Indigenising 'Research' and Reconnecting Knowledge to Place – Indigenous Compositions, Songs, and Chants as Research Methods

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Abstract

The decolonisation and Indigenisation of research have been central to ongoing debates among Indigenous scholars, as they seek to reclaim knowledge systems disrupted by colonisation. In Aotearoa (New Zealand), Māori methodologies grounded in ancestral knowledge systems challenge Western paradigms and emphasise a connection between knowledge, place, and identity. Storytelling, in its many forms—including chants, songs, and other 'artistic' compositions—remains a culturally relevant, time-tested method of knowledge creation, preservation, and dissemination. This article explores the process of composing Māori waiata (songs and chants), as a research methodology and method for analysing, interpreting, and disseminating research findings. The research identifies three key contributions of Māori composition within a contemporary research setting. These learnings emerged from a qualitative study of the connections between Indigenous peoples and their natural environment. First, it recognizes composition as a traditional knowledge-building practice that reflects diverse tribal epistemologies while fostering deep engagement with participants' narratives and settings. Second, it offers a way to connect people, knowledge, and environment, renewing bonds between Indigenous identity and ancestral landscapes. Third, it serves as a culturally resonant tool for Indigenous researchers and communities, empowering identity, preserving art forms, and ensuring that research findings are accessible and meaningful to those they are intended to serve. Ultimately, this article encourages Indigenous researchers to utilise their own respective methods of knowledge transmission and composition to re-imagine 'research' approaches that are meaningful and accessible for their own people.

Keywords

Indigenous songs and stories, Māori research methodologies, Indigenous ecological knowledge, Māori environmental knowledge, Indigenous research

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Background

The decolonisation and Indigenisation of research has been a subject of discussion and debate for decades, particularly among Indigenous scholars. In Aotearoa (New Zealand) and across the globe, colonisation disrupted the ways Indigenous peoples communicate, share knowledge, and access the ancestral lands that shaped their epistemologies and identities. In Aotearoa, Māori voices were suppressed, and the physical symbols of power, history, relationships, and connections embedded in storytelling traditions were constrained (Forster & Meihana, 2023).

In response to the harms caused by colonisation and colonising research practices, Indigenous researchers have developed methodologies grounded in ancestral knowledge systems passed down through generations. These methodologies challenge Western research paradigms, which often overlook or conflict with the diverse ways Indigenous communities comprehend, interpret, and generate knowledge. Importantly, these approaches emphasize the deep connection between knowledge and place.

Indigenous research methodologies encompass methods for recruitment, data collection, analysis, dissemination, and knowledge translation. For example, Lee-Morgan (2019a, 2019b) highlights the value of pūrākau (Māori storytelling) as narrative inquiry and its role in producing, managing, and sharing knowledge. Wānanga—a term that refers to both a place of learning and a governance, practice, and pedagogy framework—has also been applied in research as a method of knowledge construction, transmission, and translation (Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020; Pohatu & Warmenhoven, 2007; Smith et al., 2019).

Storytelling is particularly potent as a method of decolonising research (Kovach, 2010). Allport et al. (2023) emphasize its "enormous potentiality for contextual application in dissemination today" (p. 6). For Māori, storytelling takes many forms, including mōteatea and oriori (traditional chants), tauparapara (formal speech introductions), waiata (songs), karakia (incantations and prayers), and mahi toi (art) (Allport et al., 2023). These forms of Māori 'composition' are vital in transferring knowledge about tribal history, genealogy, and significant landmarks, acting like "archives of the Māori people" in preserving traditional knowledge (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2012. p. 99). These methods continue to hold a central place in Māori culture (Witehira, 2019) and it is common for Indigenous peoples to continue these practices in retelling histories, and in the telling of contemporary events (Forster & Meihana, 2023). These practices are time-tested, culturally relevant tools for preserving and sharing knowledge, as valuable and applicable today as they have been for generations, countering the tendency of scientific circles to relegate Indigenous knowledge to the past.

Indigenous stories bridge past and present, serving as a link to Atua (deities/personifications of the environment), and ancestral homelands (Walker, 1990). These knowledge systems are deeply tied to the landscapes and ecosystems from which they emerge, sustained through ongoing interactions with specific places. This contrasts with objectivist research approaches, such as randomised controlled trials, which often abstract knowledge from its original context and location.

Despite their relevance and value, Indigenous techniques of creating, storing, and sharing knowledge remain underutilized in academic research, even among Indigenous scholars who are required to produce and disseminate findings in ways that align with institutional norms. This article explores a Māori approach to analysing, interpreting, and disseminating research findings through ancestral knowledge transmission methods – 'methods' that emphasise the important connection between knowledge and the location where that knowledge originates. By promoting and revitalising traditional composition and storytelling, we seek to position Indigenous composition as an innovative and culturally relevant research methodology. This contributes to the broader journey of decolonising research and reclaiming Indigenous forms of knowledge.

He kairangahau, he kaitito – The Researcher as 'Composer'

A reflection of the first Author's experience –

While I was conducting the first interviews of a three-year study exploring the role of the environment in Māori well-being, and the role of Indigenous knowledge in strengthening our connection with the environment, I happened to be enrolled in a tertiary-level course focused on Māori forms of composition. In this course, taught entirely in te reo Māori (the Māori language), guest speakers and the course leader, whom were all recognised Māori language proponents and leaders in Māori 'composition', encouraged students to be active and consistent in creating new compositions to normalise, rejuvenate and invigorate our language. As an academic researcher of almost 20 years, I had never considered myself a composer, poet, or as having any significant ability or artistry with language. However, the encouragement to start creating compositions, specifically in te reo Māori, struck a chord with me, as a supporter of Māori language revitalisation, and as a researcher whose research explores contemporary applications of Indigenous knowledge and practice. The concluding assignment for the previously mentioned course happened to be the creation and recital of an original Māori composition. As I pondered on a topic or theme for a unique composition, I reflected on an 'interview' I had conducted just days before with one expert research participant – a renowned Māori fisherman – and the experiences and learnings that had been on my mind since my two-day visit with him collecting research 'data' through follow-along interviews. This 'interview' would provide the basis of my composition assignment.

The 'composition process' began with some initial notes and mind-mapping in te reo Māori. These notes were intentionally

taken in te reo Māori, to ensure subtle nuances of Māori culture and epistemology that are woven through language were considered, and to better ensure that findings were expressed in a 'Māori way' (rather than starting in English and trying to translate to Māori). I hoped this would inspire a more culturally relevant representation of my experience.

When discussing the translation of traditional waiata from Māori to English, Mitcalfe (1974) makes the important observation of waiata that 'imagery drawn from a mythological frame, accepted and known by all, is common. It is therefore compressed and highly allusive, so that translation is impossible without extensive explanatory notes (which lose the immediacy of the original)' (p. 11). Finnegan (1992) poses the question, 'Is translating a 'local' text into a western language a form of neo-colonialism?' (p. 229). If the answer is 'yes', then choosing to remain in the Indigenous language, in te reo Māori, during the process of composition is perhaps a decolonising act itself.

> After my initial reflection on the thoughts and inspiration that I took from this interview, I referred to transcripts of the recorded interviews for specific details and quotes that would add richness to the composition. Next, I began to weave my ideas into a poetic composition entirely in te reo Māori, representing my learnings from the interview in both literal and metaphorical styles.

Trinick and Dale (2015) affirm that waiata (Māori songs) are "cultural vessels that carry and sustain linguistic and cultural knowledge infused in the words and metaphor embedded in song". In our case, Metaphor is not merely a linguistic ornament to embellish the research learnings, but a mechanism for conveying complex ideas, values, and principles. "Metaphors not only reflect our ideas but also shape the way we think… metaphors have an important role in shaping our epistemological framework" (King, 2003 p. 106). Metaphors, including personification, function as vehicles for transmitting deep cultural insights and fostering a relational understanding of the world that is essential to Indigenous ways of knowing (Cajete & Williams, 2020). In research specifically, the metaphor woven throughout compositions facilitates a more intuitive and holistic way of organising and engaging with knowledge, facilitating the translation of what could be considered academic discourse, into forms that are accessible and meaningful among Indigenous peoples.

Like many traditional Māori compositions that were composed in admiration of others and experiences with others, this composition reflects our admiration of the interviewee, their expertise, and work. These compositions also reflect our awe of our tūpuna (ancestors), their understanding of the world, and the encoded knowledge, both hidden and apparent, within our language and narratives that emerged from interviews.

Within this investigation, the researcher assumes a dual role as both the creator of artistic work (in this case uniquely Māori

forms of song and chant) and a reflective observer of the experiences and practices of fellow collaborators (the participants). Many researchers question the dual role of the researcher in this case, that this insider position compromises the objectivity and scientific rigor traditionally associated with academic research (Innes, 2009; Toy-Cronin, 2018). However, others have long emphasized the need for research paradigms that involve the people the research seeks to understand and benefit (Mackintosh, 2024). Likewise, Indigenous researchers have highlighted the depth of insight that result from insider perspectives, as well as the complex shifting of positionality between being both an 'insider' and 'outsider' in the research (Kwame, 2017).

Readers may notice alignment between this 'method' and already known and utilised methods in their own field (autoethnography for example), and we acknowledge that the similarities that do exist provide meaningful ways to connect Indigenous and non-Indigenous research and researchers at the interface between the two. Nevertheless, our goal here is not to highlight Indigenous practices as aligning with Western scientific methods or to validate one method against another, but rather to privilege Indigenous knowledge and perspectives as already valid and of value on their own. A project currently being conducted by the authors will be referred to below as an example of traditional composition methods being used to analyse, interpret, and disseminate research findings.

The Research Process

During interviews, a wireless lapel microphone was worn while we conducted a novel form of 'go-along' interviewing that other Māori researchers have termed 'haerenga kitea' (Moewaka-Barnes et al., 2017). Haerenga kitea allowed us to video and audio record informal discussions while moving through significant locations, stopping along the way to point out and record significant locations and observations. Informal discussion was mingled with guiding questions that were identified prior.

'Data' Analysis

The process of reflecting on interviews provided a unique way to analyse 'data'. Often, such interviews would be analysed using a process of thematic or descriptive analysis, or an adaptation of either. Indeed, such approaches to analysis have been common of qualitative research with Māori and other Indigenous peoples (Sinclair, 2003; Graham & Masters-Awatere, 2020). 'Analysing' interview 'data' through the composition of waiata (song) is rooted in a deep consideration of the participants' expressions. This approach to analysis considers the participants' connection to their own contexts and unique environments. The whakataukī (proverb) "Toi te kupu, toi te mana, toi te whenua" encapsulates the essence of this approach, signifying that one must first grasp the language to comprehend its significance to the participant, and

ultimately, its connection to the land. This approach provides a nuanced representation of participants' narratives and celebrates the relationship between language, knowledge, and place.

Interpretation of 'Data'

As mentioned previously, in this study English translations were not produced until after the Māori language composition was completed. Participants (those who shared the knowledge that inspired compositions) were informed at the completion of interviews that primary author, who was also the lead researcher on the project, would work with the wider research team to develop a reo Māori composition based on the learnings taken from interviews. After an initial draft developed by the research team, the respective participants were then consulted about the acceptability and relevance of the text and the rangi (the tune) – different tribes had tunes unique to their tribal area so that the researchers (alongside participants) referred to prior compositions for inspiration.

Knowledge and lessons are encoded in the languages and stories of Indigenous peoples. As such, a significant aspect of Indigenous (and indeed non-Indigenous) poetry is the multiple interpretations that both composer and the listener or reader can draw from the work. As is the case with 'translating' between two languages, subtle nuance of the original te reo Māori version is lost when attempting to translate from Māori into English. In her article, 'Mele Lāhui: The Importance of Pono in Hawaiian Poetry', Leilani Basham (2008) highlights the difficulty of translating key concepts into English by using the Hawaiian example of 'pono'.

> 'As always, there is not a direct match between Hawaiian and English words. The word pono is usually translated in English as 'righteous' or 'proper', but is, in reality, much deeper, broader, and more complex, as evidenced by its definition in the two most complete Hawaiian language dictionaries' (p. 153).

Waiata [songs] such as the composition outlined below, excelled in succinctly conveying significant knowledge (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2010) so an entire depth of translation is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, the intention of the interpretation that we outline (in English) is to provide clarity to our entire process of analysing, interpreting, and creating a form of 'dissemination' that is culturally relevant and location specific.

Below, we provide the first 11 lines of the first composition created in this study, titled 'Te Toka Whakatā'. Subsequent compositions are being created for each interview that took/will take place.

Te Toka Whakatā

Totoro te akauroa ki te taipū Kahakaharoa

Te moana Tāpokopoko a Tāwhaki, hipokina e te huka e

Te huarahi kai, Hua rahi o te tai

Hiki ana rehutai, puakina te pae

Tae ki te toka tū moana, te tokatā o Niniwa

Tauranga whakatā, Whakapau Karakia

Pahure te tai pakoa, e pari ana te moana

kawea ngā tamariki ā Tangaroa

Ko te Ahuriri, ko te kahawai, ko te tamure, ko te araara e

Rumakihia e ngā ngaru o te wānanga

Kawea e te tai o te pukenga...

These lines are included as an example of the composition style that emerged from this process. The entire composition (25 lines in total) will be presented in another forum later, alongside a complete series of compositions reflecting the learnings from respective interviews. A translation into English follows below – not a word-for-word translation, but an interpretation as best can be made from the original in te reo Māori.

Interpretation of Encoded Learnings for an English-Speaking Audience

In this example, the composition starts where our journey started on the day of 'interviewing', on the back of a quad bike [4-wheel motorbike] travelling along the coast to the fishing ground. As has been mentioned, locating and connecting stories and histories to a place is an important part of Indigenous story telling.

"Totoro Te Ākauroa ki te taipū Kahakaharoa" – the first line geographically frames both the starting point and the final destination of our journey with the 'stretching out of Te Akauroa (a name for the Northern West Coast) to the large dunes in the distance (Kahakaharoa). We continue outlining the location of the event while highlighting some significant features observed in the environment that day

"Te Moana Tāpokopoko a Tāwhaki, hipokina e te huka e" – The Tasman Sea (known in this region as Te Moana Tāpokopoko a Tāwhaki) is covered in foam/plankton. The thick brown foam was a significant feature of our discussion as a food source that attracts the kanae (mullet), and the next day we would wade through that foam as we netted mullet.

"Te huarahi kai, hua rahi o te tai" – A play on words between 'huarahi' (a road/pathway) and 'hua rahi' (large or abundant fruits/food) that the coast (te tai) provides – in this case, the abundant food source that this coastal 'road' provides for the tangata whenua (people of the land) in this place.

"Hiki ana rehutai, puakina te pae" – The sea spray is lifting and the horizon emerges ahead of us. Although describing detailed features of the environment around us, this line has a dual meaning in a metaphoric sense, as we (the 'interviewer' and 'interviewee') get to know each other better

and 'gems' of wisdom emerge in our discussion as we stop at various locations on the 11 km journey to the fishing grounds.

"Tae ki te toka tū moana, te tokatā o Niniwa" – talks of our arrival at a specific rock where our expert has fished his whole life. Once again, a dual meaning is intended – 'te toka tū moana' is a well-known kupu whakarite (metaphor/simile) that translates as 'the rock that stands in the ocean' and refers to someone or something that is firm and unwavering despite challenges (waves) that wash over them. Our Indigenous knowledge holders and those who continue to rejuvenate our practices are like that rock, providing a firm foundation of knowledge and culture that we build upon. Likewise, this location was a significant place (a constant) where our expert had rested, learned and honed his skill throughout his life.

"Tauranga whakatā, Whakapau Karakia" – 'Tauranga whakatā' refers to a harbour or place of rest, while 'Whakapau Karakia' is part of the name of the 'Hokianga' harbour itself – *Hokianga Whakapau Karakia* – where the fishing took place.

"Pahure te tai pakoa, e pari ana te moana" – 'low tide has passed, and the tide is coming back in'. Tides provided an important marker of time for our people prior to colonisation. Once again, a dual meaning is intended, acknowledging ancestral knowledge and its connection to the environment, while also referring to shifting of tides as we shift from colonial practices back to ancestral knowledge.

"Kawea ngā tamariki ā Tangaroa" – 'Bringing with it the children of Tangaroa' (the personified form/deity of the ocean). In this case, we are referring to the fish that we were seeking, while acknowledging the ocean as the carrier of that provision.

"Ko te Ahuriri, ko te kahawai, ko te tamure, ko te araara e" – 'The large and small kahawai, the snapper, and the trevally' (common species of fish in this region). The fish listed in this line are still a treasured food source for tangata whenua in this area.

"Rumakihia e ngā ngaru o te wānanga" – This metaphorical line refers to being immersed (rumakihia) by the waves of learning and discussion (wānanga), as we had been during this 'interview' process. It also speaks to the learning that emerges from being engaged in ocean-based activities. We are taught by our environment as we interact with it.

"Kawea e te tai o te pukenga" – Once again, a metaphorical line referring to being carried (kawea) by the tides of the expert (pukenga) which pays tribute to this expert knowledge holder and the valuable taonga (treasures) of knowledge that he openly shared with us as researchers.

Discussion

Based on the research discussed above, we propose the following key points – three key learnings from the composition of waiata as a research method:

1. Composing is a traditional knowledge building tool for Māori, and many Indigenous peoples, which draws on unique tribal epistemologies to translate and disseminate research findings in culturally relevant ways.

2. Composing waiata as a research methodology could provide a culturally relevant way to 'analyse' and engage with 'data', and to ensure the interpretation of that data reflects Indigenous epistemologies that honour the connection of people and knowledge with the environment.

3. The act of composing waiata provides Indigenous researchers and communities 'research' tools that fortify their sense of identity. This approach serves to reinforce Indigenous research methodologies, particularly for Indigenous scholars who often face the task of justifying and safeguarding their research practices.

Point 1 – A Traditional 'Knowledge Building' Tool

Various Iwi and hapū (tribes and sub-tribes) possess distinct epistemologies and perspectives that contribute to a wide range of Māori lived experiences (Durie, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2012). Composition as a research method is a way of recognising these distinct cultural ways of knowing. Iwi and hapū also possess distinct definitions and localised implementations of values (Hapeta & Farah, 2014). In this approach, the researcher attentively listens to 'participants' as they share their specific, tribally oriented narratives while in and moving through locations which helped shape such narratives. This provides an opportunity for the researcher and research team to become intimately familiar with the setting and context of the 'data' that is collected. Christensen (2012) notes, researchers "listen to stories through interviews and focus groups… reflect upon those stories and interpret them, and then [become] a storyteller as [we] share these stories" (p. 232). Ultimately, researchers are storytellers, and Indigenous researchers should be encouraged to continue the practice of storytelling, to ensure our knowledge and learnings – those which come from our tūpuna and those which emerge from contemporary research – are accessible and useful for the communities we and our participants represent. A participant's and a community's tribal epistemology can be empowered and rejuvenated through the use of composition techniques. As Mahuika (2011) explains, to comprehend and analyse the world, it is essential to establish a deep bond with every community, where knowledgeable individuals, creators, narratives, and waiata all play a part in shaping a more comprehensive story. Lastly, Smith (2020) suggests, oral traditions have a profound impact on the Māori sense of place, emphasising how stories become a living thread, binding individuals to their ancestral landscapes.

Point 2: An Epistemology Connecting People, Knowledge, and the Environment

A key feature of the above composition 'Te Toka Whakatā' is its emphasis on the connection between knowledge and place.

For Māori—and many other Indigenous peoples—the connection to place, particularly ancestral lands, is central to identity and serves as a 'defining element of Indigeneity' (Durie, 2004, p. 1138). Heke (2016), in the Atua-Matua Māori Health Framework, highlights how tribal groups seek to re-establish relationships with their ecosystems, particularly in the context of health. Indigenous compositions reinforce a place-based epistemology, renewing the bond between identity and environment. What's more, conducting research within culturally significant environments deepens the understanding of how place shapes knowledge and health. Kincheloe & Pinar (1991, p.5), suggested that "without the grounding of place, knowledge becomes trivialized and fragmented into bits and pieces of memorizable waste".

For our research team, grounding research in specific environmental settings acknowledges the dynamic movements of the natural world and integrates these into the research process. The use of Maramataka—a Māori system of aligning with environmental cycles and rhythms—is a powerful example of such integration (Warbrick et al., 2023). As an environmental engagement framework, Maramataka encourages researchers to observe and respond to the natural world's patterns and phenomena. In this project, inspired by the Maramataka and other Indigenous oral traditions, detailed observations of the environment included in compositions, such as rising seaspray or plankton-covered waters, are crucial to understanding and interpreting research data. By embedding environmental details into the composition, the research highlights the interplay between place, identity, and knowledge, creating a culturally relevant and holistic approach to data interpretation.

Point 3: Indigenous Research Methodologies

Mahuika (2011) suggests that the composition of waiata establishes a connection between Ngāti Porou (a tribe of New Zealand's Eastern North Island) ancestors and descendants. What's more, waiata also serves as a model for genuine cultural representation, in this case, expressing the history and values of the Ngāti Porou people (Mahuika, 2011). As a tangible output that can be shared, sung, and recited, compositions such as this become tools for future mokopuna (grandchildren) to engage with research and ancestral knowledge. A "benefit of this particular form of preserving knowledge is that the element of entertainment surrounding waiata ensures that the succeeding generations are interested in learning them and committing the words to memory" (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2012 p. 101).

Interpreting research through Indigenous forms of composition provides another way to decolonise the research process, while also rejuvenating uniquely Indigenous forms of knowledge transfer. The dissemination and storing of knowledge are done in a way that is more accessible to Indigenous communities – those that would benefit most from the research. These practices encourage Indigenous researchers to maintain our Indigeneity within a setting (academic research) where we have often had to justify and defend this positionality. Lastly, utilising this practice within research preserves Indigenous art forms and highlights the value of these art forms in treasuring and passing on different forms of knowledge.

Conclusion

The application of traditional Māori composition as a method of analysing, interpreting, and disseminating research 'findings' is a significant step towards decolonising research practices and honouring Indigenous knowledge systems. It is imperative that we continue to explore, document, and celebrate the myriad ways in which Indigenous peoples around the world create, share, and preserve knowledge. Stories shared through song, chants and other Indigenous forms of composition have been perpetuated for many generations. We don't suggest this will necessarily be the case with the compositions we produce here – others will decide whether our compositions are worthy of sharing, let alone being passed down through generations – and that's a key point. When it comes to research about Indigenous peoples, by Indigenous peoples and for Indigenous peoples, it is Indigenous people who will decide whether the outputs of that research are meaningful or valuable. Indeed, research will only be meaningful if we do research in our own ways – from the conception of the research questions and aims which drive the research, to the ways in which we analyse, interpret and share the stories that make a research project's findings useful. We encourage Indigenous researchers and scholars to adapt or use this methodology to draw upon their own respective methods of knowledge transmission, storytelling, and composition to decolonise research processes and rejuvenate ways of 'research' that are meaningful for your own people.

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Statements and Declarations

Ethical Appoval
Ethics approval for this study was obtained from AUTEC (Auckland University of Technology's Ethics Committee) – application 21/414.

Informed Consent
All participants provided written consent to participate in this study and have their data included in this and other publications.

Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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