

# Faith / Te Ao Maori / Arts

## An interview with Dr. Rangihiroa Panoho (Te Parawhau, Te Urioroi)

Art historian and curator

Dr. Rangihiroa Panoho inside Tanenui a Rangi,  
Waipapa Marae, University of Auckland, 2003.  
Photographer: Godfrey Boenke.  
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University of Auckland.

*'There is something powerful about locating ourselves in Spirit in relation to both our being Maori and our being people inevitably enmeshed in wider global culture. This is both a challenge and something which is central to personal and professional growth.'*

The growth is connected with negotiating the often-differing range of cultures that we practise and the challenges that each context provides the other. Perhaps one of the important things Panoho says, "is to recognise that there is flow between these different paradigms".

He now works as a lecturer in Maori and Polynesian Art within the discipline of art history. In 2001 he completed the first PhD thesis devoted to Maori art. The dissertation employed the metaphor of a river to talk about continuum in the arts. He suggested that Maori art is like a river caught between its quieter spring fed nga puna matauranga (pools of knowledge) legacy, and a vast churning harbour mouth which engages trade from global cultures.

Pahoho sees Maori art at the stage where rangatahi (youth) occupy the lower regions where waka risk being overturned; where patrons and audiences are primarily pakeha. The challenge, he suggests, is one where Maori (and the pakeha arts community) actively involved in trying to shape and manage this art, are able to negotiate both parts of the river so that respectful cultural counterpoint becomes more of a characterising feature of the system.

His hydrological interest is derived partly from

Omeru, Wairua Falls, 1998. Ancestral portage point above last navigable point on the Wairoa ki Te Tai Tokerau River, Northland. Photographer: Mark Adams. © Reproduced courtesy of Dr. Rangihiroa Panoho, University of Auckland.





Top: Aerial photograph of upper Northern Wairoa River at Tangiteroria, showing three horse shoe bends at the feet of the Tangihua Ranges. Left to right these are Te Aotahi, Piritaha and Mareikura. 27 October 1998.  
Photographer: Mark Adams. © Reproduced courtesy of Dr. Rangihiroa Panoho, University of Auckland.

Above: Entrance Kaipara River looking out to the Harbour system. 26 September 1996.  
Photographer: Haruhiko Sameshima. © Reproduced courtesy of Dr. Rangihiroa Panoho, University of Auckland.

spending portions of his life living alongside the Tasman Ocean and the Whanganui River. He grew up in the 1970s on River Road, Mangawhare in Dargaville. This was down river from Te Tirarau and Maungarongo, his two marae. The muddy, churning Te Wairoa ki Te Tai Tokerau, then one of five rivers feeding into the vast Kaipara Harbour, was an ever present backdrop of childhood. Today he continues to live on the Kaipara, this time on the south head peninsula at Mairetahi. "An aunty once told me that these were not so much considered separate awa (rivers) but rather fingers of the wider whanga inland sea, branches of the same Kaipara waterway."

Panoho's people are Te Parawhau and Te Uriroroi hapu occupying the southern portions of Nga Puhinui tonu in the Whangarei, Kaipara regions. He sees the movement across the spatial boundaries of these northern Kaipara and southern Nga Puhi rohe as emblematic.

"It is an ongoing theme in how I situate myself in relation to my identity and, I think, my profession. While I am not interested in the currently fashionable post-modern idea of an indigenous person being in-between cultures I think that in Maori art history at least there is, or should be, more room for cultural counterpoint."

He returns to his tribal areas for family, for rites of passage and for research, however, he is clear that there are vastly differing parts to this identity that require different codes and rules for belonging.

"In the background the autanga (flow/current) of the river is a reassuring element which is always moving through our lives.

"Many Maori make excuses for not being Maori enough, not having te reo, not knowing genealogies, histories...and so on. We need to get past agonising

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over what we are not and reconnect with, and rebuild, those parts of who we are and what our ancestors envisaged we would be.

"So how does this all relate to the Christian context of this magazine? I think it is too easy to talk about the form of religion we practise. The more difficult task is honestly working within the tougher context in which it must be practised.

"In the intellectual field, in the humanities and in the gallery system, there seem to be powerful codes of behaviour and 'taste'. These set the tone for the way in which religion is both viewed and the ways in which it is found to be acceptable. There are modes for entertaining versions of Christianity, for example, but they're often filtered by sometimes overly worked ideas of logic and reason. If you're talking about spiritual things you would get more currency talking to wairuatanga, tohunga-ism and nga poropiti (i.e. nineteenth century separatist 'Maori prophets') than you would dealing with more conventional forms of religion.

"I think that the American art historian Thomas McEvilley's musing about 'otherness' (*Art and Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity*, 1992) might be applied here. That is, in these sorts of contexts, religion, like ethnicity, has become something that the 'west' or the majority culture needs to be different so that it might better locate itself in relation to it. However, needing the other to be different isn't necessarily reflective of broader Maori experiences. In a community context, for example, it is quite normal to move fluidly from he himene Mihinare (an Anglican hymn) to a more orthodox karakia (prayer) or waiata (song) or the formalities of maharatanga (remembering) and the acknowledgement of the deceased. Both modes of worship can involve quite different frameworks of spirituality. In other words Maori are not simply this or that entity, they may very well be both - and at the same time!"

During 1988-1992 Panoho worked as a curator for the Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui and other galleries. His work involved curating some pioneering exhibitions in Maori (*Whatu Aho Rua*, 1989 & 1992) and Pacific (*Te Moemoea no Iotefa*, 1990) art that travelled around New Zealand and Australia. Panoho says, "I realise, looking back, that my sourcing taonga equally from collections in museums and galleries in the North Island was a continuation of work undertaken while researching the Maori artist Paratene Matchitt (Developments in Contemporary Maori Art Masters Thesis, UOA, 1988). By travelling around East Coast Maori communities and spending some time with the artist, his colleagues and his family I became more familiar with the broader continuum of the art.

"It wasn't so much about going into the right meeting houses and viewing private or public collections of Matchitt's work that comprised the deeper learning experience. Rather it was other surprisingly small details that made fuller sense of the meaning of the taonga that I was encountering.

"I remember going with Matchitt's mother, Harata, and his sister, Elaine, to a function at the local Te Kaha Area School. I had been looking and thinking a lot about Te Whanau a Apanui carving style found on the where whakairo Tukaki (carved house). It was a post World War II Rotorua Carving School rendition of the famous Te Kaha pataka now held in the Auckland Museum. It represented a pakake (whale) being pulled ashore by tiki figures.

"One of the highlights of the evening entertainment was a haka. Younger children and older college kids physically took on the form of these tiki figures seen on the Tukaki barge boards. They became moving carvings pulling the whale ashore in their performance.

"The other thing that impressed me was the aroha that these rangatahi, and indeed the whole community, seemed to have for their kuia (older women). They and their leaders, like Wiremu Tawhai, quite clearly revered and cherished them. Those kinds of demonstrations of a dynamic culture in action characterise one of the key problems that any structure, like a gallery or a university system, have in relating that experience through a static art, or a theoretical or architectural tradition that is outside the terms of the indigenous culture. There are so many illustrations in te ao Maori (Maori world) of the ways in which the culture moves fluidly outside the limitations of these kinds of confines.

"The river is one metaphor, the kahu (hawk) is another. I remember going back to Te Tirarau, my marae at Tangiteroria, prior to doing research at the Museum fur Volkerkunde in Vienna in 1998. The trip involved visiting an ancestral carved figure of the Te Parawhau leader Te Tirarau. In 1879 Austrian adventurer and taxidermist Andreas Reischek travelled up the Wairoa ki Te Tai Tokerau and raided my ancestral uncle's house Te Wharenui. More than a hundred years later I found myself talking with relatives about Reischek's visit.

"My uncle, Te Ihi Tito, described a mihi where the speaker becomes the hawk. Gliding over the tribal landscape the kahu brings news. Under its wide gaze vast tribal territories are named as they pass under its wings. Symbolic of the visionary leader this special bird has the bigger picture but can also see parts of its panorama in detail. That macro micro view which incorporates, which refuses to compartmentalise or favour either the orthodox or the avant-garde, which seeks to embrace and which serves its people with vision and foresight, that is how our ancestors located themselves in spirit. I also suspect that artists, at moments in their career, reach a similar breadth of vision in their work. For a moment of time their art shares the same hau (breath) and becomes a taonga tuku iho (treasure handed down), a different vessel nurturing the very same wairua."

#### **Moana Tipa**