

TIME &

THE ART OF MAORI' STORYTELLING

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No sense of history?

Among the best loved books of my youth were *Vikings of the Sunrise* and *The Coming of the Maori* by Peter Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa). Examining traditional accounts of the peopling of Aotearoa with critical perception, Te Rangi Hiroa noted 'inconsistencies' whereby 'ancestors who lived at different periods of time are brought together to converse with each other'. Kupe, for example, gives sailing directions in the first person to Turi, who is many generations removed from him on the whakapapa. Where most scholars of the time interpreted these 'inconsistencies' as evidence that the Maori had no sense of history and the passage of time, Te Rangi Hiroa explained them as examples of a literary style which used the first person or *oratio recta*, even when ancestors belonged to different periods. The aim, he suggested, was to ensure the effective communication of information from generation to generation.¹

Tucked away in my mind for years, this insight resurfaced in the late 1960s when I was teaching courses on myth and Maori literature



Maui prepares to kill the Hine-nui-te-pō accompanied by the small birds of the New Zealand bush. Russell Clark, from Sir George Grey's Polynesian Mythology, W.W. Baird (ed), Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd, Christchurch 1956.

at Victoria University. At that time the anthropological study of myth was dominated by the theory and analyses of the French structuralist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, who concentrated on uncovering the time-less, underly-

ing structure of ideas and logical processes which work below the level of consciousness to resolve problems.² While critical of his lack of interest in the narratives themselves, I found Lévi-Strauss' approach thought-provoking.³ In the course of applying his method to the Maori myths I made a discovery which reinforced my interest in the way they were transmitted.

Nga Mahi A Nga Tupuna

The first comprehensive collection of Maori narratives was published by Sir George Grey in Maori under the title *Nga Mahinga a Nga Tupuna* 'The Doings of the Ancestors' in 1854 and in a rather free English translation as *Polynesian Mythology* in 1855.⁴ Rather more than half this collection comprises stories which fall into the category of myth. As defined by anthropologists, myths are accounts of how the world came to be the way it is for the myth-tellers, with special reference to the natural environment, the problematic issues of mortality, gender, and customary beliefs and practices. They are stories believed to be true and held as sacred.⁵ In the Maori case, the

myths comprise four main and two minor story cycles:

1. the story of the creation of the world, including the gods, natural phenomena and human beings, subsumed in Grey's collection under the title 'The Children of Heaven and Earth';
2. the Maui cycle, plus the associated stories of Hinauri, Rupe, Tinirau and their descendants;
3. the Tawhaki cycle, plus the associated stories of Rata and his descendants;
4. the migrations of the ancestors of the Maori people from Hawaiki to Aotearoa.

These myths are linked in sequence by relations of kinship and descent between the actors. Most of the action takes place in Hawaiki, a land which the Maori locate among the islands of Polynesia but also recognise as existing in a mythical dimension outside the 'real' world.⁶ One of the Maui narratives tells how Maui fished up the North Island of New Zealand (Te Ika-a-Maui) out of the sea. Many generations later, a radical change in location occurred when expeditions from Hawaiki found and planted settlers on Maui's fish. Members of these expeditions are honoured as the forebears of different Maori tribes.

Evidence assembled independently by prehistorians confirms that Aotearoa New Zealand was settled by people from the islands of Eastern Polynesia about a thousand years ago and that their culture subsequently evolved, through several time phases and with regional variations, into the

highly distinctive culture recorded by European visitors in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and generally known as 'Classic Maori'.⁷

The world of the myths

In 1970, following Lévi-Strauss'



Kae leaves Tinirau's village in Hawaiki (depicted as an 18th-century pā) riding on his host's pet whale.

Russell Clark, from Sir George Grey's *Polynesian Mythology*, 1956.

prescription,⁸ I examined separately the geographic, techno-economic, sociological and cosmological 'levels' discernible in the Maori myths, using the Maori text *Nga Mahi a Nga Tupuna*.⁹ In doing so, I assembled plentiful evidence that in *all* the myths, including those set in Hawaiki, the physical and the social

aspects of the world described were those of Aotearoa in the early 19th century, the world of the men who supplied the versions Grey published.¹⁰

Because the New Zealand islands underwent early separation and long isolation from other lands, their flora and fauna are botanically and zoologically distinctive, different from those of other Polynesian islands. The stories of the Children of Heaven and Earth, Maui and Tawhaki are supposedly set in Hawaiki before the migrations, yet all the trees, birds and fishes mentioned therein and most of the plants are identifiable, by their Maori name and characteristics, as species distinctive to New Zealand. For example, to protect the seeds of fire from Maui, Mahuika the fire-goddess hid them in the kaikomako, pukatea, poporokaiwhiria, mahoe and taraire, the native species used by the Maori for fire-making.¹¹ Maui was responsible for the distinctive markings of the kukupa (wood-pigeon) and the kahu (hawk), chose the small birds miromiro (white breasted North Island tit), pitoitoi (robin), tataeko (whitehead), koroririro (grey warbler) and tirairaka (fantail) to witness his attempt to kill Hine-nui-te-po, and was

betrayed to his death by the flighty behaviour of the fantail.¹² The plant foods mentioned are either native New Zealand species (aruhe or fernroot) or tropical species established in Aotearoa by Polynesian settlers (kūmara and taro).¹³ Other plants important in tropical Polynesia are not mentioned.¹⁴ Harakeke (flax),

raupo (bulrush) and whanake (cabbage tree) supply materials for use in building and weaving and Hīne-nui-te-po is described as having teeth of mata (obsidian), eyes of pounamu (greenstone), hair like rimurehia (a native seagrass) and a mouth like a manga (barracouta).¹⁵

Similarly, the social and cultural forms described or inferable from the action belong to early 19th-century Aotearoa, not Polynesia. The actors in the myths, including gods and demi-gods, live in unfortified kainga and fortified pa like those reported by early European visitors to Aotearoa.¹⁶ Several episodes take place in houses with features characteristic of the chiefs' houses of the early 19th century, such as poutokomanawa (heartposts supporting the ridgepole), tātau (sliding doors), tekoteko (carved figure on the gable) and enough room for crowds of people.¹⁷ The flax ropes (tuamaka, tarikarakia, whiri pāraharaha and rino), musical instruments (kōauau, pūtorino and tōkere) and clothes (maro-whaiapu, maro-waero, tū and tātua) mentioned are all typically Classic Maori.¹⁸ The depiction of social relationships is selective, focusing on actors of high rank and mana; nevertheless, the social system and tikanga ('right ways') highlighted in the stories are easily recognised as those of the Maori people at the time of first contact with Europeans. The main themes of the stories are concerns dominant in Maori society at that time: on-going conflicts between groups made up of the

descendants of common ancestors (hapū), tension between first-born males (mātāmua) and their teina (junior siblings), especially the youngest (pōtiki), the rewards and dangers of the pursuit of mana and utu, the vital importance of access to



Maui organises the snaring of the sun with plaited flax ropes.

Russell Clark, from Sir George Grey's Polynesian Mythology, 1956.

and responsible guardianship of resources and sacred knowledge.¹⁹

In search of explanation

This discovery that the action of the myths was set in the world of 19th-century Aotearoa rather than pre-historic tropical Polynesia is not adequately explained by concluding that Maori had no sense of the

passage of time, no sense of history as Western historians conceive it. Searching for a more satisfactory answer, I remembered how Te Rangi Hiroa had identified literary style as an explanation for direct speech between ancestors from different periods. This directed my attention to the role of storytelling and storytellers in the transmission of traditional knowledge.

Only a little thought was needed to conclude that, in a completely oral culture like that of the pre-European Maori, myths and other stories survived only as long as they were successfully transmitted from one generation to another. Stories had to be told orally, and their telling involved a long and many-stranded chain of tellers and receivers operating in time and space.

Accounts of the circumstances in which Maori myths were told are fragmentary, scattered and contradictory, but fortunately we have access to several versions of the same stories within and between Grey's volume and later collections such as John White's.²⁰ In contrast with waiata (song-poems) and karakia (chanted prayers), which remain almost identical in wording in different recordings, different versions of the same story vary markedly. Storytellers were clearly not limited to a fixed form of wording. They drew fairly heavily on a pool of conventional images and dramatic devices, such as repetitive dialogues and direct speech, but exercised considerable

freedom with regard to which they used and how they arranged them. Different tellers highlighted different episodes and actors and added their own individual touches.

Pine Taiapa: Storyteller extraordinary

Having thought my way through to this point, I began to listen more carefully to contemporary Maori storytelling. Amid changes due to the acquisition of literacy, individualised employment and massive urban migration, gifted exponents have kept the art of oral storytelling alive, learning and passing on traditional stories and methods of presentation, at hui (formal gatherings) on the marae and increasingly in special teaching sessions, sponsored by both Maori and general educational authorities, and open to children and adults, Maori and Pakeha.

The relevance of contemporary storytelling to the study of myths and other traditional stories was underlined for me in 1970 when a student to whom I lent my tape-recorder returned it with a recording of Pine Taiapa, carver and expert in Ngati Porou history, speaking at a weekend School of Maori Arts and Crafts in northern Taranaki. The tape included two stories of the coming of key ancestors from Hawaiki to the East Coast area of the North Island. Both qualify as myth, telling of the establishment of the social and economic order of the Tai Rawhiti people. Pine relates them in the process of explaining the symbolism of different patterns in the tukutuku (lattice

work) wall panels inside the meeting-house.

The tape recording of these stories greatly extended my understanding of the methods and processes involved in the art of Maori storytelling. I present a transcript of



Pine Taiapa and Colin Knox at Rongopai House 1969. Photo by M.D. King.

one of them to illustrate my points. Unfortunately, the recording could not capture the accompanying body language, but the meaning of the words is enriched by tonal variations and meaningful pauses. In an attempt to indicate these, I use commas, semi-colons, colons and full-stops to indicate pauses of increasing length, and dashes to represent a raised intonation, indicating something left up in the air, uncompleted:

This story is the coming of the kumara to New Zealand, as depicted by the tukutuku pattern of *roimata toroa*, 'albatross's tears'.

Ruakapanga was the outstanding tohunga of Hawaiki, to teach all manner of lore. He had a whare wānanga there. And during the celebrations of the Capping Day, he commanded one boy, outstanding in

agriculture, to make for New Zealand, because of the combustion of population there ... Everybody was touching one another's elbow, when they're eating, when they're sleeping, when they are walking. Over-population.

'Porangahua, go to New Zealand, this land found by Kupe, and report back to me as to its possibilities of growing things and making a home for the people in the future'.

Pourangahua came on his canoe, with his good wife Kaniowai, the most beautiful in Hawaiki. On arrival there, he immediately, being a student of agriculture, with a Diploma, he immediately saw the buds on the trees and immediately knew that spring

was nigh. It was autumn in his country: in this one, hello, it was spring. He left his wife behind, Kaniowai, and put a tapu on to her. This is important, put a tapu on to her.

He went back and reported to Ruakapanga: 'Sir, the buds are appearing, it is springtime'.

Ruakapanga said then to him: 'Do not return back by canoe, but you will go on my two birds, Harongarangi and Tiungarangi. You will go on Harongarangi, Tiungarangi will take your load. Added to this, you will take these digging implements known as *kō*, Mamaenuku and Mamaeroa. Go there and plant. Before landing, my birds will make a shivering movement. Upon then, these are the karakia you must say. And on landing, again you must give

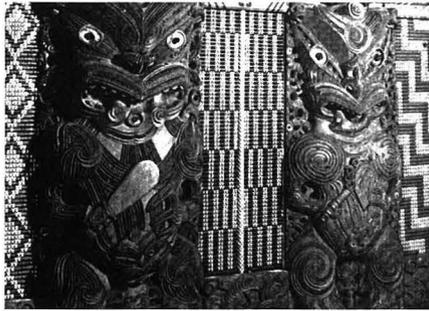
thanksgiving for their safe return, and these are the karakia'.

I have noted my father – I am six foot one in height, and normally I used to weigh 16 stone eight; now I am 14 stone eight. And my father was only five feet four. My mother; a handsome woman, six foot one. How he got her, goodness knows. And I remember every summer, every Saturday, my father riding –. And later, when I took this work on, I said, 'Dad –', confidentially with him, 'Dad. Mother. Beautiful woman like that. How did you manage it?' He gave me the little secret, and he said, 'Pine, that's why you see me, long before the others; when I leave them at the shearing shed, there's only one place I saw between the ears of my horse, your mother'.

Similarly with Porangahua. The moment he left Hawaiki, he had only one in sight of him, I think, all the way, and that was his wife Kaniowai; therefore he forgot to give the necessary prayer; until, after *great* satisfaction, then he remembered, that he had to do this. Coming back, he saw the birds, crying. Here (in the tukutuku pattern), the birds are standing there, and one can see the tears falling. Hence its significance, there you have the *roimata toroa*, giving you the significance of anxiety, and duty.

Despite its limitations, this transcript is packed with indications of Pine's responsiveness to his audience. Because the listening group included children and Pakeha, he chooses to speak in English, which he

would not have done in formal debate with his peers, he uses the name New Zealand instead of Aotearoa, even though he is speaking of the pre-European past, and his manner is colloquial, relaxed and personal. He pauses, waiting for a



The tukutuku pattern (roimata tukutuku) in the Maori meeting house Te Hau-ki-Turanga, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa.

noisy child to settle, seeking the phrase or analogy that will make sense to his listeners. He directs attention to significant points in so many words or by repetition. Sensitive to the susceptibilities of some Pakeha and the presence of children, he delicately implies the kind of satisfaction Porangahua obtained with his wife: in Maori he would have made it explicit.

While bearing his own inimitable stamp, Pine's language is also that of his hearers, strongly New Zealand in flavour. Many expressions need interpretation for non-New Zealanders. 'Capping Day', for example, is a common name for a university graduation ceremony. A 'shearing shed' is a barn-like structure in which flocks of sheep are shorn by travelling shearing gangs. Several Maori words

are used without translation because they are part of the general New Zealand vocabulary: tapu (a prohibition enforced by religious sanctions), karakia (chanted prayer), tohunga (priest specialist), whare wānanga (traditional School of Learning).²¹

However, he finds it necessary to explain what a ko is, because the implement is no longer in use.

A speaker of English as his second language, Pine often does not get its idioms quite right, but his near-misses capture the attention and illuminate meaning more than the 'correct' form would do, as when he transforms 'population explosion' into 'population combustion', and 'lack of elbow-room' into 'touching one another's elbow.'

Pine makes a different way of life understandable to a modern audience by using terms associated with modern institutions and referring to contemporary experiences. He credits the traditional whare wananga with a Capping Day and the conferring of Diplomas. He explains Ruakapanga's commission to Porangahua in the familiar terms of over-population. He illustrates Porangahua's forgetting of the birds by referring to his father's love for his mother, which caused him to head straight for home as soon as shearing was over, instead of going to the hotel to drink with his mates. He makes the actors live by putting direct speech into their mouths. In Pine's telling, a story about ancestors who lived more than 20 generations ago becomes as vivid as if it happened yesterday. Time is

annihilated, the past brought into the present.

Holding an audience

I subsequently extended my understanding of the process of oral transmission by watching other Maori tellers and audiences in action. A Maori audience is heterogeneous in terms of age, sex and social status. It is also easily bored and distracted. In a gathering on the open marae there is much coming and going on the edges of the crowd. Inside the meeting-house listeners recline on bedding spread on the floor. If a speechmaker or storyteller does not hold their attention, they talk to each other or go to sleep. If he or she makes mistakes, experts in the audience rise to their feet to correct them. If sufficiently outraged they may even order a speaker to sit down. In this way the audience acts as a check on error, preventing storytellers playing fast and loose with treasured stories. At the same time, within the limits set by consensus, the audience stimulates and challenges storytellers to capture and hold their attention. The tellers respond by presenting their stories in terms which are understandable and relevant to their listeners. Consciously or unconsciously, they use contemporary linguistic idiom, up-date and localise settings to the listeners' own time and vicinity, and make subtle changes in emphasis and interpretation to reflect current concerns.

Talking about the Maori myths with Tarutaru Rankin of Ngapuhi, another experienced storyteller, I was struck by the effectiveness with which he used illustrations from contemporary life to illuminate the characters

and motivations of actors in the myths. Describing Maui as 'a virile adolescent, mentally not just sexually', Tarutaru suggested that 'all these transformations that he makes are like people cleaning their fingernails, shaving their legs, changing their clothes, moving from one label of jeans to another label of jeans'. Discussing the way Maui obtained the sacred jawbone from his grandmother, Tarutaru commented:

When he got that jawbone, he was like a young Maori teenager with a Mark II Zephyr or a ten-speed bike – he had to show off. The sun is misbehaving in a way that does not allow the people to do their work. So he discusses the matter with his brothers to get their approval. They say, 'OK, we'll work together'. And he says, 'What we need is something to catch the sun'. You need to say things like this, much the same as when you have a flat tyre on a car, you need a jack to prop it up.

Under Maui's leadership, the brothers eventually trapped the sun using ropes made by plaiting short strands of flax fibre in complicated ways. Tarutaru stressed that:

when you weave small fibres together you get something which is very, very strong. But Maui didn't only weave the fibres, he also wove together the respect of his brothers. When you have a unity of people, you can blow down the wall of Jericho or you can handle a force as great as the sun, whether it's a Tania Harris thing or the protests against the Springbok Tour.²²

In 1982 Nikora Atama of Te Rarawa told me the story of Tawhaki's

search for his lost, other-worldly wife, as he was told it by his grandmother. In the version in *Nga Mahi a nga Tupuna*, which comes from Tainui sources,²³ Tawhaki found his wife's country on the advice of a blind grandmother by climbing into the tiered heavens by means of a fixed vine. In Nikora's version, following the instructions of a tohunga aunt, he walked across the crests of the waves out into the open sea until he came to a kelp bed, then dived through an opening in the kelp to come out in a country where he found his wife. Where the Tainui tribes lived in forested inland areas, Nikora's people live on the wild west coast of Northland, where the open sea is the major source of sustenance and the gateway to the supernatural realm. Lévi-Strauss would explain the Te Rarawa story as a logical inversion of the Tainui one. I would also see it as the product of the storytellers' drive to make stories relevant to their people's situation.

Bringing the past into the present

In the case of the Maori, their myths are at once located in the distant past and eternally contemporary with their tellers and their audience, because, in the context of telling, they are continually being re-expressed and re-interpreted in contemporary idiom. So we have the paradox that even when a people are most concerned to preserve their myths unchanged, scope for choice and therefore change is built into and an inevitable consequence of the transmission process. Myths never become out-of-date. Instead, they continue to provide a charter for existing social institutions, even in social change, and attempt to bring

about a mediation of contemporary as well as ancient problems. Myths move with the times, because myths are for telling.

If this is true for the myths, it is also true for other stories about 'the doings of the ancestors', including those presented as evidence in claims presented before the Waitangi Tribunal. Western-trained historians understandably have problems handling such material. Some take the extreme position that it falls outside the realm of history, into that of myth. Others are willing to

recognise that Maori have their own scholarly approach to history, including their own ways of testing reliability and validity. While the Maori approach differs from the Western one in significant ways, knowledge of its conventions would open up access to information at present locked away in code as it were.²⁴ I hope that this study of 'time and the art of Maori storytelling' will help historians to recognise and allow for the processes of updating and localisation at work in oral evidence. But that is another story.

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NOTES

This paper is a revised version of one first published under the title 'Myths are For Telling' in *Sporen in de Antropologie: Liber Amicorum Jan Pouwer* (ed Paul van der Grip, Ton Lemaire, Albert Trouwborst, Instituut voor Culturele en Sociale Antropologie, Katholieke Universiteit, Nijmegen, 1987), 165-78.

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3. Similar reservations led other anthropologists to devise alternative methodologies. See Terence Turner, 'Oedipus: Time and Structure in Narrative Form' in *Forms of Symbolic Action* (American Ethnological Association, 1969) and 'Narrative Structure and Mythopoesis' in *Arethusa* vol 10 no 1, 1977, 103-04; and John Perradotto, 'Oedipus and Erichthonius: Some Observations on Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Order' in *Arethusa* vol 10 no 1, 1977, 85-101.
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11. Grey, Sir George, *op.cit.*, 19.
12. Grey, *ibid.*, 10, 18, 22, 23.
13. Grey, *ibid.*, 5, 40.
14. The only two names which refer to species not found in New Zealand are manapau and poporo (Grey, *ibid.*, 10, 54), but it is unclear to which tree on which island these words refer.
15. Grey, *ibid.*, harakeke, 4, 48; raupo (in form paru, bundles of raupo used in thatch), 38; whanake, 4; Hine-nui-te-po, 22.
16. Grey, *ibid.*, kainga, 14-20, 41-42, 47; pa,

38, 40, 48.

17. Grey, *ibid.*, poutokomanawa, 30; tatau, 38; tekoteko, 52; large enough for gatherings and dancing, 8, 32-36, 52, 55-57.
18. Grey, *ibid.*, ropes, 13; musical instruments, 30; maro-whaiapo, maro-waero, tu, 10; tatau, 20.
19. Salmond, Anne, 'Tipuna - Ancestors: Aspects of Maori Cognatic Descent' in *Man and a Half* (ed Andrew Pawley, Polynesian Society Memoir No 48, Auckland, 1991), 343-56.
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21. Orsman, H.W. (ed), *The Dictionary of New Zealand English* (Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1997), capping, 133; shearing, 718-9; tapu, 813-4; karakia, 394; tohunga, 844; whare wananga, 904.
22. Tania Harris was a totally unknown young woman until she organised an Auckland street march which proved extraordinarily popular; the 1981 Tour of New Zealand by the South African Rugby Football team (the Springboks) was opposed in large public demonstrations, because of apartheid, then the rule in South Africa.
23. Grey, *op.cit.*, 39-45.
24. Sissons, Jeffrey, *Te Waimana: The Spring of Mana*, (University of Otago, Dunedin, 1991); Judith Binney, 'Maori Oral Narratives, Pakeha Written Texts: Two Forms of Telling History', *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol 21, no 1, April 1987 and 'Myth and Explanation in Ringatu Tradition', *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, vol 93 no 4, December 1984.