

## **Graduate Research Essay**

# **BEYOND BOUNDARIES: CENTRE/PERIPHERY DISCOURSE IN OE KENZABURO'S *DOJIDAI GEMU* & WITI IHIMAERA'S *THE MATRIARCH***

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In a recent exchange of letters published in *Asahi Shimbun*, author and Nobel laureate Oe Kenzaburo wrote to postcolonial critic Edward Said, expressing his feelings and opinions about Japan's relationship with the current situation in Afghanistan:

In re-reading (your book) *Culture and Imperialism* in my native language, I become keenly aware that, written some 10 years ago, it can be an exact analysis of present-day Japan and Japanese. The Japanese are now willingly accepting the rule by cultural imperialism or unification of the cultural and national identity, which engulfed America at the time of the Gulf War and has been reiterated and reinforced in America throughout the war in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Letters exchanged between Kenzaburo Oe and Edward Said, *Asahi Shimbun* (February 23-24, 2002), 24.

This is not entirely true. In fact, throughout the majority of his work of the 60s and 70s Oe's criticism of the emperor system and his confrontation with what he refers to as "Japan's centre-oriented cultural paradigm" reveals a well established awareness of the dilemma facing Japan. The dilemma that Oe portrays in his works, such as *Mannen Gannen no Futtoboru* (hereafter *The Silent Cry*) and *Dojidai Gemu* (hereafter *The Game*) is symptomatic of Japan's transition from a closed feudal society into a modern nation-state; a process I refer here to as "internal colonisation."<sup>3</sup> This process involved the homogenization of regional differences, language and culture by the power elite who manufactured a national conscious by centralising power under the symbol of the emperor.

Oligarchies of the Meiji period (1868-1912) were able to legitimate the centralisation of power under the emperor and rally support among the populace partly by instilling in the people the fear of colonisation by Euroamerica. By mimicking and internalising the logic of Western imperialism, first to redefine internal boundaries and then to stake out new external borders, Japan entered the colonial race with the West. Oe's work *The Game* explores this process of internal colonisation by revealing the center/periphery power relationship in Japan as a paradigm that has its impetus in the social upheavals that occurred during the enforced opening of Japan to foreign trade in the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

To clarify the process of internal colonisation in Japan, this paper concentrates on a comparative analysis of Oe's *The Game* with Aotearoa/New Zealand (here after New Zealand) Maori author Witi Ihimaera's work *The Matriarch*.<sup>4</sup> While at first glance the entrance of Japan into the world capitalist system seems entirely divorced from the colonisation of New Zealand and Maori, it is my belief that the following comparison of Oe and Ihimaera's works will help first to shed light on the myths supported not only by Japanese history textbooks but also by the Ministry of Education that Japan was never colonised, and second, to go beyond the boundaries of criticism that confines literature within national borders. Furthermore, despite the wealth of publications by Japanese critics dealing with themes of colonial discourse in modern Japanese literature, Western scholars of postcolonialism have tended to over-privilege the British colonial experience by focusing predominantly on postcolonial literature written in the English language. Consequently this has rendered publications written in Japanese virtually voiceless. Under these circumstances a comparative literary study that encompasses Asian-Pacific literature can hopefully move beyond the restricted framework of "Euroamerica-western-centricism."

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<sup>3</sup> Oe Kenzaburo, *Manen Gannen no futtoboru*, [*The Silent Cry*] trans., John Bester (Tokyo: Kodansha 1974) and *Dojidai Gemu* [*The Game*] (Tokyo: Shincho bunko, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Witi Ihimaera *The Matriarch* (New Zealand: Secker & Warburg, 1986).

Because both Oe and Ihimaera are deeply political writers it is perhaps wise to put them into historical perspective. With regard to Oe, Tomioka Koichiro has pointed out that it is “deceptive [...] to evaluate Oe’s literary works without reference to his social and political statements and actions as an intellectual.”<sup>5</sup> Oe has indeed been very vocal both in print and in person. For example, in a letter to *The Asahi Newspaper* he suggested that *The Game* be read as a criticism of Mishima Yukio’s view of an emperor-centred cultural paradigm:

I was in India (when Mishima Yukio committed suicide). I thought then that his suicide would bring about a revision of our history into one that centres around the Emperor. I wrote to an editor, a good friend of mine, that I would rather want to think about a god who did not obey the Emperor, and look at ancient times, medieval and modern times from the viewpoint of those who were chased outside, expelled to the margins. My novel (*The Game*) started from that position [...] I attempted to write not a history that revolves around the Emperor, but a history that belongs to those who became demons.<sup>6</sup>

In an interview with author Kazuo Ishiguro, Oe extrapolated further on his concerns with the “image of Japan” portrayed by Mishima Yukio. According to Oe, “Mishima’s entire life, certainly including his death by *seppuku* (ritual suicide), was a kind of performance designed to present the image of an archetypal Japanese. [T]his image was not the kind that arises spontaneously from a Japanese mentality.”<sup>7</sup> Although Oe does not explicate what he means by an “archetypal Japanese” that does not arise “spontaneously,” he does however say that, “[i]n his (Mishima’s) conception, the culture of Japan is completely embodied in the being of the Emperor. He advocated building up the defense of the traditional culture of Japan through the Tenno [emperor], and for him no culture existed except the culture of the Tenno.”<sup>8</sup>

Oe’s contempt for Mishima and his “false” image of Japanese culture may be related to their significantly different backgrounds. Oe was born in a small mountain village on Shikoku Island and was ten when the war ended. During the war he was taught that the highest honor was to sacrifice one’s life for the state of their country, and for the emperor. But during America’s neocolonial occupation at the end of World War Two, Oe

<sup>5</sup> Tomioka Koichiro, ‘Oe Kenzaburo’s Literature: Culmination of the Postwar Myth,’ *Japan Echo* 1 (Spring, 1995), 85.

<sup>6</sup> Michiko N. Wilson, *The Marginal World of Oe Kenzaburo* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1986), 105.

<sup>7</sup> Oe Kenzaburo / Kazuo Ishiguro, ‘Wave Patterns: A Dialogue,’ *Grand Street*, 13, 3-4 (1995), 212.

<sup>8</sup> Oe, Kenzaburo, ‘The Centre and the Periphery,’ *Writers in East-West Encounter: New Cultural Bearings* (Hong Kong: MacMillan Press, 1982), 47-48.

received an education based on an American style democracy. In contrast, Mishima Yukio, born ten years before Oe, attended the prestigious Peer's School and Tokyo Imperial University at the height of Japan's militarism, and was already twenty when the war ended. Later Mishima came to glorify the symbol of the sword-bearing samurai and his devotion to the emperor in his literature through a mixture of aesthetic nationalism and pro-militarism. According to Oe, Mishima's obsession with the emperor and his "exotic" orientalist depiction of Japanese culture is a reoccurring symptom of Japan's modernization.<sup>9</sup>

One of the basic requirements for the modernisation of Japan was the thorough centralisation of power, which, in Oe's words "was made possible by the Japanese people's ingrained inclination towards centre-orientation, and a need to see their experience as a unitary reality, with the *Tenno* at its focus."<sup>10</sup> The unification of Japan involved the political manipulation of the mythic, and hence symbolic, status of the emperor by powerful elements within the Meiji oligarchy. Consequently cultural differences in "the peripheral areas (of Japan) were sacrificed, because of the tendency to orient everything towards the centre."<sup>11</sup> According to Haruzo, Oe wrote *The Game* at a time when Japan had accomplished centralization, an economy second only to America, and had begun to reconsider the state of the nation: "Not only was 'decentralization' and 'the regional era' advocated, but topics such as relocating the capital, and regional autonomy were discussed quite seriously."<sup>12</sup> Yet, although it may have still been possible during the 60s to imagine a festive village such as that found in Oe's novel *The Silent Cry*, after the 70s it was "realistically impossible to imagine some region within Japan as a microcosmos [...] because [...] Japan had been homogenised."<sup>13</sup> Adding to this, the spread of *hyojungo* (standardized language) based on the dialect of Tokyo, to rural areas through a Tokyo-based media undermined the use of regional languages and obscured the reality of regional diversity. Nevertheless, "[w]hile there is little doubt that the ruling power of Tokyo has homogenized the nation,"<sup>14</sup> writers such as Oe have continued to focus on the margins of society as a means of resisting centralisation.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Hasegawa Hideki, Osada Yukiyasu & Go Tomo (eds.), *Oe Kenzaburo ga Kaba ni mo Wakaru Hon* (Tokyo: Yosensha, 1995), 167-170.

<sup>13</sup> Masao Miyoshi, *Gunzo Nihon no Sakka 23: Oe Kenzaburo* (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1992), 160.

<sup>14</sup> Sugimoto Yoshio, *An Introduction to Japanese Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 64.

In contrast, although Ihimaera also deals with similar themes concerning colonisation, rural depopulation and cultural homogenization within the context of New Zealand in his novel *The Matriarch*, these themes all tend to center around the British colonial government's misappropriation of Maori land. The first stage in the alienation of Maori from their tribal lands and the erosion of their culture began when British settlers and missionaries arrived in New Zealand in the late 1700s. Walker points out that "while settlers invaded the land, missionaries invaded the Maori mind,"<sup>15</sup> by using church dogma to undermine Maori society and to attack important Maori cultural symbols and customs. The next stage occurred when "missionaries advis[ed] Maori chiefs to sign the Treaty of Waitangi on 6 February, 1840 [...] (paving) the way for British colonialism and the eclipse of Maori mana by British sovereignty."<sup>16</sup> In Ihimaera's words "[t]he Maori signed a worthless treaty at Waitangi (and were) subsumed into Pakeha culture."<sup>17</sup> Maori language, for example, was taught in schools up until 1900, and then "banned altogether in school precincts."<sup>18</sup> Colonisation, therefore, meant that Maori were not only alienated from their land, but their institutions were also replaced with the purportedly superior social systems of the British colonisers.

The gradual assimilation of Maori into Pakeha culture was most severe while Ihimaera was growing up. What he observed during the 70s was a massive urban relocation of Maori from their rural and agriculturally based communities, and an attendant cultural discontinuity. Ihimaera explains that "[I]t was as if a fault line had suddenly developed in our history — on one side was a people with some cultural assurance, on the other side was a generation removed from its roots, who did not understand their language and who had not lived the culture."<sup>19</sup> In the 70s, however, young Ihimaera, like Oe in the 50s and early 60s, was writing in the pastoral tradition, and his works lacked the anger or political thought present in *The Matriarch*. According to Umelo Ojinmah, Ihimaera's first work, *Pounamu Pounamu*, was intended by the author to be an "offering from the Maori side" to the Pakeha who do not know their Maori heritage.<sup>20</sup> *The Matriarch*, however, moves beyond this pastoral tradition, particularly with the portrayal of colonisation by the British, the confrontation between Maori and Pakeha in the New Zealand Wars, and the political imperatives that concern the alienation of Maori from their land, by incorporating the 1970s Land March and the Treaty of Waitangi. Because Ihimaera was

<sup>15</sup> David Novitz & Bill Willmott (eds.), *Culture and Identity in New Zealand* (New Zealand: GP Books, 1989), 41.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 40

<sup>17</sup> Witi Ihimaera, 'Maori Life and Literature: A Sensory Perception,' *New Zealand Through the Arts: Past and Present: The Turnbull Winter Lectures 1981* (Wellington: Friends of the Turnbull Library, 1983), 45- 55.

<sup>18</sup> Novitz & Willmott, 42.

<sup>19</sup> Ihimaera, *The Turnbull Winter Lectures*, 50.

<sup>20</sup> Umelo Ojinmah, *Witi Ihimaera: A Changing Vision* (New Zealand: University of Otago Press, 1993), 28.

writing *The Matriarch* during the 80s, a decade that saw movements to revive Maori language and the issues regarding the Waitangi Tribunal taking jurisdiction over land disputes, the novel can be read as part of a larger campaign against Pakeha to acknowledge and compensate for historical injustices.

The campaigns during the 80s to resist Pakeha hegemony, however, have their roots in the late 1970s; a period that has been labeled as the “Maori Renaissance.” Strongly connected with movements like the Maori Renaissance, indigenous writers such as Ihimaera began to address the problem of representing a Maori cultural identity in the face of criticism from both Pakeha *and* Maori. The question “what designates Maori literature” has until recently generally been asked and answered away by the Pakeha majority. Many Maori authors found it difficult to publish work because of the questions raised regarding Maori readership. The Pakeha demand for an “authentic” Maori image that suited the white majority — that is to say, an image that was somehow divorced from the intrusive presence of a Western discourse — forced Maori once again to use the Pakeha as a measure. On the other side of the board, the argument went that there was no longer such an image as an authentic Maori, let alone a genuine Maori literature because it was impossible to sustain an environment that remained fixed in that moment of “first contact,” when Maori and European culture collided. These arguments, of course, have come from the Pakeha camp, and have ignored the importance of whakapapa (genealogy) as a legitimate way of deciding who is Maori. However, that many indigenous writers write predominantly in English, the language that was forced upon their ancestors, complicates for some the question of self-recognition. Ihimaera is aware of the power relation involved in writing: “[m]y own belief is that Maori writing at its truest can only be that literature which is written in Maori, where the spiritual, emotional and political dynamics control the content.”<sup>21</sup> His way of dealing with this problem in *The Matriarch* is to privilege forms of Maori oral history, including myth, as uniquely Maori, although he writes predominantly in English.

### **Myths of Resistance**

Here we have our present age, the result of a Socratism bent on the extermination of myth. Man today, stripped of myth, stands famished among all his pasts and must dig frantically for roots, be it among the most remote antiquities. What does our great historical hunger signify, our clutching about us of countless other cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the

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<sup>21</sup>Elizabeth Alley & Mark Williams (eds.), *In the Same Room: Conversations with New Zealand Writers* (New Zealand: Auckland University Press, 1992), 231.

loss of myth, of a mythic home, the mythic womb? (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*).

*The Game* and *The Matriarch* are good examples of mythopoeic or ‘myth-making’ fiction. Although a single definition of myth is extremely elusive (and moreover reductive) the history of myth theory demonstrates that there have been two basic approaches to the interpretation of myth, the literal and the symbolic. Ethnologists, for example, have tended to regard myth literally as an expression of primitive thought but have differed in their evaluation of myth. Positivistic ethnologists have regarded myth negatively as a mode of explanatory thought destined to be outmoded by scientific thought, while functionalistic ethnologists have tended to evaluate myth in terms of its pragmatic function in resolving individual and social problems such as welfare and our destiny.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, philosophers and theologians have, from ancient to modern times, interpreted myth allegorically as symbolizing some transcendental, timeless truth but have also differed among themselves as to the nature of the object and truth symbolized.

In contemporary thought, myth has been evaluated positively owing in large measure to the influence of psychoanalytical theory, especially that of Jung. Described by Jung as organic multi-leveled forms of narrative, myths are “original revelations of the preconscious psyche,” or “involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings,” which often “hark back to a prehistoric world”.<sup>23</sup> On this level myths function as “tribal histories” handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. In contrast to the philosopher, whose job it is to be superstitious of the world of appearances in order to expose what “really is,” the teller of mythology “steps back into “primordially” in order to say what “originally was”.<sup>24</sup> According to Jung, “the primitive mentality does not *invent* myths, it *experiences* them” as the psychic life of the tribe. When the tribe loses its mythological heritage “the loss is always and everywhere, *even among the civilized*, a moral catastrophe.”<sup>25</sup>

Although the above illustrates only a cursory definition of myth, it does emphasize the importance of myth for both ‘primitive’ and ‘civilized’ communities. Yet, according to Bidney, “[m]yth must be taken seriously as a cultural force but it must be taken seriously precisely in order that it may be gradually superseded in the interests of the advancement of truth and the growth of human intelligence.”<sup>26</sup> Taken within a ‘postcolonial’ framework, the advancement of ‘truth’ and ‘human intelligence’ at the

<sup>22</sup> D. Bidney, ‘Myth, Symbolism, and Truth’ in Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), *Myth: A Symposium* (London: Indiana University Press, 1971), 21.

<sup>23</sup> C Jung, C Kerényi, *Science of Mythology: Essays on the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, trans. R.F.C Hull (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), 87.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 87 (Italics mine).

<sup>26</sup> Bidney ‘Myth, Symbolism, and Truth,’ *Myth: A Symposium*, 23.

expense of myth is a serious point of contention. According to postcolonial critic Chidi Okonkwo myths, legends and ritual archetypes are important strategies of resistance and self-affirmation in postcolonial novels, where they serve both as content and as organizing principles or prefiguration techniques in the plot. That is to say, writers working within a postcolonial space often use indigenous myths in their narratives to expose and resist the oppressive history of western 'reason' and the 'scientific enterprise' that has devalued non-western beliefs by imposing binaries such as fiction-fact.<sup>27</sup> For the postcolonial writer it is not simply the replacement of a western myth with an indigenous myth; rather it is the question of agency involved in the process whereby truth/fact is separated from fiction in order to maintain the status quo. In their work Oe and Ihimaera question the common interpretation of myth as "purely fictitious"<sup>28</sup> by upsetting the apparently unambiguous line between fiction and fact. They are both aware of the persuasive power of myth in constructing national narratives and it is precisely this reason why they self-consciously *re-enter* the world of mythic apprehensions to resist the privileging of a Eurocentric historical process. In this respect, Oe's and Ihimaera's work strongly resembles magical realist writing, which rejects monolithic (logocentric) representations of national history and culture in literature.

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Given his voracious appetite for reading indigenous literature it is not surprising that Oe has incorporated strategies of resistance similar to those used by magical realist writers. The year before writing *The Game*, Oe had read both Albert Wendt, a Samoan author who uses elements of magical realism to write about the colonial history of his country, and Latin American writer Gabriel García Márquez, whose writing is synonymous with magical realism. Like Ihimaera who also admits that "The Matriarch (*sic*) was the one where I tried to blend those magic realist techniques in the same way that some of the Latin American writers were doing..."<sup>29</sup> Oe discusses his novel *The Game* in light of the importance of Wendt and García Márquez's work:

Because they need meanings that produce complex layers to express their understanding of reality as a 'whole,' containing both inside and outside, Wendt and Márquez enclose within their

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<sup>27</sup> Chidi Okonkwo, *Decolonization: Agonistics in Post Colonial Fiction* (Great Britain: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary myth is a "*purely fictitious* narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena" (italics mine).

<sup>29</sup> Paul Sharrad, 'Listening to One's Ancestors: An Interview with Witi Ihimaera,' in *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 8 (December, 1992) 100.



mythic archetypes, complexities that have the potential to rupture hierarchies. This urgent necessity results from the strong tension produced by the circumstances they face as writers. This tension is deeply rooted in ethnicity and engages with history to converge with their concept of the future.<sup>30</sup>

In magical realist novels, the representation of social relations tends to be thematized in three separated but related ways. First, the texts are metonymical of the process of modernisation or colonisation as a whole — they reflect the assumed ‘post’ colonial or unified state of culture, even though this state is described in familiar or local terms. Secondly, the texts foreshorten history so that the time scheme of the novel metaphorically contains the long process of (internal) colonisation and of homogenization. In fact, Oe’s holistic structures of time seem to be influenced by the ‘supernatural’ elements of time in Australian Aborigine’s dreamtime. Indeed, in his short essay entitled *The Loophole to “Dream Time”* he commented on the Australian Aborigine’s ability to access ancient times through unique forms of painting and oral traditions.<sup>31</sup> Thirdly, magical realist texts tend to be occupied with images of centre and periphery, particularly in the foregrounding of those gaps, absences and silences produced by the homogenization of culture, and the desire to destabilize the fixity of such binaries.

Time in magical realist narratives is closely connected to a sense of space and place. According to Kumkum Sangari, in magical realist texts “[t]ime is poised in a liminal space and in an in-between time, which having broken out of the binary opposition between circular and linear, gives a third space and a different time the chance to emerge.”<sup>32</sup> The emergence of a third space — where time allows the past, present and future to exist simultaneously — is important because it is within this space that the character building of the protagonist takes place. The strange distortions of time and space and the development of the protagonist do not happen just anywhere. In *The Game*, the primeval forest, which surrounds the villagers’ hidden valley is the most effective “chronotopic”<sup>33</sup> motif Oe uses to depict continuity between space and time. The peripheral forest symbolizes the villagers’ unconscious and serves as a particular locale in the valley where past events that have been collected as memories

<sup>30</sup> Oe Kenzaburo, *Shosetsu no hoho*. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1978), 202.

<sup>31</sup> Oe Kenzaburo, *Jizoku suru kokorozashi* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991), 510.

<sup>32</sup> Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London: Routledge, 1997), 33.

<sup>33</sup> According to Bakhtin, the name *chronotope* (literally, ‘time space’) is used to describe “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” The *chronotope* helps to discover the various relationships of people and events to time and space. “Time and space are therefore not just neutral ‘mathematical’ abstractions,” they are “forms of the most immediate reality” essential for the representation of events. See Gary Saul Morson & Caryl Emerson (eds.), *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 367.

and condensed into myths and legends can be remembered. A good example of this process occurs in the sixth and final letter of this epistolary novel.

The sixth letter, which concerns an important part of the protagonist's development, reveals Oe's nostalgic desire to return to indigenous practices and cultural forms, as they existed in the village before the domination of Tokyo. In this episode the narrator flees into the primordial forest in an attempt to find and revive the Destroyer — the village deity who symbolizes resistance to authority (especially the authority of the emperor). Here the forest actually represents the periphery of the village and a liminal space that has no structure and no sense of "fixed" time. To use Victor Turner's definition, the narrator's flight into the forest is "likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness [...] to the wilderness, and to the eclipse of the sun and the moon."<sup>34</sup>

When Oe's narrator passes the Road of the Dead on his journey into the forest, he realizes, as if suddenly seeing in a dream, why the road was built: "[T]he Road of the Dead was built by the people of our valley as a huge long altar to make sacrifices to the forest."<sup>35</sup> Here the Road of the Dead is not only a village landmark; it is also a symbolic crossroad separating the village (consciousness) from the forest (unconsciousness). The forest beyond the road symbolizes the resting-place of the valley communities' spirits, which the narrator sees in the thriving roots of the trees. The deeper he goes into the forest, the more he believes that it was "full with the scent of the ancient, which came before [his] birth, and full with the scent of the future, which came after (his) death."<sup>36</sup> The forest is coterminous with the past, present and future, and compels the reader to see historical events occurring contemporaneously before their eyes.

In his depiction of the primeval forest Oe draws on magical realism, as well as the Jungian concept of a collective unconscious, to suggest continuity exist between past and present in the forest. The content of the collective unconscious, or what Jung refers to as an archetype, is a pre-existing or inherited "primordial type of collective subconscious" (*sic*) that has either been forgotten or repressed.<sup>37</sup> The narrator's journey into the forest is in fact a rite of passage into the unconscious history and myth of the village. Jung's description of the rite of passage as a psychic transformation from the unconscious into the conscious is particularly telling if we consider the abundance of dream symbolism that Oe uses. The forest provides the narrator with an archetypal image of the myth and history from his villages' past, present, and future, which becomes a cosmos containing not only the Destroyer but also all of the other

<sup>34</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Routledge, 1969), 95.

<sup>35</sup> *The Game*, 470.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 471.

<sup>37</sup> Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, & Gerhard Adler (eds.), *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, vol. 9, part 1*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959), 3.

characters from the valley's myth and history. By going into the forest, the narrator is exposed to (and by virtue of this exposes the reader to) a myth and history different to that of Tokyo. Oe's depiction offers a panoramic picture of the entire villages' cosmos:

Everywhere in the panorama each scene from the history and myth [of our village] was reoccurring as a new event in the present. The Destroyer's giant body, stretched out and covering the entire width of the forest, was looking up at the panorama, which contained all of the history and myth.<sup>38</sup>

The narrator sees all of the characters from the village legends "contained within bright spaces like glass balls,"<sup>39</sup> each with its own space and time, but coexisting in the forest.

Oe owes much of the visual imagery in this section to his encounter with Mexico's rich tradition of popular art. In 1976 he visited Mexico where he came into contact with the Mexican Mural Movement as well as meeting Octavio Paz and Garcia Márquez. "It was quite a stimulus for me," Oe writes,

[t]here I found ancient times and the contemporary coexisting. Those colossal murals depict Mexican history from ancient times to the present synchronically. I said to myself, can it be done in literature? If you consider *The Game of Contemporaneity* (sic) as a mural, it portrays the history of a village from ancient times to the present. Right beneath the mural is a giant sprawling and looking at the entire history as contemporaneity. Both the writer and the reader can also read the novel in that fashion.<sup>40</sup>

As Michiko Wilson notes, Oe has specifically modeled *The Game* after Diego Rivera's giant fresco entitled *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda* (1948), a panoramic view of Mexican history depicting the significant political figures and social events coexisting in the same space and time. In the forest Oe tries to portray this image of a holistic reality or "dreamtime" contemporaneously, and the presentation of culture and history as natural and eternal is exchanged for a more mediated and constructed view of history and time as cyclical. Upon noticing tiny glass balls magically containing the characters from the villages' myth and history, the narrator reveals the forests' three-dimensional space through a science fiction-type story about a spaceship that can reach every planet in the cosmos instantaneously:

Among the infinite number of planets there are probably an

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<sup>38</sup> *The Game*, 436.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 485.

<sup>40</sup> Wilson, 105.

infinite number similar to earth. One could also discover an infinite variety of life forms similar to humans [...] Each planet would have its own set time, that is to say, it would form its own unit, *space x time* [...] Suppose we can see an infinite number of these space x time units on an infinite number of planets. It would mean that the eye witnessing this could see the entire history of mankind on earth with all the events taking place simultaneously. If this was the case, the viewer could then select an optional reality randomly from the infinite number of units, like a game, and reconstruct human history.<sup>41</sup>

Recuperating regional traditions by syncretising sequential and non-sequential time, and juxtaposing temporal and spatial dimensions (“space x time”), is fundamental to Oe’s reconstruction of an alternate cultural paradigm for Japan. From the vantage point of the present, *The Game* investigates the idea of an “absolute past,” suggesting that the very act of remembering and re-creating the narratives of history is an act of emancipation from the social and cultural constraints of the emperor system.

The act of reviving the past in the primeval forest is expressed through the narrator’s symbolic revival of the Destroyer. The narrator’s plan is to become “a true component of the village”<sup>42</sup> by looking for the Destroyer and reviving him. At one stage of his journey the narrator has a dream in which he is told how to revive the Destroyer. “As a symbolic act,” explains the narrator, “all I had to do was walk over the buried pieces of the Destroyer without overlooking even a tiny fragment of muscle or bone.”<sup>43</sup> The narrator’s symbolic death and rebirth or transformation in the primeval forest is juxtaposed with his sister — who is acting out the role of the Destroyer’s wet-nurse — suggesting that the narrator may become the villages’ next cultural hero. However, it is not until the narrator travels to Mexico, (another liminal or peripheral location) that he realizes and acknowledges his true identity and role as the transmitter of the myth and history of his village. Liminality in *The Game* is thus not only an imaginative space where rigid social hierarchies (the emperor system being the most dominant example) are resisted, but also a textual space where Japan’s peripheral culture can be re-inscribed.

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In comparison to Oe’s use of the forest as a liminal space, Ihimaera creates his own textual liminality in Rongopai, the family marae or meeting house built by the family of Wi Pere as a “tribute to Te Kooti’s struggle to retain

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<sup>41</sup> *The Game*, 491.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 491.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 483.

Maori identity.”<sup>44</sup> Ihimaera attempts to expose the tumultuous and violent history of the Maori by combining two seemingly antithetical characters, Wi Pere, who symbolizes a legal opposition to Pakeha hegemony, and who is in fact one of Ihimaera’s tupuna (ancestors), and Te Kooti who symbolizes a more violent resistance. In this sense Ihimaera’s depiction of Rongopai not only symbolizes the turbulent history of Maori and Pakeha relations, but also reveals a tension within Maori society between separatists (Te Kooti) and those who pursue biculturalism (Wi Pere). Furthermore, Rongopai apparently represents Ihimaera’s view that the appreciation of cultural difference is a key to finding a resolution to the problems between Pakeha and Maori. This is reflected in the building of the marae, which, just as Te Kooti had “blended the Christian faith with Maori culture,” was built by “the young people (who had) attempted to show the blending of the old ways with the new and the world of the Maori in the lands of the Pharaoh.”<sup>45</sup> While Oe’s forest becomes the source of the village-nation-microcosmos’ collective psyche, containing all pervasive time, Rongopai becomes the centre of narrator Tama’s universe:

You merely appeared to be just another meeting house [...] But for me you are the centre of my universe [...] You are my past, present and future and, thus, again I greet you and once, twice, thrice, I acclaim you.<sup>46</sup>

Tama also invites the reader into Rongopai saying, “Come with me, now, into Rongopai. Do not be afraid. Come. Take my hand.”<sup>47</sup> Then the reader (presumed to be an uninitiated Pakeha) is given an educational illustration of the significance the marae has for Maori people: “when you go into the house,” the narrator explains, “you enter into the ancestor, or, if you like, you are taken into the body of the people.”<sup>48</sup> Entering the marae is like entering “another world, the interior of Rongopai, in itself complete and self-sustaining, its own world without end, its own time-lock.”<sup>49</sup> It is a magical place containing the seeds for cultural reproduction: “Ah yes,” proclaims the narrator, “Rongopai was a fantasy as well as a real world. It conjured up an Eden where the spirit and the flesh were integrated [...] in the one, single, universe [...] (because) [t]here were no barriers between the past and the present, the living and the dead [...] And amid the profusion of plants (were) the signs of vivacity, of life rather than death, of renewal rather than recession.”<sup>50</sup>

Like Oe’s magical forest and Diego’s Mexican mural painting, on the

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<sup>44</sup> *The Matriarch*, 183.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 181.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 189.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 192-3.

walls of Ihimaera's marae, the oral histories of the Maori, from the time of creation to the journey to New Zealand and on to colonisation by Europeans are all depicted contemporaneously, to show continuity between the past and the present. In *The Matriarch* New Zealand's intercultural heritage — that is, the synergy of Maori and European cultures — is a powerful image, which Ihimaera uses to undermine the domination of one culture over another. For example, when Tama visited the mythic architecture of Venice he imagined that it “was the product of two worlds in collision, the supernatural with the real, the fantastic with the natural..” He felt as if he “had entered a timeless chamber, rather like Rongopai, whose very buildings, stones and statuary communed with men.”<sup>51</sup>

Ihimaera's references to European culture and the effects of colonisation on Maori culture force the reader to reassess assertions of authenticity, yet according to Ihimaera, his work is “exclusively Maori” in content, because it focuses on Maori culture, which is “essentially rurally based”.<sup>52</sup> The space, for example, that Ihimaera constructs inside the rural meeting-house of Rongopai is not simply bicultural; it is bound by Maori codes of conduct, rules and laws. Yet according to some Maori nationalists *The Matriarch* “is not a departure from his earlier work” so much as a “political consolidation”:

Ihimaera's politics are unashamedly integrationist — that Maori and Pakeha lives are inseparable, that ways must be found to merge the two. He mistakenly sees this as bicultural, a mixing of both cultures — that this can be integrated into the body politic. To Maori nationalists, however, biculturalism has become the latest word for a more cunning form of assimilation.<sup>53</sup>

For some Maori separatists *The Matriarch* reflects a “cultural schizophrenia” that ignores the symptoms of “colonialism's past and present imperatives” while perpetuating colonial policies and practices of subjugating the possibility of a Maori nationalist conscious. “[I]t is about time,” argues Atareta Poananga, that “we stopped genuflecting before our Maori writers for the sake of it, and stopped burnishing our Pakeha-picked “national treasures” (as one of our Maori writers was referred to recently).”<sup>54</sup> No doubt there would be some Maori readers who would question just who Poananga means when she declares “our Maori,” yet questions of who has the right to represent Maori, and what image should be manufactured are imperative to the discussion of identity politics.

In contrast to Ihimaera's resistance of Eurocentricism, Oe uses his keen

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 431.

<sup>52</sup> Witi Ihimaera, ‘Why I Write’ in *World Literature Written in English* 14, 1 (April, 1975), 117.

<sup>53</sup> Atareta Poananga, in *Broadsheet* (December, 1986), 25-28 .

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 28.

sense of marginality and knowledge of regional oral histories in *The Game* to resist the symbolic authority of the emperor system, which has colonised the village. Oe rejects the notion that his attempts to resist an internal colonisation by “stimulating the periphery would merely establish a more solid central authority.”<sup>55</sup> Instead of simply reversing the centre/periphery dichotomy and thereby perpetuating cultural essentialisms, Oe argues that the centre/periphery structure “(is) scrupulously calculated to include a kind of implicit deconstructionism.”<sup>56</sup> To decentralize the emperor without reversing binaries, Oe sets up a marginal space in the valley where the symbolic authority of the emperor (as the centre) and local customs and culture (as the periphery) coexist. To undermine the hierarchy Oe reveals the colonial nature of the empire as brutally violent.

Oe’s most effective use of centre/periphery discourse and his resistance to internal colonisation comes in the story of the Fifty-Day War, which depicts a violent battle between the small village community and the ‘Great Japanese Imperial Army’. According to the narrator, prior to the invasion of the Imperial Army the village elders all experience a “communal dream,” in which they are informed by their guardian deity the Destroyer, how to protect the village from the enemy. The villagers are told that they must build a giant dam and explode it when the Imperial Army arrives; the plan being to drown all the soldiers. The villagers carry out the task of building the dam using the same strategy their ancestors had used in the village creation myth. “It is important to note,” the narrator explains, “that for the entire valley, the preparation for the Fifty-Day War was, in effect, the reliving of the time of our land’s creation by the Destroyer and the founding fathers.”<sup>57</sup>

In fact, Oe uses the word *tsuitaiken*, from the German word *nacherleben*, or to ‘relive an experience’, to describe the villagers’ symbolic re-enactment of the creation myth. The significance of this usage becomes clearer when we gradually realize that the war is not only a physical battle between the villagers and the Imperial army, but on a symbolic level, a mythic battle between the ancestral gods of the emperor, the *amatsukami*, and the regional deity, or *kunitsukami*, who is symbolically represented by the Destroyer. In his essay *The Periphery of the Novel* (1981) Oe writes, “one must see the Emperor system, which has maintained its centrality in modern Japan, as the main theme in (*The Game*),” although “it is not actually written in the novel.”<sup>58</sup> What Oe seems to be saying here is that if most of the textual space of *The Game* focuses on the emperor system, whether critical or not, the emperor system will retain its centrality. In order to push the emperor system out to the margins of the novel’s textual space Oe merely alludes to it in his

<sup>55</sup> Oe, Kenzaburo, *Japan : The Ambiguous And Myself* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1995), 88-89.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>57</sup> *The Game*, 295.

<sup>58</sup> ‘The Centre and Periphery,’ 49-50.

portrayal of the Fifty-Day War.

Oe further reinforces this allusion by having the villagers paint on the dam in giant letters: “*matsurowanu Kunitsukami, futei Nichijin,*” (Gods of the disobedient nation; unruly Japanese). The narrator, in fact, explains that “[t]he villagers wanted to show in the beginning of the all out war with the Great Empire of Japan that the people of our village-nation-microcosmos were fundamentally different to the Empire’s army.”<sup>59</sup> Yoshiko Yokochi also states that the phrase “*matsurowanu Kunitsukami, futei Nichijin,*” not only ties the *kunitsukami* and the villagers together, it is also an allusion to the term *futei Senjin* (the rebellious Koreans), which was a term actually used by the Imperial army in their frantic attempt to justify their murder of many Koreans after the Great Kanto earthquake.<sup>60</sup> By alluding to the *kunitsukami* of the creation myth and to the murdered Koreans, Oe not only emphasizes the marginal or “outsider” status of the villagers, he also gives the impression that this “fantastic” war is “real,” stressing that just as the massacre of the Koreans was suppressed by the government, the Fifty-Day War, as a symbol of resistance, has also never been recorded in Japan’s “official” history.

After their first attack is thwarted the Imperial Army eventually arrives in the evacuated village. To protect their land the villagers organize raid parties to attack Imperial troops using ammunition from a base deep in the forest. The leader of the Imperial soldiers, “Captain No-Name”, begins to wonder “[w]hat kind of strange belief would lead (the villagers) to dream that this land was a match for the entire territory of the Great Empire of Japan.”<sup>61</sup> Then, sensing that the villagers’ spiritual bond with their land must be the source of their strength, the captain decides to carry out the “geographical conquest of the entire forest,” by using the “official map” of the area to comb the forest and “disperse its mysterious power” to reveal the villagers. Here Oe touches on cartography: the dominant practice of colonial and postcolonial cultures where the process of ‘discovery’ of an ‘undiscovered’ land is “reinforced by the construction of maps, whose existence is a means of textualizing the spatial reality of the other, naming or, in almost all cases, renaming spaces in a symbolic and literal act of mastery and control.”<sup>62</sup> The village elders, however, are already aware of the geographical assault on the forest and prepare to evacuate their base camp. In fact, because one of the villagers participated in the original survey, they too have the same one-fifty-thousandth-scale map. Thus the elders know that the Imperial army’s map was not accurate: “[t]he outsiders who came to survey to make a map know nothing about our land! Every village has mountains and rivers with high and low places [...]

<sup>59</sup> *The Game*, 261.

<sup>60</sup> Yoshiko Yokochi, ‘The Life and Works of Oe Kenzaburo,’ (PhD: Indiana University, 1981) 187.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 315.

<sup>62</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (eds.), *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998), 31.



Why does such a map made by surveyors have to be the real map of our land?"<sup>63</sup> However, when the villagers realize that their munitions factory will soon be discovered by the Imperial army, they decide to move it deeper into the interior of the forest.

Perhaps the best example of Oe's reversing the hierarchical order of the Imperial Army and the peasants comes at the very end of the Fifty-Day War, when the pressure from "the chain of command under the Emperor," the ridicule from the villagers, and the taunting apparition of the Destroyer all become too much for Captain No-Name. He resolves to destroy the entire primeval forest: "I will burn down those insufferable villagers' forest, not a blade of grass or a tree shall remain standing!"<sup>64</sup> In order to protect their forest (and hence their history) the villagers are advised by the Destroyer to surrender unconditionally. Separating those villagers who are included in the family register from those who had been kept secret, Captain No-Name exclaims:

All of you rebelled against the Great Empire of Japan by carrying out a civil war. You must pay for the crime of treason against the state. In the name of this military court I sentence you all to death!<sup>65</sup>

Suddenly a voice is heard from the huddling group of villagers:

If we do not exist in the Great Empire of Japan's birth registry, then as far as you are concerned we were never even born. Can you really sentence someone to death if they do not exist? As soon as you kill us our existence will become part of history for the Great Empire of Japan!<sup>66</sup>

Ignoring the exclamation, the Imperial Army carries out Captain No-Name's orders, using the unregistered villagers as scapegoats. They can be killed because officially they "do not exist," making it impossible for the rest of the villagers to protest. Captain No-Name's mission is to annex the village without recording the event, and the elders of the village also wish for the war to be erased from history, perhaps because their attempted revolution would be recorded as treason and thus bring a sense of shame upon them. But by killing the villagers the illusory war becomes real, and it becomes part of the Empire's embarrassing history regardless of whether or not it is recorded in the official books. By recording the village's various oral accounts of the Fifty-Day War in his letter to his sister, the narrator not only undermines the hierarchy of official and unofficial history, he also exposes the tension between oral and written history – a tension that will

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<sup>63</sup> *The Game*, 317.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 342.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 353.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 353.

become all the more obvious in Ihimaera's account.

In the story of *The Fifty-Day War*, Oe illustrates the power relationships involved in representing "truths." In this episode, Oe shows the annexation of the village as the final stage of an 'internal colonisation' under the authority of the Imperial government. Moreover, through the depiction of the Japanese Imperial Army's colonisation of the village, the centre and the periphery in *The Game* tend to blend together, upsetting the hierarchy. For Oe, what is important is becoming aware of the arbitrary nature of distinctions between the centre and periphery in order to point out the irreducible nature of the margins in all representations of national culture. Similarly, Ihimaera is aware that the decolonisation process "is a colonising process in itself,"<sup>67</sup> and to avoid essentialisms he portrays the marae – where elements of Pakeha culture exist side by side with forms of Maori culture such as oral histories – as a liminal space within the narrative.

### **Past or Present: "Official" and unofficial national histories**

As mentioned above, the interpretation of national histories is one of the more salient forms of discourse that Oe and Ihimaera are concerned with in their work. Reclaiming the histories of Maori people is a central political concern in Ihimaera's literature, and this concern is an indication of the colonised writers' mistrust of "History" inscribed by the colonisers. According to Judith Binney, the oral histories of origin and legends that supported Maori genealogies were systematically written out of their histories by early Western anthropologists and historians who considered them illogical and irrational, and therefore "unauthentic," (a highly significant action when one considers the importance of storytelling and the entire oral nature of Maori history and culture).<sup>68</sup> Binney further points out that Maori objections to Pakeha dominance in historical writing have not been concerned with claims of absolute ownership or monopoly over their history, nor claims of a right to censor "but rather to ensure that Maori understandings and values be given their full weight."<sup>69</sup> This means, essentially, that those Maori oral ways of knowing the past that "were reclassified (by Western knowledge systems) as oral *traditions* rather than histories," be respected as important representations of not only Maori but also of New Zealand history. In *The Matriarch*, Ihimaera reveals his frustration and anger toward the Pakeha dominance of historical writing and attempts to counter the ideological manipulation of the past by challenging

<sup>67</sup> Juniper Ellis 'The Singing Word,' interview with Witi Ihimaera *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 34, 1(1999), 175.

<sup>68</sup> Judith Binney, "Maori Oral Narratives, Pakeha Written Texts: Two Forms Telling History," *The New Zealand Journal Of History* 21, 1 (April, 1987), 16-28.

<sup>69</sup> Judith Binney, *Redemption Songs: A Life of Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1995), 5.

the authority of Pakeha narratives and interpretations of New Zealand's colonial history, and by privileging his own Maori perspective, which reinstates the importance of myth, legend and the oral histories of Maori culture.<sup>70</sup>

Interestingly, the privileging of a peripheral 'local' understanding of history is a method Oe also uses to destabilize the authorization of an "official" Japanese national history. By moving back (*gyakko suru*) through history, and by re-examining national myths from a contemporary space, Oe exposes the ways in which Japan's power elite has continued to create its own scapegoats in order to legitimate its authority. In *The Game*, Oe reveals how the emperor system justifies the use of violence by inscribing the ostracized villagers with taboos of death, pollution (as opposed to the emperor's pureness) and shame. The authority of the emperor is then legitimated through national myths taken from ancient texts such as the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, which have been adapted to reinforce the emperor's purity and moral virtue. In *The Game*, Oe challenges the mytho/historical narratives that define the centre and support the emperor system by contemporizing them and then by offering alternative interpretations, which undermine the authority of an "official" understanding.

To contemporize Oe's novel *The Game*, and to put the question of "official" historiography in Japan into perspective we may look, for example, at the problem concerning the controversial history textbook that came to a head in 2001. In a recent letter to the *Asahi Shimbun*, Oe wrote that the Ministry of Education's decision to use the controversial history textbook in a school for the mentally impaired, after it had been widely rejected, constituted "a blatant attack on the weak" and proved that the Tokyo mayor Ishihara Shintaro's concept of internationalization was "distorted."<sup>71</sup> In reaction to negative criticism the editor of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, a newspaper that has been criticized for its strong nationalistic stance, wrote an article attempting to defend the publication and distribution of the new junior high school textbook. According to the editor, atrocities such as the Manchurian Massacre, enforced labour and the use of (mainly) Korean women as sex slaves during the war were sensationalized by the mass media, and, in effect, never really occurred. "The so-called comfort women," claims the editor, were actually "volunteer labour workers," whose stories were doctored by advocates of a kind of "self-destructive view of history" (*jigyakushikan*), which painted Japan as a "harbinger of incomparable evil." Such events, argues the editor, should not be allowed to "dirty" Japan's history.<sup>72</sup>

Yet, despite the constant criticism from people in other Asian

<sup>70</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press), 33.

<sup>71</sup> *Asahi Shimbun* (August 8, 2001), 31.

<sup>72</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun* (March 2, 2001), 3.

countries, who charge that this relieves the emperor of his responsibilities by glossing over Imperial Japan's wartime history, there has been little discussion about this textbook's relationship with other neo-nationalist movements. Attempts by groups closely affiliated with the Ministry of Education and other government bodies to purge Japan's wartime responsibilities by distorting history and by promoting cultural nationalism are not isolated. In fact, this malignant strain of ideology has its own history: Prime Minister Koizumi's worshipping at Yasukuni Shrine (the resting-place of class-A war criminals), Tokyo mayor Ishihara Shintaro's use of the term *sangokujin* (a derogatory war-time term used to refer to Koreans and Chinese as criminals), and the legal recognition of the *Hinomaru* and *Kimigayo*, which served as the de facto national flag and anthem during World War Two are some of the more obvious attempts by nationalists to bolster a national identity built upon war-time symbols and ideology. Attempts to curb this trend have met with furious resistance and, at times, brutal violence. Yet in some quarters resistance has persisted.

Oe, for one, has continued to confront the type of historical revisionism advocated by Japanese nationalists by offering an alternative historiography. Perhaps the clearest example of how Oe confronts the problem of national histories in *The Game* is in the story of Kamei Meisuke (hereafter Meisuke). This episode is important because it illustrates how Oe uses popular legend and 'local' memory to reconstruct and reexamine some of the most influential events of 19<sup>th</sup> century Japan. In particular, Oe looks at the *sonno joi* movement, which sought to 'revere the emperor and expel the barbarian' foreigners, the dissolving of the Tokugawa Bakufu, and the *yonaoshi ikki*, or peasant 'uprisings to remake society'.

Briefly, the story of Meisuke is set around the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Before the social upheaval of the Restoration, Japan was divided into semi-autonomous feudal clans. National identity, defined as "the cultural and territorial identification with the nation [...] existed only among the ruling classes, the samurai and the vassals of the imperial court."<sup>73</sup> At this time the peasant population, which outnumbered the ruling classes, were not familiar with the emperor, nor did they have "the feeling of being one with the nation as a whole."<sup>74</sup> Thus collective memory, as the raw material of national history, was so tightly bound to the dominant social class that the identification of that class with the nation concealed the presence of local memory – namely the collective memory of those who lived in Japan's peripheries.<sup>75</sup> Regional identity, however, survived in the form of closely-knit village communities or *kyodotai*, which served as a repository for local history, and as a form of institutional support and resistance against state domination.

<sup>73</sup>Takeuchi Keiichi, 'Nationalism and Geography in Modern Japan, 1880s to 1920s,' in David Hooson (ed.), *Geography and Nationality Identity*(U.S.A: Blackwell, 1994),104.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Irokawa Daikichi, *The Culture of The Meiji Period*, trans. Marius B. Jansen (Princeton: New Jersey: Princeton University Press,1985), 273-276.

Although the story of Meisuke has not been recorded officially in Japanese history books, the uprising itself seems to be based on legends passed down to Oe as a child from a woman in his native village.<sup>76</sup> According to these legends, the protagonist is repeatedly brought back to life as a rebel, a leader of a rice riot, and later as a soldier from the Meiji period up to the war in the Pacific. Here history is not elongated through the recurrence of these episodes; it is condensed in the form of legends, for the purpose of extending and abridging what came before. The past thus becomes the basis for explicating what follows. Yet what follows can also help shape the past, at least in the way things are remembered. In particular, each event occurs within its own political context, which is remembered and passed on often unconsciously from age to age. Through alluding to an oral history Oe reveals how Japanese myths and legends, which have been manipulated to denote the origins of institutions such as the emperor system that have long been fixed historically, can contain a kind of political unconscious, which is exposed by “going back” and re-examining the past. This becomes more apparent if we consider the historical context surrounding the beginning of the story of Meisuke.

As we read we discover that the political unconscious at work in the legend of Meisuke can, in fact, be understood as an analogy for colonisation. The narrator explains that during the ‘age of freedom,’ when the village was still ‘undiscovered’ a secret trade route was opened with the main centre. Before long traders came to purchase tree wax from the village in exchange for imported goods. Eventually the ‘age of freedom’ came to an end when a group of samurai, who had relinquished their lord, discovered the valley on their way to the capital where a revolution was taking place to overthrow the feudal government, and decided to use the village as their first base camp.

Although there were a number of attempts to overthrow the feudal government near the end of the Edo period, in the story of Meisuke, Oe seems to be alluding to the *sonno joi* movement, which aimed to restore the emperor as the symbolic head and to expel all foreigners from Japan. Briefly, in 1858, Tokugawa officials decided to conclude a treaty and trade alliance with the United States, which brought about the abolition of *sakoku* or the closed country policy that had kept Japan secluded for over 200 years. A split then occurred within the government and among feudal lords, creating pro-foreign and anti-foreign factions that destabilized the already waning house of Tokugawa. Although the emperor was persuaded by the Shogunate to accept the treaty with America, the alternative being a possible war with the West, those who advocated the anti-foreign policy maintained their extremist attitude and favoured the removal of the pro-foreign Shogunate and the restoration of political power to the emperor. Realizing that resistance was futile, on November 9, 1867 the newly appointed Shogun resigned, and with the help of the allied forces of the

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<sup>76</sup> Yoshiko Yokochi, 175-6.

four most powerful clans in Japan, Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa, and Hizen (the Satcho Dohi clans), the fifteen year old emperor Meiji took control of the country. Given Oe's extensive knowledge of the Meiji Restoration, it is most likely that he modeled the story of the samurai who discovered the village, on members of the *sonno joi* movement on their way to the capital to overthrow the Tokugawa government.

The narrator informs his audience that the arrival of the samurai signaled a serious threat to the villagers, and yet they were welcomed somewhat suspiciously as guests. The villagers decided that Meisuke, still a juvenile, should be the diplomatic spokesman for the valley. According to one version of the legend the young *Sakamoto Ryoma*-esque Meisuke decides to cut a deal with the samurai: in exchange for protection from the samurai the villagers would finance their revolution in the capital to overthrow the old regime. Yet another version suggests that the samurai were actually bandits who kidnapped the village children and took them hostage in the main storehouse. According to this version, Meisuke tricks them out of the storehouse and has them beheaded. A closer look at the different versions reveals a correlation between the legends and Japan's collision with the West. That is to say, and to risk oversimplifying the point, Oe has used local legends from the village to tell, in an extremely complex and imaginative fashion, the story of modern Japan's opening to the West. He has managed to 'internalize' what was happening outside Japan, at the time, in order to show how a similar process was also happening inside. For example, the story of the samurai's untimely appearance in the 'secluded' valley seems ironically similar to Captain Perry's 1853 arrival in a 'secluded' Japan – heavily armed like Oe's samurai – and the forcing of the country open at gun point. In the story of Meisuke the villagers are able to monopolize the national wax trade (they are even able to trade internationally) because they assist the samurai with their 'revolution'. In other words, the villagers take advantage of the situation, not unlike the way the Japanese power elite took advantage of their predicament by invading and colonising the Korean peninsula – in almost perfect mimicry of Western Imperialism. This technique is considerably different to the technique Ihimaera uses, which is to insert extracts from 'official' history textbooks, only to reject them as 'false'. Oe does not necessarily 'reject' official stories. Instead, he juxtaposes versions layer upon layer to provide a dialogic understanding and an explanation of where such "readings" of history may come from. Many would argue that this technique is ultimately more effective.

According to the story of Meisuke, following its opening by force the village is rocked by three major uprisings. These uprisings seem to be based on the constant string of peasant protests that marked the end of the Tokugawa period and the beginning of the Meiji Restoration. By 1868, peasants throughout Japan had rebelled over 2000 times and had rioted approximately another 1000, mostly in protest against the exorbitant land

taxes.<sup>77</sup> Oe's own village was not exempt from the peasant rebellions, which were led by a young man (not unlike Meisuke) whose intention was to appeal to the lord of the castle town in Osu for a tax reform. The uprising "signified the masses' transfer of allegiance from the local lord to the Emperor" but that transfer was short lived.<sup>78</sup>

Land tax and conscription were not the only objects of resistance. In the legend of Kamei Meisuke, Oe also shows how people in the periphery resisted the homogenization of their language with the language of Tokyo. In particular, the influence of Yanagita Kunio's view of traditional village values seems to fill *The Games's* narrative. For example, Oe seems to be influenced by Yanagita's concept of the importance of reviving regional languages. Yanagita said, "the people of agricultural villages must find a way to retrieve their ability to take part in the process of spontaneous language."<sup>79</sup> According to Minoru Kawada, Yanagita saw that it was important that communities retain their capacity to "independently create words in accordance with their needs," even though "[E]ach village lost its function as a unit of language formation" due to the centralized education system adopted in the Meiji period.<sup>80</sup> Historically speaking, in order for Japan to become a nation-state, the government had to unify culture. The primary means for unification was to make the language spoken by the samurai class and those living in Edo, or present-day Tokyo, as the standard language for the entire nation. Japan's homogenization of culture, including the standardization of language during the Meiji period was clearly a form of internal colonisation, or what Miller calls an internally directed or "reverse" orientalism:

By setting up Japanese life and culture as somehow unique and by taking every possible step to ensure that both should remain the exclusive preserve and domain of a small closed group, a group to which an individual can gain admission only by circumstances of birth, these leaders were early determined to practice cultural and social Orientalism upon themselves, before others could practice it upon them.<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, Miller's comments emphasize the difficulty Oe faces in trying to decolonise the Japanese language. In *The Game*, Oe's technique is to

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<sup>77</sup> Irwin Scheiner, 'Benevolent Lords and Honorable Peasants: Rebellion and Peasant Conscious in Tokugawa Japan,' in Tetsuo Najita & Irwin Scheiner (eds.), *Japanese Thought in the Tokugawa Period, 1600-1868* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1978), 40-43.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 172.

<sup>79</sup> Kawada Minoru, *The Origin of Ethnography in Japan: Yanagita Kunio and his Times*, trans. Toshiko Kishida-Ellis (London & New York: Kegan Paul International, 1993), 157.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Roy Miller, *Japan's Modern Myth: The Language and Beyond* (New York & Tokyo: John Weatherhill, 1982), 209.

parody the modern myth of the standard language, or *Hyojungo*, as the national dialect of Japan. Throughout *The Game*, Oe uses the language of his village as a form of dissent and a means to enforce agency by privileging the ‘local’ and defamiliarizing those who speak the standardized language of Tokyo. In the story of Kamei Meisuke, he takes this to an extreme and parodies the idea of an ‘official’ dialect by having Meisuke recite a fabricated story about the villagers’ efforts to create their own language:

A plan to simplify language was carried out in the valley in order to meet the standard of those living there who were deprived of civilization. Naturally there were only a few words completed. For example, a dog would be called “woof”, and a cat would be “meow”. The things that flew in the air we would call “birdie” and anything in the water would be called “fishie” [...] Anyway, does a peasant community situated deep within the mountains really need many difficult words?<sup>82</sup>

After Meisuke manages to quell a pitched battle between the farmers of a neighboring clan and the soldiers who control the clan, the narrator’s village experiences another uprising. The narrator explains to a young director that once their village had been discovered by the clan authorities “they were taxed one hundred times that of a home in a normal village under the poll tax, which brought great hardship.”<sup>83</sup> The villagers began to suffer many hardships under the severe poll tax referred to as “house to house duty”. In reaction, they carry out another uprising and succeed in overturning the taxation, only after many are killed in violent outbursts.

According to the narrator, the third uprising referred to as the “blood tax riot,” occurred approximately four years after the Meiji Restoration. This uprising, which again seems to be based on actual historical events, was incited to resist the adoption of compulsory military service. During the Meiji period the term “blood tax” was often used to describe the conscription system, which was merely a form of forced labour for villagers. As Hane suggests, “[M]any peasants took this to mean that actual blood would be extracted from them.”<sup>84</sup> Some rumors suggested that the Japanese officials “will draft young men, hang them upside down, and draw out their blood so that Westerners can drink it. What the Westerners in Yokohama are drinking — something called wine, it is said — is actually the blood of these young men.”<sup>85</sup> The peasants therefore often resisted the draft through uprisings.

The narrator explains that, according to one version of the third uprising, Meisuke manipulated the connotations of the term “blood tax” to

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<sup>82</sup> *The Game*, 239.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*



induce fear in the farmers and to ignite their anger. Here, Oe seems to be touching on an important strategy taken by those opponents of pro-westernization that used the fear of foreign invasion and colonisation to unify the peasants' "sense of nation". Carol Gluck, for example, points out that "[I]n the process of demarcation, *minkan* (among the people) ideologues formed a phalanx of defensive nationalism and attacked what was foreign as a means of staking out the home ground of what was Japanese."<sup>86</sup> The manipulation of the term "blood tax" by the leaders of the uprisings was not only responsible for turning the farmers against the new prefectural governor and the Meiji government, it also seems to have been responsible for inciting in the farmers a xenophobia against the West. The hypothesis that Meiji oligarchy instilled fear and jealousy in the populace to ignite an "anti-West" sentiment has important implications when approached from the perspective of the psychology of Japanese nationalism.

Although Oe has alluded to 'documented' historical events such as the blood tax uprisings, and the uprisings in his own village, which help to add authenticity to the legend of Kamei Meisuke, by including conflicting versions, and emphasizing the arbitrariness of history, Oe's narrator suggests that "one can choose a single reality quite arbitrarily, as if playing a game, and rearrange the history of mankind as one wishes it to be."<sup>87</sup> Of course, Oe does not see history or the construction of it as a mere game. But by giving the analogy of reality as a kind of game that one can pick and chose, Oe is reminding us that, while events did occur in the "real" empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning.

If we link Oe's centre/periphery paradigm with the concept of "multiple" histories, then his privileging the villagers' perspective of history over the established official version can certainly be seen as an attempt to empower Japan's periphery. Yet compared to Ihimaera, who can depict without too much difficulty the process of New Zealand's colonisation by Europeans, Oe's case is perhaps more complex because he is dealing mainly with internal power structures and homogenized cultural images. Oe has tried to overcome this difficulty in *The Game* by juxtaposing centre/internal and periphery/external events through a composition of historiographical metafiction and magical realism, and presents the colonisation of the village by Imperial Japan as an actual historical event, which has been erased from an "official" history.

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<sup>86</sup> Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 128.

<sup>87</sup> *The Game*, 491.

### Ihimaera's portrayal of (oral) history in *The Matriarch*

Whose story is our history, in what way can we achieve an understanding of how the present emerged *without* succumbing to a myopic parochialism, and what tools should we use to excavate the fertile ground of our past? Ihimaera's answer to these questions is to expose the biased nature of nineteenth century (Western) historiography, which set the "historical" over against the "fabulous" or "mythical," (as if the former were genuinely *empirical* and the latter were nothing but *conceptual*), by creating a tension between Maori oral history and an official "written" New Zealand history.<sup>88</sup>

The division between "written history" and "oral based myth" is ambiguous in *The Matriach* due to Ihimaera's view that, at their basic foundation, myth and history are both verbal structures in the form of a 'narrative prose discourse' that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes. Instead of allowing the privileged "realist" narratal trope of modern historical writing to remain central, Ihimaera creates multiple narratives of both realism *and* myth which constantly interact. As a result, the reader's intuitive search for unity drives him/her inevitably towards a comparison of the parallelisms, events and characters from the multiple narratives, which in turn encourages the reader to construct meaning based on the various parallels and similarities between each character's stories. This is largely due to the fact that the multiple narratives, which make up the various historical events in *The Matriach* cannot be tied together by relying on one governing narratal view point. All reference to a centre, to a subject, to a privileged reference is abandoned.

In *The Matriarch*, Ihimaera uses written and oral history as an attempt to "record the whole response to colonisation, political, military, and psychological, of the Maori people during 150 years of Pakeha occupation."<sup>89</sup> Like Oe, who retells the official history of the modernisation and centralisation of Japan as a process of internal colonisation, Ihimaera looks dubiously at the official history taught in schools of the 'discovery' and subsequent colonisation of New Zealand by the British in order to expose the gaps and silences. For example, the

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<sup>88</sup> According to Hayden White's seminal work *Metahistory*, thinkers of the nineteenth century conventionally distinguished among three kinds historiography: fabulous, true, and satirical. "The Enlighteners believed that the ground of all truth was reason [...]. This meant that whole bodies of data from past – everything contained in legend, myth, fable – were excluded as potential evidence for determining the truth about the past – that is to say, that aspect of the past which such bodies of data directly represented to the historian trying to reconstruct a life in its integrity and not merely in terms of its most *rationalistic* manifestations." See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 1-11.

<sup>89</sup> Mark Williams, *Leaving The Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists*. (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1990), 119.

narrator introduces the text book version of the arrival of Captain Cook to New Zealand, only to undermine it by reminding the (Pakeha) reader that:

All New Zealand schoolchildren are taught about Captain James Cook's discovery of New Zealand [...] But what they are not told is that [t]he glorious birth of the nation has the taste of bitter almonds when one remembers that six Maoris died so that a flag could be raised ...<sup>90</sup>

In reaction to the institutionalized Pakeha version of history, which chronicles New Zealand's 'discovery' by the English, Ihimaera weaves his own textual representation by invoking Maori oral histories regarding the mythical journey from Hawaiki to Aotearoa by the canoe Takitimu. The prose Ihimaera uses to describe the building of the canoe incorporates many of the oral conventions such as repetition and onomatopoeia, and the imagery is epic in what seems to be an attempt to dwarf the importance of the British arrival. Ihimaera's depiction of the building of the canoe and the preparation for the departure evokes "the world view of another culture – heroic, tribal, organically connected to the cosmos and to nature".<sup>91</sup> The narrator, who invites the reader to "draw near and listen to the story," conveys the oratorical nature of this episode.<sup>92</sup>

Ihimaera's pedagogical approach not only re-educates the reader about the events that occurred when British settlers first made contact with the Maori, but it also introduces the Pakeha reader to a distinctly Maori perspective of history. The didactic tone taken by the narrator in *The Matriarch* often borders on harassment; he confronts the (Pakeha) audience as "You Pakeha," in an attempt, it seems, by Ihimaera to shock the reader. Ihimaera's intention here seems to be to recover Maori oral records concerning their arrival as a legitimate way of viewing their past. Early Pakeha historians saw Maori myths as irrational and therefore unrealistic. In reaction, Ihimaera incorporates myth to emphasize the function of Maori oral history, which he uses to revise versions of history legitimated by New Zealand's white colonial government. The "official" version of history is therefore contested, and becomes merely another story of the past. Indeed, the narrator Tama reinforces this concept by saying that: "[A]ll truth is fiction really, for the teller tells it as he sees it, and it might be different from some other teller. This is why histories often vary, depending on whether you are the conqueror or not."<sup>93</sup>

Another example of how Ihimaera uses an oral history in literature to change our perception of the past is found in the re-telling of the Matawhero incident. In this episode, Ihimaera purposefully sets up a discourse between the narrator, his Pakeha historian friend, and the reader

<sup>90</sup> *The Matriarch*, 36-37.

<sup>91</sup> Williams, 122.

<sup>92</sup> *The Matriarch*, 252.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 403.

to show how a Maori understanding of history can be different to a Pakeha understanding. First Tama's historian friend, who deciphers historical documents to legitimate the event, gives the reader the official Pakeha version of the incident. Tama then immediately confronts the reader, stating that "[c]ertain allowances need to be made for some of my old friend's statements [...] when he (the historian) refers to the 'Matawhero Massacre' what he is really referring to is Te Kooti Rikirangi's *retaliation* against a whole history of Pakeha abuse of Maori people, custom and land [...] He is referring to an act of utu."<sup>94</sup> According to Binney's groundbreaking book *Redemption Songs*, Te Kooti's carefully planned assault on Matawhero "was far from random: it was a war to reclaim his land."<sup>95</sup> In her meticulously researched book, Binney has relied on numerous written sources, including scriptural texts of the Ringatu faith (founded by Te Kooti), manuscripts of the official and unofficial phase of Te Kooti's military life, diaries and journals, and, perhaps most importantly, countless oral narratives. Binney emphasizes the point that stories from the Maori oral world "are narrated – and recast down the generations – for a purpose [...] If the main battle in the history of any colonised people is over their lands, the historical narratives which people retain locally are all concerned with the means of holding, or recovering and protecting, the land."<sup>96</sup> By using oral accounts of whakapapa, or genealogy, which makes up the "backbone of all Maori history that carries both the past and the present into the future."<sup>97</sup> Ihimaera exposes how the evidence pointing to Te Kooti's ownership rights of land was "manipulated (by the Poverty Bay Commission) to meet the requirement of excluding 'rebels'."<sup>98</sup> "[T]hey," (Pakeha) exclaims the narrator, "need to be told the truth."<sup>99</sup>

Besides exposing the gaps and silences in New Zealand's "official history" through incorporating Maori oral histories, Ihimaera has also hijacked official documents, only to explode them as being misrepresentative. In particular, he has directly taken some passages from Keith Sorrenson's entry on Maori land tenure from *An Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, one of the more popular academic history texts (1986 edited by W. H. McLintock) without labeling his source. According to Mark Williams, this process of lifting historical accounts is deliberate: "(Ihimaera) writes *against* Sorrenson's account and *against* the historical kind of writing Sorrenson uses." Williams, however, criticises Ihimaera for 'lifting' passages and "interpolating his own comments," accusing Ihimaera of 'plagiarism,' and arguing that it "would seem to constitute an infringement of copyright."<sup>100</sup> But Ihimaera is concerned with the representation of

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>95</sup> Binney, *Redemption Songs*, 112.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>97</sup> Binney, 'Maori Oral Narratives'.

<sup>98</sup> Binney, *Redemption Songs*, 112-113.

<sup>99</sup> *The Matriarch*, 159.

<sup>100</sup> Williams, 129.

Maori by Pakeha and has chosen Sorrenson's text – which Pakeha including Williams claim to be “exact, restrained, balanced, objective, unemotive, (and) factual” – in order to expose the absurd and unjust way the colonists recorded history.<sup>101</sup> *The Matriarch* represents Ihimaera's attempt at re-appropriating official Pakeha history and re-constructing it from a Maori perspective, while simultaneously venting his indignation at the descendants of white colonisers, whom he addresses directly as “You Pakeha,” for the role they have played in the appropriation of Maori land and in the decline of Maori culture and tradition.

## Conclusion

Edward Said has suggested that “[n]o one has written more profoundly about [...] the contradictions, the ups and downs of modernity and tradition, war and peace, dependence and audacity, empire and loss (in Japan) [...] than (Oe).”<sup>102</sup> Common to many of Oe's works has been his unyielding desire to expose the contradictions in Japanese society, between what has been privileged as the ‘centre’ and what has been inscribed as the ‘periphery’. Despite the overwhelming amount of work Oe has published concerning themes ranging from Japan's marginals (Burakumin and Ainu) to more controversial topics such as the relationship between right wing violence and the emperor system, there has been an alarming lack of criticism from both in and outside Japan. That Oe's short story *Death of a Political Youth* still remains unpublished due to violent threats from right-wing groups attests to the delicacy involved in writing about social taboos in Japan. Yet, that these issues have still not been seriously confronted by non-Japanese academics is somewhat more puzzling and has ultimately led to Oe's marginalization in Japanese literature. One important premise of this paper has therefore been to approach Oe's work outside the confined boundaries of a national literature. By comparing *The Game* with Ihimaera's *The Matriarch*, and by considering the influence of global trends in literature, this paper has attempted to shed some light on Oe's treatment of local, national, and international issues such as the effects of different forms of colonisation, which confront minority groups world-wide.

Oe and Ihimaera's emphasis on re-telling the history of cruelty and imperialist oppression as well as their celebration of indigenous culture and beliefs exposes the existence of marginalized people whose voices have been suppressed by those in power, and is extremely important and relevant to the current situation in both New Zealand and Japan, as well as in many other locations around the world. The demand for Japan to accept responsibility for its imperialist past, and for the New Zealand Government to acknowledge and reassess the improper sale of land taken from Maori,

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>102</sup> See note 2.

are only two clear examples of how important works such as *The Game* and *The Matriarch* are to contemporary society, and indeed to future generations.