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**From Reverence to Irrelevance (and back again?):**

*Women and Sexual Minorities in Māori culture, pre- and post-colonisation*

Chris Miller #11258212

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## Introduction

In the 2001 census, 98% of Māori who claimed a religion identified as Christian, with the vast majority of those being Anglican or Catholic (Statistics New Zealand, 2002).

Perhaps because of this, there is a perception of Māori culture as socially conservative on many issues such as the role of women and the rights of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Māori politicians such as Tariana Turia<sup>1</sup>, John Tamihere, Georgina te Heuheu and Pita Paraone have a history of voting against equal rights legislation, as recorded in the Parliamentary Conscience Votes Database. However, there is mounting evidence that this social conservatism is a modern creation brought about by the effects of colonisation and coerced religious conversion. In this essay I seek to explore that evidence, looking to mythological, artistic, linguistic and historical sources to examine the roles of women and sexual minorities in pre-colonial Māori society, discussing the methods used by British settlers to distort this societal egalitarianism, and finally taking a brief look at modern revivals of concepts such as mana wahine and takatāpui.

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<sup>1</sup> Tariana Turia has since revised her stance and announced that she plans to vote in favour of marriage equality, which her co-leader Pita Sharples also supports.

**Mate i te tamaiti he aurukōwhao; mate i te wahine he takerehāia.**  
*The death of a child can be overcome; the death of a woman is a calamity.*

There is a good deal of debate about the role and status of women in pre-colonial times. Reed (2002) states unequivocally that "the male line of descent was always regarded as more important than the female line"; this was on the basis that "the male sex was... said to be of divine origin and the female sex, human." However others assert that both male and female lineage were important (Johnston, 2005), that women were considered highly tapu (Murphy, 2011) and that they were responsible for "defining and re-defining Māori culture through the fostering of Māoritanga" (Dominy, 1990, cited in Bingel et al, 2011). Many Māori feminists have written on gender roles and their significance, particularly since the Māori culture movements beginning in the 1970s. One common topic of discussion is the matter of tikanga on the marae, where women perform the karanga to welcome guests whereas men give the whaikorero. Some, such as Mira Szaszy and Kathie Irwin, maintain that this constitutes unacceptable sexism as tikanga has evolved to accommodate further privileges for Pākehā men without equivalent changes for Māori women. These critics point to the fact that speakers will often address their audience in both Te Reo Māori and Pākehā, or even only in the latter, and make the observation that it would be highly unusual to see a Māori man stand up to tell a Pākehā that he did not have the right to speak, whereas this has been done to Māori women (Johnston, 2005). Johnston (ibid) also notes that, while she responds specifically to Māori critics, most criticism of this nature is done by Pākehā women or even Pākehā men: "The Governor-General's comments<sup>2</sup> followed calls by Pākehā male politicians arguing that women should play a greater role in Māori customary proceedings."<sup>3</sup> Murphy (2011) echoes these comments, going so far as to mention two

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2 This refers to a speech made by Dame Sylvia Cartwright on Waitangi Day 2005 calling for more cultural inclusiveness and mentioning specifically cultural practices that discriminated on the basis of gender.

3 (One might wonder whether these same Pākehā men felt that women should play a greater role in Western

by name in her recounting of the controversy surrounding a Te Papa exhibit that women who were menstruating or pregnant were requested to avoid. Others, however, posit that the roles are equally as important as each other. In fact, it has been pointed out that without the kaikaranga, a hui cannot even begin, and that the women also have the ability to undermine or refute messages in a whaikorero that they disapproved of through their choice of waiata to follow the speeches – the former point can be seen in Witi Ihimaera's *Whale Rider*, in which one scene sees the women leaving a group of boys and men waiting at the entrance to the marae to show their displeasure. However McBreen also points out that this role has been undermined, with the karanga and waiata seemingly relegated to the role of optional luxuries (2011), and the waiata occasionally being performed by the kaikōrero himself. Again, this can be seen in media, this time in an episode of *The Almighty Johnsons*, "The House of Jerome", in which the visiting Norse gods perform the team song of a rugby club rather than allowing the (more knowledgeable) goddesses behind them to sing. Many scholars have written about the link between cultural values and language and some aspects of Te Reo may be worth noting in this context, such as the greater degree of gender neutrality in pronouns (including possessives, such as tana/tona) and the multiple meanings of words such as whenua (land, regarded as a vital taonga, as well as the afterbirth), whānau (family and to give birth) and hāpu (the extended family and the state of being pregnant) (Opai, 2010; Mikaere, 1994; Murphy, 2011). It's easy to see a pattern wherein women's bodies are inextricably linked to those things essential to the survival of ngā tāngata Māori; this attitude can also be seen in some of the various terms for menstrual blood that Murphy names in her thesis - "kua tae mai a māui" is a phrase she cites from Te Urewera, meaning "Māui has come" but referring to a woman's

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proceedings; at the time of the Governor-General's aforementioned comments only 28% of MPs were women, this number increasing slightly to 32% after the election later that year.)

menses as well as the vaunted demigod of Māori mythology; another name she mentions is "te awa atua", the divine river (Murphy, 2011). Murphy also explains the restrictions on the tasks a woman can perform during her menses as a break from the usual hard work of daily life and a chance to relax; her interviews with kuia reveal that at this time men would often bring women special foods to eat and that these few days were a welcome holiday and a time for learning and reflection rather than a source of shame.

## Tiki and Tūtānekai

It may perhaps be more difficult to ascertain exactly what the status of sexual minorities in Māori society. While the existence of women is obvious, sexuality can be much more fluid; the idea of homosexuality as a static identity is relatively recent with even the word only appearing in the late 19th century (Misa, 2004). However there is evidence to be found, if one looks, that same-sex sexual behaviour did take place in pre-colonial times. In my research I came across several mentions of artwork depicting these relationships in various museums and galleries through Europe and elsewhere which seem to stem partly from Aspin's 2005 paper which also describes a carving in which two men are joined at the penis, forming the handles of a waka huia. He elsewhere mentions “embracing figures” (a specific genre of carved figurines, the nature of which is fairly self-evident) which include carvings featuring two men (Aspins & Hutchings, 2007). Outside of the realm of physical art, there are incidental primary sources, letters and journal entries from European explorers, missionaries and settlers which allude to same-sex encounters; as one example Richard Davis wrote in 1836, “I took the opportunity of asking them [the Natives] whether the crime alluded to [homosexuality] was previously known among them: they acknowledged it was.” When examining Māori linguistic and oratory evidence, it becomes even more stark: it's widely accepted that the word takatāpui referred to an intimate companion of the same sex, as in “hoa takatāpui”, a phrase which is used in many versions of the story of Tūtānekai<sup>4</sup> when talking of Tiki. Those versions which are printed in books generally refer to Tiki as a slave or a servant, and often neglect to even name him, but a 1854 book, *Ngā Mahi o Ngā Tūpuna Māori*, used hoa takatāpui and speaks of Tiki's great loneliness after Tūtānekai and Hinemoa were married. This telling is also known by many Māori today

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4 This is one of the many Māori stories featuring strong, dynamic women. Hinemoa is the beautiful daughter of a cheftain who loves Tūtānekai so much that when her tribespeople hide all the canoes she instead swims across Lake Rotorua during the night to his home on Mokaia Island to be with him.

who have heard the story passed down through their whānau (Te Awekotuku, 2003; Hutchings & Aspin, 2007). The fact that these relationships appear in both the reo and the artwork indicates that they were not just tolerated, but accepted as just as valid as heterosexual relationships at the very least. Beyond that, it is hard to say, and it is possible that a lot of the evidence was lost over the course of the nineteenth century.

**He wahine, he whenua – e ngaro ai te tangata.**  
*For women and land, men perish<sup>5</sup>.*

The process of colonisation is one in which not only the victims' lands are targeted, but their very identities as a culture distinct from that of the coloniser. Capitalist expansion requires the subjugation of those who would stand in its way to ensure their compliance in order to access the resources under their control. At the time of the British discovery of New Zealand the industrial revolution was well under way and European politics were tense; after Napoleon issued The Berlin Decree in 1806, banning trade between France and Britain (and their respective allies), corn prices rose sharply (University of Cambridge, 2012). While the Decree ended when Napoleon died in 1814, an alternate source of raw foods would have been a boon to Britain – by the end of that century, it was importing ten times as much food as it was exporting (ibid). New Zealand was not just valuable for its land, though, for the knowledge of the Māori people themselves was desirable to fully utilise the resources. In particular, their skills at working with flax, a necessary material for the shipping industry, were much praised, as was their ability as sailors (King, 2003). A genocide or violent colonisation in New Zealand was not ideal, owing both to this and to the lengthy period of time in which relationships were able to build between Māori and Europeans – Cook first arrived in the north of the country in 1769. In the place of violence, education was a key tool in the subjugation of Māori. This was chiefly carried out by Christian missionaries who took it upon themselves to impose what they considered to be a more civilised set of moral codes, including the separation of the sexes and the quashing of "perverse" sexual activity such as relationships between partners of the same gender. At the same time, ethnographers studied only Māori men when writing treatises on their culture (Opai, 2010); Murphy (2011) quotes

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5 This has been alternately translated as “for women and land”, “through women and land” or “by women and land”, and can be understood both as reflecting the importance of women in the survival of the culture and people or relegating women to property, “objects of beauty, bearers of chiefs” (Morgan, 1996, p.480).

one of her sources as saying that she knew of only two of these ethnographers who even spoke to Māori women! This acted as a form of censorship, making women's important roles in daily life invisible and simultaneously artificially inflating the importance of men. More active censorship also took place, such as the editing of Erenora Taratoa's piece *Poia atu taku poi* where the word "tara" (vulva) was replaced with "mea" (thing) (Murphy, 2011); when combined with missionary education where discussion of certain topics was discouraged or disallowed, this had the effect of erasing whole areas of language around women's bodies (Smith, 2010, cited in Murphy, 2011). When women's genitals and associated things were discussed in Pākehā literature they went hand-in-hand with strongly biased language, labeling them as unclean and contaminated, such as in Goldie (1904) and Best (1924), particularly during the menses which British writers regarded as a time of pollution (Goldie, 1904). Words suited actions; there is reference in some histories to the commercial exchange of Māori women, such as Te Atahoe, then known as Mary Bruce. She had been a princess of Ngā Puhi who was married to escaped convict George Bruce, and later sailed with him on a gold-finding expedition. While on the trip they were separated and the ship left with George still on land, whereupon Te Atahoe was bartered to another captain as a servant for his wife and their child (O'Brien, 2006)<sup>6</sup>. While men too fell victim to this behaviour (King, 2003), colonisation was nonetheless particularly devastating for women. During the 1890s the difference in life expectancy between Pākehā and Māori women was a staggering thirty nine years (Pool & Cheung, 2003). Assimilation policies, reaching right through the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment of the Labour government's welfare state, also left women worse off – girls' schools tended to teach

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6 Her story, interestingly, may also be illustrative of Māori attitudes towards ill-treatment of spouses, as after she died of illness after giving birth to George's daughter, Governor Macquarie of New South Wales reported that George was much dis-liked in Kororareka for his neglect of her during her last weeks and his subsequent abandonment of their daughter at an orphanage.

mainly domestic skills and the ethos of European marriage, as well as the dependence on their husbands that came with it. Women frequently became isolated as they had to work both within the home and, if economy demanded it, outside as well. The Native Land Act 1909 reached far beyond what might be implied by the name, regulating both Māori marriage and childcare whāngai arrangements (Mikaere, 1994). The latter were considered particularly dangerous when they involved Māori women caring for Pākehā children, so much so that further legislation was enacted in order to remove these children and place them in industrial schools (ibid).<sup>7</sup> Later, when Labour reformed the welfare sector and ostensibly opened it up to Māori as well, state housing and domestic payments were targeted to an idealised nuclear family unit of a wife and mother managing the home while the husband worked (Cheyne, O'Brien & Belgrave, 2008), meaning that to access poverty relief the communal structure of Māori whānau and hāpu had to be compromised.

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<sup>7</sup> This restriction remained in place until 1955 (Mikaere, 1994).

### **Mana Wāhine and Takatāpui: A conclusion**

Today, steps are being taken to reverse the patterns of the past and restore the dignity and mana of wāhine and takatāpui. Mainstream feminism and LGBT movements can be exclusionary, both having been criticised for their focus on white, often middle class, individuals (Awatere, 1982; Teunis, 2007; Ward, 2008), which has led to the formation of theoretical perspectives which pay specific attention to the intersection of Māori identity and gender or sexuality. There has been a resurgence of historical research with the goal of more fully understanding the realities of Māori life pre-colonisation, with names such as Ngāhuia Te Awetokutu, Clive Aspin and Annie Mikaere becoming more well-known as they release more work exploring these issues. As well as academic research there are countless more informal pieces of writing to be found such as blogs, many of which offer thoughtful analysis and anecdotal information despite not being up to academic standards; indeed, it could be argued that within a subject such as this, relying strictly on published sources can be somewhat detrimental, as much knowledge of Māori culture is still passed down orally – as evidenced by the number of “personal communication” sources in Ngāhuia Murphy's thesis (Murphy, 2011). While change comes slowly and there is a long way to go, no doubt work will continue on rediscovering the past, not only in academic writing, but in online discussion, face-to-face conversation, and activism both within Māori circles and outside of them. Further to this is the very existence of people and their changing lives, such as the number of young Māori mothers who are determining how their children will be raised – not being dictated by the shape of social policies, but demanding that those policies be changed to accommodate their priorities. Thus we see the growing popularity of Te Kohanga Reo, Māori language pre-schools in urban environments (Awatere, 1984) where children who may have no other contact with their whakapapa can connect with their

culture from a young age. And we see, increasingly, young Māori LGBT people identifying as takatāpui, an identity that inherently emphasises the intersection between their culture and their sexuality and the importance of both (Hutchings & Aspin, 2007).

The process of colonisation bring massive upheaval to lives that have changed only incrementally for many generations – in some cases thousands upon thousands of generations. Often this change leaves indigenous populations far worse off, with shortened life expectancies, poor quality of life, dependence on drugs or alcohol and spiralling family violence. We are able to track the effects of these changes on Māori, particularly on women and sexual minorities, to see how contact with Europeans has changed their status – and how they are starting to change it back. Though history can be distorted, enough evidence of the truth remains for those who care to find it, and with that knowledge perhaps some of the wounds of the past can begin to be healed.

**Appendix: Glossary of Te Reo terms**

<i>tapu</i> ..... sacred	<i>tikanga</i> .....protocol
<i>Māoritanga</i> .....Māori culture, customs, history; the ways of being Māori	
<i>marae</i> .....meeting house	<i>hui</i> .....meeting
<i>whaikorero</i> .....speeches	<i>karanga</i> .....welcoming call
<i>kaikaranga</i> .....the caller	<i>kaikōrero</i> .....the speaker
<i>taonga</i> .....a precious/sacred thing	<i>kuia</i> .....respected elderly women
<i>waka huia</i> .....a treasure box	<i>reo</i> ..... language
<i>whāngai</i> .....foster child	

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8 Though this edition was printed in 2002, the original encyclopedia was first printed in 1963 in partnership with A.H. Reed and reprinted every few years until the early 1980s, shortly after A.W. Reed's death; the text was edited by Buddy Mikaere.