

VIEWPOINT

Being Maori

John Broughton, BSc,BDS, Lecturer in Maori Health, Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, University of Otago Medical School, Dunedin.

Exactly what is "a Maori"? Many (European) people it seems have trouble with this question. In fact, some people of Maori descent have trouble with this question as well. In order to provide an answer however, several other questions arise such as, Who is a Maori? What does Maori mean? And most important of all, what does "being Maori" mean?

What is Maori?

Maori is the name given to the indigenous people of New Zealand.¹ The use of the word Maori to describe a person of the native race of New Zealand was a comparatively modern event beginning about 1850. Prior to this, early European writers used the term "natives", "New Zealanders" or "native New Zealanders."² The origin of the name is not known, but the indigenous population are supposed to have referred to themselves as Maori well before the arrival of the pakeha.¹ Today, the meaning of the term Maori also implies the culture of the indigenous people of New Zealand. The Maori have always referred to themselves as the tangata whenua, or the people of the land, of Aotearoa. Culture is defined as the customs and civilisation of a particular time or people.³ Maori people often use the expressions: "That's the Maori way....", or "Our Maori way of doing things..." to describe or to justify certain behaviour or beliefs. These expressions are how the Maori of today describe what they do, their way of life, their customs, practices and philosophies.

To some people, the term "Maori culture" means haka, action songs and poi dances. It is not. The word, culture³ can also mean "refined understanding of the arts and other human intellectual achievement". But these elements of the Maori performing arts, haka, poi and waiata are just one small part of Maori culture. Maori culture is the way of life of the Maori people. The ancestors of the Maori arrived in Aotearoa about AD 800 from either the Cook Islands, the Society Islands or the Austral Islands.⁴ They came on a carefully planned expedition, deliberately setting out to discover a new land. It is more than likely that over the next 500 years several ocean going vessels arrived with new settlers landing at different places at different times. They brought with them their own culture. As they established themselves in the new land and adapted to the new environment more settlers arrived and internal migrations occurred. The result was the establishment of Maori society in Aotearoa. The largest effective political grouping was the iwi, or tribe.⁵ The iwi were named after canoe ancestors or one of their descendants. They were made up of a number of related hapu (subtribes) which all descended from a common ancestor. The European (pakeha) has been in New Zealand since the arrival of Captain Cook in 1769. The impact of a new culture imposed upon the Maori and their way of life was devastating. The introduction of new diseases, the land wars of the 19th century and the alienation of the Maori from their land resulted in a marked decrease in the Maori population⁶ to the point where many people believed the Maori to be a dying race. The acceptance of Christianity, new technologies, written language and inter-marriage also had a marked effect on the Maori and their way of life.

However, the Maori was not to die out and the 20th century has seen a marked increase in the Maori population. Maori culture today is obviously not what it was when Cook first arrived, but it has survived by adapting to changing times. This adaptation of the Maori to the new culture imposed upon it did not occur without the cost of political domination, economic exploitation and cultural alienation. Maori culture today, is still the way of life of the Maori people.

What does the word Maori, mean?

The word maori means normal, usual, ordinary.² Williams gives the example: Tirohia iho, e hine ma, ki te parera e tere atu na; ehara tena, he manu maori (That is not it, just an ordinary bird - it was a paradise duck). The word was often used to distinguish objects from others which had special characteristics; eg, rakau maori, ordinary inferior trees as opposed to finer timber trees; tangata maori, man, human being, as opposed to a supernatural being. Barlow¹ states that the word maori was used as an adjective to describe anything in its natural state. Wai maori is ordinary water that can be used for ordinary everyday things such as washing, bathing or drinking. In contrast, wai tapu is sacred or holy water, ie, water that has been set apart, for use in religious practices only. The word, maori was used to describe the indigenous people of the land, that is, to refer to the ordinary inhabitants of Aotearoa. Reed⁷ states that "to the Maori himself there was no need for a word to define his own people until the arrival of the Pakeha". Thus we could presume that prior to the coming of the European to New Zealand there were no Maori people in this country! What there were of course, were Ngati Porou, Nga Puhu, Ngati Kahungunu, Ngai Tahu for example. The people identified themselves tribally. The word Maori was used to encompass the total indigenous population such that a pantribal concept was introduced for the very first time.

Maoritanga

Maoritanga is another concept. Reed⁷ states that "the ancient meaning of the word was: to explain, to make clear, or to reduce to ordinary understanding. The modern meaning of the word is Maori ideology or "Maori-ness". Rangihau⁸ takes the view that:

"There is no such thing as Maoritanga because Maoritanga is an all-inclusive term which embraces all Maori. And there are so many different aspects about every tribal person. Each tribe has its own history. And it's not a history that can be shared among others.

"I can't go around saying that because I'm a Maori that Maoritanga means this and all Maoris have to follow me. That's a lot of hokey. I have a faint suspicion that Maoritanga is a term coined by Pakeha to bring the tribes together" Rangihau maintains that it is their own tribal history and traditions that give Maori people their identity. This view supports the idea that prior to the coming of the European there were no Maori as such in this country.

Who is Maori?

For statistical purposes, a Maori was defined as a person with half or more Maori origin.⁹ Persons who were less than 50% Maori by blood were classified as nonMaori. The Maori Affairs Act 1953 stated:

"Maori" means a person belonging to the aboriginal race of New Zealand; and includes a half-caste and a person intermediate in blood between half-castes and persons of pure descent from that race." However, the Maori Affairs Amendment Act 1974 broadened the definition of a Maori person. Under that Act a Maori means a person of the Maori race of New Zealand and includes any descendant of such a person. What that meant was that any person of Maori descent who wished to identify as a Maori person, regardless of the degree of Maori blood, could now be defined as Maori. Before the 1986 census of population,¹⁰ the basis on which a person's ethnicity was defined was biological origin. A person of Maori descent was therefore

required to state their degree of Maori blood as a fraction. For example: $\frac{3}{4}$ New Zealand Maori, $\frac{1}{4}$ European. Many Maori people were uncomfortable with this as they saw themselves for what they were, Maori. Although they may have other blood lines, they identified themselves as being totally Maori. In the 1986 census, people had the opportunity to determine their own ethnicity as they saw it. Self identity was the basis for ethnicity. However, these changes to the definition of who was a Maori for statistical purposes meant that it was not possible to directly compare Maori statistics from earlier censuses with the 1986 and subsequent censuses. In the 1986 census¹¹ 295 314 persons "specified themselves as half or more New Zealand Maori plus those who did not identify the degree of ethnic origin". This was 9% of the total population. However under the wider definition, 404 778 persons identified themselves as being of New Zealand Maori descent which was 12.4% of the total population. In the 1991 census¹² 323 998 persons specified themselves as New Zealand Maori as their sole ethnic group. A further 111 621 persons specified that they were New Zealand Maori "as one of several ethnic groups". This made a total of 435 619 persons who identified as belonging to the Maori ethnic group and was 12.9% of the total population. In addition to these statistics, a person with New Zealand Maori ancestry at the 1991 census was considered to be a person who had Maori ancestors, no matter how distant they are. There were 511 278 persons with New Zealand Maori ancestry at the 1991 census.

Thus there are three concepts on which definitions of Maori can be based¹³:

1. The biological concept which emphasises lines of descent and the degree of blood of different ethnic groups.
2. The concept of cultural affiliation which emphasises the way people define themselves and the group to which they feel most closely related.
3. The concept of descent which emphasises being descended from a Maori but does not specify degrees of blood.

It should be noted that ethnic statistics collected by the National Health Statistics Centre have been based on the biological concept with persons of 50% of Maori blood being classified as Maori. Pomare⁹ suggests that Maori numbers are underestimated in health statistics and that the differences in health status between Maori and nonMaori populations are actually much wider than those reported.

What does "being Maori" mean?

It is all very well to say that a person may have Maori blood, has Maori ancestry or is of Maori descent. Does that make a person Maori? Not necessarily. Being Maori means, in the first instance, being a descendant of the original inhabitants of Aotearoa, ie, having a descent line from a particular waka (canoe) which, then determines the iwi (tribe) and hapu (subtribe) of a person. This is the tribal identity of a person. Through intermarriage a Maori person today may identify with not only one, but two or more waka and iwi.

But being Maori is more than just recognising ones tribal identity. It is a psychological process. It involves the acknowledgement of a distinct cultural identity. For Maori people cultural identity is concerned with te whanau, (the family); te whenua, (the land) and te reo, (the language).

The family of a Maori person is recognised by having a whakapapa (genealogy) which links a Maori person to their whanau (family), to their hapu and to their iwi. As a result of this, a person then has a turangawaewae, an ancestral base location which gives certain rights and privileges in that place, and a marae. The marae¹⁴ is the traditional meeting place of the Maori. It is the courtyard in front of the meeting house where the ceremonies are conducted. The family of a Maori person today is not merely the nuclear family of parents and siblings. For Maori people the family is very much recognised as being the extended family with three or four generations in one direction and brothers, sisters, cousins, and whangai (adopted siblings) in the other direction.

Cultural identity is closely associated with the land in that there was a territorial boundary within which the Maori person lived with his whanau, and identified with it as part of their hapu, and as part of their iwi. So one belonged to a whanau, which belonged to a hapu, which belonged to an iwi, which belonged to the land.¹⁵ Geographical landmarks which identify that land were and still are very important. The following whakatauki (proverb) is a good example:

"Ko Aoraki te Mauka, ko Waitaki te awa, ko Kai Tahu te iwi."

This translates as the ancestral mountain and river of the Kai Tahu people.

Awatere¹⁶ states that "Maori sovereignty is the Maori ability to determine our own destiny and to do so from the basis of our land and fisheries". The colonial processes that have continued for over 200 years made it very difficult for Maori people to be responsible for themselves and to control their own lives. The one thing that was essential for colonisation was the land. The land as the very thing with which the Maori identified so strongly. It was also the economic base on which the people depended for their livelihood. The alienation of the Maori from their land through breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi, the land wars of the 1860's and unjust acts of legislation reduced many Maori to poverty. Thus it became a struggle for Maori people to retain and to maintain their mana (dignity) and hence their Maori identity. The unfortunate reality for many Maori people today is that being Maori means a struggle for survival in a modern world. Te reo or the language is central to any culture. It is probably the most important aspect of cultural identity for Maori people. The etiquette and protocol of the marae would not be tika, or correct, in any language but te reo Maori, the Maori language. The whaikorero or oratory is one of the arts of the Maori. Unfortunately, the reality is that many Maori people today have grown up through no fault of their own, being denied their own language. The advent of the kohanga reo (language nests) in the 1980's and kura kaupapa Maori (Maori language immersion schools) has already made an enormous impact in retaining and maintaining the Maori language.

Thus being Maori means having, living, recognising, acknowledging a whole range of beliefs and practices. The extent to which these beliefs and practices are acknowledged and actioned varies considerably from individual to individual. Today, perhaps one of the most visible expressions of being Maori is in the observance and ritual of the tangihanga, as compared to a funeral. For it is here that the world of the human and the spiritual dimensions come into direct contact.

Walker¹⁷ presents a document called 'Being Maori Is' which is acknowledged to be of Tuhoe origin. It lists a series of statements which illustrate for the authors exactly what being Maori is for them. One of the statements reads "Belonging to a particular tribe which is the best in the country". Tribal identity is thus recognised as being essential for understanding what being Maori is. Another statement reads, "Having 250 000 brothers and sisters. Maori people identify closely with each other. One of the most significant statements of all which clearly demonstrates the process of being Maori today is:

"Not giving up the struggle for survival".

The Maori today

Despite the assaults that the Maori have endured upon themselves and their culture it has survived nonetheless. The Maori are still adapting to the changes in the society which have been occurring all around them. The significant change in recent times has been the post-war migration from an essentially rural lifestyle to an urban existence. In an effort to maintain mana Maori there have been a number of positive initiatives undertaken by the Maori people themselves including the establishment of urban marae. These are often referred to as being for nga iwi o

nga hau e wha, the people of the four winds, which is a pantribal concept. For many Maori people living away from their traditional areas meant that there was no immediate place for them to express their Maori identity in a truly Maori environment. The urban marae which have evolved throughout the country certainly provide this need. Another important development has been the Kohanga Reo movement of which there are now over 500 throughout the country providing the immersion in the Maori language for preschool children. A great deal has been achieved in the last two decades by Maori people, for Maori people. A great deal remains to be done. Being Maori is just as important today as it was 100 years ago. The words of encouragement by the kaumatua (elders) to the younger generation: *kia mau ki to Maoritanga* – hold fast to your Maoritanga, are important if the Maori are to survive. The Whakatauiiki or proverbial saying “*Toi te kupu, toi te mana, toi te whenua*” is full of truth. It could be translated as, the permanence of the language, prestige and land: without Maori language, without prestige or mana and without land, the Maori will cease to exist. These are the important aspects for understanding what being Maori really means for Maori people today.

Correspondence. Mr John Broughton, Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, University of Otago Medical School, PO Box 913, Dunedin.

1. Barlow CB. *Tikanga whakaaro*, key concepts in Maori culture. Auckland: Oxford University Press 1991.
2. Williams HW. A dictionary of the Maori language, seventh edition. Wellington: Government Printing Office 1988.
3. The New Zealand pocket Oxford dictionary, Ed, Burchfield R. Auckland: Oxford University Press 1990.
4. Orbell M. *The natural world of the Maori*. Auckland: Collins 1985.
5. Walker R. *Ka whawhai tonu matou, struggle without end*. Auckland: Penguin Books, 1990.
6. *New Zealand official 1990 year book*, 94th edition. Wellington: Department of Statistics, 1990:157-8.
7. Reed AW. *An illustrated encyclopedia of Maori life*. Wellington: Reed 1963.
8. Rangihau J. *Being Maori. Te ao hurihuri, the world moves on. Aspects of Maoritanga*, Ed King M. Wellington: Hicks Smith 1975.
9. Pomare E, de Boer, G Hauora. *Maori standards of health. Special Report Series 78*. Wellington: Department of Health 1988.
10. *Demographic trends 1991*. Wellington: Department of Statistics 1992.
11. *New Zealand official 1992 year book*, 95th edition. Wellington: Department of Statistics, 1992.
12. *1991 census of population and dwellings, New Zealand Maori population and dwellings*. Wellington: Department of Statistics 1992.
13. Kilgour R, Keefe V. *Kia piki te ora, the collection of Maori health statistics, discussion paper 15*. Wellington: Department of Health, Health Research Services 1992.
14. Tauroa H, Tauroa P. *Te marae, a guide to customs and protocol*. Auckland: Reed Methuen 1986.
15. Durie E. *The law and the land: te whenua, te iwi, the land and the people*, Ed Phillips J. Wellington: Allen & Unwin and Port Nicholson Press 1987.
16. Awatere D. *Maori sovereignty*. Auckland: Broadsheet Magazine 1984.
17. Walker R. *Nga tau tohetohe. Years of anger*. Auckland: Penguin Books (NZ) 1987.