

Sister Makareta Tawaroa



*Te Rongo o te Poi te whare karakia
Taritariwhioi te whenua
Kaiwhaiki te marae
Nga Paerangi te iwi
Whanganui te awa
Tihei Mauriora*

My name is Takahia Makareta Tawaroa. I was born and bred at Taritariwhioi, Kaiwhaiki Pa on the lower reaches of the Whanganui River in a small, close-knit community of about 200 people. There were five in our family, four girls and one boy. My mother was Raina Kahukura, a warm, handsome woman who was steeped in the knowledge of our old people and their ways and was a great singer and performer. Mum was also a great orator and a keen competitor at the Hui Aranga. For many years she competed in the Senior Oratory and achieved a lot of success.

My father was Te Kohiroa Tawaroa Tetana a hardworking man who spent hours in the garden, planting, weeding and producing acres of kai, Maori potato, Maori corn, kamokamo, kumara and pumpkin. One of my earliest memories is of planting rows and rows of corn alongside him. In 1965 at the age of 20, I joined the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph of Nazareth. I had a strong Catholic upbringing and mum was a devout churchgoer. Our family recited the Rosary most nights and we attended Mass on Sundays. I received catechism lessons from Father Cook who came to Upokongaro School every Friday from St Mary's parish. He would bring his tuning fork because he loved to hear us sing. His favourite hymn was Mo Maria. I spent four years at Sacred Heart College, Whanganui and loved all my teachers, Sisters Christine, Chanel, Enda, Kathleen, Catherine and Baptist. Sister Adrian was the Mother Superior when I entered.

After 12 wonderful years in the classroom in mostly small rural primary schools, I joined the Māori Mission Team in 1981. This was to become one of the most significant times in my life because I was introduced to a much broader understanding of Maori christianity through Te Rūnanga Whakawhanaunga i Nga Hāhi, the Māori Council of Churches. Mānuka Hēnare, who was head of the EJD (Evangelisation, Justice and Development), the justice department of the Catholic church at the time, was one of my mentors. Mānuka opened up a whole new world to me.

During this time I heard Filip Fanchette, a Hindu Indian Catholic priest, speak at several hui. He asked, 'Who are the poor? Why are they poor? Who benefits? Who loses? Who owns? Who controls? Whose interests are served?' This was my first introduction to conscientisation and it became a turning point in my life. The late Father John Curnow and Fernando Yusingco were two other people who had a profound influence on me. John taught me how to move away from aid and on to development, where people become the subject of their own liberation. Fernando taught me how to organise people for power.

In 1984 I came home to Whanganui. During this time I worked alongside many inspirational women, Piki, Tari, Jo, Linda, Maria, Hilda, Toots and others. We held hui, gained a lot of new information and insights, and did a lot of networking. Many of us also went overseas at this time. We found that it was easier to see the Māori struggle for self-determination more clearly against an international background; that colonizers, wherever and whoever they are, behave in the same way and that history is normally told from the point of view of the dominant group. I soon learnt that the history I was taught was not only European and male-oriented; it was also Protestant.

In July 1996 a house became available at Taritariwhio—land left to us by my paternal grandmother. The Sisters were generous in buying it for me and it now acts as a place for the tamariki mokopuna to come whenever they can.

People often ask me if I have a particular mission to carry out while I am home and I'm always pleased to say that I am here as another member of the whānau, with no particular role other than just being present. It is marvelous being home, beside our awa tupuna and knowing that I am surrounded by the whānau, both living and dead.

One of the great joys of my life is in being a nanny to our moko; Joseph, Manaaki, Te Au Maro, Kaea, Karere, Pikiteora, Mauriora, Kiritahi, Dawny, Tamahia, Blobby and all our other moko. I love when they come to visit and miss them when they go. I am very blessed and have so much to be thankful for. Praise God.

Sister Noelene Landrigan and Makareta's sister Te Kuia (Toots) Peehi were also present and made contributions to this interview.

Makareta

I started as a community worker nearly 30 years ago, a raw recruit with a teaching and a church worker background, but with very little real understanding of the complexities of the many powerful systems at play, and in which people live out their lives. So I had to learn quickly. Mostly I observed and listened. As I gained a little more experience within the community, I found that I needed to be able to identify not only what was happening in our country today, but also why it was happening. I used to ask myself, ‘Why are there so many poor people in a rich land?’ This meant a serious attempt at analysis—going back to the causes, understanding how the network of systems work, who benefits and who loses, and whose interests are served—otherwise I might end up reinforcing existing structures and attitudes that are opposite to my values. I learnt that the social context which we live within has a profound influence on the way we think, how we understand our lives, how we relate to each other, how we find our way to God and respond to the Gospel. I knew that individuals and networks of systems make up our communities and that one very significant system is the economy.

The first time I heard questions that were really important to me as a Māori—not so much as a Sister of Saint Joseph—I knew that I would never be the same again. I took a radically different course. Twenty years ago I never thought I’d be home on my own marae—that’s been an amazing change. Before I might have just come to a tangi and nipped out. Now I’d rather be home, and just go down and welcome the tūpāpaku and stand in the rain and the wind in puddles, and the poor marae like the river. When I look back, what a long way I’ve come.

When did the process begin for you?

My awareness began with Te Rūnanga Whakawhanaunga i Nga Hāhi o Aotearoa (Māori Council of Churches). It invited the disciples of Freire—Father Filip Fanchette, who brought Sister Mary-John, a Filipino nun. She was magnificent. She asked this simple question, ‘Why are we squatters in our own land?’ When you’ve got Filipinos, for example, taking a scripture passage, re-interpreting it in the light of the poor and naming who is Pilate—naming the oppressor. ‘Who are the ones who sit on the fence? Name them.’ We’d never heard anything like this—this was absolutely marvellous! I knew intuitively it was right.

I didn’t have much theoretical base but I knew that I could read and go to hui and learn and listen. I would get it, even just a little bit. Just a little while ago one woman said, ‘Oh Sister, those analyses we did in the eighties, they were massive.’ Well she’s only just using them now. It takes time to know how to use it or to be bold enough to ask questions, in a way that everyone can hear without marginalising by using words like

‘oppression.’ It’s a caution to us—always being aware not to marginalise the other Sisters. We have to respect that.

Did you get training through the church in the first place?

Oh, not a bit. It was euphemistic. It was hard to be a good Catholic...it was the traditional teachings that came through in programmes such as Renew¹, to renew the Catholic faith. It didn’t look beyond—it was very much ghettoising, as if we exist in a vacuum. But I knew Mānuka Hēnare—so twenty years ago I knew the right people.

I’ve often talked about intentional language, in the constitution of our order, the Sisters of St Joseph. It’s supposed to be inspirational, and to a few it might be, but in relationships with Māori people there is a bit that says, ‘We must take a prophetic stance.’ We go on about being a prophetic people at the edge of society. There was talk about us going down to Pakaitore, particularly that first week when things hadn’t hotted up and before the media got interested. ‘Now if Jesus was here, where would Jesus have been?’ That is the question I asked. From the second week onwards things changed. They were quite happy to be there when things were nice and rosy and not uncomfortable. Then when the police came they didn’t want to be seen to be supporting a radical movement—not in sync with the police. I was told off by the Order about a week or so after Pakaitore ended. I just explained, ‘I’m tangata whenua here. There is no way I could not be there.’ We have to take the consequences. It got exposure right across the world.

Those who were at Pakaitore were mostly children and kaumatua. There were very few with the tats and so on—they were certainly there but not in great numbers, and in the background. But sitting on the paepae in rows, and I have photos of all this, were rows and rows of kaumatua in those 80 wonderful days.

Someone said, ‘we have to be prophetic to each other’— meaning, I suppose, to challenge our own understandings of how the systems were. It was very interesting to see all the traditional mindsets appear but at least there was a willingness to be present. Many of them said, ‘I want to learn, I want to know’, but I think it was also a way for them to keep an eye on us.

John Curnow taught us the value of examining the words, particularly in church documents. Church people use a lot of intention in those, government departments too. They all come out of that agency of persuasion. They don’t use guns, they don’t use that hard army to come down on us, but they do it through schools, they do it through the pulpit. Those are the two main ways. Even through Girl Guides—they do their Māori culture badge, they perpetuate all those innocuous middle-class values. It’s what Pākehā

¹ A pastoral programme of religious revitalisation begun in the U.S.A

society is built on—the Plunket, the schools and all those supporting institutions, thousands of them. Most of them have no understanding of how institutional structures work, particularly churches and schools.

John gave us a process too where we could conduct our thoughts in an orderly way. We had all this passion and this fire burning in our belly but it needed some framework, some structure. His first step was telling our story—‘the significant turning point in your life.’ In one group someone said, ‘Two of my brothers committed suicide,’ and there was this deep silence. It’s where you learn Māori people have been marginalised from the education system—not everybody, but by and large two thirds to three quarters of our people have been marginalised by schools. How many hundreds of stories are there? Schools have been the prime agencies of colonisation, from age five to 18. At least there is an alternative here in Whanganui. We have got kura kaupapa and two bilingual schools and at least the state schools have Māori come in for a few lessons and a few waiata.

Noelene and I have been part of that domesticating education system, the banking system—rather than being subjects of our own liberation.

What do you mean by that?

You have to be ‘subject’ and you have to be ‘object’². You must control what you are learning. We put together a Māori conscientisation workshop in the Eighties—that was the first stage. Then I was able to adapt what John Curnow had done and become much freer. John said, ‘I tried to get people to work from aid to development. It’s not just giving money or a tractor when there is a typhoon. It’s a bit more than that.’ That didn’t go down well with the church. Then Mānuka Hēnare and others began working with students on a simplified praxis model called ‘See, Judge and Act.’

There was a priest called Father Dennehy who—after the First World War—met with small groups of mostly students and workers, and they asked, ‘What’s happening? What are some of the causes?’ and ‘What can we do?’ You had to do an action. So it was a simplified version of praxis—reflect and choose a situation, an experience, an issue you are involved in a parish, in your community, a justice issue. Analyse it. Look at the factors that influence it, the nature of the persons, evaluate it from a Christian perspective and try to reach a conclusion about what action to take. Denounce what is wrong. Announce the values of the kingdom and stand in solidarity.

John Curnow went to Paulo Freire when he was here. John had a very strong intellectual base, which in a way we didn’t—we knew more by gut feeling. We just knew because we lived it in our bare bones. But he taught us so much. All of these questions rang a

² Concepts from Critical Theory

bell. ‘Who are the poor and why are they poor?’ Spiritual reading and other things that we had in our training—everything rang a bell. When we had groups—mostly Māori women—they could identify with the double oppression of being women, and being black, and being poor. The feminisation of poverty—mostly brown faces. While we didn’t know the words we certainly had experience of that.

John said to us, ‘I didn’t understand. I went over South Africa and the blacks were in jail. I went over to America and by and large they were either Hispanics or blacks. I go over to Australia and it is all Aborigines—no wonder it’s Māori people here. There is a systemic pattern that pervades this all. John used to say, ‘Good theory comes out of good practice. Unless we ask hard questions and name issues we get nowhere. The truth has to be spoken.’ That is so right.

Most of our Māori men died of sclerosis of the liver. I didn’t know what that was when I visited the hospital but I now know through analysis that they were as much victims of oppression as anyone else. They were away working for months on end...they saw the land that once belonged to us and now they’re cutting scrub and doing fencing on it. There is something about the cycle of violence—if you’ve been hit all you know is to hit. You know no other way. In a way I’ve been angry with my father for years. I have visions of my mother screaming and pulling her hair. Thousands of us have similar pictures in our minds. I think that is one of the reasons I escaped and became a nun. I don’t think I ever said, ‘God called me.’ We all have our own issues to work through. It makes you more honest. We have to know what we are doing and we have to do things more deliberately. We must speak with greater clarity and coming out of a deeper reflection.

So what we say in our groups is, ‘How do we pick up our rangatiratanga—in the home, on the factory floor, in the bedroom?’ Particularly as women. From wherever we are, how can we take our own power back? You can’t get out and test it on the streets but you can begin to make inroads by starting where people are. The Māori women who have passed on this analysis include Hilda Renee, Maria Moses, my sister Toots Peehi, Lynda Thompson, Piki Takiari, Jo Maniapoto and others. Tariana Turia was also very active from this perspective although not in the group who first worked with John Curnow.

How did the process work?

John set out for us a simple process, that didn’t exist before the Eighties, which helps make sense of experiences by putting them in a broader picture. I think everyone can do it. Ask, ‘Who are the poor? Why are they poor? Who benefits?’ You need know no more than that. And just let people come. Let them talk and you might pick up things, like, ‘Oh, I had a horrible teacher.’ Then you can bring in the Education Act of 1877, which said education shall be free, secular, compulsory, and English shall be the language of

instruction. So you are situated in history around a particular act. We always knew that Act as teachers because that got the education process going but when I read it I nearly fell over—I saw that schools were the main agents for colonisation. There is no way that it could have been otherwise—this is what happens and native schools were no different—the colonising mission of the native schools graphically points out what happened, particularly when it was taken over by the State.

After everybody has talked let them get their raruraru out, their mamae out, and then that's when you pick up those points. And there might be other things about the economy or law and order and you go into the land acts that made land individualised and all the things that worked against Māori. Just having some basic knowledge of how the political system was put into place. In 1893 women got the vote but Māori women did not immediately get the vote—that came much later. Health started to be systematised more in the 1900s. Health at that stage was mainly looked after by church organisations, based on charity that was paternalistic. That's where we (the Sisters) came in. Most religious orders came about because they wanted to do something for the poor.

So whatever their issues are, and even if you're not sure of them, you just write them down. Then your part comes in, let them talk—don't talk too much—do more listening. You let people talk first, and then say, 'I'd like to pick up a few points.' Write them down ... the education acts, the Tohunga Suppression Act. Most of the ideas behind those came from Ireland and England. Another key question that John asked was, 'Where do we get our information from?' Wherever he went he challenged what people said with, 'Where did you get that information from?'

We would ask 'can we spell each other names?' A few years ago, I think it was Māori language week, I was asked, 'Can I have your name?' 'Makareta.' 'How do you spell it?' I replied, 'Can I have your name?' 'Marjorie.' 'I can spell your name, M-a-r-j-o-r-i-e, or is it a 'y'?' But she didn't get my point—I can spell your name but why can't you spell my name? People don't actually get the point at first. You have to do those things and you don't have to look far to pick up those things, they exist at every turn.

Māori people talked about te reo me ona tikanga. We honed into Māori things, Māori knowledge. To what extent were our people exposed to this knowledge? Very few of us were, very few. And that was part of the oppression. I've just bought the book *A Civilising Mission*³ which looks at native schools, and it has oral histories of past pupils and it's absolutely fascinating. It examines causes and probes the consequences. It delineates the linkages and that's something we want. Another example, is when we looked at the economic system—this woman director sat on the board of this company,

³ Simon, J.A., Smith, L.T., Cram, F., Hohepa, M.K., McNaughton, S., Stephenson, M. (2001). *A Civilising Mission? Perceptions and representations of the New Zealand Native Schools system*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.

and she sat on that one, and sat on that one. It was all in the hands of a few. And they married each other—they didn't marry a waitress or any brown faces—to keep the power in. So it's about delineating the linkages of economic power.

Toots Peehi

It was a painful process, the uncovering—even in the workshops it was very painful for me—for all of us, but especially for me. We had to feed back after looking at the statistics relating to Māori. It was very painful. We always knew that something was wrong but when John came and looked at it with us we took off our glasses. We saw where we were and what impact society had on us, and that was painful. We took off the rose-coloured glasses and this changed my whole life. I saw that our view was the view from underneath.

We grew up along the river with the nuns and priests (from the Sisters of Compassion). They were at the centre of the marae and my mother was the catechist and taught us Latin. She spoke Māori but not to us—we learned in English and Latin and yet they spoke Māori to each other. When I had my children there was an expectation we would send our kids to Catholic schools but it was too expensive. I was only the second generation of kids who went to secondary school anyway...

John was elderly—he seemed ancient to me—I was in my forties and he was a priest. I went overseas with John and when he was with other priests he became a guru and I felt like I had lost him. But then each night we would talk about it and reflect on the day over dinner. There was something in his demeanour and when he spoke it made you able to make the links to your life. He made links between the church we had thought of as wonderful and the not so wonderful things that were done, and the government and their effects on Māori. It was a hard uncovering.

My life turned upside down personally. It is no good bleating on—you have to change your personal life. When my eyes were uncovered I made an effort to talk to my children about this. They have been around the outskirts of this for many years with myself and Makareta. I really tried to point out different things to them but it has been very difficult because some don't want to know, and some sit quietly and listen and build awareness.

It's been really good over last few years as everyone now is on about the awa and tino rangatiratanga and kaitiakitanga, particularly since Pakaitore. It's been easier to get people to be vocal. Our nieces have become vocal. The links have been made.

The fight for the awa has been the longest litigation in the country, about 120 years. That has been the starting point for everything, in terms of rangatiratanga and you can link it with other things. It's not just about decolonisation, it's all about where you are in this society and what continues to impact on you. Our children unborn and global issues are

all vital but we face them a little bit at a time. People have a clearer idea now about their own situation.

Makareta

The question for Pākehā people used to be, ‘How do we give away our power?’ But people who have power don’t give it away. I used to hear Pākehā groups saying, ‘How do we share our power? How do we empower?’ Basically, people know what to do for themselves, and so just support them to do what they can do at any particular time. Often just get out of the way. Years ago Mitzi Nairn said, ‘I learnt, going to Māori hui and marae where there were Māori speaking people, that they would speak less and less Māori and more and more English.’ She told me that they would visit and answer their invitation and then cut their visit short—because the sooner they got out of the way the better. She said, ‘We don’t have to stay here, we have places to go. We have choices that Māori people don’t.’ She sensed that people would defer to the few Pākehā present so the sooner she got out of the way the better.

Did you have any trouble with some of the male priests in terms of their analysis of women’s voices?

Noelene

John Curnow told us not to join the feminist movement—we’d lose our faith. We just said to him, ‘Well if we have to do that, we have to do it.’

Makareta

Margaret Nolan, a very good friend of Noelene’s, was part of the Christian Family Movement. John was the chaplain of the Christian Family Movement at the time and after getting an understanding of patriarchy she actually left the church. She made the decision, ‘this is not for me,’ and he couldn’t get over it. He didn’t see the priesthood as part of the oppressive structure. How bizarre.

There are so many things I could talk about regarding John. We belonged to a group that was interested in cultures and religions of Asia and we were looking at the liberating elements of those cultures. We went to Korea, to a Buddhist monastery, and we stayed with Columbian priests, an Irish priest and an American priest—beautiful men, I liked them very much—but there they were, translating the Korean experience in the presence of Koreans, to ten or twenty of us who’d come from all over the world. I took exception to that and said, ‘I want to listen to Koreans—I didn’t come all this way to listen to American and Irish priests.’ As good and as wonderful as these priests were, they couldn’t see it. And John said, ‘Gee Makareta, you’re very unpopular,’ and I said, ‘I don’t care John.’ A couple of days later the Irish priest said, ‘You know Makareta, you are right.’ The women in the group had no analysis either really, although they did work in justice agencies.

We would be taken to these very poor parts of downtown Seoul literally walking over the bodies of people with nowhere else to sleep—all these people had no place to go.

Noelene

When groups went into countries they were exposed to the poor and Makareta challenged that too. She said the poor should be seeing what the rich are doing. Turn it round the other way.

Makareta

A lot of this stuff is quite hard to grasp—we could never do it enough times. You see very little change. We've got to decolonise our own people, who have been objects of colonisation more so than Pākehā people. We've been victims at every turn. From the moment we're born we're a statistic somewhere. You're logged in somewhere for how many health dollars and education dollars they can get out of you. This is how Linda Tuhiwai Smith talks. There is a lot of Māori money that doesn't go to Māori because we're the sickest. Māori health providers should be getting that money. Unless Māori are around the decision-making table about health care nothing will change. Even a fool can understand that.

Change doesn't happen at the top but you need the patronage from those at the top. At Pakaitore, it was good to see Archie Tairaro there, from the Waitangi Fisheries Tribunal—by no means a radical but he was forced to make a stand and was there when it really mattered. There were other kaumatua who are not street fighters and operate at a different level. I have been tidying back some of the kōrero from the Whanganui Māori Trust Board. Genesis Power wants a 35 year water right to harness and take away the head waters of the Whanganui and all the tributaries and all the rivers that come from the Eastern and Western Diversion, and I remember Archie said, 'I invited some students from Māori Studies to come. I wanted them to see the people who are going to make the decision that affects the Iwi's future. The waters that flow here are not from the headwaters of the Whanganui. They are whakapapa, partly the rivers of Taranaki, but they are certainly not from the headwaters. You see the headwaters and it's just a dirty puddle. They are mixing the tupuna. Our rivers link people, our rivers are about whakapapa.' It's beautiful kōrero from the Whanganui Māori Trust Board.

Looking back we do have new social realities—two kura kaupapa. Okay, they are struggling—they will develop their teaching staff, they will develop their base. They all come out of Te Rangakura, the teaching course at the Polytech. We've been at school for many, many years and we know how difficult it is to find a way to teach. We know they will go through that ...

Heaps of people were doing structural analysis, and I suppose that they can use the knowledge, but ultimately ... some years ago Jane Kelsey did an evaluation for the anti-

racism movement and she said, the real test is, ‘What’s changed? What’s changed for Māori people? Who benefits, who owns and who controls?’ Those are the key questions. If you know nothing else about analysis, that’s all you need to know. It’s about being able to put what you do know into some kind of context.

We were a small group of basically grassroots women that John lifted out. But we knew enough to know that what he was saying was right. We didn’t have very strong analytical skills but we learnt them as we went. Gone are the days when I’d just be a brown face listening to white middle-class Pākehā men speaking and thinking to myself, ‘Who does this guy think he is?’ So all the time we are evaluating the ‘who’ as well as the ‘what’.

Oppression never changes—it’s all about control and about maintaining power and using the system to keep it there. And what is the source of this understanding? The Pedagogy of the Oppressed. It’s 20 plus years old; it’s very difficult to read. You read a bit at a time, like the Bible. And if you haven’t had those experiences it’s hard to get it.

I used to edit Mana Tangata and Nganeko Minhinnick when talking about the effects of colonisation said:

“I have traversed many roads and in my view we are the most colonised people in the world. We don’t even know how colonised we really are. The process of de-colonising and de-programming ourselves is a lifelong process. This process is very painful, just another pain among all the other pains. When I was a child I don’t think that confiscation was a word I knew very well. I made sure my children and their children know it too. Occupation was a weapon we used in order to get back our land. We are a water people yet we have been denied access to our natural resources. Without the water we are nothing. There isn’t a forum in this country that we haven’t been through. We were offered \$250,000 for Maioro which was part of the urupa—New Zealand Steel wanted it — but there was just no discussion at all. No. And the airport for lengthening the runway. The challenge for us is to have bureaucracy running around chasing their tail rather than us chasing ours.”

Nganeko Minhinnick Ngāti Te Ata, Kaitiaki, 1992

This is so right. This is a wonderful kōrero. We have so much to do and we haven’t got the critical mass to do it. We have to be continually creating new ways of picking up our rangatiratanga—just invent them, make them up. We have to continually keep doing that to get out of the mould.