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Rethinking oral history and tradition: an indigenous perspective

by Nepia Mahuika, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, 304 p., $64 (hardcover), ISBN 9780190681685

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BOOK REVIEW

Rethinking oral history and tradition: an indigenous perspective, by Nepia Mahuika, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, 304 p., $64 (hardcover), ISBN 9780190681685

The trauma inflicted upon indigenous people by colonialism reaches into many realms. In some cases, the trauma reached the level of genocide and utter annihilation of the original inhabitants of some areas. At other times, the trauma also entailed the exoticization of native populations and the consignment of their ways of being and knowing to superstition and mythology. The aim of this book is to retrieve Ngati Porou's oral history tradition from entanglement in Western post-colonial narratives. Writing from a post-modern and critical tradition, the author attempts to reconstruct in text the purpose and meaning of oral history in his tribe's life in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The author is a professor of History at the University of Waikato. He is fascinated by the differences between Western and indigenous approaches to history and has pursued the decolonization of Maori oral history as his academic project.

The author's focus is deeply personal. One of his motives for embarking on an academic and historical career was his discovery of his own community's oral histories concerning Maui and Paikea, which were lumped together with fairy tales like Cinderella and Rumplestilskin in the bookstores and libraries of his youth (8). As a student of history, he learned how Maori history was appropriated by colonial authorities and relegated to the realm of myth, fantasy and folklore (10).

Mahuika questions the use of the term 'oral history' which is a Western academic term that in practice is a reduction of tradition into a recorded, transcribed interview. The practice of gathering that information was seen initially as 'democratic' reform of the discipline of history, but in practice duplicates colonial practices of reducing indigenous knowledge to superstition and mythology. For him, the correct term correlates to 'what is handed down', and is indivisible from the larger body of tradition from stories shared at funerals to what one learns from parents concerning subsistence. He argues that the holistic approach held by his community/tribe towards oral history is very different than the approach used by mainstream approaches (14).

Even the 'democratic' motives that brought oral history into the academic mainstream do not find traction within his community because politics within Ngati Porou is an aspirational exercise. There are restrictions on who gets to conduct oral history, what methods they use, the ethics they work under, and the political framework they function under. The book relies on interviews, documentary history, and experiential reflection. The interviewees included experts in tribal knowledge, including weavers and carvers. He focused on how the

individual placed him or herself in the collective memory of the community, including how they learned their stories and crafts. He also looked at proverbs and sayings and how they shape and frame the living tribal experience. Many of his participants were his relatives, so he had privileged and intimate relationships that gave him access to genealogy, the language, the songs, the crafts and the pedagogy of tribal art (38–40).

The author is fairly clear concerning his own, self-imposed limits of his work. While his work clearly fits within a greater stream that includes the likes of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, he seeks to change the approach to history in New Zealand. He particularly seeks to not only legitimate Maori approaches to history but also make people aware that they are on indigenous land and that Maori readings and perspectives should come first. Associated with this viewpoint is the idea that stories are to be told collectively, meaning that his community values the collective and communal over the individual (141–144, 234).

As a book designed for New Zealand as a critique of colonial appropriation of Maori oral history as well as an implicit policy prescription linked with how history is written and taught there, the book is of immense value, and can be read as both a primary source document in and of itself or as a critical history of Aotearoa/New Zealand. That said, there are some criticisms that can be made of the book, but these are by no means 'mainstream' or 'conventional'. First, the book can probably speak to a larger Pacific experience, to say the least, if not within a larger anti-colonial/anti-imperial literature against appropriation and marginalization. Given the close fit between the book and the critical approaches of the Frankfurt school, the problem of Western roots for the material emerges. If the historical epistemology of the Ngati Porou is something outside the realm of duplication, then its application in a book should not involve the use of a Western theory base. But perhaps this is an extraordinarily unfair press, given the complexity of Aotearoa/New Zealand, which unlike other English-speaking settler states did not choose the path of the utter genocide and annihilation of indigenous communities, but also pursued inter-mixture to some extent.

Second, the book does not address the complexity of contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand. There are very high rates of intermarriage between the Maori and European communities. There are nearly as many people of mixed Maori and European origin as there are people of solely or largely Maori origin. The book does not address how these populations are seen and what inclusion and exclusion dynamics are applied by/to them by other groups. Intermarriage has the potential to produce whole new cultures, with their own patterns of inclusion, exclusion and value systems. Mexico, Brazil and many of the states in the Americas are a testimony to the creative power of admixture. The book missed an opportunity to discuss the role of intermarriage in mediating inter-ethnic relations in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Third, there is no proposal in the book to safeguard academic freedom. While protecting against abuse and appropriation of indigenous cultures against colonialism is a laudable goal, there is also a universal hunger for knowledge that constitutes a legitimate human need. Would it be better if non-Maori had no

access whatsoever to information, however flawed, about the community? Some of these questions were also posed to Said. A Western world totally ignorant of the Middle East may have pursued an even more destructive set of policies there than one misinformed by orientalist scholarship and its gaze on the region. That said, these three questions reflect a hopeful reality as well – that a book exists outlining a Ngati Porou perspective to oral history is wonderful.

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