The Ringatu Traditions of Predictive History*

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In New Zealand, the oldest living Maori faith inspired by the scriptures is the Ringatu, or the faith of the Upraised Hand. It has about 6,000 adherents, or 2% of the Maori population (which is itself about 10% of the population of the country). It was created as a body of religious thought in the mid-19th century settler wars by the visionary leader Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki, when he was imprisoned in 1866 on Wharekauri, a bleak offshore island four days' sail from his homeland. He had been accused of being a 'spy' in the East Coast wars. His seizure was primarily instigated by a desire on the part of the local government agents to get rid of a potential troublemaker, and he was never—despite a written appeal—brought to trial. The scriptural roots of his religion are explicitly an identification with the Israelites, exiled from their own land. This was indeed the 'season of the Jew', as Maurice Shadbolt's recent novel about Te Kooti suggests. After two years' imprisonment Te Kooti and nearly 300 others (men, women, and children) escaped their Babylon and returned home, initiating the last phase of the New Zealand wars. The religion found its shape under the pressure of a further five years of war, followed for Te Kooti by 20 years of exile from his own tribal lands, a lingering punishment imposed by successive governments.

The Ringatu narrate this history orally. It is told, as are all the successive developments in the people's history, within a framework of predictive thought. For Te Kooti is seen to be Moses, their leader in the wilderness, and the future, their final entry into Canaan, still lies before them. During the 1870s, while Te Kooti was sheltering with the Maniapoto tribe in the King Country, he developed the rituals and the holy days of the faith. He created the twelfth of every month as a day of worship to remember his successful escape (the Pass-over) in 1868, in addition to a Saturday sabbath. He also set up the four 'pillars

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1 M. Schadbolt Season of the Jew (London 1986).

of the year’ (1 January, June, July, and December or November, variously): 1 January marks the beginning of the new year with a love feast; 1 June and 1 December are the planting and harvesting celebrations; 1 July marks the beginning of the seventh month, or the sabbath of the sabbath. These ra, or holy days, are still maintained by the Ringatu. On such occasions the sayings of Te Kooti will be recalled and the history of the movement recounted, not only in the speeches given on the marae but also in the lively exchanges which occur in meeting-house discussions throughout the night. The prayers (inoi) of the faith were all composed by him. Many of the songs (waiata), which are sung at the end of the speeches, were also written by him. They are adaptations of older compositions and tell the history of his pursuit as well as the support he gained from the people of the Urewera and East Coast regions.

This visionary movement was only one of many founded in New Zealand in the 19th century, but it is one which has survived. In 1977, I began to visit some of the Ringatu believers. Initially I met the Iharaira (the Israelites), who were a particular segment led by the prophet Rua Kenana Hepetipa, who in 1906 had claimed to be Te Kooti’s successor: the Maori Messiah.³ Rua emerged from the Tuhoe tribe, who had sheltered Te Kooti during the wars and who, in 1869, had bound themselves to him by covenant. Rua died in 1937, predicting that he would return from the dead. Subsequently I went to two other areas, where the Ringatu have not accepted Rua’s claim to be Te Kooti’s successor and still await the one destined to lead them to Canaan. These tribes, sections of Rongowhakaata, Te Aitanga a Mahaki, and Whanau Apanui, generally maintain the original Ringatu beliefs, but significant regional and tribal variations have also developed.

All these followers of Te Kooti, despite the differences in their beliefs, draw on his words and spoken prophecies to explain their present history. His predictions are called nga kūpu whakaaari, the words of revelation, and they are recalled, interpreted, and re-interpreted by Ringatu families on both formal and quite informal occasions. Decisions taken in their daily lives are determined by this body of thought, which looks to the fulfilment of the prophetic words and accepts physical omens, particularly different manifestations of the rainbow. In 1985, for example, I returned to see one of my informants. It was just after her husband, Ned, had died, and as I arrived a small shower of rain fell. She told me, ‘That’s what the Maoris call he aroha. It’s a good sign. Ned must be saying, “Oh, there’s Judith, come at last!” Ana ko marangat! You see, it won’t be long! Ned must be saying, “Oh, there’s those people come all the way from Auckland!”

³ The author went with Gillian Chaplin, photographer, to Maungapohatu and Matahi, which are two communities founded by Rua. We brought with us photographs of his followers (taken from about 1906) for identification. We learnt that bringing the photographs was as if we had travelled with the ancestors themselves, as people cried over and talked to the portraits. The first oral history that we wrote (with Craig Wallace) sprang from that beginning: Mihia: The Prophet Rua Kenana and his Community at Maungapohatu (Wellington 1979, 2nd ed. 1987).
Only showered for a minute. That’s aroha. Spiritually, eh? Taha wairua. You know, when I saw the rainbow this morning, it was just standing over there—oh, must be a visitor! That’s why I never moved out! I was expecting somebody to come! It was you fellows! Such decisions, together with personal interpretations of the meaning of events, are also based in a cyclic notion of the movement of time. A story repeated. That’s how the clock moves. That’s how you know, too, when it comes round again. These are the signs we have, that it’s getting into a new world.

Te Kooti created this body of thought in which two lineages of predictive history were consciously joined. One derived from Maori belief that certain individuals are granted the powers of foresight, matakite. This vision is the gift of an ancestor; it is described as the taumata or sight of the departed spirit. This gift coming from the past underlines the Maori notion of history. History is the domain of the ancestors, and their time, the past, is seen as the days which lie in front (nga ra o mua). Time itself (tau, the seasonal year) revolves, and the past, as in many oral cultures, is regenerated in the present. Knowledge and warnings from the ancestors, the dead, are conveyed to the living through dreams, signs, and visionary experiences. The scriptural traditions of prophetic revelation—the second lineage—were introduced, in the early 19th century, into this world of living history. The old Ringatu tohunga (a reader of signs (tohu) and priest) Eria Raukura, who fought alongside Te Kooti in the wars, later related how the marriage (te hononga) of these two traditions had been specifically revealed by the Archangel Michael to Te Kooti in 1867. Eria narrated how, on Wharekauri, Michael first told of the Ringatu covenant and its relationship to the prophetic sayings ‘from Abraham right until Christ. At the very time of Te Kooti only then was it made very clear the marriage of the first things to the things of the past.” The things of the past were the deeds and experiences of the ancestors migrating to New Zealand, where they encountered, said Eria, ‘the first things’, the all-knowing Maori supreme God, whom they named Io. He was Jehovah. This revelation of the overarching divine plan, the Word, was

4 Conversation with Heni Brown, 3 Jan. 1985, Whatatutu, Poverty Bay. Heni Brown is one of eight women whose narratives are recorded in Binney and Chaplin, Nga Morehu. He aroha: a sign of approval and affection; and ko marangai: there’s the rain; taha wairua: the spiritual side of life. ‘Fellows’ in Maori-English carries no distinction of gender. Gender is not differentiated in Maori in any of the personal pronouns.

5 Dialogue with Rongo (Mangere) Teka, 20 May 1978, Ruatahuna, Urewera. Rongo Teka is the son of one of the original teachers of the movement led by Rua. Rongo is today (1988) the main upholder and teacher of this particular branch of the Ringatu.


7 ‘Nga katu ano mai i a Aperahama tae noa mai ki a Te Karaiti... No te we rua i a Te Kooti kaiahi ano ka tino whakamaramata te hononga o nga mea tuatahi ki nga mea o muri nei’. (Nga koro a Eria Raukura. He mea ka pei mai nei koro i Turanga. Eria Raukura’s speech. These things were copied down at Turanga [Gisborne].) Paora Delamere, MS Notebook begun Dec. 1931, private collection of his son Monita Delamere, 34; translations from this notebook by Jane McRae, Maori Studies Resource Officer, University of Auckland. (Paora Delamere was the Poutikanga (Main Pillar) of the Haahi Ringatu until his death in 1981.) Eria Raukura, baptised as the leading tohunga of the faith by Te Kooti in 1881, died on 29 June 1938. He was said then to be 103 years old.
made to Te Kooti by Michael in a series of visions. These Te Kooti recorded in his own diary. The entries began on 21 February 1867 with the words 'This is the month in which my sickness increased, on the 21st day I became unconscious'. A Voice ('Reo') manifested itself to him in a sequence of visitations. On 21 April the Voice appeared in the form of a man clothed in white but bearing a staff of colours never before seen in this world. He gave Te Kooti certain signs, and assured him that God would never forsake his people. On 21 May, he warned Te Kooti: 'touch not any book because those letters therein are of men and are dark, but I will speak to you, and you to them, so that they may know that I am the voice of God'. According to Eria, Michael was to return later, after the wars, when Te Kooti was living in sanctuary in the King Country, 'to encourage him to fulfil all the sayings, and to finish with all those evil deeds of the fighting'. From this direction sprang the later teachings of Te Kooti, which placed emphasis on peaceful ways and acceptance of the law.

A central figure in the oral traditions surrounding Te Kooti is the seer, Te Toiroa. It is told that Toiroa was directly descended from the great tohunga Ngatoro-i-rangi, who came in the founding migration of the Arawa canoe to New Zealand. Thus Toiroa's lineage as prophet is traced from the beginning of Maori history. Toiroa is said to have predicted Te Kooti's birth, and also the coming of the white people to New Zealand. Three years before the arrival of the European explorer James Cook, in 1769, 'Arikirangi' was pointed out by Toiroa, as were all the conditions of life in this world. The spirit of prophecy had entered Toiroa and, in the oral accounts, it is said that he took on the manner of a lizard, papateretere, his back arched and his fingers splayed, as he sang his waiata predicting the birth of Te Kooti and the coming of evil to the land. The lizard, in the traditional Maori cosmogony, is an ambivalent creature. It is the bearer of both death and life and it warns, in its apparition or representation, of the presence of tapu, supernatural powers. Toiroa's predictions concerning the boy's birth were ominous, and as a very old man, in 1865-6, he watched over the history of war that he was said to have foreseen.

The major events of Te Kooti's life as a young man, that is, before his imprisonment in 1866, are all told and explained in terms of the early visions

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8 'Ko te marama tenei i nui ai toku mate 21 o nga ra ka hemo au'. Te Kooti Arikirangi, MS Notebook 1867-8, Wellington, Alexander Turnbull Library (hereinafter ATL), 1. (Contemporary translation in G. H. Davies, Maori Manuscripts 3, ATL.)
9 'ko koe ia kei whauha koe ki tetahi pukapuka no te mea ko ena reta na te tangata he mea poui engari maku e korero ki a koe mau ki a ratou kia mohio ai ratou he reo ahau no te Atua'. Te Kooti Notebook 1867-8, 20-1, ATL.
10 'ka whakahau kia a ia kia mahia e ia nga kupu katao, a mutu ana ia ki nga mahi kia katao o te pakanga.' Delamere MS, 35.
11 'ka whakaturia e Toiroa a Arikirangi me nga ahutanga katao o tona oranga i tenei ao.' Ibid., 33.
13 He is mentioned by Bishop William L. Williams as the tohunga at Nukutaurua on the Mahia peninsula, who predicted the onset of war at Poverty Bay. (MS Diary 2, 6 Sept. 1865, ATL.) He is believed to have died in 1866.
of Toiroa: Te Kooti's betrayal by his own father, who attempted to kill him by burying him alive; his 'thieving deeds', which gained him local notoriety; and the fact that he would be abandoned by God until 'the day you move away from this land, from Aotea roa here' into exile. But the later events are related in terms of his own prophetic foresight, which was the gift bestowed upon him by Michael. The authority of Te Kooti's sayings (like Toiroa's before him) is that they are vatic pronouncements. Some portion of this divinely-given authority, bestowed upon a man who called himself merely a messenger, he in turn gave to others. These men—and women—are the immediate ancestors of those living now, their great-grandparents perhaps: 'I can tell my own story about my great-grandmother because she was a follower of Te Kooti. She brought us all up; four generations she brought up. She was a makutu old lady. She could destroy, you know. You did something wrong against her, she just prayed. Some kind of prayer that she uses, and it reacts on to that person. That mana was given to her by Te Kooti. Te Kooti bestowed it upon her."

The power of makutu or bewitching Te Kooti had given to this woman, but because it was so fearful it was returned to the earth upon her death in 1944. 'I didn't know until, when she was dying, she told my grand-uncle to bury her upside down—her body—put her body like that into the coffin. They had to. It is to do with the mana she had. It will stop it from coming to destroy—the living.' The source of this woman's mana and tapu was divine, but Te Kooti was the ancestor from whom she (and others) received their power. Sometimes in the narratives the gift may be described as a matter-of-fact object. A key, for instance, is said to have been handed down by Te Kooti to leaders who are chosen.

One clustering of stories, which belong to a number of the Ringatu tribes, is that concerning a hidden diamond. Among Tuhoe, the story is narrated about their sacred mountain, Maungapohatu. In some versions the diamond was placed on the mountain by Te Kooti; in others, it had always been there, but he covered it over with his shawl (horo) to conceal its radiant light. 'The old people used to tell them it's no use our going to find that diamond: there is a time, you know, it will come out. There was a man a few years back went and tried to find it. The first time he went he was half dead, when somebody else found him, and brought him back home. He got well, and he couldn't get that out of his mind and so he went back again, that was the last. He died. He is a cousin of my father; he thought that he's that clever, he can get it. He died in the bush."

14 'ki te ra e wehe atu ai koe i tenei whemua, i Aotea roa nei.' Te Toiroa, Matakite, Poropiti, Atua Maori' ('Te Toiroa, Seer, Prophet, Maori God'), Delamere MS, 80. Aotearoa was one of the Maori names for the North Island, and is now used as the Maori name for New Zealand. It means 'long white cloud'.
16 Dialogue with Heni Brown, 27 Nov. 1983. A fuller version may be found in Binney and Chaplin, Nga Morehu, 38. The woman of whom this story is told died in 1944 and she was said then to be 101 years old.
17 Dialogue with Te Paea Hori, wife of Heta Rua, 18 May 1978, Matahi, Bay of Plenty.
The diamond was claimed to have been revealed to Rua about 1905 by Whaitiri, the ancestral Tuhoe goddess of lightning. It is the seminal story in the narratives which surround him. As his own son put it, in 1978, 'Well, that's how he first started off.' Among other tribes, who do not accept that the predicted successor to Te Kooti has yet appeared, the diamond remains unrevealed on their mountain. It is, for Ngati Maru, Te Kooti's own tribe, still hidden. 'Some say it appears at night—people that go out possum hunting, they could see this luminous light coming up from one area, only one area, at night . . . We can't see it from here. It's at Paparatu . . . This one, here, it is a diamond. He [Te Kooti] came here with a purpose—as the story goes—that he came here to hide all the wealth. If they were to find the wealth of this country, they'll ruin this country. He says, "It's better to be hidden". But there is a day coming. Some one, or somebody, will be bound to find this and there will be plenty for all.'

In this narrative, the diamond is specifically stated as having been brought to the mountain by Te Kooti. Some say that it came from the supply vessel in which the prisoners had escaped from Wharekauri; in other versions it is said to have derived from 'the Bible; one of those gems that used to go about. It used to travel with other people.' Its redemptive purpose seems common to all versions.

Among Nga Ariki, the old tribe of Mangatu, the diamond on their sacred mountain is a portion of the one carried by Te Kooti, which was said to be shaped in the form of a lamb, the Lamb of God. Its bright light had, it is narrated, directed Te Kooti's path during the wars in the dense bush. In 1889, when he was arrested to prevent him from returning to his tribal home, it is recalled that he wore the diamond in a little flax kit around his neck. People who saw him then were dazzled by its radiance. By stating that a portion of the diamond is hidden on their mountain, Maungahaumia, the Nga Ariki narratives assert that their mauri, or that which traditionally holds and preserves the land forever, was given them by Te Kooti.

19 Dialogue with Reuben Riki, former assistant secretary to the Ringatu church in the Gisborne district, 16 May 1982, Muriwai, Poverty Bay.
20 Ibid. As the key which is handed down is European, so too the diamond is not an indigenous stone. Its desirability, however, relates not simply to the European equation of it with wealth, but its quintessential quality of light. Te Ao Marama (the world of light) is the Maori name for the world of humankind into which we are born. The narrative of the diamond seems to bear a close relationship with Nathaniel Hawthorne's popular retelling of a North American Indian legend, the 'Great Carbuncle', which was first published in 1851 and extensively reprinted thereafter. Cross-cultural borrowings were not necessarily restricted to the Bible. The shrine of this 'wondrous gem' was, as at Maungapohatu, a mountain lake, and its guardian was a spirit-force. Like the Maungapohatu diamond, its light could be seen blazing far out to sea.
22 Lena Te Kani Te Ua is said to have seen it. Lena was the daughter of the famous leader Sir Apirana Ngata of Ngati Porou, and lived at Puha, near Gisborne. She died before she could be interviewed by the author.
Despite the Archangel Michael's admonitions, Te Kooti's many predictions were written down by his three secretaries in the later 19th century. They are stated as beginning on Wharekauri, and they continued to his death in 1893. They are all dated in the manuscript versions, and are ascribed to the particular place where the spirit of prediction had entered him. These manuscripts are locked away as secret books, accessible only to a few, but the knowledge of the predictions was, and still is, orally transmitted. The series of statements concerning the one whom he predicted would follow him and fulfil the tasks that he had left are now the best remembered. These narratives maintain the belief in a messianic deliverance for the faithful, or the Word (te Kupu) made flesh, and they test the rival claims of the later prophetic leaders. The words, nga kupu, warn, tease, and equivocate; they therefore stay alive and remain open to new understandings.

Other kupu whakaari relate to Te Kooti's own death, and the curiously 'insignificant' form that he said it would take. Having been hunted down by the militia for so long, he died, on 17 April 1893, after being accidentally crushed by a cart. Further sayings deal with the failure of his own generation of leaders and, particularly, the abortive attempts at Maori unity, the Kotahitanga movement for a Maori parliament, which began in his lifetime and has been revived in various forms in this century. These predictions also warn against false leaders, including his contemporaries, the visionary leaders Te Whiti o Rongomai and King Tawhiao, both of whose predictive words also remain as sources of power within the Maori community today.

One domestic example also reveals the way in which the structuring of the present derives from the past. Among Maori women probably the most feared event is childlessness. It is called the wharengaro, the ancestral house destroyed. It is dreaded not least because infant mortality, especially post-neonatal mortality, has been and remains high among Maori (in contrast with the European population). Infertility or deaths of children are, consequently, attributed to a fault. 'It's like a curse being placed on a family... The old people had to go around, saying something about it, eh, losing your kids. Quite a few of us, as they said. That's the wharengaro.' The resolution, in the case of this woman, was derived from prayers, offerings, and a search through the genealogies by the senior male in the whanau (extended family): 'Old Tuhua, he looked through the line of the family. It's always there; it's like a curse. And once you understand, then you get kids.'

33 Despite marked improvements since 1935, in 1984 the Maori post neonatal deaths per 1,000 live births were still double that of non-Maori: 13.9 Maori to 6.1 non-Maori. 'Mortality and Demographic Data', National Health Statistics Centre (Wellington 1985).
34 Dialogue with Miria Te Amoroa, wife of Mau Rua, 7 May 1984, Matahi.
35 Ibid. These events took place in 1944-5. Tuhua Pari was the senior male in Miria's family (on her mother's side); he was also one of Rua's 12 Levites (Riwaiti), or the teachers of the faith of the Iharaira.
In this short essay a few, brief examples have been chosen to show the manner in which a patterning of thought derived from the Maori oral world was reinforced by the scriptural traditions of prophetic history introduced in the early 19th century. Literacy in the Maori language and, later, literacy in English has not overthrown these ways of interpreting the past and the present. These frameworks of thought have been bequeathed to a people who are now quite extensively involved in a European society. Even though the men and women who have been quoted are relatively elderly (that is, they were in their 50s or older when interviewed), they all received some education in the state school system in the English language, and by European school teachers. But they are also all holders and conservers of the surviving Maori tribal land blocs, and the relationship to the land and the ancestors lies at the heart of all Maori tradition. These people were brought up within the Maori rural communities, as were their parents and grandparents. In these communities they were taught the values and historical experiences of their kin. These family histories invariably conflicted with the general perceptions of New Zealand's history, which they learnt at school; but they have managed to retain their own truths. They and their kin now live as a minority in their own land. New Zealand may be a post-colonial society, but for the Maori the problem is that they can never decolonize themselves. Consequently, these patterns of religious thought, which were shaped into a theology of liberation in the 19th century, live on.

Although the story of the diamond may be told to outsiders with the caveat 'as the story goes', the narratives convey the still widely-shared hope among Maori of the recovery of tribal autonomy in the land. The Ringatu covenant today asserts the belief in prophecies, revelations, speaking in tongues, and faith-healing. It also states that the Kingdom of God will come again on earth, and that Christ will return and sit on the throne of David. These two traditions—the belief in the Maori mana as protected and conserved by Te Kooti, and the millenial promises—have become entwined as one. The patterns of predictive history convey to the believers the signs (nga tohu) that events are moving to their preconceived completion. The hymns, the songs, and the oral narratives of the Ringatu affirm the certainty that the inner exile of the Maori in their own land will end.