Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements

Rua Kēnana and Iharaira

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Introduction

The Iharaira (Israelites) sect emerged in New Zealand in the early twentieth century in the region occupied by the Tūhoe iwi (tribe) on the eastern North Island. The doctrine of this syncretic sect was developed by its leader, the prophet, healer, and political activist Rua Kēnana (1869–1937), and was a variant of an earlier sect—Ringatū—founded by Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki (1832–1891) in 1868. Rua identified himself as the New Messiah, and developed a following particularly among those Māori who had been dispossessed of their territories and livelihoods as a consequence of the Crown's land confiscations in the region during the nineteenth century.

Rua established a religious community in 1907, located at Maungapōhatu, which was regarded as the most sacred mountain for Tūhoe. In the same year, he built a temple, a meeting house, and a council chamber on the site, which he named Hīona (Zion), and which became a symbol of his growing religious and political power. In additional to his religious aims, he sought to make his community economically and politically autonomous.

In 1916, Rua's settlement was raided by armed police. In the gun battle that followed, his son and another member of the community were killed. Rua was arrested and charged with sedition. He was imprisoned for resisting arrest. He was released in 1918. During his period in gaol, the community at Maungapōhatu suffered from a depletion of funds and waning membership. On his return, he endeavoured to boost the number of followers and fortify their devotion through issuing a series of prophecies, promising an imminent utopia to those who maintained their faith, along with the destruction of non-believers. Prophecy became a vital aspect in maintaining his community's loyalty to him, and a pattern developed whereby as followers drifted away from the community, Rua's predictions would become bolder and more apocalyptic in an effort to galvanise the support of those adherents who chose to remain at Maungapōhatu.

However, the failure of his prophecies, the 1918 influenza pandemic, the subsequent economic effects of the Depression, the encroachment of European social and cultural influences in the region, and the active work of the Presbyterian Church among Tūhoe, all conspired to undermine Rua's community, and by the mid-1930s, he had abandoned his movement at Maungapōhatu and moved to a small settlement of Matahi, in the eastern Bay of Plenty, which he had founded in 1910 and where he died on 20 February 1937. The Iharaira sect dwindled in membership following Rua's death, and in the succeeding decades

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periodic efforts to revive it met with only limited success.

Rua Kenana by James McDonald. Ref: 1/2-019618-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. Public domain.

Origins and Doctrine of Iharaira

The Iharaira sect was founded by Rua and was a breakaway from the religious movement known as Ringatū, which had been created by Te Kooti (who had also been a prophet). Shortly before his death in 1891, Te Kooti issued a series of cryptic prophecies relating to his spiritual successor, although he did not name that person (Binney 1995, 424). However, when Te Kooti died in 1893, Rua announced that he was the Chosen One referred to in Te Kooti's prophecies. Rua claimed that the Archangel Gabriel appeared

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before him and his first wife, Pinepine Te Rika, and led them up Maungapōhatu, where a hidden diamond was revealed to them. This diamond was the symbolic guardian-stone of the people of the region and was now entrusted to Rua's guardianship. In some versions of this account, Rua also met Christ on the mountain (Moon 2003, 70).

Among the many themes in Ringatū was that of delivery to a promised land. This held obvious appeal for a people who had been forced off their traditional tribal territories, and whose land was then appropriated by the Crown, and often sold off to settlers (Binney 2009, 94–114). The accounts in the Old Testament of the Israelites being cast into the wilderness resonated with the experiences of many Māori in this era and was a motif that Te Kooti regularly emphasised in his religious services (Webster 1979, 107) and that Rua adopted.

Identifying the distinct traits of the Iharaira faith is difficult. This is due to the fact that its doctrine was part of the oral tradition of the region, and so little of it survives in written form. In addition, the tenets of the sect were frequently altered by Rua in order to accommodate both the changing circumstances faced by his community and shifts in how he saw his own role in the movement. In 2003, the Tūhoe tohunga (traditional priest, religious leader, cultural expert), Hōhepa Kereopa, suggested that the Iharaira sect had emerged partly to overcome some of the doctrinal contradictions of Ringatū and partly because of what was seen as the excessive temporal power that some of its leaders were beginning to exercise by the close of the nineteenth century (Moon 2003, 78–79).

One of the more significant points of departure of the Iharaira sect was in its treatment of tapu—the traditional sacred Māori sanctions applied to land use and various rituals associated with food and death (Mead 2003, 32). Ringatū enforced traditional tapu, but Rua openly contravened it. He sometimes wore shoes in a wharenui (meeting-house), for example, when removing shoes before entry was a strict convention. And in a similar vein, he once made a point of eating food in an urupā (cemetery), which was regarded as a severe breach of tapu (Hanson 1990, 159–50; Moon 2003, 89). Rua's motives for this were twofold. Firstly, violating tapu represented to Māori how far Rua's sect departed from Ringatū doctrine, and secondly, it emphasised in dramatic fashion Rua's power in overcoming the supernatural force which many Māori at the time believed that tapu still held. With his quasi-divine power thus demonstrated, Rua established himself as a religious leader of some authority and commenced with the formation of his religious community. In 1906, he informed a journalist that he saw himself as the Maori messiah, claiming that 'Christ was sent to save the pakeha [Europeans] and since his advent, the Europeans had flourished and multiplied exceedingly. Now he (Rua) had been sent to remove the tapu from the Maoris, and when this is accomplished the natives, he says, will increase as the pakeha and wax fat and prosperous' (*Poverty Bay Herald* 1906, 2).

Rua's Early Prophecies

One of the defining features of the Iharaira sect was the heavy emphasis its leader placed on making prophecies. Rua's predictions were initially modest in scope and scale, but as he discovered their significant effect in increasing the number of adherents and strengthening the cohesion of his growing community, they tended to become more apocalyptic and utopian in content. A symbiotic relationship can be seen in the relationship between prophecy and its effects on members of the sect. Rua's prophecies

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initially contributed to the growth of the Iharaira sect, while the sect's membership anticipated further prophecies as a sign of the religious authenticity of the movement. This, in turn, encouraged Rua's prophecies to become increasingly ambitious to meet the mounting expectations of his followers. There was a sort of diminishing marginal utility in prophecies that were too similar to preceding ones.

One of Rua's earliest recorded prophecies was made in June 1906. That month, King Edward VII was due to visit the eastern New Zealand town of Gisborne. Rua travelled to the settlement with a small entourage of followers before the king's scheduled arrival and announced that the monarch would present diamonds to Rua and hand over the country to Rua's rule. He further claimed that most Europeans would then leave New Zealand. The meeting between the two men did not occur, and on the face of it, Rua's prophecy seemed to have failed completely. However, he was able to salvage his reputation among his followers by suggesting that he did not need to meet the king because, in fact, he was now the king (Hanson 1990, 160). In addition, the sheer audacity of the prophecy, along with its promise of a new society to come, was sufficient to garner Rua some support.

In a similar vein, Rua asserted that he could walk on water, as Christ had. He repeated this claim when at a beach in Whakatāne in 1908. Several of the Māori present were curious to see this supernatural feat performed. Again, it looked like the prophet's claims would be disproven, but once more, Rua avoided having to prove his abilities in this area. He simply asked his followers whether they believed that he could walk on water. They answered in the affirmative, to which he responded that there was therefore no need to perform the feat (*New Zealand Herald* 1908, 2).

Later in 1908, Rua took a family from the remote inland settlement of Rūātoki to Whakatāne, where they saw the coast and the ocean for the first time. As they watched the tide rise, Rua warned them that this was the commencement of a great flood that would engulf the entire region, including the land that this family owned. The fear of such an apocalyptic event led the family to sell their land and join Rua's community at Maungapōhatu. However, after three years at the settlement, the family returned to Rūātoki and discovered not only that their land had not been flooded, but that some of their relations had moved onto it and were farming it. What this episode revealed to Rua was the power of prophecy and the fear of an impending apocalypse that existed among some Māori in the region. It also demonstrated that his pronouncements were sufficiently authoritative that others found them to be sufficiently convincing to join his movement.

Not all of Rua's prophecies apparently failed to come to pass, however. In 1907, for example, he and his followers constructed a large circular meeting house at Maungapōhatu, which also served as a temple for the Iharaira sect. The building, known as Hīona, was unique in its design and function, and was an anomaly among Māori and European architecture at the time (McKay 2004, 5–6). When the temple was complete, Rua made a prophecy—known only among his followers—that one day, the New Zealand government would have a similarly shaped building (Hanson 1990, 160; Moon 2008, 120–2). The prophecy was largely forgotten until 1964, when the Scottish architect Sir Basil Spence produced the designs for a building to house New Zealand's parliamentary offices, with the resulting structure in some ways resembling Rua's edifice (Sudjic and Jones 2001, 34).

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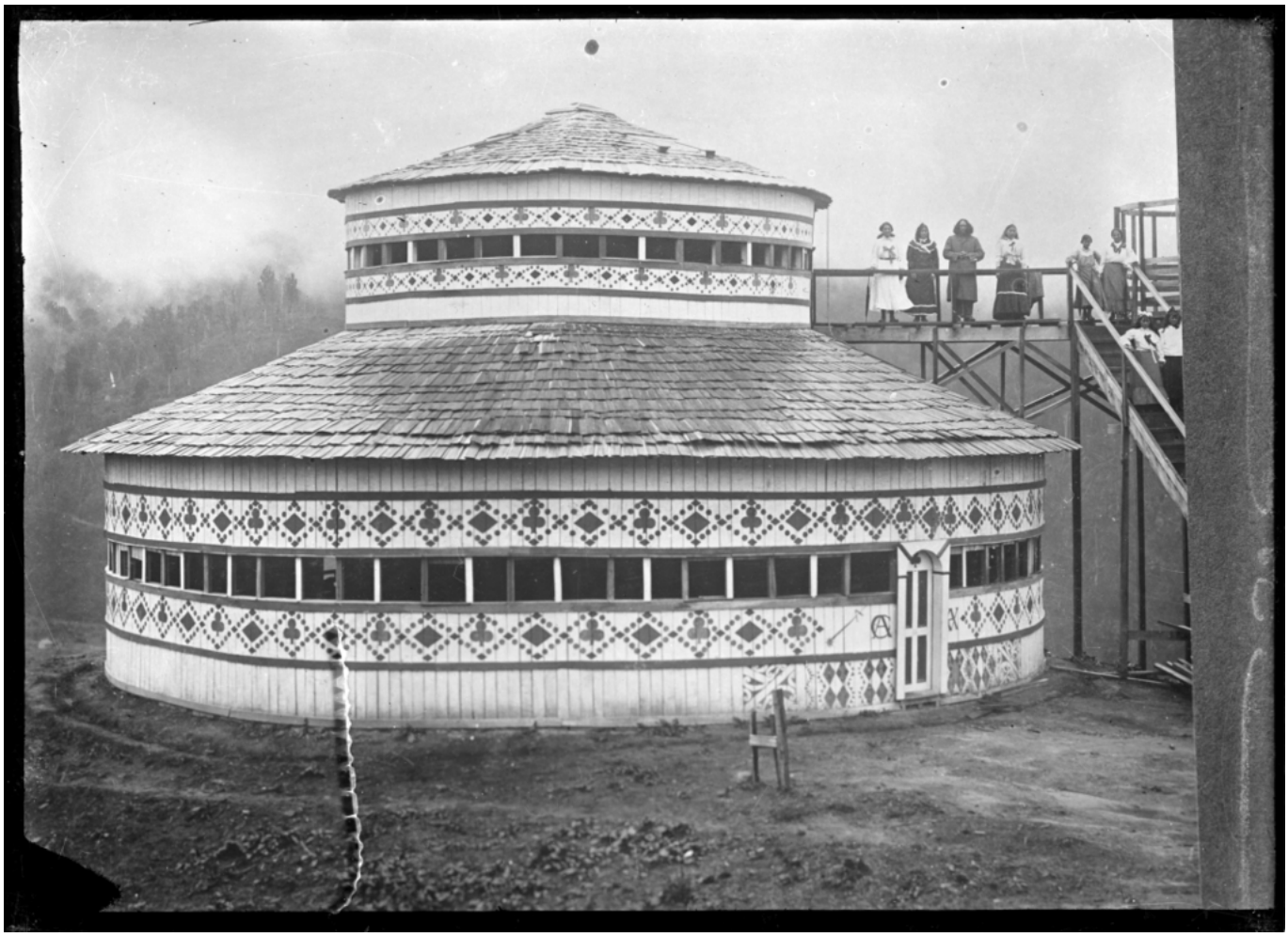

Rua Kenana Hepetipa's wooden circular courthouse and meeting house at Maungapohatu. Godber Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library.

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Beehive. Wellington, New Zealand. 1 January 2015. Michal Klajban.

In an effort to curb Rua's growing influence, in 1907 Parliament passed the Tohunga Suppression Act (Newman 2006, 67). However, the geographical remoteness of his community coupled with its small scale (probably numbering in the several hundreds of adherents at this time) helped Rua to avoid prosecution. In the meantime, he continued to promote his own self-professed divinity more explicitly and, with this, was beginning to promise the delivery of a utopian future to his followers.

On the matter of Rua's deified status, by 1908, he was publicly linking himself with Christ. This was done by claiming variously that he was Christ, Christ's Māori brother, or some variation of these themes. There was also a distinct ethnic complexion to these pronouncements, with Rua asserting his role as the exclusive deliverer of the Māori people, complementing what he saw as Christ's role in saving Europeans. On one occasion, Rua even predicted that three days after his death, he would come back to life (Binney, Chaplin, and Wallace 1979, 73–76, 151–68).

In keeping with his perceived divinity, Rua began to issue prophecies about a utopia that he and his followers would inherit at some point in the imminent (though unspecified) future following an apocalypse affecting the entire country. Exactly what would characterise this idealised post-apocalyptic society was never articulated by Rua, but the value of such a prophecy lay more in its function as an antidote to the difficult social and economic circumstances that many of his followers were experiencing. In 1915, he predicted that in the year 2000, all of the world's leaders would gather at Maungapōhatu, where they would be seated in Hīona. Rua would be the supreme leader among them, seated on the highest throne

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(Binney, Chaplin, and Wallace 1979, 62). This was the first millenarian prophecy issued by Rua, and the fact that there was an eighty-five-year gap between when it was made and when it was due to transpire meant there was no risk of the prophecy's failure during Rua's lifetime.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, there was a more overtly revolutionary rather than evolutionary basis to Rua's prophecies. They tended to conform to the model of a political or geological apocalypse, after which a new, utopian, Māori-led political and social order, with Rua at its apex, would be established.

The onset of the First World War presented Rua with an opportunity to bolster support among his adherents by means of prophesying an impending apocalypse followed by a revolution in the country. In 1916 (by which time the New Zealand public was becoming aware of the unprecedented horrors of the War), Rua made the inflammatory announcement that the Germans would be victorious and that his followers would prosper when New Zealand finally fell under German rule. While not predicting the type of cataclysm that appears in popular depictions of an apocalypse, Rua was certainly suggesting that something culturally, socially, and politically revolutionary was about to happen and that those Māori who had joined the Iharaira sect would reap the benefits of this revolution. It was not quite a heaven on earth that he was promising, but the prospect of a new order in which Māori would presumably no longer be at the bottom of society—economically or politically—would have been enticing for his followers, nonetheless.

The Inter-War Period and Decline

At the height of his influence and his community's numerical strength, Rua was arrested and imprisoned for nearly two years. On 2 April 1916, up to eighty armed police raided Rua's settlement and arrested the prophet. He was charged with sedition and resisting arrest, and was found guilty of the latter, for which he was imprisoned until April 1918. The cost of the trial imposed a heavy financial burden on Rua's community, and in his absence, some of his followers abandoned Maungapōhatu. Far from being the promised utopia, it was taking on the traits of a failed community. Moreover, three months after returning to the settlement, Rua agreed for a missionary school to be established for the community's children, which symbolically and practically subverted the notion of an ideal Māori community that would exist without any European presence or influence.

In the inter-War era, the Iharaira community at Maungapōhatu experienced a steady decline in membership. The confluence of several factors contributed to waning support for Rua and his utopian movement over this period. Firstly, it was becoming increasingly difficult—even for the more committed of Rua's followers—to contend with the succession of failed prophecies that he had issued. His credibility suffered from this, and particularly from the repeated failure of the predicted utopia to materialise (or even the preceding apocalypse to occur). Secondly, the ravages of the 1918 influenza pandemic in the region were severe, and in their own way, represented a form of apocalypse being visited on the community. Māori were seven times more likely to die from this influenza strain than Europeans, and for Tūhoe, the rates were possibly even higher (Waitangi Tribunal 2017, 35-41). The region was then struck by a typhoid outbreak in 1924. In response, Rua instructed his followers to leave their jobs and return to Maungapōhatu to escape the disease (Sissons 1991, 195). The bacteria moved faster, though, and soon the community was suffering from widespread infection which further depleted enthusiasm for Rua's utopian project but,

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paradoxically, contributed to a sense of anticipation for the apocalypse he had warned of. In this worldview dominated by belief in an imminent apocalypse, such events could be interpreted as signs of the approaching end. Even though they were open to a much more conventional interpretation—in this instance, as simply part of the manifestation of a disease—they were understood by Rua's followers in a way that gave them apocalyptic meaning.

Economically, Rua's community struggled with a perennial shortage of labour as (mainly) males from the settlement left for weeks or months on end during the summers to find paid employment principally on European farms in the region. This problem was exacerbated by the effects of the Depression from 1930, which led to a decline in revenue for the settlement. In addition, it was becoming harder to retain the cultural and social isolation that had been key to the early success of Rua's community. The influence not only of the European world but also of those Māori who had partially been assimilated into it had continued to grow over the decades since the Iharaira sect was established at Maungapōhatu.

Even the doctrines of Iharaira were under threat during this era, principally as a result of the work of the Presbyterian missionary John Laughton. Rua had initially been hostile to this European 'intruder,' but gradually established a détente with him. Rua never joined the Presbyterian Church, but he relied on it for meeting certain administrative needs, such as recording baptisms, marriages, and deaths, as well as operating the community's school (Moon 2008, 44–45).

In 1927, perhaps anxious over the dwindling number of members in his community, Rua made one of his more dramatic apocalyptic prophecies: that the end of the world was about to occur. Such a prophecy—especially one destined to take place in the very near future—seemed intended to shore up the faith of the members of his settlement. He predicted that there would be two weeks of total darkness followed by lightning and the flooding of the entire country. Only his followers would be saved, while those who rejected Iharaira would perish. Rua also predicted that the stars would fall from the sky, and that Christ would return to be reunited with Rua, his brother.

In the following months, Rua and his adherents engaged in intense Bible study, with no-one permitted to leave the community for more than a single night. And in case the prophecy did not come to pass, he inserted a caveat: if the world did not end as he described, it would certainly happen by the year 2000, which would give the community extra time to prepare for the apocalypse (Hanson 1990, 172–73). A newspaper reported at the time that 'about 2000 Maoris are trekking there [Maungapōhatu], sacrificing their money for the purchase of stores and galvanised iron, for Rua decrees that they must not live in tents, as lightning will destroy everything inflammable [sic]' (*Horowhenua Chronicle* 1927, 5).

Rua's specific predictions about a cataclysmic end of the world, and an ensuing utopia, nourished his followers' apocalyptic imagination. These prophecies gave meaning to their present circumstances, particularly the tensions they experienced and the struggles they faced, by contextualising these as a 'prototype of the ultimate decisive struggle between good and evil and its final resolution' (Robbins and Palmer 1997, 5), usually through some sort of world-ending or world-changing event.

Determinism lies at the heart of this view of an apocalypse, in that the future is already mapped out (in this case, by Rua as prophet) and that all the events and circumstances his followers experienced were analogous to a script being played out and were pre-ordained. However, within the determinist approach to an apocalypse is room for a historicist conception, in which an apocalypse is linked to the destiny of a

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collective in this world, rather than the salvation of individuals in the next. In both cases, though, there is a tendency to see the world in starkly binary terms of right or wrong, good and bad, us and them. There tends to be no room for moral ambiguity or intellectual uncertainty (O'Leary 1998, 71). Such certainties appeal even more to groups who may be experiencing cultural insecurity or fragmentation (Robbins and Palmer 1997, 261–84) of the sort Rua's followers were in this period, as demonstrated by their implicit repudiation of aspects of the traditional Māori world from which they had emerged (as well as a correlative rejection of the European world which was by now well-established in the country). Thus, Rua's apocalyptic movement functioned on the basis of a fusion of his religious teachings and prophetic pronouncements with the specific social, cultural, political, and psychological factors that prevailed at that time in the region.

The other element that had a bearing on the success (albeit limited in scale and tenure) of Rua's apocalyptic movement was the fact that it occurred in an agrarian community. Eric Hobsbawm's analysis of millenarian movements (whose followers similarly believed in impending social upheaval to be accomplished through divine agency) identified three main characteristics of such movements: a rejection of the present world and the longing for an alternative one to be accomplished through some radical transformation or revolution; an ideology which emphasises a coming golden age; and a vagueness about the precise means by which this new society will be brought about (Hobsbawm 1959, 57–58). Not only do these traits conform to those of Rua's sect, but as Hobsbawm emphasised, they tended to apply almost exclusively to rural societies. The community at Maungapōhatu was a prime candidate for this type of millenarian movement in that it was isolated, rural, vulnerable, poor, in a state of political, cultural, and religious upheaval, and separated in various ways from traditional certainties that only a few generations earlier were taken for granted. Such movements have appeared among different ethnic groups and in different areas for centuries. Rua's movement conformed broadly to this construct of millenarianism, being rooted in the hope of salvation for its followers, through assimilating other cultural or religious traditions into orthodox Christin doctrine, and through relying on a charismatic prophet-leader who calls his followers to unite in anticipation of a supernatural apocalypse (Webster 1979, 49).

Some historians have argued that Rua 'used fear to manipulate his people,' and that the faith of his followers 'needed to be fortified by fear of the unknown in order to defeat present despair' (Binney, Chaplin, and Wallace 1979, 62). In his prophecies about the forthcoming apocalypse, he reiterated that his followers were to be the Chosen People who would be saved (Binney, Chaplin, and Wallace 1979, 63–64; Webster 1979, 197). The complete annihilation Rua forecast also extended to the oppressive power structures that many Māori experienced in the country, and so to this extent, the coming apocalypse was a political as well as religious concept, offering temporal liberation as well as spiritual salvation. As one Tūhoe elder later explained it, '[w]hen Rua became a prophet, the people were in darkness, and his dreams were to elevate the mana [prestige, status] and the way the people lived, so that they could live again' (Waitangi Tribunal 2017, 18).

Conclusion

By the early 1930s, Rua had abandoned what remained of his movement at Maungapōhatu and had moved to a small settlement of Matahi, in the eastern Bay of Plenty (which he had founded in 1910), where he died on 20 February 1937. The Iharaira sect dwindled in membership following Rua's death. In the

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succeeding decades, efforts to revive it were largely unsuccessful.

In keeping with other apocalyptic movements, Rua's community Maungapōhatu rejected the present world in favour of a prophesied alternative to be accomplished through some radical transformation or revolution. It was also based on an ideology which emphasised a coming golden age, although it was vague about the precise means by which this new society would be brought about or what form it would take. The prophecy narrative of the sort Rua produced served to provide an 'imaginative framework' for explaining the way things were, and in doing so, offered a sense of hope to those who believed in the prophecies. The coming apocalypse, and the subsequent elevation of his followers to an elect status in a future society that was vaguely utopian, was at the centre of his movement. In addition, as neither the European nor the traditional Māori world individually seemed to offer answers to the struggles of the era, prophecies of a transformed world—crafted as a response to the circumstances of the present—were the supreme antidote to the trials of the present that Rua and his community inhabited.

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