

## THE WHOLE IS NOT A SUM OF THE PARTS – THINKING ABOUT AUTHENTICITY

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Cultural Identity. For some this is a non issue, for some a notion of identity in New Zealand has been bandied about for long enough, thank you very much, where is the problem? For some this 'non issue' is resolved. But I would ask this, where do the interests lie for those people? What do they consider their cultural heritage? How can something as subtle and complex as cultural identity be resolved already in such a young nation as ours?

When it comes to identity, and more specifically cultural identity, authenticity is a hotly debated and a highly emotive topic. Who or what is authentic? Who decides? What does one have to do to be considered authentic? And what is the impact on a person's experience of self when their identity and right to it are being judged by another? Is there any other circumstance where an individual's identity is so challenged as it is when it comes to being culturally 'authentic'?

In February 2008 a half day symposium titled *Teutonic Plates: a Collection of Glimpses on Cultural Complexity* was held at the Otago Polytechnic School of Fine Art. During this symposium, I delivered a short paper – "Not a Real Samoan", in which I discussed the issues of growing up in a society where, for me, my cultural identity was judged largely on my appearance. The tongue-in-cheek title came from a conversation with a colleague who deemed me not a real Samoan due to my mannerisms, superficial likes, dislikes and upbringing. Although it was intended to be lighthearted, it did highlight the issues for those of us who feel we must fight for and justify our right to something which is already ours. Often it is those of us who are in-between cultures – belonging to more than one, consolidating contradictions and conflicts, not obviously one or the other – who are most strongly challenged. Perhaps this is because we challenge the boundaries of cultures.

A person of mixed cultural heritage is not considered 100% anything, but, for example, in my case, 50% New Zealand European and 50% Samoan. It could be claimed, and has in the past, that I relate only to 50% of each culture. Now add my upbringing in New Zealand, take away, say, 25% of my 'Samoaness' for that, and suddenly I'm 75% New Zealand/European and 25% Samoan. I'm not sure how this works, but there are many who follow this line of thinking in relation to cultural authenticity.

Certainly I would hope that I identify with more than just 25% of what it is to be Samoan, or, more specifically, what it is to be a New Zealand-born Samoan, and I have definitely never felt less of a New Zealander because of my mixed heritage.

This may seem somewhat trite, but all too often this, or similar attitudes and stereotypes underpin discussions. It is unhelpful and belittles by trying to measure the immeasurable. Such an attitude also ignores the concept of dual ethnicity. Recently a friend signed up to the student job search program at Otago University. When ticking the 'which ethnic group do you belong to' box, she was confronted by the fact that she could only tick one; she was either one, or the other. According to the forms, she could not be both. Cultural identity is not a binary, it cannot be categorised into boxes, nor can the same set of criteria be applied to everyone.

A culture is a living thing, and, like all living things, a culture evolves. Yet the term 'authentic' is almost exclusively applied to non western cultures. It is as if only the west has the right to change and move on; while indigenous cultures – to be able to retain the title of 'authentic' – must stay static. This, by implication, means that they must not engage with the world in a contemporary sense; that they must stay out of the cities, and have to remain aware of the strong dividing line between traditional/authentic and contemporary/not authentic, or fake. This does not allow

for the interaction between contemporary and traditional, nor does it allow those of us with dual ethnicity to speak from a position of coming from more than one location. This also means that indigenous cultures are not allowed the freedom to engage internationally in a contemporary sense.

They, like every other culture on the globe, are subject to change and are changing constantly. I want to emphasise that such a thing as a Stone Age culture (static and unchanging) is a myth created by those who should know better. All societies and cultures change and adapt, and this is fact, not theory.<sup>1</sup>

Those of us residing in a cultural in-between space may not wish to discard one completely for another, and in all likelihood, this is impossible to do. We may be quite comfortable in this in-between space, defining it ourselves. We are looking, observing, and have taken the power to define it for ourselves. We are just waiting for everyone else to evolve and to catch up. We are waiting for them to realise that when it comes to who has the right to what – when it comes to cultural authenticity – we do not need any more uninformed judgements.

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1 Mudrooroo, "White Forms, Aboriginal Content", in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds), *The Post Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995) 228.