

Te Ao Hurihuri: Maori Funerals in a Changing World

by Kay Paku

A while ago I pondered the changing face of funerals in an essay about their value. Recently that got me to thinking specifically about the changing face of the tangi. To move ahead in a changing world, we need to know where we've come from and where we're going. Each of us has a unique perspective, so what follows is my take.



Family tangi at Ruataniwha, April 2015

In order for a culture to thrive it needs to move with the times, blending not with a melting-pot approach but rather one that respects our different world views.

Wairua , Kehua and Other Woowoo Stuff

Maori have a holistic view of the world. When a person dies, everything around them becomes tapu – taboo if you like. Before resuming normal duties – eating or drinking for example – tapu must be removed, and noa (normal) restored. Maori do this using water, and prayer.

It is believed that a person's spirit ,or wairua, is calmed by the presence of family and friends. This is especially so following death, when their love and prayers are believed to help free the wairua and help it heavenward. A spirit that remains earthbound, a kehua, is believed to wander at night causing mischief at best, and illness or death at worst. A large sign at the Gisborne Hospital Mortuary warns against the misappropriation of pens thus: *"Don't steal the biros or the kehuas will get you."*

Maori show honour and respect by acknowledging a person's wairua and that of their family and ancestors. This is personified in the formal greeting "Tena koe" - "I see you". Think of it as the diametric opposite of someone waving out "Hiya" whilst continuing to twitface on their phone.

To ignore a personal connection is a snub or insult. To whit: not acknowledging their family (where they come from), not calling in to visit, walking (or driving) past without saying hello.

Time and Honour

I share the following story of a great and much loved man, with the permission of his family.

When former minister Parekura Horomia died we learned about it on Monday's 6 o'clock news. National and international dignitaries would be arriving to pay their respects the following afternoon, until his tangi on Friday. Some hours later, family asked us to take him into our care the following morning.

You might remember that Parekura was a big man, with a big smile. You might remember that my hair used to be straight.

Let's Break The Rules Tonight

Long story short, Parekura had a sleepover at our place on the Tuesday night, and his tangi was rescheduled for the Saturday "to give everyone enough time".

Ultimately it was possible because we understood and balanced two conflicting needs: that he couldn't be left alone vs the importance to family and community of seeing and honouring him.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers

Could understanding what leads to "body snatching" prevent it? Might it be different if all stakeholders believe that their connection has been honoured?

We already identify the main players in a funeral arrangement. There are lots of opportunities to examine whether there are any conflicting needs. Are the place of birth and the intended place of rest the same? Will the journey to the place of rest pass other significant places? What is the best route to take? Do the people at those places know the family's intention?

Fighting over who has the greatest claim is a sign of the esteem in which the deceased was held. As an old workmate used to say: "Love me, hate me. But don't ignore me."

Change For The Better

When we understand the rules, we can work out how to bend them.

Take the rule of the third sunset. I'm old enough to remember why we put the lid on in that timeframe, and no, that definitely wasn't when I decided to become a funeral director.

Is it OK to arrive after dark? We can reassure our fellow travellers that there is ample lighting to identify enemies, and that most kehua know us by name.

Technology breaks all the rules. Don't mix photos of the living and the dead on a service sheet, but, filming, slideshows and livestreaming are all OK. When I was filming an event some years ago a well-meaning lady told me that "the natives will think you're stealing their spirit." Not a rule I was aware of, but an excellent way to get out of having your photo taken.

Do seek out the water and sprinkle it over your head when you leave the deceased, to remove the tapu. I also sprinkle any water remaining on my hands into the back of the hearse, to turn it back into a taxi.

How's that for a change?