

KAUMĀTAUTANGA

Reciprocity: Māori Elderly and Whānau

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Despite several generations of Western influence, Māori society generally retains a positive view towards ageing and elderly people, affording them status and at the same time expecting them to fulfil certain defined roles on behalf of the whānau (family) and hapū (tribe and community). Over the next fifty years, however, the Māori demographic pattern will change, with substantial implication for service planning both in the area of Māori development and New Zealand's services for the elderly. Future generations of Māori elderly may be less able to depend on secure roles in Māori society and may have had less opportunity to develop a secure cultural identity. Unless their position is adequately considered, in advance, there is a danger that they will become a seriously disadvantaged and alienated group.

According to the 1996 census (Statistics New Zealand, 1997) the Māori population is youthful, more than 56% being under the age of 25 years (c.f. 34% for the non-Māori population). Furthermore by the year 2051 the Māori people will still have a younger profile than non-Māori. However, over the next five decades a combination of greater life expectancy and reduced fertility will lead to increases in the percentage of Māori elderly, with significant shifts in intergenerational reciprocity and a need for more deliberate planning to take account of new needs and opportunities. In many respects, therefore, and despite the lag, the Māori trend will follow the general national pattern towards an ageing society.

This paper explores three aspects of that trend: first, the current cultural roles and socio-economic standing of Māori elderly, kaumātua; second, the likely cultural profiles of the next generation of elderly; and third, the implications

of demographic and cultural changes for older Māori as kaumātua and leaders.

Age, Mana and Tribal Integrity

While the numerical strength of Māori people will depend on the vitality and healthy development of its large youthful population, cultural strength and enrichment will continue to depend on the active participation of its relatively small elderly population. The standing of a tribe, its mana, as distinct from its size, relates more to the visible presence and authority of its elders than to the vigorous activities of its younger members. Executive and industrial leadership may well rest with the young and the middle-aged but it is the older generation who carry the status, tradition and integrity of their people. Without leadership at that level a Māori community will be the poorer and, at least in other Māori eyes, unable to function effectively or to fulfil its obligations.

Two implications arise from this view of the significance of age in Māori society:

- first, the roles ascribed older people are not only positive, they are critical for the survival of tribal mana.
- second, with age comes a new set of expectations that often require the elderly to make major lifestyles changes if they are to cope with the expectations of their people.

Age by itself does not confer wisdom nor guarantee the skills necessary for effective leadership. Nor are the positive roles which elderly Māori men and women come to occupy necessarily unique to that age group. In contemporary Māori communities, however, there are particular roles which are enhanced if they are filled by kaumātua. Those roles include speaking on behalf of the tribe, or family; resolving disputes and conflicts between families and between tribes; carrying the culture; protecting and nurturing younger adults and children; and recognising and encouraging the potential of younger members. With advancing years both men and women are expected to

demonstrate spiritual leadership and to satisfy tribal needs in either religious or cultural contexts. Attendance at tangi (funerals) is a particular obligation. It is still considered undignified for young people to travel to a tangi without kaumātua to guide them and to perform, on their behalf, the many necessary duties. By the same token if a bereaved family does not have the visible support of older people, concern if not criticism for the family and for the circumstances surrounding the death will be aroused.

The marae, or centre for cultural and traditional activities, remains the most enduring Māori institution. On it elderly people are expected to lead, reciting the rituals associated with welcomes, eulogies, protocols, and tribal custom and maintaining oversight of hospitality for guests. They may well invite younger members to assume responsibility for some of those duties, though, however, usually reserving the last words for themselves.

The age when kaumātua roles are assumed is not fixed. Occasionally a young adult with exceptional skills will join those of advancing years. However, men and women even in their forties and fifties may be regarded as quite young, at least as far as some roles are concerned. By the mid sixties, eligibility for kaumātua status may be more universally recognised.

At the other end, there comes a time however, perhaps in the eighth decade, when an active kaumātua role is allowed to become a supportive one. At that stage, the very elderly are relieved of some of the more demanding roles and come to be regarded as 'taonga', treasures, greatly enhancing the wealth of the people, worthy of tribal protection, but spared the full impact of marae obligations.

The significance of age to the standing of Māori people is crucial to understanding the positive roles assigned within a Māori context. Even in situations far removed from a marae, such as at a school or hospital, perhaps a sports venue, Māori participants will prefer to be accompanied by a kaumātua when venturing into particular situations.

Age, Obligation and Retirement

Age, however, brings not only respect and recognition, but also obligation and expectation. In his eighth stage of psycho-social development, Erikson (1963) describes ego integrity and despair as poles characterising successful or failed adaptation. Ego integrity "is a post-narcissistic love of the human ego - not of the self - as an experience which conveys some world order and spiritual sense." (Erikson 1963). It is shaped by culture and transcends the limitations of personal concerns so that the self merges with the wider human condition.

Erikson's eighth stage captures to some extent the expectations on Māori elderly. When other New Zealanders might be contemplating withdrawing from public life, Māori elderly need to consider whether they will accept the new responsibilities expected by their own people. For some there may be little real choice. By virtue of genealogical descent, cultural competence, location (living near or on a marae), or family ties, they will inevitably be caught up in the nexus of Māori society. The possibility of not

participating will simply be dismissed by the family or by the individual. Contrary to Erikson's sense of contentment, the acceptance of a kaumātua role may do little to reduce the tension, fear or uncertainty that comes with accepting new roles and responsibilities, especially late in life. Initially, especially if the cultural gap is wide, all three may be exacerbated. But in the post-transitional stage, it offers an opportunity for greater emotional integration, more mature relationships and a renewed confidence in self if not in humanity as a whole. Other indigenous societies have similar expectations on their elders.

Just as some elders have little option but to accept a role prescribed by their culture, others may have little option but to discard it. Unable to speak or understand Māori, alienated from family and tribe, lacking in marae skills and incapable of relating to Māori realities, they will be unable to respond in a positive manner to pressure for the assumption of significant senior roles within Māori society. And even if the pressure is subtle, it may be perceived as excessively daunting to the point of being unattainable. Life choices will simply not include an eighth stage shaped by the responsibilities and privileges of being a kaumātua. Nor will that necessarily be a matter of regret.

Probably, however, for most Māori elderly in this decade, a measure of choice will exist. Inevitably it will impose some conflict. Life long interests and pursuits whether they be within the nuclear family, the sporting arena, social circles, will be sacrificed as other demands take precedence. Less oriented to personal comfort and endeavours, the life of the kaumātua becomes progressively more determined by the priorities of the marae, whānau or hapū. The list of public engagements goes up. Time at home decreases.

At a relatively late stage in life, new skills must be acquired, old ones refined and political insights sharpened. Transition will not necessarily be easy or even and the relative merits of two life styles may not always represent a comfortable balance.

For most New Zealanders, the transition from active employment to retirement requires significant adjustment. For Māori kaumātua adjustments must be often made in the opposite direction: reduced privacy, less time with family (and for the immediate family a need to share their grandparent with the wider community), longer "working hours" and relative loss of independence.

For some kaumātua the new roles may be seen as burdensome. Indeed, they are at least arduous. At the same time they can offer a satisfying lifestyle in which older people are fully and productively involved within their communities, contributing at an influential level and sharing in the vicissitudes of their wider families, if not the tribe as a whole. Furthermore the reciprocal obligations on the tribe go some way towards ensuring that the material and emotional needs of the elderly are met, and in a way which facilitates active participation in the community.

In exchange for the demands placed on older Māori, whānau or hapū recognise the need to provide a measure of security and comfort to their kaumātua. This additional

provision may take the form of special housing, such as kaumātua flats, transport (many groups have vans for the special use of kaumātua when they travel on tribal business); marae hospitality suites and financial assistance to cover out of pocket expenses.

Not all families are happy about the demands placed on an elderly aunt, grandparent, or parent. Some, keen to fulfil obligations to care for elderly parents by ensuring that they are not overstressed or unduly exposed to the elements, may in fact be overly restrictive, blocking access to community facilities or discouraging a wider role within the Māori community. Balance may be compromised by an over protective attitude defensively adopted to ward off subsequent accusations of family neglect.

Kaumātua Profiles

The situation described above has been confirmed by recent studies. A survey of 400 kaumātua aged 60 years and over was undertaken from Te Pumanawa Hauora at Massey University (Durie, et al 1997). Although the sample was biased towards Māori who were well-integrated into conservative Māori society, the study participants accounted for nearly two percent of all Māori over the age of sixty and the findings are therefore not insignificant.

The study found that kaumātua live active lives, physically, socially and culturally. Contact with whānau is close and responsibilities and obligations are reciprocal. Far from being isolated, three quarters of the kaumātua interviewed provided support for other whānau members as well as enjoying high levels of marae and iwi participation. Generally they were secure in their own cultural identity, competent in Māori language and comfortable with community expectations.

Te Hoe Nuku Roa

Similar findings emerged from Te Hoe Nuku Roa. The School of Māori Studies at Massey University is undertaking a longitudinal study of 700 Māori households, Te Hoe Nuku Roa, which enables cultural, social, economic and personal factors to be correlated. The households have been drawn from the Manawatu-Whanganui, Wellington, Gisborne and Auckland regions and were selected according to a stratified random sampling method involving primary sampling units weighted to reflect Māori population density (Fitzgerald et al 1996). The overall aim of the programme, now in its fifth year, is to provide a sound empirical base to inform the planning process and facilitate the development of policies and programmes appropriate to Māori advancement in cultural, social and economic terms.

Te Hoe Nuku Roa does not pre-suppose the parameters of Māori culture or identity, but attempts to link a variety of cultural and ethnic measures with other indicators so that a more comprehensive profile of Māori might be obtained. Māori diversity, dynamic change, multiple affiliations and self-identification, are four assumptions, which underpin the study.

The programme is built on a relational framework made up of two dimensions. One dimension comprises four

interacting axes - paihere tāngata (human relationships), te ao Māori (Māori cultural identity), ngā āhuatanga noho-a-tāngata (socio-economic circumstances), ngā whakanekeneketanga (change over time). The other dimension includes a set of indicators, ngā waitohu, to describe the four axes according to : levels of choice, access, participation, satisfaction, information and knowledge and aspirations (Durie et al 1995).

In the sample of 700 Māori households which form the basis of a longitudinal study, the number of participant kaumātua from the Manawatu/Whanganui, Wellington and Gisborne regions was not large, though in keeping with general demographic profiles. Of the 38 respondents over the age of 60 years, 12 were native speakers of Māori, while only 3 had no ability in te reo Māori. Over half regularly participated in marae activities, and a similar percentage had reasonable knowledge of cultural history, including genealogy. Over three quarters were well informed about tribal matters, while more than three-quarters had interests in Māori land. Almost all respondents were closely involved with whānau.

Both studies also showed that, while kaumātua were generally secure in a cultural sense, they were also confident about their well-being, nearly one-half reporting their health status as very good or excellent. Surprisingly, less than one-quarter of the Hoe Nuku Roa sample reporting a deterioration of health over the preceding year. This is in contrast to the relatively high levels of actual disability and the need for ongoing medical treatment, suggesting that kaumātua measure good health not so much by the presence of illness as the capacity to participate. Comparatively high levels of social and economic independence were also a feature of both studies: over one half owned the home they lived in and about a half lived alone or as a couple. More than two-thirds of Te Hoe Nuku Roa kaumātua have made some provision for retirement but in the kaumātua health study, very few had any private superannuation or insurance.

Overall, though variable, there is evidence from both studies of high participation within te ao Māori (Māori society), optimism, and positive contributions to society and to family - despite disability, lack of wealth, and the need for ongoing medical treatment.

The Next Generation of Older Maori

Over the next three to five decades it is likely that the profiles of Māori elderly will change. Two trends, already evident, will combine to alter the balance between generations within Māori society so that not only will there be proportionately more older Māori but the current roles may be less relevant or less widely applicable.

First, by 2051 demographic changes will have resulted in a rise of the total Māori population to nearly a million, accounting for some 21% of the total New Zealand population. Māori will be more visible in the country as a whole. Over that same time the proportion of Māori elderly will increase from 4% to 15%. Though still youthful, the population will have a larger cohort of over 60 year olds. At ages 65 and over the growth is projected to be in excess

of 300 percent so that even by the year 2001 over 6% of the total elderly population will be Māori.

This substantial change in age structure will have major implications for Māori society and for the maintenance and development of culture. Two questions will be of particular importance: first, will Māori elderly in the future be equipped to assume kaumātua roles?; and second, will the gap widen between older Māori who are integrated into Māori society, and those who are in effect alienated from conservative Māori society?

The first question - the readiness of elderly to fulfil kaumātua roles - will depend on several factors. A resurgence of Māori identity and culture over the past two decades may have come too late for many of the second generation of post World War II urbanised Māori. Alienated from their own culture for most of their lives, and less than comfortable in a marae situation, the transition to kaumātuatanga may pose immense difficulties to the point that many will be unable to fill a positive role within Māori society. Māori in many respects, but lacking the skills necessary for effective leadership, they may not be able to access the marae or its networks. Further, without ongoing contact with the tribe, there may be little expectation that they will play a specific tribal role.

In turn and as a consequence they may be even less able to depend on whānau for care and protection.

Emerging profiles from the Hoe Nuku Roa cohort aged between 40 and 60 years appears to justify many of these concerns. The sample of 97 adults in the 40-60 year age range from households in the Manawatu/Whanganui, Wellington and Gisborne regions, shows that unlike the over 60 years cohort, only 13% are native speakers (c.f. 40%) while 32% speak no Māori at all. Similarly, in terms of participation with whānau, 17% of the 40-60 year olds reported low levels of contact with whānau and 30% had no contact at all with a marae (c.f. 9% for the over 60 year olds).

Implications

These changes have implications for Māori development. Māori elderly in the future will not form a culturally homogenous group; their numbers will substantially increase; they may lack cultural and social skills required for effective kaumātua roles and as a consequence entry into Māori society as kaumātua may be problematic. At the same time, at least according to the Hoe Nuku Roa sample, they will not wish to be acculturated into Pakeha society.

Māori solutions to these problems must be encouraged. The Kohanga Reo movement is a good example of a Māori response to altered demographic and cultural conditions. Māori initiative must now consider other positive options for those who will be elders in twenty or thirty years time. It is a challenge that will need to address:

- alienation from mainstream Māori and Pākeha institutions
- altered demographic dependency ratios
- loose and uncommitted whānau ties

- progressively less State provision
- the changing affiliations of Māori
- the significance of the marae for future generations of Māori
- an increasing gap between older Māori who are culturally competent and Māori who are culturally alienated.

New roles for kaumātua will become as important as new approaches to economic self-sufficiency and tribal development plans take into account changing demographic patterns. However, although the active participation of kaumātua is an expectation, it is also important that unreasonable expectations do not burden Māori elderly. Over the past decade there has been a discernable trend towards placing excessive demands on kaumātua by expecting them to perform in non-cultural spheres with the same intensity and confidence they might demonstrate on a marae. Marae skills do not mean there will automatically be any corresponding acumen for policy analysis, or financial management, or executive leadership. Instead the role of the kaumātua is much more dependant on cultural, political, and strategic wisdom than on a detailed knowledge of the public service, or skills in teaching the intricacies of cultural safety to nursing students.

At present there is strong Māori interest in self-sufficiency and self-management. Iwi health care plans, an independent Māori educational authority and a network of tribal development banks are high on Māori agendas. In part, they represent a loss of confidence in mainstream delivery systems; but they also reflect a wider philosophy in which state provision and state responsibility are shrinking while the call for tino rangatiratanga - Māori control of Māori resources - is increasing. Within that context, responsibility for the elderly must be reassessed alongside other tribal priorities.

Conclusions

A reciprocal relationship exists in Māori society between kaumātua and community. A positive, if demanding, role is complemented by an assurance of care and respect. It is unlikely that this special role of the elderly on the marae or with the tribe will be eroded.

Changing demographic patterns, however, will lead to a much larger proportion of Māori elderly in the next century. And, as already apparent, many will be quite divorced from the tribal context. While it appears that socio-economic circumstances are improving, and that the next generation of Māori elderly will enjoy a higher standard of living, the cost may have been a loss of cultural skills. For many now in the 40-60 years age group, traditional kaumātua roles may never be seriously entertained. That in turn will have implications for the ways in which Māori elderly might participate in society, both Māori society and the wider New Zealand society.

Active planning to meet those needs is recommended. Māori solutions will require the active consideration of Māori leaders, in association with societal planners and policy

makers. Importantly cultural alienation must be addressed as much as socio-economic disparities. The positive role of Māori elderly represents a reciprocated arrangement whereby younger people use the skills of older relatives and in return provide care and support. In the absence of specific cultural skills, the potential of age must be further revisited, traditional roles should be seen alongside the evolution of new positive roles, and the expectations on elderly ought to take account both of the actual profiles of Māori elderly within the changing nature of Māori society.

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