

# The marae in New Zealand – the resource centre of the Māori world

**Turoa K. Royal**

Te Taihuhu o Ngā Wānanga, Wellington, Aotearoa – New Zealand  
[t.royal@twor.ac.nz](mailto:t.royal@twor.ac.nz)

## Introduction

The effects of land loss and cultural alienation on indigenous peoples during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are a legacy of assimilative practices by colonial powers. Many indigenous peoples have been devastated by loss of language and loss of culture resulting from colonisation. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century indigenous peoples struggle to maintain successful bicultural and bilingual identities and must instead find their identity within the colonial society in which they live. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the experience of Māori people during colonisation was not unique; rather indigenous communities throughout the world shared elements of the experience. Gatherings of indigenous peoples result in a sharing of those experiences and this paper is a further opportunity to share the importance of place to indigenous communities and to examine how Aotearoa New Zealand communities have retained the marae as a special place.

The Māori people of Aotearoa/New Zealand were colonised by the British. A treaty was signed in 1840 between the tribes and the British Crown. It had certain protective guarantees for Māori but for over 150 years New Zealand's parliament ignored the tenets of the Treaty. Further, like other colonial powers in other countries the British set out to 'civilise' the Māori people by ignoring their language and their culture. Indeed at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century harsh penalties were imposed on Māori children who spoke Māori in school grounds.

Today the Māori language and Māori culture are enjoying a renaissance. Māori is one of the three official languages of New Zealand: English, Sign language and Māori. There are Māori language medium pre-school-, primary/elementary schools, high schools and tertiary institutions (wānanga) that focus on and teach Māori language and there are Māori radio networks and Television channels all delivering their messages in the Māori language.

The aim of this paper is to describe one Māori institution, the marae, which, despite the formal assimilative practices in education and in every day life since 1840, has remained 'staunch' in its unwillingness to perpetuate the new civilisation that 'conquered' the world.

The contention in this paper is that the marae (the traditional village community centre) has maintained and nurtured the Māori language and culture since the beginning of colonisation and furthermore continues to do so today. In addition its art forms are art forms of an emerging New Zealand culture. The koru pattern on the tail of Air New Zealand airplanes is an art form of the marae; the language of the marae is now part of the education system and has influenced the

majority culture in the sense that there is distinct New Zealand English language quite different from Australian, British and United States English. The Māori language influence has been significant. The Museum of New Zealand: Te Papa Tongarewa, opened a decade ago, in Wellington has a modern marae built inside the complex. It is a place for all New Zealanders to use on formal occasions.

This paper relates the way that the marae complex has operated and continues to do so in order to nurture and maintain the essence of the Māori world. The marae complex is a community centre built for and on behalf of a tribal or a sub-tribal group and the place on which it is built is always of significance.

In the 14th century a number of ocean-going canoes sailed south from the central Pacific to Aotearoa - the land of the long white cloud. The canoe people established their landholding units throughout Aotearoa/ New Zealand and under a tribal system they built a civilisation that for them satisfied their regenerative, biological and basic needs of food, shelter and clothing. These microstates built up over the years fought each other in defence of their territory. They built their thatched houses, their villages and they built their centres where community issues were discussed and resolved. These tribal areas are still the socio-economic and political areas of the life of tribalism and the marae is the centre of community life of each tribe. Despite urbanisation, which meant that, many families moved away from their tribal areas for economic and educational reasons the centre and focus of many is their marae and their tribe. New Zealand is a relatively small country and while people might live outside their tribal area they still maintain contact with their tribe by returning at times when special occasions arise. They either stay with relatives or on the marae. One's whakapapa (genealogy) ties one to a tribe or tribes. Inter-marriage between members of different tribes provides the opportunity for people to claim membership to a number of tribes.

A Māori sense of identity is based on whakapapa / genealogy and on place. Māori tribalism is still an essential part of their social organisation and it is much bigger than the quarter-acre section on which we build our urban homes nowadays and nurture our families. It is this sense of place and genealogical ties to a place that I will comment on in this paper. My contention is that the marae as a community centre in all districts of all tribes in New Zealand has been the resource centre of Māori culture and the Māori world. It is a place where Māori language holds pride of place. It is where people go to renew kinship ties and it is a place where Māori can be Māori in a cultural sense.

However the reality of 1450 A.D. is certainly different from today. In those days it was the only world in which the Maori people lived. A little later in 1769 Captain Cook of Britain arrived and noted the country as suitable for British settlement and colonisation. The advance guard of modernity were the missionaries who with the bible in one hand pronounced that the infidels of New Zealand were governed by princes of darkness and their cultural practices were disgusting and abhorrent. The missionaries quickly set up schools to 'civilise the natives' to introduce them to a new world. Assimilation practices eventually lead to a situation where the new world became the only world.

On the other side of the world Europe had been transformed into a highly sophisticated urban industrial society. The scientific and geographic discoveries enabled them to colonise the world

by dominating the indigenous races setting up new political entities that enabled them to make laws and rule such countries as India, parts of Asia, North and South America, Australia, the Pacific and New Zealand.

The Treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand was signed in 1840 by Māori tribal chiefs and local British representatives on behalf of the British Crown and soon after a national parliament was set up to pass laws that were not exactly advantageous to Māori. Indeed for over 100 years the British parliament on behalf of the British Crown set about systematically assimilating Māori into the ways of the British through a schooling system that did not recognise the culture of the Māori child nor did schools tolerate the Māori language – indeed for many years especially at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, children were punished for speaking Māori on school grounds. There was a mismatch between the content of the curriculum and the societal context in which the Māori child was nurtured. Just as importantly, the British Parliament over many years proceeded to replace Māori leadership with the British redcoats and later by the local constabulary. Parliament made it easy for settlers through legislative means to obtain land that advantaged settlers.

Many indigenous races in many countries suffered under the same treatment. What is significant in New Zealand is the fact that the Māori people have not lost the sense of their Māori-ness and their sense of place. There have always been Māori voices on the margins that encouraged Māori to hold on to their language and culture as an important and essential element of Māori identity. One outstanding Māori leader was Sir Apirana Ngata. In 1948 he wrote the following statement in an autograph book of a young girl. He wrote:

Ē tipu ē rea mō ngā rā o tō ao

Kō ō ringa ki te rākau a te Pākehā

Hei oranga mō tō tinana,

Kō tō ngākau ki ngā taonga o ngā tūpuna

Hei tikitiki mō tō māhuna,

Tō wairua ki te Atua nāna nei ngā mea katoa

Grow up o tender person in the days of your world

Your hands to the world of the Pākehā

For your own physical wellbeing,

Your heart to the treasures of your ancestors.

As a plume for your head,

Your spirit unto God the author of all things.

(Sir Apirana Ngata)

Over the decades this saying has been repeated many times as a basic tenet of Māori identity and as a set of ideals on which many young people are encouraged to fashion their lives. Many Māori have been inspired by such a view and have used it to shape their own identity as a Māori.

To a large degree Māori have maintained a social reality that is identifiably Māori. Even though it would be true to say that the ravages of assimilation for over 100 years culminated in a loss of much Māori traditional knowledge there is a strong and growing sense of a Māori cultural identity. Māori language is taught at all levels of the education system and a relatively new system of Maori medium schools have grown up within the larger education system: preschools (kōhanga reo) elementary schools (kura kaupapa) high schools (whare kura) and tertiary education (wānanga) In the 1960s it was predicted that the Māori language would die, but today more people are using the language as a means of communication in every day situations. There are an increasing number of people who are bilingual. This will continue to be the case as more

children emerge from the Māori medium schools. It can be said that the Māori language is a vibrant and living language of today and for tomorrow.

Further, the marae – the ornately carved community centres - still enjoy pride of place in tribal life. Despite 100 years of assimilation Māori culture has survived because of the aspirations of the people and the valuable place the marae holds in perpetuating Māori culture. It has been said that:

Marae are places of refuge for our people. Marae are the central facilities of a tribe and sub-tribe to enable us to continue with our own way of life within the total social structure of our times. They provide the physical facilities to enable us to continue with our way of life on our own terms and within our own value system. We need our marae for many reasons:

So that we may rise tall in oratory;  
So that we may weep for our departed;  
So that we may pray to God;  
So that we house our guests and hold our feasts;  
So that we can hold our meetings;  
So that we may hold our weddings;  
So that we may hold our reunions;  
So that we may sing; so that we may dance;  
And know the richness of life  
And the proud heritage which is truly ours

The marae is an institution that comes from classical Māori society and it has survived the impact of western civilisation. Indeed it is estimated that there are 1000 marae in the country. Each marae has a meeting house normally ornately carved, a dining hall and kitchen, a toilet facility and washhouse. Alongside of the marae there may be a church but the presence of a church is not essential to the make up of a marae. The church on a number of marae is an expression of spirituality and an expression of the local people's religious and denominational preference. But what is significant though not always present on every marae is the importance of an urupā – a graveyard for the local marae people. The marae area can be as small as an acre but some can be as large as 30 acres.

Directly in front of the meeting house lays an empty space of lawn. This space has a special function. The local people and the visitors call it the marae ātea or the ceremonial courtyard where formal welcomes and formal speeches are made. The local people are referred to as tangata whenua (people of the land) and the visitor are referred to as manuhiri. Distinct phases can be recognised on a marae when visitors are given a formal welcoming speech. Once the visitors are assembled at the entrance of the marae a number of activity phases begin. This may vary from marae to marae but in general one can describe the welcome as follows.

Firstly, it is customary for the women of the local marae to call visitors on to the marae. Secondly, the visitors and the local people stand for a minute or two in memory of those that have died especially those who have died recently.

Thirdly, all the locals and the visitors take their allotted seats and the speeches of welcome by men and responses by the visitors are then heard. It is expected that their speeches will end with a waiata (sung poetry).

Fourthly, the visitors will press noses (hongi) and shake hands with all the local people. In this way the marae has always been the repository of Māori knowledge, Māori ceremonial practices and Māori spirituality. The marae can rightfully claim to be the resource centre of the Māori world. It has been and still is the repository of tribal history and the place where visitors are welcomed and where photographic memories of those who have once graced the marae in the past are hung on the walls.

Short church services in the Māori language consisting of prayers and a hymn may be offered some time in the morning and in the evening and at the start of a formal meeting.

It is normal even in today's world that only the Māori language is used in the welcome speeches on the marae ātea. In this way Māori is seen as the official and primary language of the marae. That special position given to the language has been one way that has assisted its longevity and its permanence in New Zealand. However important visitors are given leave to speak in their own native tongue.

If the visitors stay overnight the beds are laid out in the meetinghouse. Visitors would know that if they intended to stay overnight they would bring their own bedding. The meeting house is turned into a communal sleeping space and a short church service is normal in the evening and the morning. The local people prepare the food and the meals are served in the dining hall.

While the English language is used throughout the marae the Māori language is seen as the more formal language to be used on occasions such as church services, the formal welcome to all visitors and the farewell speeches to those that lie in state on the marae. There is a tendency for all visitors to any marae to ensure that they have a kaikaranga (women callers) and kaikōrero (men who are formal speakers) to accompany them so that the formalities can be conducted in accordance with custom and tradition.

Māori elders, both men and women, are highly respected. They 'front' the marae on all formal occasions because of their knowledge and understanding of the history and traditions of the marae. They have been responsible for carrying the traditions of language and culture of the past into the modern world and thus on to the marae. They are well looked after by their families. They are transported by their tribe to other marae to formal functions and they speak on behalf of their tribe. They are the main living connections to the tribal past. They are expected to pass on their knowledge to the younger generations and they take great pride in noting the efforts of the young people in their attempts to speak in Māori on the grounds of the marae.

The marae as a community centre is likely to grow in number and in its importance as a cultural showcase in New Zealand. Many of the attributes of the marae – its art work, its language, its rituals its values, its functions are already part of the wider reality of New Zealand. It is quite noticeable that Māori meetings in places other than the marae observe a marae format with a greeting in Māori followed by a short prayer at the beginning of the meeting and at the end. It is normal practice in some government public service departments to offer a short welcome in Māori in their offices followed by a short prayer. That procedure is a direct copy of the marae

practice and it is adopted especially when the visitors are Māori and when the agenda items revolve around Māori concerns or issues.

The marae has an important place in New Zealand's history for it has been responsible for housing and nurturing Māori language and culture over the years ever since the arrival of the British people in New Zealand. All people who have a desire to include elements of Māori culture as part of their New Zealand cultural identity should be thankful for the function of the marae in perpetuating “ngā taonga o te ao Māori” (Ngata) the treasures of the Māori world. Long may the marae continue to thrive.

## References

Salmond, Anne (1972) *Hui - A Study of Māori Ceremonial Gatherings*. Auckland: Reed Publishers.

Walker, Ranginui (1990) *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou – Struggle Without End*. Auckland: Penguin Books.

Ka'ai, T.M, (2004) *Ki Te Whaiao – An Introduction to Māori Culture and Society*. Auckland: Pearson Longman.

## Glossary

Aotearoa	literally 'land of the long white cloud' a Māori name used to describe New Zealand
Hongi	pressing of noses in greeting to share the breath of life
Kaikaranga	women who formally call visitors to the marae
Kaikōrero	men who speak on behalf of groups
Karanga	a call by a woman to visitors to advance to the marae
Marae	the traditional village community centre
Marae ātea	ceremonial courtyard in front of meeting house
Urupā	graveyard
Waiata	song
Whakapapa	genealogy