

IN THE WAITANGI TRIBUNAL

**Wai 2700
Wai 1504**

IN THE MATTER OF the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975

AND

IN THE MATTER OF the Mana Wāhine Kaupapa Inquiry

BY Mihirawhiti Searancke, Renee Hinerangi Searancke, Doreen Hinemania Richards, Kingi Tuheka Hetet, Boyce Te Wharemaru Ihakara II Taylor and Sharon Bettina Searancke Rakena and others

BRIEF OF EVIDENCE OF MIHIRAWHITI SEARANCKE

12 February 2026

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I, **MIHIRAWHITI SEARANCKE**, Kuia, of Te Kuiti, state:

1. I am a wāhine Māori of Ngāti Maniapoto ki Apakura and Waikato ki Apakura descent. I appear before the Tribunal to provide my evidence in relation to the Rangatiratanga Pou within this Inquiry.
2. I have spent my life advocating for the rights of wāhine Māori, the wellbeing of my whānau, and the authority of wāhine Māori within our whānau, hapū, iwi, and wider society. I am now retired, continuing to advocate for the rights of wāhine in my whānau, hapū, and iwi.

A: Introduction

3. To form the essential historical background to my evidence, I discuss the battles of Rangiriri, Ōrākau, and Rangiaowhia. These wars brought invasion, imprisonment, land confiscation, and the forced displacement of our people. Following the Crown invasion of Waikato, Ngāti Maniapoto became a refuge for Waikato and the followers of Tāwhiao, and for twenty-four years our people lived in exile within the Rohe Pōtae. These events marked the beginning of sustained dispossession and reshaped our settlements, relationships, and the exercise of our rangatiratanga.
4. At Rangiriri, my mother's maternal great-great-grandfather, Roarangitia, fought in defence of our whenua and was listed as a prisoner of war while still a child. Many prisoners were detained without trial, including on the prison hulk *Marion*, and our whānau history records that he later made his way to Mahurangi, where he married Rawinia Grant before returning to Pirongia. From this line came Ruta Roa, my mother's mother, who married Henare Mahuta Hughes. Henare was the grandson of Poupatate (Popatatea) Huihi, who fought at Ōrākau in 1864, remembered for the declaration, "Ka whawhai tonu mātou, ake, ake, ake."
5. The sacking of Rangiaowhia, a settlement of cultivations, churches, women and children, also sits within my whakapapa. From my father's

matriarchal line descends Hariata Te Rangitaupua, who managed the flour mill there and died in the year of invasion after illness contracted at Te Kōpua. Rangiaowhia is therefore not only a site of historical devastation, but of maternal loss within my own whānau. The invasion, imprisonment, and forced migration into the Rohe Pōtae continue to shape our identity and the intergenerational impacts I now bring before the Tribunal.

6. My evidence speaks to my personal experiences in which the decisions and actions of the Crown have directly affected my ability, and the ability of kuia and whanaunga within my whānau to exercise their rangatiratanga, and to protect our taonga and resources in a way that is consistent with tikanga Māori and the guarantees under te Tiriti o Waitangi (“te Tiriti”).
7. My evidence speaks primarily to Issue 3(a) of the Inquiry’s Statement of Issues, which is as follows:

What roles have Crown policies and actions had in relation to participation of wāhine Māori in treaty settlement negotiations?

B: The Public Trust Office

8. From my earliest memories, the stories of my tūpuna and the struggles they have faced as a result of the Crown’s impending their exercise of their rangatiratanga over their whenua have shaped the way I understand justice, identity, and responsibility. I grew up hearing these stories not as a distant history, but as lived experiences carried by my grandmother, my mum, and our wider whānau, experiences that have revealed how the systems meant to manage our whenua instead worked to diminish our rangatiratanga over it.
9. My tūpuna, Te Puea, was only three years old when her whenua was placed under the administration of the Public Trust Office (“PTO”) until 1928. When the PTO was formed, Pei Te Hurinui Jones served as the first Māori Trustee. Growing up in Te Kuiti, I would regularly visit my grandmother, who kept an envelope from the PTO on her mantelpiece.

I had asked her what was in the envelope, with her telling me that it contained a cheque for 25 pence, representing the interest from perpetuity leases, the 99-year leases on our whenua, which our wāhine only became aware of during the 1960s.

- 10.** The amount was so trivial that my grandmother had never cashed it, and it was then absorbed back into the system. This illustrates the underlying injustice. When payments are so minimal, who would cash a cheque for 25 pence? The issue lies in the inadequacy of the payments themselves and the inability of owners to meaningfully access or benefit from their own land.
- 11.** Money unclaimed from perpetuity leases and uncashed cheques was redirected to support Māori schools, such as Te Aute and St Stephens, rather than being returned to the rightful landowners. This reveals a systemic problem within the administration of Māori land revenues.
- 12.** My mother, Renee Searancke, speaks of my grandfather, Henry Mahuta Hughes, being barred from the Native Land Court in 1945 after calling the Judge an “Alibaba”. What had happened was that my grandfather was trying to recover his mother’s whenua from the Crown. Maria Hoponi was the Mareikura of our whānau, who held the land title of her land, before it was systematically taken by the Crown through the PTO.
- 13.** My mum shared stories of her upbringing. In her whare, there was a water spring that provided the only water source to the entire household. Later on, Pākehā settlers constructed a stopbank to prevent flooding, but they had covered the spring completely. Although many Pākehā tipped their hats to Maria out of supposed respect, she knew the real reason was because they were farming her land, but she had limited power to challenge the injustice.

Whānau Disputes and Loss of Whenua

14. In 2016, my cousin Reti, explained that our great grandfather's brother had attempted to claim shares within our whenua, which caused disputes among his siblings. As the tūakana of the whānau, my great grandfather, John Hughes, had inherited the shares of our whānau whenua. This is because he was the son of Poupatate, survivor of the Battle of Ōrākau, and Hariata Thompson, of Ngāti Pāoa.
15. Our whenua, Thompson Point, which was taken by the Crown in the 1980s, is now home to multi-million-dollar homes built on whenua that once belonged to our whānau. This remains a source of deep māmae.
16. In 2023, our whānau had learned of a Pākehā farmer storing taonga on land that, according to the land title, still belonged to Maria Hopuni. The farmer then approached Te Nehenehenui, Ngāti Maniapoto's Post Settlement Governance Entity, to return the taonga. Despite this, no effort has been made for the taonga to be returned to our whānau, as her descendants.
17. Maria's lands once stretched across an immense geographical area, reaching from Wharekauri (the Chatham Islands) to Whānganui, and spanning the territories of Ngāti Mutunga, Te Āti Awa, Kāwhia, and Otewa within Ngāti Maniapoto. Despite holding such extensive whenua, she never had the opportunity to see or utilise much of it. The fragmentation of titles, the imposition of trusts, and the systemic removal of Māori from their lands meant that the physical and spiritual connection she should have enjoyed was severely restricted. Her experience reflects the broader pattern of Māori, and particularly wāhine Māori, having their land rights recognised in name but denied in practice.
18. At her tangi in 1945, the depth of Maria's mana became unmistakably clear. Aunty Rawena, who was around eight years old at the time, recalled that on the first day she could see Maria lying before the whānau. However, by the final day of the tangi, Maria was no longer

visible beneath the many layers of korowai placed upon her. This act, covering her in cloak after cloak, was a profound acknowledgment of her authority, her leadership, and her mana motuhake. It symbolised both respect and the immense aroha felt by all those who came to honour her, and it stands as a powerful reminder of the standing she held in the community despite the injustices she endured in relation to her whenua.

19. Recognising the challenges faced by kuia who often waited for days to have their names called in the Land Court, Taonui, a well-respected rangatira of Ngāti Maniapoto, built the Ōtorohanga town hall as a place of shelter and dignity. This was more than just a building, it was a deliberate act of care and leadership, ensuring that wāhine had a safe and warm space while navigating a legal system that frequently disregarded them. The creation of the Town Hall stands as a testament to the collective resilience of the community and the importance placed on supporting wāhine as they attempted to uphold their rights to their land.

C: The Maniapoto Mandate

20. My claim, Wai 1504, was included in the Wai 898 Te Rohe Pōtae District Inquiry, as it relates to the whenua within Aotea from 1865.¹ To provide some context, the original whenua block identified in 1865 was reduced by approximately two thirds. This significant reduction in land size was not accurately reflected when it came to the settlement legislation, and a false narrative was presented regarding the extent of the whenua loss during the Maniapoto land loss. In reality, Maniapoto whenua was reduced by approximately 2.3 million acres. This misrepresentation caused further friction, confusion, and trauma for Maniapoto whānau, compounding the harm already experienced through land alienation.
21. The issues that were raised throughout the Inquiry cannot be separated from questions of identity and political alignment. My mum was raised

¹ Wai 898, #3.4.225.

as Maniapoto-Waikato, reflecting the close whakapapa connections between the two iwi. My uncle Bob Mahuta spoke about Maniapoto needing to decommission themselves from Waikato in order to raise our own raupatu grievances with the Crown. While this was intended to address Maniapoto specific issues, it also created significant tension around identity, particularly in relation to the whakapapa held with Tainui. Maniapoto, as the King Country, gave sanction to Pōtatau te Wherowhero. Tāwhio was born in this rohe, and authority was later reaffirmed. These overlapping histories and allegiances added complexity to the mandate process and heightened internal tensions between whānau.

22. The effects of urbanisation further impacted the participation of wāhine, especially myself, throughout the mandate process. I was physically disconnected from my whenua and my community, making it particularly hard for me to engage in discussions and decision-making. The environment surrounding the mandate was a hostile and mana demeaning environment for wāhine. We would question the mandate being proposed, as well as the narrative being promoted for the mandate to be accepted by the iwi. It was evident that this hostility discouraged participation and limited meaningful engagement.
23. Within this environment, wāhine voices were often marginalised. My sister was frequently positioned as being in constant conflict with the Crown. Wāhine raising concerns or challenging the status quo were characterised as being divisive, rather than being acknowledged as exercising leadership or advocating for their people. There was a perception created of our people, that we are always fighting, which diverted attention away from the substantive issues and undermined the legitimacy of wāhine voices.
24. Despite this, I found that wāhine did have influence and leadership within the Maniapoto community during the mandate process. My sister, Sharon, identified three wāhine in particular that she believed had significant influence. These were Aunty Miriam, Aunty Naki, and

Aunty Pane. These women were strong, knowledgeable, and vocal, with a deep understanding of Maniapoto issues and a willingness to speak on behalf of the people. However, while they had mana and influence within the community, their voices were not always reflected in formal mandate structures or decision-making processes.

25. In summary, wāhine were present and active in the Maniapoto Mandate process, but their contributions were often sidelined or diminished within formal structures. The mandate environment, shaped by historical land loss, identity tensions, urbanisation, and political pressure, made it difficult for wāhine voices to be fully heard or respected. This evidence demonstrates that the Maniapoto Mandate process did not adequately recognise or support the leadership and authority of wāhine, despite their critical role within whānau and hapū.

D: Conclusion

26. My evidence demonstrates a consistent pattern of Crown actions and processes that have undermined the rangatiratanga of my tūpuna, my whānau, and particularly wāhine Māori. Through mechanisms such as the PTO, Native Land Court processes, and later settlement and mandate frameworks, decisions were imposed that removed control over whenua, marginalised wāhine authority, and fractured whānau relationships. These impacts were not isolated historical events, but have continued across generations, shaping the lived realities of my whānau and constraining our ability to exercise rangatiratanga in accordance with tikanga Māori.
27. The experiences I have described show that wāhine Māori, despite holding mana, knowledge, and leadership within their whānau and hapū, were repeatedly excluded or diminished within Crown-created systems. Whether through inadequate land administration, the silencing of wāhine voices in mandate processes, or the failure to recognise wāhine leadership in decision-making structures, these systems failed to uphold the guarantees of te Tiriti. Instead, they reinforced power imbalances

that privileged Crown control and male-dominated structures over tikanga-based authority.

28. My hope is that this Inquiry will recognise the central role of wāhine in upholding whakapapa, whenua, and whānau wellbeing, and will acknowledge that true rangatiratanga cannot be realised where wāhine authority is marginalised. The restoration of mana, recognition, and decision-making power to wāhine Māori is essential to addressing the injustices outlined in my evidence and to giving effect to te Tiriti in a meaningful and enduring way.

12 February 2026

Mihirawhiti Searancke

Mhirawhiti Searancke