

Tupuna Awa and Sustainable Resource Knowledge Systems of the Waikato River

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Abstract: The contested nature of rivers derives from the diverse range of interests that people have in them. Needless to say, people who have the same type of interests in the Waikato River generally perceive and describe the river in a similar way. This paper conveys how Māori understand the Waikato River to be a “tupuna awa” and how people associated with commerce understand the river to be a “sustainable resource”. The varied understandings of the river can be conceptualised as “epistemologies”. This presentation employs ideas presented by Anne Salmond in her seminal paper *Theoretical Landscapes* (1982). The discussion identifies some of the tensions that arise when Māori and commercial epistemologies of the Waikato River converge. This paper illustrates that the tupuna awa epistemology is comprehensive and dynamic. Embedded within tupuna awa is a wealth of Māori knowledge. Indeed the tupuna awa epistemology competently deals with the metaphysical aspects of the river and has procedures that address its recent commodification.

Keywords: Māori epistemology, river

Economically significant rivers are not only places of harmonious interaction and unification they are also sites where encounters of power, struggle and resistance occur. This contradiction is true of the Waikato River. With the ability to transcend territories and private spaces the Waikato A river forces people to relate to one another culturally, economically, legally, socially, and politically. The contested nature of the River derives from the diverse range of interests that people have in it. Needless to say, people who have the same types of interests in the River generally perceive its potential in a similar way.

This paper argues that understandings of the terms “tupuna awa” and “sustainable resource” are distinct knowledge systems belonging, respectively, to Māori and commercial groups that both have interests in the Waikato River. In my study, the word epistemology is used to facilitate and explore how highly structured knowledge systems are formed. Clearly, other cultural groups have knowledge systems for the Waikato River too, but, as my research investigates only indigenous and commercial groups I have not identified any other knowledge systems at this time.

In particular this discussion investigates how Māori perceive the Waikato River to be their “tupuna awa”. In the Williams Māori Dictionary (1985), the word tupuna translates to mean ancestor and grandparent and the word awa means river, channel and gully. Thus, a tupuna awa can be understood to mean “river ancestor”. In a recent legal dispute involving the Whanganui River (Ngāti Rangī & Ors decision, 2004), the Environment Court accepted evidence from Ngāti Rangī Māori that the Whanganui River is regarded by members of Ngāti Rangī as an “ancestor”. The decision (2004, p. 28) recorded that:

[103] The basis of Māori relationship is genealogical. Ancestral ties bind the people to each other and the people to their river. The river[s] [were] was constantly referred to in the Māori evidence as their “tupuna awa”.

[104] This genealogical relationship is one of the foundations upon which the Māori culture is based. It is known “whanaungatanga”. Whanaungatanga in its broadest context could be defined as the interrelationship of Māori with their ancestors, their whānau, hapū, and iwi as well as the natural resources within their tribal boundaries such as mountains, rivers, streams and forests.

In contrast to Māori comprehensions of tupuna awa, people with commercial interests in rivers often refer to economically significant rivers as “sustainable resources”. The neo-liberal discourse, of which commercialisation and privatisation are part, has brought about fundamental shifts in the way economically significant rivers are perceived and dealt with by commercial entities in New Zealand. It is universally accepted that language plays a critical role in shaping how people distinguish and understand the world, and therefore, a mechanism to facilitate the commodification of the Waikato River has been the emergence of a contemporary language to describe the River.

In Annual (2001, 2001a, 2002, 2003) and Environmental (2003) Reports, Mighty River Power who are a hydro electricity generator on the Waikato River frequently used the term “sustainable resource” when referring to the Waikato River. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* (2005), the word “sustainable” is understood as “involving the use of natural products and energy in a way that does not harm the environment (Wehmeier, 2005, p. 1548)”. The dictionary explains that the word “resource” can be understood as “a supply of something that a country, an organisation or a person has and can use, especially to increase their wealth: the exploitation of minerals and other natural resources (Wehmeier, 2005, p. 1293)”. Another useful definition of “resource” is:

... there has been a transformation of the noun resource into a verb: an example of the sort of world-class conversion that has been a common feature of English word formation for hundreds of years, but in the twentieth century continues to raise hackles (particularly when, as is often the case, it features in the language of bureaucrats). (Ayto, 1976, p. 500)

Correspondingly, Genesis Energy, who are a thermal electricity generator on the Waikato River use the term “renewable resource” when referring to the River in their public documents. The word “renewable” is explained as:

... replaced or replenished, either by the earth's natural processes or by human action”. Air, water, and forests are often considered to be example of renewable resources. (youthink.worldbank.org/glossary.php)

It is proposed here that the terms “sustainable resource” and “renewable resource” are part of a new commodifying river language. Though, perhaps it is worth considering whether the two companies are in fact referring to the whole river when they address it using these terms.

It is argued that commercial entities use the terms “sustainable resource” and “renewable resource” in reference only to the economically important parts of the River which, in this case, are the waters and their potential. While Mighty River Power is reliant on the River’s “water-flow potential” for their generation processes, Genesis Energy is dependent on the River’s “water-cooling potential”. Because Mighty River Power and Genesis Energy are competing in the same market their “sustainable resource” and “renewable resource” knowledge systems need to be slightly different. Ultimately, however, the two commercial knowledge systems attend to the needs of their companies.

No doubt there is controversy regarding the meanings of the terms “sustainable resource” and “renewable resource”. It might be argued for example, that the terms are better understood as scientific rhetoric or simply ideologies of commercial entities. Debates of this type are necessary to extend understanding of these knowledge systems.

Growing up on a marae alongside the Waikato River, and then, being employed by Mighty River Power in the late 1990s, did not initially assist the author in distinguishing tupuna awa and sustainable resource as knowledge systems. The elucidation of the epistemologies emerged from a study of the anthropological literature of landscape and two challenging fieldwork experiences. The first fieldwork, which is on going, is with Māori who live on different parts of the Waikato River. The second fieldwork was with Mohawk Indians from Kahnawake and Akwesasne Reserves who live next to the St Lawrence River in Canada.

The Mohawk fieldwork was carried out over an 8-month period in 2005. This comment by Eric Hirsch describes the research experience:

There is thus the landscape we initially see and a second landscape which is produced through local practice and which we come to recognise and understand through fieldwork and through ethnographic description and interpretation. (Hirsch & O’Hanlon, 1990, p. 2)

Hirsch discusses the difficulty anthropologists have in recognising cultural knowledge systems when they are not neatly packaged. Furthermore, he explains how the previous experience of an anthropologist can fetter their ability to identify and interpret new areas of knowledge. The author’s experience in the course of this research has brought the realisation that the local knowledge acquired from living and working in the two cultural groups and the fieldwork with the Mohawks has strengthened comprehension of tupuna awa and sustainable resource knowledge systems. Importantly, by referring to the Waikato River in the context of landscape theory, it is recognised as a challenging leap--especially, since much of the landscape theory appears to offer little support the idea that tupuna awa and sustainable resource are highly structured knowledge systems.

However, an early work by Anne Salmond (1982) affirms that knowledge can be perceived as a type of landscape. This work facilitated my conceptualisation of the two knowledge systems for the Waikato River. Māori construct knowledge systems by accessing and utilising Māori protocols (tikanga) and a number of Western knowledge systems. In contrast, the sustainable resource knowledge system is shaped by ideas emerging out of Western capitalism, environmentalism, neo-liberalism and science. It is evident that when tupuna awa knowledge is forced to merge with sustainable resource knowledge philosophical tensions appear. Embedded within tupuna awa is a wealth of Māori knowledge which includes the collecting and harvesting of customary foods; maintaining water quality; access and use of the river; prohibited behaviours and activities; purification rituals; ceremonies for group interactions; identification and access to sacred sites and guardianship obligations.

Indeed, the tupuna awa competently deals with metaphysical aspects of the River and has procedures that address its recent commodification. On the contrary, the sustainable resource knowledge system does not speak to metaphysical activity. Perhaps, this is to be expected since commercial cultures advocate secularism and the separation of metaphysical understanding from business. It is suggested that it is worth considering what the implications are for Māori when other knowledge systems for the Waikato River do not elaborate on metaphysical belief. Tambiah (1990) asserts that there is a danger in double selection:

... by which primitive peoples are described entirely in terms of their mystical belief, ignoring much of their empirical behaviour in everyday life, and Europeans are described entirely in terms of scientific rational-logical thought, when they too do not inhabit this mental universe all the time. (Tambiah, 1990, p. 92).

In order to illustrate the way in which tupuna awa is equivocal in dealing with gendering rivers, this paper concludes with a summary of some findings on whether the Waikato River is gendered. In the late 1960s and early 70s, the first Tainui university scholars, Maharaia Winiata and Robert Mahuta, wrote works which assigned the Waikato River female characteristics. While Winiata (1967, p. 64) wrote that “the Waikato River was the mother of the tribes”, Mahuta (1975, p. 6) stated that “the Waikato is much more than just a river. To the tribes who derive their name from it, it is an ancestor “the mother of the tribes”. Then in 1998, Mrs Iti Rangihinemutu Rāwiri of Te Awamarahi Marae was selected by Robert Mahuta to give evidence regarding the polluted state of the Waikato River, where she stated:

“when the people abuse the river it is the same as people abusing our mother or grandmother. People must respect our river ancestor which must be put back to good health.”

From interview data, it is noted that a young woman of Tūrangawaewae Marae, gave this response when asked if she thought the Waikato River was gendered:

“I understand the river as a female because that’s the way my father always spoke about it, you know like the river was our protector feeding us, yeah definitely a woman.”

Interestingly, discussions with kaumātua (elders) from Tūrangawaewae Marae reveal that a “female gendering of the river” and “comprehension of the river as a mother” is not shared by all Waikato River Māori. A kuia (older woman) commented:

“I don’t think about the awa having a gender, I haven’t heard anyone say it’s a female or a male, the awa is our tupuna, our ancestor, that’s how I understand it.”

While another elder (kaumātua) explained:

“That’s something I’ve never been asked before, it could be female, could also be male and female, could be different for Ngāti Raukawa, Tūwharetoa and Waikato, they will all have their own thoughts, one might see the river one way and others may see it another.”

The comments of the kaumātua are consistent with evidence given by Ms Julie Ranginui, an original member of the Whanganui Māori Trust Board, who stated:

“The river for me is like my mother and my father; it’s my grandfather and grandmother; it’s my tupuna.”

However, when another kaumātua (from Horahora Marae) was asked the question, he replied:

“Well I’d be inclined to find out what the people of the lake think, I think the answer to that question lays there.”

Discussions with people from other iwi, regarding a gender for the Waikato River included these responses.

A woman of Ngāti Awa said:

“Gendering rivers it is not something you think of straight away, I think of the Haparapara and the Kereu [river’s on either side of Te Kaha] as being female, they feel female, and the Motu [near Omāio] is a male river, it feels male even though I’m not sure if you can gender rivers. I don’t really know the Waikato but from the way you fullas talk about it, it seems more male than female.”

Finally, a participant from Ngāti Maniapoto stated:

“It is my understanding that the Waipā is female and the Waikato is male, when they join together at Ngāruawāhia they became one and then the river is both male and female.”

Joan Metge (personal communication, 17/9/06) proposes that comments like these “are often the way that people articulate their understandings of something while exploring and experimenting with new ideas”. While it is possible that some members of the group believe the Waikato River is gendered, it is probable that their comments are more about unearthing deeper understandings for tupuna awa. The interviews also illustrate that understandings of tupuna awa may not be the same for all people who belong to the same kin and cultural groups. Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of Heteroglossia can be applied to explain the differences that people from the same collective have when they express themselves. According to Bakhtin, characters in novels (and also the people anthropologists interview), speak in different voices and have multiple layers of identity. It is the “utterances” in an individual’s monologue that illustrates the basic differences of worldview that people from the same social group have. In applying this theory to participant comments, it is argued here that structural contradictions exist between the layers of meaning in an individual’s monologue and that the contradictions are not, in practice, fully resolved by anyone. Therefore, while information, ideas and meaning from tupuna awa and sustainable resource epistemologies is multifaceted and enduring my study reveals that people have the power to make adjustments and refashion knowledge to suit their personal and group needs.

In conclusion, attention is drawn to two comments by Anne Salmond. Firstly:

The ontological orders of Māori knowledge are not obvious: and in seeking to begin to understand mātauranga (knowledge), a western epistemology, cannot be presupposed. The reasonableness of mātauranga rests within Māori language and not in the partialities of translation.

And secondly:

Western thought is often closed by premises of intellectual superiority to radical cross-cultural reflection and thorough-going enquiry, and the process of opening Western knowledge to traditional rationalities has hardly yet begun. (Salmond, 1985, p. 260).

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Author Notes

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