MĀORI ART RESTRUCTURED, RE-ORGANISED, RE-EXAMINED AND RECLAIMED

Professor Hirini Moko Mead
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Introduction
This conference is timely as it brings us together at a time when I believe we need to examine what is happening in the field of Māori art. A great deal was achieved in the 1980s with the success of Te Māori and many doors were opened. Then came a period of rapid change. A decade later where are we?

Twelve years have slipped by since Te Māori first carried our cultural banners to New York and other cities of the United States of America. The decade of the eighties was an exciting phase of rediscovering our artistic heritage, reviving cultural forms and ceremonies, of strengthening ourselves culturally, raising our self-esteem and reconnecting with our cultural roots. We are now well into the decade of the nineties and it is time to assess and review. My contribution today is to identify the issues and ask questions about them. I offer some solutions on one or two of the issues but generally my aim is to bring these matters out in the open.

General Background Issues

Restructuring and Reorganising
Māori art has been caught up in the current culture of restructuring, downsizing and underfunding that have been supported by Government because, supposedly, it all leads to more efficient use of public funding, more accountability, more transparency and a better deal for the clients. The familiar MASPAC and the Māori & Pacific Arts Council have gone and Te Waka Toi as we understood it, is quite different from what it used to be. There is a new structure in place now with Creative New Zealand at the top. Under its umbrella is Te Waka Toi - an art board which handles funding policies and allocations of funds to Māori deliverers and producers of Māori art. Outside of the structure is Toi Māori Aotearoa - Māori Arts New Zealand. Some of our people mourn the passing of the old, while others applaud the new net which has yet to prove its catching powers.

New Questions for New Managers
Restructuring however, has brought with it a question of the whole field of Māori art, especially in regard to how funding is to be accessed, who is to receive funding, what applicants are required to do in order to qualify for available funds, and how to account for the money spent. Inevitably, the people charged with managing the process begin to ask many other questions, often of a type that require wide discussions among iwi, or very close examination at conferences of this nature.

Managers want to know what qualifies as Māori art, who qualifies as Māori artists, whether non-Māori artists should be funded to produce Māori art, which projects should be funded and which ones should be set aside. In effect, the new regime solves some issues that were seen before as problems, but it also introduces new problems for us. I will discuss some of them.

Where are we? Inside or Outside?
Those of us who happen to be Māori have other sorts of questions to ask but many of our questions are confusing because Māori society today is complex, often divided, very competitive when considering assets of any type and fragmented in the sense that many are no longer in their home base nor very committed to their iwi or hapū. Many individuals exhibit signs of colonisation in their behaviour and attitudes, so some of us end up inside Māori culture looking out, while others of us are outside looking in. That is a part of the burden we carry.

Some of our people are very committed to their iwi, participate extensively in tribal activities, and are confident and strong as Māori. Others are the very opposite but nonetheless identify as Māori, support Māori causes and go to battle in the conference rooms of Government, or in the offices and factory floors of industry.
Some operate as concerned pan-Māori individuals and are to be seen frequently coming out of the Beehive or out of the offices of multi-national corporations. Some are mandated by their iwi to represent them at meetings with the Crown and its various agencies. Others are at the universities from which places they are supposed to act as the conscience of the people, hopefully our people. A few are the darlings of the far right and of anti-Māori groups spread across this nation. I will not dwell further on our diversity of experiences.

Increase in Anti-Māori Sentiment and the Backlash

We have come through a period of rapid change, of protests at Waitangi and at the Moutoa Gardens, of debates on the Fiscal Envelope, the Sealords Deal, mandates, deeds and settlements and we have had to adapt to these changes. In the process we have noted an increase in anti-Māori sentiment, a toughening of attitudes against us in the press and in the media generally and a lack of enthusiasm in Government to promote Māori initiatives, except perhaps in the arena of Treaty settlements. Some Government people want to open up Māori society to their scrutiny and criticism, and make us more accountable to them. The media wants to dissect us, criticise us, highlight the negative things about us and use right wing commentators to show how primitive and evil are our ways. Through their “Letters to the Editor” section there is an endless repetition of prejudice, myth and mis-information. There are politicians who want to reshape us into individuals just like them. In short, there has been a decade of backlash against us.

Māori Artists appear to ignore Government Policy.

Throughout this period of rapid change, the impression I have is that our artists have continued to create, to produce, to hold exhibitions, to direct some of the changes that are occurring to revive such arts as moko and rāranga, to mount huge competitive events such as The Aotearoa Performing Arts Festival, to hold workshops on a variety of topics, to participate in new developments such as the new National Museum, and so on. The creative impulse of the culture remains strong. It appears to me that our artists were not deterred by changes in Government policies, and that such policies seemed to be irrelevant to their work. Or is it that artists have become astute in accessing funds from other sources, are adaptable survivors and are, in fact, in front of the fund seeking pack? Or, have they switched to doing Western art because that is where most of the Government funding goes? Is there a bit of each in the answer or none; and is something else driving our people? If so, what?

Te Toi Māori Aotearoa: A New Institution.

A direct result of restructuring the old Queen Elizabeth Arts Council is that we now have Te Toi Māori Aotearoa. Te Toi Māori is mandated by its Māori art committees to act in the best interests of the whole field of Māori art, and its main purpose is to maintain, develop and promote Māori art as an essential element of Māori culture and the culture of Aotearoa. Among the objects listed in the Trust Deed are intentions to preserve Māori art, to implement Māori projects, to gain wider support for Māori art, to develop policy advice and to encourage more Māori participation in the arts. It has a concern for the integrity of Māori art, that is to maintaining its basic wairua, or its essential Māori quality.

In putting ourselves outside the structures of Government, we have also made it far more difficult to obtain funding on the scale necessary to carry out the objects of the organisation. In respect of funding, Te Toi Māori has lost most of the advantages it had when it was part of MASPAC. That the organisation is funded to administer to its art committees and maintain a drastically reduced management is small comfort. All other funding is contestable. However, what we have done is to position ourselves to reclaim control over our arts - with or without funding.

Government Funding Policy.

The more contestable funding becomes the less is made available for distribution. It becomes necessary to define clearly the activity to be funded and the clients to be served. This is not done out of aroha and concern for the Māori people, rather it is because the funds need to be targeted to a restricted client base. There is a Treaty obligation to protect and actively promote the “taonga” of the Māori people, so funding is made available but under the rules of the present Government, a fiscal cap is placed on what is available and is always less than may be required. For example, nation-wide application in the last round amounted to $10,481,114 but only $2,503,273 was available for distribution. A portion of the available amount would then have been earmarked for Māori. In other words the contestability factor is deliberately magnified so that there are more losers than winners. Now how can
legitimate Māori needs be met with this kind of funding policy? How can the Treaty obligations of the State be adequately met?

Issues of Inclusion and Exclusion: Definitions

In this section I discuss issues of definition and join the debate that was publicised in the Sunday Star Times, 17 March 1996. Ralph Hotere, Selwyn Muru and Elizabeth Ellis were all quoted in the newspaper article in respect of how Māori art was to be defined or who was to be funded to do Māori art or more generally about standards.

What is Māori art?

Contestability is supposed to bring with it a high degree of transparency. Thus, it is necessary to define Māori art so everybody knows what it is. Before this everyone seemed to know what it was. Also in preparations and negotiations for Te Māori, easily the biggest event in the history of Māori art, there were no big discussions about how to define our art.

As already stated, Māori art is an essential element of Māori culture and it is a part of the heritage of the Māori people that was handed to them from generations of ancestors. Māori art brings together all those forms of artistic expression that follow the styles, traditions, and values of Māori culture.

These forms are recognisable as Māori and are usually produced by Māori for Māori needs. Waka and carved meeting houses are good examples. The arts are often produced primarily for Māori enjoyment as in the case of the performing arts; or might be used to emphasise identity as Māori, for example moko and the wearing of Māori costume and ornaments.

Art objects are also made for trade and exchange and today there is a flourishing trade in Māori taonga that are very old. This can be witnessed at various auctions that are held from time to time. In this circuit however, we play no part except as observers or as clients if we can afford the prices. There is a different circuit for commercial activities with respect to the performing arts, and to objects made for sale to tourists.

It is the increase and diversity in commercial activities that is clouding definitions of Māori art today. Māori and non-Māori artists are now joining enthusiastically into these commercial activities. Māori artists often feel at a disadvantage to Pākehā artists who appear to have ready access into the art and tourists markets. That is an issue by itself, but another question is whether we should allow them to interfere with the basic nature of Māori art, or with its definition.

Towards a Definition of Māori Art

It would be helpful to list some critical elements that should be included in a definition of Māori art so that we do not finish up with a definition that is more like a slogan. I offer the following:

• Māori art is an essential part of Māori culture and derives its meanings, values and traditions from that source.
• It provides creative opportunities for Māori to enhance their lives and enrich their living environment according to the styles, traditions and canons of taste handed down to the artists of today by generations of Māori artists before them.
• There is a continuity and constancy in Māori art which stems from the culture and which give to all art forms a distinctive Māori aspect, or feel, or wairua.
• Māori art is closely associated with identification by Māori as Māori, with feelings of self worth and with notions of status in the community.
• The primary purpose of Māori art is to give expression to the creative genius of Māori artists to satisfy Māori social, political, cultural and economic needs.
• Māori art is a social art that is created within a cultural and social environment, such that artists are in touch with their tribal roots and with their people.
• Changes in Māori art are brought about by Māori artists who employ new technologies, introduce new images, and recombine elements of Māori art in new and exciting ways that are accepted by the Māori public.
• The “owners” of the cultural and intellectual property that constitute the whole field of Māori art are undoubtedly the Māori people.

When is Māori art not Māori art?

One of the problems we face is caused by the nature of our society today and the degree that some of our people are assimilated into the majority culture. There is a factor of crossing cultural domains with each side wanting to poach from the other. There are Māori artists who have no grounding in their own culture and no training in Māori art now wanting to do art which they want to call Māori art? Then there are well educated Māori trained in Western art traditions entering the field of Māori art and shaking the very foundations of our art. Another category are well trained Pākehā artists entering the field and producing
Māori art forms. Do they produce Māori art? And what about works that are a mixture of Western and Māori traditions, and paintings that have just a little bit of Māori art but are painted by a Māori artist? All of this is a consequence of our Fourth World Status, as a minority in our own land with no real control over our affairs and our future.

Ordinarily, we accept these facts as happening and as part of the reality of our lives. Not so today. Everyone is being observed and judged by others.

In making judgements about these cases one can either be very cautious and compare a case against the critical list outlined above, or one can simplify the definition as Te Waka Toi is endeavouring to do. The first option has the benefit of being systematic and of having criteria in place which members of Te Waka Toi or anyone else can use to make decisions. It is a time consuming process, however. Another way is to narrow down the field of applicants by applying a pragmatic definition. Māori art might then be defined as art that looks Māori, feels Māori, is done by Māori following the styles, canons of taste and values of Māori Culture.

A Māori artist might be defined as a person who identifies as Māori, is Māori by whakapapa and has some proven ability in Māori art. A Māori new to the field of art is Māori but not yet a Māori artist.

**The Tension Between Traditional and Modern.**

There are some of our modern artists who feel that they should have priority in funding and that they should be elevated to the top of the mountain. They see themselves as exploring the frontiers of change, as agents of change who will take Māori art where no traditional artist will dare to take it, and as the forward looking people, the developers, the thinkers, the worthy ones.

On the other hand the traditional artists are seen as people locked into the past, who follow the traditions and can do traditional activities such as karanga, whaihō, karanga, whaikōrero, speak Māori, go to tangi, and so on. They are seen to be backward looking, non-thinking, non-innovative people who should not get any funding.

In my view, the whole debate is a farce, a side issue, a fudging of the real issues and an attempt by the less noble ones amongst us to sideline the traditional artists. It is nothing more than a display of crab-antics, a turning upon ourselves.

If we think for a moment about the integrity of Māori art, its wairua, ihi, wehi and wana and if we pause to think about the distinctiveness of our art, then it follows that it is necessary always to go back to traditional arts, to the traditions, to the very foundations of our culture, to the meaningful symbols, to the prime works of art created by our ancestors. In my view the traditional artists must be given our full support now and in the future. There should be no argument about this.

Modern artists come from a different base, often not from a particularly strong cultural background. They are often thoroughly enculturated into the traditions of Western art and philosophy, and have to learn how to be Māori. They are often talented, dedicated, believe strongly in democracy and individualism, and come to the Māori world with all the enthusiasm of an evangelist, fully prepared to reform us. Inevitably they find we do not want to be reformed just yet. Some of the ideas they bring are sometimes embraced by other Māori artists, but they find that acceptance comes slowly.

All of our artists (traditional and modern) are necessary to our culture, to our future development, to the continuing quest to define a new place for us in this restructured country of ours, and to modify or reinvent our cultural symbols so they continue to be of great significance to us. All of them are charged with the duty of balancing innovation while maintaining the integrity of our art so that it will always look and feel like Māori art, and to ensure that it will always be a part of us, the people.

**Bicultural Issues: Māori and Pākehā**

In this segment of the paper I will discuss some issues that stem from the needs and viewpoints of Māori and Pākehā and highlight some of the difficulties we are experiencing. This is the arena of conflicting ideologies, of talking past the other, of accusations and counter accusations.

**The Concept of Cultural Poaching.**

The fact that others who are not Māori choose to participate in Māori art does not in any way convince me to change our definition. Some non-Māori artists immerse themselves thoroughly in Māori life and become assimilated Māori. They are not a problem. Others take up only part of the total package and characteristically focus on commercial activity. They sometimes create for the benefit of a Māori community.

There are others who poach ideas and images quite blatantly and use them for commercial purposes, such as on articles for the tourist market. Many Government Departments, Ministries and Companies use Māori
images in their logos because they seek something that is distinctively New Zealand, and such distinctiveness and uniqueness is found in Māori art.

The koru on the tail of Air New Zealand planes is a very good example of the appropriation of a Māori art image in commercial activities. One ameliorating factor here is that Air New Zealand is our national carrier and that we, too, identify with it. I am proud to see the koru image on our planes, however I could have a different view if this airline ever passed completely into foreign ownership.

The Issue of Sharing our Cultural and Intellectual Property.

While we are able to say that Māori art is one of the great art traditions of the world, and that it is an essential part of the culture of this nation, a problem remains. Does this mean for example that anybody can choose to enter any part of the field of Māori art and use what they take out any way their fancy takes them.

Most of us would instinctively reject that notion as being oppressive and high-handed. It signals that our whole culture is open to the citizens of New Zealand and that we have no right to protect ourselves. Obviously, there are advantages to non-Māori in such openness, but it makes our culture vulnerable and we will lose control over it.

Today, the commercial world is careful to protect its intellectual property and there are regulations governing their protection written into law. So it is entirely fair that we should protect our cultural and intellectual property and build fences around vulnerable parts of our culture. This turns out to be everywhere including the minutest parts of us such as our genes.

In fact, Māori art is protected under Article Two of the Treaty of Waitangi but there is no mechanism for putting it in practice.

Serving Two Publics

The position here is that Māori art serves two publics, Māori and Pākehā. I have emphasised the Māori side and our cultural needs. These needs cover a wide spectrum - social, symbolic, economic, psychological and political. It is obvious that I believe our needs are paramount and more fundamental. Māori art has a different meaning and significance for us.

The other public is the rest of the population of Aotearoa and it is also a very complex and divided group of people with their own particular needs. However, that public includes the Government and its agencies, the decision makers of industry, the directors of multi-national corporations, the media, the judges and lawyers who influence opinion, and a vast army of politicians who are not particularly committed to advocating our causes.

This public appropriates Māori art to satisfy the needs of individuals within it. These individuals are not necessarily committed to Māori art and culture and are characteristically highly selective in what they take. Nonetheless, some of them are apt to say that they identify with Māori art and are proud of it. They may also claim Māori art as being their art too. Some of them will feel deeply hurt to be excluded by our definitions.

But this is the power group that controls our lives, sets policies that we have to live by, decide how much funding we receive, and how we spend it. They build fences around the money, limit access to it, and give it out very sparingly, if at all.

The problem is the relationship, the constitutional and societal relationship. It is a problem of reconciling Article Two rights and Article Three obligations of the State. Immediately one asks whether the restructured Creative New Zealand properly reflects the relationship. Is the way in which funds are being made available to us fair and proper? Are we being short changed?

Overseas Experience

Often the problems we face become more understandable when we know that other Indigenous groups around the world are experiencing similar difficulties. It is useful to compare solutions, to share the pain with others, and nod to each other by way of understanding the similar difficulties.

Comments from American Indian Artists.

The issues we are discussing today are not peculiar to us alone. Other Indigenous groups in a similar Fourth world status to us are having to face the same concerns. For example, a friend sent me an article written by an American Indian artist named Candelora Versace which is entitled “What is real Indian Art? Does it matter?”. This author discusses the debate raging among Indian artists about the issues of appropriation (I call it poaching), obligation, and authentication. They face a similar set of problems, such as defining Indian art, distinguishing real from imitation art, Indians demanding to be recognised as Indian artists and protecting their art and their images from non-
Indians (a policy of cultural segregation, they call it). Issues of cultural and intellectual property rights are also being discussed by them.

**A Pragmatic Definition**

An Indian artist, Dorothy Granbois - A Turtle Mountain Chippewa, defined real Indian art this way: Real Indian art is made by Indian artists exclusively. It's an act of tribal and personal identity, an act of who we are culturally. She is emphasising the need for the artists to be in touch with their people and to know their culture. It is a rejection of the alienated artist who works as a culturally unconnected individual usually miles away from their tribal base, and it is a reiteration of the social functions of art. One cannot fail to note that the definition builds fences around Indian art and attempts to block out non-Indian artists. Because of these factors the definition will be unfairly labelled as racist by those who are automatically excluded by it. Most Indigenous groups in a Fourth World situation will face this criticism. The policies of Te Waka Toi are already being labelled as racist here (Stewart, 1996).

**The Economic Factor**

The issues we are confronting are driven in part by the struggle to make a living in an increasingly competitive world. The question of who should benefit from the art of the ancestors is being asked in the United States and here. It is a natural consequence of market philosophy, of underfunding policies, of the notion of contestability and of reducing budgets for Indigenous Peoples in both countries. The question of cultural obligation arises for us while non-Indians and non-Māori will argue for the benefits of competition, choice and excellence and the non-relevance of our culture. After all, are we not all Americans or New Zealanders. There is an economic imperative behind the assertion. Economic considerations are important in our own case and influence the thinking of many of our artists.

Indian artists are deeply divided on the issue raised today and while some are strongly protective of their art and culture, others adopt an open attitude and rationalised the position by saying that there is room for all in the market place. On our part we could be equally divided. Discussions in this conference will give an indication of the degree of division if any exists.

**Reclaiming the Heritage**

I have already indicated that our artists are engaged in the arts and this is a good sign. However, taking control of it is a different matter and some of our people might not want to be seen to be involved in efforts to reclaim our heritage, yet that is the direction in which we are heading. It is the quest for tino rangatiratanga, for self management and self determination.

**The Role of the Artists and the People.**

Our great hope lies in the inventiveness of our people, in the creative energies of our artists, in the commitment of whānau, hapū and iwi, and our friends both in Aotearoa and overseas to the uniqueness and distinctive character of Māori art. In the area of the performing arts for example, there is a total commitment to the activity. The Festival at Rotorua this year bears witness to that fact.

There are more men and women wearing moko than ever before and some artists are tattooing them. Thus, everywhere there is evidence of activity, of creations and productions, of exhibitions and festivals. I have no idea how all of these activities are being funded, the important thing is that the art is alive and that we are alive. The art that we have inherited is a magnificent heritage and no matter what others do we have to protect our interests in this gift from the ancestors. The best way to protect it is to practice it.

**The Role of Critics, Observers and Commentators.**

There is a role for the critics, the academics, the reviewers and the armchair commentators. Some of us are also artists and it is possible to be both, but not all artists are thinkers, and not all critics know their art very well. It is important however, that critics do what they are best at, which is to ask the right question, to review what is happening, to listen to what artists are saying, to hear the voice of the people and to criticise any move by anyone to threaten the very essence and distinctiveness of our art. Through analysis the critics might be able to identify trends that we need to be aware of, practices that are not good and directions that are heading the wrong way. In this sense the critics play a self-monitoring role. We have reached a critical point when questions do need to be asked not only of Government, but also of ourselves.
Conclusion

A review of the issues facing us can dampen the spirit. We looked at issues arising from the restructuring of Government Departments and Agencies and saw how these have impinged on Māori art. I drew attention to the state of our own people and to the wide experiences we have had, some positive in a Māori sense, some not. I provided a framework for defining Māori art to show the interaction between the arts and ourselves as Māori. I emphasised the importance of all our artists, whether they be classified as traditional or modern, working for the common good of the art and of our people. However, artists need to be the main exponents and protectors of the wairua of our art. They enhance it and ensure the essential Māori aspect is never lost. Maintaining the integrity of Māori art is a charge upon the artists as well as upon all of us, the people.

Clearly there are responsibilities of accountability to the heritage handed down to us. We have to do what we can with or without Government funding to protect and develop that precious heritage. When we exert our rights over this heritage we will be offending some of the public, but we have entered the era of cultural and intellectual property rights and must protect them for if we don’t, others will appropriate and poach them from us. Inevitably we will become involved in debates about exclusion, separate development and racism.

However, we do need to work out a Treaty relationship with the other public that associates with, and relates to, Māori art. In the language of the day we need to negotiate a deed of settlement with our Treaty partner and when we do, we must ensure that the other party has a proper mandate to enter negotiations. Te Toi Māori Aotearoa is on the agenda for negotiations since it is dedicated to funding projects on the ground and protecting the essence of Māori art.

The well-known Hawaiian artist, Herb Kawainui Kane, emphasised that the most important thing before them, and I suspect for all of us, is to practice our art and to revive those that have been dormant. The artists must practice their arts and reach for excellence in their chosen fields of endeavour. Government agencies may distribute the funds to inappropriate people, they may in effect trivialise our art or even stop the flow of funding, but we must do what we have to do and hope to ensure that the artists are practising and producing art of a high standard. Artists around the country are already doing this and I applaud them for their commitment, energy and creative drive.

Māori art is an essential part of our definition of ourselves as Māori. While we might pay homage to the latest fashions coming out of the United States and Europe and even Australia, for important ceremonial occasions we want to look Māori. At such critical times we turn to our art traditions and styles and we feel proud to be Māori. How can we then allow other people to meddle in the future of our symbolic system? In a real sense we own Māori art for we inherited it by right of birth. It is our cultural and intellectual property. Māori art is us; and if it is alive and well, so are we.

References


