

# Ngaa ahuatanga marire mo te koiora

## The Elementals essential for life

Ruth Port (Te Rarawa, Te Aupouri)

*Ngaa ahuatanga marire mo te koiora...*

The Elementals essential for life...

*Ngaa hau e hurihuri o te waa*

The changing winds of time.

*Tamanui-te-raa - te poro ahi nui ka whakawhiwhia e te tuuramaarama me te puumaahana*

The sun – our magnificent ball of fire that gifts light and warmth

*Te ao aumangea ka tautokonatia moo te hemo tonu atu*

The resilient Earth that forever supports

*Ngaa tai a Kupe, e tai nui, e tai roa ana ki te moana*

The tides that eternally flow in and out.

*Maa te wairua te mauri kaa too wai tia te kaatoa*

and always the spirit that moves in all.

*Ngaa ahuatanga marire moo te koiora*

The Elementals essential for life...

### **Te Rā – the Māori Sail**

The only surviving example of a Māori rā (sail) lay in darkness in the British Museum's basement in London over a long period of time before coming to light in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This writing will follow a journey of re-connection and knowledge recovery by a small group of kairaranga (Māori weavers), who travelled twice from Aotearoa (New Zealand) to spend time with Te Rā, and closely study how the sail was made. On their return home they began the lengthy and complex task of unravelling long lost techniques used by Māori ancestral sail makers.

### **How did Te Rā come to be in the British Museum?**

Te Rā may have been collected during Captain James Cook's second voyage to Aotearoa during 1772 –1775, Following a fatal dispute between the crew of the second ship, *Adventure*, and local Māori in Queen Charlotte Sound, two waka (canoes) were confiscated by Captain Tobias Furneaux and taken back to Britain. Only one waka was eventually returned home and it is not known if the other waka was amongst taonga (Māori treasures) gifted to the British Museum by the British Admiralty. However, researchers have not yet found any clear reference to a woven sail in the documentation of

the time therefore no one knows exactly how the British acquired Te Rā, or how it ended up in the British Museum. (1.)

## **Background**

In 2010 two experienced weavers, Ruth Port (Te Rarawa, Te Aupōuri) and Mandy Sunlight (Tangata Tauīwi), along with Ruth's daughter Nane' McLean (videographer), travelled to London to visit the British Museum. They had originally gained permission to spend three days studying taonga Maori one of which, Te Rā, had to make a specific application in order to be granted a viewing.

The seeds for the weavers' research had been sown twelve years previously when Maureen Lander (Ngapuhi), an artist, weaver, and academic, first saw Te Rā in London in 1998 when she visited the *Māori* exhibition in the British Museum. As a senior lecturer in Māori Material Culture at Auckland University, Maureen later returned to document the sail hoping to revive some of the knowledge it embodied as a research project for students in her courses. She soon realised that it would take a team of experienced kairaranga to take on such a task.

When an invitation from the British Museum to Maureen was received in 2009, Maureen offered the opportunity to Mandy, Ruth and Rouati Waata, Mandy's daughter who was also a talented weaver. As Rouati was unable to travel at the time, Nane' accompanied Ruth and Mandy to document the journey. A Tahitian sailor, Tahiarī'i Pariente accompanied the weavers on the day they were able to view Te Rā which was fortuitous, as the weavers gained valuable insights from Tahī's voyaging perspective relating to the sail's design features.

Te Rā illustrates the significance of both raranga and voyaging to Māori culture, and makes connections with Polynesian histories, skills and knowledge. Te Rā highlights the desire to explore new horizons and the extraordinary skills required to adapt to life in a new world.

Te Rā is also an important and tangible expression of what makes Aotearoa special, reflecting Māori adaptations to a different environment and way of living following their migration across the Pacific.

Aotearoa's natural forests and huge trees led to the development of a range of single hull waka and the constantly changing winds led to smaller more manoeuvrable sails, particularly in coastal sailing. Some sails were made from raupō (bulrush, *Typha orientalis*) but the finer sails like Te Rā were woven from harakeke (NZ flax, *Phormium tenax*) an indigenous plant that underpinned the survival of Māori in Aotearoa in numerous ways. Te Rā is a woven spirit sail and is thought to have been used mostly for coastal sailing, as depicted in early drawings of waka by explorers to Aotearoa.

The re-creation of sails similar to Te Rā is important for the reclamation and preservation of mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge). The intricately made sail, measuring 4.5 metres tall and 2 metres across at its widest point, is exquisite and embodies much mana (prestige). Tufts of notched kukupa/kererū (wood pigeon) and kāhu (hawk) feathers adorn the top. Kirikuri (dog-skin) and small red huruhuru kākā (parrot feathers) grace the loops that attach the sail to its spars. The matairangi (pennant) is completely adorned with notched kukupa feathers on three sides, the fourth side being attached to the sail.

Te Rā is made of thirteen woven papa (panels). A complex three-way puareare (pattern of woven holes) extends throughout the papa, including through the complex hono (joins), which is something not seen today within Māori weaving. From the different weaving tensions it was evident to the weavers that Te Rā was woven by a group rather than by a single weaver and they found it incredible and somewhat poignant that they could connect through touch not only with Te Rā herself, but also with the DNA of weavers' fingers from many generations ago..

“Taonga, the carriers, the messengers of many other layers of meaning and existence. The nature of things beyond their actual appearance.”<sup>2</sup>

## **The Recreation of Te Rā**

Upon the return of Mandy, Ruth and Rouati from their second trip to the British Museum in 2019, where the group specifically documented Te Rā through photographs, moving images, diagrams, drawings, tauira (small woven flax samplers) and measurements, they set to work to recreate the ancient sail.

Each of the three weavers had been assigned specialist roles by Maureen Lander - Rouati the raranga (plait work), Mandy the muka (flax fibre) work, and Ruth the feathers. At Pā te Aroha marae, the group expanded to include Makareta Jahnke, Kerrin Taylor and Maikara Ropata and together they took on the name Te Rā Ringa Raupā (the calloused hands making Te Rā).

The preparation to upskill in order to begin their first sail took much more time than anticipated. During January 2000 Ruth and Mandy commenced their first sail, Hine Marama, and it took Te Rā Ringa Raupā (TRRR) eighteen months to complete her.

The weavers learned so much from creating their first rā - both what to do and what not to do. The work was incredibly fine, and the team had to “learn the hard way” about the importance of grading the harakeke to eliminate imperfections.

In preparation for the raranga, each leaf was sized at 12 millimetre strips, softened and boiled and then dried to preserve the prepared strips for when they were required. After re-hydrating with water, the kōrari strips were ready to use. They were whatu/twined together and then further divided into four 2-3 millimetre wide strips. Because of the preserving method Te Rā Ringa Raupā could harvest more in the summer months when the weather was better for harvesting and then simply re-hydrate as required.

In mid 2021, at the blessing and naming of their completed smaller sail, Hine Marama, the first of the prepared whenu (flax strips) for weaving the full-sized rā, Māhere Tū ki te Rangī, were also blessed.

All the weaving of Māhere Tū ki te Rangī was done in the whare (building), Tū te Whiritoi at Pa Te Aroha Marae and most of Hine Marama was as well. The first winter of weaving Hine Marama took place in Makareta’s converted cow shed as Tū te Whiritoi was unheated and very cold. The team remedied the cold the next year by asking the marae committee for heaters which were supplied and thereafter they remained in Tū te Whiritoi while they completed their challenge.

The majority of the harakeke used for the weaving was harvested from pā harakeke (flax gardens) at Pā te Aroha Marae in Whirinaki, Hokianga but some was gathered from Pehiaweri Marae in Whangārei where it had also been planted as a readily available resource for weaving.

The main variety used for the raranga was ‘taeore’ because the leaves are long, strong and very pliable, while the muka (extracted fibre) came from ‘kohunga’ which was used for the cordage because of its high yield as well as its strength and superior length which meant the weavers didn’t need to add in as often.

While the weavers already knew how to make two ply aho (threads) for stitching, the cordage is 6 ply rope and much thicker. For this they received expert assistance from Dante Bonica, a retired lecturer

in Māori Material Culture at Auckland University, who taught them the complex technique of how to miro (twine) 6 strands together by rolling them in sequence on the leg.

Obtaining some of the other resources required to recreate the full-sized sail was challenging. While Te Rā Ringa Raupā had easy access to good harakeke, they weren't so easily able to source more than sixteen hundred kukupa, kāhu and kākā feathers, as well as some small dog-skin strips.

Luckily for the weavers, through the Department of Conservation, plus various individuals and groups around the country, the feathers were gifted. The dog-skin was sourced through a personal friend who loved his dog so much that he cured the skin and was thrilled to have a small part of his beloved dog live on in another form, attached to the muka binding on the takaore (cringles) along with small red kaka feathers.

One cannot overlook the significance of the use of muka on Te Rā. For our tūpuna/ancestors this fibre had extraordinary properties. "Muka was seen not only as a concrete way to represent wairua, or life force, but also powerfully symbolic of the unseen- the spiritual element that, to Māori, permeates all aspects of life" 3

Alicia Courtney, an expert in feathers and commonly known as "Feather Girl", was able to completely revolutionise Te Rā Ringa Raupā's approach to the feather notching required on most of the manu huruhuru (bird feathers) attached to their rā.

This was one example of unlocking more knowledge and insights between the first experience of making the smaller practice sail, Hine Marama, and then learning new skills while working on Māhere Tū ki te Rangi.

### **Te Wero o Te Rangihiroa**

Te Rā Ringa Raupā was under pressure to complete Māhere Tū ki te Rangi by December 14 2022. This date was significant as the hundred-year anniversary of when Te Rangihīroa first presented his wero (challenge) in a paper addressed to members of the New Zealand Institute.

"Close-up photographs of the sail should be obtained from the British Museum and replicas plaited for our own museums. This could be done quite easily. Sails have been so long out of date that the possibility of obtaining such a copy of an authentic old-time sail should not be neglected." This paper was eventually published in 1924 in the Transactions of the NZ Institute. 4

Te Rā Ringa Raupā had benefitted from the community support at Pa te Aroha Marae and the Whirinaki community. They decided to invite the community to a dawn ceremony on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022 to bless and name the newly completed full sized rā, Māhere Tū ki te Rā, followed by a celebratory hakari (feast) in the wharekai (dining hall). The community responded and turned up in great numbers to this auspicious occasion which was indeed a day of joy, accomplishment and celebration.

A few days later on December 14<sup>th</sup> 2022, exactly 100 years to the day that Te Rangihīroa first laid down the challenge of replicating Te Rā, an exhibition of four sails, Māhere Tū ki te Rangi and Hine Marama, along with a prototype cloth sail, Piritia, and a raupo sail made by Mandy was officially opened at Hihiaua Māori Cultural Centre in Whangārei.

This opening celebration was attended by great numbers of people eager to support the huge contribution Te Rā Ringa Raupā had made to the recovery of long-lost sail-making knowledge through their dedicated response to Te Wero o Te Rangihīroa.

### **Te Hokinga/ The Return Home**

Since the very first visit to the British Museum in 2010 the weavers were eager to see the return of Te Rā to her true homeland, Aotearoa. They saw her as a kuia (female ancestor) and had identified with her pouri (sadness) and mokemoke (loneliness) at being so far away from her place of origin.

When the news of Te Rā's return was announced in 2022, Te Rā Ringa Raupā were euphoric even though the loan period at that time was only for one year (since extended). The ancient taonga was coming home.

Te Rā's first arrival place in Aotearoa was Ōtautahi (Christchurch) in June 2023 and the grand opening of *Te Rā: The Māori Sail* attended by the masses took place on July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023. She was exhibited beautifully at the Christchurch Art Gallery, Te Puna o Waiwhetū. Many, many weavers flocked to meet and spend time with Te Rā and were inspired by such an exquisite taonga from over two centuries ago. She was on display for three months in Ōtautahi before being transported north to Tāmaki Paenga Hira (Auckland Museum).

Back in Auckland, members of Te Rā Ringa Raupā were very involved in preparing for the exhibition *Navigating Home* at Tāmaki Paenga Hira featuring Te Rā herself displayed near the newly created rā, Māhere Tū ki te Rangi.

While Māhere Tū ki te Rangi was in the Māori court vertically opposite Te Rā, Hine Marama was a central feature of TRRR's own exhibition *Te Karanga o Te Rā* (The Call of Te Rā) in the community gallery space just around the corner. This exhibition documented their journey to recreate a full-sized version of Te Rā and included photographs, moving image and in some cases a step-by-step breakdown of the making of special features of Te Rā, all of which were extremely complex.

"There are no words to express how much it meant to have Te Rā back in her true homeland, it was a time for rejoicing. Already Te Rā has managed to extend her one year stay to three years. Our wish is that she remains in the land that birthed her, where she is acknowledged and able to exert her highest impact and influence."

### **Sharing Knowledge and Envisioning the Dream**

The initial vision back in 2010 was to recreate the ancient taonga, Te Rā, and following the second visit in 2019, this vision was intensified and directly activated upon on the return of the rōpu (group) to Aotearoa. The journey has included many community-based events such as travelling exhibitions, wānanga (workshops), presentations, celebrations of milestone achievements and residencies.

For the past two years Te Rā Ringa Raupā have been teaching and sharing the knowledge they have recovered and actively passing these newly unlocked skills on to three different weaving groups from around the motu (country). Already, as a result of their sharing there are six rā being woven and the hope is that when those sails are seen on waka out on the water, the sight will inspire others to learn the skills to weave rā for their own waka.

The purpose of a sail is to respond to the wind and one of the driving forces behind the second stage of Te Rā Ringa Raupā's project was to experience how Māhere Tū ki te Rangi would respond when rigged to a waka, sailing. June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024 was the memorable day when Māhere Tū ki te Rangi was first trialled on the Hokianga Harbour. Watching as Māhere Tū ki te Rangi captured Tawhirimātea, our God of Wind, enabling the waka to glide effortlessly across the surface of his brother, Tangaroa truly was a magnificent sight! Another example of harmoniously harnessing the elements as our tupuna did.

I te Wairua o Te Rā	<i>The spirit of the sail</i>
Mauri Ohaoha	<i>a beneficent life force</i>
Mauri Tū	<i>standing tall</i>
Mauri Ora	<i>to enhance our wellbeing.</i>

Currently Hine Marama and Māhere Tū ki te Rangi are on display at Te Whare Taonga o Waikato as part of the He Aa I Uta, He Aa I Tai, Weaving the Elements exhibition. They are hung beautifully as an installation that links to Te Winika, the waka that Queen Atairangikaahu gifted to the people of Waikato, and the Waikato awa that flows beside the museum. The wonderful space and light that naturally backlight ngaa raa, accentuate the intricate and fine weaving. All elements are woven together when a waka is sailing on the water.

In conclusion, Te Rā Ringa Raupā's vision is of Māori woven sails on waka, on the water. To this end their moemoea (dream) is that at the 200-year celebration of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi) in 2040, there will be a significant number of Māori woven sails rigged to participating waka, highlighting the renaissance in knowledge recovery of waka traditions. One wonders when such an event last occurred in our history.

#### *References.*

1. Nic Low, "Raise up the billowing sail", *New Zealand Geographic*, September/October 2023, p107.
2. Jill & Peter Smith, "Making Connections", 2001.
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4. Hiroa, T. R. (P.H.Buck), (1924), "Maori Plaited Basketry and Plaitwork." From Transactions of the NZ Institute. Wellington, New Zealand: W.A.G. Skinner, Government Printer. Vol. 55, p. 361.

