



Rata and the Tree

An adaptation by Wiremu Grace.

Illustrated by Andrew Burdan.

Rata was a strong young man, keen to prove himself as a future leader for his people. But he had yet to be taken seriously as a leader of his iwi. In those times, Rata's people lived on an island, a paradise island among others scattered in the beautiful seas of Te Moananui-a-Kiwa, the Pacific Ocean. In



the years that this story took place the weather patterns had changed. Days seemed to be hotter, storms seemed to be fiercer and the water that surrounded the island had slowly begun to erode more of the land and beaches close to the sea.

Rata's tribe joined with other tribes from their island to discuss the problems they faced. They talked about the weather patterns and what they could do to combat them. Some said that they should travel to the Fish of Māui and make a new home as Tāwhirimātea, the atua of the winds, would surely defeat anything they were able to build. Others argued that they should build stronger houses and bigger walls to protect the beaches. Eventually they agreed to stay on their island and strengthen their houses and build stronger walls. They also worked together to protect their crops for when strong winds next hit their villages.

It was as they were building the last sea wall that a great storm hit the island. It was a huge storm that lashed the island for five days. The people were lucky that they had finished strengthening some of the houses as the damage could have been a lot worse and lives could have been lost. Rata was with his whānau huddled in the strongest where of the village listening to the wails of his parents, uncles, aunties and small children. It was then that he decided to do something to help his people. He decided to build a waka, a huge sea vessel, to carry his people across Te Moananui-a-Kiwa to the Fish of Māui that he had heard of in the stories of his ancestors.

Rata did not tell anyone of his plans. Instead, when the clean-up of the village was complete, he ventured into the thick bush to find a tall straight tree from which he could make his waka. Rata searched the bush for many days, returning to his village at night to sleep and then venturing out again each morning. He kept his goal firmly in his mind as motivation to climb every hill and search every valley, until one day he finally came across a tall straight tree reaching far above the smaller trees up towards the sky.

Excited at finally finding the right tree for his waka, Rata immediately took out his toki – a large, heavy axe – and began chopping. He felled the tree within hours, and for the rest of the day he cleared the branches and began the first stages of hollowing out the hull.

By the end of the day Rata was pleased with his work. He headed back to the village happy in knowing that his tribe would soon be able to sail the great ocean in search of a new land where they could live safely.

But in Rata's excitement to build his waka he had forgotten one very important factor: to offer respect and acknowledgment to Tāne, the atua and guardian of the forest. The children of Tāne, the insects, the birds, the animals and crawling creatures were angry at his blatant example of disrespect. When the day was done and Rata had left the tree lying lifeless on the ground, the children of Tāne brought the forest floor to life. They gathered around the fallen tree. Some cried, and some were angry. Everyone talked at once causing a huge racket. Finally a kiwi called Kimihia stood high on the trunk, letting out a shrill cry to silence them all.

“We are wasting energy with anger and tears. The son of Tū does not know of his wrongdoing.”



One of the leaders of the many thousands of ants, Poporiki, stepped forward and hushed the excited crowd. “We should avenge this wrongdoing. We should punish the son of Tū, he needs to be taught a lesson!” An uproar ensued as the ants chanted their support for their leader.

But Kimihia yelled above the noise. “No! Wrongdoing will not be righted with violence.”

The crowd became quiet, agreeing with Kimihia’s words. Realising his idea was not supported by the majority, Poporiki spoke once more, “Then, what should we do?”

“Together, we will raise this tree,” said Kimihia. “We will return every branch, every leaf and every grain of sawdust until this tree stands proud once more!”

All the creatures of Tāne roared their approval and the quiet bush-clad hills echoed with their voices. A large kererū raised her wings to bring quiet once more. “Before we start, we will ask Tāne for his blessing.” Everyone fell silent as Kererū led the karakia to Tāne. Every creature joined in agreement as the incantations were completed and work to stand the fallen tree began.

The ants, beetles, worms and creatures of the forest floor collected every grain of sawdust and returned it to the tree. The butterflies, bees, dragonflies, flies and every other flying insect replaced every leaf. The birds replaced every branch with help from the lizards and crawling creatures. Together they lifted the tree back into place, chanting as they did so until the tree stood in the forest of Tāne once more. The children of Tāne had worked all night and were too exhausted to celebrate their success. Instead they returned to their homes happy with their achievement.

The next day Rata returned expecting to find the tree he had felled lying on the ground. Instead the tree stood as tall as ever. Rata couldn’t believe his eyes. He circled the tree several times and looked around the undergrowth for clues as to what had happened. After an hour of searching in bewilderment, Rata gave up and once more took out his toki. By the time the sun was high in the sky the giant tree, once again, lay lifeless on the forest floor. Rata whistled to himself as he headed back to his village, happy with his day’s work.

That night the creatures of Tāne returned to find the tree had once more been felled. This time they knew what to do, and set about their work immediately. The tree was standing again in half the time it had taken them the night before.

Rata returned the next day completely bewildered with what he found. His tree was back in its original state, stretching up to the sky and looking as strong as ever. Rata wasted no time in felling it once more, but this time after pretending to return to the village he sneaked back to find out what magic had been going on in his absence. He was only hiding for a few minutes when the children of Tāne got to work putting the tree back together again. Rata jumped from his hiding place and confronted the many thousands of insects, birds, reptiles and other forest creatures that gathered in front of him. “What do you think you’re doing? Why do you undo my hard work?”

Kimihia stepped forward before Poporiki could gather his soldier ants for an attack. “You have disrespected Tāne,” he said. “You have not offered thanks or shown respect. You don’t deserve this tree!”

Poporiki also piped up, “Yeah! If anything, you deserve to be punished! How can you be so ignorant?” The ants cheered while the rest of the forest creatures chattered amongst themselves.

Rata looked at all the children of Tāne gathered in front of him. He sat on the log ashamed at what he realised was the truth. He had been in such a hurry that he had forgotten the basic rules of respect. Rata was so sorry for his actions he could do nothing but sit with his head in his hands. After reflecting on his actions, Rata stood and spoke.

“Please forgive my ignorance, I meant no harm. I was in a hurry – my people have been battered by storms and our village is under threat of rising seas. I wanted to build a waka that could carry us safely across the great ocean in the hope of finding safer lands for my people.”



The children of Tāne heard the sorrow in Rata's voice and knew that his story was true and that he had meant no harm. Kimihia spoke for them all.

"Return to your village. We will consider your plea tonight. Come back tomorrow and you will tell you of our decision."

Rata returned to his village feeling sorry for himself and angry that he had not known better.

The next day Rata woke to the deafening sound of insects and birds. The children of Tāne numbering in their tens of thousands had arrived at his village carrying a huge carved waka. Rata's people were there to witness the spectacle, amazed at what they saw. Kimihia flew and perched on Rata's shoulder, whispering in his ear.

"This waka is for you and your people," he said. "It has been gifted by us, and blessed by Tāne. We heard your story and knew you were trying to do good for others."

Rata was overwhelmed with the generosity that the children of Tāne had shown. He stepped in front of his elders and led the whole village in an emotional haka of thanks. Kimihia and the children of Tāne replied with songs of their own, joining with the people of the village to celebrate well into the night.

From that day onwards Rata was seen as a valuable leader in the community. His waka was used to explore new lands and eventually carried all the villagers across the great ocean of Kiwa to the Fish of Maui. Rata always kept his promise to teach the younger generations about respecting the children of Tāne. That respect is still passed down through the generations today.

