Manawa whenua, wē moana uriuri, hōkikitanga kawenga
From the heart of the land, to the depths of the sea;
repositories of knowledge abound

Te Papa Hou is a trusted digital repository providing for the long-term preservation and free access to leading scholarly works from staff and students at Te Tumu, School of Māori, Pacific and Indigenous Studies at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

The information contained in each item is available for normal academic purposes, provided it is correctly and sufficiently referenced. Normal copyright provisions apply.

For more information regarding Te Papa Hou please contact maori-studies@otago.ac.nz

Author: Professor Michael Reilly
Title: *Beginning a conversation: writing a history about Mangaia*
Conference: New Zealand Historical Association Conference
Venue: University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand
Year: November, 2005
Item: Conference Paper
Imagine the following scene: Rarotonga International Airport, the date 26 April 1988. A young Pacific historian is standing in front of a weighing machine at the domestic check in. About to place his bags on the tray, he is told that the counter staff must first weigh him. Has he heard right? But they insist and reluctantly, in front of the other passengers, his weight is carefully recorded, before his bags are checked through. The plane is finally called, and being impatient to be off he is the first passenger to arrive at the plane. But he is told off to the side by the crew, so that two students from the local theological college can enter first. Finally, after the other passengers board, he is allowed on. Forty minutes in a small two engined turbo prop high above the dark blue green sea of the Pacific, and he cannot see an island in sight. Then as the plane banks, there to the right a solid triangle of land suddenly emerges on the horizon, its coastline lapped by the rolling waves of the ocean. As the plane descends the young Pacific historian looks out of the window at the land. This is the island of Mangaia, famed amongst Pacific scholars for the learned ethnographies written about it since the nineteenth century. But the island fails to impress the historian: the land seems to comprise barren grey rocks rising up from the seas; there are no sandy inviting beaches, no coconut trees bathed by the waters in the lagoon, not even a sign of life, no habitations, no houses, nothing. Just bush and rock. Amongst the anxieties of arrival, he also experiences disappointment: the land seems desolate and forbidding.
Arrival. The historian steps onto the crushed coral stone of the airstrip. The passengers are each enveloped in the welcoming embrace of family. The historian hangs back, anxious, nervous, at this first meeting. What is he meant to do now? Suddenly he is talking to the Chief Administration Officer who has emerged from the crowd and introduced himself. Yes they had been expecting him to arrive some time, just not today. The Pacific historian’s bags are stowed in the back of a truck and he is spirited away along the coastal road towards Oneroa, the main village and administrative centre of the island. While he doesn’t know what to expect at his destination, he comforts himself that at least he’s on the road to somewhere.

Mundane human actions predominate in this historical narrative: checking in, boarding, feeling anxious on arrival at a new and strange land. I chose those unexceptional gestures because they suggest the quite ordinary ways historians in the Pacific make the fundamental discovery that we cannot retain our distance from the lived realities of that world. Participants in this place have to learn about the economics of air travel in small Pacific Islands, where aviation fuel has to be carefully calculated according to the plane’s total weight, to avoid unnecessary costs. In the Pacific visitors quickly perceive the social prestige accorded a religious minister, as they do the central place occupied by the Christian Churches in islands such as Mangaia. For a Papa`ā visitor particularly there is perhaps the experience of marginality, but also of being taken in hand by others, who take control because it’s their place to. And finally, the character of the young Pacific historian imagined at Rarotonga Airport in 1988 is an image of myself, as it has been reconstructed, based on snippets of a field diary, here in another location, Aotearoa 2005.
In describing the past, we historians always invest it with imagined qualities, drawing on insights and experiences gathered in other times and in other places.

Insights in the course of research are rarely achieved intentionally. Nor are they always the product of reading, but rather, arise from our experiences engaging with people in the field. While visiting Mangaia I once learnt about local attitudes to outsiders such as myself while walking along the coastal road near Oneroa, talking with an expatriate Australian teacher then working at Mangaia College. She explained to me the local term, Papa`ā, used to describe Europeans such as ourselves. She reckoned we were foreigners accorded a degree of respect because we were perceived as being more educated than the locals. And yet, because we were unused to island life, Papa`ā living on Mangaia were in fact considered to be more vulnerable and in need of protection and help from the locals. Following this definition, a visiting historian anxious to learn about an island’s past cannot expect to be in control of the research process. Instead of possessing a dominion over an island’s history, the historian’s work becomes contingent on the complexities of the relationships that develop between the visitor, the people of the land, and the knowledge recorded by those people’s ancestors.

Conversation is a favourite image of mine. It highlights the potential for a dialogue between equals, and the ways that conversation partners carefully listen to and weigh up the views of the other. If it is a success, then the conversational partnership continues. There is openness to other opinions. No partner dominates the other. There is potential for each partner to gain a greater understanding and insight through their combined efforts, than through the dominance of the one. Located in Māori Studies, but writing
about the Pacific, and being a visitor to both spaces, I have struggled to discover an appropriate metaphor by which to understand the politics of writing history in such places. I like to think that the act of conversation might serve as an acceptable image for that dialogue about the past and our various ancestors. We might call such a dialogue, history. My ambition is that we may come to such a conversation as equal partners; our contributions possessing the same potential to open our minds to new ideas and new understandings.

Writing an island’s history is to contribute to a conversation, one that is not ended when a book is completed. No single historian visiting from another land can hope to understand all the possible meanings of the events that occurred in that island’s past. None of us, whether born in the land, or visitor, will ever fully understand the motivations, aspirations, and actions of the ancestors; for so much of their world makes no sense to us now. And so much of it has been lost. We only have fragments carefully collected together through the efforts of past historians, from Mangaia and elsewhere, to base our writings on. The rest is interpretation, guess-work, even imagination.

Talking about the past is something we all do. In that sense, we are all historians to our ancestors. In the days after that first anxious arrival in Mangaia in 1988 I would often walk around the village of Oneroa or take the road inland to see where it went. Walking I find a stimulating way of becoming acquainted with a place, and of thinking about events, such as the past. One walk around the back roads of the village was especially memorable for the insights I was to gain into Mangaia’s past from an accidental meeting, recalled here from an entry in my field diary. While passing a house set back from the
road, a man hailed me, beckoning me over to where he was sitting. His name I later learnt was Ti (more formally, Ranginui o te tini o te rangi). He was a Mangaian from New Zealand, and was living on the island to keep his connections alive. I noticed that Ti had tattooed insignia of the Mongrel Mob Motorcycle gang and I wondered if our meeting in such a casual and amiable way would have been possible in Aotearoa. We talked a lot about old Mangaia, and Ti made many astute observations. He had a real interest in those times, but noted that locals did not seem to share it, even suppressing their past. He told me a story about the time he visited another island in the Cook group. The incident seemed to typify a kind of response he noticed in Mangaia as well. He had dressed himself up in order to attend church to hear the hymns sung using traditional tunes. He had his hair up in a topknot, and wore ear ornaments and a tiki around his neck. But the response of many in the congregation suggested they were looking at a heathen risen up from their island’s past. By contrast, he told of Mangaians who liked the way he wore the traditional hair style and ornamentation. We both agreed that local people seemed ambivalent about their ancestors: proud of their warrior past, but critical of their heathen ways.

This mixed attitude was reflected in another common story we both had heard about the small size of present day Mangaians in comparison with their tupuna. Ti had been told stories of tall Mangaians in the past measuring nine or 30 foot. He thought these were exaggerations suggesting the idea of physically imposing people. A couple of days before, in Ivirua, one of the local ‘are kōrero, ‘traditional experts’, Tere’ēvangeria Aratangi, had also told me about giant ancestors. She described how Kirimetua, the local name for the early nineteenth century missionary, William Gill, had been terrified by nine
foot Mangaians who could pass up containers of lemon juice by hand while one stood at
the bottom of the upraised coral _makatea_ at Oneroa and the other reached down from the
top. He had prayed that God might make the men smaller.

During our conversation, Ti took me to look at a cave called Piriteumeume. When
Mangaians accepted Jehovah as their new god, the warriors had put away their weapons.
In fact they were hidden in caves such as Piriteumeume which were blocked up so that
noone would find these artifacts and use them again. We looked at what Ti thought was
the sealed up entrance. I think both of us were tempted to unblock the cave to see what
was there, on the principle that what belonged to one’s ancestors ought to be displayed to
the descendants. But we did not. I think we both realised that for many locals this would
be an undesirable step. Whatever our personal views, we respected that wish. At the end
of our conversation, Ti invited me to share a meal. He had caught a turtle and the two of
us ate this sweet tasting meat along with the island’s principal food, the _māmio_ (known in
other islands as the _taro_). He told me how he hunted pig on the _maunga_, the name in
Mangaia for the hills in the centre of the island, fished in the sea, and worked in the _taro_
plantations inland, and collected _pūhā_.

Like me, Ti was a visitor to the land who shared a real enthusiasm to understand its past.
But Ti was also a participant in the lived world of Mangaia in 1988. He worked like
other Mangaians in the island’s irrigated _taro_ plantations, and attended church. If his
motivation for the latter was to listen to an aspect of the old ways which had been
retained within the island’s version of Christian practice, he respected those beliefs in the
efforts he took to dress up for the occasion. In that sense, he and I were both visitors
seeking out what fragments we could find about the world as it had been, so that we could give it a place in the new. When we visited the sealed cave of Piriteumeumue it was a respect for the decisions of the people who converted to Christianity, and their descendants today, that determined our response. The past in Mangaia though all around us, was still the subject of ambivalent memories amongst the people who lived there. Their world was not so far removed from that past that they could look back at it with the detached objectivity so often favoured by members of the historical profession in the West. An historian in the Pacific who fails to reflect upon that indigenous response risks riding roughshod over the attitudes and feelings of the people, in an act that replicates in many disturbing ways, the behaviour of previous colonisers. If the practice of history is to avoid such a collusion with that world of subordination and domination, then we need to learn, like Ti, to respect the views of the people who share their island with those evocative memories of the past. For a Papa`a historian, hailing from the colonialist’s homeland, such reflective awareness is even more urgent, if we are not to repeat as comedy the tragic acts of colonial oppression once more.

A stranger such as myself who practises Pacific history also becomes implicated in that local world in ways that not only are unintended, but which highlight the ambivalent responses such research can elicit. There can be no more disturbing position for an historian trained to retain an objective perspective to occupy than the one I experienced when I found myself the subject of a dream narrative recounted to me by a former student who was himself a native born son of Mangaia. Fascinated by the narrative I was also aware that I had no control over the way this story unfolded. I listened to how a Mangaian viewed my involvement in that island’s history writing. In the form I
remembered it as, it is a quite short account, but one filled with evocative images from the past, alluding to ancient altars upon which human sacrifices were laid, the bravura of the ancient warrior, the defiant war dance of the people as they stamped the earth and raised the red dust of the mountain, and the post-mortem preparation of the dead for burial in the island’s many caves. Some of the dream images disturb me in the ways they implicate me in this narrative. I am depicted as having taken from all the buried corpses the coconut oil used to prepare the dead, and to have mixed it with the fertile *taro* mud, and rubbed it upon myself, as I dressed in the garb of an ancient *toa*, a warrior. That benign vision of the bewildered young Pacific historian seems to have vanished, to be replaced by someone altogether more sinister, directly implicated in the dream, with elements of Mangaia’s past which its inhabitants today prefer still to keep repressed, hidden within forgotten caves. As I write this, I still find I hesitate over the keyboard, wondering if this exposure of self is wise. Perhaps history’s muse, Clio, is warning me against such direct implication of the historian’s self in the past I am meant to be writing about?

Much could be said about this dream. I would stress that its narrator and I maintained in our daily life very good relations. Perhaps too it is useful to point out to a New Zealand audience that local people on Mangaia regularly take visitors to their famed burial caves to show something of the past to those interested in learning about it. There seems from the responses of the locals to be no sense of tapu or noa in these occasions. After all, one is taken to the burial cave by the descendendants of those buried in it. I was asked twice by locals if I wanted to visit one with them, and only went the second time because the
rest of the household planned to go as well. Somehow I hoped there was safety in such numbers.

The dream in retrospect seems to emphasise the agency of the people in their interactions with the visiting historian. The dream imagines the locals en masse performing a war dance of defiance. I, as the dream-subject, am expected to go and meet with them. When my former student told me this dream he was clearly excited by it. He had been reading my doctoral thesis on the island’s history and many of the dream-images came from it. His narrative was told more than 10 years ago now, but it still stands as a challenge for me, as the historian engaging with Mangaia’s past. In the end, I decided that my ex-student was excited at the way the dream alluded to the relationship between the two of us, and with the people of the land. The central image of the dream as he told it was that key encounter between me and the war dancing ancestors massed to receive me. There is much strength in that image. The historian is imagined as participating in the world of the people, and of being required to establish a relationship with them. Since its narrator and I continued to be friends until his own untimely death that is the message I take from it today. It remains an uncomfortable legacy for me, but serves always to remind me of the special connection the dream implied, between its narrator and me, and between ourselves and the people, past and present, of Mangaia.