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## A History of Māori Literacy Success

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## **Introduction**

This article explores literacy in Māori society, and in particular, how Māori tribal groups swiftly and enthusiastically embraced literacy (where literacy is taken to mean ‘the written word’) following contact with Pākehā (settlers of British descent). Increasingly, it is suggested that literacy is a Western competency, and that to be concerned with ensuring Māori children are achieving well in reading and writing is an act of colonisation. However, these narratives run counter to the history of many tribal groups in New Zealand. This article discusses the historical interactions of Māori with literacy, and illustrates that both the ability and the desire to succeed in reading and writing are features of Māori historical practice. Therefore, to promote high levels of literacy achievement in contemporary times is not a colonising act but rather aligns with the historical precedent firmly established in traditional Māori society.

## **The Arrival of the Written Word in New Zealand**

Pākehā settlers began to arrive in New Zealand in 1814, and their numbers slowly increased in the 1820s and 1830s (Phillips & Hearn, 2013). The settlers brought with them a multitude of different technologies, ranging from agricultural tools and household items, to new forms of storing knowledge. Although there were occasional skirmishes, this initial contact period was characterised by increased opportunities for Māori to trade, and to embrace skills associated with new technology (Butterworth, 1990; Petrie, 2013). The missionaries, who Binney (1968) believes were intent on converting Māori to Christianity and ‘higher’ states of civilisation, brought schooling and literacy (Butterworth, 1990; Jenkins, 1991; Walker, 1990), the latter of which had a significant influence on Māori groups, changing their exclusively oral nature. Mahuika (2012) notes:

There is little doubt that writing and print altered the template of what was once a primarily oral encounter.... Oral traditions have borne the brunt of a

colonial tidal wave that changed the way Māori oral traditions were passed on and understood. (p. 95)

Haami (2006) concurs, and observes the arrival of the written word had “huge implications for the validation and mana [authority] of oral expression” (p. 15). Binney (2001) emphasises that Māori were not simply passive victims of literacy but rather actively embraced print culture, reading, and books. McKenzie (1985) cites the “enthusiastic reports back to London of the remarkable desire of the Māori to learn to read, the further stimulation of that interest through native teachers, the intense and apparently insatiable demand so created for books” (p. 13) as evidence of the emphatic adoption of literacy by Māori groups. The remarkably swift acquisition of literacy is also noteworthy. McKenzie comments that in 1815 when Thomas Kendall set about re-enacting what he terms “one of the most momentous transitions in human history” (p. 10) – that is, the reduction of speech to its record in alphabetic form – Māori were:

A Neolithic race with a wholly oral culture [yet] what took Europe over two millennia to accomplish could be achieved – *had* been achieved – in New Zealand in a mere twenty-five years: the reduction of speech to alphabetic forms, an ability to read and write them, a readiness to shift from memory to written record.... (p. 10)

This begs the question: how was such a remarkable feat accomplished? In order to teach reading or writing, the first step was to establish an orthography. Kendall compiled a rudimentary list of letter forms in 1815, which was then sent to Samuel Lee, Professor of Arabic at Cambridge University. Kendall, together with two Māori chiefs, Hongi Hika and Waikato, travelled to England in 1820 and produced ‘*A grammar and vocabulary of the language of New Zealand*’ (McKenzie, 1985). An interesting feature of this 230-page manuscript is most of the English alphabet was used. However, by 1830, the Māori alphabet was reduced to five vowels

and eight consonants. Kendall's transcription of the Māori language significantly had three main outcomes. It significantly altered the sound of the Māori language, created a standardised form of the language, and, in some instances, suffocated the unique tribal dialects spoken in various parts of the country. Smyth (1946) captured the change to the Māori language with his statement:

We can but dream of what its [the Māori language] beauty must have been before its contact with the European language, and the entry of inevitable harshness consequent upon the effort to transfer its oral beauty to print in an alphabet supplied from a foreign tongue. A complete representation was of course impossible. (p. 13)

In addition to the aesthetic changes noted by Smyth, Moon (2016) suggests that the conversion of the Māori language to written form also resulted in social changes. Power shifted from resting with those who were masters of oratory to those who possessed the ability to read and write. Indeed, Jameson (1842) observed that for the younger generation of Māori, to be without literacy skills was considered to be “a mark of inferiority, against which their pride revolts” (p. 261-262). His observation illustrates the value Māori saw in literacy.

The establishment of the first school at Rangihoua in the Bay of Islands in 1816, and the ever-increasing amount of printed material circulating in New Zealand, continued to foster the swift acquisition of literacy among Māori communities. Accounts of the speed and enthusiasm with which Māori adopted literacy are manifold. For example, an early trader observed:

If one native in a tribe can read and write, he will not be long in teaching the others. The desire to obtain this information engrosses their whole thoughts, and they will continue for days with their slates in their hands'. (Brown, 1845. p. 5)

In 1829, it was noted in the *Missionary Register* that “not six years ago they [Māori] commenced the very rudiments of learning: now, many of them can read and write their own language, with propriety” (p. 372). Similarly, in 1834 it was recorded in the *Missionary Register* that “the writing of the senior classes was really much better than that of most schoolboys in England” (p. 60). And:

For this long time past it has become fashionable for the young people to try to learn to read.... Such is the wish of many of the Natives to learn to read, that on several occasions they have brought pigs, which would weigh from fifty to an hundred pounds, and offered them as payment for a book.

(*Missionary Register*, 1834, p. 119)

Learning that occurred in schools flooded into communities; the more literate Māori readers became, the more their perceptions and knowledge expanded, and the more printed materials fostered the broadening of their horizons, the higher the demand for these materials became (McKenzie, 1985). However, early texts in the Māori language were almost exclusively biblical in their content (Jenkins, 1991), and some scholars argue this brought with it its own implications in terms of a colonising agenda of the settlers (Binney, 1968; Butterworth, 1990; Jenkins, 1991; Ward, 1995). However, others reject such a relentlessly negative view of the impact of colonisation on Māori communities and culture (Ballantyne, 2011; Moon, 2016; Stevens, 2010), instead suggesting that following the active seeking of literacy by Māori, Māori encountered new skills (reading and writing), new ways of presenting and storing knowledge (books and maps), and new institutions through which they could access knowledge (mission stations and schools).

In a seminal article discussing the rapid uptake of literacy across Polynesia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Parsonson (1967) argues that Māori established relationships with missionaries

because they were intent on gaining access to education and literacy through the mission schools, as opposed to religious redemption. Others dispute this, however, and in the case of the southern tribe, Ngāi Tahu, Stevens (2010) suggests that the decimation and destruction caused by both the Musket Wars and foreign diseases on their population fostered an interest in Christianity independent of the desire to become literate. However, what is evident in both of these viewpoints is that Māori exercised agency in seeking to become literate, and this skill was then passed on to others in their communities.

The employment of agency also undermines the ‘fatal impact’ notion often attached to colonisation, which Ballantyne (2011) describes as one of two dominant interpretations of the relationship between Māori and literacy, where it is argued that contact with Pākehā initiated the rapid, inevitable, and almost total destruction of Māori culture and society. The ‘fatal impact’ contention suggests that literacy was a corrosive force introduced by missionaries to undermine Māori oral traditions, and replace Māori knowledge and culture with Pākehā hegemony. Essentially, the main assumptions inherent in this view are that literacy acted as a sort of agent for colonial imperialism, and that in learning to read and write, Māori forsook their own culture for that of Pākehā (Jenkins, 1991).

The counter to the ‘fatal impact’ argument is the notion of ‘cultural continuity’, where it is suggested that literacy had limited impact on Māori culture and society, and that despite land loss, conversion to Christianity, urbanisation, and colonial education, pre-European Māori cultural traditions continue to prevail. However, Stevens (2010) argues that such binary interpretations of Māori experiences with literacy fail to recognise the historical nuances evident at the time, and the vast range of responses among Māori communities to literacy (and to Pākehā presence in general), which ranged from resistance to indifference to collaboration. Stevens’ contentions are supported by others, who note the variety of ways in which elements of traditional knowledge and practices were woven into a new culture of literacy, which

generated innovative responses to colonial authority (Ballantyne, 2005; Curnow, Hopa, & McRae, 2002; Head, 2007; Paterson, 2006). For example, Moon (2016) discusses the agency exercised by Māori in adopting literacy, and observes that from the inception of the first government newspaper in the Māori language in 1842 until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, 42 Māori language newspapers were in circulation. These papers served a multitude of purposes, including communicating wartime propaganda to Māori during the New Zealand Wars (Moon, 2016). O'Regan (2017) also comments on the influence of Māori newspapers, as well as Māori enthusiasm for literacy in general, stating:

There is usually genuine surprise and shock when I start to introduce the history of Māori literacy prowess... with the Māori newspapers and proportionately higher rates of literacy at the turn of the [20<sup>th</sup>] century than non-Māori. Over 95 per cent of my academic and professional audiences are usually completely unaware of the fact that Māori have such a literary heritage.

(as cited in Bryant, 2018, p. 5)

The complexities and richness of Māori literacy traditions alluded to by O'Regan were documented by Haami (2006), whose work counters the modern-day notion that “reading and writing [were] Pākehā things that Māori weren't interested in and didn't need” (p. 9). Instead, Haami argues that Māori “enthusiastically... utilised and adapted literacy for their own purposes.... Reading and writing is not exclusively for Pākehā but has... been entrenched in Māori society for over a century” (p. 10). Head and Mikaere (1988) suggest that literacy was adopted by Māori “at the level of need, the level of usefulness” (p. 19). Stevens (2010) concurs, and adds that Māori were intent on becoming literate in order to be able to negotiate effectively in Pākehā political contexts. Moreover, in 1874, in a letter to a Māori language newspaper, a Māori commentator observed “we are a people who take great pleasure in reading” (as cited in Ballantyne, 2006, p. 22). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that Māori interest in literacy

was not limited to its usefulness as a tool to foster engagement in civic affairs but rather extended beyond that to the realm of leisure. Curnow, Hopa, and McRae (2002) note that Māori enthusiasm for literacy is evidence of a “belief in the importance of print to educate, inform, reform, and entertain” (p. xii), and this extract supports the notion of a multifaceted desire for literacy among Māori communities.

## **Conclusion**

This article has illustrated the rapid and exuberant manner in which Māori embraced literacy, and has documented the value Māori communities placed on literacy as a tool that had an ability to broaden horizons, contribute to knowledge and learning, and enhance self-determination. This article refutes the notion that literacy is solely a Western competency, where Māori striving for excellence in literacy is an act of modern-day colonisation. Such a view undermines or ignores the agency that Māori employed in adopting, embracing, and utilising the new skill of literacy. Instead, the remarkable acquisition of literacy by Māori shows literacy is indeed a skill at which Māori, both historically and contemporarily, have and can excel at without compromising their identity as Māori.

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