
Indigenous Theory is Theory: *Whakapapa* for Archaeologists

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Drawn by their foundation in fundamentally 'otherwise' posthuman ethical and moral worlds, archaeologists have in recent years employed a number of indigenous theories to interpret archaeological materials. In this paper I consider the potential of New Zealand Maori whakapapa, loosely and reductively translatable as genealogy or ancestry, to become a strand of general theory in archaeology. The qualities of whakapapa which I feel have particular potential are its moral and ethical embeddedness and its insistence on multiple forms of relating. Importantly, whakapapa has an accessible indigenous voice. There is an extensive published literature, both Maori and non-Maori, academic and general, discussing, interpreting and applying Maori social theory, including whakapapa. In addition, whakapapa remains today fundamental to everyday and ceremonial Maori life. It is lived. Employing whakapapa as archaeological theory does not, then, depend on a having a specific authoritative interpreter. Here I have taken recent work by installation artist Maureen Lander as a forum to outline the key principles of whakapapa and to inform my discussion of whakapapa as archaeological theory.

Introduction

As Park *et al.* (2011, 8; Hountondji 2002) argue, it is high time we stopped reducing 'what might be construed as indigenous social theory to data, rather than recognising it as theory'. It is time to 'put indigenous knowledges to work' rather than just treating them with 'exquisite politeness' (Gillett 2009, 11; Park *et al.* 2011, 8). Indigenous voices speak to similar frustrations. The Te Hau Mihi Ata research project in New Zealand, for example, was set up 'to negotiate spaces for and develop processes of dialogue that allow for a deeper level of interaction between matauranga Maori (Maori indigenous knowledge) and science'. 'The genesis of the project was motivated by community concerns at the framing of matauranga Maori (indigenous knowledge) as only relevant in a traditional context'. In response, the project sought to 'unlock' the innovation potential of Maori knowledge, people and resources'

(Hudson *et al.* 2012, 11–12) by considering how it might inform new biotechnologies in unanticipated ways.

My aim in this paper is more modest. First I introduce the Maori theory of *whakapapa*; what it is, how it is understood; how it is employed by Maori and by non-Maori academics in New Zealand. My hope is this brief overview of current thinking around ideas of *whakapapa* as social and scientific theory may inspire a wider community to examine these ideas more closely and consider employing them in innovative ways. To conclude, I point briefly to how *whakapapa* might be 'unlocked' or 'put to work', as archaeological theory.

Whakapapa is loosely, and reductively, translatable as genealogy or ancestry, but includes connotations of layering, and to lay flat (Lander 2017; Ngata 2019; J. Roberts 2006; Salmond 2019). Like other indigenous theories recently favoured by archaeologists, *whakapapa* is 'inherently values based' (Hudson *et al.*

2012, 12). It constitutes a moral and ethical framework for living founded in what western theory would describe as a posthuman world—namely, a world which does not acknowledge any fundamental division between humans, other living forms and the material, spiritual and social environments in which all live (M. Roberts 2012; M. Roberts *et al.* 2004, 4). Whakapapa is both theory and practice; it is a way of thinking, being and acting. M. Roberts (2010, 1) describes it as a ‘mind-map’, ‘a genealogical framework upon which spiritual, spatial, temporal and biophysical information about a particular place is located’.

While *whakapapa* has much in common with western ideas of genealogy and evolutionary theory, there are fundamental differences (Gillett 2009; Salmond 2019). As Hudson *et al.* (2012, 13) argue with respect to scientific knowledge, critical ‘differences lie in the way knowledge is assembled and in the ways in which people, practices and places become connected and form knowledge spaces’. These differences are powerful, and the difficulties which arise when seeking to develop ‘a creative interface between different knowledge systems’ should not be underestimated. However, with time, positive engagement, acknowledgement and respect, a ‘negotiated space’ can be opened (Hudson *et al.* 2012, 14).

Indigenous voice

Archaeologists are increasingly employing indigenous theories to interpret archaeological materials. Among the attractions of indigenous theories is their foundation in fundamentally ‘otherwise’ post-human ethical and moral worlds (cf. Alberti *et al.* 2011). Unsurprisingly a common subject for interpretation is forms of ‘artwork’. Whether ancient, modern or contemporary, art is a forum through which people seek to explore and express something of the profundities of life and living—art takes the shape of a material enquiry into the world. Shamanism, for example, has been highly influential in the interpretation of southern African rock art (Dowson 1998; Tomášková 2013). More recently, perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 1998; 2004) and animism (Willerslev 2007) have attracted considerable interest.

Unfortunately, academic use of these indigenous theories is fundamentally dependent on an anthropological interpreter, commonly a single authoritative voice, to make them accessible to other academics, including archaeologists. Indigenous voices come to us in academic anthropological writing, rather than

speaking directly for themselves. Many archaeologists find this situation unsatisfactory and indigenous voices are increasingly heard directly in published archaeological writing (e.g. Nicholas 2010). In addition, archaeologists have actively sought insight in published indigenous writing, such as the work of Vine Deloria (2003).

Whakapapa is a social theory with a strong, accessible indigenous voice. A special issue of *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, focused on *whakapapa*, has highlighted the influential work of Maori scholars during the early twentieth-century development of anthropology in New Zealand (Lythberg & McCarthy 2019). As part of this work, the national Board of Maori Ethnological Research, Te Poari Whakapapa, established by Apirana Ngata, identified anthropology as a key vehicle for promoting Maori self-identified development (McCarthy & Tapsell 2019; Ngata 2019). Numerous Maori-authored publications have subsequently described and interpreted *whakapapa* for both Maori and non-Maori audiences (Hudson *et al.* 2007; Mahuika 2019; J. Roberts 2006; M. Roberts 2010; 2012; 2013). For those who wish to find it, Maori scholarship on *whakapapa* is accessible in published forums and need not be read through an anthropological interpreter.

Beyond academic writing, *whakapapa* remains fundamental to both everyday and ceremonial Maori life. Some contexts for the practice of *whakapapa* are socially restricted, such as formal or ceremonial events on *marae* where speeches based in *whakapapa* are delivered by authoritative cultural experts. But *whakapapa* also resides in museums, in cultural centres, and is lived everywhere, every day, even in the use of humble objects (Maihi & Lander 2008). It can be encountered and experienced by any visitor to New Zealand who chooses to take an interest.

What is *whakapapa*?

Western genealogies are presented as a formal ordering of persons arranged as a branching tree. There is presumed to be a ‘correct’ structure (cf. Ingold 2007; 2011). In contrast, *whakapapa* are dynamic and relational, ‘a cosmological system for reckoning degree of similarity and difference, determining appropriate behaviour, and manipulating existing and potential relationships to achieve desired effects’ (Henare 2007, 57). *Whakapapa* are not essentialist schemas that determine who a person is, or who is/is not a member of a specific group. *Whakapapa* do not fix identities; they frame possibilities. They set out differences and commonalities in a contingent, positioned frame rather than in categorical terms. A

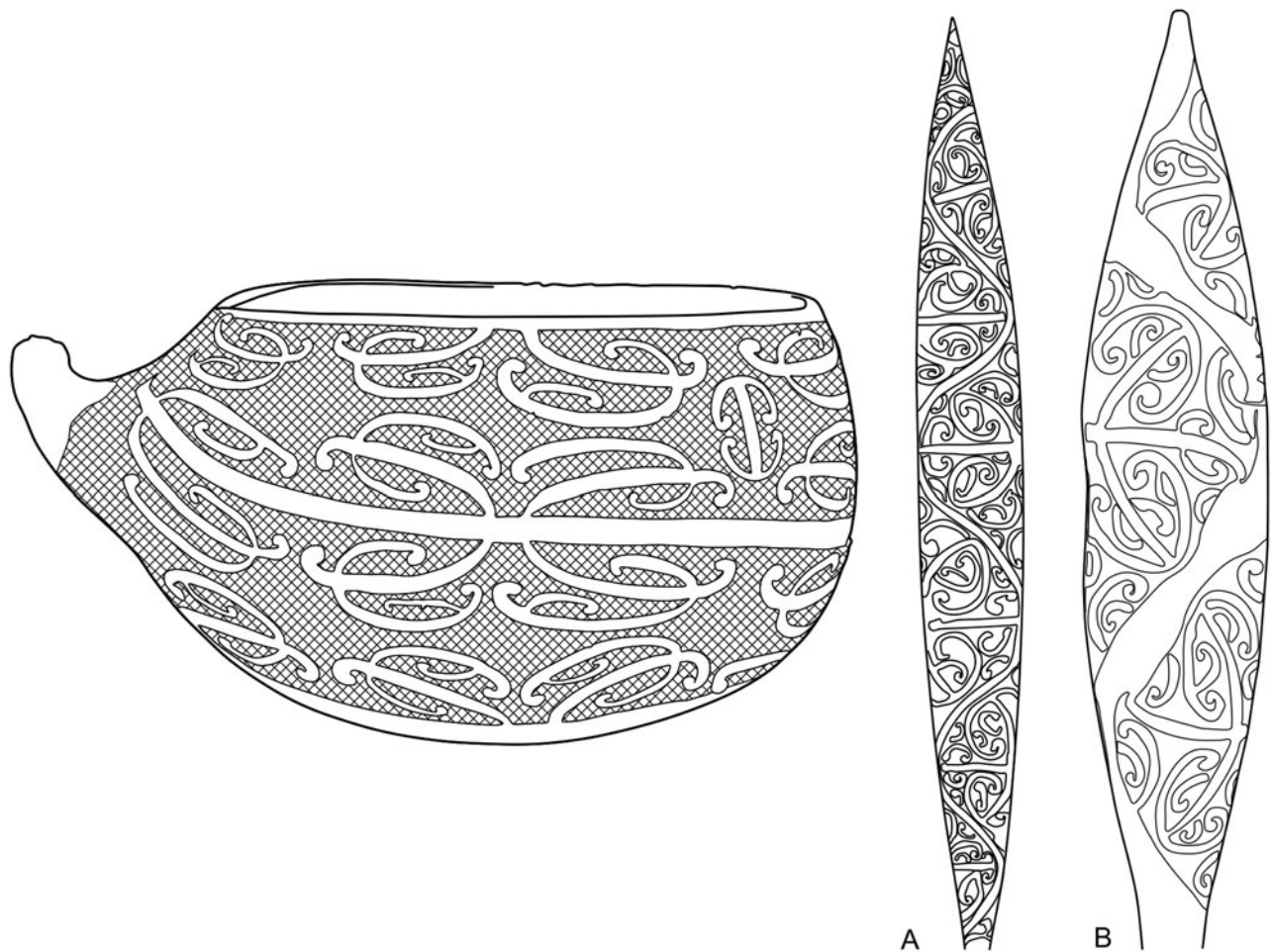


Figure 1. Kowhaiwhai designs based on the growing habit of the gourd plant or hue (left). Early nineteenth-century incised gourd container. The background fill of the design has been simplified to highlight the formline or manawa lines. Length 32 cm. (Collection of the British Museum. Starzecka et al. 2010, 42, no. 187.) (A) Early nineteenth-century painted canoe paddle or hoe. Complete length including handle (not shown) 202.5 cm. (Auckland Museum, 22068.3. Neich 1993, 68.) (B) Late eighteenth-century painted canoe paddle or hoe. Complete length including handle (not shown) 180 cm. (Cambridge University Museum, Cook collection; Neich 1993, 64.) (Drawings: Penny Copeland.)

whakapapa always speaks to the requirements and desired outcomes of the particular persons, context and situation in which it is presented—it is always contextual, situated and purposeful.

A key metaphor for *whakapapa* is the gourd plant or *hue*, *Cucurbita lagenaria vulgaris* (Neich 1993, 39), never a tree (Ngata 2019, 26). In contrast to the metaphor of a fixed, rigidly upright, branching tree, a gourd plant takes its shape and direction from the context or environment in which it grows. It is a vine which scrambles along the ground, up and over whatever it encounters. *Whakapapa* is situated knowledge (cf. Haraway 1991). A *whakapapa* speaks from a specific geographically, socially, even mythically embodied place. In addition, it speaks purposefully. Although its direction is open and contingent, it is

always responding to a stated problem, question or purpose. A *whakapapa* can never become generalized truth; it is always specific and explicitly purposeful and therefore also ethically and morally engaged.

Whakapapa is materialized in many, if not all, Maori art forms. Most spectacular of these is the decoration on and in a *whare whakairo*, a large decorated meeting-house which forms part of the *marae* complex where events are held to mark life-crisis celebrations and hold important meetings. Formal speeches based in *whakapapa* take place both inside and on the open ground directly in front of the house. The wood carvings, woven *tukutuku* boards and painted *kowhaiwhai* rafter designs which adorn the house all speak in *whakapapa*, each in their own way. *Kowhaiwhai* designs, for example, take the form of trailing

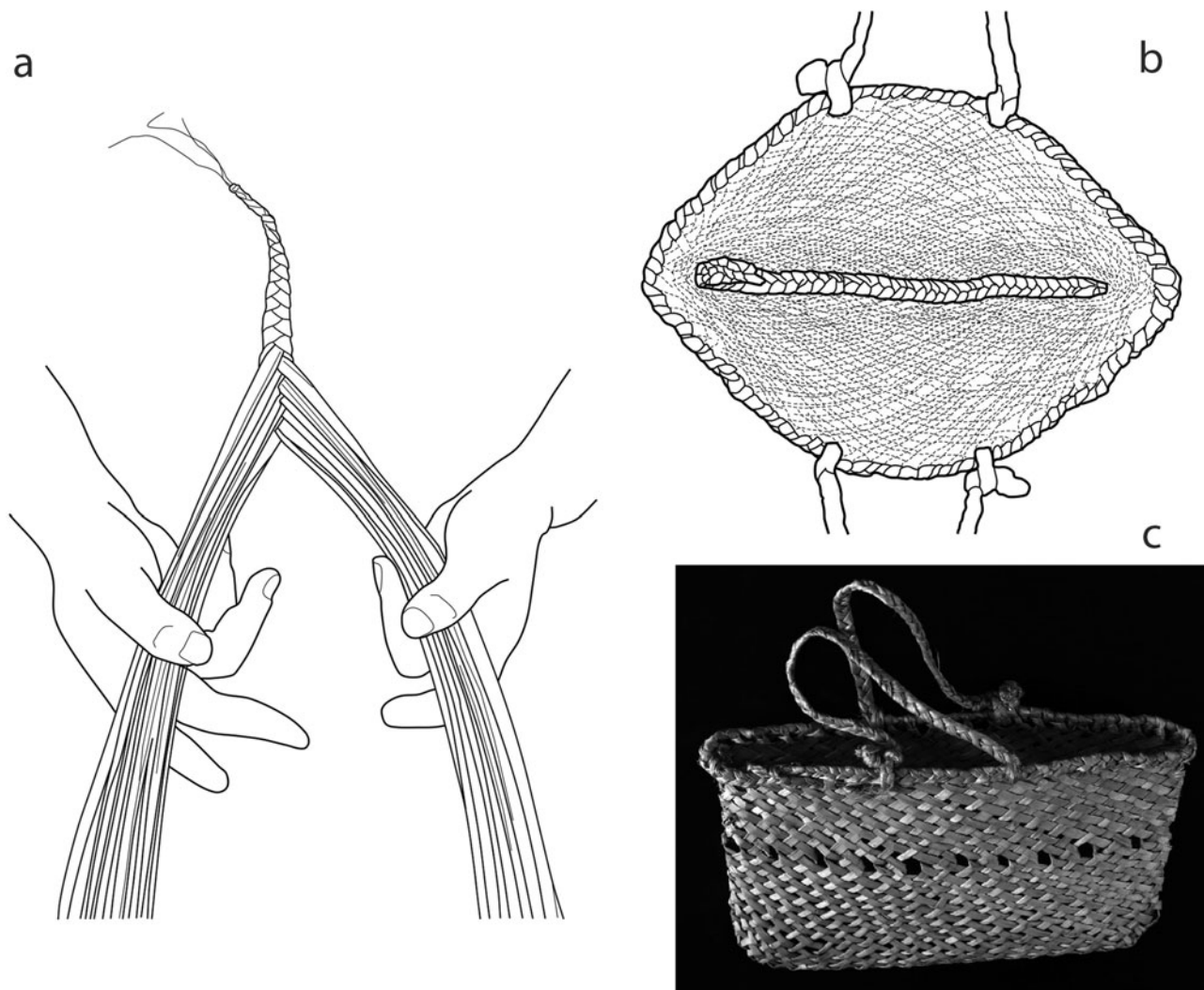


Figure 2. Weaving a flax kete. (a) Beginning a foundational braid or whiri from which the weaving of a kete will be grown. (Drawn from a 1921 Alexander Turnbull Library photograph PA1-q-257-42-5. Paama-Pengelly 2010, 43.) (b) The completed foundation braid runs along the inside, forming the base of a finished kete. (Drawing: Penny Copeland.) (c) In a completed kete the braid is hidden from outside view. (Photograph: Andrew Crosby, author's collection.)

gourd plants (Neich 1993; 2001), and were once common on canoe paddles and gourd containers (Fig. 1).

But *whakapapa* is also everyday practice. Take, for example, the woven flax basket, the *kete*, possibly the most ubiquitous and versatile item of all Maori material culture. Most people in New Zealand have one and most Maori have several. They are used for anything and everything; as planters, to carry laundry, a purse for formal social occasions and more metaphorically as 'baskets of knowledge' (Maihi & Lander 2008). They may even be employed to carry dreams (Maihi & Lander 2008, 70). Thus the social lives of *kete* are entwined with those who use them; 'every kete has a story' (Maihi & Lander 2008).

Construction of a *kete* follows a parallel path to the narration of a *whakapapa*. It begins with a foundation plait, as shown in Figure 2a, drawn from a 1921 photograph by James McDonald (Salmond & Lythberg 2019). The initial threads are fine and thin but build substance as additional strips of prepared flax, *harakeke* (*Phormium tenax*), are progressively worked in. The long, unplaited flax ends are then used to weave the body of the *kete*, in the process encasing the foundation braid inside the *kete* to form its base (Fig. 2b). When finished, the foundation braid lies hidden inside (Fig. 2c), unless the *kete* is opened out for use.

In her most recent installation, *Flat Pack Whakapapa*, multi-media artist Maureen Lander



Figure 3. Three components of Maureen Lander's installation *Flat-Pack Whakapapa*, as displayed in the Dowse Art Museum Exhibition Space, 2018. On the rear wall: *diy-DNA*, 2017, harakeke, muka. (Collection of the Dowse Art Museum, purchased 2017.) In the right foreground: *Flat-Pack Whakapapa*, 2017, harakeke, muka. (Collection of the artist.) Along the left side wall: *Kit-Set Whanaungatanga*, 2017, harakeke, Teri dyes. (Collection of the artist and her weaving collaborators.) (Photograph: Mark Tantrum.)

explores this connection between *kete*, *whakapapa* and weaving, linking it also to genetics (Lander 2017). Her work was displayed in the exhibition space at the Dowse Art Museum in 2017 and is currently touring other venues across New Zealand (Mata Aho Collective 2017; Dowse 2017; Lander 2017). The installation is composed of three parts; *diy-DNA*, *Flat-Pack Whakapapa* and *Kit-Set Whanaungatanga* (Fig. 3). Each part plays provocatively with the idea that because *whakapapa* is 'always with us' it can be 'packed down', 'carried around, reconfigured and added onto later'; 'whakapapa grows with us' (Dowse 2017).

In Figure 3, *diy-DNA* is positioned along the rear wall. It consists of huge DNA strands made from rolled flax leaves with braided *muka* [flax fibre] which visitors can walk amongst. It is a gentle provocation to question and challenge new biotechnologies such as Ancestry DNA websites and gene manipulation processes. It is also explorative; 'diy-DNA opens a space to consider why similar

narratives unfold within different cultures and religions, and how mythology, science and technology have all been used to try to understand where we come from, and what makes us who we are' (Dowse 2017).

On the wall to the right is *Flat-Pack Whakapapa*. It draws on two core meanings of *whakapapa*: to line up, as in genealogy, and to lie flat or place in layers. A continuous line of opened (flat-packed) *kete* extends vertically up the wall and down into a horizontal pile. Each *kete* is joined to its neighbours by the ends of its four finishing braids (see Figure 4). The four vertical *kete* are ancestors, who came before us but 'guide us into the future'; the top horizontal *kete* is the present, and our descendants follow into the pile beneath. Every *kete*, every person, is both unique in themselves and composed by connections to multiple others (Dowse 2017).

This theme of composition in others continues in the largest part of the installation located on the

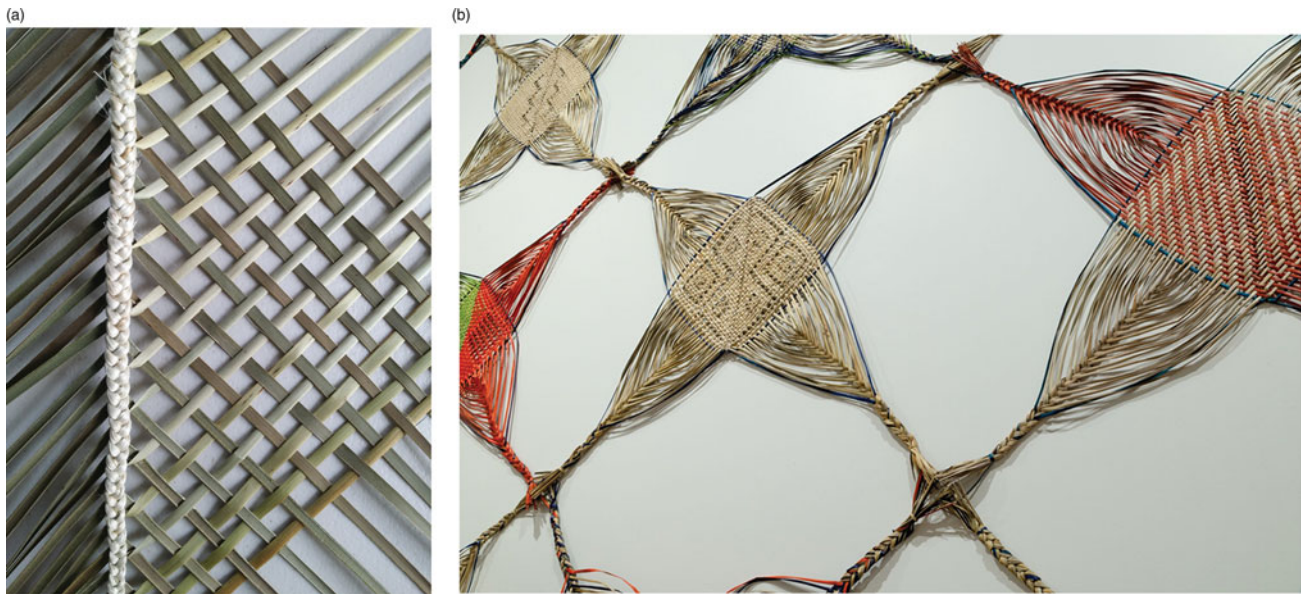


Figure 4. (Left) The foundation braid and initial weaving for a section of Flat-pack Whakapapa. Maureen Lander, Whiri Commencement (Whakapapa) for Flat-Pack Whakapapa (work in progress) 2017. (Photograph: courtesy of the artist.) (Right) Detail of several whakapapa sections of Kit-Set Whanaungatanga. Note how each section is grown from four foundation braids or whiri, which also join each section to its neighbours. (Photograph: Shaun Matthews.)

left wall, *Kit-Set Whanaungatanga*. It is a collaborative work by Maureen and a group of weavers called her A-team—her *awhina* team, meaning to help and befriend. *Kit-set Whanaungatanga* is about family (*whanau*) and our social networks of kin, friends, colleagues and others. As in *Flat-Pack Whakapapa*, each person is a *kete* woven from a single foundation braid (*whakapapa*) and completed with four finishing braids which reach out and join directly to four more, and on from them to all others (Figs 3 & 4). All members of the A-team wove several *kete*, ‘each with a predetermined set of criteria that included technique, size, colour and pattern. Even so, as in the narrating of whakapapa, every weaver had some freedom to express their skills, creativity and individuality’ (Dowse 2017).

Flat-Pack Whakapapa visually and conceptually sets out the fundamental principles of *whakapapa* while also asking us to question, challenge and critique claims which potentially erode its open, situated way of knowing—claims which run counter to its ethical and moral foundations. It is these characteristics of *whakapapa* which make it powerful in Maori lives, and potentially also as academic theory.

Applying *whakapapa* in New Zealand scholarship

For many years, Mere Roberts has championed *whakapapa* as scientific and social theory. It is largely

through her work that the application of *whakapapa* has moved beyond Maori scholarship and practice into scientific research (M. Roberts 2010; 2012; 2013; M. Roberts *et al.* 2004). Roberts trained as a biologist, initially in zoology, but her work is fundamentally interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and collaborative. She has held academic positions in biology, medicine, environmental science and anthropology, publishing widely across these fields. In its open engagement across the layered worlds of academic disciplinary practices, and across Maori and science-based ontologies, her career exemplifies *whakapapa* in practice.

Roberts’ *whakapapa* of natural and material worlds have been especially influential. Using the *whakapapa* of *kumara* or sweet potato, *Ipomea batatas*, as her starting-point, she draws out how ‘Maori knowledge concerning the origin and relationships of material things like the *kumara* is visualised as a series of co-ordinates arranged upon a collapsed time-space genealogical framework’ (M. Roberts 2012, 40). There are fascinating resonances here with the work of geographer Doreen Massey (2005). A key principle is ‘ascribing origins and the “coming into being” (or ontology) of each known thing’ (M. Roberts 2012, 41), a relational process which may draw in varying combinations of plants and animals, and ‘permits the inclusion of non-biological phenomena’ such as celestial bodies,

while also precluding any possibility of a nature/culture divide (M. Roberts 2012, 40–41).

Stepping off from Roberts work, *whakapapa* has been employed to evaluate emerging new biotechnologies such as GMO Generically Modified Organisms (Gillett 2009; Hudson *et al.* 2012; M. Roberts *et al.* 2004). The relational character of *whakapapa* makes it especially well-suited to studies which evaluate combinations of factors, for example the intertwining of genetic and environmental factors which underlie distinctive patterns of disease and ill-health in Maori communities (Hudson *et al.* 2007). Park *et al.* (2011) chose a *whakapapa* approach to examine the spread and impact of tuberculosis in Pacific populations. Tuberculosis is well known to have social as well as biological and environmental risk factors, and in their study Park *et al.* highlight among other influences the critical impact of immigration policies, calling into question the ethical and moral principles embodied in these policies.

Two features of this emerging body of work stand out. First, it is fundamentally located in debates concerning the moral and ethical contexts of research. Hudson *et al.* (2007, 45) speak in particular of ‘dual accountability’, the requirement both to be accountable to the interests of Maori kin and community and to enforce rigorous academic research practice. While often uncomfortable, these dual pressures do have the power to enrich and enhance standards of research practice (cf. O’Regan 2010; Rika-Heke 2010). Secondly, the majority of work engaging with *whakapapa* has been directed towards the development of culturally informed social policies, rather than seeking solutions to scientifically defined research questions. This is in part because reframing the moral and ethical context of research through *whakapapa* inevitability challenges the appropriateness and applicability of the questions being asked. In other words, it is not necessarily the case that Maori theory such as *whakapapa* cannot inform research solutions, but rather that we have been asking scientific questions of little relevance to Maori. A broadening of research objectives might draw in Maori scholars and enrich scholarly debate more generally.

Applying *whakapapa* in archaeology—an international reach?

The qualities of *whakapapa* which I have chosen to highlight are its moral and ethical embeddedness and its insistence on contextually informed, multiple forms of relating. These qualities have strong

resonances with other open-ended methodologies and posthumanist theories employed by archaeologists, particularly feminist writers such as Karen Barad, Elizabeth Grosz and Donna Haraway (see Alberti & Marshall 2009; Marshall 2000; 2008; Marshall & Alberti 2014). They also resonate closely with Joan Gero’s call to value, even highlight, the ambiguities inherent in all archaeological data (Gero 2007; 2015).

In recent work, I have employed *whakapapa* as archaeological method and theory for the analysis of Maori whalebone pendants—objects which are considered artworks (Lyons & Marshall 2014; Marshall 2020; Marshall & Alberti 2014). With the exception of one small fragment, none of these objects have secure archaeological provenance, so although they are exceptional in many ways, they are difficult to interpret and little has been written about them. My purpose was to use a *whakapapa* approach to open up our thinking about these objects to new possibilities. By drawing on a wider range of data, including the work of contemporary bone carver Brian Flintoff (2011), I sought to develop a broader understanding of their meaning and significance in Maori lives past and present. *Whakapapa* was a particularly appropriate analytical choice for these objects, because in themselves they embody *whakapapa*. Their design and narrative materializes both a specific telling of *whakapapa* and the principles on which *whakapapa* is founded.

My application of *whakapapa* stayed close to its Maori and New Zealand origins, and it follows the well-trodden path in archaeology of employing indigenous theory to explore art objects. However, *whakapapa* has the potential for greater reach, beyond New Zealand and beyond archaeological art objects.

Given the forums in which *whakapapa* has already entered academic debate in New Zealand, an obvious area of international research where it could make a contribution is the application of genetics in archaeological studies. This new and fast-moving field is symptomatic of two features of contemporary archaeological research: the extraordinarily large bodies of data which can now be produced, sometimes very simply and cheaply, and the extraordinarily rich array of interdisciplinary forms of data potentially available to address any archaeological question. Employing these vast, diverse databases effectively and appropriately presents stiff challenges. An object lesson in just how challenging this might prove is the development of radiocarbon dating. There has been a very long road through initial simplistic assumptions, confusions and

contradictions, repeated programmes of radiocarbon hygiene, to reach radiocarbon enlightenment and confidence. A similar path is envisaged for the application of contemporary and ancient DNA research in archaeology. Limitations in western evolutionary theories encourage simplistic, reductionist interpretations (see Ingold 2007; 2011; SAA 2019, for critiques). Lessons in building cross-cultural approaches to scientific practice, already being addressed in New Zealand as *whakapapa* becomes more widely employed, could inspire new modes of analysis and lead to more insightful outcomes.

For example, we might try weaving insights from Mere Roberts' *whakapapa* of *kumara*, sweet potato, with analysis of the genetics of modern Pacific sweet potato varieties and ancient DNA analyses of the small selection of archaeological specimens recovered in the Pacific. The aim would be a uniquely interdisciplinary, cross-cultural *whakapapa* of Pacific sweet potatoes. The foundation braid for such an analysis might focus on the homeland of sweet potato, South America. On the other hand, given the diversity of conventional and novel data available, a new form of foundation and weaving technique might be needed. When Toi Te Rito Maihi began weaving *kete* from seaweed in 1992, she quickly learnt that, due to the brittle nature of the drying seaweed, a conventional foundation braid and weaving technique could not work. A specific weaving technique tailored to each type of seaweed or kelp was in fact required (Maihi & Lander 2008, 72–4). To employ *whakapapa* as scientific and social theory will similarly require improvisation and innovation.

A case in point is how to interpret the past of Pacific people. Conventional archaeological accounts of Pacific prehistory have generally sought to distil out master narratives from multiple strands of evidence. For example, Kirch and Green (2001) employed a process they described as triangulation. Evidence from three disciplines, linguistics, ethnology and archaeology, was triangulated to identify points of convergence and produce a distilled essence for interpretation of past events. Many more forms of evidence have since become available. Especially prolific are data arising from genetic analyses of people, plants and animals. Fortunately, however, *whakapapa* works in the opposite way to triangulation. Rather than distilling down, *whakapapa* opens up the evidence base, drawing in and weaving together multiple strands of diverse data, while also seeking to maintain the disciplinary integrity of each strand. It is an approach well suited to our surprising new condition of overwhelming riches of data.

Conclusion

Whakapapa is well-established in New Zealand as both theory and practice. It is fundamental to Maori society, past and present, and it has emerged as a powerful forum for the development of social policy in a range of contexts. It is also increasingly employed to inform academic research across a variety of disciplines. My primary purpose in this paper has been to bring this work on *whakapapa* to the attention of an international audience. With this in mind, I have highlighted those features of *whakapapa* which have already demonstrated power to inform interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research, and to challenge our research cultures. Above all, *whakapapa* is purposeful, engaged research. It demands work where something is actually at stake for all participants and subjects. Such work produces both novel insights and morally and ethically enriching outcomes.

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