

Home and the Spirit in the Maori World

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Today we explore home as a place of spiritual belonging and continuity and how tangi relies on the genealogical connectedness of ancestral and living communities to care for the tūpāpaku, the human remains, and wairua, the spirit of the deceased, as well as the living. While colonisation and westernisation have changed us, the institution of tangi, our rituals of death and mourning, have remained since pre-encounter times. In the face of death, tangi and its repetitive ritualised pattern of encounter and mourning might be viewed as a lifeline to hold on to as the disturbance and turmoil spawned by death is endured.

We begin this paper by returning to the beginning, the place of potentiality to contemplate our spiritual origins and life endowments. We consider the nature of Māori beliefs about a spiritual afterlife and how through the institution of tangi we guide and support the departing spirit on its way. We argue that these rituals of departure and support are most optimally performed within the context of our marae and spiritual landscapes. Reinforcing this, the interment of the deceased amongst kin enhances our togetherness, in life and death, and protects us from entities with malevolent intent. For these reasons, we reaffirm the rightness of our beliefs and practices. Contestation of tūpāpaku, an act of spiritual responsibility in which tūpāpaku are returned to their tribal homelands for mourning and interment amongst kin is presented as an exemplar of right spiritual practice. We conclude with a discussion of some challenges Māori must confront to live life more consciously in spiritually responsible ways and in continuity with our origins and futures.

In the beginning

Māori death rituals embrace and re-enact the very essence of our cosmological universe (cf., Marsden, 2003; Rewi, 2010). From ‘The Nothingness’ we come to understand our sanctification as spiritual beings emergent from ‘The Night’. Connecting with the desires of creation in and through our spiritual home spaces of enlightenment we come into communion with ‘The Light’, to breathe life in the connectedness of ‘The Long Standing Day’ until that is complete. We then return again for renewal to our spiritual home spaces, a process schematically presented below.

Te Kore The Nothingness	Te Ao Tua-ātea The world beyond time and space	The Potential
Te Pō The Night	Te Tua-uri Beyond in the world of darkness	The Becoming
Te Ao Mārama The World of Light	Te Aro-nui From natural world of sense-perception	The Being
Te Ao Tūroa The Long Standing Day	Te Ao Hononga From the world of connectedness	The Connectedness

Making our way home

This is what I think will happen to me. I'd simply go and see my uncles who have just recently passed away, my koroua and my immediate whānau and there I'll be connected with the older/elder ones that I don't know of (Maihi in Jacob, Nikora, & Ritchie, 2012, p125).

This window on Maihi's expectations of what will occur when he dies is one traditionally expressed across the Māori world and is often manifest during the end of life phase when those close to death tell of visitations or converse with those beyond the veil. In our death rituals, the spirit of the deceased is encouraged to turn towards those relatives who have recently passed away. Through *whaikōrero* (oratory) and *karanga* (invocation), they are summoned to witness and act as familiar guides in reconnecting the journeying spirit with ancestor spirits and to begin anew their part in creation. This cosmological view is one premised on desire, re-creation and renewal (Tamanui, 2012). We die to renew and rebirth our creative potentiality and, to do so, journeying spirits must find their way across the cosmos to the many spirit gathering places like *Hawaikinui*, *Hawaikiroa*, *Hawaikipamamao*, *Te Hono-ki-Wairua*, *Te Huihuinga o te Kahurangi* and eventually to *Nga Rangi tūhāhā*, spaces that for most of us represent our ultimate spiritual home.

In the Māori after-life, judgement is not an aspect of death or spiritual journeying. There is no torment and suffering although spirits can become confused and diverted. During *tangi*, orators repeatedly present to the transitioning spirit a symbolic road map by reciting complex *whakapapa*, and describing symbols from the landscape, like sacred mountains and rivers, markers of tribal identity and histories, to direct the spirit on its journey home (Rewi, 2010). In and through our death rituals the transitioning spirit is farewelled to journey forth to the embrace of the guardian of the 'The Night', *Hinenuitepō*, reaching into infinity for their next spiritual quest. While death anxieties do remain, these are mediated by an assurance of afterlife togetherness, spiritual continuity and lingering pathways left by recently departed spirits, like those described by Maihi above.

Spiritual Landscapes

On tribal land, most Māori have ancestral *urupā* that offer an earthly resting place with close kin relatives. That these *urupā* exist with continuing interment, and increasing space constraints, demonstrates how we cherish our collective identities, our affinity to place, and our need to belong and remain connected in this life and the next. In particular, it tells of our deep valuing of sacred space - spiritual space.

Even though a person may live far away from their tribal homelands and away from kin, and even if estranged, the customary practice is that when they die they will be returned home to be mourned and interred by and amongst their own. A responsible parent, partner or child will recognise their spiritual obligation. Here we emphasized that rights to the *tūpāpaku* of a person and responsibility for their spiritual care rests with the broader *whānau* and *hapū* collective, not just with the partner, estate executor, or a court appointed administrator as prescribed by New Zealand law (Tomas, 2008). These are secular matters which should not cloud our duty to spirit and neither should final wishes remain to complicate earthly responsibilities.

Many Māori have courteously then aggressively battled with spouses, children and other tribal and cultural groups to return tūpāpaku to their ancestral homelands (cf., Tomas, 2008). This is not a new practice and irrespective of legislation, continues to this day. It is a rare event when this conflict spills into public view through the media (cf., Tomas, 2008) as was the case with the passing of Prince Tūi Teke in 1985, William Taitoko (aka Billy T. James) in 1991 and James Takamore in 2007. Most times, this contest is played out shortly after death in hospitals, mortuaries, funeral homes, domestic dwellings, community halls and marae. Any claims are usually resolved earlier rather than later in the mourning period; this leaves time for death rituals to proceed as the central focus. And, yes, kinsfolk in particular have been known to take more direct action because it matters to them, their ancestors and descendants, and to their spiritual wellbeing. In the first author's whānau, her father and his brothers were sent to retrieve the tūpāpaku of their brother from his wife's marae, where his children had taken him the day before. They arrived early the next morning before formal proceedings had started and simply uplifted their brother without ceremony and with little complaint from his wife or her people. The brothers' intervention was not unexpected, and there was a rightness about it. It was the responsible spiritual practice. Laying claim to the tūpāpaku of relatives is a practice that honours them, their significant relationships, and aspires to enhance togetherness across time and space. Even more important, is that it speaks to spiritual and mental wellbeing, for our own and ourselves.

Tangi are at their most poignant and powerful when experienced within the context of a kin group's ancestral marae, tribal landscape and relational community. It is where karanga is at its most ethereal and whaikōrero supremely eloquent (Rewi, 2010). A striking example of this practice was sensitively presented by New Zealand's Māori Television Service on the passing of Te Arikini Te Atairangikaahu, the Māori Queen, in 2006 (Nikora, McRae, Te Awekotuku, & Hodgetts, 2012). It is to such sacred spaces that the entreaty to 'take me home' refers. Yet more is implied by this. The act of taking a tūpāpaku home permits an understanding beyond the reinforcement of connectivity, and of people to place and history. It enables the living to both support the spirit of the deceased on its journey, and for us to participate in the rhythmic and infinite process of creation (Tamanui, 2012). This is spiritual work.

A further matter has to be mentioned and that is a concern to protect and secrete away mortal remains to avoid malevolent attention and spiritual aggression upon the deceased, their relatives and associates. Risk increases when burials occur beyond the tribal homelands in public cemeteries or amongst unrelated strangers or offshore in foreign lands. The Karanga Aotearoa project of repatriating home Māori human remains taken from this land by early settlers as macabre curiosities, items of trade, or objects of scientific inquiry and museum display testifies to the strength of Māori beliefs (Te Awekotuku, 2004). For the transitioning spirit, movement between worlds can indeed be troubled and the living have a duty to assist where we can.

Reaffirming our practices

Māori are a fourth-world people (Nikora, Masters-Awatere, & Te Awekotuku, 2012). We live our lives in the presence of other New Zealanders, mostly away from our tribal homelands in cities and towns where work, education, healthcare, recreation and diverse pursuits are more accessible. Colonisation, christianity, urbanisation, modernisation, globalisation... these ongoing processes are integral aspects of our lived realities and of who we are. In a postmodern world that pushes us to experience and explore our subjectivities and what it means to be human, to be Māori is now a 'project' of convenience or a crisis driven episodic

necessity (cf., Salmond, 1975). When so many aspects of contemporary life demand our attention the identity work vital to being Māori often fades away. Calls to be Māori may be seen as an inconvenience rather than an invitation to experience, learn and evolve as culturally responsive spiritual beings. We pass by the chance to connect with creation and to remain relevant with and to ourselves.

Just as Marae stand forlorn and deprived of meaning when not part of our everyday lives (cf., Tūwhare, 1993), kin group connectedness diminishes when there is no interest and intimacy. Connectedness becomes irrelevant. Traditional landscapes stand unfamiliar and disorienting and locational names sit awkwardly on tongues estranged from language. Being Maori demands time and resources, which means taking time off work, time away from partners and children, and great expense for an individual and sometimes whanau, rather than a burden to be shared by many. If we are driven by these demands, the gradual social decomposition of a damaged and damaging Māori world comes into view, as does the question, what do we do about it?

The last half century can be seen as a maelstrom of growing enlightenment and dissatisfaction as we became more conscious and discontented with the concessions made to modern urbanised life. To an introduced and imposed new society, we conceded land, language, food, health, cultural ways, and lives in wars far away (Gardiner, 1992; Soutar, 2008). The generation of the 1970's wanted a different world to the one they inherited and were not prepared to concede anymore (Walker, 1990). Well, the good parts of it, anyway.

The Māori world has matured into this 21st century. We are in a different, perhaps better place. We have claimed and affirmed those things that we value. Tangi, the creative arts, skin adornment and beautification, language, sea navigation, the health of whānau and our values and beliefs are renewed and remain. But are we improved spiritual beings? Do our new strategies nurture Māori spirituality? And, in an increasingly secular society plagued by pain and poverty, do we still know and understand what Māori spirituality is?

[A return to spirit](#)

Why do the families of such people return to the 'back of beyond' in droves for a tangi? Because it is a way of acknowledging the dignity of the person who has died, and the dignity of their ancestors and the whole whānau. And by returning to the source of tapu, the family and friends are invigorated and spiritually replenished (Father Henare Tate, 1990, para 8).

Māori spirituality is written about deeply in the theological literature because that is their domain of concern (cf., Tāte, 2012). However, most academic disciplines tend to avoid the study and discussion of spirit because of its ineffable quality, a position that sits uncomfortably with Māori who see spirit everywhere and in everything (Tāte, 1990). When considering health and wellbeing, mind, body and spirit are inseparable. Mason Durie challenged the health sector to lift its dualistic gaze and to think wholistically, for the people they were delivering services to engaged in life and health very differently (Durie, 1984). His was just one voice amongst a chorus of Māori sentiments (Walker, 1990). As a result, government policy and practice shifted. Spiritual practices like karakia (prayer), pepeha (narratives), pōwhiri (encounter rituals) and waiata (chant narratives) found space in settings beyond our homes. They occurred in prisons, government ministries, and health and education sites, their enactment mimicking our cyclical rituals of life and death, welcome and departure, remembering and celebrating. Gradually our spiritual selves have come back into

view to the point that we are now no longer self-conscious of such public or institutional performance. We expect it. We are complemented, but sometimes troubled by it. Is what we do in the name of spirituality meaningful? Is it rote or is it real?

There is an internet site where these concerns are being discussed. REVTALK (<http://www.revtalk.co.nz>) is a tool used by a group of Anglican Ministers to “inject faith into the kōrero of ‘Māori development’”. From their experience they observe a certain passivity amongst our people and increases in ‘sideline witnessing’ of ritual instead of involved participation. An example of this is the offering, at tangi, of grief in awkward self-conscious snuffles, shuffling and silences instead of freely shed tears and mucus, with attendant sounds of lamentation intended to move and stir hearts. Grief is to be shared, for this is how we honour loved ones, and make the bereaved stronger for it. REVTALK argues, as we do, for a spirituality less templated and prescribed. One less rote and more real. Being spiritually aware in our everyday lives, and more meaningful ways is what they encourage us towards. In our rush to reclaim what it means to be Māori in the 21st century, maybe we overlooked something. Maybe we left something behind. Perhaps we need to return to what we already know, that is, to a consciousness and duty to spirit beyond the consumerism that occupies much of our daily lives.

I got a mortgage to build my garage. We had just laid down the concrete pad when my mother died in 1977. As my wider whanau had no money, I used my mortgage to pay for my mother’s funeral costs. That Christmas, my own family and I sat on our concrete pad, ate our Christmas dinner and toasted life. Later, in 1995, I had saved myself a little nest egg when my brother died in Perth. Well, I hatched my nest egg and flew to Perth and claimed him from his Irish wife. I argued for her to let him come home so he could be remembered for the next million years (Ihaka Te Whetu, personal communications, 11 Dec, 2012).

Māori spirituality is about being present and in communion with all of life. It leads to greater self-knowing and emphasizes the ‘we’ness of our humanity and our duty to all beings of the natural and spiritual world. This is essentially spiritual work achieved through our everyday connectedness with the infinite. And therein is the challenge - to remain connected, for it is in this mindful relationship with all things that our true reality emerges to take us home. In this realisation, there is nothing remarkable about death. It is just one ‘turn’ in our spiritual journeying. Living as Māori deeply, meaningfully, and dutifully enhances our connectedness with spirit. Bodies die, spirits return and home is found again.

No reira, apiti hono tataihono, te hunga mate ki te hunga mate. Āpiti hono tataihono, te hunga ora ki te hunga ora Therefore, let our genealogical lines be joined, those passed to those passed. Let our genealogical lines be joined, those living to those living.

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