

I-ngā-rā-o-mua

TE MAIRE TAU

‘Time’ or *temporal time* and how it shapes the past and Māori oral tradition is an area that New Zealand scholars have yet to fully examine, although Anne Salmond and Judith Binney have both noted it as an issue for further discussion.¹ In 1983, Salmond’s article ‘The Study of Traditional Maori Society: The State of the Art’ outlined the issues of time for Māori, but within the wider ambit of *matauranga Māori*. Salmond’s article underpins much of the discussion that dominates the Māori academic world today, namely: what are the epistemological foundations of *matauranga Māori*? When Salmond said, ‘Approaches which draw on both Maori and European ways of interpreting the past seem likely to be far more productive than a strategy based on epistemological arrogance’,² she established a model for historians to use in their attempts to see the past and write history. Binney’s concern was primarily a matter of managing the problems that Salmond outlined, so that much of her work articulated not just another perception of the past, but an altogether different world view.³ In 1987 she gave us the intriguing thought, ‘Maori oral history is not merely another source of information, nor even of perception. The purposes of the oral narrative tradition are to establish meaning for events, and to give a validation for the family’s and the group’s particular claims to mana and knowledge’.⁴ Unfortunately Binney did not elaborate further on this point, not because of her tragic death in 2011, but because she was more concerned with mapping the fault-lines than ran between each culture and establishing clear signposts as to where the space of difference lay.

While little research has been undertaken on the relationship between time and history for Māori, the exact opposite is the case in the western world where this relationship has engaged historians, philosophers and novelists such as Marcel Proust. For any historian wishing to deal with this topic Kant is an obvious starting point, and from Kant there is a clear line to Hegel and Heidegger, eventually ending with Nietzsche, paving the way for Zarathustra’s ‘eternal reoccurrence’.⁵ In New Zealand, Peter Munz’s *The Shapes of Time* discussed the idea that history moves from East to West as the evolution of consciousness rather than any idea of progression.⁶ Munz’s contribution for Māori historians was that he saw the connection between narrative, myth and history: we think the past and events into narrative, just as a croupier shuffles cards.⁷ When Munz suggested that historians think the past into being he anticipated both Salmond and Binney.⁸ Munz’s chief

concern lay in understanding the philosophical breaks between Popper and Wittgenstein. Salmond simply articulated the same tension within a national context. Salmond's call for approaches that draw on both Māori and European ways of interpreting the past recalls Munz's argument that, 'There can be no objective knowledge when the object of our knowledge is a subject or a potential subject. . . . the subject's views on the matter are of the same weight as the views of the observer. For this reason, there can be nothing but a multiplicity of subjective views.'⁹ How could Munz differ in any substantial way with Salmond on anything but method? Both Munz and Salmond are interested in the epistemological foundations of the multiple world views we have. This article explores how Māori saw, understood and configured time.

'I-ngā-rā-o-mua' is the phrase that Māori use when referring to their past. It means, 'the days that stand to the fore'. 'I ngā rā' simply means 'the (ngā) days (rā)' while 'mua' signifies 'the front, or the 'forepart'. The past then is seen as existing before oneself – which is a reference more to its place in the present than any idea of the future. The immediate question that leaps from this phrase is, 'how is it that a people are able to talk about their past as if it is in the present or standing in one's presence?' This 'a-historic' world view is not unique to Māori and is known in many other pre-literate cultures. Among scholars, historians and anthropologists in particular have speculated for some time over its significance. In the twentieth century, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mircea Eliade made substantial contributions to our understanding of how 'a-historical' societies (usually non-western, tribal and indigenous peoples) constructed their past.¹⁰ Both relied heavily on the view that such societies are driven by mythic world views, which has been a substantial contribution towards our understanding of these types of societies.

Māori recall their past through oral tradition. Typically, the past is told to each generation by word of mouth and more often than not the method of telling the past is by way of mōteatea (chants), proverbs and the recitation of genealogies. Scholars have asked whether these traditions can be constructed as 'history' and how we can use the oral knowledge and traditions from pre-literate societies.

The starting point for this discussion is a text¹¹ written sometime in the 1880s by a student, Thomas Green (1840-1917), acting as scribe for his teacher, Natahahira Waruwarutu.¹² Both men were of Ngāi Tahu descent, the principal tribe of the South Island of New Zealand. Natanahira's exact date of birth is unknown and the only clue we have is when he tells us, 'I don't know the year that I was born, but I knew about the kidnapping of Te Mairahanui and of the Pakeha who took him to Waitohi in the North Island where he was killed and I knew at this time in my life to

think in my mind as I was now going to the other children and playing'.¹³ In other words, he was a child beginning to be aware of his world when Te Maiharanui, the principal chief of Ngāi Tahu, was kidnapped in 1830. Nonetheless, the manuscript also tells us he was a child when Kaiapoi was destroyed by the invading tribe, Ngāti Toa, under the leadership of their great war chief, Te Rauparaha.¹⁴ This raid was their third and most destructive attack on the people of Canterbury. From external European sources we can date the fall of Natanahira's village to the summer of 1831-32. Natanahira was not in the village at this time as he had gone to Te Waihora (Lake Ellesmere) to take part in the annual eeling season with his parents. On a purely methodological level, the historian could argue that this reading is an example of the kind of productive interpretation called for by Salmond, because the historian has deployed external western sources to validate a record based on oral tradition, locating the event in time. Yet such a reading does not avoid the epistemological arrogance that Salmond warned us about because it is premised upon a western understanding of time. It is in the next passage, that Natanahira outlines a fundamental difference in how time was understood and narrated.

The next section of the narrative starts with Natanahira and his family meeting the Kaiapoi refugees at his camp, Wai-whio, near Lake Ellesmere. The engagement between the two parties commenced with the local tohunga, Tai-aro-rua, calling out to the new arrivals to identify themselves.

'Who goes there, identify yourself', Tai-aro-rua called.

'Te Rauparaha has struck, Kaiapoi is no more, Tuahiwi is silent', was the response.

Tai-aro-rua came forth to recite the incantations for the ritual called 'Te roko-mate' – prayers for the dead. Having finished Tai-aro-rua called out, 'You, the survivors, do not come any further, go back to Kaiapoi [and fight]'.¹⁵

'Go back to what?', was the response. 'It is only the Whaka-hume (Cam River) that moves'.

The passage just cited seems on the surface easy enough to read and clear enough to understand. Visitors arrive with news that Te Rauparaha had struck Kaiapoi and that the outer village, Tuahiwi, had been destroyed. The text says that the High Priest, Tai-aro-rua, came out to the front to recite his incantations to the dead and after this he told the survivors to come no further and to return. The refugees reply that the only thing moving in the region is the local river, the Whaka-hume. Yet this incident, which could easily be seen as historical by western-trained scholars, is for tribal story-tellers an obvious example of an event being assimilated into a mythic template. From this point it has been elevated out of our normal perceptions

of real time and space in a way similar to that achieved by the western phrase, 'Once upon a time . . . '.

The account mirrors a formula often found in the oral traditions following a defeat in battle. The formula can be traced right back to the tragic myth figure, Hāpopo.¹⁵ The response from the Kaiapoi people that nothing moves in the land other than their local river is found throughout their oral traditions. When Ngāi Tahu had first reached the Kaikoura region four generations before Natanahira was born, tribal oral traditions recall that they were informed of the defeat of Ngāti Mamoe, their enemy tribe, with the words,

Ko te tai anake o Tu Purewa te āu ana.

All that stirs at Tu Purewa is the current.¹⁶

Likewise when a Ngāi Tahu war party was defeated in the Southland region near Te Mokamoka (New River) estuary, two survivors reached their chief Moki at Kaikoura informing him:

Ko te wai anake o Te Mokamoka te āu ana.

It is only Te Mokamoka River that moves.¹⁷

When Natanahira recites virtually the same line we can be sure the tradition is fitting within a cultural context that is not historical. Natanahira's recollection is a memory shaped by tribal tradition as much as observation. Moreover, could a child really recall a conversation such as this with as much detail?

Natanahira's recollection occurred in real time as opposed to mythic time and historians can safely assume that the refugees were responding within a ritualized and rhetorical format. However, it is equally clear that this account was also being structured within a mythic framework that we can trace back to the 'atua' of tragedy and failure, Hāpopo. The myth of Hāpopo is pivotal to understanding the oral tradition. In this regard Judith Binney made a significant observation concerning hapu narratives: 'The systems of explanation [of the past] which are embedded in the narrative traditions create the mental world which the people inhabit'.¹⁸ This is an important statement. The narrative may in fact be the mental template that defines the world. If this is the case, it is also the template that constructs how the past-present was seen – including Natanahira's past-present account. In the original myth, Hāpopo is killed when his 'whare' (meeting house) collapsed upon him, leaving two survivors who sought succour with another chief renowned for his hospitality. Natanahira's narrative is an example of how events are absorbed into a mythic framework. But we also need to be aware that the 'events' such as the one given were absorbed into a mythic past and mythic present.

To understand this we need to understand how a-historical societies configure time. Natanahira gives an insight into this construction when he explains the divination ritual undertaken by the tribal priest, Tai-aro-rua, after he had accepted that the refugees had no home to return to.

Ka taki te wahine, ka mauria e te tohuka kā mōrehu ki te tūāhu. Karakia ana te tohuka, ka mutu ka haere atu te tohuka ki te ‘Taki-i-te-kawa’. Ka tae atu ki te pūharakeke, ka kimihia atu i konei te karakia. Ka mutu, ka tapatapa te tohuka i te kawa, kua mau te rika, ko te harakeke ka totohu atu i te mate, i te ora. Ka whiua i te tohuka. Ko te taha tua noa mō Kaiapoi Pā, ko waekanui mō mātau, ko te aroaro mō Te Rauparaha. Ka tākina mai te harakeke, tō matuka mai, ka parea mai te pūtake ki a kātīmāua o tū atu nei i muri i a ia. Te kiteka atu o te iwi kua natunatukia te taha tuarā o te harakeke, ka hiko i konei ki te taki, te hika tāne, ka roko mai te wāhine ka taki. Ko au nei, kāhore a te tamariki mahara he mate, he ora, tū noa iho, ka taki hoki te tohuka, te mutuka o te taki a te tohuka, ka tū a ia ki ruka, ka poroporoki¹⁹ ki a Weka rātau ko kā tāina, me te whanau.

The women commenced their weeping and then the survivors were taken by Tai-aro-rua to the altar. He recited his incantations and when he finished he went to recite the rituals that made the survivors free from their sacred state. He then reached the flax bush where he considered what incantation to recite and having finished he then continued his incantations while he took in his hand a blade of flax which was to signify life or death. Tai-aro-rua cast the blade of flax. If the blade of flax fell behind us it signified death for Kaiapoi, if it fell between us it would represent our destruction and if it fell to the fore it would be a sign of Te Raurapaha’s death. Incantations were recited over the flax and when the recitals ended the base drifted towards us who were behind Tai-aro-rua. The people saw the cuts on the back of the flax and the men fell to the ground weeping and when the women heard this they also wept. And of myself, children do not know of life or death and I just stood around but I saw Tai-aro-rua also weep and when he had wept at length he stood and delivered his eulogy to the Kaiapoi chiefs, Weka and his kinsmen and families.²⁰

Scholars usually classify this type of event as a divination ritual and it is often glossed over without too much analysis.²¹ Yet for Māori, such events are pregnant with meaning. The manuscript makes it clear that the only reason the people ‘know’ Kaiapoi Pa has fallen and that they therefore need to continue their escape south to Te Muka, the next Canterbury stronghold, is because their High Priest had turned to ‘Te-ao-wairua’, the spirit world, for answers. This type of ‘divination event’ is not uncommon in oral traditions

– in fact it dominates as the primary explanation for events right through to the twentieth century by way of the prophet movements. While this essay is about time rather than interactions with the spirit world, it is important that rituals such as this are examined by historians rather than passed over.

One problem with classifying this event as an act of divination is that divination is often confused with the notion of seeing into the future. As a result, tohunga such as Tai-aro-rua may be seen as fortune-tellers or seers, which immediately relegates them to the status of those found advertising in the personal pages of our daily newspapers. This is not the case, because the way in which Māori constructed time meant that there was no such thing as the future and past as these ideas are understood today. In the passage above, the tohunga is not so much gazing into the past as reading the present. The question then is not whether such an event has any ‘truth’ status, but what does it tell us about the logic behind such a view and what does it tell the historian about time and how past events were understood?

For Māori, events were grouped according to meaning as much as cause and this is exactly how Tai-aro-rua and the people perceived the situation. This perception is based on a world view in which time is seen as an organic, synchronic whole as opposed to diachronic and lineal. This is how Māori understood their world and explained their past. Ignoring this world view when dealing with how Māori explained their past is really to ignore Māori oral tradition, which is replete with what Māori would call ‘tohu’, whether it be in mōteatea (chants), pepeha (proverbs, tribal sayings) or whaikōrero (speeches) and poroporoaki (farewell speeches for the dead). Tai-aro-rua’s exercise in reading the flax blades was essentially an exercise in reading the ‘tohu’, which are natural and human phenomena.

To give another example, in the following chant we are told how a father learnt of his son’s death with the incoming tide:

Ra te tai uru, ka koto ki te awa;
He hōmai aroha, kia tangi atu au,
E tama, i konei.

The western tide comes murmuring up the river;
Bringing sad memories and causing me to weep,
O son, who once did here abide.²²

An orthodox explanation for this chant would be that the father composed the song after he had learnt of his son’s death and that he employed the river as a metaphor for the news that was carried to him upon canoe. Perhaps, but the chant declares that the river carried the news of his son’s death. This chant is not an isolated case. Mōteatea indicate that Māori perceived the world within a framework where time was synchronic with natural phenomena acting as signifiers or messengers of other events. The most explicit example of this is where lightning was seen as a sign of a great

leader's death, usually in battle. Again, one could explain such a chant as having been composed after the event. However Māori were quite explicit that the flash of lightning and the roll of thunder signalled death – the events were synchronic or parallel.

Tera te uira e hiko ana i te rangi
 E wahi rua ana ra runga o Tauwhare!
 Kaore ianei, ko te tohu o te mate.
 The lightning flashes in the sky,
 Splitting in twain over Tauwhare!
 Assuredly a token of death.²³

The nineteenth-century war leader, Tuta Nihoniho, was clear on this matter when explaining the rituals of warfare to his students and describing what signs or 'tohu' to look for. Nihoniho's text is a fascinating account. He makes it plain to his students that the 'atua' would appear as natural or human phenomena signalling paths to take or tactics to be adopted and changed. For warriors going into battle, particular attention needed to be paid to the way the rainbow god Uenuku (also known as Kahukura) aligned itself with the war party so as to determine what route to take. Again, lightning, and its various forms, were to be watched for at all times. Nihoniho told his students,

Tohu tuarua hei tirohanga; kia ata titiro ki te hiko, haunga ia te uira me te kanapu, ko te hiko hiko he toto rangatira e hinga i te parekura, i te waka tahuri, i te whare wera ranei, i te mate tupapaku ranei.

The second sign to observe; look carefully at the lightning off in the distance, other than the ordinary lightning and that which flashes over the horizon as this signals a great chief has fallen on the battle field or has drowned at sea, or has died from his house burning down or simply from a natural death.²⁴

The Nihoniho text is full of advice to students on what omens and atua to watch for, all of which align with the omens described in mōteatea gathered in the nineteenth century. Much of Nihoniho's advice is concerned with how one was to read the 'tohu' and it is clear that his world view aligns with that practised by Tai-aro-rua half a century earlier.

Significantly, for both Nihoniho and Tai-aro-rua all rituals for reading 'tohu' occurred before an altar or shrine in an area known as 'mua'. In John White's *Ancient History of the Maori*, which explains how tohunga taught tribal traditions to their students, one passage states,

Nga whare tapu, hei whare akonga mo nga tamariki rangatira mo To-Haere-roa, E tata ana (aua whare) ki te wahi tapu i a Mua.

He mea ano, ko taua wahi tapu i a Mua . . .

The *whare-kura*, the sacred school in which the sons of high priests were taught our mythology and history, stood facing the East, in the precincts of the sacred place of *Mua*.

Mua was a sacred locality . . .²⁵

Herbert Williams' *Dictionary of the Maori Language* defined 'mua' as ' . . . sometimes the sacred place, in antithesis to *muri*, the common (noa) place, or a working place'.²⁶ The explanation here is consistent with the practice of carrying out rituals involving *tapu* near the altar of the primary 'atua'. 'Mua' was an earlier word for 'wahi *tapu*' or sacred site, and in the world of Māori the site was sacred because the 'atua' and ancestors were placed within the 'tūāhu' or altar. To extend the logic, the 'mua' was before the people and this partially explains the idea of 'i-ngā-rā-i-mua' – the days that stand to the fore. What properly stood before the *tohunga* was not the 'tūāhu' or altar, but the 'atua' and 'ancestors' within the altar because they are the ones that hold the 'tapu'. The phrase 'i-ngā-rā-i-mua' properly means the 'time of the ancestors and *atua*'. 'Sacred time' is the simplest translation. Just as Māori had 'wahi *tapu*', which translates as 'sacred space,' we also had 'sacred time'. This is why *whakapapa* and the stories attached to them were seen as *tapu* (sacred) activities. This explains the logic behind Williams' definition that 'mua' is a sacred place and therefore the antithesis to 'muri, the common or noa place of work and activity'.²⁷ Today, *marae* still function along these lines, with the activities on the front of the *marae* (*mua*) defined as 'tapu' and those at the back (*muri*) as not.

This then is how Māori configure their past. Māori live with their ancestors at a series of different levels, all within the present. The question that arises is, can there be any connection between this way of telling, living and seeing the past and the historian's way of writing the past?

Time and history

It is a complete cerebral challenge for historians to understand that there is no past beyond the text. The past does not exist, other than that which we create in our imaginations. All that we have are fragments, artifacts and documents from that time. Documents can be aligned to establish equivalences about events, but at the most documents are transcripts of what others thought happened, and no matter how many documents we have, they do not translate reality.²⁸ In hard, clear terms there is no reference point to the past other than the text. For oral societies there was no text. Consequently the past is in the 'present'. The best way to explain this is to see time as we now understand it, which is as a sequential flow to which we attach time units as depicted in Figure 1.

The western calendar flows forward in a series of infinitely subdivisible units, whether they be months, days, hours, minutes, seconds or nano-seconds.



Figure 1: The Arrow of Time

Events, such as the birth of Christ, are attached to these units and history occurs when a narrative is provided that connects one event to another. It is understood that once a date and the event attached to it has passed, it will not return. For western societies it is a truism that the world we live in is in a constant flux, always changing, always dynamic and never static. This perception can be traced back to Heraclitus who explained his idea with the adage, ‘You cannot step twice into the same river’.²⁹

A-historical societies view time differently. To twist the analogy from Heraclitus, for Māori the river is the ancestor and remains the same, constant – changing only during seasonal fluctuations, which were seen as part of a universal constant. The present was the constant. Notions of the past and future existed within the constant whole as seasonal changes.

In this model there is neither future or past, lineal or cyclical time, so much as a constant present that pervades everything and everywhere imaginable. All the gods and ancestors exist in the present. How then does this relate to human history? It could be argued that the stories of tribal battles, conquests and migrations occurred within a lineal time sequence, with Papa-tua-nuku (Earth Mother) and Rangi (Sky Father) being mere theatrical backdrops to the action now called history. After all, many oral traditions have a narrative form in which one event leads to another. Take this passage from a tribal tradition concerning the arrival of the first canoe to reach the South Island of New Zealand. The canoe was called *Waka-huruhuru-manu*, later to be renamed *Uruao* of the Waitaha people, the first people to settle the South Island. A tribal elder wrote this account in 1892:

Ko tēnei waka ko te waka tuatahi mai ki tēnei taha o te moana. E kīa ana i haere mai i te Tāepatanga-o-te-rangi. I maharatia i haere mai i Hawaiki. Kaua tēnei Hawaiki e kīa nei ko ‘Rarotonga’ e noho nei ngā Kanaka. Ko tēnei waka ‘e waka tōtara. Ko te tangata nāna te rākau tōtara ko Te-moretu. Ko ia te rangatira o te waka. Ko te rangatira nāna i mau mai ki tēnei pito o te ao ko Taiehu.

This canoe was the first to cross to this side of the ocean, as we say that it came from the other side of the horizon. Because of its speed, the canoe was named *Waka-huruhuru-manu*. We recall that it came from Hawaiki. This Hawaiki is not what we now call Rarotonga, where

the Kanaka people live.³⁰ This canoe was made of the tōtara tree and that tree belonged to a man called Te-moretu who was the chief of the canoe. The leader who brought the canoe to this end of the world was Taiehu.³¹

The passage is an example of history as a lineal narrative. It tells us that the canoe came from a land beyond the horizon, a land that is now called Hawaiki. The account states that the canoe was made from a totara log owned by Te Moretu, and that the leader of the expedition was a man called Taiehu. It is a narrative that explains change – which is of course what history tries to do. However further examination of the tradition shows that while it narrates a lineal story it is not a historical text because it contains too many supernatural events that defy rational explanation. Margaret Orbell made the point in *Hawaiki: A New Approach to Māori Tradition* that New Zealand scholars were too fond of explaining away supernatural events as embellishments while accepting the bulk of the account as historic and resting upon an ‘axiom of fact’.³² The problem with treating this account as an historical source is the way in which the story-teller has no regard for time. In the next passage the elder turns the time sequence ‘history’ on its head. Shortly after the canoe beached in the North Island, the narrator tells us, it became a constellation in the heavens, known to Māori as ‘Te Waka-a-Tama-rereti’ (Tail of Scorpio). Then halfway through the account, the tribal elder simply brings this section of the tradition to a halt and tells his readers (who he obviously sees as Māori),

Kōia te tohu o taua waka e mau ana i te rangi. Tā te Māori kīa, mihi, ka kite i a Tama-rereti i te Rangi, arā, ‘e tātai whetū ko taua waka tēnā.

According to our people, when you see the constellation Tama-rereti (the Tail of Scorpio) in the sky at night, be aware that it is the canoe and acknowledge it with your greetings.

In one sentence, the elder prisms the story out of the cage of historical/lineal narrative and recasts it as something other than history, while at the same time reordering time and space. In another account of the event, the story-teller tells the reader even more directly,

Kaore i hoki tenei waka ekari I whakaahuatia ki te Raki. Koia te waka a Tama Rereti. No reira i hoatu ai ka whetu Tohu o te tau.

This canoe did not return but instead was formed in the sky and came to resemble the image of Raki’s canoe as the constellation, Te Waka a Tama Rereti.³³

The canoe, Tama-rereti, no longer exists in the past; it is directly in front of the reader, in the night sky. Furthermore the elder tells us to speak with the canoe by greeting it.³⁴ Consequently, the idea that this account can be read

as a lineal narrative set against a theatrical backdrop of primal gods cannot be sustained, because non-godlike figures are projected into the present also. Māori continually projected their past and ancestors onto their landscape and this process was not confined to ancestors who could be placed within a mythic framework. The early scholar of Māori society in the nineteenth century, Edward Tregear, observed how Māori projected their ancestors into their present when he recalled how a tribal elder, Te Whetu, took him along the Waikato River bank to show him his tribal ancestor, Raukawa.

Many years ago I was walking with a Maori on the bank of the Waikato River, near the village of Te Whetu. The native chief said to me, 'I will show you something that no white man has ever yet seen. I will show you our ancestor, Raukawa'. This Maori belonged to the Tribe of Ngāti-raukawa. We left the river-side and proceeded up a narrow valley. Turning a sharp angle in it, we came upon a huge conical stone. It was about 30ft. in height, if my memory serves me. About 20ft. up was a bright patch of red ochre. The Maori said, 'Do you see the kura (red mark)?' I answered, 'Yes, what is it?' He replied, 'That is the blood that flowed from the wound when he was killed. That is my ancestor, Raukawa. He was a giant; he leapt across the Waikato River at the place where Cambridge now stands.' I said, 'I should like to understand exactly what you mean. Do you want me to know that this stone was set up in memory of your ancestor, and made sacred for him?' He answered, 'No, this is my ancestor himself.' I then said, 'You must know that you are talking nonsense. A stone cannot give life to a race of men, nor could it leap across the Waikato. You mean that the stone has been named for Raukawa, or else, perhaps, that your giant forefather was turned into stone by the gods and the petrified hero stands in this spot.' 'No', he replied doggedly, 'that is Raukawa, and the red mark is the place where he was mortally wounded.' I shook my head in despair. I could not follow his thought, but I feel sure that he believed in some queer idea of personality in the stone.³⁵

Margaret Orbell later recorded this passage in her publication, *Hawaiki*.³⁶ She pointed out that Tregear was thinking rationally and as a historian and clearly Raukawa, the founding ancestor of the Ngāti Raukawa was human and not a rock. Tregear was aware that in Ngāti Raukawa whakapapa, their ancestor lived approximately 11 generations earlier than Te Whetu and about ten generations after Houtura, the ancestor who navigated his way to New Zealand on the Tainui canoe. Raukawa was a human as opposed to a god or mythic hero figure. Yet for Māori, rationalizations such as Tregear's were irrelevant and missed the point. For Te Whetu, their ancestor Raukawa was before them and this 'Raukawa/Rock' was, for want of a better word, their 'ancestor'. Orbell's point was that this was the way Māori represented their

past but that modern scholars insist such traditions should be assimilated into modern frameworks of thinking such as the framework of history. The Raukawa example is not unique to this tribe. All tribes have vast genealogies of ancestors who are depicted as significant landmarks whom Māori recognize as 'living beings'. How then do we explain this and account for it as historians? This question is behind the writings of Binney, Salmond and even Munz. The only possible route to dealing with this question is to look at the epistemological foundations of other societies which saw their world in mythic terms.

Lévi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind* offers help for understanding how non-western time systems constructed the past. In the chapter 'Time Regained' Lévi-Strauss argues that there were two kinds of societies, which he called 'hot' and 'cold'. Western societies were 'hot' – he compared them to a steam engine in constant motion and always in the process of change. 'Cold' societies on the other hand had institutions or mechanisms that functioned 'to annul the possible effects of historical factors on their equilibrium and continuity in a quasi-automatic fashion'.³⁷ This tortured prose is meant to imply that while 'cold societies' recognize seasonal fluctuations in their landscapes, their purpose is to maintain their status quo. This process occurs in societies characterized by mythic traditions. People in these societies trace their origins back to a mythic past which, it is believed, still exists in a kind of temporal mode in nature. The members of such societies acknowledge a 'before' and 'after' but perceive that each reflects the other in the present. Lévi-Strauss argues that the object, for people in such societies, 'is to grasp the world as both a synchronic and a diachronic totality and the knowledge which draws therefrom is like that afforded of a room by mirrors fixed on opposite walls, which reflect each other (as well as objects in the intervening space) although without being strictly parallel'.³⁸

Myth is reflected in nature and this is seen in the story of Raukawa and the tradition of the canoe 'Tama-a-rereti'. The myth is the spiritual essence of the story because the ancestors' spirits exist in the spirit world – Te-ao-wairua. The physical form of the myth (ancestors, canoes) is captured in nature. Lévi-Strauss tells us that 'multitude of images' are always being constructed and this builds and reinforces the mental world which peoples of non-modern 'cold' societies inhabit. On the other hand people in modern 'hot' societies place time in a single continuum, which means that change is continual and represented as 'history'. Change and lineal progression were, for Lévi-Strauss, fundamental characteristics of modern societies, whereas non-modern societies were static and frozen.

Lévi-Strauss argues that a-historical societies constructed their time systems in a manner where myth and the present were continually reflecting each other as a series of mirror images. But does this prevent indigenous

peoples from constructing a history? More specifically does the fact that a-historical societies possess different time schemata mean that they cannot construct a history?

Tribal myths and historical method

The problem with this type of question is that it assumes that ‘history’ is the final word in how we see the past. The question also assumes that an essentially non-western mode of thought can be assimilated within a western discipline. It is possible that the best representation of how Māori see the past has already been written by Apirana Ngata and Pei Te Hurinui Jones in *Ngā Mōteatea*, a series of publications which collected traditional Māori chants. That we do not see *Ngā Mōteatea* as a historical text tells us a great deal about how we see the past. This, however, is a matter for debate elsewhere.

The principal concept of this essay is time. Lévi-Strauss makes his view of history clear when he declares that, ‘There is no history without dates’.³⁹ He admits that dates may not be the whole of history but they are its *sine qua non* because time and chronology are the facets that make it distinctive as a knowledge system. Historians date each event and establish a relation between ‘before’ and ‘after’.⁴⁰ But is history really a matter of plotting events along a timeline? Perhaps, but it is also clear that the timeline we have is itself based upon a mythic starting point. The western world has chosen to privilege the birth of Christ, ‘the son of God’ over and above, for example, the founding of Rome by a child of the war god Mars, or the Year Zero established by the Khmer Rouge. And even if one was to agree that a date is important, what does it really mean? If we say that World War Two started in 1939, what we really mean is that it started in 1939 for the British empire and its dominions. And the year 1939 can be reduced to many sub-components. The question remains, can a history be written where the sequence of events and time are not central?

‘Time’ is a secondary matter because in itself it is meaningless. Whether historians refer to 1939 as the beginning of the war or 1945 as the ending of the war, history is about explaining how one led to the other. A multitude of events occurred in 1939, which will never be told. What historians are dealing with is ‘historical time’ which is different from ‘temporal succession’. What makes history is the fact that historians order and link events in time and they do this by way of narrative. Historians cannot link events with any precision simply because every event is infinitely sub-divisible just as every moment within time can also be broken down. In order to create a narrative historians may start at the beginning, end or middle of an event, which is then reduced to its sub-events and so on.⁴¹ Regardless of how this is done, the historian, like the tribal elder, has given time its shape.

The similarity between the tribal story-teller and the historian is not lost on Lévi-Strauss. Hayden White brought this to our attention in his essay, 'Interpretation in History'.⁴² White cites Lévi-Strauss commenting on how historians have dealt with the French Revolution:

. . . authors do not always make use of the same incidents; when they do, the incidents are revealed in quite different lights. And yet these are variations which have to do with the same country, the same period, and the same events whose reality is scattered across every level of a multilayered structure.⁴³

What gives the French Revolution validity is not the 'factual' content because, as Lévi-Strauss says, in isolation each element of an historical account is 'beyond grasp'. Instead, for Lévi-Strauss certain elements 'derive consistency from the fact that they can be integrated into a system whose terms are more or less credible when set off against the overall coherence of the series'.⁴⁴ This is a remarkable conclusion because it essentially aligns myth and history as existing within the same imaginative universe. This notion recalls Nihoniho's instructions and the divination practices of the tohunga at Taumutu and the mōteatea chanted by tribal elders. Each example in its isolated sense appears bizarre, yet within its overall system there is a coherence. Historians unwilling to accept this proposition might protest that historical explanations cannot rest upon supernatural explanations: an event cannot be explained by a crack of thunder, a flash of lightning or the murmur of the tide. Yet historians should remember that the most basic time line we use centres on the birth and death of 'Christ', 'the son of God', and is valid today only because Christ offers a reference point that allows 'internal consistency', not because of any absolute law of time. Likewise the more modern use of BCE and CE is little more than a variation of its predecessor. Oral tradition provides a way of looking at the world that does not privilege itself as the only way. This is what Hayden White meant when he said, in 'The Burden of History',

The historian operating under such a conception could thus be viewed as one who, like the modern artist and scientist, seeks to exploit a certain perspective on the world that does not pretend to exhaust description or analysis of all of the data in the entire phenomenal field but rather offers itself as *one way among many* of disclosing certain aspects of the field.⁴⁵

After all, as White explains, history lost its privileged position in the early twentieth century.⁴⁶ Lévi-Strauss charged that the historical narrative was a 'fraudulent outline' and Karl Popper had already come to the same conclusion in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, when he said 'there can be no history of "the past as it actually did happen"; there can only be

historical interpretations, and none of them final; and every generation has a right to frame its own'.⁴⁷

There can be no history of the past as it actually happened because, Popper was aware, facts are infinitely sub-divisible and more importantly, there is no law of historical development. The act of recalling the past, whether it be the recitation of an oral tradition or the writing of history, does not recall time. Time passes regardless.

Oral traditions are a series of meaningful events constructed by the storyteller and while chronological time may not be fully irrelevant neither is it the *sine qua non* of oral tradition or history. Does this matter? Whichever time system is employed, historians are not dealing with time as dealt with by Zeno, the General Theory of Relativity or Minkowski's space-time. Historians are writing of a time that exists within the human mind, not physical time – if such a thing exists at all. From Popper to Munz, Lévi-Strauss to White, all accept that time, once placed in a narrative, is 'historical time', created and shaped by the historian just as the tribal elder creates mythic time. Does this help New Zealand scholars answer the questions posed by Binney and Salmond? It may be that the difference is more subtle. Māori are 'a-historical' in the sense that, for them, time as understood in the west does not exist. Māori accept an eternal present. This is of course closer to the truth that Munz and Popper chased, as time is nothing more than an illusion used by historians to mask our timelessness and to combat the loss felt as each moment passes.

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- 1 Judith Binney, Gillian Chaplin and Craig Wallace, *Mihaia: The Prophet Rua Kenana and his Community at Maungapohatu*, Oxford, 1979; Judith Binney, *Redemption Songs: A Life of Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki*, Auckland, 1995; Judith Binney, 'Maori Oral Narratives, Pakeha Written Texts: Two Forms of Telling History', *New Zealand Journal of History* (NZJH), 21, 1 (1987), pp.16-28; Anne Salmond, 'The Study of Traditional Maori Society: The State of the Art', *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (JPS), 92, 3 (1983), pp.309-31. See also Michael King, *Being Pakeha: An Encounter with New Zealand and the Maori Renaissance*, Auckland, 1985, pp.174-92.
 - 2 Salmond, 'The Study of Traditional Maori Society', p.311.
 - 3 Binney, 'Maori Oral Narratives'.
 - 4 Ibid, p.27.
 - 5 See for example, David Couzens, *The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality*, Cambridge, MA, 2009.
 - 6 Peter Munz, *The Shapes of Time*, Middletown, CT, 1976, p.264-5.
 - 7 Peter Munz, *When the Golden Bough Breaks, Structuralism or Typology?*, London, 1973, p.56.
 - 8 Although he also criticized the influence of postmodern ideas upon Salmond's work his 1994 article: 'The Two Worlds of Anne Salmond in Post Modern Fancy-dress?', NZJH, 28, 1, (1994), pp.60-75. Munz's principal criticism was that Salmond compared Māori

world views against the total western world view over a series of centuries, whereas he argued the western world view had altered often and from a historian's perspective one needed to be selective when making the comparison. Whatever the merit of the argument and debate that followed, the point here is there were multiple epistemologies and each deserved to be understood within its own context and beyond its own framework.

- 9 Munz, *Shapes of Time*, pp.103-4.
- 10 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York, 1961; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind (La Pensée Sauvage)*, London, 1966.
- 11 Te Maire Tau, *I Whanau au i Kaiapoi, The Story of Natanahira Waruwarutu as Recorded by Thomas Green*, Otago, 2011 (in press Otago University Press, page references not available).
- 12 I have decided to refer to these elders by their first name as opposed to normal academic convention where the surname is used. Generally within the Māori world, referring to another by their surname is seen as 'impolite'. The western convention of referring to others by their last name is just that – a convention, and a cultural one at that.
- 13 Tau, *I Whanau au i Kaiapoi*.
- 14 Patricia Burns, *Te Rauparaha, a New Perspective* (translations by Bill Parker), Wellington, 1980.
- 15 Hāpopo was the archetype god in tribal myth representing the idea of tragedy, failure and destruction. See John White, *The Ancient History of the Maori*, Vol. II, Wellington, 1887, pp.49-50; Christine Tremewan, trans, and ed., *Traditional Stories from Southern New Zealand, He Korero no Te Wai Pounamu*, Christchurch 2002, pp.49-62. In the original story we are told that Hāpopo had fallen in battle or a similar tragedy and that two survivors had sought refuge at the village of a leading chief, Paoa. The survivors were then told by the people to return to their village (whaka-hokia) and were chased by the people until the village chief, Paoa, offered salvation. This myth is repeated throughout tribal traditions where accounts often tell of two survivors arriving from defeat, being asked to identify themselves and then being told to return. Quite often the refugees visit the leading chief's village at night to enter the chief's lodgings in stealth. Typically the village leader offers food to counter their 'tapu' nature. The next morning the locals are often unhappy about the appearance of the visitors, but accept the situation because the chief has offered the visitors food. The underlying theme in this scenario is that the 'refugees' had the stigma of Hāpopo attached to them and were therefore considered 'tapu'.
- 16 T.E. Green (trans, T. Potiki), 'The History of Ngāi Tahu (Ngati Kuri Clan) by Te Wanikau', MacDonald Collection, Ngāi Tahu Archives, University of Canterbury, pp.26, 62.
- 17 Te Maire Tau and Atholl Anderson, eds, *Ngāi Tahu: a Migration History, the Carrington Text*, Wellington, 2008, p.114.
- 18 Binney, 'Maori Oral Narratives', p.21.
- 19 Obviously a variation of 'poroporoaki'.
- 20 Te Maire Tau, *I Whanau au i Kaiapoi*.
- 21 For example Elsdon Best writes, 'The term tohunga, as understood by the average European resident, denotes a shamanistic humbug; but the word simply means an expert or adept, and not necessarily in sacerdotal matters' (E. Best, *The Maori as he was: a brief account of Maori life as it was in pre-European days*, Wellington, 1934, p.74). Best dismisses what the average European thinks but also attempts to explain tohunga as an expert in daily activities such as carving or carpentry. Both views are wrong.

- Tohunga are experts as Best says, but they are also spiritual leaders of the activity. See also Reverend Thomas Buddle, *The Aboriginies of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1851; Stuart Barton Babbage, *Hauhauiism, An Episode in the Maori Wars 1863-66*, Wellington, 1937, pp.20-27.
- 22 Apirana Ngata and Pei Te Hurinui Jones, *Ngā Mōteatea*, Part 1, Auckland, 2004, pp.402-3 (Māori Text, 1959).
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp.14-15.
- 24 Tuta Nihoniho, *Narrative of the Fighting on the East Coast (Nga Pakanga ki Te Tai Rawhiti)*, Wellington, 1913, p.20. The translation is mine. The original translation was by A. Hamilton, Director of the Dominion Museum. Hamilton's translation was accurate, although he used Māori words in the translation which I wanted to avoid for the present audience.
- 25 John White, *Ancient History of the Maori*, Vol. 1, Wellington, 1887, p.8 (English), p.4 (Māori).
- 26 Herbert W. Williams, *A Dictionary of the Maori Language*, Wellington, 1957, p.213.
- 27 The same definition was applied by the nineteenth-century Te Arawa elder, Te Rangikaheke, when he explained how Māori saw and understood their past. This is explained in a sentence in George Grey's *Ko Nga Moteatea, Me Nga Hakirara O Nga Maori* (Wellington, 1853, p.xlix): 'A na reira matou nga tangata maori i mau tonu ai ki enei korero o mua, hei korero ake ma nga uri ki muri ake nei, i nga karakia maori, i nga whakatakoto tupuna, i nga aha, i nga aha noa iho a te maori (Therefore the Māori people still hold to these traditions of the past as traditions for our descendants after us so that they know their incantations, how to recite genealogies and whatever else is required by Māori).
- In this passage, Te Rangikaheke is referring to the traditions of the primal atua (gods) whom he places in the time of 'mua' and the descendants are placed in the time 'muri' which follows after or behind them. Likewise when Māori trace whakapapa or descent lines down from an ancestor, each successive generations is 'i muri' or after the ancestor (i mua).
- 28 Munz, *Shapes of Time*, p.16.
- 29 Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies. Vol. One: The Spell of Plato*. 5th ed., London, 1966, p.14.
- 30 Properly, Kanaka is the word used to define the Pacific Islander labourers who went to the Queensland sugar cane fields in the nineteenth century. However within Ngāi Tahu, 'kanaka' was a generic ascription used to describe any Pacific Islander or even Afro-American Blacks who settled and lived within Ngāi Tahu communities.
- 31 Tau and Anderson (eds), pp.46-48.
- 32 Margret Orbell, *Hawaiki: A New Approach to Maori Tradition*, Christchurch, 1985, pp.1-12. See also Percy Smith, *Hawaiki, The Original Homeland of the Maori*, Christchurch, 1905, pp.16-19.
- 33 Rawiri Te Maire Tau, *Nga Pikituroa o Ngāi Tahu, The Oral Traditions of Ngāi Tahu*, Dunedin, 2003, pp.269-72.
- 34 In fact, if we read the story even more closely, it becomes clear that when the narrator tells us of the journey of the canoe 'Waka-huruhuru-manu', he is really telling us about the movement of the constellation Scorpio.
- 35 Edward Tregear, 'Thoughts on Comparative Mythology', *Transactions and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New Zealand 1868-1961*, Vol.30, 1897, pp.56-57.

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- 36 Orbell, p.1.
- 37 Lévi-Strauss, p.234.
- 38 Ibid., p.263; see also pp.242-3,
- 39 Ibid., p.258.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Peter Munz, *Shapes of Time*, pp.22-38.
- 42 Hayden White, 'Interpretation in History', *New Literary History*, 4, 2 (Winter 1973), pp.281-314 .
- 43 Lévi-Strauss in White, p.288.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Hayden White, 'The Burden of History', *History and Theory*, 5, 2 (1966), p.130.
- 46 Ibid., pp.111-13.
- 47 Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies. Vol. Two: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*, 5th ed, London, 1966, p.268.