

CHAPTER 2

Mere Rikiriki at Parewanui: The Genesis of the Māramatanga

The history of the Māramatanga begins in the early years of the twentieth century, when a relatively obscure prophetess, Mere Rikiriki, moved away from the models invoked by her nineteenth-century predecessors. Her work, with its ritual and ideological implications, transformed the Māori prophetic tradition, shifting the paradigm from the Old to the New Testament. She is the origin, both physical and spiritual, of the Māramatanga.

By 1900 Māori were no longer in decline, numerically or culturally (King 1983: 159). European leaders who had predicted that the indigenous people would soon disappear were faced not with a diminishing Māori population, but one clearly on the ascendant. A new group of Māori leaders, educated in both Pākehā and Māori traditions, emerged to take their roles not only on tribal marae but on the national stage as well. For most Māori, the new century brought changes on all levels: social, political, and economic, but most significantly, religious.

Māori prophetic movements relying on Old Testament frameworks continued into the twentieth century. For example, Rua Kēnana (see chapter 1), who died in 1937, was a contemporary of T. W. Rātana (discussed in this chapter) and Hori Enoka Mareikura. At the turn of the century, new leaders began to address tradition, incorporating it into Christian ideology or putting it to sleep. Mere Rikiriki was such a prophet. She was a transformative agent, a woman whose fame within the movement crossed centuries, whose works bridged the Old and the New Testaments, the Māori past and the Pākehā present. The New Testament was called upon not only to buttress Christianity, but also to sustain the foundations of the past.

Events during the period 1910–1935 and instructions from Mere Rikiriki shaped the initial contours of the Māramatanga. Personalities emerged within the movement to interpret events and guide social relations. Present narratives of the movement's history emphasise individual achievement and group acquiescence. The New Testament superseded the Old Testament as a metaphor for the Māori place in New Zealand; images of exile and selection, so important to

nineteenth-century prophets, were transformed but not abandoned. The history that is now told of these times refers to specific times and places—the turning century on the west coast of the North Island. But these narratives also have cosmological implications: the time scale shifts, from historical to cosmic, in the process underscoring the interdependence between divine forces and human actions.

Mere Rikiriki and her Nephew, Wīremu Rātana

Few people in New Zealand have heard of Mere Rikiriki. To most of those who have she is known as the aunt of Tahupōtiki Wīremu Rātana, and the woman who foretold the powers that would eventually overtake her nephew. At one of her hui she said (as quoted by Henderson 1963: 14):

O ye people [of Ngati Apa], hasten to me your Prophetess of Peace. A time will come when the Child (or Chosen Man) will take action directly and strongly and with a great mission, without favoritism, he will be more than a man in his attributes.¹

At first it appeared that one Pānau Tāmami was selected, but Tāmami failed to obey the words of God and became a cripple (Henderson 1963: 14; Young 1991: 568). In time it became apparent that the prophecy referred to Mere Rikiriki's nephew, Wīremu Rātana. Rātana was far from secure in his selection; but he trusted his aunt. She named two of his sons Ārepa and Ōmeka, signifying the beginning and the end. But her recognition of their spiritual powers led to such barriers between the prophetess and the children of her nephew that she would not touch the boys, even refusing to attend Ārepa in illness (Young 1991: 568; Henderson 1963: 23). Rātana continued to visit his aunt, seeking guidance in troubling times and becoming familiar with “the psychology of faithhealing” (Henderson 1963: 23).

A farmhand who had left school at ten, described by Henderson as “a wild and moody fellow,” Rātana was an unlikely and at first reluctant candidate to assume religious authority. In 1918, the year the World War I ended and the influenza epidemic ravaged Māori, Rātana had a number of visions that would later be seen as decisive. He had been waiting for a sign, for his aunt had been certain that something would reveal itself to him. In one of these visions, on November 8, he received a spiritual message from which he took the name *māngai* (mouthpiece).

Rātana was a mouthpiece, a mediator for Jehovah, although he was otherwise firmly rooted in the New Testament. It was in Jehovah's name that he urged the Māori people to transcend tribal allegiances and unite, and with a substantial

measure of success. He appealed to workers and laborers, quoting the words of Tāwhiao, “My friends are the shoemaker, the blacksmith, the watchmaker, carpenters, orphans and widows.”² His followers were called the *mōrehu* (the survivors), people who were non-chiefly, detribalized, lacking mana and access to the prerogatives of rank in either of New Zealand’s worlds.

But it was his national recognition and political success that distinguished Rātana from other prophets. Rātana has become the most influential of all Māori prophets, founding the dominant Māori political party as well as a religion. Through the formation of an eponymous church and political party, he was able to overcome tribal barriers, forging alliances that overcame ancient loyalties. And in so doing he also fulfilled both his aunt’s prophecy and an early symbolic message that he would bring together two foundations, religious and political: the Bible and the Treaty of Waitangi.

Mere Rikiriki recognized the talents of Hori Enoka Mareikura as well as those of her nephew Rātana. The descendants of the people who gathered at Parewanui see no rivalry between the men. Her work at Parewanui clearly paved the way for Rātana just as it did for the Māramatanga. There is a strong conviction that the men had different destinies to follow, with each taking the path for which he was most suited. Hori Enoka, who took the name Mareikura, increased his spiritual mission when Rātana closed his, in 1928, in favor of his material works (Elsmore 1989: 389). From that time, Rātana was concerned with political, not spiritual, works. Each was caught between two centuries, between two modes of revelation, between individual demands and collective forces. Rātana bridged politics and religion; Hori Enoka Mareikura and his followers transformed their social and physical worlds.

Parewanui

The seminal event of the Māramatanga occurred when Atareta Kāwana Roiha Mere Rikiriki, prophetess, jumped forty times into the Rangitikei River and brought forth the New Testament.³ Mareikura was there, as were Weuweu from Levin and Merehapi from Kuratahi.

Mere Rikiriki and events at Parewanui (her marae on the banks of the Rangitikei River) figure prominently in stories told in the Māramatanga. While most of the members who are today elders of the movement were not yet born, their parents and grandparents were present on Mere Rikiriki’s marae. Their actions too are related whenever the history of the Māramatanga is reviewed, and continue to shape the experience of its members.

Mere Rikiriki is a border figure, bridging centuries, straddling modes of religious revelation, and capitalizing on the ambiguities inherent in Māori gender

ideology. On a practical level, she was a healer of considerable skill (successfully treating a sick child and thereby saving an important descent line from extinction). On her marae and under her guidance, the family learned of their guardian, who has continued to serve as protector and source of revelation. She named a new generation of young Māori, including Mareikura's infant son. She gave the Māramatanga a flag, the time for prayers, and a rā—a commemorative day that enshrines the shared history of Mareikura and the prophetess of the Rangitīkei. In the retelling of Mere Rikiriki's life, these foundational protagonists and their actions are constantly present in the lives of the current membership. Buildings were named, as marae with her teachings at the forefront were developed. In the twenty-first century, this imprinted landscape reminds the initiated of the historical depth of the movement, a depth they can claim by right.

I first heard about Mere Rikiriki in 1972–1973 when Pauro, Aurora, Tika, and Hine Ataarangi related the history of the Māramatanga to me. That history was told repeatedly at rā and on other occasions at which the elder generation sought to impress upon the young the significance of their ancestors. In 1987, 1990, and 1991, Hoana, the acknowledged kaimahi, explained that history in greater detail in tape-recorded sessions.

Mere Rikiriki was born in or about 1866 (Young 1991: 568) into the Ngāti Apa and Rangitāne tribes of the west coast of the North Island; her family was well connected to the Pākehā government and to the Catholic church (Elsmore 1989: 373). Her gifts were formidable and appeared to be, at least in part, inherited. She was a descendant of Maata, who in the early years of Christianity in the Manawatū cast out lizards, ngārara. Like other prophets, she found herself looking in two directions simultaneously. And like other prophets, she was fiercely protective of her people and their destiny, which she did all she could to alter. Her own work is referred to as Te Māramatanga (the light or enlightenment), and in the conviction that they follow the path she opened, the movement's members adopted this name in honor of the prophetess.

Parewanui attracted many in Mere Rikiriki's time, including those who were to found the Māramatanga. Opposite the marae is the house of prayer, Te Wheriko (Jericho), which looks very much like a Victorian church and was built and consecrated by the Rev. Richard Taylor in 1862.⁴

Mere Rikiriki was a strong-willed, determined woman, achieving leadership stature in a male-dominated society. Evidence that Māori women could take senior roles, especially in religious innovation, was overlooked by early European ethnographers, men not trained to look for or to recognize female leadership,⁵ but there were many cases of women whose powers were oracular (see Elsmore 1989; Binney 1989). Mere Rikiriki was just such a spiritual leader, and an exemplar to the Māramatanga. Her prominence indicated a new dispensation: it became evident even to Pākehā that women could be chosen and would be

able to function in their selected role. Married, she was childless, another mark of spiritual ascendancy recognized by the members of later movements. For the women of the Māramatanga who were childless, what would normally be thought of as a misfortune was taken as a blessing.

But, rather than being famous, she appears to have been infamous. Recognizing her considerable abilities, King Tāwhiao, himself a prophet, summoned her as “the adulterous woman of our times.” Indeed, she was described to me in this fashion in English, and in Māori as a *wāhine pūremu*, an almost exact translation. When Hoana discussed this term, she laughed, saying Mere Rikiriki no doubt deserved the appellation. Her sexual activities did not negate her spiritual potency.⁶

It was Tāwhiao, perhaps, who presented a flag to her, inscribed with the words *E Te Iwi Kia Ora* (Blessings to the People), a phrase whose significance will emerge below. Such a gesture placed Mere Rikiriki firmly in the company of prophets.⁷ At Parewanui, Mere Rikiriki and her actions acquired almost mythical stature. Holy and devout, she transformed both the immediate and cosmic worlds.

The oral accounts of Mere Rikiriki’s achievements that one hears from members of the Māramatanga are both more vivid and more revealing than the written record. Moreover, the oral narratives, in their refusal to see the changing milieu in stark contrasts, reveal a subtle understanding of the transformation that was taking place within the Māori world.

Many people, representing diverse tribal groups, attended the hui on Mere Rikiriki’s marae. They may have come seeking cures, but they found new meaning introduced through oratory and shared symbols. These gatherings were devoted to reconciliation, not to condemnation or repudiation. Visitors at Parewanui, even if they were not already related, became intimates. On her marae, strangers became, in time, family. They not only saw one another regularly, but they also operated within an arena in which their most private, personal dilemmas emerged for public scrutiny. Alliances formed that were to carry the participants beyond Mere Rikiriki’s marae and link them together in the formation of a new movement.

Weuweu from Levin, Merehapi from Kuratahi, Hori Enoka Mareikura and his wife Te Huinga, from Karioi and Ohakune, came to Parewanui. At the time, they were in their thirties and accompanied by young children. While we know for certain that Parewanui provided a meeting place, it may not have been their first encounter with one another. Each of them had attended the hui of other prophets, with several of them going regularly to the *rā* at Parihaka organized by Tohu and Te Whiti. By the time they all met at Parewanui, there were kinship ties that were recalled, renewed, and subsequently reinforced with arranged marriages (*taumau*) in the next generation. These were like-minded people,

readily congregating and worshipping together. Kin ties undoubtedly strengthened religious bonds, while transcendent religion reinforced kinship relations. (Diagrams 3 and 4 in appendix 1 depict the following relationships).

Hori Enoka, who became known as Mareikura, travelled to Parewanui, as did many of his relatives from nearby areas. Born into Te Āti Hau and Tūwharetoa, he received his name because of an especially propitious constellation of the stars on the night of his birth. Mareikura is the word for messengers of Io (the supreme God).⁸ His name, the surname of his descendants, maintains a link to the substance of specifically Māori beliefs and, more significantly, to the role played by intercessors and intermediaries.

Mareikura was a quiet and humble man. Nevertheless, by the time he appeared at Parewanui, he had acquired a reputation as a religious leader. In thirty years of discussion about the man and his character, his children and grandchildren have never deviated in their emphasis on his humility and modesty. He was unassuming about his gifts and willing to extend help to the needy. His teachings and advice, at least in the many stories that have been told to me (see the narrative of Hine Ataarangi), always emphasized the moral high ground; his worldview encompassed neither vengeance nor pettiness. Although he had been brought up in the Church of England, Mareikura became knowledgeable in the liturgies of the major denominations and, more importantly, he was also firmly grounded in the beliefs of his people. He was, in short, both tolerant and ecumenical.

His wife, Te Huinga, had ties to Rānana on the Whanganui River and to Ohakune. Of three sisters, she was the only one to produce issue. She was considerably more forceful than her husband, although in a quiet way his was the will that prevailed. While Mareikura was otherworldly, Te Huinga was more involved in the daily lives of her children and the running of their home marae. She was a Catholic, and when her husband began his fledgling movement, she assured his ability to continue by giving her family land over to his cause. Maungārongo marae (see chapter 3) was built on land that belonged to her family. As the movement grew, Catholicism became a strong but not the only influence. The next generation were raised largely as Catholics.

Weuweu had followed many prophets, attending the ritual occasions at Parihaka and not surprisingly seeking help for an ailing child at the marae at Parewanui. Her tribal affiliations were Ngāti Apa, Rangitāne, and Muaūpoko, while at least one of her three husbands came from Pīpīriki, on the Whanganui River. She shared tribal affiliations, through birth and marriage, with Mere Rikiriki and with the Mareikura family. She bore at least nine children with her three spouses. At the time of Mere Rikiriki's jumping in the river, Weuweu was immersed in her growing family. Yet she was profoundly devout, praying regularly at seven o'clock in the mornings and evenings, urging her children in

similar directions, breaking her domestic routine to attend hui on the marae of prophets. Years later she would emerge as the outspoken, deliberate woman who would stand upright at the side of Te Karere's coffin and demand that Lena's spirit be permitted to speak.

Merehapi, already a matriarch of Whanganui's senior descent line,⁹ came from Kuratahi with a sick ward. That child's recovery and the circumstances surrounding it (described below) have become understood as transformative in the Māramatanga's history. Her immediate descent line was problematic, yielding, despite many births, only two living adults. Through the marriage of her two children, Merehapi was allied to the river and to the Mareikura family. Her son Pēpene Ruka married Mareikura and Te Huinga's daughter Anaera, while her daughter Kataraina married Rūrangi. But the problems of perpetuating the descent line were destined to continue in the next generation (see chapter 4).

As the events at Parewanui unfolded, culminating in the development of Mareikura's own movement, the prophet was surrounded by forthright and bold women: Mere Rikiriki herself, Weuweu, Merehapi, and his wife, Te Huinga. Mere Rikiriki was asked, most probably by an envoy from King Tāwhiao,¹⁰ the source of her light, the origin of her māramatanga. She replied quite readily that her foundations were Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. To seek the Holy Spirit,¹¹ to bring it out of the water and to the Māori people, Mere Rikiriki jumped into the Rangitīkei River forty times.¹² After she came from the river, she said:

Let the source of the revelation
Be from the Rangitikei
The three shoots
Remain there.¹³

She also repeatedly said, "E te iwi, kia ora" (Blessings to the people), the motto inscribed on Tāwhiao's flag for her. For her followers, her proclamation of her foundations together with her diving into the water ushered in a new era.

By jumping into the Rangitīkei River, she emphasized the relationship between the land and the sea, a relationship that became metaphorically transformed into the relationship between the old and the new. Hoana explained this relationship to me thus. Mere Rikiriki had a mission to accomplish; a job whose terms she had to fulfill. It was important for her to jump into the river and thereby bring God to the people. In the process, she ended one era and allowed another to begin. This would be a new life, signified by the saying "kotahi waewae kei roto i te wai, kotahi waewae kei tua i te whenua" (one foot in the water, one foot on the land).¹⁴

Mere Rikiriki's dives into the Rangitīkei River and the subsequent reliance on the New Testament, with her injunction to her followers to heed the words

of the Apostles, could easily suggest that the prophethood was advocating the adoption of Christianity at the expense of older Māori beliefs. It is not so. She held firmly to notions of causality consistent with the Māori, not the Pākehā, worldview; by delving into the past she sought answers and assistance for the present. In this act, Mere Rikiriki provided for a duality in Māori existence.

Mere Rikiriki's action emphasized both separation and linkage of the two domains. If the water represented the old ways, the land represented the new. But their conjunction meant that Māori could never leave the past. As Hoana recounted:

What Mere Rikiriki did was dive in the water 40 times and when she came out she was able to put the other leg on land, which meant, into the New Testament. It is a beginning of the birth of the New Testament in the Maramatanga, in our people, all of our people. I truly believe that the Maramatanga, Mere Rikiriki's, is the first Maramatanga to actually be the Maramatanga that's come out of the New Testament. And that's the reason why you hear talk about one leg, tonu i te wai, that's still in the water; it means the tapu, and the other is tonu i te whenua [still on the land]. It is because she couldn't get, it isn't correct to bring the two legs together and completely do away with your past.¹⁵

Hoana suggested that water was representative of the old ways because it “is a sign of tapu, sacredness, and all the things that we were born into and inherit as a people.” In Hoana's exegesis, Mere Rikiriki's coming out of the water established a clear path, or channel, for the things that were to come. An important and critical component of these events was that they would draw on the power of the old and the new. As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, the Old Testament was no longer sufficient. New powers would now be needed to augment and reinforce the spiritual arsenal of the Māori.

That E Te Iwi, Kia Ora and “kotahi waewae kei roto i te wai, kotahi waewae kei tua i te whenua” are central is not surprising. Though encompassed in a few words, these are not simple stories, for they link narrators and listeners to one another and to a past that is posited as exclusive. Stories about the prophethood, about the transformation from the Old to the New Testament, have been told on the marae of the Māramatanga for over ninety years. As narrators unweave the numerous and condensed strands for their listeners, those who hear the story cease to be passive, becoming instead participants in events which continue to hold profound, and particular, meaning.

The prophethood went on to name people and places, and in this way inscribed her message upon the landscape and within the family lines of those who bore these special names. The power to name became the power to define. She placed new names on four children from west-coast families: Ringapoto (short hand,

but recalling Mere Rikiriki's prophecy regarding Rātana); Whakarongo (listen); Kawai Tika (correct lineage or genealogical ascendancy); and Tikaraina (straight line, as a behavioral imperative). These names stood as a reminder to the group of their position and of their obligations. Their religious ascendancy obligated them to listen, to behave properly, and to act directly. Thus they would be assured guidance and salvation. The names also linked families of the Rangitikei and Whanganui areas. Whakarongo was the niece of Rātana, while Tikaraina was the fourth child of Mareikura and his wife Te Huinga. Tika (who returned home in the 1920s) was raised in a Māori adoption by a couple near Parewanui who were clearly gifted in spiritual ways.¹⁶ Whenever names were given, they were intended to recall Mere Rikiriki's work and its foundations.

The name Tikaraina was originally on a house at Parewanui. When there was an exodus in the 1920s to Rātana Pa, the house was also moved there. The meeting-house at Maungārongo marae in Ohakune is also called Tikaraina. The name Tikaraina thus links Mere Rikiriki, Rātana, Mareikura and all their followers and meeting-houses. As with so many names within the movement, Tikaraina is thick with meaning and dense with power, recalling worlds and possibilities not accessible to non-initiates. It summons forth the man, the stature of his family, the buildings which bear the name, the links to other prophetic movements, the transferred concern of Māori religious innovation from the Old Testament to the New, and the potent days of the prophetess's hui, when the efforts of a gifted leader and her committed assembly could achieve anything.

Mere Rikiriki's Importance to Mareikura

At Parewanui, Mere Rikiriki was active as a faith-healer, and stories of her abilities in this arena have become part of the movement's oral tradition. According to observers, Mere Rikiriki effected cures through prayer, most often to the Christian God. For example, one of Weuweu's daughters suffered from severe tuberculosis, a disease that in the early years of the twentieth century afflicted Māori at alarming rates.¹⁷ Mere Rikiriki ordered the invalid, a child of eleven or twelve, to stand on the marae, to speak in Māori, and to seek help in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ She did as she was directed and the symptoms of tuberculosis subsided. Typically, Mere Rikiriki produced cures for illnesses that had baffled practitioners of Western medicine. Such illnesses had peculiarly Māori causes; the infringement of tapu or ancestral curses working their evil on unsuspecting descendants were often responsible. It is hardly surprising that the etiology eluded Western-trained physicians. When one woman was unable to nurture her male offspring past infancy, she sought help at Parewanui. Familiar with such misfortunes, Mere Rikiriki recognized

the source of her patient's disability. The prophetess prayed over the woman, who later became the mother of a son.

While these cases provide a clear indication of Mere Rikiriki's faith-healing abilities, the following case, critical in the history of the Māramatanga, is perhaps the most dramatic. Merehapi, the matriarch from Kuratahi, brought her sick ward to Parewanui. She was understandably alarmed at the illness of yet another young boy, as her descent line had been plagued by infertility and early death. In the presence of Mere Rikiriki, Merehapi offered up the old gods of the family. In effect, she was hoping to strike a bargain: in return for the life of this sick child, her family would commit itself to the New Testament, to the Scriptures and to the God of the Bible.¹⁹ According to Hoana, Mere Rikiriki went into a trance and began to tāpae, "to place before," "to present." In effect, the old gods, the wairua, and beliefs of Merehapi's family were placed, through the agency of Mere Rikiriki, before the Wairua Tapu.²⁰ As the family offered up each of their gods, the Wairua Tapu suddenly spoke, saying "Not that one. You take him back. You keep him and you take him to look after you. He is your family guardian. He is your keeper." That spirit was Tangi Wairua. Of the old pantheon, only this spirit was retained and has looked after the family for over ninety years. Merehapi's ward survived and died recently, a renowned elder of the Māramatanga.

Tangi Wairua is also known as Tū-nui-ā-rangi. He appears as a partial rainbow.²¹ Hoana described him as a *wairua hiahia*, a "yearning spirit." He is both venerated and trusted. Messages continue to come through him and he has remained an important guidepost through transformations of times and places. He has overseen the world of the members of the movement through four generations.

Bronwyn Elsmore writes that Mere Rikiriki relied on prayers that are "Christian in form, patterning, and content" and that she "taught that rites and practices relating to former beliefs be abandoned" (Elsmore 1989: 374–75). But the oral histories of this time suggest that, at most, the scriptures augmented other sources of revelation, but did not supplant them. This is an important difference: Mere Rikiriki did not advocate the abandonment of the past—in fact, quite the contrary, as the story of Tangi Wairua reveals.²²

The Legacy of Mere Rikiriki

One of the most important of Mere Rikiriki's legacies was the passing of her rā, July 27, to the Mareikura family. Since 1910 the family has met to celebrate this day. Even today, with many significant rā added over the years, this is seen as the senior day for commemoration. The July 27 rā has been held at Kuratahi

since 1926 (chapter 4), when Pēpene Ruka built a house designed for the purpose.

When Mareikura returned from Parewanui to the Waimarino to tell his people about the Māramatanga, they were already committed to Hāhi Ringatū (Te Kooti's church), and therefore not receptive. However, Merehapi, who had so clearly benefited from Mere Rikiriki's talents, welcomed the Māramatanga that Mareikura offered. There is no doubt of Merehapi's influence; she made it possible for Mareikura to carry the Māramatanga to fruition.

Mere Rikiriki also gave her flag, E Te Iwi Kia Ora, to the movement. That flag, a white banner with a red stripe in which the inscription and stars appear in white, flies on the July 27 each year and on many other occasions as well.²³ For over ninety years that flag has been a clear mnemonic device, compressing the illustrious deeds of Mere Rikiriki, the legacy of Māori prophets, the ties that bind the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the links that connect a group of Māori in the North Island to the more cosmic concerns of Christ's Apostles, into a multivocal symbol whose meaning can only be untangled by the initiated. E Te Iwi Kia Ora, semantically dense (see Sissons 1991:287), conveys history that is simultaneously personal, tribal, and cosmic.

Mere Rikiriki also gave Mareikura the seven o'clock bell that rings in the mornings and in the evenings summoning the faithful to prayer.²⁴ "Given" in this sense means "entrusted to," "given to hold and make good use of," and differs from English connotations that suggest permanent possession. It now hangs outside the chapel on the Maungārongo marae.

Mareikura's major task was to tāpae, to make otherwise tapu places safe for future generations. Mere Rikiriki reportedly said to him: "Take the straight line back to the foothills of the mountain, fill up the valleys, level off the hills, make the crooked paths straight, make the rough paths smooth." (Quoted in George 1990:318; I have been told the same thing in Māori.) This is an injunction to make the way safe for future generations, but there is also a clear allusion to Tikaraina or "straight line." Missions and pilgrimages to accomplish these ends, to make the world safe and liveable, have marked the work of the movement since its inception and are described in the following chapters.

The figure of Mere Rikiriki does not loom large in history books. Indeed, she is seen more as an adjunct to her nephew Wīremu Rātana than as a power in her own right. She provides a perfect example of the ways in which written narratives, especially those written by Pākehā, fail to give the Māori perspective or oral histories their proper due. On the other hand, Mere Rikiriki is also an example of how individuals are seen, through stories that accumulate over decades, as pivotal players in history. Their significance often increases in retrospect. This is perhaps what is meant by the distinction, attributed to Walter Benjamin, between information and stories: information is coolly empirical, independent of

the parties to the communication; by contrast, stories require the involvement of both teller and hearer. Stories that are so important that they are retold convey, for the members of the Māramatanga, far more than information. Though historical, even cosmological, they provide a heritage that both frames and justifies contemporary lives.

Discussion

Mere Rikiriki's feats and accomplishments are kept alive through their narration at rā, at tangi, and when the elders want to teach the next generation. Pauro and Hoana were convinced that members of the next generation must be conversant with the events at Parewanui in order to understand fully the work of the Māramatanga. It is said that the stories are "held by" one or two people in each generation; Hoana, who allowed me to record her telling, was such a holder. Nevertheless, there may be twenty or more who presently narrate them, and always with personal twists. Yet, over ninety years of retelling, the stories have become fairly standardized, and there are no contested areas among current narrators.

To know this history means more than to be able to recite stories of activities on the banks of a west coast river. It is to untangle the condensed and multiple meanings that are contained in names, songs, and flags, all of which provide mutually reinforcing information. For example, Tikaraina was a person, an uncle to today's elders, who lived from 1910 to 1975; but his name also appears on meeting-houses at Maungārongo and Rātana marae. Mere Rikiriki's jumping in the river is called up by E Te Iwi Kia Ora; yet this phrase also summons forth both her links to the prophets of the nineteenth century and her commitment to the New Testament. Names, phrases, flags, and songs carry varied connotations easily missed; they are mnemonic devices, that compress the personal, the tribal, and the cosmic; they permit a layering of Māori experience that facilitates its ready transmission to future generations. Any attempt to subject it to "objectification" or "historicization" would be to depoliticize it, to neutralize its potency.

Mere Rikiriki was a transcendent figure. Stories of her link the present narrators and listeners with their forebears, a process very typical of the Māori, with whom genealogy is fundamental to identity. For members of the Māramatanga, Mere Rikiriki serves as the link between them and the nineteenth century. But these stories of the past also reveal a journey in which the social landscape is reinvented, shot through with new meaning and new significance. As the Old Testament yields to the New in Mere Rikiriki's work, new names define individuals and physical locations, not creating barriers or boundaries, but mapping the contours of the present world.

One cannot help being aware of Mere Rikiriki's being a woman. Should there be any doubt, the narratives always include reference to her as a *wāhine pūremu* (loose woman). The gifts of the prophetess of the Rangitikei are re-echoed in the later activities of several women in the movement—Weuweu, Merehapi, Te Huinga, and in later generations, Kataraina, Anaera, and Hoana. Indeed communications between wairua and the living members of the movement have often, if not exclusively, been carried on by women.

The history of the Māramatanga, which begins at Parewanui, details the lives, adventures, and exploits of powerful and heroic women. The narratives of Mere Rikiriki—removed in time and space—legitimate the role of these strong, authoritative women in framing the lives of members. For women especially, they validate their own forays into domains often seen, mistakenly, as exclusively male. But in this the stories of Mere Rikiriki are consonant with other Māori histories in which women take prominent, indeed pivotal, roles, especially in generative narratives. Mere Rikiriki stands as an exemplar of what women know women to be—thinkers, cosmologists, and creators of worlds.

The narratives of Mere Rikiriki are effective also as models of redemption for Māori living with competing traditions. Where prominent Māori leaders such as Maui Pōmare, Peter Buck, and Āpirana Ngata pressed for accommodation to the Pākehā world, Mere Rikiriki's insistence on conjunction, her simultaneous recognition of Tangi Wairua and the Four Apostles, made her place and that of her followers secure. Whatever other crises may have afflicted this group of Māori, there has been no crisis of legitimation. The Māramatanga's claim to a place in the chain of history, represented as whole and continuous, is validated through the people's connections to Mere Rikiriki.