

# He Taonga Tuku Iho nō Ngā Tūpuna

## Māori proverbial sayings – a literary treasure

JOAN METGE AND SHANE JONES

*Since her retirement from the Anthropology Department, VUW, Joan Metge has continued her work on cross-cultural communication, and is soon to publish New growth from old: the whānau in the modern world (Victoria University Press) from which the illustrations – each representing a whakatauki – by Toi te Rito Maihi are taken.*

*Shane Jones, of Ngāi Tākoto in the Far North, is a member of the Treaty of Waitangi Fisheries Commission and a part-time lecturer in Maori Studies, at Victoria University of Wellington.*

*The series and this opening paper were launched with a mihi by Shane Jones. Shane also demonstrated the oral delivery of the whakatauki.*

In our mihi we remembered all those fighters for the cause of te reo Māori who have passed to their eternal rest. We pay special tribute to Pei Te Hurinui of Ngāti Maniapoto and Reweti Kōhere of Ngāti Pōrou. Pei Te Hurinui edited three volumes of Ngā Mōteatea, celebrated the life and work of the poet Puhīwahine and translated Shakespeare into Māori. Reweti Kōhere wrote many articles in Māori and two biographies in English, translated Burns' poems into Māori, and produced a collection of whakatauki titled *He Kōnae Aronui*. Men of great mana in their own iwi, Pei and Reweti served Maoridom and all the people of Aotearoa New Zealand in many ways but above all as writers and communicators. Equally skilled in Māori and English, they delighted in both and in the art of translating from one to the other. Today we honour these two great scholars by sharing their enthusiasm for Māori poetry and whakatauki.

The word whakatauki is formed by adding *kī* (to say) to whakatau, a verb whose many meanings include 'to search or examine', 'to adorn' and 'to address in formal speech'. Whakatauki is usually trans-

lated (for example in Williams' *Dictionary of the Maori Language*) as 'saying, proverb or aphorism'. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines a proverb as 'a short pithy saying in general use, held to embody a general truth'. Proverbs are not usually thought of as literature: most people dismiss them rather cavalierly as clichés of no great depth or literary merit. To appreciate whakatauki we must first of all disembarass ourselves of this popular understanding of the nature of proverbs.

Our first example had its origin among the iwi of the Far North but is now disseminated widely throughout the country.

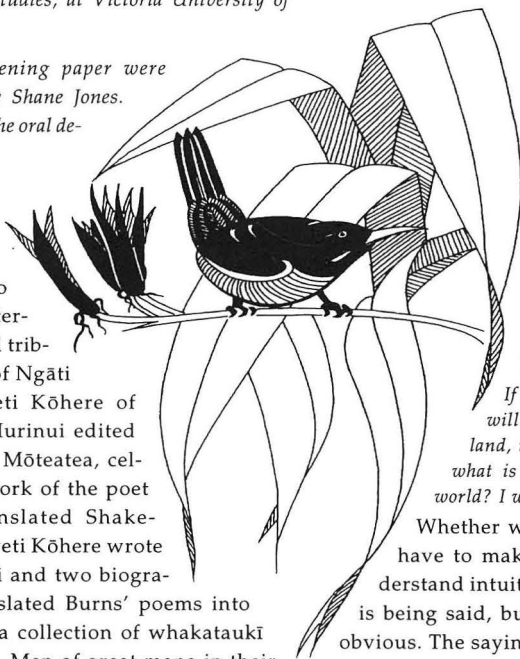
Hutia te rito ō te harakeke, kei whea te korimako e kō? Ka rere ki uta, ka rere ki tai. Kī mai koe ki au, he aha te mea nui i te ao? Māku e kī atu, He tangata! He tangata! He tangata!

A close translation runs as follows:

*If you pluck out the flax shoot, where will the bellbird sing? It will fly inland, it will fly seawards. If you ask me, what is the most important thing in the world? I will reply, People! People! People!*

Whether we can understand the Māori or have to make do with the English, we understand intuitively that something significant is being said, but just what is not immediately obvious. The saying jumps from flax shoot to bellbird to the supreme value of people, leaving the connections for us to work out. Non Māori (and probably more Māori than care to admit it) need help to unpack the meaning.

Northern kaumātua attribute this saying to a rangatira whose relatives married her off to seal a peace but prevented her from having children. The saying is part lament, part warning. She begins by referring to the flax bush, something all New Zealanders are familiar with. Each flax bush (*pā harakeke*) consists of many swordlike blades growing in fans. New shoots (*rito*) emerge between the two centre blades in each fan. Māori identify each



shoot as he tamaiti (a child) and the two blades between which it grows as ngā mātua (the parents). The flax bush is a favourite Māori metaphor not just for the parent-child family but for the larger family group, the whānau. Note that flax fans grow not singly but together in a clump; their roots are so intertwined that they stand or fall together. The rito is the growing point not only of the fan but of the whole bush. Weavers cutting flax always take the outer leaves of a fan, leaving the central three: to remove the rito is to destroy the whole fan. If the bush stops growing and fails to put out flower stalks, there will be no flowers full of nectar to attract the bellbird and give it cause to sing. Instead it will fly distractedly between land and sea, searching for somewhere to perch and feed. If the whānau ceases to produce and nurture children, it too will die. The saying concludes with the strongest possible affirmation of the value of people and thus of the whānau which produces and nurtures them. (Tangata is an inclusive term embracing both sexes and all ages.)

Many whakataukī use the imagery of the flax bush. Here is another:

Parapara waerea a ururua, kia tupu whakaritorito te tupu o te harakeke.

*Clear away the overgrowth, so that the flax bush will put forth many new shoots.*

This saying makes immediate sense as a piece of horticultural advice: we all know that plants grow best when we clear away the weeds that compete for space and nourishment. But when we follow out the analogy between flax bush and whānau, a deeper meaning becomes apparent. If families, large and small, are to fulfil their functions effectively, we must cultivate them carefully, ensuring they have the room and resources they need for continuing growth.

Besides the flax bush, whakataukī also use the kumara vine and the fern frond as images of human growth and interconnection. One often used advises young people:

Kia ū ki tōu kāwai tūpuna, kia mātauria ai, i ahu mai koe i hea, e anga ana koe ko hea.

*Trace out your ancestral stem, so that it may be known where you come from and where you are going.*

The word kāwai is the main stem of plants of a creeping, branching habit, like kumara and hue (gourds). The kumara vine spreads towards the sun, putting down suckers at intervals to draw extra sustenance from the earth. Kāwai is also used to mean the descent line which connects ancestor with descendant. Playing on the analogy between kumara vine and descent-line, this whakataukī stresses that to know yourself you need to know who your ancestors

were. From your ancestors you inherit a store of mana, your own particular abilities and your roots in the land. Look to them also to provide examples and guidance for the future.

Ka mate atu he tētē kura, ka whakaete mai he tētēkura.

*One fernfrond dies away, another fernfrond pushes its way through.*

Here is another statement about regeneration in nature which is really talking about regeneration and continuity in human life. Kura, the colour of red ochre, is a symbol of the rangatira who wore it, the chiefly leaders of hapū and iwi. This whakataukī offers reassurance that when one phase of our life ends, another begins, when one leader dies, another will arise to assume the mantle.

As well as a symbol of the whānau, the flax bush provides the raw material for many Māori crafts. One that is often overlooked but was vitally important in house and canoe building, in fishing and trapping in times past, is ropemaking. Māori freed the muka fibre from the flax blade by scraping, twisted muka fibres together by rolling on the thigh, and plaited the twists in twos, threes, fours, sixes and eights into ropes that multiplied the strength of their individual strands. He taura whiri, a plaited rope, is commonly used as an image for the weaving together of different descent-lines and hapū by able leaders. Here is a northern whakataukī on this theme.

He kōpu puta tahi, he taura whiri tātou, whiringa ā nuku, whiringa ā rangi, tē whatia ē.

*Issue of one womb, we are a plaited rope, plaited on earth, plaited in heaven, we will not be severed.*

This whakataukī stresses the strength and solidarity of those who share the same descent. This solidarity has a spiritual as well as a practical dimension, deriving from God and the ancestors. Note the reference to one womb: in the Far North, the key ancestors, the ones who weave the people together, are often women.

Whakataukī also draw inspiration from the birds and fish of the New Zealand habitat. A favourite whakataukī in the Far North describes the flocking habit of the godwit, the kūaka.

He kūaka marangaranga, kōtahi te manu i tau ki te tāhuna, ka tau, ka tau, tau atu ē.

*Godwits rise and flock together in the air; one bird comes down to land on the sandbank, then another, another and another.*

Each year flocks of godwits fly thousands of miles from Siberia to New Zealand, to spend the summer feeding on the beaches and estuaries. If they are startled while feeding they take off en masse, wheel-

ing through the air in a great flock. Then single individuals peel off and return to earth, followed by the rest, till the flock is feeding together again. This saying is used in a variety of contexts to emphasise the importance of combining group action with individual initiative and vice versa.

Having looked at these six whakataukī, we want to use them as a springboard for making some general points about the nature of whakataukī.

1. They *sound* good. They are characterised by musical cadences, pronounced rhythms, and the contrast of flowing with staccato phrases. They make much use of repetition, opposition and balance. They exploit the possibilities of onomatopoeia.

2. While they often appear to be simply recording observations about nature, they are in fact talking about human beings and their interactions: they operate through analogy.

3. For this purpose they use a rich repertoire of metaphors which evoke vivid mental images and lend themselves to visual expression. A large number of these metaphors are drawn from the world of nature but they also include the things humans make (ropes, cloaks, houses, canoes). Sometimes they refer directly to human relationships or behaviour. When they do so, they use these too as symbols conveying deeper truths. Let me give you an example.

Arohaina ō tamawāhine, hei tangi i a koe; arohaina  
ō tamatāne, hei tanu i a koe.

*Act lovingly towards your female relatives and they will weep for you when you die; act lovingly towards your male relatives and they will bury you.*

The basic, traditional meaning of *aroha* is love for kinsfolk, those bound by descent from the same ancestor(s). Here the speaker advises individuals to fulfil their kinship obligations in life, so that in death their relatives will reciprocate, the women by leading the mourning with the keening cry of the tangi, the men by digging and filling in the grave. But this reminder of what may be expected of kinsfolk points up by implication a problem not mentioned directly: the tension, sometimes conflict, between a person's loyalty to relatives by descent on the one hand and to his or her spouse on the other. Māori have never really accepted the view that the marriage tie supersedes all other ties. This whakataukī affirms the importance of descent over marriage by pointing out that you can count on your kin to go on caring for you after you die, but spouses can form new relationships. Whakataukī always involve symbolism, even when they appear to be straightforward.

4. The metaphors whakataukī use are indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand, drawing on this country's

flora and fauna and landscapes, on Māori arts and social arrangements. For this reason they should have a special appeal to all who consider themselves New Zealanders. However, they assume extensive knowledge about all these things. If our knowledge is inadequate or shallow we will miss much of the message and undervalue whakataukī individually and as a genre.

5. The metaphors and images used in whakataukī are highly condensed. A single symbol typically stands for several different referents or has several layers of meaning; unnecessary and even necessary details are omitted. Listeners are challenged to work out references and connections for themselves. Like icebergs, much of their meaning is submerged and has to be inferred. This is characteristic of Māori poetry and oratory in general. Meaning does not rest entirely in the words but is to a large extent discovered in an intellectual duel between speaker and listener.

6. While some whakataukī are in general use and convey general truths, many have arisen out of highly specific situations and are grounded in particular places. While we can achieve a degree of appreciation without that background, exploring it in depth greatly extends understanding. Often a whakataukī we think of as having general applicability turns out to be the conclusion of a specific and localised story. The whakataukī quoted above about the kuaka, often used on its own, comprises the final lines of a longer saying attributed to the rangatira Tūmatahina of Murimotu, North Cape.

Ruia ruia, tahia tahia, hei here mai i te kawau i roto  
i tana pūkorokoro, whaikoro. He kūaka marangaranga,  
kōtahi i tau ki te tahuna, tau atu, tau atu, tau atu.

To the east of North Cape there is an island which is joined to the mainland by a land bridge exposed at low tide. Bottled up there by a Ngāpuhi war party, Tūmatahina devised a plan of escape. Under his direction his people cut quantities of flax which they used to plait a long rope and make effigies which were set up to make the enemy think the island was still occupied. A good swimmer took one end of the rope across to the mainland and fastened it to a rock. Under cover of darkness Tūmatahina, who had extremely large feet, walked down the beach to the water's edge, directing his people to follow in absolute silence walking in his footprints. In that way only one set of footsteps showed up leading away from the island. Then, holding the rope as support and guide in the dark they crossed over to the mainland and escaped before the enemy realised they had gone.

The first sentence of the expanded saying can be translated as follows:

*Let it (the cut flax) be scattered, let it be woven together, to serve as noose and guideline across the shag's wind-pipe.*

In recalling the details of the escape, the whakataukī celebrates the success that comes when leader and people work together in trust and solidarity.

7. Finally, whakataukī are flexible and re-useable.

They do not have an invariant, fixed form. The more comprehensive collections include

several versions of the same whakataukī supplied by different authorities. Furthermore,

whakataukī are continually given new applications. Using

whakataukī to underscore or illustrate an argument, speakers are not satisfied with trotting out familiar phrases in expected places: the art of using whakataukī involves applying them in new contexts to new problems in a way that sheds light on context, problem and whakataukī.

There is a well known proverb that runs:

*Ka pū te ruha, ka hao te rangatahi.*

*The old worn-out net is cast aside, the new net goes fishing.*

Rangatahi is a particular kind of fishing net. Originally it was assumed that both nets, the worn out one and the new one, were rangatahi nets. This whakataukī thus said much the same thing as the one about the fernfrond. Then late last century an orator used the whakataukī to point out that the old style of leadership was no longer effective and should be cast aside, to be replaced by leaders of a new style in the up and coming Young Maori Party. Rangatahi came to mean a young leader. Since then its meaning has widened still further until now it is often used to mean a 'young person'.

Now for four more examples of whakataukī we find thought provoking.

*Ko te toka i Akiha, he toka whitianga rā; ko te toka i Māpuna, koia tau e titiro ai, ko te ripo.*

*The rock at Akiha is a rock the sun shines on; the rock at Māpuna, all you can see is an eddy.*

Toka is the word for rock, especially in the form of reefs, islets and shelves around the northern coasts. Under the water they provide shelter for all kinds of

fish, shellfish and crustaceans. This whakataukī is about two rocks in the Hokianga Harbour: one which can be seen rising above the water line, exposed to the sun, the other submerged and marked only by a ripple. One commentator likens Akiha to a person who boasts of what he plans to do but does not do it, Mapuna to the person who quietly gets on with the job. Another identifies Akiha as a rock on which seagulls perch, inferior to Māpuna, a chiefly rock

with hidden depths. A third says that the saying comes from Tōhe, the great rangatira who travelled from Spirits' Bay to Hokianga on his way to visit a married daughter in Ngāti Whātua territory. Swimming across Hokianga he found only one uncovered rock, Akiha, to rest upon. This version obviously favours Akiha above Māpuna.

*Nāu i whatu te kākahu, he tāniko tāku.*

*You wove the body of the cloak, I added the taniko.*

Among the special cloaks woven for and worn by rangatira is the kaitaka. The body of a kaitaka is woven closely of very fine muka: the taniko borders are woven separately and then attached. Some commentators interpret this whakataukī as emphasising the responsibility of parents for their children's behaviour and character. We like to interpret it as stressing the complementary importance of parents who lay the groundwork and grandparents who add the finishing touches. It is the parents who teach basic skills and manners, the grandparents who develop the child's self-esteem and linguistic skills.

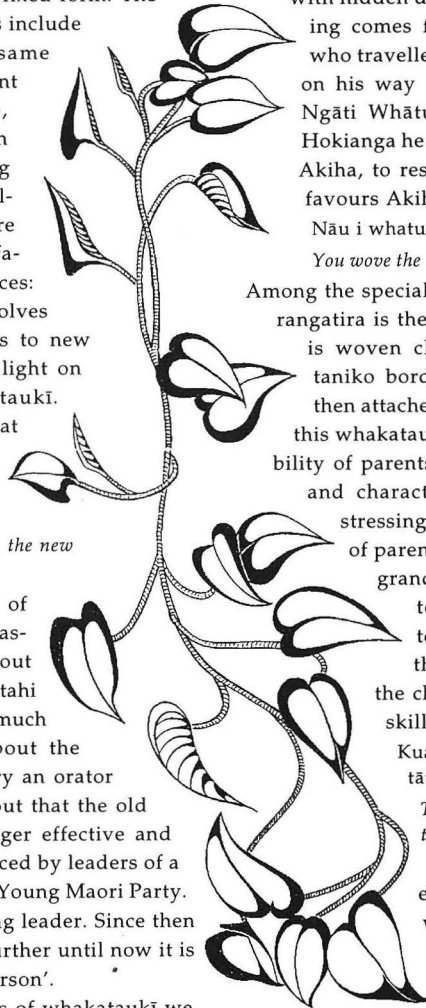
*Kua tae mai te wā, e whakapuru ai tātou i nga kōwhao o te waka.*

*The time has come when we must plug the holes in the canoe.*

After 1990 there is no need to explain the significance of the waka. The great carved canoes rank with carved meeting houses as symbols of tribal mana and achievement. In the

past, however, the unadorned fishing and transport canoes were just as important to the smaller hapū and whānau which owned them as symbols of group co-operation and solidarity in daily life.

In this talk we have introduced you to eleven whakataukī, only a small sample of a repertoire which runs into hundreds and is always being added to. Our aim has been to whet rather than satisfy



your appetite: to demonstrate enough of the variety, complexity, subtlety and richness of whakataukī to tempt you to explore further for yourselves. Many of you will know the Brougham and Reed collection, *Māori Proverbs* preferably in the edition edited by Timoti Kāretu. Limited in the amount of explanation and elucidation provided and handicapped by the lack of an index, it is a good book for browsing in. Murdoch Riley's *Māori Sayings and Proverbs* is fuller and ordered into subject groups. Reweti Kōhere's *He Kōnae Aronui*, notable for its fine translations, is regrettably out of print but worth tracking down in a library. We also recommend the chapter 'Values in Proverbs' in John Patterson's *Exploring Maori Values*. Then there are the more specialised collections, often made by iwi for their own purposes: for example, *Ngā Pepeha ā Ngaā Tūpuna* by Hirini Mead and Neil Grove, and *He Pepeha, he Whakataukī Nō TaiTōkerau* by Jane McRae.

This brings us to an issue of central importance, the accessibility of whakataukī to the general public. It is part of the European tradition that proverbs belong in the public domain, generally available without copyright for general use. They are folk art, they belong to everybody. This is not the case with whakataukī. As we have seen, many can be traced to particular sources, grounded in particular places, and claimed by particular hapū or iwi as part of their ancestral taonga. Māori are very properly becoming concerned about the ways in which their ancestral heritage is being appropriated by outsiders. By what right then do we venture to explore whakataukī as we have done today, and to encourage others to do so too?

Our first response to this question is to refer back to Pei Te Hurinui and Reweti Kōhere, to whom tribute was paid at the beginning. They loved the literary treasures of their people and worked hard and enthusiastically to encourage others to appreciate them. In the foreword to *He Kōnae Aronui* Kōhere said his aim was to produce 'a booklet which will be used in all Māori schools and colleges' and that 'if the children could commit to memory even a quarter of the sayings included and carry them with them throughout their lives, they would be considered cultured men and women, for proverbs epitomize the thinking of a people'. While he wrote especially for the up and coming generations of Māori, it is clear from his attitudes and values that he did not

intend to limit them to Maori students. In publishing his book in English he made them accessible to a wider audience. Both Reweti Kōhere and Pei Te Hurinui were always open and generous to any Pākehā who approached Maori matters with genuine interest and humility.

Here lies the key. Māori use the word Pākehā for those of European descent who have put down roots in this country and committed themselves to belonging here. Can we truly belong here if we do not recognise and learn enough to appreciate the richness of Māori literature and Māori culture generally? Can we become genuinely cultured citizens of Aotearoa New Zealand without access to the Māori half of our identity?

There is however, a fine line between appreciation and appropriation. Appropriation means to take over as your own, without regard to the rights of the original owners. The best safeguard against crossing that line is for Pākehā always to work in partnership with Māori: to go to Māori experts for instruction and explanation, to check back with them when inspired to venture into the field of interpretation, and to support them in the fight to keep the Māori language alive.

The content of whakataukī is profound and important. Even if we have little or no Māori we can get a great deal out of studying them in translation, especially if we have access to Māori scholars to explain and interpret them. Through their content, whakataukī give us access to Māori thinking and values. However, in whakataukī as in all forms of literature, the content is only half the story and half the fun. The linguistic form in which the content is embodied is an integral part of the whole. The compilers of the collections mentioned generally take a rather instrumental view of whakataukī, stressing the purposes for which they are used as reasons for studying them: to cast light on Māori traditions and lore (Riley), to educate the young (Kōhere), to elucidate values (Patterson). In this presentation we have endeavoured to stress the value of whakataukī as literature, as linguistically exciting and aesthetically satisfying, a way into appreciation of Māori poetry and oratory in general. Our message is clear: if you want to appreciate whakataukī to the full, learn te reo Māori.

Kia ora ra tātou katoa.