

Reading the Environment

Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Communicating in Context

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The Aleut Way

Kuuyux was born of the sea lion people, the Aleut, in the Pribiloff islands off the coast of mainland Alaska.¹ Their people have lived for over 10,000 years around what Europeans call the Bering Sea. This region and the island on which Kuuyux's immediate family, great grandparents, great-great grandparents, and great-great-great grandparents are buried is the sea lion people's history book, containing thousands of years of memory and knowledge. It is from this people that the sixty nine Aleutian Islands get their name. Kuuyux's name means "to extend", like when your arm reaches out from your body. He was not given this name until he had seen four annual cycles. An elder of the same name came searching for a successor and found the child, he was the next Kuuyux.

The generation among which Kuuyux was born was the last generation to have lived immersed in their traditional upbringing. That meant that he spent an equal amount of time living in each different segment of the community. He went berry picking with the women; hunting and fishing with the men; and camping with the elders, listening to the ancient stories passed down from generation to generation.

He spent a two year period 24 hours every day with his grandfather—eating, sleeping, working, and learning. The days began and ended in worship. Ritual washing in the sea while chanting prayers facing east to the sunrise, and attending liturgy at the Russian Orthodox Church in the evening; each integrated into their connection with the spiritual world, weaving together the creation and Creator in whom they live, move, and have their being.

Kuuyux was traditionally educated by an Aachaa as he grew. His Aachaa adopted him as a five year old learner. Each Aleut was disciplined by one of the elder Aachaa from a young age. The Aachaa taught all about Aleut life: about relationships with people, both within and outside of the tribe; about hunting and other gender appropriate skills; about the tribe's expectations on him as a man and, eventually, a leader; and about their relationship to and understanding of nature. During his training, between the age of 5 and 13, Kuuyux's Aachaa may have said no more than 200 words to him. For the Aleut, words are traditionally thought to be

¹ Kuuyux is otherwise known as Larry (Ilarion) Merculieff. This story is drawn from an interview with David E. Hall in 2007, published under the title "Native Perspectives on Sustainability: Larry Merculieff (Aleut)" from http://www.nativeperspectives.net/Transcripts/Larry_Merculieff_interview.pdf (accessed 13 September, 2024). Also available from Merculieff, Ilarion (Larry); Roderick, Libby. 2013. *Stop Talking: Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning and Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education*. Anchorage, AK: University of Alaska. Available from: https://ctl.oregonstate.edu/sites/ctl.oregonstate.edu/files/stop_talking_final.pdf (accessed 13 September, 2024).

superfluous. They inhibit and diminish a person's understanding of things that should be intuitive, natural to a person's inherent intelligence—what the Aleut consider to be the authentic or real human person.

The Aleut traditionally thrive living a deeply integrated existence, embodying a high regard for relationships, reciprocity, and concern for generations into the future. They live off the land and the sea with restraint, taking care not to take more than they require for their own sustenance. Even when picking flowers for dyes, they pick every seventh blossom so as to not exhaust one particular patch. They walk through their world with a heightened sense of reverence for the entire ecology, relating to their surroundings as one would commune with a relative, with great care, sacred concern, for mutual benefit.

In Kuuyux's words,

“A single action of walking across the tundra... has major implications for insects, has implications for plants, it has implications for everything that interacts with that. It has implications for that land and that particular area in which we walk. One has to be very deeply aware, not in a mental sense, but in an embodied sense of awareness, which is very difficult to explain in Western terms what that really means. But, basically, it's a level of intimate and profound connection whereby the human body is in alignment and in harmony with the environment which we're in. There's an intelligence inherent in us, that if we allow it to go, and we don't function simply from the head, allow it to operate, will bring us more into alignment with creation.”²

Kuuyuk laments the way his traditional way of life and living in the world is being rapidly depreciated by external forces. The human being is being replaced by human doings. Modern humans have become agents of transformation rather than guardians of preservation.

Traditionally, Aleut knowledge is shared in context with information transferred by life on life lived experiences, from generation to generation through an embodied system of learning that involves the reinforcing use of language, storying, singing, dancing, acting, thinking, imagining, speaking, and relational interaction with a conscious acknowledgement of the vital essence of what it means to be human—the life force of creation. Modern humanity, in contrast, is marked by a radical sense of disconnection, with the illusion of being autonomous subjects in an objectified world. Traditional humanity, like Kuuyuk's, retains a sacred sense of unity, being one with lived reality—material and spiritual. Everything is interrelationally connected, designed for mutual benefit.

From the age of five, Kuuyuk would go hunting sea lion with the men, accompanied by his Aachaa. Sea lions wintered in the ocean because it was warmer, but the hunt was conducted from land because the sea was dangerous at that time of the year. The men would sit for hours on end waiting for the appropriate time to strike a prize. While waiting, they would never zone-out. Their entire attention was focused on the sea,

² Hall, David E. 2007. “Native Perspectives on Sustainability: Larry Merculieff Aleut”.
http://www.nativeperspectives.net/Transcripts/Larry_Merculieff_interview.pdf (accessed 13 September, 2024)

constantly aware and attuned to the micro changes in their environment. With time enough to ready themselves, veteran hunters would always know when a sea lion was about to emerge before it could be seen. Kuuyuk learned that using one's entire human being, full embodied intelligence, allowed an almost supernatural sense of perception. In reality it is fully natural. It is an intelligence that does not just use one's head but all of the senses: eyes, ears, smell, skin, deep intuition, physical equilibrium on the earth, all working together synergistically to read their environment.

Kuuyuk recalls that as young as six cycles old he ventured beneath the cliffs where tens of thousands of sea birds nested. He went before sunrise because he wanted to watch the birds launch into flight. He soon started to recognise different species and their various ways of flying. When they launched it was chaotic as each took its own route at different speeds to find their preferred height, yet not once did Kuuyuk see two birds collide or even touch wings. From this experience the young explorer realised that the birds knew something the hunters had learned: to be completely present and intensely alive, distracted by nothing, only fully engaged senses and a wide field of awareness.

Six year old Kuuyuk decided to try being fully present the next time he went hunting with the men. He sat with them, hour after hour, eradicating thoughts from his mind so he could remain fully aware of his surroundings. Hearing the rhythm of the ocean swell, the wind lashing against his face, and time passing by tempted to lull him into a distracted reverie, but he fought to remain totally attentive to the slightest shift in his surroundings, ready for that 30 second window, enough time to prepare a strike when a sea lion emerged. He knew he had successfully attained this state of total awareness when he began to feel their totem mammal approaching.

By the time he was eleven he was able to skipper his own motorised skiff out on the Bering Sea to fish for halibut. He would often be ten miles offshore during an expedition. By that age he had learned to read the winds, tides, currents, knew about safety, and how to navigate the thickest fog without the need for mechanical navigation aids. In a region that is fortunate to get twenty days of sunshine a year, understanding how to live with inherent intelligence is essential for ocean survival. Their expert maritime navigating ability afforded the Aleut the privilege of travelling all over the Pacific Ocean, as far east as South America, south to the South Pacific islands, west to Kamchakta and Siberia.

Once Kuuyuk had mastered his ability to remain profoundly connected to his environment, he could feel the energy of the ocean, its tensions, differences in colour, variations of rhythm, the vital life force of creation as tangible as electricity coursing through him. In the most adverse of circumstances he would always know his location. The ocean, the weather, the appearance of either sex of seal at a particular time of the day in a particular season, all spoke to him in a way that he could synthesize the information and know exactly where

he was. Kuuyuk explained this as a part of an indigenous³ person's spiritual consciousness and relationship with both creation and the Creator. A visceral sense of deep communion. Something very difficult to communicate and explain. It is genetically encoded, honed by learned experience, and those who have learned it can communicate on an entirely different plane. Words become superfluous. Literacy is irrelevant.

The Kūaka Connection

More than 80,000 kūaka, bar-tailed godwits, depart the Bering Sea region in autumn, flying due south non-stop for eight or nine days at an average of 56km/h (35mph), travelling more than 11,000km (6,835mi) to settle in Aotearoa New Zealand in spring. It is the longest single flight taken by any bird in the world. Their arrival to and departure from my homeland is increasingly commemorated, with throngs of people gathering at different sites around my nation to welcome and farewell the migrating visitors.

For traditional Māori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand, godwits were birds of mystery, thought to have come from or at least flown through the mythical homeland of Hawaiiki. Their regular seasonal visit granted them indigenous status and a place in ancient lore. The mystery formed around the fact that their origins were unknown. Kūaka were said to be children of Karihi, the grandson of the god of the seas, Tangaroa. In this telling, Kaitara is the mother of the kūaka. In Māori lore, Karihi and Kaitara are the parents of all sea birds that fly in flocks like the kūaka, like the tara (white fronted tern), and tōrea (oyster catcher). The Kūaka Project maintains that “In the formative period of living creatures on this earth it is said to have been the task of the kūaka to fly to the furthest seas to call together all sea birds to fight for a share of the harvest of river fish claimed by land birds.”⁴

An ancient Māori whakataukī (proverb) says, “Kua kite te kōhanga kūaka?” (Who has seen the nest of the godwit?). From the narrative of the kūaka's responsibility in Māori lore and the powerfully collective way the kūaka fly in v-formation, each pulling its own weight and alternating leadership at the air-breaking point of the v, this proverb encourages people to “take up your responsibilities”. The idea here is that even though their origins are unseen, the ancestors have prepared a way to live and it is for each generation to continue it, just as the kūaka's seasonal responsibility was to call the migrating birds to come to the land for their share of the summer bounty and participate in flight over the long haul.

My father's people may not have known where the kūaka came from, but Kuuyux's people had no idea where they would fly off to for the winter. The bar-tailed godwit connects our two indigenous realities to each another. Like the Aleut, Māori and other island peoples from Te Moana nui a Kiwa (the great ocean of

³ For the purposes of this contribution, the use of “indigenous” assumes the United Nations' definition. United Nations. 2004. *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples*. edited by Secretariat of the permanent forum on indigenous issues. New York: United Nations. Factsheet available online here:

https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf (accessed 10 September, 2024).

⁴ He Kūaka, Te Mana Kaha o Te Whānau. The Kūaka Project. <http://www.hekuaka.co.nz/the-kuaka-project/lessons-from-the-kuaka> (accessed 13 September, 2024).

high Chief Kiwa, the Pacific Ocean) also walked traditionally on the land and sea with heightened attentiveness, sharing many of the same indigenous values as our Arctic cousins. Our people were also expert mariners, navigating the great ocean highways by the swells, currents, temperature, colour, and other states of the seas, winds, creatures, and the steady reliability of the constellations of the southern hemisphere.

Knowledge, skills, values, and meaning were passed on much the same way as Kuuyux experienced it on the other side of our biosphere. Responsibility for creation, restraint in consumption (in so far as we could⁵), a deep interpersonal reliance on community, and a rich intuitive sense of the world is common to both peoples. That is not to say that the ravages of sin were absent. It was no utopian paradise.⁶ But there were ways and means to deal with behaviour that ripped apart relationships and disturbed the order of things.

That all changed of course when European colonisers finally figured out a way to navigate the southern seas without the aid of a pole star. By the time their technology enabled them to travel beyond their hemisphere, they were too powerful for our people to resist. From the point of first contact, when maps were drawn up and journals recorded every encounter, our way of living with deep intuition as one with creation began to diminish. The technology of ink on paper was a power that proceeded to shrink our reality to that which is plausible to the Western mind, the mind of our colonisers. And a much smaller world it is indeed.

The Means of Retention

Writing to record and transfer knowledge is obviously not unique to the European West, neither is it a recent technology. The skill dates back to the very cradle of civilisation in the northern hemisphere, from across the broadest span of Asia to North Africa, Southern Europe and eventually further north and west. Even Mesoamerican civilisations developed a glyphic form of record keeping. In the spread of peoples across the globe over time, however, the need to keep a material record of knowledge using a limited set of visual symbols was considered unnecessary for some. Other means of memory keeping and knowledge transfer were developed. Perhaps to note the obvious for the reader, indigenous memory specialist, Lynne Kelly, points out that,

“‘Illiterate’ people are those who cannot read while living in a society that uses writing. ‘Non-literate’ or ‘oral’ cultures are those that have no dependence upon writing... Cultures without any contact with writing at all are better referred to as ‘primary oral cultures’. It is the memory technologies of these cultures that are referred to as ‘primary orality’.”⁷

⁵ Māori are guilty of consuming entire species, like the moa, a giant emu-like bird now extinct. However, meat options were hard to come by as the population increased. There are no land mammals native to our nation and other birds were difficult to catch. For those living inland, where moa resided, hunting the large source of meat was a matter of survival. Human flesh was another viable option at the time, but consuming slaves was a costly alternative.

⁶ For example see, Moon, Paul. 2008. *This Horrid Practice: The Myth and Reality of Traditional Māori Cannibalism*. Auckland, NZ: Penguin Books.

⁷ Kelly, Lynne. 2024. *The Knowledge Gene: The Incredible Story Of The Supergene That Gives Us Human Creativity*. Melbourne, Australia: Allen & Unwin. Kindle Loc. Page 63 of 458.

Rather than encoding the structure of a language into a restricted set of symbols, the transmission forms developed elsewhere were far more dynamic and dependent on the communicator to bring meaning to the transmission. The recipients then needed to be educated how to effectively decode the meaning. Thus, creating a tight insider culture where precious knowledge was protected from the uninitiated, the outsider.

The storehouse of ancient wisdom, knowledge, and memory was often guarded by a trusted few—usually spiritual leaders: shamans, priests, elders, or as Māori call them, tōhunga⁸. Tōhunga trained half a life-time to learn and recall, store and access, the esoteric library of the ancients. Receiving and using this library was a deeply spiritual pursuit with secrets so closely guarded that Māori tōhunga developed their own spiritual language to communicate with one another.⁹ Access to this knowledge by common people was forbidden. The process for obtaining it was sacred and everything about the learning and the people involved were tapu (holy, set apart, prohibited, restricted, from which we derive the Anglicised word, taboo).

That it was limited to only a few specialists, was a major weakness of this detailed means of memory-keeping and operating in the material and spiritual world as “fully human”, to use Kuuyux’s terms. Very soon after the coming of the Europeans to our shores, the arts of the tōhunga began to die out. Eurocentric Christianity was the primary cause as the gospel swiftly broke their spiritual power over the people. Young Māori were the primary evangelists, declaring that everyday normal people could have direct access to the spiritual power of the Holy Spirit through Jesus without the mediation of a specialist. Suddenly, curses lost their efficacy, mishandled taboos no longer resulted in physical harm, feuds were resolved as the people came to understand Jesus’ example and call for reconciliation. As many as ninety percent of the Māori population turned to follow Jesus in some form or another by 1852.¹⁰

Sadly, the proverbial baby was thrown out with the bathwater as the tōhunga rapidly lost influence. Tōhunga were not only practitioners of spiritual power, they were the repositories of ancient knowledge and skill. Contrary to missionary and settler opinion, “tōhunga” meant specialist, not shaman. They were the educated elite among the people and with the swift settlement and take-over of the land by English and other European colonists, mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) became prohibited and was systematically lost. Today the fragments are being spliced together as indigenous knowledge becomes much sought after in light of the dangers now apparent in industrialisation and the global crises the world is facing.

⁸ In her volumes, Lynne Kelly cites sources that incorrectly classify Māori knowledge keepers with tōhunga positioned on the bottom tier of a three-part hierarchy, with kaumatua (tribal elders) at the top. Typical of external anthropological research, this is a misunderstanding. The very concept of hierarchical stacking is a foreign paradigm imposed upon Māori social reality, interpreting complex honour systems by inappropriate Western framework categories.

⁹ Marsden, Maori and Royal, Te Ahukaramu Charles. 2003. *The Woven Universe: Selected Writings of Rev. Maori Marsden*. Otaki, NZ: Estate of Rev. Maori Marsden.

¹⁰ Falloon, Malcolm. 2020. *The Māori Conversion and Four Early Converts*. Otago, NZ: University of Otago. P71. The missionary endeavour began in earnest in New Zealand in 1823, the New Testament was translated by 1837, the full Bible in 1868 (see, <https://biblesociety.org.nz/discover-the-bible/the-bible-in-maori/> accessed 10 October 2024).

Prior to colonisation, tōhunga would disseminate mātauranga noa (profane, common, or unrestricted knowledge) to the masses required a variety a variety of means and methods. We have retained that much at least. As our language and culture experiences a renaissance, mātauranga noa is being widely celebrated and adopted. Yet, there remains much of worth, even to followers of Jesus, that has been lost, or at least very obscure.

For Māori, the most important things for everyone to know were encoded into waiata (song), karakia (chants), inoi (prayers), haka (dance), raranga (weaving), tukutuku (latticework panelling), and tikanga (customary protocols and practices). Whakairo (carving) of wood, stone, bone, or skin told stories of people and events, as did the whenua, the physical environment around the settlements, including the fauna and flora.¹¹ Like Kuuyux, my people have a traditionally intimate relationship with our environments. One evidence of this is that the placenta/afterbirth is called “whenua”, associating the environment with the sustaining role of the placenta in the mother’s womb. After a successful birth, the placenta is buried in the baby’s turangawaewae (standing place, place of belonging), forever cementing the person’s relationship with the land of their forebears.

I grew up in my turangawaewae, under a range of three oblong hills shaped like upturned waka (canoes) some distance away to the east of town. From North to South each of the hills is larger than the previous. The hills form part of the Aorangi ranges which rise to the south into a rounded mountain. These land features serve a mnemonic purpose to recall the discovery of Aotearoa New Zealand by the great maritime navigator Kupe, the name Aotearoa (land of the long white cloud) said to have been coined by his wife, Kuramārotini. The upturned canoe-like hills are called ngā waka o Kupe (the canoes of Kupe) and the rounded mountain at the southern end of the range is known by my people as Tuhirangi (literally, a mark on the horizon).

Tuhirangi was the name given to a great sea serpent, thought to be a massive octopus or squid that was exhausting the ocean food supply of people in the eastern Pacific Islands, most likely in or near the Cook Islands. The great chief Kupe decided to hunt the beast somewhere around AD1000, chasing it beyond the horizon to the south and west. Tuhirangi led Kupe and his crew on a merry chase around the ocean, eventually succumbing to the hunters in the strait between what became known as Te Ika a Māui (New Zealand’s North Island, the Māori name of which represents the fish of Māui, evoking an entirely different and much more mythical story) and Te Wai Pounamu (New Zealand’s South Island, known for its precious pounamu, nephrite jade, carved mostly for ceremonial use).

It is said that Kupe and his fellows pulled their waka (canoes) up onto the land and went exploring. Stories of Kupe’s exploits are written on the landscape throughout the region. In addition to the previously described mountain range, for example, two triangular patches of light coloured cliff, shaped like sails, recall the story of a competition between Kupe and his companion Ngake to weave the best sail for their return voyage.

¹¹ Haami, B. 2004. *Pūtea Whakairo: Māori and the Written Word*. Wellington, NZ: Huia.

Kupe was the faster sailmaker and won, but both sails were hoisted onto the side of the hill as a memorial visible still today.¹² Using environmental markers such as these enabled my ancestors to pass down oral history from one generation to the next. Each story contained rich repositories of knowledge for practical application, wellbeing, and existential peace as meaning and cultural significance was conveyed in the repeated creative showing and telling.

Australian scholar Lynne Kelly is a researcher in indigenous memory and oral history transmission, drawing on the ancient ways of knowing among Australian Aboriginal peoples. In “The Memory Code”¹³ she too affirms the legitimacy of land forms and physical space as aids to historiographical recall. She argues that ritual, myth, customary practices, and ancient monuments did not have a purely (or solely) religious or ceremonial use, as Western interpreters have traditionally posited. They were also highly practical for conveying information that would ensure the survival and wellbeing of the people.

Kelly maintains that knowledge required for an oral society’s survival could not be effectively understood and transmitted from generation to generation through abstract rote learning, repetition, and memorization of raw facts. It needed to be concretised and encoded into lived experience with its recall triggered by external stimuli. Kelly quotes Eileen Mc Dinny of the Yanyuwa people living in the Northern Territory of the land now known as Australia, who explained that, “Everything got a song, no matter how little, it’s in the song—name of plant, birds, animal, country, people, everything got a song.”¹⁴ Using mnemonics like songs, poems, chants, dramatic stories, and visual cues from their environments, indigenous people have learned the ability to retain large storehouses of knowledge without the need to memorize taxonomical data. Literate societies, in contrast, struggle greatly, as Kelly attests,

“Despite being active in natural history groups, I know no one today who could identify all the insects they may encounter even with a guide book, let alone all animal species. Yet, that is common practice among indigenous people.”¹⁵

Kelly broadened the scope of her research in “The Knowledge Gene”¹⁶ where she argues that humans have a pre-encoded genetic ability to extend our memory capacity with creative methods and external aids. Literacy is an obvious example of an external aid, with use of digital technologies a more recent development, but there are many much more effective ancient forms that have been too readily dismissed by those from literate cultures, especially music, storytelling, and dance.

¹² See <https://teara.govt.nz/en/1966/kupes-sail> (accessed 10 October 2024).

¹³ Kelly, Lynne. 2016. *The Memory Code: The Traditional Aboriginal Memory Technique That Unlocks The Secrets Of Stonehenge, Easter Island, and Ancient Monuments The World Over*. Melbourne, Australia: Allen & Unwin.

¹⁴ Kelly, 2016. Kindle Loc. Page 3 of 335.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* (i.e. Kelly, 2016. Kindle Loc. Page 3 of 335).

¹⁶ Kelly, 2024.

While Kelly holds to an evolutionary scientific methodology, her concepts unravel the original evolutionist idea of a progressive civilisational hierarchy. This ethnocentric bias is being debunked as the knowledge encoding and transmission abilities of oral culture people are becoming better understood for their sophistication and validated as trustworthy. This should be considered good news for Christians, because much of what we hold to be true about the gospel and our faith in a triune God was passed on as oral tradition before being archived and passed on as written doctrines and sacred canon.

Our genetic capacity to extend our cognition with the assistance of method and technology has important ramifications for an increasingly digital and virtual society as confidence in the written word (think: fake news) and even photorealistic stills and video (as AI improves deep fakes) is eroding. Could it be that we will need to see the return of embodied interpersonal relationships as a factor in our knowledge transmission (i.e. education) in the future to ensure that what we are receiving is trustworthy and true? Perhaps too, the material environment around us should once again be relied upon to help us retain important knowledge as the virtual world begins to warp our sense of reality.

The Limits of Literacy

In each of Kelly's books cited she spends a good amount of white space focusing on the skill of orators and artists as key knowledge guardians and transmitters. In "The Knowledge Gene" she explores the challenge that the use of abstract symbols known broadly as literacy has on the more dynamic disciplines of orators, performers and other artists. She observes that,

"For the vast majority of human existence, there was no writing. Our ancestors used a combination of three communication systems, superbly optimised to work together: language, music and art. ...all of these skills were ancient, innate, universal, uniquely human and so valuable that evolution ensured that the genetic mutations (neurofibromatosis type I gene) which enhanced them spread through us all, despite any vulnerability they might cause in a small proportion of people.

And then came writing...

Everywhere, writing sidelined music, art and our association of knowledge with spaces. As literacy took hold, humans continued to build monuments. They just aren't as mysterious anymore, because we have written records to tell us what they are. So we started calling them temples, palaces and cathedrals. Writing and scribes gradually took over the role of storing knowledge."¹⁷

Whenever Kelly writes about literacy (yes, the irony) there is a distinct tone of lament in her narrative. She reinforces the fact that public literacy and literacy as a civilising educational goal is a relatively recent phenomenon. Her historic survey concludes that "It was bureaucracy that drove the invention of writing. The sheer volume of data, and the boring nature of it, meant that memory alone was no longer sufficient."¹⁸ It

¹⁷ Kelly, 2024. Kindle Loc. Page 274 of 458.

¹⁸ Kelly, 2024. Kindle Loc. Page 276 of 458.

was not that less complex oral cultures did not have the intellectual capacity to read and write, but they did not have the need. When it was deemed beneficial, literacy could be quickly acquired, as Māori did, rapidly,¹⁹ but a cost followed...

“Writing meant you no longer needed ritual performance to retain information. Knowledge could be transmitted not only across space but also across time, with neither the writer nor a messenger being present. But it also lost the performative element, and this was a much greater loss than anyone realised.”²⁰

A big part of the loss was the loss of connection. Kelly goes on to compare libraries in literate cultures as “silos of generic information”²¹ severing the interconnectedness of knowledge about the world. Unlike Kuuyux and his people who walked lightly on the land as all indigenous people seek to do, literate people too easily treat creation without concern for the systemic repercussions of actions. Literacy effectively estranges us from what it means to be fully human in the way that indigenous pre-literate or primary orality people experienced the world.

This state of disconnection is a distinct hallmark of industrialisation, built as it is on a revived interest in Greek philosophy informing a particular type of Christian theology that served to reinforce a secularising impulse. Functional Deism grew, with an emphasis on the transcendence of God and neglect of the immanence of God, especially insofar as God being intimately involved, infused even, in the created order. Industrialisation rapidly emerged as literacy increased and the dissemination of ideas spread via improved printing techniques. Only relatively recently have we begun to see the damage done to the environment from this dissociative relationship with the material world, 250 years or so from the beginning of the industrial revolution. As I wrote in an editorial for Christian Daily International,

Most of us fail to comprehend the full extent of the dark side (of industrial globalization) because it is eclipsed by the narrative of good presented with the blinding light of a tactical nuke. To fill out the metaphor, we only need to wait for the invigorating blast to wash over us before we’ll see the devastation left in its wake. Don’t be fooled. None of us is innocent of this. We are all complicit.²²

As implied already, literacy also provides literate societies with an unhealthy sense of superiority, as if the literate person is at the apex of a civilisational hierarchy. The bright light of ethnocentrism blinds us to the rich value of oral tradition and knowledge keeping, to our detriment. As the metaphor above suggests, only when we have ceased to be enamoured with the energy created by the shock wave of our favoured world

¹⁹ With oral gospel transmission and acceptance there came an insatiable desire among Māori for literacy so that they could read (and interpret) Scripture for themselves in their own language, which had been reduced to writing no more than two decades prior. See, Davidson, Allan K.; Lineham, Peter J. 1995. *Transplanted Christianity*. Palmerston North, NZ: Massey University Department of History. P42.

²⁰ Kelly, 2024. Kindle Loc. Page 276 of 458.

²¹ Kelly, 20216. Kindle Loc. Page 29 of 335.

²² <https://www.christiandaily.com/news/the-end-is-nigh-so-hold-your-faith-up-high> (accessed 26 December 2024).

view can we begin to make out the ruins we have created in our pursuit of property and so-called progress as now promoted by neoliberal capitalism.²³

Whether identified as industrialisation, capitalism, or globalisation, the ideologies dominating our global reality today only exist because they have commodified the environment as a profit generating resource, driven by an insatiable and desire to accumulate capital, the idolatry of Mammon. This perspective is diametrically opposed to the indigenous view, well represented in Kuuyux's testimony. In the indigenous cosmivision²⁴ our environment and all of its treasures is effectively devalued when we treat it as a means to an end. A full exploration of these differences is beyond the scope of this presentation but, suffice it to say, literacy is a key enabler of the abuse of the environment in the name of technological progress, profit making, and, ultimately, power. This point is amply supported above in the work of Kelly where she found that literacy emerged precisely to assist bureaucracy and its companion, commerce.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor helps us understand the different experiences of the world in his exploration of "The Secular Age".²⁵ He refers to the industrialised world as one that is disenchanted, buffered or sealed off from what it does not understand. Literacy reinforces this state of being by reinforcing a bounded plausibility set, expanded only by what can be proven using a restrictive scientific method. Indigenous people, on the other hand, live in what Taylor calls a porous reality, open to external experience, including that of the spiritual world, for which very different methods of knowing truth and exploring reality are accepted. This open reality, he claims, is enchanted and he argues that the secular age needs to find its way back to an openness to enchantment.

Rather than treat people from oral cultures as pre-literate, we who enjoy the privileges (and pains) of literacy should look to them for the kind of knowledge and insight that we cannot find in our newspapers, books, journals, scripts, magazines, blogs, social media, and other forms of literature. We have the challenge of transcending literacy to embrace some knowledge porosity. To expand our comprehension of what is plausible in such a way that it enables us to embrace a broader set of experiences rather than resisting the possibility of such things existing. Western Christians in particular should take note. God is not limited to the pages of our Bible translations.

The Danger of Mistranslation

²³ For a thorough Christian critique of capitalism as an ideology, see Jonathan Cornford's "Christianity vs Capitalism", available online here: <https://mannagum.org.au/articles/Setting-the-Record-Straight-The-origins-and-meaning-of-capitalism> (accessed 26 December 2024).

²⁴ I use world view in its structural sense of anthropological meaning when referring to industrial world perspectives, and cosmivision as a more integrated dynamic understanding of reality when referring to indigenous ways of experiencing and interacting in the world.

²⁵ Taylor, Charles. 2007. *The Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walking along the beach after a storm I usually keep an eye out for useful debris, predominantly branches that I can carve into tokotoko (walking sticks). One find stood out in particular. This branch had a dimension to it that I cannot explain, I just knew it was to be for a special use. Over several years I hand carved the wood into a tokotoko for my personal and ceremonial use. I am not trained in traditional Māori carving, or any carving for that matter, but I had viewed enough and understood enough to recognise the significance of certain symbols and styles. For me, the carving process is innate, highly intuitive.

At the top of the stick I carved a person-like figure with a large head and protruding tongue, somewhat typical of the Māori style that represents ancestors (literal or mythical). Meaningfully, the head is scarred at the back by a knot in the wood. To me, this symbolised humility. Below the figure is a spiral of twenty nine sideways arrowhead steps, each step down reminds me of an ancestor, concluding with chief Kahungunu, our tribe's namesake and the famed great-great grandson of Arikinui (High Chief) Tamatea who captained the Takitimu, the waka (canoe) that brought our tribe to Aotearoa New Zealand. Underneath the spiral are swirls representing te moana nui (the ocean) and a hoe (a paddle), recognising our migration and symbolising the effort needed for the journey of life. The indent in the head of the hoe serves as a thumb hold. In the middle opposite four finger indentations is a triquetra centring the Trinity on the staff. When held balanced in my hand, my fingers find the indents, my thumb rests on the head of the hoe, and the triquetra imprints on the palm of my hand.

The lower half of the tokotoko begins with kowhaiwhai (intersecting curls like fern fronds) representing animated life, which leads down into another stepped spiral of arrow heads pointing up, each step down is a prompt to recall an ancient mythic story, before ending in a set of swirls at the bottom of the piece signifying the unknown realms.

This random beachcombed branch became my genealogy stick, a device common to Māori orators. I named it Mōhio, which means wisdom, understanding, comprehension, competency. The scarred head reminds me of the humility required before communicating.

The curious thing about this creative process is that it was almost an unconscious act spread over numerous summers at the beach. I had no prior design in mind as I carved. It emerged from somewhere deep in my subconscious, a genetic memory, or perhaps from the Spirit, the difference can be indistinguishable for a follower of Jesus. I just gave myself to the process each step of the way. Whenever I picked up the knife or chisel there was something transcendent about the activity—I was fully attentive to the task.

At times like this I understand something of Kuuyux's explanation of what being fully human feels like. It was a sacred, spiritual space. As a follower of Jesus I didn't feel that I was being in any way unfaithful or idolatrous in crafting the exaggerated human figure and symbols, or using the stick as a memory aid. On the contrary, it felt like a communion with the biblically revealed Creator, a spiritual discipline where I was fully

alive. Each time I handle the tokotoko I sense that reconnection. This otherwise dead branch, embalmed in and tossed by the sea onto the shore from who knows where, has come alive again through an act that I testify was co-creative with the Spirit. Far from having any material value, the entire object rests in my hands as a symbol of resurrection and new creation. Rooted in my history and culture, the rod is used as a tool to speak of the One who created us, was known in some limited way by my ancestors, came to the earth as a human, died, was resurrected, and provides us with new meaning for our mythology, our ancestry, and our lived experiences.

As my friend and mentor Brad Haami points out, the objective of carving is not to create a finished product but to grow oneself in the process.²⁶ Carving is an act of memorisation in itself, it enhances one's memory as recall and meaning is etched into wood. I began carving tokotoko not long after I learned my whakapapa o te whānau, my biological Māori lineage or genealogy, in my early 40s. Whakapapa as genealogy applies to many things in Māori and Pacific Island ways of knowing. It is more of a scientific method, a paradigm, than a mere historical record of who begat whom. Whakapapa tells the story of life, the process of creation. It is a way of mapping the generative universe. Whakapapa links us intimately with our surrounding environment, and the physical world assists us with our recollection of and connection with the past.

The rejection of this deeply spiritual way of being in the world as “animism” is brutally demeaning of the indigenous experience. Again, the ethnocentric hierarchy of civilisations, taxonomies created by apostate Europeans, raises its unsightly head. Rooted as it is in Darwinian evolutionary theory, the concept of animism grossly misunderstands the indigenous experience and should be cleansed from our theological and missiological records. To completely demonise the indigenous cosmivision, relegating our knowledge as unworthy of preservation, and prohibiting our languages from thriving, is to egregiously mistranslate who we are and the grace that the Creator has deposited in our cultures—a grace that, when redeemed in Christ, is meant to be for the benefit of all nations just as surely as Abraham's was.

When sharing the good news with people, particularly indigenous people who are newly literate or still fully oral, the translator must be careful not to constrain the message according to their own plausibility structure, that which may or may not exist in their reality. As the great English bard wrote (to be performed largely to non-literate people), “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”²⁷ Yes, we must remain biblically faithful in our communication of the message, but we can transcend the written word in doing so.

Contrary to what seems to be prevailing doctrine among some Protestants, the Bible is not the only means of communication between God and humans. The Bible itself contains evidence of this. The power of God for

²⁶ For more on this phenomenon, see Haami, B. 2004. *Pūtea Whakairo: Māori and the Written Word*. Wellington, NZ: Huia.

²⁷ Shakespeare, William. 1603. Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5.

salvation (Romans 1:16) is not the book. The power is experienced in the encounter with God as people respond to the narrative of Jesus—his ancestry, his people’s history, his birth, his work, his ministry, his miracles, his suffering, death, and resurrection; and his invitation for us to join him in new creation, the realm of the kingdom of God. It is good news as a narrative arc. Conveyed as a reduced set of propositions leads to a reduced sense of the significance of the gospel. A positive response to the whole narrative and its meaning opens the new believer to the Holy Spirit, who indwells us and enables us to step into and live in new creation now, all the while transforming us collectively into the image of Christ ready for the fulness of new creation to come with Christ’s return. Meanwhile, we remain to bless those around us in life-giving ways, retell the story of Jesus, and invite them too to respond and join us in Christ’s new creation.

Access to new creation as a telos of the gospel is an easily conveyed desired ideal for indigenous/oral people. Abstract concepts like freedom from sin, guilt, and shame, are much less understandable. However, indigenous or not, sin explained as our spiritual capacity for selfishness that ruptures relationships, creating disharmony, is far more concrete than debates over whether or not the Genesis account should be considered literal or not. It is an irrelevant point. Indigenous/oral people are not overly concerned about facts but rather the meaning of stories retold. For another theological example, Jesus’ blood as the means to become one with God’s family as an adopted heir to the new creation wealth of the Father makes much more sense (in Māori terms, this fits the whakapapa methodology) than the cleansing dynamic of some foreign religious temple-worship ritual or some mystical power within Jesus’ blood to act as some sort of talisman. So, gospel translation is not merely the retelling of Anglo-Eurocentric theologies (including those from Anglo-America) in an oral language. It requires a reframing of the biblical narrative in indigenous forms and meanings—a reframing that has potential to be more biblically faithful and theologically sound than what the translators themselves understand. This is what happens in the act of co-creation. It affords a reciprocity and mutuality where all parties are transformed by the translation process.

When the gospel takes root amongst a people we need not aim for a great cultural transformation. When we story the whole gospel we should be aiming for a shift of allegiance. It is freedom from the malevolence of spiritual forces as the stronger force of the Creator is now readily accessible. It brings enlightenment as they realise that the spiritual domain is Jesus’ to command and the natural world was created by and is sustained by God revealed in Jesus. The vital life force of creation is actually the imminence of God in Spirit, animating all of life; and all of life exists to please God. Our care for the creation that nurtures us then ceases to be just for our benefit and the benefit of future generations. Our care for creation is participation in the very purposes of God. Care for creation is a means for worship, of the Creator not the created. After all, a deep relationship with creation need not infer worship any more than a relationship with our pets does.²⁸ In this regard, the irrational spectre of animism is relegated to being something of an archaic artefact of unbelieving speculative Western philosophy.

²⁸ Although, some people do have a worship relationship with their pets, or their possessions, or their wealth. We all need to take care that we do not fall into the trap of idolatry.

If we from literate cultures fail to appreciate ways that we can mistranslate the message to our friends in oral cultures we will lose tremendous opportunities for the gospel to spread freely amongst a people. If we tell them that their relationship with the environment is unacceptable they can quite rightly become deaf to our message. But, if we can learn to read the environment, appealing to it as a partner in our communication, it has potential to amplify our message and aid with its retention. Syncretism need not be our concern at this point. As a people come to know God as their God; as the biblical narrative becomes their narrative in the retelling; as the Holy Spirit meets them in their time of need and eradicates all fear with the love of God, the people will discern for themselves what is of God's right ways and what is not.

Any hint of a thought that they could not possibly do that without outside help reveals little more than the ethnocentric superiority of a coloniser. However, if they ask for external help, seeking to build deep co-creative relationships outside of their circle, give freely and expect to receive as much as you give, as uncomfortable as that experience may be. From the remembering, knowledge is conveyed; but it is in the rupturing that transformation happens. So, interact wisely—remembering that wisdom has a wounded head.

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