

Traditional Māori Kinship Structures

Kinship structures within the Māori society play an important role not just in the grouping of people, but more importantly in defining the social, cultural, and economic values and ideals of that particular group of people. Kinship structures define the basic household group and, upon birth, a Māori takes a place in the cultural, social, and economic realm in which that household exists. Thus, it follows that a particular Māori's customs, beliefs and ideals has a direct root in kinship. However, this place in society goes farther back than merely kinship structures and is not necessarily a direct function of them. Since *whakapapa* is at the root of kinship structures, it is more accurate to declare it as the source of a particular Māori's cultural, social, and economic principles.

The Waka

The highest level of Māori kinship is the *waka*. The *waka* consists of a 'loosely organised cluster of tribes which descend from the crew members of one of the canoes' (Mead 1997, p. 191). Thus, the *waka* is shown to not only be the highest level of kinship, but also a high level of common ancestry (with the only level higher being the Māori people as a whole). The *waka* is a very large group and has a somewhat limited effect on the Māori cultural, social, and economic values, mainly due to its size. However, the *waka* is important because it is essentially the basis for where in New Zealand the current Māori's live and call home.

Each *waka* came from Polynesia in a canoe, landed, surveyed the land, and settled in a certain part of the country. The *waka* is therefore, loosely confined to the area settled and the climate, resources and survival needs associated with that area have a dominant effect on the economy and subsistence practices of the people. The Māori people understand that and when they call themselves the *tangata whenua* (people of the land) they evoke their feelings of belonging to the land mainly because of their descent from the people who originally settled it (Metge, Lecture 1, p. 1). The *waka* also had a minor part in war efforts. All the groups of people in the *waka* joined together in war, led by the most senior line of descendents of the founding family (Mead 1997, p. 193). However, this aspect plays little part in today's Māori society.

The *Iwi*

The *iwi* is the second kinship group that Māori people can associate themselves with. The *iwi* is a tribe of people that are all descendent from one common ancestor that was one of the important members of the *waka*. The *iwi* is usually named after this one ancestor, although it could be named after an important event in the history of the group (Mead 1997, p 193). Today, most Māoris can associate themselves with a particular *iwi*, but this group does not rule the social, political, or cultural lives of the people. Membership in the *iwi* carries with it no economic advantages or privileges, but also requires no specific obligations (Metge, Lecture 2, p. 7). The *iwi* is really a very loose association of smaller groups of people. Nevertheless, the *iwi* has some important implications in Māori society.

First, the *iwi* further divides ownership of the land. Going back to the *tangata whenua* concept, Māori people have a bond with the land that they live on and that their ancestors lived on before them. Since all the members of an *iwi* are descendent from a common ancestor, they hold to the land that this common ancestor originally settled for his people. Thus, each particular *iwi* has a piece of land that they belong to and that they are able to use for their purposes, whether they are economic or cultural.

The second importance of the *iwi* is that it provides a pervading sense of security and pride. Members of a certain *iwi* have the security of knowing that they belong to a large group that will provide some sort of limited support when needed. They can feel the psychological security that comes with belonging to any group. Also, since each *iwi* has an illustrious history associated with it, membership also carries a sense of great pride. Modern Māori people are eager to proclaim their membership in a certain *iwi* simply because of the exploits and past successes of the people that they are descendent from.

The bond of friendship among members of an *iwi* is also important. Modern Māori people no longer all live in their tribal area and meeting someone from their tribe that is also far away is more often than not a very comforting thing (Metge, Lecture 2, p. 7).

The Hapu

The third unit of Māori kinship structure is the *hapu*. The *hapu* is a subtribe of the *iwi*, again being descendent from a common ancestor. The *hapu* is usually associated with a particular town or small area, usually containing 200 to 300 people, although

today containing many more. The *hapu* is important in forming the cultural, social, and economic ideals of Māori society.

Culturally, the *hapu* is the level at which the people come together and work to preserve their heritage and ancestry mainly through the *marae*. The *marae* is the primary meeting place of the people in the *hapu*, but it is also the place where the Māori people best express their emotional relationship with the land and with their ancestry (Metge, Lecture 1, p. 7). This emotional relationship is one of the defining characteristics of the Māori culture. Also, descent grouping is important at this level for ceremonial gatherings, such as weddings, 21st birthdays, and other “rites of passage” ceremonies (Metge, Lecture 2, p. 6). These ceremonies also form an important part of Māori culture.

The *hapu* is the main unit for establishing the social structure of a town. This social structure is employed to provide for the many needs of the people of the town (Ritchie 1963, pp. 54-56). Each person in the *hapu* has a social identity that defines his or her place in the group. The *hapu* is small enough that members can be known for their specific talents, gifts, and personality and thus have a particular identity within the group. The kinship that exists between the members of the group provides an “integrative force in the community” (Ritchie 1963, p. 54). Thus, this social structure that relies on kinship creates a positive environment for the advancement of the workings of the community, both economically and culturally. It also provides a safe place to express negative feelings of the workings of the community, promoting security in the face of steady changes (Ritchie 1963, pp. 54-56).

Economically, the *hapu* is again important for dividing land ownership. Land ownership is very important because with ownership comes the right to speak on the *marae*, due to the descent and ancestry that is tied to the land (Metge, Lecture 1, p. 7). The *hapu* group is much more committed to securing the economic survival of the town and the people in it. Because the *hapu* group is much more of an extended family, each member is concerned with the other members and wants to see them through to success by providing support.

The Whanau

The most basic kinship group, the *whanau*, is also the most important for establishing a cultural, social and economic identity. Essentially, the *whanau* is the household or family unit and usually consists of approximately four generations. The members of the *whanau* all have intimate relationships with each other and work together for the common good of all (Metge, Lecture 3, p. 1). The eldest member of the *whanau* is the leader and is an active authority over the members of his household, being responsible for their general well being.

Culturally, the *whanau* is where the ceremonial aspect of Māori society most comes into play. It is the household unit that is the most deeply involved in the “rites of passage” ceremonies. It is more than just a ceremony at this level, but a celebration of a close family member coming of age. The *whanau* also provides a cultural identity in the traditions and rituals practiced by the group. Each household has particular traditions and rituals that are especially important to them for specific reasons, often dealing with

ancestry. This level of kinship provides for a much more unique cultural identity that is based on the ancestry of only a few generations.

The household is the effective social unit in day-to-day life (Ritchie 1963, p. 52). At this level of kinship, the relationships between members are deep and intimate and form the social identity of the Māori life. The family is the base for the nurturing of each other and each member has a responsibility to care for, guide, and discipline the others. The household also holds social significance in forming one's beliefs and values (Metge, Lecture 3, p. 1). Whether they are political, religious, or educational, the values, beliefs, and morals of a Māori are rooted in the household kinship unit.

Economically, the *whanau* is the most important in terms of land ownership, work, and economic survival (Metge, Lecture 3, p. 1). The household unit owns the land, equipment, and housing and shares them as a whole (Mead 1997, p. 194). It is the responsibility of each *whanau* to secure the needs of its members.

Contemporary Māori Society

Obviously, the importance of kinship structures as a base for identity in the Māori society is today very different. The *whanau* is probably the level where kinship importance has changed the most. While most Māori still hold to their cultural identity, they are eager to form their own identity socially and economically. However, the kinship structures are still important in that they do provide a base for the identity that surrounds ancestry and *whakapapa*.

References

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