

Tangata Whenua: An Environmental Ethos Essential for Health and Wellbeing

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Tangata (people) whenua (land) translates directly to ‘people of the land’ (Panelli & Tipa, 2007). From a te ao Māori (Māori worldview) lens, this term encapsulates the deep connection Māori tangata have to the whenua of Aotearoa (Panelli & Tipa, 2007). The way Māori view whenua is much more holistic compared to Western views. Māori see themselves as part of the environment which contrasts with traditional Western practices where land is seen as a commodity (Henare, 2001). Māori are linked spiritually to the whenua through their ancestors and whakapapa (King et al., 2018). Because of this the health and wellbeing of both tangata and whenua are reliant on one another (Le Grice & Braun, 2016). For the wellbeing of both tangata and whenua to be prosperous, the act of kaitiakitanga (guardianship) over rohe potae (tribal lands) is crucial for Māori. Each whānau, hapū, and iwi will have a unique connection to whenua because of their varied pūrākau (stories), whakapapa (genealogy), and tikanga (practices, customs) (Lee, 2009).

The relationship between Māori tangata and whenua is illustrated beautifully in Ruth Panelli and Gail Tipa’s Integrated Well-Being Model. The model’s place-based approach acknowledges the reciprocal relationship between tangata and whenua and reinforces the idea that Māori health and wellbeing are dependent on the specific needs of the individual, whānau, hapū, or iwi (Jackson, 2009). The central element of Panelli and Tipa’s model is an image of a rohe potae which is depicted in both parts of the model (see Appendix A). In part A all of the traditional elements of a rohe potae such as awa (river), moana (ocean), and maunga (mountain) are labelled with the names of the atua which relate to that specific

element. Part B integrates specific Māori values and concepts that underpin Māori health and wellbeing. Panelli and Tipa's model is important because it recognises the relationship between tangata and whenua as well as the significance of the environment in relation to health and wellbeing.

This article will critically explore the term tangata whenua in conjunction with Panelli and Tipa's model. This relationship will be unpacked by examining the concepts of whakapapa, mātauranga (Māori knowledge), and tikanga from a te ao Māori lens; to highlight how tangata whenua generates an environmental ethos that is crucial for health and wellbeing.

Whakapapa

It is impossible to unpack tangata whenua without discussing whakapapa. Whakapapa is an essential element to both te ao Māori and Māori way of life. Because whakapapa contains the word "papa" (foundation, base), it is clear that it is not only an essential element but also the essence of te ao Māori. (Phillips, 2018.). Whakapapa is one's genealogy, however, the term whakapapa is much deeper than just this simple translation. Te ao Māori recognises that the relationship between the atua (gods, deity), environment, and the living is permeable (Ballantyne, 2014). Whakapapa is the connection between all three of these realms and what connects the past to the present (King et al., 2018). One simple way to look at whakapapa is to think of it as a structure that connects all tangata and natural elements to the genesis of the universe (Roberts, 2013). King explains whakapapa as "...a series of ordered genealogical webs that go back hundreds of generations to the beginning..." (King et al., 2018). Mauri

(life force) goes hand in hand with whakapapa as it is the Māori concept that explains the link between the physical and spiritual worlds (Harmsworth & Awatere, 2013).

Creation narratives are the perfect example of whakapapa because Māori can trace their ancestors through them. There are many different versions of the same creation narratives which are unique to certain iwi, however, these stories are often very similar and have the same ancestral links, which enables all Māori to connect to creation narratives (Lee, 2009). The story of Ranginui and Papatūānuku is a widely known narrative but an effective example of whakapapa. Te ao Māori recognises Ranginui and Papatūānuku as the genesis of the universe and therefore all things today are descendants of them (Roberts, 2013). In the excerpt below the whakapapa from Ranginui and Papatūānuku to the creation of humans is explained:

“Tāne, after forcing apart his primordial parents Papatūānuku and Ranginui, sought the female element to procreate the earth with human beings. In his quest, he procreated with numerous female deities producing offspring of plants and trees with their own Whakapapa. He procreated with Huna and Pākoti, and from these unions came harakeke. He then took the name, Tānemāhuta. His search eventually led him to the female element within at Kurawaka, the pubic region of his mother Papatūānuku where, from her sacred red soils he fashioned the figure of Hineahuone, and breathed life into her nostrils, the first hongi. Brimming over with her own mana (authority) and tapu (sacredness), inherited from the divine river, Hineahuone met Tānemāhuta as a beloved companion. We are their descendants, a living legacy of their love” (King et al., 2018).

Clear parallels between whakapapa, creation narratives, and the environment can be drawn from this extract. The action of Tānemāhuta breathing life into Hineahuone is significant because it explains the creation of the first human, a moment all Māori can trace their whakapapa back to. This action can be explained as hauora which means breath of life. If you

break this word down, ‘hau’ (vitality of man, essence of land, breath) and ‘ora’ (alive and healthy) the complexity of the word is revealed (Jackson, 2018). Many Māori words have multiple meanings, often relating to both tangata and whenua. Both the action and the word hauora link tangata and whenua and capture the essence of the permeability between the atua, environment, and the living.

The above excerpt also aligns with Panelli and Tipa’s model because both whakapapa and the environment are key elements of the model. Panelli and Tipa’s model recognises the importance of creation narratives with the inclusion of atua within the landscape of the rohe potae (see Appendix A). The inclusion of atua within the landscape of the rohe potae in the model also reinforces the permeability between the atua, environment, and the living, linking the past to the present (Jackson, 2009). The connection between whakapapa and the environment influences how Māori understand their rohe potae (Harmsworth, 2013). This relationship highlights the deep connection between tangata whenua and the environmental ethos it creates. Creation narratives not only contain whakapapa but have been passed down through whakapapa and enabled the continuation of traditional Māori knowledge.

Mātauranga

The term mātauranga embraces the accumulation of all Māori knowledge that has been passed down through whakapapa. Mātauranga is not only about knowledge but also about being able to trace the origin of that knowledge (Phillips, 2018). Mātauranga like all Māori words is complex and has a multifaceted definition. To fully understand the term it is easiest to break the word down into ‘mataui’ (to know) and ‘ranga’ (pull up by the roots) (Phillips,

2018). Although socio-cultural norms are constantly evolving, mātauranga remains within the structure of whakapapa that connects all tangata whenua to their roots (Roberts, 2013). Mātauranga has been evolving since the beginning of time tracing back to Polynesia and Pacific migrations (Harmsworth, 2013). Māori values such as kaitiakitanga and manaakitanga (hospitality) are derived from mātauranga, which informs how Māori treat the environment and one another (Harmsworth, 2013).

One of the most common ways Māori engage with mātauranga is through oral narratives such as whakataukī (proverbs). Whakataukī are Māori sayings that hold valuable mātauranga that help maintain the wellbeing of both tangata and whenua (Sadler, 2014). Whakataukī is one form of mātauranga that has been passed down through generations. Mātauranga in the form of whakataukī or other oral narratives are powerful because Māori can connect through them (Phillips, 2018). The act of engaging in mātauranga from oral narratives is also a form of tino rangatira (self-determination) and decolonisation (Lee, 2009). The whakataukī below showcases the environmental ethos the concept tangata whenua elicits:

*“Ko Papatūānuku to tatou whaea
Ko ia te matua atawhai
He orange mo tatou
I roto I te moengaroa
Ka hoki tatau ki te kopu o te whenua*

*The land is our mother
She is the loving parent
She nourishes and sustains us
When we die she enfolds us in her arms” (Roberts et al., 1995).*

This whakataukī holds mātauranga that emphasises the intricate relationship between the atua, the environment, and the living. Papatūānuku embodies not only the earth but is also personified as a living atua and mother to all living things. This whakataukī conveys the

mātauranga that tangata should treat the earth and environment with the same respect they would give their mother. This highlights that the health and wellbeing of tangata are reliant on the sustenance that Papatūānuku provides (Cunningham, 2018). This emphasises the importance of kaitiakitanga because if we do not look after Papatūānuku the health and wellbeing of tangata will diminish (Cunningham, 2018).

The last line of the whakataukī alludes to the continuous cycle of life and death that revolves around Papatūānuku. Like most Māori words whenua also has a dual meaning. Whenua not only means land but it also translates to the word ‘placenta’, which links the life of tangata to Papatūānuku (Boyes, 2010). Both placentas and the bodies/ashes of the deceased are traditionally buried within the rohe potae of an iwi (Boyes, 2010). The use of karakia (prayer) is incorporated in the burial of both the placenta and the deceased to recognise the significance of Papatūānuku (Roberts et al., 1995). The fluidity of these Māori terms represents the importance of tangata whenua in te ao Māori and the significance of Papatūānuku. Whakataukī that gives Māori this mātauranga are essential for the sustainability of both tangata and whenua.

Panelli and Tipa’s model incorporates this Māori environmental mātauranga within part B of the model which integrates the traditional rohe potae, environment, and wellbeing. There are six core values/concepts in part B of the model (see Appendix A). Turangawaewae (stand place) is one of these six values and is significant in the context of the whakataukī above. Rohe potae are so significant because not only do the ancestors of the tangata of that iwi reside in the landscape but also a part of themselves and their mother (the placenta). The burial of the placenta is called whenua ki te whenua. Whenua ki te whenua “inscribes the links between people, their whānau and the natural environment in a tangible way” (Le Grice

& Braun, 2016). The model's place-based approach and centralisation of the rohe potae recognise this.

Tikanga

Tikanga can be defined as the correct procedure, custom, way, practice, or protocol of implementing Māori mātauranga into everyday life (Phillips, 2018). Modern-day tikanga would not exist without whakapapa and mātauranga. It is the transferring of mātauranga from generation to generation that informs Māori way of life and te ao Māori today (King et al., 2018). Each whānau, hapū, and iwi will engage in tikanga practices that have been passed down through their whakapapa and therefore are specific to them (King et al., 2018). Tikanga has naturally adapted throughout generations but each whānau, hapū, and iwi will have their own set of core values which are at the heart of their tikanga (King et al., 2018). For example, values such as manaakitanga (hospitality), utu (reciprocity), rangatira (self-governance), or kaitiakitanga (guardianship) could be at the heart of a particular iwi. Keri Opai discusses that engaging in tikanga as Māori and also informing non-Māori of culturally appropriate ways they can engage in tikanga is important because it preserves Māori mātauranga and contributes to the whakapapa of the future (Opai, 2021).

One common tikanga still used widely in Aotearoa today is a pepeha (tribal saying, saying of the ancestors). Pepeha is used in the context of introductions and formal welcoming specific to Māori culture. Over the last decade, the use of te reo Māori has been increasing in Aotearoa and the expectation for both Māori and non-Māori to be able to introduce themselves in the form of a pepeha is far greater (Harris & O'Sullivan, 2013). When an individual recites their pepeha it is less about introducing themselves and more about

introducing their whakapapa, acknowledging both the living and the dead (Harris & O’Sullivan, 2013). This highlights how important the recognition of the permeability between atua, the environment, and the living is in te ao Māori. In a pepeha one shares their whakapapa by naming places and tangata of significance such as their awa, maunga, waka, iwi, hāpu, or whānau. The sole reason for a pepeha is to connect to the tangata you are introducing yourself to (Opai, 2021).

There are numerous factors to consider when performing a pepeha because there is a lot of traditional tikanga centred on the sequence in which a pepeha is recited. Te ao Māori emphasises an individual's whakapapa far more than the individual. For this reason when one recites a pepeha their name is usually the last piece of mātauranga given, “the whānau, hapū, iwi or even rohe generally takes place over oneself.” This is because that individual would not be here without the whakapapa that preceded them (Opai, 2021). The most widely used structure of a Māori pepeha is to first greet the room by saying ‘Tēnā koutou katoa’, then list the places and tangata of significance in the order of maunga, awa, waka, iwi, hapū, marae, parents, and finally self (Opai, 2021).

However, the order can differ depending on the area and the iwi. For example, in Waikato, the waka of Tainui is of great importance. Because of this, the waka is usually stated first in the pepeha because the tangata of that area identify strongly with the Tainui waka (Opai, 2021). The order in which the waka is placed within a pepeha is therefore iwi specific. Iwi near the Taranaki area see Mount Taranaki as incredibly important, because of this they list their maunga first in their pepeha. Pepeha can also include sayings or other oral narratives that indicate landmarks specific to an iwi or “local tangata whenua” of an area (Opai, 2021).

The excerpt below is an example of a pepeha from the Waikato-Tainui from the Waikato Region:

*“Mōkau ki runga; Tāmaki ki raro, Mangatoatoa ki waenganui; Pare Hauraki; Pare Waikato
– Te Kaokaoroa o Pātetere ki Te Nehenehenui*

*Mōkau to the south; Tāmaki to the north; Mangatoatoa in the middle – Waikato,
Hauraki protections – the Kaokaoroa o Pātetere Range into the Nehenehenui”
(Roa & Tuaupiki, 2005).*

This pepeha is significant for the tangata whenua of Waikato because it includes places of significance specific to them. The importance of place is represented in this pepeha from Waikato which directly links to Panelli and Tipa’s model. Panelli and Tipa’s place-based approach was specifically designed so that Māori from any region in New Zealand could utilise the model as a tool to boost the wellbeing of both tangata and whenua in their region. The tikanga of pepeha not only connects tangata with their ancestors but also contributes to understanding one's environment. The model includes all elements that are in both the pepeha of an individual or iwi.

Health, Wellbeing, and the Environment

Te ao Māori has a much more holistic view of health and wellbeing compared to Western views. The World Health Organisation's definition of health says, “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organisation, n.d.). The health and wellbeing of tangata whenua is

complex because it is reliant on the health of Papatūānuku which can only be achieved if tangata are aware of the whakapapa, mātauranga, and tikanga specific to them. Panelli and Tipa's model is so crucial because it encompasses so much more than the World Health Organisation does in their definition. Panelli and Tipa's place-based approach and centralisation of the rohe potae is significant because it recognises that all atua, environment, and living things are intrinsically linked. Samantha Jackson explains that "each experience of well-being will vary from place to place and reflect different aspects which are important for health and identity." Research shows that a healthy ecosystem leads to healthier tangata (Harmsworth, 2013). So, when tangata have a reciprocal relationship with the environment and treat Papatūānuku with respect their well-being will flourish (Jackson, 2009).

Conclusion

This article has explored the complex nature of the term tangata whenua and the environmental ethos it produces which is essential for health and wellbeing. The depth of te ao Māori has also been highlighted by demonstrating that the concepts of tangata whenua, whakapapa, mātauranga, and tikanga are all connected and can not be explained without one another. All elements of Māori culture and te ao Māori weave together to form the mātauranga Māori draw on today. This article has only scratched the surface in analysing the intricate relationship between tangata and whenua and how important the reciprocity between the two is for the health and wellbeing of Māori.

*Disclaimer: All opinions expressed, unless referenced, are of Scarlett Rogers.

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Appendices

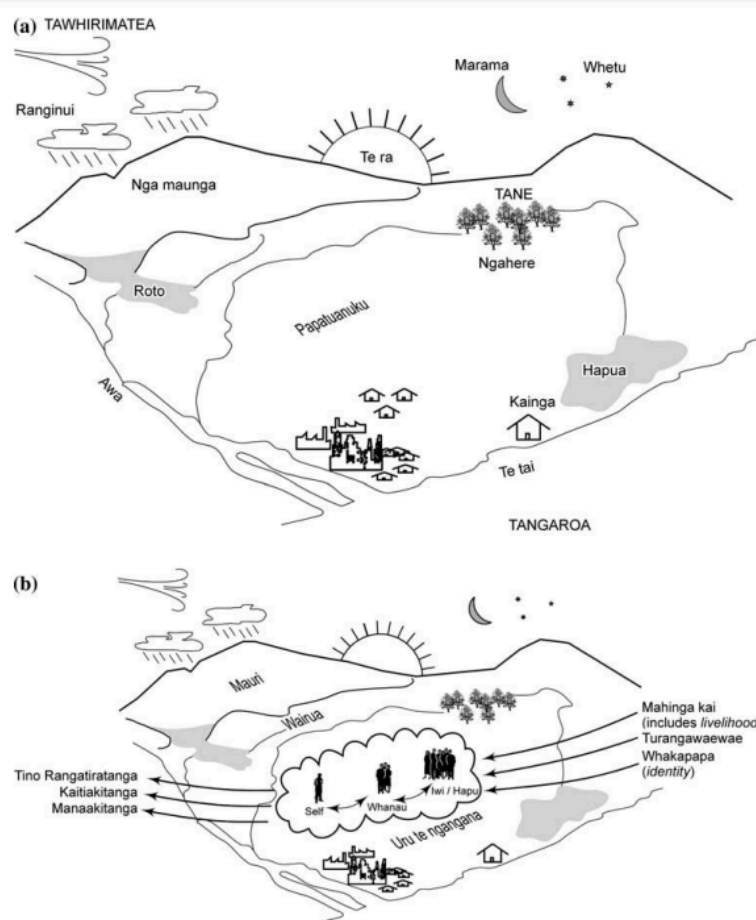


Figure 1. A: Traditional conception of a *Rohe Potae*. **B:** Integrated culture-environment linked well-being.

Appendix A: (Panelli & Tipa, 2007)