



**MĀORI  
BACCHAE**

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**Te Reo Kiriti:  
When Euripides Speaks Maori.  
Intercultural Collaborative Practice as  
Instinctive Teaching Methodology.**

This paper takes the form of a report on an artistic project and the task I have been given bring matauranga Maori into mainstream tertiary teaching of our department, of performing and screen arts at Unitec.

The two are connected in that I wish, through the artistic project to learn more about, and find a way to expose our mainstream students to Maori knowledge and ways of learning.

Firstly ; our project

<https://vimeo.com/117993577>

So this was in May 2014, and when he said these things about haka and Greek tragedy, an old dream began to stir.

He said...

“What I saw here, this particular primal energy, this haka, was in my humble belief in the way Greek tragedy originated, it was the way they trained the chorus, it had that energy, and that is lost.”

Later that day, after Yannis had charmed the students with stories of being a drama student with Meryl Streep and sleeping on her sofa after a night on the town, I brought the conversation back to his words. I explained my own admiration of the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles, but I had always been disappointed in productions I had seen as the situations were made domestic, and I see the plays as a dialogue between humans and gods, a contemplation on our divine origins and the nature of human existence, requiring not a realistic portrayal but something stylised, energetic, epic. We laughed about this modern tendency to reduce and package and make small. “The haka is not small” I said, “maybe that’s how we should do it” was his response. We looked at one another and there was a short silence. “Which play?” I asked. “*The Bacchae*” was his instant reply.

The conversation grew and I picked up the thread with Matua Hare Paniora, Pae Arahi and kaumatua here at Unitec and mentor to me in so many ways "it's a wonderful idea" he said. "How do we do it?"

"Not sure" was my answer but I truly felt that the time had come.

Now I need to cut a long story short. We obtained funding and Yannis returned to Aotearoa in 2015. My friend and colleague Vicky Yiannoutsos had been responsible for bringing Yannis to Aotearoa. Vicky is first generation New Zealander to Greek parents has connections to other people with Greek parents, including the Nathan whanau.

The short video I will now show has images of Manos Nathan who sadly passed away in 2015, but he remains deep inside the heart of this project.

<https://vimeo.com/137544541>

Dr Charles Royal, Associate director at Te Papa Tongarewa

Has translated the entire play into te reo Maori.

We have held auditions and cast the play. We have a Maori costume designer, a Greek stage designer, a Cretan Maori visual artist engaged with the project.

Hawaiki TU Haka Theatre are working as co-directors, choreographers

My artistic question of our work is:

*Does the stylization and power of Maori performance and aesthetics release principles of Aristotle's poetics and embedded dramatic themes from within Greek tragedy?*

I maintain that the research into these specific languages and their storytelling paradigms has never before been undertaken. Culturally a traditional Maori form reaching into ancient Greek culture is a unique quest and will reveal a force; a new theatre form.

The play concerns what happens when people turn away from not only the Gods, but their own divinity. There are consequences. Themes of renewal vs status quo, law and order vs chaos, totalitarian vs anarchy, materialism vs spirituality.

Our production is to be set at the time of the new townships which were being built in New Zealand during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When these settler towns sprang up they drew to them Maori who became involved with the new religion, values, social expectations, new clothing and technologies. In the process of turning from the old ways, the old Gods, there is a loss, and in this play a dire revenge is sought. Dionysus brings ruin upon those who have turned away from him and his godliness.

This process of placing the work in Te Ao Maori world has raised many questions. The central character is Dionysus, son of the king of the Gods and a human mother. Should we seek within the Maori pantheon an equivalent character, in terms of attributes, tendencies, powers and functions? Or is it

completely inappropriate to ask: who is the corresponding Maori god to Dionysus?

I WOULD LIKE TO SHOW YOU SOME THOUGHTS FROM BEEZ NGARINO CO-DIRECTOR AND CHOREOGRAPHER OF THE PROJECT AND DIRECTOR OF HAWAIKI TU HAKA THEATRE COMPANY.

Our Greek partners have said they like transliteration as it has a resonance with the Greek audience who will hear the echo of the original. The transliteration of the place names also raises vexing questions. The city of Thebes becomes the town of Tepe. But where in Aotearoa is Tepe? And the people of Tepe, who are they, of which iwi, hapu and whanau do these characters belong? The opening section of the play chronicles the journey of Dionysus and the Bacchae across Asia, but we would need to transfer this to Aotearoa, so which part of the whenua do they travel over? Do we name the maunga, awa, and moana they pass by; upon whose whenua do we place this play?

**Here is translator and artistic director Charles Royal sharing some thoughts about characteristics of gods and how such things can be brought into the world of theatre.**

## SLIDE, FIRST PART OF CHARLES KORERO

Another question we must consider is dramaturgical structure of the play. Should it be altered; this is Euripides after all, but once again if this is to be the Maori Bacchae then we need to understand Maori dramaturgical structures and how they might influence and shape our approach to the telling of this story. One idea has been to treat the play as if it were a kapa haka set; a suite of songs and dances dovetailing one into the other to make a coherent whole. The opening with the entrance of Dionysus and the Bacchae could well be set as a *whakaeke*. From there on we would allocate aspects of kapa haka conventions to the action of the play. Would this then be seen as a more authentic, or would we compromise the original?

HERE ARE SOME MORE THOUGHTS FROM CHARLES AROUND THE PROCESS OF TRANSLATION.

SLIDE OF CHARLES START AT 1:48.

Our discussions have extended into the design world of the performance.

Gavin McClean has worked as a designer in film and television for many years; one of his standout

productions was in collaboration with the late great Don Selwyn on *The Maori Merchant of Venice*. I would like to quickly show some of his initial sketches.

Tolis Papazoglou is a Greek stage designer but has lived in Aotearoa for many years. Here are some of his initial sketches for how the stage design could work.

As you can see, all of these ideas and worlds are causing much impassioned debate; it is an ongoing discussion. We have funding for another hui in February of next year. When our production opens, we are uncertain, but there is a determination about us. Watch this space.

This brings me the second part of this paper

By the 1980s Māori communities "were so concerned with the loss of Māori language, knowledge and culture that they took matters into their own hands and set up their own learning institutions at pre-school, elementary school, secondary school and tertiary levels" (G Smith 2003:6-7)<sup>1</sup> These Maori education facilities have played a central role in retention of language and culture; I believe to the benefit of all New

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kura\\_Kaupapa\\_Māori](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kura_Kaupapa_Māori)

Zealanders. I also believe that it has allowed mainstream education designers to more or less ignore the place of Maori knowledge within status quo curriculum. Unitec has a clear mandate in this regard.

I wish to quote from Whea Josie Keelan Dean of teaching and learning matauranga Maori and Academic development.

“I focus on strengthening Mātauranga Māori in learning and teaching in every aspect of Unitec’s delivery to students. The goal is Māori student success – as tribal, sub-tribal, whānau and community members. **Another objective is developing the confidence of all Unitec students and staff to engage with Mātauranga Māori and have the strength to participate in a developing world**”. Josie Keelan, Dean Teaching and Learning Mātauranga Māori, Academic Development.<sup>2</sup>

I do not have the mandate to enter into direct engagement with the design and delivery of education within a kaupapa Maori situation. But the second part of this stated intention I wish to take a role in developing. And its difficult. The idea of matauranga Maori in a post colonial paradigm is worrisome to say the least.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unitec.ac.nz/ahimura/pages/about.php>

Maori people must be able to live in both worlds of Aotearoa New Zealand, the Maori world and the Pakeha world. Pakeha don't have to do that, they can live without ever encountering Maori, its entirely possible and many do, deliberately so. But in my role as an educator in the realm of culture and the humanities I am aware that this attitude breeds mis-conception, mis-understanding, even prejudice. I have been privileged in my life to have had some powerful teachers, Maori men and women who have looked right into me and seen something. Ngapo Wehi once said to me "the reason why I'm telling you this John is that you can go and tell your pakeha people; maybe they will listen to you." I don't pick this up as any kind of burden but I do believe that a more aware and appreciative pakeha sensibility around Maori world view can only help with the terrible problems we have. The over-representation of Maori in prisons, our institutionalised racism, these issues are often seen as a Maori problem, but this is not the case; it is our problem, our history made these difficulties. I believe in the power of education; so I pursue my agenda and support Whea Josie Kelan, to somehow increase awareness of matauranga Maori and wisdoms and insights therein, as a way to begin to mitigate this fear of difference which governs race relationships in our precious Aotearoa.

I seek to make my contribution in the Pakeha space.

One way of understanding culture is through dimensions of variation in cultural values. The culture of settler society, the Europeans who colonised these islands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were powerfully committed individuals, their quest for a new world, a better life was very much based on what they themselves could achieve, the notion of “I” was very important for them, and remains so for the descendants of the settlers, the people we call Pakeha. The notion of individualism operates within a very loose social framework, the person, the individual is considered to be very important. We look after ourselves and our immediate family, being autonomous is valued and preferred. On the other end of the spectrum we have collectivism which has a very tight social framework and the collective is highlighted, “we” is preferred, people are expected to fully contribute to the notions of family obligations, family connection is preferred and expected. Realities such as “I” vs “we” are only part of the way I’m starting to think about how I as an educator can see beyond the differences and achieve understanding.

This is where our artistic project and the issue of Unitec and whaea Josie’s stated intention intersect.

Our department is committed to teaching matauranga Maori but is struggling to know how.

My intention is that the process of preparing The Māori Bacchae for performance *serves as a model for teaching and learning in a tertiary education setting.*

Socially it provides a template, a methodology for intercultural appreciation and understanding.

I intend to craft a teaching and learning methodology that is built on partnership.

The collaborative process is an ideal arena in which to build partnerships. Intercultural theatre is not new in Aotearoa, but seldom have such experiences been recognised for their educational value.

The ethics of intercultural work are complex, subtle and can only be conducted if there is genuine good will from all parties. We all share a vision of how the Bacchae will work as The Maori Bacchae. During our workshops issues of tokenism and cultural appropriation have been openly discussed and we have committed to an open dialogue conducted under a mantle of tikanga Maori.

**SLIDE**

Working with my colleagues on the artistic process, and with my fellow teachers and education specialists at Unitec I intend to base all teaching and learning of matauranga Maori in our department on the following 5 principles.

Rangatiratanga – Authority and  
Responsibility

Wakaritenga – Legitimacy

Mahi Kotahitanga – Co-operation

Ngākau Māhaki – Respect

Kaitiakitanga – Guardianship

SUMMARY