

# PUTTING DOWN THE *HANGI*

## Upholding the *mana* of the *marae*

Tony Whincup and Ross Hemera<sup>1</sup>  
Massey University

### *Abstract*

A *hangi*, or traditional method of underground cooking using steam from heated stones, is historical and contemporary, symbolic and utilitarian, communal and individual; and reaffirms cultural values and beliefs. It is a central and vital component in the maintenance of *tikanga* (Maori cultural customs and practices). Within the ever-changing technologies of contemporary life the *hangi* adapts and survives while maintaining its core cultural meaning. This photo essay records the established practice on an urban *marae*. Although traditionally procured materials of wood and stone were not available the ‘waste’ from contemporary life—old sheets of corrugated iron, wooden produce palettes, the couplings of discarded railway lines and yesterday’s newspapers—were brought in as alternatives in order to carry on the practice of ‘putting down the *hangi*’. This adaptation speaks much for the cultural significance of the *hangi* and its dialectical relationship in establishing and maintaining a sense of identity for both the individual and the community.

The pleasure and pride experienced in producing a *hangi* is not so much about individual involvement but rather in contributing to the community. The *hangi* is a part of an encompassing practice of upholding *mana* (the supernatural force in a person, group of people, place or object) and *manaakitanga* (prestige through hosting and hospitality) that is inextricably a part of an underpinning Maori worldview. This article focuses upon the *hangi* as a part of the *powhiri* process in which *manuhiri*, or visitors, become one with the *tangata*

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*whenua*, ‘the people of the land’, with reference to a particular *hangi* that took place in Maraeroa Marae, Porirua in December 2009. [Note: All quotations included as photo captions in this article are the words of *kaumatua* Peter Morgan, Ngati Maniapoto, who is in charge of the Maraeroa *hangi*.]

### *Keywords*

*hangi, tikanga, marae, marae atea, tikanga, mana*

## Introduction

The *marae*<sup>2</sup> is a place where the expression of cultural values and beliefs are reaffirmed through enactment and ritual performance. It is where key customs and traditions such as *manaakitanga* or hospitality are practiced.



*Figure 1 – Maraeroa marae, Porirua, lower North Island, New Zealand.*

The *hangi*, the traditional method of cooking underground using steam from heated stones described in this photo essay and written text, took place at Maraeroa Marae,

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Porirua, New Zealand. The beauty and spiritual peace of the *marae* is in sharp contrast to the half empty, graffiti-vandalised shops across the road.



Figure 2 – Vacated shops close to the marae.

Activities associated with groups of people gathering together are guided by *tikanga* or cultural customs and practices. The *tikanga* at a *powhiri* or Maori welcome ceremony is based on cultural values and beliefs that give expression to a Maori view of the world. The associated values and beliefs are exemplified in the Maori creation narratives.

Oral traditions explain the universe and everything in it as interrelated and interconnected. The creation mythology uses personification as a means of describing the natural world and its origins. *Rangi-nui* (the Sky Father) lay in embrace with *Papa-tu-a-nuku* (the Earth Mother) and their children were confined to the small dark space between their bodies. After much debate and trial among the children, *Tane* (the personification of the forests) lay with his back against *Papa-tu-a-nuku* and pushed up against the sky with his legs. Using all his strength *Tane* was able to separate his parents and heave *Rangi-nui* high above into the heavens. As a

result light came into the world and there was now a place to live. *Tane* had created the light in the world, as we know it today. The knowledge established here concerns the fundamental states of *Po* (darkness) and the state of *Ao* (lightness). As well as representing a personification of the natural elements *Tane* and his many brothers each represent a spiritual dimension about an aspect of the natural world. For example, *Rongo-ma-Tane* is *atua* or god of cultivated food and *Tangaroa* is *atua* of the sea and all the creatures in it. *Atua* are reference points that are constantly referred to in cultural practices today. As descendants of the *atua*, *iwi* (tribe) oral traditions reiterate this *whakapapa* (genealogy) because it establishes the connection of people to the natural world. This connection identifies the *tapu* (sacredness) people are born with and the *mana* (prestige) that people may aspire to in caring for the environment. The *powhiri* on the *marae* is the symbolic process during which *manuhiri* (new visitors to the *marae*.) are led from *Te Po* (the darkness) through to *Te Ao Marama* (the World of Light).

The concept of *manaakitanga* prescribes the responsibilities of the *tangata whenua*, the 'people of the land' or hosts. These responsibilities are derived from maintaining personal as well as tribal *mana* and adherence to *tapu* requirements. *Manaakitanga* is accorded when *manuhiri* have arrived to stay. The process of hosting embodies a number of associated components of which many are undertaken as part of the *powhiri*. These include particular customs that acknowledge the significance of *tapu* and *noa*. The removal of the *tapu* surrounding the *manuhiri* is necessary in order that they are made *noa* (ordinary) and able to mingle freely with the *tangata whenua*, their hosts.

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Figure 3 – The boundary of the marae complex is marked by sentinel figures.



Figure 4 – Maraeora Marae hosted a hui (gathering) for 40 to 50 motor bikers who were involved in a week-long tour, visiting most of the major towns in the north island of New Zealand.

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Figure 5 – The powhiri begins with a karanga by a woman from the tangata whenua calling across the marae grounds to the visitors waiting at the gate. There is often a reciprocal call back from the manuhiri in acknowledgment. Sometimes a wero (challenge) is performed by a young warrior followed by a haka powhiri (dance chant of welcome) as the manuhiri are drawn onto the marae.



Figure 6 – Once all are gathered mihi (formal greetings and speeches) are exchanged. There is whakairo (oratory acknowledgment) to the atua (ancestors) and to both the living and the dead. An

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*expert speaker will not only recite the whakapapa of his people by describing the links between tribal ancestors and the living but also explain the connections between tangata whenua and manuhiri.*



*Figure 7 – Each speech is followed by a waiata (song) often sung by a group. The purpose is to show support of the orator's words and to remove the tapu from the oratory process. At the conclusion of the speeches the manuhiri usually present a koha (gift) to the tangata whenua. In traditional times this gift would often comprise food as an outward expression of reciprocity and was a means of upholding the group's mana. Maori oral traditions make use of proverbs or whakatauki as a way of referencing important cultural messages. This whakatauki talks about the sharing and combining of resources as a means of collectively going forward in strength.*

Next the *manuhiri hongiri* (press noses) with the *tangata whenua*, sharing together the sacred breath of life. The final part of the *powhiri* is the sharing of *kai* (food). Traditional foods are explained as gifts from the *atua*. Birds of the forest come from *Tane*, seafood comes from *Tangaroa*, cultivated vegetables come from *Ronga-ma-Tane* and wild plants from *Haumia-tiketike*. The *hakari* (feast) is an essential component that fulfills two important *tikanga*. Food, and in particular cooked food, will remove the *tapu* of the *manuhiri* making it possible for the two groups to come together. The *hakari* also provides an opportunity for the *tangata whenua* to express their *mana* through their capacity to host and provide for the wellbeing of their guests. Food is a vital part of this wellbeing and much of the host's *mana* depends upon the quantity and care of its preparation.

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*Figure 8 – On the marae there is always a place for putting down the hangi.*



*Figure 9 – “Bit of overkill, but they enjoy it a lot – when their grandmother passed away they wanted to do a hangi for her... this was their input... something from the heart, from the boys to their grandmother. Just so she knows they are helping out.” Irons are inserted amongst the wooden pallets and newspaper added to get the fire started. “Some make the fire inside the hole.”*

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Figure 10 – “While it’s burning people stand around talking. If the kaumatua [old men] were there they would be having a beer... to ‘christen it’. Hangi is a social focal point, even women can come... and chat with us as long as they don’t pick up a shovel or start telling us what to do around the hole!”



Figure 11 – “The guys set it up wrong – criss-crossed them and set the irons up too high. This led to the burning palettes toppling over and having to be held back.” Traditional materials used are manuka

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*(tea-tree) rather than palettes: “it’s in the taste as well. Instead of iron special stones are used. There are two main types – ones from the river and volcanic rocks. To find the river rocks... you have to go out at a certain moon... at full moon it makes the certain stones glow in the water, but the best stone to use is the lava rock. River rock you can use twice if you are lucky.”*



Figure 12 – Peter Morgan is in charge of the hangi, which is a big responsibility. “Most times I have about six for the team – that’s enough.”

Peter learned from his grandparents, “little kids hanging round the hole... never had baskets put the food straight onto the rocks. When the food came out that hole belonged to the kids – they just ate off the rocks – that was beautiful!”

*For a couple of years now – every time I have done a hangi there is this tui, a native bird, sitting up in the tree. He sits there all the time you are doing the hangi until it comes out and then it flies away. Just flies around in this one tree and see him looking down. I have adopted that as one of the kaumatua, the old men, from up there – just watching down, he must have been an old man that always spent his time out the back, in the hangi pit. So he is up there making sure it’s being looked after, that it is still being used. Before I got up there it hadn’t been used for quite a while.*

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Figure 13 – The food baskets are heated over the fire to ensure they are completely sterile before re-using.



Figure 14 – “The women run the kitchen and order the men around – it’s their domain, fair enough too. But they can’t tell us what to do at the hangi.”

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Figure 15 – The division of the roles for women and men is based on customary practices where the mana of each is recognised and upheld.



Figure 16 – Baskets of pork prepared for putting into the hangi.

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Figure 17 – “The preparation for the hui... lands on the shoulders of the marae – to keep the mana of the marae, as how your food comes out. That’s the main thing that a lot of people remember – it’s the food.” Food is organised weeks in advance. “This one was run by the Women’s Refuge, the clinic is associated with the marae. The women do all the shopping and organisation of the menu. They will put a menu out for every day.”



Figure 18 – Dragging irons into the pit for cooking. “Easier with the irons as they have the holes to help drag it into the hole, makes it a lot easier. Don’t look hot but are damn hot.”

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Figure 19 – “Meat goes down first... big meat at the bottom, smaller meat like chickens and then the veggies.” Vegetables include potato, kumara or sweet potato and pumpkin – cabbage can line the baskets instead of foil.



Figure 20 – “Use the white sheets so there is no dye in the material... very wet.” The sheets are soaked in buckets of water near the fire until the moment of use.

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Figure 21 – “Sit the sacks up on the side so the dirt doesn’t fall in. Put dirt on the edge of the sacks first.”



Figure 22 – “I like five hours... I like the minimum of five hours, five and a half even better... Heat and steam – it’s a pressure cooker in there. Want as many irons as you can, as hot as you can for as long as you can.”

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*Figure 23 – Much experience is required to judge the correct cooking time. Factors such as wind cooling the irons, the pit being wet, the ambient temperature, the amount of food and so forth are all variables that impact on the cooking.*



*Figure 24 – “The sacks are placed in a certain way to peel back without getting the dirt in the food.”*

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*Figure 25 – After five and a half hours of cooking the food is finally unwrapped for the tables.*

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*Figure 26 – Even though most marae are equipped with excellent cooking facilities, the cultural meaning associated with the hangi continues to reiterate cultural aspirations as an enjoyable and shared collective experience. Once the manuhiri shares the meal they complete the process of becoming one with the tangata whenua. “It just a traditional thing, we can do it inside, but it’s still not the same as this – it’s the sacks that give it the taste as well as enjoying the time spent doing it... the satisfaction at the end of it when they see the smiles on people’s faces.”*

The *hangi* has its origins in the history of the Pacific way of life and even today remains a very practical way of cooking for a large gathering of people. Given that *hangi* cooked food acquires its own unique flavours and succulence, it is considered a special *hakari* treat. Because ‘putting down a *hangi*’ draws on the combined expertise and helping hands of many, it reaffirms the collective aspirations of *manaakitanga*. Today the process of preparing, cooking and serving a *hangi* is a celebration and reaffirmation of *tikanga* customs and *whanaungatanga* or the sense of belonging through shared experiences.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> All photographs in this article were taken by Tony Whincup on Maraeroa Marae, Porirua, New Zealand, 4 December 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The *marae* is a place of deep significance for Maori, as it is a symbol of tribal identity and solidarity. The *marae* consists of a meetinghouse, called the *wharenuui*, a *wharekai* or dining hall as well as the *marae atea*, the courtyard in front of the *wharenuui*.

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