

Tangihanga: The Ultimate Form of Māori Cultural Expression— Overview of a Research Programme

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Abstract

Death, observed through the process of tangihanga (time set aside to grieve and mourn, rites for the dead) or tangi (to grieve and mourn), is the ultimate form of Māori cultural expression. It is also the topic least studied by Māori or understood by outsiders, even after televised funeral rites of Māori leaders and intrusive media engagements with more humble family crises. It has prevailed as a cultural priority since earliest European contact, despite missionary and colonial impact and interference, and macabre Victorian fascination. Change is speculative rather than confirmed. Tangi and death rituals have yet to be rigorously examined in the Māori oral canon, or in the archival and historic record that may be discarded or reinforced by current practice. As researchers we are committed to studying tangi, conscious of the belief that such work carries the inherent risk of karanga aituā (inviting misfortune or even death itself) by drawing attention to it. Contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand is constantly touched by aspects of tangi practice through popular media and personal exposure.

This volatile subject nevertheless demands careful and comprehensive scrutiny in order to extend and enrich the knowledge base, reveal the logic that guides ritual, inform the wider New Zealand community and, more importantly, support the cultural, social, ritual, economic and decision-making processes of bereaved whānau (family, including extended family), people affiliated with marae (communal meeting complex) and iwi (tribe, tribal). This paper provides an overview of a research programme that began in July 2009, based at The University of Waikato. The programme is funded by Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, the Marsden Fund of New Zealand and the Health Research Council of New Zealand.

Introduction

We are Māori scholars with similar iwi and hapū (kinship group) backgrounds, a shared interest, and the desire to continue working together. Each of us is interested in tangihanga or tangi, the complex interaction of rituals surrounding them, the taonga (treasures) or significant objects displayed, the practices involved, the music and chants performed, as well as the conflicts and changes that arise from the passing of loved ones. The subject has brought our individual research pathways together, and has also attracted the interest of others—students, practitioners, and people in the community.

In this paper we present a brief overview of the Tangi Research Programme, based at The University of Waikato. We begin by outlining the rationale for the programme and comment on existing literature and its relative scarcity. We follow this by describing in very general terms the most common process of tangi. We duly recognise that such a process varies according to tribal group, urban or rural setting, and constraints on participants. The general pattern of tangi presents a foundation for further, more specific investigations. These are listed at the end of this paper and are starting points, initial probings, into areas that have received little previous attention. In the current changing environment, these areas demand critical examination in order to provide clarity and direction for future generations, particularly to those seeking to revive and renew traditional practices.

Programme Rationale

Death, through the customary observation of tangi ritual, is the ultimate signifier of Māori community and self-expression. Tangi, the Māori experience of death, has yet to be analysed by social or

academic commentators. Very little has been published; the television of high-profile funerals like those of Te Arikini Te Atairangikaahu and the intrusive media reactions to more humble family crises reveal the need for informed commentary.

Māori constantly talk about death, spontaneously composing farewell orations and enduring chants but seldom writing anything down. Pre-contact and primary sources such as apakura (lament, song of grief), waiata tangi (lament, song of mourning), family manuscripts, and descriptive, detailed oral accounts (McLean & Orbell, 1975; Ngata & Jones, 1980; Servant, 1973; Te Rangikāheke, 1854), including those by living ritualists, provide rich information for future analysis. Keen ethnographic observation as well as speculative reminiscences (Best, 1924; Buck, 1966[1929]) reiterate or question the variant reporting of earlier times (Cook, 1955[1728–1779]; Cruise, 1824; Fox, 1983; Marsden, 1932; Pollack, 1976; Te Awekōtuku, 2004; Te Awekōtuku, Nikora, Rua & Karapu, 2007; Williams, Williams & Porter, 1974) and require further study. Only one commentator (Phillips, 1954) has considered the impact of Europeans on tangi.

These early historical and ethnographic works culminate in one scholarly monograph by Oppenheim (1973), almost forty years ago. Apart from work on tangi and other Māori gatherings by Beaglehole and Beaglehole (1945, 1946), Metge (1976) and Salmond (1975), commentary has been informative rather than analytical. Māori death practice is explained to concerned others, to the health, religious or social welfare sectors, or to the mortuary industry. Two small pieces stand out: Dansey's powerful narrative (1975) and Paratene (Pat) Ngata's personal and professional insights (2005). Although significant, these are only chapters in books, with Ngata's enhanced by three brief perspectives from Clair, Piripi, and Reid (2005). Ngata (2006) also offers a succinct online guide for health providers on Māori palliative care. Tomas (2008) considers ownership of tūpāpaku (corpse), and Hera's (1996) unpublished doctoral thesis includes interviews with nine older Māori women about tangi. Witana (1997) offers a Māori counsellor's perspective in his sensitively written chapter. Poignant male perspectives are also given by Edwards, McCreanor, Ormsby, and Tipene-Leach (2009). The topic is superficially considered in various books that introduce the reader to customary values and practice in modern times (Barlow, 1991; Dansey, 1971; Harawira, 1997; Mead, 2003; Tauroa & Tauroa, 1986); and, following the Trade Union Education Authority manual (1990), these references are summarised in a recent booklet of instruction and advice by Matengā-Kohu and Roberts (2006). Currently there is no definitive historical or contemporary published account of tangi and the Māori experience of death which captures its fluidity, transformation and effects.

A General Pattern

We know there is a general but increasingly mutable pattern to tangi. Death takes place. Sometimes the ceremony of tuku wairua (sending on the spirit) occurs. Family and friends are alerted, and if required there is an autopsy. The deceased is prepared by an undertaker, often with assistance from family members. He or she then proceeds to the marae, sometimes via the family home, for viewing, mourning, remembering and celebrating. Marae rituals are enacted over a few hours or a few days before burial or cremation and associated rites. These include the performative elements of pōwhiri (welcome ritual), tangi, whaikōrero (oratory), haka (posture dances), waiata (song, dirge), whakapapa (genealogy), poroporoaki (farewell speech) and karakia (prayer). Proceedings are enhanced by the display of significant artefacts, including kākahu (cloaks), rare traditional weapons and jewellery, all of which adorn the casket. Portraits of deceased relatives are exhibited. The casket is generally closed before the final church or memorial service. Takahi whare, or the ritual cleansing of the deceased's house, usually follows internment. Hākari (feasting) completes the process; it releases the family back into everyday life. Sometimes grief is relieved by kawē mate (ceremonial visits following the burial or cremation of the deceased) over ensuing months, and later by the hura kōhatu (unveiling of the headstone).

This is a general pattern that brings order and predictability during a time of critical emotional upheaval, grieving and healing. People know what to do, what comes next, and what counts as doing the right thing—as tikanga (customary practice). It originates in traditional behaviour and time-

honoured values, rationalised in the oral/aural canon, reinforced by repeated enactments, and discussed in historical accounts.

More Complex Patterns

When considering the huge range of issues and interests that might emerge from a study of tangi, it quickly becomes clear that so much more is encompassed than the general pattern described above. The pattern is influenced by a broad spectrum of other possibilities; for example, the health strategies we use to avoid or delay death, the misadventures that might befall us, the extent to which a person is connected within a Māori kinship and marae network, the availability of people skilled in whaikōrero or waiata, the economic resources available to families and marae communities, and the degree to which people subscribe to marae-based tangi rituals. The influences are many and complex. If we are to successfully pursue research in this area, we must take the time to unravel this complexity and, indeed, the aspects of tangi that we as researchers and as members of our respective communities take for granted. Moreover, death is a concern of everyday life for everyone. Much of our lives are spent in the usually unconscious project of survival and the avoidance of death. Mortality is undeniable, and sooner or later we all have to face death—our own and, of course, that of significant others.

Tangihanga as a Field of Study

This topic interests researchers in a range of disciplines, including anthropology, art, classics, demography, environmental studies, history, literature, medicine, music, screen and media, socio-legal studies, social policy, sociology, philosophy, psychology and religious studies. It is also of special interest and relevance to those professionally or voluntarily engaged in the health and caring professions, in bereavement counselling, the funeral industries, and in central and local government. More interestingly, though, is the recent shift in Western thinking about death and the borrowing that has occurred from indigenous peoples to inform therapies, rituals and processes of memorialising. People of the Māori and Pacific diaspora are compelled to engage with the mortuary industry overseas; in this context, whānau experiences reveal the urgent need for more information and cultural guidance.

Through this humble beginning, the Tangi Research Programme has become a safe and welcoming environment for researchers and students, a place where ideas germinate and grow. The project leaders remain profoundly aware of the element of spiritual risk, and the sensitivity and guidance required. Therefore, two tohunga (ritual experts) and an ordained Anglican deacon are involved in all aspects of the programme.

Associated Studies in Progress

Noted below is a list of studies in progress that have emerged from the core project. They are built on collaborative endeavour and cumulative effort. We look forward to seeing these projects through to completion as we ensure that tangihanga as performance, ritual, healing and celebration continue far into the future.

Aitua: Death in a changing Māori world. Ngāhuia Te Awekōtuku and Linda Waimarie Nikora (principal investigators).

Apakura: The Māori way of death. Ngāhuia Te Awekōtuku and Linda Waimarie Nikora (principal investigators).

Kia ngāwari: End-of-life experiences amongst whānau in New Zealand. Tess Moeke-Maxwell, Linda Waimarie Nikora and Ngāhuia Te Awekōtuku (principal investigators).

Ngā tangihanga o ngā manukura, 1800–1900: Ngā wā o te pakanga, ngā wā o te tahu maene. Enoka Murphy (doctoral candidate).

Ritual practice and death in the Ringatū canon. Te Kahautu Maxwell (doctoral candidate).

Touching life and death: An exposition of ritual and ritualised materials, objects, and artefacts in New Zealand Māori funerary processes. Vincent A. Malcolm-Buchanan (doctoral candidate).

The final journey, the canoe way: Māori canoe traditions and star lore in mourning practices. Haki Tuaupiki (doctoral candidate).

I muri i te ārai: Ko ngā mōrehu ka toe. Healing processes inherent for Māori women in tangihanga. Keriata Paterson (doctoral candidate).

Gāpatia i le maliu ma le tagiauē: Examining customs and cultural practices that support Samoan men and their aiga through bereavement. Byron Seiuli (doctoral candidate).
A state funeral and a tangi: Print media representations of the passing of Te Arikini Dame Te Ataairangikaahu and the Rt Hon Prime Minister Norman Kirk. Karen McRae (master's candidate).
Waikirikiri marae: Shared stories of the whare mate. Hare Rua (master's candidate).
Ngā whakaihonga: Symbols of death. Rangihurhia MacDonald (master's candidate).
Poukai: He whakaaro noa. Tame Pokaia (master's candidate).
Tangi: Dual heritage, conflicts and compromises. Kiri Edge (master's candidate).
Tangihanga and aituā: Symbolism in the Māori moving image. Terri Crawford (master's candidate).
Experiences of young Māori men at tangi. Arana Harmon (master's candidate).
Tangi through the eyes of young Māori women. Hemaima Wihongi (master's candidate).
Communicating the concept of death to children: A Māori perspective. Juanita Jacob (master's candidate).
The first call: Marae communities and change. Vicki Bhana, Heeni Poutu and Ngāmihi Crapp (community researchers).

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Glossary

apakura	lament, song of grief
haka	posture dances
hākari	feasting
hapū	kinship group
hura kōhatu	unveiling of the headstone
iwi	tribe, tribal
kākahu	cloaks
karakia	prayer
karanga aituā	inviting misfortune or even death itself
kawe mate	ceremonial visit following the burial or cremation of the deceased
marae	communal meeting complex
poroporoaki	farewell speech
pōwhiri	welcome ritual
takahi whare	ritual cleansing of the deceased's house
tangi	to grieve and mourn
tangihanga	time set aside to grieve and mourn, rites for the dead
taonga	treasures
tikanga	customary practice
tohunga	ritual experts
tuku wairua	sending on the spirit
tūpāpaku	corpse
waiata	song, dirge
waiata tangi	lament, song of mourning
whaikōrero	oratory
whakapapa	genealogy
whānau	family, including extended family

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