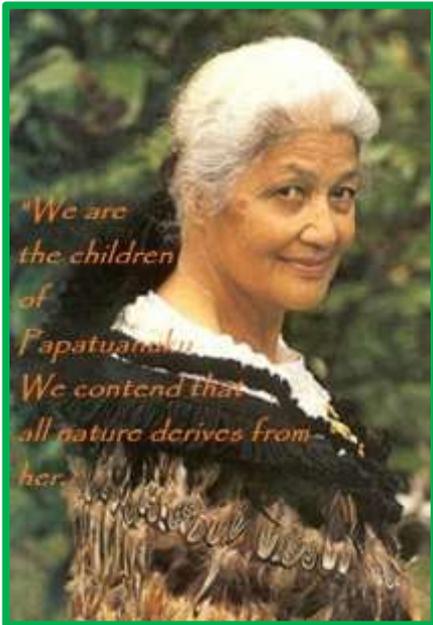


THE MAORI SITE AND CONCEPT OF POWER¹ - edited by Anahera Herbert-Graves

Like every indigenous nation, our Iwi and Hapū developed unique constitutional systems based upon our own history and cultural reality. As we developed distinct dialects and attachments to whenua, we became polities that constructed our own concepts and sites of power.



We were never a lawless people because we developed a philosophy of law to regulate our behaviour, and devised ways to make ordered political and constitutional decisions. Governing ourselves and the right to make our own decisions are an inherent part of who and what we were, because we were never power-less.

Our concept of power was known generally as mana (and much later in the 19th century as rangatiratanga). It was also defined in some Iwi and Hapū as mana motuhake, mana taketake, or mana tō rangapū. It implied an independence that [Dame Mira Szaszy](#) once defined as “the self-determination” implicit “in the very essence of being, of law, of the eternal right to be, to live, to exist, to occupy the land.”

Our concept of mana as a political and constitutional power denotes an absolute authority because it was absolutely the prerogative of every polity. It was also absolute in the sense that it denoted an independence and exercise of authority that could not be tampered with by any other polity.

Our site of power was vested in the institution of ariki and rangatira who were charged with the responsibility of making decisions. [John Rangihau](#) once noted that “rangatiratanga was people-bestowed and could only be exercised in a way that the people thought was tika.”

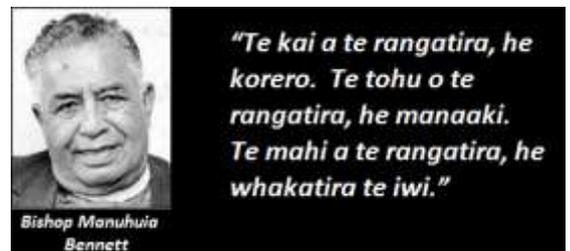
As such, all rangatira learned that good leadership depended upon how well they responded to their people, and how well they were able to protect them and their whenua. In a well-known aphorism the rangatira [Manuhūia Bennett](#) described the necessary attributes of rangatiratanga in a way that sums up its constitutional and cultural parameters –

*“Te kai a te rangatira, he kōrero.
Te tohu o te rangatira, he manaaki.
Te mahi a te rangatira, he whakatira te iwi.”*

The ‘kai’ of the rangatira, and thus the sustenance of mana, is not just the gift of oratory but also the responsibility to heed and articulate the voice of the people. The ‘tohu’ is the obvious obligation to care for both the people and any manuhiri, while the ‘mahī’ or prime role of rangatira is to keep the people together with all the necessary implications to husband and care for the taonga of Papātūānuku which that entails.

Like all cultures our people recognised that we could not survive in a power vacuum, and from the earliest days of colonisation we have endeavoured to assert and maintain the essential constitutionality of our relationship with the Crown through our own concepts and sites of power.

We will explore these further next week.



¹ Edited extract from pp. 33 – 34 of He Whakaaro Here Whakaumu Mō Aotearoa – The Report of Matike Mai Aotearoa – The Independent Working Group on Constitutional Transformation.