

**KA MATE, KA ORA  
I DIE, I LIVE**

**Robert Sullivan**

Ka mate! ka mate!

Ka ora! ka ora!

Ka mate! ka mate!

Ka ora! ka ora!

Tēnei te tangata pūhuru,  
Nāna nei i tiki mai whakawhiti te rā!

Hūpane! Hūpane!

Hūpane! Kaupane!

Whiti te rā!

I die! I die!

I live! I live!

I die! I die!

I live! I live!

This is the hairy man  
Who fetched the sun causing it to shine!  
One upward step! Another upward step!  
One last upward step!  
Then step forth!  
Into the sun that shines!

- Te Ngeri a Te Rauparaha (c.1768? – 1849) Nō Ngāti Toa, nō Ngāti Raukawa; he rangatira.

Haka by Te Rauparaha, a chief of Ngāti Toa and of Ngāti Raukawa descent.

(Karetu, 63-68)

## **1. Haka and Rugby**

I was fortunate to see New Zealand defeat South Africa in the last rugby world cup. I was with a large group of expatriate kiwis at a friend's place in Honolulu. At the moment of victory we all leapt to our feet and performed the world-famous "Ka mate, ka mate". The majority of the people in the room were not of Maori descent, and even fewer spoke the Maori language with any fluency. Still the great gusto of our warrior chorus carried throughout the neighbourhood – so much so that neighbours three blocks away complained to the police and our victory celebration was closed down.

A dramatic part of each New Zealand rugby test match is the haka performed at the beginning by the All Blacks. It psyches up the team and intimidates their opponents. Many New Zealanders have watched Australian, French, British, South African, and Argentinian teams not know how to respond to the haka: some turn their backs, others glare back. It is not a normal part of their rituals, unlike the time to line-up to listen respectfully to the national anthem "God Defend New Zealand", originally a poem by Thomas Bracken. A recent innovation at tests, begun by the singer Hinewehi Mohi, is to sing the anthem in both English and Maori. The crowd knows the English version, but has not yet learnt the Maori, which is something of a reality check for biculturalism. The same home crowd will know a version – 'bowdlerised' is Dr Timoti Karetu's adjective - of the haka. They know it because it plays up our machismo and transforms spectators into animated participants in the ritual of the game.

But is the warrior chorus in the living room, or the team on the field, really aware of the meaning of the most famous haka? Are they aware of its composer? Do they understand that they're giving a poetry performance each time they leap up to celebrate?

## 2. Poetry of Life and Death

“Ka mate, ka mate” is an example of the *ngeri*, a short haka which, Dr Karetu writes, is composed “to stiffen the sinews, to summon up the blood” (41). The events that led to its composition by Te Rauparaha demanded no less.

The Ngāti Toa chief was fleeing a group of Ngāti Te Aho (related to Tuwharetoa) who were seeking revenge against him and a party of Ngāti Toa for previously killing and eating some of their people at Te Onepu, below Mt Tongariro.

To avenge a wrong was held as a sacred duty. Should a community consider itself too weak to attack an enemy in order to avenge some insult or other wrong, then several courses were open to them. They might seek armed assistance from another tribe or clan; they might wait patiently for a generation or two until strong enough in numbers to gain their object; or they might practise one of the extraordinary substitutes for vigorous action that we often encounter in studying native traditions and customs. Thus they might compose a bitterly worded song reviling their enemies, and sing it as a *ngeri*, or *haka*, before such enemies. Or they might endeavour to seriously injure their enemies by means of magic arts. (Best 156)

Te Rauparaha sought advice from Te Heuheu, the paramount chief of Tuwharetoa, but the great chief could not protect him and advised Te Rauparaha to seek shelter with Te Wharerangi, the chief of the Rotoaira district. It was a sign of his desperation that the Rotoaira chief advised him to hide in a kumara pit (Burns 45-47). Food is commonly regarded as a profane, or *noa*, substance.

In the traditional Maori worldview, among other divisions or *kauhanga*, all facets of life were divided into *tapu* and *noa* categories: the sacred and profane. Each was a powerful and essential counter-balance to the other. *Tapu* represented a range of restrictions relating to social power, resources, and religious objects and activities. It set apart a person, a place, or a thing from indiscriminate access. *Noa* on the other hand represented unrestricted access. Margaret Orbell (186) makes the point that

nothing in the traditional Maori world is secular, that everything is in the reach of religious thought and practice, and so noa cannot be translated as secular. Generally speaking, women were noa and men were tapu: “the entire system of Maori life and thought depended on the subtle interplay of these two states of being” (Orbell 187). So when Te Rangikoahea, Te Wharerangi’s wife, sat over the kumara pit to conceal Te Rauparaha within, she was not only physically hiding the Ngāti Toa chief, she was also negating the incantations of the Ngāti Te Aho tohunga (skilled priest) with the noa of her body. In this worldview, words of makutu or sorcery spoken from the mouth of a tohunga, possess tremendous religious power.

As, from within the pit, Te Rauparaha heard the approaching enemies, he muttered to himself, “Ka mate, ka mate – I die I die”. When they moved further away he said “I live I live – ka ora ka ora!” It should be pointed out that the word “I” is elided here. The personal pronoun is never used in this ngeri. Its absence opens up a greater sense of self, a cultural and a collective self, for this poem.

The next lines may refer to the culture-hero Maui Potiki (a potiki is the youngest sibling):

Tēnei te tangata pūhuru/	This is the hairy man
Nāna nei i tiki mai whakawhiti te rā! /	Who fetched the sun causing it to shine!

Among many great feats, Maui slowed the sun as it travelled through the sky so that the days were longer and people could work more and prosper. The reference to hair may be to his mother Taranga’s topknot (tikitiki) creating a neat homophone with the verb tiki, “to fetch”. The mythical child was set afloat in the ocean on his mother’s topknot, so he also became known as Māui Tikitiki a Taranga. As a child, Te Rauparaha was nicknamed Māui Potiki “...because he, like Māui Potiki, was lively and mischievous” (Oliver). The potiki in the family is in a teina (junior) rank within the family – the challenge, embodied in the feats of Maui Potiki, is to rise above that lowly station to attain greater mana. Maui finally, and fatally, attempted to gain immortality by trying to pass through the vagina and out the mouth of the death goddess Hine-nui-te-po. Similarly, in this ngeri the composer must come to terms with the possible prospect of his own death beneath female genitalia.

The word "tangata" may also mean "person" and so it may also refer to the person sitting above.

One dance element in this ngeri includes the initial parahako stance, which is a position that the god of war and man, Tūmatauenga, adopted when standing up to the winds of his brother Tawhirimatea who was furious with his brothers for separating Papatuanuku and Ranginui, the earthmother and skyfather. In the parahako the back is straight while the legs are bent at the knees so that the thighs are flexed. It is very difficult to push over a person (or a god such as Tūmatauenga) in such a posture.

The next lines are also rich in multiple levels of meaning and reality:

Hūpane! Hūpane! / Hūpane! Kaupane! / Whiti te rā!

One upward step, another upward step,/ one last upward step, then step forth/ [Into the Sun] the Sun that shines!

Perhaps this recalls the poutama pattern symbolic of the god Tāne-nui-a-rangi's journey into enlightenment, where he travelled upwards into the heavens to retrieve the baskets of knowledge. The poutama geometrical design, often expressed in woven tukutuku panels, portrays a series of steps indicating an upward progression with plateaux. As chanted, the long upward 'u' and 'a' vowels are followed by the short 'e' vowel in the word 'hūpane' which forms an aural rest/plateau before the next long vowel. There is a finality in the initial fricative sound in 'Whiti' – and a sense of arrival in the long 'a' in 'rā'.

The lines also remind us of the journey out of the kumara pit: from darkness into light. On a mythopoeic level they represent the many 'pō' (nights) within the Maori cosmogony through which the gradations of darkness give way to light and the creation of the world itself. The Polynesian pō can be found in George Grey's rendition of the Maori creation cycle as told to him by Te Rangikaheke (Grey 1), and in the first Hawaiian 'Wā' or interval in Beckwith's translation of *The Kumulipo* (58). Beckwith also discussed the pō in the cosmogonies of Hawai'i, Mangaia, Tahiti, and the Tuamotus (163-168). The pō are strongly associated with death, and the underworld, while the ao (light) is associated with the world of the living. Hence, the

upward movement, despite its Judaeo-Christian overtones, also depicts a journey from a pit in darkness representing death to a sunlit place representing life. The marvel is that the movement is specific also to the circumstances of the ngeri's composition – the composer actually escaped out of a pit from his enemies.

The artist Kamaka Kanekoa (9) quotes the Irish poet Padraic Colum about concealed multiple meanings within Hawaiian literature. Colum claims there are always four layers: “an ostensible meaning, a vulgar meaning, a mythico-historico-typographic meaning, and a deeply hidden meaning”. Kanekoa, citing Mary Kawena Pukui, reduces this to two layers - ostensible and inner. This is something we might usefully apply to Te Rauparaha's haka.

The blood and flesh layer of this ngeri is Te Rauparaha himself, and the myriad of performers past and present of “Ka mate, ka mate”, while the psychology that informs the poem (leaving cross-cultural differences of the terms ‘poetry/moteatea’ and ‘psychology/hinengaro’ aside) is also his, as well as the collective psyche of the Ngāti Toa and Maori people

Recounting the events that led to the ngeri's composition is a reminder of this fierce leader's tenuous but tenacious grip on life. What if Te Rauparaha had died? Ka mate? Would the Ngāi Tahu tribe in the South Island have survived the raids led later by him? Would Ngāti Toa have perished in battles over their traditional lands in Kawhia with the powerful Waikato tribes? Would Ngāti Raukawa have joined the great migration south from their base at Maungatautari? My direct ancestor Pomare II was allied with Te Rauparaha and his mother's tribe Ngāti Raukawa. Had Te Rauparaha died who would have lived? Ka ora? and who would have risen up to take his place? What changes would there be to the shape of many whānau today?

The multiple levels of interpretation in this ngeri also speak to the heterogeneity of the poem, the diverse interests and experiences of the peoples Te Rauparaha's haka has come to represent and inspire.

### **3. The Haka and War**

How many Maori leaders died in the 20th century fighting in foreign conflicts? How many died in the New Zealand Wars and in the musket wars in the century before? I think of these things when I think of haka – how traditional martial arts and close-combat values no longer mesh with modern military technology and its destructive distance from the victims of war.

In our more recent history there are famous stories of the 28<sup>th</sup> Maori Battalion leaping to their feet during World War II to inspire themselves and their comrades with haka: from the battlefields of Crete, Egypt, Italy, and North-West Africa, sometimes to the applause of their enemies. “Ka mate, ka mate” itself was performed after the victory at Tebaga Gap where many New Zealand soldiers were decorated, which included Lieutenant Ngarimu’s posthumous Victoria Cross (Cody 278). Te Rauparaha’s ngeri has managed to endure, even in a field smelling of cordite.

### **4. The Worldview of Ka Mate, Ka Mate**

When I think of the haka I also think of the discipline of the dance. The coordination of fierce facial gestures, the proportional balance of the thighs, arms raised, voices charged with passion, and the certainty that death is on the other side of the face crying life or death? Ka mate ka ora! What a wonder to live and die in an instant. The intense appreciation of it is embodied in this haka.

“Ka mate, ka mate” belongs to an intrinsically Maori worldview. It comes to life every time it is performed and in a different way each time. The body language of its performers speaks volumes as to their knowledge and their understanding of the composer’s intent, of the language and their appreciation of the culture – whether the performer is a haka expert or a beginner. The ngeri derives its power partly from the tantalizing presence of death, partly from its spiritual ethos.

For a deeper discussion of this particular ngeri, which is significantly longer than the text discussed here, I encourage those interested to read Dr Timoti Karetu’s *Haka: the*

*Dance of a Noble People*. Karetu's work also lists other useful references on the dance and discusses more traditional and contemporary haka.

## **5. Ka mate, ka mate and Time**

Poetry is an art-form concerned with time, whether it is connected to the breath or to the rhythmic stamping of warriors' feet, or to the great and minor narratives of history. "Ka mate, ka mate" has a place in history. It was composed by Te Rauparaha to celebrate his survival from his Ngāti Te Aho pursuers. The life-affirming ngeri also anticipates the great hekenga or journey of Ngāti Toa south from Kawhia to the Kapiti district in the 1820s. Even though he was an inspirational leader who persuaded his people to leave their ancestral lands for the strategic stronghold of Kapiti Island, that journey was a part of the greater cycle of miseries brought by European muskets and artillery throughout the North Island in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the even greater miseries caused by diseases either accidentally or carelessly introduced to Aotearoa.

Te Rauparaha's composition is an artful slice of oral history that demonstrates the vigour of Maori culture and its refusal to be subsumed by an empire, even when fighting in the service – along with so many other colonial and minority regiments - of that empire.

Yet as in the inspirational ngeri, there is hope. In the 1901 census count there were 45,549 Maori. In 2001 the population of people who identified as Maori was 526,281 (Statistics New Zealand), with more than 600,000 people acknowledging Maori descent. As a people we almost died, but now we are alive!

In the future, whenever I read this new nzepc journal *Ka mate ka ora* I will think of the many voices and bodies that have performed Te Rauparaha's haka, and marvel that "Ka mate, ka mate" is one of the best-recognized New Zealand poems anywhere. I will also think of the stark cultural, ethnic and personal resonances of death and life.

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