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Abstract

This is a film review of *The Patriarch* (2016), directed by Lee Tamahori.

Keywords

Maori, New Zealand, Colonialism, Aboriginal, Indigenous

Author Notes

Ken Derry is Associate Professor, Teaching Stream, in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). Since 2011 he has been a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion and Film*, and since 2012 he has been the Co-chair of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion. Aside from religion and film his teaching and research interests include considerations of religion in relation to literature, violence, popular culture, pedagogy, and Indigenous traditions. He is the recipient of the 2013 UTM Teaching Excellence Award.



The Patriarch (Mahana)

Directed by Lee Tamahori
2016

New Zealand

103 minutes

TIFF Contemporary World Cinema Program

Trailer: <https://youtu.be/VowvDCtc26o>

Released as *Mahana* in New Zealand, *The Patriarch* arrives with an impressive Māori cinematic pedigree: it is directed by Lee Tamahori, who made 1994's landmark *Once Were Warriors*, and is based on a novel by Witi Ihimaera, author of *Whale Rider*. The film is set in the early 1960s on the East Coast of the North Island of New Zealand, and tells the story of the Mahana family and their feud with the neighboring Poatas. We learn of the feud in one of the first scenes, as the two families dangerously race each other to a *funeral*. When the two lines of cars approach a one-way bridge at top speed, the Poatas are forced to skid off the road or risk someone getting badly hurt or killed.

As with *Once Were Warriors*, colonialism is rarely critiqued directly in this film, but is still clearly implicated in many of the hardships faced by the Māori. The race to the funeral, for example, is part of an ongoing competition for the sheep shearing contract from the settler Collins clan, whose own patriarch has just died. As the heads of the two Indigenous families—Tamihana Mahana and Rupeni Poata—argue with each other over the contract in front of Collins' son, the minister reproaches them for fighting at a house of God. Tamihana and Rupeni remind the minister in turn that it was a house built by Mahana hands, on Poata land. This one brief exchange beautifully and succinctly illustrates the British appropriation of Māori people and resources, the annexation of Māori religious traditions, and the imposition of colonial authority to quell inter-Māori conflicts created by that very authority.

The most explicit critique of colonialism arrives after an incident that takes place during a screening of *3:10 to Yuma*. One of the Poatas rides a *horse* into the theatre, which leads immediately to a fistfight between members of his family and the Mahanas who are also in attendance. The next day, the film's young protagonist Simeon Mahana visits a court for a class field trip. He watches three Māori tried and convicted in quick succession, including the young Poata man who incited the violence at the movie house. Simeon had been asked to say thanks to the judge on behalf of the class, but he instead rebukes the judge and the colonial justice system. How can Māori properly defend themselves, he asks, when they are forbidden from speaking their own language in the courtroom?

Not incidentally, these two key moments are based on the filmmakers' own experiences. In the movie's press kit, Tamahori states: "Our cinema scene is a direct steal from something that happened in the cinema at Te Araroa on the East Coast when I was

about nine. I saw men on horses, skinning knives in their belts, people stamping, hooting, jeering and creating mayhem, you couldn't hear the movie. It was hilarious.” For Ihimaera the courthouse encounter affected him deeply: “That scene is exactly as it happened. I was with a school group and at the end of it I was asked to give a speech of thanks to the judge. My life changed in that courtroom. I realised that justice is not always equal and from that point onwards my political path as a Māori writer was forever sealed.”

The incident at the theatre also prompts the critical rupture between Simeon and his grandfather, as Tamihana declares that no one is to see any more films. When Simeon challenges Tamihana he erupts in violence, physically throwing Simeon out of the house and yelling for the shears to cut Simeon's hair. Simeon's father Joshua intervenes, hitting Tamihana in order to protect his son, which results in his family's banishment from Mahana land. The grandmother Ramona defies her husband, however, offering Joshua her own home on her own land; when Tamihana forbids her from doing this she says there is nothing he can do to stop her. “Even *your* power,” she growls, “has its limits.”

From this point on the Tamihana family is split. The remainder of the film is devoted to the struggle of Simeon's family to build a new life on their own, and to uncovering the origin of the Mahana-Poata feud. Simeon ultimately learns the awful truth directly from his grandmother. But it is Tamihana himself—on his deathbed—who tells Simeon where to find the letter that he will read out at the Mahana patriarch's funeral, revealing to the entire community what happened.

Religion is a key element in *The Patriarch*. The film most obviously is full of Christianity, from the opening funeral, to the cross over Tamihana and Ramona's bed, to the Bible in the courtroom, to the names of Simeon and his father, Joshua. But this

Christianity is often, like Tamihana himself, unyielding, oppressive, and patriarchal. In the opening scene Tamihana looks out from his porch as his family members arrive in order to then leave for the funeral. He angrily declares that they are late. When his son protests that they are late only by a minute, he asks, “Do you think God will let you into heaven if you are one minute late?” After the funeral, Tamihana declares without a hint of sarcasm: “This country is great because of men like Collins. Hard-working men of God.” The letter that Simeon retrieves near the end of the film as his grandfather dies is in fact hidden in Tamihana’s Bible. The truth that finally sets everyone free therefore comes not from the word of God itself, but from knowledge of past actions, agreements, and relations.

Given the implicit critique of (colonial) Christianity in the film, it is not surprising to find that it is replaced with other religious perspectives over the course of the film. The first is Māori tradition, which in the beginning is apparent simply, but crucially, in Ramona’s *moko kauae* (chin tattoo). Then, after Simeon speaks up at the Poata boy’s trial, Rupeni approaches him and performs a *hongi*, the ritual greeting in which one person presses their nose and forehead against another’s. Most dramatically, the film ends with Tamihana being given a Māori funeral in front of a *wharenui*, a traditional meeting house. The funeral is disrupted by the arrival of the Poatas performing a *haka*, a group ritual traditionally carried out as a precursor to battle as well as to mark important events, including funerals. The act in this case suggests both possibilities, although the Mahanas respond as if it is a purely aggressive act. If the *haka* is indeed meant even partly as a rebuke against Tamihana, the gesture is completed by Rupeni’s statement that he is glad the old man has finally died so that they can all get out from under his shadow, and move into the light.

There is one other critical Māori ritual in the film, one that underscores the implication that the violence we see tearing Indigenous communities apart is in many ways the result of colonial patriarchy. After Simeon's family has been banished, Ramona shows up one day and sings to the bees. When her granddaughter asks what she is doing, Ramona replies that she is reassuring the bees that her family won't cut down the wildflowers, and that the bees are telling her that in return for this kindness they will give the family the sweetest honey. The song, in other words, shows us a way of being in the world that is not colonial, not patriarchal. Ramona does not command the bees, or threaten them, or compete with them. She has a *relationship* with them. The central importance in the film of this way of being is highlighted by the fact that Roman's "Bee *Waiata*" ("Bee Song")—composed by Haare Williams, a Māori elder—is the foundation for the film's musical score. Mahuia Bridgman-Cooper, one of *The Patriarch's* composers, is quoted in the press kit saying that this song "was really the key for us to tell the story through the music."

The other "religion" in the film, arguably, is film itself. Ramona describes it as a source of joy for the younger Mahanas, before their fated experience at *3:10 to Yuma*. On the other hand, Tamihana forbids his family from seeing movies after this experience, because he believes they are morally corrupt. When Simeon asks if this is also true of religious films, like *The Ten Commandments*, his grandfather bellows: "There's no such thing as religious films!" In apparent defiance of this perspective, people in *The Patriarch* reverentially quote film characters at significant moments. When Simeon says that he is sorry for standing up to the judge, the teacher replies with John Wayne's famous line from *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*: "Never apologize . . . it's a sign of weakness." Simeon himself

attempts an imitation of Jimmy Stewart as he tries to find the silver lining in his family's banishment: "Sometimes you gotta fall down to know where you stand."

Perhaps the most notable statement that *The Patriarch* makes on this topic comes at the very end. The film does not conclude, as might be expected, with the climactic scene at Tamihana's funeral when everyone learns the truth about the Mahana-Poata feud. Instead, there is a coda. Once the dust has settled a bit after the big revelation, the camera cuts to Poppy Poata, the girl to whom Simeon is attracted, who asks him if he wants to see a film with her. She tells him that the movie stars Elvis and is directed by Don Siegel (which means that it must be 1960's *Flaming Star*) and Simeon immediately identifies Siegel as the director of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. This, amazingly, is how Tamahori concludes *The Patriarch*: by showing us how much two young Māori care, and *know*, about film, how it connects them with one another. In interviews over the years Tamahori has often spoken of his own love of movies. Although filmmaking is obviously not a traditional Māori form of creative expression, Tamahori once again shows in *The Patriarch* that it is a form that they can appropriate, that Māori can and do use movies to find and make meaning, to build relations, to tell their own stories in their own way.