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Mātauranga Māori, Bicultural Jurisprudence, and Indigenous Epistemology in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

This research paper examines the transformative integration of Mātauranga Māori (Māori indigenous knowledge) and Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi) principles into contemporary New Zealand humanities and academic scholarship. By exploring concepts such as Kaitiakitanga (environmental guardianship), Whanaungatanga (relational kinship), and Mana Motuhake (indigenous self-determination), this paper articulates a bicultural framework for higher education in the Pacific. Furthermore, it evaluates the legal recognition of natural ecosystems as legal entities, legal pluralism, and the preservation of indigenous oral histories in digital academic repositories.

Keywords: Mātauranga Māori , Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand

1. Introduction:

Bicultural Horizon and Indigenous Agency in Aotearoa New Zealand

In contemporary global humanistic inquiry, Aotearoa New Zealand occupies a pioneering position in decolonizing higher education and embedding indigenous epistemologies into national discourse. The unique co-existence of Te Ao Māori (the Māori worldview) alongside Anglo-European academic traditions offers a compelling model for bicultural governance, legal pluralism, and environmental ethics.

For decades, Western university paradigms dominated Oceania, marginalizing indigenous ways of knowing. However, the re-assertion of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi, 1840) as a foundational constitutional document has transformed academic research, establishing Mātauranga Māori as a co-equal epistemological partner in higher education.

This article presents a comprehensive study of New Zealand's humanistic contributions. By analyzing indigenous ecological guardianship (Kaitiakitanga), relational ethics (Whanaungatanga), legal personhood for natural landmarks, and language revitalization (Te Reo Māori), this research demonstrates how Pacific indigenous frameworks enhance global academic pluralism.

2. Mātauranga Māori and Te Ao Māori: Foundations of Pacific Epistemology

Mātauranga Māori encompasses a holistic system of knowledge, philosophy, pedagogy, and empirical observation developed by Polynesian navigators and settled iwi (tribes) over centuries. Unlike Cartesian dualism, which separates humanity from nature, Te Ao Māori views all living and non-living entities through a genealogical framework (Whakapapa).

Through Whakapapa, humans are intrinsically connected to the cosmos, land (Papatūānuku), and sky (Ranginui). This relational ontology gives rise to Kaitiakitanga—an active obligation of environmental stewardship, where humans act not as owners or exploiters of natural resources, but as kin guardians responsible for future generations.

In higher education, integrating Mātauranga Māori into environmental sciences and humanities redefines sustainability. It shifts research methodologies from extractive observation toward community-led, reciprocal partnerships (Kaupapa Māori research), ensuring that academic inquiry directly serves indigenous self-determination (Mana Motuhake).

3. Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Bicultural Legal Pluralism

The Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 between the British Crown and Māori chiefs (Rangatira), represents the founding document of modern New Zealand. Crucially, the linguistic divergence between the English text and Te Reo Māori text (Te

Tiriti) generated enduring constitutional debates regarding sovereignty (Tino Rangatiratanga) versus governance (Kawanatanga).

In recent decades, New Zealand jurisprudence has embraced legal pluralism by recognizing groundbreaking legal personhood for natural ecosystems. Landmark legislation—such as granting legal personality to the Whanganui River (Te Awa Tupua) and the Te Urewera forest—represents a world-first synthesis of indigenous philosophy and Western statutory law.

Under this framework, the river and forest possess legal rights, duties, and liabilities, with human guardians appointed from both Māori tribes and the Crown to advocate for the ecosystem's intrinsic well-being. This legal innovation provides an essential precedent for global environmental humanities and indigenous rights litigation.

4. Te Reo Māori Revitalization, Oral Histories, and Language Sovereignty

Language is the ultimate repository of cultural memory and ontological perspective. Following severe decline due to assimilationist colonial policies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the revival of Te Reo Māori stands as one of the most successful linguistic recovery initiatives in modern history.

The establishment of Kohanga Reo (language nests), Kura Kaupapa (Māori immersion schools), and official language status for Te Reo Māori in 1987 laid the foundation for academic revitalization. Scholars at universities across Aotearoa now publish peer-reviewed humanities research in Te Reo Māori, expanding academic nomenclature.

Furthermore, indigenous oral traditions—including Mōteatea (traditional chants), Whakataukī (proverbs), and Maramataka (lunar ecological calendars)—are recognized as rigorous historical and environmental archives, validating oral history alongside written texts.

5. Indigenous Digital Humanities and Archival Data Sovereignty

In the digital age, the digitization of indigenous taonga (cultural treasures), oral recordings, and genealogical records raises critical questions regarding data sovereignty, ownership, and ethical access.

Māori scholars and digital humanists in New Zealand have pioneered CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance (Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility, and Ethics) alongside international open-data standards. These protocols ensure that indigenous communities retain intellectual authority and control over digitized heritage.

University archives and national museums in Wellington and Auckland utilize community-curated digital repositories, combining high-resolution scanning with traditional protocols (Tapu and Noa). This approach prevents commercial exploitation while granting open access to global scholars under indigenous community consent.

6. Conclusion: A South Pacific Model for Global Epistemic Pluralism

Re-imagining the humanities through an Aotearoa New Zealand lens provides global academia with a profound alternative to eurocentric intellectual models. The Pacific experience demonstrates that genuine biculturalism enriches scholarship, deepens environmental responsibility, and strengthens democratic governance.

By honoring Te Tiriti o Waitangi, recognizing the legal agency of the natural world, and advancing Indigenous Data Sovereignty, New Zealand higher education offers a transformative vision for twenty-first-century academia.

Ultimately, the lessons of Mātauranga Māori remind global humanists that academic wisdom must remain grounded in relational ethics, ecological balance, and human dignity.

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