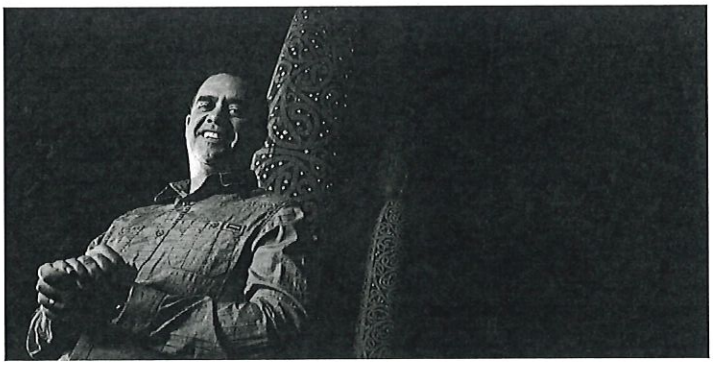
KŌRERO

Rangi Matamua: Matariki and Māori astronomy

by **Dale Husband** | Aug 1, 2020 | **0** | 12 min read



Professor Rangi Matamua, astronomer and author of the best-selling book 'Matariki: The Star of the Year.' (Photo supplied).

LATEST STORIES

Correcting the course

When our excellence constrains their privilege

Professor Rangi Matamua, at Waikato University, has been focusing on Māori science — astronomy in particular — for a few years now and feels it's his duty to keep spreading the word. One reason is to counter the bad mouthing from western critics who don't understand the history, the depth, and the practical experience behind the Māori knowledge. And another is the responsibility and legacy from his ancestors and family to revitalise the understanding and wisdom that their studies have delivered through the centuries. Here he and Dale are discussing the pathway he's on.

Kia ora, Rangi. Can I start by asking you to share some kōrero about your names, your whānau and the situation you grew up in?

My full first name is Rangiānehu. It was given to me by my dad, and it means misty sky, which I suppose isn't really the best name for someone who's interested in astronomy, but it has a connection to the sky and the mist from where I come from: Te Urewera.

My family name, Matamua, originates from Waikaremoana, and my family comes from there as well as from Ruatāhuna. While my father is from Tūhoe, I grew up with my grandmother's people in Levin. And I was very fortunate to grow up in a household where my

parents were dedicated to educating us well.

My grandparents also played a huge role in the lives of me and my siblings. I have an older sister Karemoana, a younger brother Nathan, and a younger sister Materoa. We were all schooled in Levin, before going off to boarding school.

My brother and I spent five years at Hato Paora College, near Feilding, while my sisters went to Turakina Māori Girls' College in Marton. From there, I went on to university, and ended up being a "career academic", I suppose you could say.

Could we flesh out a little more about your name? Why would your dad call you Rangiānehu? Did he ever talk to you about that?

He wanted a name that had a connection to Tūhoe, us being Ngā Tamariki o te Kohu (children of the mist). If I cast my mind back to my schooling in Levin, I'd say at least 60 percent of the kids at my primary school were Māori, yet of all of the kids there, only my sister and me had first and last Māori names. It was a real sign of the times — it wasn't seen as a cool thing to have Māori names.

Most of our Māori friends had a first Māori name or a last Māori name, but not both. I think my dad was part of the

Māori renaissance, and he wanted us to be Māori.

I find it fascinating that your grandad was known as Jim Moses, whereas his real name was Timi Rāwiri Matamua. How come he wore the Jim Moses handle?

Like many of that era — we're talking about the 1930s to '50s, when urban drift was happening — he moved from Ruatāhuna, where everyone spoke Māori, to a place where Māori were a minority. And to survive, he had to speak English. His name was a mouthful, so he changed his last name to Moses and his first name to Jim.

Then he thought: "I want a middle name." So he gave himself the name Frederick. I asked him why, and he said: "I just thought it was a fancy sounding name."

This was in the assimilation era, where everything was about being good British citizens, and God Save the Queen was still our national anthem.

My dad grew up in this era, and he used the name Matt Moses until the 1970s. Then he just said: "No, my name is Matamua," and he changed it. He was one of the first generation to reclaim and decolonise Māori names, and I'm always proud of him for taking that stance.

Boarding school obviously played a part in the pride you feel in our people. What can you tell us about that experience? And are you still an advocate for that style of learning?

I am. I'm a product of the Māori boarding school system, and proud of it. Education has shifted in recent years, and I think in a good way. The work that people are doing with kura kaupapa is magnificent, and I think that people today are looking for that more tribal or localised education for their children.

But there are generations of Māori who've come from the traditional boarding schools: St Stephen's, Te Aute, Hato Hōhepa, Turakina, Hato Pāora, Hato Pētera, Queen Vic, Hukarere. The people who've come out of these schools have had a massive influence in the shaping of New Zealand society and Māori society.

For me, my years at boarding school were arguably the best years of my life. It was a place (before kōhanga and kura kaupapa) where it was cool to be Māori, and we lived and interacted as Māori. It normalised Māori life, and I loved it. And it did shape me in many ways.

And, no doubt, it helped you in your reo journey as well.

I've been fortunate to have reo speakers around me, Dale. My grandfather spoke

Māori to us when we were small, particularly to me and my older sister. Then, at Hato Pāora, te reo Māori was one of the fields that I excelled in. But it was only when I went to university that I began to hone my skills a little bit more. I was taught by the likes of Pou Temara and other language teachers.

Later in life, I've been involved in Te Panekiretanga o Te Reo Māori under Pou and Timoti Karetu and the late Wharehuia Milroy. So I've been exposed to very good speakers of the language.

The language journey can be fraught with all sorts of land mines and challenges, and be quite daunting. But acquiring te reo Māori has shaped my life and opened up so many avenues for me.

I guess varsity was an expectation for you, but it's not an area that all of our families move into. I was intrigued to see that you did your thesis on Tūhoe weaponry. What prompted that?

Probably all the Kung Fu movies that I used to watch, Dale! But, also, when I did my master's degree at Victoria I was part of Tūhoe ki Poneke, the Tūhoe cultural group based in Poneke. We went back to the Ahurei, which is Tūhoe's biennial festival where I won the wero competition.

I was under the tutelage again of my uncle Pou Temara, and through that, I got interested in studying more about Māori weaponry and traditional schools for the use of weapons.

Once I'd completed that degree, I moved back to Levin to be near my parents and I got a job at Massey University, where I took a completely different course and did my PhD thesis on language and Māori radio.

In both cases, I was studying things that were of interest to me. So, yeah, I've got one thesis on weaponry and one thesis on reo in radio. But my field of expertise now is Māori astronomy.

It's interesting that you were involved in Māori radio, since it's part of our recent history of Māori development. It's not the silver bullet, but it does help to instil pride in our people when we hear our own music and our own perspectives, whether it's in English or te reo Māori.

Yes, it does play an important role. Radio is a passive medium that touches people differently from television, where you need to be fully engaged. Radio can just be in the background at times.

I don't think that Māori of today appreciate the efforts of the pioneers of Māori radio — people like Wiremu

Parker, Kingi Tahiwi Angela Grennell, Henare Te Ua, or Bill Kerekere. They worked to give us a voice in an industry that was almost completely white, and they were rockstars in their day.

I know you're an advocate for te reo Māori, but there's a generation for whom the reo is a little more distant than others. How does the issue of broadcasting Māori kaupapa in English sit with you?

I think it's important that we have platforms where te reo Māori is the norm, and we need to make sure that they're maintained. But we need to recognise that, if that's our only means of getting our messages out there, then we won't reach the vast majority of our people.

Reo Māori is a wonderful mark of identity, but our main mark of identity is whakapapa. It's our genealogy back to our origins, and every one of us needs platforms where you express and discuss and debate and disagree as Māori. So we need platforms where English is the medium but the message is Māori.

While I'll always advocate for the language and the need for platforms where the reo is the norm, we also need to ensure that we're giving everyone an avenue where they can contribute.

At the rising of Matariki (Photo supplied).

Let's turn now to the stars and how you discovered your family connection to Māori astronomy.

I had no idea that my family had an association with Māori astronomy. We have an ancestor, Te Pikikōtuku, who was from Te Arawa, and it was from him that knowledge was passed down through the generations.

That resulted in a manuscript on traditional astronomy that was handed to my grandfather. He put that book in his cupboard and pretty much didn't touch it until the 1990s, when I was at university and saw one of the early celebrations of Matariki at Te Papa Tongarewa.

I was all excited and went home and asked my grandfather if he knew anything about Matariki. He had a bit of a laugh and went off to the cupboard and came

back with this manuscript. I opened it up and had a look, but I couldn't understand the style of writing, so I gave it back to him.

Then I went off to do my university stuff — and it wasn't for another year that it dawned on me what that manuscript was. So. I went back and asked him if I could have the book. He said yes, but only on condition that I'd never let it go. It had to be maintained as an heirloom. It's a treasure written by your ancestor.

But he also said to me — and this was just a couple of weeks before he died — that I needed to find a way to share the knowledge in the book. "Knowledge that isn't shared isn't knowledge," he said.

And I think that was the moment where I thought to myself: "Okay. This is my pathway in life. My job is to help with the revitalisation of this space." And that's what I've dedicated myself to in order to honour the words of my grandfather and the legacy of my family.

How did you react to the level of interest that your work has inspired? All of a sudden there's a pukapuka and whakaaro about how we can be more attentive to the natural world. And many people have been swept up alongside you, Rangi. How has that felt?

It's been overwhelming. It's a wonderful space to work in, and I just want to acknowledge that there's a community of people out there working to help revive the traditional knowledge in our modern world.

I look at the likes of Rereata Mākiha and the work that he does on Maramataka. I'm a huge fan of him. He's such a humble, knowledgeable man. I look at what the navigators are doing too — the likes of Hoturoa Barclay-Kerr and Jack Thatcher and Piripi Smith.

I view it as a second renaissance. The first renaissance was the period of Māori activism and the role that Ngā Tamatoa played.

Now there's a second generation wanting to not just have status as Māori but to practise as Māori and live with the principles and values that help them reconnect to the environment. I think this astronomy work is speaking to that group of people.

I'm uncomfortable that, in our modern society, we often focus on the individual. For me, that's been flattering at times, but the focus of attention should be on the practice. And it's the knowledge base that is the important element, not the individual.

Your ancestors' interest in recording this stuff is a stark

reminder of the sophisticated approaches our people had to astronomy. How does this revitalisation of that knowledge marry up with western science? Does it sit comfortably alongside western astronomy?

Dale, I love your use of the word *sophisticated*. That's because the knowledge base of our ancestors is sophisticated. It's detailed and fundamentally scientific.

There is empirical science that sits at the root of their practices, and I think about the very beautiful division of time that our ancestors followed.

There's their observation of stars that indicate months and, when triangulated with the position of sun and the lunar phase, that gives you season and day. It's a beautiful lived and practised science, and it's the kind of science that they used to navigate the Pacific and to come up with scientific breakthroughs like the development of kumara storage pits here in Aotearoa — and the timing of planting and harvesting and fishing.

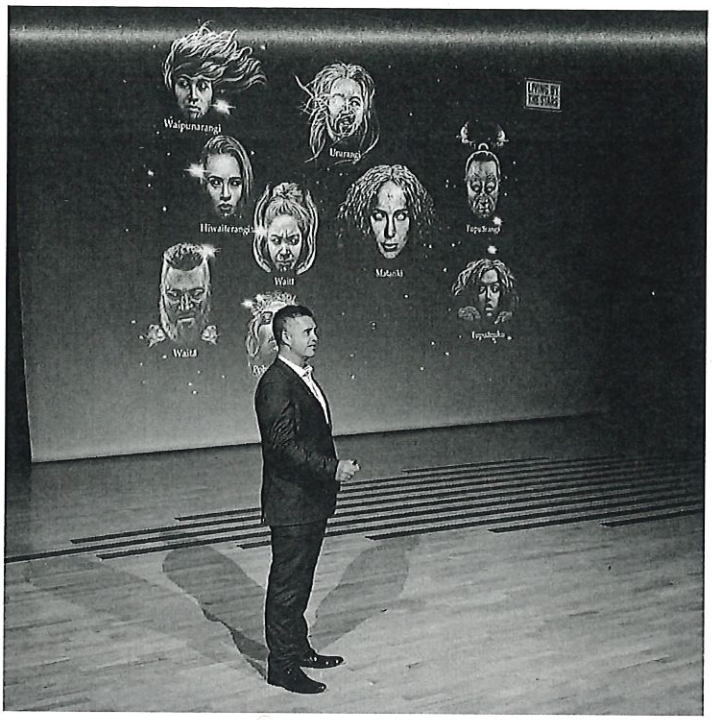
It's also a knowledge base that's been, for the most part, disregarded by western science. I'm fortunate to work in this space and see the science in it, but not everyone sees it that way.

And I regret to say that there's institutional racism and a looking down on what is seen as a lesser body of knowledge that's not as accurate or as important as western science.

But that's just not true. Western science has a lot to learn from Indigenous people, because our science isn't just about knowing. It's about practising. And that's the difference. We don't just learn to know. We learn to connect and learn to survive.

The knowledge base is not there just to be studied but to be interacted with and lived. That's what our science is. And, when it's wrapped in these beautiful rich narratives and kōrero and cultural understandings, it just comes alive.

But yes, I've had people tell me that what I do is voodoo. One time I wanted to use some equipment at an observatory, and I was told that the equipment was for "proper science and not myths and legends." That attitude still exists out there, but I think we are starting to break it down.



Sharing knowledge about Matariki. (Photo supplied)

What has been the international response to the work you're doing?

We've been fortunate to have made connections with people from around the world with this amazing body of indigenous knowledge. It makes me realise, too, how colonisation and the universalisation of science has severed connections that people have had with their environments and with their cultural world — and with their understanding of who they are.

But it's not just Māori who are going through this next phase of revitalising our ways of living and understanding. It's happening right around the world — for instance Hawai'i, Tahiti and across into North America and up into Canada.

You know, for all the western scientific advancements over the last 100 years,

you just have to look at how we're polluting and destroying the planet to realise the limitations of the western approach of "knowing without practising". That doesn't fit into an indigenous understanding of science at all.

Matariki has the potential to be something special here. It's underpinned by a number of values and principles, but its major points are remembering those who are no longer with us and saying farewell to those who've passed and to the year that's passed.

It's also celebrating the present and all the things we've got to be thankful for. And it's planning for the future with a promise of a new year, new times and new beginnings.

Matariki also embodies values like sound environmental practices, unity, and aroha. It transcends political issues and speaks to the best parts of who we are as people.

I hope that Matariki can become a beacon for us, and I hope it becomes our new year. Why should we follow the northern hemisphere and the rest of the western world and celebrate the new year because that's when they're celebrating it?

Like Christmas, it has no connection to where we are. You know, we're singing about Santa's reindeer and sleigh and

snow in the middle of December. There's no lunar reason why we celebrate it, no astronomical reason. It's not connected to our environment in any way.

With Matariki, we've got this beautiful celebration with these wonderful values and principles, unique to where we are in the world. So I hope that we take the opportunity and embed that into our consciousness as a national celebration.

I know that you want to build an observatory that can bring our Māori people together and see the skies through Māori eyes. How far down the track are you with that idea?

My idea is to establish an institute of Māori astronomy where people can come and explore that knowledge. I'd like to put together a curriculum for a degree in Māori astronomy and have the institute facilitate the uptake of that knowledge in a more formal manner.

The goal is to grow a new generation of Māori astronomers. I've always thought that my ancestors' role in this was to record their knowledge, my grandfather's role was to hold it, and my role is to disseminate and share it. There's a role that comes after me with the new generation, and that role will be to practise and to normalise this practice within our communities.

Let me just add that all of us Māori descend from a people whose cultural astronomy and scientific knowledge guided their lives every day and that connected them to their world.

The astronomical bodies played an integral part in the way they lived their lives. There's a saying: *Ko tātai arorangi he kai arataki i te rā*. That means the astronomical bodies guided people throughout their daily lives.

I'm part of the regeneration of that knowledge base and for it to play a major part in our modern lives.

And, for me, this is a crusade.

(This interview has been edited for length and clarity.)

Professor Rangi Matamua lectures at Waikato University. He is the author of the best-selling book Matariki: The Star of the Year, *written in both English and te reo Māori. This year, he was awarded the Prime Minister's Science Communications Prize (worth $100,000) from the Royal Society of New Zealand.*

commentary, we need your help. Our content takes skill, long hours and hard work. But we're a small team and not-for-profit, so we need the support of our readers to keep going.

If you support our kaupapa and want to see us continue, please consider making a one-off donation or contributing $5 or $10 a month.

Become a supporter

SHARE:

‹ PREVIOUS

Cole Meyers: Bringing truth to trans stories

NEXT ›

Māori hands on the future

RELATED ARTICLES

Submit a Comment

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment

NAME * EMAIL * WEBSITE

SUBMIT COMMENT

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. Learn how your comment data is processed.

About

E-Tangata is an online Sunday magazine specialising in stories that reflect the experiences of Māori and Pasifika in Aotearoa.

Contact

We welcome submissions or inquiries to:
editor@e-tangata.co.nz

Subscribe

Sign up for our new email newsletter and be in to win one of 40 copies of ***The Best of E-Tangata***.

SUBSCRIBE

PressPatron

You can support E-Tangata's kaupapa by contributing through PressPatron. With your help, we can tell more Māori and Pacific stories.

Become a supporter