



**STOUT RESEARCH CENTRE**  
*for New Zealand Studies*

## **UNDERSTANDING NEW ZEALAND CULTURAL IDENTITIES**

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Definition*

Culture is always going to mean different things, ranging from global culture to the organisational culture of the New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage, but for our purposes a succinct working definition is possible. Cultural identity is the software of large human groups – it is what makes them self-aware *groups*. It is not simply a matter of shared artistic culture, high brow or low, but of shared language, customs, habits, values and practices, and of shared identifiers, icons, and symbols. These things are not necessarily superior to those of other cultures, or even unique; the point is that they are *shared* within the group and thought to be distinctive.

### *Nationhood*

A country's most obvious form of cultural identity is its sense of being a country, its 'nationalism'. This concept has recently had a bad press, to some extent deservedly so. The old nationalist idea that pasts and futures are primarily to be understood in national terms, and that nations have room for only one culture, should be rejected. Singular, exclusive and often aggressive *ethnic* nationalism needs to be distinguished from plural, inclusive and non-aggressive *civic* nationalism, or nationhood. The notion now abroad in some quarters that increasing globalisation renders nationhood redundant is highly contestable. Plenty of evidence suggest otherwise. Because New Zealand benefits greatly from marketing difference, moreover, global uniformity could be disastrous for it economically as well as culturally. Civic nationhood is arguably a crucial mediation point between the local and the global.

Even if 'New Zealand-ness' is only membership of 'a nutter-free zone in the South Pacific', it is still worth having. New Zealandness is, in fact, considerably more than this. Yet we still do not understand it very well, or value it consistently highly. Some may dismiss discussion of it as collective psychotherapy for a non-existent ailment, academic talk-festing, or the ritual self-flagellation of liberals bearing guilt. In fact its importance as New Zealand's invisible intranet, social lubricant, and image abroad is immense. If one could place a value on it, even in solely economic terms, it would be in the tens of billions. Cultural identity ranks right up there with grass as New Zealand's chief asset.

### ***Imagined Communities***

We can gain some insight into the functions of cultural identity by considering its close relative, ‘imagined community’. Your *actual* communities are your various circles of family, neighbours, colleagues and associates, people you actually know and with whom you share specific interests and regularly interact. Your *imagined* communities are wider circles of people you do not know, but with whom you think you have something significant in common and who reciprocate this feeling. You and they *identify* with each other, and share some values, habits, and practices – you share not only identity but also some culture or sub-culture. If you do happen to meet these known strangers, or if you engage indirectly with them in some joint activity, such as an election campaign or protest movement, the shared culture and identity lubricates the interaction, or at least gives you some idea of what to expect.

To attempt a concrete example, national labels, and the vices and virtues ascribed to them by insiders and outsiders, are one form of cultural identity. In a London newspaper ‘To Let’ column, the phrase ‘New Zealander seeks flat-mate’ conveys potentially useful information. As a fellow-New Zealander, you might feel that co-patriotism should make living with a stranger easier, or perhaps that living in a New Zealand-abroad bubble is not the way to get to know London. If non-New Zealanders ascribe certain characteristics to the identifier ‘New Zealander’, the advertisement might also attract compatible flat-mates or filter out the incompatible. Whether the ascribed characteristics are real or not, genuinely typical or not, is less important than the fact that their ascription is shared by the parties. Our cultural identities define ‘Us’, to ourselves and to others, whether we like it or not. Shared cultural identities lower ‘transaction costs’, permit cheap informal solutions as against expensive formal ones, and enhance the ‘social capital’ of informal joint action and voluntary association.

### ***Icons and Identity***

Recently, New Zealand cultural identity experienced an interesting epiphany with the death of national icon Sir Edmund Hillary. His passing was widely mourned, and his life widely celebrated. The achievements of ‘Sir Ed’ as mountain-climber, explorer, and active friend of the Indian sub-continent in general and Nepal in particular were indeed extraordinary. Yet in a sense it was Hillary’s *ordinariness* that was mourned and celebrated. He was considered to epitomise, in extreme and heroic form, the

virtues of the (white male?) New Zealander: self-reliance, toughness, loyalty, ingenuity, courage, determination, modesty, fairness, and an unpretentious capacity to get things done.

Government participated in the outpouring of grief and celebration, but did not control it. The media flashed out long-stored obituaries, sometimes extending to half a newspaper, but this did not appear to exceed most appetites. Academic pundits were ambushed by the intensity of feeling, as were their British colleagues on the death of Princess Diana, when the working-class took over the public face of England. The 'Ed and Di' phenomena demonstrate the unpredictable, uncontrollable, even politically incorrect, yet immensely powerful, character of national identity. Far from talk-festing, seeking to understand this invisible tidal force in our lives, honestly and innovatively, will always be time well spent.

At the outset we make the point that cultural identity is not static, and is always full of pluralities, stereotypes, contradictions and paradoxes. This paper seeks to identify areas of New Zealand's cultural identities where fresh understanding and debate might be particularly useful.

## CULTURAL ICONOGRAPHY

### *Iconographies*

As noted above in the case of Sir Edmund Hillary, individuals can act as symbols, repositories, even change-mechanisms of cultural identity – as ‘living treasures’. Public reactions to their death reveal their importance, and it would be fruitful to consider, compare, and reflect on these. How did the Passing of Hillary compare with that of, say, double VC winner Charles Upham? Are any differences a measure of the men in question, or of the times – for example, of variations in the felt need for Pakeha New Zealandness to re-assert itself? How do these passings of male heroes compare to that of, say, the Maori Queen, or Janet Frame, who were more specialised repositories of identity?

Physical symbols can be iconographic too. Is there significance in the tendency for these, such as ‘No-Tree Hill’ and the national war medals collection, to demonstrate their full importance only when they disappear – just like living icons. Do we have to wait for them to die, be chopped down, or stolen before trying to understand their role? Attitudes and objects can also be icons, such as the allegedly characterising attitudes of ‘Fair Go’ and the (anti-) ‘Tall Poppy Syndrome’? Is their grip lessening with time, however, especially with our increasing degree of cultural pluralism? Conversely, what is the explanation of the increasing popularity of Anzac Day? Why do some icons wax while others wane in the popular imagination?

### *A Classless Society*

There are long held social beliefs that are integral to New Zealandness. There is, for example, a long tradition of priding ourselves on being a ‘classless’ society. This is obviously not true, either in the past or in the present; indeed nowadays the gap between the richest and poorest is, all studies agree, widening all the time. The most recent Salvation Army study (reported on Radio New Zealand, 11 February 2008), in fact, identifies the widening gap as responsible for the increase in social problems experienced in the last decade.

But class difference is not simply a question of wealth, for in New Zealand factors such as when you arrived here and where you live are highly relevant in society, and there are significant status differentials within classes or sectors. Farming, for

example, is rife with differentiations – sheep farmers, dairy farmers, winemakers, shearers, farm labourers, market gardeners, cow cockies, sharemilkers and so on. Such differences have been the source of literature, comedy, cartoons and films, including New Zealand’s best loved comic characters, Fred Dagg and the denizens of *Footrot Flats*, for example. Social differences are also nuanced along traditional ‘boundaries’. Accents, suburbs, schools, choice of leisure activity and food are all as delicately demarcated here as elsewhere. But class is not a tightly defined social phenomenon as it is in the United Kingdom. It does not govern New Zealand culture or behaviour; our society is, indeed, relatively permeable and ethnically mixed.

This is in part, perhaps, because in New Zealand social networks are relatively small and often closely connected: we are the ‘small town’ of the western world. This might feed into New Zealand’s strong traditions of egalitarianism and community participation, which are important factors in our cultural identity, and (relatedly) to the concept of a ‘fair go’. But where is that aspect of our cultural identity as we become more and more consumer driven and individualistic, more like every other western society? Might such valued traits of cultural identity survive, in the end, as just another reality TV show?

### ***Oppositions***

There are a number of oppositions which lie behind cultural identity which can be usefully explored. For example, what does *not* fit with the idea of New Zealander? Or, we can learn from exploring the circumstances in which monoculturalism prevails: the great un-orchestrated event of the Hillary funeral was not bicultural, for example, for there was no noticeable Maori element. Can cultural identity be most clearly expressed in resistance? Consider the 1975 Land March led by Dame Whina Cooper, which brought inalienable elements of Maori cultural identity into sharp focus and began the process which led ultimately to Treaty hearings and negotiations; it was a transforming process in New Zealand history and society.

This is one key example of the way in which cultural identity is inextricably connected to political, social and economic factors. Another is the ban on nuclear power, weaponry and propulsion inside New Zealand and its waters. Even if this were not the product of a coordinated public impulse at the time, it did become the expression of an identity the great majority of New Zealanders subscribed to. But originally, there was great resistance to it from within sectors of (especially) Pakeha

society. Resistance plays a significant role in forging cultural identities. But 'resistance' is a complex phenomenon and does not always come from the 'minority' position. Do Pakeha appreciate that resistance to minority cultures has been a feature of the dominant Anglo-Celtic culture? And what about tensions within and between minority cultures? How do such two-way and multilayered resistances and tensions within society impact on our cultural identity?

### ***The Environment***

Pakeha New Zealanders tend to have a strong, if mythic, connection to a rural society or imagined versions of it, and (perhaps contradictorily) to an unspoilt landscape. If pristine scenic vistas constitute the landscape of our imagined community, then who belongs in it? In nineteenth century Pakeha art, Maori figures might be placed in it; in twentieth century equivalents, the landscape might be curiously depopulated. In other contexts, the inhabitant might be the 'Man Alone' stereotype, which is not necessarily one of manly and laconic solitude; especially when it is a rural person, it can be humorous – as with Fred Dagg. It can also be connected to the strong utopian tradition in New Zealand, which might be seen to be reflected in the Green Party or the ohu movement, or in a long line of utopian literature celebrating sustainability, independence and environmental idealism, or in a '100% pure' campaign. The environment and how you live in it is a constant theme of what it means to be Kiwi.

But just as the negative connotations in Man Alone are often invoked, so too there are many challenges to our self promotion as a place where urban blight is unknown – the sardonic point made, for example, by panning away from the motorway poster of an idyllic non-urban landscape in the opening of the film *Once Were Warriors*. Similarly, the boom of second house buying, and 'landscape as real estate', questions our role as guardians of scenic treasures. Could we 'Save Manapouri' again? Has the connection of our cultural identity with land become 'boutique', aiming essentially at adventure tourism and cruise boats, and retaining almost no real connection with wild landscapes and conservationist values?

### ***Provincialism and 'Kiwi Gothic'***

Much popular imagery has developed around rural or small town communities. A darker side of New Zealand society is reflected in our attitudes towards small towns and the country, and (relatedly) the cultural identity reflective of provincialism.



Social realism, which was the foundation of literary nationalism (1930-40s), famously 'exposed' the puritanical aspects of New Zealand society, represented by Frank Sargeson's uncle with the 'hard knocker' and James K Baxter's excoriation of provincial New Zealand in his 'Pig Island Letters'. Many pundits have noted the strange dark side of Pakeha culture, 'New Zealand Gothic'; something terrible in the wood shed, the attic or the father's den; the loneliness of Man Alone; prisoners in paradise. *Vigil*, the novels of Ronald Hugh Morrieson, *In My Father's Den*, the portraits of Yvonne Todd, *Heavenly Creatures*, all reflect a sinister side of Kiwi cultural identity, our innocence exposed. Kiwi gothic tends to be about Pakeha – the 'other side' of our veneration for Sir Edmund Hillary, perhaps. What is this telling us about how we like to think of ourselves?

Contemporary manifestations of narrow minded and defensive provincialism include fear and loathing of Australia, and the exclusive clubbism that makes many New Zealanders resist migrants, tolerate parochial newspapers and media, and anxiously inspect every visiting traveller's book/blog/interview for flattering (or sneering) opinions. Is our cultural identity too dependent on approving reflection from outside? Would we really rather be New Zealanders somewhere else? Is our cultural identity detaching from its place of origin?

### ***'Sheilas' and Other Girls***

Are our cultural identities still dominated by masculinism? Attitudes to women, like attitudes to indigenous people, foreigners (especially Asians) and animals are lightning rods for social and cultural identity. Do the stereotypes which operate for men also operate for women? Do we like our women to be like Ed Hillary, strong and silent? It could be so. Think of the way, for example, Helen Clark has never been allowed to forget her tears on the marae. We admire athletes – such as Sarah Ulmer – who like All Blacks fight on through their injuries. We do not really like sex symbols – we don't have a Madonna, or a Marilyn Monroe or J-Lo. Instead, there seems to be an attitude towards women which may not have moved too far from the time when women were 'sheilas'. In the domestic domain, violence against women is a scourge.

As against that we have had a remarkable series of female 'firsts' – obviously, in terms of global importance, suffrage, but more recently we have seen our first female Prime Ministers, Chief Justice and Governor-General. We now, too, have high

achievement by women in all professional fields. The days of ‘Ladies a Plate’, then, are over. But to come back to an old question, is New Zealand still essentially a man’s country? Women are over-represented among the poor, who in turn seldom make it to the status of cultural icons, or only if they can seem romantic and a source of cultural richness – the Irish, for example, and Maori for certain things at certain times. But how do Maori women figure generally in New Zealand’s cultural identity? Who is the Dame Whina of this generation?

Who are our female icons? Who gets the punters out, as the All Blacks can always be guaranteed to do? Do the Black Ferns have the same iconic popularity? Is our cultural identity still gendered? If so, do you have to be well-off to feature in the imagined community of cultural identity?

### ***Humour***

There is a ‘reverse cool’ to provincialism. This produces *Eagle vs Shark*, or the Grammy-winning *Flight of the Conchords* – dysfunctional nerds and country bumpkins, whose naivety represents truth telling and self awareness. While the dark side of Kiwi gothic is worth probing, there appears to have been little consideration of this inverse bright side, embodied in humour. Early strands of Pakeha humour included the racist ‘Hori’ syndrome and the sexist male ‘crew culture’ humour of campfire yarns, which stretches from 1790s sealers to Barry Crump. There is also the gently mock rural strand – Dad and Dave, or (again) Fred Dagg – which has some kinship with female and urban strands of humour: Lynn of Tawa and the Topp Twins, or the early Peter Jackson splatter movies, *Front Lawn* and *Back of the Y*.

People who think there is no Pakeha culture might consider this rich and continuing comic heritage (along with other home-grown products such as music and song, both Maori and Pakeha). There is also a politically incorrect Maori humour found among speakers on many self-confident rural marae, most brilliantly expressed in the work of the late, lamented Billy T James. This meshes with Pakeha humour to some extent, and also with the new Polynesian comics of *Bro’Town* and *Sione’s Wedding*. Perhaps we should stop picking the scab of the dark side for a moment, and ask what the very many jokes about ourselves have to tell us about ourselves and our cultural identities.

## BICULTURALISM

### *Treaty of Waitangi*

New Zealand cultural identity is strongly reflected in what has been happening around the Treaty of Waitangi. Nothing has changed the way New Zealanders interact and conduct their social lives in the last twenty years as much as the Treaty and what it stands for. It has changed how we pattern or conduct ceremonies, manage institutions, process law, speak to each other on public occasions and listen to the radio. As Claudia Orange noted when hosting the 2008 Te Papa Tongarewa Treaty of Waitangi debate series, the Treaty is embedded in New Zealand life. Anne Salmond argued recently that a country cannot have a strong national or cultural identity without staying true to its history. New Zealanders have discovered we are more racist –and certainly more ethnocentric – than we like to believe in our national self-mythologising. Recent settlements, protests and police actions have illustrated the perils and the promise of the Treaty. It is central to both Maori and Pakeha cultural identity.

It is of importance to other New Zealand peoples too; would the apology to Chinese New Zealanders over the poll-tax have happened when it did without the Treaty? Acknowledgment of the Treaty, however grudging in some quarters, may well be a necessary condition of modern New Zealand-ness. But is it a sufficient condition? Is it true we have treaty-fatigue? Are we in danger of expecting the Treaty's three paragraphs to carry too great a burden? For example, the Treaty tends to be used as the base for an appreciation of New Zealand history in schools. Is it too narrow a base? Does the Treaty focus unduly narrow our schools' approach to New Zealand history, and render it unnecessarily vulnerable to allegations of parochialism? Or are such allegations merely ammunition for defenders of traditionalist elements of the history curriculum? Does what is taught in schools matter for cultural identity anyway?

### *Beyond the Treaty*

We often talk as if the Treaty has an expiry date – as if we are moving towards a post-Treaty utopia in which all grievances are settled in a perfect bicultural society. Are these beliefs simply political expediency, or are they fundamental components of our cultural identity – a naïve optimism, a wish for perfection which is also a

complacency? Does the Treaty and its focus on biculturalism allow us, as some Australians allege, to ignore our multiculturalism and cloak what is essentially a brown-white standoff? How can our cultural identities deal with history and also move beyond mere cosmetic recognitions that we are the sum (or perhaps the dream) of many diversities?

## ONE, TWO, TOO MANY?

### *Cultural Identities*

Do biculturalism and multiculturalism have to be opposed to each other? Can the tensions between them be constructive? Is it time to go beyond both, and to distinguish between *peoples in New Zealand*, who have bases elsewhere, and *New Zealand peoples*, home-grown in these islands, for whose cultures and identities we have a special responsibility? There are at least two, probably three, and possibly several more of these autochthonous cultures: Maori, Pakeha, compound Pasifika or 'Nesian', and perhaps others such as what Jock Phillips has called 'Chiwī'.

There is a shared New Zealandness common to these, even if it is sharing knowledge of the significance of the 'bach' or the 'bro' in past and present popular culture. When they meet in the streets of Sydney, London, or Bangkok, Maori, Pakeha and Nesians have no doubt that they have something in common.

But the tension between bi- and multi-culturalism has brought into focus some deeper anxieties, exclusions and uneasinesses that fracture our cultural identity and are often the subject of our cultural production (Sam Neill's documentary film *Cinema of Unease* makes this point eloquently and cogently). On the basis of much of our artistic production, anxiety seems to be a base emotion.

Do we still exhibit cultural cringe? The perennial questions of our artists (which are core questions of postcolonial societies in general) are to do with the deep entanglement of geography and history, the meaning of place and the connection of place with identity, when culture has been transmitted from elsewhere and is in an uneasy relationship with indigenous culture. Many artists, such as McCahon, express spiritual and cultural volatility. Is it peculiar to *us*, *New Zealand peoples*, to feel this way, or is it just Pakeha who worry about their place in the world? Are we getting over it?

In New Zealand, originary anxieties are also part of a paradox, which has as its flip side 'the quarter acre paradise'. On returning to New Zealand from Berlin, Nigel Cox wrote: 'What a bunch of optimists we are!' (*Phone Home Berlin*, p 177). We are both what Cox described as a 'bit of a knocking culture', anguished about who and what we are, and expressing our uncertainties in fear of provincialism and unwillingness to

praise; and at the same time optimistically at ease in the world, sure we come from 'Godzone'.

On the one hand, living on an island far away from everyone else gives us a paradisaical sense of security – we don't have to deal with boat people for example, and so can be generous to the Tampa refugees. We are (we think) still in control of our own destiny. But on the other hand living far away can be imprisoning and make us feel vulnerable: the cost of distance haunts us and makes us anxious about our economy, our place in the world, our insignificance. There is constant anxiety about people leaving. Is our 'knocking culture' just a tepid piece of self-flagellation, or is it important to be hard-headed in a complacent society? Are Pakeha attitudes being diluted, or is 'Pakeha' still the dominating cultural dynamic in New Zealand?

### *Migrations*

One way of finding out what countries think they are is by looking at who and what they try to keep out. Until relatively recently, New Zealand immigration policy was a sorry tale of ethnic prejudice, seeking to maintain a Better British New Zealand, if not a wholly white one. Are there residues of ethnic preference in current policies? Conversely, has the relatively open door gone too far in reaction to racist legacies? And what about the people who leave, notably the large Maori and Pakeha populations of Australia? It seems that while we are a very mobile people, we also wish we were not. Is the Kiwi diaspora a dead loss to New Zealand, or a ready-made, world-wide, Kiwi-web? If the latter, how do we best enhance and utilise it? And what would we use it *for*? Do we need to know *why* people leave New Zealand, or should we quit worrying about that and accept the 'godwit view' of history? As people leave, others come in.

A simple example of our growing diversity is the proliferation of New Year festivals. We celebrate New Year now at least four times – European, Chinese, Indian and Maori. The novels of Christos Tsiolkas, a Melbourne writer, argue that multiculturalism has increased racism in Australia, and produced hard edged ethnic boundaries – is this starting to happen in New Zealand? Does more cultural diversity produce a reactionary, 'Ocker-type' cultural identity? Do we run the risk of throwing out the nuances that make us complex and interesting in favour of cultural inclusion?

And where does the current sharp debate about Muslims and their place in Western societies fit into all this?

Faith and ideologies are powerful components of cultural identity. As Tariq Ramadan has recently said:

From Canada to Australia, by way of the United States and Europe, hardly a Western society has been spared its own searing questions of “identity”, its own “integration”-related tensions, and its own debate on the place of Muslims within its confines. (‘Manifesto for a new “We”’, 2006)

Ahmed Zaoui may not have posed a threat to our security, but do Muslims pose a threat to our existing cultural identities? Debates over headscarves in schools, wearing the burka in trials and other Islamic cultural practices put our sense of what is culturally appropriate to our community on the line. Can a society tolerate fundamentally diverse practices without damage to the sense of ‘New Zealandness’ explored above? If it does tolerate everything, does the cultural identity that is so important for New Zealand marketing become obsolete or useless? Can cultural identity be at risk from social values?

## IMAGING NEW ZEALAND

### *Brand New Zealand*

Most New Zealand earners of overseas money do not sell lamb, butter, tourist experiences or educations. They sell *New Zealand* lamb, butter, tourist experiences and educations. New Zealand's reputations abroad, the various resonances of the concept 'New Zealand' in various cultures, are crucial New Zealand resources. But how much do we really know about them, and how can we find out? How can we accentuate their positives and counteract their negatives? Is there a case for a scaled-down version of the British Council, actively seeking to enhance New Zealand's cultural identity abroad?

It is interesting to note that Tourism New Zealand has recently turned from an exclusive emphasis on '100 percent pure' New Zealand nature, to an approach that celebrates our cultures as well. It asserts, probably rightly, that New Zealanders are the youngest people in the world, but acknowledges that our history is therefore fast and dynamic as well as short. Where next for 'Brand New Zealand'? Is fast and dynamic enough? Do we belong to Asia Pacific, which we often trumpet but hardly reflect? Or are we a bit of Europe, but luckier because we have nicer weather and an interesting cultural mix?

How important is it to attach a face to a place? When *et al* was chosen to exhibit in the Venice Biennale the resulting outcry was partly about the refusal of the collective to do interviews or attach their names to the work. Critics also felt the work did not 'represent' New Zealand. Does cultural *work* have to reflect cultural *identity*? And if it does not, what does that mean? What is the status of *intellectual* life in *cultural* identity? Some famous names are always invoked for Brand New Zealand – Lord Rutherford, Alan McDiarmid, Katherine Mansfield – but are probably not as revered or well-known as Ed Hillary. What does this tell us about our cultural identity choices? Should we try to get over attaching everything to sport, or would that destroy our cultural branding internationally?

### *More Questions*

There are many questions this paper has not addressed. They are important and ongoing. What is the role of religion in cultural identity, for example? Will the



resurgence of the religious right affect how we see ourselves in the future? Is the experience of war still formative in cultural identity? What about political correctness? Is it the elephant in the room? Or is it only Pakeha who subscribe to an idea of political correctness? There are other questions we have lightly touched upon which need deep exploration. Does globalism impact negatively on cultural identity, for example, or is it an enhancer? How does comparing ourselves with our closest neighbours – Australia and the Pacific nations – show ‘us’ what it means to be ‘us’? How can New Zealand identities be diverse and still say something about *this* place?

## CONCLUSION

The questions above try to canvas the many dimensions of cultural identity and identities and raise provocative issues. Our questions, we contend, point inescapably to the conclusion that there is no aspect of New Zealand history, economy, environment or society which would not be better understood by understanding the dynamics of cultural identity and the challenges and opportunities posed by cultural identities. It is not possible to live without a cultural identity, as an individual, a community or a nation. In a time of globalism, cultural identities are what other nations, and people within them, notice about us and our nation. Cultural identity is a hard asset. Thinking about it is one way of looking after it.