



# TE PŪTAKE – WHAKAUAE RARO

OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES

Number 3, June 2022

Rongoā Māori: more than mirimiri and pani

Dr Glenis Mark, Donna Kerridge, Dr Tanya Allport,  
Gill Potaka-Osborne & Dr Amohia Boulton

## **Rongoā Māori: more than mirimiri and pani**

Dr Glenis Mark, Donna Kerridge, Dr Tanya Allport,  
Gill Potaka-Osborne & Dr Amohia Boulton

Number 3, June 2022

ISSN:2703-6189

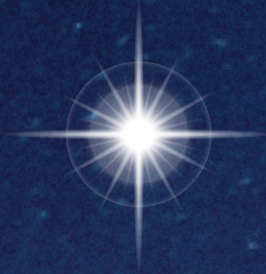
© 2020 Whakauae Research Services Ltd

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Any unauthorised copy, reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this content may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from Whakauae Research Services Ltd.

### **Acknowledgement: Pātiki Pattern** (front cover & throughout)

(front cover & throughout). The kōwhaiwhai pattern is of the pātiki and was designed by Honor McCorkindale for Ngāti Hauiti to reflect one of the mōkai left by Tamatea Pōkai Whenua in the district. Pātiki may still be found in the Rangitīkei River





Ka tiaho mai ngā whetū o Puanga  
Hei tohu o te Kauaerunga  
Ka whitiwhiti mai te rā  
Hei ara ki te Kauaeraro  
Ngā pou o te Whare Kura

*The lights of Rigel glows  
The beacon of celestial origins  
The sun shines bright  
A pathway to terrestrial horizons  
Pillars of higher institutions*

Ko Papatūānuku, i tūhonotia e te  
Pito o Te Hono i Wairua  
Ko Ranginui, i tūhonotia e te kāwai  
i Tākawe o Kahukura  
Ki te Whaiao, ki te Ao mārama

*The female form, joined  
by the umbilical cord to Te Hono i Wairua  
The male form, joined  
by lineage to Tākawe o Kahukura  
Behold the world of light and understanding*

E ngā whānau, e ngā hapū ō  
Ngāti Hauiti whānui  
Nei rā te mihi atu ki a koutou katoa

*To the families and extended families of the  
wider Ngāti Hauiti group  
This is our greetings to you all*

Mauria mai o koutou mate kua tangihia  
kua mihia i waenganui i a tātou

*Bring your departed, so that we may weep  
and pay homage to them together*

Nōreira, e te whānau, tēnā koutou,  
tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa

*Hence whānau, our greeting,  
thrice greetings to you all*

Many generations ago our tupuna, Tamatea Pōkai Whenua travelled through the Rangitīkei valley naming places along the way. The range, that extends, from the north-west of Mangaweka along a ridge to the west behind Taihape, was so named; "Te Whakauae ā Tamatea Pōkai Whenua" (The Jawbone of Tamatea Pōkai Whenua).

The jawbone of a rangatira was said to be where Mātauranga, both celestial and terrestrial knowledge, was stored. It was for that reason Whakauae Research was so named.

We believe that information researched and gathered by Whakauae, in relation to all things Ngāti Hauiti should, most appropriately, be stored in an institution of the same name.

Matua Neville Lomax

## Te Pūtake – Whakauae Raro Occasional Paper Series

*Te Pūtake – Whakauae Raro Occasional Paper Series* is a forum for working papers, original research and review studies, commentary and reflective essays on issues of relevance to whānau, hapū and Iwi Māori. Produced by Whakauae Research, these peer-reviewed papers are designed to disseminate formative thinking, early research findings, critical commentary and ideas to support discussion and engagement around creating positive outcomes for all Māori. The Series explores aspirations, challenges and important new issues arising from research on hauora Māori, where hauora is defined in its broadest sense, and is intended to address a wide audience of national and international change-makers.

The name *Te Pūtake – Whakauae Raro* reflects the merging of two key concepts central to Ngāti Hauiti's tradition of pursuing knowledge and applying that knowledge for the benefit of its people. The kupu pūtake refers to the idea of the source or origins; the origins of Hauiti as a people, but also the origins and creation of knowledge. *Te Pūtake* is also the name given to Ngāti Hauiti's own journal, launched in 2006 and intended to support Iwi advancements through the provision and dissemination of Hauiti-specific whakapapa, waiata, mōteatea, pūrākau and other scholarly writings.

Whakauae Raro, meanwhile refers to the origins of our organisation's name. Our name is derived from Te Whakauae ā Tamatea (the Jawbone of Tamatea), a hill country range between Mangaweka and Taihape in the Rangitikei and named by Hauiti tupuna, Tamatea Pōkai Whenua. In Māori tradition, the jawbone holds significant meaning referring both to te kauae-runga (celestial knowledge) and te kauae-raro (terrestrial, or worldly knowledge). Te Whakauae ā Tamatea provides Ngāti Hauiti with a physical and cultural link to ancestral knowledge and traditions. As the Ngāti Hauiti centre for health research and development, Whakauae Research is a hub for information and knowledge that strives to improve Māori communities and embody the essence of Te Whakauae ā Tamatea.

*Te Pūtake – Whakauae Raro Occasional Paper Series* brings these two traditions of knowledge and information together. Launched during the time of Puanga, this series of occasional papers also serves to remind us of the need to take stock, to reflect on the past, to make time for wānanga and to re-energise for future challenges. Thus, *Te Pūtake – Whakauae Raro Occasional Paper Series* seeks to promote new knowledge, new ways of thinking and of contributing to knowledge and evidence that upholds and supports Māori wellbeing. We hope you enjoy the series.

The Editorial Team





# Rongoā Māori: more than mirimiri and pani

Dr Glenis Mark, Donna Kerridge, Dr Tanya Allport, Gill Potaka-Osborne & Dr Amohia Boulton

## Introduction

This paper explores the definitions, meanings, practices and processes of Rongoā Māori with the aim of generating improved understanding of the breadth and depth of Rongoā. We contend that Rongoā is much more than mirimiri (massage) or pani (ointment) and that there is a need to address misconceptions and misunderstandings of what Rongoā Māori encompasses. We review the literature to understand the general knowledge level about healing practices and to provide reasons why Rongoā is significantly more than physical therapies or herbal remedies alone.

The paper is derived from a research project titled *Te Ao Rauropi: Mapping the biosphere of Rongoā Māori*. The term 'biosphere' was adopted as a way to indicate the complex and comprehensive multiplicities inherent in the nature of Rongoā. A biosphere, a term derived from Western science, describes the biological environment of the Earth where living things thrive and live (Biology Online, 2021). The term 'biosphere' was used in this project to represent the concept that Rongoā is much more than simply physical therapies or herbal remedies. Rather, as a taonga tuku iho (cultural treasure), Rongoā philosophy and healing practices are inextricably intertwined with, and draw upon, an intimate knowledge and understanding of all aspects of our physical environment including the air, water and a deep connection with the power of nature in, and above, the ground. Although the biosphere is not a term commonly associated with Rongoā Māori, we have adopted this term as a way to metaphorically represent the holistic layers and spheres within Māori healing practices, which are often misunderstood and overlooked.

“Rongoā philosophy and healing practices are inextricably intertwined with, and draw upon, an intimate knowledge and understanding of all aspects of our physical environment including the air, water and a deep connection with the power of nature in, and above, the ground.”

To explore the greater meaning of Rongoā Māori in the *Te Ao Rauropi* research project, we began by reviewing how the literature has described the nature of traditional Māori healing. Although defining a Māori cultural taonga (treasure) such as Rongoā is difficult, we approach this exercise as an academic exploration into past and current understandings of Rongoā, as a starting point from which to explore the topic further in the upcoming research.

## Historical overview

A brief overview of the history of understandings of Rongoā is provided here as an introduction to the healing practice. Before European contact, traditional healing was an integral part of Māori culture and society in New Zealand, wherein tohunga (experts in traditional healing) learnt and graduated from whare wānanga (learning institutions) and were accorded a position of authority and respect within their iwi (tribe) (Jones, 2000b).

Traditionally, Māori believed themselves to be guardians of the earth, and lived as one with the natural and supernatural world (McGowan, 2009; Pere, 1991). Illness was seen more as a symptom of a disharmony with nature and traditional beliefs regarding health and illness focused on tapu (sacred) and noa (neutral) (Jones, 2000b; Mark, 2012; Parsons, 1995). Transgression of a tapu, whether temporary or long-term, could lead to sickness or death. When this happened, retribution was made by the tohunga for this transgression, and the patient would return to noa, to neutrality, again. Although other illnesses were caused by sorcery, or mākutū, which could

result in death unless a tohunga could repel the spell, the main cause of illness was believed to be spiritual. There was a natural balance between tapu and noa, which was dynamic, depending on seasonal, environmental, human and other needs which all of Māori society adhered to. These traditional beliefs resulted in a variety of healing practices that consisted of herbal remedies, minor surgical techniques, mirimiri (massage) and spell retribution (Jones, 2000b).

One of the many impacts of colonisation meant that diseases were introduced that tohunga had not experienced before and were unable to counter. The introduction of these diseases, and the devastation they inflicted upon Māori communities, resulted in a number of changes to Māori societal norms and structures including decreasing confidence in the abilities of tohunga Māori and in the traditional systems which Māori employed to maintain their wellbeing. The Tohunga Suppression Act 1907, which prohibited tohunga from practicing healing, was another blow to the practice of traditional healing, as tohunga were seen as scientifically unproven and potentially dangerous (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2008; Jones, 2000b; Mark, 2012).

These processes of colonisation, which challenged traditional Māori beliefs and knowledge of healing activities, resulted in suppression and erosion of Māori knowledge related to sickness and healing (Jones, 2000b). In our current context however, there has been a resurgence of interest in the utilisation of Māori healing practices (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2008; Mark & Lyons, 2010; Mark, 2012; Mark et al., 2017; Mark & Koea, 2018; Mark et al., 2018; McLeod, 1999).

## Current understandings of Rongoā

Rongoā Māori has been described as a holistic system of healing that has developed out of Maori cultural traditions (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2008; Jones, 2000a; Mark, 2012; Mark et al., 2018). Durie et al. (1993) presented an initial list of Rongoā modalities and healing practices within Rongoā Māori, which were underpinned by a Māori worldview and conceptualisation of well-being. These modalities included: ritenga and karakia (incantations and rituals involved with

healing); Rongoā rākau (herbal remedies derived from trees, leaves, berries, fruits, bark and moss such as pani or ointment); mirimiri/romiromi (similar to massage/physiotherapy); wai/hauwai (use of water steam to heal); surgical interventions; and matakite (prophecy, second sight or intuition). Considerable diversity in the application of particular modalities has also been noted (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2008; Jones, 2000a; Kerridge, 2018; Mark, 2012; Mark et al.,

“The critical nature of te taha wairua in Rongoā Māori derives from the traditional beliefs held by Māori that illness occurs as a result of not living 'harmoniously' or in a balanced way (Parsons, 1995), or by transgression of tapu (Jones, 2000a).”

2018). Jones (2000a) took this list of modalities one step further observing that contemporary Māori healers do not necessarily follow a prescribed model or approach to healing. Jones (2000a) explains that this is a consequence of cultural tradition and a long history of oral transmission of knowledge, leading to a specificity of healing methods employed by Māori that vary according to region, iwi (tribe), hapū (sub-tribe) and whānau (extended family).

In addition to the modalities listed above, it has also been indicated by McGowan (2000) that the taha wairua (spiritual side) forms the very basis of Rongoā Māori. The critical nature of te taha wairua in Rongoā Māori derives from the traditional beliefs held by Māori that illness occurs as a result of not living 'harmoniously' or in a balanced way (Parsons, 1995), or by transgression of tapu (Jones, 2000a). The rituals of karakia (prayer) involved in healing address these traditionally based beliefs inherent in the aetiology of illness (McGowan, 2000). Although there is increasing acceptance of aspects of Rongoā Māori pertaining to physical remedies, the spiritual dimension is less accepted by the 'mainstream' health system (McGowan, 2000; Ngata, 2014).

Rongoā Māori is also described as the healing energy of all things, including the restoration and management of our natural resources through an intimate relationship with nature (Kerridge, 2018). Rongoā Māori is a way of living that restores the natural balance, or wellness, in ourselves as human beings and as inhabitants and kaitiaki (caretakers) of this land (Kerridge, 2018).

One of the greatest concerns relating to the understanding of what Rongoā is, and what it is not, is the overall lack of knowledge on the part of New Zealand society as a whole, that Rongoā exists at all, let alone what it entails. In a recent study on the attitudes of health professionals towards the place of Rongoā Māori in the public health system, fewer than half of all respondents (46% - n = 540) indicated familiarity with Rongoā Māori (Koea & Mark, 2020). Furthermore, when questioned in greater detail about their knowledge regarding Rongoā Māori, even fewer respondents were able to identify key components of Rongoā Māori. This study concluded that the provision of Rongoā Māori education for staff who indicated an openness and desire for more information was critical, both to enhance understanding at an individual level (Koea & Mark, 2020) and to ensure the wider health system is better equipped to deal with the needs of Māori. Other research has also shown that there was disbelief and scepticism toward healing practices, which was an undermining force (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2012). Not only is there a need to understand more about what Rongoā entails, but there are likely to be many people in Aotearoa/New Zealand who either do not know Rongoā exists or who are sceptical about the healing practices.

### **Rongoā uses a wide range of techniques, not just mirimiri or pani**

As discussed above, Rongoā has often been defined and understood by reducing it into a simple list of modalities. However, one single healing session may draw upon more than herbal remedies, physical therapies and spiritual practices; indeed, a wide variety of techniques, therapies, and combinations thereof, may be used. In research on diagnosis and Rongoā healing, Jones (2000b) described that during a healing session, an initial impression was formed by the healer followed by kōrero (discussion usually involving a series of questions asked by the healer), and lastly a physical examination. Some healers described using a spiritual examination as a separate entity, used to detect any underlying spiritual problems. Some healers may use the physical therapy of mirimiri to help patients open up and discuss their problems.

There are also many other forms of Rongoā treatment, which may be a part of everyday life, and/or may be included in an official healing session. These could include eating healthy kai (food), karakia, wai (water), mirimiri, romiromi, honohono (connections), through to wairākau (herbal remedies). Rongoā could be used as a preventative to keep well, utilising healthy behaviour such as growing the food that nourishes the body to keep you well, including weeding the garden and turning the soil (Reinfeld & Pihama, 2017). A specific Rongoā product could be used as a face wash or a preventative (Mark, 2014). Kerridge (2020) notes that Rongoā could also include listening and talking, encouraging self-responsibility, pūrākau (myths and legends), sharing stories, taonga puoro (musical instruments) or the sounds of nature, the arts such as weaving, waiata (songs), good food, working in the garden, gathering herbs, gathering seafood, whānau, togetherness, whenua (land) (personal communication, October 19, 2020). Pūrākau about local mountains and history for the local people can be a form of healing, as can spiritual possession and removal, or healing people who have already passed away (Mark & Lyons, 2010; Mark, 2012; Mark et al., 2017).

The use of wairākau is the one technique most commonly known in Rongoā healing (Reinfeld & Pihama, 2017). However, even this form of Rongoā treatment may draw upon a range of plants and plant products depending on the needs of the patient, their symptoms, their geographic location and the skills and knowledge of the healer. Whereas Indigenous plants such as kawakawa (*Macropiper Excelsum*), harakeke (*Phormium tenax*), cabbage leaves, karaka berries (*Corynocarpus laevigatus*), mamaku (*Cyathea medullaris*) and kowhai leaves (*Sophora Microphylla*) are commonly used for a wide variety of applications, there are many more plants that are used in Rongoā herbal remedies (Riley, 1994).



## Rongoā is a vehicle for Māori cultural values

One of the components of Rongoā healing that is overlooked due to the focus on modalities only, is the capacity for Māori cultural values to be embedded and enacted within the treatment practice (Mark et al., 2017). Rongoā can be seen as a vehicle for Māori cultural values that are embedded in healing practices. This is a cultural component that is much more than the healing components alone (Mark, 2012).

There are a number of concepts that are often used when discussing Rongoā Māori, including: mauri, or life force that gives Rongoā its ability to heal; tapu and noa where tapu means to set something or

someone apart, and noa which means to extinguish the tapu (McGowan, 2009). In addition, a range of holistic concepts have also been noted to be a part of the Rongoā healing process (Mark, 2012; Kerridge, 2018).

### Mauri

Mauri (life force of all things) is an abstract concept that is very important and extremely difficult to define in English but which is a key Rongoā Māori concept (Kerridge, 2018; Pere, 1991). Mauri is described as an electrical force that animates the body similar to the electrical impulses passing through the nervous system that gives the body the power of the five senses, touch, sight, hearing, taste and smell (Robinson, 2005). Each individual has a mauri, as do all living things, such as lakes, rivers, the seas, the bush and buildings which have a mauri that should be appreciated and respected. It helps one to relate to and care for everyone and everything across the universe (Pere, 1991). At the heart of Rongoā is the practice of helping to strengthen the mauri or physical/spiritual bond of an individual to assist the body's innate capacity to self-heal (Kerridge 2018).

### Tapu/noa

Tapu can be understood as a protective measure; a way of imposing discipline and social control as well as a key component of spirituality. It can also be described as a way of developing an appreciation and a respect for another human being, another life force, life in general. Any area can be recognised as tapu, irrespective of whether it is man-made e.g. urupa (cemetery) or parts of a marae complex or natural features e.g. awa (rivers), maunga (mountains) and other significant places. Once recognised as being tapu, these areas are treated with respect and reverence (Pere, 1991). Tapu

and noa are fundamental to the health and illness beliefs of Māori. Tapu was traditionally seen as the basis of law and order, founded on sacredness, a divine derivation that governed the interactions between people, communities and the

environment (Jones, 2000a).

Noa as a concept is applied to everyday living and ordinary situations, or any person, place or thing that is free of restriction or protection orders (Jones, 2000a; Pere, 1991). The influence and power of noa frees people from any quality or condition that makes them subject to spiritual and/or ceremonial restriction and influences (Pere, 1991). The principle of noa applied has a complementary role to the principle of tapu, to ensure that a reasonable balance is kept (Jones, 2000a; Pere, 1991).

### Holistic values

A range of holistic values can also be found in Rongoā practice. Healers who took part in a research project on diagnostic practices in Rongoā, conceptualised health as wairua, hinengaro (mental side), tinana (physical side), whānau and mātauranga (education) which relate to the necessary components of what makes someone healthy (Jones, 2000b).

Important aspects of Rongoā healing include values such as aroha (love) to build rapport with people; wairua to receive input from tūpuna (ancestors); kaitiakitanga (care-taking) to take care of the people; utu or reciprocal respect. Also included are shared knowledge, power and control, and equity that ensures that all are informed and agree

“Rongoā can be seen as a vehicle for Māori cultural values that are embedded in healing practices.”

about what is to happen, and tapu where the information shared between healer and patient is confidential (Mark et al., 2018). When practicing Rongoā Māori it can also be important to maintain humility, openness, being non-judgmental, practical, maturity, community and whānau support (Kerridge, 2018).

Each of the values described above show that Rongoā Māori is intrinsically based on Māori cultural values and beliefs that provide a culturally appropriate form of holistic healing treatment (Mark, 2012). Therefore Rongoā is much more than mirimiri or pani because of the capacity of the healers, and healing practice, to embody and enact a wide range of Māori cultural values.

### **Rongoā encompasses Māori health frameworks**

The principles found in Māori health frameworks are also reflected in Rongoā healing practices. Research focusing on the diagnostic practices of healers found that they believed that health is more than just not being sick; it is an all-encompassing holistic concept to keep a healthy mind, body and soul (Jones, 2000b). Māori frameworks of health such as Whare Tapa Whā (Māori model of health based on the four walls of a house) encompass many of the same values and concepts found in Rongoā Māori.

#### *Whare Tapa Whā*

The Māori perspective on health represented by the Whare Tapa Whā model of health (Durie, 1994) is now widely accepted and understood by Māori and non-Māori alike, who work in the New Zealand health system. The model compares health to the four walls of a house, all four being necessary to ensure strength and symmetry with each representing a different dimension of well-being: taha wairua (spiritual), taha hinengaro (mental), taha tinana (physical), taha whānau (family) (Durie, 1994).

Taha wairua is an essential requirement for Māori health that involves having faith and being able to understand the connections between people and the environment (Durie, 1994). The wairua concepts that can be seen in

Rongoā Māori healing include spirituality, faith, belief in self, others and a higher power, collective consciousness, connection, communication, regulation of instinct, intuition, contentment, and caring (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2012).

Taha hinengaro is about the mental capacity and expression of thoughts and feelings. In a Māori worldview, thoughts and feelings derive from an integrative and holistic perspective, rather than being analytical.

Explanations are sought by searching outwards rather than inwards, including relationships with others such as whānau, and poor health is related to a breakdown in harmony between the individual and the wider environment (Durie, 1994). The concepts reflecting hinengaro in Rongoā practice include mental states; cognition, emotional states, consciousness, belief, behaviour, insight, understanding and the

connection to the physical dimension (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2012).

Taha tinana (bodily health) is expressed through the tapu and noa concepts relating to different parts of the body. The head is regarded as special and tapu, where other bodily functions such as sleeping are noa activities. In particular, food which is a leveller that removes people from sacred states (Durie, 1994). In Rongoā practice, the tinana concepts/indicators considered by healers include mobility, flexibility, posture, balance, coordination, pain including self-assessed, circulation, flow of the breath, blood, energy, fluid, āhua or the overall presentation, body language, poise and quality of life (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2012)

The taha whānau acknowledges the importance of extended family for health. The family is the prime support system for Māori, who also take collective responsibility for the health of individual family members. Whānau also give Māori a sense of identity and purpose (Durie, 1994). The concepts relating to whānau in Rongoā Māori include whakapapa (genealogy), roles and responsibilities, identity, connectedness, mana (prestige), leadership, influence, participation (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2012).

“Research focusing on the diagnostic practices of healers found that they believed that health is more than just not being sick; it is an all-encompassing holistic concept to keep a healthy mind, body and soul (Jones, 2000b).”

## Rongoā is utilised by patients for many reasons

Rongoā is well known for providing herbal remedies, physical remedies and spiritual practices during healing sessions for a wide variety of reasons (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2008; Jones, 2000a; Kerridge 2018; Mark, 2012; Riley, 1994). In 2006, Durie identified three levels of outcomes that patients may receive from the traditional healing process: the alleviation of distress, improved well-being and the modification of lifestyle. The alleviation of distress is about reducing the level of physical, spiritual, emotional or social discomfort for the patient. Improved wellbeing is linked to a holistic approach to healing and recognition of multiple dimensions of wellbeing (Mark & Lyons, 2010). Modification of lifestyle for a greater lifestyle balance is another goal of traditional healing to help patients with their wellbeing.

We know that patients seek out and utilise Rongoā for a wide range of reasons. Patients often use herbal remedies at home such as kawakawa as a daily tonic, to clear the blood, for facial skin care or in the bath, as a blood purifier, for weight loss or for sores. Patients have used Rongoā to heal from major car accidents and people also learn about their spiritual gifts and understandings from healers as well as Māori cultural health issues (Mark, 2014). Rongoā practitioners have found that patients utilise Rongoā because it works for them, and they feel listened to and respected by the healers, with whom they feel safe to tell their stories. Often healers are local and well-known within their community. For some members of the community going to a Rongoā healer is a 'safer' option than attending a General Practitioner clinic. For example, elders may be less comfortable in the Western health system; mothers may be anxious about being judged; and yet others want to discontinue their physician-prescribed medications. Those who are disadvantaged or whakamā (embarrassed) about their situation, for example, victims of domestic violence/sexual abuse may not feel comfortable sharing their symptoms with a health professional, but feel comfortable telling a healer (D. Kerridge, personal communication, November 15, 2020).

In addition, Rongoā is considered a part of natural everyday life, rather than useful in a healing session only. Research has showed that Rongoā includes practical

knowledge for multiple purposes e.g. survival, sustenance, safety, identifying fishing spots for sourcing kai moana, and knowledge of plants in the ngahere (forest) that are edible (Wikaire, 2020). Rather than a 'healing treatment,' Rongoā is described as simply the normal process of whānau showing manaakitanga (caring) for other whānau members. Research participants recall childhood memories of their whānau members administering Rongoā Māori for health problems. To the participants this was a normal part their lives, often using locally available plants and traditional methods of application (Wikaire, 2020).

Rongoā Māori is particularly valuable for those patients who have an issue or concern related to spiritual or cultural issues, because they often cannot find the appropriate assistance or support they require from any other source.

“ Modification of lifestyle for a greater lifestyle balance is another goal of traditional healing to help patients with their wellbeing. ”

**Rongoā encompasses respect and care of the taiao (environment)**

Rongoā is known as being a healing treatment first and foremost. However, the environment plays a central part in the philosophy and processes of Māori healing (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2008). Rongoā Māori is a way of reconnecting with the land in order to restore wellness not just for the people, but also to the land itself, which will in turn nurture and provide for the needs of the people (Kerridge, 2018).

According to McGowan (2009), the starting point for learning Rongoā Māori is the ngahere, Te Wao Nui a Tāne, the forest. According to whakapapa, Māori share a common tūpuna with the trees and plants, and all the creatures in the forest. All are descended from Tāne (God of the forest) and it is because of this common origin that Māori develop an intimate relationship with the forest. The trees, the birds, and all the living creatures in the forest are tuākana (senior) to people (McGowan, 2009). In recent research, participants acknowledge the whakapapa connections between humans and atua (god/s) through knowledge that is passed down from the atua as taonga tuku iho (treasure handed down the generations). These whakapapa connections include ancestral scientific knowledge of the natural environment, which is fundamental to Rongoā systems, and connection to the atua tūpuna (sacred ancestors) (Wikaire, 2020).

Rongoā practice involves connection to, and interaction with, the natural environment. Key natural resources including water, sun and wind are essential to Rongoā practice in alignment with seasonal ecological changes (Wikaire, 2020). It is important to protect natural resources such as plants in order for them to be available for Rongoā purposes (Wikaire, 2020). There is a collective responsibility to care for the land, and to pass it on for future generations. Respect for, appreciation of and conservation of the natural environment are encouraged and are important for Māori, and part of Rongoā practice (Mark, 2008; Pere, 1991; Wikaire, 2020).

“In addition, Rongoā Māori healers describe reciprocal mutual communication between people and plants that creates a synergy, which enriches the healer and enhances the potency of plants in Māori healing.”

The sustainability of the ngahere, and the maintenance of the very source of Rongoā materials has been noted as important to the participants in several research projects (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2008; Reinfeld & Pihama, 2007; Wikaire, 2020). Without access to Rongoā materials, the maintenance of the tradition of Rongoā would be near impossible. Participants noted the difficulties in accessing clean rākau (plants) were a result of loss of land, deforestation and increasing pollution (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2008).

A connection to the environment is also shown in tūrangawaewae, which refers to specific whakapapa/Māori geographical ancestral land connections. Rongoā is about connecting with and to the natural environment of personal, whānau, hapū and iwi ancestry in terms of whakapapa such as marae (ancestral meeting house) and maunga (mountain) (Wikaire, 2020).

In addition, Rongoā Māori healers describe reciprocal mutual communication between people and plants that creates a synergy, which enriches the healer and enhances the potency of plants in Māori healing. This synergy occurs during the picking and preparing stages of the healing, where communication happens between the healer and the plants. Plants are viewed by healers as individual entities that are alive, imbued with the ability to communicate, and who have their own stories and genealogy. When a plant is taken, there is an acknowledgement of the spiritual world, through karakia,

and this continues during the preparation of herbal remedies (Mark, 2012). Other healing stories focus on clearing and providing healing to the land, rather than people. Because the land is viewed as a living entity, healers believe it is possible to heal the land in a way that is similar to healing a person (Mark et al., 2017).

Rongoā encompasses respect and care of the taiao because it is an inherent part of Māori cultural identity and conservation responsibility. In addition, the taiao provides the herbal material used in Rongoā healing, and there is a strong connection with the

environment that includes communication with plants and healing the land itself.

### Rongoā derives the power to heal from the wairua

McGowan (2009) advocates that knowing the medicinal uses of native plants is important, but that the foundation of Rongoā Māori is not the rākau (trees and plants), but the taha wairua or the spiritual dimension. The spiritual dimension can be seen in the physical world, because even rocks and other inanimate objects have both a spiritual dimension and a mauri (Kerridge, 2018; McGowan, 2009). Wairua is a way of describing spirit as denoting two waters, both positive and negative streams. Everything has a wairua, or an energy, and it is a matter of keeping a balance (Pere, 1991; Valentine, 2009). Wairua has an intellect of its own, as though it has its own language (Mark, 2008).

Wairua for Māori has also been described as an infinite energy without physical boundaries, which cannot be defined because it is a perceived sensation and is relational. Wairua is fundamental for Māori, encompassing the Māori concepts of mauri, whakawhiti whakaaro (communication), whakapapa, whenua, tapu and mana (personal spiritual integrity) (Valentine, 2009).

The role of wairua Māori in nurturing spirituality and faith has also been raised by research participants in terms of healing and general wellbeing. Key themes relate to religion/spirituality such as tohunga, matakite and karakia. For Māori, religion and Māori spirituality, may not

be mutually exclusive, and whānau may be involved in more than one church (Reinfeld & Pihama, 2007).

Karakia is seen as the most commonly used practice for healing alongside rākau (Reinfeld & Pihama, 2007). Karakia, or prayer, establishes or re-establishes the connections that make all things one (McGowan, 2009). Karakia and waiata can be used daily as part of overall wellbeing, as well as in more formal situations. Karakia is a Rongoā in itself and has the power to transform people's illnesses or circumstances (Reinfeld & Pihama, 2007).

Research also shows how wairua offers insight, knowing and direction in Rongoā healing (Wikaire, 2020). Spirituality is seen as a natural phenomenon that involves family spiritual guides and spiritual tohu (signs). Māori healers refer to family spiritual guides that connect them with God and provide them with healing information (Mark, 2008). Rongoā Māori recognises the ancestors of everyone involved in the healing process and enlists the power of many generations (Kerridge, 2018).

Healers spoken to as part of one research project observed that it is really the ancestors doing the healing, because they offer the messages to the healer of how to do the work. Such messages could be communicated through words, or a feeling, which is directed, guided and conducted by the tūpuna (Mark et al., 2017). Māori healers have also indicated modes of receiving messages through nature and senses such as colour or smell or through dreams or written messages (Mark, 2008).

The term used to describe someone who uses spiritual gifts is matakite, or prophet, seer, clairvoyant. Ngata's (2014) work on the nature of matakite experiences found that these spiritual gifts may include an element of premonition and may also carry important messages regarding the health of the individual or of the wider community. Matakite is a concept that encompasses a multi-sensory and multi-dimensional nature involving intuition working through all the five senses, as well as mystical experiences and beyond, which may not be perceptible to others (Ngata, 2014). The term "matakite" refers to this experience of heightened intuition "... or

an ability to understand something instinctively, with conscious reasoning or spiritual insight or communication" (Ngata, 2014:101).

It must also be acknowledged that no single term could completely encompass the entire experience of matakite (Ngata, 2014). Even traditional healers experience difficulties in quantifying and measuring wairuatanga, and question whether that is either appropriate or even possible (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2012). Matakite and wairua are both described above in experiential terms, rather than definitively, in an effort to explore, rather than to limit, their definitions.

### Rongoā is a site of decolonisation and sovereignty

Rongoā may be harnessed by the wider Māori community, and employed as a tool of decolonisation, in efforts to achieve sovereignty. Mark (2012) explores the contribution of Rongoā to the greater advancement of Māori tino rangatiratanga (self-determination), particularly when Rongoā is considered in terms of conservation and protection of environmental resources as well as preservation of sacred Māori knowledge. Rongoā is more than just a healing tool – the philosophy and principles that are inherent within Rongoā can contribute to addressing issues of sovereignty and the survival of Māori cultural traditions.

“Rongoā is more than just a healing tool – the philosophy and principles that are inherent within Rongoā can contribute to addressing issues of sovereignty and the survival of Māori cultural traditions.”

Rongoā is a cultural taonga that should be respected, protected and treasured as an entity in its own right, rather than sitting under the umbrella of complementary and alternative medicine (Mark et al., 2019). Unlike Rongoā, therapies that are termed complementary or alternative may not have a cultural basis nor the Māori values or customs associated with an Indigenous worldview. Rongoā is a traditional healing practice that has deeper and underlying ontological and epistemological connections. Rongoā includes the right of Māori to access traditional medicine and related practices, but also to the ability to access, protect, and maintain the lands and cultural practices within which Rongoā operates (Mark et al., 2019).

Rongoā is the only healing practice native to Aotearoa/ New Zealand. Māori cultural values and beliefs will not be found in any other complementary and alternative modality, making it a unique and distinctive form of cultural healing treatment (Mark & Koea, 2018). Furthermore, and as observed by Jones (2000a), the right to practice Rongoā as a cultural tradition is enshrined within the Treaty of Waitangi. There is no other complementary and alternative medicine that has a Crown Treaty obligation to ensure Indigenous peoples can utilise their own traditional healing system.

“Traditional healing should be recognised as a legitimate form of Māori health care, and Māori should be guaranteed access to this part of their cultural heritage.”

Traditional healing is a repository of Māori culture and history and represents a taonga (treasure) (Jones, 2000a; Waitangi Tribunal, 2011). The articles of the Treaty of Waitangi are relevant to Rongoā healing in several ways. Article One establishes a partnership and the right of the Crown to govern; Article Two guarantees that Māori have self-determination over all their taonga; and Article Three relates to citizen rights and social equity. Traditional healing should be recognised as a legitimate form of Māori health care, and Māori should be guaranteed access to this part of their cultural heritage. It is critical that Māori ownership of this cultural tradition is assured, and that measures are adopted to protect its intellectual property against exploitation (Jones, 2000a; Waitangi Tribunal, 2011).

Traditional healing has a collective impact, as well as an individual one, and has been described as a tool of resistance against the effects of colonisation (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2009). In research undertaken with Māori healers, those healers spoke about changes in Māori thinking that have occurred as a result of the process of colonisation. Healers noted that the process of colonisation and subsequent diminishing of the mana of Rongoā has in turn narrowed our understanding of Rongoā (Mark, 2012). Rather than a healing function only, Rongoā holds a significant role within Māoridom to impact Māori

individually as well as collectively, for the benefit of the whānau, hapū and iwi (Mark 2012).



## Conclusion

Through an exploration of the current literature, we have shown that Rongoā healing may be regarded as a multi-faceted practice that uses a variety of physical, mental and spiritual techniques, which embody and enact a wide range of Māori cultural values.

Techniques and modalities can be ascribed to any form of complementary or alternative medicine. However, we advocate that Rongoā has a greater purpose and meaning than a list of modalities for a number of reasons, not the least of these being that Rongoā:

- uses a wide range of techniques;
- is a vehicle for Māori cultural values;
- encompasses Māori health frameworks;
- is utilised by patients for many reasons;
- encompasses respect and care of the taiao;
- derives the power to heal from the wairua; and
- is a site of decolonisation and sovereignty.

This paper offers an initial exploration of the meaning of Rongoā Māori healing supported by the literature. Most New Zealanders do not even know that Rongoā Māori exists, let alone grasp its wider contributions of cultural values and sovereignty, in addition to healing. The *Te Ao Rauropi* research project aims to increase awareness. We anticipate an exploration that will bring further understanding and a greater expansion of the nature of Rongoā healing. The length and breadth of Rongoā Māori is much greater than most people realise, and while that may be an issue of education, or lack of interest or awareness, Rongoā Māori is a part of the cultural heritage for Māori and all people of Aotearoa/New Zealand. A greater focus on learning more about Rongoā may reduce the discrimination against, misunderstanding of, and lack of awareness about, the fuller practice and value of Rongoā healing.



## Glossary

Āhua	overall presentation
Aroha	love
Atua	god
Atua tūpuna	sacred ancestors
Hā a koro mā, a kui mā	breath of life from forbearers
Hapū	sub-tribe
Harakeke	Phormium tenax
Hau ora	physical health and wellness*
Hawaiki	ancestral homeland
Hinengaro	mental side
Honohono	connections
Iwi	tribe
Kai	food
Kaitiakitanga	care-taking
Karaka	Corynocarpus laevigatus
Karakia	prayer
Kaumātua	elders
Kawakawa	Micropiper Excelsum
Kowhai	Sophora Microphylla
Mākutu	sorcery, curse
Mamaku	Cyathea medullaris
Mana	prestige/personal spiritual integrity
Mana ake	unique identity
Manaaki	care
Manaakitanga	caring
Manawaora	capacity for growth and development*
Māoritanga	Māori culture
Marae	ancestral meeting house
Matakite	prophet/prophecy, seer, clairvoyant, second sight or intuition
Mātauranga	education/knowledge
Maunga	mountain
Mauri	life force of all things
Mauri ora	cultural identity/elemental essence*
Mirimiri	massage
Ngahere	forest
Ngā manukura	community leadership
Noa	neutral
Pani	ointment
Pūrākau	myths and legends
Rākau	plants
Rāranga	weaving
Ritenga	incantations
Romiromi	deep tissue massage
Rongoā Māori	traditional healing
Ruaukoko	god of volcanoes and earthquakes
Taonga puoro	instruments
Taha wairua	spiritual side
Taiao	environment
Tāne	short for Tāne-mahuta, god of the forest
Tāne-mahuta	god of the forests
Tangaroa	god of the seas
Tangata whaiora	patients
Taonga	treasure

Taonga tuku iho	treasure handed down the generations
Tapu	sacred
Tāwhirimātea	god of the winds
Te Ao Rauropi	literally 'The Biosphere' but is a term coined as the name of our research project exploring the nature and meaning of Rongoā Māori
Te Mana Whakahaere	autonomy
Te Oranga	participation in society
Te Pae Mahutonga	Māori model of health based on the Southern Cross
Te reo Māori	Māori language
Te Wao nui a Tāne	the forest
Te Wheke	Māori model of health based on the eight tentacles of the octopus
Tikanga	customs, traditions
Tinana	physical side
Tino rangatiratanga	self-determination
Tohu	signs
Tohunga	experts in traditional healing
Toiora	healthy lifestyles
Tuakana	senior
Tupuna /tūpuna	ancestors
Tūrangawaewae	specific whakapapa
Uri	descendants
Urupā	cemetery
Utu	reciprocity
Wai	water
Waiata	songs
Waiora	total wellbeing/physical environment/essential element of wairua*
Wairākau	herbal remedies
Wairua	spirit/spiritual
Wairuatanga	spirituality
Whakamā	embarrassed
Whakapapa	genealogy
Whakawhiti whakaaro	communication
Whānau Ora	family wellness
Whatumanawa	healthy expression of emotion
Whānau	family
Whanaungatanga	extended family
Whare Tapa Whā	Māori model of health based on the four walls of a house
Whare wānanga	learning institutions
Whenua	land

*\* Please note that these words have been adapted into terms that are contextual in nature and may have been combined to represent a theme in specific research which may not be literal translations.*

## References

- Ahuriri-Driscoll, A., Baker, V., Hepi, M., Hudson M. (2008). *The future of Rongoā Māori: well-being and sustainability*. Wellington: Institute of Environmental Science and Research Ltd.
- Ahuriri-Driscoll, A., Hudson, M., Bishara, I., Milne, M., Stewart, M. (2012). *Ngā Tohu o te Ora: traditional Māori healing and wellness outcomes*. Porirua, NZ: Institute of Environmental Science and Research (ESR) Ltd.
- Biology Online. (2021). *Biosphere*. Retrieved April 2, 2021 from <https://www.biologyonline.com/dictionary/biosphere>
- Durie, M., Potaka, U., Ratima, K., Ratima, M. (1993). *Traditional Māori healing: a paper prepared for the National Advisory committee on Core Health and Disability Support Services*. Palmerston North: Massey University.
- Durie, M. (1994). *Whaiora*. Oxford University Press. Victoria, Australia.
- Durie, M. (1999). *Te Pae Māhutonga: A Model for Māori Health Promotion*. Retrieved from <https://www.cph.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/TePaeMahutonga.pdf>
- Durie, M. (2006). *Measuring the effectiveness of rongoā. Conference: what is rongoā practice? Otaki: Te Wānanga o Raukawa*.
- Jones, R. (2000a). *Rongoā Māori and Primary Health Care* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Auckland, Auckland.
- Jones, R. (2000b). Diagnosis in traditional Māori healing: a contemporary urban clinic. *Pacific Health Dialog*, 7(1), 17-24.
- Kerridge, D. (2018). *Rongoā Rākau Māori Herbal Medicine*. Oakura Bay, New Zealand: Ora New Zealand.
- Koea, J., Mark, G. (2020). Is there a role for Rongoā Māori in public hospitals? The results of a hospital staff survey. *New Zealand Medical Journal*, 133(1513).
- McLeod, M. K. (1999). *E iti noa na te aroha: a qualitative exploration into the realms of Māori healing* [Master's thesis, University of Waikato], Hamilton. <https://www.worldcat.org/title/iti-noa-na-te-aroha-a-qualitative-exploration-into-the-realms-of-maori-healing/oclc/154642163>
- Mark, G. (2008). *Conceptualising mind, body, spirit interconnections: perspectives of Māori and non-Māori healers* (Unpublished master's thesis). Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand.
- Mark, G. (2012). *Rongoā Māori (Traditional Māori healing) through the eyes of Māori healer: Sharing the Healing while Keeping the Tapu*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand.
- Mark, G. (2014). *Huarahi Rongoā ki a ngāi tātou: Māori views on Rongoā Māori and primary health*. Whakauae Research for Māori Health and Development: Whanganui.
- Mark, G., Boulton, A., Kerridge, D. (2019). Rongoā Māori is not a complementary and alternative medicine: Rongoā Māori is a way of life. *Indigenous Women in Research: Global Conversations on Indigeneity, Rights and Education*, 3(1), 1-17.
- Mark, G., Chamberlain, K., Boulton, A. (2017). Acknowledging the Māori cultural values and beliefs embedded in Rongoā Māori healing. *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, 12(1).
- Mark, G., Johnson, M., Boulton, A. (2018). *Cultural, Ethical, Research, Legal and Scientific Issues in Rongoā Māori research*. Whanganui: Whakauae Research for Māori Health and Development.
- Mark, G., Koea, J. (2018). *Knowledge and attitudes of health professionals on Rongoā Māori in hospitals*. Auckland: Health Research Council.
- Mark, G. T., Lyons, A. (2010). Māori healers' views on wellbeing: The importance of mind, body, spirit, family and land. *Social Science & Medicine*, 70, 1756-1764.

- McGowan, R. (2000). *The contemporary use of rongoā Māori: traditional Māori medicine* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Waikato, Hamilton.
- McGowan, R. (2009). *Rongoā Māori: a practical guide to traditional Māori medicine*. Tauranga: Robert McGowan.
- Ministry of Health. (2017). *Māori health models – Te Pae Mahutonga*. Retrieved from [https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/pages/maori\\_health\\_model\\_tepaemahutonga\\_0.pdf](https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/pages/maori_health_model_tepaemahutonga_0.pdf)
- Ngata, R. (2014). *Understanding Matakite: A Kaupapa Māori Study on the Impact of Matakite/Intuitive Experiences on Wellbeing* (Unpublished doctoral thesis). Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.
- Parsons, C. (ed). (1995). Notes on Māori sickness knowledge and healing practices. In *Healing Practices in the South Pacific*. University of Hawaii Press: 213-234.
- Pere, R. R. (1991). *Te Wheke: a celebration of infinite wisdom*. Wairoa, NZ: Ao Ako Learning New Zealand.
- Reinfeld, M., Pihama, L. (2007). *Matarākau: Ngā kōrero mō ngā Rongoā o Taranaki*. Foundation for Research Science & Technology/Health Research Council: Taranaki.
- Riley, M. (1994). *Māori healing and herbal*. Paraparaumu: Viking Sevensseas NZ Ltd.
- Robinson, S. T. (2005). *Tohunga: The Revival: Ancient Knowledge for the Modern Era*. Auckland: Reed Books.
- Valentine, H. (2009). *Kia Ngāwari ki te Awatea: The relationship between Māori and well-being: a psychological perspective* (Unpublished doctoral thesis). Palmerston North: Massey University.
- Waitangi Tribunal. (2011). *Ko Aotearoa Tēnei: A Report into Claims Concerning New Zealand Law and Policy Affecting Māori Culture and Identity. Te Taumata Tuarua volume 2*. [https://forms.justice.govt.nz/search/WT/reports/reportSummary.html?reportId=wt\\_DOC\\_68356606](https://forms.justice.govt.nz/search/WT/reports/reportSummary.html?reportId=wt_DOC_68356606)
- Wikaire, E. I. (2020). *The Past, Present and Future of Traditional Indigenous Healing: What was, is, and will be, Rongoā Māori* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.





## **Rongoā Māori: more than mirimiri and pani**

© 2020 Whakauae Research Services Ltd

For more information about this study contact:  
Whakauae Research for Māori Health & Development,  
19 Ridgway St, Whanganui. Phone 06 347 6773.

[www.whakauae.co.nz](http://www.whakauae.co.nz)

ISSN: 2703-6189



The production of Te Pūtaka – Whakauae Raro is made possible through the Independent Research Organisation Funding which Whakauae receives from the Health Research Council of New Zealand.