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Metiria Turei
Anarchism: a Māori Perspective
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Anarchism: a Māori Perspective

Metiria Turei

1993

BEING Maori, identifying with Mana Maori and believing in the principles of anarchism is a seemingly huge paradox, full of insurmountable contradiction.

Maori who are part of the struggle for Tino Rangatiratanga (Maori sovereignty) see their political and social ideal in the return of Mana Whenua, the control over their own physical (fisheries, land, forests, seas) and intangible (Te Reo Maori, health, justice, beliefs) resources and the working in partnership with the colonial government on issues affecting the nation.

How can this reconcile with the political and social ideals of anarchism, where every person is free to organise themselves and their lifestyle as they please, in co-operation with others and the environment; without oppressive hierarchical or discriminatory structures, especially as the traditional Maori structure of society is hierarchical, patriarchal, oppressive and sexist?

Hapu and iwi were ordered into rangatira (ruling class), tutua (commoners), and taurekareka (slaves). Power was handed down from the chief to his eldest son, although if he was a bad or inad-

equate leader he could be usurped by one of his younger brothers. Women, if a member of the chief's family (sister, daughter) were accorded the mana of the ruling class, but did not become chiefs. They were used as bartering objects to build stronger alliances with other hapu and iwi. This enforced marriage/slavery often led women to choose suicide as their only option. Women were also prevented from being involved in some tasks because of menstruation, which was considered unclean and capable of rotting vegetable crops and spoiling food.

There are many aspects of traditional Maori culture which work contrary to basic anarchist principles: Maori were a warrior race, who actively sought to invade other communities, killing, brutalising and enslaving the inhabitants, destroying their homes and crops and stealing their possessions.

Yet there are some aspects of Maori culture which are living examples of anarchist co-operation – the concept of whanaunatanga, the extended family, was the basis of all Maori society. The hapu was simply a larger whanau with a leader (chief) and iwi were related hapu to a common ancestor. The whanau was usually made up of three or more generations, who worked and lived together for the good of common existence. Each generational group had a particular role to play, and each role was recognised as equal in value for the good of the whanau.

Adults made up the regular labour force of working the gardens, maintaining the buildings, cooking, making clothes, fishing, hunting, and any other heavy labour work, including war parties. Having and raising children was considered the primary function of the whanau and their care was left mainly to the elders, who were greatly esteemed for their knowledge and life experience.

Everybody took responsibility for the children regardless of who the parents were. This collective responsibility is demonstrated through the language where matua applies to mother, father, aunt and uncle, and tuakana, teina, tungane and tuahine applies to brothers, sisters and cousins.

Overall the whanau and the hapu worked collectively for the benefit of everyone, crops were collectively worked and shared amongst everyone. Fishing and hunting successes were also shared. Each hapu worked for themselves, and traded with neighbouring communities if necessary or desirable.

One of the most important and significant aspects of Maori culture is the relationship of the people to the land. Maori cosmology forms the basic premise of the creation of the world and its people and prescribes the way people must behave and relate to the earth and its resources. Many stories and myths describe exactly how to fish, plant, and catch birds while still respecting environment's need of time and space to recover.

People's relationship with the earth is one of child to parent, where Papatuanuku is revered as the giver of sustenance, provider of life, as well as the receiver of a person's body for protection and comfort at death. Every living thing: plants, trees, animals, and even inanimate things eg. rivers, mountains, waka, wharenuui have a mauri, an essential life force which is respected and valued. Any handling of these things required chants, rituals and expressions of appreciation and concern for its well-being.

This principle of respect and value of the earth is still an essential part of Maori identity and many practices are still maintained, especially with fishing and the collecting of flax and other natural resources for making cloaks, kete etc. This area is one maintained predominantly by Maori women.

Working with our natural resources rather than against them is a basic premise of a successful anarchist society.

A culture is not a static institution but a living, growing response by a self-identified people to their changing environment. But a people whose culture is threatened by imminent absorption (destruction) will hold steadfastly to its remaining ideals and practices in an effort to protect and preserve itself.

Maori culture was nearly wiped out by colonial invasion. Maori people were decimated by a combination of introduced disease and

government sponsored genocide; the Maori population declined by 60% in only 20 years.

The assault against our culture forced Maori who had the knowledge of our cultural ways into staunchly keeping them alive through rigid practice and rejection of change. This 'cultural freeze' is a self-protective response to a threat of destruction and the very real fear of being 'pakehified'.

Maori feminists have struggled for years against a barrage of accusations of 'having gone the Pakeha way' or that feminism is a Pakeha thing and anti-Maori. Yet Maori women continue to struggle not only against white New Zealand patriarchal dominance, but also Maori patriarchal dominance, believing that "unless Maori feminism is harnessed and the sexism of society, including Maori society, challenged, the successful attainment of the goals of Maori development will elude Maoridom".

A society under siege had no room for development, only self-preservation. There is no way Maori culture will change or grow unless guaranteed by white society security from interference or integration.

So, how can this contribute to anarchism's movement towards free, non-hierarchical collective communities? I have already given a few examples of some aspects of Maori culture which relate directly to many anarchist's ideas of anarchist society. There are many more, such as holistic healing and real justice and rehabilitation for victims and offenders.

Many ways of doing things inherent in our culture and which were suppressed by the colonial government and its institutions, correspond with many anarchist principles.

But only through the restoration of Tino Rangatiratanga to Maori people will our culture have the freedom to grow. And only through cultural growth will Maori society be able to discard the oppressive and hierarchical structures of the past and develop into a free and egalitarian society.