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Tini Whetu Marama Tirikatene-Sullivan (1932–2011)

Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Kahungunu

Politician, fashion icon, wahine toa

Tini Whetu Marama Tirikatene was born at Rātana Pā, south of Whanganui, on 9 January 1932.¹ Her mother, Ruti (Lucy) Matekino Horomona (Solomon), was of Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Pāhauwera of Ngāti Kahungunu, Danish and Jewish descent.² Her father, Eruera Tirikatene, was Ngāi Tahu, a descendant of the rangatira Tūhuru of Westland and of Mōtoitōi of Otago.³ Eruera was one of the political advisers of the prophet Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana, and the first Rātana (independent) MP elected to Parliament.⁴ Before Whetu was born, Rātana prophesied that she would become a political leader and named her 'Whetu Marama' in an evocation of the star and crescent moon of the Rātana symbol.⁵

Whetu was the seventh child of twelve and the eldest surviving daughter.⁶ From an early age she was raised by her maternal grandmother Amiria (Miria) Solomon because her parents travelled frequently on parliamentary business.⁷ Her early education at the Native School at Rātana Pā and her personal interactions with Rātana set the foundations for her deep, lifelong Christian faith.⁸ The family lived in a number of places in the South Island during her childhood, though Whetu always regarded Rātana Pā as her 'real home'.⁹

Her experience of discrimination at school made Whetu determined to succeed in the Pākehā education system, and later to advocate for the teaching of Māori language, history and culture in all New Zealand schools. In Form Five she made headlines for typing at 240 words per minute – close to the world record.¹⁰ These skills proved valuable when she became an MP – she would produce her transcripts to challenge inaccuracies in the official record.¹¹ Outside of school she worked hard, digging potatoes, concreting, doing the laundry and driving tractors.¹²

When the family moved to Wellington in 1949, she joined Victoria University College's fencing club and became one of the top four women fencers in New Zealand.¹³ She also did occasional fashion modelling, designed jewellery and clothes, and won national titles in ballroom and Latin American dancing.¹⁴ While still at high school, she was one of two Ngāi Tahu rangatahi who designed the logo for the Ngaitahu Maori Trust Board of which her father was president.¹⁵ She also worked as an unpaid and unofficial assistant to her father and his parliamentary colleagues, laying the groundwork for her future political career.¹⁶

Tini Whetu Marama Tirikatene-Sullivan, c.1960. Photograph by S.P. Andrew of Wellington. Alexander Turnbull Library, 1/4-020004-F





Whetu and her husband Denis Sullivan, 1974. Design and dressmaking was a lifelong passion for Whetu, whose signature style was unique in the history of New Zealand fashion. She was keenly aware of the political statement she made through her fashion choices, which drew upon her whakapapa and celebrated her love of Māori design. In 1972 Whetu and Denis personally supported the development of Māori fashion design by establishing a boutique in Wellington which sold Māori and Polynesian-inspired garments made by local designers. *Archives New Zealand, AAQT 6419 CR113*

Opposite, left to right: Whetu, her father Eruera Tirikatene and sister Rima, 1959. Whetu was fiercely loyal to her father and did her political apprenticeship at his side. In her maiden speech to Parliament, she described him as her 'inspiration'. *Private Collection*



Whetu was part of the Labour Party shadow cabinet in 1979. Back row (left to right): Fraser Colman, Russell Marshall, Koro Wetere, Joe Walding, Mick Connelly, Whetu, Michael Bassett, Roger Douglas, Frank O'Flynn. Front row: Sir Basil Arthur, Bob Tizard, David Lange, Bill Rowling, Arthur Faulkner. *Dominion Post Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, EP/1979/4422/9-F*

In 1949 she was employed as a stenographer for the Royal New Zealand Air Force in Wellington and was then appointed secretary to the assistant director of the Royal Tour Office. In this capacity, she travelled with the royal entourage as a member of New Zealand's official party when Queen Elizabeth II toured the Dominion in 1953–54.¹⁷ Near the end of the tour she contracted tuberculosis which required a four-year period of convalescence, during which she honed her interest in social work by acting as a spokesperson for other patients.¹⁸

In 1958 Whetu was employed by the Department of Maori Affairs as a Māori welfare officer in Wellington.¹⁹ She also studied part time at Victoria University, where she was the women's vice-president on the executive of the Victoria University Students' Association (1960–61), and inaugural president of the Federation of Maori University Students.²⁰ She commenced her PhD at the Australian National University in Canberra in 1965, but her studies ended abruptly in 1967 when her father died and she was called home to replace him in Parliament.²¹ She convincingly won the by-election for the Southern Maori seat, and at thirty-five was the youngest woman to have been



Whetu, resplendent in a gown designed by Kura Ensor featuring a red, black and white kōwhaiwhai pattern, was at the forefront of the group that met the Māori land marchers at Parliament on 13 October 1975. Legislation to establish the Waitangi Tribunal had just been passed and though Whetu had been instrumental in its development, she was critical of the fact that it was not retrospective so could only deal with grievances arising from Crown actions from 1975 onwards. Front row (left to right): Marshall Asher, Tiria Asher and Whetu. Back row: Jonathan Hunt (holding the wrapped copy of the Memorial of Rights), unidentified, Matiu Rata, Robert Muldoon, Tilly Reedy, Prime Minister Bill Rowling (obscured), Sally Marshall, Harata Solomon. *Courtesy of John Miller*



Whānau portrait, c.1999. Left to right: Denis, Whetu, May-Ana and Tiri. *Courtesy of May-Ana Tirikatene-Sullivan*

elected to New Zealand's Parliament to that time.²² She and fellow doctoral student Denis Sullivan from Sydney were married, and Whetu took the surname Tirikatene-Sullivan.²³

Dressed in beautiful garments featuring Māori motifs, including many of her own design, Whetu was a distinctive presence in Parliament. Her early parliamentary career was spent in Opposition. In 1967 she was one of two Māori among the six women in the House.²⁴ She immediately challenged some of Parliament's patriarchal norms, including the exclusion of women from a visitors' area in the House and from Bellamy's bar.²⁵ When her first child May-Ana was born in 1970, Whetu became the first member to give birth while Parliament was in session.²⁶ She returned to work within weeks and cared for her daughter in her office, an arrangement then considered extraordinary.²⁷ The birth of her son Tirikatene (Tiri) in 1974 is thought to have been the first to a Cabinet minister in the British Commonwealth.²⁸ Whetu contributed to the normalisation of the idea of women combining career and parenthood, paving the way for later parliamentarians and New Zealand women in general.

Whetu was driven first and foremost by a sense of duty to Rātana and to the Treaty.²⁹ She was pan-Māori in her approach and regarded an emphasis on tribal affiliation as divisive.³⁰ Along with the Māori Women's Welfare League and the Rātana movement, she lobbied for the involvement in the political process of Māori who had lost their tribal connections.³¹ When Labour came to power in 1972 she was appointed Minister of Tourism and Associate Minister of Social Welfare, making

her the first Māori woman Cabinet minister.³² Labour was back in Opposition for three terms from 1975, with Whetu the spokesperson on social welfare and family affairs until 1980.³³ She chaired the Labour Party's Māori Policy Committee from 1979 to 1986 but was frustrated by her party's consistent lack of enthusiasm for recognising the rights of tangata whenua under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.³⁴ When the Fourth Labour Government came to power in 1984, Whetu was not offered a Cabinet portfolio; however, she continued to work on causes she believed in.³⁵

Throughout her parliamentary career, her home was her oasis and the only place where she truly relaxed. Even so, dinner-table conversation always focused on social injustice and the Treaty. May-Ana recalls that her mother 'was always working. She never took her foot off the pedal.'³⁶ At home the family's four telephones rang continually, and Whetu had a constant stream of people in her office seeking help with their personal difficulties.³⁷

By the mid-1980s Whetu was sometimes portrayed in the media as moderate in comparison with younger urban activists. She acknowledged that she had not been 'a high-profile person' and that much of her work had been done 'behind the scenes'.³⁸ In 1993 a National government recognised her decades of service by admitting her to the twenty-person Order of New Zealand, the country's highest honour.

Whetu had a difficult and sometimes acrimonious relationship with the leaders of Ngāi Tahu. A new generation of Ngāi Tahu leaders regarded some of the laws sponsored by her father as paternalistic Crown impositions. In 1969, when the Ngaitahu Maori Trust Board petitioned for the repeal of the Ngaitahu Claims Settlement Act 1944, Whetu was steadfast in her opposition. She felt the petition implicitly questioned her father's credibility.³⁹ She also opposed the Trust Board's attempts to create a legal personality for the iwi in the lead-up to the Ngāi Tahu treaty settlement with the Crown in the 1990s, though Ngāi Tahu beneficiaries voted overwhelmingly in favour of the Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu Bill.⁴⁰ Whetu argued that the process of drafting the Bill had been undemocratic and that the tribal leadership lacked a mandate, and continued to press these points in parliamentary debates and select committee hearings. Subsequently the iwi authority Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu came into being. Whetu scrutinised its actions for the rest of her life.⁴¹

In the 1996 general election, after almost thirty years of service over ten successive terms, Whetu narrowly lost her seat, and retired from politics. After a lifetime in Parliament, she was able to devote more time to her family and her health, though she continued to work with former constituents whose families had known hers for generations.⁴²

Whetu died in Wellington on 20 July 2011, aged seventy-nine, after suffering a stroke. Hundreds attended a public memorial service to celebrate her life and achievements at Wellington's Cathedral of St Paul.⁴³ She was survived by her husband, two children and two beloved mokopuna.

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