

Māori culture: contemporary or not?

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Abstract: Williams and Henare's article (2009) offers a bicultural structuralism specific to the New Zealand situation. The present commentary unpacks such an idea by examining structuralism, poststructuralism and Enlightenment rationalism.

Keywords: Enlightenment rationalism; poststructuralism; structuralism

The present article is timely in the wake of the recent death (30 October 2009) of the famous cultural anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose work borrowed from the ideas of structural linguists in helping to synthesise the structuralist school of thought and, in particular, structural anthropology.

One of Lévi-Strauss' key considerations centred around the taboo myth, which he held was common to the majority of cultures regarding incest. That is, he argued that most cultures, for genetically good reason, had an inclination to ban incest and thus created cultural mythologies or 'taboos' surrounding such practices. Thus, structuralism can be loosely defined as the search for underlying structures or patterns of thought, which universally underpin human activity.

Williams and Henare's article finds some middle ground between a structuralist position and what could be called a poststructural philosophy, at once calling the reader to recognise that "we are unified as human beings at the broadest level" whilst also positing the "diversity of 'existences'". I employ the term 'poststructural' here to invoke the idea that multiple truths co-exist and are dependent upon a multitude of epistemological viewpoints, as the Williams and Henare article in-part presumes.

Such a positioning is in stark opposition to the universalising principles of Enlightened rationalism from whence 'modern' science derived. In the universe of Enlightened rationalism, it was assumed that reason (that is, European reason) could differentiate between truth and falsehood and, thus, the world was inherently knowable. That is, that the universe could be uni-dimensionally explained. Hence, statistics developed to propagate ideas such as objectivity, generalisability, validity (coherence) and reliability, and conterminously, universal truth.

Through the 'cultural revolution' Indigenous epistemologies amongst other variant perspectives challenged and, as Williams and Henare's article points out, continue to challenge the uni-dimensional imposition of Enlightenment rationalism. More to the point, poststructuralism developed to suggest that the 'single truth' inherent to modernity and its mouthpiece, positivist science, were merely a will to power serving to propagate and preserve the privilege of a few.

It should be pointed out that, at times, Williams and Henare similarly invoke a narrow definition of 'science' (and theory) privileging explanation (making the world knowable), prediction, control, objectivity and the elimination of confounding variables. Here, I pose the question for discussion: can self (subjectivity) ever be eliminated from our research? Whether hidden behind the thin veneer of positivistic objectivity or not, I believe there is no approach to research that is non-ideological.

The alignment of decolonial thinkers with poststructuralism is not surprising given the scepticism of poststructuralists regarding the Enlightenment view that reason provides the foundation for deciding between truth and falsehood and, consequently, that through reason the world is intrinsically knowable. Poststructuralism suggests that such a premise is inherently 'cultural' and, instead bases its theoretical conditions upon dissimilarity, difference and unpredictability, this contrasts to how Williams and Henare define 'theory' as a driver of science.

While described as politically impotent (and this critique must be taken seriously by indigenous decolonial theorists whose project is to 'decolonise' and, hence, is inherently political), the allure of poststructuralism to indigenous theorists is its inherent acceptance of alternative epistemologies and difference, and its ridicule of the Enlightenment's universalism.

And here, as a bridge, I think of Māori tribal histories in relation to Jean-François Lyotard's *petit récit*, in that Māori tribal histories never pretended to assert universal truth, merely their own. That is, it is quite common for various hapū and iwi to accept that the 'facts' surrounding a narrative can vary between groups. Thus, Māori tend to not hold the same fetish to search for a singular truth as do, for example, colonial historians.

The inter-relational colonial context brings to the fore Lyotard's question because it spotlights the universalising Enlightenment project. It demonstrates how Enlightenment reason, as the determinant of truth and falsehood, was applied to the untranslatable—the epistemologies of other cultures. The process involved, firstly, 'authenticating' indigenous knowledge by translating the untranslatable. That is, by encompassing and reconfiguring the incomprehensible into comprehensible forms.

The authentication element in this equation is crucial because from the premise of the Enlightenment reason, knowledge was only authentic if it was known. That is, the cultural concepts from Other epistemologies were only authentic if they were comprehensible to Western understandings. The first principle of colonising the indigenous mind, then, was to bring the philosophical underpinnings of the savage under the logic of the coloniser, to authenticate the inauthentic.

In getting back to the task at hand, Williams and Henare's article offers a bicultural structuralism, if you will, that is possibly specific to the New Zealand situation, in that unlike any other colonial context, the idea of biculturalism and its importance to the political milieu has become a discourse ingrained within the political imaginary of Māori and Pākehā, especially in the political assertion of sovereignty. As opposed to the multicultural discourses that pervade other postmodern societies, Williams and Henare foreground a double reality which considers "the co-existence of two worlds [where] it is clear that each has a part that is specific to itself and another part that is shared in common with the other world."

Ultimately, however, Williams and Henare lean towards structuralism because in due course they desire to demonstrate a commonality between takarangi and theories of 'contemporary physics'. It is possible that such a desire demonstrates a will to avoid the logical conclusion to poststructuralism, nihilism. If, for example, we accept that a Māori epistemological perspective is merely one valid reality amongst a multitude of realities, then logically we could deliberate that all truths are individually constructed and that, in honesty, there is very little commonality between any of us. Such is the postmodern condition. Yet, I pose for discussion, what drives this compulsion for convergence? And, more importantly, what is lost when we attempt convergence?

To conclude, I want to briefly return to Lévi-Strauss and a fundamental of his analyses, the binary. He suggested that all humans formed conceptions of reality through binaries, as in his classic work *The Raw and the Cooked* (1969). I make note of this here because of the binary that at once underpins the present article but that Williams and Henare also seek to dilute. That is, the traditional/modern binary.

It is indisputable that Enlightened rationalism led to modern scientific reasoning which, along with major world events such as colonisation, led to an era that has come to be known as 'modernity'. Driven by science, which in turn drove technology, and the foundation of modern states and capitalism, secular modernity was constructed as a fundamental condition of cultures or societies that had evolved out of pre-enlightened 'traditional' societies based in dogmatic mythology.

Hence the development of anthropology as a 'science' which analysed 'man' in a pre-enlightened state, and with an intent not to understand 'savage' cultures *per se*, but rather to allegorically explain the evolution of Western people. Thus, I pose for discussion, why the natural inclination to frame the article in terms of 'tradition' and 'science', and their convergence? Why does the article naturally coin the phrase 'contemporary physics'? Is there something un-contemporary about Māori culture?

Reference

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