

An artistic illustration of a tea plant with dark green leaves and brown branches. Some leaves have small white spots, and two yellow buds are visible on the right. The background is a textured, light green wash.

**TOITŪ TE TAI AO  
TOITŪ TE TANGATA  
RESEARCH PROJECT**

**Rongoā (front cover)**

**ARTIST:** DLT

**IWI:** Ngāti Kahungunu

**TITLE OF WORK:** Rongoā

**MEDIUM:** Acrylic paint on canvas

# Introduction

This booklet presents the summary findings from a small, qualitative study that was undertaken with the people of Tauranga Moana, Te Matau-a-Māui and Whanganui. The project was conducted by Whakauae Research Services and funded through Independent Research Organisation Funding received from the Health Research Council of New Zealand.

We had two key research questions:

1. How does mātauranga-a-iwi (tribal knowledge) speak to the intrinsic relationships between Rongoā Māori (Māori traditional healing) and toitū te taiao – toitū te tangata (healthy environments – healthy people) from the perspectives of Māori traditional knowledge holders?
2. In what ways are the perspectives of each traditional knowledge holder, iwi and rohe distinct and what are the synergies among them.



# In addition, the Project had two objectives:

- to facilitate Māori approaches to healing that contributes to the wellbeing of Māori;
- to explore the ways in which this knowledge might benefit approaches to human health and sustainability for the Aotearoa New Zealand population more generally.

This study builds on a body of work Whakauae have conducted over ten years, to advocate for the “normalisation” of Rongoā Māori and greater Crown support for Rongoā Māori within a contemporary health system. The Whakauae team acknowledge the research work of Glenis Mark, Donna Kerridge, Annabel Ahuriri-Driscoll, Maui Hudson and others who, through their efforts, enhance the mana of this precious taonga.





# Why this project?

For Māori, the ability to practice traditional forms of Rongoā Māori is largely unsupported by contemporary health systems.

Authentic Rongoā Māori practice has been diluted to sit within the modalities of mirimiri (massage), rongoā rākau (herbal medicine), and wairua matakite (*spirituality/spiritual abilities*) (Mark, Boulton & Kerridge, 2019).

This contrasts with Te Ao Māori where the past, the present, the future; the physical and spiritual; the environment and mātauranga Māori are all interrelated and connected.

Disruption to these relationships can be healed and restored by Rongoā Māori which is why it is important that Māori can access traditional practices alongside contemporary methods of healing for them to flourish.

Why is this  
project important?

Mainstream funding models and health practices are driven by western understandings of an individual's health. Mainstream often view Rongoā Māori as a health practice aimed at individual or at best whānau well-being. We believe it is much more layered and holistic than that and from a cultural perspective cannot be framed as a simple list of modalities. Rather Rongoā Māori can be thought of as:

- A way of understanding our world and our interconnected relationship; how we protect, preserve and heal according to mātauranga Māori.
- A way of living and life force that recognises the interdependency that exists between all things; and, the strengthening and connections to the whenua.







# What we did

A Kaupapa Māori research methodology that aligned with cultural structures and social systems of Te Ao Māori was implemented. For the research team, it was paramount that the research captured the voices of the participants and their experiences of Rongoā Māori (Mark, Johnson & Boulton, 2018).

In addition, we included the perspectives of the researchers, each of whom felt a spiritual connection to the kaupapa believing it was traditionally significant for the iwi they belonged to and for Māori in general (Potaka-Osborne, G., Stewart, A. & Boulton, A. 2013).

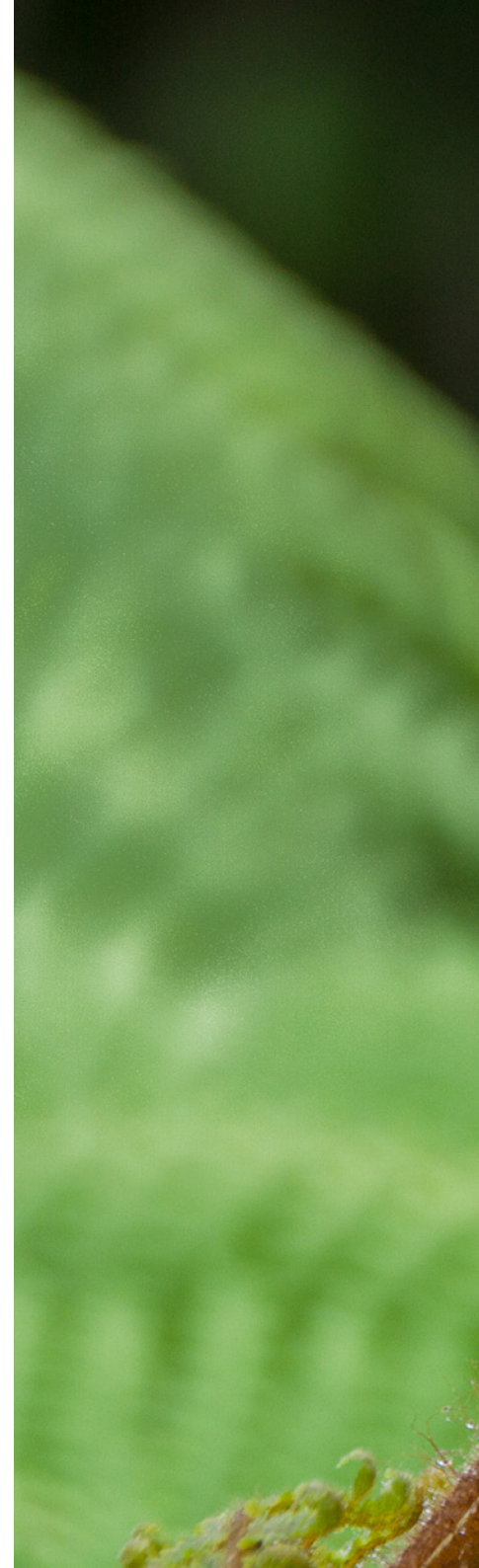
The research team consisted of four wāhine (women) Māori researchers who had whakapapa to each of the areas they interviewed in. Graham (2020) describes the relationship between these women.

*“Whilst from different iwi and rohe, through whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building and connections) and hui wānanga (in depth discussion) a unified connection to Te Waka Takitimu (the Takitimu canoe) was acknowledged.”* (A Graham, personal communication, July 17, 2020).

# How we did it?

Using local knowledge, each member of the research team identified Māori traditional knowledge holders (male and female) within their iwi or rohe who could contribute their perspectives for the research.

In all, nine participants were interviewed. Of these, four were female and five were male. The interviews took place at the end of 2019. A mahi a rōpū (group) (*Boulton, Gifford, Kauika & Parata, 2011*) approach to analysis was employed to draw out themes from the data.







# What the researchers said...

My deep abiding interest is the well-being of Papatūānuku. Rongoā Māori if practiced according to its deeper philosophies is very much about kaitiakitanga and whanaungatanga - caring for our mother Papatūānuku so that through the Rongoā she can also care for us. As a practice which engages head, heart and hand, Rongoā Māori is very powerful. I believe that if practiced according to its broader philosophical base (rather than merely as a series of 'treatment modalities') that Rongoā Māori could have far reaching implications for addressing some of the most fundamental issues of our times such as climate and environmental crisis and the human condition of disconnect from Papatūānuku. We hope reading this report will ignite your passion for Rongoā Māori, not just as a 'treatment' but as a way of life!

Lewis Williams / Tauranga Moana

My understanding of Rongoā is both academic and intuitive. From my academic side I am aware of the long history of suppression and subjugation that has characterised our living as Māori in this nation we now call New Zealand. Since the arrival of Pākehā, efforts to terminate our rights to our land, our waters, our traditional kai sources, our institutions of culture, our language, our knowledge have been unrelenting. Western society sees these things merely as commodities to trade or threats to be extinguished. And yet intuitively, I know the land, the water, our culture, our language, our relationships with each other, with those present and those past, our relationship to all living things sustain and nourish us. All these things are, in fact, our Rongoā. [Amohia Boulton / Tauranga Moana](#)

Rongoā Māori is part of who I am as wahine Māori. For me it is about my connection and relationship with all things Māori; both physical and spiritual. Rongoā is healing, and based on the past, present and future. It is about wairua. My memories of Rongoā include rebuilding our flood damaged marae, feeling the embrace of the awa tupua, and making tonics and balms. My father spoke of visits from tūpuna and actively used karakia to keep us kids and others safe. We were lucky enough to see and feel Rongoā as natural and normal.

Gill Potaka-Osborne / Te Ātīhau nui a Pāpārangi

Rongoā Māori (rongoā) to me is the enactment of those principles, passed on through whakapapa, to care for the people and environment so that in return humanity may access healing and peace. Rongoā to me is boundless: from embracing and kissing my children and tāne, to standing in the wind and allowing Tāwhirimātea to race through my hair, using water to wash drink and cleanse, sleeping and encountering the echoes of the dark, karakia and saying thank you to ngā Atua. My tribal beliefs tell me that whakapapa provides the blueprint to our existence, and we cannot go wrong nor are we alone because it is imprinted in our DNA.

Aria Graham / Ngāti Kahungunu



# What people told us

People told us that Rongoā Māori was natural therefore intrinsic to being Māori. From the kōrero that was shared with us we were able to further refine these in to four key sub themes, namely:

**RONGOĀ ME NGĀ TĀNGATA**  
(People)

**RONGOĀ ME TE TAIAO**  
(Environment)

**RONGOĀ ME TE WAIRUA**  
(Spiritual)

**RONGOĀ ME TE MĀTAURANGA MĀORI**  
(Māori knowledge)

# TE ROHE O TAURANGA MOANA





## RONGOĀ ME NGĀ TĀNGATA

"I've always look at it as a kind of a triangle, eh? As the gods at the top of the triangle or pyramid if you like, man at one corner and nature at the other... and man really has the, how do you say it? Has the, not has the power but is the balance between the forces..."

[on te reo Māori and Rongoā] *"The lullabies that, that, uh, rock babies to sleep and some of the therapy that the mothers use to, to relax babies and to put them off to sleep, you know? Those sorts of things."*

## RONGOĀ ME TE TAIAO

*"Every time I go out fishing, I time it with the moon, and it hasn't turned me down yet, yeah."*

"And like I said with the environment, [it] is the balance of the environment and, you know, we're going through that right now with, with the dredging of the harbour and the digging up of pipi beds and stuff like that. And, you know, the depletion of the maritime life, it's just awful, and we can't go and get pipis anymore because, well, first of all the banks that we used to have, which were, you know, which were abundant no longer exist. And it's awful. And that's a form of Rongoā, you know?"

"The land is being fed all this poison, and it's not gonna be productive anymore. I don't know, it's, you know, it's just hard to kind of picture...for me personally, it goes back to god and god is the dollar and there is no way you're gonna change that. The dollar rules all, eh? And...the rising sea levels is one thing. The change in the climate is another. The predictions that we used to use, like, Matariki and the birds coming and going, were the messengers of what was to come, and the blooming of the trees and all of that, it isn't the same anymore, eh?"

## RONGOĀ ME TE WAIRUA

*"The Rongoā part of te reo is in the karakia....I've had a very good friend who, who had the, who had the power, I suppose...to help his family during illness. Uh, with karakia...so I'm a, I'm a firm believer that karakia is part of the Rongoā process."*



# TE ROHE O WHANGANUI



## RONGOĀ ME NGĀ TĀNGATA

*"Exciting part is about identifying in upcoming generations those who have that natural inclination of the healer in whatever aspect of Rongoā that might be...but I think the whole relationship between Rongoā Māori and tangata is that it's empowering and the moment we start to lose this taonga of knowledge it's that, yeah, we actually disempower ourselves and the generations to come."*

## RONGOĀ ME TE TĀIAO

"Having a relationship with the with the taiao. Yeah. So, and always being, like I think, um, one thing that, that always carries is gratitude, you know? Asking, um, well explaining why you're there for, what you're there for, um, why you're there to get Rongoā when you go to harvest and, and always being grateful, thanking, giving thanks, um, however you do it. It's that hono, te hononga, aye?"

*"All that of the Rongoā, yeah, always had these protocols. And it was about keeping things in balance. And it was also about looking after in a sustainable way the places where we went to take Rongoā from and so, yeah, it was it was a kura wānanga in itself just around Rongoā."*

## RONGOĀ ME TE WAIRUA

*"It's about that, that collective channelling, of being able to sit, if you've got someone that's manini within your clan you gather the healers, you gather those matakite and you collectively work and there's a whole collective channelling."*

## RONGOĀ ME TE MĀTAURANGA MĀORI

"...whakarongo to me says to become like Rongo. So Rongo is the deity or the atua that covers all those sensory perceptions and they are all indicators of health, uh, and we might define it, you know, in to the wairua aspect of the person, um, or even take the tapawha model but, um, yeah, so kia Rongo, to be like unto Rongo. And I suppose that indicates there is a part of us that is naturally aligned to heal and, and to reach out with empathy when others are in need of healing."

*"Approaching Rongoā Māori, yeah, was always part of an integrated system...of tikanga practices...but personally for myself growing up in the world of Rongoā Māori was just natural."*

A wide-angle landscape photograph taken from a high vantage point on a mountain ridge. The foreground shows a steep, grassy slope with some rocky outcrops. The middle ground features a deep valley with rolling green hills, a winding river, and small settlements. The background shows a distant coastline under a sky filled with large, dark clouds, with sunlight breaking through on the right side.

# **TE ROHE O TE MATAU-A-MĀUI**



## RONGOĀ ME NGĀ TĀNGATA

"The old man used to go on, the old maramataka, you know? He'd wake us up and we'd go eeling or rustling cos it was a, you know, good night for, for doing those things so, and it's true... I think that's where some of our healing in terms of the climate and where we're heading lies. We've all gotta go back to doing our own gardens."

*"Rongoā, wai, wai, sure, we've got our ngahere and gardens and everything but a lot of it, I think even before you get to that is your general wellbeing, eh? Your hinengaro and then your tinana, um, has to be, has to have a lot to do with, with wellbeing today."*

## RONGOĀ ME TE TĀIAO

"So that's why I show people in my life how to be aware, awareness is happiness, Rongoā, all of those things, just being aware. Um, the most enjoyable thing in the last ten years has been maramataka coming to the front so that you have to start paying attention."

*"To me Rongoā is eating. Eating energy, mmmm. That's energy to me. I'm here to experience this plane so that I may go home to my natural plane, my natural space who lives in a different space to me. Where we sit around and smile about the, um, astounding feats on earth. That's it to me."*

"Now I see a bigger picture of Rongoā, it's not just the ngahere in a silo... To me Rongoā is now a bigger world. But going back to as we were growing up...so then we had lots of involvement with karakia."

## RONGOĀ ME TE WAIRUA

[What is Rongoā to you?] *"To me it's whatever brings me back to centre, I don't, sometimes it's the, the plants...but for most of the time it's, being still."*

"Because my wairua is this earth and everything in between. Yeah.  
So that's Rongoā to me."

## RONGOĀ ME TE MĀTAURANGA MĀORI

*"Rongoā is not what Pākehā's think it is. It's not some green shit from the bush, put in a hot cup of tea."*

"To me I see the bigger picture of Rongoā. We should all be under the korowai of Rongoā in all aspects of wellbeing."

# Conclusion

In this project we sought to explore the mātauranga Māori that underpins the relationship between Rongoā Māori and our environment. The project, *Toitū te taiao – toitū te tangata*, required both researchers and those we interviewed, to consider what makes Rongoā Māori intrinsic to culturally significant, sustainable practices and to our wellbeing. The views captured in this booklet represent the diverse perspectives of knowledge holders regarding what Rongoā Māori means to them and why it is important we maintain our Rongoā Māori practices.

We know that there has been a long history of suppression and subjugation that has characterised our living as Māori in this nation we now call New Zealand. Whereas a Māori view of our environment is that we are intimately linked to it, and that our health mirrors that of the places in which we dwell, and from where we source our kai; Western notions of health and wellbeing are seemingly divorced from these intimate connections to whenua, to wai and to wairua.

This study has allowed us to share just a hint of the many elements that comprise Rongoā Māori. Rongoā It is more than the kawakawa balm applied to the tamaiti (child) suffering eczema; more than the mirimiri given to the diabetic pakeke (adult); more than the karakia offered to the dying kuia. Rongoā is everything that keeps us well and whole and thriving as Māori - it is being able to plunge our hands into Papatūānuku or dive into Tangaroa and bring forth kai to sustain our whānau and friends; it is being able to croon oriori to our pēpi to soothe their cries; it is the joy and awe evoked by a new performance at Matatini; it is our coming together as a collective to confront a specific topic; it is the quiet times we sit in our wharehau and listen to the voices of our tupuna. Rongoā is also those traditional remedies we use to prevent and treat illness. Our concept of Rongoā must never be compartmentalised or condensed down to simply being a few essential lotions, potions and balms. Such reductionist thinking will, if not challenged, result in the further decimation of Te Ao Māori. The beauty and depth of Rongoā Māori lies in the fact that it is intrinsically tied to who we are as tangata whenua, our place in the world and our connection to this realm and beyond.

Whakauae is committed to contributing to the growing body of work regarding Rongoā Māori. To date, other than this small exploratory piece of work, few studies have attempted to ascertain the range and diversity of wellbeing benefits to which Rongoā contributes, both to the people and to the environments we inhabit. To that end, and building on previous work undertaken by members of the research team, we will investigate the breadth and depth of the practice of Rongoā and identify how, and in what manner, Rongoā delivers benefits within our communities. In our new research project we will work with healers and whānau members to better understand the contribution that Rongoā makes to the health and wellbeing of the Aotearoa/ New Zealand population and our environments. The study seeks to reinstate a wider understanding and appreciation of the nature and significance of Rongoā, restoring our own unique philosophy of wellbeing to our communities.

If you would like to know more about our new study, *Te Ao Rauropi: Mapping the Biosphere of Rongoā Māori*, please contact our team at Whakauae Research Services Ltd.



# References

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