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## Kei kōnei Aronui – the collective experiences of MAI ki Aronui, a Māori and Indigenous doctoral scholar support network.

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## **Abstract**

Kei kōnei Aronui (Aronui is here) is the title of a waiata (song), composed by Jani Wilson (former coordinator of MAI ki Aronui), and is sung when welcoming newcomers into our space – declaring our presence and identity. This collective article presents the narratives of nine scholars affiliated with MAI ki Aronui, a Māori and Indigenous doctoral support network – hosted at Te Wānanga Aronui o Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland University of Technology) in Auckland, Aotearoa (New Zealand). Authors were invited to contribute short narratives or illustrative pieces describing their experience of MAI ki Aronui and their PhD or research journey. These contributions likely represent similar sentiments shared by fellow Māori and Indigenous PhDs. They include a range of creative and conventional vignettes illustrating the experience of being an Indigenous scholar in a western academic institution. The educational pathway for Māori and Pasifika, in Aotearoa has several compounding pressures, resulting in these scholars being amongst a small minority in Aotearoa's universities. This collaborative article attempts to present the collective experiences of Māori and Indigenous scholars from elsewhere who found a place of belonging and acceptance, beyond the margins of academia and centred within an Indigenous worldview.

## **Introduction**

MAI Te Kupenga is doctoral support network, established to support Māori and Indigenous scholars on their doctoral pathway. Initiated in the late 1990's by a group led by Distinguished Professors Graham Hingangaroa Smith and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, at the University of Auckland (Pihama et al., 2019), Te Kupenga o MAI is now a national programme consisting of 10 sites across New Zealand universities and polytechnics - funded by Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga (Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, 2024). With the intention of providing culturally appropriate and supportive spaces for the growing number of Māori and Indigenous doctoral students, Te Kupenga o MAI and its individual sites, now caters for students from Te Tai Tokerau (Northland) to Ōtākou (Otago in the South Island) with activities such as wānanga (collaborative

gatherings), writing retreats, workshops, and an annual Hui-ā-tau (conference) that brings together all sites. In the current political climate, where such spaces are being challenged and treated as racial segregation (Parmar, 2024), it is more important than ever to foster these inclusive and culturally relevant environments of learning and networking.

MAI ki Aronui is one such environment, hosted by Te Wānanga Aronui o Tāmaki Makarau – Auckland University of Technology (AUT). Formerly, MAI ki AUT, since 2018 MAI ki Aronui has supported almost 20 Indigenous PhD students through to graduation with many others (Masters and PhDs) continuing to be supported. In 2017, Dr Jani Wilson (now Associate Professor at University of Canterbury) began as Pou Kaiārahi (site coordinator). Under her leadership and intentional desire to foster excellence within the scholars of MAI ki Aronui, the group flourished. Developing the reputation of the MAI site that “brought the I in MAI”, the group enjoyed a diverse membership of Indigenous scholars hailing from Aotearoa and the Pacific, along with Mexico, Colombia, Mangareva, Yemen, and more.

Centring tikanga Māori (protocols and practices) and intentionally practicing whakawhanaungatanga (process of establishing relationships), manaakitanga (hospitality), and kotahitanga (unity), MAI ki Aronui made a home for themselves and welcomed many others through regular, monthly weekend wānanga – at Ngā Wai o Horotiu Marae (AUT). There, they continue to present their works in progress, engage in collegial conversations about Indigeneity, the academe, methodology, whānau (family), and they strengthen their bonds by learning waiata, haka, and mōteatea (songs and cultural performances).

In this collective piece, we offer a creative platform to document and explore our experiences of MAI ki Aronui and the wider MAI network. Each autoethnographic expression is presented in a particular creative form, either related to the author's discipline or to depart from the convention of academic writing, allowing the author to speak freely from their own perspective and in their own words (Chen, 2016). This means of collective writing allows us to present a range of complex issues, where each author can view their experiences as rich stories (Stewart, 2023).

We honour the collective Indigenous tradition of storytelling in this collective piece by melding the conventional processes of data collection and analysis into a more holistic practice of autoethnographic prose, poetry or pictures (Lee, 2009; Stewart, 2021). Our collaboration was inspired by the many conversations that were shared in our wharekai (dining hall), where we spoke of the many trials and tribulations of being a Māori or Indigenous scholar in a western academic institution. We spoke also of the importance of a space like MAI ki Aronui, where we can be unapologetically Indigenous, without the need to explain ourselves. In those wharekai-kōrero (dining hall conversations), contained insights and opportunities for reflection that would contribute immensely to the many doctoral theses to come. The essence of conversations and the voices that contributed to them are presented in this collective piece along with a short biography of each of our MAI ki Aronui authors.

### **Kei kōnei Aronui**

*Jani Wilson – Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Hine, Ngā Puhi, Mataatua, Pou Kaiārahi (coordinator) 2017-2021*

#### *MAI ki Aronui mātou e*

Kei kōnei Aronui  
 Kei kōnei mātou  
 Tukua atu te aroha e  
 Anei ngā tauira  
 Ki te tohu kairangi  
 Karanga atu e ngā iwi e  
*Aronui (men only)*  
 Ngā Wai o Horotiu  
*Aronui (men only)*  
 Te Pūrengi te whare  
 Te Kaipara te whare manaaki  
 Mai te Rangitūhaha  
 Mai te kete a Tāne Mahuta  
 MAI ki Aronui mātou e  
*(After repeating once)*  
 MAI ki Aronui mātou e  
 MAI ki Aronui mātou e----

#### *We are MAI ki Aronui*

Here is Aronui  
 Here is Aronui  
 Sending out our love  
 Here are the students  
 Towards a doctorate  
 Calling out to the peoples  
*Aronui (men only)*  
 Our marae  
*Aronui (men only)*  
 Our meeting house  
 Our dining hall  
 From the heavens  
 From the baskets of knowledge  
 We are MAI ki Aronui  
*(After repeating once)*  
 We are MAI ki Aronui  
 We are MAI ki Aronui

Kei kōnei Aronui  
Hi aue hi!  
Hi aue hā!  
Hi aue hei hā!

Here is Aronui  
Hi aue hi!  
Hi aue hā!  
Hi aue hei hā!

## **Using curiosity to conquer mountains for the collective**

*Cecelia Faumuina – Samoan/Tongan, 2023 PhD graduate.*

I had always been a curious child. One day when it must have got a bit much for my father; he blurted, “sshhhh! You’re asking too many questions; don’t you know that curiosity killed the cat?” in reply to his question I asked, ... “but dad, don’t you know, cats have nine lives right?”

It was curiosity now as an adult student, that led me to MAI ki Aronui. I became interested in an online invitation I received, encouraging Postgraduate Māori and Indigenous students to come along to monthly weekend sessions. My inquisitive spirit took control and I decided to venture into one of the meetings to see what it was all about. I do not regret my decision to show up to my first ever MAI ki Aronui wānanga.

For my study, I was researching an Oceanic concept, ‘asi – an unseen energy or presence that exists when people create, collaborate and perform faiva – creative performance which includes poetry, sound and movement. I was using a methodology based on the creation process of ngatu – patterned bark cloth. As an Indigenous, artistically-oriented approach, the ngatu (bark cloth) inspired methodology was designed to resource and reflect upon collective, Oceanic, artistic expression (Faumuina, 2022).

Joining MAI ki Aronui helped me address the sense of isolation of formulating a relatively new methodological framework, I had joined reading groups and attended workshops in the wider university, where discussion about research progress was encouraged. However, often these did not work well, because they emanated from assumptions about the nature of research (as something primarily concerned with data gathering and analysis). Given its distinctively artistic Oceanic paradigm, I was

seeking informed feedback that might provoke judicious rethinking and experimentation inside a very specific kind of research.

Within Mai Ki Aronui, I was able to share my thinking and progress each month, while feeling supported and accepted in the process. Many of the people in this group were also undertaking artistically-oriented research projects, so issues like balancing poetic and objective concerns were familiar to them. In addition, because all members of the group were either Māori or Indigenous to elsewhere, I was able to discuss the concepts I was exploring with researchers whose studies emanated from similar world views. In our monthly meetings, it was normal to eat, noho marae, wash dishes, learn to kapa haka, perform, laugh and cry together.



Figure 1 The MAI Ki Aronui group with whom I met each month to share progress and discuss issues relating to Māori and Oceanic – based research (2019). ©. Cecelia Faumuina).

At one symposium we attended together (Figure 1), we were able to perform a haka we had spent months learning at our weekend wananga so we could tautoko (support) members of our rōpū (group) who had graduated. All the concepts I was in university to research for my own study, were present in that one united act. 'Asi – the presence of the unseen became manifest as we came together to support our

fellow members through faiva, in this case haka. The feeling of mafana (warmth) and malie (joy) that could be felt was electric. Together through performance we were united and strong, working to empower Indigenous thought, knowledge and ways of being as accepted ways to navigate academic and societal spaces (Smith, 2014, October 22).

Joining MAI ki Aronui and being part of the greater Te Kupenga o MAI scholar network grounded me and my research in an academic world where initially, I felt I did not belong. Now, I know and truly believe everyone's voice is important no matter how small and insignificant you may feel you are in the world. Be brave, be curious and seek out your tribe that will be walk together with you on your journey - for as each member conquers their own mountain, collectively we all win.

### **The I in MAI: A journey of healing and belonging**

*Diana Albarrán González – Nahua/P'urhépecha mestiza, 2020 Graduate*

It is challenging to write about MAI ki Aronui, the nourishing space supported by Te Kupenga o MAI for Māori and Indigenous scholars since words cut short what is felt with the heart.

I was starting my PhD journey on decolonising artisanal design alongside Mayan weavers from Chiapas, Mexico, my place of birth, when I met Atakohu during our PhD induction. We had a deep and heartfelt conversation about Indigenous ancestry, which is uncommon for me in a first-time connection. After some time, she invited me to join the recently revamped version of MAI, this time coordinated by Dr Jani Wilson (who later became my supervisor, mentor and role model). While I was attracted to the idea, the imposter syndrome I felt from the mestiza identity I grew up with, as a person of mixed Indigenous and Spanish ancestry, was too hard to confront.

Listening to the voice in my heart provided the courage I needed to get out of my comfort zone and attend a session. There were so many things that not only made me stay that day but actively attend MAI wānanga over the years.

For example, I still remember how amazed I was after hearing Sierra's presentation

using Pacific frameworks like the Fono Fale model of health. Could we do this on our PhD? Indigenous knowledge to guide our research? I was deeply inspired.

Another important part of why MAI was pivotal in my PhD journey was that I felt 'at home'. While MAI ki Aronui kaupapa (philosophy) is centred around tikanga Māori, there was a strange familiarity from my background that made me feel at home: warm, loud, and huggy people like me, food and laughter. Until that point, I had not experienced an academic space like this when academia in a settler-colonial nation like Aotearoa New Zealand is predominantly a 'white space'. There, I did not have to code-switch but I could be truly myself and speak my truth.

Nevertheless, there was something unexpected and invaluable that MAI ki Aronui gifted to me: the healing journey of the colonial wound in myself and my family. I explained many times the impacts of colonisation in my country, Mexico, the mestizo identity we were imposed, and the reasons why I still struggled with my identity and presence in Indigenous spaces. They listened patiently every time, encouraged me to reconnect and reclaim my Indigenous roots, but most importantly they accepted me beyond colonial narratives. They told me: "you bring the I in MAI, you belong here", their acceptance of me helped me to accept myself. That gave me the courage to look back at my land and my people with a different gaze, and using pepeha as an inspiration, I reconnected with my maunga, my awa, my whānau. I still remember the first time I could name the Indigenous groups I whakapapa to, Nahua from my mother's side and P'urhépecha from my father's side, I cried the tears of my unnamed ancestors.

These experiences and the ones lived with *mis compañeras* (my friends), the Mayan women I was doing the research in *colectividad* (collective) (Albarrán González, 2020), had a life-long impact on me as a person and as an academic. I learned that manaaki, mutual support, reciprocity, and letting the heart be the guide are fundamental to allowing the seeds of knowledge to germinate, grow, and flourish in the safe-guarded walls of conventional academia. Even in the cracks of concrete walls, life flourishes.

I will always be grateful to my MAI whānau, and as a way to pay forward, I want to



finish hoping to plant a seed of inspiration in your hearts through the Mexican proverb I used for opening my PhD thesis: “*Quisieron enterrarnos pero no sabían éramos semillas*” (They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we were seeds).



Figure 2 Connecting the hearts of MAI ki Aronui. The photoembroidery I made for our MAI coordinator and my PhD supervisor Jani Wilson.

### **The Torch with No Batteries.**

*Zena Elliot – Ngāi Te Rangi, Ngāti Rangitihī, Ngāti Awa, current PhD student.*

I loved to dream; I would dream during conversations with whanau and friends. Some people would make assumptions, think I was rude, and don’t listen. If only they knew what I see and how my imagination creates images of their discussions. Through words, I came across as slow and would respond way off track; I couldn’t help it if the words that flowed from my mouth were too far behind my thinking and imagination. I would talk, throwing my arms in different directions as if I were physically expressing my thoughts, opinions, and ideas through movement. Most often, I can’t be bothered with small talk and prefer to talk about exciting subjects that interest me. I could understand information much better through visualisation

and creative expression. Words alone cannot describe what I see, feel, and express.

I was left behind at five to wander and roam the educational landscape. I think and see in metaphors; many brick walls block my view and understanding. I was fed old and stale food for my young mind. I found a torch with no batteries; I had to visualise my path and follow it with courage and determination. The torch had an imaginary light beam, and sometimes, I played in the shadows along the way. I soon realised that I had created my path. It was thin and narrow at various points, plummeting downhill and accelerating. The bends and side paths were the most interesting as the torch struggled to create a light down them. I continued to follow the path that I could see. However, I often came across a gatekeeper blocking my way. They had hairy chins and smelly breath, preaching words of entitlement. These gatekeepers would whisper in the ears of others, and a powerful gush of wind would throw me off my feet. I often struggled to get back and stand on my own two feet. I would approach the gatekeeper again and ask them why they would knock me down when I only asked to pass through your gate. They would laugh and make insulting comments that hurt. I carried the hurt in my coat pocket for two years, and I would ask them to let me pass to reach my destiny. Unfortunately, I couldn't get through because I could not march in a straight line like others before me. That was okay because I remembered that there was a side path, but my torch could not work. I backtracked, which set me back in time. There's the path, and I decided to take it even though my torch had no batteries.

As I walked, I could feel a familiar breeze and warmth surrounding me. In a far-off distance, I could also see a flickering light on the ground, and as I got closer, my surroundings lit up with luminous light; they were glow worms. I stopped to stare and admire them; I felt like I was in another world where time, place, and space merged. Below the wall of glow worms was a muddy ditch where the water and plant life had broken down artificial materials that harmed fragile plant life and water systems. The magical thing is that the natural environment transformed these harmful materials into positive substances that helped the natural environment flourish. I reached into my pocket, took hold of the hurt and pain I carried, and threw it into the ditch; I watched as I saw vines and plants transform the wound into beautiful flowers. I

picked one, put it into my pocket, and continued my journey. As I approached a well-developed roading system, I could hear waiata in the distance and see a waharoa at the top of a hill. I no longer needed to use my torch like the people who welcomed me into the marae. They had a custom-designed light to support people like me.

### **A chance conversation**

*Tammi Wilson Uluinayau – Te Rarawa, Ngāi Tahu, current PhD student.*

I pushed,  
    I laboured,  
        I toiled,  
            I tried,  
                I struggled ...  
                    in isolation.

These are reflections of my earlier postgraduate journey, my ‘pre-MAI Ki Aronui’ experience, if you will. The doubts, the second guesses, the anguish, the imposter syndrome. What was I thinking? The solitary journey that was my experience was not working. I needed to remedy the situation, and fast.

*A chance conversation, “Do you want to come to our next Māori and Indigenous Postgraduate Wānanga at the marae? You get a mean kai, too”.*

Soul food ... in more ways than ever imagined.

I turned up. They all seemed to know each other, there was laughter, there was joviality, there was assuredness, there was confidence. I wanted in, but I didn’t quite

fit yet. I was one of them, but not even. They were learning as a collective, I was self-directed. Was this going to work for me?

I questioned,

I wondered,

I thought,

I grabbed a tea towel,

I made it so.

Each time it got easier; I embraced the collective solitude. I persevered with my mahi, but we ate together. Whanaungatanga. Connections. Shared whakapapa, shared experiences, shared understandings, shared aspirations.

These are reflections of my Postgraduate journey to date. My 'MAI Ki Aronui' experience. The doubts, the second guesses, the anguish, the imposter syndrome. What am I thinking? They remain, but more contained, more in the background, more on the periphery, more in the margins. The solitary journey is shared, my experience was enhanced, and this is working for me. I remedied the situation.

A chance conversation, *"Do you want to share your experience of MAI Ki Aronui?"*

Manaakitanga ... in every possible way imagined.

I grew,

I unfurled,

I thrived,

I soared,

I succeeded ...

(with)in a whānau.

## **Indigenous knowledge entwine**

*Haidee Rēnata – Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Kahu, Pākehā, current Masters' student.*

Journeying to MAI, a beckoning call,

Haere mai, the echoes call.

A tapestry woven with diversity and trust,

Joining MAI is simply, a must.

No barrier or fuss, no need to discuss,

It feels like home, easy to adjust.

Bring your true self, no need to pretend.

Come and go when you need,

no need to defend.

Aē bring your tamariki, let them explore,

Have you got mokopuna? Free them to soar.

Collectively we combine,

Indigenous hearts, minds,

and knowledge entwine.

Graham Hingangaroa and Linda Tuhiwai Smith,

wisdom so profound, you get the drift.

A transformative space,

Where intellects bloom,

Not judged by race,

Emerging scholars' boom.

A movement centred on collective pride.

A wave of transformative praxis,

Can no longer hide.  
My tupuna whispers, “PhD”,  
Or was that just my ADHD?  
But kaupapa Māori is running through my veins,  
Harnessing the power of my Indigenous reign.  
No doubt in my mind,  
My future is clear,  
A Māori, activist,  
Scholar is near.

### **The value of finding your PhD tribe**

*Atakohu Middleton – Ngāti Māhanga, Pākehā, 2020 graduate.*

As I write this, in late November 2023, my PhD journey has come full circle. I have just opened a package from Wellington-based Indigenous publishing house Huia containing the advance copy of the book that arose out of my 2020 thesis (Middleton, 2020). The thesis is titled *Kia hiwa rā! The influence of tikanga and the language revitalisation agenda on the practices and perspectives of Māori journalists working in reo-Māori news*.

If you had told me 10 years ago that I would have a PhD and a book to my name by 2023, I would have laughed heartily and said, “He aha hoki, egg!” (Doubt it!)

MAI ki Aronui has been a critical part of the journey. Some background: Over the past 15 years, my primary focus has been to steadily improve my reo, and in my mid-40s, I did some reo papers at Te Ara Poutama at AUT. I then embarked on a Postgraduate Diploma in Arts in te reo Māori, which is essentially the first year of a master’s programme. I had no intention of going on to do a masters – except the qualification required a master’s proposal. I did one as an exercise, not intending to take it any further, then several people got in my taringa. I enrolled in a

master's programme in 2016 and by the end of the year had been transferred to the PhD programme under supervisors Helen Sisson and Hinematau McNeill.

At that point MAI at AUT had been in abeyance for some years. When not on fieldwork, I was at home on my own, writing; I worked part-time in my own business as a communications consultant, so I wasn't meeting many other Māori doctoral students. I was often isolated physically and socially. I completely understood Massey researcher Marion Lara Tan when she summed up her experience of PhD isolation on a blog called The Scholar's Lounge: "Often I experience isolation in two forms: Perceived isolation, feeling that no one else understands what I am going through and actual isolation, distancing myself from peers or supervisors. These two forms of isolation develop into a vicious cycle" (Tan, 2017).

Marion broke this loop through finding a peer network of other PhD students. In early 2018, when MAI was revived at AUT by then Te Ara Poutama lecturer Dr Jani Wilson, it became my PhD tribe. MAI gave me a safe space to be my authentic Māori self, and in its embrace, I made firm friends, tested out presentations, sought feedback and built my confidence. Meikore ake a MAI ki Aronui! (We are so fortunate to have MAI ki Aronui!)

### **Embracing the odd-one-out: A Non-Indigenous Scholar's journey in Mai Ki Aronui**

*Chien Ju Ting (Turtle) – Taiwanese, 2021 graduate.*

When Deb asked me to jot down my MAI journey for a collaborative piece, I immediately said 'yes'. During my PhD, MAI always made me feel that I was doing something important, that my research meant something to someone. MAI was my happy place, and still is. As I pen down my thoughts for this collective manuscript, I embark on a reflective journey shaped by the collective energy of MAI-Ki-Aronui, an experience both stimulating and reassuring, particularly as a non-Indigenous scholar navigating the currents of Indigenous language revitalisation. While this experience posed challenges, it wove tales of friendships and learning.

This is how it all started. In 2017, my PhD on Indigenous language revitalisation in Taiwan (Ting, 2021) planted the seed of this destined friendship. Before joining MAI, I met Diana at an workshop on Indigenous research. Later, in 2018, I met Atakohu at the Postgraduate mix & mingle. It felt like fate. Atakohu, with determination, said, “Those of us working on Indigenous language revitalisation should stick together; you should join MAI.” She invited me to MAI to kōrero about my study. I admit, at that time, I was a little apprehensive, I didn’t know what MAI was. Despite my nerves, I accepted the offer and stepped into the marae a few weeks later. The rest is history.

Initially uncertain, I found a balance in the delicate dance between respecting cultural nuances and offering my view as non-Indigenous. Being a non-Indigenous person in an Indigenous space demanded sensitivity and humility. Despite being an outsider, MAI embraced me, acknowledging my endeavour and giving me the support I needed to soldier on in my PhD journey. In turn, I felt a sense of responsibility in contributing to MAI and its 16aupapa, paying it forward. The unscripted nature of this engagement became a source of growth and a space for reflection. Kaupapa that require a critical eye to unpack the often taken-for-granted positions are always up for discussion. The offering of support and the learning simultaneously became a defining feature of the relationship I have with MAI.

For me, if I had to pick just one word to describe MAI, it would be manaakitanga, because MAI has truly lifted my mana as a student, a researcher, and a person. It has made me reflect on my own colonial mentality and biases, both within myself and in the context of my background, all while fostering a positive sense of myself. Undoubtedly, it is one of the most incredible things to witness and experience. Hence, I felt it is inadequate to simply describe MAI as a PhD group for Māori and Indigenous students. It is so much more; it’s a philosophy and a way of living and doing.

All in all, it’s not easy to describe MAI because you’ve got to experience it. It has given me a deeper perspective about research and about relationships. It was wonderful to have found my PhD tribe during and beyond my PhD journey. As Deb weaves this story into the rich tapestry of our collective manuscript, I can hear



people asking in their minds, 'Who is this Taiwanese person?' I am Turtle, and I am not Indigenous. Drawing on my academic background in language and culture, I hold a deep appreciation for the Inherent kaupapa of MAI and have come together to celebrate the convergence of diverse voices in the pursuit of revitalising Indigenous knowledges and worldview. I am on this journey with my MAI whānau. I am honoured to be given this opportunity to walk alongside people who have a strong sense of identity and stories to tell in a variety of ways.

I give special thanks to Jani, Deb, and Zak. Jani, your mentorship and leadership are outstanding. Deb and Zak, thank you for continuing to support MAI. I don't mean to be overly sentimental about it, but MAI did play a massive role in my overall PhD experience.

### **Brown Magic**

*Deborah Heke – Ngā Puhi, Te Arawa, 2022 PhD graduate.*

Bound in leather

Approaching, silently cautious

A self-imposed sense of safety – shhhh

Don't say too much

Like the motorcycle helmet tucked under my arm

Keeps me safe

But hides who I am

And conveys a false sense of bravado

I find my seat and lay my helmet at the back of the room

I am seen

I've arrived at MAI, now what?

Whakawhanaungatanga?

Do I *have* to speak too?

Anxious anticipation arises

It's almost my turn

My fearful tongue has been ever-held encircled in my own thoughts

An affliction I've endured since the creation of sacred circles

I know this paralysis too well

But still, I stand, and I speak

Pepeha trembles

and trickles out, like a spluttering tap

that hasn't been allowed to flow

freely

or frequently enough

I dip my toes in the waters of Aronui

It *seems* safe here

It *is* warm

It feels like nanny's woollen blanket...

Familiar

It feels like being hugged by a stranger who seems to know you...

Foreign

***What is this brown magic?***

Still, I continue to cling to my quiet caution

It's not warm but it is familiar

Still, hidden

I'll stay here for a while

I'm drawn back to the waters of Aronui

First a toe, then ankles, then knees

The warmth rises

Is it MAI or my own warmth within?

Thighs, hips, puku...heart

Can I keep coming back to these familiar waters?

Just to play in the shallows

I'm quite good at that

Staying, unseen, unheard

I find out, the answer is a resounding: "no"

We are encouraged to embrace our discomfort

To step out, into ourselves

To dive in, head and heart and whakapapa first

To speak!

...Um, this is an introvert's worst nightmare, you know?!

Still, I keep coming back

To stand

To speak

Oh, to sing?!!

Still, fear enters my body

As the circle of whakawhanaungatanga tightens and then unravels from around my tongue

That familiar foe, that anxious anticipation

***But still, what is this brown magic?***

With every visit from that familiar foe, that tap starts to splutter less,

it starts to *flow*,

At times, it even feels natural

I'll stay here for a while

....Many whiles later

I find solace and warmth where I was once filled with that old familiar foe, fear

I find friendships with and where people welcome you like you've always belonged

I find my Indigenous mind in a place where people speak from their Indigenous hearts

I find selfless service in a place that demanded reciprocity in the gentlest of ways

Manaakitanga

and a mop

I find my voice where I heard it in the mouths of others

I find confidence where I least expected it, in MAI and in myself

I find my Indigenous, academic, growing self in a place where Indigenous academics grow

I find my own, brown magic.

Where once I hid in the background, hoping not to be seen

- spluttering words that I was uncomfortable saying

I now stand-up-front, unable and now unwilling to hide

- confidently leading with *my* Indigenous mind and voice

Emboldened by the words written across my heart:

**I AM MAI**



Figure 3 MAI ki Aronui performing their haka at Ngā Wai o Horotiu marae.

## The Evolution of MAI ki Aronui

*Zak Waipara - Ngāti Porou, Rongowhakaata, Ngāti Ruapani, Ngāti Kahungunu, 2022 graduate.*

# THE EVOLUTION OF MAI

KI ARONUI

## OR HOW TO LOGO DESIGN INDIGENOUS STYLE

by Zak Waipara

THE MAI ROPU AT AUT HAD LAIN DORMANT FOR SOME TIME BEFORE JANI WILSON WAS CHARGED WITH RESTARTING IT.



JANI WILSON



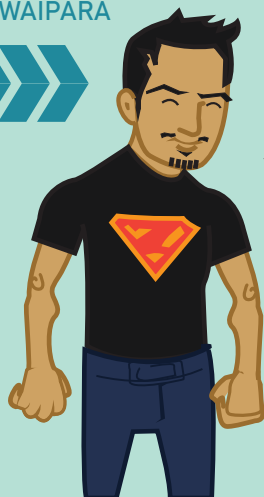
My main objective was to reclaim MAI at AUT as a dynamic, supportive, unapologetically kaupapa Māori environment, where candidates from all disciplines and all Indigenous backgrounds would be welcome and benefit from whakawhanaungatanga, kotahitanga.

BUT RECLAMATION REQUIRED...

"renaming and rebranding. The name of our rūpū became MAI-ki-Aronui and although conducted at AUT, we invite PhD (and potential PhD) students from all over Tāmaki..."



ZAK WAIPARA



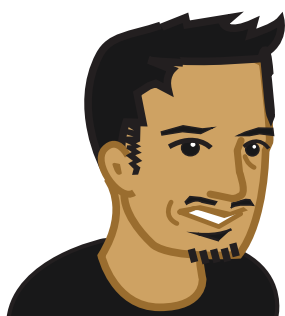
This was where I could offer some assistance. While Jani composed an anthem/waiata-ā-ringā, Kei Konei Aronui, I set to work on designing a logo from whakaaro developed from the kaupapa presented by Jani, including the rich diversity of our member group.

JANI WILSON:

"The overarching concept of the logo design is that whatever colour/ethnicity, we are woven together by this doctoral journey..."



...and teal represents Ngā Wai o Horotiu, the stream that flows under our City campus marae."



The weaving image came from a bookmark my daughter made at school,



and the rich blue tones from watercolour swatches I painted.



The central diamond was the kete Aronui from which AUT derives its Maori name – Te Whare Wananga o Aronui.



LOGO 1

MAI  KI ARONUI



"MAI-ki-Aronui have grown in unity, primarily because one of our central principles is that MAI-ki-Aronui are 'all in'. When a member is presenting at the University, those who are free support wear our t-shirts, and do waiata tautoko... having a banner was an intrinsic part of the rebuild, and it appears on all of our hui screensavers, and was unveiled on our t-shirts at the MAI Ora Conference we hosted, 2018.

MAI CONTINUED TO EVOLVE, SO TOO DID AN OPPORTUNITY ARISE TO DEVELOP THE LOGO ANEW.



By this stage I was deep in my PhD research, so the richness of pūrākau was at the forefront of my mind.

Te Kete Aronui, one basket containing "knowledge of aroha, peace and the arts and crafts which benefit the Earth and all living things - one of the three baskets of knowledge. This basket relates to knowledge acquired through careful observation of the environment. It is also the basket of ritual, of literature, philosophy and is sometimes regarded as the basket of the humanities."



This kete was said to be located in the tenth heaven home of Rehua, an atua.

Rehua, untouched by death, has the power to cure blindness, revive the dead, and heal any disease.

(Orbell 1998:119-120)

Rehua is also the name of the star Antares.



Rehua was the parent of the giant eagle Te Hokioi, who was the progenitor of kites.

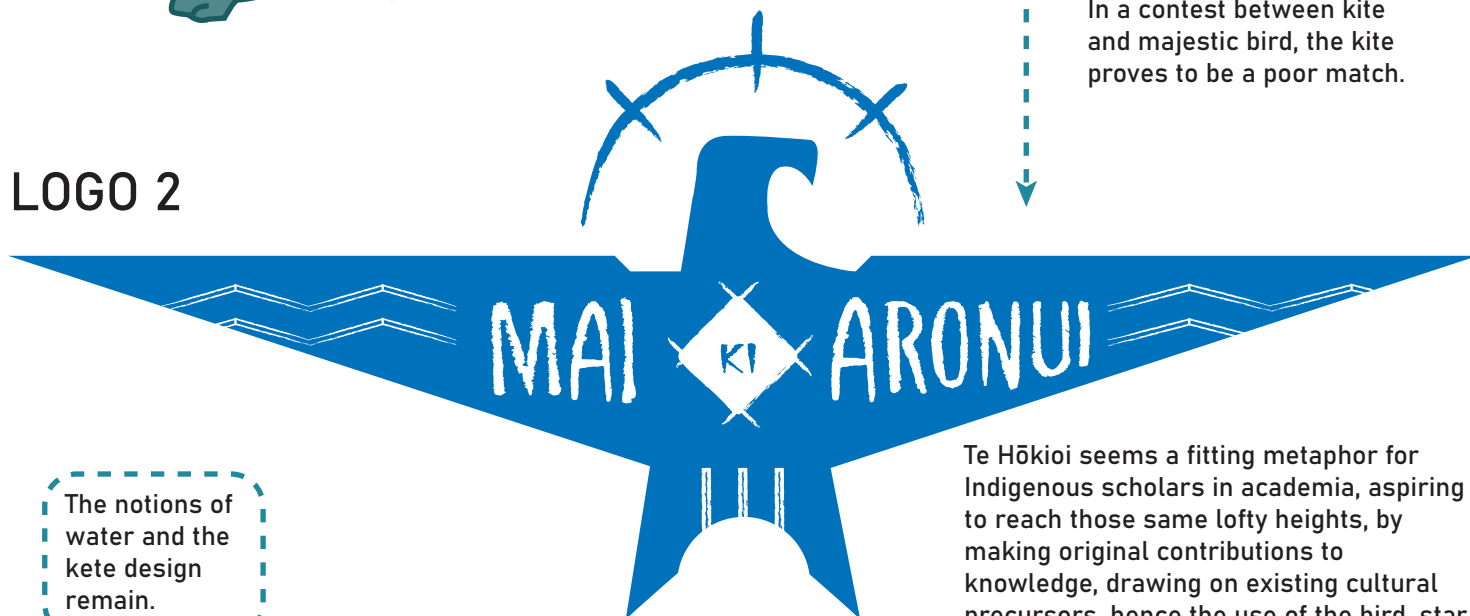


In a Ngāti Porou account Tāwhaki was turned back by Te Hākuwai (Te Hōkioi) after attempting to gain access to the heavens by means of a kite.



In a contest between kite and majestic bird, the kite proves to be a poor match.

## LOGO 2



The notions of water and the kete design remain.

Te Hōkioi seems a fitting metaphor for Indigenous scholars in academia, aspiring to reach those same lofty heights, by making original contributions to knowledge, drawing on existing cultural precursors, hence the use of the bird, star and kite motif combined into one symbol.



# CONTINUED

JANI WILSON LEFT AUT & MAI TO PURSUE NEW ACADEMIC OPPORTUNITIES. DEB HEKE & ZAK WAIPARA WERE APPOINTED CO-COORDINATORS



DEB HEKE



FROM DEB'S THESIS SHE DREW ON A METHODOLOGY ILLUSTRATION FOR THE NEXT ITERATION OF THE MAI DESIGN:

"The triangular shape was inspired by a contemporary representation of the whale tangata... Within its construction is the inherent dimension of seeking knowledge, especially as it pertains to humanity, wāhine, and ways of being... within Te Kupenga o te Kaupapa retains a space for storing and displaying the knowledge it gathers. This is illustrated as a triangular space at the centre representing Aronui, an acknowledgement of the third basket of knowledge retrieved by Tāne."



ENA, OUR MANGAREVAN COLLEAGUE CONTRIBUTED THE CONCEPT FOR THE NEXT ITERATION, USING A PLAY ON WORDS.

ENA MANUIREVA



So despite some minor dissenting voices questioning the point (mainly cost) of T-shirts, a small expenditure in the scheme of things, whose reward cannot be counted in these limited purely monetary terms... the efficacy of the exercise has proven itself, and borne fruit, as each rūpu in Te Kupenga o Mai undertakes their own branding for similar outcomes.

NOTE: Any resemblance between Sam the Eagle and the MAI ki Aronui blue manu symbol is entirely coincidental!



"This would not be the first time I would be called upon to volunteer design services for MAI."

"At one stage we had to fundraise our way to conference, and our colleague ALAYNE HALL requiring a logo design and a waiata oriori for a research project she was involved in, kindly assisted MAI in this venture."

## VERSION 1



## VERSION 2



I continue to draw inspiration from my father who was a talented artist and an excellent logo designer and volunteered and contributed his skills often to the many communities he was part of, including for his iwi and his whānau, whenever he was asked.

Tōu Manawa, Tōku Manawa



MANAWA - OTE - RANGI  
WAIPARA



## Conclusion

Through collective writing and illustration, we have provided a platform to share the depth of the experiences of Māori and other Indigenous scholars. Most of our authors extol the benefits they experienced as active members of MAI ki Aronui, where their Indigeneity and their ways of being, were normalised, celebrated, and shared. The powerful narratives presented, demonstrate the difficulties faced by Indigenous scholars in the academy – both in bringing their true and genuine selves to their research and having the conviction to embrace and be embraced by a place that fosters their Indigenous identity.

This article has provided a window into the diverse but overlapping experience of MAI ki Aronui whānau, who likely represent many other students from across the 9 other MAI sites in Aotearoa. It demonstrates the collective power of whakawhanaungatanga and manaakitanga in the pursuit of excellence. It reveals the challenges we face as contemporary Indigenous folk, who crave community but still question our place in it. It shows us that a sense of belonging has the power to show us who we are and what we are capable of – being our true, genuine, and unapologetic self. It may encourage others to take that first scary step into a room of strangers and potential life-long friends. And in many ways, many of us describe an unseen but powerful force that draws us together, draws us apart, and that we can draw strength from.

We felt it important to document the experiences of Māori, Pacific, and Indigenous scholars as a contribution to works seeking to counter dominant assumptions and systems of whiteness or western academia (Stewart et al., 2023). Especially in the current political climate in Aotearoa NZ that seemingly disregards the significance of our Indigenous experience and spaces (Dunphy, 2024; Parmar, 2024). Like Te Kupenga o MAI, our work seeks to provide and amplify spaces where Māori and Indigenous ontology, epistemology, and pedagogy prevail, and the assumption of conventional research paradigms are challenged (Pihama et al., 2019).

The work that was started with Graham Hingangaroa Smith and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, daring to dream of 500 Māori PhDs, continues with the network and sites that have benefited from that dream. The increasing number of Māori and Indigenous doctoral students is an immense achievement but one that brings increasing

challenges. How do future scholars satisfy the requirements of doctoral study while balancing the demands of their culture and with a hesitancy to sacrifice either? Who is supporting these scholars to embrace their culture, identity, and ideologies in their respective research spaces? How do we sustain the successes of the few to inspire the ambitions of those to come? MAI ki Aronui and the wider MAI network have taken on that wero (challenge), we encourage further thought and action to ensure that scholars such as the authors of this article and the wider communities they represent, do not need to grapple with their worth and identity in order to don the floppy hat.

## Glossary

### Māori

|                          |                                                                      |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Āe                       | Yes                                                                  |
| Aotearoa                 | New Zealand                                                          |
| Haka                     | Cultural posture dance, performance                                  |
| Hui-ā-tau                | Annual gathering (conference)                                        |
| Kai                      | Food                                                                 |
| Kapa haka                | Cultural performance                                                 |
| Kaupapa                  | Philosophy, purpose                                                  |
| Kōrero                   | Conversation                                                         |
| Kotahitanga              | Unity                                                                |
| MAI (Te Kupenga o MAI)   | Acronym for Māori and Indigenous (research scholar network)          |
| Mana                     | Prestige, authority, power                                           |
| Manaakitanga             | Hospitality                                                          |
| Marae                    | Cultural meeting space                                               |
| Mōteatea                 | Traditional chant, lament                                            |
| Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga | New Zealand's only Indigenous Centre for Research Excellence         |
| Ngā Wai o Horotiu        | The waters of Horotiu                                                |
| Ngatu                    | Beaten, decorated bark cloth                                         |
| Noho                     | Sit, stay (noho marae – to stay at a cultural meeting house)         |
| Ōtākou                   | Otago (southern city of South Island of New Zealand)                 |
| Pepeha                   | Ancestral saying, usually depicting connections to place and peoples |
| Pou Kaiārahi             | Site coordinator                                                     |
| Puku                     | Stomach                                                              |
| Rōpū                     | Group                                                                |
| Tamariki                 | Children                                                             |
| Taringa                  | Ears                                                                 |
| Tautoko                  | Support                                                              |

|                     |                                                   |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Te Ara Poutama      | Department of Māori and Indigenous Studies at AUT |
| Te Reo              | Language (referring to Māori language)            |
| Te Tai Tokerau      | Northland (of the North Island of New Zealand)    |
| Tikanga             | Cultural protocols, practices                     |
| Tūpuna              | Ancestors                                         |
| Waharoa             | Entrance, gateway                                 |
| Waiata              | Song                                              |
| Wānanga             | A collective space for knowledge sharing          |
| Whakawhanaungatanga | Process of establishing relationships             |
| Whānau              | Family, extended family                           |
| Wharekai            | Dining hall                                       |

### **Sāmoan**

|           |                                                    |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------------|
| ‘Asi      | An unseen energy, presence                         |
| Fono Fale | Sāmoan model of health representing a fale (house) |
| Mafana    | Warmth                                             |
| Malie     | Joy                                                |

### **Tongan**

|       |                      |
|-------|----------------------|
| Faiva | Creative performance |
|-------|----------------------|

### **Spanish**

|                |                         |
|----------------|-------------------------|
| Colectividad   | Collective              |
| Mestiza        | Woman of mixed heritage |
| Mis compañeras | My friends              |

## Acknowledgement statement

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