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# Three feet under: hāngī and the contemporary adaptation of indigenous culinary techniques

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## ABSTRACT

The sharing of familiar foods is but one of the ways a cultural group identifies itself. But what happens if that cultural group begins to lose touch with, or control of, its food traditions? Worldwide, professional chefs are embracing traditional indigenous cookery techniques and ingredients in their search for national culinary identity. In doing so, the line between ownership and appropriation is becoming an increasingly fine one. Within today's Māori society, the hāngī is one of the few remaining traditional food preparation techniques still in regular use. Yet the use of its traditional earth oven form is growing more infrequent as less labor-intensive variations grow in popularity and as the technique becomes increasingly incorporated into commercial hospitality practice. Drawing on research that explores the knowledge and personal experiences of seven hāngī practitioners, this paper examines the cultural significance of the hāngī as a traditional indigenous food preparation technique. As the hāngī increasingly crosses over into the commercial realm it questions the fine line between cookery technique and indigenous culinary property as it asks just what makes a hāngī a hāngī?

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## Introduction

Traditionally, kai (food) plays a prominent role in Māori culture. Māori food traditions can be said to extend back nearly 3000 years into the Pacific from whence the Polynesian settlers of New Zealand, the early ancestors of the Māori, arrived (Belich 1996). Oral traditions state that food descended from the atua (gods), and that it was through the actions of the atua Tūmataunga (god of war and humans) and his desire to seek utu (revenge) on his brothers for their cowardice, that kai was made noa (without restriction) and thus able to be consumed by humans (R. Walker 2004). This mythological connection has led to the harvesting, preparation and cooking of kai being surrounded by a series of spiritual, cosmological, and environmental beliefs and rituals (Moon 2005; Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori 2010; Williams 2013). The concept of manaakitanga (hospitality) plays a pivotal role in Māori social interaction, wherein an obligation is placed on the host to provide food, sustenance, and hospitality to

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a guest. In return, the host gains mana (status) from the exchange (Martin 2010; Mead 2003; Neill, Williamson, and Berno 2015).

One of the last traditional food preparation techniques still in regular use within Māori society is the hāngī, or earth oven – a cooking technique that utilizes a pit in the earth to cook food with steam and heat from pre-heated stones. Prior to European arrival, the hāngī was used daily as the primary technique for the cooking of kai (Burton 2009; Fitzpatrick 2007; Leach 2010). The introduction of European cooking techniques and oven apparatus has seen a gradual reduction in the use of hāngī (Belich 1996; Leach 2010). Today, hāngī are put down for hui (gatherings) or times of celebration and loss – particularly on the marae (complex of carved buildings and grounds that belong to a particular tribe). Increasingly, hāngī are now being put down outside of the marae space as part of fundraising activities or as the focus of special monetary events.

Within New Zealand there is a growing consensus amongst culinary art practitioners, influencers, and suppliers around the cultural, social, and economic benefits of defining what a contemporary New Zealand cuisine may look like (Clifford 2021; Latham 2021). As a result, interest in traditional Māori cookery techniques and ingredients is growing as chefs, both Māori and Pakeha (New Zealander of European descent), seek to incorporate aspects of New Zealand's indigenous heritage as they individually interpret what a New Zealand national cuisine may look like (Brett 2022; Fiso 2020; Ahi 2024; Thorner 2022). Alongside this is the increasing use of the hāngī for financial gain, bringing into question how indigenous culinary techniques are being incorporated into European structured hospitality frameworks. This change in purpose raises questions around indigenous food sovereignty and how the cultural importance imbued within these indigenous culinary techniques is being recognized and respected as these techniques increasingly take on a financial focus (Grey and Newman 2018; Huambachano 2018; Veracini 2022).

## Materials and methods

### *Methodology*

This research project was approached through a critical theory worldview. A hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, utilizing key informant interviews, provided the structure within which this research was conducted and analyzed. The entire research project was built around a Māori centered research approach (Cunningham 2000) which recognized the critical research aspects of Kaupapa Māori research theory (Mahuika 2008; Smith 1999). This research approach recognized that the project would be engaging with Māori knowledge (Mātauranga Māori) with its fundamental structure of wholism, connectedness and interdependence between the personal and the collective, and the physical and spiritual environments. In doing so, the project acknowledged the breadth and scope of Mātauranga Māori, its critical connection with the Māori identity and Te Ao Māori (the Māori world), and the value it places on the oral transmission of that knowledge and connection (Hikuroa 2017; Mead 2012).

The research team acknowledges that the Mātauranga Māori contained within this paper is not newly discovered but has simply been brought together into the one kete (basket), and unlike contemporary western thinking the knowledge contained in this kete is not owned by one individual but is held for the benefit of all – past, present, and future.

## Participants

Data gathering was achieved using a series of semi-structured key informant interviews with seven participants. Participants were obtained by use of purposive sampling, based on the participants' first-hand knowledge of either preparing hāngī, or of organizing hui where hāngī have been used as the primary kai cooking technique. Of equal importance, the participants were required to have a strong connection to, or identify as, Māori. This was to ensure that the experience of participants relating to hāngī, either impacted on or were centered within a Māori cultural environment. Participants were informed that they would be identified by name and role within the final analysis. This is culturally important in terms of status, mana, and acknowledgment of mātauranga Māori (customary knowledge) (S. Walker, Eketone, and Gibbs 2006).

The seven participants who agreed to be interviewed for this research were:

*Riki Bennett – Te Arawa, Ngāti Porou*

Riki has facilitated workshops on traditional native plant use, and the making of mōkihi (reed boats) and traditional rat traps and has presented at environmental conferences both in New Zealand and Australia. He has represented New Zealand at the Pacific Arts Festival in Palau Micronesia, speaking on traditional New Zealand native plant use. Riki has put down numerous hāngī, both for personal use and at many fundraising and corporate events. He is also a recognised expert in the making and use of taonga puoro. (traditional Māori musical instruments)

*Stan Tawa – Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Awa, Te Arawa*

Stan is a professionally trained chef and culinary arts lecturer. In this role, he was instrumental in the founding of the Ngā Kete e Toru—a programme which provided young chefs with an understanding of Māori culture, and tikanga (protocol) relating to food. He was also catering coordinator for Te Matatini 2015, an event that catered for approximately 7000 manuhiri (guests). Stan presented on the authenticity of the hāngī at the 2013 Council for Australasian Tourism and Hospitality Education (CAUTHE) conference.

*Monique Fiso – Ngā Rauru*

Monique is a professional chef of Māori and Samoan descent. Having started her career in Wellington, she spent almost a decade in New York. Returning home in late 2015, she has begun work developing and refining traditional Māori cookery methods and promoting them into cutting edge cuisine in her own restaurant, Hiakai.

*Brett McGregor – Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangī, Ngāti Kahungunu*

Self-taught, Brett has been putting down hāngī on a regular basis since the early 1990s. In his role as a caterer, Brett has provided catered earth cooked hāngī events for nearly all the marae of Tāmaki-makau-rau. (Auckland)

*Jason King – Waikato, Ngāti Mahuta ki te hauāuru*

Jason is a Senior Lecturer at Te Ara Poutama, the Faculty of Māori and Indigenous Development at AUT, where his teaching areas focus on Māori language, leadership, and marae customs and protocols. Australian film-makers Matthew Salleh and Rose Tucker filmed Jason and his whānau (family group) as they demonstrated a hāngī being put down on their marae, Te Koraha, for inclusion in their documentary “Barbecue,” which is now available to be viewed on Netflix.

*Paul Retimanu*

Paul, who is of Samoan descent, is a successful hospitality operator and managing director of Manaaki Management. Alongside his wife, Keri (Ngāpuhi), Paul has been promoting modern Māori kaupapa and cuisine throughout his venues. Paul is also Chair of the Pacific Island Business Development Trust and Wellington Pacific Business Network.

*Joe McLeod – Ngāi Tūhoe*

Joe is a professionally trained chef and promoter, researcher, and practitioner of traditional Māori kai. In a career that has spanned nearly 50 years, Joe has cooked both commercially and most recently as a food presenter for his own show, Joe's World on a Plate, shown on the Māori television channel Whakaata Māori. In 2021, Joe was inducted into the New Zealand Chefs Hall of Fame

**Research questions**

While the interviews were conversational in tone, participants were asked two core questions to provide a repeatable structure across all seven interviews. The two research questions were:

**RQ1:** What are your experiences of hāngī?

**RQ2:** In what situations or in what contexts were your experiences of hāngī based?

Four further questions were then put to the participant as prompts over the course of the interview. They were:

**RQ1:** In your experience has the frequency of hāngī use changed?

**RQ2:** Has the reason for the use of hāngī changed?

**RQ3:** Was or is there any cultural significance beyond its use as a food preparation technique?

**RQ4:** Has the meaning behind the use of hāngī changed?

**Results*****The Hāngī as a cultural learning space***

It's not just a hāngī, it's not just cooking this food in the ground. (Stan)

Māori culture is traditionally built upon a complex layering of social, cultural, and quasireligious rules and guidelines (Mead 2003). These tikanga (correct procedure or custom) weave in and out of a person's life and provide them with guidance on a wide range of issues, such as kaupapa (policy), whakapapa (genealogy), wairuatanga (spirituality), and tapu (under protection, or sacred). As is the case with any cultural

knowledge and understanding, mātauranga Māori is passed on and learned in many formal and informal, active, and passive ways (Mead 2003; Salmond 1975).

Riki, Stan, Jason and Joe were all raised in rural Māori communities within whānau strongly connected with their marae. For them, hāngī were part and parcel of the Māori world in which they were brought up:

Well as a child, as a kid, hāngī was very much a part of our upbringing. (Riki Bennett)

Hāngī was a staple diet—hāngī and boil up, those two. (Jason King)

It was while immersed within this rich Māori environment that all four were exposed to the various aspects of tikanga that surrounded the hāngī:

We were taught it all—reo (language), whakairo (carving), waiata (song), mara kai (garden-ing for food). It was a concentration of knowledge—all the mātauranga, tikanga. It was immersion, total immersion . . . You learned it because you were in it. (Joe McLeod)

For those interviewees brought up within a whānau (family group) of strong Māori cultural connections, the hāngī provided a platform around which issues and examples of tikanga were learned in a more informal environment. For example, before beginning the process of organizing and cooking a hāngī, thanks would be given, and protection sought from the atua. In doing so, the participants (as children observing this) began to understand the concepts of whakapapa, wairuatanga, and Te Ao Mārama (the natural world). Through observing the selection and gathering of resources, they gained an understanding of the importance of sustainability, of rāhui (ritual prohibition), and the role of Papatūānuku (earth mother), as the motherly provider.

All three acknowledged the connection between hāngī and whenua (the land). The resources of kai, wood, the earth, all the resources come back to the whenua and, thus, whakapapa back to Papatūānuku and providing a strong physical and spiritual connection to the land, the land of their ancestors. Although hāngī was not the only way in which this connection was sustained, through its role in the production of food and sustenance, it did connect, and still does, in a very direct way.

The importance of manaakitanga is conveyed by the occasion, where the roles of host and guest are clearly defined. Understanding the concept of manaakitanga as a child, would become important in the future, when they would play a part in the formalities of the pōwhiri or tangihanga (or “tangi,” funeral):

I think about one of my aunties who passed away. Before she passed away, she gave me a call and said can you take care of the kai for us. I said it was a sad call to get, but I’ll do that, Auntie . . . So, it’s significant, and that’s about the manaakitanga and those who are coming to support my family, and the hāngī was a very important aspect of that. (Stan Tawa)

All this knowledge was inherent within the process of preparing, cooking, and serving a hāngī. This knowledge learnt in their youth remains with them all, and they continue to live by those learnings.

Yet, within this environment the learning was not structured or defined; it was both active and passive. Children picked up knowledge through doing—helping to gather the resources, dig the hole and put down the hāngī, and then to serve and eat it. They also learned through observation—watching whānau prepare and cook hāngī, observing what was being done and how differing people reacted and responded:

As a young person, I'd watch my father and my uncles put down hāngī, and my grandfather as well put down hāngī. And you'd just ask questions about that, and my mother as well, just ask them because they all had different ways to do the hāngī. (Stan Tawa)

The hāngī itself as a technique is not particularly difficult and has relatively few steps, yet a successful hāngī relies upon knowledge gained through experience – how deep to dig the hole relative to the amount of food, the soil type and its dampness, knowing when the rocks are hot enough, and understanding the balance between the number and temperature of the rocks and the amount of food being cooked when judging the length of cooking time. What was observed in the interviews was that hāngī—as a central pillar of Māori kai – provides an environment rich in cultural learning:

So, the cultural significance would be in what I would call tikanga, that folded in at certain stages of the hāngī. (Jason King).

Through observation and participation, Riki, Stan, Jason and Joe grew up understanding their place within the whanau, and within tribal society. It was a form of cultural apprenticeship that allowed them to grow up with an understanding of their own world and culture – Te Ao Māori (the Māori world view). Simply put, hāngī provided a space in which they learnt to *be* Māori.

For Monique, Brett, and Paul, hāngī provided a gateway into Māori culture. In utilizing the hāngī as a cookery technique as a part of her professional career, Monique, who grew up within a predominantly Samoan cultural environment, has begun to explore the cultural knowledge that surrounds hāngī, and this has provided her with an introduction and a space from which she can explore Te Ao Māori in an informal way. Encouraged, Monique has begun a process of reconnection with Te Ao Māori, something that would have been unthinkable only a few years back. In doing so, she has gained a more complete understanding of her own Māori background and culture, and there is now pride rather than shame. Her exploration of hāngī has also led to a growing accumulation of knowledge. With this has come a desire to help preserve areas of mātauranga Māori, in particular, the cultural knowledge associated with kai that has begun to be forgotten, or is now consigned to the history books:

I know way more than I ever did in my entire life. What's been quite interesting is that I had no idea that there were all these different rules and protocols for cooking things, and now that I do, I approach things so differently. (Monique Fiso)

Brett's introduction to hāngī also came late in life. For Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent), the Māori world can at first be an intimidating one to enter. In Brett's case, while he does have whakapapa connections, he does not live within Te Ao Māori, and nor does he look recognizably Māori. In fact, he is known by some customers as the “ZZ Top guy,” due to his resemblance to members from that band. The informal nature of the cultural space that surrounds the hāngī has, for business purposes, allowed him to straddle both Pākehā and Māori cultures:

Funnily enough, because I'm so pale when I turn up to a 'do' (event/gathering) that's predominantly Māori there'll be two looks on their faces. One is “Why are these white guys turning up and I hope they know what they are doing.” The other is the first question they ask, “Is this one of those steamers bro?” But each and every one of those guys have come back and said “Oh, that's choice.” (Brett McGregor)

For Paul, who grew up in Invercargill with recently immigrated Samoan parents, the connection growing up was not to the hāngī, but to the “umu” (Pacific Island style earth oven). He sees connections between the umu and its place within Samoan culture, and the role of hāngī within Māori culture, and this understanding allows him to feel comfortable around hāngī and the cultural space it occupies.

To Paul, who already had a reasonable level of familiarity with Māori protocols and tikanga through both his wife and his business associations with Māori, hāngī has provided him with a space in which he can continue to grow his understanding of Te Ao Māori. But, arguably more importantly for Paul, the hāngī has provided a cultural learning space not for himself, but for his customers. The hāngī provides a single, simple tool through which he can introduce people to a vast expanse of Māori tikanga, culture and knowledge. Food can be a great leveler – we all eat, we all cook, and so we can all relate in some way to the hāngī. The basic concepts, of course, are not alien. Prepare the food, cook the food, eat the food together; every culture has something similar in their culinary repertoire. Unlike the pōwhiri, which has more formal connotations and involves issues of mana, tapu and cultural appropriateness, the hāngī can be as relaxed as a family barbeque, even allowing for issues of tikanga. In the hāngī, Paul has an informal, non-confrontational space in which his business can interact culturally with both Māori and non-Māori customers.

The cultural space provided by hāngī differs, depending on a person’s needs. For Riki, Stan, Jason and Joe, growing up with hāngī exposed them to the many aspects of mātauranga Māori that surround it and are folded through it. In doing so, it provided them with a space in which to explore and understand Te Ao Māori, and a punga stone (traditional weight) with which to anchor themselves to their culture, to the whenua, and to their whānau. In Monique’s case, hāngī has provided a comfortable space in which she has been able to tentatively reengage with Māori culture. Backed by a confidence in her own high level culinary skill set, in hāngī and Māori kai she has found an environment in which she can feel safe and increasingly comfortable in exploring a culture that is both familiar and alien to her – her own. For Brett and Paul, while the hāngī provides a financial opportunity that taps into Māori culture, both are effectively ‘outsiders. The hāngī provides the two of them with a culturally safe space within which to enter and engage in Te Ao Māori.

### ***The Hāngī as a social space***

For Riki, Stan, Jason, and Joe, early hāngī memories revolve around the frequent social gatherings held at the marae. They stem from the feelings of a common bond that hāngī invoked; the working together of many people, of it being an “event.” For them all, it was the sense of community that they remembered fondly; the “coming together of people,” of whānau, the youthful excitement of the event and the sense of adventure, the sharing of resources, and of all pitching in together to make the event a success:

For me, a connection between the hāngī . . . it’s more about the memories it evokes. So, when I think about hāngī I think about what we’ve done, and the circumstances that have brought the hāngī about. I remember and I think about the celebrations, but I also think about the sadness. (Stan Tawa)

All four commented that hāngī required resources that were not always readily or easily available, and they had strong memories that in their youth, it was a communal task to gather them. Tribal or whānau members would be allocated tasks, and others would offer resources, such as food or wood, or manpower. Thus, a sense of community was formed, one of reciprocity for the greater good, and of contributing to something bigger than oneself – whānau. For them, these were fun times remembered fondly and missed. Today their experiences of hāngī are different. Organized events are infrequent, and by natural extension, so are the number of hāngī. Events held on the marae today are smaller, and tend to also be shorter in duration. Tangi, for example, are now usually held on only one day, rather than the traditional three. In some cases, whānau and friends no longer have the same access to resources owing to the changing structure and makeup of rural communities. In all cases, the tribal base has become either smaller, or more scattered, and in many cases it is simply a case of there no longer being enough people available to put down the traditional earth hāngī:

You used to get 30–40 people go down and grab all of it and come back with 30 kete (baskets) full of pipis (clams) then pour it on. We don't have those numbers nowadays, unless they organize a specific event to do that, but that's not commonly seen now. (Jason King)

What all participants did agree on, however, was that the social environment surrounding the marae has changed. The result of these social changes is that for each participant associated with a marae, the cooking on their marae is now undertaken using modern catering equipment and/or artificial hāngī cookers:

What's happened and what's evolved is their whare kai (cooking and eating house) burnt down. So, they got a brand-new whare kai, but they've got a brand-new whare kai with combi therms, Bratt pans, you know. So, all that stuff with the hāngī unfortunately . . . they still have a hāngī pit there, but it's just not utilized. (Paul Retimanu)

This modern equipment speeds up the process of catering to the whānau and manuhiri, making it more time-efficient for the volunteers, which is an important consideration at a time when it is difficult to obtain volunteers. Today the social space that the hāngī occupies has changed. When any of the interviewees do put down a hāngī, it is more likely to be as a fundraiser for others, or as a financial opportunity, rather than as an event for themselves and their whānau. In this way, the focus has changed from hāngī being a natural part of an event, to the hāngī being the event itself. Where once hāngī provided a technique in which large amounts of food could be produced for a tangi, wedding, or birthday, today it is more likely that the event has been organized with the sole intention of celebrating or highlighting the hāngī technique. It has become a situation whereby it is the hāngī itself that people are there for.

There are exceptions. Brett continues to provide earth hāngī to those requiring catering for a large number of people at an event, and for whom the hāngī provides a required cultural link. He also continues to provide hāngī for many of the marae of Tāmaki-Makaurau (Auckland) and is unsure whether any of its marae put down a traditional hāngī themselves anymore:

I've been around to Te Unga (marae name) three times. One time I went out there, these young fellas, these young bucks, are hanging around and I said to the lady "You've got

a hāngī pit out the back there, why don't you get those young fellas to do it?" She said getting them to do work is near impossible. I said that I bet they come out of the woodwork when the kai is on the table. (Brett McGregor)

This, of course, has created a niche for him to fill, but may also possibly reflect the lack of resources available to urban marae. While rare, in the experiences of Riki, Stan, Jason and Joe, rural marae do still put down traditional earth hāngī, if only once a year or so. Even this, however, they acknowledge is a significant undertaking. Gone are the days when a hāngī could be organized with a phone call, and the old networks and systems all quickly swinging into action. It takes a lot more organizing now. As Brett acknowledges, it is much easier for a marae committee to ring him and have a hot hāngī delivered the next day. In fact, Brett once received a call mid-morning to the effect that a local marae needed a hāngī for several hundred-people, cooked for six pm that evening. Members of the marae in question had attempted to organize their own hāngī, but come the day, had failed to obtain all the necessary resources. Brett managed to arrive on site with ten minutes to spare. That particular marae is now a regular customer of his.

Of the others, Joe and Riki continue to provide regular hāngī as fundraisers for events, or as educational experiences. Already well-involved in promoting other aspects of Māori culture through their professional lives, for Riki and Joe, their continuing involvement with hāngī is simply a part of who they are. Jason and Stan only occasionally put down hāngī these days. Jason's most recent hāngī have been for a documentary, and for AUT as part of their overseas cultural program. While hāngī may not be the regular occurrences they once were, both Stan and Jason make an effort to remain actively involved in marae activities. They both believe it is vitally important that their tamariki (children) and mokopuna (grandchildren) understand and feel connected to their whakapapa, and that this won't happen if they, as parents, do not facilitate it. Both Monique and Paul regularly put down hāngī, but theirs are for financial and professional benefit, and the focus of their events are on the hāngī itself – generally as a celebration or promotion of Māori kai. In all cases, hāngī put down specifically for family and friends are the exception, rather than the rule:

I haven't done one for a while or so . . . I've still got all the resources. I probably could do them as often as I wanted, but I don't want to. (Stan Tawa)

It seems that without the incentive of financial gain, putting down a hāngī today is seen as too much like hard work. If you want to get the family together, it is much easier to simply fire up the gas barbecue.

### ***When is a hāngī not a hāngī?***

From its origins in the Pacific, the hāngī as a technique has constantly evolved or been adapted to suit its user's needs. As the hāngī adapted to Aotearoa, deeper and larger holes were dug to retain the heat needed to cook the larger cuts of protein found here, while native plants and berries were identified and added for flavor. The introduction of wire baskets in place of rourou (flax baskets), and the incorporation of iron, in place of stones, has occurred more recently. There are now many artificial hāngī cookers available, all of which attempt, with varying degrees of

success, to imitate the earthy, smoky flavor of the traditional earth hāngī. This, though, raises the question of what is truly a “traditional hāngī,” or even if there is still such a thing:

I don’t know if the hāngī I put down is authentic in any way shape or form because of the fact that things change, things evolve. (Stan Tawa)

These days, when discussions turn to hāngī (of any kind), and the food that is prepared in them, the expectation is of the classic “meat and three vegetables,” usually pork, potatoes, kūmara (sweet potato) and pumpkin, and perhaps a little more. Yet, the growing movement toward a “New Zealand” cuisine is prompting a rethink of traditional Māori kai and culinary techniques. For Monique, the hāngī offers an opportunity for culinary experimentation. In her experience, there is growing interest from young chefs in hāngī and other traditional Māori culinary techniques. But if our young chefs have become increasingly inspired by the hāngī, this poses the question of how they learn how to prepare it, and who is entitled to teach it.

It will always survive and there will still always be those people who are “this is what hāngī is.” But we just need more people passing their knowledge along - something that Māori, particularly of an older generation, are not good at. It’s a case of, “this is ours, it’s our culture, we are not going to share it with you or the Chinese guy that just got here.” (Monique Fiso)

In Monique’s view, this does not necessarily mean that hāngī must stay entirely within Māori ownership:

If we are just going to continue this whole “you have to be Māori to do it” then it’s going to die along with a whole lot of other things that have died and a lot of knowledge that has already been lost. (Monique Fiso)

In her professional eyes, the hāngī is at once both simple and complex. The technique itself is straight-forward, but if thoughtfully used, can result in food of textural and flavor complexity. This leaves it well-suited for use within a fine dining or haute cuisine setting. It is this transition, the elevation of hāngī from a simple home-cooked style of meal to a dish that the world’s diners would seek out, and just as importantly pay well for, that excites her.

With his business operations strongly influenced by tourism, Paul sees a similar future for hāngī. He feels that the future is all about broadening its appeal while still maintaining its cultural links. “Why,” he asks, “is our indigenous food seen as something cheap?” His belief is that as long as the hāngī is viewed as something that comes in tin foil for \$10, a business like this will never be able to utilize it as a cookery technique, and as long as customers’ perceptions of hāngī remain that way, it won’t be financially viable. For hāngī to work in a café restaurant operation such as his own, Paul’s belief is that hāngī needs to be seen as a value-added product, that the six-hour cooking process and the food cooked in it are worth paying for. This is a belief shared by both Riki and Monique:

I was like, why have we just stopped and gone well this is hāngī, its comes in a tray and is \$10 a pop. (Monique Fiso)

They turn up somewhere and get the food and they walk away. They get it plated up for them. They don’t actually see the work that’s gone into it beforehand. Because there is a lot of work that goes into it. (Riki Bennett)

Paul's belief is that this attitude can be shifted by using higher quality produce and moving away from the traditional fatty pork, potatoes and kūmara recipe. As he points out, New Zealand is well known as a producer of high-quality food products – people overseas are willing to spend top dollar on the New Zealand food brand. In his view, the hāngī itself is already a draw card due to its rarity, and fits in well with current trends of cooking over fire:

You notice it down here. As soon as we light the fire people gravitate towards it. It's a big thing – particularly blokes and barbeques. Fire, we love fire. Kids love fire. Everybody loves fire. (Paul Retimanu).

His belief is that if you can combine the two, New Zealand's high-quality produce and the very on-trend use of fire for cooking, then New Zealand food is on to a winner. Riki, along with his business partner, is also exploring the commercial side of hāngī. They already provide hāngī commercially for fundraisers and events on an intermittent basis, and it is their belief that offered in the right way, hāngī can be a healthy everyday option – something to replace the kiwi roast dinner. For Riki and his business partner, it is all about making good hāngī accessible every day.

Stan, Joe and Jason believe that the future of hāngī lies with the marae, although, all three are concerned over who will pass the knowledge on. In their own experiences, the number of Māori remaining connected to the marae is dwindling, and marae themselves are naturally moving toward quicker food preparation techniques and equipment. All of this impacts on the number of times a hāngī is used. As a result, the number of Māori with knowledge of preparing hāngī is declining, and there are differing views on how to prevent this. Both Stan and Jason believe that the knowledge will remain alive if people remain connected to the marae, but both acknowledge the difficulty people face in doing so:

Our philosophy is always to make sure the boys are connected to their land, to their marae all the time. And it's a lot of effort from the parents. Now if the parents aren't connected then bye-bye, bye-bye to that generation, that whole generation, that legacy. (Jason King).

For Stan, as a culinary arts lecturer, the issue of knowledge transfer is a familiar one:

It's a valid question, how do we keep it alive? Who are the kaitiaki (guardians)? Who are the ones who become a guardian for it, and is there a need for that? Perhaps there is. Maybe that's a question we need to ask. (Stan Tawa)

Neither Riki, Stan nor Jason had ever really given thought to the future of the hāngī, and the possibility that it could slowly disappear, prior to having the question posed by the researcher. While all three are well aware that hāngī are no longer being used as often as they had been in the past, all three were quick to grasp the connection between what the gradual disappearance of the hāngī would mean in regard to its associated knowledge and social value. It is this potential loss of mātauranga Māori that concerns them the most; they do not believe that the loss of the technique would be in any way an issue.

Joe, on the other hand, is quite clear about where knowledge of hāngī will reside in the future. He sees the future of hāngī as being digital. To that end, Joe is currently recording a series of instructional videos that share his knowledge and skills. It is his hope that by placing them into the digital world, the knowledge and skill will be recorded for posterity,

and easily accessible to those who seek it. Joe's view is that this type of change is a sign of the times – people are busier, kids live in a digital age – and if you want to keep people connected with Māori culture, it should be easily accessible. Unfortunately, for many Māori, and even more so for Pākehā, this type of knowledge isn't accessible whilst it remains solely on the marae.

None of the interviewees were particularly concerned about the rise of hāngī substitutes, or its eclipse by modern catering equipment. Most saw this as a natural progression, or as a reflection of the times. The greater concern was around the loss of associated knowledge surrounding the hāngī. Asked whether a hāngī cooker was a true hāngī, all paused. For the participants in this study, in terms of the status of an event, no-one felt that an event at which a hāngī was put down traditionally held more significance than one that didn't. Stan and Jason both hesitantly agreed that the rarity of the earth oven hāngī did imbibe an event with a greater feel of occasion, but not to the same extent that they remembered from their youth. The most important consideration (agreed by all) was upholding manaaki (hospitality) through the offering of food, regardless of how the food was cooked:

The key culturally, it's about feeding your manuhiri—you have to feed your visitors, and that's where your mana is . . . the key is that you'll feed the people that come, and how you feed them is up to you. (Stan Tawa)

Still, not one of the participants would say unequivocally that a hāngī cooker of any type was a *true* hāngī. Jason commented on a recently watched cooking program where a hāngī cooker had been used:

As I was watching that, a few things came into my head, and the first one was where is the community? There was only one guy making a hāngī, and if you come back to the ethos of the hāngī, it's about bringing people and communities together. (Jason King)

Joe and Paul had no issue regarding the use of the steamer type hāngī and acknowledged the practical nature of them, particularly in the commercial setting of a café or restaurant. But both believed you had to be upfront about the food cooked in it not coming from a true earth oven – to mislead a customer about just how the hāngī was truly cooked was in their view, dishonest, although, both thought that anybody with experience with food from a true earth oven hāngī would spot the difference between that and an artificial cooker straight away. A key area of hesitancy in calling the artificial hāngī cookers a “hāngī,” was simply the fact that the food was not cooked in the ground. Asked whether hāngī was a technique, or whether it was a coming together of people, Monique's response focused on the technique. In her eyes, the lack of technique required by artificial hāngī cookers meant that they were not hāngī. She felt that the lack of technique translated into a lack of knowledge. Without the cultural knowledge (the mātauranga Māori) when using an artificial hāngī cooker, the food was simply being cooked, and nothing more.

So now because people just put it into a box, in tinfoil, I'm always a bit skeptical. I've always put my hāngī down in the ground, always. (Stan Tawa)

This acceptance, yet reluctance, behind the views of all participants regarding the use of artificial hāngī, perhaps provides the clearest understanding of the cultural value that all

interviewees place on traditional hāngī. They were at pains to point out that food from an artificial hāngī is not as good as the earth-bound hāngī, and that this is not what they expect from “hāngī,” also, that it is not what they grew up with. For all seven participants, hāngī has played or continues to play a fundamental role within their lives. For some, that role was in their childhood, shaping their cultural development and influencing their own personal views on their culture. Today, hāngī continues to provide a cultural reference point that strongly influences how some of the participants pass their culture on to their children. Others have been attracted by the financial opportunities that are offered by providing hāngī; these participants have also gained entry, in varying degrees, to Te Ao Māori. For hāngī is not simply a cookery technique – it is knowledge, it is whakapapa, it is culture. In New Zealand, the hāngī is unmistakably Māori. When you enter the world of the hāngī you enter Te Ao Māori.

### ***Limitations of the study***

Within this type of study, the text is formulated through interviews led by the researcher. In doing so the researcher is, to a certain extent, a co-creator of the text they are then interpreting. As such, the researchers’ position within the study, and how it is interpreted and reported must be kept in mind when evaluating the data analysis and conclusions presented. The researcher is himself a male Pakeha chef lecturer married into a family who whakapapa to Ngāi Tahu. While every effort has been undertaken by the researcher to ensure the emotional, spiritual, and physical comfort of the interviewees during this research project, the possibility of their not being so was always present and could have influenced the research project; it therefore needs to be mentioned.

### **Conclusion**

This paper set out to explore the cultural significance of an indigenous food preparation technique – the contemporary earth oven hāngī as used within Māori society. Indigenous food and foodways has become an increasingly rich area for academic study, particularly in the food studies space. Yet, previous academic research on earth ovens, both in New Zealand and within the wider Pacific region has tended to focus on either the application or mechanics of the technique itself (Black and Thoms 2014; Huebert, Allen, and Wallace 2010; Messersmith 2012; Thoms et al. 2015) or the archeological aspect (Carson 2002; Leach 1981; Morrison et al. 2022). Wider academic literature on traditional Pacific indigenous food tends to focus on foodways and ingredients, either with an eye to their potential commercial value (Cambie and Ferguson 2003; Jefferson 2021), within the context of colonization (Neill, Williamson, and Berno 2015; Santich 2011; Veracini 2022; Wessel 2019; Wessell 2017; Williamson and Neill 2014), or through a health promotion lens (Divarkarla, Aroni, and Sutherland 2020; Ferguson et al. 2017; Lopes et al. 2023; Rush et al. 2010). This focus on ingredients tends to mean that the cultural role played by traditional cookery techniques that utilize these ingredients gets overlooked.

At the core of this research, sat the question of just what transforms an earth oven into a hāngī. The earth oven itself is not unique to New Zealand or to Māori – its use in various configurations has been well documented around the world (Black and

Thoms 2014) – and since its arrival in Aotearoa the hāngī has continued to evolve (Burton 2009; Tawa 2013). But regardless of the form it takes, what this research arguably highlights is the slowly changing nature of hāngī use – becoming less frequent within its traditional cultural role but increasingly being utilized as part of a financial transaction within a wider commercial hospitality context. All the participants in the study recognized and acknowledged this change. Some saw it as a natural progression, an opportunity to be embraced. Others were more wary, concerned over the potential loss of the very thing that made a hāngī more than just a simple earth oven. For them, an earth oven only truly becomes a hāngī when it is situated with Te Ao Māori – the Māori world – and enrobed in kaupapa and practices of tikanga and manaakitanga. The hāngī is, at its heart, a social gathering space. This is, of course, not surprising. Food is a subject around which people congregate, talk, and share stories – a place to reconnect culturally, socially, and mentally (Appadurai 1988; Fischler 1988, 2011; Kittler, Sucher, and Nelms 2017; Sobal and Nelson 2003).

The shift toward hāngī being utilized more frequently for monetary gain brings financial opportunity no different than that of any other cooking method. Yet, the concern shown over the potential lack of cultural involvement raises questions around how indigenous culinary techniques can be incorporated into commercial hospitality practice without losing what it is that makes them unique indigenous culinary practices in the first place, and secondly, who is allowed to do so. Speaking in commercial terms, the cultural significance of the hāngī is the intellectual property of Māori and is a part of “brand Māori” – as is the umu to the Samoan people or the lovo to Fijians, to give just two examples. When these types of culinary techniques are removed from their cultural context and placed into western structures, particularly for financial benefit, then concerns over cultural appropriation and colonization are justified (Harmsworth et al. 2013; Love and Hall 2022).

If we take Grey and Newman’s (2018) framework for the colonization of a food culture, it could be argued that the New Zealand culinary landscape has moved past the initial stage one of suppression (see Morris 2010), and having quickly skipped through the authenticity seeking plurality of stage two, is now entering the third and final stage of convergence, or creolization, as Māori and Pacific food becomes increasingly incorporated within the menus of New Zealand hospitality venues (Brett 2022; Fiso 2020; Thornber 2022). Veracini (2022) points to Levi-Strauss in stating that a societies way of cooking expresses its foundational structures when discussing the decolonization of cuisine and argues that we need to be wary of allowing a situation whereby the colonizer feels comfortable as the host “allowing” indigenous cuisine a place at the table. In much the same vein, Grey and Newman (2018) argue that it is well within the rights of Indigenous Peoples to withhold gastronomic capital in response to this assimilation and commodification. They make the point that food is and should be treated as political. As we move forward, discussion around the decolonization of cuisines will only increase and it will be important to remember that indigeneous cuisine is not limited to its traditional ingredients, but also to the techniques traditionally used to prepare them. As seen in this paper, these techniques are often immersed in culturally significant practices and beliefs. For Indigenous Peoples, allowing the natural evolution of their culinary

intellectual property whilst still ensuring the continuation of the cultural practices and values which make these very techniques unique, and thus commercially valuable, will become an increasing challenge.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Ethical statement

This research project applied for and was granted ethics approval from Auckland University of Q2 Technology's Ethics Committee (AUTEC) - Application number – 17/185.

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