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- Identity
- Reo

COMMENT & ANALYSIS

Are Māori Indigenous? That's not the real question

by **Alice Te Punga Somerville** | Oct 8, 2023 | 1 🗨️ | 12 min read



"It's possible to have robust conversations about "Indigenous" things without obsessing over a single fixed definition," says Professor Alice Te Punga Somerville. (Photo supplied)

Winston Peters' claim that Māori aren't Indigenous needs to be seen in the context of a classic three-yearly New Zealand election cycle of "Māori-bashing, poor-bashing, beneficiary-bashing and Pacific-bashing", writes Professor Alice Te

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After the “Winston Peters said Māori aren’t Indigenous because they come from Hawaiki” thing blew up, I posted on Facebook something my grandad always said: “Don’t argue with a fool because people won’t be able to tell the difference.”

Now, let me be clear: I don’t think Winston Peters is a fool. He is strategic, and he knows how to speak directly into the ears of people who could vote for him. I don’t believe for a minute that he simply fails to understand what “Indigenous” does or doesn’t (or might or mightn’t) mean.

Instead, I think he put this distracting — and yes, foolish — kōrero into the public sphere because he knows he can use this widely-used and definitely-complicated, often-seemingly-vague word to gain tangible political mileage.

By the time I woke up in Vancouver to find New Zealand social media was already lathered up about the situation, I knew the solution was not to produce a checklist to “prove” Peters wrong (as a certain Pākehā historian did — but more on that below).

Speaking back directly to Winston Peters by addressing the logic of his argument is a waste of time. The question Peters is asking isn’t a yes-or-no question (“Are Māori people Indigenous or not?”) in which he made an oopsie-daisy mistake and got the wrong answer by not correctly adding up the ticks in various boxes. Rather, it’s a statement (“Māori aren’t Indigenous”) that is really about another (quieter, perhaps less speakable) question, which is: “Why should Māori people get extra stuff on the basis of being Indigenous?”

First, I want to write about the definition of “Indigenous” because this is something the Peters-fuelled discussion has raised. We as Māori people care about this question and its many possible answers. I’ll also turn to the unspeakable question that the definition of Indigenous will neither answer nor solve. And, finally, I’ll propose some questions I personally think are much more interesting than: “Are we Indigenous — yes, or no?”

A totally understandable reaction to the idea that Māori aren’t Indigenous is to say: “Hang on a minute. Yes, we are!”

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and then to find a definition and note how many boxes we can tick. Unfortunately, however, the term “Indigenous” is not easy to define, and this is what makes it so powerful when it is wielded to enable amazing and important things to happen. But it’s also what makes it able to be wielded in disempowering and vague ways, and in ways that are about obscuring rather than informing (such as by Peters).

Most responsible people working in areas connected to anything Indigenous try to avoid simple checklist definitions as much as possible. Not because we don’t know what “Indigenous” means but because it’s very difficult to produce a single definition that doesn’t end up accidentally excluding some people (or peoples — whole communities or nations) that you intended to include, as well as including some people you didn’t mean to. (For instance, the claims made by British commentators of being Indigenous to the UK in order to make anti-immigrant arguments, which two British scholars of Indigenous Studies have responded to here.)

I usually tell my students that “Indigenous” as a term works best at about 20 paces: when it’s close enough that it enables something important to be described, but it’s far enough away or fuzzy enough that it doesn’t end up either creating hoops that not all Indigenous people can (or want to) jump through, for specific cultural or general colonial reasons.

Definitions of “Indigenous” will only get you so far, I tell my students, and then you’ll find that you’re spinning your wheels. Understanding what “Indigenous” means is better done by paying attention to who is using the term, and why, and where.

Maybe this sounds a bit Humpty Dumpty-ish.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.”

But how do we measure the risk of coming up with a definition that *excludes* people precisely because of their experiences of . . . exclusion?

We might say: “Okay, Indigenous people have a distinct culture and language.” But colonial processes have focused so much attention and resources on ensuring that this isn’t actually the situation for so many people.

We might say: “Okay, Indigenous people are the people from a particular place.” But all humans are from a particular

place, and the bit that matters in any useful sense is who was where when colonialism commenced (more on this below).

We might say: “Indigenous people love the earth as their mother.” Or: “Indigenous people all value their elders.” And those things may feel true, but before long, we’re at a point where we’re describing most humans or adopting stereotypes of Native peoples as imagined by Europeans. And there will always be specific Indigenous communities who’ll say: “Ummm, yeah, not us. We have another way of seeing or doing it.”

As much as we may feel all kinds of connections and resonances between our various specific cultures, the term Indigenous is ultimately a political term that’s been mobilised and used by Indigenous people to describe ourselves and each other in certain contexts.

Often, people point to the 1970s as the time when it became widely used, and 50 years later, it has become the most popular term used in English to describe who we are. The hard bit about defining Indigenous is that the only thing we can say we share outside of colonialism is our insistence on our uniqueness.

It feels so awkward that colonialism is the only thing we share for sure. This might not be something we want to be the case, because we may not want to be defined by colonialism, but any discussion about what “Indigenous” means that sidesteps colonialism is missing the point.

This is what I found so incredibly problematic about the image of a checklist that was produced by Professor Paul Moon and shared on social media by so many people in the aftermath of the Winston Peters comment. The things on the list were fine on one level — who could disagree that all, or at least most, of those things were indeed true on some level?

But they weren’t connected to any actual formal definition of “Indigenous”, despite being presented as if there was a source or logic to the items on the list, and there was no mention of the specific structures, impacts or effects of colonialism.

I’m not alone in feeling a bit iffy about firm definitions of “Indigenous”. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has a helpful [fact sheet](#) that explains why defining “Indigenous” is tricky, and the University of British Columbia, where I work, developed a whole [booklet](#) on the

complexity of terminology about Indigenous peoples because, yes, this stuff is complicated.

When the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was created over many years, as a result of hard work by many Indigenous people, including Māori, a decision was made to not produce an accompanying singular definition because of this complexity. But also — and this feels important to me — it wasn't considered necessary to finalise a single definition for UNDRIP itself to become a thing. (See? It's possible to have robust, significant and meaningful conversations about "Indigenous" things without obsessing over a single fixed definition.)

Yes, there are a few definitions out there that get a lot of airtime. The UN often turns to the definition created by Jose R Martinez Cobo (Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities). Organisations such as the World Bank have their own definitions. The International Labour Organization has a definition encoded in article 1 of the 1989 Convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, No. 169.

Most existing definitions of "Indigenous", wherever they may be, agree on a few things: connection to a particular place, an experience of colonialism, and ongoing disadvantage and discrimination.

To speak directly to the matter of Māori being Indigenous (or not) as raised by Winston Peters, it's worth being very clear that none of the formal definitions *or* widespread uses of "Indigenous" includes a requirement that the people in question have no histories of movement or mobility.

Q The idea that our whakapapa, which stretches back in so many directions across Te Moananui a Kiwa — and the striking connections between ourselves and our cousins and relatives in the vast, beautiful, diverse Pacific region — should somehow disqualify us from being Indigenous or from understanding ourselves as having a specific relationship with our whenua, as tangata whenua, is absolutely at odds with global use of the term "Indigenous".

(I will leave aside that there are also kōrero about tūpuna who were here prior to waka arrivals, and that tracing one's ancestry back to Māui, and to various maunga and awa and so on, means that Māori stories of being connected to these islands have rarely framed us "only" as the descendants of

Oceanic voyagers. These are good additional questions for another kōrero, but not ultimately why we find ourselves having the “How can we be Indigenous if we come from Hawaiki?” conversation.)

Once you start moving around the diverse Indigenous world, it turns out that many, many Indigenous communities have longstanding understandings of historical and ancestral migrations. Many provide accounts of their own arrivals to the specific territory to which they are now deeply connected.

And while it is true that (New Zealand) Māori people “became Māori” on arrival in our home islands (as people have rightly argued for years), and that this is an aspect of how we understand our specificity, being Indigenous doesn’t hinge on whether people are like an endemic species of plant or bird that only appears in one habitat. If anything, it hinges on a relationship of place and time: Who was where when the colonial project showed up?

(Full disclosure. I am so interested in the question of how we as Māori understand ourselves as Indigenous as well as being connected to the Pacific, that I wrote my first book about it. Clearly, I should have sent a copy to Winston Peters back in 2012 when it came out. Actually, this whole thing blew up literally the week I signed a contract with the publisher, University of Minnesota Press, to bring out an open-access (that is, free downloadable) version of *Once Were Pacific: Māori connections to Oceania* early in 2024, which was an interesting comment for me about the evergreen nature of the questions we can ask about how we think about Indigeneity in our part of the world.)

To return to the logic of the arguments he made about Māori not being Indigenous, Peters directly contrasts Māori as waka arrivals (and therefore not “Indigenous”?) with Indigenous people in Australia. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples undoubtedly do have ties to their stunning ancient continent and its nearby islands that are unparalleled in length (sometimes described as the world’s longest continuous culture), this, by itself, doesn’t determine whether Māori are Indigenous.

And Indigenous Australians are themselves people with longstanding practices and networks of mobility. They’ve been there so long that they’ve lived through various ice ages and other climactic and territorial(landform/waterway) changes. Moving around is handy in such moments!

Indigeneity isn't something you earn after passing "go" (or, well, not passing "go" — indeed, not going anywhere) for several centuries or millennia. I did chuckle when I heard this contrast with Indigenous Australia, because usually when people want to tell Māori people to stop whining or being greedy, the contrast is made with Australia in order to say: "They've been treated much worse than you — what are you complaining about?", rather than: "They haven't moved from elsewhere, unlike you."

So, to look on the bright side, at least there's an element of innovation in the comparison this time, even if the intended effect (and the use of generalised stereotypes of other Indigenous people as a patu against Māori) is the same.

Definitions of "Indigenous" are tricky, and even when we find them (the actual ones, not the ones on social media attributed to Paul Moon) they don't exclude Māori on the basis of our ancestral mobility. And, no, I don't think that Winston Peters was raising the issue of Māori not being Indigenous out of concern for Indigenous Australians and their Indigenous-er claims to Indigeneity.

Why, then, would Peters even claim that Māori aren't Indigenous? Or, at least, what is the effect of this claim in the context of a classic three-yearly New Zealand election cycle of Māori-bashing (and poor-bashing and beneficiary-bashing and Pacific-bashing)? Peters is a lot of things, but he's no fool. This was a strategic claim to make.

Arguing that Māori aren't Indigenous is logical if you're trying to appeal to voters who are concerned that Māori shouldn't receive "special" and "unfair" treatment. Shorter life expectancy isn't what I'd describe as special, but there you go. There is, of course, a longstanding obsession on the part of some non-Māori about how unfairly good the treatment of Māori people is in our country. In his short BWB text, Māori historian **Peter Meihana** has done the work if you want to know more about how **assumptions of Māori being privileged** is not a recent glitch in the system but part of its design from the start.

Interestingly, the "Māori aren't Indigenous" claim manages to simultaneously invoke three different myths that often get flung at Māori: *We aren't actually the first* (the "Moriori were here first" myth in which we are no different to any other coloniser). *We were the first but in a way that was not substantially different from anyone else who has arrived here since* (the "nation of immigrants" myth in which we are

no different to anyone else in New Zealand). And, *other people have it worse than us, so why are we complaining* (and here we are, back to the Australia comparison, but for variety's sake, other Indigenous people are sometimes photoshopped into this argument, too).

All these myths and false comparisons are very familiar, because they're routinely held up as slogans that don't need to have historical, political, cultural or legal integrity — because that's not what they're about. The voters Winston Peters is trying to appeal to don't care about legal or political definitions, or the history of Māori connections with other Indigenous peoples at the global level, or Indigenous Australians.

When we focus on arguing about whether or not we're Indigenous, we risk not addressing why this is even being questioned, which is to suggest that there's a sneaky or unfair way that Māori people are getting something that we shouldn't. (That it isn't ours. That it belongs to someone else — or should do.)

Challenging the idea that we're Indigenous is a deliberate strategy to reassure certain voters that there are people willing to stand in our parliament and advocate for the deliberate undermining of whatever gains have been made by the blood, sweat, tears and ink of generations. It's to suggest to the electorate that removing small crumbs that fall from a loaf of bread — a loaf of bread baked in a kitchen that's been systematically removed from our control — is a heroic, just and fair thing to do.

I'll end with this footnote. Are there things to talk about when it comes to the concept of Indigeneity in New Zealand? Absolutely!

How do we account for the other Indigenous peoples whose home islands are currently within the political borders of the Realm of New Zealand? How do we think about our obligations and relationships with Indigenous peoples of other countries when we move there for travel or to live? How can our thinking about Indigeneity and land enable us to think about the presence of Indigenous Banaban people who are present in our whenua via the phosphate industry that removed whenua from their islands and spread it all over New Zealand farms and sites of agriculture? How do we think about claiming "Māori" only exist in New Zealand, when there are also "Māori" people in the Cook Islands?

What grounds and opportunities are there for us to extend the solidarities we practise with Indigenous people from non-British and even non-European empires? How are our ideas about being Indigenous shaped by the borders of the New Zealand state to the extent that *manawhenuatanga* becomes sidelined when it suits — especially in urban centres?

What are the risks of some Māori people promoting a progress-based narrative about us being “ahead” of other Indigenous peoples in an imaginary competitive journey to decolonisation? How can we become proficient in diplomatic relationships when it comes to our engagements with other Indigenous peoples? What can we as Māori learn from other Indigenous peoples who’ve been thinking in significant ways about how anti-Blackness, homophobia and transphobia, and anti-Asian racism, need to be addressed within our own communities?

What possibilities are there for thinking about knowledge of global Indigenous peoples and issues within Māori-focused educational environments? To what extent can we imagine that global Indigenous networks and knowledge of UNDRIP could be an aspect of what people learn at New Zealand schools or universities? Just as English-language terms such as “Indigenous”, “Native”, “Aboriginal” and “Autochthonous” (yes, really, it’s a word!) change over time, how do we continue to refine and reconsider the ways we use terms like “iwi”, “takekake”, “tangata whenua”, and so on?

How do we ensure that all kinds of knowledge holders contribute to our shared conversation about Indigeneity — not just academics, or not just any other single group, but all of us, collaboratively, with our various angles and blinkers.

The list goes on. There are so many questions that keep me awake at night, and that so many Māori people around the *motu* and around the world are asking, along with many other Indigenous peoples. These are, for Indigenous people, interesting times. *Far* more interesting than questions that can be answered yes or no.

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