



MĀTAURANGA WAHINE

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*He Atua. He Tangata. Behold a God/dess! Behold a Human
– who has the same blueprint, the same breath and is in the image of the
God/dess head itself (Pere, as cited in Raua, 2001).*

There are two foundational theories at the core of my recent research of matriarchal leadership in the indigenous Māori culture. The research seeks to restore the mana of tohunga kuia, the seemingly invisible cornerstones of the tangata whenua. In early childhood education, these kuia (and koroua) support the next generation of teachers, guiding and leading them by example. These elders are walking the talk so that we, the next generation, will follow in their footprints.

The Mana Wahine theory first inspired me in my academic journey to stand up and sing the unsung songs of my kuia. However, the patriarchal values of Christianity have played a huge role in the loss of Mātauranga Wahine, especially with the displacement of female spirituality, even though women have been involved in traditional leadership up to the present day (Evans, 1994; Hamilton-Pearce, 2009; Smith, 1999; Yates-Smith, 1998).

Ministers of the word were male, stamping the patriarchal seal firmly on the Māori congregation. Implicit and explicit messages were conveyed to Māori women and men that the male was superior, and the inferior female should know her place (Yates-Smith, 1998, p. 3).

The patriarchal Christian dominance has also had an effect on the infrastructure of Māori women in society. In the decolonisation process, Māori women have been re-writing and re-righting their history, using a Mana Wahine theory and methodology, asserting our Atua Wāhine heritage into contemporary Māori society in order to reclaim the birthright of our female spiritual leadership (Hutchings, 2005; Smith, 1999; Yates-Smith, 1998). Hence the colonial and patriarchal ideologies and hegemony are being vehemently challenged by Māori women in the 21st century. The issues pertinent to Māori women present

an opportunity for us as Mana Wahine to interpret our own sites of struggle instead of them being interpreted for us by men (Evans, 1994; Hamilton-Pearce, 2009; Hutchings, 2005; Irwin, 1992a; Irwin, 1992b; Jenkins, 1992; Smith, 1993; Smith, 1999; Waitere-Ang & Johnston, 2000b; Yates-Smith, 1998).

‘Ki te mārama i te tangata, me mārama hoki i tōna ao’

‘To know the woman is to know her world.’ (Evans, 2010, p. 1)

Wiessner (1998) describes how the dominant society has defeated the Indigenous peoples: the deep spiritual bond with our sacred mother earth, burial grounds and spiritual beliefs have been severed as a consequence. Acoose (1993) confirms the deconstruction of five generations under Christian patriarchal rule, with the generational burden still heavy as a result of physical, psychological, sexual and spiritual abuse. The bigger picture of Whānau Ora, although controversial, calls for Māori women and their families to collectively take a stand against the colonisation process by reconnecting with the cultural and spiritual values of our indigenous people (Acoose, 1993).

The journey of decolonisation requires women to love nature and to transmit the spiritual and cultural knowledge to our families. The responsibility sits with the grandmothers to take ownership of Mātauranga Wahine and to direct the education of this cultural taonga to effect healing for the next generation of mokopuna.

Women’s deep concern for the environment, their concern for maintaining diversity and their holistic desire to raise healthy children is an intimate part of most indigenous women’s lives. These concerns are embedded in their daily lives, experiences, interactions and perception of reality ... a distinctive knowledge ... that is holistic. (Hutchings, 2005, p. 51)

This applies not only to our kuia Māori, but to the medicine women and elders who are the wisdom keepers of other indigenous cultures, similarly laying claim to the nurturing of our mother earth for the sake of future mokopuna (Grandmother Sky Weaver, personal communication, 2010). In almost every aspect of our lives as women, the Mana Wahine theory exists in the landscapes, the mountains, the seas, the stars, the moon, the great darkness, the forest, the mist, the rainbows — to whom we all whakapapa as Māori women (Evans, 1994). Mātauranga Wahine thus has an ancient whakapapa that is true to the source of divine femininity.

The deeds of the Atua Wāhine are the blueprint for the feminine dimension of the divine ... the first being created was not only divine but a woman (Evans, 1994, p. 54).

The purpose of sharing Mātauranga Wahine is to enable future generations of mokopuna, tamariki and young Māori women to glimpse into the world of spiritual matriarchal leadership that they may never otherwise have had the opportunity to follow. Aroha Yates-Smith's research regarding atua wahine calls into question the ethnographer's obsession with Māori male figures as the primary figures in Māori society ... evidence from karakia, waiata, kōrero, mōteatea and a range of oral accounts from tribal authorities highlights the presence of atua wahine as critical in understanding Māori worldviews ... all too often those genealogical tables contributed to the invisibilisation of Māori women ... renders invisible the role of the feminine ... interpreted by Pākehā men, thereby being relocated within colonial notions (Pihama, 2001, p. 267).

Our tamariki in schools and ECE centres are only introduced to the male atua and the knowledge of the female atua is rarely found in educational books, because it is an ancient knowledge that the wisdom keepers have kept safe from exploitation.

Dr Arikirangi Turuki Rangimarie Rose Lambert-Pere, a tohunga kura waka and international educationalist, was surrounded from birth by the matriarchal leadership of kuia. She asserts her connection to Papatūānuku and other magnificent feminine beings who work beside the male atua. Many years ago, Dr Pere personified the ancestral *tipua* to me by placing her palm over my forehead and asking if I could see Haumapuhia spiritually (R. Pere, personal communication, 2001). Even though I was willing, with my eyes closed or open, I could not see her. Dr Pere proceeded to ask me if I could feel this ancestress but still, I could not. Dr Pere then asked what colour I could see and I described a light-blue colour to which she said 'See, I told you that she loves you. She will always be with you when you travel and she will keep you safe' (R. Pere, personal communication, 2001). This is the way in which I was introduced to many spiritual phenomena with Dr Pere, and in time I came to appreciate how to become one with my tribal tipua and ancient kaitiaki. However, not all mātauranga of our ancient ones is based on the teachings or authentic tribal identity of the tohunga. Some years ago, a Māori author, now an esteemed professor, portrayed our ancestress Haumapuhia very differently. In 2003 Professor Ngahua Te Awekotuku published a book called *Mythic Women* in which she portrayed a fictional story of Haumapuhia, the female taniwha of

Lake Waikaremoana, with explicit descriptions of physical and sexual abuse and murder. There was no evidence or tikanga to prove or misprove this story, but once you have read it, it is too late. The story depicts a father beating his daughter because she did not fill the water gourd fast enough. As the story goes, Haumapuhia was too busy aborting her own father's baby in a hole she had dug out with her bare hands. Once she buried the newly-born baby, her father pushed her into the water and held her head under as she fought for her life, until she stopped moving and drowned (Te Awekotuku, 2003). There are so many underlying themes in this story that it is hard to know where to begin. Can the lens through which the author wrote this story be a result of the generational abuse of patriarchal colonisers?

As a mokopuna of Haumapuhia, I was saddened to read something as degenerative as this about my ancestress, whom I had only just discovered. When I asked Dr Pere about it, she quietly acknowledged that this was the way Ngahaia saw it. Imagine how a Tūhoe mokopuna might feel after reading such a shocking portrayal of what she might consider to be her matua tipuna. How might a story like this affect the mana of mātauranga Māori and mokopuna Māori or set a benchmark for abuse and violence in Māori families?

Professor Te Awekotuku (2003) identified the women she writes about in her book as mythical, but does not distinguish her tribal identity or rites of passage to write about the ancestress Haumapuhia and the father figure in a way that is debilitating to the mana of wāhine Māori. However unintentional, it is this kind of European colonisation that has contaminated the indigenous culture of the tangata whenua and needs to be addressed by Māori in the 21st century (Moon, 2003).

How do we stop these unconscious effects from being planted in the psyche of our children in the 21st century as the incest whakaaro serves to further oppress Māori of both genders? Dr Pere states that the 'church groups must stop changing Māori into a sexist language' (Pere, as cited in Poupou Karanga, 2011, p. 38). A classic example of this is Samuel Robinson (2005), raised in and a resident of Australia but identifying himself as a Māori tohunga, who describes Tāne as having sexual desires towards his mother and 'not being satisfied with his wife' (p. 35). Robinson introduces non-Māori concepts into the story of atua Māori with undertones of incest once again as he condemns Ranginui for being jealous of his own son, Tangaroa, for caressing Papatūānuku's body as though he was having an affair with his own mother (p. 32).

Interpretations like this make us aware of how the sacred knowledge of Māori has been misconstrued. There is no evidence in *mōteatea* or *pūrākau* to support these notions prior to European contact. The lens Robinson has used to interpret the *atua* demeans the *mana* of the *atua* (both male and female) and falsely incriminates and invalidates the spiritual values and beliefs of the *tangata whenua*. Not only is this accusation disturbing, it is unhealthy for our *mokopuna* to digest these fabrications.

What is even more frightening is that these untruths are being told in our own communities to our Māori children at school and pre-schools. Our *mokopuna* are being unconsciously introduced to concepts of abusing women and incestuous relationships. What effect will such undertones have on the *mana* and self-esteem of our *mokopuna* Māori? These concepts of abuse and incest are not part of the ancient language of the *tangata whenua*, nor do they align with the values and beliefs of the indigenous Māori culture (Pere as cited in Poupou Karanga, 2011). What can we do about this personally from a social justice perspective as a teacher, a mother, an aunty and a grandmother?

The Implications as teachers

As a *pouako* at Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand in Hawkes Bay, I have had the opportunity to look at and observe student teachers through many culturally diverse lenses. From my observations, one of the main issues they struggle with is learning *te reo* Māori and understanding the Māori concepts of *tikanga* through a holistic world view.

The Māori world view is bewildering for the greater majority of student teachers and lecturers, both Māori and non-Māori. The curriculum is underpinned by a patriarchal version of Māori history, related by both non-Māori and Māori, male and female authors. Many of the historical stories of Māori are deemed 'mythical' which in essence is saying that they are fairy-tales. In other words, the traditional *pūrākau* have evolved from their original form into a *Pākehā* lie that undervalues the knowledge base of Māori.

Often the *pūrākau* are re-written from an angle that places men in positions of power over women and have abusive connotations to women and their children (Te Awēkotuku, 2003; Reed, 2004). In the 21st century, people are repeating these stories to our *mokopuna* and manifesting notions of male chauvinism, thereby trampling on the *mana* of women. In doing so, the seed is planted in the minds and hearts of our *mokopuna* that women are mere chattels and are not to be trusted; therefore we must abuse them, punish them, and kill them.

The implications clearly point to teachers making sense of mātauranga Māori before sharing it with mokopuna. Are we being consciously aware of the subliminal effects that some mātauranga Māori may have on the values of our future mokopuna? In some cases, stories have a western patriarchal interpretation that describes Māori as insensitive, unfeeling natives who have no sense of respect for women, no family values and no regard for the kuia. In reality, the family values in Māori culture are the complete opposite and yet this is what we may be feeding into the unconscious belief systems of our mokopuna today. Consequently, ECE teachers need to be conscientious in examining the stories they are sharing with mokopuna Māori for they may have adverse effects in their lives.

Re-telling Māori pūrākau that normalise crimes of incest and rape to dominate and oppress women can cause irreparable damage to the self-esteem of our children. How would you feel if you thought that your ancestors were like that? Through a child's eyes, this may be a vision that is difficult to erase. What is even more disturbing is that these stories are not true, but can be labelled as fiction, making it acceptable.

It is time to start re-righting and re-writing some of our own stories so that we can restore the mana of Mātauranga Wahine to its rightful place. As women and teachers, ongoing critical reflection of our understanding of Māori knowledge is important, especially pūrākau that have been tainted by patriarchal dominance. It impels teachers to be the God/dess so the mokopuna will mirror the image of who we really are. The wisdom of the grandmother acts as the backbone of pre-school education and exemplary role modelling will grow and develop in the spiritual whare tangata of life as a blueprint for all our mokopuna.

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About the author



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I have worked as a Pouako at the Hastings base of Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand for over three years. I received honours for my Master's thesis in Indigenous Studies at Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi and I am currently studying for my PhD; researching *romiromi* as a traditional form of healing in Aotearoa. The holistic wellbeing of future generations of mokopuna, whānau and our earth mother Papatūānuku is a strong focus of my thesis.