

Tu Mai Rongoā Māori Symposium Presentation by Pā Rōpata McGowan

29 June 2022

E Tū Rongoā Māori:

We need to remind ourselves of the context in which this conference takes place:

Māori health is in crisis, and the situation continues to deteriorate. The current system is fighting a losing battle. But it is not just Māori health; the whole health system in Aotearoa is under increasing stress, and the country is losing the struggle to find a solution. Covid has contributed to the current situation, but even without Covid, it was very evident that the health needs of the New Zealanders were exceeding the resources available to address them.

So, we ask the question, how can Rongoā Māori, and the Māori understanding of health and healing help address this crisis, not just for Māori, but for the whole of Aotearoa?

But that is only a part of the story; the whole planet is in a state of crisis. Global warming, man-induced climate change, global pollution, shortage of critical resources, etc. threaten the very existence of life on earth. We are facing the biggest threat to earth in the 65 million years since the demise of the dinosaurs, and it is caused not by some natural event such as a meteor strike but by us, human beings.

We are doing our best, maybe, to mitigate the situation, to try and ensure that we can continue to live the lives we know. But we know that we will fail. We live in a “me” world, so dominated by self-interest that we are incapable of making the changes that will give us a chance of a long-term future.

Where do we find a solution, one that gives us hope for the future, especially those who come after us? Past experience makes this very clear: We won't find the solution to our current crisis out of the thinking that has created it. Too many of the powers that dominate the planet are too entrenched in their own self-interest to allow the changes that are desperately needed.

We need a fresh start, based on a different set of priorities. This set of priorities is already there, in the wisdom of the old people. The time has come to recognise that and follow the teachings that have been handed down.

The full title of this paper is: “Rongoā Māori as Māori understand it to be, not as others perceive it to be”.

One of the main reasons why Rongoā Māori has never been accepted by mainstream New Zealand is that the medical profession for the most part presumed they knew what Rongoā Māori, traditional Māori medicine, was, and had decided that it had nothing to offer. It is not “real medicine”, they tell each other, it is “faith healing” and based on primitive superstitions and the like. Very few stopped to ask Māori what it actually was, and not many wanted to. And that only didn’t apply to Rongoā Māori. To me one of the big mysteries is why the New Zealand health sector is so distrustful of herbal medicine, given the fact that it is supported by so much research, so well verified by centuries of well documented use, and accepted and utilised by so many first world countries. Even a very cautious approach could save Pharmac millions of dollars and benefit many of the people it is currently unable to help. Medical herbalism, like Rongoā Māori, hasn’t been adequately and fairly considered because mainstream health has chosen not to.

Our health system is unable to cope with current demand; it hasn’t got the resources and given the growing cost of modern health care under the current model; the situation will only get worse. Now is the time to look of other options. For us in Aotearoa that needs to include Rongoā Māori, as Māori understand it to be.

But we first need to set aside some of those presumptions.

I can use myself as an example. As a young priest in Whanganui in the mid-seventies I very much wanted to learn about Rongoā Māori, as I perceived it to be. I was fired up by my imagining, and endlessly bothered the old people with my questions. They listened kindly and told me bits and pieces, but kept telling me things I really wasn’t interested in. “We don’t have to tell you anything; all you have to do is ask the plants and they will tell you all you need to know”. That didn’t help at all; plants can’t talk. And then: “Why do you keep asking about plants; you already have the main medicine”. “What’s that” I said on many occasions, even though I actually knew the answer. “You have karakia; the foundation of Rongoā Māori is not rākau, trees, and plants, but wairua”.

It took me a long time to start to understand what they were telling me, and I am still on that journey.

Māori understand health from a very different perspective to that of our western industrialised society. As the recent Matariki celebrations have highlighted it is very much based on close

observations of the natural world. The priority is to ensure that we live very much aligned to the rhythms and variations of the world around us. That makes for a healthier lifestyle because it draws from the strength and energy of the mauri that supports life. Mauri is found in the connections that enable life to thrive.

The Europeans that migrated to Aotearoa in the 19th century came from a world that still had vestiges of connection to the natural world. Christmas, like Matariki, was celebrated at the coldest and darkest time of the year when people's spirits were likely to be low. It was a time to remember and to reconnect, and kindle new hope for the year that was just beginning. Easter was held when the world of nature was waking up from the cold sleep of winter and celebrated the burst of new life that comes with spring.

The trouble is when these early settlers came to Aotearoa to begin a new life, they not only brought all the things they needed, their technology, plants and animals, and their personal possessions. They also brought their calendar unchanged from the northern hemisphere. They wanted to feel close to home at the most family centred times of the year, even if they lived on was the other side of the world where it didn't snow at Christmas. In doing this they established a way of life that was fundamentally out of step with the rhythms of the world around them. No wonder we have a mental health crisis!

Māori have a very different view of their place in this world. It was and is vastly different from those who lead the industrial development which transformed the whole world from the 19th century onwards. The great developers of the time had a different outlook that actually differed greatly to that of most people in Europe at the time. Very many still lived in their traditional villages and were as horrified as anybody at the wholesale destruction that the industrial revolution brought, all in the name of progress; but they were powerless to stop it. We need to keep reminding ourselves that the great changes in world history seldom happened because the majority overwhelmed minorities like Māori here in Aotearoa; rather the world has always changed because minorities, sometimes even small minorities, with the power were able to impose their interests and their desires on the masses of people who looked to them for leadership. Is it any different today?

Māori, traditionally, did not regard it as a resource to be utilised for their own purposes. They saw the earth, Papatūānuku, as their mother, the source of life. Nor did they regard themselves as the masters and summit of the universe, with the right to use all that the planet contained, living and

non-living, for their own purposes. Māori saw themselves as part of the world of Tane, not as the tuākana, but as the pōtiki, bound together by whakapapa and intricately interconnected in the web of life. Mauri is found in the connections that enable life to thrive. The role of tāngata is to care for the mauri. The integrity of the mauri and its web of connections has greater priority than the rights and needs of any individual species, let alone an individual person, the “me” people of the 21st century. That means the needs and ambitions of individuals must never take precedence over those of others, not just other people, but all living beings and Papatūānuku herself, especially in a way that the network of life is impaired. That includes the smallest living creatures, the microbes too small to be seen by the naked eye; they are the key to life on earth.

Such a view has profound implications on health and healing, not just community health, but that of each individual. Health is best measured in relation to the whole universe, the whole network of life that binds together each one of us. Modern medicine focuses strongly on symptoms that manifest themselves in each individual that presents as unwell, blood pressure, oxygen levels, sugar levels, etc., and that’s essential, but how can that person be effectively treated without major consideration of the world in which they live. Many of the sicknesses that contribute greatly to Māori health statistics are lifestyle sickness, derived from the environment in which they live.

That has been long recognised, but the focus is confined to the social circumstances in which people live. But how can the people be well when the whenua is unwell? In years past many Māori were able to supplement their diet with what the land and sea could provide. Those days have passed, and most Māori live in cities and can only access such traditional kai as a kīnaki on special occasions, if at all. Māori have been alienated from the whenua through the process of colonisation, and the sea is so affected by human activity, over-harvesting, sedimentation, and pollution that it struggles to provide.

There is much more involved than the loss of the physical resource that the environment once provided; Māori identity comes through their connection the whenua. Mātauranga Māori is not the result of tohunga meeting in a whare wānanga or in a special place philosophising on the deep questions of life. It is the outcome of their inter-relation with the whenua over many years.

Mātauranga Māori is the knowledge of the land

from the people who belong to the land.

It is the result of their interaction with the whenua over many generations.

**It is the knowledge they have accumulated
by living on the land,
working with the land, harvesting from the land,
all the time listening, watching, caring.**

When Māori lose connection to the whenua, they lose their identity. They cannot see themselves apart from the whenua and the myriad of connections that make them who they are. When that happens, they are indeed lost.

I believe that the greatest step forward in Māori Health in post-World War Two Aotearoa, when the great migration away from the traditional kāinga happened, has been the Waitangi Tribunal. The Tribunal will never be able to restore the physical losses that Māori have experienced because of colonisation, but it has done much to restore mana. It has helped take away that shame and powerlessness that has inhibited attempts to sustain identity. But the land remains unwell, and the moana is losing its ability to provide. More and more people struggle to survive, and that is reflected in the health statistics.

So, what is Rongoā Māori as Māori understand it to be?

The foundation for Rongoā Māori is certainly wairua, not rākau.

Not that wai rākau is unimportant. It has much to offer, much more than most people realise. Wai rākau continues to be widely used and continues to provide an immense help to many people, often more successfully than what mainstream is able to provide. And it is not “faith healing” as some want to believe. Certainly, there is a psychosomatic element in availing oneself of the Rongoā used by tūpuna, but science has demonstrated that many Rongoā are safe and effective, regardless of who makes use of it. Today the availability of wai rākau is limited because there are not enough people who have the in-depth knowledge of the ngahere and its plants, as was the case when Rongoā practitioners lived close to the ngahere. That limits many Rongoā practitioners to a restricted range of species, the ones they do know. The other major challenge for healers is accessing rākau Rongoā. Most Rongoā plants grow on the regenerating fringe of the forest, the totarahoe as it is referred to in Whanganui. There they are either eaten by browsing animals or displaced by weeds. In many cases they have disappeared completely.

To restore the use of wai rākau there needs to be a major effort both to reconnect people to the ngahere and its many rākau, teaching them how to identify and harvest the plants they need, as well as a major effort to re-establish Rongoā plants in the places where they should be. That means connecting Rongoā Māori to the major efforts nationwide to reduce the effects of browsing animals, control weeds and replant the forest. Much is happening on that front at the moment; Te Uru Rākau, the One Billion Trees programme, Jobs for Nature and other restoration programmes. Rongoā Māori practitioners need to make it a priority to be involved in such work. Remember that advice at the beginning of this paper: get to know the plants and they will tell you everything you need to know. Helping to heal the ngahere by bringing back the plants it needs can be a pathway for many to find their own healing. Remember the main task of the Rongoā plants is to heal the whenua, not us, at least not in a self-centred way. We always need to remember where we fit in.

Nevertheless, the foundation of Rongoā Māori is Wairua, or “Taha wairua” but again, as understood by Māori.

Māori see the natural world as an interconnected whānau, bound together on many levels, both physically and non-physically, arranged in a hierarchy based on whakapapa (genealogy). They often use the term “taha wairua” to describe this perspective, often translated as the “spiritual dimension”. But that is an inadequate translation. There is a difference between “wairua” and “mauri”, for instance. Perhaps it is safe to say that “taha wairua” relates to the many dimensions that constitute the wholeness of the connections that sustain life. That means much more than physical connections.

Taha wairua is about relationships and connections that are so basic that they are taken for granted. Māori don't take them for granted; they are fundamental to how they see the world. What is the relationship between fish and water? Obviously without water fish would die; if the water was polluted, they would struggle and die. Māori would describe that as saying that the mauri is weakened or fading, or even extinguished – mauri mate.

Mauri exists in the connections that sustain life. Taha wairua is about the many connections and relationships, physical and non-physical, that enable life to thrive.

That applies very much to Rongoā. Healing is much more than helping a person recover from a sickness or injury. A health service is much more than providing the help that is needed for a community to deal with sickness and injury, and somewhere to fade away when lives have run their course. Fundamentally our focus needs to be about restoring the connections that are needed, not

just for the individual, or the community in which they live, but for the environment in which they live. You can't have a healthy community when the land where people live is so severely modified that the children never get to play in a park and feel the grass and the soil, or the rivers unsafe for them to swim in, or where they never hear birds sing and tell them of the changing seasons. Because all these things are needed for us to be truly and wholly well. Too often our children are growing up in a world in which they find their connections from the electronic devices that dominate their lives, and the foods from the many fast-food options which provide them with the calories they need, too many calories, yet deprive them of the range of nutrients they need to own a healthy body and the chance of a long and fruitful life. We are born of the earth and need to be connected to the earth to find who we are and where we belong, for us and the whole whānau of life that we belong to, to thrive. Ka ora te whenua, ka ora te tāngata.

This like sound like a lot of dreams, but you know, our health system is struggling with no hope in sight. It is going to get worse. We know that. We won't find the answers to our current crisis in the thinking that caused it. We need a fresh start, a new beginning. That can be found in the mātauranga of those who have been here longest. Rongoā Māori, as understood by Māori, is part of that heritage. Let's focus not on sickness but on wellness. Let's not think about your health or my health but our health, meaning the whole family of life, not just us humans. Let's care for our tuākana, that they can care for us. Let's, most of all, care for Papatūānuku. When she is well, we are well. We may have made a big start with the celebration of Matariki. We have started the beginning of a new year. We have started the new year in step with what is happening around us.

Ka ora te tangata, ka ora te tāngata.