

Tōku Tūrangawaewae: Culture, Identity, and Belonging for Māori Homeless People

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Abstract

To be Māori is to have a tūrangawaewae (a place of strength and belonging, a place to stand). If so, is it conceivable that Māori are homeless in our own homeland? This presentation focuses on the experiences of two Māori homeless people who took part in a 3-year research project conducted in partnership with not-for-profit service agencies. Previous research into street homelessness has all but ignored indigenous histories, circumstances and worldviews. The situation in which indigenous people find themselves requires us to rethink how we understand homelessness and the development of culturally based roles and identities on the street and beyond.

Keywords

Māori, Indigenous, homelessness, cultural practice, home

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Homelessness has been a feature of urban life in New Zealand for over a century. It is often portrayed through images of elderly men drinking in parks, bag ladies going through rubbish bins, street kids committing crimes and panhandlers harassing passers-by for money (Cooper, 2001; Winter & Barnes, 1998). Such public images are partial and tell us little of Māori cultural practices among street homeless people. Despite the consistent presence of homeless people, there is no nationwide official census of street homeless people. We simply do not know definitively how many homeless people there are in this country, or their demographic profiles. As a result, service providers in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch have developed local street census counts. For example, in 2008 the Auckland Rough Sleepers Initiative (ARSI) carried out its fourth street count to date (Ellis & McLuckie, 2008). The purpose of the count was to provide a snapshot of street homeless people within a 3km radius of Auckland's Sky Tower. Results suggest that at least 91 street homeless people were in the area. Almost half of this group were Māori (approximately 43 people), the majority were males (approximately 74), and the largest proportion in terms of age were in their 40s (approximately 29). These findings are supported by other studies, suggesting that Māori are over-represented in the street homeless population in Auckland relative to their proportion in the general population (Gravitas Research & Strategy Ltd, 2005). Likewise, indigenous people are disproportionately represented in the homelessness populations in Australia, Canada and the United States (Hanselmann, 2001; Waldram, Herring & Kue Young, 2006). Because of this, it is important to consider *why* Māori are represented within the homeless population.

As for other groups, pathways for Māori into homelessness are various but often stem from vulnerability to poverty and socio-economic exclusion, intensified by a combination of traumatic life events such as family deaths, abuse, relationship breakdowns, mental illness, addictions and job loss (Morrell-Bellai, Goering & Boydell, 2000; Toohey, Shinn & Weitzman, 2004). As with many social issues, those from economically, ethnically and socially marginalised backgrounds are over-represented among street homeless people (Bang, 1998; McIntosh, 2005; Tois, 2005). Kearns and Smith (1994) noted that many urban Māori live in impoverished and overcrowded conditions. Further, continued processes of colonisation and cultural, social and economic subordination (Enriquez, 1995) mean that indigenous peoples continue to die on average 7 years younger than members of settler populations, and are more likely to experience poverty and homelessness (Hanselmann, 2001; Waldram et al., 2006). Māori experiencing homelessness face barriers to accessing basic physical necessities, such as a warm dwelling and adequate food. They often experience hardship in terms of

psychological resources for good health, including supportive networks, respite from stress and a sense of belonging, self-esteem, hope and care. Once homeless, personal vulnerability issues such as mental insecurity intensify the situation so that these people can become stranded (Hodgetts, Stolte, Chamberlain, Radley, Groot & Nikora, 2009; Hodgetts, Stolte, Chamberlain, Radley, Nikora, Nabalarua & Groot, 2008).

While homelessness remains a pressing societal and health concern in New Zealand (Kearns, 1995; O'Brien & de Hann, 2002; Peace & Kell, 2001), which affects Māori disproportionately, little has been written about this group that emerges from economic and social deprivation and encompasses substance mis-users, mental health clients and long-term recipients of welfare (the permanent poor). Previous research into homelessness, even when dealing with issues faced by minority peoples (Prince, 2008) and indigenous groups (Memmott, Long, Chambers & Spring, 2003), rarely employs cultural concepts germane to these distinct groups as interpreted by their lived realities. In this paper we draw on Māori cultural concepts to explore two case studies of Māori homeless people and the ways in which they work to make a place for themselves on the streets of Hamilton (Phil) and Auckland (Ariā). Pseudonyms are used for both, and images in photographs have been obscured to uphold ethical obligations. The case studies are based on an initial biographical interview, a photo-elicitation project where each participant used a camera to capture their everyday life, and a follow-up interview where participants described the photographs they had taken and the significance of the people, places, objects and situations depicted. Both participants are over 40 and came to street life in their early teens, either to escape abuse or after being removed from their family by the authorities. Our analysis is orientated around understanding how specific places, objects, concepts and practices constitute Ariā and Phil as Māori people living on the streets of Auckland and Hamilton. Of particular note is how participants conduct their lives on the streets and the importance they both place on notions of home, heritage and belonging in making sense of their own situations. The analysis also highlights the legacy of abuse towards Māori children that can continue into adulthood, although this material should not be taken to imply that all Māori families embody abuse.

The Case of Phil



Figure 1. Phil: Self portrait.

Phil has been homeless since he was 14 years old. He is now in his early 40s. During the initial interview he uses a history of his iwi (tribe) in the form of a book to introduce himself in a culturally patterned manner. Phil leafs through the book and literally talks to, and of, the people in the pages. As part of the process he recounts walks he used to take with whānau (family, extended family) along an old forestry railroad track, and describes what he sees and points to photographs in the book. In the process he takes us back in time and along for the walk.

Phil: This book is me, that's who we are ... That's my great grandmother and that's my marae [a group's meeting grounds] ... that's my dad's side ... This was all bush up through our valley ... See, go across this little bridge and then go way up the bush. This is who we are and

these are our chiefs ... These are our saw mills and that's our river right there ... And when we used to go hunting we used to come across the old forestry rail tracks ... It's clear like a walking track. No bush or nothing ey. And we just left it like that eh, for our walks through the bush ...

Interviewer: Is that by the river?

Phil: Yeah down there, and you can take it down to where the river connects. [Points to another photograph of family] And these are all my whānau on the picnic table by the marae. [He reads the caption]. Public picnic 1911. That's our old school, the original primary.

Interviewer: Gee, it just looks like a deserted farm shed, eh.

Phil: Yeah, and the school now is over here. And there's our route and I used to go up there and I could see for miles. Could see the road and hey bro here comes the cops [laughs]. Everybody gone hey before they turn up [laughter]. And it only took like half an hour before the car actually got to where we are, see on that hill?

Phil makes the walk an occasion of remembering who he is, and to communicate his sense of belonging and place to the researchers. He takes us on a tour of his childhood area, pointing out where his grandfather lived and where the school was located. A *tūrangawaewae* is something that is engaged, nurtured and sustained through *whanaungatanga* (relatedness, the establishing of relationships) and *ahi kā* (keeping the home-fires burning)—connections that are lived in the present. Without these two latter ideas, the notion of *tūrangawaewae* in relation to Phil's childhood home collapses. Phil is vicariously navigating his childhood *kāinga* (home), his memories and feelings. This places the idea firmly in the past when he was well connected in lived spaces and environments. He tells his story through the eyes of a "child", which suggests his home fires haven't been fanned for some time. His tour is a means of exploring the place and relationships he hopes to return to in a future where he is no longer homeless. Phil uses the book as a visual map (de Certeau, 1984), to lay out a representation of his past and a potential future back home. Through movement, the narratives of "self" and "home" are constructed. This is seldom a straightforward matter of undisturbed movement and memories, as narratives provide a bridge between the old and new life-worlds (Kuah-Pearce & Davidson, 2008). Images may also be used to invoke the presence of other people and physically distant places in a way that exceeds the materiality of the actual object. References to the police are also important as Phil was removed from his whānau by social services and taken into a youth detention centre. He ran away several times to return home but kept being removed by the police. In the end he ran away to the streets. This action causes tension in Phil's account, as he regrets not asking his whānau for cultural tutelage, but yet he never had access because he was taken away from his whānau. This is a common story among Māori men of his age.

Using the book, Phil becomes immersed in a metaphysically charged world, with objects, places and spaces the *mauri* (life force) of which only he can see. The images evoke memories, emotions and reflections of his *iwi* that are extended into consideration of his current circumstance and how his life could be changed. The library answers his yearning to learn more about his culture and history. He says:

I can't face them down there until I do all this stuff first Young people should be on the marae learning. You know, I should have done this stuff a long time ago ... I go to the library and I read, you know, about different religions or whatever. Something to do during the day time, read about different nationalities and how they go through life. And how I'm living and how are they living. And in some countries it's pretty hard. We've got it pretty easy here. I can't believe why we have to be homeless when there's places for us to go to. And that's what I said, ask your family first and ask them where you're from and what's your heritage, where you're from, who you are, what's the meaning of your *whare* [ancestral house], your marae, how does that connect to your tribe. I do that research.

Phil's "walk" is similar to a physical walk but more flexible in terms of transcending the issues of time and place. For Phil, the images in the book offer ontological proof of his being and dimensionality to his life, because it contains a record of how he came into being and documents his existence and place in the world. The book is more than a simple extension or manifestation of his

cultural identity as a Māori man; it is a vehicle for constructing himself within a web of relationships, experiences and places that span time and space. It provides a form of connective tissue, linking him to others and invoking a sense of belonging and home at a distance from his present life. Here there is an issue relating to the material basis of cultural practices among Māori homeless people. Objects, such as Phil's book, are woven into a network of relationships, histories and cultural practices that determine their placement in communal life (De Vidas, 2008). The book, for example, provides a focal point for the practice of Māori culture in which Phil can position himself. Cultural relationships and roles are crystallised around such objects.

In Phil's account we see the role of forgetting in the process of making a home away from one's ancestral homeland and the way in which this experience contributes to a multiplicity of "home" (Kuah-Pearce & Davidson, 2008). Phil has had to invoke aspects of forgetting to contend with the profound sense of whakamā (shame, embarrassment) he feels at being separated from his family and childhood kāinga home. Being whakamā is summed up by the whakatauākī (saying), "waiho mā te whakamā e patu" (leave them for shame to punish) (Mead & Grove, 2003, p. 418). Phil can use the book to transport us back to his childhood and family and remember once again what has been taken from him, without exposing and laying raw his feelings of whakamā. The book protects him from us and from himself. Through the book, he takes us back and forward in time. In talking and showing us these images Phil is literally walking us through where he's from, who he is and the places and landmarks that are important to him. Here we have a homeless man walking home with a researcher. In this example we see how home is spatially expressed and emotionally realised for a Māori man experiencing home(less)ness.

The Case of Ariā



Figure 2. Ariā (left) and her grand-niece.

Ariā is a homeless woman who presents herself as a guardian of cultural knowledge regarding health and spiritual care. With reference to her interactions with other Māori homeless people, Ariā constructs herself as having an age-related cultural role to guide others as an elder and affirm relational bonds between people by emphasising the values of whanaungatanga and manaakitanga (kindness, support) (Ritchie, 1992). At the time of this research Ariā was 53 years old and had recently returned to the streets of Auckland. Throughout her life Ariā has been socialised by wāhine toa (strong women), who acted as cultural mentors. She reflects on a childhood immersed in the teachings of her grandmother, in tikanga Māori (Māori customary practices), particularly around rongoā Māori (Māori medicines and healing). Despite her grandmother's efforts to provide a safe environment, several children, including Ariā, turned to street life as a means of escaping abuse at the hands of other family members. Ariā took to the streets of Wellington at age 12. By the age of 17 she had made the streets of Auckland her home. On the streets Ariā was cared for by drag queens in Wellington and an older Māori homeless woman named Mā in Auckland. This support led to Ariā training as a nurse aide and working in the rural Far North with geographically isolated, elderly Māori. She returned to the streets of Auckland in late 2007. Her partner had died and her own whānau had asked her to help a niece, grandniece and three cousins living on the streets.



Figure 3: A couple for whom Ariā provides spiritual guidance.

Ariā photographed a young couple (Figure 3) and talked to us about her responsibilities to them:

These two are trying very hard to get themselves together ... Because his wahine [woman] is a schizophrenic and so she is having problems coping ... Because they believe a lot in our Māori way of life ... they think that something's been put on her. Because a couple of nights back she freaked out ... They came to me at breakfast the next morning and asked me to bless the taonga [treasured object] she's wearing It's been gifted to her by her sister's father-in-law. She was brought up by him. And I blessed it, and then today ... she came and kissed me and said, "I feel wonderful."

All cultures have their seers and shamans (Ingold, 1994). The young woman in the picture has been diagnosed with schizophrenia, a diagnosis that often misconstrues the emphasis and value Māori place on spiritual connectedness and communication with ancestors. In the Māori world, seers (matakite) are held in awe for their capacity to connect the everyday and ordinary with the sacred or other worldly. Objects like the taonga mentioned by Ariā, which are designed to be circulated among the living, absorb some of the previous wearers' spiritual status (mana) and or the accumulated mana of succeeding generations (Te Awekotuku, 1990). In the hands of a young woman sensitive to spiritual reverberations, objects like taonga can invite unwanted risks (tapu). Ariā works to remove the tapu (restriction) to return the taonga to a protective state of safety (noa). The fact that the "streeties" have someone to seek cultural wisdom, advice and guidance from is crucial in understanding Ariā's life on the streets.

Ariā invokes familial links central to her identity, which span both domiciled existence back in her iwi homeland and the streets of Auckland. She positions herself as a conduit spanning this divide and keeping family ties alive. References to her niece and grandniece illustrate how Ariā works to maintain connections between her whānau in her iwi homeland and her kin in Auckland. Ariā's grandniece provides a physical attachment to the ancestral land and relationships from which they both come as descendants. Links between places, such as ancestral land and where people enact their familial ties and obligations, are central to a Māori world view and where whanaungatanga "embraces whakapapa [genealogy] and focuses upon relationships" (Mead, 2003a, p. 28). Throughout her account, Ariā draws on this fundamental value by invoking a tradition of women working to keep family members connected through supporting and caring for others. This is particularly evident in how she talks about her grandmother visiting whānau on the streets:

I told my grandmother, "This [the streets of Auckland] is where they run to. They [Ariā's family on the streets] think they're alright here" Because she was being very judgmental. When she got to see them all, she got a fright. I said "see, they're all here." I said "I'm at home [on the Auckland streets], it's our whenua [land], I'm tangata whenua [person of the land, indigenous],

and I'm still here". And then she understood ... I can talk to them about their family back there [ancestral land] because they miss them and like hearing about them. And because I've been back there they want to go back now. But it's taking time, just talking to them, just like you and I are, and just letting them listen ...

For indigenous peoples, spiritual homelessness can occur when one is separated from one's ancestral land, family and kinship networks (Memmott et al., 2003). Ariā's account evokes tensions between whānau members having fled their ancestral home because it was not safe and yet wanting to return. Ariā and others in her family who are living on the streets of Auckland may be dislocated from their ancestral homelands. However, they can still centre themselves around family-based relationships enacted in a new place, Auckland. In the process they can maintain a sense of cultural identity and mitigate feelings of mokemoke (loneliness). The presence of Ariā's grandmother represents a strong physical embodiment of the connection between those living on the streets of Auckland and members of their family who live on their ancestral homeland. This gives continuity across places despite the dislocation they experience as homeless people. Ariā transcends the distance between the border of "here" (Auckland, her current place) and "there" (her ancestral land and history). Her whānau living on the street and those back in her iwi homeland allow her to maintain a position of ahi kā (keep the home-fires burning). She cements her position within the street community through an extensive knowledge of the ways in which she can whakapapa to the street. The street becomes a place of strength and responsibility, a place where she can stand with confidence—her tūrangawaewae.

Discussion

We have explored the negotiation of a sense of self and place by two Māori people engaged in street life outside their tūrangawaewae. Durie and colleagues (1996) highlight a number of important conventional markers of Māori identity—self-identification, ancestry, marae participation, involvement with extended family, access to ancestral land, contacts with Māori people and ability in the Māori language. Nikora (2007) argues that a conservative interpretation and application of these identity markers is problematic as they are unable to account for the dynamism of human behaviour. Finding confidence in one's identity based on the strength of how many items can be ticked off on a scale continues to be problematic for many Māori. Those who are not connected in such a way are instead often defined by what they are seen as lacking. It is important to realise the diversity of Māori identity as much as it is to recognise diversity within the homeless population, otherwise we risk dehumanising both groups by reducing their lives to the problems they face without recourse to their own understandings and strengths. One can have multiple homes, or multiple tūrangawaewae, but one has to engage them and be seen to be engaging them. The difference between Phil and Ariā appears to be, in part at least, the level of connection or disconnection from whānau. Phil is more disconnected and has not had the same level of cultural mentoring as Ariā. He holds tightly to his core identity as Māori, but in many respects appears lost. He is looking back for connections to his ancestral home and re-imagining his role there, whereas Ariā is enacting and fostering links between whānau back home and those on the streets of Auckland.

Phil and Ariā have varying degrees of exposure to tribal history and customs within a range of contexts and participatory experiences, which has helped shape and define their reality. This occurs despite being physically dislocated from tribal roots by time, space and distance. Both illustrate the complexities of home and identity among homeless Māori that we are only beginning to explore. Cases such as Phil's and Ariā's raise more issues and questions for us than answers. Rather than pretend to have the answers and close off the discussion we would like to raise a number of questions for us all to reflect on.

Do we need to revise our understanding of the enactment of key Māori cultural concepts as applied to the lives of people such as Phil and Ariā?

How might interventions be developed to better meet the needs and to build on the interests and wishes of these participants?

How are iwi responding to homelessness in both the physical and spiritual sense?

What are Māori academics and researchers doing to better understand Māori homelessness?

Glossary

ahi kā	keeping the home-fires burning
iwi	tribe
kāinga	home
mana	spiritual status
manaakitanga	kindness, support
marae	a group's meeting grounds
matakite	seers
mauri	life force
mokemoke	loneliness
noa	protective state of safety
rongoā Māori	Māori medicines and healing
tapu	unwanted risks, restriction
tikanga	customary practices
tikanga Māori	Māori customary practices
taonga	treasured possession
tangata whenua	person of the land, indigenous
tūrangawaewae	a place of strength and belonging, a place to stand
wahine	woman
wāhine toa	strong women
whakamā	shame, embarrassment
whakapapa	genealogy
whakataukāki	saying
whānau	family, extended family
whanaungatanga	relatedness, the establishing of relationships
whare	ancestral house
whenua	land

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