A question of identity for our rangatahi

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This paper combines the views of both the author and a rangatahi, Areti Metuamate. Areti is from Ngati Kauwhata and Ngati Haua iwi, as well as being of Cook Island and European descent. At the time he wrote his thoughts, Areti was a 16 year old at Hato Paora College, Feilding. In 2002 he is the Head Boy of Hato Paora College. His thoughts are presented in italics.

A reflection

On a trip to Palmerston North in September 2002, the Minister of Youth Affairs, John Tamihere, described 2002 as ‘annus horribilis’ in terms of New Zealand’s space of youth crime, much of which he said could be attributed to Maori (Eames, 2002: 1). This article suggests that it is important for our young rangatahi to have a sense of identity in being Maori as this in turn has a stronger likelihood of leading them into positive pursuits rather than negative pursuits similar to those described by John Tamihere. In addition it impresses upon adults the role that they need to play in ensuring that our rangatahi are indeed the leaders of our communities in the future. While this article is written from the perspective of a rapidly ageing adult, it incorporates the perspective of a rangatahi who alongside of me was asked to speak about identity for our rangatahi at a forum looking at youth issues.

What is identity?

Ko wai koe? No hea koe? These two simple sentences are critical for us as Maori, helping us to identify who we are, where we come from and who we are connected to. Sadly however, there is an increasing number of Maori who are not able to link back to their roots as Maori, or who have developed a whole new identity in order to cope with the modern world that they live in.

Maori cultural identity has traditionally encompassed knowledge of whakapapa, marae, language, whenua, whanau and whanaungatanga (Durie 1996, Metge 1995). Maori were raised in a community where identity was
as a part of a whanau and where your grandparents bore the responsibility for teaching you who you were and how you were related to others. The social structures of the hapu and iwi further supported the communal identity of a person. Knowing who you were meant also knowing what hapu and iwi you came from and how you inter-related with others.

Our identity is who we are. We are seeds of our tupuna and we represent a great whakapapa and history, and that is why it is important for us to learn the ways of our old people and to know where we come from and ultimately where we want to be. It’s about awareness. It’s about being aware.

Our identity is influenced heavily by those around us and by the type of environment we live in. Our mums, dads, kuia, koroua, our brothers and sisters and other family friends all play a big part in the development of our identity. As a young Maori New Zealander, knowing who I am and where I come from is very important.

For some of us, these concepts may still have a strong influence in forming our identity, but in our constantly changing world there are also many other factors that have impacted on the shaping of our identity. Most prominent has been a western perspective of identity where the primary emphasis is not communal but rather on the characteristics of individuality. Erikson (1968) believed that this individual (personal) level of ‘identity’ focused on a sense of sameness and a unity of personality that is felt by the individual and then recognised by others (Bowles 1993: 418). The individual focus emphasised independence from the family unit as you grew up.

History would show that colonisation and deliberate attempts to assimilate Maori to a western perspective of identity would result in generations of Maori being made to feel different and lesser beings than their Pakeha counterparts. Maori cultural identity was in many ways effectively repressed and marginalised.

Generations were punished at school for speaking Maori, others were wrongfully imprisoned when their land was taken from them, and laws were developed to ensure that traditional medicines and spiritual practices could no longer be used. This effectively began soon after the Treaty of Waitangi was signed and still occurs today. Maori were told that if they wanted to succeed they needed to grasp the knowledge of the Pakeha and to forget about their own cultural institutions.

So effective were these attempts at assimilation that many Maori rejected their own cultural identity and either tried to imitate Pakeha New Zealanders or played out stereotypical roles of being a carefree, unambitious people who did not have much chance of getting ahead in life. The move from rural to urban areas after World War II further perpetuated the growing gap for Maori from their traditional roots. ‘No longer exposed to tribal homes, a loss of ‘culture, traditions and language’ gave way to ‘alcohol, drugs and crime’. Negative identities were assumed (Durie 2001: 56). The strong warrior image was a romanticism of the past, replaced by Maori who were faced with many coping problems in their modern day lives. Many Maori now appeared unable to have meaningful contact with their own language, customs, or inheritance, with no evidence of the wider society being geared towards any expression of Maori values and culture (Durie 2001: 54).

Can you imagine what it must have been like for generations to be told that their cultural identity was worthless? Can you imagine how that effectively made people feel after a period of time? People reacted to these influences in a variety of different ways. Some still managed to maintain close ties to their marae and to their hapu and...
iwi. Others maintained their Maori connection by maintaining relationships with organisations like the Maori Women’s Welfare League, the Maori District Council or Maori urban organisations. Still others did not have a lot of involvement in things Maori but simply knew that they were Maori, and still others were strongly influenced by other factors and as such preferred not to strongly identify with being Maori. Today Maori live in diverse cultural worlds, with not one reality or single definition of identity encompassing the range of Maori life styles.

These diverse realities have affected many Maori whanau but the loss of cultural identity has been most notable with our rangatahi and their sense of identity. Many Maori whanau have been totally fragmented. Not only are they victims of societal attempts to assimilate us as ‘New Zealanders’, but they have also become victims of the negative statistics generated in our society in relation to – prisons, the health system, social services and the education system.

Whanau which have maintained strong ties with a traditional cultural identity have tended to come from isolated areas. There is also an emerging group of modern whanau who are reclaiming their cultural identity with pride – people who have been influenced by movements such as Kohanga Reo, Kura Kaupapa and Wananga. These families are moving back to papakainga, are bringing their tamariki up with the Maori language and are also maintaining strong links with their marae, hapu and iwi.

As adults we are products of our history, but it is important that we learn from our history in order to ensure that there is not a repetition of the past. In our complex world how is it that as adults we help our rangatahi to grow up with positive sense of identity, particularly when we ourselves may also be products of that assimilationist environment? Peers and other elements in society play a pivotal role in forming how our rangatahi identify, but it is important that we also see that their whanau can also play an important role. We also need to get it right, by ensuring the pakeke-tamariki relationship helps to develop positive self esteem and cultural identity so that the rangatahi are active participants and leaders in their communities.

How does this affect our relationship with our rangatahi?

Our rangatahi are crying out and we as pakeke/adults have a responsibility to nurture and care for our young people. We need to hear the voices of our young people and create more dialogue between the generations.

The Maori population is currently a youthful population, with the number of people under 15 years accounting for some 37 percent of the total Maori population, and the median age being 21.6 (Durie 2001: 6). This is a substantial portion of our population who will be the parents of tomorrow and who need support in growing up with a strong sense of who they are and where it is that they come from. It is understandable that given the diverse realities of Maori society that have been previously described, that we have rangatahi who are growing up in a minefield in terms of identity formation. Not only are there the complexities occurring within the culture, but there are also outside influences that originate overseas. Globalisation is creating a new environment that particularly influences our rangatahi. In my day it was the Rastafarian movement, but today it is American Black culture with rap and hi hop music, label clothes and behaviour. This has ultimately led to the formation of new identities that influence being Maori.

I want to talk about ‘rap’ music and ‘hoodies’ and ‘gangsters’ and
the so-called ‘cool’ and ‘not-so-cool’, the ‘what’s mine is mine’ and the ‘rip off the system’ syndrome.

These are for me where some big problems for youth begin. In speaking as a rangatahi, I feel honest in saying that many of our generation are trying to be somebody they are not. Many of us are trying to hide our true identities behind aspects of a foreign culture, and although I have no problem with rap, hoodies, gangsters and being cool – no problem at all (because these are not bad things), I do have a problem with people who put this wannabe ‘Afro-American mentality’ before their own cultural heritage and identity. I become concerned when I see the youth crime statistics and note that Maori are at the top of the list and that Maori are also at the top of the ‘youth suicide’ statistics and ‘youth pregnancy’ here in Aotearoa.

I then wonder how many rangatahi are knowledgeable about their language, about their tikanga and about their whakapapa? I ask this because I believe these elements are more important than trying to gain status in a gang or trying to become ‘cool’ in schools, or trying to out-do the pakeha in the nation’s ‘negative statistics’.

A sense of self and identity is integral to the growing up process for all children with much of their identity being formed in those first seven years, but growing up Maori demands extra strength. While the early years are influenced by the values, attitudes and family lifestyle each child is born into, sooner or later a Maori child, has little choice but to confront the forces coming from society at large that devalue Maori cultural identities in all sorts of subtle and indirect ways. At a point when our young people might be suffering a crisis of identity, they may also be facing the crisis of adolescence. This means two wammies that are difficult for rangatahi and adults alike to work through.

Durie (1996: 23) says that ‘cultural identity should not be regarded as an optional extra or as something from a mythical past, but as something central to the well-being of contemporary Maori’. Therefore we should be encouraging our rangatahi to develop a sense of cultural identity as this will help them to move positively into the future. Of course the dilemma is that many of their parents’ generation had also grown up away from their connection to marae, whanau, hapu and iwi. However, this needs to stop and as adults we need to do some work on ourselves to at least support our rangatahi in their journey of discovery.

I ask the question, where does this ‘cool person’ or ‘gangster mentality’ come from? I know for sure that the answer is not New Zealand and it definitely isn’t Maori. I ask myself why on earth we as rangatahi Maori, as young New Zealanders are trying to be like someone else? Are we not proud to be Maori? Don’t we not want to have a ‘positive’ identity of our own?

Where to in the future?

Thank goodness identities continue to be moulded as life circumstances change, so that even those that don’t currently have a strong Maori identity can acquire this given sufficient confidence and opportunity (Durie 1997: 157). The critical piece here is the acquisition of confidence and opportunity. The truth is that in order to acquire a secure and meaningful identity, and to enjoy good health and a sense of well being, Maori people must be able to live comfortably as Maori and as New Zealanders. While it may be that not every rangatahi or matua for that matter
believe that cultural identity is an important part of identity formation, I am of the opinion that a lack of strong cultural identity causes many difficulties for rangatahi. It is important therefore that our rangatahi are nurtured under a korowai that allows them to proudly claim ‘He Maori ahau’ ‘No ______ahau’. This is the beginning of a journey that allows our rangatahi to make the connections of discovery where they learn about themselves as individuals but also about how they link to a wider communal identity. As adults if we have not taken this journey ourselves then it might be that we accompany our rangatahi on their journey. In order to cater for this, whanau, hapu and iwi need to strategically plan activities which encourage our rangatahi back to marae where they can learn about themselves. They need to open the doors to information that will help these young people strengthen their knowledge of who they are and where they come from. It is really important that as adults we embrace our young people. The new world means that we cannot be too hard and harsh on our young people or we will lose them and they will walk away. As adults we are competing against all the other attractions of the wider world that entice our rangatahi away from their whanau and their marae. We therefore have to be serious in finding exciting ways of working alongside of our rangatahi as cultural identity makes them unique and exciting young people, but it also ensures that the future for us as Maori is left in safe hands.

Maybe in moving towards the future we need to return to the past and heed the words of Apirana Ngata.

E tipu e rea mo nga ra o tou ao;
ko to ringaringa ki nga rakau o te Pakeha,
hei oranga mo tou tinana;
ko to ngakau ki nga taonga a o tipuna,
hei tikitiki mo to mahunga,
me to wairua ki te Atua,
nana nei nga mea katoa.

Ngata was encouraging Maori youth to seek out knowledge derived from science and technology and to blend it with Maori custom (Durie 2001: 3). Ngata was urging movement in two directions simultaneously, and warned against turning away from either the Western world or the Maori world.

Given the reality of how our history has affected our sense of identity as adults, it is important that we work with our rangatahi to find positive solutions to some of the issues that they are currently facing. This is not easy at times when the generation gap looks like a chasm. However, our rangatahi are currently faced with many complex issues to deal with and while they may have some solutions of their own to these issues, this may not always be the case. Creative solutions have to be found that also ensure the voices of our rangatahi are heard. Our Maori communities need to address the gap between our matua and rangatahi as a priority to work on. If we believe that our people are our biggest resource and our most important taonga, then we need to move beyond complacency to find as many ways as possible to work alongside our rangatahi, to positively encourage them in the future. Practically, as adults, we need to think of strategies that will help reinforce a strong Maori identity in our rangatahi? To our rangatahi I would ask, “What help do you want from adults in order to move positively into the world of tomorrow as young Maori?”

Annus Horribilis is a sad state of affairs to arrive at in describing the current state of our Maori youth. This doesn’t acknowledge the
many positive community, hapu and iwi initiatives that are attempting to ensure that our rangatahi do not have to question their identity, that know who they are and how it is that they belong. Many of these groups operate on the ‘smell of an oily rag’ in trying to provide preventative programmes, leadership programmes and rangatahi hui that allow many of our rangatahi who are questioning their identity, a pathway which will allow those questions to be answered. It may be that whanau, communities, hapu and iwi, matua and rangatahi alike have to purposefully strategise for ways of ensuring a positive future for as many of our rangatahi as possible.

A message here for us all is that we need to get our act together, need to support each other and we need to make sure we are focussed on the same kaupapa. ‘Ka huihui tatou, ka tu. Ka wehewehe tatou ka hina’

References


