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GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

Rangimarie

Waikato-Tainui

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I want to start by acknowledging the inaugural article written by Claire G. Coleman¹. Her capture of the relationship between colonisation and pandemics stripped me of any preface I could have conjured for this reflection. This pandemic is, as she stated, eerily familiar to those of us who have an all too intimate experience of the historical traumas that continue to ravage our bloodlines. In the times of our ancestors, we were taken by the disease-ridden blankets and cursed muskets of our colonisers. In this age, it is the stench of wealth that encumbers our wellbeing.



In reflecting on the effect that COVID-19 has had upon the Māori community, I feel inept. From the privilege of my bubble, it is impossible for me to understand the impact of the devastation that this pandemic has had and continues to have on the welfare of the members of our community who are most desperately in need of comfort and support. We have a proverb: *He waka eke noa*. We are all in this boat together. In all honesty, this bubble lifestyle feels as far removed from that as I can imagine. Yet, this is the message our government is giving us. We are told daily to “Stay home, save lives”.

I wholeheartedly agree with this approach, and our government seems to be having great success in guiding our country through this unforeseen time. Although, I find myself asking: What does this mean for Māori? What does this collective individualism do for the interconnectedness of Indigenous culture? I feel that we are striving to decolonise ourselves from the multifaceted wave of intergenerational trauma caused by our colonisers, so how does this work continue in isolation?

In the most basic sense, it keeps us alive. Many of our cultural practices, the acts our resilient ancestors have carried through wars, famine and pandemics of the past, are disallowed because of the risk of infection. This isn't the first time we've faced this, but it is the first time that many of our generation have had to follow a coloniser's rule into the darkness and accept that the survival of humanity is more important than the continuation of our grieving, connecting and healing.

¹ See KHT Voices - <https://korieheritagetrust.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Essay-Claire-Coleman.pdf>



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However, we are still adapting. We have yet another proverb for this: *Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari, he toa takitini*. Loosely translated, it is used to describe the ways in which strength is not limited to one; it is the strength of many. The sacrifice we make to disconnect from each other is the very thing that is keeping us together. As our ancestors adapted, so too do we.

Many of our whanaunga are practicing mana motuhake by erecting checkpoints at their borders to ensure their hapū are kept safe from the COVID-19 scourge. These heroes are actively decolonising their rohe. And yet, for those of us urbanised in our bubbles and suffering from the absence of the cultural practice of connection, the immediate feeling of disconnectedness prevails. Recently, I spent a blissful day wafting happily through the smell of freshly-baked bread and clean linen. This is my heaven, I told myself. Then, the old colonised guilt swept in. I had somehow forgotten that people were suffering and that the privilege of my bubble had me trapped in an idyllic loneliness that I didn't know I'd always wanted. Turns out that my burgeoning social anxieties lie in direct contrast to my cultural identity. Who knew?

To torture myself out of this, I began a practice of starting every day perusing the only connection I have remaining to the outside world: social media. I used this perusal time to hunt out any hint of Indigenous tragedy caused by this pandemic, or even vaguely likely to be affected by it. I found examples of modern-day slave trafficking from Guinea to Kuwait. I had tears in my eyes as I watched Aboriginal Elders being removed from their homes on the streets with nowhere to go. I read any articles I could find about the disparities between experiences of middle-class lockdown and those who live below the poverty line: those for whom the services of a women's refuge are in higher demand than ever; those for whom the buses are kept running; and, those for whom the newly acquired title 'essential worker' means nothing more than 'cannon fodder'.

I signed petitions to give all 'essential workers' the right to a 'living wage', and then made my daughter scrambled eggs and grumbled that we would have to wait until the next shopping delivery for store-bought bread.

Naturally, all of this made me feel worse. I have come to realise that this dissonance lies completely within the colonisation of my own mind. In my pre-pandemic life, I had carved out a sunny nook for the Indigenous artists, ringawera, storytellers, writers, orators, kaikaranga, creators, activists and lovers of my own social bubbles, and left an indebted corner of my mind for the rest. You see, I had completely convinced myself, as the coloniser has, that to be Indigenous, to be Māori, means to be poor, under privileged



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and bereft of basic comforts. Being Māori in a pandemic ... well, that must surely mean 'to suffer'.

I had searched the tunnel of social connection for evidence of it and whipped myself across the back a hundred times a day for living any other way. In the absence of my connection to cultural practices, I had started to forget that to be Māori is to be 'normal', at the very essence of the word. Is this lifestyle of isolation, where whispers of self-sustainability and the persistent messages of 'people over wealth' are daily, as close as we will ever get to being ourselves as truly, Indigenously, and a decolonised normal?

This terrible disease has affected humanity in ways that none of us could have imagined. Our Indigenous communities have thrived in ways that the coloniser certainly couldn't have anticipated. Many are sharing, talking and whispering about the changes to come, following our collective incubation, which is exciting. I only hope that a whole new wave of invisible kids becomes liberated by this change, so that these manifested intentions are the final cure for the infected muskets and blankets of our rangatahi. As we say: *he waka eke noa*. We're all in this together.

Rangimarie is a writer, poet and storyteller based in Porirua, Wellington. She is a founding member of the Hine Pae Kura and Toi Wāhine Māori female artist collectives. In 2015 she published a collection of short stories for children alongside Robyn Kahukiwa, and has since been involved in numerous storytelling workshops and poetry readings. Her poetry has been included in exhibitions in Porirua, Wellington, Auckland, Tāneatua, Melbourne and New York. She has also contributed poetry to the Wellington Museum, and magazines throughout Aotearoa. Her work focuses on exploring the perspectives of Māori Women.