DEVELOPING A CROSS-CULTURAL NARRATIVE IN ENVIRONMENTAL FILM:

A CASE STUDY FROM AOTEAROA

by

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GLOSSARY of MAORI TERMS

Aotearoa – Maori name for New Zealand

Iwi – tribe

Kaitiaki – environmental guardian

Kaitiakitanga – environmental guardianship

Kaumàtua – Màori elders

Koru – a spiral, the shape of an unfurling fern frond

Manuhiri – a visitor

Màtauranga Màori - Màori knowledge

Marae – central meeting place in Màori culture

Pàkehà – New Zealand resident of European descent

Pòwhiri – welcoming ceremony on a marae

Te Tau Ihu – the area around the North end of the South Island

Tuatara – species of reptile endemic to New Zealand

Wànanga – an educational event or learning forum

Whakapapa – genealogy or ancestry

Whakataukì – Màori proverb or saying

Whànau – family

ABSTRACT

Environmental filmmakers often construct narratives about cultures or appropriate cultural ideas for their storylines. However, the majority of environmental films rely on Western methods of filmmaking and storytelling, even when the topic of these films may be non-Western and the narratives involved are non-linear and complex. In this essay, I argue for a cross-cultural approach to narrative development in environmental film that incorporates defining aspects of storytelling from the cultures represented. I use my experience of making a film about cultural collaboration in New Zealand resource management as a case study and I highlight the challenges of developing a cross-cultural narrative in environmental film.

INTRODUCTION

Kia mòhio tika te tangata ngà kòrero
me ngà tikanga o te tai Ao

"The one who teaches about the environment must
understand the structure, lore and rituals pertaining to it"

In 2009, I was awarded a Fulbright Graduate Student Fellowship to New Zealand (Aotearoa) to make a film about cross-cultural collaboration in environmental conservation. I chose to focus on the relationship between Western scientific research and Màori traditional knowledge and how each contributes to an environmental ethic in the country. In particular, the cross-cultural management of offshore islands that contain the majority of Aotearoa's remaining endemic species provided a compelling topic. Màori families (*whànau*) with strong historic and spiritual ties to particular islands are collaborating with university and government researchers in hopes of finding a sustainable future for the islands that will include use of the resources while maintaining their sensitive ecological dynamics. Aotearoa has become a preeminent international model for culture and science collaboration because of similar efforts across the country (see Stephenson and Moller).

My thesis film, *Kaitiakitanga*, is based around the conservation of offshore islands off the top of the South Island (Te Tau Ihu region) and the historic traditional harvest of sooty shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*) by Màori people. Rakiura Màori with ancestral (*whakapapa*) rights harvest sooty shearwater chicks (i.e., muttonbirds or *titi*) extensively on New Zealand's southernmost islands and is the only wildlife harvest fully under Màori control (Taiepa 244). Harvest on islands off

the top of the South Island, however, is another matter. Here the breeding populations of sooty shearwaters number in the hundreds of paired birds rather than the hundreds of thousands in the South. Therefore, the government agencies charged with managing the country's wildlife have questioned the sustainability of harvest. In the early 1960s, the Crown made harvest illegal on some islands in the Te Tau Ihu region.[1] The only harvest since has been poaching, and more recently, traditional harvest for educational purposes (Gaze and Smith). Màori families from multiple tribes (*iwi*) maintain that the populations have not rebounded since the cessation of legal harvest, which may in part be due to the regulated exclusion of people from these islands. These *whànau* consider themselves guardians (*kaitiaki*) of their original homeland islands and therefore have a personal and tribal obligation to care for them. Without a regular presence or reason to visit the islands such as on a harvest trip, some feel there has been a negative feedback loop in which the seabird populations have suffered because they are not being harvested. Therefore, they are not watched over on a regular basis and perhaps are more vulnerable to poachers who indiscriminately destroy-burrow habitat (Aldridge pers. com.).

A distinctive relationship exists in Aotearoa between Màori people and the government in managing the country's offshore islands. Resource managers make a concerted effort to include indigenous knowledge, traditional practices, and

[1] Crown agents assigned to the islands believed that harvest was no longer sustainable in the face of other determining factors such as the presence of introduced Norway rats that decimate seabird populations.

epistemologies alongside of Western-based scientific research and implementation of tested environmental management actions. When the Department of Conservation was created in 1987 its original mandate included "to give effect to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi" (Gaze and Smith). It is a stretch to consider environmental management in Aotearoa co-management between *iwi* and the government agencies (i.e. the Department of Conservation). This cross-cultural interaction is not without contention (Taiepa 247) but takes a small step in cross-cultural collaboration becoming a larger influence on modern environmental conservation practices.

As a scientist turned filmmaker, I have an interest in including cultural use of resources alongside scientific research in the dialogue about conservation and management of wildlife. I set out to make a film that would present a broad scope of what constitutes a conservation ethic in Aotearoa. Therefore, I chose to present what I consider are the three main grounding forces behind conservation practice: 1) scientific research, 2) educating young people, and, 3) utilizing sustainable resources through cultural practices. I structured my film as three short stories to address each of these ideas. The first story follows Master's student Amelia Geary as she conducts science fieldwork with *tìtì* seabirds and investigates the possibility of reinstating a Màori traditional harvest on Motungàrara Island. The second short showcases educator Louisa Paul (Ngàti Koata *iwi*) and her mission of teaching children about the scientific and cultural importance of tuatara reptiles on Stephen's Island (Takapourewa). The third story shows members of Ngàti Kuia *iwi*

participating in an educational gathering (*wànanga*) and harvesting *tìtì* on Tìtì Island.

In this essay, I argue that presenting such a cross-cultural environmental story on film should not rely solely on simple Western narratives, but instead create a hybrid cross-cultural narrative. I define a cross-cultural narrative as a narrative that takes into account storytelling techniques from the *cultures* represented. Filmmakers should not rely solely on Western storytelling to tell non-Western stories but should utilize culture-specific concepts and storytelling approach. Therefore, a cross-cultural narrative is not just a story that contains two or more cultures. It gives all cultures involved a voice of representation. Herein, I make an argument for the need of cross-cultural narratives in environmental film. I first present a problem—the lack of indigenous voice in mainstream environmental films. I then provide examples of mainstream environmental films that incorporate an indigenous voice. I follow with ideas from indigenous film theory and present an approach to develop a cross-cultural narrative in environmental film. And finally, I draw from Màori concepts and storytelling to apply these indigenous film theory concepts to my thesis film, *Kaitiakitanga*.

TOWARDS A CROSS-CULTURAL NARRATIVE

A reoccurring problem in environmental film is that filmmakers often silence the indigenous voice in cultures outside their own. Western documentary styles of storytelling dominate the environmental film industry and Western filmmakers often do not consider the storytelling methods of the cultures they portray. This attitude creates a problem of representation. Filmmakers suppress the indigenous voice by molding indigenous philosophy and concepts into simple Western narratives. Therefore, there is a need for cross-cultural narratives in environmental film—narratives that give equal voice to the cultures portrayed on screen.

I see two main obstacles in constructing a cross-cultural narrative in environmental film. First, there are very few examples of filmmakers who attempt to incorporate cross-cultural narratives. Therefore, little historical reference or theory exists as a starting point. Second, filmmakers need to obtain a deeper understanding of the cultures they represent. This responsibility takes a high level of time and personal commitment. Because of these factors, culture-based environmental films often resort to familiar, simple narratives that audiences (primarily Western) are accustomed to. The result is productions such as the BBC/Discovery's recent seven-part series, *Human Planet* (2011), which explores cultures subsisting in extreme ways around the globe. Although *Human Planet* episodes depict many cultures, the approach to filmmaking and narrative is purely Western. In fact, the storytelling is no different than recent BBC blue-chip wildlife productions such as *Blue Planet* (2001) or *Planet Earth* (2006), which both present

nature as a series of spectacles. For example, one of the most captivating scenes in the series shows a Laotian fisherman walking a high-wire above the raging Mekong River in order to reach an island fishing hole. He holds on with no safety ropes and a simple slip would mean certain death. The scene resembles a daring circus act, rather than an everyday activity for the villagers. High angle cable dolly and aerial shots overlayed with dramatic music give the viewer a gut-wrenching perspective of the high-wire walker. A long zoom-out provides a perspective detached from the fisherman's experience and feelings. A European narrator describes the daring event and we only hear the fisherman's voice a few times. Like this fisherman, all the people in *Human Planet* are on display for consumption by an international audience, their voice rarely heard. Although captivating to many viewers, this treatment of culture as spectacle is problematic. As Neil Genzlinger writes in his review of *Human Planet* in the *New York Times*, "There is something unsettling about glorifying subsistence living for the sake of our high definition televisions" (C5). *Human Planet* programs do have a positive aspect if viewers gain an appreciation for or an awareness of the cultures they are perusing; however, the dominant Western society suppresses cultures' narrative voice by telling *their* stories for them.

Environmental films such as *Human Planet* suppress the indigenous voice by using expository voice-over (also known as voice-of-God narration). This method is especially damaging because the narrator is from a different culture than is being represented. Telling another's story reinforces the imperialistic notion of one

culture asserting dominance over the other. As Kahurangi Waitìtì states in his discussion of applying an expository documentary mode of filmmaking to Màori stories, "In the past this [expository voice-over] has been the technique used to document our culture, values and beliefs…It is ironic that this method was once acceptable when documenting Màori but is now deemed more appropriate for animal documentaries" (8). And yet filmmakers continue to use European "voice-of-God" narration to tell stories *about* other cultures, placing them in the same light as wildlife.

Although few environmental films represent an indigenous voice, I believe *The Elephant, The Emperor and the Butterfly Tree* (2003) is a step in the right direction. A tale of the interconnected and fragile relationship between elephants, mopane trees, emperor moths, and people living in the mopane forests of Botswana, the narrative is cyclical, following the lives and perils of the animals throughout the seasons. The film ends where it begins—with the flourish and regrowth of the mopane tree. Cyclical narratives are common in wildlife film and are a defining characteristic of indigenous culture's storytelling (Miller 17). Therefore, the cyclical narrative in *The Elephant, The Emperor, and the Butterfly Tree* is an appropriate approach and fitting for the idea of people being interconnected with their environment.

Unlike *Human Planet,* which is narrated by European actor John Hurt (BBC version), *The Elephant, The Emperor, and The Butterfly Tree* employs an African, Sello Maake, to narrate the script. Although Maake did not write the script and never

appears in the film, he gives a voice of self-representation to the local people. The film makes a truth claim: the narrator is telling a story of his people and their delicate relationship with the mopane forest. It is *their* story. Appropriately the film opens with a family journeying to harvest the riches of the emperor moth caterpillars. This scene suggests the narrative is based in their experience and told from their world-view.

The Story of the Weeping Camel (2004) also gives power to an indigenous voice. Co-directed by Byambasuren Davaa, a Mongolian, the film is a semi-observational documentary about a family of Mongolian herders and their attempts to reunite a newborn camel with its mother. The herders try to coerce the cow to nurse its calf using many traditional methods including having lamas perform a Hoos ceremony at a sacred site. After many failed tries, the family persists and sends two boys to the local town-center to find a traditional violinist. The indigenous music proves to be the only method to bring the camels together. The uniting of the camel mother and calf is a symbol of the herders' resiliency and steadfastness of the Mongolian culture in the face of modernization.

Critics have questioned whether *The Story of the Weeping Camel* is a documentary or a fully-staged narrative as the filmmakers incorporate fiction techniques. Therefore, does the film fairly represent the Mongolian voice? The filmmakers refer to their work as "narrative documentary" and maintain that even though they staged some minor scenes, they filmed the actual events as they unfolded and never told the characters what to do or say on camera (cited in

Cummings). Whether *The Story of the Weeping Camel* is documentary or docu-drama, I believe the filmmakers give a voice of representation to the Mongolian culture. The narrative plot follows a standard linear structure of overcoming a problem (the camel calf not nursing) to a climactic resolution (traditional music brings the cow and calf together). However, beyond this Western element, the story is based strongly in Mongolian culture, uses Mongolian language, and avoids the pitfalls of voice-over narration by capturing the story in a semi-observational style.

Indigenous filmmakers have embraced using storytelling approaches unique to their culture. Indigenous filmmaking requires a new theoretical approach and critical analysis; one that is non-Western and originates from the cultures represented in a film (Miller 42). Western film theories do not incorporate non-Western or indigenous world-view, and therefore cannot fully interpret indigenous films (Miller 3). In *Tonto and Tonto Speak*, Heather Miller develops an indigenous based theory for interpreting films that "recognizes the differences in aesthetics, time and symbols used in Native American film […] and underscores the value of storytelling while interpreting thematic and symbolic elements of Native film" (4). Although Miller's theory deconstructs Native American culture present in dramatic feature films, it provides a useful starting point for incorporating other indigenous people's ideas of time and storytelling into a documentary narrative.

Miller defines indigenous films in four ways: 1) the presence of community in the narrative and aesthetic, 2) the application of indigenous ideas of time (non-linear) and thought, 3) the use of indigenous semiotics (codes, signs, icons, and

metaphor), and, 4) a grounding in the history and political implications of the narrative. Miller's theory provides a framework for non-indigenous filmmakers such as myself to give a voice of representation to Native people.

In *Kaitiakitanga*, I adapt aspects of Miller's indigenous based film theory to an environmental conservation story. My goal is to give Màori and Western scientists an equal voice of representation in a conservation film. I incorporate Màori concepts of time and storytelling into the narrative structure and use Màori semiotics to inform the story. The narrative contains elements of traditional Western documentary and Màori storytelling in an attempt to present a cross-cultural narrative that gives voice to Màori philosophy and conservation science.

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ENTERING THE MARAE: FILMMAKING AS A MANUHIRI

Community defines indigenous films (Miller 27). The process of making an indigenous film is grounded in community relations. Filmmakers wishing to make films about indigenous people must seek out community consent before production begins, consult communities during the filmmaking process, and incorporate ideas of community in the film's narrative (Miller 27-31). As a non-indigenous filmmaker and outsider to Aotearoa, incorporating Màori culture into an environmental documentary presented a situation I could not enter into lightly. My main goal was to integrate the Màori concept of *kaitiakitanga* into the narrative of my film. I wanted my story to include Màori storytelling style and aesthetic so the Màori voice and spiritual concepts in my film were on equal level with a non-spiritual Western conservation story. My first step was to learn the basics of Màori culture, customs and protocol. From this starting point, I was able to apply these lessons to the filmmaking process and aesthetic of my thesis film, *Kaitiakitanga.*

A *marae* is a sacred meeting place of highest significance in Màori culture. It is the cornerstone of most Màori communities. Each Màori *iwi* and many communities within have their own *marae* for holding ceremonial gatherings, important meetings, cultural activities, and family events such as weddings or funerals (*tangihanga*). A visitor (*manuhiri*) must first be invited onto a *marae* through a formal ceremony called a *pòwhiri*. My first formal introduction to Màori culture was a *pòwhiri* arranged for the visiting Fulbright Graduate Fellows. We traveled to Whaiwhetu Marae for an educational visit, to experience a *pòwhiri* and

learn more about Màori culture from the people of the land (*tangata whenua*). A defining aspect of any *pòwhiri* is the structure of alternating speeches followed by song (*waiata*). The *tangata whenua* open with the first words, followed by the *manuhiri*. Ultimately, a *pòwhiri* encourages open communication and allows the guests to become one with the hosts. A closing meal or feast seals the new bond.

Barry Barclay, a respected New Zealand filmmaker of Màori and Pàkehà (European) descent, set the groundwork for image-making of Màori culture in Aotearoa. In his book "Our Own Image," Barclay argues the filmmaking process should be approached in the manner of a formal gathering (*hui*) on a *marae* where "the process involves humility, the humility to bend technology to the rules of the *hui* – to allow the people, the whole people, to speak" (13). His view likens the filmmaking process to entering a *marae* (such as for a *pòwhiri*) in which people are viewed as equals and everyone is allowed to present his or her views. During a *pòwhiri* ceremony, everyone voices his or her intentions without interruption. The process focuses more on listening rather than immediately responding. This style reflects in many of Barclay's films with long dialogues and narratives that do not necessarily adhere to any formal structure (Murray 38-39).

Since Barclay's early fiction feature films, other Màori filmmakers have applied Barclay's *hui / marae* methodology of filmmaking. In his essay "Applying Kaupapa Màori Processes to Environmental Film," Kahurangi Waitìtì outlines how the conceptualization of Màori knowledge can apply to filmmaking, including using *pòwhiri* as a metaphor (29). Waitìtì posits the filmmaker should view himself as a

manuhiri when documenting a cultural situation even if he is making the film within his own culture ("Kaupapa" 27). The camera should be viewed as an invader and used cautiously before the filmmaking process begins (Barclay). Therefore, Màori may better understand intentions and not view the filmmaker as just another voyeuristic ethnographic filmmaker if *marae* protocol is followed, as Waitìtì writes:

> On a basic level, using Marae concepts as a metaphor offers a form of validation for the application of different *Te Ao Màori* concepts. Protocols and *tìkanga* that are still robust within *Te Ao Màori* need to be applied conceptually in Western technologies and professions (such as documentary) if dealing with Màori people. This application needs to be applied because it helps to make sense and to make relevant to Màori people by relating familiar Màori ideology to foreign concepts. ("Kaupapa" 26)

I was an outsider when I arrived in New Zealand wanting to make a film that incorporated Màori concepts of environmental conservation. I was worried about appropriating cultural ideas and applying them to a Westerner's film. Within Barclay's and Waitìtì's writing on *marae* filmmaking, I found a method in which I could approach the filmmaking process in a culturally sensitive manner and as part of a community.

I was based in the Allan Wilson Centre at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) for the entirety of my Fulbright fellowship. Here they maintain a long-standing cooperative relationship with representatives from various *iwi* around Te Tau Ihu. Master's student Amelia Geary was beginning a study on the convergence of Màori traditional ecological knowledge and science in the conservation of sooty shearwaters in the Marlborough Sounds. I found Amelia's story perfect for a cross-

cultural film because she was attempting to balance two world-views in her research. As part of her Master's research, she interviewed elders (*kaumàtua*) about their knowledge of past harvests of sooty shearwater chicks on Motungàrara Island in the Marlborough Sounds. I filmed these interviews and met nearly all of the subjects in my film through this process. In exchange for the participants' time, we gave them the full transcripts and digital video archives of their interviews. Amelia's story of researching the seabirds on an isolated island for *Nga Takiwa whànau o Te Atiawa iwi* became one of the short stories in my film. From this starting point, I was able to approach *our* Màori collaborators and discuss my intentions for the project. We took care to follow *marae* protocol and made sure everyone was comfortable with the project. We entered into a Cultural Safety Contract that was drawn up for past participants in cross-cultural research at VUW. This strategy allowed everyone to be upfront about his intentions. I entered the production phase of the film no longer an outsider, but as a member of team comprised of many distinct cultural backgrounds. My film project started with being invited into a generous collaborative relationship. All parties accommodated each other's wishes. In other words, it was a *pòwhiri* approach to filmmaking,

My experience as a *manuhiri* and learning about *pòwhiri* and applying *marae* protocol to the pre-production of my film, made me strive to incorporate these purely Màori experiences into my thesis film aesthetically. Using *pòwhiri* as a model, I wanted my film to allow space for everyone to present their stories. I also hoped the narrative would direct viewers towards an understanding of Màori concepts and

a reflection on cross-cultural relationships. In the opening scene, I let an image of a harrier riding the air currents above a rough sea play out for nearly a minute. This scene symbolically ties the sky to the ocean, mother-earth (*Papatuanuku*) to father-sky (*Ranganui*), thereby acknowledging a small part of Màori creation legend. Highlighted with traditional Màori *toanga puoro* instrumentation, this image sets the pace and approach for the entire film. It allows the viewer (a *manuhiri*) time to enter a mental space and invites them into a visual and spiritually rich environment (like a *marae*). Therefore, the opening of the film is my metaphor for entering a *marae* for a *pòwhiri* and beginning a cross-cultural exchange.

I continue to follow *marae* protocol, allowing the *tangata whenua* the first spoken words in the film when a Ngàti Koata *kaumàtua* states in voice-over: "This is just not an exercise in experimentation and discovery, this is a discovery of yourself. It is in the tuatara. It is in the muttonbird. It is in everything else that is New Zealand because there is no such thing as a tangible object or physical object, because everything is spirit." This opening provides the thesis of what is to come in the film and grounds the narrative in ideas of science (experimentation) and Màori philosophy (spirit). My film addresses this balance and reciprocity between two world-views. I represent the cultural balance and alternating structure of a *pòwhiri* ceremony aesthetically by using text in my film. I showcase Màori proverbs (*whakatauki*) and scientific facts about *tìtì* and tuatara. *Whakatauki* are sometimes called "ancestral sayings" and are commonly used in Màori oration and storytelling as a way to refer to lessons from the past or provide a connection to ancestors. They

are often succinct, filled with metaphor, and in a few words are able to encapsulate entire thoughts or discussions with little extra oration needed. For example, during Amelia's science research section of my film, I used a text *whakatauki* which read, "*He nui maunga, e kore e taea te whakaneke; he nui ngaru moana, te ihu o te waka e wahi.*" This phrase roughly translates to "a great mountain cannot be moved, but a giant wave can be broken by the prow of a canoe." This saying has many interpretations, but the basic sentiment is that many things are possible to overcome no matter how insurmountable they seem and one should not give up trying. This idea encapsulates Amelia's philosophy of incorporating Màori knowledge (*Màtauranga Màori*) into her science research, an approach to conservation few have attempted because of the inherent extra effort and personal commitment involved. She is charged with not only following the rigors of scientific discipline but also showing care and respect for Te Atiawa *iwi* (Nga Takiwa *whànau*) traditional ecological knowledge.

In addition to alternating text, I incorporate defining aspects of Màori storytelling in order to give the film an indigenous voice. I allocate space for the viewer to take in abstract imagery and music without spoken words by letting scenes play out with extended shots and natural beauty. This style allows viewers to ponder images, points, and relationships brought up in the narrative. According to Barry Barclay's film editor, Dell King, this viewing space is a defining aspect of Màori filmmaking:

> What I like about Màori filmmaking is that in contrast to Pàkehà filmmaking, generally speaking there is space for

> resonance. In the Màori vision of the way the universe works, the interaction of all things, and the fact that people are pushed by forces which are emotionally powerful but not necessarily idealogical, means that you use that, and give the audience a chance to respond […] In New Zealand Pàkehà filmmaking, there's a tendency not to wait for the resonances, always to be driven by some quite narrow idea of what's going on. (qtd. in Cairns and Martin 131)

In *Images of Dignity,* Stuart Murray points out Barclay's filmmaking style by writing, "The abstraction of visuals makes the viewer concentrate more on what is being said. The spoken word achieves greater resonance, while the effect of the combination of word and image creates an aesthetic effect, a sense of what Barclay always thought of as 'poetry' in his work" (87).

The main obstacle I confronted in the cross-cultural filmmaking process was learning about and applying Màori concepts to the aesthetic of my film. I entered as an outsider with little knowledge of protocol or customs. However, I quickly learned important aspects of Màori culture that applied to storytelling, such as providing space for resonance and using *whakatauki* to inform the story. In *Kaitiakitanga*, I combine Western methods of filmmaking with Màori storytelling style to fit the cross-cultural interaction and subject of my documentary. This balancing act, where a Maori and Western approach are on equal level, is an immense challenge in the filmmaking process. Using *marae* protocol as a metaphor to inform the narrative, I alternate between the different cultural modes in the piece, as would happen at a *pòwhiri* ceremony where the *manuhiri* and *tangata whenua* each take turns speaking. The result is a hybrid documentary style that incorporates Màori concepts

using poetic scenes, metaphor, proverb, and resonant space into what would otherwise be a traditional Western narrative.

THE KORU: MÀORITANGA AND SCIENCE AS SPIRAL NARRATIVES

Indigenous concepts of time and thought differ from Western perspectives (Miller 17). In Western society time is linear, whereas for many indigenous cultures time, and therefore storytelling, is circular. Western narratives generally have a definitive beginning, middle and end, but indigenous storytelling often blurs the lines between the past and the present and does not adhere to a rigid narrative structure (Miller 17-18).

The *koru* is a well-known symbol in Màori culture, and for that matter, modern New Zealand culture. A *koru* is a spiral shape, representing an unfurling fern frond. It stands as a symbol for new beginnings, growth, and rebirth. The inward curl of the spiral represents returning to an ancestral link, a critical aspect of Màori culture. It ties people to their ancestral heritage (*whakapapa*) and acknowledges for them to inform the present they must first look to the past. *Màoritanga*, or the ways of knowing in Màori culture, is thought to have developed much like a fern frond unfurling to a point of maturation (Knudsen 4). This simple idea not only applies to everyday life in Màoridom, but also to Màori storytelling, where using the past to inform the present is a key ingredient in any Màori *kòrero* or oration.

Màori cosmogony, and therefore storytelling, is very much based on inter-relatedness – of universe, people, ancestors, and land – all tied together in an unending spiral. The scientific process, like many aspects of *Màoritanga*, is a spiral narrative. The scientific method involves defining a question, developing a

hypothesis, outlining predictions and then testing that hypothesis and predictions using repeatable experiments. Science is an iterative process where at any point along the line the scientist may revise their hypothis(es) and provide definition to the question they pose or their methods, thus having to start anew. The scientific method as a spiral narrative always refers back to its beginnings, its initial question and hypothesis, in order to inform the contemporary process. Scientists acquire results at the end of the scientific process and use them to formulate new hypotheses for testing, thus is a continuing endeavor. The apparent "end" of the scientific process is actually a new beginning. Therefore, the scientific narrative is not linear as it repeatedly refers back on itself. Nor is it circular as the end result is not an exact match of the beginning. The scientific process does not end after the first experimentation and analysis, but continues with new data and hypotheses. The scientific narrative continually spirals outward.

A spiral narrative may seem undefined and confusing to a viewer accustomed to linear storylines. Whereas those accustomed to non-Western thought processes of interconnectedness, symbolism, and circularity may interpret the text and subtext with relative ease (see Miller). The dramatic feature film *Whale Rider* (2002), closely based on a novel of the same name by Witi Ihimaera, is a mythological tale of Màori culture viewed through a modern day lens. *Whale Rider* weaves a story imbued with myth and contemporary Màori culture, and blurs the lines between past and present, ancestors and modern people. Although the film follows a linear structure of a main character overcoming odds to reach a resolution, the *koru*/spiral notion of

Màori world-view applies to the narrative. The main question posed in Whale Rider is whether the young girl protagonist (Paikea) can convince her grandfather (and chief) that she is strong enough to lead their *iwi* and bring her people out of a spiral of lost traditions and "old ways." However, her grandfather believes her gender precludes her from leading their *iwi*. After he struggles to find an heir apparent in the boys of the *iwi*, and misses many signs that she is a strong leader herself, it takes a miraculous event to open his eyes. After being shunned "of no use" she leads a pod of stranded whales out to sea by riding on one's back and nearly drowns in the process. Like many aspects of *Màoritanga*, here the past informs the present. Only the grandfather's knowledge of the original "whale rider" who brought his people to Aotearoa allows him to overcome his ignorance and accept Paikea as a true leader of their *iwi*. The majority of *Whale Rider's* narrative conforms to the Western standards of linear development, closure and final resolution. However, *Whale Rider* incorporates spiral elements within the narrative, blending the past with the present. Furthermore, the end of the film is the new beginning, the rebirth, of their *iwi* - the *koru*.

In *Kaitiakitanga*, I use the notion of a spiral narrative to maintain a cultural balance and approach a cross-cultural narrative. I showcase a contemporary cross-cultural relationship in environmental management of islands in Te Tau Ihu, Aotearoa. I seek out a cultural balance and attempt to promote two ways of thought. Instead of framing the environmental argument in the polarized preservationist (Western) versus utilitarian (indigenous) debate, I choose to take a middle stance.

For me, both cultures working together is the most valuable and effective approach to conservation of the islands. I believe traditional indigenous practices and use of resources in a sustainable manner is critical for a robust approach to environmental conservation.

Science and *Màoritanga* as spiral narratives provided me with a structure for my cross-cultural story. The first way I incorporated spiral storytelling was to construct the film as a series of three short stories, or "endeavors in conservation", that would inform each other. Each story originated with a different *iwi* and focused on a different approach to conservation. They all contain the common element of science and culture working together but present only a narrow view of cross-cultural conservation on their own. By sharing three short stories in sequence, the film progresses in a spiral manner, whereby each story builds on the central concept of *kaitiakitanga*. Therefore, they each contribute to an overall metanarrative in the film. Like a *koru* with its central point being the ancestral link, the idea of *kaitiakitanga* is the film's central concept and reference point for each short story. Furthermore, the characters within each story embrace both Màori traditions and science/conservation and use their distinct histories to inform their present situation. Like *Màoritanga* and science, the narrative of my film has its roots in an ancestral link, a core concept and guiding force.

Another important aspect of indigenous storytelling I wanted to include in *Kaitiakitanga* was the lack of a defined beginning, middle and end. Therefore, the second way I incorporate a spiral narrative is through open-ended storylines. My

goal was not to provide viewers with resolutions and definitive answers, but to open up a discussion about cross-cultural collaboration in environmental management. Just as Màori storytelling brings up new questions and the scientific process highlights new areas of study, I hope my film will do the same. For example, I want my New Zealand audience to ask: why is a young, Pàkehà New Zealander (Amelia), and not an *iwi* member, researching the *tìtì* for a Màori *whànau*? This fact brings up broader questions: What is the status of Màori in the scientific fields? And is there a place for *Màtauranga Màori* in Western science? The open-endedness of the narrative allows the audience to address these questions in their own minds, rather than the film telling them what to believe.

In the final section of the film, I show a traditional Màori harvest of *tìtì* by members of Ngàti Kuia *iwi.* Where they once harvested thousands of birds over days of work, they now harvest only a few to teach their grandchildren (*mokopuna*) about this important tradition and historical food source for their culture. This storyline brings forward many questions including: what is the future of the harvest in the face of a world-wide seabird declines? What is the future of the science/traditional knowledge relationship in protecting the birds? In what ways can Màori preserve cultural ties to traditional food harvest? Just like the *koru*, the past informs the present and the end is a new beginning, begging for new questions, and allowing the culture to move forward and adapt but not necessarily change.

In summary, the *koru* in Màori culture, with a spiral suggestive of eternal movement and its central point returning to ancestral links, symbolizes how

cultures move forward and adapt but remain the same. A *koru*-like worldview allows Màori people to embrace science while retaining their traditions, and Western scientists to embrace *Màtauranga Màori* while staying strict to the principles of the scientific method. Each of the characters in the film believes in these central ideas and provide an argument for closing the perceived gap between indigenous tradition and science.

KAITIAKITANGA: GUARDIANS, TUATARA and METAPHOR

Every culture has its own way of understanding the world. People will interpret images, narratives, and films differently depending on their cultural frame of reference. Semiotics is the study of cultural knowledge transmitted through signs, icons, codes, and metaphors. When making films for an indigenous culture or from an indigenous culture's world-view, filmmakers should consider indigenous semiotics when presenting cultural stories. Filmmakers should acknowledge semiotics because indigenous people may interpret a film's images and story differently than a Western audience (Miller 35). For example, Native American tribes in the Pacific Northwest view the raven as a creator who brought sunlight and animals to humans (see Clark). In other stories the raven takes on the role of a trickster (Robinson). Therefore, a simple image of a raven in an environmental film may convey a much deeper meaning for a Native audience. In my thesis film, I use the tuatara as an icon and metaphor to add a Màori voice to the narrative and provide a deeper meaning for my Màori audience.

The central theme of my thesis film is the Màori concept of *kaitiakitanga*. Although an English translation does not give full value to the concept, *kaitiakitanga* means environmental guardianship. Therefore a *kaitiaki* can be a guardian of a place, an idea, an object, or even a story. For example, Ngàti Koata *iwi* are the *kaitiaki* of Stephen's Island (*Takapourewa*) and hold a great personal responsibility for its care. For some Màori, a *kaitiaki* can also be an animal or even an inanimate object that looks over an environment.

Màori regard tuatara as a special treasure (*toanga*). They are the last living representatives of an Order of reptiles (Rhynchocephalia) that first appeared over 220 million years ago and have changed little since that time. For many Màori, tuatara and other reptiles are indicative of sacred boundaries (*tapu*) that are not to be crossed. If people cross these boundaries, and prestige or sacredness (*mana*) is impinged upon, there could be serious consequences for those involved, even death. In that regard, some Màori consider tuatara the *kaitiaki* or the guardians of the islands on which they reside (Ramstad 19). Because of their ancient appearance and long lifespan, some Màori believe tuatara are the *kaitiaki* of knowledge (Ramstad 19). They guard the stories and histories of their islands as they have done for millennia. Therefore, tuatara are adored and respected in Màori culture.

Reptiles occur in Màori mythology, stories and on film as metaphorical boundaries. In the fiction film *The Strength of Water* (2009), a particularly powerful scene uses a reptile as a boundary metaphor. A young Màori man attempts to rescue a small girl run from an attacking dog in a junkyard. Just as the dog reaches up to bite, the man lifts the lid of a decrepit deep-freezer and throws the girl inside, hoping to protect her. Along the edge of the freezer sits a gecko that overdramatically hisses, effectively warning the pair that they are about to cross a boundary. Tragically, the girl becomes locked in the freezer, cannot be freed and dies, leaving the man and community to grieve. The filmmakers place the reptile in this scene as a metaphor for guarding the boundary between life and death and *tapu*, or forbidden places. This metaphor is likely lost on an international audience

who do not make the connection between the reptile and its symbolic representation in Màori culture. Whereas for a Màori audience, it is a dramatic reminder of the spiritual lessons provided by the natural world.

As Stuart Murray writes in his book *Images of Dignity*, "putting Màori values at the heart of representation of Màori does not mean that the narratives concerned will be communicable to all sections of national or international communities" (94). The same idea is proposed by Heather Miller's indigenous based film theory in which Native America (or indigenous) semiotics applied to filmmaking means that indigenous people will interpret a film's narrative and ideas differently than a Western audience (35). Referring to films made by indigenous directors Miller writes:

> Indigenous film requires a certain amount of effort to watch. To truly understand what is being said in the film, one must have a certain understanding of the culture represented on screen. The use of certain images on film call for an interpretation that can possibly only be understood through understanding the culture on the screen. (35)

I use the tuatara as a metaphor in my film without worry to how, or if, it will translate to a non-Màori audience. In my film's opening, a Ngàti Koata *kaumàtua* speaks over an image of a tuatara emerging from its burrow. I keep the voice non-diegitic, never showing the person who is speaking. I give authority to the tuatara itself. I acknowledge that this reptile is a *kaitiaki* of this knowledge in Màori culture and perhaps it is the one narrating.

Later in the film, I intercut a shot of a tuatara with a scene of Amelia conducting her scientific research on a remote island. Here I symbolically

acknowledge the tuatara is ever so closely watching over this "outsider" as she conducts scientific research. This image speaks to the tuatara as a guardian or *kaitiaki*, which I expand on in the second short story. It also alludes to the ties between *Màoritanga* and science, as the survival and sustained existence of tuatara is largely due to the efforts of modern conservationists. In essence, they are "watching over" each other. I am not concerned with how this symbolism translates with my entire audience. Instead, I use the tuatara as an icon based in Màori semiotics to provide greater resonance for Màori viewers.

Louisa Paul leads the second short story of my film. She is of Ngàti Koata descent and her passion is educating young children and her people about tuatara and Stephen's Island (Takapourewa) as both a spiritual place and an essential ecological landscape. Her "Tuatara Roadshow" allows children and other educators to experience a small slice of Ngàti Koata culture through tuatara education. They see a tuatara in person and experience an intimate connection to an animal that only resides on a handful of remote islands in Aotearoa. Outside of representing the tuatara as an icon, I included Louisa's Tuatara Roadshow in my film for two main reasons. First, I believe educating children about conservation of species is of utmost importance when considering the long-term health of any sensitive population. And secondly, Louisa represents those in the Màori community who embrace science and those working in the field to benefit species. She actively encourages young Màori to become involved in science but also reminds them to hold tight to important elements of their Màori heritage. She uses tuatara as a

vehicle to explore the realms of cultural knowledge, storytelling, art, and science in a multi-disciplinary approach to education.

In conclusion, the tuatara represents ideas of history, storytelling and guardianship in Màori culture. I incorporate tuatara in the narrative of my film as a model for using a particular species to educate people about conservation and culture simultaneously. It is a symbol for conservation success in Aotearoa. It also acts as a metaphor and icon that adds deeper meaning to the narrative for some Màori viewers. Therefore tuatara, like the *tìtì*, stands at the juncture of a bi-cultural relationship in Aotearoa and provides common ground for science and culture to collaborate.

CONCLUSION:

WHERE SPIRIT MEETS SCIENCE ON SCREEN

In this essay I have presented a problem in environmental film in which filmmakers portray cultures using Western styles of storytelling. This approach creates an issue of fairly representing an indigenous voice. I use the *Human Planet* series as an example of environmental films that put culture on display as spectacle and retract an indigenous voice. I then contrast that approach with films (*The Elephant, The Emperor, and The Butterfly Tree*; *The Story of the Weeping Camel*) that incorporate an indigenous voice. Despite these examples, there is still a place in environmental film for narratives that take into account storytelling methods from the cultures we portray. Therefore, I attempted to construct a cross-cultural narrative in my film *Kaitiakitanga* that fairly represents the bi-culturalism present in New Zealand island conservation. I turned to recommendations from indigenous film theory on how to incorporate Màori storytelling into a conservation narrative. I presented my learned approach of applying a Màori process to the production of a film, how I used a Màori symbol, the koru, to inform the structure of a *Màoritanga*/science narrative, and how I incorporated a particular species of wildlife (tuatara) as a metaphor for the main message of environmental guardianship I was attempting to promote.

In conclusion, I would encourage more attempts and discussion at creating cross-cultural narratives in environmental film as I have demonstrated only one stand-alone example of my experience. Filmmakers should enter into cross-cultural

filmmaking endeavors with the respect and caution of a *manuhiri* and follow the protocol of the local culture(s). Without such an approach, environmental filmmakers who wish to portray cross-cultural ideas on film will continue to fall into the trap of placing the dominant culture in a position of authority and power, thereby going against the cause they are trying to promote. I will conclude with the Màori *whakataukì* I began this essay with, a lesson for us all: *Kia mohio tika te tangata nga kòrero me nga tikanga o te tai Ao;* the one who teaches about the environment must understand the structure, lore and rituals pertaining to it.

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