

Opinion Page

Moonstruck in New Zealand: Identity Politics and Promotion of the Māori Lunar Calendar

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In recent years New Zealand has become a well-recognised site in international debates about the appropriate recognition of Indigenous beliefs about nature (sometimes called 'indigenous science') in national and provincial education. These debates have hotly contested educational, philosophical and political dimensions.

Different aspects of the New Zealand situation have been addressed in earlier Opinion Pages of this newsletter:

John Raine (2024), 'Imposed Ideologies and the Future of New Zealand Universities' [HERE](#)
Elizabeth Rata, Peter Schwerdtfeger, David Lilis, and Raymond Richards (2023), 'Open Letter to New Zealand Prime Minister Opposing the Inclusion of Mātauranga Māori as Science in the School Curriculum' [HERE](#)

Michael R. Matthews (2023), ‘Science and Pseudoscience: Reaffirming the Distinction’ [HERE](#)

Michael R. Matthews (2022) ‘Indigenous Science and the Science Curriculum: The New Zealand Debate’ [HERE](#)

Michael Corballis, Elizabeth Rata, and Robert Nola (2019), ‘The Defence of Science and the Status of Māori Knowledge’ [HERE](#)

The New Zealand debate has been, since the 1990s, prompted by the government’s formal and legislated positions on the incorporation of Māori Indigenous Knowledge ([Mātauranga Māori](#)) in education, law, health and social policy.

No where has the push to give traditional knowledge an equal standing with science, moved more swiftly, visibly, or to such an extent than in New Zealand. From government ministries to the national museum to university syllabi, the push to “decolonise” education has been relentless. These events are being watched by academics around the world who are fearful that they may soon come to an educational institution near them.

Government ‘incorporation’, or *mana orite* policy, has been directly responsible for a rise in [pseudoscientific beliefs](#) around indigenous knowledge. Georgina Stewart, a proponent of the policy, explains:

In sum, the principle of ‘mana orite mō te mātauranga Māori’ is claiming ‘equal status’ for a holistic view of knowledge that is undefined and dynamic and potentially includes *all* knowledge.¹

By potentially *including* all knowledge, it *excludes* none. There is no better example than the surge in popularity of the Māori Lunar Calendar or Maramataka (‘the turning of the Moon’). Learning about the Calendar, and its functioning in Māori culture, is important, but the problem is that this material is typically promoted without any scientific perspective. There is a hesitancy to criticise Māori beliefs, out of the fear of being branded as racist, insensitive, or suffering employment or social harassment.

In writing my book, *The Science of the Māori Lunar Calendar* (2025), I observed that *many* of the materials that have been dispensed by the government on the Calendar, lack any mainstream scientific perspective. But that’s not quite true. I used the word ‘many’ to cover myself. In fact, I was unable to find *a single example* where the scientific perspective was given alongside the Māori worldview. None. This includes an array of government materials and in media reports. I even read through nearly 1,000 articles in the Dow Jones Factiva Database that included the word ‘Maramataka.’

Of course, there is nothing wrong with teaching about the Māori Lunar Calendar – the problem lies in the absence of a scientific perspective. This state of affairs has led to the widespread belief among Kiwis that the Calendar can impact school learning, health, social behaviour, plant growth – and even the weather.

The Maramataka

¹ ‘Mana orite mō te mātauranga Māori: A closer look’. [HERE](#)

Soon after Europeans arrived in what is now New Zealand, they observed that the inhabitants used a lunar calendar to regulate activities around horticulture, hunting, and fishing, and to guide an array of social activities. It was known as ‘marama taka,’ with marama meaning ‘moon’ and taka – ‘to turn.’ The literal translation is “the turning of the moon.” It is referred to today by the word maramataka.²

Māori recognized four main seasons that were regulated by the appearance and position of stars and the changing path of the Sun on the horizon. The seasons were commonly referred to as *Takurua* (Winter), *Mahuru* (Spring), *Raumati* (Summer), and *Ngahuru* (Autumn).³ The number of phases in the Māori lunar calendar varied from 28 to 32 although it is often described as having 29 phases which reflect the 29.5-day lunar cycle.

The National Museum

One example where the scientific view has been conspicuously left out is the treatment of the Maramataka by the country’s national museum – [Te Papa](#). Materials produced by the Museum state that different lunar phases result in different energy levels which “are caused by the gravitational forces of the moon, Sun, and Earth.” It then asserts: “We humans are also pulled by gravitational forces, which affect our biology and emotions.” We are then told that certain days with “low energy” are a good time to “clean up inside and outside the house.” This appeared under an article titled: “Plan your Life by the Maramataka.”⁴

Readers are then referred to an article by a Māori expert on the Calendar who claims that “The maramataka can tell us... high and low energy days, the effect those days can have on people’s moods and how you should best spend your day.” It goes on to assert that because certain phases of the Moon are associated with high and low energy days, people should alter their behavior accordingly.⁵

These claims are all fanciful, if not pure poppycock, and have no basis in science. Yet someone reading the article from the nation’s premier museum, could be forgiven for believing that the claims are both true and endorsed by the museum.

Awash in Pseudoscience

As a result of the failure to challenge these and other claims around what is essentially Māori astrology, wild assertions about the Calendar began circulating on social media and in mainstream news outlets.

². Orchiston, Wayne, and Orchiston, Darunee (2017). “The Maori Calendar of New Zealand: A Chronological Perspective.” Pp. 57-78. In Nha, I. et al. (eds.) *The History of World Calendars and Calendar-making. Proceedings of the International Conference in Commemoration of the 600th Anniversary of the Birth of Kim Dam*. Seoul: Yonsei University Press. Pp. 57-78.

³. Harris, Pauline, et al. (2013). “A Review of Māori Astronomy in Aotearoa-New Zealand.” *Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage* 16(3):325-336. See p. 330.

⁴. Te Papa Staff (2020). “Plan Your Life by the Maramataka,” July 20, accessed [HERE](#):

⁵. [Matata-Sipu](#), Qiane (2018). “Move Over Astrology, it’s time to Return to the Māori Lunar Calendar.” *The Spinnoff*, August 7.

How wild? One popular self-help book written by Māori psychiatrist Hinemoa Elder claims the Māwharu phase is associated with heightened female sexual energy “and great sex.”⁶ Another popular book, *Living by the Moon* by Wiremu Tāwhai, asserts that the Whiro phase is associated with troublemaking, while other phases affect energy levels. There is even a suggestion that the Moon can foretell the weather. What is even more shocking is that it won awards for best educational book and best Māori language resource.⁷

If students can be taught such baseless beliefs, then it is a slippery slope to where even more outlandish claims can be taught in the classroom. The uncritical teaching about the existence of fluctuating energy levels, mood swings, and sexual desires is not education, it is indoctrination. It weakens national defences against charlatans, purveyors of nonsense and pseudosciences of all kind.

It is alarming to see major organisations jumping on the Maramataka bandwagon. One group leading the charge is the country’s largest education union – The New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) which boasts 50,000 members in primary and early childhood education. Their magazine has included lengthy articles on the wonders of the Maramataka and its application to education – without a hint of skepticism.

In one school, a primary teacher in the Gisborne region of the North Island said her lessons were determined by the energy levels as predicted by the Maramataka. Saying:

If it’s a low energy day, I might not test that week... I slowly build their learning up, and by the time of high energy days we know the kids will be energetic. You’re not fighting with the children... Your outcomes are better.⁸

A South Island teacher told how he uses the Calendar to plan sports activities to coincide with ‘high energy days,’ while calmer activities were scheduled for ‘lower energy phases.’ “Behaviours on a full moon tend to be higher need,” he said, and that knowing it was approaching allows him to prepare.⁹ Meanwhile, an Auckland teacher who centres her daily routine around certain lunar phases, is convinced that it is working:

We have recorded huge positive behaviour shifts in autistic children and boys, and increased staff wellbeing through observing high and low energy days and implementing those into our planning school wide.¹⁰

⁶. Elder, Hinemoa (2022). *Wawata Moon Dreaming: Daily Wisdom Guided by Hina the Māori Moon*. New Zealand: Penguin Random House, p. 78.

⁷. Tāwhai, Wiremu (2013). *Living by the Moon*. Wellington, New Zealand: Huia Publishers. See p. 43.

⁸. Collins, Heeni (2021). “Te Maramataka: A Way to Live and Know.” *AKO: The Journal of the New Zealand Educational Institute Te Riu Roa*. Summer.

⁹. Heke, Wairangi (2022). “A Return to Wisdom – Understanding Maramataka Maaori.” *AKO: The Journal for Education Professionals* (Spring, 2022). Accessed [HERE](#): [‘Maaori’ is a regional spelling variant of the word ‘Māori’].

¹⁰. Heke, 2022, op cit.

There is a plausible scientific explanation for the observations that certain lunar phases are influencing student behaviour – and it is never mentioned by the NZEI reporters. It is called the [Placebo Effect](#).

If a student believes that a particular phase is associated with greater energy, it could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. But it can also have the reverse effect: if a student believes that the next several days correspond with low energy levels – they may become sluggish and use it as an excuse to slack off. Conversely, if a student believes they are in a high energy phase where they are less likely to concentrate during class, they could play up and become less focused in accordance with the expectation. Some teachers may even excuse poor behaviour during these times, considering it beyond the student’s control.

In fact, the Moon has been used to explain away violence by Māori. Whiria te Muka (Weaving the Threads) is an initiative between New Zealand police and local iwi in Northland aimed at reducing domestic violence. After a surge in family violence reports in the region in 2021, an advisor to the organisation attributed part of the problem to the Moon’s phases. She told a reporter:

The fact that we have just come out of the Tamatea days on the Māori maramataka, and the unsettled energy of these days, may also have had an impact on the seriousness of the physical assaults reported.¹¹

A Public Health Threat

There is also a danger that people may abandon conventional health treatments and instead use the Moon as a healing force. This has already happened as there are reports of people who have stopped taking their medication for conditions such as bipolar disorder, and instead they are trying to regulate their mood by the phase of the Moon.¹²

Several publicly funded health clinics are using the Maramataka to treat people with physical and mental conditions under the moniker of “traditional Māori healing,” when these treatments have not been tested.¹³ According to the Health Ministry, the clinics involved are “part of the growing movement to place indigenous knowledge and practices on an equal level with western epistemologies.”¹⁴

While there is nothing wrong with encouraging people to retain their cultural beliefs, these unproven therapies should not be a substitute for scientifically-backed treatments. Earlier this year, the government-funded Māori health organisation Te Rau Ora released an app which they claim allows people to enhance their wellbeing by following the Maramataka and track the flow of their vital life force – what Māori refer to as *mauri*. While Te Rau Ora claims that

¹¹. “Worrying Spike in Family Violence.” *The Northland Age*, March 22, 2021.

¹². Parahi, Carmen (2020). *Stuff* (New Zealand). “The Ancient Māori Healing System that is Making Waves.” January 19.

¹³. “Why are Taxpayers Funding Astrology-based Health Services? – NZTU.” *Fuseworks Media*, January 22, 2020.

¹⁴. Parahi, 2020, op cit.

it develops “evidence-based resources,” there is no evidence that *mauri* exists.¹⁵ Despite this, one of its developers, Clinical Psychologist Dr Andre McLachlan, has called for widespread use of the app.¹⁶

Going Unchallenged

The belief that the Moon can affect human emotions and energy levels has been espoused by several prominent Māori academics. The publications in which these claims appeared lacked any hint of skepticism, they were swallowed whole. Dr. Leonie Pihama, a research fellow at Waikato University, believes that different lunar phases affect peoples’ moods and energy levels. Writing:

Sometimes you know if there’s a bit of hara (wrongdoing or sin) going on at that time our moods can be escalated so it polarizes our mood. Polarizes it so if we’re a bit angry on a full moon it just throws you off the deep end (sic) you’ll be raging because it’s already high energy time.¹⁷

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Māori at Otago University, [Justine Camp](#), says that she has used the Māori Lunar Calendar “to determine whether a person’s Hauora [health] was enhancing or diminishing, identifying that mothers would often go into a diminishing, or low emotion, phase during a new moon.”¹⁸ Camp completed a PhD in 2020 that addressed the maramataka and health. She also believes in the existence of high and low energy days that correspond with certain lunar phases. She claims that “during certain moon phases, people tend to be a bit more forgetful.”¹⁹ Camp also says that Korekore days are associated with “low energy” and have been linked to suicide. Her evidence: unpublished statistical data and anecdotal information.²⁰

This longstanding claim has appeared many times in the mainstream media over the years but was finally put to the test in a 2025 study in the *New Zealand Medical Journal* which found

15. Matzke, Nicholas J. (2024). “Vitalism in New Zealand Science Education.” *Science* 385(6705):152.

16. “Groundbreaking App for Maaori Wellbeing.” *Scoop Independent News*, press release, Te Rau Ora, February 13.

17. Pihama, Leonie (2022). “Tikanga and Maramataka Professor Leonie Pihama.” *He Waka Eke Noa Conference* presentation, October 11 and 12, accessed [HERE](#).

18. Swart, Kelsey (2024). “University of Otago - Service in the Blood for Associate PVC Māori.” Media release, Otago University, November 17.

19. Camp, Justine (2020). *Te Tautarinui o Matariki: A Whānau Health Compass*. A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand 28 February 2020 in the School of Physical Education, pp. 22, 42.

Quote taken from p. 42; “Dr Justine Camp: Re-creating Traditional Knowledge for new Contexts.” *Brain Research New Zealand News*, May 26, 2021.

20. Camp, 2020, op cit., p. 49.

no significant correlation with lunar phases either for the overall population or the sub-group of Māori.²¹

A Double Standard

In recent years the New Zealand media have been critical of Aucklander Ken Ring, the self-proclaimed ‘Moon Man’ for pushing the notion that lunar phases influence everything from earthquakes to human behaviour. Ring’s weather predictions have even been used by Kiwi horse punters.²²

In 2006 Ring published *The Lunar Code* in which he suggested that students do better on assessments “when the Moon is in perigee” and that certain phases are capable of producing a cerebral “micro-storm” that stimulates adrenalin and leads to more aggressive behaviour.²³

Ring’s popularity plummeted after the Christchurch earthquake of February 22, 2011, when he unsuccessfully predicted another big quake three weeks later. While the day passed without incident, many residents packed their belongings and left town for the weekend. The situation was serious enough for the prime minister’s chief science advisor to make a public appeal for calm.²⁴

It was at this point that NZ media outlets published a flurry of skeptical articles on Ring’s assertions. In 2023, The New Zealand Skeptics even offered to give him \$100,000 if he could prove his claims, saying his predictions were “no better than chance.”²⁵ They still have their money.

The Ring case illustrates the clear and common double-standard when it comes to the New Zealand media’s reporting on Māori knowledge. Unlike their treatment of Ring who is of European decent, they have been dead silent on criticising anything to do with the Maramataka. There appears to be an unwritten rule among Kiwi journalists – don’t criticise claims about Māori knowledge systems, no matter how extraordinary they may be, because it’s not worth dealing with the backlash.

That the maramataka is rarely subjected to the same scientific rigour that is applied to non-indigenous beliefs, is concerning. But perhaps I’m just being cynical as I am writing this under a new Moon. After all, in his popular book, *Living by the Moon*, Wiremu Tāwhai asserts that the new moon is associated with troublemaking.²⁶

²¹. Cumin, David, Nicholas Matzke, and Rikki Solomon (2025). “Does Suicide in New Zealand Follow a Semi-lunar Rhythm?” *New Zealand Medical Journal* 138(1608):24-30.

²². Dillon, Mike (2005). “Hiccup Haunts Trainer.” *New Zealand Herald*, February 11.

²³. Ring, Ken (2006). *The Lunar Code*. Auckland: Randon House.

²⁴. Wood, Stacey, and Johnston, Kirsty (2011). “Moon Man’s Claim’s Terrifying People.” *The Dominion Post*, March 17; “Award for Gullible Media Over 'Moon Man.'” *The Otago Daily Times* (Dunedin), August 12, 2011; “Christchurch Earthquake: Ring's Tip Sends Families Fleeing.” *New Zealand Herald*, March 19.

²⁵. “\$100K Reward for Proof of Psychic Powers.” *The Sunday News*, April 16, 2023.

²⁶. Tāwhai, Wiremu (2013). *Living by the Moon*. Wellington, New Zealand: Huia Publishers.

Protected Knowledge

If Maori knowledge is to be given parity with science, it needs to shed its protected cultural status and be held to the same rigorous standard as every other body of knowledge. The rapid spread of pseudoscientific beliefs around the Maramataka in New Zealand is a cautionary tale of what can happen when identity politics shapes public policy and educational content.

What began as a well-intentioned effort to celebrate Maori knowledge, has turned into a nightmare for many Kiwi academics who are afraid to even broach the topic, much less critically appraise it, for fear of being permanently branded as anti-Māori.

In writing my book on the Calendar, several Māori lecturers were upset that I had not first sought their permission. It would never have been granted, as I was also told that the Calendar cannot be validated by ‘Western colonial science’ as it is a spiritual system. They also explained about ‘Māori data sovereignty’ – the notion that Māori control their own data including who can access it and what it is used for. The assertion that the Maramataka cannot be subjected to scientific scrutiny as it has protected cultural status, undermines the very foundation of scientific inquiry.

Many of those who advocate giving Maori knowledge parity with science claim to be engaging in decolonisation. But by insisting that it is protected knowledge that cannot be challenged, and claiming sovereignty over their data, they are engaging in the very conduct that they claim to oppose – conduct which harkens back to the time of European colonial rule. Indigenous knowledge deserves our respect, but if their supporters want it to receive scientific acceptance, curriculum space and research funding, it must *earn* that respect through scientific testing.²⁷

²⁷. Matzke, Nicholas J. (2025). “Preface: Science at a Crossroads.” In Bartholomew, Robert (2025). *The Science of the Maori Lunar Calendar: Separating Fact from Folklore*. Auckland: The Author.