

Using Hakomi to Mediate Cultural Differences

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Abstract

In the following article I have begun by describing the process of Maori and European cultures meeting in Aotearoa (land of the long white cloud), New Zealand and how colonization changed Maori life and culture, creating present day conditions. I address the question of how as a non-Maori I work with Maori whaiora (health-seekers/clients), and how I offer Hakomi to them as a way of understanding their experience. Also, I discuss how working with Maori whaiora has changed my Hakomi practice.

Aotearoa, New Zealand

Myth has it that Maui chased and caught the giant fish, Te Ika (fish); Maui that has come to be known as the North Island of New Zealand; the South Island is Maui's waka (canoe). Although Maori refer to themselves as Tangata Whenua (people of the land), whakapapa (oral genealogy) speaks of great waka arriving from mythical Hawaiiki, thought to be a more northern part of Polynesia, seeking new land to re-establish their agrarian lifestyle in approximately the 14th century (King, 2003).

The first European explorers from Holland, France, and England in 1650 did little to disrupt this way of life, merely sighting land or coming ashore briefly. In the nineteenth century European seafarers began establishing whaling and trading between Sydney and Aotearoa. Maori participated in both whaling and trading, some becoming seafaring entrepreneurs (Belich, 1996).

As more Pakeha (non-Maori) settlers arrived, their idea of land-ownership clashed with the Maori idea of kaitiaki o te whenua (guardians of the land), who were responsible for the on-going well being of the land. The Treaty of Waitangi, signed by many Maori chiefs in 1840, exemplifies this cultural misunderstanding; the Maori chiefs were agreeing to kawantanga—governance, which to them meant protection by the Queen of England from war and further European invasion (Considine & Considine, 2012). To the English, it meant Maori were now a colony under British laws and customs whereby land could be bought and sold. Many of the “agreements” that Maori signed since the Treaty saw them lose vast tracts of land to “the Crown” and Pakeha settlement (Considine & Considine, 2012).

For Maori, land is more than a commodity to be bought and sold. Whenua, the word for land in Maori, means both land and burial place of the placenta, indicating the interconnectedness of land and personal identity. Loss of land was the beginning of loss of identity as Maori were separated from lands their tipuna (ancestors) had inhabited and where they were buried, as land confiscation by the crown continued (Considine & Considine, 2012). This aspect of colonization is only now being rectified through the Waitangi Tribunal, established in 1975 to compensate iwi (tribes) for the misappropriation of land.

In 1907 the New Zealand Parliament passed the Tohunga Suppression Act, intended to replace what were seen as superstitious and dangerous traditional Maori healing practices with modern medicine. Tohungas were not only healers, but carriers of tikanga—traditional wisdom, history and cultural practices—so by prohibiting Tohunga from practicing, Maori oral traditions were severely compromised, which hastened cultural assimilation. Te Reo (Maori language) was suppressed in schools, either formally or informally, Maori children punished or beaten for speaking their native tongue (King, 2003).

After WWII there was an economically fueled drift of Maori from remaining rural land to the city for jobs in factories and freezing works, causing further loss of cultural identity. This process of acculturation was seen as inevitable and desirable by some pragmatists who felt it portended economic progress for Maori (King, 2003).

The 1970s heralded a resurgence of Maori identity in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Land marches challenged to confiscation of Maori land, as mentioned previously, the Waitangi Tribunal was established to restore illegally confiscated land, the Kohungareo (language nest) movement established early childhood centres, which have gradually become total immersion Te Reo education. Kuras, total immersion primary schools followed, and soon Te Reo was part of the secondary syllabus.

Although Maori seats in New Zealand Parliament were established in 1867 by the Maori Representation Act as a way of rewarding Maori loyal to the crown and placating Maori rebels, disparities in the administration of the Maori electoral system meant Maori did not enjoy the same representation as those of European descent (New Zealand Parliament, 2009). Between 1893 and 1975 persons of more than half Maori descent were not allowed to vote in a European electorate, however, since 1975 a person with some degree of Maori descent is able to choose whether to vote in a Maori or general electorate (New Zealand Parliament, 2009). These legislative changes reflect both the effects of inter-marriage between Maori and pakeha and the resurgence of Maori cultural identity. In general parlance today and in the casework I will discuss below, the term Maori refers to anyone who culturally identifies as Maori.

Continuing an historical understanding of the marginalization of Maori, the post war employment boom came to a halt in the 1980s, closing small factories and freezing works. In the Hawkes' Bay where I practice, there are now three generations of numerous Maori families, once employed at the freezing works, who have been unemployed

and on welfare benefits with little prospect of employment.

Not unexpectedly, social problems among Maori abound today: Although 14.6% of New Zealand's population are Maori, Maori represent over 50% of the prison population (Ministry of Justice, 2015); the incidence of sexualized violence among Maori women is twice as high as among pakeha women (Mayhew & Riley, 2009); 30% of reported incidents of domestic violence involve Maori; the Maori youth suicide rate was 35.5 per 100,000 of the Maori youth population, which is more than 2.5. times that of non-Maori youth in New Zealand (Ministry of Health, 2012).

So today, while there is a resurgence of Maori language and culture that has produced growth in Maori art, literature, the performing arts, with more young Maori entering university and following professional careers, Maori are still some of the most socio-economically marginalized people in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Motivated by these social problems, my colleague, Donny Riki has established Te Aratika (the good/honest/right path) to make psychotherapy available to Maori and Pacifica people in the Hawke's Bay. Mental Health Initiative referrals have come to us in this service from two medical practices who have a high percentage of Maori whaiora (those seeking health), and one dedicated Maori medical practice, and through word of mouth in the community, funded ultimately by the Ministry of Health.

A Non-Maori Working with Maori

I am tauiwi, a person not born in New Zealand. I was born in Torrington, Connecticut, U.S.A. of Eastern European Jewish parents and attended a primary school where I was one of two Jewish students enrolled. I encountered ignorance and prejudice about being Jewish from an early age, and so have been sensitive to feeling "different." At University, after intending to major in psychology and finding the prevailing "behaviorism" mechanistic and devoid of attention to human relationships or spirituality, I stepped sideways to anthropology and archeology. I became skeptical about the wisdom of analyzing other cultural systems when one of my anthropology professor's study of the organization of rural power was used by the C.I.A. to destabilize villages in Thailand.

My first experience of travel abroad taught me how much distortion can be created by our cultural lenses: I began reading a *Washington Post* article on the six-day war that described a conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. At mid-flight I was given a *Manchester Guardian*

that described the same event as conflict between Palestinians and Israelis!

When I came to New Zealand in my early twenties, suntanned with curly black hair and brown eyes, arriving in Wellington train station and was asked by a Polynesian railway worker, "which island do you come from?" I replied, "The big one." However, I was aware that although I could pass for Polynesian until I began to speak, I came from another culture and looked at the world differently. I chose not to pursue an academic career in archaeology because I felt I would be a foreigner offering an interpretation of Maori culture, which I knew little about. Instead, I again stepped sideways, offering a social studies unit on archaeology to the local primary school and went on to train as a teacher. My experiences at Teachers' College learning Maori waiata (songs) and a canoe trip up the Whanganui River visiting some of the old villages and maraes were a gentle introduction to Te Ao Maori (the Maori world), reminding me how much I don't know about that world where I am a visitor.

I have taken this attitude into my work as a psychotherapist by following the cultural lead of the client, be they Maori, pakeha, or tauwiwi. On the advice of wise kuia (grandmother/elders) and karaua (grandfather/elders) I offer my pipiha (my genealogy and the land marks of my birthplace) to Maori clients and make a place for them to respond. I also offer them a karakia (prayer) to begin and end the session, if they wish.

I have been fortunate to work for two kaupapa Maori (conceptualized by Maori knowledge and oral tradition) organizations. Several months after completing my general psychotherapy training, I had two job interviews on the same day. The morning interview was with Te Rangi Haeata Oranga (the breaking of a new dawn), Hawke's Bay's kaupapa Maori gambling help agency. The "interview" was a mihi whakatoa, a meeting to get to know and welcome me. Seated on mattresses, "marae-style" were all the staff and kaumatua (elders) of the agency who introduced themselves with their whakapapa (genealogy) and spoke of their work. I was invited to reciprocate. Talk continued in the whare-kai (dining area) over "a cup of tea," a generous lunch, in keeping with Maori protocol of transitioning from the tapu (sacred) process of mihi to the noa (profane/everyday) business of eating that also happens in the process of powhiri (formal welcome) on the marae. At the end of the morning I felt well-fed and well-met.

I also noted that at Te Rangi Haeata Oranga as well as therapists and kaumatua to hold tikanga, there were social

workers, a woman who did regular mirimiri (traditional massage), and opportunity for whaiora to be referred for rongoa (traditional medicine). This attention to the needs of the whole person impressed me as truly wholistic healing, something that is often stated as the goal of health practices, but not achieved.

The second interview was in the afternoon with a firm of psychologists. After I had sat in the waiting room for several minutes, a woman came out with a cup of coffee in hand and said she was just finishing her lunch and would be with me shortly. I was invited into a boardroom with this woman who, with pencil poised, asked questions about my curriculum vitae, what I thought I could offer to the company, and my "learning edges."

I was offered both jobs, but the choice was a no-brainer for me. Whereas I felt the psychologists were only interested in my mind and my ability to use it in my work, the experience with Te Rangi Haeata Oranga had engaged my complete embodied self. It was a wonderful and welcoming place to begin my career as a psychotherapist and to begin to implement the Hakomi I was learning at professional Hakomi trainings.

Using a Hakomi Paradigm with Maori Whaiora

The Hakomi principles sit comfortably alongside a well-regarded and popular Maori model of health, Te Whare Tapa Wha (the four walls of the house) (Durie, 1998). These four walls or spheres of reality and importance in Te Ao Maori (the Maori world) are Hinengaro (mind), Tinana (body), Whanau (family), and Wairua (spirit). The equal importance of mind and body means that the Hakomi concept of mind-body wholism is not foreign to Maori. The importance of familial connection motivates Maori to seek emotional, social, and economic support from their whanau. When a ceremonial meeting and welcoming (powhiri) takes place on the marae (courtyard of a Maori meeting house that acts as a social and ceremonial forum), speeches are made to make connections to whanau and tipuna, thus easing tensions and animosities. When meeting informally, Maori seek familial connection to each other, and often with pakeha, Maori will name the origin of their pakeha tipuna to seek connection. The wairua is the immortal part of a human being that leaves the body at time of death—best translated as spirit (Best, 1934)—and is similar to the Hakomi concept of essence or essential self (Morgan, 2015, p. 40).

Ron Kurtz, when working in Aotearoa, New Zealand and meeting Maori people, perceived them as psychically

whole, embodied, personifying the unity principle: “A Maori person sang a Maori parting song. . . about going away over the sea. As he sang, I could feel his love and knowledge of the sea. I felt like we were there, on the sea, sailing away.”

The Hakomi principle of organicity, the idea that things unfold according to a higher order plan, is also consistent with Maori paradigms.

Although Maori were traditionally a warrior culture, in day-to-day life there is a non-violent attitude of going with the flow of life. For example, Maori seem much more accepting of death as inevitable than pakeha, and often if an older Maori person is diagnosed with a terminal illness they will choose not to seek medical treatment. Neither does mindfulness seem an alien concept to my Maori whaiora, particularly if I describe it as “going inside to have a look at your wairua.”

Some examples of how I have worked with whaiora using Hakomi principles and techniques will best illustrate this synergy.

Terry (pseudonym) was a client who I worked with during my three years at Te Rangi Haeata Oranga. He identified as Maori, was thirty years old and married with four children. He was referred through another agency in Central Hawkes Bay as a whanau member affected by gambling, his father being the gambler. Terry spoke about feeling let down by his father when his parents split up. Terry was in his early college years at the time, and was living with his father. He was an excellent rugby player, but felt his father hadn't helped him to realize his dream to play rugby professionally, and had steered him into his own profession of shearing. Terry was also sad that his father now rarely visited Terry and his whanau.

I explained that Hakomi was a technique that helped us get in touch with our wairua. I explained that it was like looking inside and talking about what we saw and felt. I asked Terry to sit with his eyes closed or softly focused and just notice any thoughts, body sensations, emotions, or memories he noticed arising in him when he heard the words, “Terry, you are loveable.” This initially acted as a fluffy probe, as Terry was taken back to very early childhood. He had just gotten out of the bath and his mother was drying him by the fire. His dad was there, too, relaxing in his chair, and he could feel how much they both loved him. Terry basked in the warmth of this memory for quite a while before returning to ordinary consciousness and becoming tearful. I contacted his emotional response and he remarked, “that's what was missing after my parents split

up: love.” The probe had hit home and Terry had made sense of it intuitively.

I was also struck by the ease with which Terry was able to become mindful. As a Maori, perhaps his concept of “wairua” was not so compartmentalized as a western ideas of “spirit.” This may have allowed him access to his inner landscape, displayed in the present moment, as his psychodynamic history and his experiences of being loved and feeling held. The ease of accessing the past also indicates a Maori way of thinking where time is not so compartmentalized as it is in western society. This is reflected in a felt sense of the nearness of tipuna who are deceased but are said to stand behind their progeny when they are called through the recitation of whakapapa, or in times of need.

Another whaiora, who I will refer to as Mere, has been an Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) client since 2012. ACC is a government scheme that provides free therapy for people who have sustained physical and mental injuries that includes incidents of sexualized violence. Unfortunately, as indicated above, Maori women are subject to an extraordinary frequency of sexualized violence. Mere was one of those women. She had earlier disclosed and processed with another Hakomi therapist, an incidence of being gang-raped when she was a teenager and had found mindfulness invaluable for dealing with recurrent flashbacks as a way of separating “what happened back then from what is happening now.”

She had had a break in therapy and then was referred to me to deal with a memory of her mother being drunk and sexually violating her when she was eight years old. It seemed that Mere had been drawn to me unconsciously to work through her *mamae* (troubling sorrows) with her now deceased mother, because her transference towards me was strong from the beginning of our work. She commented on my curly hair at our first meeting, saying it reminded her of her mother's hair, and found it hard to make eye contact with me. I suggested that she experiment in mindfulness looking away from me, noticing what happened, then looking at me for a few seconds and noticing her reactions. She reported an anxiousness feeling in her *puku* (stomach) about me looking at her while she was looking away. Looking at me felt “scary,” and when she looked away again, she could feel what she imagined to be my critical gaze looking at her, looking away.

I then suggested we try the experiment with me looking away, looking at her, and looking away again. When I first looked away, Mere said she felt relieved that I wasn't looking at her. When I looked at her she said she felt “confused

and lost and nervous.” As I looked away, she reported a deep sense of sadness. Mere quickly grasped the parallels to her experiences with her mother, wanting connection and protection but feeling frightened and confused by her mother, the dilemma of disorganized attachment (Wallin, 2007). Safety in our therapeutic relationship was the focus of therapy for the first year.

In a more recent session, Mere came troubled by her lack of courage to speak to the mistreatment and disrespect she felt she endured from family members. She felt her siblings only valued her ability to cook, and ignored her when she tried to give her opinion on whanau matters. She explained, “They takahe (trample) on my mana (honour).” When I asked her to direct some mindfulness to her physical body, she said she felt “floaty, kinda disconnected” from her body. She was staring intently at me and I contacted her intent gaze. She replied, “Something weird is happening. . . your face is changing. I’m seeing my nanny. . .nanny loved me. . . she’s telling me kia kaha (be brave), to gather my feathers. . . she’s telling me to gather my feathers and weave a korowai (cloak). . .the whanau will see the korowai and know they must listen to me. Again, Mere was quick to make meaning of this experience. She said the feathers she needed to gather were those things about herself that she knew were her strengths: her ability to be a good mother, a good listener, a practical person, and clear-thinking. Mere said that her nanny had those qualities herself, and had passed them on to her. For her, this was a reminder of how present her nanny was, although deceased. When I asked how she was feeling physically, Mere took a deep breath, smiled slowly, and closing her eyes said, “I feel full, I know how to restore my mana,” and her ease with herself was palpable.

I sensed that Mere was connecting, through her own physical body and through her nanny’s body, to the sacredness of the female body that is inherent in Maori tikanga. As the vessel of procreation, the female body is revered and tapu according to tikanga. When a woman is hapu (pregnant) or mate (menstruating), she does not enter a garden, enter an urupa (cemetery), or bathe in the sea or river. This does not mark her exclusion, but rather the sacredness and importance of her female body, particularly in these conditions (Wallen, 2007, p. 118). With this reminder from her nanny, Mere was embodied as a wahine toa (a strong woman).

Mere was able to draw on this strength later when whanau members were questioning her for reporting violence and intimidation she experienced by her niece, whose children have been removed from her care, and who Mere volun-

tarily cares for. The children overheard their mother threatening “Nanna” (Mere), and were confused and fearful. Mere knew “It was my chance to stop the cycle of whanau violence,” so she put a protection order in place that prohibits her niece from seeing the children except at specified times and under supervision, despite whanau criticism.

Learnings from Te A Maori and Maori Whaiora

I feel enriched as an individual and as a Hakomi psychotherapist for having worked with Maori whaiora, for working with Maori colleagues and kaumatua, and for the opportunity to be exposed to Te A Maori (the world of Maori). From my first experiences with Te Rangihaeata Oranga I have learned the value of manaakitanga (providing support and hospitality) to whaiora and colleagues. This allows us all to relax and be more available to each other in the present moment.

The fact that Maori tikanga (cultural practices) encompass a consciousness of the presence and power of ancestral forces in present life experiences adds a dimension to life that is rich and supportive. Encouraged by the awhi (support) and wisdom of kuia and friends, I have felt the reassurance of my own tipuna in times of stress. When I voiced concern to my Maori friend about taking the role of kaikaranga (the one who calls) to lead a Hakomi student body onto the marae, she wisely reminded me, “Sarah, your ancestors will be there. You are calling to them and they will awhi you.”

I have also used my pipiha (account of geographical and genealogical origins) to help me feel grounded and supported when I was being interviewed by a panel of psychotherapists for membership in the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists, and now often tell new clients, Maori and Pakeha, about my origins when I introduce myself.

This affects how I work with Maori clients, for example how I contact and track their experience. Knowing there may well be the added presence of tipuna in our interactions adds another layer of mutual respect and makes me less liable to make assumptions about the meaning of their experience. I now think of ancestry as another level of consciousness in the hierarchy of experience to be considered when I lead clients, Maori and Pakeha, in mindful study of the levels of their present experience. I imagine that other Hakomi practitioners could find this way of thinking beneficial and enriching.

I have also benefitted from a deeper understanding of the sacred feminine as understood in tikanga, Maori. Initially, when told, “Don’t go into the garden if you’re mate,” when

at the marae, I understood it only as a restriction. I now appreciate the respect and veneration for women as child-bearers and mothers that this rule of tapu implies.

Conclusion

Maori are a people who have been socially and economically marginalized in their own country though the process of colonization. While there has been a resurgence of cultural pride and identity beginning in the 1970s, Maori are represented disproportionately in social problems.

My own experience of marginalization has created an affinity with Maori and a caution in assuming I can fully understand their experience. This has led to an attitude of following their cultural lead in the therapeutic relationship. I have explained how I have offered Hakomi as a way of allowing whaiora to make sense of their experiences, how Hakomi and tikanga Maori can create a healing synergy for whaiora, what valuable learnings I have gleaned from my contact with Te Ao Maori, and how they have changed and enriched my Hakomi practice.

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