in *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*, eds. D A Mihisuah and A C Wilson (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 88-99.
9. See also William G Bowen and Derek Bok, *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1998), 275-90.
10. J Jonassen, *Kama'atu: Verses of Wisdom* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 2005); Apenera Short, "Native Proverbs and Figurative Expressions of the Cook Islands," *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 60:4 (1951), 255-9, http://www.jps.auckland.ac.nz/document//Volume_60_1951/Volume_60%2C_No._4/Native_proverbs_and_figurative_expressions_of_the_Cook_Islands%2C_by_Apenera_Short%2C_p_255-259/p1

