

**Stories whispered by the land:**

**An account of two workshop events, in Parua Bay and Te Kaha**

*Authors:* Janinka Greenwood & Arnold Wilson

***Abstract:***

Stories are powerful agencies. They carry explicit and latent messages about the meanings of things around us, our identity and our connections.

This article looks at ways in which particular stories may spring from the land itself.

In particular it looks at two workshop events that invite an exploration of the relationship between stories and land, and that provoke questions about the roles people might take in that relationship.

Arnold and Janinka are currently finishing a book, *Te Mauri Pakeaka: A journey into a third space*, that looks at the relationship between art, culture and education. (Auckland University Press plans publication this year.) This article picks up one of the themes in that book.

***Bios:***

Arnold Manaaki Wilson, Tuhoe. Since his retirement from the position of Director of the Cross-Cultural Community Involvement Art Programme in the Department of Education, he continues his educational role as kaumatua and adviser to a number of art programmes in tertiary institutions, to Awataha marae and to the Auckland Art Gallery.

Dr Janinka Greenwood, of Czech descent. She has taught across a wide range of sectors, in New Zealand and in Australia, including primary, secondary, tertiary, special education and community programmes. She is actively engaged in the development of drama processes as means for learning in a wide range of areas.

## Stories whispered by the land

An account of two workshop events, in Parua Bay and Te Kaha

Janinka Greenwood and Arnold Wilson

Ka tu te ihiihi

ka tu te wanawana

ki runga i te whenua e takoto nei,

e takoto nei

so that the land surrounding us

proclaims its wonder

### **Introduction and context**

Theatre is a form of story-telling. In contemporary New Zealand forms of theatre have evolved that can claim Maori as well as western roots. Both draw on strong though different conventions of story-telling and story-making. This article looks at certain aspects of that storying.

Before beginning, however, we need to set out a context for the themes we discuss here. Currently we are in the process of writing a book that explores a number of different aspects of story-making and story-telling. We explore the impact stories have had on colonisation and decolonisation, the way they express individual and collective identity, and the way they evolve with the living traditions that they relate to. We also explore processes of story-making in both visual and performing arts, and how those processes fit into, and in turn shape, the interaction between Maori and Pakeha cultures. This article shares one particular aspect of our discussion. In it we give an account of two workshops that invite an exploration of the relationship between stories and the land. Together they provoke questions about the roles people might actively take in that relationship. The first took place at Parua Bay in Northland, the second at Te Kaha.

Within our book we use the project *Te Mauri Pakeaka* as a platform for our discussion. Since we refer to that project within this article it would be useful at this stage to offer a very brief summary of that project. *Te Mauri Pakeaka* was a cross-cultural arts project that ran from 1975 to 1988. Arnold Wilson was its director. It was set up within the education system at a time when there was an emerging awareness that New Zealand society could no longer afford to ignore the presence of Maori people and their cultural values, and that schools needed to play a role in changing society from one with a monocultural outlook. The project as set up as an alternative to *talking about*

culture. Instead it offered participants a chance to experience for themselves how Maori culture operated, and to find a place for themselves within it. The project operated on a workshop basis using art, visual and dramatic, as a catalyst for cultural exploration.

### **Taniwha in the Sand**

At the end of 1980 Northland art teachers and regional art advisers were brought in to a weeklong workshop. The focus was on a Maori perspectives to the arts. Although Maori experimentations with theatre were just beginning and were very much off the public stage, Maori visual arts were developing a high profile.

There had recently been several high profile *Pakeaka* workshops in Waitangi and in Auckland, and another one was coming up in Forum North early in the next year. This workshop was seen as an opportunity to ensure that there was a knowledge and skill base in the schools and in the department to reinforce what participants learned in the *Pakeaka* workshops.

The group stayed in the youth camp on a beach at Parua Bay. Although it is close to the road that runs from the city to the harbour heads, that beach is a quiet one with few buildings, a backdrop of mature bush, a small strip of sand, rocks, mangroves, mudflats, and a view across the water to the surrounding hills.

The art teachers and advisors set out to make a mural together, following the same process the students would use in the *Pakeaka* workshops. Most of them had already learned quite a bit about Maori art forms. They had researched the kinds of curvilinear forms that contemporary Maori artists were using to depict wave and air and land. Their group project was to bring those forms together to tell a story about the bay and about how it might have appeared to the first people who beached their canoe there. They planned to accompany their mural with an explanatory performance.

In the afternoon one of the advisors engaged the teachers in an environmental exercise on the beach. As a creative initiative, he suggested they should make their own myth. He took the group down to the beach and talked them into a sensitivity towards the rock forms, the overhang of the trees, the movement of the waves. Then they began to draw designs on the shore, move about rocks, make patterns with seaweed and stones and plant driftwood upright in the sand. They were building a taniwha, a spirit force that might have grown out of that landscape, and as they worked they began creating their own myth of its relationship to the land.

Some in the group felt a growing sense of unease. Although they were Pakeha they knew that from a Maori perspective, taniwha are real. Were they perhaps calling on an untamed energy that lived in the area? They were

becoming so aware of the feel of the rocks and the trees and the sea that they could feel the power of something unknown but alive being evoked in the beach sculpture. As the shadows lengthened, the figure seemed to have an energy of its own.

Arnold had been away from the workshop while this was happening. "When I came back and walked onto the beach," he recalls, "I was rushed at by a group of distressed people who all talked to me at once. They wanted me to go down to the beach with them and clear it. Not just of the physical clutter, but of the spiritual energies that had been activated. So we did."

### **Arts, and whatever else comes with the arts**

At the time, the incident brought out quite different attitudes to the arts. Some of the group were very open to a sense of the spiritual potency of the forms the arts could take. They had a sense that the beach was already strong in its own spiritual energies: that it was alive with the life force of the trees, the tides, the carving by weather and time; that along with the hundreds of creatures that lived there on the margins of the sea, there were perhaps other energies present, watching. By consciously tuning into the energies that they could see, perhaps they were also opening themselves to others and their art was being sparked to life by something unseen that was alive around them.

Art is not just about form, one of the teachers insisted in discussion that followed. It can be a way of opening up to forces in the world that we normally ignore. As you write or paint or dance or carve, if you surrender fully to what you are doing, you let something bigger in. It is not only a Maori way of looking at art, another added: there are European artists who saw their work connecting with very powerful spiritual energies. You can see it in the work of Grotowski, El Greco and William Blake. Or, take Coleridge and the Romantics: they wanted to move the arts back to a time before the Renaissance brought in rules of realism and scientific accuracy: they wanted to write and paint with the soul. Even some of the early British painters who came here to New Zealand knew that they were not just painting beaches and trees, one said: they could feel the spiritual powers in the land. When you look at the work of Sharpe or Gully: you can see their awe in their paintings.

Others argued that it is the artist who gives the work whatever spirituality it may or may not have. El Greco painted that spiritual resonance into his work: it was a very sophisticated application of skill; Grotowski developed a highly disciplined skill base in his actors before he encouraged them to surrender to built very deliberately built skills in his actors before to yield to a spiritual dimension. Yes, course we were responsive to the energy of the beach, said one of the advisers: we went down there to be in touch with it, and it was an inspiration for what we made. That was the aim of the exercise. But art

making is an intellectual and technical process that relates to an entire history of art making images and concepts as well as to any particular inspiration. The artist deliberately plays with subtle manipulations of form. It is the artist's craft that creates the sense of spirituality.

But you cannot just arbitrarily create your own spiritual framework, protested someone from the first group. You cannot create your own myth out of nothing: it belittles the whole concept of myths.

The making of our own myth simply illustrates how traditions begin, said someone else in reply. All the taniwhas of mythology have at some time been created by people's response to the environment.

It is disrespectful, said the first group.

Art does not have to be respectful, answered the second. It is not an obediently replicative process; it is creative, interpretative, individualistic. And it can freely cross all boundaries. Crossing boundaries is part of the challenge. So is breaking down traditional restrictions. Artaud, Beckett, Ionesco, Pollock, Dali, Picasso, were cited as models. The remainder of the evening was spent talking about what had happened.

In the context of the workshop, the event served as a catalyst for the group to talk through their different attitudes towards the Maori art forms they had set out to explore. In the process they also developed a more honest relationship with each other, learning how to listen to each other's points of view.

Incrementally they surrendered the high ground of self-justification and worked towards the appreciation of each other's understandings that would allow them to collaborate.

At the end of the workshop a mural emerged that the group decided should hang in the Department of Education offices. "What was so fantastic about it," Arnold recalls, "is that they went for the feeling thing. They were honest about how they felt and it came out in the work. The forms were not just a surface reproduction of forms they had picked up from elsewhere. They had developed an understanding of what lies behind the forms. And it showed. The mural was their soul thing. Part of themselves was in it."

On a wider front, the incident opens up a number of questions: about the spirituality of place and story, about collectivity and identity, about issues of ownership, borrowing and appropriation, and about how all these impact on our sense of being New Zealanders. Before we come to discuss these more fully, however, we are going to turn to another workshop that took place six years later at Te Kaha.

### **Where being Maori comes naturally**

Te Kaha is on the coast of the Bay of Plenty on the way to the East Cape. It is a rural settlement with a population that is predominantly Maori.

Livelihoods depend on farming, fishing and forestry. In contrast to some of the regions where the Pakeaka workshops had been set up, it is a place where Maori people and a Maori way of life are not at the margins of what was important, but at the centre. In Te Kaha, Maori protocols do not come out of a rulebook nor are they something to be treated with tentative correctness. They are quite simply the way life is.

The people of the area have had close to two hundred years of selectively accommodating to the impact of western material life and absorbing its technical benefits into their own flow<sup>1</sup>. Whaling provided one of the first encounters. First the local people allowed the foreign whalers to make a base on their shoreline. Then they incorporated elements of the foreign technology into their own enterprise and edged a role for themselves in the international trade. The same kind of thing happened with farming. Large slices of land in the Bay of Plenty were taken in confiscations during the Land Wars. However, compared to other parts of the North Island, large tracts of land stayed in Maori hands. The people learned what they could from western processes of agriculture, bringing in ploughs, fencing, livestock and new crops. At the same time the vigilant tekoteko stood over the carved meeting houses, and the community ordered its social interactions according to values that had been there before the foreigners came.

Whereas the missionaries stamped their influence strongly on the spiritual expressions of the north, the peoples of the Bay of Plenty listened to the new evangelism, absorbed aspects of it into their own social practices, and sometimes reshaped it into messianic expressions of their own. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century colonial farmers looked to expand their holdings. The government repeatedly endorsed first military actions and then confiscations that supported the colonists' augmentation plans. The struggle to hold onto the land gave rise to the religions of Pai Mairire and Ringatu. In each, the bible introduced by the missionaries was assimilated into Maori belief systems and re-defined as a practice of resistance and a re-affirmation of independence. The religions and an awareness of the history are alive and active in the region today.

In the twentieth century retaining land was an on-going battle, as was making a living on the land that was retained. Governments remained intent on making land available to Pakeha farmers who wanted to develop dairying and mixed farming. Maori, because they owned land communally rather than under separate title, were not able to raise loans from banks or private institutions. Most farming was at a harsh subsistence level. When Apirana

Ngata became Minister of Native Affairs, he introduced a policy that made it possible for Maori farmers to incorporate their farms into large community schemes, and obtain state credit. Marae, some newly built and carved in the moment of renaissance, provided the focus for communal collaboration, and for unifying the people in their continuing struggle for economic survival.

The community, however, had no power over the forces of change in the country as a whole. Education, like health, housing and the national economy, ran on centralised, Pakeha lines. In all those fields the government put its money into areas that were equipped to exercise the greatest political pressure. In all those fields the systems that were developed aimed to deliver Pakeha goals. As previously, the people looked to learn from what western society had to offer, but they relied on their own traditions for social organisation, for values, and for meaning.

### **A sense of centre, outside the mainstream**

In 1986 when the Pakeaka workshop came to Te Kaha, the district was not a rich one, in housing or in amenities. The people, however, had a uncompromised sense of identity and a direct connection with their history.

The Pakeaka programme when it came in could work off that existing strength. It also offered a new element to the relationship with the mainstream. On the one hand it offered the community an opportunity to come in, get involved with the education system that was largely seen to be Pakeha, and actively support their young people in a particular project relating to the community and its histories. On the other hand it offered the teachers in that Pakeha school system a chance to explore what kind of people their students really were.

To put it another way, the schools who were invited to the workshop were being given a chance to see what it would be like if they operated within the social organisations and the value systems of the community. They were offered a chance to see themselves not as *outside* the cultural framework of Te Kaha, but as *inside* it, able to support students in achieving the outcomes that their families wanted for them and in ways that were consistent with the culture of the community.

It is a common expectation of the mainstream community that teachers should teach in a way that is consistent with its established values. Here in the Pakeaka workshop was an implicit proposal that it was the values of Te Kaha that should be seen as the centre of reference for these people and the teaching of their children. The teachers were being given a chance to re-explore the educative process within this context and to find more collaborative roles for themselves.

The community came in readily to support the programme. They welcomed the chance to tell the histories of the area to their young people, and they were eager to encourage them in their education. It helped, no doubt, that they already had strong connections with contemporary artists and art-making. Te Kaha had been the host for the first national hui of Maori Artists and Writers and the people had an appreciation of the way traditional art processes could be drawn on for contemporary purposes. They opened up their marae and hearts to the project.

The old people told the histories of the district. They offered traditional waiata and haka. Some picked up a chisel when it seemed to be lying idle. Others sat down in front of the tukutuku boards and bent their stiffened fingers to the motions they remembered from childhood. They listened intently to the ways the students told their stories, laughed uproariously at their jokes. Weavers brought in flax and showed how to hold and fold the springing blades. A mother watched for a while, gathered confidence, and tried her hand at the carving. The advisors sat late into the evenings with mounting piles of paper stretched along tables, writing schools readers in Maori, and turning what they heard and saw into school resources.

Initially it had been planned to involve the students as extras in the commercial film production of *Mauri* that was going on in the area at that time. Arnold was a member of the production team, and he saw an opportunity to bring film into the Pakeaka art mix. It turned out that crises and shifting schedules of production made the connection impossible. So the focus stayed very simply with the interaction between the students' work in the arts and marae on which they worked. The students looked for ways to put what was important to them in their environment into the murals and into the enactments that accompanied them.. They depicted the plumed volcano of White Island, the forest and its variety of foods, the wealth of the sea. A huge, richly embossed crayfish spoke of their passion for fishing and diving, and their enjoyment of eating the catch. A representation of a whaling expedition celebrated the area's history.

### **Art that grows out of the land**

In very direct ways the art in the Te Kaha workshop sprang directly out of communication with the land.

Firstly, the images came out of stories that are anchored in the past and present experience of the people who live there. In the whale hunt mural, for example, a powerful whale arches around a group of men with a harpoon in an open and vulnerable boat. Some of the old people in the community may well have remembered their fathers or their grandfathers launching their boats in response to the raising of the flag that signalled a whale had been

sighted in the bay. Iron cauldrons, harpoons, flensing knives were visible reminders of the work, as were photographs of particular teams and catches.

Secondly, the stories in the murals are told in a language of signs that link them simultaneously to the student artists and to the traditions of art in the community. Some of the representations are realistic, responding to the students' own graphic conceptualisations and also to elements of painting that are found in the meeting houses of the area. Other aspects of the representations involve modifications of traditional patterns of carving and tukutuku. In the crayfish mural, for instance, the almost photographic realism of the crayfish is combined with the curling motifs and the semi-relief style of classical carving. In the whale mural the whole scene is framed by spiralling forms that echo those carved on the meeting house, Tukaki. The frail boat with its hunters stretches beyond the curve of the whale's tail to blend with the surrounding frame of ancestral energies suggesting connection between this particular hunt and history. The bargeboards of the meeting house, which show the hauling in of whale also highlight the importance of whaling to the history of the community.

Thirdly, the stories stayed alive on the land because the community as a whole continuously strokes the stories and tickles them into life with constant re-telling. The connections between people, land and stories are spun through generations of living on the land, reacting to its forces, telling the stories of the relationship.

Finally, the works developed a life force of their own. Through their makers they had drawn on the energy immanent in the land. They had also drawn on the students' maturing sense of identity and of relationship with the community and with the land. Into that already potent mix came the excitement, the questions, the sense of discovery, the exaltation in achievement that the students felt as they were making the work. All those elements created an energy in the art works that allowed them to talk back to the people, to become another voice in the stories whispered by the land.

### **A matter of relationship**

And the taniwha in the sand at Parua Bay?

Did it too spring from the land? Was it a desecration of the beach? Or a legitimate artistic response?

From our point of view, the answer might depend on a number of factors. Part of the answer might lie in the quality of the makers' relationship with the beach. Another part might lie in the collectivity of the group. It hardly needs saying that it not only Maori who recognise the energies within the land and within stories that link people to the land. The makers of the taniwha may

have been responding to a real sense of those energies - or they may have been making something up. The collective feelings within the group may have been focused and strong enough to give the latent energies of the land a form that was real and that might live, at least as long as the makers believed in it. Or the taniwha may have been an individual creation that had life only until the group turned away from it.

In one way, perhaps, the issue of that particular taniwha does not matter so very much. Media - advertising, serials, music videos, political comment, and even the news - repeatedly pour out 'mythologies' that have no connection to the land, to the people, to lived and careful preserved histories, or to the truth. One small ungrounded energy that might have been called forth on a beach in Northland seems an innocuous thing in comparison. Beach seems particularly well equipped on its own to clear any errant energies. Wind, rain, tide will eventually wash the sand clean.

But at another level the question matters a lot. It matters because if art has the power to evoke energetic connections between people and land, then it is important that the power be invoked in a search for something true.

It matters also because it is part of how we as a country take the opportunity to write our roles as New Zealanders. Do we write the stories of our identity in the same way as an advertiser might build the image of a product? Is the canvas empty and waiting? Or do we write with attention to the stories already told by the land?

The art teachers and advisers at Parua Bay and the teachers who came to Tukaki in Te Kaha were in similar positions. They were invited to explore what Maori art meant to them, and to take a role in a context that honoured Maori values as well as Pakeha ones. They were challenged to move beyond their habitual ways of operating and to find out how art making works within a Maori perspective. They were challenged to look beyond the curvilinear surface forms of Maori art and into the area of meanings and relationships. And they were challenged to explore just how proactive they could be in stamping their own intentions onto the forms of art and onto the stories that were associated with them.

### **Participation, borrowing, appropriation, and just walking past**

There were similar challenges present in all the Pakeaka workshops, and there were protective structures that helped participants explore such issues. The initial protection was the explicit invitation to come in and participate. Another protection was the presence of people with relevant knowledge of art and things Maori who were available to talk through ideas with participants and were willing to challenge an approach if they felt it crossed into reserved territory, or if it went off target.

Many of the participant groups took the opportunity to explore the boundaries. Over the years they evoked different reactions. In a Forum North workshop a few years after the Parua Bay camp, Whangarei Boys High School experimented with comedy in their enactment of Reitu and Reipae. In the traditional story the beautiful sisters were carried north on a magical bird. In the boy's production it was dilapidated jalopy. The students themselves may have turned to comedy initially as a way of avoiding the risk of looking too serious. However, for the teachers and resource people the decision to support the students in their humorous modernisation did constitute a risk. They were asking: is it okay to play with this material in this way? Their choice in following the students' initiative was validated when the kaumatua in the audience led the laughter.

A few years later in another Forum North workshop Polytechnic students performed a danced enactment of the same story. Reipae, abandoned on the beach, danced her desolation and collapsed on the ground over her split legs. Western ballet tradition led to a reading of signs in that sequence simply in terms of confusion and loss. A Maori frame of reference led a few members of the audience to read the semiotics as an implication of shamelessness on the part of a significant ancestress. The Polytechnic group experienced at first hand the pain of an unexpected stumble into bicultural politics as some of their audience responded vehemently to their work at level of one culturally-bound reading while they had designed it at another.

It is not so simple as to say that the first innovation was a good one and the second one was wrong. For one thing, the five years between the two events brought changes in politico-cultural attitudes. In 1983 the kaumatua were glad to see the dread-locked young men engage with the traditional story. By 1988 vigilance had developed about cultural property and its possible misappropriation. The 1988 critics were inclined to make polarising judgements.

For another, both experimentations were valuable because they allowed the experimenters to move beyond previously sanctioned forms of enactment and to play with the connections between their own world and the world of the story. They also allowed the experimenters to deal with audience reaction. The 1983 reaction affirmed the way actors and audience had become a unified community under the safe umbrella of the Pakeaka workshop. The 1988 reaction spelled out a rupture in communal acceptance, that echoed cross-cultural confrontations in the outside world. The actors had a range of choices for their future work; they could shrug off the criticisms, determine to never again enter the field of intercultural art-making, or continue to negotiate the complex field of forms, meanings and communal understandings. Part of the power of mythic stories is that they have multiple layers of meaning and carry complex resonances. The Polytechnic group

could well have justified perseverance with their narrative. That would have involved quite a bit of homework. And perhaps the story's meanings would have continued to unfold and grow.

As we look beyond the context of those particular enactments, we see that the story of Reitu and Reipae could be explored by art makers in different ways. It could be picked up for its exotic Maori flavouring, or it could be an opportunity for a dialogue between the traditional meanings of the story and its implications for the contemporary world. We are suggesting that the first way is careless of the meanings the story already has for its people. We are suggesting that it is valid for an artist to ask: what does this story mean to me? But we are also suggesting that such a question will be more profoundly addressed if the artist also carefully considers the meanings within the story's own cultural context.

We are suggesting that the commonly used term *appropriation* needs a little further unpacking<sup>2</sup>. The borrowing of stories and art forms is in itself neither good nor bad. What matters is the quality of attention, or the lack of attention, that accompanies the borrowing. A borrowing that tramples over the meanings that are important to the people who originally evolved the form or story is usually destructive, particularly if the borrower operates from a position of privilege, with the power to access more resources and reach a wider audience than those the story belongs to. Then the original meanings can become lost. However, borrowing can also be an aspect of participation. In that case it has some reciprocity of exchange, a real care for complexity of what is being borrowed and for the people it relates to. That kind of borrowing involves investing one's self into the exchange.

### **Negotiated transactions**

As we read some of the international literature we noticed that the academic debate about cultural interaction moves gingerly towards concepts that lie outside the standard parameters of such discourse. The word *love* is one that occasionally appears, with some nervousness yet with a strong sense of personal discovery. As part of her quest for ways to displace the dominant mainstream centre, Spivak<sup>3</sup>, the acute dissector of postcolonial practices, explores alternatives to Western ideological concepts. She hesitantly offers the term "a witnessing love" to describe the quality she most admires in the work of a woman whose writing combines art with activism. Bharucha<sup>4</sup>, the critic of the politics of interculturalism, abandons his customary incisive style and looks cautiously outside the Western critical canon when he talks about the ritual of Krishnatta. He writes; "I have found at last a 'theatre' that answers my deepest questions of love."

Perhaps the influence of Maori discourses may make it easier for us in New Zealand to talk about this quality of love. The word *aroha* means love but it carries a sense of commitment and accountability. When it comes to art, is *aroha* – love - about hearing the voices of the land? Is it about being sensitive – though not necessarily obedient – to what other people hear? Is it about risking one's self?

When the *taniwha* was erected on the beach in Parua Bay, what was the quality of the makers' relationship with each other? They had come to make art together, were they willing to listen to each other? What was the quality of their relationship with the beach. Did they know its history, and its moods? Did they feel enough at one with it to be able to enhance it? Or were they just adding froth? Did they own? Or were they being owned? What aspect of themselves did they leave open to the bay?

---

<sup>1</sup> . The historical material recounted here comes from what is commonly known within the community. However, aspects of the history are recounted in histories of New Zealand. Readers unfamiliar with this history might read, for example, Walker, R. (1990). *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou: Struggle Without End*. Auckland: Penguin.

<sup>2</sup> Other discussion of the issues associated with appropriation and borrowing can be found in Greenwood, J. (2003). Teaching and theatre in our sacred spaces. *NJ*, 27 (2). 93-105.

<sup>3</sup> Spivak, G. (1996) Translator's Preface and Afterword to Mahaweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps*. In Landry and MacLean (eds) *The Spivak Reader*, New York: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Bharucha, R. (1993). *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*, London: Routledge.