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**INTERSECTING WHAKAPAPA:
RETHINKING DATA SOVEREIGNTY
FOR MĀORI-PACIFIC WHĀNAU**

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INTERSECTING WHAKAPAPA: RETHINKING DATA SOVEREIGNTY FOR MĀORI-PACIFIC WHĀNAU

Wahineata Smith and Jacinta Paranihi-Anae

INTRODUCTION

Aotearoa New Zealand is a country in the Pacific and is home to a rich tapestry of cultures and ethnicities, shaped by centuries of Indigenous presence and successive waves of migration. The Indigenous people of Aotearoa are Māori, whose deep cultural, historical, and genealogical roots are increasingly intersecting with those of diverse Pacific communities. As a result, a growing number of whānau Māori now identify with one or more Pacific Island ethnicities, such as Tongan or Samoan.

Despite increased recognition of dual and multi-ethnic identities, institutional data systems often fail to adequately capture the cultural complexities of these groups (Butler, 2022). Māori-Pacific dual-heritage individuals face challenges in terms of visibility and representation in administrative data, academic research, and policymaking. The concept of data sovereignty, both Māori and Pacific, has emerged as a vital framework for ensuring that Indigenous communities maintain guardianship, control, and autonomy over data that relates to them. As Kukutai and Taylor (2016) articulate, data sovereignty is grounded in the principle that Indigenous peoples should retain authority over the collection, access, and use of data about their lands and communities. Te Mana Raraunga, the Māori Data Sovereignty Network, defines this right as the ability of Māori to determine how Māori data is collected, owned, and applied. However, a significant gap remains in our understanding and governance of dual Māori-Pacific heritage, whose identities challenge conventional data structures (Kukutai et al., 2023).

This article explores the intersection of data sovereignty, representation, and the lived realities of Māori-Pacific whānau, specifically Māori-Tongan whānau based on findings from a small qualitative study. It highlights how existing data systems fail to reflect the nuanced identities of dual-heritage individuals, with implications for their social, cultural, and economic wellbeing. Central to this discussion is a call to shift from viewing governance of dual-heritage communities' data as an external task to enabling data for governance by these communities themselves. That is, the data must serve their self-determined futures rather than merely fulfilling institutional requirements (Hudson et al., 2019). If all Māori data is protected under Māori data sovereignty, to what extent should data relating to Māori-Pacific whānau also incorporate Pacific or pan-Indigenous data governance principles?

CONTEXTUALISING MĀORI-PACIFIC IDENTITIES IN AOTEAROA

Māori and Pacific peoples share deep genealogical, linguistic, and cultural links that stem from ancestral Polynesian migrations. These connections are expressed through shared cultural concepts, such as whakapapa (genealogy), whanaungatanga (relationships), and the prioritisation of collective hauora (wellbeing). Oral traditions and origin narratives often reference ancestral voyagers who connected Aotearoa with a broader Pacific world.

More recently, large-scale Pacific migration in the mid-20th century established strong urban communities of Samoan, Tongan, Niuean, Cook Island Māori, Tokelauan, and other Pacific peoples in Aotearoa. These communities have since formed extensive social and familial networks with Māori. Marriages, partnerships, and shared generations of history have given rise to whānau who whakapapa to both Māori iwi and Pacific nations. This dual heritage is increasingly common, particularly among younger generations. Between 2013 and 2018, the number of people identifying as both Māori and Pacific increased by 42% (Stats NZ, 2019). By 2023, 90,648 Pacific peoples also identified as Māori, representing 20.5% of the total Pacific population. Among Pacific children under 15, one in three (32.7% or 44,544) also identified as Māori (Stats NZ & Ministry of Health, 2023).

DUAL ETHNICITY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Raising tamariki who carry both Māori and Pacific whakapapa offers rich opportunities for nurturing a strong sense of identity and belonging. However, these families often encounter distinct challenges. Tamariki may be expected to speak te reo Māori and also their Pacific language (e.g., lea faka-Tonga or gagana Samoa), and to uphold differing cultural protocols such as tikanga Māori alongside Tongan or Samoan customs. While this dual navigation can be deeply enriching, it is often complicated by geographic distance from extended whānau, limited resourcing for language revitalisation, and social stereotypes about what it means to be Māori or Pacific in Aotearoa (Te Huia, 2015; Butler, 2022).

Institutional frameworks compound these complexities. In official statistics, dual heritage identities are often reduced to a single ethnic label or fragmented across data sets in ways that obscure cultural nuance. This flattening of identity in data has real consequences. Policies developed on the basis of aggregated or incomplete data often fail to reflect the realities of Māori-Pacific whānau. As Cormack & Kukutai (2021) note, government surveys, censuses, and research protocols have rarely been designed to account for dual heritage, leading to systemic underrepresentation and misrecognition.

A pressing question arises: if you are not connected to iwi but identify more strongly with your Pacific heritage, how do you access data that speaks to your experience, and who makes decisions about data collection for your whānau? Te Kāhui Raraunga (Kukutai et al., 2023) report that many Māori-Pacific individuals feel marginalised by data systems that require them to prioritise one aspect of their identity or that collapse their experiences into generic categories. In such contexts, questions of trust, consent, and representation become increasingly complex. Who speaks for the data of dual-heritage individuals? Which cultural protocols take precedence? As Hudson (2010) argues, conventional consent models rarely accommodate overlapping spheres of authority, something especially relevant when individuals belong to both Māori and Pacific communities.

These data governance gaps undermine the effectiveness of policy. Without accurate data on Māori-Pacific whānau, interventions in education, health, and social services are built on partial or skewed understandings. The insights found not only deepen our theoretical approaches to Indigenous data sovereignty but also inform more equitable and culturally grounded policies that can adapt to Aotearoa's increasingly diverse future. The Ministry of Health's *Ngā Wānanga Pae Ora* (2023) summary report acknowledges current gaps in cultural responsiveness to Māori-Pacific whānau, calling for health strategies that are equitable, accessible, and culturally grounded.

Similarly, Webber and Macfarlane (2020) identify that education initiatives often overlook the distinct learning needs of Māori-Pacific students. A 2022 Ministry of Social Development review found that social programmes frequently do not reflect the unique structures and support systems of these communities. Addressing these challenges requires not only revising data collection methods but also embracing Indigenous principles of data governance that reflect the lived realities of dual-heritage whānau. Doing so is essential to building equitable, culturally grounded futures in Aotearoa.

DATA SOVEREIGNTY IN AOTEAROA

Data sovereignty refers to the rights and interests that communities have in governing the collection, ownership, and application of data about themselves. For Indigenous communities, this sovereignty ensures that they retain authority over how their data is stored, accessed, interpreted, and used. Such control is fundamental to self-determination: data shapes narratives, informs policy, and redistributes resources in ways that can either empower or marginalise. In Aotearoa, Māori data sovereignty is grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi), which guarantees Māori tino rangatiratanga (absolute chieftainship or self-determination) over their taonga (treasures). Increasingly, Māori communities and scholars argue that data, especially data that uniquely identifies Māori individuals, groups, or resources, constitutes a taonga that should be governed in accordance with tikanga Māori (Māori protocols and values) (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016; Smith, 2021).

MĀORI DATA SOVEREIGNTY

Māori data sovereignty initiatives have gained momentum through movements such as Te Mana Raraunga, the Māori Data Sovereignty Network. Their foundational principles include:

- Rangatiratanga (Authority): Māori maintain control and authority over Māori data.
- Whakapapa (Context): Data is understood through genealogical relationships, emphasising the interconnectedness of people, places, and resources.
- Whanaungatanga (Relationships): Data governance should prioritise collective benefit, enhance relationships, and empower whānau, hapū, and iwi.
- Kotahitanga (Unity): A collective vision for the care, ownership, and governance of Māori data.

These principles support the creation of data systems that are by Māori, for Māori, and with Māori, ensuring ethical data use grounded in cultural integrity. Yet, a critical question arises: if datasets include whānau who are not solely Māori but also identify as Tongan, Samoan, or another Pacific ethnicity, does Māori data sovereignty alone suffice?

PACIFIC AND BROADER INDIGENOUS DATA SOVEREIGNTY

Alongside Māori data sovereignty are parallel discussions of Pacific data sovereignty, shaped by the distinct cultural and political contexts of Pacific communities in Aotearoa. Pacific peoples represent diverse island nations, each with its own genealogies, languages, and governance systems. Although minority populations in Aotearoa, many Pacific communities advocate for data governance frameworks aligned with their own cultural values and aspirations (Walter et al., 2021). Internationally, Indigenous data sovereignty continues to gain traction. The CARE Principles (Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility, and Ethics), offer a globally recognised framework for ensuring that Indigenous communities maintain control over data that pertains to them (Carroll et al., 2020). These principles complement local efforts by Indigenous peoples across regions including Australia, Canada, and the United States.

For dual-identity Māori-Pacific whānau, the convergence of Māori, Pacific, and broader Indigenous data sovereignty frameworks presents both opportunity and challenge. Effective governance cannot default to a single approach. Instead, it must acknowledge shared whakapapa and respect multiple cultural obligations that influence how these whānau experience and understand their identities.

EMERGING TRENDS AND FUTURE GROWTH

As the demographic landscape of Aotearoa continues to evolve, the number of children with Māori-Pacific whakapapa is projected to grow. This shift heightens the urgency for data systems that meaningfully represent dual affiliations. Inadequate data risks perpetuate misrecognition and under-resourcing. Conversely, culturally responsive data collection and governance can empower dual-heritage communities and support informed, holistic policy development. Meeting this need requires a fundamental shift, not simply adjusting existing systems but reorienting towards “data for governance” rather than data governance. As Carroll et al. (2020) articulate, the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance emphasise that data should support Indigenous Peoples’ self-determined development.

STRATEGIC PATHWAYS FORWARD

Several practical steps can advance this vision:

1. **Ethnicity classifications:** Develop classification frameworks that honour the integrity of dual Māori-Pacific identities rather than forcing artificial choices. Cormack and Kukutai (2021) advocate for innovations that move beyond simplistic multiple-ethnicity checkboxes. Statistics Canada’s approach to First Nations and Métis classification (2022) offers a valuable precedent.
2. **Community-led data protocols:** Ensure Māori-Pacific whānau are actively involved in decisions about how their data is collected, stored, analysed, and used. This requires respectful engagement with both Māori and Pacific cultural authorities, and alignment with existing frameworks grounded in tikanga and Pacific protocols.
3. **Dedicated research on dual-heritage experiences:** Rather than subsuming these communities within separate Māori or Pacific studies, dedicated research should reflect the unique lived realities of dual-heritage whānau. Methodologies must be culturally appropriate and community-informed.
4. **Cultural competency training:** Equip researchers and policymakers with the tools to understand dual-heritage identities. The Health Research Council’s updated guidelines (2023) emphasise the need for recognising intra and inter-group cultural distinctions and tailoring ethical practice accordingly.

CULTURAL AND POLICY IMPACT

The benefits of responsive data governance extend beyond improved statistics. By acknowledging and respecting Māori-Pacific identities, we validate lived experiences and contribute to cultural wellbeing. Looking forward, the experiences of Māori-Pacific whānau offer valuable insights for navigating increasing cultural complexity in Aotearoa. Upholding the principle articulated by Te Mana Raraunga, that data must serve communities, not extract from them, requires humility, innovation, and unwavering commitment to Indigenous self-determination in an interconnected world (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016).

WHĀNAU REALITIES: INSIGHTS FROM RAISING MĀORI-TONGAN TAMARIKI

To ground these discussions in lived experience, insights from a small qualitative research project that is yet to be published, highlight the cultural and systemic dynamics faced by whānau raising Māori-Tongan children. These families often engage in a careful balancing act of cultural revitalisation and identity formation across multiple spheres of influence.

Findings from that study show that Māori-Tongan tamariki are often, not always, raised with an intentional focus on maintaining strong ties to both cultural lineages. A child might participate in tangihanga processes as well as Tongan putu (funerals), learn both te reo Māori and lea faka Tonga, and navigate whānau gatherings alongside

church based activities and marae hui. The ambition of parents and grandparents is to draw on distinct knowledge systems from both cultures, seeking to transmit these in ways that avoid overshadowing or diminishing either heritage. These efforts support not only a strong sense of cultural identity but also sustained connections with extended whānau and broader kinship networks – and is the aspiration of those interviewed for the study, but not necessarily a reality for many.

GEOGRAPHIC REALITIES AND CULTURAL EXPRESSION

Geography plays a critical role in shaping how Māori and Tongan dual identities are expressed and sustained. In regions with smaller Pacific populations, whānau may have strong Māori networks and access to kaupapa Māori education or marae-based initiatives yet encounter limited opportunities to participate in Tongan cultural events, such as language classes, lotu (church services), or faikava gatherings. For example, some parents shared that they rely on digital platforms or travel long distances to access Tongan language resources or connect their tamariki with cultural mentors. In contrast, areas with larger and more diverse populations often provide greater opportunities for integrated engagement. Parents in these communities described taking their children to both kapa haka and traditional Tongan dance practices, or attending events where Māori cultural activities and Tongan cultural activities are shared in a single space, like birthdays and weddings, reinforcing a strong sense of dual belonging.

However, despite these enriching experiences, whānau consistently noted the challenge of not seeing their realities reflected in national data, research, or policy. For example, some parents expressed frustration that school enrolment or health forms often require them to select only one ethnicity for their children, effectively erasing part of their identity. This administrative invisibility continues to obscure the nuanced experiences of dual-heritage whānau, limiting targeted support and cultural recognition (Butler, 2022; Kukutai & Taylor, 2016).

SOCIETAL PERCEPTIONS AND THE INTERSECTION OF SOVEREIGNTY FRAMEWORKS

Raising dual-identity Māori-Pacific tamariki also involves navigating societal stereotypes and pressures. Misconceptions tied to both Māori and Pacific identities can overlap, resulting in experiences of racism or marginalisation. Some families interviewed in the study report pressure to prioritise one identity in certain contexts or to validate their authenticity through language proficiency or cultural visibility. These challenges reflect broader societal assumptions and underscore the urgent need for data systems that recognise, rather than erase, dual heritage.

The complexities of Māori-Pacific identity also highlight tensions within existing data sovereignty frameworks. Māori data is governed under rangatiratanga, as guaranteed by Te Tiriti o Waitangi. At the same time, Tongan communities have legitimate claims to govern data relevant to their people. However, for Māori-Pacific individuals these frameworks cannot be neatly separated, identity, experience, and cultural obligations are intertwined. Any attempt to default to a single governance model risks sidelining aspects of dual heritage. We argue that moving forward requires the design of integrative frameworks that honour the interconnected sovereignty interests of both Māori and Pacific communities.

By centering the lived realities of Māori-Pacific whānau, particularly those navigating multiple cultural inheritances, we gain a more nuanced understanding of the limitations and possibilities within current data governance. These insights not only deepen our theoretical approaches to Indigenous data sovereignty but also inform more equitable and culturally grounded policies that can adapt to the diverse future landscape of Aotearoa.

CONCLUSION

Data sovereignty in Aotearoa must move beyond siloed approaches if it is to meaningfully serve the communities it seeks to represent. For Māori-Pacific whānau, particularly those raising tamariki with dual whakapapa, identity is not a static category but a lived, relational practice that spans multiple cultural lineages. However, current data systems often reduce these complexities to singular ethnic markers, rendering rich genealogies invisible and limiting the transformative potential of data.

By grounding this discussion in both the conceptual foundations of Indigenous data sovereignty and the lived realities of whānau navigating Māori-Tongan identities as expressed in a qualitative study conducted at Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka, this article highlights the urgent need for governance frameworks that reflect the intertwined nature of identity, culture, and rights. Such frameworks must be co-designed, multi-layered, and rooted in the principles of rangatiratanga and collective wellbeing.

To advance this vision, four strategic insights have emerged:

1. Visibility matters: The increasing presence of Māori-Pacific communities must be met with systems that accurately reflect their identities.
2. Data sovereignty is essential: Māori-Pacific whānau must retain authority over how data about them is governed, interpreted, and used.
3. Collaboration and co-governance: Intersectional identities require governance approaches that honour multiple cultural frameworks.
4. Practical implementation: Systemic shifts must occur across policy, research, and practice to embed cultural responsiveness into everyday data use.

One promising pathway forward lies in governance models that refuse to split whakapapa into neatly bordered categories. Instead of forcing Māori-Pacific whānau to choose which part of themselves counts more, data systems must reflect the full, entangled realities of dual-heritage lives. This will not be easy, it will require resourcing, courage, and a willingness to unsettle the status quo. But the alternative is a continued erasure of complexity in favour of convenience. If data is power, then who gets to decide which identities matter? And as Aotearoa reckons with its past and looks to its whakapapa informed future, the challenge remains: can we build data systems that honour every strand of whakapapa, and in doing so, help shape a nation that truly sees all of its people?

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