



Indigenous Future of Missions

Authority, Indigeneity, & Hybridity

A seminar presented to Global Connections UK February 14th, 2022, via Zoom.

This seminar provides a thumbnail sketch overview of some of the issues arising from Jay's exploration of two global epistemic domains: Indigenous and Industrial, and the significance of these schema to the current state of Evangelical world missions. The title is not meant to suggest that the future of missions will 'only' experience changes around the issues of indigeneity, but, since historic evidence shows that world Christianity spreads as indigenous faith, Jay believes the future of missions will be significantly influenced by centring the local and allowing indigenous values to guide the practice of missions forward into a healthier intercultural experience.

Kia ora (a greeting of life blessing)! As is my Māori custom I am obliged to formally introduce myself according to my background. For the sake of time, I'll just give you the short version... *Kia tau te aroha noa ki a koutou me te rangimarie, he mea na te Atua na to matou Matua, na te Ariki hoki, na Ihu Karaiti* (Grace and peace to you all in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ). *E nga Rangatira i hui hui nei. Nga mihi nui kia koutou katoa* (Most respected leaders, I greet you all very warmly). *Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa* (Three times greetings to you all). *Ko Jay Matenga ahau, ki te iwi Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa moana, a te tonga o te ika a Maui* (I am Jay Matenga of the Maori tribe: Ngāti Kahungunu of lake Wairarapa—at the lower end of the North Island of New Zealand).

Introduction

Ti hei mauri ora! (This is the life force). Today, the vital life force comes to us today through James 1:2-4 (NIV)

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

As some of you will already know, I speak to you as person that is indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand. I am Māori by my father's line, whose father, my paternal grandfather, had only Māori heritage. But I was raised in the home of my mother and stepfather, both of European descent. I was educated as a white person under my stepfather's surname, which I held for the first part of my life. That I was a white person went without question due to my skin tone and stepfather's 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 have learned to embrace my hybridity.

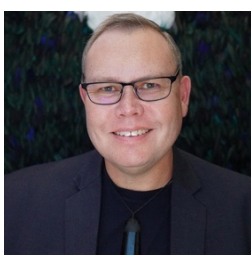
The story of discovering my indigenous roots is a complex one, and it is beyond the scope of this presentation. Suffice it to say, it involved Ghanaian and Zambian brothers recognising that I seemed understand

them at an intuitive level in a way that our Western colleagues did not. One of them said to me after one meeting, "Jay, you have a white face... but you have an African heart!"

That started me thinking, which ultimately led to me tracking down and bonding with my dear dad, who passed away at the end of April 2021. He fully embraced me and formally blessed me with our Māori heritage that stretches back 22 identifiable generations to the waka or canoe that first brought us to Aotearoa New Zealand from the Eastern Pacific islands about 700 years ago.

In every way, we are indigenous. If not technically to Aotearoa New Zealand, then at least to the South Pacific. Indigenous may mean "people of the land", but we are also a seafaring people so I reckon it should mean "people of the environment". But when I speak of the future of missions as being indigenous, I'm not specifically speaking of those who the UN define as indigenous peoples. It includes them, but my use of the term is much broader.

In this presentation I am going to lead us along three streams and then interconnect them as I close. First, we'll touch on issues of authority. Then I'll explain something of what I call indigeneity. And finally, I will



Jay  Matenga

Dr Jay Mātenga is the author of "Mutuality of Belonging: Towards Harmonizing Culturally Diverse Missions Groups" and co-author of "Mission in Motion: Speaking Frankly of Mobilization". Jay is the Executive Officer for Missions Interlink NZ, the Director of the World Evangelical Alliance's Global Witness Dept. and also serves as the Executive Director for the WEA's Mission Commission. Jay maintains a blog and publishes his articles on his website: <https://jaymatenga.com>.



all too quickly identify hybridity as the desirable outcome of missions for the participants.

Authority

Speaking about the natives, nationals, locals, or indigenous people is not a new thing in missions. In fact, from the early decades of the Evangelical missions movement, the development of an indigenous church was right up there in priority for most missionary sending agencies. We only need to think of the methodologies that Roland Allen popularised in the 20th century from the architecture Henry Venn developed in the 19th to see that they were passionate about releasing local agency as much as possible, albeit within an imperial framework. In Venn's case it was an increasingly global Anglican denomination. Less so the congregationalist Rufus Allen, who also promoted local autonomy of newly created churches and was in conversation with Venn.

Local autonomy may have been the ideal of influential missions administrators, but as we have probably all experienced, the ideal rarely becomes the reality. Have you ever tried to get expatriate missionaries to submit to local church leadership? For some denominational missions it might be compulsory, but it is not an easy ask for the missionaries. So it has always been. There is a superiority about the one who is sent, and it chafes them to be considered subordinate to leaders among those who receive.

The three-self type of autonomy of the local church sounds fine in theory, but in most traditional missions strategies, it was imagined to be the final phase of establishing Christianity in a region... to be put into play once the church was, quote unquote, mature enough and the missionaries were ready to go home. Or, at least, with the missionaries still in the superior, so-called Apostolic role, of the St Paul kind.

As J D Payne has implicitly re-emphasised in his very recently released book *Apostolic Imagination*, missionaries tend to view themselves as apostles. This is what we are taught. Missions education typically suggests, implicitly or explicitly, that ALL those who go, are apostolos; or sent-ones. Technically, that may be valid, but the technical meaning of the Greek is easily lost. Regardless, whether it is meant with 'a/A' in the lower-case or upper, the message received is the same... missionaries are the ones with the authority.

Granted, we have authority to convey the message, that much is clear in Scripture. We are teachers in the sense that we're authorised news readers. But that does not translate to authority *over* those with whom we share the message. The New Testament Apostles, and those

who are appointed to lead by a denomination, may claim such authority ascribed to them, but this should not be the assumed posture of every missionary or supposed church planter who leaves their homeland to go and live in another's. My point here is not to debate apostleship but to highlight this issue of authority-over and imposition-upon, because it is central to my belief that the future of missions is indigenous.

As a theologian of missions practice, when I survey a topic with tight time constraints such as this, with such a broad sweep, I can be accused of hyper generalising and unfairly stereotyping. Fair enough. I will be the first to admit, and tell of, the exceptions to the norm that I am proposing. But I have heard and experienced enough from the underside of missions to say that a misplaced sense of authority is indeed a persistent norm, and not one restricted to those who serve from traditional sending nations. I am not just talking about ethnocentrism here. It runs much deeper than a superior view of one's own culture. Regardless of their country of origin, transboundary missionaries carry an implicit sense of superiority of self that is not scripturally warranted because, while we may be sent and go, we are not all Apostles (with the upper-case A).

It is time to flip the script and centre the local. To put authority in the hands of the recipients of the gospel and allow the gospel to take root and grow endemically, indigenous to its new context.

For the so called 'new normal' period ahead of us, a lot of airtime is being given to the need for fresh innovation in missions. But I firmly believe innovation will arise, indeed it *is* arising, from local guardianship. According to the likes of Sanneh, Walls, Kim & Kim, and Zurlo & Johnson, the Church that has spread and grown around the world has always been an indigenous Church. The innovation is happening. If we cannot see it, perhaps we blinded to it because we're not in control of it.

That is material for another discussion. For now, let me move on to describing what I mean by indigenous. Locals guarding their authority is an essential aspect of the core concept of 'indigenous', in terms of the upholding their right to self-determination, but for me indigenous is more a values-set than it is a location.

Indigenicity

As I said, the term Indigenous literally means, "of the land". So, it implies connection to a specific location. In many contexts this word has attracted a negative sense that diminished the dignity of people who were considered to be indigenous. It was treated like the concepts of 'primitive', 'underdeveloped', 'uncivilised', or (the concept I love to hate) 'animist'. The indigenous

were seen as inferior by their colonisers, and in many cases still are considered that way. In recent times, however, the term has gained higher status and there is a sense of pride returning to the idea of being 'indigenous'.

Rather than it remaining problematic for its past connotations in colonialism and even missions thinking, I believe it's time to revive the word and add new meaning to it in keeping with the way it's being used in the decolonisation process of indigenous people themselves.

My use of the word 'indigenous' in a revised missiological sense builds on the UN definition of indigeneity and adds to it the integrated values of people throughout the world who have a collectivist orientation. I contrast an Indigenous ecology of knowing (Indigenous epistemé) with the one that is dominated by an individualist perspective, which I call the Industrial ecology of knowing (Industrial epistemé).

Rather than speak of the Western world and the Majority, Developing, Third, or non-Western world, highlighting their geographic, demographic, or economic divisions, I prefer to see the world as a schema of two major complex knowledge domains or epistemic ecosystems: Indigenous and Industrial, with overlapping influence and hybridization developing between the two.

So, the Indigenous domain is more about a set of values and a way of seeing the world, rather than a specific geography. While they might be formed in a particular place, values are held and passed on by the Indigenous that transcend their location of origin or, if remaining in the land, development in their own nations (via the 'modernisation' process). Dislocated and migrant people can find it difficult to retain their collectivist identity over time, but it is not impossible. Our convictions and values continue with us long after we have left the land that nurtured us or our forebears. So, I include all collectivist-oriented peoples under the category of "Indigenous" because there are so many commonalities shared by people whose culture is still very much guided by the ideals, the principles, priorities, and responsibilities of a collective.

In contrast to the Indigenous, those categorised as Industrial belong to, or have adapted to, Western industrial enlightenment philosophies that have so influenced politics, education and commerce around the world that they can no longer be geographically linked to the Euro-American (Colonial) West. Successive generations of formerly collectivist people, educated in Western-styled universities and living in urban centres, have become hybridized to individualist Industrial values to some degree. The anthropologically savvy might be tempted to think 'enculturated' when I

mention hybridize, but don't make too many assumptions just yet.

Industrial values, arising out of Western Enlightenment-dualism, continue to be the dominant influencer on the world stage, but the crises that COVID-19 has accelerated are exposing the inadequacies of these values. The collectivist values of the Indigenous are coming into focus as a way forward, with potential to provide solutions to problems such as poverty, pollution, and political upheaval.

Let me try and concretise the difference between Indigenous and Industrial for you. In the Industrial epistemic ecology, relational expectations develop contractually, are transactional and usually productivity or outcome oriented. That's why the Western Church and her missions speak in terms of "partnership" and "team" and "working together". They are word pictures that assume autonomous agents in collaboration within an atomised or disconnected world. Groups formed and dominated by the individualist perspective hold together because of a common aim or objective. They are dependent on outcome. The relationship is one of applying one's resources (which are owned by the individual contributor) toward the achievement of a task, and the reward is individually meritorious.

The Indigenous knowledge ecology is a counterpoint to this. It is a spiritually connected collective understanding of reality where the social agreement is covenantal, mutual, reciprocal, and familial. The outcome is less important than the relationship building process undertaken along the way. Sharing is more important than acquisition. Very little is individually possessed, and nothing is autonomous. Everything is interconnected and affected by human agency. There is a conscious responsibility to nurture and foster growth in creation and each other, not to consume and manipulate. The Indigenous seek to honour and value and give toward the common good.

Hybridity

My framing of the differences throws a bit of shade on the Industrial and light on the Indigenous, but I feel that is necessary to nudge a bit of equity into the situation. You may have noticed that I mentioned Indigenous as a counterpoint. That's because I see these two systems of knowing and experiencing the world as ultimately needing to work together, in harmony, where they hold each other in creative tension. But to do that, you need to first find the equilibrium.

The image here is of tuning an instrument string. Any stringed musician will know that a harmonic note requires tuned tension. So it is with our relationships of



difference, the key is to hold the tension and find the transformative harmony. You cannot create tension if one side or the other is slack or has too much pull. To switch back to the ecosystem metaphor, you do not get transformative growth if there is too much dominance or too much resistance between the ecologies. This applies to a marriage or a friendship as much as it does to the interaction between Indigenous and Industrial knowledge ecologies, or the sent-one and the recipient.

In environmental biology, ecologists identify a space where two distinctive domains meet and integrate as an *ecotone*. 'Eco' referring to the environment and 'tone' from the Greek 'tonos' referring to stress or tension. Here we have an intersect of the musical and ecological metaphors. In these ecotone spaces, where two distinct biological communities intersect, quite distinct species have been found, along with hybridized species. This is a fair parallel to the new type of life that can emerge from the meeting of different epistemic domains.

An epistemic ecotone is an innovative space, but when encountered it is an uncomfortable space, and it is meant to be. Remember, you can only create harmony by tuning and holding tension. Consider it joy, James says, when this happens because as you persevere it matures you. The troubles he wrote of were internal to the fellowship, not external to it. In fact, I believe that interpersonal tensions are the primary way the Holy Spirit transforms us "by the renewing of the mind". We don't have the time to unpack that, but it is a fascinating way of looking at Romans 12:1-2 in light of all of

Conclusion

My time is almost gone, I need to wind to a close. This is an all too brief overview, probably covering much more ground than expected from the subject title. But to weave it all together, I believe we need to start reframing our transboundary ministries as opportunities for co-learning. To see missions as an opportunity for us to share the message we have authority in Christ to share, but then explore the meaning of that message together as the recipient grapples with what it means for them in their context, and let it challenge what we assumed it meant from our context.

When I speak about letting even the newest of indigenous believers be the guardians for the gospel for their context, the most common reaction expressed is the fear of syncretism. But I can't help wondering if syncretism is a strawman of a supposed superior position. Don't get me wrong, part of the authority to share the message is to unpack or teach the message well, but not to hold authority over the recipients interpretation and integration of the message and its outcomes.

Global missions needs to shed itself of its confidence in the Eurocentric theological consensus. It is not the only way of following Jesus. Majority world churches continue to struggle to emancipate themselves from this consensus. By all means, let us hold Scripture in the highest regard and hold to the doctrines of historic orthodoxy, but that leaves a lot of wiggle room for indigeneity in interpretation. And, to the point of this presentation, when we learn to learn from one another across the epistemic domains, in the tensions of difference, we will discover new things about our God that would have never occurred to us if we had stayed in our hermetically sealed theological bubbles. Today we call those "echo-chambers". And you cannot create harmony with an echo.

Equalising authority, amplifying indigeneity, and embracing the benefits of hybridity are some core ingredients that I believe need to be put in the mix of a new imaginary for the future of missions ahead of us—an indigenous future—so that, we will be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Romans 12, among many other passages that point to interpersonal/cultural conflict as having a sanctifying and maturing purpose.

Rather than speak of enculturation, which is, more or less, adapting to the norms of another culture, I am speaking here of deep personality-changing transformation happening within the encounter with difference. A change that happens for *all* involved, if the tension is equitable; and it requires holding that tension or sitting in it long enough for change to happen, for something innovative to emerge. It doesn't happen when you wield authority over the other, and it doesn't happen when you resist the affect another is having on you. It happens when you yield, give way. This is the essence of kenosis, but that's yet another conversation.

The science of interpersonal neurobiology is proving this process. It's at the heart of what psychologists are discovering about post-traumatic wellbeing. Sudden and prolonged exposure to a crisis has the potential to mature us in ways we do not expect. Sudden and prolonged exposure *to people not like us*, hybridizes us in the ecotone. If this makes you think of culture shock, you'd be right. The shock creates the tension but as we tune the tension over time, we change. Only the most buffered long-term missionary returns from the field and fits right back into their home country. No, almost all missionaries become hybridized. Not enculturated. It's a much deeper and more transformative change than that. It is a metamorphosis.