

# Tangihanga — The Rituals of Death

The continuing influence of Maori primal religion is seen most clearly in the rituals of death. The *Tangihanga* takes its name from the verb *tangi*, 'to weep', and in modern times is the most familiar of all the ancient rituals. Although those participating would describe themselves as Christians and Christian symbols and meanings are attached to the procedures yet the essential elements observed are those from the primal religion. Details vary from place to place and my descriptions which follow are largely derived from the *Tuhoe* tribe of the *Urewera* country, which lies in the North Island inland from the Bay of Plenty. These people, following the disastrous Land wars of the 1860's, shut themselves off from all but minimal contact with the European for many years. Consequently they have preserved a much fuller content of the rituals.

Death in pre-European times was always considered an intrusion. To be sure, it was recognised as part of the 'natural' order, yet there was always a 'cause' for a death. This attitude to death is stated in many of the proverbial sayings, as in the chant, quoted in Section 5, which refers to death by misadventure. Another favourite proverb quoted at *tangihanga* (funerary rites) goes:

*Tatai whetu ki te rangi;  
Mau tonu, mau tonu.*

*Tatai tangata ki te whenua;  
Ngaro noa, ngaro noa.*

A star placed in the sky, abides forever.  
A man placed on earth, is soon lost.

These sayings recognise both the inevitability of death and man's tenuous hold on life, as exemplified in the following:

*He toa huata,  
e taea te karo.*

*He wero no aitua,  
e kore.*

A skillful warrior can parry the thrust of a spear.  
But no one can avoid the spear of death.

Because death is an intrusion and man is part of the spiritual world the *karakia* (rituals) associated with death comprehensively recognise this and provide the necessary 'requital' for the death.

When a warrior falls *i te pae o te pakanga* (in battle) it is the great and dreaded *Tumatauenga* who is addressed. If a death is by misadventure then the victim belongs to *Tupaoa*. If a breach of *tapu* was the cause then this must be dealt with. Should the cause be a *makutu* then this will, if possible, be identified; and also, if possible, the invoker of the *makutu* will be identified. When however the death has come from 'natural' causes, e.g. old age, then this calls for a different form of requital. The principle of requital is central to Maori life and thought. The point is that all death must be 'paid for' in some way or another. This principle is referred to as *utu*. In sociological terms it is sometimes described as 'equalisation' (Oppenheim: 102). *Utu* can be translated as 'payment' to redress a wrong either in blood or in plunder although 'satisfaction' or 'requital' can also be used. Yet no one word really carries all the nuances of the term *utu*, for it is used in a wide variety of circumstances. In replying to a speech one may say, *kei te whakautu ki te korero* ("in reply to what has been said"), but the term also holds the sense of 'paying back'. Maori oratory has a great deal of repartee, humour and scoring off other speakers. There may be allusions to ancient or recent events in which the speaker may indirectly taunt another person, group or tribe. The reply must deal with this and by apt riposte, turn the jeer back on the original speaker. To fail to do so involves a 'loss of face' and so diminishes the *mana* of the person or group addressed. Behind the good-natured banter lies the concept of personal *mana*.

In earlier years those arriving at a tangihanga would perform *haehae* (lacerate) on the face and chest with a *pipi* (mollusc) shell until the blood ran. This was *utu* for the death. Sometimes a widow would strangle herself for the same reason. Today these dramatic gestures have been abandoned and mourners pay *utu* in three main ways: (a) by weeping and wailing, (b) by oratory and (c) by the exudings of the nose and mouth. These are considered appropriate forms of *utu* for the loss by death of a member of the tribe.

## Myths of death

Oppenheim, in his work on Maori death customs (pp. 88ff), examines the myths of death and finds in them three themes as explanations of death. (a) Death is prepotent in the universe and originates with the gods. (b) Death originates with an act of primal disobedience of a "law of nature". (c) Death originates with the actions of a primal man.

In the first theme 'prepotent' seems to indicate that this is the chief and most powerful cause for death. The god *Whiro* is held responsible in that when he failed in his attempt to gain ascendancy over his brothers he retired to *Rarohenga* (the Underworld). *Whiro* represents all that is evil including disease, illness and death.

The second theme is located in the myth of *Hinenuitepo* (Great Hine of the darkness). The myth relates that she was originally *Hinetitama* the first daughter of *Tane* and *Hineahuone* (the first woman, fashioned from the earth). Subsequently *Tane* took *Hinetitama* as his wife and she bore him ten children. When *Hinetitama* discovered that her husband was also her father she fled from *Tane* and took refuge in *Rarohenga* where she adopted the name *Hinenuitepo*. Thus, as Oppenheim notes, incest is the cause of death. Other accounts, however, while giving the same details, say that the role of *Hinenuitepo* is to guide the children of *Papa* safely through *Rarohenga*, past *Whiro*, and on to the way that leads to the realm of spirits.

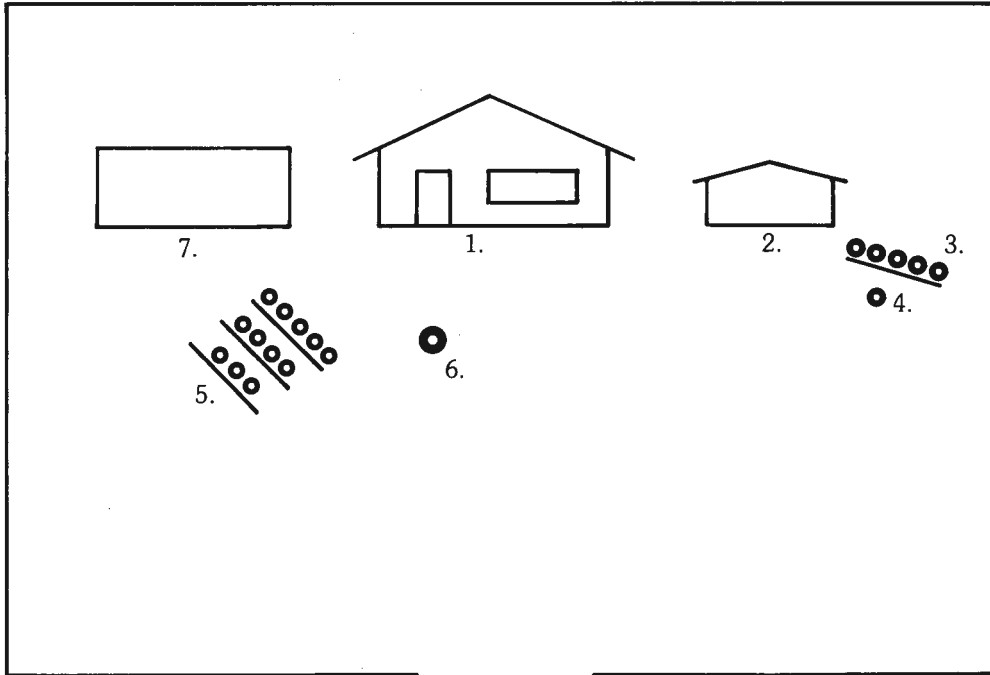
The third theme is found in the final story in the *Maui* myth cycle. In his last exploit, *Maui* attempted to secure immortality by visiting *Hinenuitepo* while she slept, seeking to reverse the birth process by entering her vagina and so destroying her. Instead she awoke and crushed *Maui* between her thighs. Thus death remains the fate of man, as *Maui* fails to overcome death. It is not accidental that death is sometimes referred to as *te whare o aitua* (the house of misfortune) nor that the female genitals are also described by the same phrase.

## The rituals of death

*Ohaki*. The rituals associated with death normally begin before the actual moment of death, when the family and close friends gather to listen to the *ohaki* (last wishes and instructions) of the dying person. This may involve instructions as to the disposal of treasured family relics, the choice of the one who shall assume family leadership, the place of burial, or other matters.

*Tuku*. As death becomes imminent, or immediately after death, the *inoi tuku* is recited. This is a *karakia* that releases the person's *wairua* (spirit) from the body to prepare for the journey on *te ara wairua* (the road of the spirit). This involves the spirit of the person in the journey to *Te rerenga wairua* (flight of the spirit), a rocky promontory on the northern tip of the North Island known as Cape Reinga. On reaching there the spirit may pause before descending to the floor of the ocean to begin the pilgrimage that will take it to the abode of *Hinenuitepo*. She acts as a guardian to guide the spirits of the dead past the lair of dread *Whiro* in *Rarohenga*.

Diagram 5



1. *Whare tupuna*

2. *Whare mate*

3. *Tangata whenua*

4. *Speaker*

5. *Manuhiri*

6. *Speaker*

7. *Whare kai*

This journey will not commence until the funerary rituals have been completed. Should these not be completed, the *wairua* will become a wandering spirit to trouble the *hapu* or family and will then be known as a *kehua*.

*Pu roimata*. Someone other than of the immediate family will then be given the task of informing the community of the death. Since the days of early European contact this has been known as *te pu roimata* (the tear gun) when a gun was fired into the air. Sometimes a rider will gallop through a scattered community firing his gun, and calling the news "*Kua hemo a ...*" (so-and-so has died). Immediately all able-bodied people of the *hapu* (sub-tribe) would make their way to the *marae* to prepare the meeting house. This will be where the body will lie surrounded by the close relatives who will then be addressed as the *kiri mate* (kin of the deceased). Some tribes would place the body on the porch of the meeting house, others would use the interior. Today telegrams are sent also to distant relatives and friends. It is important that all who learn of the *aitua* should attend the *tangihanga*.

*Marae*. Meanwhile the preparation of the body will be carried out by someone skilled in such matters and special *karakia* recited at the conclusion. Close friends and neighbours now take the body to the *marae*. This is a recognition that the deceased belongs to the tribe and, in John Donne's phrase, "everyone is diminished" by death. Death in Maori society is a public concern. The sub-tribe accept all responsibility so that close relatives who are now under the *tapu* of death may, in the modern phrase, 'do their grief work'.

The arrival of the *tira* (mourning party) is signalled by a *karanga* (call, highly stylised) from an older woman as it enters the *marae*:

*Haere mai, e tama, hoki mai ki to kainga.  
Hoki mai ki nga okiokinga o o tupuna.*

Come, O son, Return to your home.  
Return to the resting place of your ancestors.

The address 'son' will be replaced with the appropriate term depending on the age and sex of the deceased.

The party advances slowly up the *marae* (that grassed area fronting a meeting house) and the body is placed on the ground in front of the meeting house. Nowadays, of course, it is encased in a coffin. On arrival, the lid is unscrewed and remains off until shortly before burial. The *tangata whenua* (local people) now join in *tangi* (weep) and address the deceased person. When this is concluded the casket is removed to the prepared place, and the close relatives (especially the women) will sit around the open casket. In earlier

times the corpse was placed in a specially constructed *whare mate* (house of death) which was burned after the interment.

The Tribe's people will now prepare to receive visitors. All procedures come under the *kawa* (protocol) of that *marae*. Differences in *kawa* are most clearly seen in the system followed for the formal speeches made to visitors. In some areas the *paeke* form is observed where all the orators of the *tangata whenua* will *whai korero* (make their speeches) first, and then the visitors will respond. In other places the *whakautuutu* procedure is followed where alternate speakers from the *tangata whenua* and the *manuhiri* (visitors) take their turns. In the main the chief features are generally observed, but the local *kawa* is normally observed.

A second series of ritual procedures are carried out as parties of mourners arrive from other districts.

## Ritual framework

The *karanga*, *tangi*, *whai korero* and *hongiri* are a sort of framework, and other procedures may be introduced or omitted depending upon the *mana* of the particular *ope* (party).

*Te karanga* (the call) to bid visitors enter the *marae* was (and is) given by a senior woman who is accorded this honour because of her status and ability. No man is permitted to give the *karanga* even now. This summons first the ancestors to join in the occasion:

*Haere mai ra i te reo o te ra,  
Haere mai ra ... (prolonged cadence)  
Haere mai ra e kui ma, e koro ma i te po.  
E tama ma, i te karanga o to tatou tipuna whare e tu nei,  
Haere mai ra (prolonged cadence fading to silence).*

Come to the voice of the day,  
Come.  
Come old ladies and old men from the shades.  
You younger people, respond to the call of the ancestral home.

As the *karanga* begins, the *ope* advances slowly towards the meeting House, pausing from time to time. The older women in the party of mourners would respond to the call:

*Noho mai ra e kui (koro) i runga i te tupuna whare.  
Takoto mai ... e.*

Rest there, old woman (or old man) on the  
ancestral house.  
Lie there ...

*Te tangi* (the weeping) now swells from a low keening to louder tones, hands are outstretched, and the tears fall. As the party

moves within speaking distance of the *tangata whenua* it will stand for a period of prolonged weeping. Some of the women, especially relatives and *poaru* (widows), will enter the *whare mate* (house of mourning, a temporary structure) to sit with the relatives. The remainder will stand, occasionally calling out a phrase or the name of some other relative who has died, thus identifying with the present *aitua*. They then move to seats placed at the side of the *marae*, or sit on the ground, where they wait for *whai korero* to commence.

*Whai Korero* follows a careful pattern and the listeners pay close attention to note any omission or mistake on the part of the speaker. Who speaks, what is said, and how it is said is of great importance. No man should speak if his father or senior uncles are present — they speak on his behalf. Should one do so then it is tantamount to challenging the *mana* of his relative. When this happens the senior relative might well never speak again on that *marae* (I have known this to occur in quite recent times).

The speech will be made with much use of traditional chants, proverbs, pithy sayings and appropriate *waiata* (songs). First will be the call that claims the right to stand:

*Tihei mauri ora ...*

or

*Kia hiwa ra, kia hiwa ra ...*

The first phrase literally means “I sneeze — it is life” and recalls the creation of the first human being whose sneeze betokened the gift of *te hau ora* (the breath of life). Modern speakers often say it means “I am a living being”. If the second is chosen it is a call to “Be watchful, be alert”. This was the call used by sentries on watch at a *pa* (fortified village); this should only be used by the *tangata whenua*. Then would follow a *tauparapara* (chant). These chants are of a wide variety and often the details are obscure. In the main, however, they have reference to creation myths or the coming of the canoes which brought the first ancestors. The chants used at *tangihanga* will include reference to death. An example of this is found in a brief *tauparapara*:

*Piki mai, kake mai,  
Homai te wai ora ki ahau.  
E tutehu ana te moe a te kuia nei,  
I te po, po, ka awatea.  
Papaki ana te tai ki te Reinga,  
Ka po, ka ao, ka awatea.*

Climb towards me, ascend the summit,  
Give me the water of life.  
Troubled is the sleep of this elderly woman,  
Through the night until daylight.

The tides are breaking on the shores of Te Reinga.  
It was night, then dawn, and now it is day.

In this chant, appropriate to the death of an older woman, can also be traced a reference to that other 'Great lady of the Night', *Hinenuitepo*. *Te Reinga* can be accepted as an alternative to *Te Rerenga Wairua*, but it also refers to the Underworld where she resides. The repetition of *te po*, *te ao*, and *awatea* recalls the chant given in Section 1, and therefore picks up the theme of a spiritual universe and man's place in it.

In their speeches the *tangata whenua* will relate the circumstances of the death with frank detail, and often deeply moving tributes. All is embellished with colourful chants appropriate to the occasion. If possible they conclude with an ancient song known as an *apakura* (lament) made up of cryptic word-associations that defy translation today. Never-the-less they are recognised and responded to, for as Mitcalfe (p. 2) says, these *karakia* represent the sacred and mysterious core of Maori cultural being.

In replying to such speeches the visitor will greet the *marae*, "*Te marae e tu mai nei, tena koe; Papatuanuku, tena koe*". ("The *marae* on which I stand, greetings; *Papatuanuku*, greetings.") Here is expressed again the spiritual nature of the cosmos and of the origin of humankind from the Earth Mother. If he has not previously visited this *marae*, the visitor would recite a *waerea* (a protective incantation), for he would be a *waewaetapu* (lit. 'sacred feet'). In this way he indicates that he bears no alien *tapu* and at the same time protects himself against any ill-wish. Then the *whare tupuna* is greeted by name for it represents the ancestral founder of the *hapu* and is linked with important historical events.

Then follows the *poroporoaki* (farewell). This is a direct address to the deceased, for it is conceived that the spirit of the person is still present and will hear what is said. The ritual which now follows indicates the primal view of the universe, and will include references to the deceased person's achievements ("warts and all"). This latter is important, for the *tangihanga* is the final opportunity for the speaker to settle any unresolved conflict he may have had with the deceased. This is dealt with delicately with much allusion, but it will be understood nevertheless by the locals. Thus this is one of the rituals for reconciliation. The *poroporoaki* begins with a traditional chant that bids the deceased go out on the journey to the ancestors through a series of stages:

*Haere e te hoa, haere, haere, haere.*  
*Haere ki o tupuna.*  
*Haere ki Hawaiki,*



*ki Hawaiki nui, Hawaiki roa, Hawaiki pamamao,  
ki te Hono a wairua.*

Go, O friend, go, go.  
Go to your ancestors,  
Go to Hawaiki,  
Hawaiki the great, far distant,  
the resting place of spirits.

At the conclusion of the farewell the recital will be closed off by such words as:

*No reira, haere, haere, haere.  
Kua hinga nga roimata me te hupe,  
A, kua ea, kua ea.*

Go, go, go.  
The tears have been shed.  
All is settled. You are required.

The speaker now turns to the living and replies to the speeches that have been made. Care is taken to avoid repeating any of the chants already used. Thus it is important that the speaker be well versed in the intricacies of *kawa* and have a reasonable repertoire. For this reason a young man seldom commences speaking on the *marae* until he is well into his forties. The final speaker for the visitors will be the senior of the group who is capable of picking up any mistakes made by his team. Once he has spoken no one else may speak.

The *tangata whenua* then call the visitors to come and *ruru* (shake hands). They make a line across the front of the meeting-house and the visitors advance in single file. As they greet each other the hand is held lightly, avoiding a 'bone crushing' grasp, for this could well indicate hostility. Then the traditional salute of the *hongi* is given by pressing noses with a murmured phrase of greeting, grief, or affection. Its significance is that the two people are sharing their *hau ora* (living breath), so it is a moment of deepest acceptance. It is also the ritual of personal reconciliation when people who have been estranged now speak a brief phrase such as "*kei te pai, e hoa*" ("It is well, O friend") and hold each other closely for a moment thus becoming friends again. Whatever has been the difficulty, it is now ended and the persons will resume normal relationships.

The two groups now mingle for a few minutes of informal talk until the visitors are summoned to the *whare kai* (dining room) where food will be provided. This can be a full meal, if the time is suitable or if they have come from a long distance, or else a cup of tea with a biscuit etc. This is a form of *whakanoa* ritual, since any alien *tapu* brought by the visitors, or any *tapu* associated with death, is nullified. The visitors can then take their place on the *marae* to greet

any further groups who come. Europeans frequently will avoid this meal because of other engagements, not realising that to the hosts this is both discourteous and dangerous.

When I attended my first *tangi* in the Urewera country (I had been passing through the district and had seen the flag flying that indicated a *tangi* was in progress and knew enough protocol not to pass by), I made the mistake of not remaining for that brief cup of tea. I resumed my journey. To this day when I visit that *marae* I am gently reminded of my breach of *kawa*.

The *tangihanga* extends over a period of several days (now it is seldom more than three) and during this time many matters of importance to Maori people are discussed in the forum of the people. This can be on the *marae* when, because the open *marae* comes under the presiding deity *Tumatauenga*, very frank and vigorous statements are made. Sometimes these can be strong expressions of anger. Because it is in the forum of the people and is a structured situation no lasting offence is taken, although the speaker can expect to be most vehemently attacked verbally. Then the matter is ended. The other forum is that held inside the meeting house in the evenings following the conclusion of the service of worship. However the interior of the house is the area where *Rongo* (god of peace) rules, so direct verbal attacks may not be made. Instead, indirect speech, historical allusions and apt quotations of proverbs etc. make the point quite clearly.

On the day of the funeral a special *hangi* (earth oven) is prepared for the *hakari* (feast) that follows the funeral rites. Today these follow the usages of the various Christian churches. In the evening the members of the bereaved family are installed in the meeting house and, with suitable speeches, restored to the community. The phrases used in these speeches indicate that this is a final *whakanoa* rite associated with the *marae* and the *iwi* (tribe). The children of the deceased are addressed as "*Nga tipu harakeke*" ("the new shoots of the flax bush") and will be advised on how to play their part in the community. They are welcomed into the house by the call "*Haere mai ki te wahi mahana i te wahi weriweri*" ("Welcome to the place of warmth from the fearful place of death").

The penultimate ritual of death is carried out on the following day when the family are taken back to their home. This is known as the *Karakia takahia whare* (trampling the house) when a *tohunga* or *kaumatua* (senior male) will conduct a *whakanoa* ceremony. This consists of prayers outside the house after which the group follows the *tohunga* through each room while he recites appropriate prayers and sprinkles water. At the conclusion a cup of tea is consumed and the visitors depart. The family is now *noa* and free from any malign influence associated with death.

The final ritual is held one year later — as close as possible to the date of death — to unveil the headstone of the grave. This is a modern usage that replaces the pre-European procedure known as *hahunga* when the bones of the deceased would be disinterred, scraped and placed in a *waka* (receptacle), and conveyed to the *ana* (cave) or other *tapu* place where the bones of the ancestors lie.

A careful reading of these procedures will show that the primary concerns subsumed in the *mauri-mana-tapu-noa* complex are all being acknowledged.