
Pupuri Pohewa: Collective Memory

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Abstract

Pupuri Pohewa was used as the Māori name for the *Contained Memory Conference* held at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, in December 2010. Because this international conference was hosted in Aotearoa New Zealand, the title would provide a cultural perspective on memory based on the traditions of the indigenous people of this country. In the spirit of New Zealand's aspiration to recognise its indigenous culture as an expression of its interface with the world, the use of Māori concepts was a key component of the conference. A translation of the term "pupuri pohewa" means to hold on to the ability to imagine, to create, and to dream through the medium of collective memory. This article introduces the notion that deep-rooted cultural concepts affect the way memory is understood and explained. Such concepts refer to past generations as a means of genealogical belonging and connectedness. The cultural imperative in such a view is echoed in the well-known Māori proverb, "taonga tuku iho" (gifts handed down). An expanded meaning of this proverb expresses the idea about holding onto the knowledge handed down to us by our ancestors and passing it on to the generations to come. Māori recognise the implication as being a matter of survival. Hence the essence of "taonga tuku iho" is a central part of the creative practice of many of today's Māori artists. In this article I will talk about my own artistic practice as one that responds to taonga, the drawings left on rock surfaces by my ancestors, the Waitaha people. I will discuss how, as Ngāi Tahu, my artistic practice relates to these taonga and draws on an inherent cultural context, which provides a genealogical link to ancient drawings and (as such) a connection also to the knowledge surrounding them.¹³ Specifically, I will introduce the notion that through the recognition of this connectedness comes a certain responsibility. For the artist tied into this continuum, the obligations are to retain and treasure the ability to imagine, to create, and to dream.

Keywords: Aotearoa, collective memory, Māori, connectedness, ancestors, generations, taonga

Figure 1. This reef off the Otago coast (South Island, New Zealand) is the remains of Araiteuru, ancestral waka of Ngāi Tahu.



Ka tangi te tītī

Ka tangi te kākā

Ka tangi hoki ahau

Tihei Mauri Ora!

Ko Araiteuru te waka

Ko Aoraki te maunga

Ko Waitaki te awa

Ko Ngāi Tahu te iwi

Ko Ngāti Māmoe, Waitaha te hapū

Ko Motoitoi te tipuna

Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou

Kia ora mai tātou

Nō reira

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou,

tēnā koutou katoa

The muttonbird cried

The parrot cries

And I cry too

Behold there is life!

Araiteuru is the canoe (Figure 1)²¹

Aoraki is the mountain (Figure 2)³²

Waitaki is the river

Ngāi Tahu is my tribe⁴³

Ngāti Māmoe and Waitaha are the ancient tribes⁵⁴

Motoitoi is my ancestor

Warm greeting to you all

Greetings to us all

Therefore

Greetings to you all

The mihi above is my greeting and introduces me in te reo (Māori language). The mihi is at the heart of a Māori world-view and, as such, is central to this article. In the mihi I have explained who I am, who I descend from, where I come from, my river, my mountain, and how I am connected to the world. This is, therefore, the inherent cultural context from which my creative practice originates.

Fundamental for Māori are the threads that tie the world and the individual

together as a whole. It is through a process of personifying the land and its features that Māori perceive the world and connect themselves genealogically to it. For example, Ngāi Tahu (the principal Māori tribe of the South Island of New Zealand) explain the unique boulder formations at Moeraki as the cargo of their ancestral canoe. (Figure 3) The mihi is an overt expression of this containing two intertwined threads, the two essential relationships: tīpuna (ancestral connections) and iwi (tribal connections). These closely linked ancestral and tribal connections are collective and Māori refer to them as whakapapa. It is through such affiliations that the notion of pupuri pohewa (collective memory) has such resonance and application.

Figure 2. Aoraki is one the principal ancestors of Ngāi Tahu connecting land and people.



Figure 3. Ngāi Tahu whakapapa explain these Moeraki Boulders (large spherical rock forms, which are a unique geological phenomenon near Moeraki on the Otago coast) as the cargo of the Araiteuru.



Essential to the collective is knowledge about the collective, and this includes the protocols associated with its retention. To begin to recite whakapapa in your mihi is to begin to build your knowledge and your ability to undertake customary iwi practices. One begins to understand one's place within the whole. The ritual of mihi is a cultural device, which assists the retention of knowledge; in essence it is an aid to memory. Equally, both visual and material objects also assist in the retention and expression of knowledge. For example, Māori art forms are devices used for this purpose and I will return to this point presently.

One of the key ways that Māori culture recognises the importance of knowledge (and knowledge systems) is by assigning high value to such things, and this is observed through the notion of taonga. It is through this concept that knowledge is manifest and, as such, it is central to my own creative practice.

Dictionary definitions of taonga seem inadequate. Yes, taonga is a treasure and something prized. However, in the context of whakapapa, it is much more. My understanding of it has slowly evolved over the years and is still expanding. Let me explain how I think about taonga in relation to my work.

I first visited the Takiroa rock shelter (Figure 4), which contains ancient Waitaha drawings, when I was seven years old. Even though I had no idea that a term like taonga existed, I did, however, recognise that there was something particular about this site and its drawings. Recognition that the drawings were very special probably had something to do with how very old we perceived the drawings to be. As children, I remember my dad telling my brother and I that, “These were the drawings that the old Māori made.” Yet at such a young age we sensed their importance. For someone, a very long time ago, to make these mystical drawings out in the open, on a rock wall, seemed somehow very important and this was enhanced by the fantastic imagery depicted in them

Figure 4. Takiroa rock art shelter (an inland locality in the central region of the South Island of the New Zealand known for its Māori rock art) and ancient taonga.



There were things in these drawings that echoed with our own young imaginings. There were all sorts of people and creatures doing all sorts of things. These drawings were awesome. While coincidental, it is significant that right from preschool age my brother and I had a really deep passion and excitement for drawing. As children we were always drawing, and looking back now I recognise just how liberating it was to us. We could create anything we liked; we imagined and created the world we lived in through drawing.

It is not unexpected, therefore, that we developed a kind of empathy through a perceived sharing of creative imaginings and delight in drawing. We sat for hours in the shelters and copied the imagery in the drawings. We began to feel closely connected to them, and I think this was how I recognised their importance and special meaning. I thought of them as perhaps the greatest treasures in the universe.

I certainly appreciate that this is where much of my continued desire and aspiration to understand them stems from. They hold vast knowledge and information about the world of our tipuna. While most of this knowledge is clouded away in a haze of history, it continues to inspire. These rock shelters, together with the ancient drawings, are taonga. These drawings are the containers of the creative imaginings of our ancestors, although much of their original meaning has been lost over time.

Iwi traditions include taonga as part of an ongoing cultural process reaffirming collective continuity; the drawings maintain their value for generation after generation.

Taonga tuku iho translates as the gifts handed down to us by our ancestors. Ngāi Tahu Cultural Advisor, Moana Tipa, talks about taonga tuku iho as something underpinned by wairua or spirituality; something experienced and felt.

Let us return to the idea of art forms functioning as cultural memory devices where memory is about connecting with the ancestors. When visiting rock art sites and examining the ancient rock drawings I have come to experience and feel the wairua (the spirit or presence of the ancestors) in them. The desire to seek after the knowledge and connect with the ancestors is both inspirational and obligatory. I think somewhere in this apparent duality is the wairua that Moana Tipa speaks about.⁶⁵

As a Ngāi Tahu artist the challenge for me is to find ways to recognise the mātauranga (knowledge) inherent in the drawings. Further, the challenge is to continue to recreate new imaginings and interpretations about the mātauranga given to us by our tipuna, while retaining the integrity of the taonga it comes from, and ensuring they continue their position as markers of collective definition.

Inspiration comes from the drawings of the tipuna. My obligation is in recognising that they are my tipuna, and that they are the physical manifestation of the collective identity of which I am a part.

Despite being inspired by the rock drawings from a very early age, it has been relatively recently that the associated obligations have become fully apparent. For instance, taking on the responsibility for looking after the knowledge and

mātauranga linked with them is today a primary consideration for me. While this involves particular sensitivities and understanding about preserving the art form, it is also incumbent on the artist to develop new interpretations. The manu, tiki, and kuri are such innovations (Figure 5). The responsibility of interpretation is a major consideration associated with the inspiration and obligations of the process of creating new art works. The following provides an insight into this process with reference to examples of my creative work.

Figure 5. Manu (bird), tiki (human like), and kuri (dog) motifs inspired by ancient rock art imagery.



One of the themes in my 2008 *Manu Atua* solo exhibition (Figure 6) at the Kura Gallery in Wellington, New Zealand, was an investigation into the body blank area of rock drawing design. An example is the central negative space found in tiki or human figures. The first part of the responsibility of interpretation is recognising the visual occurrence of the body blank and its possible cultural implications. Speculation about the meaning of this space covers a range of possibilities, including the Ngāi Tahu explanation about it being a residing place for spirits.

Figure 6. Three works from the *Manu Atua* exhibition.



This explanation describes the pervasive spiritual nature of all things in the Māori world; both the physical and mental are imbued with the wairua (spiritual essence) of the atua or gods. In addition, this space can be compared to similar visual spaces found in other Māori art forms. For example, negative space in kōwhaiwhai (rafter painting) is explained as a space occupied by manawa or genealogical bloodlines.

Most negative spaces are devoid of any imagery. However, breaking from convention, there are a few examples where spaces do contain some imagery. As a Ngāi Tahu artist I am inspired by these variances and excited by their occurrences. The second responsibility is in recognising that such irregularities provide inherent lessons about exploration, risk-taking, and discovery, together with applying them

in our own time and place. Representing the body blank symbolically into a wātea (an open and available space) has been an area of development. By doing this a place has been created for the wairua of the memory of people special to us to reside. A space has been created in the *Manu Atua* works for my late brother (Figure 7), with whom I shared many childhood experiences drawing in the rock shelters.

Figure 7. Manu Atua exhibition detail.

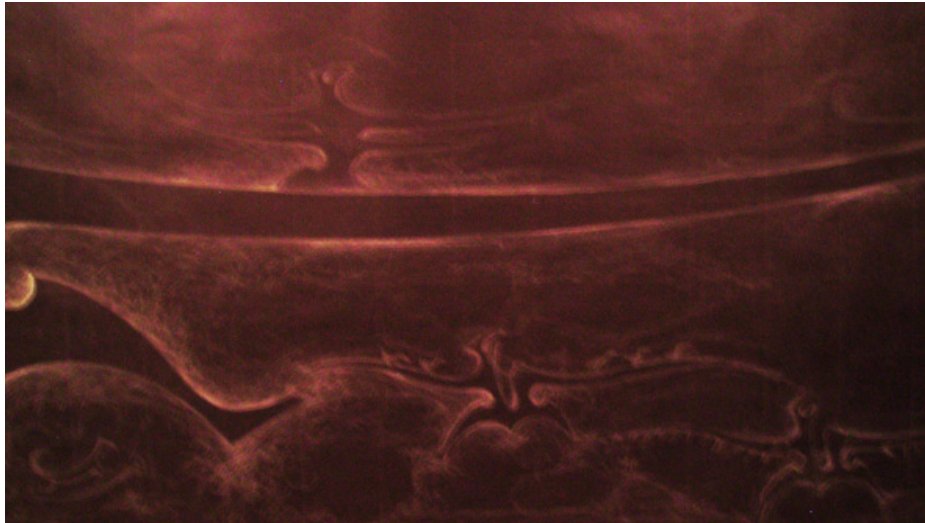


Paemanu featured in the innovation segment of the *Mō Tātou, Ngāi Tahu Whānui* exhibition at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in 2009.⁷⁶ In a similar way, the responsibility of interpretation in this work recognises that a particularly rare image can be used as a starting point for creative imagining. While the birdman image is relatively common in Māori rock drawing, the depiction of a bird figure with, what Ngāi Tahu refer to as babies perched on its outstretched wings is unique. My investigation of the possible cultural meaning has uncovered some fascinating interpretations for me. A literal description suggests something about a place for birds to perch. The translation for a bird perch is *paemanu*, meaning literally a perch for a bird. While this might normally be a satisfactory explanation, the term *paemanu* also has other meanings such as the collarbone or clavicle (Waitaha narratives talk about the collarbone and the perch as transposable). Yet another meaning of *paemanu* is the thwart in a canoe. As a Ngāi Tahu artist, the responsibilities are to sift through this terminology for a range of possible ideas and to interpret them as creative works celebrating social organisation in Ngāi Tahu society.

Simultaneously, while examining such a unique image, there is another quite different responsibility to consider involving the inherited genealogical responsibilities of *iwi* expectations, and an understanding of one's place in the world, according to *whakapapa*.

The paemanu interpretation (Figure 8) is therefore a creative, imagined result that combines all three meanings together. Iwi imperatives are reaffirmed by emphasising imagery that depicts position and place within the larger group. The work celebrates cultural objects and images that define and describe the importance of the individual as part of the collective. The designated position of each and every warrior in a war canoe is testament to this.

Figure 8. Paemanu, drawing detail.



Recently, I was invited to work with Ngāi Tahu Holdings Group, Ngāi Tahu Properties, and Ngāi Tahu whānui on two significant iwi projects, including the installation of culturally specific art works as part of civic building developments.⁸⁷ These projects highlight the role of the artist as kaitiaki (guardian) of Ngāi Tahu visual culture. Primarily the role is one centred on iwi aspirations, expectations, and requirements. For example, the *Pouwhenua* project seeks to physically portray Ngāi Tahu as mana whenua (people and guardians of the land).⁹⁸ I was invited because my whakapapa links to the region are regarded as very important by Ngāi Tahu iwi.

The works developed for the Queenstown Post Office Precinct project were created to affirm whakapapa links to the area as a means of asserting iwi identity. This tribal aspiration guided the creative process. The theme for this project was to celebrate the extraordinary accomplishments of local tipuna, Hakitekura. Her selection was based on her interconnectedness with the land; many prominent landmarks in the Queenstown and Lake Wakatipu area bear Hakitekura's name and reference her exploits.

The *Kauati Globes* (Figure 9) comprised one of the works that make up the Queenstown project. They contain sculpted faceplates mounted on seven bowl-shaped bases. The bases have a dual meaning as a metaphor for both Lake Wakatipu as a container of the water that challenged the women of the area, including Hakitekura, and the bundle of firewood that she carried on her epic swim across the lake. The radiating nature of the faceplate is a reference to the

lighting of Hakitekura’s fire as a result of her significant achievement. They also make reference to her adventures, including the rhythms of her swimming motion across the lake and Ka-Kamu-a-hakitekura, the glinting of the sun on the nearby mountains (Cecil and Walter peaks).

Figure 9. Kauati Globes.



The second *Pouwhenua* project included another of my artworks, the *Tuhituhi Whenua* mural (Figure 10), and was completed in August 2010. The title refers to the mural as a symbol of Ngāi Tahu’s visual identity drawn into the land in the manner of the ancient rock drawings. Again, working with Ngāi Tahu whānui, the mural was created for “Te Hononga”, the new civic buildings in Christchurch, and is a joint venture between Ngāi Tahu and the Christchurch City Council. Ngāi Tahu elders requested that the mural incorporate the iwi’s cultural traditions, as well as reflect the partnership established through the joint venture. The elders requested that the mural be inspired by the words of Ngāi Tahu tipuna, Mātiaha Tiramorehu, in his petition to Queen Victoria in 1857. His words conveyed Ngāi Tahu’s understanding about their relationship with the Crown in such a manner that the spirit of his sentiments still resonates today as Ngāi Tahu continue to forge partnerships with national and local authorities.

Figure 10. Tuhituhi Whenua.



Tiramorehu’s words convey the collective aspirations of Ngāi Tahu iwi. My responsibility as an iwi artist is, therefore, to embrace and express these aspirations while developing a creative interpretation. The key components of my role are about upholding the fundamental values underpinning collective thinking, primarily tapu and mana (respect and trust).¹⁰⁹ As much as the words of Mātiaha Tiramorehu are valued for their particular poignancy, the deeper knowledge is contained in the mātauranga (wisdom) associated with them. While commitment to the memory of these words reflects collective values, they also express innovative thinking. They capture the collective consciousness of today’s iwi because, while founded in tradition, they continue to express aspirations about the future.

The artistic approach in the mural was to incorporate specified imagery, such as sailing ships and the Tiramorehu text, together with an array of imagery representative of the visual and material culture of both Ngāi Tahu occupation and European settlement in the Christchurch area. Visual coherence was achieved through reference to and innovative interpretations of the ancient imagery of the Waitaha and Ngāti Mamoe. Tiramorehu’s words are taonga that have been handed down, and they contain a wealth of knowledge and mātauranga, least of which is to do with appreciating the ability to imagine and to dream. Pupuri pohewa: hold on to the ability to imagine, to create, and to dream through the continuum of collective memory.

Nō reira

Kia ora mai ano

Tēnā koutou katoa

And so

Once again greetings

Greetings to you all

Endnotes

¹Araiteuru: a Ngāi Tahu ancestral canoe.

²Aoraki: the highest mountain peak in New Zealand, also known as Mount Cook.

³Ngāi Tahu: the principal Māori tribe of the South Island of New Zealand.

⁴Ngāti Mamoe and Waitaha: early Māori inhabitants of the South Island of New Zealand.

⁵Moana Tipa, “Akona ki ngā Rerekereke: Learning From the Knee,” in *Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu Presents Akona ki Ngā Rerekereke: Learning From the Knee* (Christchurch: Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu Publisher, 2006).

⁶Mō Tātou, Ngāi Tahu Whānui’: the name of an exhibition featuring Ngāi Tahu culture past, present, and future.

⁷Ngāi Tahu whānui: a term referring to the broad or extensive nature of Ngāi Tahu iwi as a large interconnected family.

⁸Pouwhenua: an identity marker.

⁹Tapu: sacred, restricted, prohibited.

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Biographical note

Ross Hemera (Ngāi Tahu) is Associate Professor, School of Visual and Material Culture College of Creative Arts at Massey University. His creative interests include Māori visual expression, Māori material and visual cultural and Māori art and design practice. In recent times Ross's creative works have drawn their inspiration from ancient rock drawings, found in limestone caves and outcrops, created by his ancestors, the nomadic Waitaha people of the South Island of New Zealand. His work examines the inseparable relationship between the land and culture, recalling the words of an old Waitaha saying: "In the silence of the rocks the spirit of the old inhabitants is still alive." Ross has built an art practice that honours and reflects the cultural and artistic traditions of his iwi, whilst incorporating contemporary forms and materials. In this respect, his tribe has sought Ross's contribution and leadership regarding the development of Ngāi Tahu arts.

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