

# Tangihanga in Aotearoa

Piripi Whaanga reflects on what he learned from his family about acknowledging and respecting the dead.



In Aotearoa New Zealand the word *tangi* is associated with crying, mourning and grief. A *tangihanga* is comparable to a Pākehā funeral. I grew up with a Māori father and Irish mother and although I lived mainly in a Pākehā world, we also inhabited the Māori culture, especially in burying the dead.

A traditional Māori philosophy of life can seem back-to-front. The past is seen as being before us (*ki mua*) as a model for how to live. The ancestors and their lives are a major part of this. That's why from a Pākehā media perspective, Māori may seem to be preoccupied with the past—especially when resource and land claims feature. However in a Māori worldview, the future is unknown because philosophically it is behind us (*ki muri*). As it comes into view, it becomes the present but it is superimposed on what is before us. So everything of the present is vetted through that prism. In this light, “burying our dead” takes on a new meaning as does “living in the present”.

The *tohunga Kereopa*, a ritual expert, has criticised the modern practice of erecting a gravestone in a *urupā* (graveyard) one year after the death. He thought the dead should be remembered by their descendants as living memorial stones rather than memorial stones.

## Stories hold beliefs

The traditional Māori concept of an afterlife uses myths to convey metaphorical meaning, just as the

biblical writers used the creation stories. *Tane*, one of the children of *Rangi-nui* (Sky father) and *Papa-tū-ā-nuku* (Earth Mother), was said to have created the first woman out of the earth, *Hine-ahu-one*. He then mated with her. When she learned her husband was also her father, she fled to the underworld changing her name to *Hine-nui-te-pō*. There she awaits her children. The values operating in the story are relational as are those operating in the *tikanga* (customs) surrounding *tangihanga*.

*The body lies in an open coffin in the meeting house surrounded by whānau who take turns to sit or lie beside the loved one.*

Traditional Māori believed the dead person went to *Rarohenga* (the underworld) but they could return as troubled spirits if something needed to be attended to in this world. Psychologist, Donna Awatere, says it is not uncommon for Māori to be visited by ancestors. Another Māori psychologist, Mason Durie, stresses that Māori mental health is dependent on a functioning relationship between the *wairua* (spiritual *mauri* or essence) of a person, their *hinengaro* (mental faculties), their *tinana* (body) and their *whānau* (extended family). A close-to-home comparison is seeing all humankind as belonging to the Body of Christ. How we interact with one another, how we show and receive

love and compassion, determine our *wairua* wellness. In Māori *tikanga*, this is expressed as *whanaungatanga*, as belonging within a supportive framework, where all of creation is kin.

## Expressing whanaungatanga

A person's death is understood in this relational, supportive framework. Grieving is encouraged and when the *tangihanga* is held on a *marae*, or in an urban community hall, the mourning can take some days. This allows people to travel to pay their respects, have their say, unload and reconnect. The locals swing into action on a rural *marae*, supplying the food, the cooks, the elders and *kuia*, the ministers and even the entertainment after the burial.

When an aunt, uncle or cousin has died, there's always that phone call that sets the ball rolling. The first questions are where did they die and are they “going home”? That's the urban situation I grew up with. Sometimes the burial wishes of the bereaved compete with the locals who want to honour the deceased with a home burial.

With my father's generation there was no question that when you died, you were taken back to the home *marae* to be mourned and buried in one of the family *urupā* (cemeteries).

We lived in Palmerston North and when my Irish mother died it was different. My aunts from Nuhaka, in northern Hawke's Bay, came down our road crying and calling the *karanga* as they approached. Dad went out on the road and asked them to stop as we lived in a Pākehā neighbourhood and the *karanga* might

Piripi Whaanga learned his *reo* on a golf-course with his dad and helped the birth of Māori journalism and Iwi Radio.

