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## **Maori Performance/Cultural Performance: Stages of Powhiri**

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“You can take the marae onto the stage, but don’t bring the stage onto the marae.”<sup>i</sup>

### **Mihi**

Tiro iho mai Mauka Aoraki, whakatau mai i nga uri o ratou ma, kua nekeneke mai, kua nukunuku mai i nga topito o te motu, ki te whakatakoto i nga matou kaupapa ma te marea hei wananga. Kei te haukaika, Kai Tahu iwi tena koutou katoa. Kei Te Whare Wananga o Waitaha, Te Kura Aotahi me nga kaiwhakahaere, ngaku mihi nui mo ta koutou manaaki mai i a matou mai i te timatanga o tenei hui, a , mutu noa. Te minenga e pai nei, nau mai, tauti mai! Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

### **Kaupapa**

We have titled our presentation “Stages of Powhiri” as a way of sparking a discussion of the ways in which powhiri and its essential elements can be seen to be performed in diverse contexts, on and off the marae. We begin by exploring the implications of a powhiri that was staged for a recent theatre conference, positioning this performance against the backdrop of some more explicitly touristic equivalents. We will then also consider the meanings potentially produced by the incorporation of aspects of powhiri into the Te Matatini kapa haka festival. How might contemporary performances of powhiri, ubiquitous as they have become, be seen to be staged along a continuum from idealization to realization? Leaving to one side, for a moment, the reflexive repudiation of what are often called “dial-a-powhiri,” what might be learned from analyses of sometimes less than ideal examples of powhiri in performance? How might the frequently uneasy balancing act between ritual and theatre in the performance of powhiri be seen to provoke contradictory, troubling, but nonetheless powerful ideas about cultural (and bicultural) identity?

## Sharon's Talk

Recently, I found myself sitting in the back row of one of two buses full of theatre academics – members of the Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies (ADSA) – about a hundred of us on our way to a marae in Dunedin for our conference's powhiri. A Maori woman sitting in the middle of the bus was reminding us of how we were to act and what we could expect to see enacted, as we clutched our song sheets and practiced our songs (including *Waltzing Matilda*). At the marae, we were formally welcomed; we had morning tea together, and Rangimoana Taylor spoke to us of his awakening as a Maori theatre artist. Then we got back on the buses and went back to the conference.

I confess I was cranky, and not for the first time. It was déjà vu all over again. Especially on that bus, where I was thrown back into feeling as I had on the buses that take tourists from their hotels to the tourist shows in Rotorua – only without the jokes. Once again, I was caught in the middle of a group of foreigners being given a taste of Maori culture through a performance of powhiri that was supposed to be edifying, but instead it was really mystifying. After all, we were not being welcomed into our conference; that had happened the night before at Otago University where the conference was actually situated. At the marae, our conference hosts were actually with us, as manuhiri, while the tangata whenua – our hosts – were an elderly couple, who were otherwise not connected with the conference, and whose names were never given to us. (And how odd is that, to be welcomed without being introduced?)

This wasn't "dial-a-powhiri": the genre of powhiri summoned up by Pakeha organisations when they want to tick the Treaty box. It was more a "faux-whiri": a demonstrative performance of powhiri staged at the outskirts of an event, to show us how it's done. It was skilful, gracious and touching in its own way, adhering to the basic stages of powhiri performance as I've experienced them on other marae at other times. But even so, it was not the staged coming together of two distinctly identified groups of people, a way of making ourselves known to each other for the purpose of discussing an issue critical to us both, in a reciprocal manner.

The kaupapa of this powhiri was the powhiri itself. That is to say, we weren't there to share – for example, to debate the nature and meaning of our work as theatre academics from different parts of Australasia. We weren't even there to work toward arriving at a mutual understanding of the conference topic – and I do recognise the irony here – "Turangawaewae, a sense of place." We were there to be shown Maori culture in a contained, "safe" format that did not demand much more of us than to follow our scripts, sing our songs and leave our shoes at the door.

This performance of powhiri was both performative<sup>ii</sup> – that is, staged as a production of Maori identity – and a synecdoche: a vital part of Maori culture that was being displayed as a stand-in for the whole. It was no less powerful an experience for being problematic. It was, in fact, a profound experience for many of those present who, acting more like theatre audiences than theatre academics, seemed all too willing to suspend disbelief.

But not me. Oh no. What a wonderful opportunity for me to flex some reflexive conceits about my Maori performance research. Just as I know the difference between professional wrestling and “real” wrestling, I knew this wasn’t “real” powhiri. We’d paid for this experience as part of our conference fees; this was the “show” put on primarily for our Australian colleagues, in which we New Zealanders (perhaps conscious of the dire state of race relations across the ditch) had the opportunity to demonstrate our bicultural vanities...I mean, virtues.

And so on...

But. What if this rush to judgment on my part is too easy? What if there’s something really powerful and promising in the proliferation of powhiri, in the way its aspects now are permeated into so many facets of New Zealand culture – well beyond its origins as a Maori ritual of encounter? Perhaps, as a performance researcher, it’s somewhat ill-considered for me to denigrate such a significant cultural practice as it moves along the continuum from ritual to theatre.<sup>iii</sup> Following on Victor Turner’s formulation of social drama, powhiri can be seen, in the present as in the past, to stage, contain and reconcile the crisis that erupts when the “other” arrives at one’s doorstep. But like other cultural and ritual practices, powhiri structures and protects the encounter between two peoples through posture, gesture and tone in ways that are intrinsically theatrical. That is, while Turner’s formulation puts ritual and theatre at opposing ends of a spectrum, it is possible that in powhiri, as in many other ritual, cultural and traditional practices, ritual and theatre are more closely aligned than Turner’s construct allows. That is, it is possible that what we often experience might not be powhiri per se, but it is not powhiri either.<sup>iv</sup>

Perhaps, also, following the logic provided by Diana Taylor in her influential book on the performance of cultural memory, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, the diverse stagings of powhiri in multiple contexts can be understood as strategies of remembrance – that is, as a vital piece of the Maori “repertoire.”<sup>v</sup> From Taylor’s perspective, powhiri might be viewed as a way of maintaining and extending a continuity of knowledge of past identity through present performance – performative but also restorative. As repertoire, the stages of powhiri we find proliferating and permeating in New Zealand culture might then be analysed for the way they produce different meanings for the participants depending on their positions in the continuum of cultural identity and knowledge of tikanga.

Still. Ritual can be elastic. But how far can it stretch before what might seem to be a testimony to its resilience is actually a breaking point, the point at which a key cultural practice in breaking with the past, loses its meaning and force in the present? There’s no question that the movement of powhiri off the marae has shifted the shape of its performance. The rules are being broken by those who are not so culturally aware, or committed to formal cultural practice. Often, as at the ADSA conference, we (Maori and non-Maori alike) turn up, but we don’t quite know why or how we are to be there.

Even so, what if instead of being simply – or at least solely – a sign of the contamination of Maori culture, the ongoing outcome of an inexorable compromise with the European, the spread

of powhiri and key aspects of its performance can also be seen as a tangible sign of the success of efforts by Maori to revive their culture through its practices? After all, powhiri is still practiced on the marae much as it should be, so the proliferation of powhiri-esque performances outside the marae can be seen as a parallel development, not a substitute, and some of these performance practices – for example in kapa haka – can actually be seen to promote, protect and preserve powhiri as a ritual practice.

### **Te Rita's talk**

Let's now consider the powhiri, or aspects of powhiri, that are present at Te Matatini.

There are two versions of powhiri in play throughout the festival.

The first is held the day before the competition starts: to welcome judges, performers and members of the Kahui Ariki of Waikato, as the late Te Arikinui Dame Te Ata-i-rangi-kaahu was the patron of Te Matatini.

The second version appears – although in an often dislocated and non-connecting way – throughout the haka performances, but situated primarily in the whakaeke (or entrance on to the stage). I say dislocated, because not all aspects of powhiri are presented, so those aspects that are sit in isolation from the whole like flotsam and jetsam discarded to float aimlessly in the sea. I say non-connected, because there is no opportunity for reciprocity to take place as it would in a real and complete powhiri. For example, a kapa may choose to do a karanga (call) or a whaikorero (speech) or even a taki (challenge) during the whakaeke. These normally would require a response – an utu or whakautu sent out – but in this case no answer is expected, or possible. And what is powhiri without reciprocity?

For the moment I will leave aside discussion on the first version – the powhiri on the day before – but if time permits I will address it later.

An evolving whakapapa of whakaeke as it's performed on the festival stage has been created over the last 38 years. The initial rule stated that the matua or kapa should enter on to the stage as if entering on to a marae.

(It is noted in the Ruatoria lectures in Ta Apirana Ngata's time, and well before the national festival's genesis, that the koroua actually detailed which side of the stage was most appropriate to enter from and where men and women should stand in relation to each other and according to their roles in traditional society, but I perceive even his instructions to be confusing as he mixed war time roles with that of peace time, a point I will reiterate later in the talk.)

Back to Te Matatini and whakaeke. If one is entering the stage as if on to a marae then the questions beg:

What is this place I am entering?

Who am I in this whakaeke – tangata whenua or manuwhiri? And where are either in this scenario? If I, in the kapa, am manuwhiri, then where and who is tangata whenua? Is it the judges, the audience?

The stage we currently whakaeke is a proscenium theatre stage. Its arch looks like a gateway to a marae, but even though we decorate it with maihi and amo, it is not. That is, we use this symbolic construction to represent a marae, but the festival stage is not a marae. And in this confusion, how then does a kapa know what aspects of powhiri to use in its whakaeke? Since tangata whenua do not perform whakaeke, what happens to me if I enter the festival stage in my own rohe? Am I now manuwhiri in my own place?

If the festival stage on to which kapa whakaeke is framed as any marae and no marae, then where am I? And who am I? Is it possible that I am practicing powhiri, enacting and embodying its values, and I am erasing it at the same time?

The rule that prescribes whakaeke no longer exists as a guideline for competitive performance at Te Matatini, but it has not been erased from the cultural knowledge that judges carry within them, and this knowledge still influences the way judges view the performance. In fact, it is a nebulous journey to try and determine when this change occurred, a change I do know that was pre-empted and predetermined by the kapa themselves and not by any governing body. Yet we still maintain aspects of powhiri. The ritual holds us and grabs us even when we want to get rid of it, and its shadow hovers over kapa in performance regardless.

This also leads me to pose the question that is pertinent to my research: What role does kapa haka play in the construction of a modern Maori identity and if it has changed what does that do to my identity?

Te Matatini was set up as a vehicle for the maintenance of Te Reo me Ona Tikanga, i.e. Maoritanga, the term bandied about in the 70s. This was a time when any type of total immersion education wasn't even a dream in anyone's mind, the birth of which we now know occurred in the early 80s with the establishment of Kohanga Reo.

Te Matatini was and still is, the single biggest gathering of iwi Maori in Aotearoa, and across the Tasman, who come together to talk to each other via Maori cultural performance. It is also a forum for reaffirming our Maori identity. Kapa Haka is not a tourist performance or dial-a-powhiri. Kapa Haka is an artificial form of Maori repertoire that preserves cultural memory, reo, ritual and protocol through performance – a living, performative means to restore, transmit and value Maori culture through performance for all Maori people regardless of iwi. Part of what troubles the performance of powhiri on the festival stage is this tension between the pan-tribal and the iwi-particularity in the nationalisation of Kapa Haka.

I want to return to the question of the first version of powhiri that we see at Te Matatini. If the performance of powhiri – or at least whakaeke – has become more theatrical than ritual on the festival stage, it is tempting to look to the powhiri that welcomes participants at the start of the festival for the “real” ritual. But here I find aspects of this performance problematic in relation to my initial statement: “You can take the marae onto the stage, but don’t bring the stage onto the marae.” More and more the staging of the first version of the powhiri has become a theatrical spectacle where ritual and protocol have become blurred by the need to display one upmanship: i.e., the current tangata whenua trying to outdo the previous festival tangata whenua by showing how many warriors they can arm, and not just male warriors but female warriors too; what new and unusual costumes and accessories they can garb themselves in under the guise that these costumes have been retrieved from ancient times; how many kaitaki (challengers) they can send out and how vicious and warlike they can be to the point of being rude and often placing the manuwhiri in an invidious position debating whether to pick up the teka (dart) or not, usually because the tangata whenua have made a mistake in their actions of challenge forgetting that we are in peace times. One is left wondering whether the powhiri was for the purpose of connecting iwi to iwi or just an opportunity to display one’s wares. Usually the mana of an iwi is based on its ability to manaaki (take care of and show hospitality to) its manuwhiri, not on such fierce displays of haka performance.

Or can the complete reverse argument be the correct one? Te Matatini has given the encouragement to and opportunity for tangata whenua to lift the ante in their bringing back into the powhiri all its ritual aspects as seen on the marae that are performative and descriptive of their iwi so giving a stronger emphasis to the maintenance of their identity.

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End Notes:

<sup>i</sup> Te Rita Papesch.

<sup>ii</sup> In the sense provided, for example, by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (NY & London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>iii</sup> See: Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (NY: PAJ Publications, 2001).

<sup>iv</sup> Here I am using Richard Schechner’s now well-known formulation of the paradox of performance in *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) and elsewhere.

<sup>v</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).