



# Roots of Indigenous Ethics: Te Ara Tika | The Right Path

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*In this presentation Jay Matenga introduces the differences between Industrial and Indigenous perspectives of reality and contrasting priorities and expectations that arise from those differences when it comes to collaborating in trade. He lays some groundwork for a more wholistic ethical approach to what is understood to be “fair trade” in our contemporary global contexts, introducing the spiritual dimension and some a priori assumptions that should not be dismissed by people from Industrial backgrounds when relating to those with Indigenous roots. The implications are wide ranging.*

**K**ia tau te aroha noa ki a koutou me te rangimarie, he mea na te Atua na to mātou Matua, na te Ariki hoki, na Ihu Karaiti. (Grace and peace to you [all] from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ). Tīhei Māori ora! He aha te mea nui ki tēnei ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata (What is the most important thing in the world? It is people, it is people, it is people).

## 1. Introduction

I am Māori by my father’s line, whose father, my paternal grandfather, had no Pākehā heritage. But I was raised in the Pākehā home of my mother and stepfather and educated as a Pākehā under my stepfather’s surname, which I held for the first part of my life. That I was Pākehā went without question due to my skin tone and faux surname. That I am instinctively Māori has long been a source of confusion for me, and those who have suffered to work with me! But I’ve come to embrace my hybridity.

I have been a leader of missions organisations for the past 19 years, carrying responsibilities here in Aotearoa New Zealand as well as leadership involvement in multi-cultural contexts overseas. I am currently the Executive Officer of Missions Interlink NZ, the industry association of missions organisations here. Adjunct to that, I serve as the Secretary of the Interserve International Council, and as one of four Associate Directors of the World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission.

In this session I’d like us to pull back the curtain on our lived reality a bit and have a look at some a priori or base assumptions we have that inform our ethics. Because our unconscious or hidden bias will always determine how we understand, interpret or process what we experience, as well as influence the consequences or outcomes of that interpreted perception. In other words, roots will always determine fruit. Often in unanticipated

ways, as Merton’s law of unintended consequences warns us.

### 1.1 Two Domains: Industrial and Indigenous

Now, for some of you during this session you might start to feel like Alice hurtling down the rabbit hole. I certainly hope in the end your landing will feel soft.

Influenced by my own life journey, my doctoral work led me to consider the values differences in Individualist and Collectivist epistemé, or ways of knowing—kind of like a “worldview” but I have moved beyond that rather rigid concept. I then began to equate Individualist with Industrial and Collectivist with Indigenous. Epistemé are knowledge domains rather than geographic domains. Which allows for the Indigenous to be located within the so-called “Western” hemisphere and Industrials to emerge within Eastern and Southern geographies.

So, for me, there really are “just two types of people in the world”, and the subjects of fair trade and other justice causes will most likely identify as Collectivist or, as I prefer, Indigenous.

Setting up two sweeping domains might seem overly binary, and to some degree ‘Industrial’ and ‘Indigenous’ are simplified groupings, but they are not reductionist categories. There is a great deal of complexity to them that we cannot do justice to in this session. Suffice to say, organisational and cross-cultural psychologists tend to agree that the Individualist and Collectivist values dimension explains much about cultural ideals that are very much in conflict today.



**Jay Matenga**

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O.K. so there's a glimpse at my foundation, some of my *a priori* assumptions. If you want to probe my influences further, I am a student of post-modern and post-colonial philosophies, that inform an interpretive lens that helps me understand the interpersonal and intercultural dynamics of different groups of people, particularly where they are trying to interact with each other for some reason.

In this presentation I will focus on amplifying an Indigenous epistemé (an indigenous knowledge domain or ecosystem) in relation to the Industrial epistemé, but I want to emphasize that my objective is to counterpoint them, not set up the Industrial in opposition. One of my 'rules for life' (no reference to Jordan Peterson intended) is to "never diminish the dignity of another". Neither am I trying to set up a straw man to easily defeat. I am merely pointing out gaps in the Industrial epistemé where the Indigenous voice can compliment. My objective is always harmonization not denigration.

## 2. Realities

Right, now that we have all that established, let's talk about reality. Reality. It's an interesting concept. It's more appropriate to speak of realities. Once you are exposed to difference, to plural realities, suddenly a lot of the world becomes relative. There really is no single reality, only interpreted experiences of reality shared by groups — and each group, however you define the group, has a different understanding of what their reality actually is and means. And it's all because the roots differ.

Sure, there is significant enough overlap to allow us to interact, but below the surface there are at times subtle and quite significant differences. If there's one thing common to all humanity it's our propensity to corrupt the ideal. Even good roots can produce bad fruit in the wrong environment. Nevertheless, in order to show how Industrials and Indigenous can misunderstand each other in intercultural relationships I will deal with the subject matter in rather idealised and generalised terms.

In the Industrial domain the ground is very solid. It is material, physical, scientifically provable, mechanistic, separated, divisible, and freely manipulatable. Material is there for the taking and whatever is there is viewed for its economic worth. Industrials call that 'capital'. In order to use it you must have some degree of ownership over it, whether by title-deed (however that might be gained) or contracted permission. The objective is acquisition because economic wealth is power.

In the Indigenous domain the ground is very fluid. It is spiritual, traditional, it is volatile, interconnected, wholistic, innate and visceral, it is vital and intimately

relational. Seen and unseen reality is there to be respected and nurtured with benefits and responsibilities shared communally.

Here, I am speaking very generally of two broad sets of base assumptions—so, two types of people. These are important to ethics because roots will always determine... fruit. We cannot automatically assume a shared understanding of what ethics are, let alone trade ethics. The whole fair-trade industry is built on a very particular set of ethical assumptions that have developed in the Industrial world over a couple centuries of Euro-colonial philosophising that increasingly pushed the spirituality so core to the experience of the Indigenous into the realm of fantasy. If you remove the spiritual dimension from the picture your ethics and your morality will take shape accordingly.

### 2.1 Utility — the default ethic

For the most part, social justice devoid of spirituality resorts to utility as the highest good. Utility is determined by how useful or beneficial something is. We can immediately see how relative that standard is. For a hard-nosed Capitalist, utility is marked by largest profit margins and most net-income generated. For the more socially concerned, utility is determined by how much something will be of benefit to the most people in society. But who is the determiner of what "benefit" means? Those in positions of power that's who. This is not unique to Industrials.

Let us apply utility to the official fair-trade systems for a moment. Those with control over the certification process have become external determiners of what well-being should look like to another group. I'm not saying fair-trade aspirations are wrong, but when the certifiers focus solely on their perspective of economic, environmental, and social good, it too easily becomes imperialistic. If a one-size-fits-all Industrial approach is imposed, it will inevitably disadvantage those whose circumstances and values don't fit.

Furthermore, the more economically valuable the Fair-Trade concept becomes, the more likely more and more hands will extract profit from processes that maintain the system—extra levels of management, compliance controls, then producer cooperation under duress, corruption, etc. All of which leaves the producers ultimately bearing the cost. The success of fair-trade and the means to its success could too easily undermine its own reason for being.

### 2.2 Growth — the greatest good?

Global trade is predicated on an ethic of economic growth as the highest good. Daniel Bell, writing in his 1972 article *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*

observed that, “Economic growth has become the secular religion of advancing industrial societies.” Furthermore, I might add, seeking economic growth for others, in more Indigenously inclined societies, has become the very definition of altruism in this religion. It is what energizes an Industrial humanitarian mission to do material good in the world.

By economic growth, we generally mean a rising standard of living. From increasing affluence more choice is possible, with more choice, more independence, greater tolerance, increasing individualism—in other words, a drift toward the assumptions of the Industrial domain, which delights Industrials no end. Colonisers used to call that ‘civilisation’. It seems great at a superficial level, from the standpoint of the Industrial, but the values clash with many of the priorities of the Indigenous.

The morality that emerges from these so-called ‘freedoms’ is not necessarily wrong, but it is incomplete and, as we’re experiencing in Industrial-world nations, it comes at a deeply concerning cost. A cost to the environment, to relationships, to our identities, to the very fabric of our societies. In many ways, the soul is missing from the economic growth mission. You probably didn’t notice, but every single one of the global sustainability goals or the donut economic categories mentioned yesterday morning are material.

### 2.3 Spirituality — the missing piece

Remember, roots will... always determine fruit. If you are part of the Industrial domain and your roots only assume a material reality, you will likely treat things with utility towards economic growth or a more existential outcome like individual pleasure, which economic growth then becomes a means toward.

However, if you are innately Indigenous and your roots dive deeply into a spiritual reality, I suggest you will treat things far more relationally—and quite a different ethic emerges. While the former is often considered more ‘rational’ this is a baseless and arrogant assumption. For the Indigenous, spirituality is completely rational, with its own powerful logic. It is a different reality, but no less valid. And the Industrial domain has, thankfully, lost its moral authority as the validator of reality around the globe.

Like the iceberg with most of its mass below the surface, the rationality of the Indigenous has very deep roots and what is seen on the surface, by Industrial surface-dwellers with shallower roots, is easily misinterpreted.

If you have any desire at all of undertaking truly ethical trade with people from Collectivist societies you cannot afford to ignore what’s below the surface of their

Indigenous reality. You may never fully understand it, but you cannot afford to just pay lip-service to their beliefs with a condescending “aw, ain’t that quaint”. To start with, you need to learn to appreciate and, to some degree accept, the concept of life-force.

Every Indigenous culture is familiar with the life-force that animates all material things. It is not the stuff of fantasy, it is the very core of Indigenous reality, usually quite high in our consciousness and part of our real-world perception. The concept of life force is described in different contexts in many ways, like Qi (Chinese), Ki (Japanese), Prāna (Hindu), Vijñāna (Buddhist), Ruach/Spirit (Judeo-Christian), Barakah (Islam), Ntu (Bantu), Manitou (Algonquian), Ni (Lakota), Nilch’I (Navajo), Bio-Plasmic Energy (Euro-Russian), Mana (Melanesian), or for New Zealand Māori, we call it Mauri.

If you have seen the movie Avatar you will have a reasonable appreciation of the life-force connectedness that Indigenous people innately feel with creation and one another. There are varying degrees of awareness of this but it is the source of the values that the Indigenous would strongly adhere to and hold in common. And these roots determine quite different... fruit.

Oddly, in my investigations, I’ve found that only those within the Industrial epistémé or knowledge domain disregard life-force. The refusal to acknowledge life-force as part of our lived reality is a by-product of Industrial rationalism where 19th Century/early 20th Century evolutionary biologists and anthropologists ranked religious behaviour on an evolutionary scale: life-force believers at the bottom and enlightened rationalists at the top. They even invented a phrase for life-force belief. They called it animism. Let me be clear: animism does not exist. It is an entirely colonising myth. Yet this colonising construct continues to negatively influence Western thought.

A belief in the spiritual realm and life-force is the taproot of Indigenous-informed ethics. The energy flow in all of creation is viewed with deep reverence and respect. There is therefore no disconnect between the material and the spiritual. Cartesian dualism, separating the subject from the object is irrelevant. It’s ALL subjective. It’s all personal. Our interactions with the world are not mechanical, they are relational, with wide-ranging affect. And nothing is exempt. “Transformation” has spiritual dimensions.

### 2.4 Kaupapa — the Māori example

Here’s how life-force flows into reality for Māori—at least as best as I understand it at the moment. It also should be noted that I am speaking for myself, not



Māori in general. Different Iwi have different kaupapa, but even though I believe this will resonant with most, some Māori may disagree or pull me up on some points. We are now diving below the surface of the iceberg of one Indigenous perspective of reality but in my experience the concepts are resonant with other Indigenous peoples...

*Mauri* is the life-force essence of all things, emanating from the Creator into all of creation. *Mauri ora* is activated mauri that animates things, enlivens them. *Hau* is the essential being that is activated—for a human, *hau* is our personal power or will.

*Wairua*, or spirit, on the other hand, brings a different dimension. *Mauri* is temporal and terrestrial, it ceases to flow when the being ceases to live. *Wairua* is the eternal aspect of being and remains connected to the unseen, spiritual realm: terrestrial and celestial. It is the aspect of our human being that enables us to commune with spiritual beings—for good or ill.

*Mana* is what you see when these things are activated and at work in a person's life. It is our charisma, in the spiritual sense of the word—our divine grace. For Māori, and no doubt many other indigenous peoples, a person's *mana* is recognised by their community and ascribed to the person by the community—you can't claim it for yourself. You can do things that affect the community and lose *mana* and you can do things for the community and gain *mana*. The more *mana* you are recognised for, the higher the status you have in the community and greater is the responsibility for the community's wellbeing you carry.

Simply translating *mana* as "honour" or "respect" does a disservice to the concept. If a person is recognised has having great *mana*, it is because their life-force, talent and spiritual giftedness is recognised and endorsed by the community. Furthermore, the benefits of having *mana* make you want to defend your *mana* to ensure it is not unfairly tainted. If it is then you are compelled to seek retribution as if something dear had been stolen from you. Traditionally, your very life could depend on your *mana* being reclaimed.

When translated into Western concepts Industrials know that these psychological and personality dimensions exist, it is part of their lived experience, but shallow roots do not enable them to explain why they exist, let alone identify the source of our being.

This deficit is being increasingly felt in the Industrial domain. So-called "New Age" expressions of spirituality and a rise in the pursuit of mysticism in Industrial societies reflects a yearning for what philosopher Charles Taylor calls "re-enchantment", a desire to reclaim a spiritual sense of the world. The increase of

supernatural and super hero fantasy in the entertainment industry from the 80's reflects a shift away from the enlightenment rationalism that disenchanting reality. Fair warning here: dabbling in the spiritual realm without the checks and balances of religious disciplines and relationships leads to very real danger, but that's beyond the scope of this presentation.

### 3. Ethical Implications

That said, the default Industrial perspective is still very much limited to the material or physical realm, with little understanding or appreciation of the unseen influences from the spiritual realm. It is most common to see Industrial visitors to Indigenous contexts treat spiritually informed practices with some condescension, or at least some confusion. They might genuinely feel moved by the Indigenous passionate belief, but will most often write off the practices as needless superstition. We see that here with Pākehā rolling their eyes and checking their watches over tikanga Māori.

Rarely can an Industrial thinker move beyond the position of an observer to experience the world of the Indigenous as a participant. You may think this unnecessary for trade, but until you are able to accept and, to some degree navigate, spiritual realities you will never fully be able to connect with and understand Indigenous colleagues, nor appreciate their expectations from your relationship—which reach far beyond business metrics as we will see.

#### 3.1 Morality — a social construct

My point is that appreciating a life-force and spiritual connection between all things in relationship with a Creator or Ultimate Source changes ethical boundaries and adds a new dimension to the idea of "wholistic". My ethics are not determined by human norms, economic priorities, or social constructs. The ethic of my faith community is a transcendent ethic, rooted and revealed in the character of God, with the Bible as the interpreter of our experience of God.

Morality on the other hand is socially constructed. Morality is the way we apply ethics to our lives and that changes according to context, which I don't have time to tease out here.

Suffice to say, when it comes to ethics, in my faith community, we understand that a core character of God is fidelity—faithfulness. Among many other characteristics, God is faithful and this shapes what we understand love to be: a selfless continual commitment to another's well-being. Even the Industrial domain's understanding of marriage is still based on this, at least as an ideal.

Fidelity in relationships is core and common to the Indigenous experience and it cannot be underestimated as a motivator in any intercultural relationship, especially trade relationships. Because fidelity has to do with maintaining relational connections, which for the Indigenous holds deep spiritual significance related to the interweaving of life-forces. In kaupapa Māori this is whanaungatanga, encompassing concepts like aroha, awahi, and manaakitanga, which is remarkably similar to the concept of Ubuntu in parts of Africa.

### 3.2 Agreements — contracts or covenants

So roots will... always determine fruit. Rooted in a utilitarian ethic, traders from Industrial domains naturally view relationships in transactional terms. It is deeply ingrained. Remember, for Industrials, reality is somewhat mechanical and only material, people are individuated, and components within the system are open to be manipulated.

With the material world manipulatable what remains is access—access to the material one requires to create what others desire in order to generate more wealth. This is business 101. Typically, the way access is obtained is via a contract—"if you do this for me I will do this for you and if we are both satisfied with the anticipated outcome, we are agreed, sign here". If this sounds normal, reasonable and ethical to you, you are likely from the Industrial domain, which is viewed through a transactional lens, where relationships are contractually based. Once the objective is achieved or conditions as not satisfactorily met, the relationship naturally dissolves.

For the Indigenous this is far from the case. Relationships are their driving motivation because they infer, whether consciously or unconsciously, a spiritual connection that has no end—unless you break faith, but even then, the ideal is to reconcile.

Time is not money for the Indigenous. It is an opportunity to build relationship connections. Relationships create influence. Influence increases status and one's status is the thing that draws material wealth like water down a hosepipe of relationship.

For the Indigenous, transactions do not create wealth from profits you generate by adding mark-ups. No. Transactions are a means to strengthen your relationships, further binding you to one another in mutual obligations and reciprocated responsibilities. This is a very spiritual dynamic, a weaving together of two life-forces which synergistically creates power greater than the sum of the parts.

In contrast to a contractual engagement, this is a covenantal commitment. If you have understood this

even a little you might be able to understand why Indigenous participants in an intercultural relationship can be deeply *deeply* grieved when an Industrial decides the contract has concluded and severs the connection. It is akin to a divorce, or a death.

Industrials take for granted that agreed payment for services-rendered or products supplied is the fulfilment of the contract. The Indigenous tend not see it that way. Rather, they could be forgiven for feeling objectified and used as a commodity. What Industrials often don't understand is that it is not about how much money was paid or how high the standard of living increased during the transaction period. Nor is lament primarily about the loss of financial reward. It is the visceral gut-level grief over a spiritual tie being severed.

Industrials say, that's superstitious nonsense. Indigenous say, that's our core reality and can point to the devastating effects of the broken pledge—you only need look at the effects of the breach of the Treaty of Waitangi for Māori to appreciate this. I believe a counterpoint is possible and understanding can be gained, so long as participants from both domains stay in the conversation. Because it's about more than money or wealth that you cannot take with you beyond the grave. The Indigenous will argue, from experience, that only relationships are eternal—he tangata.

Another way of viewing trade relationships between these two epistemé is the Indigenous view of the Industrial moneybags as a patron. Patron/client relationships are deeply complex, with expectations on the patron from the client that few Industrials will be aware of. Patronage can be a very healthy relationship model—if viewed holistically.

### 3.3 Applications — how we respond

I have deliberately accentuated, generalised and idealised the contrast between an Industrial and Indigenous perspective. But life is never so clear cut. Still, understanding some of the biases helps us better appreciate differences even if they are not as clearly defined as I have set described it here. In organisational psychology individualism and collectivism is set on a values spectrum and Industrial and Indigenous people are scattered all along the continuum between the two extremes. The very fact that we live in Aotearoa New Zealand, identified (incorrectly I believe) as one of the most individualistic nations in the world, we are deeply influenced by an Indigenous epistemé. When we live this close we cannot help but rub off against each other.

When exposed to vastly different realities overseas, I think it brings out the best in Kiwis. Sir Ed Hillary would be a fine example in our national psyche of a





patron who fostered a wholistic ethic with his enduring relationship with the Sherpa. I cannot say how spiritually aware he was in the relationship but the fruit suggests the roots went deeper than most Industrials. He adopted a strong sense of responsibility for the relationship in reciprocal fashion. Over there his life was in their hands. Back here he remained conscious of their life struggles and the power he had to help.

Any relationship we engage in, whether it be commercial, educational, religious, diplomatic, or even

military, we must remain conscious of the full gamut of ethical responsibility. I am looking forward to seeing the documentary “Soldiers without Guns” because I suspect the military response it documents resonates with the wholistic ethics I am encouraging here—spiritually aware, rooted in relationship, seeking harmony, allowing hurts to be aired and revealing along the way the limits of the Industrial perspective so that the concerns of the Indigenous can be understood, appreciated and healed.

## Conclusion

I hope this brief glimpse into these two epistemic or knowledge domains proves helpful for you who are pursuing ethical trade relationships with overseas suppliers, as well as people who participate in your supply chain. If you want to promote a high and wholistic ethical standard you are taking on a significant responsibility, which is very difficult to maintain at scale. May your ideals be fuelled with much wisdom and great sensitivity, and may your rewards be eternal.

For we who participate as consumers, our relationship with the providers of the products we use and consume is also a vital one. The Fair-Trade lobby has taught us that we customers have power to demand ethical standards from companies that have earned our trust. We have a responsibility to manage those relationships well too. They may not be as spiritually connected as the interpersonal relationships experienced by frontline traders or entrepreneurs—or maybe they are; food for thought—but they are more than merely transactional. More power to us there.

For all of us, as we go about our daily lives may we take care to nurture all relationships, not just in our personal lives but also our professional ones. I pray that this session will help you extend your roots a little deeper and your mind a little broader toward the vital life-force that most of the world believes sustains us. As you do so, in all your relationships may you experience the Creator there in such a way that you are forever changed. Ma te Atua e manaaki ki a koutou—the goodness of God be to you all.

And remember: roots... will always determine fruit.

As the waiata by my whanaunga, Canon Wiremu Te Tau Huata of Ngati Kahungunu, encourages us—let us make an effort to align ourselves together in unified fashion, all seeking mutual enlightenment and love.

Tūtira mai ngā iwi	Look this way together, people
Tātou tātou e	All of us, all of us.
Tūtira mai ngā iwi	Align together, people
Tātou tātou e	All of us, all of us.
Whaia te maramatanga	Seek after enlightenment
Me te aroha - e ngā iwi!	and love of others - everybody!
Kia tapatahi,	Think as one,
Kia kotahi rā.	Act as one.
Tātou tātou e	All of us
Tātou tātou e.	All of us.

The All Black supporters’ version of this song can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxorRtINRTc>