

Matariki, a symbol of survival

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Abstract

The Māori people of Aotearoa, like their Pacific relatives, did not have a written language by which they preserved their historical narratives. What they did have was a gift of observation that allowed them to establish and build an empirical foundation of knowledge based on the activity of natural phenomena. Signs or symbols within nature provided guidance on what they could do. The appearance of significant astral bodies was noted as being coincident with tidal flows, the flowering of certain trees and the appearance of game birds. When aligned with significant landmarks they located fishing grounds far out to sea and allowed the terrestrial traveller to mark his location and to find shelter.

I was raised in an environment and in a time when that traditional knowledge system was at risk of being overtaken by new technology. Small pockets of cultural resistance remained however and I was fortunate to have experienced firsthand how traditional knowledge could survive and be passed on to those of us willing to accept the custodian's role. This paper reflects on the gift of observation of my ancestors and how that gift was exercised in establishing relationships among several sets of natural phenomena that were the basis of our economic activity and survival.

Te Ngārehu Tairoa – The Lingering Ember

My uncle John Sadlier was born at Waipiro Bay on the East Coast of the North Island of Aotearoa / New Zealand in 1916. His father was half-caste Irish and his mother a Māori. He was raised and spent a significant part of his life on our ancestral lands at Whakawhitirā, about two hours north of the city of Gisborne.

In the mid 1800s the largest occupied area on the East Coast stood at Whakawhitirā and more than 3000 people lived there. Today there are 27 people living in the vicinity of the marae,

our ancestral meeting place. They are known as Te Ahi Kā, a term that means ‘the burning fires’ a historical abstract symbol that meant that an area of land was in occupation. These people maintain our traditional lands where significant gardens once flourished, where we fished, fowled, farmed and hunted, where we were born and where we return to be buried. John Sadlier resisted the post-world war two urban drift and until his death in 2004 was Te Ngārehu Tairoa o Te Ahi Kā (the lingering ember of the fires of occupation), a further abstract symbol.

Over his long life he saw many changes in the area and while he gradually accepted the technology of the later settler, he remained a gardener, fisherman and food gatherer whose methods were located in the appearance of selected stars and constellations in the eastern sky. The appearances of these stars were symbols that indicated that conditions were propitious or otherwise for various activities to occur and acted as self-regulating conservation mechanisms.

Between 2002 and 2004 I spent much time interviewing my uncle and recording his experiences so that later generations will never lose the significance of the symbolism of ngā whetū o te tau (the stars) and their place in our survival. This essay is a selection of the experiences that I was fortunate to have been entrusted with. Much of my source material was recorded in the Māori dialect of Te Whānau a Uruahi (a sub tribe of the east coast of Aotearoa) and I have reproduced some of his quotes here in English for a wider audience.

John Sadlier and his siblings, my mother included, were raised in an environment of hard work where everyone had their responsibilities. His brothers were involved in taking care of the farm animals but he was chosen to be the one who would care for the gardens on the alluvial river flats of the Waiapu and Mangaōporo Rivers. While he was a competent farmer himself, he preferred to garden and to supplement the family larder with Kahawai (a type of fish) and sharks from the Waiapu river-mouth and eels and whitebait from the riverbanks. He was also a skilled hunter who trapped weka (a flightless native bird) and kererū (wild pigeon) and kept a constant supply of wild pork coming in to the kāuta (the cooking shed).

There were specific times when these activities occurred and they all had to do with the appearance of significant stars or constellations.

The stars told us when to do certain things. They were symbols that told us when it was time to plough up the gardens, when to sow the seeds and when to harvest the crops. The moon was our guide for fishing and hunting. The clouds in their various forms were also symbols, the same as low fog. Cloudy nights were good for eeling and whitebait netting and the low fog kept the smell of the pigs down near the ground so the dogs could get on to them. We had to be able to see these symbols and read the signs.

Matariki, te tohu o te tau – the symbol of the new year

The most significant symbol was the appearance of Matariki (the Pleiades). This is a group of stars in the constellation of Taurus known as Messier 45 (M45). The appearance of this star cluster marked the start of the Māori year in the month of Pipiri (June). The family were all involved in breaking up the hard soil and ploughing the gardens. Once the gardens were done, it was a good time to snare kererū and to hunt weka. It was also a good time to fish and collect kuku (mussels), koura (lobster) and pāua (abalone).

Now we have these scientists from DOC (Department of Conservation) telling us not to catch pigeons and weka and the fisheries put a quota on the shellfish. It is not our hunting and fishing that has depleted the stock, it is their roads and pine forests and people diving and long lining from big motor launches. Matariki was a symbol to us of what could be taken and in what numbers because the birds also knew the significance of Matariki and the fish rode the currents that in turn were controlled by the position of the moon. They went to certain places and we had a certain amount of time to take our catch before the rāhui (ceremonially imposed restrictions) went on.

In July we were really into the heart of winter and this was when the lamprey were running and the big eels were lethargic and could be taken and smoked. It was also the time to go out to the beaches nearby to gather parengo (seaweed) to be dried and used as a relish with preserved birds and pork.

When we got those birds and eels, we would preserve them in their own fat which was poured over them in a tahā (dried gourd with significant markings). These tahā were dried and cleaned out then rubbed on the outside with shark oil to make them leak-proof. If we put pigeons in a tahā, it was marked with a pigeon feather on the stopper, same for weka. If it was pork or other mīti tahu (meat rendered down by roasting) we attached a tusk to the stopper. Shark had a shark tooth. I guess it is just the same as a label on a can of beans from the supermarket. We didn't pollute the contents with preservatives though; the process of preservation was natural and lasted for years if needed. It is quite humorous to think that our Pākehā (European) friends would turn their noses up at us eating dried seaweed but now they pay for sushi. They are a strange breed!

He hononga – a relationship

It is interesting to note that the appearance of Matariki had special significance to the ancient people of Peru, who aligned their building projects with the main stars of the Pleiades.

There is significant evidence that the kumara (sweet potato) and the potato arrived in the Pacific Islands then Aotearoa from our ancestor's voyages to the west coast of South America, using Matariki as a navigational aid. One type of potato is in fact known as 'Peruperu.'

The peruperu seed that I have has been in our possession for a long time. I think it might have been off-loaded in the very early years of occupation here and has been passed down over the years. I think that makes sense because when you look at it, there is no land apart from scattered islands between us here on the east coast and the west coast of South America. We are the most eastern point of Aotearoa, the closest land mass to Peru.

The building of the Andean cities and their roading layout was based on quincunx practice. My uncle's maara (gardens) were oriented in accordance with quincunx practice as well, with the four corners and the centre marked during the first appearance of Matariki, each being aligned to one of the zodiacal signs in that constellation.

My uncle was an acknowledged expert on the various types of kumara and under which conditions they would provide the best yield. He passed this knowledge on during the Matariki period when the fields lay fallow. Our job as his understudies was to break up the hard soil and hand plough the old maara behind our horses. It was at this time that my uncle laid out the new maara with a mathematical precision based on a knowledge system that preceded Galileo's discourse on the relationship of the moon and the tides and was being used to navigate the southern ocean at a time when the great navigators of the western world were afraid to go out of sight of land lest they fall of the edge of the planet.

He akoranga mō te ora - learning for survival

The influence of Matariki lasted through the winter months until late September. During this time we (my generation) were taken into whare wānanga (periods of learning) on weekends and in the evenings. We learnt many things that were symbolic of the way that our lives had been and would continue to be ordered.

We had not seen many of the technologies that were commonplace elsewhere in the 1960s. Electricity had not reached our homes so we knew that this was a time to work while there was ample light. There was no refrigerator or deep freeze unit so we preserved food in the way our ancestors had. There was no typewriter or computer so our learning was oral and repetitive and maintained in the mind. There was no telephone so knowledge of when things were happening was a case of empirical understanding and review.

The appearance of Matariki was a symbol of the new-year and what it was about to bring. If the star cluster was clear and easily visible straight after the first new moon of June, it was a sign that there would be good crops. It therefore became a time when the men gathered to reflect on past seasons and plan for the new one, to mend fishing nets, to shape fish hooks, to store seeds and to tell their stories to us in the hope that we would carry on the work.

Puanga kai rau – puanga of a hundred foods

In late September, one of the stars of the M45 cluster (Rigel) known to the Māori people as Puanga takes on a dominant aspect. For us of the East Coast of Aotearoa this occurred after the first full moon in Whiringa-a-nuku (the fifth-month of the Māori year, October). This was the symbol that told us it was time to begin the planting of kumara, potatoes and corn.

When Puanga shone brightest of Te Huihui o Matariki (the assembly of the Pleiades) we knew that the soil was beginning to warm up. When that happened the trees began to flower and that flowering was the symbol for sowing and fertilising your seeds. It was also a symbol that certain shellfish were in prime condition. There were other stars attached to Ranginui's cloak (the night sky) that indicated when to sow specific seeds at this time. Tautoru Orion's Belt) and Whakuahu (Castor) would appear and we put in the potatoes and corn. When the maara were all bedded down, we waited for the appearance of Autahi (Canopus). She was the main star for navigating to the fishing grounds offshore.

Te rerenga o whānui (the flight of Vega)

Whānui (Vega) was probably the most significant astral symbol to us of the East Coast. In Kohitātea (the eighth month of the Māori year, January) Whānui made its appearance and between then and the appearance of Poutūterangi (Altair), which marked the tenth month of the Māori year, she appeared at different positions in the evening sky. Each position, when aligned with significant landmarks on certain nights, was a symbol that divined the activity of the family in the intervening period.

Whānui was a symbol for the hauhake (harvest). On the first full moon after she first appeared we knew it was time to harvest the first lot of potatoes. These were heaped up, covered with the leaves and then covered over with soil. These mounds were lined up at right angles to the rising sun so that they were kept warm throughout the day. This harvest carried on throughout the flight of Whānui across the evening sky.

Between the lifting of the potato crops there was fishing and hunting to be done. Whānui's flight was another example of how we conserved our food resources. It wasn't a case of outsiders legislating our conservation ethic. Ranginui signalled to us that we had this period, when Whānui was in flight, to harvest our crops, to catch fish, to trap birds and to preserve them for the winter months. The moon during Whānui's flight signalled the best time for fishing and diving.

My brothers and I grew very close to our uncle and to this day the oldest of us, still lives in our valley and continues to prepare his gardens in the same way, waiting for Matariki to signal the start of the new-year and then for the other astral symbols to guide him for the rest of the year.

Te roanga atu – the continuation

Part of our way of life is for us as an extended family to return home whenever possible for a monthly church service. This extended family lives mainly in the neighbouring city of Gisborne though many of us live many hours away. Arriving on a Friday night, we gather and re-live the stories so that the next generations know about the special relationship that they have with their environment.

Teenagers can easily identify significant stars and speak with authority about their importance not only in divining what is to come but also on the future welfare of the family. They do the jobs that I did in my youth. They understand and can apply quincunx practice to

set out their maara. They can align geographical features with the appropriate stars and navigate to our fishing grounds. They do not need scuba to obtain shellfish, relying instead on their knowledge of the tides and their relationship to the moon. They know that the observation of celestial phenomena and the ability to read the signs and symbols in nature will allow them to predict the coming seasons.

Conclusion

As I conclude this essay, it is the 12th of June 2009. Today, Matariki appeared above the eastern horizon. On this day also, the Māori Party celebrates the fifth anniversary of its formation as a political voice for Māori in the Parliament of New Zealand. The formation of the Māori Party in 2004 was in response to the legislated theft of the foreshore and seabed of Aotearoa by the Crown, represented by the Labour Government of the time.

It was an act of cultural survival as Tariana Turia crossed the floor of Parliament, abandoning years of Māori support for the Labour Party. That the celebrations for the Māori Party are coincident with the appearance of Matariki is symbolic of the inherent desire of Māori to live as Māori. As we celebrate this expression of sovereignty, we look to the eastern sky, to Matariki.

Our ancestors were close and accurate observers of the heavens. They named many of the stars and constellations in a way that was different to western astronomers. These western astronomers look to the deep heavens and seem to be preoccupied with predicting when the next asteroid will hit earth or when the planet will next enter an ice age or worse still, when life will cease to exist on earth. The astronomy of our ancestors by way of contrast was focussed on those astral bodies as symbols of survival, of guides to us that allowed us to regulate those activities that ensured our survival. The symbolic appearance of Matariki then was to foretell the nature of the coming season and to determine and regulate the cycle of food gathering. This is expressed in the following lines from an oriori (a mother's lullaby).

You come hither from the realm of Rigel,
From the assembly of the Pleiades,
From Jupiter and Altair,
These alone oh child are the symbols
Which provide food at Aotea.

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