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Story: Ratana, Tahupotiki Wiremu

Page 1: Biography

Ratana, Tahupotiki Wiremu

1873–1939

Ngati Apa and Nga Rauru; faith healer, religious founder, political leader

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Tahupotiki Wiremu Ratana was the founder of a Maori religious movement which, in the late 1920s, also became a major political movement. He was the latest in a line of prophetic descent which included Te Ua Haumene, Tawhiao Te Wherowhero, Tohu Kakahi, Te Whiti-o-Rongomai, Titokowaru, Te Kooti Arikirangi, Paora Te Potangaroa and Mere Rikiriki.

Ratana is widely believed to have been born on 25 January 1873 at Te Kawau, near Bulls. His father was Wiremu Ratana, also known as Wiremu Kowhai or Urukohai, and his mother was Ihipera Korua Erina. Through his grandfather, Ratana Ngahina, he was connected to Ngati Apa, Nga Wairiki, Nga Rauru and Ngati Hine. The family also had connections with Ngati Ruanui, Taranaki and Ngati Raukawa, but in official documents they usually described themselves as Ngati

Apa.

Ratana Ngahina inherited and bought land on which he developed a prosperous sheep and cattle station at Awahou, near Turakina. An Anglican, pro-government loyalist, Ratana Ngahina was respected as a chief and generous benefactor of the community. After the 1918 influenza epidemic Tahupotiki Ratana was his only male heir. Ratana's mother was Methodist; his senior kinswoman, Mere Rikiriki, a faith healer and dispenser of herbal medicine, had been at Parihaka with Te Whiti and Tohu and had later established her own Church of the Holy Spirit at Parewanui, near Bulls. She taught Ratana her beliefs and skills. He was thus exposed to strong but diverse religious and political influences from his childhood.

Ratana, who had many younger siblings, was brought up by an adoptive mother, Ria Hamuera, at Te Kawau, attending a village school. He later said that he learned little at school. Ratana worked on the family property and other farms; he was keen on rugby and race-horses, and was a champion ploughman and wheat stacker. As a young adult he took part in the social life of the district centred on the Turakina hotel and later stated that before his enlightenment he sometimes drank to excess.

Towards the turn of the century Ratana married Te Urumanao Ngapaki, also known as Ngauta Urumanao Baker, of Nga Rauru and Ngati Hine, in the Methodist Church at Parewanui. They had four sons: Haami Tokouru, Matiu, Arepa (Alpha) and Omeka (Omer) and three daughters: Rawinia, Maata and Piki. All would play important roles in the Ra church and political movement.

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Although Mere Rikiriki had prophesied in 1912 that Ratana would become a spiritual leader, he showed little sign of his potential until 1918. That year, events occurred which were later interpreted as omens of significance. During one of these, on 8 November, he saw a strange cloud like a whirlwind approach. As he ran towards his house he experienced a vision of all the world's roads stretching towards him and felt a heavy but invisible weight descend upon his shoulders. His family saw that he looked strange. He had been struck dumb, but the Holy Spirit spoke through him to his family: 'May peace be upon you; I am the Holy Spirit who is speaking to you; wash yourselves clean, make yourselves ready.' Ratana was regarded as the Mangai (mouthpiece) of the Holy Spirit, and in later years this day was celebrated as the anniversary of his maramatanga (revelation).

Through the next few weeks Ratana's family believed him mad. At times he spoke with the voices of the Holy Spirit or the archangels Gabriel or Michael. He cleared out his house and took his family for night walks over rugged farm land. He put all the clothes and belongings of some members of his family in piles and said they belonged to the dead; all of their owners died in the influenza epidemic then raging throughout New Zealand. Those who had followed his advice to leave their homes survived. As his strange behaviour continued, Te Urumanaao and other family members came to believe that he was not mad but divinely inspired.

Ratana began to show an ability to heal through prayer. The first healing was that of Omeka, who had become ill in October when a needle became lodged behind his knee. A planned operation at Wanganui Hospital did not eventuate because the needle could not be located. Omeka was brought home; it was predicted that he would die. After a week of intensive prayer the needle emerged from Omeka's thigh. Word spread, and at a hui tangihanga for all those who had lost family members in the influenza epidemic, the Whanganui chief Te Kahupukoro brought his bedridden daughter to see Ratana. After asking the girl whether she believed in the power of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Ratana told her to rise; she recovered to lead a normal life. This was the second of many healings, and by the end of 1918 a growing number of visitors came to Ratana's farm.

The three years following saw the rapid rise of Ratana's reputation throughout New Zealand and, after his first cures of Europeans, further afield. During 1919 and 1920 the train disgorged from 20 to 100 visitors at Ratana station daily; in these early years they were all entertained at his expense. A makeshift village began to develop at what was beginning to be called Ratana pa. Requests to the government were made (but refused) for free railway passes for patients to visit the pa. Many articles, pamphlets and books were published about Ratana; one called him 'the Maori Miracle Man'.

His calling legitimated through cures, Ratana also led a sweeping religious revival, mainly among Maori. In 1921 and 1922 he travelled throughout the North and South Islands with dozens of supporters; marquees were erected to shelter them and some meetings were attended by thousands. His motorcade between Napier and Tauranga was estimated to have cost £1,300. All of these visits produced numerous conversions to his teachings; in some places more than half the Maori population agreed to become part of the morehu (survivors), the name for Ratana's followers.

Ratana continued to use tribal institutions to host his tours and allowed his followers at Ratana to organise themselves tribally; initially, he also encouraged them to continue as members of their own churches, and some of his most enthusiastic followers were Anglican and Methodist clergymen. Mass conversions meant that several other locally based Maori

churches ceased to exist. In places visited by Ratana the cures witnessed lent weight to his prophetic sayings, which were treasured afterwards. As part of his campaign against traditional Maori religion and *tohunga* he deliberately desecrated places of ancient *tapu*.

Ratana was physically unremarkable save for his piercing eyes. His voice and manner were quiet and gentle; he adopted no histrionics and did not touch his patients. His method was to question them about their illness and their faith in the healing powers of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and the Faithful Angels. If the answers were satisfactory he would command them to rise, or set aside their crutches. He worked mainly with the lame, the blind or the paralysed. He did not always aim for instant healing, often commanding cripples to give up their props over a number of days. A growing pile of crutches, walking-sticks and wheelchairs at Ratana pa testified to his success.

In these early years Ratana regarded himself as a Presbyterian layman and did not preach during services, even in the church, Piki-te-ora, he had built on his property in 1920. His teaching and healing was done at night in the meeting house. There he also signed the letters prepared by his secretaries in response to the many written pleas for help. He did not allow journalists to photograph or even to interview him, and in his travels hid among his followers. Because of the press of the curious, bodyguards surrounded him.

From the beginning of his public mission, Ratana was criticised. Eyewitnesses who attended his meetings said they had seen no cures, and the reports of miracles were often second-hand, many being described to journalists by Pita Moko, Ratana's secretary. Even the famous cure by letter of Fanny Lammas was said to be through auto-suggestion. Accusations were made that sick followers were refusing to visit doctors. Orthodox Christians claimed Ratana was worshipping angels. Reweti T. Kohere conducted a campaign against him in Maori newspapers, claiming he was a *tohunga* similar to Rua Kenana, Te Wereta and Hikapuhi – a potentially damaging charge. Ratana was defended by the superintendent of the Anglican Maori mission, the Reverend W. G. Williams, and by Arthur F. Williams in *Te Toa Takitini*. They claimed he preached a simple biblical faith, and that his revivalism and work against 'tohungaism' were invaluable. Nevertheless, in 1921 Ratana sent newspapers a defence of his activities, saying that criticism was so frequent and antagonistic that, although he had received more than 70,000 letters from New Zealand and other countries, he would in future work only with Maori.

Through the early 1920s Ratana's movement became gradually more institutionalised and politicised. In 1920 he set up an office at Ratana, and as the costs of his meetings increased, gifts of food and money were canvassed from other Maori settlements. The King movement leader, Tupu Taingakawa, was among those who challenged him in 1920 to care for the sicknesses of the land as well as those of the body. Ratana's response was that first it was necessary to unite the people in the worship of Jehovah. Convinced of his divine mission, Ratana and his staff were confused and upset when an attempt to draw the Maori King Te Rata and his people into the movement in 1922 was rejected by King movement leaders as an affront. Ratana made later attempts to heal the breach but was never successful. Throughout 1922 he and his staff denied any interest in politics. The press labelled various followers of Ratana, including his son Haami Tokouru, as official Ratana electoral candidates. Ratana continued to say publicly that voters should follow their conscience. But the movement was growing beyond his own aims. The rise of other strong leaders within the movement with their own agenda of Maori nationalism was lessening Ratana's control over its direction.

By 1923 the first Ratana federation, the United Maori Welfare League of the Northern, Southern and Chatham Islands, had been formally set up. Football, haka and poi dancing teams were organised; apostles (Ratana ministers) had been appointed and sent to travel the country seeking converts; awhina (sisters) and akonga (lay readers) were being instituted; the first two Ratana churches had been built by Ngati Maniapoto and Ngati Whatua; and Ratana choirs and bands had been trained, dressing in their distinctive purple, white and gold uniforms. A schoolhouse had been opened at Ratana pa.

In a speech at Christmas 1923, Ratana publicly committed himself to a partly political programme: on a planned journey to Britain he would take both the Bible and the Treaty of Waitangi, symbolic of the spiritual and political sides of his mission. While Pita Moko obtained passports from a reluctant government, on 18 March 1924 Ratana and his family visited Mt Taranaki and Parihaka. Beside a stream on the mountain he heard a voice repeating words of Titokowaru, and encountered at Parihaka sayings left by Te Whiti and Tohu that foretold that he must take his spiritual message to the wider world.

Before leaving, Ratana endorsed a new formal organisation of his federation and its banking operations. They were announced in the Ratana newspaper, *Te Whetu Marama o Te Kotahitanga*, the first issue of which appeared on 15 March 1924. An executive council of the federation was appointed, as was an interim management committee.

The party of 38 left Ratana pa on 9 April 1924 and returned there on 24 December. It included Ratana's wife and children, Pita Moko as the main organiser and spokesman, Ratana himself to care for the spiritual side of the journey, and Tupu Taingakawa and Pepene Eketone to look after the material aspects. They hoped to present their petition on the Treaty of Waitangi and land confiscations to King George V. A large group of young people also travelled, whose function was to perform at concerts to raise money for the movement. The travellers were prevented from presenting their petition to or even encountering the King. Ratana remained in Paris while Moko led a group to Geneva in an unsuccessful attempt to present the petition to the League of Nations.

On the positive side Ratana had taken the first step in his aim of bringing his message to every continent. He had to make a supplementary trip in 1925 to the United States and Canada as a change of plans had prevented a visit there on the first journey. The party had also succeeded in getting the petition into the hands of the New Zealand government, contributing to its decision to set up a royal commission of inquiry into confiscated land. Ratana would later reject the commission's findings as a political move against the Ratana party.

Ratana returned from his first trip to find a number of storms raging. There had been talk before he left of forming a Ratana church, and this continued while he was away. An attempt by Otene Paora of Ngati Whatua to register his own Church of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit and Faithful Angels was forestalled when the Reverend A. J. Seamer, general superintendent of the Methodist Maori mission, hastened to Ratana pa to warn the morehu to remain faithful to the Mangai. Instructions were issued not to sign covenants endorsed with the Mangai's seal while he was away, and lists of authorised apostles were published in *Te Whetu Marama*. The Ratana church was formally established on 31 May 1925, and a list of ministers gazetted on 21 July 1925. This move provoked the Anglican church into declaring it schismatic, and announcing that anyone who signed its new covenant was automatically excommunicated.

The breach with orthodox religions widened over the years, provoking intense theological debates at Ratana pa. Initially, Ratana had discouraged attempts to deify him, but within two years the Ratana formula for the godhead included the Mangai, as well as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Ratana began to refer to other churches as introduced to New Zealand by gentiles, and therefore not fit for his people. In the early 1920s the Mangai had often prayed publicly in the name of Jesus; in the 1930s this practice was dropped and the Mangai himself was sometimes regarded as the kaiwhakaora (saviour). Both Arepa and Omeka, always regarded as imbued with spiritual forces, died early in the 1930s, and not long afterwards the Mangai began to encourage his followers to regard them as Ratana saints or mediators.

The final straw for the orthodox was that Ratana abandoned monogamy. In 1925, encouraged by Te Urumanaao, he took a second, much younger, wife to protect him against the infatuation of thousands of admiring women; this was Iriaka Te Rio, one of the female dance troupe who had travelled with Ratana. He had two children by her: another special son, Hamuera, who also died early, and Raniera Aohou; later there were other associations, causing controversy among his followers. In all, Ratana is said to have had 18 children. Te Urumanaao was known from this time by the title, Te Whaea o te Katoa (the mother of all).

A second battle was raging in 1925. On his first overseas trip Ratana had returned via Japan, visiting a Japanese Christian bishop. Relations with the Japanese had been very good; it was the highlight of the trip. Ratana thought that both Maori and Japanese were among the lost tribes of Israel. A marriage between two of his party took place in Japan, the ceremony presided over by a Japanese bishop. The idea grew that Ratana had 'married the Maori race to the Japanese race', had enlisted their support for Maori grievances and had prophesied the coming of worldwide war between the non-white and white races. He was accused of brandishing a 'Japanese Dagger' and flying the Japanese flag at Ratana pa. Eyewitnesses denied these stories, and Ratana himself gave a speech describing his family's loyalty to the Crown, but some Maori leaders grew concerned and reported their fears to the government. When Pita Moko issued an official denial and published the text of Ratana's new covenant to demonstrate that the church was not disloyal, some morehu were disappointed at what they regarded as a betrayal and withdrew from the movement.

A third battle concerned the Ratana federation's banking operations. While away, Ratana had received disturbing reports about the 'bank' and had tested it by demanding money, but none was forthcoming. There had been reports, later denied, that its secretary had managed to lose some of Ratana's family money. Certainly the management committee had entered into unwise commitments in his absence, acquiring expensive property on which mortgages were later foreclosed. In Ratana's absence the government had asked the Crown Law Office for an opinion on whether the federation's activities were illegal, but the office considered they were not. In 1925 questions were asked in the press and in Parliament about the Ratana bank, and a constable was sent to Ratana pa to investigate, but the government decided it could not prosecute without evidence.

The next two years brought mixed fortunes for the movement. Ratana's troubles drove him at times to take refuge at the seaside with only his immediate family. Typhoid was endemic at Ratana pa and its haphazard development and lack of amenities made it difficult to improve matters. In 1926 the Ratana Post Office was authorised and opened, and money was collected for the planned Ratana temple and building commenced. But Ratana's healing power, as he had predicted, was deserting him, although Pita Moko continued to report some cures. In

1927 Ratana was convicted on a charge of drunken driving. Name suppression was refused; news of his lapse, and a similar one in 1931, caused waves throughout his movement and beyond. He offered to resign his leadership of the church, but the morehu could not agree on a successor. On the suggestion of Te Urumanaao, he resumed his position.

Ratana's attempted resignation was due partly to his weariness with his own money problems and those of the federation; this was now registered as a company, the Maori Welfare, Provident and Finance League Limited, of which he was president. The government refused the movement's 1927 petition for financial aid for Ratana pa and for its schemes for Maori welfare. Ratana also believed that as a registered minister he was working for the government. From this time two grades of apostle were accepted; those who were licensed to perform marriages, and those who were apostles of the spirit.

From the dedication of the Ratana temple on his 55th birthday in 1928, Ratana indicated that his spiritual work was complete; his attention would now be focused on politics. But there was never a rigid line between his religious and political aims. He continued to make journeys throughout New Zealand at which he taught spiritually, but electioneering for the Ratana party and ratification of the Treaty of Waitangi were also discussed. On these journeys he sometimes called himself Piri Wiri Tua (the campaigner). He called the Maori parliamentary seats the four quarters of his body, indicating his intention to capture them all with the support of the estimated more than 20,000 morehu – about a third of the Maori population. In 1934 the number was calculated by some as being close to 40,000. From 1928 he chose the candidates, and asked them to sign a covenant declaring themselves to be his representatives and pledging to work for the whole Maori race. After their strong showing in the 1928 election Ratana was seen as a powerful political leader by those who had previously ignored him.

Ratana had secretly favoured the New Zealand Labour Party since 1925, and the party had developed its Maori policy with the help of Rangi Mawhete, a supporter of the Ratana movement. Discussions took place prior to the 1931 election, in which Labour did not endorse Maori candidates. In 1932 Eruera Tirikatene became the first Ratana MP; shortly after his election, Ratana assured Labour of the full co-operation of his movement, and Tirikatene consistently supported Labour in Parliament. One of Ratana's sons, Tokouru, was elected for Western Maori in 1935, and both he and Tirikatene joined the Labour Party. In 1936 Ratana declared himself and his family to be Labour Party members, and in a historic meeting on 22 April 1936, presented the prime minister, M. J. Savage, with symbolic gifts. Savage's acknowledgement of Ratana's mana laid the foundations of an alliance between the Ratana movement and Labour Party. Members of the former had been elected to three out of the Maori four seats by 1938, and the fourth was captured in 1943.

Tahupotiki Wiremu Ratana died at Ratana pa on 18 September 1939, survived by both wives, three daughters and three sons. He was buried before the temple on 24 September. His tangihanga was attended by thousands and lasted a week. He had founded a national Maori church that melded the political and spiritual in a way aimed for but not previously achieved by any other Maori leader. In doing so, he had provided charismatic leadership at a national level, and had set a course followed by his political representatives and spiritual successors. To his Maori opponents and many Pakeha he was a charlatan and an over-ambitious politician. In his lifetime, those who initially ignored him saw his church firmly established

and his political movement becoming victorious in the polls. Both church and party endured as powerful forces.

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