PAPAHURIHIA, PUKERENGA, TE ATUA WERA
AND TE NĀKAHI: HOW MANY PROPHETS?

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… We have to remember, we don’t know what his name was before he was Papahurihia;
he had another before Papahurihia
according to William Yate.

(Smithyman 1997:4)

The early northern Māori prophet Papahurihia, the first exponent of the Nākahī movement, has been discussed in a number of recent essays and books. I first wrote about him in this Journal and then, nearly 25 years later, in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Volume One (Binney 1966, 1990). In a draft of the latter essay, I raised the likelihood that, in the early history of the movement, two men had been elided under the name Te Nākahī: Papahurihia and a different elderly seer. My suggestion was erased by editorial decision as it seemed too convoluted to explain. In his magisterial poem-cycle *Atua Wera*, published posthumously, Kendrick Smithyman re-affirmed the position that two visionary leaders (*matakite*) carried the name of the Old Testament serpent, “Te Nākahī” (Smithyman 1997:42-43, 121, 264-65). Smithyman also reminded us that “Papahurihia” was a name spun by that particular prophet for himself. This brief essay probes these several puzzles, finding Papahurihia’s earlier self and divorcing him from his alter ego.

There is clear evidence that the prophet known as Papahurihia, first described in missionary sources from the Bay of Islands in 1833–34 and who subsequently moved to Hokianga where he adopted the name Te Atua Wera (The Fiery God), was not the only early visionary within the movement. Two men, one younger and one older, were recorded preaching and teaching in Hokianga in 1847, and both claimed to be the voices of the serpent-apparition derived from the Old Testament, Te Nākahī. The elder Te Nākahī was fused by some writers with the younger (for example, Elsmore 1985:100).

Let us start with the origins of the movement. The 1844 journal of the Rev. William Cotton (Bishop Selwyn’s personal chaplain) contains a description of Pukerenga, a prophet, who fled from the Bay of Islands to Hokianga after the “last” fight at Pōmare’s Pā, Ōtūihu. Given the date, 1844, Cotton must have been referring to the prolonged tribal fighting there in 1837, when Ōtūihu was attacked; the later, infamous British
assault on Ōtūihu occurred in 1845. Pukerenga said that the Māori god, “whose waka [canoe] he was”, was named Papahurihia (Cotton 9 November 1844, Journal VIII:168-69). From Cotton’s account it seems clear that this prophet had been connected with the Rangihoua/Te Puna mission station of the Anglicans in the northern Bay of Islands, where the Papahurihia movement first emerged. He had earlier promised that many new goods and fine food would be distributed to Māori at a feast (hākari) at Te Puna, but the event did not take place. After the attack on Ōtūihu, Pukerenga was obliged to flee to Hokianga, where he has drawn many disciples after him. The Atua Māori whom he represents as dwelling in him is Papahurihia – and the sign of his presence is a whistling at his lips, which is of course a mere trick. One of their observances is to keep Saturday instead of Sunday … and his followers promised that Papahurihia wd. appear on a certain day on a high hill at the back of Tepuna, and give the Māoris a most magnificent Hakari [feast]. Splendid blankets, suits of armor, and things entirely new, such as had never been seen in the world before. Mr. [H.] Williams was asked if he wd. be present at this Hakari. Oh yes – I will come. …The day was named. It came within a fortnight of the time – and nothing more was heard of Papahurihia. … Aperaniko [Cotton’s companion and translator] represented Pukerenga as a Patipati kai, that is one who lives at the expense of his friends. (Cotton 9 November 1844, Journal VIII:168–69)

+ It was a little before Picopo [Bishop Pompallier] came, who was introduced by Jacky Marmon to the Tribe of Papahurihia as his wise younger brother, upon which the whole tribe (Hikutu of Hokianga) joined the Papists. (Note in Cotton’s Journal.)

Cotton’s account depicts the central elements of this early visionary movement, notably the declaration of the Jewish sabbath as its own, along with its early version of a cargo cult. These aspects are well known, and have been extensively discussed (Wilson 1965; Binney 1966; 1990; 1993). Cotton’s appended footnote dates the planned hākari as prior to the arrival of the first Catholic Bishop, Jean Baptiste Pompallier, in January 1838. As Cotton indicated, the Rev. Henry Williams had already encountered the teachings of Papahurihia at Ōtūihu Pā during 1833–34 (Rogers 1961: 15 December 1833; 31 August, 12 October, 11 November, 7 December 1834). On 11 November 1834, Williams commented that Papahurihia had gone to Hokianga to make converts. There, at Waimā early in 1835, the Wesleyan missionary Rev. William White wrestled with “Papahudihia” in extended theological debate (William White 4 April 1835: Journal). By 1836 Papahurihia’s influence was spreading through the lower Hokianga, and included the large Māori community at Pākanae (Woon 26 September 1836: Journal). This evidence suggests that his extensive preaching along the Hokianga River had commenced earlier than Cotton realised.
Figure 1. The dream of Te Nākahi, February 1847. The sketch suggests the scattering of the divinatory sticks of the tohunga. Figure number 1 represented the high cliff on the East Coast, with great waves dashing against it; 2, the canoe upside down and people drowning; 3, a second canoe, dragged over by the first and, similarly, overturned; 4, “Ata o te rangi or the Spirit of the air”, who stretched out his hand to Mohi and threw him back on land; 5, Mohi Tāwhai. (John Webster, Maori Journal, NZ MSS 116, p.76, Auckland City Library.)
Cotton’s note also makes a link with the early conversion to Catholicism of the Hikutū hapū ‘sub-tribe’ living in Hokianga. Te Hikutū were the first hapū to welcome Pompllier, who initially settled among them at Papakawau, near Omanaia, in 1838. Father Catherin Servant, a Catholic priest serving in the Hokianga between 1838 and 1842, left an important and frequently cited description of the beliefs of the Näkahi movement. Servant knew the teacher there as “Atuawera” and stated that he had been a Te Puna chief, who now preached in favour of the Catholics. Te Näkahi was understood to be his god (Servant 1973:56-57). Te Hikutū adopted both the Bishop and Papahurihia, intensifying their long-standing rivalry with the hegemonic up-river hapū, who gave their support and protection to the Wesleyan mission (Turner 1986:64-68).

It was after these events that, in 1847, the Hokianga settler John Webster met, on the same day, two men living at or near Omanaia, both of whom were prophets in the Näkahi movement. The first was an old man. Webster called him the “Nakahi, or Serpent”. This man was a visionary, and he had drawn on a rock an image of a dream that he had had the previous night. The cryptic sketch depicted the Waimā chief Mohi Tāwhai who was away travelling with the governor, George Grey (Fig.1). In the dream, Mohi Tāwhai had been tossed in his canoe from a high cliff into the sea and almost drowned, but was thrown back onto land by the intervention of a spirit-force named Te Ata o Te Rangi (Webster 16 February 1847: Maori Journal). The young John White, who accompanied Webster, later published his own account of the old seer or matakite, “Nakahī”, and the seer’s dream of Mohi Tāwhai. This was a dream to which White gave some credibility because Mohi narrowly escaped death by drowning soon afterwards (John White 1861:19). Webster also conceded prescience to the dreamer (Webster, 18–19 February 1847: Maori Journal).

John White’s accounts also confirm that there were two men whom he and Webster both met on their journey up the Omanaia river in February 1847. On the following pages of White’s published narrative, he introduced a new figure, Papahurihia, calling him the “imposter”, whose inadequate powers twice failed to avert cannon shots that burned out the meeting-house or “council chamber” that he had built at Ōhaeawai for the chiefs during the siege of June–July 1845 (John White 1861:21). White first recorded this story in his Private Journal when he described his visit to Ōhaeawai in January 1848 to dig potatoes. In that account, he named the prophet at the siege of Ōhaeawai as being “Te Atua Wera” (John White 31 January 1848: Private Journal).

On 16 February 1847, after White and Webster had talked with the old matakite “Nakahī”, they travelled a little up-stream towards Waimā and the settlement of “Atua Wero”. Webster greeted Te Atua Wera in “dog-Māori”,

ten a ra ko koe e papa [Greetings to you, Papa] he is generally called papahurihia or papa he is a fine looking intelligent young man about 33 or 4 years of age fully tattooed he is a prophet & is in great repute. (Webster 16 February 1847: Maori Journal)

In 1847, Papahurihia was also known as Te Atua Wera; there is no doubt about this. This man had two named wives: Te Hunga, the daughter of a leading Hikutū chief Kaitoke, and Kikihu (Webster 16 February 1847: Maori Journal). Kaitoke had been an early follower of Papahurihia, and in January 1837, using a gun marked with red
wax “hieroglyphics” that Papuhurihia had sent to him, he had struck at a group of Wesleyan converts in a village in the Mangamuka region, killing two Wesleyan Māori preachers (Davis 1876:27; Hawke 25 January 1837: Journal). In reprisal, Kaitoke was himself attacked and wounded, and the fighting spiralled across to Ōtūihu in the Bay of Islands.

White and Webster met Te Atua Wera again later in February 1847. White, himself self-consciously a short man, standing at 5’ 6 ½” (169cm), described the prophet as being “rather short” (John White 23 February 1847: Private Journal). This time the two encountered Te Atua Wera at Kokukohu, from where they all travelled down-river to a hahunga ‘mourning ceremony’ being held at Waimā. Webster described Te Atua Wera dressed in a red crimson cloak, over which he had tied his chief’s dogskin. He wore a jaunty cap with a gold band, military style. At Waimā, Te Atua Wera led the hari ‘dance’ for the ceremonies. The dancers “numbered several hundreds”. Te Atua Wera had “stripped naked with a small piece of white cloth in front shewing off his finely tattooed thighs & seat”. The elderly father of the dead man also accompanied the dancers, “perfectly naked [sic] jumping about with surprising agility & giving directions with an air of authority” (Webster 23 February 1847: Maori Journal) (Figs 2 and 3).

Te Atua Wera, as he was known in the Hokianga in the 1840s, was unquestionably the prophet Papuhurihia who died at Omanaia on 3 November 1875. He is buried there under his Wesleyan baptismal name, Penetana Papuhurihia. His wife, whom he married by church rites after his baptism in 1856, was Kikihu, who survived him. Mohi Tāwhai’s son, Höne, writing Papuhurihia’s obituary, said that the “Nakahi”, Papuhurihia’s “atua” (god), had directed Papuhurihia and his followers to be baptised, lest they and the Nakahi “be destroyed by the fire of the anger of God” (Tāwhai 1875:297). This may be a reference to the fiery “Tarakona” (Dragon), said to be threatening Hokianga and Whangarei in 1855; the missionary Richard Davis

Figure 2. Te Atua Wera leading the hari at Waimā, February 1847. (John Webster, Maori Journal, NZ MSS 116, p.106, Auckland City Library.)
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discovered a sketch of it in circulation at that time (Fig. 4). Spencer von Sturmer, the resident magistrate, who attended Papahurihia’s tangihanga ‘funeral’, took a photograph of “old Papahurihia” as he lay in state on the marae, and forwarded it to Donald McLean, the Native Minister (von Sturmer 1875) (Fig. 5). Höne Mohi Tāwhai, who knew Papahurihia well (as had his father), wrote that Papahurihia was about 78 years old when he died (Tāwhai 1875:297). If accurate, he was about ten years older than Webster’s estimate of 33 or 34 in 1847. Webster’s observation, however, seems to be supported by Papahurihia’s estimated age cited in a government list of Hokianga chiefs compiled during 1866: “Papahurihia, Penetana (Te Atua Wera), aged 50 years, living at Omanaia: “the most influential man in this District” (Māori Affairs 1866: Register of Chiefs).

There were many chiefly converts to the Nākahi movement in the later 1830s in the Bay of Islands and in Hokianga. It is therefore likely that a number of chiefs acted as matakite or seers within the movement, as well as its founder. Old “Nakahī” in 1847 was such a man. In 1843 Cotton had been told about another elderly tohunga ‘religious expert’ named Te Haua, who was depicted to him as “the greatest magician in these Parts” (Cotton 7 January 1843, Journal III:179). Later, at Waimate in 1844, Cotton met Te Haua and witnessed his divinations as a tohunga, when he interpreted future events through the scattering of a bundle of sticks, thrown about by the passage of the “Atua Maori”. Te Haua was regularly consulted by Heke, even if Heke did not believe in his “juggling”, as Cotton surmised (Cotton 24 July 1844). Cotton’s informant, himself once a tohunga, but now a Christian preacher, had said that Te Haua “was just like Moses serpent which swallowed up the other serpents—for he

Figure 3. Te Atua Wera and the Taiāmai chief Penetaui, who led the defense at Ōhaeawai, talking with John White and John Webster (and possibly his friend A. Motte, who was with them) in February 1847. Te Atua Wera (left) possesses the full-face moko; Penetaui sits beside him. (John Webster, Maori Journal, NZ MSS 116, p.97, Auckland City Library.)
had destroyed them all [rival tohunga] one after the other”. He evoked the downfall of these rival tohunga by slapping his thigh and laying down the fingers of his left hand, one by one, exclaiming “‘kua mate’ he is dead” (Cotton 7 January 1843, Journal III:179). The preacher’s scriptural reference was, presumably, to the “fiery serpent” on the rod of Moses which overpowered the sting of all other serpents (Exodus 7:8–12; Numbers 21:8–9). This conversation gives a good indication of the cross-cultural transfer of ideas at work and helps to explain the impact of the image of the Biblical serpent, Näkahi. Cotton’s account of the Papahurihia movement, cited earlier, adds a new dimension: the probability that its founder had formerly been called Pukerenga. This man was Hōne Heke’s most famous war prophet.

During the fighting in 1845–46, he was mostly referred to as Te Atua Wera. It is clear that he lived in Hokianga. Henry Williams specifically listed “Atua Wera and Party” as opponents of the government, allied to Heke and living in Hokianga (Williams 1847). This new name seems first to occur in European sources from the Hokianga at the beginning of 1837 (Hawke, 22 January 1837: Journal). At Hokianga, the Catholic missionary Servant was told that the serpent, Te Näkahi, appeared to “Atua Wera” as a bright light that vanished like lightening (Servant 1841). John Webster described his “friend” “Te Atua Wera”, when he held a séance for Heke in

Figure 4. The fiery “Tarakona” (Dragon) threatening Hokianga and Whangarei, 1855. On the right the towering structure represents “the House of the evil on the water coming hither (te Whare o te mate kei te moana e tere ana)”. The unnamed prophet associated with this movement was said to live at Waimate. (K.A. Webster collection, MS-Papers-6373-28-001, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.)
1845 just after the fall of Kororâreka (Russell); Te Atua Wera used ventriloquism, as Cotton had noted. Te Nâkahi spoke in a “whistling sighing kind of sound” that moved about, “sometimes a fluttering, and I thought that something actually touched me” (Webster 1908:259-61). Frederick Maning also famously described a war-séance that “Te Atua Wera” held for Heke, where the Nâkahi spoke through him (Maning 1956 [1862]:233). Later still, the Wesleyan missionary John Warren, stationed at Waimâ, came to know Te Atua Wera. He considered that he had been the “mainspring of Heke’s war”. He added that Te Atua Wera had taken the name Te Nâkahi “to himself”, the serpent being described in scripture “as more subtile [sic] than any beast of the field” (Warren 1853) (Genesis 3:1). Thereby, the God, the medium, and the man became entwined.

During the siege of Öhaeawai, Papahurihia’s “council chamber” was twice destroyed. Cannon shot broke down the meeting-house, and it was not rebuilt a third time (John White 1861:21). This narrative is of particular interest as a wooden carving, rescued from a destroyed building associated with the Nâkahi movement, has survived. It is a carved panel that was said to have been an “altar” piece of a Nâkahi “chapel” destroyed in the fighting in the Northern War. The panel depicts St Patrick driving the snakes from Ireland and is understood to have been carved by a European sailor. The wood is cedar: probably a ship’s plank (Fig. 6). The connection with the Nâkahi movement is explicitly made in the stated provenance for the carving: the chapel of the “Nakahe” cult, where the panel was placed, had been built in honour of St Patrick. The panel was rescued by a follower of Heke’s during a British attack, before the building was damaged (Taylor 1974). However, in this account, it is said
that the “chapel” was located near the southern entrance to the Mangamuka gorge, where a few grave mounds remain. Thus the site is placed in the Hokianga district, rather than the Bay of Islands, where the bulk of the fighting took place in 1845–46, but close to the fighting with the Wesleyans in 1837. This carved image of St Patrick and the serpents in flight in Ireland recalls the story of the tohunga Te Haua who, like the biblical serpent, killed his rivals. These ramifying associations help further to explain the links that contemporary commentators drew between Te Näkahi and Papahurihia’s suggested sympathies with Roman Catholic teachings—apart from his hostility to the Anglican missionaries, which he made clear from the beginning.

As is well established, the Näkahi faith survived the wars and the baptism of its founder-prophet into Wesleyanism. It notably re-emerged in the “Dog-Tax War” of 1898 at Waimā; this time the prophet was Hōne Tōia. In 2003 a further aspect was revealed in an exhibition at Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand associated with Hōne Heke and the Näkahi faith (“te hono ki Näkahi”), “preached by Te Atua Wera”. Displayed were some of the taonga ‘treasures’ of the movement. Among the items were two ornately carved tokotoko ‘orators’ staffs’. One bore two carved “lizards”, expressly said to represent connections with the spiritual world in the same manner as the serpent. A rākau atua ‘wooden god-stick’ named “Rangi Āwhiowhio” (Whistling Head) was also shown. It was used by tohunga to invoke the Näkahi spirit in rituals, or “te ara ki te wairua ‘the pathway to the spiritual world’”. Three dried leaves of the karaka tree, on which the god-stick rested, represented the tears of the

![Figure 6. St Patrick driving the serpents from Ireland. Cedar wood panel, donated by Alan Taylor, Auckland City Art Gallery.](image)
Nākahī believers for their ancestors. In this private collection, belonging to Heke’s kin, the Nākahī faith is seen as central to Heke’s vision of “self-determination”.

In summation: the “Nākahī” (Serpent) appeared in visions to more than one of his followers. One old man possessed his name in 1847; he was a matakite or seer. But the prophet who fought for Heke’s cause at the siege of Ōhaeawai, and who had earlier saved his life at the fight at Te Ahuahu, was the younger man whom John Webster described and drew in 1847.

He was first known as Pukerenga: this is “what his name was before”. He was of Te Hikutū hapū, which originated in Hokianga; however, a number of people of that hapū, including the two chiefs Waikato and Wharepoaka, were living at Rangihoua and Te Puna in the 1820s and 1830s. While Papahurihia’s whakapapa (genealogy) is known (Binney 1990), this early name is not. At first Pukerenga called himself the vessel (waka) for Papahurihia; then he took his name. After he moved to Hokianga, he re-named himself again and became Te Atua Wera. He also took the name Te Nākahī “to himself”, as Warren noted. It is this man who rests, perhaps unquietly, in the grave at Omanaia. His gravestone was erected there by the government in 1879 (Fig. 7). It is often recalled that the gravestone has changed the direction in which it faces, following the prophet’s inclinations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Margaret Edgcumbe for assistance with William Cotton’s letters and journals, and Kendrick Smithyman for his life-long conversations.
NOTES

1. Smithyman was citing the Rev. William Yate (Yate 1835:221).
2. More recently, in a discussion of Näkahi, Paul Moon claimed that the movement’s origins were pre-European, criticising a “consensus” of historians, including myself, who date its origins to 1833 (Moon 2006:25, 353, n.43). Moon misquotes and misinterprets. The Anglican missionaries were quite clear that it was a “new” movement, and it was they who first described Papahurihia’s teachings in 1833–34. Moon’s only “evidence” for an earlier, pre-European origin is a vague prophecy about the coming of a new people to the land, attributed to a Hokianga elder and described by S. Percy Smith in 1910. Papahurihia was a *matakite* in the tradition of Māori *tohunga* ‘religious expert’, as I stated in my biography (Binney 1990:331). Among other errors, Moon consistently misspelt the title of this biography.
4. It was White’s published narrative of the dream that Elsmore attached to Papahurihia (Elsmore 1985:100).
5. Kaitoke was the main seller of the land at Onoke (by the mouth of the Whirinaki River) to the “Pakeha Maori” F.E. Maning in 1839, and he continued to live near Maning. He was either father, or close elder kin, to Maning’s wife Moengaroa. He is described with droll humour in Maning 1956 [1862]:167-70.
6. There is a small textual issue: the reference in Exodus, in which the serpent devours all others, is to Aaron’s rod; the fiery, brass serpent on Moses’s rod gave life (instead of death) to those bitten by serpents. Moses, however, commanded Aaron. Choose your text.
7. The original French is: “le tonakahi … el autres m’ont dit aussi que lorsqu’il avait disparu il y avait une lumière qui disparaissait avec la rapidité de l’éclair.”
8. That is, descendants of Heke’s brother Tuhiangi.
9. An extended *whakapapa* ‘genealogy’ is given in Lee 1987:297. There, however, his father’s name, Te Wharetī, was misprinted. Tūhoehoe was his mother. Both are said to have been *matakite*.

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