



Tupuna awa: People and politics of the Waikato River

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Book Review 1, July 2018

Mike Ross

Victoria University of Wellington

Book Title: Tupuna Awa: People and Politics of the Waikato River **Author:** Marama Muru-Lanning **Year of Publication:** 2016 **Publisher:** Auckland University Press **Number of Pages:** **ISBN:** 978-1-86940-850-3

Waikato te awa katohia, katohia he wai māu!

*The current of the Waikato flows onward as a wellspring
for you!*

This line taken from the well-known song “Waikato Te Awa” alludes to the connection the Waikato River has to the wellbeing of the people living along its banks. I submit this review as a person from Waikato with a natural bias toward narratives from this area. This book tells a story about the Waikato River and its people.

It was great to read a Waikato perspective from a Waikato scholar about the Waikato River. And although the focus is on Waikato, this is likely to be a familiar story for tribes throughout *Aotearoa* (New Zealand) and for other colonised Indigenous peoples who have become a minority in their own lands. Issues arising from New

Zealand’s colonial history are played out in the decisions affecting the river between 1995 to 2010, the first 15 years of the post-Waikato-Tainui Treaty Settlement.

I particularly enjoyed hearing the voices of elders that were interviewed for the book and voices from the past via the use of oral traditions in song, proverbial sayings, and historical accounts. These comments supported the sense of value placed on local knowledge while the author traversed the river physically and figuratively to develop her thesis. The brief historical accounts of the river tribes were also helpful in understanding tribal perspectives and their particular interests alongside the huge changes that have occurred as a consequence of the Waikato River being an essential source of water for the primary industries, towns, cities, hydroelectric generation, and the resulting employment and business that support these activities.

The important contrast in perspectives of the river was clearly made. At one end, the river is a living being to whom Waikato River tribes have had a long and intimate relationship. While on the other end, the river is a resource to be managed economically and environmentally in order to maximise benefits for its stakeholders. I think Muru-Lanning is fair handed in acknowledging that people, whether *Pākehā* (New Zealand European) or Māori can operate at either extreme of these positions but most are trying to

negotiate a sustainable position that we all can live with.

I appreciate the detail Muru-Lanning gives to defining terms, such as stakeholders, guardians and co-governors; the contrasting positions of *Tupuna Awa* (River Ancestor) and *Te Awa Tupuna* (The Ancestral River), and linguistic features of the Māori language. However, I'm not sure the amount of detail is necessary to convince readers of the shift taking place in attitudes and behaviours affecting the river. As a result, at times the book reads like its primary audience is academia, and it was difficult to get into the flow of the narrative because it was punctuated with asides to justify and explain connections to wider academic theories. For example, descriptions of “process theories”, explanations of “comparative methodology” and terms such as the “Waikato River Field Site”, may not have relevance to a general reader or a person primarily interested in the river and its people. I understand how these are important markers for academic credibility, but these asides distracted me from the important themes within the book and at times, affected its readability.

The introductions in each chapter provided a good summary of the issues to be discussed; and conclusions highlighted points made, often with leading questions of topics to be discussed in the following chapters. These were helpful in drawing together the various threads of discussion in each chapter.

Tribal politics is a complex topic. Within Waikato-Tainui, the role of the *Kīngitanga* (King Movement) as an institution, the authority of the *Kāhui Ariki* (Royal family of the Kīngitanga), the *mana* (authority) of the tribal council and its Executive, the *mana* of *hapū* (subtribes), *marae* (formal gathering places) and their representation of tribal members interests, have been repeatedly debated in tribal forums and the courts. The author provides an explanation of the political state within Waikato-Tainui and the implications it has on the well-being of the tribal estate, and in particular as it relates to the river. These included comments on the democracy within the tribe, the access by tribal members to important information and its affects on the decision-making process. Although I did not always agree with her conclusions, Muru-Lanning makes valid

arguments and raised insightful questions which are worthy of debate.

This book reminds me again of the wider influences of historical colonisation and government policy that have excluded Waikato River tribes from the decision-making relating to the lands and waterways in the region. This power imbalance between Māori and the Crown continues to be the reality in Waikato-Tainui's dealing with Government. Accordingly, Muru-Lanning sees the latest co-governance arrangements as progress but well short of restoring the *mana* of the river and its people.

Despite these difficulties, we have proven to be a resilient people. This year the Kīngitanga celebrates 160 years since its establishment. Waikato-Tainui has over 70,000 registered tribal members and more than a billion dollar capital base with multiple strategies and activities to improve the well-being of our people and the river. The work this author has put into this book informs Waikato-Tainui people of the hopes and aspirations of our *tūpuna* (ancestors), tracks the path we have travelled, and it has not always been smooth sailing, and then encourages us to learn from that past so that we can engage in setting a way forward.

Heoi anō, me mihi ka tika ki a koe e Marama. Ahakoa e ruarua noa ibo āku kupu mihi, waiho mā te eanga o te kaupapa me te hekenga o tō werawera koe e mihi. Waiho mā ngā bua nui, ngā bua pai i puta mai i tāu nā tubinga koe e mihi. Otiia, ka takī anō ngā korero a ō tātou tūpuna, tōia Tainui kia tapotu ki te moana. Mā wai i tō? Mā tātou!

Mike Ross (Ngāti Hauā) is a Lecturer in Māori Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, where his research focuses on issues relating to iwi history, Māori community development and governance. Before coming to Victoria, he worked at Te Wānanga o Raukawa. Prior to pursuing an academic career, he spent many years in youth and community work. mike.ross@vuw.ac.nz