

# THE PERFORMANCE OF WHAIKŌRERO

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## Abstract

In most areas, whaikōrero in pōwhiri has survived the test of time sheltered by the confines of marae, but the performance aspect of this art form has changed significantly. The impacts of Christianity, the influence of European culture and the movement of pōwhiri from outdoors to indoors have created a more subdued speaker, free of weaponry and limited body movement. In recent years there has been a renaissance among particular groups to revive past ways of performance. According to Poia Rewi (2010), there has been an evident increase in the use of a variety of Māori weaponry during whaikōrero since the turn of the millennium. These efforts have met both praise and criticism from within the Māori community. I will explore how these aspects of whaikōrero enact ideas of belonging to people and place, weaving a thread between past and present generations.

## Keywords

whaikōrero, performance, belonging, marae, oratory, Māori

When I think about belonging, I think of people and place. I am a member of my whānau, hapū and iwi. I am the property of my tribal landmarks, our mountains, our waterways and marae. I belong to them as much as they belong to me. Whaikōrero in pōwhiri has survived the test of time in most areas of Aotearoa New

Zealand, sheltered by the confines of marae. However, the impacts of Christianity, the influence of European culture and the movement of pōwhiri from outdoors to indoors changed the performance aspect of this art form significantly. These developments led to speakers becoming more subdued, performing without

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weaponry and with limited body movement. In recent years there has been a renaissance among particular groups to revive and teach past ways of performance to younger speakers. According to Poia Rewi (2010), there has been an evident increase in the use of a variety of Māori weaponry during *whaikōrero* since the turn of the millennium. These efforts have met both praise and criticism from within the Māori community. Elders have expressed delight in seeing a style of performance they witnessed as children, while others have ridiculed the keen speakers, calling them “show ponies” and insisting the words are foremost, not the performance. Amongst practitioners, in fact, it is agreed that, if employed correctly, the use of weaponry and movement has the power to enhance the delivery of the speech. I will explore how these aspects of *whaikōrero* enact ideas of belonging to people and place, weaving a thread between past and present generations.

Hirini Moko Mead (2003) describes *tūrangawaewae* as a place for the feet to stand, a place where one’s rights are not challenged and where one feels secure and at home. In Mead’s words: “*Tūrangawaewae* represents one spot, one locality on planet earth where an individual can say, ‘I belong here. I can stand here without challenge. My ancestors stood here before me. My children will stand tall here’” (p. 43). According to a Māori worldview, *whakapapa* is the key to *tūrangawaewae*, the right to be associated with locality. Joseph Te Rito (2007) talks about how knowing who we are is deeply tied to knowing our place, where we belong:

As *tangata whenua* we are people of the land—who have grown out of the land, *Papatūānuku*, our Earth Mother. Having knowledge of *whakapapa* helps ground us to the earth. We have a sense of belonging here, a sense of purpose, a *raison d’être* which extends beyond the sense of merely existing on this planet. (p. 4)

*Tūrangawaewae* is directly linked to *marae*, and *marae* in turn is attached to *hapū* identity:

“This is my *marae*,” we say. The *marae* has been described as a refuge for Māori culture (Mead, 2003). In the precolonial days, it was at the heart of the community; our villages and homes were established around *marae*. In colonial times and now that we talk of the postcolonial, *marae* are even more important as the places to which we return to be together, to strengthen our *whānau*, *hapū* and *iwi* connections and sense of being at home in the world. Although Māori culture does not exist solely in this space, the *marae* is the central gathering point of the people, where cultural practices like the *pōwhiri*, like being Māori itself, are expected to be the rule rather than the exception.

A *pōwhiri* requires two parties—the *tangata whenua* and *manuwhiri*—to engage in a series of long-standing ritual components of encounter (see, e.g., Mead, 2003). *Whaikōrero* is an integral part of this process. Almost 30 years ago Cleve Barlow (1991) defined *whaikōrero* as the formal speechmaking performed by male elders on the *marae* at tribal social gatherings. This definition was useful at the time, but it has evolved greatly since in ways that are important for my paper now. Writing a decade later, Mead (2003) formally prescribed *whaikōrero* as number 12 of 20 complementary steps to be expected at a standard *pōwhiri* on the *marae*. While a number of the 20 elements delineated by Mead may be omitted depending on tribal variation, context and occasion, the *whaikōrero* will always remain. Robert Mahuta (1974), writing over 40 years ago, insisted that the absence of *whaikōrero* from *pōwhiri* would be seen as a lack of fulfilment of etiquette, rendering the ritual of *pōwhiri* incomplete and disrupting the gradual transition from *tapu* to *noa* in which human relationships are normalised so that *tangata whenua* and *manuwhiri* can mingle more freely and come together to proceed with the *hui*. Even a *mihi whakatau* can be seen as *pōwhiri* reduced to its most essential element, the *whaikōrero*.

*Manaakitanga* is another concept that sits alongside *tapu* and *noa*, which govern

the etiquette of pōwhiri and whaikōrero. Manaakitanga can be described as the process of showing respect, generosity and care for others. In pōwhiri it can be seen as the overriding principle governing the respect to be enacted between tangata whenua and manuwhiri. One of the underpinning principles of whaikōrero for the tangata whenua, regardless of the context, occasion or group, is to afford manuwhiri with absolute manaakitanga (Mead, 2003).

The whakapapa of whaikōrero is sometimes contested; however, a number of iwi agree it began during the time of the atua in the great debate amongst the children of Ranginui and Papatūānuku (Rewi, 2010). The children deliberated at length whether or not they should separate Rangi and Papa. A number of the children sympathised with their parents, while others supported the idea to separate them in order to create space and freedom in the world of light. The two opposing sides defended their argument, which went back and forth in an exchange of oratory that became whaikōrero as we know it today. This telling of the history implants a distinctively Māori ethic of exchange, of reciprocity, at the very heart of the practice both of whaikōrero and of pōwhiri.

The principles of whaikōrero—that is, tapu, noa and manaakitanga—remain considerably unaffected by outside influences. However, the performance of whaikōrero has changed significantly in the last century. Eric Schwimmer (1966) and others have written about the spirited performances of past orators:

Dramatic ability found plenty of expression in the elaborate posture and pantomime that was part of Māori dancing and oratory. . . . Similarly oratory had customary forms, beginning with the intoned welcome to the dead and the living and interrupted by suitable songs, which are called the “relish” of the speech. While the orator is delivering the more emotional parts of his speech, he walks or runs a short distance during each sentence,

sometimes concluding the period by a leap to give emphasis, and accompanying his words with graceful motions of arms and body. (p. 86)

These performance elements act as a paralanguage representing the movements seen in the birds of the forest, hence the terms given to a gifted orator: manu kōrero, manu hakahaka, kākā wahanui, kōkō tatakī. Some speakers were known for their brevity or the way they used their body or cocked their head. Others were known for their impulsiveness, their agility or their use of weaponry. It was not uncommon in the past to see orators wielding a traditional Māori weapon to enhance their performance and punctuate their remarks. Dame Anne Salmond (1975) describes a whaikōrero this way:

He strides towards the opposite party, chanting or calling out his greetings and gesticulating with a walking-stick, then abruptly spins upon his heel and walks back in thoughtful silence. He returns with the next few sentences, stressing each point with a stylized gesture, occasionally getting really carried away and making terrific faces. Tongue out and eyes rolling; but turning back as quietly as before. (p. 56)

More recently, Pou Temara has stated that an array of weaponry—both short clubs and long staffs—were used to enhance one’s whaikōrero (Brown, 2017). He reflected on his elders who, in 1957, all used weaponry during whaikōrero at the pōwhiri to welcome the prime minister to Ruatāhuna. Pakake Winiata (2014) explains that each weapon in whaikōrero has its own stylised movements, and each orator will favour a particular weapon and stance. Orators of excellence were known for their distinctive personal styles of delivery. One practitioner in particular, who was known throughout the country, was Te Pairi Tūterangi of Ruātoki. Te Pairi was given the nickname Te

Pairi Tarapekepeke (Te Pairi the leaper) by his relative and compeer, Mita Taupopoki of Te Arawa, which conveys his style of performance. Temara (n.d.) states that:

He was an eloquent and charismatic speaker and this was enhanced by the way he used the marae as his stage. An impressive figure, with white hair and flowing beard, wearing long greenstone ear pendants and gesturing with his toki (adze), he would strut, run with short steps and leap into the air to give emphasis to his words. Immediately on landing he would flick his outside foot behind him and continue in the opposite direction. (p. 1)

Te Pairi's skill with traditional weaponry was a result of his upbringing in the second part of the 19th century, when traditional Māori weaponry was still employed on the battlefield. Rewi (2010), who has written extensively on whaikōrero, has noted that the use of weaponry in whaikōrero originates on the battlefield, where their primary role is protection: "When a speaker steps out from his paepae he is in effect in 'no man's land' and the weapon stays in front of him at all times so that it is always between the speaker and the opposing side" (p. 97). Here I want to confirm this understanding of the traditional performance of whaikōrero before turning to the debate over contemporary practice, in particular the tendency to condemn physical displays as "not traditional".

Temera (2014) has said that while there are a number of people who know how to use weaponry to perform the wero or perform on stage within the boundaries of kapa haka, there are very few that have the ability or acquire the technique to make the weapon speak. As Temara says, "Whakakōrero i te rākau" ("Make the weapon speak"). In another context, Rewi (2010) has said that using a weapon in whaikōrero changes it from an intimidating thing to a means of letting words and ideas flow.

For an orator, the weapon may be more than the physical manifestation he wields in

his hands. The weapon has its own mauri that protects the orator, embellishes his delivery and in some cases aids him by providing words and information as certain movements may call up words and ideas. With the use of rākau, the body and face of the performer come alive and a spirited performance of whaikōrero is witnessed full of wana, as Ward (1872) observed nearly 150 years ago:

The speaker generally roused himself into a strong passion, as he walked backwards and forwards before the audience, brandishing his weapon of war, striking his sides, and assuming a countenance so agitated and fierce, that a stranger from England would tremble for the consequences. (p. 91)

The decision to use a weapon in oratory will be based on an orator's school of learning and tribal background. For example, I come from a hapū and marae where I have always witnessed my elders using rākau during whaikōrero. The use of weaponry is encouraged alongside the customs and beliefs around the use of weaponry. The choice of rākau will vary from speaker to speaker. Again, speaking for my own experience, I would not use a tewhatewha or a toki in oratory, as I lack confidence in knowing how to use either of those weapons correctly. My preferred choice would be a tokotoko or a tiripou, as I have been taught at my own school of learning how to correctly employ these rākau in a genuine manner to embellish the delivery of my whaikōrero.

Outside of my hapū and my school of learning, Te Panekiretanga o Te Reo—the Institute of Excellence in the Māori Language, I have heard remarks about the use of rākau amongst young practitioners. Winitana (2014) has also heard such remarks: "Some say there is nothing wrong with your legs; don't use a tokotoko." In response, he has asserted that if people don't push past these remarks and insist on practising the use of weaponry in whaikōrero, this tradition will be lost (Winitana, 2014). These remarks tie

into Barlow's (1991) definition of whaikōrero given earlier; traditionally whaikōrero was the domain of the elders, qualifying perhaps the use of a tokotoko. Nowadays, whaikōrero is the domain of the able and proficient, in the most part regardless of age; however, it must be understood that the purpose of the tokotoko in whaikōrero is not to assist the speaker in standing or walking but rather to enhance the delivery.

In Winitana's (2014) view there is no sole occasion that is appropriate for the use of rākau; it should in fact be used during whaikōrero outdoors whenever the orator sees fit. However, Rewi (2010) states that the orator's decision in regard to his weapon of choice is tied to the occasion and the status of the manuhiri.

It is important to note here that the true mark of the speaker then, as it is now, was his ability to use a whole range of oratorical devices to punctuate, to illustrate and to excite the audience. It was an aural, as well as a visual, experience. There was a theatrical component to whaikōrero that embellished what was being said; however, you could overlook the performance, as the words were always paramount. In recent times there has been a renaissance in this style of performance, but it is still rarely seen. It is also important to note here that there has also been a renaissance amongst some groups in terms of the role of each speaker and the content of whaikōrero that they will largely focus on when speaking.

The decline of this style of whaikōrero is due to a number of reasons. Since the mid-1800s Christian beliefs have influenced the beliefs of a large portion of the Māori population, which in turn has influenced whaikōrero. Rewi (2010) has made the observation that "strong Christian teachings influenced Māori oratory in the speaker's conscious selection of words, constructions, paradigms, genealogical inclusions and structures" (p. 81). It was as a matter of course, in the course of colonisation, that this past way of performing whaikōrero was also abandoned as speakers adapted Christian ideas

of propriety, conforming to the performance of sermon.

Another factor was the urban drift that occurred after World War II. In some cases entire Māori communities left their ancestral lands and communal way of life for the towns and cities, seeking better work opportunities. This disrupted the transmission of customary knowledge from one generation to the next. At the same time, it is my contention that elders who were learned in past forms of whaikōrero were reluctant to pass on that knowledge in the customary way of mentoring younger generations. In my experience the old people believed, for the most part, that the younger generations would benefit more in assimilating and conforming to a Pākehā way of life. As with the imposition of English language in schools and homes, the constraints placed on whaikōrero were symptomatic of colonisation and as such critical to the degradation of Māori culture and language.

Closer to home, on the marae, changes in whaikōrero performance were reinforced by moving the pōwhiri indoors. Pōwhiri were traditionally largely practised outside, on the marae ātea in front of the whareniui. A largely different form of whaikōrero exists within the four walls of the meetinghouse. The whare is the realm of Rongo, whereas the marae ātea is the realm of Tū. According to Māori belief, the whare is the embodiment of an ancestor. My own mentors used the phrase "ki te mau rākau koe i roto i te whare, kei te haehae koe i te puku o tō tupuna" ("if you use a weapon inside the house, you are lacerating the stomach of your ancestor"). It is deemed inappropriate to speak boisterously, to strut back and forth and leap into the air during whaikōrero inside the whareniui, and it would be most offensive to wield a weapon—all of which are appropriate during whaikōrero on the marae ātea.

Sir Tīmoti Kāretu mentioned that there were a number of speakers of te reo Māori in the mid-1990s but very few who were proficient in oratory (Personal communication, June 24,

2017). Oratory was a specific skill that was not acquired or, in fact, desired by everyone (Rewi, 2010). In 2004, Kāretu, along with Professor Wharehuia Milroy and Professor Pou Temara, established Te Panekiretanga o Te Reo, which offers a 12-month course for speakers who are already fluent in the language. The course, which is still running, is designed to train and develop participants' understanding of traditions and protocols, their grasp of the language and their ability to orate (for men) and call (for women). Men are taught traditional forms of *whaikōrero*, including how to employ a *tokotoko*, or other weapons, correctly when speaking.

Robert Pouwhare saw the establishment of such a school as necessary to maintain the high standard of *whaikōrero* demonstrated by the old people:

One of the problems today is that more and more *whaikōrero* has become homogenised and it all starts to sound the same with very little point of difference. In the old days, the old people were judged by their delivery of *whaikōrero*; oratory was an art of expression, a highly refined skill over time. There was great stress on being accurate, and there were consequences if one made a mishap in recital. (Personal communication, June 26, 2017)

Graduates of Te Panekiretanga o Te Reo, and other younger practitioners of *whaikōrero* who have been trained in this style of performance, have met both criticism and praise from within their own communities. I want to be careful in speculating about why the revival of this way of performing *whaikōrero* is condemned by certain people. For some, their opposition seems to reflect their immersion in Christianised proprieties, a kind of continuation of the colonial cringe. For others, who have fought very hard to build a new view of what is traditional in ritual performance as in Māori performing arts, this style looks like a theatricalisation—that is,

an imposition of European stage practice that distracts from the purity of the form. Others admire the efforts of younger generations to seek multiple ways of presenting *whaikōrero*, seeing in this an awakening of a ritual performance practice that is deeply centred in Māori ontology and Māori epistemology. Elders like Pouwhare welcome the revitalisation of this style of oratory because, from his perspective, this is what is traditional:

Having those different styles often reflected on the mana of the *manuhiri*, they wanted to make it look spectacular for the *manuhiri*, and if the *whaikōrero* was stunning and followed up with strong voices in either a *haka* or *waiata* afterward, then those people would know that the *mauri* of the *hapū* is strong, the display of these traditional methods of expression are totally intact. (Personal communication, June 26, 2017)

What is, in the end, of utmost importance is that performances of *whaikōrero* are nuanced and inflected with knowledge of history and tradition, in order to create and sustain feelings of identity between people and communities.

The reawakening of the more physical display of *whaikōrero* out of doors on the *marae ātea* enacts both resistance to colonisation and reclamation of Māori ways of knowing and being in the world—our belonging to our communities, our right to *tūrangawaewae*. The debate over the authenticity of one style versus another seems to fall into a colonial trap, in which we find ourselves defining what is true to our culture according to the rules of outsiders. That said, the debate shows us how important it is to keep this conversation ongoing. It represents a critical argument that we need to be having over what it means to act as Māori here and now. To look more closely at the performance of *whaikōrero* is to see how identity is bound up not only in the words spoken but in the paralogues employed.

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## Glossary

Aotearoa	Māori name for New Zealand; lit., “land of the long white cloud”	mauri	life essence
atua	god	mihi whakatau	short welcome
haka	posture, stance	noa	everyday
hapū	sub-tribe	paepae	speakers’ and callers’ bench
hui	gathering	Pākehā	New Zealander of European descent
iwi	tribe	Papatūānuku	earth mother
kākā wahanui	big mouthed parrot	pōwhiri	welcome ceremony
kapa haka	traditional performing arts	rākau	weapon, stick
kōkō tataki	witty parson bird	Ranginui	sky father
mana	authority	Rongo	god of peace
manaakitanga	hospitality	tangata whenua	hosts
manu hakahaka	dancing bird	tapu	sacred
manu kōrero	talking bird	te reo Māori	the Māori language
manuwhiri	visitors	tewhatewha	long wooden or bone weapon with a flat section at one end like an axe
Māori	Indigenous people of Aotearoa	tiripou	walking stick, staff, pole, crutch
marae	courtyard	toki	adze
marae ātea	open space in front of the meeting house	tokotoko	walking and speaking staff
		Tū	god of warfare
		tūrangawaewae	place of belonging
		waiata	song
		wana	excitement, thrill, exhilaration
		wero	ceremonial challenge
		whaikōrero	oratory
		whakapapa	genealogy
		whānau	family
		whare	house
		whareniui	meeting house

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