

The Marae as an information ground

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Marae are a gathering place for Māori (indigenous New Zealand people). Māori gather at marae for a variety reasons, including meetings, celebrations, tangi (funeral rites) and to socialise.

Most marae are attached to a particular hapu (sub-tribe) and an iwi (tribe) will have many hapu as part of its structure. Many marae are in traditional areas associated with that particular hapu or iwi, but since the 1950s there has been mass urbanisation with 80% of the Māori population living in the cities. Urbanisation has led to the development of urban marae, with many of these still associated with an iwi.

However, most major cities have urban marae that have no association with any particular iwi but are attached to urban Māori who no longer have links or easy access to their own marae.

Although many of the activities that take place at the marae can be quite casual, there are also very formal ceremonial functions associated with a marae, particularly when welcoming and hosting visitors and the rituals associated with tangi.

The marae cannot simply be described as a single information ground as described by Pettigrew¹ (2000) Fisher (2004, 2005) who developed the concept. As they are large complexes with many different zones and encounters taking place it qualifies as the ultimate Māori information conduit with a smorgasbord of information available for exchange.

The main areas of a marae where information can be exchanged while carrying other activities are: the waharoa (gateway) the marae-atea, whareniui (meeting house),

¹ Karen Pettigrew later became Karen Fisher

wharemoae (sleeping quarters), wharekai (dining room), mahau (porch/veranda), wharehoroi (bathrooms), kauta (cookhouse), hangi pit (earth oven pit).

The Waharoa

The waharoa is where the manuhiri (visitors) gather before a powhiri (formal welcome). The number of people gathered at this point will be dependent on the reason for their visit. If it is for a tangi (funeral), hui (conference) or a celebration, it is possible that the numbers will be large, with some of those gathered knowing each other and others being unknown. It is normal for those gathered to go on to a marae to establish amongst themselves what form their response to the welcome will take. Depending on how familiar those gathered are with tikanga Māori (Māori protocol), some sharing of information regarding the protocol of the welcome will be exchanged and those who will participate as the spokespeople will want to know who is amongst the group, where they are from and why they are there. This is a process known as whakawhanaungatanga (making connections).



Te Kupenga o te Mātauranga

Massey University Wharenui, with the waharoa in the foreground

The karanga and the korero

Once these gathered at the waharoa are ready to proceed onto the marae they will indicate to the tangata whenua (rightful occupants of the land/marae) that they have finished their preparations. When the tangata whenua, have themselves finished their

preparations they will assemble at the seating provided for the welcome. They will then signal their kaikaranga (caller) to commence the karanga (call) to the manuhiri. This karanga is structured by the caller to welcome the people to the marae and the region (when appropriate).

The kaikaranga for the manuhiri responds in kind to the tangata whenua and at this point provides a wealth of information to them, their karanga including an indication of who they are, whether they are one group or many groups, where they are from and what is the purpose of their visit.

The kaikaranga from both groups in their calls make special mention of well known tupuna (ancestors) from their respective marae and will also acknowledge the dead, especially those that may have recently passed away, particularly if there is a strong connection to the group being welcomed or the one that is welcoming. All of this is conducted in te reo Māori (Māori language), so for those that are listening to or are participating in this ceremony it is essential that they are fluent in te reo Māori. This is normally the case for the kaikaranga and kaikorero (orators). The lack of fluency of other participants may lead to them not picking up information that is important to them.

The kaikorero are male in most tribal areas, although there are some tribes that allow women to speak on the marae. In their role as orator for their group, whether they are the hosts or the visitors is to ensure that their side's sentiments, goodwill, sorrow, connections and thoughts about the take (purpose) that is being discussed are heard. In listening to the exchange between the kaikaranga, the kaikorero have had the opportunity to identify any special connections, stories or events attached to the other side that they should refer to in their speeches. This knowledge is further enhanced through whispered conversations with those sitting close to them on the paepae (speakers chairs). Quite often this information will be passed onto them from other members of their group, who may have recognised someone on the other side that should be referred to or paid homage to, particularly if they have been recognised or achieved a great honour and the icing on the cake is if someone has information about that special person's relationship to their group. The exchange occurring on the paepae will often take place while another speaker is on their feet and although it

could be seen as rude in some cultures, in Māoridom it is more about being prepared and to ensure that there is no loss of mana (status) on their side for not according due respect to the other side.



The kaikorero in full flight

As each kaikorero rises to speak, they will impart further information to those assembled and again it is vital that this information is heard, absorbed and responded to in the most appropriate manner. It is normal for the tangata whenua to have the last say in these proceedings, regardless of the different kawa (protocols)² that are in place and this will give them the opportunity to respond to any of the information that has come from the visitors. After each speaker, a waiata will be sung to support the content of their speech. Quite often, these waiata will be oriori (traditional songs), that represent significant occasions or tupuna in the history of their marae, hapu or iwi and as such place that event or person in context.

As a Māori who participates in powhiri, mostly as a passive participant (i.e. non-speaking role), the korero gathered from the karanga and the korero assists me in learning more about both the hosts and the visitors, particularly if there is discussion around, people, events, placenames, whakapapa (genealogical links), agreements and previously made decisions. As an observer and a collector of information, the korero I am exposed to is priceless and serves as the basis for dissemination to other friends, whanau (extended family) and library clients.

² The kawa of the marae varies from tribe to tribe, but the most common forms of interaction for speeches are Paeke and Tau-utuutu. In paeke, all the tangata whenua speakers speak first and then the manuhiri with the tangata whenua having the last say. In tau-utuutu the speakers alternate from one side to the other with the tangata whenua having the privilege of speaking last

Hariru, Hongi & Kai

After the speeches, the tangata whenua invite the manuhiri to come forward and greet them with a hongiri (pressing of noses) and a hariru (handshake), occasionally the hongiri is replaced by a kiss on the cheeks for a member of the opposite sex. Once this process is complete, the manuhiri are invited to the wharekai (dining room) for a meal or a snack. The partaking of food between host and visitor is the last stage of removing the tapu (sacredness) from the visitor and making them noa (normal).

Apart from the ritualistic importance of the hariru, hongiri and kai, it is another part of the information exchange process. While the greeting and eating are taking place, individuals are free to exchange information with each other, this can include individuals from opposite sides attempting to find a common connection, either through an ancestor or a connection through another organisation like a boarding school, armed services division or a sporting club or they could both be from the same area or iwi. The object of this exchange is whakawhanaungatanga either by building on previous relationships or to find some common ground to build future relationships on. Common questions during this time would include Nō hea koe? (where are you from), Do you know _____?, Did your uncle marry a woman from ___?. Who was the headmaster when you were a boarder at St Stephens? What year was that? To some extent it is like Stanley Milgram's small world model, the longer the conversation and exchange of information can continue the more likelihood there is of a mutual acquaintance being found. Once a mutual friend or whanau member has been discovered, an exchange of information about that person and how they are related and other details such as other members of the same family have fared or how their whakapapa relates to a particular place or person. The longer the conversation continues, the greater the chance is that more mutual areas of interest will emerge. At various times, an individual that has revealed a particular fact or relationship, will be informed that there is someone else at the hui that has a link to that person or place and they will be either pointed out or introduced to them. Thus some participants in these hui can be identified as 'connectors', due to their ability to process information about others and then retrieve that at an appropriate moment. Over the years, I have myself been a recipient and deliverer of this type of information and this has allowed

me to build on knowledge I already have of this situation; or with further leads to ways of developing or verifying facts and relationships.

The wharekai: not only a place of nutrition

The wharekai plays an important role in the marae as it is not only the place where nutrition and nourishment needs are fulfilled but as a site where people congregate and converse providing natural information exchange channel. In the previous section, I identified its important role in nullifying the tapu nature of manuhiri, however in many ways it is the hub of information exchange as people naturally converse while they eat together.

However the wharekai is also a workplace, with the ringawera (kitchen workers) being an important part of the marae. It is the ringawera that work at the back to ensure that everything can function properly at the front. At any onetime during a hui there will be a contingent from the tangata whenua in the kitchen ensuring that the next meal is prepared on time and in sufficient quantities. Depending on the marae, the occasion and the relationships, they will sometimes be joined by individuals from the manuhiri, particularly if they have a strong bond with the people of that marae. Others from the manuhiri will often feel more comfortable in the kitchen and will do what they can to help. Sometimes this assistance will only come after the meal has been prepared and served and might consist of helping with the dishes. As with any kitchen that have many people working simultaneously there is a not only a routine to follow so that everything is prepared on time and to a high standard. This does not stop the exchange of information being full and frank. Often the more experienced ringawera will use the occasion as an opportunity to assist others with less experience. This might come in the form of them working with an apprentice, showing them how to prepare a dish and working out the correct quantities of ingredients. These relationships are representative of the tuakana-teina (mentoring) relationship. At other times, the senior ringawera may act in an observational role, being ready to step in when necessary to save the mana of the marae (if anything looks like it will not meet the high standard they expect). As the ringawera are quite often in the kitchen for a long period of time they do not always get to participate in the other activities of the hui, thus often relying on others that flit in and out of the kitchen. These people

will often come in to help during breaks and will update those in the kitchen of any key issues that have been discussed, who is present (particularly if they are well known) and what they have said and what the response was from others to that speech. Other conversations and exchanges will revolve around whakapapa and history, especially if there has been some korero (talk) about ancestors and events that are in common between the manuhiri and tangata whenua. I have also heard kuia (women elders) providing strict instructions to others about what should be said about a particular issue and why. The people that flit in and out will also act as a source of information regarding the overall running of the hui, whether it is running to schedule or not and the impact that delays may have on meal breaks.



In the marae kitchen

As Māori have a very strong sense of tapu and noa, there some topics that should not be discussed in the kitchen. I witnessed one occasion when some of the more inexperienced ringawera were subjected to a telling off due to their discussion of how a death had occurred and the arrangements that had been made to release the body from the morgue. Other issues that should not be discussed in this environment (but occasionally do) are bodily functions, female hygiene issues and sexual inter-relationships. Unfortunately these restrictions are not always known by everyone, particularly if they do not have a strong awareness of tikanga Māori and another problem is that rules might be broken when senior more experienced ringawera are not present, which can lead to elements of inconsistency and confusion on the part of those that are less experienced.

Other notions of tapu that are frequently breached in the vicinity of the kitchen are the passing of cooked food over the head of another person (the head is the most tapu part of the body) as this diminishes the sacredness of that person. Placing food on a table that has important information on it, such as whakapapa booklets or placing your buttocks on a table used for eating or for learning/information purposes is also not permissible. These lessons are learned early in life, however these actions are not always known by those from other cultural backgrounds and sometimes those who should know better err through force of habit or forgetfulness. In the latter case a short sharp rebuke from a kuia (women elder) is enough to remind any deviant of their tikanga.

The hangi pit or the Kauta

A kauta is a cooking shed and before the development of modern marae, this is where most of the food preparation took place. These days kauta are few and far between but at some marae I have been to, they are still used as a space to prepare some of the more messier/smellier dishes, shelling kina (sea eggs) and other shellfish, boiling fish-heads or smoking eels. In inclement weather, barbecue grills can also be used to prepare meals.

On special occasions, the marae may be used to prepare a hakari (ceremonial feast), which will often act as the grand finale to the hui or tangi. This feast will often require days of preparation, with designated individuals being responsible for the gathering of seafood and other delicacies. A key feature of a hakari is the kai (food) cooked in a hangi (earth oven). Many marae have a pit where they lay their hangi and although it is traditional to have a pit that is completely made of earth, some marae have opted to modernise their hangi pit through the use of gas fired cooking methods.

When preparing a hangi in the traditional style, a pit would be dug, a fire would be lit onto which stones would be placed for approximately two hours. Once the fire had burned through and the stones were thought to be hot enough, food in wire baskets lined with wet muslin material would be placed on Hessian sacks which cover the stones. Another layer of wet Hessian style sack cloths is then placed over the top of

the food, with the dirt from the pit being placed on top. The hangi will steam will approximately three to four hours, before it is raised and served.

With such a labour intensive process, there is a need for a sizeable number of workers to undertake the preparation of the food, the fire, the pit and the stones. While all this is happening discussions will also be occurring and this will include the exchange of information. The information exchanged here will often be quite practical, with older and more experienced persons instructing the younger workers on the correct process for putting the hangi down and the protocol that should be followed. There will normally be moments of hilarity as, younger workers may have their legs pulled by the experienced workers. Like any work team, the new workers are fair game for this type of initiation. I was once witness to a young man being sent to the kitchen to ask the cooks for a left handed vegetable knife. Needless to say this youngster (he was about 12) came back looking quite sheepish. Similar incidents will occur, normally with good humour intended or as a way of showing the youngsters that they have a lot to learn.



Lifting the hangi

Others will share stories of feasts gone past or of feasts undertaken by various members of the iwi, or of the deceased (in the case of a tangi). This information often generates other snippets or insights from those present, so it can be a great learning experience for the uninitiated and initiated alike.

The wharenui & wharemoe

The wharenuī (meeting house), is often used as the wharemoē (sleeping house). When it is not being used for sleeping during a hui, it is where the discussions, presentations and debate occurs. This will often occur in a semi-structured manner and will not always require tikanga Māori to be followed as stringently as it is in other parts of the marae complex, although there are rules about who should sit or sleep where if this is required. There are also other formalities that should be followed if the hui is being held as part of a tangihanga and the tupapaku (corpse) is present in the house, including just exactly where the body should be placed.

The wharenuī can be a place of learning with most being adorned with whakairo (carvings) and tukutuku (latticed panels) and it is quite normal that a hui which consists of mainly visitors to be told about the significance and history of the meeting house, carvings and panels. In the process of this being explained the orator will wherever possible identify links between the marae and other hapu and iwi. If there is time, the orator will also relate the marae's history to that of the area that it is located in.

Depending on the occasion, mihi mihi (informal greetings) will take place and this normally involves everyone in the wharenuī, introducing themselves, where they are from, what iwi they belong to, where they work or study and their reason for coming and this is also a chance for them to raise any issues they would like to see addressed during the hui. Again like other encounters that occur within the precincts of the marae the mihi mihi focuses largely on whakawhanaungatanga and as each speaker rises and identifies themselves there can be an orchestra of kia oras' from others that are present and recognise the speaker as being from the same iwi, or a well known institution or family. The information given in a mihi (informal speech) will often spark up conversations and information exchanges as those who feel a close connection to the speaker will try to establish what their relationship is.

If the visitors are present due to a tangihanga, most often the speeches will be focused on the relationship between the deceased and the person that is speaking and their whanau. Although this is solemn time, there can also be large doses of humour as past exploits, achievements and relationships are outlined. The whanau pani (close

family of the deceased) at this stage will learn more about the impact that the deceased had on other peoples lives and will hears stories that fill in some of the gaps in their knowledge about the deceased's life.



On the mattresses in the Wharenui / Wharemoa

When the wharenui transcends into a wharemoa, individuals will identify and mark their sleeping place, firstly with a mattress and then their possessions. Like any communal sleeping arrangement, people will try and position themselves close to others they know. To some degree this is because of the nature of their friendship or relationship that they will feel more comfortable sleeping near them, than they would to someone they don't know so well. If the latter should happen then it will be coped with and it could become the beginning of a bond between those who are involved. It can also mean that there is more scope for information exchange between people who don't know each other so well, due to the fact that they will probably have access to a chain of information not normally available to the other party. This is in keeping with the strong tie-weak tie concept that Granovetter (1972, 1983) promotes in his work.

Mahau

The mahau is the veranda area just outside the meeting house. After the formalities of the powhiri are over and if the weather is warm, this area will be populated by tangata whenua and manuhiri alike. Quite often the people here will be kaumatua or kuia. The conversation will typically revolve around current events, whanau, historical events, previous hui, whakapapa, what was said in the whaikorero or other everyday occurrences such as health, television, politics, etc. The nature of the

information exchange will be dependent on who is there, whether someone is 'holding court', how many are there, the occasion and the age of those gathered.

Conversations between friends will tend to focus more on everyday occurrences and be more of a personal nature. If the conversations are between people that don't know each other so well the conversations and subsequent information exchanges will be geared more to establishing connections to each other either through whakapapa or another common link. As mentioned in the earlier examples in this essay, this is commonly referred to as whakawhanaungatanga. Small snippets of information will be exchanged until a mutual acquaintance or family link is established. There can be many conversations taking place in the mahau at the same time and the seasoned mahau dweller is normally able to monitor the multiple discussions with a trained ear and launching an opinion where necessary. Sometimes the conversation will all be in English and sometimes in Māori. However it is not unusual for both languages to be used at the same time on the mahau and it is also not uncommon for any single conversation to be conducted in a mixture of the two languages.

The modern marae complex

The modern marae will have additional features that are not always present at some of the more traditional marae based in rural centres. Marae based in urban cities can also have papakainga (marae housing) quite often reserved for kaumatua and kuia; health centres which have their own Doctors, Nurses, Counsellors and Social Workers; smokers spots (many marae are now going smokefree and attempt to have spots where smokers can congregate on or off the marae, and classrooms (particularly marae at educational institutions). Information exchanges will occur in all these places and the types of encounters will be similar to those already described elsewhere in this essay.



Health clinic at Orakei marae, Auckland

Conclusions

The marae is a diverse place that brings together Māori and other peoples together and as such provides limitless opportunities for these people to converse and exchange information. Although there are set protocols in place, the encounters can be relatively informal in some areas of the marae. There is genuine interest in ensuring that visitors to a marae are made to feel welcome and that they receive hospitality of the first degree. The process of establishing relationships via whakawhanaungatanga ensures that there is a common interest between all those that are present. The marae also has an active learning and teaching role in that those present are consequently exposed to new information about the marae and its facilities or the relationship with others. These educational sessions will not necessarily be planned but will occur as there is an active group of participants and willing conversationalists. Not everyone will participate, but there is an active information exchange network occurring nonetheless, as some of the more active ‘information carriers’ move from group to group, passing information one to the other.

Marae have stood the test of time and colonisation, and although they may have changed dramatically in the period since Western contact in the late 18th century and settlement in the early to mid 19th century, they have retained their authenticity in terms of their role of bringing people together and providing a venue that allows Māori just to be Māori.

As a home away from home for the tangata whenua, it fits neatly into the 'third place' concept promoted by Ray Oldenburg (1991).

Due to the size of some marae and the many different gathering points within, it would be better to identify it as a series of information grounds rather than just one.

As such the communication between the different groups gathering is organic and is largely dependent on individuals that participate in more than one information ground being the 'information carrier' or the bridge between the different groups. Whether these individuals should be described as gatekeepers in line with the writings of Shoemaker (1991), Agada, (1999) Metoyer-Duran (1993) is open to question, however their role provides the dynamic that is required in some of these groups to keep them from 'information implosion' or the small world phenomenon that was explored by Elfreda Chatman (1991, 1992, 1996, 1999) in her studies of the information worlds of janitors, retired women and prisoners.

Marae themselves will continue to evolve as is already evident from the addition of housing, health clinics and social services functions and as such there should also be a continued development of them as rich sources of information, whether it be cultural or everyday life issues under discussion.

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