

Article

Using the Stars to Indigenize the Public Sphere: Matariki over New Zealand

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Abstract: As the rate of affiliation to Christian identity continues to decline in Aotearoa New Zealand (only 49 percent of the population said they were Christian in the last census), public space has become more receptive to other forms of religiosity. In particular, community rituals around the winter movements of the Matariki (Pleiades) constellation have gained support since the year 2000. For instance, the capital city, Wellington, has replaced a centuries' old British fireworks festival, Guy Fawkes, with an enlarged version of its Matariki celebrations: an action seen as a tipping point in the incorporation of Māori spiritual values into public life. Interactions between European colonisers and Māori have been characterised for more than 250 years by tensions between the relational thinking of Māori who see human beings as both participating in and constrained by an environment resonant with divine energies, and the quantitative, hierarchical, 'Great Chain of Being' model that had long been dominant among Europeans. Now, when the natural environment worldwide is under strain from population and economic pressures, it seems to some both appropriate and vital to look to epistemological and spiritual models that are intimately responsive to the specificities of location.

Keywords: religion; New Zealand; Māori spirituality; Indigenous religion; environmentalism; Māori astronomy; Matariki

1. Religion in New Zealand

New Zealand was established as a secular British colony in 1840, secular in that there was no state religion established and all religions were to be treated equally (Byrnes 2009; Ahdar and Stenhouse 2000), but it is now also becoming increasingly secular in terms of de-identification from religions in general. While there has been some increase in followers of religious traditions such as Hinduism and Islam because of increased immigration (Statistics New Zealand 2013), the retreat from Christianity is notable. In the 1960s when Māori and European New Zealanders were the largest population groups, 90 percent of the inhabitants identified as Christian, yet in the last census data available (from 2013) only 49 percent of the population affiliated to a Christian identity. The percentage for Māori is similar but their disaffiliation from Christianity is happening later and more rapidly—for instance, a 19.2 percent decrease in Christian affiliation in the 7 years between 2006 and 2013 (Statistics New Zealand). Within that overall trend towards people living their lives without membership of a religious organization, however, it is our observation that there is a renewed appreciation of customary forms of Māori religiosity that may also be having an influence on the views and actions of members of the wider society. In particular, it was notable that both the state, and more especially the popular, response to the deadly March 2019 terrorist attacks on two Christchurch mosques was frequently mediated through Indigenous concepts with spiritual connotations related to social unity (e.g., *aroha/love* and *kotahitanga/standing in community*) and the practices that embody them, such as the collective performance of the *haka* and the *hongi*, the sharing of breath between people greeting one

another (Elder 2019; Williams 2019). Spontaneous behaviours at such traumatic times may suddenly make manifest what is actually a series of gradual, underlying changes in how a society sees itself.

2. Methodology

This article considers one of those gradual and underlying changes: the re-establishment of Indigenous knowledge and practices around Māori astronomy, the relevance of which to seasonal practices and rituals is being offered to a new generation. The project is a qualitative cultural studies one, based primarily on two series of semi-structured research interviews done in 2010 and 2017 respectively, with a total of 22 respondents. Artefacts and ephemera related to Matariki celebrations have also been collected over more than a decade and were displayed in the contemporary section of the *Te Whaanau Maarama/Family of Light* exhibition at the Waikato Museum from 2016 to 2019. There has also been a large amount of media coverage of the Matariki phenomenon since the early 2000s, much of which has been archived. The 2010 interviews were undertaken by the first author from the position of an external Pākehā (European New Zealander) researcher with organizers of, and resource providers for, Matariki programmes at public institutions such as the national museum Te Papa Tongarewa, a childrens' science centre, astronomical observatory, a national organisation for the maintenance of the Māori language, and the City Council in the capital, Wellington, as well as interviews with two persons, one an artist and one a Chief Executive of a sporting organization, who had been identified as early movers in the redevelopment of Matariki at the cusp of the twenty-first century. A telephone interview was also conducted with the organiser of the large Auckland City Matariki Festival. All but two of the interviewees were Māori. In the years following the initial set of interviews, the first author joined a research team consisting of the second author and others, headed by the Tūhoe astronomer and academic Rangi Matamua. In so doing, the project has become aligned with the engaged scholarship model of the kaupapa Māori method (Tuhiwai Smith, 2015; see also Hudson et al. 2010) where research is led by Māori scholars, values Indigenous epistemology (mātauranga Māori), and is conducted for the ultimate benefit of Māori communities. Under this paradigm, the researchers were able to connect with other key Māori individuals related to the Matariki phenomenon and to conduct a second series of interviews in 2017. All interviews were conducted in English.

After thematic analysis of the information gained from the interviews and from the other public sources indicated above, we propose that this revived appreciation of a localized vernacular science, allied with an increased awareness of the need for environmental protection, is leading some New Zealanders, especially some Māori, away from a Christian model of life, towards an Indigenous spirituality and practices.

3. Forty Years of Political and Cultural 'Renaissance'

Back in 1975, the Māori historian Douglas Sinclair, chronicling the British legal manoeuvres that had deprived the tribes of New Zealand of all but remnants of their land over a century from the 1860s to the 1960s, noted nevertheless that his people had both survived colonisation and learned from that process. They had for instance, learned the points of connection and influence between their own customary laws for the conduct of life, and the statute and common laws of the British. In a book, *Te Ao Hurihuri*, the title of which means 'The World Moves On' and which itself was an active agent in the renaissance it described, Sinclair made a claim that now, albeit more than 40 years later, has proved prophetic:

The odds are that the Maori renaissance in populations, education, cultural development and material progress over the next 20 years will be felt throughout the whole of the land and will create a kind of reverse culture shock. (Sinclair 1992, p. 83)

This article reports on a situation where the 'reverse culture shock' he describes is now a marked feature of general New Zealand society and politics. The structural manifestation of a new degree of Māori influence is in the most recent outcome of New Zealand's system of representative democracy

where, at the 2017 election, 18 Māori were elected members of the governing tri-party coalition, 11 of whom gained Ministerial portfolios. Four of the five political parties represented in Parliament now have Māori persons as either leader or deputy leader. In a symbolic enactment of bicultural leadership, our Prime Minister, herself of European descent, wore a Māori cloak, or *kākahu*, for her inaugural meeting with the Queen of England. Following the settlement of, and awarding of compensation for, breaches of the Treaty signed at Waitangi in 1840 between the British Crown and the chiefs of many of the Indigenous tribal groups, the Māori economy has now grown to a size of \$50 billion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2018). Te reo Māori, a crucial carrier of the epistemology, values and sense of identity of Māori, and one of the official languages of New Zealand, is used in sectors of the education system, the Māori Television Service, and increasingly as a regular adjunct to English in state-owned organizations such as Radio New Zealand National and Air New Zealand. Uses of te reo Māori is now widespread, albeit often in a superficial manner, with evidence of the permeation of Indigenous loanwords throughout popular linguistic culture (Calude et al. 2018), noting that discourse around Matariki has been a significant vector in an increase in the use of Māori terms in the public sphere. There are numerous other initiatives in law, health, education, sports, and media that tell a similar story of increasing Māori visibility in local, national and international venues.

This article focuses on an issue that faces all people, whatever our ethnicity or nationality, but which has a particularly strong salience for Māori, as for other Indigenous peoples who retain a strong awareness of the interdependence of human beings and the land (Keenan xl; Watts 2013). That is, the need to forestall the worst effects of climate change and population pressure by curtailing human exploitation of the environment (see also Lockhart et al. 2019 in this volume). It is this issue that has an inherently religious base and which is having a small but growing impact on wider New Zealand society. The most innovative of recent Indigenous actions to protect the environment have been the award of the legal status of personhood to several large natural features. The first of these was the granting in 2014 to the former Te Urewera National Park (now known simply as Te Urewera) ‘all the rights, powers, duties, and liabilities of a legal person’ (cited in Ruru, see also Ruru 2014). The Whanganui River (Te Awa Tupua Whanganui River Claims Settlement), has received similar status as will nearby Mount Taranaki. While the practical ramifications of these changes of status have not yet become fully evident, it means, as one New Zealand legal company notes, that these entities can now be acknowledged as having an extensive, active and creative status:

such rivers, mountains and other such natural resources are considered to be living, breathing and sustaining communities from mountains to sea. They are considered the life force which supports the health and wellbeing of entire communities. (Lane Neave 2018)

That this kind of description of the interwoven relationship between the natural world and the lives of human beings now appears as news is an index of how far inhabitants of urbanized societies have separated themselves mentally from the ecosystems they in fact depend on. In the writings of Māori scholars however, the conception of existence is such that the spiritual and material realms are inextricably interwoven: “You’ve got to realise that there is a spirituality about Māori things,” wrote John Rangihau in *Te Ao Hurihuri* 1992: 14. According to Maori Marsden in the same volume this spirituality is associated with elemental energy, or *mauri*:

“[this] elemental energy is derived from the realm of Te Korekore, out of which the stuff of the universe was created” [. . .], it was “a massive release of energy catalysed by the primary deity Io” [and consequently] “all the created order partook of *mauri* (lifeforce, ethos) by which all things cohere in nature”. (Marsden 1992, pp. 121, 134)

Since the time in the late 1970s when Sinclair, Rangihau and Marsden wrote in the first edition of *Te Ao Hurihuri*, other holders of tribal knowledge have detailed Māori elaborations of Polynesian ontology, epistemology and praxis, comparing and differentiating them from their European counterparts (Henare 2001; Mead 2003; King 1992). This knowledge is considered at once religious (or spiritual)

and scientific, but scientific in an observational, rather than an experimental mode. More recently, scholars such as the Māori scientist Roberts (2011) and the Pākehā historian Salmond (2017) have made detailed comparisons between Indigenous models and those derived from European epistemology, explaining how they have led to different views of what can be done to, or with, the other aspects of the natural world.

4. The Great Chain of Being and the Nature–Culture Divide

According to Salmond (2017), herself drawing on a paradigm that dates back to Aristotle and the Neo-Platonists, the missionaries, administrators and military men who colonised New Zealand were guided by their shared commitment to a European ideological model known as ‘The Great Chain of Being’. This model is of a hierarchical, or stadial, world system in which initially, divine power, and later, the classificatory systems of science, assured class structures where so-called civilized groups, such as the English, were considered of greater capacity than the ‘barbarians’ and ‘savages’ successively below them. This hierarchical model entailed that no matter how harmonious relationships might be between particular individuals or groups from Māori and European societies, the constant assumption was that Māori should be induced, or if necessary coerced—and there was a large amount of outright warfare, imprisonment and land confiscation (Keenan 2012a; Hill and Belich 2000)—to take up British ways of behaving and thinking in order to progress further up the Chain of Being. In this model, the elements of nature were of a lower status than the various ranks of humans, and therefore given by God for Man’s use and sustenance, to whatever level of exploitation humans felt appropriate. Mere Roberts also writes about this mindset but focuses more tightly on the emergence of scientific thinking and the creation of the ‘Nature–Culture Divide’ by surveying the works of the ‘Natural philosophers’ such as Descartes, Kepler, and Galileo Galilei. Their mechanistic view of the world in which matter and mind were separate, was a hegemonic philosophy that, according to Roberts, “dominated Western attitudes to ‘Nature’ for the next 300 to 400 years and contributed to the successful colonisation and exploitation of entire countries and their resources” (Roberts 2011, p. 35).

Similar assumptions also underpinned the British legal system adopted in New Zealand and were activated in particular by the establishment of the Native Land Court in 1862. The Court’s mission says M.K. Sorrenson, was:

[...] not merely to interpret and record Māori custom but to free it from the constraints of time and set it on a path of evolution. Māori land was to be converted from the communal, or, as it was sometimes described, “communistic ownership of the tribe” and individualised. (Sorrenson 2015, p. 224)

The Court did this by assuming the power to overwrite Māori customary, communal and spiritual relationships with the land and convert them to individual titles that could be sold and bought.

Meanwhile, the Church, in the form of Methodist and Anglican missionaries, used soft power to offer Māori an alternative to the inter-tribal wars, resourced by the muskets Europeans had provided, that wrecked havoc on Indigenous communities from 1820 through to the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 (Salmond 2017; Mikaere). The results of these missionizing efforts were that by the time of the Census in 1916 95.7 percent of the population, including the most 4.6 percent of the population who were Māori identified as Christian (Statistics New Zealand Digital Archive), although in many cases the new religions did not erase the power of *kōrero tahito*/ancient explanations from people’s minds. Pre-colonial Indigenous religious practices such as the reliance on tribal priests, *tohunga ahurewa* (Marsden 1992), receded from public view in most areas, and were in fact outlawed by the Tohunga Suppression Bill of 1907. Yet, in some parts of the country, the isolated and independent lands of the Tūhoe people for instance (see Binney 2009), the customary practices of *taha wairua*/the spiritual side of life, continued to guide the relationship between people and the environment. A study of a *Tuawhenua* worldview carried out through interviews done between 2004 and 2014 (Timoti et al. 2017)

outlines how this works in the relationships between the people of Tūhoe and the large fruit-eating pigeon known as the kererū. As the abstract explains:

Whakapapa (genealogy), whenua (land), and tangata (people) were interconnected domains that formed the conceptual basis of our framework. Within these domains the concepts of *mauri* (life essence), *mana* (authority) and *ihi* (vitality) guided the expression of the community's relationship with the environment. Cultural expressions related to the kererū demonstrated the cultural significance of the bird to *Tuawhenua* that went well beyond the ecological and intrinsic value of the species. (Timoti et al. 2017, p. 1)

Such was the mana of the kererū that an interviewee in the *Tuawhenua* study reported feeling an intense emotion of awe as a flock of hundreds of them flew past on the way to eat *toromiro* berries in the autumn. And when the people wanted to harvest and eat the *kererū* rituals ensured that prayers (*karakia*) were offered to the deity of the forest (*Tāne*) to ensure the future of the environment–human–bird relationship,

Karakia by *tohunga* (specialist or expert) would establish the connections and acknowledge the *mana* of *Tāne* and the forest . . . These practices were enacted to entice *Tāne* to pour out his abundance and enhance the *ihi* of the forest so that the harvest of *kererū* by the community would be bountiful. (Timoti et al. 2017, p. 5)

The culture of respect through which the relationship with the kererū is enacted is an example of the Indigenous relational paradigm (Salmond 2017; Roberts 2011; Henare 2001; Marsden 1992) in which there is little separation between matter and mind, materiality and spirituality, nor between humans, their cultures and nature.

Those principles of ordering the world by 'networks of kinship and alliance' and 'animated reciprocal exchanges' (Henare 2001, p. 196) can still be found in traditional cosmological chants. Because all the beings and objects contained in these networks of kinship were engendered by the relationship between the female Earth figure Papatūānuku, and the Sky Father Rangi, in clear distinction to the stadial model, the resources of the planet do not *belong* to humankind. Rather, human beings belong to the Earth (Henare 2001, p. 204) and are both enabled and constrained by their multi-directional relationships with other beings. Within this model, humans have "user rights", especially tribal group user rights, during their lifetimes (ibid.) as long as they do so in a sustainable manner, respecting the fact that other elements of the ecosystem are their kin, nor something other and able to be exploited without cost.

The templates that record these cosmic and genealogical relationships are known as *whakapapa* and while many of them are built around human descent lines stretching back to the central Pacific homeland of Māori, there are examples such as the *whakapapa* of the *kūmara*, a sweet potato that is a valuable food source, where celestial, human and plant lines are interwoven.

As recounted by Roberts (2011) the coming into being of the *kūmara* is dependent on other "comings into being" including that of the deity Rongo's older brother, the star Whānui, and of Pani, the wife of Whānui's younger brother Rongomai, all of whom are stars in a large constellation associated with the *kūmara*. These two celestial beings, along with the *kiore* (rats) and insects that like to eat *kūmara*, re-enact their relationships with the *kūmara* and its life history on an annual basis here on earth (p. 41). These relational ontologies, says Roberts, permit the inclusion of non-biological phenomena (for instance the star Whānui) that are also seen as related to the object at the centre of the *whakapapa*—the *kūmara* vegetable. The rationale for this is, she assumes, 'that non-human *whakapapa* represents a temporal as well as a spatial "mind map" of territorial ecosystems and cosmological relationships relating to particular species and objects within a particular tribal area' (ibid.).

This means that these narratives contain much of the environmentally grounded scientific knowledge of Māori: 'Whakapapa', observes Roberts, 'thus serve another function as cognitive template and mnemonic for the storage and retrieval of knowledge' (p. 41).

5. Celestial Observation and the Environment

One of the main triggers for the seasonally appropriate release of this whakapapa knowledge as a matter of daily life in pre-colonial times was the night-sky, where the constellations functioned like volumes in a celestial encyclopaedia, as was the case not only for Māori, but also for most societies reliant on oral transmission of knowledge (see Kelly 2016). Knowledge of various plants, animals and the deities to which they were related, as well as the times when they were most plentiful, was attached to the stars as they shifted around the sky throughout the year. Rituals and prayers performed by *tohunga* at significant celestial moments served the human desire of ensuring sufficient food for the community by propitiating the gods.

It is this alignment between the seasons and aspects of ecosystems—both those aspects that are under human control and those that cannot be controlled—an alignment which was perceived by Māori as indissolubly both spiritual and material, that is now seeming attractive again. With the natural environment under strain from population, climate and consequent economic and social pressures, it seems to some both appropriate and vital (Matamua 2017c) to revisit epistemological and spiritual models that are intimately responsive to the specificities of location. That is, to look to Indigenous understandings of ideal modes of interaction between human beings and the other entities in an animated or vital environment. In the contemporary world, these ancient explanations do not replace Western science but are layered onto it and augment it.

[...] sometimes when you say 'science' you are putting up a divide straight away between scientific and metaphysical, things that are spiritually ... that's astronomy and this is astrology. See for Māori it's the same thing, you look for those environmentally accurate, for want of a better name, indicators that are in the environment and then that's entwined with your spirituality and your approach. So you mean 'yes, the star's there, the lunar phase is there, let's combine that with a ceremony to celebrate that species of animal but also this deity who rules over that species, you know and then the running of the eels, you know the fact that they are going to spawn, but that they come from this star cluster in the sky which is in the sky at that moment'. (Matamua 2017c)

Since the stars over the islands of New Zealand or Aotearoa still move in the same patterns as when the main migration of Polynesians arrived 800 years ago, and because there is enough of the natural vegetation and fauna left for seasonal patterns to have continued relevance, there are many star movements that could be looked to for environmental and seasonal guidance. For instance, Rehua (Antares) is a summer star, rising early in the morning from December to February. Together with his two wives Rūhiterangi and Whakaongekai, Rehua is connected to the bounty, benefits, and difficulties associated with the heat in the summer months. However, the celestial event which has most caught the imagination of the public and is therefore supporting the reintroduction of Indigenous scientific/spiritual concepts into the public sphere is the rising of the Matariki star cluster in early winter (Hardy 2012; Matamua 2017a).

6. The Revival of Matariki Celebrations

There have been Māori-led public rituals around the winter movements of the Matariki (or Pleiades) star cluster since the year 2000. A pre-colonial set of new year astronomical observances which fell into disuse once New Zealand was Christianized, its conscious revival dates to the last years of the 1990s when Māori staff associated with the national museum Te Papa Tongarewa, located in the capital city Wellington, began to celebrate Matariki amongst themselves (Prince 2010; Temara 2017; Hakiwai 2017). With Te Papa offering a burgeoning annual Matariki public programme from the early 2000s (Hardy 2012, 2016), and later, another large festival provided by the Auckland City Council, celebrating the Māori new year has come to be seen as attractive to many New Zealand communities and the majority of large towns now have at least one Matariki event in winter. These festivals tend

to have Māori heading their organizational committees, but there are often Pākehā and other New Zealanders involved as well, representing local Councils, community and educational organizations.

There is a variable date for celebrations of the rise of the Matariki cluster over a span of almost a month from the third week of June to the middle of July each year because days for sightings are linked to the last-quarter phase of the lunar calendar. However, most multi-event programmes will begin with a pre-dawn ceremony where people invited by the organizers will gather to offer prayers or karakia to the stars, which, if the weather and timing are right, are sighted low in the eastern sky in the minutes before the first light from the sun appears. In Hamilton, in the Waikato, where the ceremony took place at the city's botanical gardens on 14 June in 2019, the karakia and address to Matariki were followed by a communal breakfast attended by more than 200 guests. A *wānanga* or educational seminar on the *māramataka*, or lunar calendar, a lightshow in the central city, and a market day featuring Māori products were some of the events held in successive days. In Auckland City the opening *karakia*, which include acknowledgment of those who have died in the previous year, were said at 6 o'clock in the morning on a hill in the Auckland Domain on 22 June. From 27 June for a week, there were also opportunities for paying customers to sail out into the Waitemata harbour on a *waka hourua*, or double-hulled canoe, to view the stars from a dark sky perspective, with an explanation of their significance from the renowned Pacific navigator Hoturoa Barclay-Kerr. One of the most popular events that Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington hosts each year is the Kaumatua Kapa Haka or performances of group song and dance by senior exponents of Māori performing arts. These performances speak of both worldly and spiritual matters, but the liveliness of the performances is in itself also an expression of spiritual energy. The Kaumatua Kapa Haka performances are live-streamed and attained 1.5 million views online in 2017 ([Hakiwai 2017](#)) demonstrating something of the reach that the Matariki celebrations now have.

While events led by Māori normally start and conclude with prayers, in keeping with the secular nature of wider New Zealand society, most Matariki events over the last 20 years however, have been framed within secular genres. That is, they are usually either entertainment programmes— theatre and music performance, art exhibitions, programmes—or educational events: lectures on Māori astronomy, practices of food gathering and cooking, or seminars on physical and mental health. A third genre consists of multicultural community gatherings, often involving bonfires, processions with candles, and storytelling: people enjoying spending time together at a dark time of the year. The decision that Wellington would replace a centuries old British fireworks festival, Guy Fawkes, with an enlarged version of its Matariki celebrations, has been seen as a tipping point ([Devlin 2017](#)) in the incorporation of Māori cultural values into wider public life within that secular context. In 2019, the state radio service Radio New Zealand began its morning news broadcasts on 25 June with an announcement that the Matariki period of the year had begun, while in the same week brief public service announcements on state-funded television channels presented poetically-framed information about Matariki against a visual background of the star cluster.

Sociologists of religion might read these developments as changes in the texture of a form of civil religion ([Bellah 1967](#)), and indeed Māori rituals of welcome have long been used at official and governmental functions. However, it is important to note that they are rarely explicitly discussed as religious in popular discourse, since religion is understood as having been differentiated into the private realm. Nevertheless, these events can support diverse interpretations in that most Māori would know that the practices around celebrating Matariki refer back to the departmental gods associated with Indigenous knowledge, with elements such as fire and water, and with various forms of food cultivation and gathering. This double coding is particularly evident in the visual branding of Matariki events, several hundred examples of which can be found online, and many of which are resonant with spiritual motifs (see also [Hardy 2016](#)).

7. The Evolving Nature of Contemporary Matariki Celebrations

However, in the last few years there has been a move towards an increasingly explicit religious framing for Matariki—in terms of foregrounding customary Māori relational ontology that is, not a Christian framing. In this activity, the authors are both observers and participants. We are part of a team that curated an exhibition at our local museum on Māori astronomy and the 21st century revival of Matariki celebrations, *Te Whaanau Maarama/The Family of Light* that has been visited by more than 150,000 people since June 2016. The principal researcher on the project, Professor Rangi Matamua, the inheritor of cosmological knowledge from his forebears in the Tūhoe tribe, has also written *Matariki: the Star of the Year* (2017a), which has so far sold 7000 copies over the English and Māori language versions. Each Matariki season moreover Matamua gives around 60 public talks about the influence of the stars to both Māori and mixed audiences (Matamua 2014, 2016, 2017b). During the 2019 autumn and early winter for instance, he has been giving a series of lectures on Māori astronomy in New Zealand and Australia under the auspices of the Royal Society of New Zealand, the nation's peak body for advancing and promoting science, technology and the humanities (Royal Society of New Zealand 2019). In the book and talks, Matamua explains the provenance of his knowledge, describes the practices of tribal astronomers and talks about the association of each of the stars in Matariki with aspects of the environment and human activity. Working only with their naked eyes the tribal astronomers could discern many more stars in the cluster than the seven, (the Pleiades, the Seven Sisters in European mythology) that are generally attributed to it. Matamua's account adds two more stars—Pōhutukawa, associated with death and remembering those who have died over the previous year, and Hiwa-i-te-Rangi, associated with aspirations for the future. In addition, three of the stars: Ururangi, Tupuārangi and Waitā, have masculine characteristics attributed to them, whereas many of the participants in previous celebrations have associated the constellation with wholly feminine properties (2017a).

Specifically, Matamua has been advising attendees at his talks to consider reviving the customary practice of *whāngai i te hautapu*, the practice his great-grandfathers described using:

The old people might wait up several nights before the stars rose. They would make a small hangi. When they saw the stars, they would weep and tell Matariki the names of those who had gone since the stars set, then the oven would be uncovered so the scent of the food would rise and strengthen the stars, for they were weak and cold. (Matamua 2017a, p. 69)

The revival of the *whāngai i te hautapu* takes the form of people ascending before dawn in a specific lunar phase of the month known as Piripi (June/July) to a high place where Matariki may be seen just above the horizon if the sky is clear. Food corresponding to each of the productive stars of Matariki is cooked while *karakia* are performed. Once both the food and *karakia* reach a stage of readiness then the smoke from the food is offered to the stars as sustenance. This ritual, which evidently works with the principles of *whakapapa*, or relational thinking, materializing the linkages between deities, the environment, animals and the activities of human beings, is being reinvigorated, not just by Rangi Matamua but also by a group of other young *tohunga*, called Te Matapuenga, who have been trained by senior ritual expert Professor Pou Temara of Tūhoe for the last several years (Matamua 2017c). The revival of the role of the *tohunga* parallels an increasing dissatisfaction with Christianity now understood primarily as a vehicle for promoting colonisation,

You know, before European settlers came to Aotearoa, we had the land and they had the Bible. Now, we have the Bible and they have the land. And that's fairly much how I explain Christianity. I think that for many, in many ways Māori were misled through Christianity. And so much of who we were, and the good things, have been lost because of Christianity and people's interpretations of it. (Matamua 2017c)

This explicitly religious version of Matariki is also promoted by the Māori tertiary institution Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, which has published materials visualizing the characteristics of the nine stars

of Matariki—Te Iwa o Matariki—the relational map or whakapapa of Matariki is indicated in those images (Te Whare Wananga o Aotearoa 2017).

In turn, the national museum, Te Papa Tongarewa, where the revitalisation of Matariki celebrations began 20 years ago, in 2017 for the first time offered its own public ritual loosely based on the *whāngai i te hautapu*. However, since the museum is set in the heart of the capital city and serves the whole community, there were less-culturally specific substitutions made for some of the Indigenous concepts and materials, so that the ritual might be experienced as either a secular or a spiritual event, as explained by the Creative Director of the Matariki Rising festival at Te Papa Tongarewa, Dr Charles Royal;

[. . .] it was explicitly a ritual, people were primed to come and participate in it [. . .] there were specific opportunities in the ritual where people could actively come and do something of meaning so one was to talk about themselves, another was to light tea-lights upon the pond to farewell loved ones, and another was to write down their hopes and aspirations for the year to come and to place it into a community basket and we were going to revisit those in the year to come [. . .] that's the specific Matariki part of the ritual versus the first part which was about honouring identity and honouring the land and honouring this home. (Royal 2017)

More than 500 people, from a variety of ethnic groups, turned up to the first instantiation of the ritual, it was held again in 2018 and the positive response ensured that it has also been scheduled for future years.

8. Conclusions

These new patterns in the public culture of New Zealand—the thousands who attend Matariki events up and down the country, the hundreds who attend rituals with a strong religious or spiritual character—have been enabled by the Māori insistence that its partner, the Crown, now embodied in the government of New Zealand, honour the commitments it made in the Treaty of Waitangi to both grant Māori the rights and privileges of British citizens and also to allow them to retain sovereignty over their own treasures and customs. It should be noted though, that not all the tribes of New Zealand actively support this new growth in Matariki observances. Moreover, for some in the south, west and north of the country, it is the star Puanga/Puaka that marks the beginning of the new year (the winter event in the southern city of Dunedin, a Ngāi Tahu tribal area, is known as Puaka Matariki). There are also differences in tribal accounts of when the Matariki period begins: the people of Waikato Tainui for instance, who have featured the star cluster on the Kingitanga coat-of-arms for more than a century (Papa 2016), align the celebrations with the 1906 birth date of King Kōroki, rather than the lunar calendar (Ruka 2019).

It is therefore early in the process of this development towards religiosity in the celebrations around Matariki but in some sections of the community at least, there is evidently a desire for this kind of ritualized experience that mobilizes deep values aligned with the physical and bicultural environments of Aotearoa New Zealand. Particularly in the case of Te Papa Tongarewa, one can participate in these developments without compromising one's secular identity or traducing another pre-existing form of religious belief, such as might exist among those who belong to one of the Christian denominations or the faiths of the newer immigrant groups coming to New Zealand.

The *whāngai i te hautapu* ceremony and the *kōrero*/talk that surrounds in it as practised and promulgated by Rangi Matamua and Te Matapuenga, are more distinctively Māori but in Matamua's mind resonate with a contemporary desire for self-determination in matters of religiosity:

[. . .] the syncretic [religions] like, Ringatū-ism, it's a blending of traditional Māori beliefs and Christianity, Rātana. You know they were massive in their day, massive, massive in Māoridom. I think their influence, for me is starting to dwindle, as Māori are starting to think mmm—you know, the *Christian* aspect of it is that what we want to continue to do or should we be thinking more about our environmentally-focused, environmentally-connected traditional

religions or traditional spirituality?’ Religion’s probably the wrong word, spirituality. I think there’s a little bit of a shift and this is in the mix somewhere. (Matamua 2017c)

The alternative paradigm for understanding and marking seasonal change that Matariki offers is a specific instance of the general move away from Christian affiliation in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is one of many marks of an expansive period in Māori identity and politics where indigenous epistemology, ontologies, and the rights granted by law are asserted as valid and useful for the contemporary world. Highlighting the seasonal movements of the Matariki star cluster for instance provides an introduction to the multi-layered resonances of the relational paradigm, both for Māori who have become distanced from their heritage and for other New Zealanders doubting the sustainability of maintaining a “stadial” view towards the Earth’s resources. There have been a number of regional research and environmental management projects that have harnessed mātauranga Māori: among them the *Tuawhenua* research project described above (see also Taiepa et al. 1997), and in the Waikato area, the creation of the Waikato River Authority that binds the Crown, Waikato Tainui and other iwi to guard and improve the river that ‘has provided physical and spiritual sustenance for large populations of Māori living along its catchment [for more than 700 years]’ (Waikato River Authority 2019).

According to Indigenous legal scholar Jacinta Ruru, there is still not enough consideration given to, nor an appropriately targeted understanding of, a Māori approach to sustainable environmental management, under which humans must be able to make use of resources as well as to ensure that these resources continue to exist:

New Zealand’s law and policy needs to shift from a principal objective of conservation as preservation to a more pluralist approach which also encompasses a tangata whenua inclusiveness that signifies conservation for cultural and sustainable management outcomes. (Ruru)

The many different activities through which the community is being educated about Māori cosmology and the natural world by Matamua, Royal and numerous others is helping to demonstrate that there continues to be a strong ‘fit’ between *mātauranga Māori*, *taha wairua* and the physical environment of the islands of Aotearoa New Zealand. Christianity may have, in the 179 years since the Treaty was signed, transformed the way that most Māori communities enact their attitudes towards the metaphysical aspects of life, but for many, at a deeper level, there is still an orientation towards a spiritual system developed out of the Pacific region. Contemporary trends and changes in religious and spiritual affiliations, including connections with politicized issues such as the maintenance of a healthy and productive environment, are also ensuring that there is now a reciprocal influence by Māori on the wider community of later immigrants.

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