

**ONCE WERE WARRIORS –
A MODEL THAT MATTERS AND A MIRROR OF CONCERNS**

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Introduction

In 1994, the feature film, *Once Were Warriors*, directed by the Maori filmmaker, Lee Tamahori, was released. I think it is fair to say that the film became a significant public event in Aotearoa New Zealand.¹ The film became the greatest box office success in the history of Aotearoa New Zealand's film industry. It won several awards, which were listed on the film's homepage (www.flf.com/warriors/wawards.htm). It was celebrated as being a symbol of the national film industry (Martens 2007, Clelland-Stokes 2007). However, in addition to its significance as a film, *Once Were Warriors* could be said to have brought about things outside the field of entertainment.² In fact, it had a significant impact upon the national awareness of relations between Maori (persons of the indigenous Polynesian population) and Pakeha (New Zealanders of European descent) in Aotearoa New Zealand. For example, it triggered a debate about stereotypes of Maori in the film (Martens 2007); while some individuals perceived the film as being a social problem documentary (Alia 2010), others were fascinated by portrayals of Maori sociality. To some, the true nature of post-colonialism was portrayed in the film. Altogether, the film can be regarded as an important lens through which the relations between media and indigeneity can be explored.

In this article, I will focus on connections between media, culture and society in order to understand two prototypical Maori responses to the film. The two kinds of responses are captured in the following phrases: "*The film should never have been made*" and "*That's not fiction, that's reality*". One of my objectives is to show how these particular Maori responses to this fiction-film are entangled with deep concerns about ethnic policies and marginalization in general. In other words, the film is explored as a statement about Maori – Pakeha inter-ethnic relations and 'bi-culturalism', which is the official term for the political vision of the post-colonial nation. Subsequently, my analysis suggests insights from a deeper concern about the contexts that contribute to these particular Maori formulations of media-reality configurations, in addition to lessons of a more general character.

¹ In a so-called post-colonial era, the naming of a nation of two distinct peoples bears a strong symbolic power. 'New Zealand' is the name which was given by the European explorers who claimed to have discovered the territory. 'Aotearoa' is the Polynesian/Maori equivalent. In 1987 *The Act of Maori Language* was passed in Parliament, thus providing an official alternative to 'New Zealand'. The name 'Aotearoa New Zealand' has gained increased acceptance among citizens of different ethnic backgrounds.

² When the book *Once Were Warriors*, by Alan Duff, was published in 1990, it evoked strong opposition among many Maori. These reactions primarily opposed the morality by which Alan Duff was said to "put his people down", i.e., referring to the manner in which he represented *Maoridom* to the public. To my knowledge, the number of Maori persons who actually read the book is significantly lower than the number who saw the film that is based on the book. For a study of contemporary Maori fiction, including the work by Alan Duff see Heim (1998).

Once Were Warriors

In this section, I will first give a short presentation of the fiction-film *Once Were Warriors* by Lee Tamahori.³ The film depicts contemporary under-class Maori ghetto life in urban Auckland, in a neighbourhood of state housing, far away from tribal territories and ‘exotic’ practices. The opening scene is worth mentioning, as it becomes a metaphorical window into the life of a displaced child and his world. An open sky, and a wide and beautiful landscape is presented to the viewer as the panoramic camera slides and fixes on a spot underneath a noisy, concrete highway bridge. What we see appears to be someone’s home. The young boy who lives underneath the bridge seems to be forgotten and can therefore have his glue and sniffing cloth all to himself. The majority of the people we meet are unemployed but survive on social welfare allowances.

The film follows a married couple, Beth and Jake Heke, and their five children through ordinary everyday life. Beth is the long-suffering wife of Jake, a fearless muscleman who drinks his lunch, lives off the dole and punches out anyone who gets in his way, including his wife. Jake is tough and charismatic. He practises mate-ship. Beth, who is charming and strong, tries to hold the family together by pulling their teenage son, who has been recruited as gang-member, into the family again; by nurturing the hopes of a daughter on the verge of emotionally retreating from the frightening scenes around her, including late-night boozing parties at home; by promising to visit her other son who is detained in a youth camp by social workers, etc. At the same time, there is the ‘nitty-gritty’ of empty wallets, electricity bills and desires to look good. Often shown from the perspectives of the kids, the film moves between several episodes of extreme violence and fear, and those of joy, singing and tenderness. It portrays a Maori family on the verge of dissolution, while simultaneously suggesting various options for a different way of living. The ‘if only...’ is continuously present. Options exist by virtue of retrieving the wisdom and ‘roots’ of Maoridom, i.e., values associated with ‘togetherness’, ‘pride’ and ‘strength’, and in a different attitude towards life and survival, metaphorised in ‘warriorship’. The film provides only a very limited representations of the direct impact of the authorities or Pakeha society on family matters, broadly speaking. The subversive impact of the colonial operations that have been brought upon the Maori people can be conceived however – at least by spectators who attribute Maori poverty to colonialism.⁴

The film has an open ending. After the teenage daughter was raped by a mate of her father’s and thereafter committed suicide, we see Beth and the kids leaving Jake and the ghetto for a different life, hinted at by the arrival of Beth’s tribal people at the daughter’s funeral. Jake remains in ‘his’ environment, that is, next to the pub, his mates and their comforting male ways.

³ The director, the cast and the crew of the film were all Maori. In an interview, the director claims that this film could never have been made by non-Maori filmmakers. They would have been “chased down with guns and knives” (www.flf.com/warriors/wawards.htm).

⁴ See Martens (2007) on representations of Maori in art and documentaries. See also Alia (2010, 58-61) on audience receptions of the film.

Model and mirror

I saw the film three times in rural areas of Aotearoa New Zealand, and four times in urban Auckland. Sometimes I was accompanied by Maori, other times I went alone. Every performance I attended was remarkable in specific ways: in Auckland, the audiences, a large proportion of them being Polynesians, were quietly weeping, sobbing, blowing their noses, holding each other's hands. Without exception, people remained in their seats long after the film had ended. In addition, there was this intense silence, largely filled with an emotional atmosphere. In rural Tai Tokerau,⁵ the adult Maori responded in similar ways to those just described. The striking and scary difference was, especially during two of the performances I attended, many young Maori males openly and loudly applauded Jake and the other men's acts of violence: "Get him! Right on, man! Don't chicken out, man! Fuck off, you bitch!" These young boys seemed to get carried away in what appeared to be a praise of such expressions of masculinity or resourceful violence. In a context of action, show and excitement, the boundary between the screen and the audience appeared to be blurred - at least to me. The audience seemed like it was being drawn into the plot of the film as it moved from the screen and into our real lives, so to speak. Insofar as my understanding of the audience's reactions holds water, in the sense that the film played upon the realities of Polynesian audience groups in convincing ways, I suggest that the affect I observed and sensed went beyond the emotional state of the individual spectator. I observed affect as a social phenomenon, rather than as exclusively individual outbursts and expressions of emotional anguish. This common experience, in the form of empathy, was expressed through the practice of comforting that occurred both inside and outside of the cinema.

As a witness to the audience's actions after the film ended, I take it that many Maori were compelled to take the Other's view of their own Self as it was directed at them. In this respect, I gather that many Maori also interpreted scenes from the film as supporting a familiar Pakeha stereotype of Maori as being 'primitive and violent' (see below). For instance, Pakeha in general are believed to be incapable of distinguishing Maori gang tattoos from those that signify a specific tribal achievement. Analytically speaking, I observed several incidents of mutual dislike or anxieties caused by both the Maori and Pakeha respective *models* of each other as social categories. To illustrate, in public places such as the cinema, Maori and Pakeha mingled with their own 'lot', that is, they avoided the physical proximity of their primary ethnic Other, or s/he who has a different skin colour or hair texture. Correspondingly, Maori groups may prefer to corroborate a Pakeha stereotype of them by acting as if they belonged to a Maori gang (see below). In other words, racialism in the sense of differentiating people by racial symbols, models inter-ethnic relations in public places. Accordingly, the film presents reasons for Pakeha to stay away from the Maori 'lot'. After all, the film is made by a Maori, a person who 'knows' Maori ways within their world - as one Maori informant said to me.

In addition, I suggest that Maori interpretations of the scenes of violence, joy, fellowship and loneliness in the film, which led them to comfort specific fellow Maori amongst themselves, reflected their understanding of the way many Maori

⁵ This region is also called Northland. It denotes the northern part of the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand.

lives are actually lived. For instance, in one incident, a Maori man was accused of being like 'Jake' (in the film). This accusation relied on information about the conduct of this particular man. In this respect and from an analytical perspective, the film took the form of a *mirror* from which personal, cultural and social experiences and anxieties stood out, making actual and virtual realities too similar for comfort. I learned that the film opened the door of many "hidden closets", as one Maori termed it. Many Maori began to compare atrocities experienced in their own lives with those displayed in the film. Yet I also sensed a trace of hesitation and reserve, related to self-esteem, about whether letting the stories out would somehow change something, for example, turn one into a 'Beth', who never left, or a 'Jake', who never learned. There is much *aroha*, or 'love and care' according to the Maori translation, in the following advice by one Maori woman to another: "Let it go, dear, but not here in front of these Pakeha bastards."

With this latter example, I also draw the attention to the fact that empathetic processes never occur in a cultural or political vacuum. This particular Maori woman was just one of many who carefully chose with whom she wanted to discuss the film or her assumptions about its possible effects within Maori communities and on political agendas. In line with Hollan & Throop (2011), the adult Maori could be said to exhibit empathy because their experiences in life are similar if not equal. The youthful aggressive energy that I described above can be understood to reflect processes of projection and identification with 'outer' images of 'inner' emotional turmoil. In other words, Jake resembles a role model if this character is perceived to accomplish male anxieties, a topic that is beyond the scope of this article. I will, however, return to the constellation of reality – media below.

My ethnographical material stems from what is often termed a classical anthropological fieldwork of altogether 20 months.⁶ Methods such as participant-observation and unstructured conversations were employed when gathering information on Maori/indigenous affairs. I was given the privilege of living among so-called 'ordinary Maori' and share many aspects of their 'ordinary' everyday life – in rural as well as urban areas. Thus, I have peeled potatoes while discussing Maori humour; I have been part of Maori groups out shopping, while observing that our group is being watched over by watchmen on call. I have participated in tribal *hui* (gatherings) in *marae* (tribal meeting house) or community halls where important issues have been tackled, both in rural and urban areas. In addition, I have survived late night parties with joy, sorrow and lovely guitar playing. All in all, I have attended various social situations and have had the opportunity to follow acts and events as they have shaped Maori ways of living, and which further allowed me a degree of access into the concerns of their fellow Maori. The strategy that Barth (1992), in being inspired by Bateson (1972), discusses and that resembles my efforts is called 'to follow the loops'. This strategy brought me into arenas and situations where Maori felt that the topic of violence and the stereotype of Maori as a 'violent

⁶ More precisely, 1988-89 (9 months), 1994 (7 months), 2004 (2 months), 2007 (2 months). My long-term engagement with Aotearoa New Zealand and Maori reflect what Howell and Talle (2012) call a 'multitemporal research', and I add, on the relationship between modernities and belonging. During my stay in Aotearoa New Zealand I have had more or less systematic contact with Pakeha. This includes being a tenant in a Pakeha neighborhood for five weeks.

people' could be at least partially addressed, among themselves. For instance, when Maori addressed their use of drugs and alcohol, a reference to *Tikanga Maori* ('the right way to live') served as a basis for discussion. Besides the fact that Maori probably would not admit a 'foreigner' to such an occasion unless they 'trusted' him or her, I will maintain that a grasp of *Tikanga Maori* requires long-term fieldwork. My venture into many aspects of Maori realities was frequently as the 'listener'. If I held a position among Maori in what can be understood as sensitive contexts, I was usually an audience to Maori exchanges of opinions, experiences and plans for the future. My understanding of Maori-Pakeha ethnic relations is also an outcome of the interactions and conversations among various Maori, and between different Maori and me. In the wake of the film, and the extensive public attention that was afforded to its 'success', Maori also held *hui* (meetings) where the problem of real violence in Maori communities was on the agenda. Data on intra-ethnic concerns about the Maori practice of violence is outside the scope of this article. My analysis of responses to *Once Were Warriors* relates to data regarding inter-ethnic issues. In addition to paying attention to debates concerning both the film and mainstream media presentations of violence and indigeneity, I collected material from Maori-controlled media, that is, mostly written items and radio shows. This material has indirectly influenced my analysis within this article; one example is the newspaper *Te Maori News* (vol. 3, no. 8, 9, 12 – 1994), which offered the opinion that the film is counterproductive to indigenous affairs. I should also add that the topic of violence is a very sensitive and difficult socio-cultural matter for most Maori, which is something I believe they share with the rest of human kind.

My exploration of the connections between media, culture and society in Aotearoa New Zealand is closely linked to a powerful stereotype of Maori, namely that they "are" a "violent people". It is necessary to give a short outline of mainstream media coverage on occurrences of violence in Aotearoa New Zealand society – in order to identify how this stereotype is reproduced. This section constitutes one context for my analysis of Maori responses to *Once Were Warriors*, and to the mainstream media's use of the film when reporting on the problem of real violence in both actual Maori communities and in the broader society in general. Since reports on indigenous affairs in the media are a hot topic in many parts of the world (Spoonley & Hirsh 1990, Martens 2007, Collins & Davis 2004, Wilson & Stewart 2008), some reference to this field of research is useful.

Media and indigeneity

It is widely acknowledged that relations between media, culture and society are complex empirical matters both 'here' and 'there', generating complicated research tasks for both social scientists and media scholars (Curran 2010, Boyle 2005, Ginsburg 2005). On the one hand, the concept of media is best regarded as a heuristic term for many forms of (visual) media. Newspaper, television and film are just three of many important sites where culture, identities and opinions are (re)produced, (re)contested, (re)negotiated and neglected (Gripsrud 2007, Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002).⁷ Furthermore, it is a fact that media have been approached from

⁷ For the sake of the argument, I ignore the fact that new forms of media, combined with available technological opportunities, create a much more complicated and unanticipated 'input' and 'output'

different theoretical perspectives and professional interests. The anthropology of media is particularly concerned with linking media production, circulation, and reception in social and cultural fields in order to understand the nature of media power in local, national or transnational contexts. (Spitulnik 1993, Abu-Lughod 1993 and 2001, Ginsburg 1994, Hall 1997, van Dijk 2000, Boyle 2005, Cottle 2000, Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod & Larkin 2002). Relating to the field of indigenous studies, Tomaselli (1999) argues that owners of the media use representations of the Other, such as the San, in accordance with their own economic and political interests. Therefore, media representations of the San as prehistoric savages or noble savages serve the purpose of denying their own responsibility for the depressed situation in which the San people live in contemporary South Africa. Walker (1990, 1996) and Ginsburg (2008) refer to studies that demonstrate how many media representations of Otherness have proven to be damaging to the lives of indigenous peoples around the world, especially in relation to land claims, like in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. The public perception of Maori activism from the 1970s onwards has been described as follows:

[...] young radicals disturbing harmony, and dividing the races, was fostered by the news media treatment of activism. In this respect, the Forth Estate, as an integral component of the Establishment, functioned to maintain the status quo and the structural relationship of Maori subordination. (Walker 1996,143)

Clelland-Stokes (2007) substantiates the conclusion that representations of Aboriginals in the Australian film industry have affirmed white racial stereotypes. In 1989, Australia adopted 'multiculturalism' as a cultural policy in an attempt to establish a 'new' national identity. In 1992, the Mabo High Court Decision gave symbolic and legal recognition to the pre-colonial settlement of Aboriginal groups of people. Clelland-Stokes (ibid.) maintains that to a large degree the Aboriginal people are portrayed as a problem community, as maladjusted to the dominant social order in Australian society. Several films link Aboriginal black characters to killings and violence. Accordingly, Aboriginals are increasingly demanding greater control over representations of Aboriginality in mainstream media (Collins & Davis 2004).

Wilson & Stewart (2008) relate to several studies that depict how various forms of mass media have contributed to negative stereotypes of indigenous populations all over the world. In relation to Hanson's (1989) perspective that 'culture' is 'invented', and that social reproduction can be described as "[...] a case of sign-substitution in the play of signification" (ibid., 898), my analysis underscores the assumption that images of indigenous minorities, such as the Maori, are far from being innocent 'signs' in the 'play of signification'. Images, separate or mixed together, can easily be transferred to essentialist accounts of both minority and majority populations. Subsequently, the same images become political instruments in fights over sovereignty and recognition as distinct peoples.

In referencing this short and obviously limited list of studies of the impact of media on social life, I suggest that the concepts of *model* and *mirror* offer ideas

from peoples' engagements with the media. See for example Alia (2010) and Landzelius (2006).

about familial likenesses between real life and media depictions of real-life.⁸ In this respect, I hope to present food for thought regarding ‘a model that matters’ to Maori who, cannot escape what many believe is a truthful and convincing ‘mirror’ of the real lives of Maori.⁹

Violence and indigeneity

In the early 1990s, there was widespread public concern about what was termed an increase of violence in Aotearoa New Zealand society. According to statistics, between 1983 and 1992, the most serious category of assault, injuring or wounding, had increased by 121 percent (New Zealand Official Yearbook 1994). The dominant mainstream media did its job: it reported incidents of violence in identified suburbs, streets, pubs, schools and private homes. Information concerning the classificatory identities of those involved, for example, sex, age and *minority* origin was regularly given. In addition, reports on crime were often hiked up with photos of, as was often the case, the Polynesian persons involved, be they the ‘victim’ or the ‘perpetrator’. Following Paine (2001), I regard ‘violence’ as a relational phenomenon. ‘Harmful acts’ are a universal phenomenon in the sense that they occur everywhere. Still, what counts as ‘harmful act’ is entangled in socio-cultural, and thus specific, moral universes (Riches 1986). The general public was regularly informed about police interventions and court sentences, thus contributing material to the discourse on violence in society.

It seems fair to say that mainstream media employed a language on crime and violence that spoke to existing cultural (folk) models of ethnicity. Thus, the reports presumably appealed to and reproduced hegemonic constructions of ‘violent acts’ and stereotypical constructions of the Maori male. The power to define or oppose ethnic labelling is, of course, closely related to the opportunity for presenting different and complementary constructions of an imagined ethnic Other in this case, the Maori male. The scholar Ranginui Walker was one of very few Maori who could voice his critique against the media’s culturally insensitive representations of the Maori realities in his regular column in the mainstream magazine, the *New Zealand Listener* (Walker 1987, 1996).¹⁰

An illustration of this point follows. A large portion of the media coverage on violence dealt with what is referred to as “the gang problem”, and more often than not, “Maori gangs” (see e.g. Ritchies 1993, Duff 1993, Martens 2007). Notably, neither the media nor the general public had unlimited access to the communities of which the Maori and the Pacific Islander gangs are a part, and within where their

⁸ In order to avoid possible confusion, I stress that I use the formulation ‘real life’ when I refer to actually lived lives. The term real-life is related to (media) choices of representations of real life. The distinction resembles Goffman’s line of thinking about ‘identity’, e.g. when he employs the concepts of “actual identity” versus “virtual identity” (Goffman 1963).

⁹ For a further theoretical elaboration on the analytical concept of ‘model’, see Handelman (1998, 22-62) and Geertz (1973, 93ff).

¹⁰ I digress a bit by pointing out that the establishment of Maori Television in 2004 was based on a long-lasting critique of the fact that Maori ‘realities’ were marginalized in mainstream media institutions. Secondly, this fact, as argued by Maori working in the media industry, was a breach of the basic principles of the *Treaty of Waitangi*, which were meant to regulate relations between the indigenous Maori tribes and the British Crown and colonial agency.

fight normally take place – which is something I learned during my fieldwork (see also Ritchies 1993).¹¹ The media coverage on the inclination of Maori males and gang members to use violence often emphasised the perpetrator's irresponsibility and cruelty, as well as the individual person's potential lack of safety in society.

As an example, under the title "Death a tragedy among friends", the *Sunday Star Times* (June 26, 1994) reports a fatal outcome of violence among young gang members "of Tongan and Maori descent". The article addresses the sorrow of both families, but the readers are not informed about what brought about the fatal conflict. However, the article reminds the readers about this gang's previous troublemaking, and the fact that the police have kept the gang under surveillance.

As yet another 'witness' to these crime reports, I felt that such reports failed when they did not qualify terms like 'group mentality', or provided descriptive material on the gang plot or the setting of sometimes fatal conflicts. Thus, I could only speculate on, for instance, the district authorities' reasons for banning 'patch-users' from certain public places - a decision which received great media coverage.¹² As reported in *Northern Advocate* (July 27, 1994)

[...] anyone wearing a gang patch in Ruiatoria could be arrested and removed from the town. They could also be charged with a breach of the peace. Mr. Waitai [the police district commander] said wearing a patch in Ruiatoria was tantamount to declaring war on the locals.

Maori gangs surely exposed fierceness and forcefulness due to outfit and, sometimes, facial adornments compared to non-gang persons who occasionally assembled in public places. Yet the media did not offer an explanation to central questions, like how their mere presence turned public places into risky places for the law-abiding citizen in general? If we accept the proposition that 'violence' has different meanings depending upon context, what factors and circumstances could be thought to have brought about or influenced both the increased use of weapons in schools and violence in particular groups of the total population? Referring to a vast literature on psychological and socio-cultural perspectives on social behavior (e.g. Ritchie & Ritchie 1993, Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2005), why was the potential impact of displaying weapons and using violence as a resource, for example, in action series on TV, and even in police work, absent from the mainstream media's debate about violence and moral decay in society? Why did they not address the fact that being disempowered in most spheres of life could contribute to the use of

¹¹ We can speculate as to whether 'Maori gang fights' are modeled on traditional principles of reciprocity and balance in the Maori world-view, or what is conceptualized as *utu* and *muru* in Maori society. The first concept refers to practices that followed inter-tribal offences of sorts, and were carried out in order to reclaim balance between social/tribal groups. *Muru* also instigated balance, but were used exclusively in internal tribal affairs. These emic concepts, in addition to 'warriorship', have positive connotations in the Maori world today.

¹² Maori gang society consists of several groups. Individual and collective membership is based on specific emblems of differentiation. A patch on the back of the leather jacket is part of the emblematic repertoire of the individual gang member, and it indexes 'trouble' should someone consider challenging one of them. This sketch is based on talks with 'them'.

violence?¹³ An illustration of this point follows here.

As the mainstream media profiled violence and crime, I learned that the public's attention was directed towards the prototypical violators of order, also known as the prototypical assailants, that is, specifically, Maori/Polynesian males, or rather, those who might be suspected of having a gang connection. In other words, ideas about who should be regarded with caution seem to become a convention.¹⁴ With reference to perspectives summoned by the metaphors model and mirror above, the idea cannot be ruled out that the concept of 'Maori' invokes dominant Pakeha ideas about 'trouble' and 'violence' in society at large. Three examples that convene 'Maori problems' can do.

The Northern Advocate (August 2, 1994) re-presents a Pakeha retailer's reasoning for banning a family from his place of business. It reports on how two boys in the Maori family were caught shoplifting and spraying graffiti. Until the parents gained some control over their kids, the whole family was not welcome as customers. The parents were reported to claim that they were singled out to set a warning example.

Correspondingly, one of my Pakeha informants explained, Maori parenting to me in the following way:

They [the children] can do as they please. They wreck a toy or a video, and get no spanking. Those Maori mothers just give the kids heaps of sweets and lollies to shut up their mouth. That's their idea of child rearing. No wonder they end up in prisons and mental hospitals. Discipline, that's the problem.

A slightly different twist to the problem of violence in Aotearoa New Zealand society can be found in an article in *The Northern Advocate* (September 6, 1994), which suggests that by bringing back "Pacific forgiveness", societies can solve many of their problems without violence.¹⁵ Thus, it could be said that the problem is transferred to selected persons, and it becomes transformed into a cultural framework that does not necessarily involve other peoples or their systems.

The media also articulated the topic of moral decay in specific groups of the population (see Duff 1993). In addition to informing the public about diverse governmental initiatives to combat the use of violence, redressive actions taken by Maori communities, including Maori gangs, preoccupied the media. It should be

¹³ According to national and official statistics in the *New Zealand Official Yearbook 1994*, Maori make up a greater proportion of the populace with social problems in comparison with Pakeha: shorter life expectancy, greater likelihood of poverty, higher unemployment, poorer educational achievement, more health problems, lack of satisfactory housing. These are all factors that are regulated by financial means, and are thereby related to the Aotearoa New Zealand Welfare State. The welfare state was heavily privatized in 1989 by the policies known as Rogernomics, alluding to Finance Minister Roger Douglas, who was in charge of this new policy line. I add that statistics still demonstrate a significant gap between Maori and Pakeha 'achievements' and 'failures', (<http://www.tpk.govt.nz/mi/in-print/our-publications/publications/for-maori-future-makers/download/tpk-qualityoflife-2007-en.pdf>).

¹⁴ See Spoonley, Pearson & Macpherson (1991) on ethnic relations and racism in Aotearoa New Zealand, and Metge & Kinloch (1978), on problems of cross-cultural communication in Aotearoa New Zealand.

¹⁵ "Pacific forgiveness" is about reconciliation, often carried out through gift-exchanges.

noted that these Maori initiatives were understood as being directed towards other Maori and not towards Pakeha, due to a standardised pattern of separate sociality. Besides identifying redressive Maori activities, these reports were regularly accompanied by photos of the Polynesian participants, more often than not, the tattooed muscle-pumping Maori male who converts his energy into healthier outcomes such as teaching life skills to young Maori. Based on Pakeha accounts about ‘Maori’ related to me during fieldwork, I suggest that this coverage of Maori attempts at ‘redirection’, as Pakeha often called it, confirmed a basic Pakeha understanding that humans, in this case the Maori people, can be ranked according to certain criteria of ‘development’, here maturation.¹⁶ Without specific information concerning motives behind redressive Maori activities, these Maori gang initiatives were readily reinterpreted by many Pakeha as efforts to counteract an innate Maori disposition towards violence, like that which is exposed in their former practice of tribal warfare.¹⁷ More than once have I met Pakeha persons who claimed that their colonisation proved to be a good thing, that Pakeha saved the Maori race, which was about to become extinct due to tribal warfare and cannibalism.

One example of this is the Maori gang that has opened a community gym, free of charge. The president of the gym says that

This is part of a new direction for the gang... People had nothing to fear from the gang members. The district police is quoted to have said: “The Mongrel Mob used to cause some problems in Dunedin but recently we have had little or none of that. A number of gang members are getting older and had families, so were looking more to the future. (*Sunday Star Time*, September 4, 1994)

Correspondingly, in a casual conversation in a shop, a Pakeha salesman asks me,¹⁸ “What’s so interesting about Maori culture and lifeways?” Thereupon he explains his question to me:

Maori have only had about 150 years of development. When we arrived, they were really primitive. It was very good that we turned up, because Maori were beginning to become extinct due to internal warfare. You see, my hobby is reading history, so I know. But they’ve been quite good in developing towards being modern men. You know, this country was built by us [Pakeha]. We built the social welfare system, paying for it too, I’d say.

¹⁶ I add that this cultural model matches ‘racialism’, here understood as propositions conducting social differentiation and categorization. For more, see Ramstad (2001). See also above.

¹⁷ Maori social organization is closely connected to their tribal structure, in the sense that their bilateral cognatic descent system invites individual persons of the indigenous Polynesian population to acknowledge their genealogical connections. It is common for individual persons to choose which tribal association s/he will allocate primary responsibility to. I add that today, the ascription of primary membership status is often regulated by economic and political factors, as is reported to have been the case in the past. Tribal warfare reflected a hierarchical system that, even today, distributed resources according to prestige estimates— what is usually related to as an issue of *mana*.

¹⁸ It is common practice in public spaces that if you are identified as a foreigner, Pakeha will ask you questions about your reasons for being in the country, and where you come from – all in a friendly manner – and, as I perceived it, based on a genuine interest in me (and other foreigners).

New Zealand is a country without racial tension. This is an orderly society and people are on friendly terms with each other. Everyone has got the same opportunities, only Maori are lazy buggers.

A third illustration proceeds in the following way. Two Pakeha are informing me about 'Maori' and the state of the country today (1994). One of them states that the worst thing a person can do is to buy an apartment or house next to Maori, since very soon the market price of your property will decrease, since the area is expected to attract criminals and their activities. Besides, as stated by one of the men, you cannot expect your belongings to be left alone. However, both Pakeha agree that there is a qualitative difference between

the old Maori and today's generation [...] they collect the dole, which we, by the way, pay for. They do nothing, except sit on their fat ass and let others provide for them. It's disgusting. And what do Government do? They prepare those Maori for the fact that they do not have to work. [...] You see. Maori stick together, bloody Mongrels.¹⁹

A similar conversation occurred in a café in Auckland between two Pakeha women. My Maori companions and I sat at the table next to the women. Back on the street again, my friends uttered one word: "Colonialism".

I conclude with the role of mainstream newspaper media in reproducing a representation and stereotype of Maori as 'a violent people': the simplification by which 'violence' in society is articulated, mainly as a relationship between 'perpetrator' and 'victim', removes factors such as class, colonisation and marginalisation from the public awareness on violence in society. The descriptive association of 'Maori' and 'Pacific Islanders' with 'violence' configures a stereotypical mode of thinking. 'Violence', when linked to a dominant Pakeha and media hierarchy of moralisation, shapes the process of constructing Maori as a violent people.²⁰

Personally, I morally object to violence, irrespective of its perpetrator or the situation. Yet contrary to most Pakeha I had met, I had no pre-set fear of the 'Maori', or the 'Pakeha' for that matter. I had no pre-conceived image of a prototypical assailant or a stereotypical Maori. When reading the reports in mainstream media, I could not clearly grasp who the 'victim' was and of what. On the other hand, the mainstream media reports invoked questions concerning the cross-cultural validity of violent acts. Inspired by Riches' (1986) reasoning about the cultural construction of violence, my interpretation of the media's crime reports challenged, in my mind, the way the 'perpetrator' is the act- an awareness that produces a certain insight into the perpetuity through which stereotypes in Aotearoa New Zealand triumph. The evident failure of national institutions, such as schools, in providing Maori an education did

¹⁹ Mongrels, lit. cross-breeds or bastards, refers to one of several Maori gangs in Aotearoa New Zealand. I learned that the connotation of the term Mongrels was "Maori you should be suspicious of", i.e., from a Pakeha perspective. Some Pakeha use the term Mongrel as a synonym for 'Maori', and with a special reference to his capacity for destruction.

²⁰ To my knowledge, Pakeha images of the 'primitive' – unpredictable – Maori male stems from a lack of familiarity with Maori communities (*kainga*), and Maori occasions on the tribal estate (*marae*) in which Maori men hold important positions of high prestige.

not receive the same scrutiny by media. The next example illustrates this point. In a discussion with Maori women, a story was related about a single Maori mother of three children who was sentenced in court for shoplifting for the third time. When the judge said, "I hope this is the last time I see you here", the woman being jailed replied, "Honourable Judge – if my fridge is empty and my kids starve, I'll do it again." I add that, according to my informants this woman was unemployed because she was a Maori.

In concluding this section, I want to emphasize that the Maori people in general are not unacquainted with the mainstream media's presentation of Maori or the sort of Pakeha constructions of 'Maori' that I have described above. The important point here is that Maori tend to see them reproduced in the mainstream media's interest in indigenous affairs. Consequently, many Maori find reasons to maintain that Pakeha stereotypes of Maori influence national policies, including 'bi-culturalism', which is said to honour the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi.²¹ In addition, Maori suspect that these stereotypes affect their access to the labour market, the housing market, the education system, that is, institutions that are controlled by the majority people and their values.

Of course, violence and crime are frightening for everyone, regardless of socio-cultural background and identity formulations. Still, violence is also a cultural construct, embracing diverse political agendas - a statement I will substantiate in the following section. In other words, my exploration of certain links between media, culture and society above, constitutes one important context to which the two kinds of Maori responses towards the film *Once Were Warriors* relate.

"The film should never have been made."

The film raises very many questions about violence, whanau [extended family], you know. You cannot avoid thinking about who's to blame and who's ashamed... Is it the Maori or the Pakeha system ... Interference is a very sensitive thing, you know! (an academic).

I don't want to see the film. It's full of Pakeha ideology. The film surely describes what happens in Maori communities, but it supports Pakeha who think that every Maori is a violent piece of shit. (an activist).

It's racism. And it will do Maori society no good. I know many Pakeha who have seen the film. And I'm worried about its impact. ... 'Partnership' depends on Pakeha seeing us as competent partners, and that we contribute ... (a 'corporate warrior', i.e. a Maori who is educated in the Pakeha system and who is expected to help the tribe s/he belongs to).

In order to grasp the idea that the statements above articulate the conviction that the

²¹ The Treaty of Waitangi was signed in 1840 between the British Crown and about 100 Maori chiefs. Today, its three clauses are said to regulate processes of nation-making, by referring to its statutes of 'partnership' between the Crown representative and the Maori people. For more information, see Kawharu (1989) and Belgrave, Kawharu and Williams (2005). See also below.

Maori people would have been better off without the film, some additional contextualisation is required. I will argue that the risk assessments that are invoked in such statements address the prospects of political participation, and a greater control over policies regarding ethnic relations in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Aotearoa New Zealand's colonial history can be traced back to 1840, when the British Crown and approximately 100 Maori chiefs, on behalf of their separate tribal peoples, thereafter the Maori, signed the *Treaty of Waitangi*, a binding contract regulating the respective rights and duties of the partners in question. Nowadays, the interpretation of 'partnership' is central to the ethnopolitical issues that pertain to the on-going ramifications of the *Treaty*. Aotearoa New Zealand is a liberal-democratic nation-state that adheres to principles of egalitarianism as well as representative democracy. In principle, this political system seeks to secure the liberal and universal rights of citizenship. In addition to individualised rights, it aspires to protect the collective rights of minority societies within the nation-state. The colloquial term of 'Maori claims' refers explicitly and exclusively to *Treaty* rights, or 'indigenous' rights. In short, Maori 'settlement claims' usually relate to land and other resources that the colonial authorities unlawfully annexed, and 'partnership rights' often refer to collective Maori representation in the nation's parliamentary system or in statutory local bodies of decision-making. In addition, the term is used when contemporary Maori address the need for establishing institutions and facilities that can accommodate Maori cultural institutions and ways of life as complementary to the dominant Pakeha institutions and ways of life.²² All in all, the Maori minority position in Aotearoa New Zealand society is a significant political challenge in nation-making processes that proclaim 'bi-culturalism' as a vision for the future of the nation.

Over the years, a substantial amount of Maori ethnopolitics has addressed the misrepresentation of Maori in overall Aotearoa New Zealand society. By the term 'misrepresentation', I am referring both to the lack of Maori representation in bodies of national decision-making, and to dominant Pakeha imagery of the category 'Maori'. The general colonisation of Aotearoa New Zealand has encompassed diverse strategies to assimilate a distinct social and cultural population, the Maori, into mainstream, Pakeha, values and standards. This policy never became entirely successful. On the contrary, the physical, social and cultural 'Otherness' of the Maori was not acknowledged on equal terms with Pakeha characteristics. Consequently, mutual stereotypes reinforced the social and cultural barriers between Maori and Pakeha. It is also worth mentioning that after World War II, the government advocated a policy of urbanisation as part of a political programme for 'modernisation'. Many Maori saw opportunities of employment and education in the cities. In retrospect, many urbanised Maori insist that they would have been better off if they could have escaped stigmatisation and 'loss of their cultural identity'.

The 1970s gave rise to 'The Maori Movement', whose prime objective was, and still is, to recodify differences between Maori and Pakeha. Mostly radical and/or highly educated Maori were at the forefront of the politicisation of indigenous issues

²² Educational institutions such as *Kohanga Reo* (pre-school institution), *Kura Kaupapa* (primary school), *Te Puni Kōkiri* (statutory office that is to promote Maori development) are three achievements of the Maori Movement.

(Walker 1987). The Maori ethno-political struggle has largely consisted of diverse strategies for an overall repositioning of the Maori in society *and* strategies of resistance against dominant representations of them (Schwimmer 1972, Shakespeare 1998). As I have argued elsewhere (Ramstad 2003), the representation of Maori identity for ethno-political purposes seems to require a degree of generalisation often found in processes of essentialising ‘culture’ (Hviding 1993). As documented in the ethno-political struggles of other indigenous peoples (Eidheim 1992, Thuen 1995, Saugestad 2001), it is unsurprising to find an element of rhetorical affinity between an essentialist Maori articulation of the Maori identity and the Pakeha articulation of the same identity (Belgrave, Kawharu and Williams 2005, Maaka & Fleras 2005). The rhetorical aspect relates to the procedures for submitting persuasive arguments to mainstream Pakeha society and its authorities, for instance, insisting that Maori are ‘competent partners’ in processes of nation-making.

To illustrate, in order to maintain an orderly society, Pakeha converse morality in terms of laws and regulations for the ‘well-being’ of everyone. A Maori ethno-political objective of taking part in the governing of overall society must therefore provide arguments for a similar Maori preoccupation with law and order. The rhetorical work deals with convincing Pakeha society that Maori institutions of ‘law’ and sense of moral responsibility are compatible with the Pakeha ones.

Above, I have elaborated on the stereotypes of Maori as being ‘primitive’, ‘lazy’ and ‘violent’ in my description of mainstream media coverage of violence in the Maori society. When these stereotypes become part of the Maori ethno-political struggle, it may be a reflection of how the political agenda puts forward the relation of representations and establishes the politics of representations, in order to express that Maori are just as preoccupied with law and order as Pakeha (Ramstad 2001, Schwimmer 1972).

The essentialist impetus in the construction of *Maoritanga*,²³ caused many problems for those Maori who had adjusted to a policy of urbanisation and assimilation (Ramstad 2003). In short, the urban, detribalised Maori became marginal within the tribal society to which they aspired, especially according to the criteria of ‘true’ and ‘right’ Maori belonging.²⁴ Further, due to Pakeha stigmatisation, they became marginal within the urban, dominant Pakeha society they knew, and within which they lived their lives. It is in this context that the politics of representation, in terms of the struggle over the power to define the categorical ‘Maori’, flinches when its rhetorical essentialism is challenged by images of ‘real’ life, that is, the life that Maori disclose through a Maori-controlled film about the Maori people in general. Evidently, the question of Maori belonging is more complex than the standardised version generated for ethno-political purposes suggests. I may add that, in the cinema, Maori could be heard criticising their fellow Maori for crying and sobbing in a place where “bloody Pakeha colonisers” could

²³ *Maoritanga* is usually defined in terms of “...ways of being a Maori and a manner of looking at the world that has become symbolic of a Maori identity” (Dominy 1990, 237).

²⁴ In the processes of re-producing viable associations in contemporary Maori society, specific stereotypes of Maori circulate. Three of them are as follows: ‘The Pakehafied Maori’ (person who is strongly influenced by Pakeha values), ‘The Plastic Maori’ (person who is seen as pretending to be authentic, but who exposes pretense and falsehood) and, finally, ‘The Tutura Maori’ (person who is regarded as reliable and true to the values in the Maori world). See Ramstad (2003).

witness their vulnerability. So when Maori were concerned about the Pakeha reception of the film, they were actually worried about the prospect of backlash in the ethnopolitical struggle. *Once Were Warriors* can be understood as having invigorated public awareness of an economic, socio-cultural and politically diversified Maori population. Consequently, the detribalised Maori, as portrayed in the film, could presumably undermine the ethnopolitical struggle to gain control over both the definition and construction of Maori identity, referring to the simplification by which ethnic identities and belonging circulate in a restricted political field – both ‘here’ and ‘there’. Thus, Maori could suspect that the film befitted a Pakeha *model* of ‘Maori’, and/or that it confirmed the dominant Pakeha image of Maori – which was very different from the images that hardworking ethnopoliticians and their supporters were trying to convey. It is no wonder, then, that many Maori have an ambiguous attitude towards getting involved in the field of national politics – referring to my talks with ‘corporate warriors’ (see above). It is also not surprising that many Maori are emphatic toward fellow Maori who they know deserve a better life than the one that is portrayed in the film.

“That’s not fiction, that’s reality.”

The other kind of Maori reaction to the film, that is, “That’s not fiction, that’s reality”, is shaped by a different framework of identification. It reflects a disclosure of a specific kind: it gives publicity to what many of them called ‘the nitty-gritty’ of their lives, namely, that living comprises a whole range of ups and downs, of which the occurrence of violence can unfortunately be quite common among Maori whose living conditions are similar to those so candidly conveyed in the film. The scenes in the film recount certain things, for example, violence, family life, love, unemployment, mateship, etc., all of which are judged by their credibility. As I see it, in order to make such judgements, viewers must share an experience with the characters of the film, which gives off a sense of connection, a quality of commonality – experiences to ‘know from’ and which therefore elicits the same sort of bodily activities when under similar circumstances. The sobbing and comforting in the cinema illustrate this process of identification. Put simply, the message is “when you have been there, you know from a different perspective” – an understanding which was frequently maintained among Maori who discussed the film, and the prospects of potential lessons from the film. As one Maori man told me, “In the street where I grew up, there were heaps of Jakes.” This media-reality construct was also applied to people’s reception of the film, for instance, when Maori tried to assess who the different audiences were. One of my informants claimed that she saw many former and present gang members in the audience, some of them even moved to tears by scenes in the film: “It’s an excellent film, because it moved me. That is a good sign, but it’s also a dangerous one. You don’t know what happens next...” Thus, their support and comfort toward fellow spectators of the film related to their assumptions regarding fake or genuine reactions from persons in the audience. The film seemed to do at least two things to some of the Maori in the general public. First, it was appreciated because it instigated a process of comparing the story in the film with their experience of real life. “My marriage was like that ... but, I had no whanau [here, support group]”. Analytically speaking, some Maori

employed the metaphorical *mirror* and conclusions were made. Second, given the fact that many Maori are generally preoccupied with the efficacy that persons, events or things produce, many of them are especially attentive to signs that can tell them “where someone is coming from” – as the phrase goes. Therefore, the impact of the film was often filtered by exchanges of information regarding the real lives of specific persons in the audience. The man who had the name ‘Jake’ thrown at him is one example (see above).

Thus, for most Maori I met, this film underscored the basic fact of social, economic and cultural diversification among the people. Some Maori declared their familiarity with Pacific Islanders and Pakeha families who were living under the same economic restrictions as the ‘Heke’ in the film, and the ‘Hone’ among real Maori.²⁵ Accordingly, the Maori who gave voice to this (latter understanding) maintained that the film was not about Maori people as such, but about poor and neglected people, of which Maori were a good illustrative choice by the film-makers. As I see it, this kind of response reflects a de-ethnification of Maori or a neutralisation of ethnicity, while declaring the impact of class distinctions in society. Moreover, the problem of violence among certain groups of Maori, for example, does not (intrinsically) arise from either Maori character or culture, since many Maori obviously take pleasure in quite different living circumstances, and many do not live with violence.

In conclusion, many Maori expected that this fictional story would engage the dominant Pakeha media because of its depiction of violence. Spokespersons of both responses to the film tended to stress the political consequences they saw coming. The first kind of (Maori) response is testament to a framework I call *the politics of representation*, the second I call *the politics of marginalisation*. Both reactions are closely related to the assumed effects of calling attention to an unfortunate occurrence in the Maori society. The first kind of response relates to anticipated backlashes in the ethnopolitical struggle; the second kind aspires to a greater involvement in people’s ‘nitty-gritty’-situations, and empathy with people’s troublesome daily lives. As I see it, both kinds of reactions to the film have to do with its specific potential consequences for Maori in their real lives. As one Maori woman said, “finally things are happening ...”. She was referring to the socio-economic struggle that many families had faced under the present government. In other words, both kinds of Maori responses are analysed in terms of the language available to many Maori to address ethnopolitical issues.

Whereas representations of Maori in mainstream newspapers can largely be said to emanate from Pakeha ignorance of ‘things Maori’ and/or their own ‘power-game’ (as Maori term it), the film displays realistic brute facts to the Maori audience, even though the filmmakers said they never aimed to represent the entire reality, including having to endure colonialism in time and through time.²⁶ The impact of the film,

²⁵ Maori often employ the concept and name ‘Hone’ when referring to ‘ordinary Maori’. There are several familial resemblances between ‘ordinary Maori’ and the ‘statistical Maori’. The ‘Heke’ in the film are struggling to meet economic ends. Jake is fired from his workplace, Beth has no income of her own, probably so as not to challenge the role of husband Jake as the ‘supporter’ of the family.

²⁶ Critical Maori voices of the film especially stressed what they saw as a lack of references to the historical, political and cultural circumstances that produced these types of social drama in real life. See also *Te Maori News* (1994, vol. 8 and 9) and Martens (2007).

especially on the Maori audience, is closely connected to what I call the work of the metaphorical *mirror*. They experienced violence, triggered from their intimate knowledge of violence combined with *aroha* – love and compassion for one another. I believe the film challenged Maori ethnopolitical priorities among their people. The Maori controversy over the movie revealed ambivalence about ethnic representation and identification. Accordingly, it posed a formative place in the constitution of social and political life, for example, in having the dominant relations of representation reworked (see also Martens 2007).

Mainstream media and *Once Were Warriors*

After the release of the film, mainstream newspapers began to refer to the film when reporting *warrior*-like incidents in real Maori lives. The heading “Welfare fails on Warrior family” (*Sunday Star Times*, July 27, 1994) reports on the ‘home alone’ fire and death of a four year old boy, while his father, being a member of the Maori gang *Black Power* (in photo), is “... out drinking”. Furthermore, the article relates to a social welfare officer’s description of the family “... as a real-life ‘Once Were Warriors’ family”. He is quoted to have said:

What do we do? This is the biggest-grossing movie in New Zealand history and everyone goes along and gets moved by it. When faced with what appears to be real-life parallel, we sit around and don’t do anything. And the government agency that’s supposed to do something about it appears to be doing the same.

Another heading, “Movie prompts battered women to flee” (*Sunday Star Times*, 17. July 1994), leads up to another “warrior-like” story. Relating to the impact of the film, a Maori woman is reported to have said, “They [Maori women] don’t have to take it, they don’t have to sit back and be quiet about it [abuse].” Referring to an interview with a police officer, a gang member told him “... people are saying Once Were Warriors is really violent, but it’s not as bad as in my own home ... I’ve got a problem, haven’t I?”

I have presented two examples of mainstream media’s reports about violence in Maori communities after the film *Once Were Warriors* was released and then honoured by national and international critiques. There was a slightly new twist in mainstream newspapers’ coverage on violence, especially when it occurred in Maori communities. As the examples show, mainstream media tended to incorporate images from the film in their descriptions of real-life incidents of violence. In that respect, the film became a publicly shared point of reference to ‘know from’ – a symbol and an avenue which most likely elicited about the same type of disgusted sentiments towards acts of violence, and, I add, towards the stereotypical Maori male who does not even spare his own family. This particularly refers to extensive reports about domestic violence and child neglect (Martens 2007). Thus, the film served as a modelling device for the newspapers, as they continued to present violence as a relatively closed ‘Maori’ and ‘Polynesian’ system. In that respect, mainstream media played out images from the film in support of their model of the Maori world as a ‘violent’ one. The film seemed to have brought a new flavour into the news reports.

The film afforded more ‘flesh and blood’ to reports on real life perpetrators, so to speak.

The examples above offer prospects of a possible revised model for reality, when the news items confer a degree of blame onto the authorities who have neglected their duty in putting a stop to such violent actions. Factors such as lack of discipline and leadership in the Maori society were added into newspaper articles. For instance, the Maori author of the novel *Once Were Warriors*, Alan Duff, had a regular column in the mainstream *Northern Advocate*. On August 15, 1994 Alan Duff criticised the Maori leadership for having neglected their responsibility to guide young Maori away from the path of under-performance and crime. Without deeper contextualisation, I suggest that this Maori contribution to the public discourse on violence in Maori societies does not necessarily encourage a cross-cultural perspective on violence in parts of the Maori society in general.²⁷ Still, if the purpose of the media is to raise the level of public awareness of the problem of violence in society, it is obvious that cross-cultural issues and opposing cultural buffers need to be addressed in order to promote a Maori and Pakeha *exchange* of views - for the benefit of all. I have no recollection of ethnographic media material that dealt with Pakeha domestic violence or poverty reports. The question regarding the cross-cultural validity of violent acts remained unasked. In contrast, the Maori media addressed the public representation of Maori as ‘a violent people’ through a variety of understandings (Martens 2007). However, that story is beyond the scope of this article.

Conclusions

In this article, I have presented empirical material about two forms of media, that is, mainstream newspaper and film. I hope that I have demonstrated that the relationship between the two was of great concern to many Maori persons, because both media intersect with circumstances that effect their real lives. It is the efficacy of media descriptions that mattered to Maori. Alternatively put, the power of media is related to the anticipated consequences for inter-ethnic relations in Aotearoa New Zealand in general.

On the one hand, mainstream media was perceived as reproducing representative voices in the dominant Pakeha population. In addition, Maori tended to view Pakeha as the prime recipients of mainstream media’s messages to the general public. It is a fact that the Pakeha majority largely learn about Maori ways of life and culture through the media or public artefacts of sorts (King 1988, Archie 1995). In popular speech, the topic of indigeneity was called ‘the Maori problem’, and it was primarily directed at politicians who were expected to deal with ‘it’ and ‘bi-culturalism’ –for everyone’s benefit. That is partly why media matters so much to most Maori, irrespective of sex, generation and occupation. That is also partly why Maori focused on *Once Were Warriors* as a political statement that concerned nation-making, regardless of what the director’s intentions might have been with the film. Finally, that is the reason I have selected factors that can contribute to a better understanding

²⁷ Contrary to the accusation by Alan Duff, the topic of ‘violence’ was openly addressed in many Maori tribes. However, for many different reasons, these discussions were kept inside the *whanau* (metaphorically, the extended family). Therefore, they gained no public attention. I also add that this article does not deal with material about specific tribal affairs regarding violence.

of Maori contextualisation of the film.

The concept of context is a vague term that indicates frames of interpretation and levels of analysis. The concept is a central part of social and cultural anthropology because it is intimately linked to anthropological methods, and the comparative mind-set that support our work. Dilley (2002) argues that context is linked to connections and disconnections that are guided by shifting sets of interpretation. Therefore, an act that connotes 'violence' in one frame of reference, informed by a set of relevant factors, can connote 'discipline' when other sets of criteria are made relevant in the process of making sense of 'what happens'. In this respect, every understanding is provisional in the sense that new facts can be attributed to the phenomenon at hand, thereby potentially dis-connecting what was taken for granted. Insofar as contextualisation reflects general cognitive processes of meaning-making, the anthropologist who is out on a mission to understand things and explain matters, might face an additional problem. S/he discovers *that* things are mysteriously incomprehensible. In time, the fieldworker, and, in this case, one who is situated in an unfamiliar territory, hopes that s/he gets a grasp on *why* that is the case.

In this project, I have obviously not aimed for representative Maori reactions to the film, in terms of charting the distribution of opinions among the Maori population. I have, however, sought a deeper comprehension of two kinds of Maori perceptions, that is, responses that were prototypical in the ethnographical material I gathered. In my understanding, the two prototypical Maori responses to *Once Were Warriors* give some insights with regard to aspects of ethnic relations and processes of nation-making in Aotearoa New Zealand. They reflect layers of meaning that Maori often consider to be embedded in the mainstream media's reproduction of official documents on the rhetoric of "partnership" and "good ethnic relations". The relationship between media and indigeneity sets the frame of reference to which Maori link what they see as relevant Pakeha interpretations of the film. However, a shift of attention towards violence and indigeneity also set off a different interpretation of the film. I have tried to make this Maori shift in frames of relevance intelligible by referring to the metaphors of *model* and *mirror*. These metaphors administer different entanglements of media, culture and society.

In taking inspiration from Abu-Lughod (2001), I could follow ideas, persons or concerns that people themselves related to when they made sense of the film as a socio-cultural fact. My analysis is not about contexts that could be called 'mainstream media', or 'indigeneity'. Rather, my objective has been to alert us to the ways in which the people we study invoke context as part of their own practice of making different meaning of events in their social lives. Accordingly, the film has been contextualised and re-contextualised in my search for these two Maori understandings of the film as a political artefact and as an actual-virtual manifestation of Maori presence in Aotearoa New Zealand society.

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Summary

In this article, I will focus on connections between media, culture and society in order to understand two prototypical Maori responses to the film. The two kinds of responses are captured in the following phrases: "The film should never have been

made” and “*That’s not fiction, that’s reality*”. One of my objectives is to show how these particular Maori responses to this fiction-film are entangled with deep concerns about ethnic policies and marginalization in general. In other words, the film is explored as a statement about Maori – Pakeha inter-ethnic relations and ‘bi-culturalism’, which is the official term for the political vision of the post-colonial nation. Subsequently, my analysis suggests insights from a deeper concern about the contexts that contribute to these particular Maori formulations of media-reality configurations, in addition to lessons of a more general character.

Keywords

Film, Indigeneity, Maori, Minorities, Marginalization, New Zealand, *Once Were Warriors*, Media Anthropology