

Witi Ihimaera's use of nineteenth century Maori prophets' oral narratives in *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer*.

Julia Calvert

Since its first publication in 1986, *The Matriarch* by Witi Ihimaera has been classed as one of the most political novels to date written by a Maori writer. Mark Williams, in his essay "Witi Ihimaera and the Politics of Epic", calls the novel "politically engaged", "angry", and "antagonistic" (118). The novel spans over 150 years of Pakeha occupation of New Zealand and weaves a complex variety of literary styles and sources together. Much attention has been given to the way these conflicting stylistic tendencies add or detract from the overall success of the novel but there is one strand in particular that has not been looked at in any depth. The oral narratives relating to Te Kooti and Rua Kenana which Ihimaera threads through *The Matriarch* and its sequel, *The Dream Swimmer*, are used by the author to make some of the strongest political comments to be found in the two novels.

The Matriarch and *The Dream Swimmer* continue the nineteenth century tradition of resistance to Pakeha land domination by incorporating and extending oral narratives surrounding the lives of Te Kooti and Rua Kenana. Ihimaera outlines the historical and legal right of his semi-fictional characters¹ to the land in question and adds a weight of (syncretic) existential ties to their claim by creative use of the existing narratives. The novels form part of the ongoing political campaign by tribes on the East Coast, including Rongowhakaata and Te Whanau A Kai, Ihimaera's own tribes, to have land which was confiscated during and after the Land Wars returned to its rightful, Maori owners.²

Ihimaera connects his fictional characters to Te Kooti and Rua Kenana principally through the narrative of the diamond of Te Kooti.

¹ Parallels can be drawn between the figure of the matriarch and Ihimaera's own grandmother Teria Pere. They bear the same relation to Wi Pere and share minor, but significant details. Among the preparatory material for *The Dream Swimmer*, draft Land Court Records show the name of Ihimaera's mother "Julia Keelan". These references to his mother and grandmother compiled with similar whakapapa links between himself and Wi Pere, and the narrator Tamatea and Wi Pere, suggest that in the two novels discussed here Ihimaera is telling the "story" of his own tribal lands. The boundaries of his family land given in the Turnbull lecture are frequently repeated in the course of *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer*.

² Rongowhakaata and Whanau-A-Kai land claims date back to 1869. Periodic protests and petitions have been made to the government concerning this land and these events compromise the main "action" of the two novels.

In the Maori narratives of Te Kooti and Rua Kenana specific mountains take on particular significance. It is believed that Te Kooti hid a diamond on the sacred mountains of each of the tribes who had sheltered him during the war with the colonial government.³ Rua Kenana, who claimed to be Te Kooti's successor, is recorded as ascending to the top of Maunga Pohatu. Here, the diamond of Te Kooti was revealed to him. The character Tamatea, in Ihimaera's novels, also sees the "diamond of Te Kooti" whilst on the top of a mountain – Maunga Haumia (*Matriarch* 293).

There are many oral narratives concerning Te Kooti's diamond. In her article "Maori Oral Narratives, Pakeha Written Texts", Judith Binney includes a conversation with Ned Brown and Heni Brown, held at Whatatutu, 14 February 1982. The Browns offer information concerning Te Kooti and the diamond. Ned Brown's grandfather went to see Te Kooti in 1878 to ask him what would happen to his family's land. After a short while Te Kooti said to him, "I'll give you something – he mauri. He mauri mo te whenua". Ned Brown goes on to explain that Te Kooti's words were "pertaining to some powers unknown to us", that would protect the grandfather's rights to the land (19). Ned Brown continues:

So my grandfather never talked about this thing. But I hear a lot of others – outsiders – talking about it. 'Cos it is believed that it was part of the diamond that Te Kooti used – to go through the dense bush at Te Wera. And those that followed him saw it. It was in the form of a lamb: the diamond. Some say that it is a portion, or part of it broken off from that, and given to my grandfather to bring back and plant it on Maungahaumi[a]. That is the mauri, to hold and preserve the family in the years to come. It was told to Te Hira's father, old Pera Uetuku Tamanui. Te Kooti said to him, "You can sell the rest of Mangatu, but don't ever sell the mountain. Hold the mountain. Because that mountain in days to come, well, your great-great-grandchildren will have a footing. It's better that than having no land." (20)

As Binney notes, this story establishes the family's relationship both to the prophet and the land. Te Kooti bestowed his protection upon the family and in this telling the diamond, which is symbolic of this protection, is identified with the sacrificial Lamb of God. The multitude of meanings invested in the diamond reflect the hybrid nature of the Ringatu church founded by Te Kooti. Binney writes (1987: 20):

³ Not all accounts of the diamond state that Te Kooti placed it on the mountain himself. Some narratives tell of the diamond always being there; Te Kooti is believed to have just covered it up so it could not be found. See Binney *Redemption Songs* p.508. Other accounts, such as the one above, state that Te Kooti gave it to other people to place there.

It is not only an image of hidden wealth, or power to be recovered in “the days to come”. It recreates the quintessential image for the Maori world, Te Ao Marama, the world of light and knowledge, and it specifically asserts through its biblical reference the salvation of the people in the “days to come”.

As diamonds are not found naturally in New Zealand the origin of the diamond remains uncertain. Binney identifies several imaginative sources; these include the possibility that the North American legend of the diamond hidden in the land, which had been retold by Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1851 as “The Great Carbuncle”, may have circulated and been adapted either by Te Kooti or his followers. Alternatively, the narrative of the Maori culture hero Tawhaki, who is believed to have brought back the first whatu kura, precious stones, used in the East Coast to “seal scholars” knowledge may be cited as a source for the “diamond”. Some narratives state that scholars had to search for tiny stones, usually white or red, and then swallow them to seal their knowledge (Binney, 1999: 229). In some *whare wananga* (Maori schools of learning) a stone was used to keep the rhythm of the sacred teachings e.g., *karakia*, *whakapapa*, to aid memory and to seal the knowledge in the student’s mind. Binney continues to explain how in exile on Wharekauri in 1868, “Te Kooti set the prisoners a riddle to resolve before their escape: how to eat a small white stone that he said had been revealed to him. The solution, to pound the stone and share it, bonded the prisoners and sealed their grasp of the escape plan” (1999: 229). The diamond is therefore symbolic of land, knowledge and solidarity: three key aspects of the Ringatu movement.

Rua Kenana, according to Iharaira (Israelite) narratives is recorded as ascending to the summit of his mother’s tribal mountain, Maunga Pohatu. Whilst at the summit the diamond of Te Kooti is said to have been revealed to him:

This bright stone remains covered and protected by Te Kooti’s shawl (*horo*), just as Tane’s younger brother covered the bright stars with his mats (*whara*), before he gave the stars to Tane to create the skies [...]. In the Tuhoe narrative, Rua is the last to have seen the diamond on the mountain. It is sometimes said to be hidden within one of the three strangely coloured lakes on the mountain’s plateau, and in some versions the diamond was revealed to Rua by Whaitiri, the grandmother of Tawhaki, who is also ancestress of the Tuhoe people. In all versions, Rua encountered Whaitiri on the mountain’s summit. She is described, at first, as disguised in rags, but revealing herself to

be like “an angel”, possessing wings, and as “more or less Rua’s sister [...]”. (Binney, 1999: 228-229)⁴

In *The Matriarch*, Artemis and Tamatea ascend Maunga Haumia. It is on the summit of this mountain that Artemis, Tamatea’s grandmother, “uncovered” the diamond. By looking on the precious stone Tamatea glimpses a world beyond his own:

I saw into the geological structures of the earth, and the diamond sparkling structure of the mountains, Maunga Pohatu, Munga Haumia and of Paparatu, were one and the same with the gleaming cellular structure of my body (293).

In this section of *The Matriarch* Ihimaera draws a number of parallels between Tamatea, Rua, Te Kooti and Tawhaki. The matriarch in her relation to Tamatea and her love of opera is aligned with Tawhaki’s grandmother, “Whaitiri”, who appears in the guise of an “angel” singing “ageless music” (*Matriarch* 294). Further parallels between the elision of Maunga Pohatu and Maunga Haumia establish Artemis and Tamatea in the myth cycle of the diamond of Te Kooti. By being prefigured in Rua and Whaitiri, just as Tawhaki prefigured Te Kooti, their mana is presented as equal to that of their spiritual ancestors. Ihimaera leaves his readers with no doubt as to the power of the mana at stake in *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer*.

In keeping with the religious blending of the prophetic movements, Ihimaera includes references to Christianity in the revelation of the diamond to Tamatea. In the Judeo-Christian theological conception of the world, mountains are viewed as marking the meeting place of heaven and earth. It is on the “mountain of God” that Moses’ destiny was told to him and it is also here that God revealed the Covenant to him. Likewise, Tamatea undergoes a spiritual awakening on top of a mountain.

When Tamatea receives the diamond he claims to have seen “the pillars of the sky” (*Matriarch* 292) which evoke the images of the “pillar of cloud” and the “pillar of fire” which guided Moses out of Egypt towards the land of Canaan. Furthermore, Tamatea has “looked into the faces of the gods” and not been blinded (*Matriarch* 294), just as Moses looked upon God whilst on the summit of the “mountain of God” (Exodus 33:20-23). Ihimaera appears to be implying that, like Moses, and like Te Kooti and Rua Kenana, Tamatea

⁴ This is one telling of the story but there are several local variations. In her article “Maori Oral Narratives, Pakeha Written Texts” Binney contrasts Te Puhī Tatu’s version (daughter in law of Pinepine, Rua’s first wife) and Heta Rua’s. In both narratives Whaitiri is present but in the former Christ is also present with his “sister” (“yuhine”), Whaitiri, on the mountain top (25).

shares a special relationship with his gods. Tamatea's crusade to have the land returned to its Maori owners is therefore made to appear divinely endorsed.

Ihimaera retells the story of Rua and Te Kooti's diamond in *The Dream Swimmer* (129-132). In this version Ihimaera conflates several narrative discourses: Iharaira narratives which in themselves blend Maori mythology and Christianity, are interspersed with folklore and allusions to the Arthurian legend.⁵ Here is an extract:

And when he saw the diamond, Rua knew that there was no going back to his old life. For this was the same diamond that Te Kooti had spoken about. It was the diamond that sometimes allowed itself to be seen and sometimes hid itself. Sometimes, sailors would see it like a beacon shining from Maungapohatu like a star. "What's that?" a sailor might ask. "Why that is Te Kooti's diamond", would be the answer. Often, a ship would become so fascinated by the glorious light that it would sail toward the siren star. But the closer it got the further away the star shone until, with a wink, it would disappear.

From that time forth, Rua knew he was the one. The diamond was like the sword in the stone. It was like the star that announced the birth of Christ at Bethlehem.

Then Gabriel left, and in his place a Maori woman appeared from out of the mist. Her long black hair gleamed in the first shafts of the sunlight. She was dressed in rags. But when she took off her rags Rua and Pinepine saw her glowing wings and knew she was also an angel. (129-130)

The imagery of the diamond appearing like a star drawing in sailors from the sea derives from an oral narrative identified by Binney in *Redemption Songs*, told by Heta Rua, Rua's son (p.508). Again, we see the process of spiritual rebirth, the acknowledgment that the life of the chosen one will never be the same again. The presence of Whaitiri is also described. However, the inclusion of popular legend and the reference to the European Arthurian saga illustrate how myth narratives are interpreted according to the present times. Such eclectic use of sources may also reflect upon Rua's own borrowings from international events reported in the *Auckland Weekly News*.

⁵ This is not the only reference to the Arthurian legend – see *The Dream Swimmer* (418). The lifting of the mate at the end of the novel is compared to the coming of the spring to the wasteland. This suggests the epic nature of the tale and alludes to the cycle of death and resurrection which is evident in both the Christian and Maori perception of the world. Christ was "reborn", as were the prophets. The mauri of the land in the Place of the Willows is also representative of this cyclical view of life.

Rua Kenana was a regular reader of the *Auckland Weekly News*. The walls of his home and surrounding buildings at Maai were papered with the photographic images taken from the magazine. Binney identifies how Rua rekindled the stories of Te Kooti's diamond in 1905, and suggests that his intended purpose to use the diamond (which he had somehow in his own possession) to buy back New Zealand from King Edward in 1906, was based upon the case of the Cullinan diamond reported in the magazine in January of 1905. The South African Cullinan diamond, or "God's Stone" as it was called by the Boers, after much public discussion and parliamentary debate, was offered, in 1907, to King Edward VII as a statement of Boer loyalty. Binney notes how Rua appears to have pre-empted this decision and in his pilgrimage to Gisborne in 1906 planned, likewise, to give the diamond to the King. However, Rua's "gift" was intended to "buy back" the land "given" to the Crown in 1840. The impetus behind Rua's actions was claimed by him to be a revelation received on the 12th April 1906:

On that day it was revealed; on June 25th I will ascend the throne, the King will arrive at Turanga [Gisborne]. (Binney 1999: 231)

The King never arrived, and although some of Rua's followers reinterpreted the prophecy as indicating that Rua himself was the King, others in Poverty Bay began to lose faith in him.

Judith Binney explains how the narratives which grew up around Te Kooti and Rua Kenana were "brought forth to help make sense of their political decisions and to guide the choices they make" (1999: 235). She goes on to explain that the stories were told to "evaluate contemporary political, spiritual and cultural problems in the light of the people's past experiences (1999: 235). In *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer*, Ihimaera incorporates some of the principal narratives that surround the lives of the prophets into his own story about the Mahana clan for similar reasons. He takes the old narratives and couches them in a late twentieth century context.

The narratives about the diamond of Te Kooti are concerned with the retention of spiritual and cultural integrity, leadership and the land. Whoever holds the diamond of Te Kooti is charged with the responsibility of protecting tribal land. In *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer* the diamond passes from Artemis to Tamatea. Both these characters interpret their possession of the diamond as a sign not only to protect the tribal land that remains but to continue the political fight begun by Te Kooti and Wi Pere in the 1860s to have confiscated land returned to their people.

The history of the area in question in the two novels is given, if in a fractured manner, by Ihimaera during the course of the narrative action. For much of the information on land confiscation Ihimaera has used J. B. Mackay's *Historic Poverty Bay* and Keith Sorrenson's entry on "Land Confiscations" in the *Encyclopedia of New Zealand History*.⁶ The acres of Maori land which Tamatea informs the Prime Minister at the end of *The Dream Swimmer* were "taken in error", refer to a real section of land which entered the Crown's hands after the Land Wars of the 1860s. Tamatea is referring to the 26,161 acres of land deemed by the Crown Commission in 1920 to have been wrongly taken by the government after the Hau hau uprisings in 1869.⁷

Since 1869 there have been numerous protests and commissions into the confiscation. Several petitions were filed by the Whanau-A-Kai in 1925,'26,'27,'29,'30. Whanau-A-Kai and Rongowhakaata land grievances remain to this day. They stand alongside numerous other land claims currently being made to the Waitangi Tribunal.

In both *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer* characters from Te Whanau-A-Kai, petition the government for land which has not been rightfully returned nor adequately compensated for (244; 356). This is why the matriarch takes her "ope" to the Wellington hui – to demand that the Prime Minister "finally settle the account and return the land to its rightful owners" (*Matriarch* 244). Tamatea, likewise, nearly thirty years later petitions the government for exactly the same reason.

Tamatea is placed within a line of leaders who fight for the return of their land – the diamond works to symbolize their historical and spiritual connection. At the end of the two novels the "diamond of Te Kooti" passes out of Tamatea's hands to the runanga (tribal committees), (*Dream* 417). The kaupapa of this body remains the same as before: to reclaim ancestral lands, "always to fight and keep on fighting until it is done, generation after generation" (*Dream* 418). Likewise, it is to this purpose that Ihimaera's novels are dedicated.

The Matriarch and *The Dream Swimmer* illustrate the constant theme of Ihimaera's work to interpret and reinterpret the world from a Maori perspective by using the past as a guide to the future. By incorporating the narratives which surround the lives of Te Kooti and Rua Kenana into the two novels, he

⁶ Mackay's text has been extensively used by Ihimaera in the section on Te Kooti in Act Two of *The Matriarch*. In Act Three (238-244) Ihimaera uses Mackay's chapter entitled "Spoils to the Victors" (305-309) alongside Sorrenson's essay. Ihimaera's failure to acknowledge Sorrenson as a source sparked controversy – see "Matriarch Passages Copied – Historian" by Andrew Johnston, *Dominion Sunday Times*, 26 Nov. 1989:1.

⁷ See Julia Calvert "Contextualizing Maori Writing" PhD Thesis (48-52) for a more detailed account of the area in question.

demonstrates how fiction writing by contemporary Maori authors contributes to the historical narrative of political protest against Maori land alienation.

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