

**EAD 801: Unit 7 Writing Assignment-Using Participant Observation in  
Recalling “Our Ancestors”**

It wasn't until I could take a step back and truly observe and listen to “Our Ancestors” from the award winning film *Whale Rider* that I was as close to a participant observer as one could get. Through the use of this fieldwork in small town Wharanga, New Zealand one can justly have an opportunity to crucially consider feeling “yourself welcome...and at the same time very aware of how different the world is you are encountering from your own.” (Introduction 7.1) It is ones true goal (and mine as well) to keep in mind that there are two levels of participant observation at play “I am present in the situation as a participant...and I am outside the situation as an observer, so I am potentially aware of my double role.” (Learning in Layers) During this process one should also “entertain multiple points of view” and the fact that “participant observation is probably our best bet for getting close to our subjects and at the same time making a role for our own thinking” (The Young and the Old) It is through this discussion and observation that one will comprehensively see that through “Our Ancestors” there are significant aspects of the Maori culture demonstrated including tradition (history), leadership, and gender.

With such a rich culture grounded in distinct traditions and history, this experience takes us to a different dimension in understanding the Maori culture. As Koro continues in the backyard of the house seemingly fixing an old boat's motor, Pai carefully watches and studies her grandfather. It is here that Pai begins to probe her grandfather for some information on the traditions and history of their ancestors. Pai explains the fact that they must write a speech for school on “where they come from”. Pai demonstrates pieces of knowledge and longs for more from her grandfather asking about where her ancestors actually came from, how they got to their small town, and how that all relates to the great myth and legend of Paikea, the whale rider. Briefly pausing, Koro takes the piece of rope that was lodged around the motor and hands it to Pai and asks her this: “Look at the rope closely, what do you see?” As Pai carefully studies the rope and pulling it apart at the ends, she effortlessly reveals that she sees “little bits of rope” that are all “woven together to make one large rope”. Through this metaphor of the rope, Koro is able to discuss the tradition of the history of the Maori people, telling Pai that just like the rope the little pieces “weave together so our line remains strong, each piece of rope is one of your ancestors.” In using the rope and the many metaphors that comes with it, Koro is able to enlighten the girl as to her questions of their ancestors and the relation of the great whale rider to all of these life questions, seemingly passing down the traditions and history of the Maori.

Another significant aspect that is brought about in the observation of this setting is the strong connection and correlation of leadership. In “Our Ancestors” a struggle develops that clearly exhibits the issues of leadership and the traditions it has in the

Maori culture. As one can undoubtedly see, the leadership roles have been passed down and handed to the first born male. The importance of leadership in the Maori culture is visibly confirmed from the breaking of the rope in this setting. As the “useless bloody rope” breaks, Koro heads back to the shed to fetch yet another piece. With Koro absent, Pai takes the broken rope and ties it back together demonstrating not only a sense of curiosity, but a sense of taking a lead role in the mending of this broken link. With the rope tied back together, Pai makes the bold decision to try and start the motor. Successfully, the motor gears into life. Pai, looking a little nervous, but also proud bellows in her childish voice “Paka! It’s working!” With an astonished look upon his face, he pauses for a moment and then rushes to rip the life from the motor. Representing the disagreement of leadership that Koro has for this situation not only because Pai is still yet a child, but also a girl, he sternly demands that “I don’t want you to do that again-it’s dangerous!” It is through this aspect of the scene that reveals the significance of leadership in the Maori culture and the roles and responsibilities that it lies in. As one can truly see in experiencing this culture “first hand” that in “Maori culture women lead from behind, men have status.” (Whale Rider)

The last key characteristic of the significance of the Maori culture that can be experienced through this situation is that of gender differences and expectations. The reason one may chose to look at the concept last is due to its connections to the previous two ideas discussed: tradition in the form of history and leadership. One can already see that there are distinct gender roles in the Maori culture. As observed in the scene noted earlier, Pai is crossing those lines in relation to the role she plays in fixing the motor. When she has effortlessly repaired the rope in order to start the motor, she has taken control of her grandfather’s situation. By his remarks of it being “dangerous” and to “never do it again” he is reconfirming this gender identity role. By doing this, he is showing Pai that men are to do this work, not children, especially little girls. Although one would see this as the main aspect of this experience, one cannot forget the school yard at the very beginning of this observation process. Here, Pai is confronted by her male schoolmates teasing and taunting her as she walks by. This form of teasing is a direct link to the leadership role she played in the former nights play in which Pai was the center of the show. As the boys continue to laugh at Pai, her grandfather pulls up on a bike behind the boys and strikes one on the back of the head, reminding the boy that he should show “more respect next time”. All of these actions, grounded in tradition and history, demonstrate how women and men should act and therefore be treated. With specific gender lines drawn it is through this encounter and many others that “leadership presents itself in the form of a young girl” which is unheard of in the Maori culture.

As one exits this brief period of participant observation many different themes, concepts, and values have been presented. Listening, observing, thinking, and deciphering this experience can give one many insights into the Maori culture, their morals, and how they function as a group of people. Although three main cultural distinctions have been brought about in the eyes of my observation, many more could be seen and it should be noted that depending on your experiences “people have different ways of saying the same thing and differences signify how experience is perceived variably depending on who and where you are.” (The Poet’s Classroom) This experience of participant observation can give one an in depth view of the Maori culture and how from the “foreign” we can find the “familiar”, but it should also be stated that “To

understand another culture, one must include ghosts and spirits in an explanatory system, as well as the abstractions--pride, honor, sin--that appear as reasons for action. The great ideas of human history do not, after all, refer to anything visible to the eye." (Peripheral Visions)