

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Tangihanga

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Abstract

The influenza pandemic of 1918, which killed 50 million people, has been acknowledged as the most significant disease event in human history. In response to the pandemic, the ways in which tangihanga (Māori funeral practices) were carried out changed. Bodies were immediately taken to the urupā (burial ground) without the customary extended ceremonies. Similarly, the impacts of the burgeoning COVID-19 situation has meant uncomfortable, albeit temporary, changes to Māori funeral practices. At the very worst part of the COVID-19 experience, tangihanga were essentially prohibited, and immediate burial or cremation became the norm. In some cases, tūpāpaku (bodies) were cremated with the intention that the remains would be returned to tribal burial grounds at a later date. This article will explore the impacts of COVID-19 on tangihanga and how technology has been used in this context with particular reference to Taranaki examples.

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Introduction

Tangihanga is a customary practice that holds great significance within Māori communities and whānau (families) bringing multitudes of people together to farewell the dead. Travelling the breadth of the Aotearoa New Zealand to attend tangihanga is commonplace and represents the great lengths that whānau and Māori communities go to, to pay their respects. It is not unheard of for whānau to travel all hours of the night and morning to arrive on time and be first to the gateway of the marae (traditional gathering place) to be then welcomed in and invited to farewell the deceased through oratory, song and gifts. These practices are traditional yet have adapted to the changing times and circumstances of Māori society. This article briefly examines the tangihanga process in light of COVID-19 and how tikanga (Māori practices and protocols) around tangihanga have come under threat, including physical presence at tangihanga, the adaptation of tikanga and reduced gatherings for final farewells. The article also highlights the critical role of technologies through the tangihanga process.

Methodology

A Kaupapa Māori research methodology which takes the Māori worldview and all its associated philosophies, customs and practices as valid and normal, has been used in this paper. Kaupapa Māori is a Māori-centred system of *tikanga* (Māori customs, practices and ethics), epistemologies, ideologies, theories and knowledge, which understands Māori history and culture as determined by *whānau* (family/families), *hapū* (sub-tribe/s) and *iwi* (tribe/s) and provides the means for critically examining the world from a Māori perspective (Nepe, 1991; Pihama, 2001; Smith, 2012). Based on principles that are coherent with, but not reliant on, critical theory, Kaupapa Māori is about radical consciousness and transformative action for

Māori (Pihama, 2001; Smith, 1999). Thus, Kaupapa Māori is a decolonising research methodology that reclaims space and positions Māori at the centre of the research (Smith, 2012). Kaupapa Māori legitimises Māori perspectives within the academy (Smith, 2012) and transcends institutional disciplines (Smith, 2011).

Changing *tikanga* - How Lockdown forced our *tikanga* around *tangihanga* to adapt

The word *tikanga* comes from the word *tika*, which means “correct, right, appropriate and fair” (Duncan & Rewi, 2018, p. 33). *Tikanga* are Māori cultural practices, customs and traditions, protocols, etiquette, manners, guidelines for behaviour, and customary practices (Duncan & Rewi, 2018). Mead (2016) states that *tikanga* is altered in light of changes that affect Māori: “landscapes change, governments change, policies change, and we change. Along the way *tikanga* Māori adapts and accommodates to the rhythm of change and the rhythm of life as generations pass on and new ones emerge” (p. ix). Furthermore, renowned Tūhoe scholar, Te Wharehuia Milroy, opined “*Me takahi te tikanga e ora ai te tangata*” (cited in Duncan & Rewi, 2018, p. 31). His profound statement expounds that it is sometimes necessary to break *tikanga* so that *tikanga* may endure in an ever-changing world (Duncan & Rewi, 2018). Duncan and Rewi (2018) argue that “*Tikanga* continually face the challenges of relocation, reinterpretation, [and] re-application” (Duncan & Rewi, 2018, p. 31). COVID-19 significantly challenged *tikanga*, and particularly those *tikanga* about *tangihanga*.

Pōtiki (2018) states that “Death is as much a part of the Māori world as life” (p. 137). When a Māori person died, the corpse was prepared—anoined and trussed—for *tangihanga* by close relatives (Buck, 1949; Higgins, 2011; Oppenheim, 1973). A natural method of excarnation was selected, which reflected the tribal environment (Best, 1934; Solomon, 2016). The bones were later retrieved, venerated with ritual, and discretely interred (Best, 1934; Higgins, 2011). In

contemporary times, however, Māori have become accustomed to entrusting the care of the dead to modern funeral services who embalm the corpse to provide a final and dignified image of the deceased (Rangiwai, 2018). Despite some adaptations, Higgins (2011) states that of all Māori cultural expressions, tangihanga rituals remain as the closest to those practised before colonisation. Undeniably, “Tangihanga is one of the longest-standing and lasting cultural bastions in the Māori world today” (Pōtiki, 2018, p. 145).

Tangihanga are considered by Māori to be the most important of all gatherings (Higgins, 2011) and the ultimate form of Māori cultural expression (Nikora et al., 2010). In this ceremony, the corpse lies at a marae (a complex of buildings where Māori rituals and cultural activities take place) (Higgins, 2011; Pōtiki, 2018). During several days—most commonly three days—people will come to pay their respects, and traditional speechmaking, chanting, and singing takes place (Higgins, 2011; Pōtiki, 2018). Indeed, the “ceremonial conventions associated with death are pivotal to Māori culture and tradition” (Pōtiki, 2018, p. 137). At tangihanga, people are encouraged to express their mourning openly and not hold back their grief (Higgins & Moorfield, 2004). On the final day of the tangihanga, a tohunga or minister of the church will officiate at a service held at the marae followed by burial at a urupā (Māori burial grounds) or cemetery (although cremation is becoming more common too) (Higgins, 2011; Pōtiki, 2018; Solomon, 2016). A hākari or feast follows the burial.

On Saturday 21 March, Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of Aotearoa New Zealand, announced a four-level COVID-19 alert system. The levels were as follows: Level 1: Prepare—the disease is contained; Level 2: Reduce—the disease is contained, but the risk of community transmission remains; Level 3: Restrict—high risk the disease is not contained; and Level 4: Lockdown—likely the disease is not contained (New Zealand Government, 2020). The alert

levels affected tangihanga in the following ways: Level 1—no restriction on tangihanga; Level 2—tangihanga restricted to 100 people; Level 3—tangihanga restricted to 10 people; Level 4—no tangihanga allowed (New Zealand Government, 2020). New Zealand went into lockdown on 26 March and remained at that alert level for almost five weeks (Kronast, 2020). During the Level 4 Lockdown, tangihanga were banned; this meant that Māori had to find other ways, such as digital means, to participate. Although Level 4 included the most severe restrictions, digital participation has been used throughout the levels.

Burrell and Selman (2020) argue that mourning in a COVID-19 context presents additional challenges at every stage of the bereavement process. Indeed, the absence of physical presence at funerals could have some impact on mental health (Beaunoyer et al., 2020; Burrell & Selman, 2020). However, digital technology offers people a way of participating online (Bear et al., 2020; Beaunoyer et al., 2020). In Māori cultural tradition, physical presence, represented in the practice of *kanohi ki te kanohi* (face-to-face), is fundamental to relationships in Māori society and is particularly crucial at tangihanga (O’Carroll, 2013).

The physical practice of *kanohi ki te kanohi* maintains strong kin relationships (Mead, 2016) and is the basis for many Māori customs and cultural practices, including those surrounding tangihanga (O’Carroll, 2013). O’Carroll (2013) opines that “Māori have long been early adopters of communications technologies” (p. 271). Digital technologies allow Māori to shift “*kanohi ki te kanohi* practices and rituals to the virtual space to empower their people with the ability and access to participate and engage” (O’Carroll, 2013, p. iii). Indeed, the rituals of tangihanga “are increasingly applied in virtual spaces as technology continues to advance” (O’Carroll, 2015, p. 201). Through social media, for example, Māori have been able to participate in tangihanga online as “tangihanga are shared on Facebook” (Keegan & Sciascia,

2018, p. 366). However, because of the tapu (sacred or restricted) nature of the dead in Māori society, it is essential to be considerate about how information, images, or video of tangihanga are shared online (O'Carroll, 2015).

Digitally mediated grief and grieving and the reliance on technology regarding tangihanga

COVID-19 has proved to be a challenging time for society in Aotearoa New Zealand but especially and in particular for Māori (Science Media Centre, 2020). The implementation of the COVID-19 Alert Level system forcibly, through the law, enacted restrictions that impacted Māori practices of farewelling the dead, the process of grieving and coming together during a difficult time were more or less reduced to an exclusively immediate family and funeral director event (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2020).

During COVID-19 Alert Level 4, many whānau Māori experienced the loss of loved ones. The process, as identified by the Te Puni Kōkiri, outlined that once a whānau member passes away, only one whānau member would be able to accompany them to make arrangements for immediate burial. Whānau were not permitted inside of the funeral home, and in negotiation with the Funeral Director, the tūpāpaku would be buried promptly at the nearest urupā or public cemetery or be refrigerated upon request by the whānau (to be buried at a later date and outside of Alert Level 4). Furthermore, the restrictions placed on whānau to attend any ceremonial proceedings were restricted to immediate family members only (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2020).

Living away from ancestral lands represents a particular challenge for whānau when the death of a whānau member occurs and in particular when whānau cannot return home due to enforced restrictions such as that of COVID-19 Alert Level 4. The inability to return to one's ancestral

lands to grieve the loss of whānau members would bring = to bear raw emotions, deep grief and pain and a yearning to be close to one's kin during this time. Instead of returning for tangihanga, which would have been the normal proceeding, whānau across the country were finding new ways to connect spiritually to the tangihanga process and grieving process.

During such a difficult time of processing grief in a lockdown situation, it was eased by the holding of virtual karakia (prayers/incantations). Taranaki, for example, led the way in this approach - local tribal radio station, Te Korimako o Taranaki (Te Korimako o Taranaki, 2020) arranged a panel of exponents and leaders from the Taranaki region to come together and share in karakia and waiata (songs) to support whānau who were experiencing loss and grief during Lockdown. The first Karakia Zoom was broadcast to Facebook Live on 5 April 2020 with more than 11K views on the video, over 200 comments and over 300 interactions (likes, etc.) were recorded on the video (as at September 2020).

“Ko mātou e kore e tae ā tinana ki a koe, i runga i te rāhui, kua whakaritehia e Taranaki mounga e tangi atu nei ki a koe” (Te Korimako o Taranaki Facebook Live, 2020).

(Those of us who were unable to attend in person, because of Lockdown, our people of Taranaki mounga have come together [online] to mourn you).

These words were uttered by one of the iwi leaders during the virtual karakia ceremony held shortly after the burial of a Ngāruahine Rangī leader (a tribe in South Taranaki). The online karakia ceremony attracted a gathering of grieving whānau from across Aotearoa who were lulled into a state of reflection and sombre as karakia were shared. Grief and grieving was being nurtured through the words of karakia, which in an otherwise ordinary situation would have been afforded in a whareniui of a marae where the tūpāpaku would be laid, surrounded with whānau whānui (wider family). However, this process was mediated through an online

platform. While the physical connection to the tūpāpaku and the connection of noses through hongī, or embracing of one another was not present, the spiritual connection to home and each other was felt through the Facebook Live karakia. In this way, the process of grieving was eased through virtual connections,

“Haramai rā... kia karakiahia tahi tātou, i roto i te matenui, kua whakawehewehe nei tātou i roto i ngā kāinga. Engari ko te ia o ēnei karakia ka noho tahi tātou kia pakari te wairua, kia piki ake te wairua o tēnā ō tēnā ō tātou (Te Korimako Radio Station, Facebook Live, 2020). (Come so that we may be together in prayer, despite the global pandemic and being isolated in our own homes, the purpose of these karakia are to solidify us and bring us together, to strengthen our spirits and to lift our spirits, for all of us).

The importance of social media during Alert Level 4 in Aotearoa New Zealand is anecdotally recognised by whānau, hapū and iwi as being integral to how we managed and coped with grief during a Lockdown. For the health, wellbeing and safety of our older generations, our kaumātua (elderly) who occupy the roles of the marae, where tangihanga are ordinarily played out, there would have been a significant risk to them. Whānau Māori from across the country challenged to reimagine tangihanga and grieving during a global pandemic, highlighted the importance and therefore, the reliance of human beings on technology for connection. It is because of these online tools and spaces that we have been able to bear witness to laments, song and oratory at the highest levels, and in recognition and honouring of our dead – these values and principles of tangihanga in a cultural lens have been maintained despite being physically disconnected and enabled through technologies (O’Carroll, 2015)

When Aotearoa New Zealand moved to Alert Level 3 in May 2020 and then Alert Level 2 in July 2020, Māori communities were again required to think about how to manage tangihanga gatherings under restrictions. An example of this was again situated in Taranaki of which the first three-day tangihanga was to be held in the region during Alert Level 2. There was a lot of pressure for whānau to adapt the tangihanga process to accommodate restrictions in place (Te Ao Māori News, 2020). Upon arrival, manuhiri (visitors) were asked to remain in vehicles until it was their turn to enter the marae via the pōhiri process (formal welcome ceremony). Once groups were ready to ascend the marae, a check-in process was undertaken by completing a contact tracing form at the gate. Once ascended onto the marae, no hongī (formal greeting through the pressing of noses) were exchanged, and upon the conclusion of speeches, visitors in groups of 10 were asked to enter the wharenuī (meeting house) where the tūpāpaku laid, to pay their respects briefly and then to exit immediately so to allow the next group of 10 into the wharenuī. Food tables for meals were prepared as if in a café; smaller numbers at tables and food served to their table (such as at a restaurant) and by the same server. This Level 2 tangihanga became the template for other whānau to see, in situ, what tangihanga can look like under specific restrictions and that the intention of cultural practices and protocols, while adapted, continue to be uplifted (Te Ao Māori News, May 2020; Te Korimako o Taranaki, May 2020).

These restrictions on the ability to carry out some of our most important components of what makes us Māori, have been challenged in and throughout Lockdown. However, the role of the social media, Zoom video conferencing, and online digital platforms were utilised to connect whānau who not able to return from overseas (due to the heavy border restrictions of quarantine time of 14 days) and those who were immune-compromised, unwell and asked to stay away from the marae.

Since June 2020, Aotearoa New Zealand has moved through the Alert Levels leaving much uncertainty for whānau around the restrictions upon us if someone were to pass away. Despite the alert level, marae are required to display COVID-19 QR Codes for contact tracing, are encouraged to have sanitiser and masks available and continue to remind whānau during a tangihanga to stay home if unwell.

The resilience of Māori communities through the Lockdown period in Aotearoa New Zealand is evident in the ability to adjust and adapt tikanga Māori to suit the occasion – without the agility and flexibility of these practices and protocols (Duncan & Rewi, 2018), Māori cultural practices would be severely threatened. The role of technologies, social media and video conferencing tools more specifically have enabled the practice of Māori cultural protocols around tangihanga in an otherwise isolating situation of being effectively locked down to one's own home for four weeks. These tools have become a lifeline for the (re)connection of whānau, hapū and iwi during times of loss and grief. If it were not for these technologies and the online support given to whānau, tangihanga and the grieving process associated with it, the process of farewellling dead would have been left only to immediate whānau members and funeral directors. Similarly, as we move up and down Alert Levels and restrictions ease, whānau have held memorial services on the marae to recognise those who passed during Lockdown and who did not have an appropriate tangihanga ceremony or service. These occasions also enabled wider whānau to share in the physical grief process that was not afforded to them during Lockdown.

Conclusion

Enduring online tangihanga practices - no matter the Alert Level - has seen more of a reliance on communicating about tangihanga arrangements and restrictions via online social media

platforms as well as the use of online video conferencing during tangihanga to ensure whānau feel connected and are able to participate in tangihanga. We will undoubtedly see more adaptations to our cultural practices if COVID-19 continues to have a presence in our society, and these may be enduring. The wellbeing of our community is paramount, and it is by intention and design that our tikanga Māori have been built to adapt and adjust to the situation and environment at hand and to ensure we keep whānau safe from infection as well as continue to carry out our practices as Māori, as iwi, as hapū, and as whānau.

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