



Chapter Two

What is Whaikōrero?

Ko te whaikōrero, ko ia nei ngā mihi nui a ngā kaumātua i runga i ngā marae i roto i ngā huihuinga a te iwi.¹

Whaikōrero, or formal speech-making, according to Barlow is performed by male elders on the *marae* and at social gatherings.² A definition of this type is a useful starting point for a person unaccustomed to Māori culture and etiquette, or to a tourist in New Zealand. However, it is not a definition that will satisfy the Māori mind or belief system. The boundaries of this belief system span from one horizon to the next, and its philosophies originate from the beginning of time with links to the present, and encompass the Māori and non-Māori worlds and the evolution that continues to take place within, between and around them.

The Origin of *Whaikōrero*: Cosmogony

Understanding the origin of *whaikōrero* poses some difficulty. Who delivered the first *whaikōrero*? Where was the first *whaikōrero* delivered? Where did the template for *whaikōrero* come from? When did *whaikōrero* begin? If these questions were raised with exponents of oratory, it would not surprise me if their replies differed from each other and revealed some uncertainty. When I asked a number of scholars and practitioners the same questions, the overwhelming feeling was that ‘*whaikōrero* just is’. They were hardpressed to find answers, but they generally agreed that *whaikōrero* is not a recent development. So let us begin these discussions by casting back into the





cosmogonical past, before moving through to the colonisation era and the twenty-first century.

We start with Barlow's comments about the Māori creation story and the separation of Rangī-nui and Papa-tū-ā-nuku:³

The wheiao is that state between the world of darkness and the world of light, but it is much closer to the unfolding of the world of light. The first wheiao occurred during the time that Ranginui (the Sky Father) and Papatūānuku (the Earth mother) lived together with their children locked within their embrace. After a considerable time, the children became restless and were intent upon escaping from the confines of their parents into the world of light beyond. They convened a council to discuss a plan for making their escape.⁴

Following on from Barlow's explanation, Te Kei Merito says that, according to the accounts of his elders, speech began when three of Rangī-nui and Papa-tū-ā-nuku's children – Tāne, Paia and Tūmatauenga – brought about the separation of their parents and the liberation of their offspring onto the earth:

E ai ki ngā kōrero a aku koroua, i tīmata mai te kōrero, te whakatakoto i ngā kupu i reira. I te wā i whakaarotia ai e Tāne me Paia, me Tūmatauenga kia whakawehetia ō rātou pākeke, engari, i roto i ngā whakaaro o ētahi atu, pērā i a Whiro, me Tāwhiri-mātea, me ētahi atu o ngā tuākana o te hunga nei, kāore rātou i manako, kāre rātou i whakaae, anā, i tērā tonu ka tautohetohe, ana, i roto i te tautohetohe koirā te tīmatatanga o te whaikōrero e mōhiotia nei e tāua.⁵

Te Wharehuia Milroy elaborates on these comments by Te Kei Merito, and introduces the element of discourse, of discussion of opposing ideas, when some of the children, such as Whiro and Tāwhiri-mātea, did not support the separation. This discussion resulted in 'the great debate', which was the beginning of *whaikōrero* as we know it.

Hirini Melbourne, Tamati Kruger, Hue Rangī, Te Wharehuia Milroy and Te Kei Merito share another view. In that account, *whaikōrero* eventuated in the darkness when Papa-tū-ā-nuku and Rangī-nui were still bound to each other in close embrace. Their offspring were disenchanted with their existence in a world without light, which resulted in a discussion between the siblings about whether or not to separate their parents. Hirini Melbourne states that this family quarrelling constitutes the origin of *whaikōrero*, as well as the origin of particular styles of *whaikōrero* that will be discussed later.





Te Ariki Morehu also places the origin of *whaikōrero* with Rangi-nui and Papa-tū-ā-nuku, whereby, in his account, there was a debate over the issue of who should have care of their children when they passed from the land of the living. Papa-tū-ā-nuku declared, ‘They were born of me and should return to my ward’, which is interpreted as meaning that *whaikōrero* came to exist purely as a result of the supreme deities, Rangi-nui and Papa-tū-ā-nuku, communicating with one another. This was one of the earliest forms of *whaikōrero*, for Māori.

While Te Ariki Morehu also places the origin of *whaikōrero* with Rangi-nui and Papa-tū-ā-nuku, in his account the debate was over the issue of who should have care of their children when they passed from the land of the living. Papa-tū-ā-nuku declared, ‘They were born of me and should return to my ward’, which is interpreted as meaning that *whaikōrero* came to exist purely as a result of the deities communicating with one another. Māori believe this was one of the earliest forms of *whaikōrero*.

Hiko Hohepa goes as far as to state that, for Te Arawa, *whaikōrero* was handed down from the *atua*⁶ of war, Tūmatauenga, who was associated with the sacred teachings from the school of combat in the uppermost heaven, with *whaikōrero* being a safe and stylised means of airing differences and resolving conflict.

We now take leave of the separation of Rangi-nui and Papa-tū-ā-nuku, and skip to the period of the demigod Māui-tikitiki-a-Taranga and Hine-nui-te-pō, the goddess of death, some generations later. In Kimoro Pukepuke’s reflections on mythology and the origin of *whaikōrero*, he refers particularly to an episode between Māui-tikitiki and Hine-nui-te-pō, when they argue about the permanence of death for humanity.⁷ They discuss whether a person should die only for a month and then come back to life again, or die for all eternity. My interpretation of Kimoro Pukepuke’s comments is that this argument between deities is a model of *whaikōrero*, and was in fact one of the first examples of it.

Another theory is that *whaikōrero* resulted from the Māori creation of humanity whereby Tāne fashioned the first woman, breathing life into her and naming her Hine-ahu-one.⁸ They cohabited and begat Hine-tītama, whose incestuous relationship with her father resulted in the birth of the first humans, and with humanity came speech, from which, says Pou Temara, *whaikōrero* eventuated.





The Origins of *Whaikōrero*: Geography and History

Hapi Winiata and Patu Hohepa are of the view that *whaikōrero* began in the Pacific Islands, in Rangiātea, prior to the migration to New Zealand. There are divergent references to this place called Rangiātea.⁹ Rangiātea has been mentioned as an altar in Hawaiki. Theogonical Māori tradition affords this name to the house from which all Māori knowledge hails or the structure in which this knowledge was housed.¹⁰ Despite Timoti Karetu stating that he did not know where *whaikōrero* originated, he expressed his own view that it may have begun with Io-matua-te-kore's comments to Tāne while on his quest to procure the baskets of knowledge.¹¹

Raiatea is an island in the Society Islands (sometimes spelt 'Ra'iatea') that is 'widely regarded as the center of Polynesia and it is likely that the organised migrations to Hawaii, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and other parts of East Polynesia started at Ra'iatea.'¹² In this account of history, the Māori language and *whaikōrero* were brought to New Zealand by these ancestors when they migrated.¹³

Te Poroa Malcolm says that *whaikōrero* is inherent in the procedures of Te Arawa, and those procedures were received directly from the *atua*, from the supreme God and the cosmogonical beginnings of the people.¹⁴ Around the time of the great migration, when each tribe discussed and appointed their representative leader, Mauriora Kingi says, *whaikōrero* came to be.¹⁵

Another explanation is given by Hieke Tupe, who admits that he does not really know where *whaikōrero* came from, but extrapolates that it was a form employed by Māori in the 1800s. He bases his surmise on a discourse set up by the Māori prophet, Te Kooti, who after prophesising the eruption of Tarawera in 1886, requested land from the Ngāti Whare,¹⁶ Ngāti Manawa,¹⁷ Ngāti Haka¹⁸ and Patuheuheu¹⁹ people who were residing together at the time. According to Hieke, his request was presented in the form of *whaikōrero*:

Kāore au i te tino mōhio i puta mai tēnei mea te whaikōrero i hea, engari i te wā i ngā koroua tonu, me kī, kua tāti kē te whaikōrero i mua noa atu . . . te whaikōrero i te 1800, ināhoki, ngā kōrero i kōrerotia i te wā e noho tōpu ana a Ngāti Whare, a Ngāti Manawa, a Ngāti Haka, Patu Heuheu. Kua tāti kē ngā whaikōrero i reira. I reira hoki te haerenga mai o te koroua nei, o Te Kooti, kātahi ka kōrero . . . tono kia hoatu e ngā koroua he takoha ki a ia, ko mōho kē ia ka hū a Tarawera, koirā te kaupapa.²⁰





The Functional Essence of *Whaikōrero*

Our account of the theories relating to the origin of *whaikōrero* has taken us from the world of *atua*, to the Pacific Islands and to the present.

Comments by informants and in the literature indicate a functional diversity as well as a diverse range of opinion about what *whaikōrero* is.

Whaikōrero, according to Ward, allowed a speaker, or a leader, to present issues to the people in an open address.²¹ As he explains:

The Maories are fond of public speaking, and opportunities for such an exercise often occurred. To consider an affront given by another tribe, to determine on war, to make arrangements of peace, and to discuss any other affair of general interest, a numerous meeting was convened, and their oratorical powers were freely displayed.

Smith says that ‘set speeches were made by the principal men’ when the tribe gathered to discuss affairs pertaining to the tribe or other matters.²² McGuire emphasises the value of *whaikōrero* to ancient Māori who ‘expected problems to be thrashed over on the marae’.²³ He further stresses that *whaikōrero* was not lost through the years of colonisation, war, land loss, disease and depopulation. It is clear that Māori continued to value this art form as a manifestation of all they still valued.

In support of Ward, Mataira makes the following comment:

I mua i te taenga mai o te pākehā ko te whaikōrero anake te āhua whakaputa whakaaro, whakatakoto kaupapa, whitiwhiti kōrero, e pai ai te whakatau a te iwi i ngā take katoa e whai pānga ana ki tō rātou noho, ki ā rātou mahi, ki ngā whakahaere o ia rā, o ia marama, o ia tau, e ora pai ai rātou . . . mehemea he take nui kei mua i te minenga, arā, ka tūtū mai ia kaikōrero me ōna whakaaro mō taua take, me te whitiwhiti whakaaro kia tau rā anō ngā whakaaro o te katoa.²⁴

Mataira describes *whaikōrero* as an important Māori custom which, prior to European colonisation, was the primary medium for expressing opinion and presenting topics for discussion. It helped people make decisions with regard to all matters affecting their living arrangements, their work, and their daily, monthly and yearly activities that would keep them safe. If there were any major issues put before the people, each speaker would stand and air their opinion until all concerned had expressed what they wanted to say.





Mahuta also describes *whaikōrero* as an integral part of any social gathering amongst Māori, particularly in more formal surroundings.²⁵ Its absence from such occasions could be seen as a lack of fulfilment of Māori etiquette. Indeed, even the omission of a particular component, such as declining to reply, could indicate cultural conflict between visitor and host,²⁶ and be interpreted by the host or visitor as evidence that they are not being afforded due respect in such an important cultural exchange. We will address the effects of *whaikōrero* on peer esteem in a later chapter (see chapter 10).

Ranginui Walker expresses the view that *whaikōrero* originated from the period of inter-tribal feuding amongst Māori and that *whaikōrero* was put in place to assess the intent of visitors. This confirms Te Kotahitanga Tait's comment that *whaikōrero* originated as a ritual of encounter. The following descriptions published by John White in the nineteenth century are illustrative of this interpretation:

They went on over the hard scoria flat on the east of the pa, and ascended the hill by a path that led from the Tiko-puke (Mount St John) Pa, and sat down on the marae (courtyard) of the pa, where speeches of welcome were uttered by the chiefs and answered by some of the young men of the guests.²⁷

He continues:

The visitors had not been there long when an Awhitu chief rose and made a speech of welcome, and was followed by a Mount Eden chief.²⁸

According to Te Wharehuia Milroy:

*Ko te tangata e tū ake ki te whakatakoto i ētahi kōrero i roto i te reo Māori i ngā wā e whakatauria ai te manuhiri i ngā wā o te tangihanga, i ngā wā rānei e huihui ai ngā tāngata ka mihimihī ki a rātou anō . . . hāunga ia ngā mihimihī he kōrero ērā, he whakatau ērā, engari kia tae mai ki te āhua o te whaiwhai kaupapa haere i konā kua kī ake au hei reira kē koe āta kite ai i tēnei mea te whaikōrero e whakatakotoria ana, e whakapuakina ana, e whakamahia ana.*²⁹

Te Wharehuia explains that *whaikōrero* can be defined as a particular kind of language use, for example, during rituals of encounter, when welcoming visitors, at times of bereavement, or on other occasions when two or more autonomous entities gather

