

Tangi and Final Responsibilities

Keynote paper presented at the
World Indigenous Suicide Prevention Conference
Rotorua Events Centre,
Rotorua

Professor Linda Waimarie Nikora
Maori & Psychology Research Unit
University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

3rd June 2016

Abstract

Death is an ordinary everyday event in the Maori world. We have templated ways of responding to the disturbance it causes. This instructive and comforting institution helps us to hold each other close during such distressing times. In this address, Professor Linda Waimarie Nikora who co-leads the Tangi research programme at the University of Waikato, will critically reflect on the responsibilities incumbent upon the living to support, care and heal lives and spirits, living and newly departed.

00. Opening

Ngati Whakaue, Ngati Pikiaio he nui nga aitua i runga i a koutou, i runga i nga marae maha o Te Arawa. Ka nui te aroha. Kia tau te manaakitanga me te rangimarie. No reira, e oku rangatira, koutou e huihui mai nei i tenei ata, tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

E te iwi, kua mihi nga mihi. No reira, ka huri au ki te kaupapa o te ra. Morena koutou.

Michael and team, thank you for the invitation to address this gathering today. It is both humbling and intimidating but I hope the research about Tangi, death rituals in the Maori World, that we have been working at the University of Waikato, might make a small contribution to those reflections already presented by other speakers so far. And so I begin.

1. Tangi conversations

Sit down in the company of Maori, inevitably the topic of tangi will emerge. Most times this will be as a **time marker** — anchoring the conversation to time, place, people and incidents. "I remember when uncle died"; or "he was still alive then" or, "she was long gone by then".

Sometimes it will be as a **presence or absence marker** - Aunty was there, Aunty was on her way, or, Aunty didn't show up.

At other times, it will be as a **process marker** - when something did or didn't occur, or occurred in an unusual way. They had the hakari or funeral feast before they went to the urupa; or they refused to go to the marae, or they drove the hearse past the rugby club; or Ngati Hapu came to ask for her;

or his brother talked for the longest time; or very few tears were shed. Process markers point to the rightness or strangeness of how tangi occur.

Aside from the first, about time marking, implicit in all conversations about tangi is the purpose and function that our rituals of grief serve and our responsibilities therein. And, because most of us are regular participants in tangi, we tend to take these things for granted - they pass us by as ordinary and just what everyone does, mostly without question, unless there is something that occurs to directly challenge what we assume to be the commonly agreed and shared practice.

Today, I want to bring these implicit ideas, out of the shadows and into the foreground, into the light of day. It is important to do this so that we might better understand the relevance and importance of our death and grief rituals particularly in providing care for the living and in light of deaths that occur suddenly, unexpectedly and in incomprehensible ways, such as in the case of work and motor vehicle accidents, domestic violence, homicide and, with respect to the focus of this conference, suicide. When death pathways are challenging, sometimes we forget about the important parts we have to play in making our rituals what they are. So now is perhaps a good time to reflect on these.

2. Powhiri Rituals

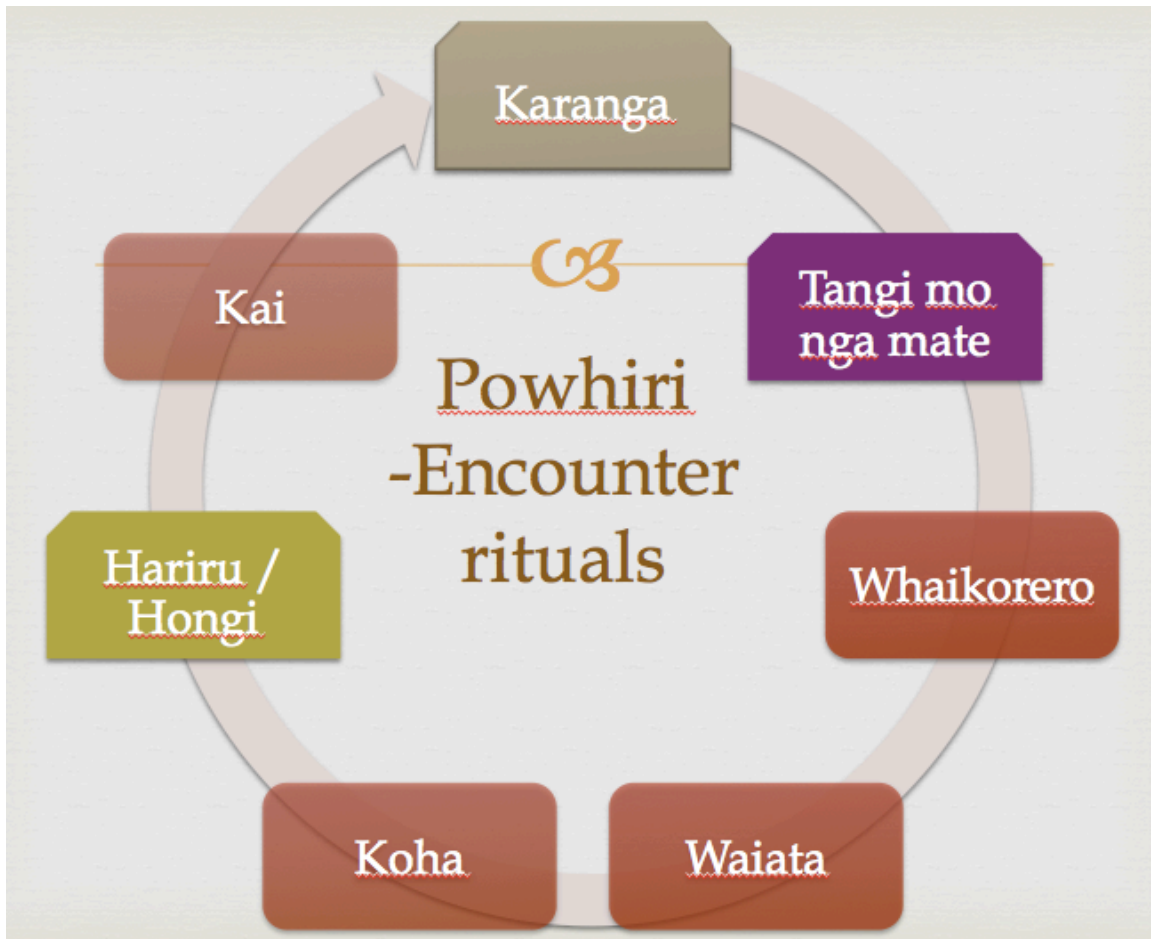
No matter where we live or how different we may seem, all people around the world have some basic things in common.

One of them is the eventuality of death. How we cope with death is a defining characteristic of both our universal humanity and of our individual indigenous cultures around the world.

The rituals following death can vary greatly. Whether to bury, cremate, memorialize, open a facebook page, or never speak of them again – everyone has developed their own unique ways of dealing with the passing of loved ones.

In the Maori world, the formal ways in which we encounter and greet each other form the foundation for our grief rituals. Those who attended the powhiri for the conference would have experienced a Maori encounter ritual, or powhiri. And the basic powhiri process goes something like this.

The encounter ritual begins with karanga, or calls of welcome, of identifying, of remembering. Karanga are also invocations, calling our ancestors to return to witness and engage with our encounters, to gather with us to remember. As the visiting group proceeds on to the marae, time and space occurs for outward displays of remembering and grief, sometimes noisy, sometimes restrained, some times simply silent. After this has been observed, and the visiting group is seated, speeches or whaikorero take place and are embellished with chants and songs. An orator from the visiting group will reply, and donations are usually presented. Once the speeches are completed visitors and hosts greet each other with hongi, symbolising the coming together of two people. Food is then shared, moving participants from formal and sacred space, to ordinary and everyday.



3. Tangi rituals

When adapted for grief rituals, three major changes occur in the pattern of our encounter rituals. **The first** is the presence of the deceased, usually in bodily form but could be in the form of cremains or ashes, and sometimes may simply be a photograph.

The second change is to the extent that time, space and energy is focused on the deceased and the bereaved. This involves greater degrees of lamentation, cathartic expression, invocation of ancestors passed, oratory, dirges, the recitation of genealogy, prayer and speeches of farewell. The proceedings are enhanced by the display of significant objects important to the deceased or family and usually adorn the casket. Portraits of ancestors and deceased relatives are exhibited, and the deceased is never left alone. They are conversed with as if still present, their last night with us being an important period of farewell. The following day, the closing of the casket usually precedes the final church or memorial service that is followed by interment and then a meal is shared.

The third change is the repetition of the encounter cycle. When new visitors arrive, the process is repeated and may occur once or twice in a day, or 10-15 times, and can continue across 1-3 days or more. It is in this cycle, that we find the foundations for healing and renewal.

The pattern of tangi is best understood as a series of waves washing in and out. As visitors arrive to pay their respects, waves of memory made heavy with grief crash down on the mourners. This is gradually relieved by the poetry of formal orations, the lightness of pleasant rememberings, the wry humor of gifted speakers, and the comforting and familiar chants, however sad their lyrics. This is the rhythm of tangi, painful in its design, kind in its healing outcomes. Eventually, after 2-3 or more days of what may be called "induced mourning", the urge to return to ordinary life, to move on from the immediacy of death, to start anew begins to emerge. New psychic energy has been invested between the passing of the deceased and their interment. In such a short period of time, so many people have been encountered, so many memories invoked, so many stories told and songs sung. These all create important distance from the critical event and brings the actuality of death into view. It is no longer a bad dream. It is a living reality. And so is one's life.

After the tangi, the emphasis moves to returning to ordinary life - to homes, work, demands of children, partners and the like. Yet Maori rituals such as kawemate acknowledge that grief is not a process confined by time. Support continues to be important. And so the bereaved are encouraged and expected to continue in their grieving until they feel the time is right to walk differently with their loved one. This time is usually marked by a memorial service, often a year after death but sometimes longer. Memorialising usually involves the dedication of a headstone in a ritual that brings family and friends back together to re-greet, to re-remember, and to renew life together and apart.

Although abbreviated, this is the pattern of mourning long established by tradition and custom. Tangi continue in this form and even today are being enacted, here, across the Rotorua area as I speak.

4. Final responsibilities

I want to turn now to highlight some of our responsibilities within the institution of tangi and I suggest that there are 5 big responsibilities to be met. They are to:

1. acknowledge that a death has occurred
2. lend support to the immediately bereaved and the grieving process
3. help the spirit on its way
4. to dispose of the body
5. mend the rupture in community caused by death

I'll briefly comment on each of these responsibilities in turn.

4.1 Acknowledging that a death has occurred

To name a death as suicide is a brave and courageous act especially in the face of religious condemnation, community fear, public shaming and gossip, and the vesting of blame in significant others, including close family and friends.

When we avoid naming a death as a suicide, we take away the opportunity for communities to rally in positive and supportive ways. We remove the

possibility for compassionate and preventative interventions and healing. This denial gives rise to secrets, silences and shame.

4.2 Supporting the immediately bereaved and the grieving process

Talk is how we name and navigate the world, and in our world, *whaikorero* is a powerful tool for healing and harm. If within our institution of *tangi* we seek to condemn the deceased or the bereaved, then we are causing serious harm. We are doing no one any good. We are not holding people close. We are not delivering on our responsibility to support and nourish but rather we are contributing to the possibility that further negative events such as isolation, abandonment, and feelings of being unsupported, might arise.

Much of what occurs at *tangi*, mainly through talk, is directed at the deceased, who they were, what they did in life, the challenges they faced, their achievements, what they were renowned for, their quirky characteristics, their habits, their relationships with others. A life is assessed and evaluated and often judged as being worthy, or a waste.

And talk can be painful which means that sometimes people do not want to talk, or for that matter, are not ready to hear. So, time out and being absent from the cycle of rituals should not be read as a bad thing, but simply a 'pause', a 'recharging' until ready to re-enter proceedings.

4.3 Helping the spirit on its way

Within the ritual of *tangi*, helping the spirit on its journey is probably one of the more easier tasks provided the process is not complicated by religious stigma that withdraws such support. In the Maori world, the final destination for spirits is various, depending on the subscribed to tradition.

For some, the journey involves traversing the landscape, leaping off cliffs, soaring over seas, finally to greet life in an underworld united with ancestors past.

For some, the journey takes on supernova qualities resulting in perpetual star shine alongside others past.

There is no hell, there is no heaven. There is simply the bliss of peace. And within our rituals, peace, balance, harmony should be our objectives.

4.4 Disposing of the body

Disposing of the body remains a pragmatic purpose of tangi. There is a body, and it must be disposed of. By and large, this is a time limited activity because there is indeed life after death. Irrespective of the best embalming strategies, mother nature will continue to do her job.

Denying those who suicide the right to a humane interment, interring them outside the gates of urupa, or subjecting them to forced cremation, or some other insulting or disrespectful act is not only spiritually criminal and inhumane, it is crass ignorance. Just dumb. It does not change anything, not here in this world, or in others. I regard this approach as the work of fear, shame and blame.

We are much much more than this. And we must step back and view suicide beyond the body that has died.

4.5 Mending the rupture in community caused by death.

When we do step back, we begin to see a whole colourful network of relatedness depleted by one. There is a gap that demands acknowledgement and transformation. For some, this gap is a huge chasm with strong emotions such as anger, abandonment, maybe rejection, all rocking ones existence.

Here, we have to be watchful in sensitive and responsive ways. Until the need to understand ‘why’ has found a meaningful answer, even if it is simply an acceptance of the fact that there are some things no one can know, we need to "hold each other close". Grieving is a transformation in and of itself.

5. Conclusions

Everyone has final responsibilities and our death rituals help instruct as in times of grief, loss and pain. But such rituals will only function to support us, if we support the rituals. Rituals are only as good as we are. When death calls and tangi rituals begin, excuses and barriers often arise...

No money

No time

No transport	Fear of marae
Work commitments	Fear of language
Family commitments	Fear of death
Education commitments	Other priorities
Distance	
Estrangement	The list is endless.

Let me simply say, our ancestors evolved a sophisticated therapeutic and effective healing strategy designed to help us weather the chaos of grief. We are the envy of the western world. Tangi presents a way forward for the living; an opportunity for the living to speak into death, to clarify, to question, to, maybe, eventually, forgive. With kaumatua elders as strong and gentle guides, healing can occur in lives that will continue to be lived. Let's hold each other close.

E te iwi, kua mutu te korero. No reira, apiti hono tataihono, te hunga mate ki te hunga mate, apiti hono, tataihono, te hunga ora ki te hunga ora, piki te ora kia tatou katoa.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to...

- ∞ Organisers and hosts of the World Indigenous Suicide Prevention Conference, Rotorua, 2016
- ∞ Nga Pae o te Maramatanga, Centre of Maori Research Excellence
- ∞ Royal Society of NZ - Marsden Fund
- ∞ NZ Health Research Council
- ∞ University of Waikato