

TE KŌ

PARA

PARA

AN INTRODUCTION TO
THE MĀORI WORLD

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Ritual Today: Pōwhiri

Suzanne Duncan and Poia Rewi

The marae is a place for people to gather and to connect, both physically and spiritually, to each other, to the land and to the atua. At a time when the environment outside of the marae threatened their maintenance, these bastions of Māori culture were able to shelter and preserve the rituals; they acted as ‘cultural retreats’. Hana O’Regan comments that: ‘Ko kā marae te wāhi morehu mo a tātou tikaka i ēnei wā. Ēkari, ehara i te mea ko te marae anake te wāhi kitea ai a tātou tikaka i mua’,¹ that is, marae are places of survival for our cultural practices. But in the past, the marae was not the only place they would have been seen. Just as there is a misunderstanding that tikanga is frozen in time, so too is the belief that Māori ritual is frozen in place. The notion that Māori rituals only occur on the marae ignores the performance of, or at the least the potential performance of, these rituals in other spaces.

The performance of the pōwhiri in relation to the marae space is of paramount importance when discussing it, though variations of it can be observed in other spaces. While the symbolism of the marae ātea and the whare tūpuna (meeting-house with ancestors represented within it) provides guiding principles as to the way the pōwhiri is performed, there are no limits as to the ‘scene of enactment’.² It is for this reason that this chapter will explore the rituals not only as they play out upon the marae space, but also with reference to their individual role and function within the wider context of Māori society,

*Ka rite te kōpara e kō nei i te ata.
It is like a bellbird singing at dawn.*

Like the clear morning song of the kōparapara, the bellbird, this book aims to allow the Māori world to speak for itself through an accessible introduction to Māori culture, history and society from an indigenous perspective.

In twenty-one illustrated chapters, leading scholars introduce Māori culture (including tikanga on and off the marae and key rituals like pōwhiri and tangihanga), Māori history (from the beginning of the world and the waka migration through to Māori protest and urbanisation in the twentieth century), and Māori society today (including twenty-first century issues like education, health, political economy and identity). Each chapter provides a descriptive narrative covering the major themes, written in accessible formal English, including appropriate references to te reo Māori and to the wider Pacific. Chapters are illustrated with a mixture of images, maps and diagrams as well as relevant songs and sayings.

Te Kōparapara is an authoritative and accessible introduction to the past, present and future of the Māori world for students and general readers.

Ko te manu kai i te miro nōna te ngahere, ko te manu kai i te mātauranga nōna te ao.

*The bird that feasts on miro tree berries belongs to the bush,
the bird that feasts on knowledge belongs to the world.*

Most of the editors and authors research and teach at Te Tumu, the School of Māori, Pacific and Indigenous Studies at the University of Otago, one of the most significant clusters of research-active Māori Studies scholars in the country. They live in Ōtepoti (Dunedin), in Te Waipounamu, also known as the South Island, which lies under the mana of the people of this land, Kāi Tahu. Māori who live in the southern parts of Te Waipounamu historically called the bellbird ‘te kōparapara’, and the editors have chosen this local version of the bird’s name for the book’s title to acknowledge the people of this place.

as well as the connection of these practices to philosophical foundations and belief systems imbedded and adopted, located and relocated over generations and geographies. We can then begin to understand how these rituals have developed and reflect on the pre-colonial realities of our tūpuna, whilst also increasing an understanding of the aspirations of many, including emerging generations, for these rituals to be re-normalised and reintegrated back into their everyday lives and communities. To restrict these rituals to the marae space, in our thinking and in practice, is, perhaps, a new form of colonisation.

This chapter focuses on major public rituals of encounter and functions that are performed on the marae, specifically in relation to the pōwhiri,³ and reflects on the importance placed on establishing relationships in Māori society, the value of whakapapa and the cultural bottom line of manaaki. It is important for newcomers to the culture and those who wish to learn more about these rituals to understand their function on the marae and ways to navigate the intricacies of the performance of these rituals; but it would also be a disservice not to demonstrate the transportability of these rituals into all elements of Māori society, including contemporary interactions.

Pōwhiri – Whakaeke Mai (The Formal Welcome Ritual – Come Hither)

While history suggests that Māori are adventurous and highly adaptive opportunists, there is also an element of risk adversity within Māori society. Rituals were developed to manage risk and mitigate any potential harm to ensure the survival and wellbeing of the community. Clear processes were established that would ensure cultural, physical and psychological safety during times of uncertainty and conflict, and especially during intertribal engagement. The pōwhiri is one such ritual. Often translated as a ritual of encounter, pōwhiri is in fact a complex system of a number of rituals. It is made up of many elements that serve to accommodate the laws of tapu, to recognise and pay due respect to mana and, most importantly, to effect the fullness of manaaki prior to, during and after visitation to the marae.

Pōwhiri and its components are governed by kawa that have been established by the tangata whenua. Kawa comprises a system of appropriate rules, rituals, practices and behaviour that would ideally occur and apply on the marae; in particular, when and how rituals are performed, the order of performance, the location of performance and those tasked with performing it. The term



‘kawa’ derives from the opening ceremony that lifts the restrictions of tapu from the whareniui, a ceremony that is called te kawanga whare (rituals regarding a building’s proposed use) or te tā i te kawa.⁴ Upon the establishment and opening of a marae, the marae community is responsible for deciding the kawa for their marae. This will be influenced by the kawa of other tribally related marae and the precedents that have been set on those marae, that is, the precedents normally set by tūpuna with direct affiliation. Kawa may also be influenced by the current needs of the marae and the environment it sits within. This includes cultural capacity, the economic situation of the marae and the physical position of the marae. Ultimately, decisions about kawa are made by the tangata whenua as they have the mana and it is their prerogative to determine the way rituals will be performed on their marae. It is equally important that, as the governor of kawa, they are also charged with upholding and ensuring the integrity of the practice they have determined. Therefore, every marae will have its own kawa and, while you will find similarities in practice within and across iwi, it is important to recognise the mana of each marae. Here you can see the direct role that a location may have on the performance of the ritual.

If the performance of pōwhiri were to occur in another setting, such as a university or community-based institution, the participants may be bound to

Figure 7.2
A wero taking place at beginning of pōwhiri.
Photographed by
Poia Rewi

perform such rituals based on the tikanga of the local iwi. One such example can be found at the University of Otago, Dunedin, located on Kāi Tahu lands, and the University of Waikato that stands on Waikato-Tainui lands, with each respectively adhering to Kāi Tahu and Tainui protocols and giving precedence to representatives of those tribes advising the rituals where possible.⁵

There are several underlying reasons for the pōwhiri process: one of the primary purposes is to mediate the coming together of two sets of tapu and mana, the tapu and mana of the tangata whenua and the tapu and mana of the manuhiri. Manuhiri who have not visited the marae before are considered to be waewae tapu. This ‘foreign’ tapu must be neutralised to ensure a constructive interaction. The pōwhiri process manages that risk and ensures that all parties are safe to engage freely and without restriction. In times of conflict and uncertainty, such as periods of intertribal warfare, the pōwhiri was also a mechanism to determine the intentions and purpose of the visiting group’s arrival.⁶

In a contemporary context, with the advent of telephones and the Internet, and a requirement to ‘book ahead’, the purpose of the manuhiri is often clearly established in advance. It is most likely to involve the management of tapu and the creation and strengthening of connections – spiritual connections first and then using whakapapa to draw physical connections as kin. For example, it is noted that manuhiri bring with them the spirits of their ancestors who are acknowledged throughout the process. Pōwhiri bring the people together and each ritual duly recognises the mana of each group – host and visitor. An equally important purpose, if not the paramount reason for the pōwhiri, is to welcome and to display manaaki for the visiting group, a core responsibility of all involved with the host marae. In fact, this powerful principle can impact on the manner in which the rituals are performed to ensure that the manuhiri are hosted correctly and, therefore, the mana of the visitors is acknowledged. There is also an expectation of reciprocal displays of manaaki and respect by visitors, because a balance of mutual respect results in a positive experience for both parties; it enhances the tapu and mana of all involved. An example of this might be the consideration hosts have in not making them wait longer than they have to at the gate, and, likewise, the visitors not straggling to arrive.

The various rituals that make up the pōwhiri, therefore, are practices that are implemented to fulfill their purpose. While the context of the event, the location and kawa of the marae, the availability of resources and numerous other factors will impact on the final process, the general order of events and usual components of a pōwhiri are as shown in Figure 7.3.

Figure 7.3
Flow chart of pōwhiri
process.



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