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PROCEEDINGS

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INDIGENOUS TRANSFORMATION THROUGH RESEARCH EXCELLENCE
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KAPA HAKA AND ITS EDUCATIONAL MEANINGS IN TODAY’S AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

Basic findings and professionalisation

Hiromi Sakamoto*

Abstract

Kapa Haka is a form of Māori performing arts and cultural practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. After learning Kapa Haka for two and half years, I decided to pursue research on the educational meanings of Kapa Haka in today’s Aotearoa New Zealand. In this article I introduce why and how I came to conduct this research, and the basic research findings. Because of its thematic connection to the Indigenous Development Research Conference 2012, I include a summary of discussions I had with Kapa Haka teachers on possible professionalisation of Kapa Haka in the context of a performing arts industry.

Keywords

Kapa Haka, Māori performing arts, indigenous cultural practice, arts education, democratic education, qualitative research

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Introduction

Kapa Haka is a form of Māori performing arts and cultural practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. After working as a theatrical producer and director for over two decades in Japan and New York, I came to Aotearoa New Zealand in 2008 to be a PhD candidate at the University of Auckland. Upon arriving, I started learning Kapa Haka as a practitioner under Dr Ngapo Wehi, a respected Kapa Haka exponent, at the Department of Māori Studies. From the early stage of learning Kapa Haka, I became fascinated by its artistic quality, its ability to evoke emotions, its popularity and the depth of knowledge it could offer. I decided to look into educational meanings of Kapa Haka in public spaces. I met with more than 20 kaiako Kapa Haka (teachers of Kapa Haka) who taught in diverse social contexts, between 2010 and 2011, and exchanged thoughts with them. In some places teachers shared similar meanings of teaching Kapa Haka, while in other places there existed unique and site-specific reasons. This paper introduces a basic summary of my research and findings.

Furthermore, I include diverse discussions held with kaiako Kapa Haka on how Kapa Haka might be developed into a professional activity in the context of the performing arts industry in mainstream cultural New Zealand. Should Kapa Haka be defined as a national cultural treasure and artistic expression of Aotearoa New Zealand? Should the public support Kapa Haka exponents as they support exceptional ballet and opera artists? What would this possible professionalisation mean, educationally, to the general public of Aotearoa New Zealand?

On Kapa Haka

Kaiwai and Zemke-White (2004) write in their article:

Māori performance genre Kapa Haka developed amid culturally hostile conditions and amalgamated Māori and European cultural influences into a music genre that has become popular locally and globally. Māori have displayed ingenuity, resourcefulness and creativity by conserving their unique cultural identity in spite of, as well as reflecting, the homogenising effects of colonisation and globalisation. (p. 139)

Today Kapa Haka exists in Māoridom as significantly meaningful educational activity to retain, sustain, revitalise and proliferate te reo Māori (Māori language) and tikanga Māori (Māori cultural protocols), amalgamating tradition, other cultural elements and creativity (e.g., Karetu, 1993). In mainstream schools, Kapa Haka provides Māori students with cultural identity, confidence and significantly positive educational experiences (Whitinui, 2008).

Methodology

The research methodologies consist of constructivism (Crotty, 1998), critical theory (Freire, 2009; Greene, 1995) and Kaupapa Māori approach (Bishop, 2005; Smith, 1999). I started as a manuhiri (guest, visitor) when I first arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand. Yet in the process of learning Kapa Haka practically, I gradually gained an understanding of the culture of tangata whenua (people of the land), and acquired some inkling of mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge). Throughout Kapa Haka research, I also started seeing the socio-political conditions of Māori people and Māoridom in wider New Zealand social contexts, sharing critical views with kaiako Kapa Haka, and started developing an “agentic positioning and behavior” for the people in Kapa Haka communities (Bishop, 2005, p.115).

The methodologies also indicated that my perspectives on Kapa Haka could be unique and different from the mainstream culture of Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent/settler), and even from Māori people. As a producer
and director who has worked internationally in the industry of performing arts, it was difficult for me to comprehend why professional opportunities for exceptional Kapa Haka artists mainly existed only in a tourism or trade industry. Also, as someone who has promoted the arts of minority people in public spaces as an educational vehicle to enhance democracy (Greene, 1995), I see more meaning for the majority to watch and learn Kapa Haka. In addition, as someone from Japan, a nation that was not colonised by European countries, I would imagine how an indigenous cultural form might be respected, if Aotearoa had not been colonised (Sakamoto, 2011).

**Data collection method**

With the approval of the ethics committee, I visited more than 10 sites where Kapa Haka was taught, and observed the teaching process and interviewed more than 20 kaiako. The five visited categories are: Māori educational institutions (Kohanga Reo, Kura Kaupapa Māori), mainstream educational institutions (primary and intermediate schools, colleges), community and tribe-based groups (Taikura, urban competitive group, tribal festival), national or public organisations (Navy, Māori Television) and tourism industry (Rotorua-based Māori village).

The research participants, kaiako Kapa Haka, ranged from people in their 20s to those in their late 70s, mostly Māori. In this research, my definitions of “teachers” are broad. Participants included classroom teachers in schools, a television producer, festival organisers and an organiser of dinner shows for tourists, who views their shows as a means to educate the visitors. Some teachers teach in multiple locations.

The questions to the teachers included: (a) What kind of performing items do you choose to teach and why? (b) What do you expect your students to learn and achieve? (c) Why do you teach Kapa Haka? (d) How do you see the future of Aotearoa New Zealand; by teaching Kapa Haka do you foresee any difference? (e) What do you think about professionalisation of Kapa Haka?

**Basic findings**

Almost throughout the research, Kapa Haka teachers mentioned that Kapa Haka is a vehicle to teach students Māori culture. When they say Māori culture, their primary concerns are retention and revitalisation of te reo and tikanga. Tikanga includes learning rituals such as pōwhiri (welcome ceremony), karaokia (prayer) and whaikōrero (speechmaking). Kapa Haka can teach how one behaves on a marae (gathering house); for example, knowing which waiata (song) to sing when a particular group of manuhiri arrives. The performing skills taught in Kapa Haka, such as taiha (weaponry) and poi, are often supported by traditional Māori concepts and philosophy. Kapa Haka can also teach other tikanga such as Māori social values and manners, which are considered important in developing decent human relationship skills in the community. Those include whanaungatanga (sense of family connection), manaakitanga (hospitality) and aroha (love, feel compassionate).

Whakapapa (genealogy) is another important cultural concept taught in Kapa Haka: knowing who you are, where you are from and who you belong to. Many teachers emphasised this aspect of Kapa Haka. In an urban context, learning pepeha or mihi (self-introduction in Māori) teaches students a concept of whakapapa, which is often beneficial for young Māori students whose family migrated to urban areas to gain their identity. Interestingly, it is also beneficial to non-Māori students who immigrated from abroad, who may not be too familiar with their own cultural heritage.

Site-specific meanings and reasons to teach Kapa Haka include: (a) to obtain life skills and
achievement skills (commitment, discipline); (b) to obtain specific skills (ambidexterity, weaponry skills, fighting spirit); (c) to enhance writing and composing ability in te reo Māori; (d) to achieve artistic excellence; (e) to preserve waiata, to strengthen memory retention and to socialise; and (f) to retain tribal reo and waiata, tribal tikanga and identity.

Kapa Haka beyond Māoridom

In culturally diverse mainstream schools, there are teachers who teach Kapa Haka to mostly non-Māori students. A Māori teacher who teaches Kapa Haka as an extracurricular activity in a mainstream intermediate school shared his vision:

We try to incorporate some Māori influence, ideas within our units. One term we would do sustainability ... I have come on board and said, “Let’s talk about sustaining cultures. Keeping that alive.” And not just Māori culture, [but] any culture. You get these Asian kids who come from these Asian countries here and also South Africans and English and wherever, and they come over here and because they were born here, they think their own cultures are not important anymore. So I am trying to instil in them, find out about your culture, where you are from, why it is important, your language and your customs and all that. Then once they appreciate that, then you can introduce Māori culture and say now that you are in New Zealand, now you can see how your culture is important ... now you see, why it is important that you should support Māori culture.

One Pākehā teacher in a mainstream school said, “We [New Zealanders] embrace all cultures. And through one special culture, we can bring people together ... Kapa Haka and Māori culture can bring people together.” In Rotorua, at a tourist site, where they have a dinner and a cultural show, another participant shares a similar vision: “We would like to promote understanding of Māori culture, so we can find commonality [with the visitors]”. Such efforts, he thinks, can “bind” people from different cultural backgrounds. In these situations, Kapa Haka functions as an educational vehicle to promote dialogue and understandings in a pluralistic public space.

In the Royal New Zealand Navy, a “bicultural policy” has been established. It is part of the training for new recruits to learn the Navy haka. It is often recognised that people who practise Kapa Haka are doing part of their Navy duty. Participants mentioned that in the history of the Navy, “visitors educated commanders”, because manuhiri (guests, visitors) from overseas frequently appreciated Kapa Haka performances, and marvelled at pōwhiri when they were welcomed onto the ship or to the Navy’s marae. Today many aspects of their duties reflect Māori cultural elements. The high-ranking officers must go through classes on Māori culture to be promoted. Kapa Haka groups in the Navy are often invited to international cultural exchange ceremonies as representatives of New Zealand, together with their brass band. Arguably, the Navy is one of the most progressive national institutions in which Māori culture is given respect and important status, almost equal to Pākehā cultural status.

Professionalisation of Kapa Haka

When I saw the regional Kapa Haka competition in Auckland for the first time, in 2008, I was highly impressed by the artistic quality of top Kapa Haka groups. I asked Dr Pita Sharples, a well-known politician and a Kapa Haka exponent, “Why is there no national Kapa Haka company in New Zealand, equivalent to the Royal New Zealand Ballet?” I was simply curious then, because I thought New Zealand had a bicultural tradition. His answer
was that “Māori are tribal peoples and it would be difficult to have one national company”. My Kapa Haka teacher, Dr Ngapo Wehi, on the other hand, said, “It’s do-able”. After learning much about Māori society, I still wanted to keep discussing the idea of professionalisation of Kapa Haka with my research participants. If having one national company is not culturally proper, is there any other way to recognise and reward this artistically excellent and educationally meaningful performing art in public spaces? Besides, unlike Kapa Haka, there are so few ballets and operas shown here that have thematic connections to today’s New Zealand society.

Most Kapa Haka teachers have been supportive of the idea of having a professional environment for Kapa Haka. Many argued that excellent Māori performing arts deserve respect and more funding, stating “It’s about time” and “That would be a dream come true”. Yet many agreed that serious discussions are required on how to create a national (or public) entity, or a company or companies equivalent to nonprofit Pākehā performing arts groups such as the Royal New Zealand Ballet. Some people expressed their concerns: “That’s a Pākehā concept”, “We may lose something if we get paid to do this” and “Pākehās won’t let us”. The teachers who were against such a concept of having a united Māori company, understandably, tended to be the teachers who teach Kapa Haka to preserve cultural heritage based on their own hapū (subtribe) or iwi (tribe). This issue clearly reflects existential meanings of Kapa Haka: whether it is for preservation of tradition or an opportunity for artistic and creative expressions; whether it is for nurturing tribal identity or to be a place to represent diverse social voices of Aotearoa. One person suggested, “What if every hapū had a professional group?”

There are legal arguments as well. The Crown has to protect and recognise the importance of te reo Māori, and hence Māori Television (national indigenous broadcaster) was created as part of the Waitangi Tribunal Settlement. Similarly, if we read Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Māori version of the Treaty of Waitangi signed in 1840) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2008) carefully, we could argue that the New Zealand Government has good enough reasons to more generously support Kapa Haka groups, academies, festivals and community activities. Creative New Zealand’s annual report (2011) states that Māori Performing Arts received (only) 1% of their total funding.

Some teachers who have been developing the diploma programmes of “Māori Performing Arts” through the New Zealand Qualifications Authority talked about the need for professional job opportunities for their students. With skilful performers and composers graduating every year, and with an educated audience increasing in number, there seems to be a need for a professional infrastructure of some kind. In fact, Te Matatini (National Kapa Haka festival and competition organiser) committee has started exploring professional possibilities using talented artists from competitive Kapa Haka. One such example is a production entitled Te Aroha Nui (“The Greatest Love”), which took place during the Rugby World Cup in 2011. Competitive Kapa Haka exponents and theatre professionals collaborated to transform Kapa Haka into a two-hour semi-musical with a plot to suit a mainstream theatrical audience. Some people called it a “haka theatre”.

Other teachers argued that Te Matatini has its own history and characteristics, and that it should be possible to use its structure to create a professional environment. Such ideas include having the top three Te Matatini winning rōpū (teams) touring New Zealand as well as overseas, or having Te Matatini committee select a creative team who become paid professionals for 2 years. They would be given opportunities and budget to produce a production at a metropolitan theatre. Performers would be chosen and hired by auditions accordingly.

How to professionalise Kapa Haka should be debated by Māori peoples first, and then the
Kapa Haka and Its Educational Meanings in Today’s Aotearoa New Zealand

Blueprint should be suggested to the general public of New Zealand. At least ideologically, Kapa Haka has provided a public space for Māori peoples to be united. On Te Matatini’s website, the section “What Is Kapa Haka” says:

Kapa Haka celebrates Maori contribution to New Zealand’s uniqueness in this modern world …. Kapa Haka while recognising the many differences within Maoridom, between iwi, between hapu … it still allows for Maori to come together and celebrate its oneness. (Te Matatini, n.d.)

Can this “oneness” be extended to all, Māori and non-Māori, living in Aotearoa New Zealand, and even beyond? Would Māori be fine with sharing their taonga (treasure) with others out of aroha as they have done for decades? Can the New Zealand public embrace Kapa Haka as their own national taonga, by recognising the talents of Kapa Haka artists and rewarding them on an equal basis with ballet dancers and opera singers? Will the Crown allocate sufficient funding to Kapa Haka exponents? (Currently, the Royal New Zealand Ballet receives $4.3 million annually from the Government, yet Te Matatini, with 40 groups, receives only $1.2 million.) Professionalisation of Kapa Haka seems to possess extraordinary opportunities for the descendants of the two partners who signed Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and new immigrants, to start engaging in positive, creative and deep dialoguing of sociocultural construction of a truly post-colonial Aotearoa New Zealand.

Conclusion

Through this research, it may be possible to conclude that the presence of Kapa Haka in public spaces, both in schools and in performing arts industries, would be educationally meaningful in transforming a culturally divided, pluralistic Aotearoa New Zealand into a more harmonious, just and unique nation. Kaiako Kapa Haka are constantly dealing with the issues of cultural identity: the difference and the sameness among tribes, uniqueness and commonality between Māori and non-Māori, and who New Zealanders are, culturally, in domestic and international spaces.

Despite seemingly divided social values between Māori and Pākehā, Māori values are quite in line with an idealistic version of “a democratic community”, suggested by distinguished educational philosophers worldwide (e.g., Greene, 1995). In the “social imagination” (Greene, 1995) of kaiako Kapa Haka, I see their desire to create a more beautiful Aotearoa New Zealand than what is offered by the current educational policies based on globalisation and neo-liberalism. I am not alone in expecting New Zealand to be a place where people care about each other like a family member (whanaungatanga), people treat others as important guests (manaakitanga) and people care about each other with love and compassion (aroha).

If the educational mission of performing arts in public spaces lies in beautification and materialisation of our idealistic visions of a democratic community, then teaching of Kapa Haka and professionalisation of Kapa Haka have much to offer today, and in the future, to Aotearoa New Zealand, and even beyond.
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<td>Aotearoa</td>
<td>the Māori name for New Zealand</td>
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<tr>
<td>aroha</td>
<td>love, compassion</td>
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<tr>
<td>haka</td>
<td>to dance, dance</td>
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<td>hapū</td>
<td>subtribe</td>
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<td>iwi</td>
<td>tribe</td>
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<td>kaiako</td>
<td>teacher, instructor</td>
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<td>kapa</td>
<td>group, to stand in a row</td>
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<td>Kapa Haka</td>
<td>a form of Māori performing arts</td>
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<td>ritual chant</td>
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<td>Kohanga Reo</td>
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<td>Kura Kaupapa Māori</td>
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<td>hospitality, kindness</td>
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<td>mātauranga Māori</td>
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<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>New Zealander of European descent/settler descent</td>
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<td>pepeha/mihi</td>
<td>self-introduction in Māori that includes one’s tribal affiliations</td>
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<td>pōwhiri</td>
<td>ritual of encounter, welcome ceremony on a marae</td>
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<td>“the many faces”, national Kapa Haka festival and competition organisation</td>
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<td>relationship, kinship, sense of family connection</td>
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