The uniquely female art of karanga

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Ko Maua Toku maunga tapu
Ko Ngati Ranginui raua ko Ngaiterangi oku iwi
Ko Sonia Hibbs tōku ingoa
Ko te taha o tōku matua tuturu, he Ngati Pakeha ia, kei Otumoetai tona kāinga noho, ko Eddie Hibbs tōna ingoa.
Ko te taha o tōku matua whāngai, ko Ngati Ranginui te iwi, ko Pirirakau te hapū, ko Reg Borell tōna ingoa.
Ko te taha o tōku whaea, e toru nga whanau. Te whanau tuturu, ko te whanau Parkinson no Opotiki me te whanau Maka no Kaihau. Ko te whanau whāngai tuatahi o tōku whaea, ko te whanau Tutahi no Maungatapu, ko Ngarino Tomika Tutahi tōku kūia, i Hairini tona kāinga noho i nga wa o mua. Ko Marlene Borell tōku whaea Noreira ka mihiri aroha ki o Mauao me nga wai o Tauranga Moana, tena koutou, tena koutou, tena ra tatou katoa.

Introduction

Traditional Māori philosophies follow the example of te ao tūroa, the natural world, and are guided by ngā Atua katoa. Every aspect of the natural world is demonstrative of balance; these natural principles provide Māori with an intrinsic understanding of the interrelatedness of all things and an appreciation of the balance necessary for the productive functioning of all relationships.

Māori philosophies include a fundamental understanding of the balance between te ao tangata and te ao wairua, the physical and spiritual spheres, and an easy acceptance of the balance necessary between the essence of male and female and the complementary roles performed by each gender.

This essay, however, by examining the uniquely female art of karanga, focuses upon the essence of wāhine, keeping in mind that for every female position there is a male counterpart.

I begin by describing the role of ngā Atua wāhine in the creation of the world. This is followed by a description of karanga and one aspect of the wairuatanga associated with this art form. I then identify the female energy associated with karanga and finally describe the role of karanga within the powhiri process.

Woman’s role in the creation of the world

It is important to remember that every iwi, hapū and even whānau will have their own creation stories; stories relevant to their own rohe, histories and landscapes; stories that explain human relationships and connections to the natural world while also providing an understanding of how we came to be.
A theme common throughout all these stories, however, is the majestic procreating power and awesome reproductive energy of wāhine; a totally unique energy responsible for helping create the world.

**Te Po**

Te Pō; she who is the deep night; she who is complete and utter darkness, darkness upon darkness, darkness with a different knowing to that of light. Te Pō, she who goes back beyond the gods themselves (Grace, 2000).

It was the whare tangata of Te Pō that gave essence to Papatūānuku, earth mother. Papatūānuku was born of Te Pō and grew in the darkness, darkness with a different knowing to that of light.

Grace’s (Grace, 2000) understanding of Te Pō being wāhine makes perfect sense. If we think about the life giving creative hum of the universe of course it is whare tangata.

A child in the womb, the seeking, the searching, the conception, the growth, the feeling, the thought, the mind, the desire, the knowledge, the form, the quickening (Grace, 2000: 65).

**Papatuanuku, Hine-ahu-one, Hine-ti-tama and Hine-nui-te-po**

It was in Te Pō that Papatūānuku, the great earth mother, was born and grew and it was in Te Pō that she found Ranginui, the great sky father. They clung together as lovers and had many children. Trapped between their parents’ tight embrace the children longed for freedom, movement and growth. They longed for the knowing of light. One of the children, Tāne, separated his parents and by doing so allowed growth and light to penetrate.

Papatūānuku is our ancient earth mother. She cannot be owned, bought or sold, she nurtures and protects us in this world of light until we finally return home to Te Pō.

With room to move and grow in the light, Tāne longed for a female companion capable of producing te ira tangata, the human element. He searched and searched, encountering the essence of many female beings along the way, together producing the many different birds, trees and creatures of the forests. These creatures while perfect were not the element Tāne was searching for. In desperation he went to his mother, Papatūānuku, for guidance. Papatūānuku directed him to Te Kurawaka, the very female essence of herself, where she stored the energy of wāhine. Papa instructed Tāne to form wāhine from the red clay of her own body, which he did. When the woman was complete he passed to her the sacred breath of this world.

The woman’s name Hine-ahu-one, woman formed of clay.

Together Tāne and Hine-ahu-one produced a child, a daughter named Hine-ti-tama, woman of the dawn. Dawn, the sacred time when night and day embrace each other on their eternal journey into the future.

Hine-ti-tama grew into a woman, not knowing Tāne as a father, only as a husband. One day when she asked him if he knew the origins of her father, his evasive answer revealed the truth. Deep within her being she knew it was not right that the father of her children also be the
father of herself. She could not live with this thought, so left Tāne to look after their children in this world while she travelled home to Te Pō where she waits to care for her children in the next world. Hine-tī-tama is the origin of human conscience, now known as Hine-nui-te-pō, great woman of the night. As Hine-nui-te-pō the cycle is complete. As promised she now waits to embrace us when we leave this world and return home to Te Pō.

**Karanga**

On a purely physical level the karanga is usually a very high pitched penetrating call which is always delivered by a wahine. Traditionally, the karanga was delivered by women past childbearing age; kuia whose age and life experience had earned them respect and endowed them with the wisdom and matauranga necessary for such a role (Ferris, 2004: 58).

There are usually three basic components to a karanga. The first call is to welcome the manuhiri to the host marae, the second is to poroporoaki the dead of both groups and the third is in reference to the kaupapa or reason the two groups have come together (Ferris, 2004: 58).

Clues to a literal understanding of karanga can be found in the word itself; *ka* is a verbal particle used to describe events in the past, present and/or future and *ranga* a word meaning weave (Gough and Tairuru, 1998). One function of the karanga, therefore, is the weaving together of past, present and future (Ferris, 2004: 17-18).

The different stages of a karanga can take the discerning listener on a journey that encompasses all three measurements of time. ‘It awakens the world gone, the world today and the world to come. It connects all three’ (Ferris, 2004: 61).

The karanga also weaves together the living and the dead and has the ability to take one to another place on a journey unlocking wairua.

The intrinsic tapu of wāhine, especially that of kuia, is also evident as a kaikaranga apart from displaying the skills mentioned above, also has the unique ability, power and mana to negate any unseen negative forces that may be present.

**Wairuatanga associated with karanga**

The karanga is an expression of emotion (Ferris, 2004: 60).

The word wairua when broken down literally means two waters. Water, in all its forms, comes from one of two sources, ‘...it either arrives as rain from Ranginui, or it comes as a spring, breast milk, from Papatūānuku’ (Johns and Johns, 2000: 39).

It is said that the rains, mists and snows are tears of greeting and arohā shared between Ranginui and Papatūānuku (Winitana, 2000: 20). Water therefore is the medium by which the emotions of our ancient parents are shared – it is pure arohā.

In terms of the wairuatanga of karanga I believe it is the kaikaranga that reflects the role of water in this situation, as she is the medium by which arohā is shared between Rangi and
Papa. With her feet firmly planted on Papa and voice raised to Rangi she acts as a conductor or pathway for the unique energy shared between the two. It is indeed an honour.

This idea is supported by Ferris who notes the main intention of karanga is arohā (Ferris, 2004); *aro* meaning feelings or emotions and *hā*, being breath (Gough and Taiuru, 1998). The kaikaranga then is responsible for giving breath or expression to the feelings of our ancient parents and is a vessel where the two waters meet.

It is also important to note that the human body is largely made up of water, so in a special way we are all reflections of the arohā shared between Rangi and Papa.

**The female essence and energy within the art of karanga**

It is said that the karanga is not unlike that sound a woman releases during childbirth (Ferris, 2004). To me it is not so much the actual cry, because many women do not physically cry out while giving birth, but more an internal sound that resonates throughout the body. From my experience it is an intense high pitched hum that builds in intensity as the pains increase and the actual time of birthing comes closer.

On another level I believe the karanga is a re-enactment and tribute to the ritual of birth. While the physical actions are very different the spiritual intention and focus is the same; similar patterns being repeated over and over again.

Firstly they both act as a pathway from one world to another. A new-born baby has come from the place of ngā Atua, and the whare tangata is the sacred pathway between that world and this.

Kuia who have ceased to be the physical pathway between worlds but whose bodies, minds and hearts still carry the memories and knowing of childbirth now become spiritual pathways by way of karanga.

Likewise the karanga provides a *safe word pathway* (Tauroa and Tauroa, 1986: 50), that crosses the physical space between manuhiri and tangata whenua, and also acts as the medium by which the ancestors of both groups meet.

This idea is repeated through the ritual of birth as a new-born baby, indeed every human being, is the living point at which two groups of ancestors have met.

The notion of weaving together the past, present and future is also very evident. A new-born baby not only represents the future because of the life yet to live and a continuation of whakapapa but also the past as it is the physical manifestation of layer upon layer of generations stretching right back to ngā Atua themselves.

The shared experience of giving birth connects us as wahine to our past; to generations of tüpuna wahine stretching right back to the birthing time of Hine-ti-tama, Hine-ahu-one and Papatūānuku. This notion is repeated through karanga. When wahine stand to karanga they are repeating an ancient practice that connects them to generations of wahine past plus those yet to come.
Both experiences signify a time of kaha, foresight, intense focus, emotion, wisdom and responsibility in a way that is purely wāhine. The shared experience of birth plus being responsible for new life provides wāhine with a deep understanding and an intrinsic appreciation of life; these understandings and responsibilities duplicated through karanga.

Huata comments on the wisdom of wāhine: ‘…wāhine have an inbuilt notion of continuity and this continuity is that beyond themselves’ (Huata, 2002).

**Karanga in the powhiri process**

The unique sound of the karanga flying above the marae atea will usually signify the beginning of the powhiri. The kaikaranga belonging to the tangata whenua side will always begin by calling to the manuhiri. This first call welcomes the visitors and signals them to come forward. A basic example of this first call could be:

Haere mai te manuhiri tūārangi ki tēnei o tātou marae, haere mai, haere mai, haere mai (Ferris, 2004).

The manuhiri, who up until this point would be waiting at the gate or outside the area of the marae atea, would return the call.

Karanga mai e te marae e tū nei , karanga mai, karanga mai, karanga mai (Ferris, 2004).

The second stage of the karanga now begins with the tangata whenua responding a poro-poroaki to the dead.

Mauria mai ngā mate i waenganui i a koutou, kia tangihia, kia mihihia, kia poroporoaketia, e tatou e (Ferris, 2004).

The manuhiri, who by now have walked slowly onto the marae atea, will stop walking and with heads down will remember the dead and pay respect to the loved ones of both groups. The manuhiri will respond with a similar call.

Karanga mai ki ngā mate o tātou kua wehe atu ki te pō, karanga mai, karanga mai, karanga mai (Ferris, 2004: 59).

The third stage begins with the tangata whenua turning to the kaupapa or the reasons for the coming together of both groups.

Haere mai koutou ki te kaupapa o te rā, haere mai, haere mai, haere mai (Ferris, 2004).

The manuhiri who by now may have made their way across the atea to the front of the porch may respond in a similar fashion.

Karanga mai ki te röpü nei e tautoko ana te kaupapa o te rā, karanga mai, karanga mai, karanga mai (Ferris, 2004).

This part of the powhiri usually ends at this time with a karanga telling the manuhiri it is time to sit. Sometimes when a koha has been given there will also be a karanga in accep-
tance of the gift.

The karanga in the powhiri process can be used to signify who the manuhiri are, where they are from and what the purpose of their visit is. The kawa of the marae can even be explained during the karanga, perhaps saving those manuhiri unfamiliar with the kawa embarrassment later on. The men on the paepae, if they are wise, will listen intently for clues as to the identity of the visitors as this will enable them to adjust their kōrero accordingly if needed.

The karanga can be a unique conversation strictly between the women folk; a conversation that involves ngā tupuna and ngā Atua.

**Conclusion**

Ngā Atua wāhine provide us with a foundation on which to build our lives as wāhine Māori. Knowing that as Māori women we are linked directly to them instils an enormous sense of pride in oneself which in turn provides the strength, dignity and self respect necessary to lead a positive life.

To me the karanga is one way in which we as Māori women can honour ourselves, each other, our tupuna and most importantly those Atua wāhine who continue to play a major role in all aspects of our lives.

**References**