

## Death, Dying and Grief

Paratene Ngata (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Ira)

Illness, dying, death and grieving are a central part of Māori life. They are imbued with tapu (sanctity)<sup>1</sup> and kawa (ceremony). The formal rituals and practices are elaborate, and the reo (language), karakia (invocations) and waiata (chants and songs) are symbolic and poetic, encouraging emotions to be openly expressed.

Formal Māori procedure is determined by the customs and traditions of the local iwi or hapū (tribal group). The kawa for a particular situation can be clarified by local tribal leaders and elders; however, the general obligations and expectations associated with sickness, dying and grieving are similar throughout the Māori world.

### Te ao Māori: The Māori universe

The chain of events associated with death can be understood more easily with some knowledge of te ao Māori. In Māori culture, health, healing, illness, death and grieving all centre on notions of unity and balance, whereby a person lives in harmony with the natural, physical and spiritual world. This delicate balance is maintained through laws of tapu, and systems of customary practice and ritual. Transgression of tapu angers the gods (atua and tipua), and breaks down the person's defences and protective barriers (kaitiaki), thus allowing harmful and evil influences to intrude. The outcome may be mate wairua (sickness of the spirit), which results in illness and sometimes death.

Individuals rely on the whānau (wider family) for support and sustenance. Kinship ties maintain collective strength, and each family member contributes to the health and well-being of the whānau group. Consequently, any illness affecting one of the group is shared by others, and any loss through sickness or death weakens the family network as a whole. The most

<sup>1</sup> These English terms are not definitions but provide a context for Māori expressions used. These glosses are provided the first time a Māori phrase appears in this section.

vulnerable members, particularly the old and the very young, are the focus of special care and support. Children have a place in all aspects of caring for the sick and farewelling the dead.

#### Before death

##### *Te tangata taumaha i te mate: The seriously ill patient*

When a person is seriously or terminally ill, relatives and friends gather daily at their bedside, whether at home or in hospital. They seek to provide spiritual, emotional, moral and physical support for the patient and their family, and to pray for recovery. The needs of the patient and their close relatives are of prime concern.

##### *He kanohi kitea: The seen face*

Māori people believe that seeing the patient while he or she is still alive is very important. The closer the family relationship, the greater the obligation to visit. Families are usually aware of who has visited and who has not. If relatives delay or are unable to visit before the patient dies, feelings of anxiety and guilt may overwhelm them.

##### *Te whakawhanaungatanga: Gathering of family and friends*

Family, relatives and friends visiting the sick person bring with them their wairua (spirit), mauri (life spark and life principle) and whakaaro kotahi, aroha rānei (collective concern, love and sympathy) to promote healing and recovery.

Everyone is seen to have a contribution to make, no matter how great or small. Every guest is welcomed by the patient and the family. People assemble at the bedside and in adjoining rooms to pray for spiritual strength and sustenance to assist the patient and the family in their time of crisis.

Many hospitals are now providing special facilities to accommodate families of the gravely ill, or those on special treatment, so that the number and frequency of visitors is less likely to embarrass the family or strain hospital resources. Most visitors come with some form of koha (offering). Food and monetary gifts are shared around. The patient's favourite food is often brought to encourage their appetite. Guests often express an unconditional guarantee of assistance, should the need arise.

##### *Karakia: Prayers and invocations*

In the Māori world, karakia are an integral part of sickness, dying and grieving. Traditional and religious karakia all acknowledge and reaffirm the

the old and the very young, are the focus and have a place in all aspects of caring and healing.

#### *seriously ill patient*

When a seriously ill, relatives and friends gather around the patient in hospital. They seek to provide emotional and spiritual support for the patient and their family, and address the needs of the patient and their close family.

For a seriously ill patient while he or she is still alive is a significant relationship, the greater the obligation of who has visited and who has not. It is important that before the patient dies, feelings of love and support are expressed.

#### *Support of family and friends*

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It is important to make, no matter how great the need of the patient and the family. People often gather in rooms to pray for spiritual strength and support for the family in their time of crisis.

Special facilities to accommodate special treatment, so that the number of people do not embarrass the family or strain resources. This is often done with some form of koha (offering). The patient's favourite food is often served. Guests often express an unconditional love and support when the need arise.

It is an integral part of sickness, dying and healing. All acknowledge and reaffirm the

spiritual dimensions of humanity, strengthening the delicate relationships between the living, ancestral and spiritual worlds.

Karakia ask for peace, mercy, spiritual strength and guidance from the divine creator. Also, they aim to assist a person who may have violated the law of tapu, by invoking the protective and defensive attributes of kaitiaki.

Karakia may be recited, chanted or performed. They usually incorporate references to the patient, their immediate family, ancestral spirits of the whānau, and those who have gathered to provide care and support. Water and certain foods can also play a significant role in Māori healing and sickness management, as essential elements in many ceremonies or rituals for lifting tapu. Tohunga (experts in custom and healing), kaumātua (elders) and members of the clergy are all practitioners of karakia.

Karakia may take several forms. They often combine traditional Māori knowledge and modern Christian beliefs, and also acknowledge the place of medical science in taking care of the sick. In some areas, local tohunga take care of te taha Māori (the Māori aspects of illness); in others, Māori clergy, elders and lay readers may conduct both traditional and modern karakia.

Waiata often complement karakia. They voice inner feelings and thoughts, and enable a group to express concern, love and compassion together. Tears of both joy and sorrow often flow at the same time.

Following the karakia, people in the gathering may make a brief speech, generally wishing the patient a rapid recovery, thanking the tohunga or clergy for their guidance and spiritual help, and greeting all those present. The patient in turn may wish to raise various important matters with close relatives and friends, such as arrangements for the tangihanga (funeral) or burial in the event of death, or who should inherit personal belongings or complete unfinished tasks. In earlier times, a person nearing death would make a final speech, the ōhākī, which contained instructions or messages for various individuals or for the whānau or hapū. It was expected that these last wishes would be scrupulously fulfilled.

#### **Te mate: Death**

##### *Te tuku i te wairua: Uplifting the spirit*

At the point of death, the ceremony of tuku is carried out. Traditionally, this was a karakia to free the spirit from the body and assist it on its way, ensuring that the spirit did not remain in the world of the living. Tuku also means to return a gift of great value. The ceremony purifies and cleanses the spirit of the deceased before it rejoins the spirits of the ancestors and gods.

Once a person dies, everything around them becomes tapu, the kawa of the tangihanga ceremony takes over, defining the roles of various participants in the rituals that follow.

The body of the deceased immediately becomes the most sacred taonga (treasured gift), and the close family is shrouded in tapu and grief.

As the tuku is performed, mourning commences. Amid the wailing and weeping of family, relatives and friends, the body of the deceased is carefully prepared. The poroporoaki and tangi whakahuahua (farewell speeches, tears and mourning laments) begin. Anyone who has not experienced a tangihanga before may be surprised by the emotional intensity.

From the moment of death, the people who were at the patient's bedside become the tangata whenua (host community), who ensure that the appropriate kawa is carried out. The home or the hospital waiting room temporarily becomes the marae (place where Māori customs and values prevail). Everyone who arrives after the death is regarded as manuhiri (a visitor), so a karanga and pōwhiri (ceremonial welcome) are extended to them as they arrive. One or two elders then speak on behalf of the family and inform everyone of the arrangements agreed to by the family. Once the formalities of karanga, tangi (sharing of tears), whaikōrero (speeches) and hongī (pressing of noses) are completed, everyone at the bedside becomes tangata whenua. They form the ope (travelling party) that accompanies the deceased to the undertaker and then to the marae.

#### *Te tūpāpaku: The deceased*

Death is an inevitable part of life and of living. Although it ends the whānau's physical link with the person who has died, the spiritual link goes on forever. Decisions about the tangihanga and burial are hotly debated, because they are so final.

If someone dies at home among their own people, their local hapū approaches the family formally to ask whether they can take the deceased to the marae.

This can be a time of confusion, conflict and anguish, particularly if no specific instructions about the marae and place of burial have been issued. A Māori person may belong to several hapū, each of which has an equal claim both in life and in death. Compromises are often made; for example, the deceased may stay a night at one marae, and another at the marae closest to where they will be buried. It is also common practice to allow the funeral procession to spend some time at certain marae en route, so that particular hapū or family groups may grieve and farewell the deceased.

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Once a decision has been made, other members of the hapū are informed and preparations at the chosen marae may begin.

The ope waits with the tūpāpaku at the funeral home or with the undertaker until the appropriate preparations and legal formalities have been completed. Once the body is released, relatives from far and near may join the funeral procession along the route to the marae. Just as the body of the deceased is tapu, so are those who accompany it.

Deaths that require a coroner's inquest, and deaths in hospital, raise a number of important issues. The legal process of enquiry, with its delays and post-mortems, is abhorrent to Māori people, however sensitively and promptly it may be done. Patients and their families dread the thought that body parts may be removed without their knowledge and retained by the authorities. The physical coldness and isolation of the hospital mortuary is contrary to Māori views that the deceased must be kept constantly warm and comfortable by the presence of kinfolk, in order to calm the soul and assist it on its journey to the spirit world.

The person who has died is a link between the living and the dead; people also grieve for those who have passed on earlier. The tangi and poroporoaki are given in the belief that the deceased will communicate these greetings to others in the spirit world. Delays caused overnight or during the weekend seriously disrupt customary grieving practices.

#### The funeral ceremony

As the funeral procession approaches the marae, the formal tangihanga begins. The kawa is determined by the local iwi or hapū, and details of the location and order of ceremonies on the marae will vary from place to place. Visitors take directions from their own leaders, who will be guided if necessary by the tangata whenua.

#### *Te karanga: The call of welcome*

The karanga is usually performed by the women of the marae, as the ope assembles at the gate. The karanga welcomes the body and spirit of the deceased, and the accompanying ope, onto the marae, and acknowledges that the deceased has gone to join his or her ancestors. It also farewells ancestors of the deceased and others who have passed on, and refers to the family and descendants of the deceased.

Members of the ope manuhiri respond with similar sentiments, acknowledging the calls of welcome while expressing sadness and pain at the loss of one of their whānau, hapū or iwi.

*Te tangi: The expression of grief and sorrow*

Tears, wailing and emotional pain are openly expressed and shared as the deceased is carried from the hearse onto the marae courtyard and taken to the whare mate (special house for the dead) or the whareniui (meeting house). The coffin may be placed on the verandah of the meeting house or inside, on a special mattress or mat, and is usually open. Photographs of relatives who have passed on are placed around it. Wailing and crying by the immediate family reaches a climax as they gather round the coffin, while other relatives and friends stand, embrace each other, grieving aloud or silently. The local tribal elders on the paepae (the speaker's platform) usually sit down first, followed by the visiting elders and speakers, who take the front seats on the opposite side of the marae or the house. All the other manuhiri take their appropriate places, as indicated by the tangata whenua.

*Te whaikōrero: The speech-making*

While the wailing and crying continue, the speech-making begins with the tangata whenua. A whaikōrero usually opens with a tauparapara or whakataua (a form of classical Māori oral literature). The speaker then addresses the deceased directly, in poetic and symbolic language that tells of the sacredness of the dead, and encourages the spirit on its journey to the spirit world. The speech acknowledges those who have recently died, referring to kinship ties and genealogical links, and conveys the whānau's sadness and pain at the person's death. Greetings and thanks are extended to those who have gathered. The whaikōrero concludes with the group singing a waiata that expresses sadness at the loss of a loved one, often a tribal ancestor.

The visiting speakers respond in a similar way, and if they are from a different hapū or iwi, a mau-ā-ringā or koha (monetary gift to assist the marae and family with catering and funeral arrangements) is presented by the last speaker. Reciprocity is paramount – such occasions are an opportunity for others to repay the bereaved family for their support in the past, and to assist the family at a time of emotional and spiritual pain, and financial cost.

*Te hongī: The pressing of noses*

Having completed all the whaikōrero, the manuhiri move over to hongī, rūrū (shake hands) and tangi with the tangata whenua, beginning with the principal speakers and elders of the paepae. To hongī, people press noses and foreheads, symbolically representing a meeting and sharing of personal mana, mauri and tapu. In doing so, manuhiri and tangata whenua

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are reconciled. The final symbolic action is the horoi ringa (washing of hands) and sharing of food. Sometimes a bottle or basin of water is placed near the meeting house; otherwise people visit the ablution block to wash or to sprinkle themselves with water before they eat. Thus tapu has been removed by the kawa.

However, the immediate family remain tapu until the deceased has been buried. They are referred to as te pae mate, te whare mate or te kiri mate (those touched by death). They do not speak or reply to speeches throughout the tangi, leaving all responsibility for organising and conducting the tangihanga to the wider community.

#### *Whakakotahi whakaaro: Unity of effort and support*

Tangata whenua and manuhiri now become one, and each member of the marae community retires to carry out their particular role and function. The ringa wera or hāpai ō ki muri (kitchen workers) light the fires and prepare the food, the tū marae or amorangi ki mua (ceremonial leaders) prepare to welcome manuhiri, the elected women to karanga and others to assist with waiata. Younger tribal members are given various jobs, depending on their interest, and many learn also by sitting and listening to elders on the marae. All of this ensures the continuity of skilled people to carry out the kawa.

The women of the immediate family sit beside the deceased throughout, with others nearby. The tūpāpaku must never be left unattended. If the family all leave for a meal, others sit with the deceased until they return. Over the following two or three days, manuhiri come to pay their respects, giving speeches that cover a whole range of issues. Debates concerning the burial of the deceased may continue as each hapū makes its claim to their taonga. These can become heated arguments, requiring senior kaumātua to arbitrate. This can be upsetting to some people, but such disputes demonstrate the importance of the deceased to all of their relatives.

The immediate family, the local hapū, and manuhiri stay overnight with the deceased. After the evening meal, everyone gathers in the meeting house for karakia. Speeches of farewell and thanks then continue and, with potential conflicts having been resolved through the whaikōrero, women and younger people may speak. In many areas, it is a time for rekindling old friendships, story-telling and singing, and recalling recent events.

Although this is a time of sadness, it is also a time for rejoining the world of the living. At this point, there may be light-hearted laughter and good humour, often with special reference to the deceased – including their shortcomings! In some areas, the pō whakamutunga (the last night before

burial) is a special time, when everyone who knew the deceased is encouraged to share their memories. Entertainment, singing and telling stories all help to reconnect the family with the wider world.

*Te rā nehu: The day of burial*

The day of the funeral service and burial is called *te rā tāpuke* or *te rā nehu*. Burial completes the life cycle by returning the *tūpāpaku* to the body of *Papatūānuku*, the ancestral mother earth who sustains all life. Cremation is rare among Māori.

The grave is usually dug early, its location having been debated and decided by the family, *hapū* or tribal elders. The coffin is closed before the sun rises, after a short *karakia* with all members of the immediate family present. *Manuhiri* again start to arrive at sunrise, while the *tangata whenua* prepare for the funeral service and *hākari* (main feast).

The format of the funeral service may follow one of several religions, or may be inter-denominational. It may be modified as the family wishes. During the *kauhau* (sermon), a eulogy is customarily given by someone who has known the deceased well, and reassurances are made to the family that support and help are readily available. The first part of the service takes place at the *marae* or church (if one is available), and the second part at the graveside. Again, farewell speeches may be given, and the ceremony is concluded by the *horoi ringa* as mourners leave the cemetery.

While the graveside service is taking place, some of the local people remain at the *marae* to dismantle the setting where the deceased lay in state and to remove the *tapu*. When the mourners return from the cemetery, the family is formally welcomed back onto the *marae*. Family elders thank the *marae* people for their support, and then they are called to partake in the *hākari*. This may be a time for more light-hearted speech-making and entertainment, to help the family overcome their sorrow and grief.

*Te takahi whare: The tramping of the house*

After the *hākari* – either on the day of the funeral or the day after – the *takahi whare* is carried out. Although the deceased has been buried, the *tapu* and their spirit still prevail at home. The *tapu* must be lifted, and the spirit encouraged to leave on its journey. Before the *whānau* return to their home, a person who is familiar with *karakia* – a *tohunga*, an elder or a member of the clergy – carries out this ceremony at the house. It involves invocations, and the use of water or special food to ensure that the spirit of the deceased does not remain to harm anyone.

When the family arrives, the *karanga* and *pōwhiri* are performed, and

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the service inside the house begins, moving from room to room. Speeches of thanks are then offered to all those who have helped the family through the grieving process. Warmth and ordinary family living are brought back into the house. Whakangahau (entertainment) and singing follow, to assist the family and to make the house habitable again. Everyone participates – the old, young, tū marae and ringa wera.

The following day, most people take their leave. But the family is not left completely alone. Close kin stay on for some time. It may be a week or longer before the family has made the first adjustments to their loss, and is able to cope. Others who have suffered a recent bereavement will be particularly reminded of their experience, and will often stay a while longer to help – thus perpetuating the cycle of kin support.

In the days and weeks after the tangihanga, the family regularly visits the grave to mourn in silence.

#### *Te kawē mate: Taking the spirit of the deceased*

Traditionally, the kawē mate is a custom whereby the spirit of the deceased is taken by the family from marae to marae, so that people from areas where the deceased had strong whakapapa (kinship) ties can mourn. It is a kind of 'return visit' to the mourners who came to the tangihanga, to reciprocate their support. In the past, this often took many days to accomplish; nowadays, only one or two marae are visited. Te kawē mate may take place several months or even a year later – the person's spirit lives on forever. The kawā is much the same as for the tangihanga ceremony.

#### *Te hurahanga pohatu: Unveiling of the memorial stone*

It is generally the family's responsibility to raise funds for a permanent memorial on the grave, for the benefit of the wider community and future generations. The unveiling takes place some time after the burial – usually one to five years later – and is the final event in the grieving process.

And yet the loss of a loved one never ends. Those who have passed away are recalled in speeches and remembered in the heart at every tangihanga and family hui.

#### **Te ao hurihuri: The changing world**

Many changes are having a profound impact on traditional grieving and mourning practices, which are woven into the fabric of Māori community life. In the modern world, the whānau is often fragmented, and widely dispersed – sometimes across the globe. There are significant social and

economic costs involved in maintaining traditional customs and community ties under modern circumstances.

These changes became obvious when Māori moved in large numbers to the cities. The strong, land-based whānau network and support system in rural areas started to unravel, while in the cities, a predominantly young, landless population grew up without much knowledge of te reo (Māori language) or experience of traditional practices. Many urban Māori lost connection with their hapū or iwi, and with their marae.

Distance and cost have meant that urban families are sometimes unable to return their dead to their traditional marae and urupā (cemeteries). Thus tūpāpaku are often buried in city cemeteries, where they are nearer to their relatives, and the graves can be kept neat and tidy. (Among the options for burial are the plots provided by local authorities for returned servicemen and women, with the protocol of a military burial.)

Tangihanga ceremonies are now sometimes held in private homes, but most houses are too small to accommodate the many visitors who still come from far and near, and neighbours have to be considered. A funeral director's chapel does not usually have adequate catering or accommodation facilities. These more constrained settings tend to restrict the open expression of grief.

Urban marae were built partly because people from other tribes were reluctant to ask local iwi for the use of their marae and other facilities for tangihanga. The invitation to do so must come from the marae owners or tangata whenua. While the local tribes in urban areas did their best to offer hospitality to the migrants, they could not meet all demands. So in the second half of the twentieth century, newcomers from many different tribal areas formed associations, raised funds and built their own marae.

These developments have inevitably led to changes to kawa. In cities, for example, when the deceased lies in a private house, the tangihanga kawa once performed in front of the main meeting house is now conducted inside. Even on marae, the deceased may be moved inside from the verandah of the meeting house in the winter, out of consideration for elderly mourners.

Rural marae have recognised the long distances that mourners may have to travel to a tangihanga, and the pressures of job and family commitments. Visitors who arrive late at night are welcomed anyway, despite traditional prohibitions. There is less expectation that visitors will stay for the duration of the tangihanga (typically three days), sleeping overnight in the meeting house. Instead, they may 'pay their respects', stay a few hours, then return to work. Others, and tangata whenua too, may stay at the marae during the day, but sleep elsewhere.

In the past, the tākā escorted home after the night. But with many visitors, the takahi whare may be h times, the hākari may b

### Recognising cultural d

One of the main difficulties is the loss of practices surrounding the edge, understanding an and institutions.

The tangihanga provides a shared expression and helping to heal the individual through sharing and reciprocity. It is a time for reflection, loss, and grief. Māori know that a strong and spiritual well-being is essential for health. Practices such as the tangihanga are part of this.

This is beginning to change. Many Māori are now large become more aware of their culture relating to sickness, dying, and death. In New Zealand, the cultural sector is growing. Māori have also insisted on their own managers recognise their contribution of tradition.

Increasingly, the spirit of the marae is recognised in ways that support the whānau. The growing of Pākehā and other cultures is also being recognised.

The bureaucratic rigidity of some services have caused people to be dissatisfied with traditional practices. Change and greater flexibility are needed. For example, the care of the terminal is a challenge. Facilities in paediatric, o

In the past, the takahi whare was conducted when the family was escorted home after the hākari, and visitors stayed on for the following night. But with many visitors anxious to start their long journey home, the takahi whare may be held after the burial, but before the hākari. Sometimes, the hākari may be held before the funeral service.

### Recognising cultural diversity

One of the main difficulties of maintaining traditional customs and practices surrounding death and bereavement has been a lack of knowledge, understanding and cultural sensitivity on the part of some employers and institutions.

The tangihanga provides a culturally safe environment for the free, open and shared expression of grief and sorrow, which is increasingly seen as helping to heal the individuals involved. In addition, the cultural values of sharing and reciprocity, expressed in the formal rituals surrounding sickness, dying, death and grieving, serve to bind the kin community together. Māori know that a strong whānau and hapū are vital to their social, cultural and spiritual well-being. Thus their participation in traditional customs and practices such as the tangihanga must be accepted by the wider community.

This is beginning to happen, as both the health profession and society at large become more aware that people need their own cultural practices relating to sickness, dying and death. For example, through Te Kawa Whakaruruhau, the cultural safety programme designed by Māori, nurses in New Zealand are trained to respect the cultures of all the people they care for. Māori have also insisted that health professionals, administrators and managers recognise the different ways of expressing and sharing grief and loss, and that health services formally acknowledge and legitimate the contribution of traditional healers and tohunga in the care of Māori patients.

Increasingly, the spiritual, social and cultural needs of all people are being recognised in ways that consider the whole person and their family or whānau. The growing demand for this trend to continue is coming from Pākehā and other cultures, as well as Māori.

The bureaucratic rigidity and 'red tape' of some institutions and health services have caused problems and distress among people who are not satisfied with traditional Western practices. However, there are signs of change and greater flexibility in many community health and sickness-based services; for example, the holistic approach of the hospice movement to the care of the terminally ill, and the provision of family care and support facilities in paediatric, oncology and intensive care departments.

In the twenty-first century, a number of factors are driving change in the Māori world. They include the resurgence of te reo, tikanga (customs and values) and tribal identity, and the settlement of some claims under the Treaty of Waitangi. These parallel developments have helped to build communication networks and connections among individuals and iwi. The advent of e-mail and the internet has created opportunities for distant members of a whānau or hapū to participate in the life of their community without being physically present (for example, via tele-tangi and e-hui). The tangihanga remains the best opportunity for many such communities to maintain and renew personal contacts, however it happens.

Technological changes in the health sector are also presenting Māori with new challenges. Medical advances mean that whānau may need to consider the cultural implications of interventions (such as organ transplants to maintain life or quality of life) that were inconceivable in previous generations. Conversely, whānau may also find it difficult to decide, for example, at what point the wairua of a person on life-support has departed the body, and the kawa of the tangihanga should commence.

The marae and the tangihanga are two Māori institutions that have survived the impact of Western civilisation. Flexibility and adaptation to changing circumstances have ensured the survival of Māori customs, beliefs and practices. Compromises have been and will continue to be made, although Māori are becoming much more assertive in defining their own needs, and in expressing a wish to control their own lives and determine their own future.

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*Kia ora koutou katoa.*