

Are Palestinian people tangata whenua?

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Tangata whenua is a peculiarly Aotearoa New Zealand term used by Māori to self-describe and by non-Māori to describe those whom they believe to be indigenous to the land. This understanding is based on deep relationship with the land through one's own birth and the births of ancestors. Many Palestinian people similarly have deep relationships with the land of Palestine without anything like the citizenship or tangata whenua rights of Māori. Something is not right? It is surely a matter of justice requiring critical attention. This lecture presented by Dr Jenny Te Paa-Daniel explores the dilemma and proffers a possible solution.

Thank you for coming today – I am hoping this might be more of a mutually respectful conversational experience because I come to you as one ever hopeful that someday preferably in my lifetime, all and not just some of the world's peoples will know the sweet, sweet experience of living peacefully with justice – the visceral experience I know without doubt all human beings both yearn for and so deserve . . .

I have lived now long enough and have experienced global human realities enough to know this utopia of which I speak is not within reach for too many in the world today and usually always this is so through no fault of their own.

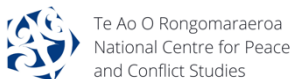
I know enough of the history of my own people to know why and how we as indigenous people have suffered down through the centuries. This is what motivated me to study race politics because I wanted to understand how best to name and where possible to redeem the enduring effects of deep spiritual and political violence so often at the heart of humanly inspired injustice.

I know enough of the history of religious movements especially Christianity in the world and of how it has been complicit in so many of the indigenous struggles especially those post-colonial. This is what motivated me to study theology because I wanted to understand how best to name and to redeem the enduring effects of deep spiritual and political violence so often at the heart of unconscionable religiously inspired injustice.

I was raised in a bicultural, bilingual whanau where all of the tensions inherent in having a staunchly royalist Pakeha father and a staunchly activist Māori mother were daily played out! Fortunately for me both my parents while fierce and often unyielding in their respective beliefs, were always decent with each other and so what my siblings and I witnessed in our parents frequent debates over their 'differences' was respect and often barely reasoned determination to hold to their own! Yes, there were periods of agonizing silence and great heaving sighs of exasperation and the occasional walkouts but inevitably too their love for one another and for my siblings and for me proved the clincher and so they would either agree to disagree or they would agree to set aside the principle for another day rather than insist upon immediate personal victory at any cost.

Their loving example of transcendent human decency surpassing often intractable personal and political difference has always been one I have endeavoured to live by.

This speaker series is a credit to its initiator Professor Katerina Standish, a much admired and respected colleague and friend. When Katerina asked me for a topic I guess my



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first reaction was to model what I firmly believe in and that is to always resist being type-cast, to being constrained by the expectation of single identity politics – sure this a tangata whenua series and sure I fit the bill but would it be ok if I spoke of things somewhat outside of the geo-political context of Aotearoa? Things about which this indigenous woman is now deeply troubled, things about which this indigenous woman now considers demand urgent pre-emptive scholarly attention. Fortunately for me and hopefully therefore for you – she said just go ahead!

As I have already intimated I have been blessed through the circumstances of my birth, through the exemplary courage and dignity of my activist tupuna, through their legacy of both determination to overcome colonial cruelty and deception, through their extraordinary political savvy, through their successes and their failures I in my turn am now also tangata whenua – a child of this land Aotearoa –proudly and confidently an indigenous tangata with deep roots planted centuries ago in the whenua of Te Tai Tokerau.

As a child I learned:

Ko Whangatauatia te Maunga
Ko Karirikura te Moana
Ko Te Ohaki te Whare Tupuna
Ko Te Rarawa te Iwi.

Here is the land, the mountain, the ocean, the people to whom I belong, to whom I am inextricably connected and therefore to whom I remain indebted.

Tangata whenua is a peculiarly Aotearoa New Zealand term used by Māori to self-describe and by non-Māori to describe those whom they believe to be indigenous to the land. This understanding is based on deep relationship with the land through one's own birth and through the births of ancestors down through the generations.

Not only do the words convey in a literal sense one's belonging to the land i.e. tangata = person, whenua = Land but these words are also in a far more enduring sense, deeply prescriptive. I am referring here to the traditional practice still adhered to among Māori whanau – a practice which irrevocably enacts what being tangata whenua actually is.

Whenua is also the Māori word for placenta...thus usually soon after birth the whenua is literally ceremonially embedded in the land by way of marking ones place of belonging forever – irrespective of where in life one journeys to there is always the small piece of tribal land to which one will always belong, land that remains as place of standing, of being connected to and thru that land to all others similarly connected – tangata whenua is thus both a powerfully integrated relationship as well as a reciprocal one – in this respect it is one powerfully evocative of the concept of kaitiaki or guardian – those entrusted to care for all of creation...by being of the land one is therefore obligated to care, to protect, to nurture and sustain. In this sense the practice is deeply, deeply ecologically and spiritually imbued. It is a beautiful tradition.

As one blessed with a career and professional leadership responsibilities, which took me all over the world, I have since the late 1980's, enjoyed working alongside countless indigenous peoples – initially those particularly focused upon indigenous education – thus mainly previously colonized peoples – First Nations in Canada, Hawaiian peoples in their islands, Aboriginal peoples in Australia, Sami peoples from various Northern European countries – the narratives all bear similarities – indigenous peoples displaced by colonisers, land loss, cultural genocide, human devastation, political struggle . . . As an indigenous Christian woman, it did not escape my attention that the colonial churches were undeniably complicit in initiating and exacerbating indigenous displacement and were thus culpable in the subsequent marginalization and ongoing oppression of indigenous peoples including Māori.

Over the years of course there have been seismic shifts in secular identity politics . . . shifts which have seen both rightful and spurious new interrogations invoked, which have seen cynics and liberals alike warring over associated facts and ideologies pertaining

to identity – where sexual politics, gender politics, race and class politics have become both common and oppositional intellectual battlegrounds.

As an indigenous scholar whose academic career began almost commensurate with the fledgling discipline of what was then more popularly known as ‘race’ politics it has been an extraordinary academic field to have been immersed in and I delight in the way in which it continues to burgeon and to flourish albeit not without more than a to be expected portion of controversy!

One of my great sadnesses however as an indigenous theologian has been the almost complete and now understandably insistent silence in the theological academy not least on the myriad moral, ethical and economic questions always at the heart of identity politics!

In directly related spheres of academic enquiry such as post-colonial theology, post-colonial biblical studies both still fledgling in their realization within the theological academy, identity politics and all of its offshoots have yet to gain any kind of substantive foothold. For example, theologically nuanced gender politics are still fraught and little wonder as they strain to be heard, to be seen, are still having to plead, to cry out for legitimacy within an impossibly burdensome patriarchal infrastructure. Sexual politics similarly are scarcely allowed out of the utterly perverse institutional darkness where too many women’s and men’s and children’s bodies are now known to have been routinely, unforgivably abused...and race politics which ought require no penetrating analysis because any decent theology will speak for itself on the question of the fundamental oneness and equality of all in created humanity—this does not however account for the astonishing whiteness of too many mainstream/malestream churches – just how many major church leaders of colour and therefore of global influence can we name... notwithstanding that leadership is of course but one measure of influence...

It was into this utterly contradictory identity politics milieu – the secular versus the religious that I so inadvertently stepped almost 30 years ago on my first ever visit to the Holy Land, to Palestine, to the place of my childhood Sunday School imaginings, gentle Jesus meek and mild and inexplicably white (for a Palestinian Jew!) riding on a donkey beneath the gentle swaying palm trees dispensing unending largesse to all the children of the world – red and yellow black and white, all are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world...

It was however during that life-changing visit that not only did my sanitized, romanticized asinine theological understandings come under fire, so too did my equally, unconsciously underdeveloped indigenous portfolio – I met with Palestinian people during that visit who became and remain among my most treasured family friends, scholarly colleagues, faith-filled sisters and brothers. In so many ways I felt completely at home in Palestine, especially with the elders – there was so much of my own indigenous tradition, especially to do with relationship and responsibility toward land, which resonated so closely with those of my newfound friends. I met with Israeli activists now also among those I proudly claim as lifelong greatly respected friends and colleagues. Even almost three decades ago my Israeli Jewish friends were already warning of the evil of unchecked Zionist ideology – the most shamelessly murderous expression of which we have seen this week in Gaza.

But perhaps the most distressing and thus affective experience for me all those years ago was in recognizing just how ignorant I was about just who Palestinian peoples really were, about their inextricable, irrefutable historic connection to the land of Palestine, about their continuous presence in Christian, Muslim and Jewish religious history, about their complex and relentless political struggles, about the Nakba, about the Balfour Declaration, about their extraordinary resilience in the face of unspeakable, unfathomable contemporary brutality and expulsion at the hands of those with whom they had once peaceably co-existed, those to whom they had never done any harm whatsoever. How dare then I even ask the question, are Palestinian people tangata whenua...?

I recall feeling an overwhelming sense of outrage – why did I never really notice the systematic erasure of the name of the land Palestine, let alone the name of the indigenous peoples of Palestine, from key political public discourses.

As an indigenous woman it was such a shaming *déjà vu* moment – the realisation that yet again the enduring narratives of tangata whenua, in this case those of the peoples of Palestine had in my lifetime (which by then comprised just on four decades) been so flagrantly and purposively reconstructed. And these narratives had been constructed in such a way that the deep and abiding and expansive presence and influence of the peoples of Palestine had not only been minimized and diminished in scale and importance but so too was their humanity being increasingly demonized – the ‘dirty Muslim Arabs’ springs to mind.

How was it that I had been so unaware but perhaps more disturbingly how was it that as a Christian woman for whom the Holy Land is synonymous with the ancient history concept of Palestine, holds so much resonance, how had I been fooled into so uncritically accepting the populist supposedly Bible based narratives to do with the history of the Holy Land, the stories of the emergence of the peoples of God, tribal responses and warfare, stories of chosenness and of exile – I was too new in the theological academy to realize what the problem was! Now I am too old to ignore it!

But so it was that there in the late 80’s and early 90’s it was as an activist indigenous woman from Aotearoa New Zealand that I became immersed in the struggles of indigenous Palestinian people for the right of return to their land, for their fundamental human right to live freely and to flourish once more in the land of their ancestors.

One of the perversities arising in the foment of identity politics is the irrational expectation that one’s frame of activist reference is somehow predetermined and restricted according to one’s geography and so it was that initially I was both roundly criticized and undermined by some of my Aotearoa activist colleagues – what has Palestine got to do with *tikanga Māori*!

My response then and now is quite simple, and it is biblical. Either we are our sisters and brothers’ keepers or we are not! And so just as I remain forever grateful to those *Pakeha* and other non-Māori who took courage to align themselves to the struggles here in Aotearoa, to prevent any further land confiscations, who raised their voices in advocacy and solidarity with the push for *tino rangatiratanga*, who saw the legacy of generational suffering arising from colonial dispossession, dishonesty, destruction, disease – then so too did I see it as being only right and proper for me to stand alongside my indigenous Palestinian sisters and brothers for whom as it turns out the true horror of illegal occupation was only just beginning.

Edward Said was only just on the literary horizon when my work in Palestine began and his words served then as no less potent a reminder than now, ‘the job facing the cultural intellectual is therefore not to accept the politics of identity as a given but to show how all representations are constructed, by what purpose, by whom and with what components’ (1993:380).

The conceptualization and representation of the past is fraught with difficulty not simple because of the ambiguities and paucity of data but because the construction of history, written or oral, past or present is always a political act. It is the recognition of this reality that has freed other indigenous peoples to demand a reframing on the historical narrative and rightly so (Whitelam).

Aboriginal Australians have over the past decade or so reacted vociferously to Australia Day celebrations where indigenous identity is all but erased, consigned instead to being a flora and fauna footnote in Australia’s history – a history which too many still insist ‘officially’ begins instead with white ‘civilized’ settlement.

Similarly in the United States where the offensively titled Thanksgiving Day celebrations are founded on the still largely uncritically accepted premise that American history began with Christopher Columbus’ so called discovery of the New World.

What is heartening to me as an indigenous scholar is therefore that within the academy today these profoundly and previously unapologetic Eurocentric histories and representations are now being subjected to critical enquiry – no longer accepted as legitimate or just, as authoritative or complete. These formerly singular and dominant accounts are now rightly being contested no less than by indigenous scholars who only over very recent decades are finally assuming their rightful places within the academy in spite of and because of the ubiquitous reality of institutional racism.

What remains disheartening to me however is the pressing question of where in 2018 does Palestine and where do Palestinian people as tangata whenua sit within all of this progressive revisionist scholarship? And why is it that those with an abiding interest in the deep history of the Holy Land irrespective of their religious affiliations appear the least interested in the urgent work of interrogating the causes of the seemingly endless cycles of massacre, expulsion, disproportionate state sanctioned violence, incarceration now being exacted routinely by the state of Israel against largely unarmed, defenceless, vulnerable indigenous Palestinian peoples.

Mine always appears as a completely naïve question but wouldn't you think that the people of the God of the Torah, the Bible and the Koran would find it impossible to remain silent in the face of injustice, would find it impossible to be complicit in the intentional harming of innocent human beings, would be articulate, fearless, prophetic leaders in the public square crying out relentlessly for an end to human suffering . . .

For years I was utterly bewildered and disgusted at the spectacle of seeing thousands and thousands of misty eyed Holy Land tourists flocking to the holy sites, craving their deeply personal mystical spiritual fix while all around them in clear sight the obscenity of the so called security wall has risen like an overpowering monolith dividing communities, separating families from their livelihoods, from each other, from their places of work and education, while all around Bethlehem and Jerusalem, checkpoints, sniper points, heavily armed soldiers and outposts now dominate, where the blatant Judaisation of landmarks, signposts continues unabated, where Palestinian merchants are deliberately bypassed by Israeli owned tour companies by way of squeezing the economic life out of the indigenous community, where in Hebron Palestinian children are routinely abused, harassed, terrified on their way to and from school – all of this and now much much more, is in plain sight for anyone with eyes to see but somehow it has seemed not to register, not to disturb, not to outrage any one of the hundreds of folk I have known and talked with over the years and who have been on their once in a lifetime pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

I began to ask myself what kind of theology is at work in the hearts and minds of people who are then rendered both blind and dumb by it?

And then I was introduced to the truly despicable phenomenon of a biblical theology of dispossession. This is what Hazian describes as 'a process of utilizing biblical text as a vehicle by which to grant legitimacy to the displacement and collective silencing of the Palestinians.' He goes on, 'over the past 40 years we have witnessed a shift in the basic academic assumptions concerning the history of ancient Palestine and in the process a fundamental alteration in the field of Biblical studies. We see that central to all of these works, even those that are in opposition has been ancient Palestinian history which to this day is only allowed to exist as a backdrop to the histories of Israel and Judah. Palestinian history is thus seen as a problem disrupting the triumphant return of the Biblical people'.

Whitelam concurs, 'The problem of the history of ancient Palestine remains unspoken, masked in the dominant discourse of Biblical studies which is concerned principally with the search for ancient Israel as the locus for understanding the traditions of the Hebrew Bible and ultimately as the taproot of European and Western civilizations.

I am not by any means a Biblical scholar, but I am a critical educator and so finally I now get what has been happening inside the theological academy and it is no different to what has happened for years within the secular realm in terms of the intentional erasure of narrative and memory in order to secure dominant power interests.

Only this time what has occurred is as a result of an intensive sustained campaign of deep biblical conviction has been waged by the right wing inside Israel – at its core rests a narrative of dispossession that not only informed the past but serves as the cauldron for shaping the present reconstruction of the imagined past. What is constantly deliberately omitted from this reconstruction of the past is the identity of Palestinians as an indigenous population. The settlements, the eviction of the Bedouins, the uprooting of olive trees, the burning of crops, the confiscations of land, the denial of residency permits, the theft of water and resources, the home demolitions, the arrest and imprisonment strategies, the dumping of sewage, the restriction of marriages and the daily use of wanton violence and humiliation are all supposedly sanctioned by biblical authority. The idea that Palestinians are merely disposable in the past and present must therefore be confronted for it is only

then that their indigenous rights to their ancestral lands and property can be asserted. This spurious theology of dispossession and manifest destiny is not the will of God, it is as with Zionism instead an evil human enterprise rooted in human greed and unbridled lust for power.

I have to admit that I am still coming to terms with the ways in which this insidious theology of dispossession has gained such a foothold in the academy which, I hold so dear.

What I can see needs to happen is for Palestinian history to be reclaimed, reasserted, re narrated, legitimized and in its own right rather than as oppositional to the establishment of a Jewish state. What must instead be advanced in reading the past and rewriting the history of Palestine is the vantage point of an indigenous population facing the consequences of a biblical theology of dispossession, which has translated into a colonial and religious nationalist project. Although cynical I agree with Hatzian when he claims, 'in reality Palestinians are an indigenous population who entered the 20th century as victims of a global colonial grab at the territory and resources of the collapsing Ottoman order. Greed was the motivation, and the Biblical text was used as a deed to claim the territory. Palestinians are indeed victims of a Zionist manifest destiny that functions to create facts on the ground and attempts to recreate the mythical past in the present through the re-enactment of biblical narrative.

If peace, then is ever to be the end goal in the region then the starting point must be the dismantling of this obscene ideology of dispossession masquerading as theology and the reinstatement and recognition of Palestinians as indigenous people of the land – then and only then might we even have a chance of discussing future possibilities ...'

And so, to the biblical scholars in the room you have an urgent work to do, to the historians in the room likewise. To all of us in the room I pray that just as our hearts and minds have been so deeply, deeply distressed by what we have borne witness to this week that we too will therefore find it impossible not to act now for justice for all and not just for some.

What we saw was a devastatingly murderous massacre of unarmed utterly powerless Palestinians, unarmed utterly powerless Gazan Palestinians, predominantly young people, young men whose lives, whose wellbeing, whose destinies are completely subsumed and controlled by the illegal occupier – an illegal occupier whose moral horizon seems now to be so tragically bereft of humane decency.

I could not help but recall the words of Albert Einstein – can you remember when he once said, 'It would be my greatest sadness to see Zionist Jews do to Palestinian Arabs much of what Nazi's did to Jews ...

Thank you for listening.

Dr Jenny Te Paa Daniel (Te Rarawa) is Te Mareikura (Esteemed Indigenous Professor) at the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, Otago University, Dunedin. Previously she served for 23 years as Te Ahorangi (Principal) at St Johns Theological College in Auckland. During her lengthy leadership tenure she established herself as one of a very small group of leading Pacific women theological writers and teachers. Highly respected globally and nationally for her fearlessness in critiquing injustice and for her relentless advocacy for women's leadership, she has been awarded four international honorary doctorates and two prestigious Distinguished Alumni Awards in recognition of her own leadership example and her prolific scholarship. Te Paa Daniel lives in both Aitutaki and Auckland enjoying a perfectly balanced lifestyle which now prioritises affinity with and affection for, whanau (especially mokopuna!), whenua and moana.