Feeling and spirit: developing an indigenous wairua approach to research

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Abstract

Wairua, a Maori (indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand) concept, somewhat restrictively translated as spirit or spirituality, resonates with many indigenous peoples globally. While spirit is recognised as an important human dimension, the denigration of non-western spiritual understandings means that indigenous peoples often choose to remain silent. Transferring these concerns to research approaches, we edit our voices, with a view to what we think will count as knowledge and what we choose to share with academic audiences. This article discusses the challenges we face when we enter into conversations about wairua and how this might be approached in research. With reference to emerging social science innovations in affect and emotion, the article draws on audio visual recordings of people’s experiences of significant national days in Aotearoa New Zealand. Issues of analysis and representation are explored, along with the potential of these methods to explicate feelings, emotions and spirit.

Keywords

affect, decolonisation, indigenous research, Maori, spirituality

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Introduction

As indigenous researchers we are constantly aware of ourselves as ‘other’ within colonised spaces. For many, academic existence is given over to explaining indigenous ways of being and understanding the world and arguing for and defending the right to exercise this in practice. In Aotearoa New Zealand Kaupapa Māori Theory provides a platform for indigenous research; asserting Māori worldviews and approaches as paramount and outlining features such as Māori leadership, pursuing Māori aspirations and seeking transformation (Moewaka Barnes, 2009). A growing number of studies are conducted by Māori based on our epistemologies and methodologies and informed by Māori cosmology. In backgrounding the research they may, for example, describe the beginning of life, how our world was shaped and the continuing concepts and relationships that explain our place in the universe. Wairua, somewhat restrictively translated as spirit or spirituality, appears in these accounts as an intrinsic part of a Māori psyche.

Wairua is understood as an important part of experience and how we understand the world; although ‘for many Māori, spirituality lies at the heart of Kaupapa Māori’ (Ratima, 2008: 2), there is discomfort in giving voice to wairua in practice and within the academy. Unease at this silence sits alongside a sense of caution in what we decide to share and where. While spirit is recognised as an important human dimension (Hill and Smith; 2010; Hussain, 2011), the academy struggles with questions about inclusion and exclusion, with defining or leaving unspecified (Elkins et al., 1988), usually resulting in mentioning but not placing spirit at the centre of research. In the face of the denigration of non-western spirituality as primitive, shamanistic and heathen, indigenous peoples often choose to remain silent. Transferring these concerns to research approaches, we edit our voices with a view to what we think outsiders will count as knowledge and what we choose to articulate; whether this amounts to suppression of already marginalised values, an act of protection or both is a central concern.

This article discusses some of the challenges faced in the development of a wairua approach to research as part of our National Days, Wairua and Affect project (National Days project). With reference to emerging social science innovations in affect and emotion, the paper draws on audio visual recordings of Waitangi Day, a national holiday marking the first signings by Māori leaders and the Crown of Te Tiriti o Waitangi/Treaty of Waitangi. Issues of analysis and representation are examined, along with the potential of these methods to explicate feelings, emotions and spirit.

Seeking wairua

Learned elder, Reverend Māori Marsden argues that objectivity does not concern him, rather he sets out to view attitudes from within Māori culture, examining first what this means to him then asking if this view is held by Māori more generally. This provides guidance for our search for spirit.

The route to Maoritanga through abstract interpretation is a dead end. The way can only lie through a passionate, subjective approach. That is more likely to lead to a goal. (Marsden, 1992: 117)
Maori have ‘held out’, maintaining the primacy of wairua in various ways and arguing for its inclusion within the academy (for example, Moewaka Barnes, 2009; Ratima, 2008). Although sometimes seen as only applying to ‘ritualistic’ moments rather than life in general, most Maori literature points to everyday, not just ‘supernatural’, ritualistic or organised, expressions of wairua. While often present in research literature describing Maori worldviews and providing a backdrop or grounding for studies, wairua is not employed as an explicit approach in analysis and interpretation. As Moewaka Barnes wrote almost a decade ago:

Despite the argument put forward by indigenous scholar Reverend Marsden that metaphysics, including spiritual matters, and the theory of knowledge could not be discussed separately, I am aware that there is much we, as indigenous academics do not express in writing. There are ways of seeing that we leave out of proposals and research reports, but nevertheless acknowledge and talk about among ourselves. … I became increasingly aware of the difficulties of expressing spirituality as a part of indigenous worldviews, including its place in science and research… These things are a part of our knowing, but they are not a part of the mainstream, legitimated ways of knowing… in western eyes, I would be seen as less of a scientist if I suggested that the place of spirituality may be broader and largely indefinable; as a result, these less tangible aspects are dealt with only lightly. (Moewaka Barnes, 2009: 7–8)

Elsewhere other indigenous peoples also questioned spirit in research, Aluli-Meyer, (2006: 263) arguing that we need to find ways of ‘seeing through engagement with mind, body, and spirit’ in order to ‘develop a different consciousness.’ This approach would move us ‘from fragmentation to wholeness.’ (Aluli-Meyer, 2006: 264). Aluli-Meyer (2006) suggests using triangulation, organising and extending our research by using three points: body, spirit and mind. Body is what you see; it is descriptive rather than interpretive. Mind, encompassing subjectivity and thought:

explains, contextualises, or challenges. It gives us the green light to engage in creative exploration needed to unburden ourselves from the shrivelled promise objectivity has offered the world. (Aluli-Meyer, 2006: 272)

All occur simultaneously and spirit connects all three. People speak through being who they are, and, when self-reflection and mindfulness are employed, this will lead us to ‘seek inevitably what most scholars refuse to admit exists: spirit.’ (Aluli-Meyer, 2006: 273) Aluli-Meyer (2006) argues that in using all three points we might change the culture of research.

An ideal opportunity to explicitly address spirit came about when a team of us (Maori and non-Maori), including Margie Wetherell were discussing ideas for a proposal to the Marsden Fund of the Royal Society. With Margie being at the forefront of new thinking around affect (Wetherell, 2012), affective practices, emotions and feelings were a key part of our discussions. We were interested in how wairua and ‘Northern theory’ around affect and emotion might interrelate. As a Maori research group, we could not envisage a research project that looked at emotions and feeling without looking at wairua.

Beginning in 2013, the project is the first to apply Kaupapa Maori, wairua and affect theory approaches, using multiple qualitative techniques. The focus is on
national days, particularly Waitangi and Anzac Days, both marked by a public holiday. Acts of commemoration and celebration are intertwined with identity and social cohesion and may be felt very differently by individuals and groups of people. Our guiding questions are:

- How do Maori and non-Maori represent and respond to these observances?
- When, where and how do race/culture/ethnicity emerge in expressions of nation?
- How do these translate into affective mobilisations such as anger, protest, denial, shame, pride, grief, fear, belonging, increased understanding and respect?
- What are the embodied and located understandings of these expressions?
- What are the pathways and affective politics through which such emotional repertoires contribute to social justice/regressive relations in Aotearoa?

**Wairua and affect**

In exploring how to employ wairua as part of the methodological frame, we needed to see what could steer us. We were aware that a wairua approach could never be, nor should it be neat or simple, but it might move us to exciting understandings. Affect provided some resonating pathways and ideas that assisted us in our thinking and in recognising the fluid and interwoven nature of the approach needed:

> Affective practice focuses on the emotional as it appears in social life and shifting, flexible and often over-determined figurations rather than simple lines of causation, character types and neat emotion categories. (Wetherell, 2012: 4)

A focus on affective practice examines the ways in which people are moved and how they make sense of this embodied involvement in social life, paying attention to their formulations, rather than categorising in terms of a limited palette of ‘basic emotions’. Attention to wairua, similarly, explores how Maori (including Maori researchers) make meaning beyond the usual routes recognised in settler societies; the intimations and resonances, sometimes subtle and fleeting, sometimes repressed, and sometimes strong and vivid. Aligning with affect, our intention too was to move beyond the standard categories of emotion and develop ways we could explicitly address wairua in the analysis of our research. We hoped this would lead to an expansion of our research horizons.

> To know we are more than simply body and thought is to acknowledge how these ideas expand into wider realms of knowing and being. (Aluli-Meyer, 2006: 274)

Here then were some pathways to follow, some grooves already worn that we could use to guide our steps. Approaches to affect and wairua had potential convergences; however there were also divergences and a growing knowledge that wairua could challenge the turn to affect to consider and include spirit. We also knew we faced challenges in developing a wairua approach: denigration of wairua; the nature of wairua; decisions around what we make visible and; potential risks of taking a wairua approach.
Challenges of a wairua approach

Valuing: The first consideration was the place of wairua. As discussed earlier addressing spirit in research and giving voice to it in the academy is unusual given the tension with the materialist and objectivist approaches that dominate. In addition, through colonial processes, wairua has been denigrated, seen as primitive in comparison to Christian superiority:

Maori find themselves ridiculed as superstitious in a way that a Pakeha\(^1\) talking about religion never is. (Clifton, 2000: 22)

We recognised this context within which we were working; in essence, this was a motivating factor and the project was a way of challenging these notions. We knew however, that developing a wairua approach needed, for these and other reasons to be a step by step process, as we built our case.

Defining: As discussed earlier, while often present in research literature, wairua is not employed as an explicit approach in analysis and interpretation, nor is it defined. We were aware that defining wairua was problematic; was it a reductionist exercise, an attempt to define the undefinable? On the other hand, if we didn’t explicitly look at meaning we would remain silent and risk conforming to western notions that wairua was not scholarly, was uncanny and not part of a research approach. It would remain part of the research context as a largely descriptive aside. We proceeded on the basis that we could not provide a definition but, in order to develop a practical research approach, we needed to understand and articulate some of what might be involved in wairua based on multiple resources as well as focused on the participants themselves.

Making visible: In tandem with avoiding definitions, we needed to consider other aspects of what we put in to the research domain. Reservations exist in relation to expressing wairua, one idea being ‘to speak of these things publicly is to make them common.’ (Clifton, 2000: 22) On the other hand a number of us were uncomfortable with silence and saw expressing spirit within our work as being about claiming rights and asserting the importance of wairua. One concern was academic writing: what we would ‘offer up’ to journals; what would be acceptable and; would requirements of such spaces overshadow what we wanted to express. There was also caution in relation to our ‘right’ to articulate wairua in this way; was it our place and should we attempt this. As Aluli-Meyer (2006: 274) acknowledges, these forays take some courage:

Spirit … is all about seeing what is significant and having the courage to discuss it.

Decolonising: Amid concerns about the commodification of wairua, (Clifton, 2000), we questioned whether developing a wairua approach was an act of decolonisation or whether it could become a tool used for appropriation. In asserting our rights to make our worldviews visible and articulating this in research would we potentially expose wairua, leaving it open to appropriation by those who could not understand it, but nevertheless felt they would have a basis for claims of understanding and interpretation. We considered whether others might think it had become definable and touchable and therefore
open to reductionist approaches that they would then ‘own’. We couldn’t resolve this, but needed to reflect and acknowledge these possibilities; our approach was an ongoing puzzle and an offering, open to discussion and challenge and entered into with caution.

**Developing a wairua approach**

Our initial step was, as suggested by Marsden (1992), an analysis of what wairua meant to us followed by consideration of what the meanings might be for other Maori. Here, however, we were not looking to see if meanings were the same for others, but were seeking a broad range of understandings; in particular, how wairua was written and spoken about. After discussions among the team, we conducted a literature review and key informant interviews. We brought our findings back to the team and discussed them with others, including Maori researchers and elders. This process enabled us to delineate some aspects of what might be important in this endeavour. We then used data from our National Days project to see how we might apply wairua in research.

We found overlaps in the way that wairua and affect were written and spoken about; for example, participants in the National Days project ascribed feelings to wairua, such as a ‘sad wairua’ being used to describe an event. Wairua was seen as being within people as well as all around us. A number of key and relatively consistent spheres emerged. Wairua was associated with:

- Tupuna (ancestors), people who have gone before, particularly one’s own relations; honouring, feeling connected to them, their actions, intentions and legacies
- Future generations, seeing oneself as having obligations to children, grandchildren and generations to come
- Connection to place, people, events and issues; knowledge and sense of belonging
- Connection to self; a sense of wholeness
- Connection to something wider than oneself; for example, connection to tupuna, atua/gods/spirits
- Tikanga whakaaro: Barlow (1991) uses this as the title of his book along with the English explanatory *Key concepts in Maori culture*. Here we use it as a connection to, and understanding of, Maori ways of doing things and the obligations, relationships and accountabilities this entails
- Practising wairua; the processes involved in rituals and events using particular customs and protocols
- The so-called supernatural or uncanny; although rarely written about in the literature and one aspect key informants were reluctant to talk about, this is one of the spheres people may more commonly associate with wairua, but it is only one aspect (Moewaka Barnes, 2016)

Although presented here as separate bullet points, these spheres are fluid and overlapping; for example, the first two locate us within generations and time, which in turn are located within place. This is also not an exhaustive list. Here we attempt to engage with
some of the richness of wairua without reducing, being superficial, defining or neatly packaging within borders. At the same time, we want to explore concrete ways of expressing wairua in research analysis while always leaving the possibility of something unexplainable beyond the approach. At this stage we have chosen to steer clear of the uncanny, being a sensitive area where we would need to tread with even greater care.

These are beginning points only, a way of approaching our data to explore whether we might see these associations and if it is practical to look at our data in this way; what can it tell us and will this be useful? Using these spheres as guides we began to look at the data generated by our National Days project. The following section describes the database that we then draw on to provide two examples of what the application of a wairua approach might tell us.

**Methods**

The National Days project database consists of key informant and focus group interviews, media and web items and *haerenga kitea* (go along visual records), referred to in this article as haerenga. We developed the haerenga drawing on ‘go along’ interviewing and Photovoice techniques (McCreanor, Kaiwai, Jensen et al., 2006; Oliver et al., 2011). Researchers used purposive sampling to recruit and conduct haerenga with a total of 34 records (18 for Waitangi and 16 for Anzac, from 2013–2015 although this may change as we confirm back with participants). Participants were a range of Maori and non-Maori; some attended events on Waitangi Day or Anzac Day and some chose not to participate in these events.

Although we obtained ethics approval from our university human ethics committee we endeavoured to reach beyond this. As well as discussing the material with participants and giving them copies, with the opportunity to delete material and discuss use, we are also editing some haerenga in order to provide a resource for participating communities. This in particular applies to Maori participants who invited Maori research team members to record local events, seeing this as an opportunity to tell their stories and have a record of the day, as well as wanting to support the researcher.

Participants had an individually assigned or invited researcher for the day or part of the day (although three haerenga involving Maori took place over two days), who recorded activities and impressions, gathered verbal data and recorded still and video footage. With all participants we were careful to follow their directions and minimise our intrusion on their experiences. The researchers captured moments as directed by participants, recorded participants immersed in the events, particularly moments or activities that appeared to be of significance, or simply sat and talked with the participant. We found data gathering differed depending on the nature of the activities; many Anzac events for example, being solemn, rather scripted occasions while Waitangi Day provided intermittent activities and moments that allowed discussion to take place.

Analysis involved viewing data multiple times and logging the footage (labelling and describing visual and audio content). After more general viewings, excerpts were selected that appeared to provide instances of the spheres described above. We looked at discourse, expressions, gestures and the nature of activities or events and also paid attention to our own inner subjectivity; what we felt. We wanted to be able to understand what might be more generally accepted as ‘spiritual moments’, but it was critical to us to
explore wairua in the everyday; not just the tikanga whakaaro and events and rituals, but how wairua might be seen in more mundane moments.

In this article we focus on excerpts from two Waitangi Day haerenga; one recorded at Waitangi and one at Mangungu. On Waitangi Day, the 6th February events occur throughout the country, but a particular site is Waitangi itself in the north of the North Island, where the first Te Tiriti signings occurred in 1840. After the signings at Waitangi in 1840, Te Tiriti was taken to other sites. On February 12, the largest group of signings took place at the Mangungu Mission, some 60 km from Waitangi. The Waitangi site includes the Waitangi National Trust Treaty Grounds (upper grounds) and Te Tii Marae. In the upper grounds there are food, craft and other stalls as well as performance stages. Te Tii Marae, a gathering place across the bridge from the grounds, is run by a committee and involves local organisers. There is a meeting house and tents erected where numerous discussions on issues of concern, such as decolonisation, constitutional transformation, the environment and trade agreements occur. People can camp on this land and stalls are also set up, but to a lesser extent than on the upper grounds. Te Tiriti is often represented as the ‘birth of the nation’, or our ‘founding document’; however Maori and European understandings differed and conflicts quickly arose (Orange, 2012). This is evident in the ways we respond to and mark Waitangi Day in the present day.

Applying a wairua approach to analysis

We begin with an excerpt from Mangungu where the day centred on an organised event involving a ritual of encounter – powhiri – where visitors are called on to the site, participate in speeches, each followed by a song or chant, and other interactions, culminating in sharing food offered in hospitality by the home people. Among attendees were local people, visitors from further places and local school children who participated in welcoming the visitors and performed a piece about the history and meanings of the signings at Mangungu. Marsden (1992: 118) argues that:

An analysis of the concepts which underlie this formal welcome reveals the basic themes and approach of the Maori to questions of ultimate reality and the relationships among God, man and the universe.

One video excerpt shows the visitors being called on to the site by a kai karanga, a woman whose voice is the first to be heard. As the visitors begin their slow walk up the hill to the waiting hosts and tent, a woman from the visiting side responds and the children perform a haka powhiri, Toia Mai. This is a form of chant referring to hauling the canoe to its resting place.

In the speeches that ensue, the word wairua is mentioned several times, referring to the significance of the day and the events that took place there in the past.

It’s coming from the heart and it’s also coming from the wairua of our ancestors.

Here the speaker describes the welcome and the events of the day in ways that link to the history of the event and the ever present nature of the wairua of ancestors.
In this excerpt we can observe spiritual signification through expressions of tikanga whakaaro and discursive deployment of the word wairua. If the observer has deeper knowledge there is more to see; connections occurring between people, to ancestors, to place and to the meaning of the day; for example, the calls of the women weave a spiritual rope that pulls the visitors’ canoe on to the marae (New Zealand folksong, 2003), the haka powhiri supports and assists this process, signifying a pathway for spirits to enter and leave the world (Barlow, 1991). Wairua does not need to be mentioned for this to be recognised.

As an excerpt where we may readily recognise wairua, this example could be seen as ‘easy pickings’ and only a part of what we set out to achieve. We had also wanted to explore wairua in the everyday; not just the tikanga whakaaro and events and rituals, but how wairua might be seen in more mundane moments.

To do this we move to our second case and a more challenging exercise using excerpts from a haerenga at Waitangi with a local resident who had not attended for any specific purpose. We follow her as she moves through the various places and spaces of the Treaty grounds and Te Tii marae on Waitangi Day. On leaving the upper national trust grounds and headed home, she reflected:

> it feels kind of like there isn’t really any point to being here in some way, a purpose or a centre or something significant to be here for, it’s kind of wandering around and there’s shops to go to and things to look at and kai (food) to eat…

On her way she passed Te Tii Marae and went in to the tent where people spoke, including a young woman descended from a well-known leader in Maori land rights and a group of young Maori preformed action songs. She stayed for a while then reflected again on her day:

> I’m so glad we came here…I came and connected with what for me feels like the heart and the wairua of Waitangi and the Treaty and Waitangi Day for me we were just about to leave without that, I felt sort of frustrated … to hear talk of the Treaty and what it meant originally and what it means now… and then the kapa haka … amazing, it was so beautiful … it was such a fitting accompaniment to the words…for me it felt like [puts her hand to her heart] I can go now feeling satisfied.

In the first excerpt, although she does not articulate specifically what she might hope to experience, she expresses a sense of disappointment at not finding a reason for being there, which she reflects on later as ‘frustration’. In the second, her demeanour has changed, as she connects with the heart and wairua of the place, Te Tiriti and the day. Using the spheres described earlier, we gain a sense of her connection: to past, present and future, place and meaning. In the full version of this excerpt she made particular comment about hearing the young woman speak. This, along with her description of the kapa haka as ‘beautiful’, indicates her appreciation of the importance of younger generations and the continuity of whakapapa (broadly meaning genealogical relationships). Together these give her a sense of completeness so that, putting her hand to her heart, she explains she can now go, satisfied.
These examples could be seen as at opposite ends of the wairua ‘spectrum’ but, if rituals such as powhiri are about trying to capture the ideas and values of spirit (Aluli-Meyer, 2006), then through the desire to find meaning and connection, our participant in the second example expresses something akin to this. Past, present and future are to the fore in both examples and give meaning to the events. Both demonstrate a connection between heart and wairua, being discursively linked in both. This illustrates how wairua is linked to feelings and emotions and, when in balance, has an integrity that is heartfelt.

**Discussion**

We set out to see if we could find entry points to exploring the working of wairua in a range of settings, including the everyday as a key practice through which Maori engaged in commemoration. We hoped that, if we looked at wairua as fluid and intertwined with social practices of meaning making, rather than as solely a pre-eminent force we might find an approach that gave greater voice to Maori worldviews and make the invisible (in part at least) visible.

Here we will not grapple with the question of who can or should use this approach and under what circumstances; although these are clearly discussions that need to be had. There is one point we would like to raise here – by putting a passionate inward subjective approach at the forefront we signal who might do this work and what they might discover. The Maori research team members were, in varying ways, insiders so our position stems from this. We seek to discover what we and other Maori understand in relation to wairua and what this means to our experiences. Non-Maori, as outsiders, might discover what they perceive wairua to mean to Maori; these positions are quite different.

We are not however, attempting to present the wairua approach outlined here as the Maori way, the right way or the only way; there are many ways and nothing is as simple as it sounds. Reference to affective-discursive approaches has been useful and motivating in both developing our approach and in our analyses; for example, in understanding that ‘work’ is involved. Wairua is not static and outside of feelings, emotions and actions but is something we work at and with, shaping and being shaped by us at every turn as we struggle to make sense of our lives.

We believe our initial attempts have been able to explicate meaning, indicating transformative potential theoretically and practically. We hope further work will enable us to, in a small way, redress the denigration of wairua. We also hope to move the conversation beyond abstraction. Here we are able to ‘see’ wairua through the haerenga kītea data as both articulated and lived embodied experiences. We are beginning to formulate routine affective practices that make sense to Maori. In our study this brings a deeper understanding to what the commemoration days mean to Maori participants and provides insights into the intensity of experience. Giving voice to more than the dominant notions of the aggrieved and angry Maori, a wairua approach places Maori in the centre of a world where past, present and future generations are at the forefront of affect; where wairua is felt as the ability to honour and connect to others, not simply a feeling on the day, but an imperative within a colonial agenda of forgetting. This is in stark contrast to the remembering we are collectively as a nation bound to actively generate on and around Anzac Day.
Conclusions

Embarking on a study of emotion and feelings and delving into the turn to investigate meanings and implications of national days in Aotearoa New Zealand meant there was an imperative to include wairua. In undertaking this journey we wanted to move beyond wairua as an acknowledgment, consideration or domain in research and explore it as an approach. We did not seek to provide some sort of rational synthesis that categorised or explained away the importance of wairua, but we wanted to see if we could begin to place wairua at the centre of experience, where useful or relevant. In doing this we have attempted to articulate our logic and processes for taking a wairua approach. We also declare and give permission for an inner journey, far removed from objectivity.

Conversations suggest that our wairua approach may have resonance with other indigenous peoples. We also need to cross borders and challenge western research to not just acknowledge the importance of wairua or spirit to indigenous peoples but to also look to their own possibilities for an approach to spirit. We urge all researchers to engage with their own understandings of spirituality as a first step in their wairua approach. Bravery may be needed, but we encourage all people to see themselves as experts in their experiences of wairua. This includes the need for researchers to acknowledge others’ expertise by engaging in dialogue, including interpretive discussions with participants, rather than imposing their understandings from a distance. The ‘connection between the “seen” and “unseen”’ has ‘often been “left at the door” so we might participate in the academy.’ (Ratima, 2008: 2) A wairua approach challenges all researchers to bring the gift of spirit into the heart of the academy.

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Note

1. Settler of European origin

References


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