

‘Reclaiming the Ancient Feminine in Māori Society.’ ‘Kei wareware i a tātou te Ūkaipō!’¹

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Abstract

With our constant interface with the threat of globalisation, it is timely that we reflect on the words of an ancient god who advised his brother, Tāne, to return to their mother, Papatūānuku (Best, 1923, p. 111). His words, which translate loosely as ‘lest we forget the Mother who nurtured us at her breast,’ remind us of the importance of considering the feminine, respecting our Earth Mother, and not taking either for granted.

This paper addresses several issues pertaining to the Māori feminine. The discussion of these will begin with a brief reflection on the importance of balance between the male and female in Māori cosmogony and the marginalisation of the feminine as a result of two hundred years of colonisation. The principal focus of the article as a whole will be the last two decades and the efforts made to address some of the negative effects brought about by colonisation, which could be described as forming the first waves in the tide of globalisation.

The key for the ordering of Māori society lay within our cosmogonic beginnings.² Recent studies of Māori cosmology reveal that both male and female deities held prominent positions in the pantheon of gods (Yates-Smith, 1998). There was a strong presence of the feminine at the embryonic stage of Māori society.³

Introduction

Cultural encounter challenged traditional Māori spirituality as the pivotal point of Māori life. Christianity, the Victorian ethos and the European education system collectively impacted on the Māori society of the time.⁴ Western civilisation was seen to hold the answers for the future of the Māori.

The traditional Māori belief system changed dramatically, rendering the feminine invisible; women in Māori society became more invisible and powerless (Yates-Smith, 1998). A microcosm of the effect of colonisation on Māori society can be found in reviewing New Zealand literature over a two hundred year period. Evidence indicates that the references made to Māori goddesses in books written about Māori life and customs, and in particular, religion and mythology, were fragmented and skimpy. The roles of the female entities were generally downplayed, marginalised, or in many instances, completely omitted from historical records. Yet, by looking at the material available, one can ascertain that the feminine did indeed hold an important and powerful position throughout Māori history (Yates-Smith, 1998, p. 122). Such marginalisation, it is argued here and in other fora (Mikaere, 1995; Smith, 1992) also occurred in the wider Māori society.

To redress the imbalance brought about by such a shift in the belief system and Māori society as a whole, the feminine needed to be restored in the belief system, or at least be given more recognition. Discussion later in this paper will go some way to showing how this is occurring. I suggest here that balancing gender relations in our society will come more easily when gender relations in the belief system are balanced.

Let us now reflect on the feminine, which was a vital component within Māori cosmology and history. References to atua wāhine (goddesses) in kōrero (stories, history), karakia (incantations), whakapapa (genealogy) and waiata (songs) indicate that female power was built into Māori philosophy, religious ritual and cultural experiences of everyday life. Certain atua wāhine emerged very strongly in my doctoral study of Māori childbirth and death. Papatūānuku, the ultimate source of creativity, along with her female descendants, reflected the nurturing quality of the feminine and the complementary aspects of the creator/transformer figure as embodied in the whare tangata/whare aituā⁵ concept, connecting women with life and death. Other qualities the deities possessed were identified. The sexuality of the female element was prominent throughout the anecdotes, karakia and waiata.

The primary sources indicated that a significant aspect of Māori pre-European history has been overlooked or ignored, supporting the argument that the role of the feminine was never appropriately recognised in the early ethnographic works.⁶ Generally, the subsequent publications did little to reassert the position of the feminine in historical writings.

Relatively little knowledge has survived about Hineteiwaiwa, Hinerauwhārangī and other ancient figures⁷ owing to details about them being forgotten or misplaced.⁸ The devastating effect of European diseases on the Māori, e.g., the influenza epidemics (Pool, 1991), combined with the personal cost of military conflict and, more recently, the urban drift further contributed to a reduction in the pool of knowledgeable resource people.

Mana wahine in a modern context

Modern Māori women have inherited mana wahine from ancient times, retaining some roles of Hine in their everyday life: in the home, on the marae, as well as in places of employment and recreation. The fundamental role of woman remains as creator and mother thus fulfilling the generative function previously carried out by Papa, Hineteiwaiwa, Hinekōrako and the many other atua wāhine. Women are still regarded as te whare tangata. Though the role of ruahine⁹ may have altered (some of her tasks taken over by Christian ministers, or doctors and midwives) on the marae, kuia and some younger women are still placed in the role of ruahine and perform ritual functions including karanga and waiata. Women continue to compose waiata to commemorate certain events and to express their emotions.

The role of manaaki tāngata (hospitality) is maintained by women extending hospitality to visitors, some taking part in the formal kawa (ritual) process of welcoming the manuhiri, and others involving themselves in the preparation of food. The entertainment of visitors is an art at which women excel. In the meeting house the whāriki (finely woven mats) are laid out in accordance with age-old custom and the bedding is made ready for the people. If the occasion is a tangi then the tūpāpaku (deceased) is surrounded by women, and tended with great care; this particular

function links women with te whare aituā. The old craft of weaving whāriki and cloaks has survived with many women learning to weave, and so examples of these taonga (precious items) are still to be found in wharenuī (meeting houses) today.

Many of the modern women mentioned in this paper are fluent speakers of Māori and have a strong cultural and spiritual identity; others are attempting to learn their language and tikanga. The achievements of the native speakers show that success is attainable when one is comfortable in one's own world. Those desiring to develop a stronger understanding of reo and tikanga belong to a diverse range of people, from society 'dropouts' to successful professionals. The common bond is the need they feel to reacquaint themselves fully with their taha Māori and assert their identity as Māori, at the inner core of which is the spiritual dimension, te taha wairua. Many of the women with strong cultural backgrounds recognize the positive impact that knowledge of the atua wāhine would have on Māori women's self esteem. Through such knowledge women are empowered.

The revival of te reo, our indigenous language, has culminated in a Māori renaissance and new Māori initiatives in education, the church, and in government departments, thereby impacting on society in general. Māori have revived the craft of weaving, the art of tā moko (traditional markings which Europeans termed 'tattoo'), and the use of traditional musical instruments. Māori medical practices are commonly used as an alternative to western medicine. The ancient custom of returning the placenta to Papatūānuku on the birth of a child has been revived.¹⁰ The return of such traditions coincides with the call for further knowledge about the feminine.

The energy and success of Māori women is evident in every sector of society. Māori women are providing leadership in numerous ways, on marae, in voluntary community groups, as well as in high profile professions. They have been a driving force behind the Kōhanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Māori initiatives. The accomplishments of Te Rōpū Wāhine Māori Toko i te Ora, the Māori Women's Welfare League and the efforts of Māori women in the Women's Health League continue to make huge inroads into improving aspects of Māori health. These groups have been responsible for assisting in the setting up of marae-based health centres and special programmes for Māori mothers and children, e.g., the Tipu Ora¹¹ programme in Rotorua. In the wider community some women are matakite (seers or psychics), having inherited these particular powers from their ancestors; some are healers¹² who use traditional techniques combining karakia, massage and rongoā (medicine) on their patients. Some of the matakite and tohunga practise in Māori health centres, as in Ngā Miro at Ngāruawāhia, and the Tunohopu Health Centre at Ōhinemutu, Rotorua. Politically, women have been active leaders in the campaign for the return of tribal land. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, a large number of women in the Māori community feel unsuccessful, lack self esteem and confidence, women who merely 'survive' the stresses of modern living.¹³ Knowledge about the feminine is particularly relevant for these women. Education is a key to self-empowerment.

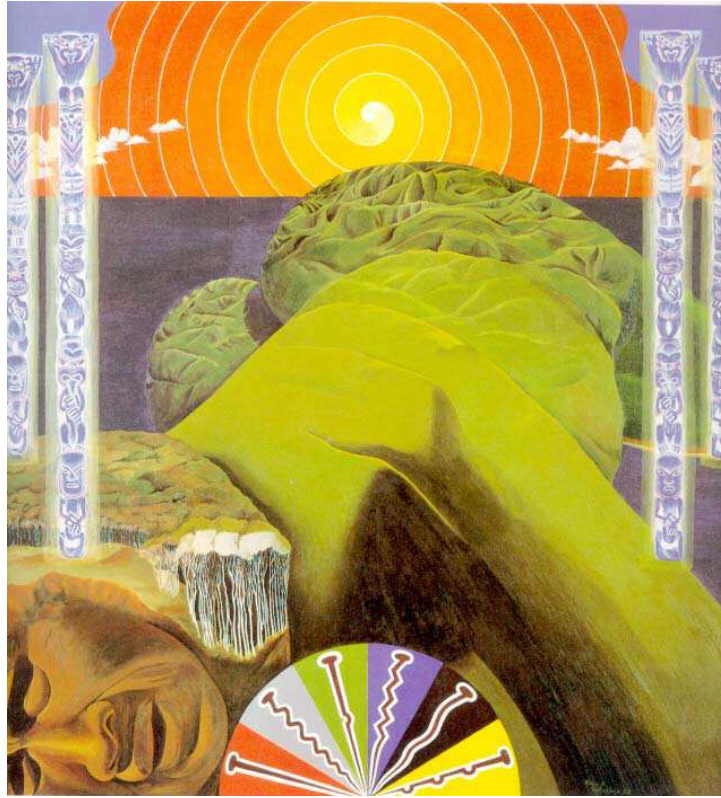
Change is evident within the education system; the young are being taught about Rangī and Papa, although the emphasis is still placed largely on their male descendants. The kōhanga reo preschools and kura kaupapa primary schools have provided the forum. Reconstruction and revival of tradition is taking place, with the modern generation fitting elements of past traditions into a modern context.

In the performing arts the same vibrancy can be found. Such productions as 'Ahorangi Genesis', although mainly focussing on the male gods, paid tribute to the mana of Papa, Hineahuone, Hinetītama/Hinenuitepō, Mahuika, and Murirangawhenua. The play 'Wāhine Toa' (staged in 1992) presented Māori cosmology from a woman's perspective. Modern Māori compositions focussing on the feminine in cosmology and society have had their debut at Māori Performing Arts Festival events where kapa haka performers display their prowess through competition. The compositions are in the form of traditional waiata, haka, poi and waiata-ā-ringa, examples being Wakahuia's 'He mana tuku iho' which contains the words 'Ko Hineahuone tōku mana e', and Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato's 'Ko Papatūānuku'.

From waiata to written poetry, new compositions are appearing with references to the more well-known Māori female deities. The poems, a number of which are written by Māori women, are imbued with a strong sense of the feminine. There is also evidence of great pain, sorrow and anger, not only for the plight of the general Māori populace over the last century, but particularly for the marginalization of Māori women and knowledge about the feminine. Mahinarangi Tocker sings her message and frequently introduces female deities into her musical compositions, as with 'Papatūānuku (will survive)' (1993, p. 44). Keri Hulme is another writer who has articulated her feelings about Papatūānuku through poetry, e.g., 'Papatuanuku E Tu!' (1992, pp. 33-34). Hinewirangi Kohu has entitled her book of poetry *Screaming Moko* to describe her anguish. Her reaction towards early Pākehā researchers' opinions is expressed in her poem 'Historians' where she recalls how Māori were described as 'savage', 'devil worshippers' and how the 'white historian' became 'an expert' on her (1986, pp. 28-29).

Māori men, too, have produced poetry about the great mothers of time. Hirini Melbourne's songs about Nature include many compositions celebrating Māori female deities. Apart from the importance of these songs in Māori music, they also serve to remind people of some of the lesser-known female entities such as Hineraukatauri and Hinemoana (Melbourne, 1993). Other poets have alluded to Papatūānuku or Hinenuitepō, as with Haare Williams (1981), and Apirana Taylor (1981). Writer Witi Ihimaera has produced fiction revealing the strong influences of the feminine in his tribal area. *The Matriarch* (1986) and its sequel *The Dream Swimmer* (1997) have powerful statements on mana wahine; in the second book a local female taniwha, Hineteaiki, has a prominent role in the story.

Ngāhuia Te Awekotuku's writings, both literary and academic, have a strong feminist thread running through them, *Mana Wahine* (1991) being one with particular relevance here. The work of Anna Rogers, Miria Simpson, Mira Szaszy, and Margaret Kāwharu in publishing *Te Tīmatanga Tātau Tātau* brings a fresh approach to oral and written literature regarding Māori women. In a similar way Amy Brown's *Mana Wahine: Women Who Show the Way* (1994) records some philosophies and experiences of Māori women. The Māori magazine *Mana* informs the country of Māori issues and success stories; women feature prominently in its articles. *Wāhine Toa* (1984), with artwork done by Robyn Kahukiwa and text by Patricia Grace, is a first in depicting so many goddesses in pictorial book form.



Papatūānuku.

Oil painting by Robyn Kahukiwa.

Women artists Robyn Kahukiwa, Jolene Douglas, and June Northcroft Grant incorporate the feminine into their creations. Each modern artist has made a significant impact in restoring the feminine to her rightful place in Māori culture. This reconstruction takes place at the various levels of Māori society, strongly influencing the psyche and attitudes of our people, and thus the structure of Māori culture itself.¹⁴ The present findings provide material to assist the artists' research in their respective areas; further subjects for future compositions may be found in the collated information. The ancient stories, karakia and waiata of the tūpuna hold a depth of knowledge which many Māori today have not yet tapped.



Hineteiwaiwa.

Pastel on archival paper. By Jolene Douglas.

In the male domain, Māori carvers are continuing to create images of the feminine. The brilliance of the feminine is reflected within the whareniui Te Ihorangi,¹⁵ the inspiration of master carver Kereti Rau Tangata. A strong presence of the atua wāhine can be found in the house's carvings and tukutuku. Smaller creations such as the nguru Hineteiwaiwa, crafted by Rangi Skipper, are indicators of the renewed awareness about atua wāhine. In fact atua wāhine have been portrayed in stone and wood for centuries. Although many of the taonga are still situated in their original locations, hundreds are to be found in museums throughout the country. Several atua, including Horoirangi and Pani,¹⁶ are stone effigies presently housed in Te Whare Taonga o Te Arawa. Pani was found near Lake Taupō and was taken to the museum in 1971, while Horoirangi was returned to Rotorua in 1993.¹⁷ These stone atua provide physical evidence of the goddesses' influence on traditional Māori society.



Horoirangi.

Courtesy Te Papa Whakahiku - Auckland War Memorial Museum.

Instrumental in the success of women is the changing attitudes of many Māori males. Again this has come about through education, a stronger sense of equality and partnership in people's relationships and the economic need for the woman to have an income. Indeed it is increasingly common to find the male partner at home caring for the children while the woman is out working. Despite this social shift in thinking, tension remains, with change varying regionally (more so in urban areas as opposed to rural) and tribally. At a domestic level many Māori women are being abused by men; idealistic as it may seem, one of the aims of my research is to assist in providing information to victims and their families to aid their healing and rebuild their self-

esteem.

It is suggested here that the achievement of Māori women, once empowered with the knowledge of their 'Hine' heritage, would be greatly enhanced. Women, who are already considered successful, value the recognition given the atua wāhine and acknowledge the sense of security and increased self-esteem that comes with connecting with the feminine powers. Positive responses from such diverse groups provide a strong indication of the need for knowledge about the goddesses to be made readily available.

Some understanding of the feminine aspects which have been recovered would aid Māori men in reassessing their role in light of the changing Māori lifestyle. Only then might the balance between the feminine and masculine at a spiritual, cultural and social level be fully restored. Such a balance would re-establish Māori women as co-inheritors of the Māori spiritual tradition. In addition, conveying a holistic Māori view¹⁸ to the younger generation is critical to ensure a perpetuation of the traditional Māori spiritual beliefs. Spiritual knowledge provides a mechanism for coping with the difficulties of living in a modern society which places more stress on material wealth than on the metaphysical and physical wellbeing. Furthermore, revival of the spiritual dimension within Māori life is held by Māori to be fundamental to the survival of our language and culture. Hence the desire of Māori people, particularly the young, to reclaim the traditional element in Māori spirituality, te taha wairua.

Recognition of the inter-connectedness between the spiritual plane and the political plane could enhance the wider participation of Māori women in decision-making at all levels of society in Aotearoa (New Zealand). The consequences may have impact not only on the cultural, social and political scene but also on the environment, with people adopting a more caring and informed attitude towards Nature, thus affirming the importance of Papa and her offspring. Then perhaps will the inter-connectedness of humankind, te ira tangata, and the gods, te ira atua, indeed the entire Universe be recognised.

The power of the feminine is being re-asserted to establish the balance needed in these modern times. The positive effect of the shift in consciousness will filter out from the individual, to the whānau, the hapū, tribe, nation, extending to our natural surroundings, to Papatūānuku and Ranginui from whom we descend.

The goddesses' names collectively form the feminine principle, Hine, the ultimate source of creativity born of the primal parents. Together with the male gods and all of our tūpuna they guide us into the future. It is therefore with the renewed vigour of the ancients that we Māori move forward, intent on retaining that which is uniquely Māori in a modern world.

How then is this relevant to any discussion on globalisation? In reflecting on the impact of European colonisation on the Māori belief system and culture, one should consider the continuing influences of modern American capitalist policies on our society. Although claims are made that globalisation delivers economic growth for some, little heed is paid to its negative impact on indigenous peoples' cultural beliefs and ways. Joseph Stiglitz, author of *Globalization and its Discontents*, notes that managers of globalisation "all too often have shown an insufficient appreciation of

this adverse side, the threat to cultural identity and values” (2002, p. 247). Having moved painfully through two centuries of European colonialism, we are now faced with new threats, imposed by collective corporate powers. Globalisation poses a financial, economic threat to the Māori spiritual and social fabric, and unmanaged, directly threatens intellectual and cultural property of Māori.

In the footsteps of our ancestors, we need to maximise opportunities presented by this new phenomenon to assist in developing our cultural integrity. This, combined with the implementation of ancient knowledge to advance our people, will provide a paradigm or model for the future. We need to protect all that is inherent in our culture from the most recent tide of global capitalism, which assaults our shores.¹⁹

Endnotes

1. Paper presented for the 7th Joint Conference “Preservation of Ancient Cultures And The Globalization Scenario”, 22-24 November 2002, University Of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.
2. Other studies confirm the important relationship, which exists between a culture’s spiritual belief system, and the social structure. For instance, research conducted by Fletcher and La Flesche described the influence of Omaha cosmogony on the organisation and ceremonies of the Omaha society (in Ridington, 1988, p. 136).
3. Information found in literature suggests that there was a strong presence of the feminine in Māori cosmology, that the atua wāhine held very powerful positions, and that they influenced the traditional Māori values and way of life. The numerous stories and waiata which hold references about them, and the karakia which invoke them, reinforce this conclusion (Yates-Smith, 1998, p. 96).
4. See Mikaere (1995) for a fuller discussion about the impact of colonisation on Māori society and in particular, on Māori women.
5. Definitions as used in the context of this paper: whare tangata – lit. human house (referring to women as bearers of humankind); whare aituā – lit. house of misfortune or death (referring to women as descendants of Hinenuitēpō, the guardian of the spirit world, and therefore their connection with the spiritual realm).
6. Bernard comments on the impact of male bias in disciplines such as sociology and history, stating for instance that “what history we have is almost exclusively a history of men” (1973, p. 780).
7. In contrast, places in Hawai’i where the goddesses Papa and Hina had resided are still known by the local people and can be visited to this day.
8. See Yates-Smith (1998).
9. The term ruahine applies to a woman of high rank, usually the eldest daughter (Best, 1976, p. 271), who possessed knowledge of karakia and ritual behaviour which enabled her to carry out her tasks among her people.
10. This practice was not lost in all tribal areas, but until recently, it was not a common occurrence in hospitals to return the whenua (placenta) to the child’s parents. For traditional practice, refer to Chapter Four of ‘Hine! E Hine! Rediscovering the Feminine in Māori Spirituality’ (Yates-Smith, 1998).
11. The Tipu Ora programme was founded by the President of the Women’s Health League, Inez Kingi, and Dr Jacqueline Allan. This Women’s Health League initiative has its base in the Mātaatua/Te Arawa (Bay of Plenty) region, with another centre in Christchurch.
12. Some healers also possess powers of matakite (seers or psychics).
13. See Mikaere (1995, p. 153), and Smith (1992).
14. Echoes of this phenomenon can be found in the statement of philosophy of *Woman of Power: A Magazine of Feminism, Spirituality and Politics*: ‘. . . we transform our outer world, by recreating our personal lives and relationships, our communities, and our world’ (1990, p. 1).
15. Te Ihorangi stands on Te Aratiatia Marae at Fairfield College, Hamilton.

16. Pani, carved from pumice stone, was found at Tutuhouhou pā site, Te Hope Bay, Lake Taupō. The atua was acquired by Te Whare Taonga o Te Arawa (the Rotorua Museum of Art and History) in 1971. Pani measures 297mm x 132mm.
17. Horoirangi had been held in the Auckland Institute and Museum for approximately seventy-five years when she was returned to Te Arawa on long-term loan.
18. Te taha wairua, te taha tinana, te taha hinengaro i.e. the spiritual, physical and psychological/intellectual dimensions of personal and iwi health are encompassed in this holistic view.
19. I wish to end by acknowledging and thanking all of those ancestors and contemporaries whose creativity and intellectual endeavours have provided the basis for this discussion. In addition to those contributors mentioned directly in this paper there are numerous others whom I wished to acknowledge but were unable to name individually here. Tēnā koutou, te hunga pupuri i ngā taonga a kui mā, a koro mā. Tēnā koutou katoa.

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