

## **KĀKAHU HOU: THE BREATH OF CLOTH**

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### **Preface**

The fibres of your cloak cascade through landscape. Whiri whiri ringa ringa, whiri whiri e. Braid, twist with the hands, braid, twist away. For every braid that is made by the hands of our primordial 'beings' we are sustained by your nature. You prop up fiercely protruding the landscape you stand, caressing the skies as you gently touch the heavens. The smell of the cold air whispers across my nostrils awakening my senses you cleanse. Your tenderness and gentle curves flow through the life-giving rivers perpetuating the land I know, Wai Te Ika. I hear the beat of your heart by the sounds of a flowing river, Tangahoe. Your mauri bellows in the pastures of your knowledge, past, present, and future. You are the guide that navigates life itself.

### **Abstract**

Kākahu Hou explores the potential for fashion, film, and garment design through a series of major projects and investigations to act as cultural knowledge catalysts that inform a Taranaki cosmological worldview. This, in turn, enhances knowledge exchange through visual communications and documentation. Furthermore, this paper explores the role of 'rongo' (a cosmological entity of peace, balance, and equilibrium), and how a deeper knowledge of rongo can better enhance an understanding of creative design/art practices through a counter colonial methodology. Rongo, is used as a tool to personify a certain 'being' that shows characteristics are able to enhance a better understanding of traditional and contemporary ideologies. Rongo is recognised in various ways but ultimately personifies characteristics of cooperation, consensus, and commitment. These characteristics result from struggles of colonisation particular to land confiscations in Taranaki and historical events that took place in Parihaka. Accordingly, this project activated a temporal understanding of taonga (treasured articles) driven by auto-ethnographic methods and epistemologies of propositional knowledge (undocumented knowledge). Other ways of activating knowledges are explored, through reciting karakia and oral expressions of propositional knowledge and knowledge transference.

The emergence of this knowledge are attained in cosmological narratives, which inform an indigenous Māori worldview. This projects purpose is to articulate the methods of whakapapa and understand the ‘hou’ or the breath of contemporary fashion presentation, informing the past with the present and preparation for a transformative future.

Ko Taranaki te Mounga  
Ko Aotea te Waka  
Ko Tangahoe Te Rorohenga  
Ko Ngāti Ruanui Toku iwi  
Ko Hāmua, Hāpōtiki Toku Hapū  
Ko Taiparohēnui Toku Marae  
Ko Alison Luke, Diane Luke Raua  
Ko Robert Campbell oku Matua  
Ko Bobby Campbell Wahawaha Luke Toku Ingoa



Figure 1. Whiri Kawe film, 2019 (00:18)

## Introduction

Often to understand the value in valuing a precious object or taonga (treasure). The object in hand, however it may look, has an embodied relationship with the owner through the metaphysical senses and energies bound by whakapapa. Similarly, to the relationships Māori have with the environment. Preface to this paper a poem explains the synergies of this connection with my whakapapa to Mounga Taranaki. The ‘hou’ or the breadth prescribes the notion of vitality, life force, and ‘kākahu’ meaning clothes or in this context, cloth. I ask, how does this relationship have a prevalence in the relationships we have with our clothes, through the breadth (hou) of cloth.

As an introduction, one critical methodology that has contributed to the whakapapa of this research and creative practice is ‘whiri kawē’, a three-strand plait. These threads acknowledge the essence of the past, present, and future, and in turn has become poignant fragment of the overall project. Not only does this acknowledge a temporal understanding but significant because of its multi-disciplinary approach to understanding contemporary forms of taonga, as a practice-led repository of traditional knowledge, an activator of rongo, an ideology enriched by pacifist attitudes forged by the legacy of Taranaki histories, knowledge, and worldview.

That multi-disciplinary approach was presented at New Zealand Fashion Week 2019, a ten-month project that encompassed a fashion show and a fashion film, a presentation that has driven this project.<sup>1</sup> Screened at the beginning of the show the film evokes characteristics that gesture towards locative spaces of significance; that is Taiporohēnui Pā, Tangahoe and Mouna Taranaki, these places I whakapapa to and whakapapa from. In particular, this film highlights Taiporohēnui Pā. The opening scene in the film *Whiri Kawē* (2019) (Figure 1) captures the flowing river of Tangahoe and my niece Carlida Te Awhe washing an apron. She is the film’s main protagonist, representing a lineage of Tupuna Kuia. The aim of this research is to evaluate a series of creative practices undertaken and capture the synergies and characteristics that depict ‘rongo’ and applying a counter-colonial analysis of western design thinking and practice. The question main this project seeks to ask is as follows:

How can notions of a personified deity, ‘rongo’ and ‘rongo attributes’ communicated through whakapapa and propositional knowledge become a vehicle and method for an art and fashion practice?

Following this question, an in-depth literature review explores notions of rongo as a creative practice and contextualising of a series of art works and articles compiled between 2019-2022. This project encourages a better understanding of how we communicate through clothes with an added approach from an iwi, hapu and whanau worldview. To understand this particular worldview, I have approached this project from whanau-centric perspective and also as a creative practitioner, in turn this has become a deeply personal journey and also a project undertaken during my doctorate candidacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Please access Whiri Kawē Film and Presentation via links code below:

Fashion week 2019 – Whiri Kawē Presentation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peqNQubOusY&t=533s>

Whiri Kawē Film: <https://www.bobbycampbellluke.com/basic-01-1>

## Tōku Kainga: My Home



Figure 2. Still from Whiri Kawe film, 2019 (06:10)

I was born in Hawera, South Taranaki, a taurima (adoption) to my now mother Alison Rangitaupe Lee Luke, granddaughter to the late Ngarue Pokou Ngeru. She, among many others, was born into a vanguard of tauheke and kuia, (elderly). Mum Alison's upbringing yielded the soft gestures of strong tikanga, kawa and mātauranga Māori (knowledge) pertaining to Taiporohēnui Pā. Cultivated by our tupuna kuia, her matrilineal whakapapa lingers through the tenderness of a nurturing mother. Taiporohēnui Pā being a product of her fostering care, like her predecessors and many others with her, she endeavors to foster the people that walk through the waharoa (gateway to a fortified Village) of our ancestral establishment. We encounter the waharoa at Taiporohēnui Pā visualised in *Whiri Kawe* (2019) seen in Figure 2. My niece Carlida Te Awhe stands steadfast under the waharoa, waiting, with pride, she represents the fostering nature of a strong matriarchal whakapapa in a place of cultural, spiritual, and physical significance. Not only known as a marae, but a pā (fortified village). An entire community, a bustling metropolis we call home. Rich in historical significance, the name Taiporohēnui is an ancient one. Prior to the great heke (migration) around 1400, bringing the main body of our tupuna ancestors here (some sea navigators settled in Tahiti and adjacent islands), they built a great house, a temple, and named it Taiporohēnui; a name of mana (strength) (Houston, 2006, p. 162). That name is given to the place nestled in the shadows of our mouna (mountain) Taranaki, on our reservations of sub-tribes, Hāmua and Hāpōtiki, and a part of the rohe (wider community), Ngāti Ruanui. These places, I call home. Te raukura and kawakawa, Figure 3, are illustrated in a print used in my *Whiri Kawe* (2019) Collection. Te raukura has a special meaning for the people of Taranaki. Te raukura is an adornment placed on the head or the lapel as a symbol of these prescribed actions. In acknowledgement of this, I have styled the collections *Whiri Kawe* (2019) with the adornment of our raukura; a symbol that represents the passive attitudes forged by rongo.

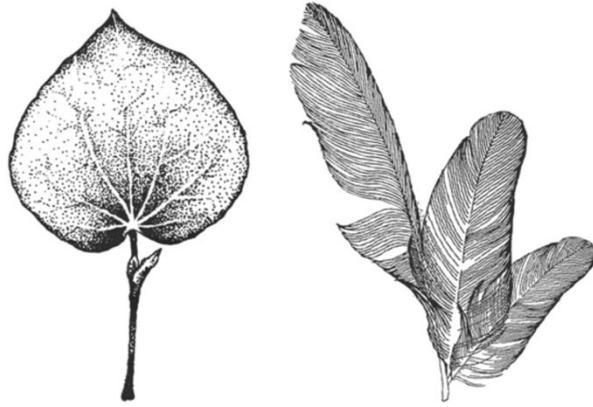


Figure 3. Kawakawa and Raukura illustration 2019.



Figure 4. Kākahu Hau, 2018 (photoshoot)

## Hou Rongo – Breath of Rongo

This section explores the ways in which such contemporary initiatives come in the wake of Māori cosmological worldviews. From this perspective, situating rongo within the context of an iwi/hapū/whānau centric space is rooted in a Māori conception of the universe. To understand rongo is to understand where rongo has come from in the order of our Māori cosmos. *Te Kōpū o Te Tai-Ao – The Womb of the Universe* (Waikerepuru, 2014) articulates this space as, ‘Rongo-tautangata Matua’ or, in short, ‘Rongo –tau’, taking place as one of the first in the field of Atua (Gods), rongo is the principle of balance, stability, equilibrium, harmony, and peace. From rongo there stems a wider narrative/knowledge of spiritual entities, such as Te Kore and Te Pō. The story goes: Te Kore is cradled in the embrace of primordial beings Ranginui (sky) and Papatūānuku (earth) and, following their separation, ‘Te Ao Marama’ is revealed (the building of the natural world). It is also important to note that these entities are not only personified gods but foremost ‘beings’ or ‘phenomena’. Christianity and colonisation paint our primordial beings as people. If we distance ourselves from this colonial application, we can see the true potentiality of these entities. Rongo can be understood as tapu, meaning ‘sacred’ or a ‘sacred entity’ and this is closely associated with the potentiality of power and spiritual energy, or as ‘mauri’ or ‘mouri’ (Shirres, 1997). This applies to all primordial beings, as they become energies of Mauri prescribed to all living and non-living things. Rongo becomes an intrinsic tapu. As an example of this in my fashion film practice, Carlida gestures and moves toward spaces such as the dining room, Kautu-ki-te-Rangi in the *Whiri Kawe* film (2019). In washing the apron and then wearing an apron, she signifies, and highlights acts of care. In this respect, Carlida represents peaceful actions that keep the balance of the marae in order. Waikerepuru (2014) discusses these concepts through catalysts of pragmatic understanding forged through ‘Karakia Tatai Whakapapa’ and this karakia recites the whakapapa of our world. Significantly, rongo as an activation of balance, through connections to Taranaki, forges counteractions to colonisation and land confiscation. In this context, Tonga Kerena discusses key attributes of rongo regarding the legacy of Parihaka: “Rongo is part of a wider political phenomenon of Indigenous resistance to colonialism – as it is an integral part of the identity of Parihaka” (2017). Parihaka, a humble village in the shadow of Taranaki, has become a catalyst embodying rongo. Parihaka Pā housed many survivors who were bullied and threatened off their lands. Parihaka signifies a place for survivors to remain steadfast, keeping alive the teachings of Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kākahi, two profound leaders of Taranaki established Parihaka.

*Whiria Te Tangata, Ka Puta He Ora, Whiria Nga Mahi Toi Ka Puta Te Tino  
Rangatiratanga*

Weaving together the people brings life, weaving the arts enables our sovereignty.

In relation to this project, gathering specific information in all senses of verbal and visual nuances particular to ‘Toi Taonga and Rongo’ develops powerful decolonial methodologies through an interdisciplinary fashion film and garment design practice. It is in the weaving of knowledge from the past, present and futures that brings people together and ultimately paves ways to enable our sovereignty as Māori.

*Koia kei a ia te wā āiane, Koia kei a ia te wā a muri, Koia kei a ia te wā a muri,  
Koia kei a ia te wā a mua, Wā muri ka oti a mua*

He who holds the present holds the past, He who holds the past, holds the future'  
(Sole, 2005, p. 1).

It is therefore understandable that addressing my pepeha above (page 2) is important to the research as it establishes a foundation and anchors the research to a specific place. Whakapapa is like the growth of a tree. It creates new extensions, bringing new life. But, without the foundation of the root, its whakapapa is non-existent, and like this project, acknowledging these roots will enhance the Mana (strength) of the project. Broken up into parts, 'whaka' – means to bring about, create, and activate, and 'papa' – is to ground with foundations. In this respect, Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999) uses whakapapa as a fundamental tool to understand an organisation of knowledge and layering knowledges through commonalities. Similarly, Charles Royal developed 'Te Ao Marama', a research paradigm to identify whakapapa as an analytical tool where one phenomenon can be in common with another, for example, "to lay one thing upon another" (1998, p. 57). This concept, or analytical tool, will be key to this research and its scope in understanding a deeper meaning of whakapapa.

### **Te Aho Tapu o Rongo**

'Te Aho Tapu', refers to the sacred eternal thread that is centralised around ideologies of the genealogical line, the first sacred line which is used in Māori weaving practices. This is the first weft thread threaded by the turuturu (cloak weaving pegs) which are anchored in the ground. The aho tapu is the thread also known as whiri holding suspended threads to create adornment of kākahu, korowai or kahu huruhuru. Ideologies that surround the concept of the Te Aho Tapu are a metaphorical expression or technique to represent a whakapapa. Whiri is also integral to the making of the kete (flax bag). Without the whiri/aho tapu of the woven article, it will not hold together. Metaphorically speaking if we discuss rongo as the subject or sacred thread, rongo holds the research and practices together. The Aho Tapu comprises the whakapapa of the woven pattern in the article which is bound together as one to create a fabrication/article embodying a visual language, a record of history and genealogies. This is present metaphorically in art works such as *Whiri Kawe* (2019) film. Rongo is present through the activations carried out by Carlida performing gestures that bind the Whakapapa of the apron and the fabrication that embodies a visual dialogue registered from memories and moments in the spaces she walks through. Furthermore, the ritual of the Aho Tapu is practiced during a ceremony within the 'Te Whare Pora'. Gestures Carlida performs in *Whiri Kawe* (2019) film seem ceremonial and ritualistic, just as the space she walks through Kautu-ki-te-rangi is a place of ritual through Tikanga and Kawa (policies and procedures) guided by rongo. *Whiri Kawe* (2019) film becomes enlightened with in-depth knowledge that carries narratives and histories, as do the articles created traditionally in the state of 'being' in Te Whare Pora. In this regard, rongo is the sacred thread; a thread that anchors future concepts. In relation to signifiers of rongo, this is displayed by the adornment of our raukura (feathers).

### Rongo: A Mechanism of the Counter Colonial

Rongo, as a method of resistance, provides a catalyst for pacifism. In turn, it acts as the ‘counter-colonial’ mechanism that responds to colonial ideas assimilated in Parihaka. Carl Mika suggests that the term ‘counter-colonial’ can mean various things, but essentially refers to thinking that reflects cultural metaphysics while reacting to the voice of the ‘other’ (Mika, 2016). When referring to the voice of the ‘other’, Mika notes that these authors are foreign. Mika states, “A Māori counter colonial approach, hence, reads an assertion made in literature through holistic eyes and assesses whether it supports, or derogates from that worldview of holistic oneness” (2016, p. 2). In the ‘assessment’, Māori critique the ‘other’, referring to colonial cultures foreign to a Māori worldview. This has influenced a particular idea or conceptualisation pertaining to my creative mediums. Each article sewn, woven, performed and filmed is a political statement that expounds core facets of rongo. The historical teachings of Tupuna leaders, Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kākahi of Parihaka, brought a Māori counter-colonial approach to present alternative ideas. Rongo is the central teaching of the counter-colonial approach. To discuss visual nuances as passive political statements, I use the *Whiri Kawe* (2019) collection as an example. Within the fashion collection, there is a mini-series of dresses, entitled Colonial Prairie (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Colonial Prairie (look book), 2019



Figure 6. Image of Carlida wearing Colonial Prairie Dress from Whiri Kawe collection 2019

From a counter-colonial stance, my statement with this mini-series is ‘reclaim the Colonial Prairie’. Figure 6 shows Carlida, wearing one of the Colonial Prairie dresses, standing in front of Taiporohēnui Whareniui (meeting house). This still image is taken from the film *Whiri Kawe* (2019). The fabric shown here was given to me by whānau and was curtain fabric once stored in our family homestead. Pictured in Figure 7, a photograph of Tupuna Kuia from Parihaka, is a group photo of poi dancers dating from the 1890s. Two known Tupuna Kuia in this photograph are Kui Ngarere Tapuke and Ngarere Te Pare Mouri Kipa ne Kihi. When analysing the photo of these kuia, we are met with facial expressions that draw attention to the sombre nuances of a kuia. The fashion collection in question, *Whiri Kawe* (2019), asks how a political phenomenon of indigenous resistance, using pacifist attitudes, can be communicated through a multi-layered creative practice.



Figure 7. Group of poi dancers, Parihaka, 1890s. Collis, William Andrews, 1853-1920: Negatives of Taranaki. Ref: 1/1-012050-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22843943

When making design decisions about the Colonial Prairie series, a part of *Whiri Kawe* (2019) showcase, I note references from our tupuna kuia in photographs such as Figure 7. Fascinated by their dress, the focus became the garment combinations and silhouette of that period of clothing, including cotton and linen shirts with leg of mutton sleeves, frills, cuff details paired with layered gathered skirts and scarves adorning their necks. These garment ‘articles’ are reminiscent of Victorian dress and the Colonial Prairie. Enacting a Māori counter-colonial style, there are the soft touches of harakeke (flax) adornments and pūpū (flax skirt) seen in the photograph that echoes the panache of Victorian colonial dress. Hazel Ellis (model) is wearing two of the four Colonial Prairie dresses; the style stems from the Victorian silhouettes of the Parihaka kuia: puff sleeves, pleat details and small frills accompanied by a layered skirt and linen pants, styled with soft touches of natural elements that reconnect with Te Taiao (the natural world) (Figure 5). These designs include a metaphysical nature and essence. Hazel holds a kete, woven by Keita Tuhi (Ngati Kahungunu). Inside the kete is the plant kawakawa, a representation of rongoa and rongo. The purpose of the Colonial Prairie was to assert a counter-colonial gaze by assimilating and using the elements of design principles seen in Victorian dress, using sacred signifiers such as the raukura (feathers) and kete, both of which embody a Māori worldview. This becomes a way to visually gesture and indigenise colonial ideologies. Notably, other Māori artists and designers have cultivated ideas taken from colonial references and shifted meaning by activating a Māori counter-colonial gaze. This is in part due to recent movements towards a decolonised society and the activating of cultural agency through a dominant Māori worldview.

Artist and fashion designer, Misty Ratima (Ngāti Kahungunu, Rongamaiwahine, Rongawhakaata and Ngāti Hine) shared similar ideas in her avant-garde collection, 'Decolonise' (2018) and a unisex streetwear collection 'Ko Rangi Ki Runga, Ko Papa Ki Raro' (2018). Ratima discusses the ideas behind the collection: decolonise is an avant-garde collection that empowers women to consciously and actively decolonise themselves from colonial and patriarchal ideas that continue to dictate the worth and worthlessness of women' (Ratima, 2018). Referring to the images of her collection, details such as the puffy and frilly sleeves reflect the silhouettes of colonial dress. The counter-colonial (decolonial) approach highlights 'Te Whare Tangata'—the house of humanity and the uterus, which gives life. As mentioned earlier, in the discussion that all life came from 'Te Kōpū o te Taiao' (the womb of the universe) and is carried by 'Wai Te Ika' (life of birthing waters), Te Whare Tangata can be applied through the physical nature of women's bodies. Ratima highlights this by revealing Te Whare Tangata through intricate sewn designs on leather underwear. The 'Decolonise' collection asserts a reclamation of indigenous womanhood through a fierce and provocative concept that is natural within a Māori worldview. Encouraging the self-sovereignty of a matrilineal nature, this collection makes a statement about worth and 'tino-rangatiranga' (self-determination) without patriarchal disparities. If rongo asserts itself as pacifist attitudes, understanding this deployment of actions is seeded in our tupuna kuia. The work centres their soft, and equally fierce attitudes, focused on matriarchal lineage: it is the strength of women that activates this space. As a male designer, my gaze when engaging with these concepts is a worldview that comes from being at my mother's knees as a child and understanding my ūkaipō (spiritual and physical nourishment).

## Conclusion

This project investigates how notions of a personified deity, 'rongo' and 'rongo attributes', communicated through Whakapapa and propositional knowledge, can become a vehicle and method for an interdisciplinary art and fashion practice. Furthermore, I explore how my own work nestled in fashion film, photography, and garment making enhance a contemporary relationship with Taranaki taonga and knowledge. Moreover, I ask how an art and fashion practice might become a tool to enact counter-colonial ways of both observing historical fashion and designing contemporary fashion. Foremost, I have attempted to explore the agency of rongo as stemming from the actions and activations of my tupuna kuia and extended ancestors. They are the catalysts that inform my cultural sovereignty which includes all place-based knowledge, marae, iwi, hapū, waka, and most importantly, a broader worldview of Taranakitanga. In summary, through inter-related and cumulative creative outputs, such as *Whiri Kawe* (2019) showcase, I explore how rongo becomes activated with innumerable attributes which include an inherited Whakapapa as a mouri of healing equilibrium aimed at accountability and peace within a Taranaki understanding. Acknowledging cosmological origins in Te Ao Māori, as a crucial part of design methodology and outcomes, is significant for Māori. It anchors us forever to our place and our ancestors. Ka pū te ruha ka hao te rangatahi—when the net withers, another is made and cast out. When an elder is no longer fit to lead, a healthier leader will stand in his place.

This well-known proverb acknowledges new generations. In this context, taonga tuku iho—as the passing down of knowledge—forms of koha are given through hau. The aspiration is that knowledge, redeveloped in a cyclical manner, cultivates contemporary and aspirational ideas that encourage a Māori way of being within the context of art and fashion.

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