

Moehewa : Death, Lifestyle & Sexuality in the Maori World

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Abstract

Customary death ritual and traditional practice have continued for the Maori (indigenous) people of Aotearoa/New Zealand, despite intensive missionary incursion and the colonial process. This paper critically considers what occurs when the deceased is different, in a most significant way. What happens when you die – and you are Maori and any one, or a combination, of the following: a queen, takatapui, butch, like that, gay, she-male, lesbian, transsexual, a dyke, intersex, tomboy, kamp, drag, homosexual, or just queer? Who remembers you and how? Same sex relationships today are still discouraged or denied, although traditional chant and Maori visual narratives record such liaisons and erotic experience as joyously normal. And yet some people choose to remain in the closet. With three case studies, we reflect on mourning rituals or tangi – Maori death rites, in a same sex relationship, or for a gay, lesbian or transsexual family member. We use the Maori term takatapui to refer to these partnerships.^{1 2}

Keywords: Maori, takatapui, gay, lesbian, disenfranchised grief, death rituals, bereavement, tangi.

1. Introduction

Bereavement events for Maori occur in a larger context. Maori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Despite intensive disruption during the colonial period, our death rituals and traditional practice have continued. As a tribally organized society, each tribe is comprised of *hapu* - allied sub-tribal groups that through genealogy and customary practices function to draw extensive networks of *whanau* - extended families, together as a political and caring community. The cultural heart of hapu is the *marae* - a community meeting place, often with elaborately carved buildings that symbolize the identity of those whanau that make up the hapu. As a functional environment, marae are usually comprised of a whareniui - sleeping house, and dining room, kitchen, toilet and shower facilities. Most marae can sleep at least 100 people, and during the day serve to receive many more. Not far from the marae, there is usually an associated *urupa* – cemetery, where ancestors have been interred. It is to these tribal lands and marae that Maori traditionally return to conduct their tangi rituals.

Tangi ritual has retained its significance and structure since 1769. It is the most resilient Maori ritual of all, and has adapted, innovated and endured. Death rites follow a time-honoured pattern. Although there is some variance, the familiar sequence is: a) the person dies and kin are advised; b) the ritual mourning space is made ready; c) the deceased is prepared for viewing and lies in state for about three days with attending kin and spouses keeping vigil; d) waves of visiting guests pay their respects through tears, oration and song; e) and these encounters repeat until interment. Within this sequence are specific roles that are accorded certain privileges or mourning restrictions and are occupied by the immediately bereaved, the extended whanau, and members of the broader community of interest. When such privileges or restrictions are not bestowed or expected confusion can arise and offence or exclusion sometimes inferred.

When a Maori person dies, their remains are expected to be returned and mourned within the hapu group they were born into. Given that Maori can claim belonging to multiple hapu groups sometimes conflict arises requiring attention and negotiation, and this is usually worked out early in the mourning period. The interests of the spouse or partner and children are also considered in this process but if you are takatapui, this fact is often overlooked and mourning rituals dominated by heterosexual normative assumptions. The recent passage in New Zealand of The Civil Unions Act (2004) and the Marriage Amendment Act (2013) extends the same rights and privileges of heterosexual partnerships to those of takatapui.³ These Acts, have significant implications for mourning ritual in the Maori world, in particular, the extent to which broader communities of interest acknowledge the fact of the deceased's takatapui lifestyle, communities and significant relationship(s).

The authors of this paper were unable to find any literature relating to the mourning of takatapui people in the Maori world, or for the mourning of gay people in New Zealand. There is some work in the international literature theorising the mourning experiences of unacknowledged gay partnerships, the most significant, in our view, is Kenneth Doka's 1989 book entitled *Disenfranchised grief: recognizing hidden sorrow*.⁴ Resulting from the sometimes hidden or 'in-the-closet' nature of gay relationships is the complex of disenfranchised grief, an idea that Doka describes as a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported. He argues that if grief is not socially sanctioned or even known about, the grieving person receives less support from others.⁵ In our experience, this also applies during the end-of-life period as well as during the process of death rituals when the wishes and sensitivities of a grieving partner may not be seen to be as paramount as their heterosexual counterparts or even acknowledge, or in many cases, known of.

2. Our Study

Our overall research programme is concerned with all aspects of tangi, of our institution of mourning. Because ritualised roles are gendered and age defined, this naturally has been a topic of investigation, for example, who carries coffins, who digs graves, who cooks, who talks, who recites, who weeps and wails, who chants, who gets attention, and who does not. While we are able to discern some complexity and variation in gender roles between different tribal groups, our focus on sexuality helps to both complicate and disrupt the apparent natural order of tangi even further. In a world where change is the only constant, how and why we change needs to be better understood so that we may be more conscious and present to the institutions and rituals we take part in.

From a range of qualitative sources like our own participation and observations, media reports and publicly available images, we have compiled below case studies of those Maori death rituals enacted for three takatapui people. The deceased persons were all known personally to us and either or both of us attended their tangi. The journals of the second author, who has diligently kept a personal reflective record over many decades, were particularly useful for this purpose. The details of the deceased, the settings in which they were mourned and other identifiable information has either been removed or made anonymous. We present these case studies below and follow with a brief discussion of arising patterns and issues.

3. Case Study One - Al Koru

Civil servant, musician, weaver

Al grew up in a remote village, and joined the army as a teenager in the 1950's. From the military, she entered the civil service in Auckland, the largest city in New Zealand where she purchased her own home. She was a handsome, musical, chunky butch, and an articulate leader who co-founded an innercity gay women's social and sports club. In late middle age, she settled down with Pani whom she was with for about 4 years.

At this time she began to reconnect with her father's community, a stronghold of traditional textile arts, and her innate weaving abilities blossomed, leading to greater involvement. When in later life she became ill, she returned to her Auckland city house that was close to health services, and where Pani moved in to care for her. The family rallied, but siblings and their children began to remove chattels, stripping the house. They ignored Pani, and refuted her rights to anything. She was defenceless, and thus seen to have none.

On death, Al was taken to her mother's village where she had grown up. Takatapui friends and their partners, former lovers and workmates accompanied her home to this isolated marae. They observed the encounter rituals, kept vigil but

were refused speaking rights. Pani's special place sitting by the coffin as the bereaved widow was cruelly denied her. Many were distressed, especially her art-making kin on her father's side many openly takatapui or the parents thereof. They argued for Al's return to her father's village. Although they had the privilege of dressing her for her final journey in a smart roll neck sweater, dark jacket, sharply pressed trousers and polished lace up shoes, their arguments were refused.

The speeches were perfunctory, often referring to a pretty schoolgirl of fifty years gone, who was good at sport, and went away. Her female friends and lover were silent; just tolerated by the locals. However, at the grave side, this changed. A prominent and sensitive male elder and close kinsman of Al's father intervened, opening up the opportunity for Al's friends to pay their respects. As she was about to be buried, the gang from the city and from her father's village began their own chant narratives, orations and gift offerings to send her on her way. They reassured her that Pani would be looked after, and they remembered Al's remarkable life.

At the hakari, the funerary feast, the same senior male relative, an ordained minister, was invited by the locals to bless the food. He took the opportunity to acknowledge Al's community, and honour the nature of her life. In both Maori and English, he declaimed, "How can you deny your sister, your aunty, your cousin? How could you deny what she was, and how she lived, and not recognize her as a good person, a strong person who was loved and admired by many friends who were with her until the end, and have brought her back to 'this' marae."

4. Case Study Two – Papa

Maori language advocate, TV personality, Aids/HIV educator

He was called Papa. He has his grandfather's name and everyone just knew he was 'like that'. It was undeniable. Papa had a successful career, first in the public service and later in television. He was an entrepreneur and staunch advocate for Maori language retention. In the late 1990's, Papa returned home. He was HIV positive and wanted to spend time in his tribal community. He had not lived at home for any significant period since leaving in the 1960's although he and his partners were frequent visitors. At home, he spent time as a health educator visiting local schools telling young people about AIDS and safe sex practices. And as his illness progressed, he became more and more conscious of the need to protect himself from others and, for him, the very real potential of catching some infectious disease like the flu. He explained to his audiences his protective strategies, how they may be seen, and their potential impact on Maori rituals of greeting and encounter.

Papa was 48 when he died. During his life, he freely told people that he was fortunate to have a very loving and supportive whanau/family. And this feeling was apparent during the mourning period after he passed. This occurred in two settings, the first at an urban marae in Auckland where members of the gay community, his work colleagues and tribal relatives came together to memorialise

his life. He was then transferred into the care of his own kin who returned him to the sacred space of his marae of origin and traditional hapu community.

In the traditional environment, very little cross-over occurred between his tribal and takatapui communities. This reflected a compartmentalised life. In oratory, few if any explicit references were made to him as a takatapui man, to his having AIDS, to his partners or friends except by his colleagues from the AIDS Foundation, but they too adapted their performance to the conservative norms of the mourning space. There was no air of flamboyancy or effeminate gesturing or innuendo suggestive of what, in this context of family, had become a coded life story. And the symbols were there in plain view. One was the rich quilt draped across his casket. This powerful *memento mori* crafted by ‘his friends’ was a celebration of Papa’s life as yet another lost to the AIDS pandemic.

In the context of his kin, the theme of his passing was whanau/family. The last night, customarily a night of intimacy, oratory and song was enthusiastically enjoyed in remembered moments, crying and laughter. To an outsider without knowledge of Papa’s life, this might present as ordinary, expected and unremarkable. Yet there was a strange unspoken of absence. There were no distant relatives or friends or prior or present boyfriends. It was just Papa’s immediate kinship group. Maybe those absent had already shared their time, in Auckland, where Papa had lived his life, serving to keep these groups compartmentalised as they were during his life. And perhaps these circumstances created space, as his senior brother observed “that it was only family there”.

5. Case Study Three – Casper

Bus Driver, Unionist, Lover of Women

Casper grew up in a rural seaside community a couple of hours from the Auckland metropolis. As a wiry androgynous teenager she moved away for work and adventure in the 1960s. She raised a son, and fell in love with Mere, whose colourful femininity countered Casper’s well groomed butch style. They were together for 28 years, enjoying their comfortable inner city home, grandchildren and jobs. Casper drove the larger urban buses, and was a union delegate respected by all her co-workers, especially Maori. She initiated meetings on urban marae to address Maori issues appropriately. After a brief and sudden illness, Casper passed away in hospital with Mere and close butch buddies all at the bed side. The loss was devastating. Casper had mentioned the city marae where they’d had Maori union meetings; someone made inquiries, and the marae people opened their doors, and prepared the ritual space. Carried on, Casper arrived at the richly carved house in a splendid casket, covered with a fine flax cloak. She was dressed in a crisp white shirt, silk paisley cravat under a tailored waistcoat, with trousers and shoes impeccable.

Maori rituals of encounter were observed as Casper was taken inside; these are clearly gendered roles, women chanting and wailing, men performing orations and

issuing orders. The family and friends settled around Casper, and the local ritualists then handed over the ceremonial responsibilities of the *paepae*, or orators' speaking bench, to them. This is an urban, city-based marae, where rituals and ceremony are flexible. After the first meal was served and enjoyed, the local ritualists returned to their nearby homes. This enabled the Maori takatapui women with ritual skills and confidence to assume particular roles; and they knew that Casper would've relished it! Women not only chanted and wailed, but they also spoke from the *paepae*. They described Casper's busy life and work to the visiting mourners over the following two days, connected various genealogies to those who came in, wove together bonds of kinship, love, and compassion.

Dressed in copious black, Mere graciously received words of consolation while being reminded of her partner's mischief and sense of humour. The tangi was about Casper. On the main road outside, passing buses slowed, paused, some tooted their horns mournfully, and then continued on their routes.

In the middle of the second night, after a lively *po whakamutunga* or final farewells, the doors flew open, and a male elder strewn with green garlands stomped in, followed by three large men. The lush greenery identified him as from the far north, where Casper had family affiliations. He bellowed that he'd come to take the relation home right now! The principal women's ritualist rose to the occasion and said "who the hell are you"? He roared back "I've come to take my cousin home. Now!" The plan was for Casper to return to the north in the morning, to be buried with her mother. That had been decided, and the woman ritualist serenely reassured the raiding party that the family had already agreed to honour the ties to the north. Casper's adult son was sitting with Mere, his other mother. He duly invited his uncles to stay the night, enjoy a good breakfast, and then escort Casper home.

Casper lived, worked, loved and dressed as a man. Often Casper was referred to as 'he', and 'him', even by close friends and family, and other butches. Casper was farewelled as a Maori, with full Maori mourning ritual, and the spirit of Casper as Casper was honoured. And the bus company she worked for donated two vehicles; one filled with 'straights', or Casper's co-workers, neighbours and friends; the other roaring with 'kamp' girls who sang their good mate and buddy all the way home.

6. Conclusions

Death rituals are about the deceased in as much as there is a spirit to care for, a body to dispose of, and a person's life to be remembered. They are also about healing relational communities disrupted by death, and more particularly, relieving the burden of grief from those closely related to the deceased like partners, children, grandchildren, parents, siblings and intimate friends. Our case studies highlight the persistent value placed by Maori on the custom of returning the deceased to their ancestral marae to be mourned and *urupa* to be interred. This

practice enhances kinship togetherness, belonging and continuity.⁶ The case study about Casper, in contrast to those of Al and Papa, highlights how Maori death rituals and the institution of tangi can respond to the sexuality and lived lives of takatapui people and the bereaved takatapui community without compromising the social cohesiveness of the traditional and familial community. There is evidence to suggest that the relationships between both communities may well be strengthened and purposefully united as was the case in Casper's passing. Such gatherings are not without their challenges; these may be negotiated in the manner of Papa's ceremony, with two separate sites and rituals observed. With legislative reform, and the gathering momentum of support and social recognition, we anticipate the time in which Casper's model of mourning will prevail.

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Notes

- ¹ Wiremu Maihi Te Rangikaheke, 'GNZ MMS 51 Special Collections' (Auckland Public Library, New Zealand).
- ² Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, 'Hinemoa: Retelling a Famous Romance,' *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 5.1 (2001): 1-11.
- ³ 'New Zealand Legislation' last modified November 29, 2013, <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/>.
- ⁴ Kenneth J. Doka, *Disenfranchised grief: recognizing hidden sorrow*. (Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1989).
- ⁵ Doka *Disenfranchised grief*, 4.
- ⁶ Linda Waimarie Nikora, Ngahuiua Te Awekotuku, and Virginia Tamanui. 'Home and the Spirit in the Maori World' (paper presented at the He Manawa Whenua Conference, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand, July 1-3, 2013).