



# Cultured Conversations



*Cultured Conversations* is a digital series produced by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Exploring issues and ideas from the cultural sector in Aotearoa New Zealand, this series is hosted by Gallery Director, Kirsten Lacy, and invites exceptional leaders from arts, philanthropy, economics and politics to discuss topical issues facing the sector today.

In this episode, Ngahiwi joins Kirsten Lacy to talk about growing up in a Māori-speaking family, learning the value of hard work, dealing with racism, being kind and manaakitanga – the approach he takes towards his vision of a Māori-speaking New Zealand.

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## **Kirsten Lacy:**

Kia ora. Welcome to Cultured Conversations here in the atrium of Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery. I'm Kirsten Lacy, Gallery Director and excited today to be with a cultural leader across music, media, education and te reo, but he asked today to be introduced solely as the Chief Executive of the Māori Language Commission. Kia ora, welcome. So great to have you here.

## **Ngahiwi Apanui:**

My pleasure, my pleasure.

## **KL:**

Perhaps we just start off with, if you could talk about where you're from.

## **NA:**

I grew up on the East Coast in a little place called Te Araroa, which is almost smack dab in the middle of Ōpōtiki and Gisborne, so it's about an equal distance to reach each town. I was brought up in a Māori-speaking family until I was seven by my mum, and then she moved to Ruatōria because the telephone exchange in Te Araroa had closed down. We stayed with our grandfather because at the time she had four of my brothers and sisters in boarding school, so the only way that she could pay for them was to work these silly hours on the telephone exchange. So we got to stay with our grandfather, which was a blessing in itself because my grandfather was this this amazing man. Our mother was incredible, too, she would work 18-hour shifts so she could pay her bills. That's what I grew up with. I got used to seeing women in leadership positions. The rock in my life, until she died in 2006, was my mum. The rock in my life now is my partner. All of these things have been really, really important. My mother showed me the

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value of good hard work. She showed me that there are no shortcuts to success; that you have to put in the hard work. But you also have to be kind; that was the biggest thing she gave me: be kind. There's a famous saying: there are three great things – the first one is to be kind, the second one is to be kind, and the third one is to be kind. Those are the things that I took away from my mother, and my grandfather, from my upbringing, as well as a real love for te reo Māori.

**KL:**

It's a challenge, though, isn't it – to be kind all the time? You talked about your grandfather in your opening comments and that he was an amazing man. Was there stewardship in the application of your mother's teaching around kindness that he afforded?

**NA:**

It was more demonstrated than it was spoken about. I remember going into the shop, for instance, and on our way back we'd pass a hitch-hiker, some Pākehā kid who was hitch-hiking around the East Coast, and my grandfather would stop to pick him up, and so we'd stop, pick him up: 'Have you got a place to stay?' 'No.' 'Do you want a place to stay?' 'Yes.' They'd come stay around home; they'd be fed by my grandfather, who would fill them up with the history of the area. I remember asking him one day, 'Why do you keep picking these people up? They're not related to us.' And his answer was that manaakitanga, kindness, was for everybody, not just for family. It's that type of approach that I've taken into the Commission. If you want people to be a part of the revitalisation of te reo Māori then you have to be kind; and you have to open up the door and you sometimes have to hold it open for quite a long time and coax them in, and once they're in they've got to be in a place that's safe, that is enabling. And most of all it gives them something that enriches their lives. That's the example my grandfather set for me and it is the example I've taken into the Commission with me.

**KL:**

Ngahiwi, you're a man on the mission. You're pursuing te reo passionately. I wanted to share a quote you've given to me and throw it back to you in your own words. Your goal is a Māori-speaking New Zealand. You've written: 'I'm realistic enough to understand that I may not achieve it in my time. It's an aspirational goal in a long game: a nation that values te reo Māori.' I thought we might talk about that and the long game that you're in and how you're playing it.

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**NA:**

When I started at the commission there were two things that bugged me. The first thing was that we had spent close to 30 years promoting the language to Māori communities, when I thought we should have been promoting the language to the whole of New Zealand. That was the opportunity. I'm not too sure why the message was primarily for Māori communities but that's the way it was. For me, that's part of thinking small about the language. The language needs big thinking and it needs big commitment and it needs big love. I did an interview, my first interview, and that was what I said: I wanted a Māori-speaking New Zealand. I wanted to hear politicians in parliament arguing in te reo Māori. I wanted to hear my grandchildren and their children speaking Māori to all the other children at school, regardless of whether they were Māori or not. But most of all I want te reo Māori to be around in 2050, in 2100, in 2200, as long as we have a country that calls itself Aotearoa New Zealand. I want the language to be around and the only way that it can stick around is if everybody in Aotearoa values and loves it and sees it as an important expression of our national identity. So that statement was really about me putting a stake in the ground and saying, 'Here's what I want. Who else is on board?' The funny thing was the Māori Party put it up on their Facebook page and there was a lot of, 'Who is this idiot? Who is this guy?' There were a couple of people who said, 'This is great,' but a lot of people said, 'Who's this guy? All New Zealanders speaking the language – can't happen.' That might not be the feeling today. For me, that was important, to say, 'This is what I what I believe. This is what I want. This is my vision, my goal.' But there had to be some other things that went with that, so the first thing was to change the approach. We don't go and do battle with people in the press anymore because I'd rather go and visit them, or ring them, and say, 'Hey, how can we help?' Because when people are having these issues, often it's not deliberate – it's ignorance more than anything else. My role is to get in there and say, 'How can I help you?' Rather than, 'You bad, bad boy. You've been saying bad things about my language and I'm going to get you.' All that does is create more enemies and I don't want enemies for te reo Māori. I want friends, I want people who love it. We want to build a family around the language that is made up of people of all backgrounds, but in order to get there you have to stop fighting people. You have to stop scrapping with people. Before I started, a press release went out from the Commission having a go at the then prime minister, John Key. I rang up the guy who was relieving and he said, 'Well, I didn't put it out there. That was the board and the comms manager – they put it out there.' And I said, 'Do you realise who this guy is? He's the guy who signs the cheque for us every year. Why didn't we go and talk to him first? Why don't we give him the opportunity to explain himself?' That's what we do now. Rather than take somebody down in the press, which might be gratifying for some people, I'd rather go and talk to them. The Hauraki thing, for instance, with NZME. That story broke in my first year; my comms manager was about to put out a statement, and I said, 'No, let's get in touch with Dean Buchanan,' and we did. We've now got relationships with them. Scotty and Stacy do lots of wonderful work with them, and we now have the official pronunciation of the name as Hauraki, which is what it should be. But you don't get those kinds of wins if you go to battle with people – you end up in a fight with them and you become enemies. When these issues pop up, it's about that thing again: kindness. Getting in there and instead of saying, 'You're bad, let's have a fight,' saying, 'It's okay, potential friend. How can I help you?' That's the way I approach the job.

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**KL:**

Your support for me in the Gallery is really exciting. I think we're going to do some great work ahead, but before we talk about language in the institution or its institutional framework, I wanted to talk about language and culture. Are they indivisible? Are they the same thing?

**NA:**

Yeah, there's the language and customs, and those customs come out of the language and the language comes out of the customs. So trying to explain them in English sometimes is really, really difficult. But if you learn te reo Māori, all of a sudden the whole thing opens up: the whole depth and breadth and height of the thing is opened up to you. That's the great thing about learning te reo Māori. I look at New Zealanders and I see the research figures that come back about the guilt about our colonial history. There are a lot of New Zealanders who want to do something but they can't give back a piece of land, for instance, but they can learn the language. They can learn the language. For me, that's a really, really important thing to do, because not only does it maybe give them something to contribute to but it also brings us all together. When we have a common understanding of kaupapa Māori of the Māori worldview, which is contained within the language and within the culture, then we have a different country, we have a richer country. We have a country that understands that there's more than one way to do things, and that these other ways of doing things are just as valid. There are things to learn. Just as my Western education has enriched my life, my life has been incredibly enriched by being someone who was brought up in a Māori-speaking family. The culture is very much a part of the language and the language is very much a part of the culture.

**KL:**

When we met in Wellington last year, you said to me you thought down the road, by the time we get to 2050, I think was the line in the sand, there'll be more Pākehā speaking te reo than Māori. Is there a tension about cultural authority there? Is that where perhaps the resistance has come from? Because it's not about pronunciation and speaking; it's about concepts and understanding and adopting them in the work that we do, and the relationships that we build in our lives.

**NA:**

There will be and there is. I'd be lying if I said there wasn't. But that's only because so much has been taken from Māori in post-colonial New Zealand. So much has been taken from Māori people. So they see the language as the last bastion. The issue here is if you want the language to live and you want the

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language to be spoken, then everybody has to speak it. I've often told the story, and my friends and staff probably get sick of it, but I remember one of my cousins coming up to me when I first started at the Commission and saying, 'Why do you want non-Māori people to learn the language?' And I said, 'Why? What's the matter with it?' 'Well, they might steal the mana of our language.' 'Okay, how long have we been speaking English for?' 'I don't know.' 'From the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, about 180 years, right? I'll tell you, those English, they're tough as.' 'Why are they so tough?' And I said, 'Because we haven't managed to steal the mana of the English language from them. If anything, the mana of the English language has gotten bigger and bigger because so many people are speaking it.' That's the thing: the more people who speak your language, the more mana, the more prestige and authority and importance and relevance it has. You can't have it both ways. If you want to go to the bank and you want to do your transactions in te reo Māori, then the people at the bank have to speak the language. The same if you want to go to school and have your children and the teachers be able to speak and teach the language. In order to get something, you've got to give something. Kāore he paku aha ki roto, kāore he paku aha ki waho. If you don't put anything in, you don't get anything out. It's as simple as that. For me, giving te reo Māori to everybody in Aotearoa is about getting our language back, it's as simple as that.

## KL:

In your dream of Aotearoa speaking reo, how would it change the nation, and how we think, work, feel and relate?

## NA:

What you'll have is a nation that thinks differently about themselves; a nation that thinks more about the environment and their impact on it; a nation that thinks more about how we're connected to the earth; a nation that thinks in two ways about knowledge and about how we apply it. I think you will have a kinder nation, too. The way I see New Zealand is this little country that tries to do the right thing. That's what makes us so great. We haven't got the biggest towns, we don't have the flashiest cars, but we try so hard to get it right and that's what I love about New Zealand. Everywhere else I go, I last about a week and then I want to come home because I miss it. On my father's side, my whakapapa goes back to the Deputy Governor of New Zealand in 1850; on my mother's side, it goes all the way back into deep, dark Ngāti Porou. My Polish heritage is really important to me, my English heritage is really important to me, my Scottish and Irish heritage is really important to me. They make me who I am. When I look at my whakapapa, I think, *I'm Māori but I'm also Scottish and English and Polish*. I expressed that through my Western education, the way that I've been brought up through school, and on the Māori side in the way that I've been brought up at home. When I look at the world, I see lots of different ways of doing it. I think that's what New Zealanders will have: *It's okay, we've got two ways going around us; we could do it this way or we could do it that way*. And when you have options, it's a really cool world. When your mind and

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your heart have options as well, it's an even cooler world. That's what I think a future New Zealand will look like. If I've still got my marbles in 2050, I'd love to hear my grandchildren speaking Māori to non-Māori children. That that would spin my wheels big time.

**KL:**

Thinking about the language in popular culture; you've had a long, successful career in the music industry as well—

**NA:**

I don't know about successful . . .

**KL:**

Well, I've been told I'm not allowed to ask you to sing today! We do have some beautiful acoustics here. But how has music culture changed around you?

**NA:**

Over the last two or three years, we've had the *Anthems* album come out, so we've had non-Māori musicians record their songs in te reo Māori. Last year, I went to be a part of a documentary with Drax Project and they were talking about how they had performed one of these songs in Māori at a gig and the whole vibe and feeling and the wairua around their performance was totally different, in a really good way. They were trying to understand it. I remember when I had my first management job, which was at Radio Ngāti Porou in the '90s, and I was about to go and tell the staff of a restructure. One of my board members was Aunty Kate Walker. Aunty Kate was this beautiful speaker of Māori; I just loved listening to her speak Māori. And she said to me, in Māori now, 'When you talk to your staff tomorrow, don't you forget those who stand behind them.' I said, 'Yeah, yeah, I consider their families all the time.' 'I'm not talking about the living ones, I'm talking about the ones who've died.' I said, 'Okay, with a bit of a frown on my face.' And she said, 'Yeah, because they are the ones who'll play up. You need to sort them out. The only way to sort them out is to speak Māori to them.' So I go to this meeting and I speak Māori and I speak Māori to people who aren't there and we finish up about 15 minutes later. I asked, 'Are there any questions?' 'No, we're fine,' and they walk out. I talked to her about it the following day and she said, 'Yeah, because those ancestors were happy with what you were doing. They realised you weren't trying to harm their descendants. I told the story to the Drax Project boys and said to them, 'So when you sung in Māori, you weren't just singing a song in Māori – you were opening the doorway up to those ancestors to come in and give you their blessing.' I think that's really, really important. I could bore you with numerous

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stories like that but, for me, speaking Māori allows you to access those ancestors if you need to. There are probably a few people thinking, 'this guy's la-la', but it's an important part of te reo; the wairua, understanding that we're still connected to our ancestors. Just because they've gone doesn't mean we can't talk to them, that we can't communicate with them and we can't ask them for help.

**KL:**

When we started talking, you touched on some of the issues, some of the detractors you've had to deal with, and how you've chosen to manage issues at the Commission. It's unavoidable when you're leading in the sphere of culture that there'll be detractors around you or issues that you have to deal with, but yours comes with racism added as well. How do you survive that?

**NA:**

Racism has been part of my life. From the time I was a teenager being pulled up by the police. Or going into a place and ordering a coffee and being the first in line, waiting to order a coffee and being passed over for people who are standing next to me. Or going to a car shop to look at a car and because I'm wearing a hoodie and a pair of jeans nobody comes to serve me. I'm this Māori guy with no money, right? Those are the things that I run into, still, regularly. But they don't stop me. It's one of those things that's there but if you make it big then it becomes big. I go back to that thing again: I believe that New Zealanders want to do the right thing. That's the thing that makes me really, really proud to be a part of this country. New Zealanders want to do the right thing. Often we talk about unconscious bias – I think that's what a lot of it is. For instance, my nose: I might think my nose is not sharp enough or not sexy enough and I could let that become an issue. That's how I regard racism. Racism is just another thing that I have to deal with. I deal with it with kindness because that's what I've been shown in my life. Be kind to people and things will happen for you. If you want to start fights with people about things, including racism, then you earn enemies. For me, it's really around that kindness thing, coming back to that, and saying, 'Okay, I can defeat this thing if I'm kind. I can make it worse if I decide to scrap with people and I choose not to.' It's a choice between making that thing as big as Africa or minimising it. That's how I approach it.

**KL:**

Here at the Gallery, for the first time, we've presented an exhibition and all the displays in te reo and English and we're also building an online exhibition, which will be a virtual presentation. It's raised a lot of questions, for me as Director, around how we progress forward with language at the Auckland Art Gallery. My question to you is: How can I and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki partner with and support the Commission in its ambition for a te reo-speaking Aotearoa?

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**NA:**

It's simple, really. What we're trying to do is to turn New Zealand into a Māori-language domain, so that when children learn the language, regardless of who they are, everywhere they go they see the Māori language, just as much as they see the English language. For us, any use of te reo is better than nothing, so when we talk about kia kaha te reo Māori, let the language be strong, part of that is no matter how much or how little, use what you have. If you can only say kia ora or ngā mihi, use it, because the more you use it the more it's heard. We always advise organisations who take on the Māori language to start small, because there's nothing worse than trying to be a bicultural organisation within two or three years and it gets too big. It gets too hard so you're better to do things that are achievable in the first couple of years and then start the stretch, but make sure that when you stretch yourself you're not killing yourself. It's really about building a foundation and then continuing to build on that. I think that's what you're doing here, which is a great way to go about it. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.

**KL:**

It's true! Tom Irvine, who's the CEO at Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei, said to me on Saturday morning that culture and mana don't necessarily manifest from the place in which you're born, but become evident in the actions you take in the place where you choose to be. I wanted to thank you because I think you've given me some answers in our conversations, both in Wellington and now today, about the kinds of actions that we need to be taking. It's an act of creativity that we do together. Perhaps a final remark from you, Ngahiwi.

**NA:**

Mana is a lot about what we do. I love the word manaakitanga, for instance. The core word there is mana, the last part of it is aki – aki, to encourage, and mana, which is derived from service and from looking after people. That's what manakitanga is, and for me that's the best kind of mana you can get. The mana you get from service, the mana you get from making other people strong, that's the best kind of mana you can have. There's a difference between mana and money! Which I think America has woken up to. Mana is about caring for people, it's about caring for your community, it's about giving as much as you can to make your community and your world a better place. That's why I love that word manaakitanga. I'd like to be remembered for what I did, the good things I did rather than whether I was a chief or not. Because what makes you chiefly is the work that you do for others.

**KL:**

It's a beautiful point to end on. Thank you so much for joining me today.

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**NA:**

My pleasure, my pleasure. Thank you.

**KL:**

You've been watching Cultured Conversations, hosted by myself, Kirsten Lacy, Director, Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery. You can find each episode of the Cultured Conversations at [aucklandartgallery.com](http://aucklandartgallery.com).