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When ‘water’ meets its limits: A Maori speculation on the term *wai*

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Abstract

There is something thoroughly unsatisfactory and incomplete about the usual translation of the Maori term ‘wai’ as ‘water’ and ‘who’. Consequently, as Maori sceptics we need to think outside of the limitations imposed by western thought and speculate on the vitality of the Maori language and existence, although through a colonised lens. While I do not completely discard the translations of water and who and their strict referencing, I speculate beyond their colonising limitations and consider the possibility that wai is an active, existential and metaphysical phenomenon that gives rise to entities by its *pervasion*. In a colonising era, where English language and its foundations would separate water and who from each other to distinguish them, we can conceive of them abstractly through a term that embraces them whilst not directly referencing them. This paper considers the possibility of the English term ‘pervasion’ as the confluence of the *intention* of both water and who.

Keywords: water, identity, Maori, existentialism, metaphysics

Introduction

Recently, and worldwide, water has taken on special significance in debates due to the threat to its quality and, more urgently, to its very existence. Writings on indigenous views of water within these discussions nearly always reference its spiritual nature (see e.g. Jackson 2006; Assembly of First Nations (n.d.); Harmsworth et al. 2016; Larson 2012). Maori philosophy, as one example, calls for us to explicitly reference more than just the physicality of water in its Maori translation ‘wai’. Most importantly for this paper, alongside its meaning of water, wai also means ‘who’, and asks us to acknowledge the essence of all things. All things are possessed of wai although water may not be present; all entities manifest as one-of-many, and therefore have their existence as an influx (in a sense, the deluge, which to some degree evokes the English ‘water’) by the world. ‘Who’, as I shall go on to argue, is equally as unsuitable a translation of wai as ‘water’. On their own, and indeed as a combined water/who dyad, water and who do not fully answer to that call of Maori thought and its language I have just referred to.

Any toing-and-froing between the English and Maori languages is a messy one, but then colonisation is not especially tidy. This problem raises one that a Maori counter-colonial writer frequently encounters and comprises this: I am forced to refer to water and who to philosophise ‘wai’ to begin with, despite my dislike of their strict, rigid forms, which I describe later. In this paper, part of my challenge is directed at the replacement of Maori phenomena with western ones. By ‘replacement’, I really mean the removal of the All from terms so that they are forced to mean specific things (for example, the strict meaning of either water and who given to wai). What I propose is obliterated in colonisation is the capacity of Maori terms to signal totality, to such an extent that wai, for instance, is stripped of its spiritual vivacity. Wai should indeed be like water – inundating everywhere but not necessarily contained to what we now commonly call ‘water’. Moreover, through a Maori philosophical lens we can contest the specificity of the Indo-European origins of ‘who’, as well. Overall, for holistic Maori thought wai may only signify water and who quite incidentally. Its reach is similar to them both, in that water and who are world-embedded phenomena, but it is our responsibility to understand them as unrestricted by those definitions.

In this paper, I will show how wai can be viewed more expansively and with an aspect of ‘motion’ (McNeill 2005) in mind. However, we should note here that motion does not suggest the in-filling of a thing by the world. I therefore resort to several English terms that cast a wider net than simply water and who, and motion, and suggest how the phenomena of water and who can still find purchase in those terms. While water and who, as colonised language and concepts, are still discernible in my approach, I do not limit my discussion to water and who. Instead, I hope to veil them with a much more fundamental sense of tumult. With that aim in mind, the word I shall chiefly use, in order to discuss wai, is *pervasion*, which is useful for the following reasons: it identifies with a spreading through, and can thus reference water but is not limited to that as such; and it suggests that something is apparent *as* itself throughout something else (and is therefore consonant with ‘who’ or identity). As a Maori writer, I draw on my own tribal saying to argue that wai has a sense of tumult that governs our thinking and representations of the world.

Maori philosophy of interconnectedness: An introduction

Maori thought is premised on an immediate reality that all things in the world are one. This first principle is shared by other indigenous groups, although there may be variations on how this unity manifests according to the particular languages and practices of any one group. Maori thought reflects this oneness in several ways: through its language, where time is collapsed through a term such as ‘mua’, which means both beforehand and the future; through the idea that one’s ancestors are always present; and where natural phenomena and the self are one. In a metaphysics of interconnection, distinctions between entities are much less marked, making for some interesting possibilities in our current, colonised times. Where dominant western thought attempts to clarify things in the world, a Maori metaphysics of interconnection would instead prefer to retain the reality of all other things whilst referencing one entity. The All, or ‘world’ as I will now mostly refer to it, is held in any expression about one thing; thus, the one thing being referenced would not be so dominant in one’s ideas or speech.

I go on to talk about the Maori term ‘wai’ in that light soon, but another example serves here. An extremely important Maori word, ‘Papatuanuku’, means equally earth mother and conceptual foundation (Mika 2017). Like other Maori terms, she is not simply a term but an entity, and even the term itself is constituted by the object that it points to – her, the earth mother. Papatuanuku (Papa) is the fact of existence, constituting our and all other entities’ being such that we are essentially indistinguishable. She then comprises important aspects of our language and various phenomena within that language: kaupapa (the first appearance; the ongoing manifestation of original ground; the materiality of thought), for instance; raupapa (ordering; the categorisation of being); whakapapa (genealogy, but also the claiming of Papatuanuku of all things). Papatuanuku transcends components, and within all Maori terms featuring her name she manifests as a complete fact.

There is a unity evident here of language and world. When, for instance, whakapapa is referred to, immediately the fact of interconnection arises also. We would not so much talk about whakapapa, then, as be claimed by its fact: We might *mean* ‘whakapapa’ as genealogy, but a persistent ground of thought (Papatuanuku) establishes itself in our speech or perceptions in various ways. As we mention ‘whakapapa’ we are reminded of our reliance on the world and, indeed, on the ancient origins of our thinking and our existence. All language or speaking is an

outcome of this primordial grounding. Further, all things in the world are *materially* collapsed through Papatuanuku. As an original foundation, all things arise from her and are simultaneous with each other and her as well. This perplexing idea means that, although she is the first, she is not the first in a Maori sense, because she establishes all things *but* is immediately (always-already) established by all things as well.

Here, we meet a crucial divergence in Maori philosophy from the linearity of western notions of time. In interconnection, there is a strong argument for the possibility that past, present and future are one (Mika 2017). I mean this in a real sense, beyond what western categories call the so-called metaphorical or mythical. An ancestor is present and was always so; one's descendants are always-already in the 'now'; a thought or emotion is similarly embedded deeply in the present; a rock has its own, abiding current existence that is part of the total world, to name a few examples. Time is more an insistence or persistence of the world, as the fact of the enduring nature of all things. Consequently, things in the world have always-already instituted themselves within all other things.

Our language has perhaps always proposed this reality without stating it in theoretical terms. Now, however, there is a greater need to philosophise on the relationship of language to metaphysics and to other things in the world, due to the ongoing colonising force of fragmentation and separation. I do not refer primarily to the separation of humans from each other (although human interaction is certainly one manifestation of the problem), but what I instead want to emphasise here is that fragmentation and separation occur between all things. It is the role of the Maori philosopher to rethink the interconnection so that it forms a theoretical base of a practice, such as in language or even research and writing.

This rethinking of interconnection underpins my approach to this paper, which I want to outline here. There is no research method at work in this paper but, instead, an encounter with ideas that pushes me forward towards new ideas. In a Maori sense, my approach could be described as follows: I am granted a glimpse of something-beyond-comprehension that intrigues me; its illumination (or perhaps its darkness) draws me towards it; it obscures itself and withdraws and, in so doing, another idea is revealed, and so the process continues. Any idea is not my own, and likely this is where a Maori view of the idea diverges so significantly from that of the dominant west, because an idea for Maori is material (Mika 2017), a relation of the self, and

not simply constituting the human self but all other selves as well. There is a curious interplay between terms at work in this description, because the Maori translation of idea, ‘whakaaro’, is directly connected to Papatuanuku. And, with its establishment of all things, Papatuanuku exemplifies the inflow of the idea/whakaaro in all its fundamental unknowability. One way of referring to all this is ‘pervasion’ or ‘pervasiveness’, which is actually shared by all things in a Maori metaphysics of interconnection.

The in-dwelling of wai in a formal Maori introduction

Water and who are terms derived from an Indo-European language. However, as Maori philosophers, we have to keep them on the periphery. That is, we cannot ignore them but, on the other hand, they are not as central for us as the western concern wants them to be. A fun-filled, creative Maori philosophy would want to play with their possibilities in the light of what they can reveal. What do water and who imply about the world? Imply itself is an interesting word for its origins in ‘to fold in’. From a Maori worldview, our statements about the world are folded into and by the world (Mika 2017), and so we can speculate that a broad version of water and who overlap and imprint themselves on our discussions about them. This recognition of the impact of things as we discuss them forms the basis of a way of introducing the human self, typical in formal Maori settings, where s/he signifies the entities that allow him or her to be who they are. One version that relates to my own connection to my tribal lands and its landmarks is the following:

Ko Tarawera te maunga
(Tarawera is the mountain)

Ko Tarawera te moana
(Tarawera is the lake)

Ko Tuhourangi te iwi
(Tuhourangi is the tribe)

He uri au na Tuhourangi
(I am a descendant of Tuhourangi)

I could take this further as a Maori writer on water and who, and say ‘I am implicated by water and place-in-the-world as I discuss them’: certainly, that approach would ensure that I retain

the upsurge of those waters and their identity – their in-folding - at the forefront of my writing. Yet, it is not simply water that drives through every aspect of our existence - our dwelling on the page, in our discussion or indeed in the basic identity of the self (the ‘who’) - but the full force of all things. Thus, water and who are only useful as colonised shorthand for something much more fundamental, which is the deluging of the world. The English terms that translate the Maori thought in that introduction are unsatisfactory, and I return later to the introduction with the aim of turning over the Maori terms and their English equivalents in mind. I now turn to the problem of the colonised signifier and emphasise that water and who, as western imports, are only incidentally useful (but certainly are useful for emphasising what they *do not* include).

The freezing of language and its things: The problem with ‘who’ and ‘water’

For Maori, philosophy always simply manifests as a current concern, and we do not have to refer back to any individual writer or -ism to recognise its silent structures constantly evolving in front of us. One medium through which philosophy reveals itself currently is language. Presently, language in a rationalistic age is simply a mode of technical expression (Heidegger 1977). It no longer outpours as an excess, yet this surplus of meaning might have been the foundation for a more authentic view of language for Maori in traditional times. Language, unfortunately, is now a primary leveller of things in the world, with its precise definitions and its role as a conveyer of rational ideas. Any one term no longer disturbs the utterance because it follows rationality’s lead in ensuring that any overspill of the All is contained (Mika 2016).

Additionally, in practice, language in its rationality is economically transferrable. It therefore translates as a succinct thing into another language much more easily. However, ultimately there are no full or perhaps even satisfactory translations from Maori into English. Things in the world are petrified through language as one medium (Mika and Stewart 2017). When we talk of ‘wai’ with the frozenness of rationality in mind, then, we are referring to the restraint on the world’s ability to evolve fully. The ‘who’ or essence of language and the world it is meant to disclose, calcifies. Language itself has no upsurge in this view but instead it imposes a calm exterior upon what should be an uncontrollable upwelling (in Maori, unconventionally translated as ‘tupuna’ or ‘ancestor’ (Mika 2014).

While I do not want to restrict my argument here to language – because, in Maori interconnected philosophy, language is not the primary cause of the discontent – it is worthwhile making the link with other writers on the theme of translation as it encompasses both indigenous languages and epistemologies. Translation between indigenous and colonising language does not occur without an accompanying philosophy or its own fraught set of metaphysics. Generally, it is accepted and most likely a truism that translation is not straightforward (Hadaway & Young 2014; Masolo 2003; Mika & Stewart 2017). Not limiting his argument to language, Ahenakew (2016, 324) calls the taking of one set of metaphysics and merging it with another in a colonising context *grafting*, whereby we end up “operating with severely uneven environments shaped by historical circumstances where the grafting/hybridizing does not happen as a mutual exercise, but as assimilation”. He is referring to the problem of crossover between deep assumptions and then the submission of one (indigenous) to the other (colonising). For language, the grafting that occurs is the transporting of one worldview on top of the other through even a single term. In the colonised context, the “contrast in the entire range of culture represented by … two languages” (Nida 1945, 194) is therefore not fully resolvable but it may be negotiable. With that possibility in mind, Masolo (2003, 34) asks whether English or French can truly convey African concepts, and concludes that they can because “[l]anguage is an elastic phenomenon, and we can bend, twist, weave, and stretch it in any direction and to any length to accommodate the concepts we have in our minds”. In that reading of language’s ontology, we can talk about a phenomenon with malleability as a tool, although we will have to dispense with short, economic translations.

Yet, from the perspective of a Maori philosophy of language, a phenomenon is less resolvable than dialectic through language. That is, we must wrestle continuously with the English language because of its inherent accrual from a western origin. My position here is that there is something *not* navigable about language because it carries a continuing essence or metaphysical given. How we position ‘wai’ is therefore urgent because it signals whether something is to be deluged or paralysed, depending on our view of language. The paralysing of ‘water’ - its taming by western thought – and its subsequent incompatibility with ‘wai’ from a Maori worldview, is noticeable in its Proto-Indo-European origins. Water originally had two root words: **ap-* and **wed-* (Harper 2019): the first of these, **ap-*, signalled an animate view of water and is enshrined within Vedic Sanskrit *apah*, with the second, **wed-*, indicating an

inanimate version. It may be of little surprise to the indigenous reader to learn that **wed-* became the preferred origin for most versions of water in western use; water, like many other concrete examples in western languages, was to be a physical substance and could be referred to on the grounds of that permanence. ‘Who’ is also marked out by its tendency to signify the fundamental, visible characteristics of a thing, participating in Aristotle’s essentialism by which “some of the attributes of a thing (quite independently of the language in which the thing is referred to, if at all) may be essential to the thing and others accidental” (Quine 2004, 396). Both words in their current use imply an unchanging prior structure.

Moreover, at no point in the English language do ‘who’ and ‘water’ converge into one phenomenon and term as they do in Maori, and it is in this fact that the Maori translation of ‘wai’ poses the greatest challenge. Interestingly, Rendich (2013, 308) posits that “the intuition demonstrated by Indo-European and Sanskrit is worthy of appreciation inasmuch as they named man with the words *nṛ* and *nara* ‘what comes [*r/ar*] from the waters [*n*]’”. Thus, there was an ancient connection made between who in the form of identity of humanity and water. In Maori thought, though, it is possible to inquire into the identity of *anything* with the term ‘wai’, suggesting that all things have the capacity to participate, in some form, in an origin of water. It is this sentience of all things that ‘wai’ signals, by attributing the capacity of ‘who’ to them.

In Maori thought, wai reflects the fact of the world’s encroachment within all things, and this surge moreover takes place in establishing the flourish of a thing’s identity – the ‘who-ness’ of an entity. Wai is far from simply the physical phenomenon of water, and it exists outside of trying to establish the strict identity of a thing. A closer interpretation of ‘wai’ to my attempt in this paper to leave the fixity of water and who behind, is that of McNeill’s (2005) who, after a discussion with a participant in her research, refers to wai as ‘motion’. Matamua (2013 n.p., cited Wai o Papa 2016, n.p.) talks about wai in relation to ‘flow’ and further troubles the strict identity of the self by identifying that there is a celestial origin to knowledge. He also uses ‘water’ and ‘who’ interchangeably but, I suspect, wants the sense of both to remain in any one use of wai:

Ko te mātauranga he wai nō ruawhetū

Māori knowledge flows from the cosmos / the stars

Kia mahara koe i te puna inā inu koe i te wai

When you drink the water, remember the spring

Ko wai koe?

Who are you?

Ko wai ahau?

Who am I?

Ko wai ahau

I am water

One implication of Matamua's translation of *wai* as 'flow' is that, when Maori traditionally brought to mind the phenomenon of '*wai*', they likely did not restrict its essence to water. We now come to a problem with normal uses of English because, although flow might suffice in a certain sense, it carries with it a distinctive limitation. A difficulty that arises with several English terms – at least from a Maori perspective – is the distance that they infer between an origin and its destination. The term 'flow', for instance, does connect them both but makes a distinction between them such that they are not the same. Yet there is space in Maori metaphysics to think of origin and endpoint as being deeply western constructs, especially with the aforementioned Maori metaphysics that views time and geometric space as collapsed entities. Clearly, writing itself forces the indigenous writer to place distance between object and self, object and other object, and one time and another, but this approach is not consonant with the Maori thinking that preferred all things in the world as interconnected (Marsden 2003). Moreover, as I suggested earlier, Maori thought privileges the encroachment of an origin onto the so-called endpoint. That is, origin and endpoint diverge in western thought but merge in Maori philosophy. Thus, the apparent origin asserts itself within any other thing in an active sense.

The English language therefore leaves us with a limited number of terms to describe the inundating fact of the world on Maori existence, but one that does suggest the complete saturation of one phenomenon with another is pervasion. Pervasion denotes, to some extent, the fact that one thing always-already commissions throughout others. It is somewhat distanced from a strict notion of water but does not exclude it either, and it implies that a distinctive quality or nature of a thing is retained as it deluges throughout all other things (and therefore signals the identity or 'who' of a thing in its presence throughout the All). In light of the

limitations, yet possibilities, that the English language holds for Maori thought, I now return to the Maori introduction I gave earlier and try to salvage it from the distancing effect that western metaphysics imposes by understanding it within the language of pervasiveness.

The pervasiveness of the world within identity

Terms such as ‘mountain’ and ‘water’, mentioned in the introduction earlier on, are culturally bound. Although I cannot say for sure, it is highly likely that, when our elders glanced at what we now call ‘mountain’ etc., they had a more expansive word for it that, in fact, encompassed the pulling together or congregation of things in the world. A so-called mountain, for instance, may have been an instance of an assemblage of all things, not simply adhering to the western-derived categories that a thing needs to meet to be a ‘mountain’. With a Maori metaphysics of the pervasive in mind, I now translate my earlier Maori introduction in the following way:

Ko Tarawera te maunga

(Together with the amassing of world-as-Tarawera)

Ko Tarawera te moana

(Tarawera inundates those entities that all things have seen fit to presence as Tuhourangi, and deluges that Tuhourangi presencing in congregation with those entities)

Ko Tuhourangi te iwi

(All things irrupting as Tuhourangi henceforth pervade as Tuhourangi, persisting *as* themselves throughout other things in the world)

Ko wai koe? He uri au na Tuhourangi

(As for the fact that this deluge manifests *as* you? I am designated as Tuhourangi).

My basic premise is that, when we ask after the ‘who’ of a thing, we are inquiring into the fact that all things flood it, alongside its continuation as itself in that surge. On the other hand, however, that thing never is truly *itself*, because all things give rise to it. My attempt at the new translation began with disregarding ‘is’ in favour of an activity: ‘Tarawera is the mountain’ became an ‘amassing of world’. The Maori language does not have the verb *to be* (Mika 2016; Mika 2017), and the language complicates what something *is* through that thing’s complete association with the All. With the use of ‘is’, we are much more likely to fix the thing so that

it is no more nor less than our categorisation. An activity of all things as they establish something, though, suggests that there is an overspill from those categories, and I began describing this volatile impact of the world in the following ways: Tarawera is an amassing (speculatively, from ‘mau’ which means ‘to gather’) and through that term it retains its sense of a focal point (mountain) but it also implies that our ability to perceive it, at all, is due to its deluge by and with all things. In other words, the world converges in particular ways and at certain points, with Tarawera as one manifestation of this confluence.

However, Tarawera does not pervade and ultimately make the introducer what s/he is on its own. Again with the world as the defining, constitutive influence, Tarawera as both lake and mountain both cascade/devolve themselves within the human self’s existence as Tuhourangi: Tarawera as mountain, through its unification of the world in its unique way and also its focal insistence for the human self (it hence gathers the human self – and therefore the human self could be said to pervade Tarawera as much as the converse); and Tarawera as lake, by its sheer spread throughout the landscape. We should be mindful here, too, that landscape is not simply geography but also the convergence of all things – ancestral and those to come. With all phenomena as impinging world, Tarawera in both its forms establishes all things that come to be as Tuhourangi.

Not quite incidentally: For any counter-colonial indigenous writer who places himself or herself within what they write about, one major challenge arises in ensuring that the concepts behind the terms also spill over into whatever else the writer describes. The normal English translations – Tarawera is the mountain, Tarawera is the lake – do not imply any association between those important phenomena. Part of the pervasive of wai is that the writer should allow for the overflow of these phenomena so that they do not act as individuals; in a pragmatic sense for the introduction, it means avoiding leaving one line for another and challenging the issue of forgetting what has gone earlier. Perhaps more accurately, it means accounting for what has apparently ‘gone before’ so that it is now no longer *earlier* but currently in existence. Tarawera, earlier understood as mountain/lake, now acts as an ongoing confluence within what it is to be Tuhourangi. Tuhourangi in that sense is not simply a product of the mind but, instead, a beyond-human event or fact. It presences, irrupts or comes to be in correspondence with Tarawera (mountain), Tarawera (lake). Tuhourangi, often categorised as ‘tribe’, is now a form of persistence, in that it endures not simply as a tribe but as a form of continuous manifestation.

In its pervasion throughout the world, Tuhourangi is both distinctive and dependent on the world as a whole.

Finally – and yet not *ultimately*, because this would suggest a strict linearity – the human being as introducer is announced. Rather than simply asking ‘who are you’ and then answering ‘I am a descendant of Tuhourangi’, the fact of Tuhourangi’s presencing, indebted to the world as the world deluges Tarawera in its manifestations, complicates the human self’s identity. I (and any other manifestation of Tuhourangi) can only pervade all other things because all other things have brought me into being *as* all other things. The reader may have noted my frequent use of ‘as’ throughout: this use is an attempt to collapse both entities on either side of the word so that they cannot manifest without the other. If I manifest *as* Tuhourangi, then, I *am* Tuhourangi, and vice versa. Other entities from Tuhourangi equally and simultaneously presence in conjunction with Tuhourangi – not just the *I*. In fact, human-centric ‘I’ is a perverse pronoun in this entire account.

Inquiring into ‘wai’: Conclusion

If we are some of the products-of-many of the world’s driving force, and with the deluge and collapse of all things within any one thing that I have just described, what is the actual role of the person inquiring into ‘wai’ – into the personal and fundamental pervasiveness of a thing within all others? If we encounter something, rather than asking after its specific ‘who-ness’ how do we account for its torrential overflow into the world, and, just as importantly, the world’s flooding of the inquirer? The fact that we only ever have a partial glimpse into the world should provide some guidance here: we could say that the world reveals itself through any number of freshets that – as with a glowing rupture in the earth that does not divulge its inner secrets - will never allow us truly to say what anything is. The overarching lesson of wai is a tentativeness in saying what something is, where asking after the identity of something is fraught with the inquirer’s own worlded flux. More than that, though, it asks us to reconfigure our thinking and then our language so that our drive to fix the identity of things is loosened.

From a Maori perspective, it is difficult to see how water can be preserved when it is just ‘water’ – devoid of any active and persistent encroachment on all things. Further, from that same standpoint we cannot assure ourselves of our own existence when we do not conceive of

ourselves as fundamentally unknowable entities that are products of an equally unknowable world – the uncertainty of ‘who’. It becomes necessary, then, to be speculative in our approach to our language, and sceptical of the very subtle assumptions that guide our translations and our uncritical thinking. Bringing wai to the fore as a world-flooded phenomenon is, hopefully, one instance of that counter-colonial (Mika 2015) act that is, itself, not free from the deluge of the world.

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