

The Life of the Tree



Te Matua Ngahere - The Father of the Forest, a tall Kauri - *Agathis australis*, up to 2000 years old (Salmon).

At the beginning of time stood Te Kore, the nothingness - Io.

*Then there was Te Po
the Great Night, the Long Night
the intensely Dark Night, the Gloom-laden Night
the Night to be Felt, the Night Unseen*

*Then Rangi the sky, dwelt with Papa tu a nuku the Earth,
and was joined with her, and land was made.
But their numerous offspring lived in darkness,
for their parents were not yet parted,
the sky lay upon the earth
and no light came between them,
and the land was unfruitful,
and the sea was all dark water.*

*The war god Tu matauenga said "let us kill them",
but Tane mahuta, god and father of the forests
and all things that inhabit them answered
"No, not so. It is better to rend them apart,
and to let the Sky stand far above us
and the Earth lie below here.
Let the Sky become a stranger to us,
but let the Earth remain close to us
as our nursing mother."*

*Over vast time, the Kauri pushed them apart.
With heavy groans and shrieks of pain,
the parents of the sons cried out
"Why did you do this crime,
why did you slay your parents' love?"*

The tree of life carries the promise of immortality, echoing from our cultural origins in the primal garden, and deeper in the flowering of all life in cosmic time. Today in the scientific epoch, the tree of life is recognized as the tree of evolution of biodiversity. Interconnecting the individuals in this tree is a more subtle genetic web, which in eucaryote organisms is the web of sexual recombination. For each of us this web has formed an unbroken chain of genetic transmission all the way back to the first life forms which graced the Earth over 3000 million years ago.

Our human community in action must also become at one with the tree to survive. No human is an island. Our survival is completely dependent on the survival of the species with which we interact and use, for our food, many of our medicines, for the stability of our climate and for the air we breathe. We owe our very existence to the tree of life and to the diversity it brings forth. If we forget the tree and lay waste to nature, or seek to modify its branches without the wisdom of knowing how its woven genetic threads may reap unforeseen changes later, we risk leaving the future Earth destitute.

The tree of life bursts forth from our founding creation myths. Before Eden, Sumeria accounts the felling of the Huluppu tree in founding the throne of state. It also exposes and the trickery of the gods in denying immortality. Gilgamesh sought after the plant of rejuvenation which Utnapishtim the Sumerian Noah had discovered in the flood, only to be tricked by the serpent who sheds its skin and gained the powers of regeneration by stealing the leaves. Adapa, the Sumerian Adam is similarly tricked by the gods who claim the waters of life are those of death. In the Eden the tree stood in the centre of the garden and likewise conferred immortal life. When Eve ate the fruit of knowledge, God cursed the ground and the tree of life was withdrawn, in a similar trick lest humankind gain both knowledge and immortality. The tree of life has become "hidden since the foundation of the world" prophesied to return in the apocalyptic 'unveiling'.

In the carnal knowledge of the fall, Adam and Eve were said to have lost the innocence of their sexuality in stitching fig leaves over their genitals. Indeed there is a deep relationship between sexuality and individual mortality because, in adopting sexuality, evolution sacrificed the endless cloning of parthenogenesis, mitigated by viral promiscuity, to achieve a greater beauty and complexity. Almost all higher organisms are sexual. Those few that are not are closely related to and derived from sexual organisms, often sharing cryptic exchange with their sexual look-alikes. Without the altruism of sharing half one's genes in a recombinational merging, the almost limitless variety of combinations permitting complex organisms to evolve could never have occurred.

The reason the tree of life stands as the secret of the apocalypse is that, in our cultural emergence, we entered free-fall from natural diversity, leading ultimately to our awakening as a cosmic species. In this awakening we discover the nature of intent and taking personal responsibility for the Earth's living future. This future is in turn a product of how well we guard the evolutionary tree from threats within and beyond Earth and how richly we provide for its future ramifications.

The dangers for the tree of life are immense. From its first beginnings in the felled Huluppu Tree of Sumeria and before that in the first gatherers of the Rift Valley, the tree and its diversity have been under constant threat. The first of the great extinctions caused by human hand occurred in pre-historic times with the first migrations of humans. Since the Fall into 'civilization', humanity has inherited an attitude of dominion over a nature defined as a chaotic evil to be vanquished. With increasing population and industrialization, human impact has become an oppressive genocide of biodiversity, driving towards a human-caused mass extinction equalling those caused by mas-

sive asteroidal and cometary impacts and supernovae. Now with the gathering pace of habitat destruction, through forest felling and fragmentation, urbanization, climate change, desertification, destruction of wetlands, clearing for mass agricultural crops, invasive species transfer and massive pollution, we are converging towards a tumult of the holocaust of life.



Holocaust of the Life Tree - Burning Amazonas

At the same time the covers are being thrown off reality in the discovery of the major features of the cosmological description, from the symmetry-breaking at the cosmic origin, through the quantum physics of complexity, to nuclear weapons, the discovery of the genetic code, and the structure of the human genome, climaxing in the dynamics of the sentient brain. While many of these features will be continuing developments in epochs to come, the end of the 'second millennium' has seen the broad outlines of our cosmic knowledge taking shape in a way which can never be repeated, so long as humanity shall survive in evolutionary time.

The genocide of life is about to be further exacerbated by a runaway deployment of genetic modification and cloning which could render the natural food species on which we depend, effectively extinct, confined to gene banks, and us dependent on technology and non-viable engineered varieties for a transient existence. It is vital that human society, both for its own genetic survival, and for the survival of its interdependent species, develop ways of conceiving of genetic modification which enrich diversity and the future viability of the planet, rather than reducing genetic diversity to a fragile, technology-dependent *cul-de-sac* subject to total breakdown, through minor social, natural or astronomic disruption.

Along with the future of biodiversity is conceiving our future in a way which allows the unanticipated aspects of evolution, which have since time immemorial graced the evolutionary tree, becoming even ourselves among others, to flourish, to feed us well and to produce new life forms which make the Earth ever more resplendent and conscious of itself and our unfolding futures.

Tied to the future of the tree and our genetic web is a future of human society in true compassion and social justice, which evokes, in like kind, the diversity and autonomy of all peoples, to live and love in peace on this paradisiacal planet. The survival of human society as an ecology is founded in the tree of life as the living expression of individual diversity in inter-relationship. To survive, human society needs to be adaptable, compliant, richly interdependent with nature and as diverse as possible, retaining its most ancient and ecologically robust gather-hunter traits, as well as high-tech futures in space, to help protect us from astronomical disaster.



Tree of Life with animalia in its branches (Internet Japan).

The Tree of Life comes to its full expression in the ultimate paradox of incarnate existence. The sentient experience of reality. Although we accept that we live together in a physical universe, our only access to this knowledge of the world is through our subjective conscious experiences. also accompanied by extra-physical dreams and visions. The complementarity of existence derives from the interdependence of subjective conscious mind and physical universe. This incarnate complementary nature is the source of the mysteries of existence and the spiritual quest for the totality of being that is represented in the Kabbalah by the Tree of Life as Axis Mundi, bridging the Vedantic chakras from Earth to Heaven and spanning conscious existence and the universe in the very trunk which this caudex becomes - a navigation manual for our living futures and in traversing the Styx from life to death and back again, transcending the mortal coil in the joyous cosmology which unites all living beings throughout the universe, from alpha to omega. In this sense the tree of life stands taller than the lonely God of the patriarchs, for in it is the completion of the *mysterium tremendum* of the divine with the imminence of nature in the Tao of existence.

Only the tree transcends mortality in this life as the closing myth of Maui, cheated by the fantail's chirp, while seeking to defeat death in entering the vagina of Hine, attests:

"Now, at last, this Maui comes towards me, coming in the hope that he will conquer me, and that the children of hard-won light will never know death.... But I do not cause death, and did not ordain it. Human death was ordained when human life was ordained. And we - my father-husband Tane; Taranga who gave special birth to Maui; Makea-tutara, speaker of the tohi rites; Maui-potiki, and I, Hine-nui-te-Po, are merely the instruments, the practicalities, and the sequence of death. ... To defeat death he will need to gain living entry to my womb, and living exit, but this he cannot do. ... My vagina, where he must enter, is set with teeth of obsidian, and is a gateway through which only those who have already achieved death may freely pass. ... Your bird companions chuckle and flutter at the strange sight of you, but they are not your undoing. ... In this your last journey, you will give your final gift to those of earth, the gift not of immortality, but of homecoming, following death. ... I will wait at this side of death for those who follow, because I am the mother who welcomes and cares for those children whose earthly life has ended." (Patricia Grace)