

*Māori Oral Traditions He Kōrero nō te Ao Tawhito*

By Jane McRae

Auckland University Press (2017)

ISBN 978 1 86940 861 9

Reviewed by Mike Ross

Like yesterday's newsfeed most people, whether Māori or Pākehā, are ignorant about the traditions of their ancestors. However, like today's cellphone, those ancient traditions were constantly on hand for their Māori ancestral users, and referred to in everyday activities to inform, communicate, create, entertain, and survive in their world. The oral traditions were 'shared', critiqued, tested, 're-tweeted' and 'liked', within social networks. Although oral traditions contained "the sum of experience and learning acquired over generations", they were limited by the capacity of an individual's mind (12). Information was prioritised through systems of memorisation and use, to ensure secure and reliable retention and recall. This book reminds the reader about the treasure trove of wisdom and beauty that exists in Maori oral traditions, nō te ao tawhito.

I appreciated reading this book because the author has worked hard to collect, organise and present a coherent narrative on oral traditions. Passion for the subject is evident in the vast amount of material used as a foundation for the book and the commitment to becoming familiar with the nature of Māori oral traditions. McRae is generous with giving credit to the early Māori recorders of this knowledge and their immense capacity to retain and recall information orally. A description of the characteristics of Māori writers builds the reader's understanding of the skill and dedication needed to transfer onto paper, the creativity, intellect and knowledge of ancient Māori. This is complemented by McRae's analysis of the material and the examples that value and engage with the intention of the original narrative. Rather than dismissing ancient stories as simple or confused, or poorly constructed thinking, the author assumes it is our ignorance and inability to appreciate what was plainly stated in the writings of our ancestors.

McRae has designed this book with the reader in mind and this is seen in the careful and thoughtful research, and the way a reader is guided through the discussion. The book includes the necessary formality of acknowledgements, introduction, conclusion, and references, but there are only 5 chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the four modes of Māori oral traditions, whakapapa, whakataukī, kōrero and waiata, which she explains are the broad terms used by tūpuna Māori to differentiate the forms of oral traditions; and these are the headings and focus for the following four chapters. Helpful and interesting endnotes are also clearly organised and provide added depth. References to the primary documents are touched on, and readers invited to access those manuscripts to develop their own understanding and thinking on Māori oral traditions.

Although each chapter could stand alone, as the amount of material relating to each element is substantial, there is a fluency and consistency in the overall flow of the book. Even a chapter on traditional lists, whakapapa, that could be perceived as monotonous, is energised by the messages that come through the explanation of the lists and their place in Māori society. Consequently, the reader will gain a greater appreciation of the knowledge and practice associated with the whakapapa of things such as: place – rights to land and resources, of people – belonging and identity, and the Māori view of order in the natural world – the seasons, fishing and gardening.

McRae has chosen short examples of oral traditions in each chapter, from a range of iwi, with no favour to a particular writer or tribal knowledge, and in the process indicates the range of sources that exist across all tribes. The selection of kōrero may be familiar to those who have been students of Māori formal language in whaikōrero and karanga. Whakatauki and

waiata, because of the brevity of the sayings and the likely association with local traditions, people, events and the environment, can be particularly cryptic, however, those selected as examples are complemented with insightful commentary that bring the proverbial sayings and poetry alive in English.

The technical process of translating the original text from Māori into today's English is a difficult task that is done with careful consideration by McRae. All of the original scripts were written in Māori and so explanations in English are necessary for non-Māori speaking readers to understand the texts. Even a fluent speaker of Māori will value the translations and commentary in the same way that Shakespeare is appreciated by students of English. The author takes into account the nuances and variations in the meanings of words and phrases in the original text. The subtle differences in linguistic features, such as the use of directional particles ('nei' and 'rā'), the use of 'ka' and 'kātahi' for the flow in stories, and the economic use of words, contributes to the translation. While demonstrating the importance of linguistic explanations as an important set of tools to engage with the language of oral traditions, it avoids confusing readers with the linguistic detail and keeps the focus on the messages and ideas within the text.

Interestingly, the English translations also enriched the Māori text. McRae provides clear and reasoned interpretations but is careful to say that this is not the only interpretation and "there is a lot more to know to fully understand it..." (143). This approach allows the reader to apply their own translations and knowledge to the original text in the same way the traditional listener may have done when they heard and used this information. Of course, these translations are couched and explained in the context of Māori societal values such as mana, whenua, tapu, utu and manaakitanga.

Those interested or already engaged in composing waiata, kapa haka enthusiasts or whaikōrero, karanga practitioners and storytellers, will appreciate the insights in this book. McRae identifies patterns, formulaic adaption and staging to see under the hood of compositions and the mechanics of oral traditions that assisted composers and whānau to communicate and retain important information, displays of intellect, creativity and entertainment in an oral society.

McRae passes on her passion for the subject and provides tools for others wishing to follow her into this field. She takes an objective position, as a facilitator, and gives samples from the pool of information and insights and opportunities we have to explore the thinking, practices and to hear the voices of ancient Māori. I'm ready to test some of these theories in my own readings and translations of oral traditions.

Hei whakakapinga māku, kei te mihi ki ō tātou tūpuna, tuatahi. Nā rātou ēnei kōrero me ngā mahi i poipoi, i tuku hoki, tae noa mai ki tēnei whakatupuranga, kei te huakina mai te kūaha ki tēnei reanga. Tuarua, kei te ihu oneone e Jane, tēnā koe. Ka rongō mātou i ō pukenga rapu kōrero me te whakatakoto kaupapa hei whakaarotanga mā te hunga e kimi ana i te mātauranga nā ngā nunui. Kāti, kua whakatakoto te mānuka, kia kaha tātou.