

Maori of Aotearoa-New Zealand

Manuka Henare

MAORI PEOPLE ARE THE *TANGATA WHENUA*, people of the land, the land of Aotearoa-New Zealand. They have settled and developed the land since their ancestors from East Polynesia arrived about 1,000 years ago. During these years of constant occupation Maori have developed a distinctive modern Polynesian culture, a culture wrapped in its own religion and spirituality.¹

Founding ancestors and communities

Traditional oral history tells how the islands of New Zealand came into being during the time of Maui of Polynesia. He was half human and half spirit and travelled the Pacific Ocean fishing up islands and atolls and founding many new communities. Maui caught a great fish – Te-Ika-a-Maui, the fish of Maui – which became the North Island of New Zealand. Maui's canoe, Te-Waka-o-Maui, became the South Island and what is known today as Stewart Island is the anchor of Maui's canoe, Te-Punga-o-te-Waka-o-Maui.

It was the legendary Kupe, a great explorer from Hawaiki, who discovered the islands. His wife Kuramarotini was travelling with him. On seeing clouds hovering over the islands she called out, 'Aotearoa', which is glossed as 'the land of the long white cloud'. Aotearoa is the traditional Maori name that is used today to describe national identity.

After exploring the islands Kupe and his crew returned to Hawaiki to tell of their discoveries. Over a long period of time other ancestral Maori voyagers arrived and settled and continued the practice of naming the lands. Maori communities trace their ancestry back to Maui and Kupe, ensuring a sound basis for being *tangata whenua* – people of the land.

Language – decline and revival

Maori language came with Kupe and crew from East Polynesia. It is a Pacific language with longer tap roots to the ancient Austronesian language group, which extended from Madagascar to Taiwan. However, ultimately the language is considered a gift from the spiritual world. It is much more than a social-cultural construct. Its vocabulary developed in the new larger island environment and subsequently

through the encounter with Europeans. Then with the introduction of formal education systems in the 1840s under British governors and later settler governments, it was systematically attacked as of no value in the new settler society. Despite the official attention the language remained the principal means of communication in homes in the rural Maori society. It was supported by a vibrant Maori print media, first with the publication of the Bible by 1840 and later when Maori organized publishing houses and newspapers in Maori. Maori publishing virtually died under the continued onslaught and struggled in a sharply diminished form throughout the twentieth century.

From the 1940s atomized urban living made an impact and the language went into further decline in home use. However, a linguistic renaissance, which started in the 1970s, may now have arrested the demise. Its use in homes is encouraged and courses in schools and tertiary institutions have thousands of Maori and Pakeha (white people) learning the language. But the struggle to ensure its survival remains, with a diminishing number of speakers using it for everyday conversation. Many see Maori language as a metaphor for the life force of the people and culture and with its demise envisage the end of Maori culture and the people.

Religion, philosophy, ethics – a philosophy of vitalism

Within the culture and its language a religion emerged. With its sense of the holy, beliefs, rituals and ethics, it continues to be significant in the lives of Maori. For example, the ritual of the burial of the dead, called the *tangihanga*, continues to be practised in country and city settings alike. Often lasting from two to four days, it entails the gathering of family, friends and colleagues who through speech-making, ritual prayer and watching over the body ensure that the separation of the life force, the *mauri*, from the physical body has taken place safely for the dead person. Upon completion of the ritual the *tupapaku*, the body, is buried. It is through religion that 'the domain of the Holy, the constituents of which include the sacred, the numinous, the occult and the divine' are generated.² Ritual is the means whereby all the constituents of Maori religion are practised and witnessed, and its spirituality expressed.

A cosmic outlook is at the core of the Maori religious and philosophical world-view.³ Philosophically, Maori are vitalist, acknowledging daily in ritual prayer, speech-making and song an understanding of *te tangata*, the human person, and creation. For

Maori, 'life is an absolutely originary phenomenon, irreducible to matter', and is traced to a Supreme Being.⁴ It follows that mechanistic explanations of life make little sense in Maori thought. The traditional religion is not found in a written text or a set of dogmas, but in a close study of the culture itself. Both the religion and philosophy have within them a discernible set of ethics, which can be outlined as follows. The ethic based on:

- *te ao marama*, the cosmos, seeking enlightenment;
- *mauri*, life essences in all things material and non-material, vitalism;
- *tapu*, the state of being and potentiality, sacred, holy;
- *mana*, power, spiritual authority and concern for the common good;
- *hau*, the spiritual source of obligatory reciprocity in relationships and economic activity;
- *te ao hurihuri*, change and tradition;
- *whanau*, the extended family as the foundation of society;
- *whanaungatanga*, belonging to and maintaining the kinship system;
- *kotahitanga*, solidarity;
- *manaakitanga*, quality care, kindness, hospitality;
- *kaitiakitanga*, the guardianship of creation;
- *wairuatanga*, spirituality, the recognition that all things in creation have a spiritual dimension.

All these are recognized as some of the key virtues of contemporary life. They are tangible signs of a person's or group's mana, which is rendered as well-being and integrity. Mana is recognized for its active manifestations and is always closely linked to the powers of the spiritual ancestors. It is a quality which cannot be generated for oneself; rather it is generated by others, and is bestowed upon individuals and groups. To understand mana is to gain a pathway into the Maori and Polynesian world-view.

Social organization and spirituality

Maori culture's strong sense of interconnectedness with humanity and with nature is reflected in its social organization. Kinship is a dominant theme. In Maori thought the cosmos unfolds itself as a huge 'kin', in which heaven and earth are the first parents of all beings and things.⁵ Historically Maori organized themselves around the principles of kinship. There are currently four levels of social organization – the *whanau*, *hapu*, *iwi* and *Maori* – each of which interacts with the others.

Through these groupings, kinship with the spiritual world is bound through human ancestors to living generations.

Historically, the whanau is the foundation of Maori society. It is a rural-based extended family system consisting of several generations and their spouses, from great-grandparents to the great-grandchildren. The whanau was responsible for socializing children as part of the tribe, transmitting culture, and providing housing, clothing, education and food for its members. With growing numbers of Maori now living in towns and cities, the whanau is undergoing dramatic change.

Maori culture and society have undergone two transformations during the twentieth century. The first became evident in the 1940s with the start of the transition from a rural tribal culture to one that is largely urban and atomized. An associated transformation became apparent in the 1980s, with statistics showing that significant lifestyle changes had been taking place among many Maori. Some 43 per cent of Maori children now live in one-parent families. These changes require new methods of culture transmission and tribal identity formation and raise questions about the kind of *Maoritanga*, Maori culture, that is wanted in the new millennium. Almost one in five Maori, however, or 19 per cent of the Maori population, still live in extended households that contain several generations of the same family.

The second grouping, the hapu, was traditionally a group of whanau connected by a common ancestor. A whanau could be a member of many hapu. Hapu identity has been much weakened by urbanization. Since the 1850s – the start of the colonial period – a third level of social organization has emerged. Known as the iwi, it is a social grouping consisting of many hapu and whanau and is a major source of identity for many Maori today. The fourth level, being Maori, has been the primary means of national ethnic identity since contact with Europeans.

Economy and humanity – economy embedded in society

The people of the early Maori communities were skilled in canoe-building, ocean-navigation, fighting, hunting, fishing, gardening and crafts, and they had a system of social and political relationships that suited their subsistence economy, an economy embedded in society where economic activity was relative to the social and political constraints of the social system.⁶ This is exemplified in Maori cosmological chants, where a world ordered by reciprocal exchanges is described in which all forms of life, including people and things, have the hau and tapu. These metaphysical powers embodied the presence of

the ancestral spiritual powers or gods and mana, or ancestral efficacy. The hau, like the tapu and mana, was within the kin group, and all exchanges of gifts required reciprocal exchange and the return of hau: 'Gifts by embodying mana and carrying the donor's hau, created an obligation for return gifting.'⁷ Economic activity was considered part of religious life and vice versa. The economy was organized in a context of a spiritual sphere.

Pa, or fortified villages with palisades, ditches and embankments, emerged where economic expansion was possible. Most of the *pa* occurred in horticultural areas and were often found on hills. The escalation of warfare and the development of fortified villages in later Maori society may reflect pressure on resources.

The *pa* presents a phase in settlement history whereby Maori ceased being nomadic fishers and horticulturists and began living in larger organized communities. This early form of urban living is also associated with dramatic economic change with the introduction of new technologies, such as white potato, pigs, sheep, cows, horses, wheat and associated farming implements. Food production increased and sustained the settled communities.

Bartering with visiting whalers and traders led to further changes in economic activity from the 1800s, including Maori exports to Australia and Great Britain. The Maori economy continued along the path of dramatic economic change as more tribal areas produced goods and services for both local and export markets. From 1840 into the 1860s Maori trade with Australia and other parts of the world expanded and produce became sensitive to the rise and fall of world market prices. Whanau and hapu kinship groups were responsible for the allocation of resources, the organization of production and the distribution of economic activity. The kin groups owned, organized the commercial enterprises and operated wheat and sheep farms, flour mills and their own coastal shipping fleets.⁸ However, Maori control of the economy and the various means of production came to a sudden halt with the assertion of settler political and military power and numerical superiority.

From the end of the nineteenth century Maori were no longer agents of change and were reduced to the status of a cheap, sometimes unwanted, labour force for settler commercial enterprise. This status continues today. The shift from subsistence to industrial economic activity and the destruction of the business enterprises did not radically change Maori understandings of the relationship between economy and

society. The Maori view remains that the economy is for the service of humanity and not humanity for the economy.⁹

Politics and spirituality of identity – mother earth and the land

The identity of Maori as a people emerged when from 1769 Europeans – English and French – began an encounter that continues today. The local reflection on the encounter experiences led to the term ‘Maori’ being used to distinguish them from Europeans, or ‘Pakeha’, as the latter were described. These terms, while originally ancient Maori words, are used as commonplace ethnic labels today.¹⁰

The relationship with Europeans intensified further through the activities of traders and Christian missionaries. In 1820 while on a visit to England, two Maori leaders, Hongi Hika and Waikato, visited Cambridge University to put Maori language into written form, and later met with King George IV. This association was further developed when in 1831 Maori leaders wrote directly to King William IV, formally asking for an enhanced relationship based upon trade, protection and religion. In response a British Resident, James Busby, was appointed in 1833 to further British interests and advise Maori. Very soon, in 1834, a national flag was chosen, which guaranteed British Navy protection to Maori and trade and, significantly, provided Maori with the first recognition of an international identity. Then on 28 October 1835 Busby helped some Maori leaders draft and adopt a formal Declaration of Independence, called *Te Whakaputanga o te Rangatiratanga o Niu Tirenī*. Written in Maori language, it proclaimed that the Maori leaders had formed a confederation of tribes and, second, that New Zealand was an independent state under the united tribes and their leaders. They announced that a Congress would be convened to pass laws for justice, peace and trade, thanked King William IV for his support and sought a continuation of the close relationship. In return the King’s people could live in the islands in peace and for trade. The declaration gained international recognition from Great Britain, France and the USA.

However, after agitation from some settlers, who were concerned about their continued safety, and pressure within Great Britain for increased emigration, the young Queen Victoria and her Government sought a treaty with Maori. Between February and September 1840, some 540 Maori leaders and the British Crown signed a two-language treaty in Maori and English. Five hundred leaders put their signatures to the Maori text, it being the principal language during the debates.

Misunderstandings and mistrust started almost immediately after. The Crown believed that Maori had ceded sovereignty to Great Britain for ever, that land could be acquired by the Government when Maori decided to sell and that large-scale immigration was approved. Maori understood that the desired close relationship with Britain was more firmly in place, that Maori sovereignty was confirmed and that assistance would be given to help establish the institutions of law and order. From these times until today the two sides to the Treaty have different understandings as to the original intent.¹¹

Maori minority – the importance of the land

Following the 1850s colonization process, which included the confiscation and alienation of land for new settlers, Maori became a minority in their own country. It became important to emphasize their identity in and with the land. The land is a material manifestation of the spiritual, and a person's identification with their tribal land provides both spiritual and physical nourishment. Indeed, the Maori word 'whenua' means both 'land' and 'placenta'. The land is as important as the placenta that nourished them when they were in the womb. It is a force that relates to and interacts with mother earth's life essence.¹²

In Maori mythology the creation of the universe began with the Supreme Being Io-matua-kore and was continued by Ranginui, the sky father, and Papa-tu-a-Nuku, mother earth. These two lived in a permanent loving embrace and had a number of children. After living in continuous darkness and being totally inhibited by their parents, the children decided to separate them and create a world of light. This they did and Whenua Hawaiki, the New World, the original homeland of the Maori, came into being. Together with their children, the creation parents are the source of all life, and everything in the world, including ideas and language, has a life essence that maintains its existence.

This account of the origins of the cosmos, the world, nature and humanity are at the heart of Maori world-view. It provides a sense of unity, identity and continuity with the past. Maori conceive of the universe as a two-world system in which the material proceeds from and interacts with the spiritual. Primacy, however, rests in the spiritual sphere.

Vitalistic arts and crafts

Cultural integrity and spirituality is maintained through a thriving arts and crafts movement. Maori art can best be described as vitalistic

where the intention of the artist or the performer is to enhance the vital potential,¹³ the tapu and mauri, of the figures, the words and images in song or dance or the building. Maori are highly skilled woodcarvers and the abundance of timber on the islands provides ready materials. Tools were traditionally made from stone, bone and shell. With the adoption of steel tools, more elaborate carving became possible. Much influenced by myth and legend, woodcarvings have provided a way for transmitting Maori spirituality while at the same time passing on knowledge, traditional stories and creating a historical record.

The human figure in abstract form is a prominent feature of both traditional and contemporary carving. Another distinctive characteristic is the spiral pattern, which has potent religious significance. Carving is to be seen on meeting houses, canoes, weapons, musical instruments and ornaments. It is considered a religious activity and the carver is expected to work according to certain rituals.

The carved *whare tupuna*, ancestral meeting house, is the highest expression of contemporary carving. Constructed in a specific rectangular shape, the building represents the body of a founding ancestor of the tribe. The ridgepole stands for the ancestor's backbone and the rafters form the ribs. When the people of the tribe meet in the whare they symbolically meet in the bosom of their ancestor. Further, the house is the symbol of the life force of the tribe.

Carvings adorn the front of the whare and tell the history of the ancestor and the people of the tribe. Carvings of other ancestors decorate the inside of the building, together with woven panels known as *tukutuku*, which express ideas from Maori mythology, tradition and history. Tukutuku reinforce also the ideas and symbols expressed in carvings. Panels inside the house, on the ceiling rafters, may also be decorated with *kowhaiwhai* paintings, which are designs composed from the curvilinear alphabet of Maori designs. They are stylized painted designs often associated with tribal or canoe insignia such as the sweet potato, taro, tapa, nets, ropes and various fish, whales, birds and feathers. Together the art-workers relate the stories of both spiritual and historical ancestors. Different tribal groups have developed distinctive carving and weaving styles.

The whare tupuna is the central building on a *marae* – a place of meeting, which is the focal point of Maori culture and communal activities. The idea of the marae came with the first Polynesian settlers and has been modified to suit the needs of subsequent generations. On formal occasions strict protocols and rituals are observed when visitors are welcomed to the marae.

The body and the discipline of dance

A distinctive aspect of Maori culture is *moko* or tattooing. An ancient art practised by many cultures, body-tattooing was generally used by Maori to indicate a person's social standing, their genealogy, tribal affiliation, allies, or achievements such as bravery in battle. Both men and women were tattooed on their thighs, buttocks, lower back, chest, stomach, arms and face. There were tribal and gender variations in both pattern and tattoo location. Men often had full facial tattoos while women's facial tattoos were usually limited to the lips and chin. By the 1900s *moko* among men had almost disappeared, but women continued to be tattooed until the 1930s. In recent times some young men and women have revived the tradition.

The *haka* dance and action songs are well-known expressions of Maori identity. According to tradition, Tane-rore, son of Tama-nui-te-ra the sun, was the first to perform a *haka* when dancing to entertain his mother Hine-raumati. His dance can still be seen as the shimmering in the air on hot summer days, and is represented by the quivering of the hands in the dance.

Today, the term *haka* is usually used to refer to an aggressive dance, with or without weapons, that is generally performed by men. *Haka*, however, means dance, and Maori have many types of dance. *Haka* can certainly be used to intimidate, but they also express grief, anger, welcome, farewell, even humour, and are also sometimes used to educate.

What were once referred to as *haka waiata*, or action songs, are now known as *waiata kori*. *Waiata kori* are songs accompanied by actions that complement the words. In *haka poi*, another form of dance, performers use a *poi* – a flax ball on a piece of string – twirling and snapping the *poi* in time with the song.

Performing *haka* requires considerable discipline. Correct breathing, phrasing, enunciation and rhythm must be mastered and the performers must act in unison. Skilled dancers perform forcefully and experience a strong sense of unity and focus. A national *haka* and *waiata* festival is held every two years in which Maori groups from all over the country and Australia gather to compete.

New Zealand's rugby team, the All Blacks, perform a *haka* before their international games. The best known of all *haka*, it is called 'Ka Mate! Ka Mate!' and refers to a situation in the 1820s when the leader, Te Rauparaha, thought he was to die, *ka mate*, but through the support

and guile of others he lived. Today this haka is performed to build and express mana, solidarity and support action.

Maori renaissance

The survival of Maori as a people and society is in itself a great achievement. At the end of the nineteenth century observers believed that Maori were a dying race, especially when the population fell to about 45,500 people in 1901. However, for most of the twentieth century the Maori population has grown at a greater rate than any other population sector in New Zealand. At the 1996 census, 579,700 people – 16 per cent of the New Zealand population – claimed Maori ancestry.

Maori life expectancy has increased dramatically in the past fifty years or so. Currently it is 73 years for women and 68 years for men, and it is expected to reach 75 years and 70 years respectively by about 2030. Maori are also a youthful population, with 38 per cent currently under the age of fifteen, compared with a figure of 23 per cent of the rest of the population. Before the 1940s, more than 80 per cent of Maori lived in the country, but now some 83 per cent live in urban areas. These figures suggest that urban living, in providing access to improved housing, education and health care, may have played a major part in Maori survival and development.

What might be described as Maori activism has its beginnings in the immigration schemes of the British governments and the settler governments of New Zealand from the 1840s to the present times. Generations of Maori have protested and lobbied parliaments and governments in their struggle for self-determination. And, for a time in the mid-nineteenth century Maori went to war to defend their mana. Having in 1835 declared the islands an independent state in Maori control with the signing of Te Whakaputanga o te Rangatiratanga o Niu Tirenī, the Declaration of Independence, and later in 1840 signing the Treaty of Waitangi with the British Crown, Maori have consistently claimed autonomy.

Christianity and Maori – Maori Christianity

The encounter with the world-view, the codes of ethics and morals contained in Christian theology, rituals and institutions constituted one of the most influential events in Maori history. Maori witnessed new forms of religious services when encountering the first groups of explorers, whalers and traders.

The engagement with Anglican, Catholic and Methodist missionaries started in the early 1800s when Maori visited Sydney. The first missionaries arrived in the north of the North Island from 1814 onwards on the invitation of some Maori leaders. By the 1830s a small number of Maori missionaries had become significant evangelists among their own people. Many Maori leaders sent their children to Sydney for catechetical training and the use of published texts from the Bible became widespread. By the 1850s most of the tribes had declared themselves as Christian. From this period onwards Maori have struggled to get their expression of Christianity accepted by the dominant settler churches. Unfortunately while the churches came originally to work with Maori, they quickly shifted their missionary focus towards the fast developing number of settler communities and became mainstream settler churches. Meanwhile within the various churches Maori Christians sought their own appropriate institutional structures, such as synods and dioceses, which were slowly conceded from the 1940s onwards. At the same time a number of indigenous Maori Christian churches emerged, Ringatu and Ratana being the two major cases. After the Second Great War in Europe, ecumenism became a focus of the New Zealand churches. A Maori Council of Churches was established as a sub-committee of the Council of Churches. In the 1980s this Committee was replaced by a fully autonomous council of Maori Churches, called *Te Runanga Whakawhanaungatanga i Nga Haahi o Aotearoa*.

While Christian theology, rituals and institutions have become an integral part of Maoritanga and have generated change in religious practices and worship, they have not displaced traditional Maori attitudes and the fundamentals of their world-view. Rather, Christian theological insights have been incorporated as part of Maori world-view. The tangihanga, referred to earlier, is often the preferred burial service for Maori Christians. The Christian churches have incorporated the ritual, with the addition of Christian prayers, as part of church ministry in Aotearoa-New Zealand. The Bible is recognized by Maori as a most sacred text and biblical sayings have been incorporated as part of Maori proverbs. Yet a developed Maori theology and appropriate rituals have yet to emerge. The challenge for Maori Christianity in the new millennium is to continue the dialogue between Maoritanga and the gospel.

Manuka Henare is Senior Lecturer in Maori Business Development at the University of Auckland. He has published widely on Maori culture and Maori Christianity in particular.

NOTES

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