

## Tō mātou haerenga: our journey of a fractured-connected Taiamai whānau: Reflections from a hapū wānanga

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### Abstract

*For some whānau Māori, colonisation has resulted in the disconnection from their home marae, whenua, hapū and iwi. This paper takes a collective autoethnographic approach to describing and exploring a recent journey of reconnection and discovery embarked on by one whānau.*

*The journey is framed by the construction of a waka hourua, a double-hulled canoe, to represent the two parts of the hapū: those who retained their home base connection and those who were disconnected through generations of colonisation, racism, and geographical distance.*

### Key words

Colonisation; alienation; Māori; autoethnography; waka hourua; reconnection; Meihana model.

## Pepeha

Ko Te Ahuahu te maunga

Ko Omapere te roto

Ko Waitangi te awa

Ko Ngātokimatawhāorua te waka

Ko Ngāpuhi te iwi

Ko Ngāti Hineira me Te Uri Taniwha ō mātou hapū

Ko Parawhenua me Rāwhitiroa ō mātou marae

Ko Edmonds me Calkin ō mātou tūpuna whānau

## Introduction

*Knowing the details of whakapapa is the mahi of some, but not all. Their knowledge is held, bone deep, on behalf of the rest of the hapū and is transmitted when, where and how it is needed. Our place is to nurture what we receive, build and share it, but not grasp or yearn for what is not yet ours.*

I (JK) wrote that earlier this year, after attending Waitangi Day commemorations at the Treaty Grounds for the first time. I wanted to acknowledge the limits of my personal understanding of my whakapapa and my increasing certainty that *having* whakapapa is different to *knowing* and *living* it. *Having* whakapapa means belonging to a people beyond those I interact with daily. It's a belonging that reaches back through time, and extends far into the future. Yet, it does not assume that we know each other. Belonging to that people is a reality that can be traced through genealogical charts and whānau stories. Whakapapa just is.

*Knowing* whakapapa is a little more tantalising for me; an academic and reader. My happy place is when I'm immersed in the written word. In addition to learning through reading, I 'write to understand' (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), using journalling, lists and notes to make sense of my experiences. So, when I wanted to know more, I began researching whakapapa through reading and internet searching to build my knowledge. What I found was often contradictory, lacked nuance, and was most often written through the problematic lens of the male historian, whether Māori or settler. While there was some level of satisfaction in collecting information, it also left me feeling unsatisfied and aware that the more I learned, the less I knew. Knowing whakapapa as an intellectual exercise was unfulfilling.

*Living* whakapapa is my greatest challenge. It involves he kanohi kitea, being a face that is known, and whanaungatanga so connections and relationships are developed and nurtured. Living whakapapa requires being emotionally, physically and spiritually present with whānau and whenua, with all the challenges that brings. In this paper, I have moved from this individual space of inquiry into a collaboration with my four adult children as we trace the haerenga of our whānau away from, and back towards, living our whakapapa.

Our whānau have been registered members of the Ngāpuhi rūnanga (a collective of organisations representing the aspirations of people who identify as Ngāpuhi) since the early 1990s, but had few communications with them. Then, in early 2021, we had the opportunity to register with Ngā Hapū o Te Ahuahu, our hapū (sub-tribe) collective, and were invited to

regular hui (gatherings) to “strengthen who we are by connecting all uri (descendants) back to our hapū so to better prepare, plan, design and build a thriving collective future of our collective choosing” (<https://teahuahu.nz/about-te-ahuahu/>). The hui initially occurred during the COVID lockdowns, so as a whānau, we occasionally attended these virtually. We began to know some of our relatives and the issues they were grappling with at home, although we remained uncertain about how we could contribute to the hapū from our homes in other parts of Aotearoa New Zealand. However, as a part of this initiative, specific wānanga were planned that would share knowledge about whakapapa, locations and events relevant to the Treaty of Waitangi claims our hapū have interest in, and that would encourage uri (descendants) to return home and help.

The second of these, ‘whakapapa wānanga’, held in April 2024 at Rāwhitiroa Marae, is the focus of this collective reflection.

## Approach

Writing about our experiences serves several purposes. It is primarily an enduring record of a pivotal time in our whānau that also affords us the opportunity to understand how each of us is experiencing it in real-time. To achieve this, we wrote, reviewed, and revised this paper until we were all satisfied with what it portrays.

The second purpose of this paper is to offer our hapū our story of reconnection and, potentially, homecoming. As we discuss later, there is a tangible fracture between disconnected whānau and whānau ahi kā (those who have maintained unbroken connections to home; people who have kept the home fires burning) that, in our experience, can be bridged through whanaungatanga and manaakitanga (building reciprocal relationships). Our focus on the recent hapū wānanga also evidences the value we experienced from that weekend and its far-reaching consequences for us.

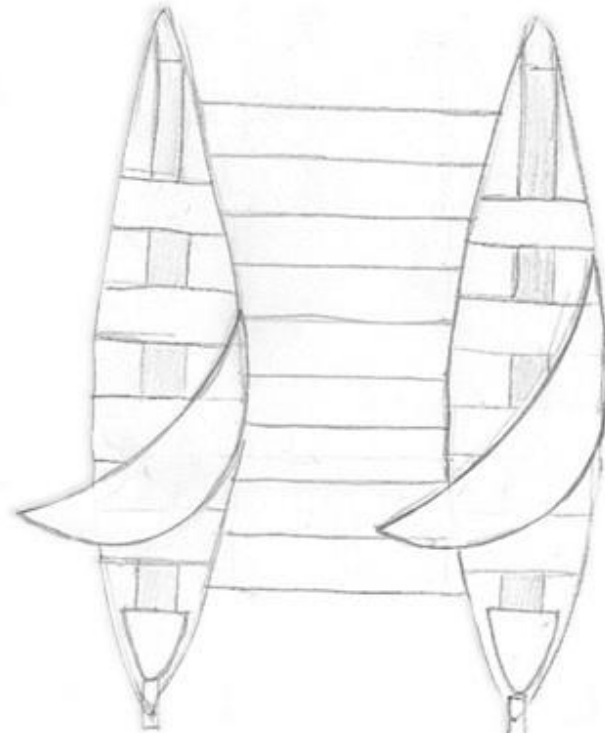
The final and arguably less important reason for writing is to share this account of colonisation and moves towards decolonisation and Indigenisation taken by a very ordinary whānau. Our story is common in Aotearoa among whānau who have moved away from their ancestral lands, so perhaps by making it visible, we can support other whānau in their own efforts to reconnect.

We have loosely drawn on the research methodology of collective autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Kidd & Finlayson, 2010; Rinehart & Earl, 2016), which privileges our personal voices and emotions as a way of reaching across different audiences. In order to structure our story, we have adapted a well-evidenced model from health psychology (Pitama et al., 2014). The Meihana Model<sup>1</sup> includes the four broad aspects of Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1985); whānau (family), tinana (the body), hinengaro (thoughts and emotions) and wairua (beliefs), plus te taiao (the environment) and iwi katoa (wider society). These features of everyday life are presented in the form of a waka hourua (traditional Māori double hulled canoe) connecting the patient and whānau, and assessed within the context of societal influences and things of personal importance to the patient.

Our adaptation, supported by an illustration in Figure One, shifts the focus from a health assessment to a whānau haerenga, or journey towards a united and stable hapū.

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<sup>1</sup> Short translations from te reo Māori into English are generally imperfect and open to misinterpretation. While we have provided short definitions, readers are encouraged to refer to Pitama et al’s paper to fully understand the original model and its application



***Figure one: Waka hourua, adapted from the Meihana Model (Pitama et al., 2014). Artwork by Addison Murphy (age 11)***

The double hulls of the waka hourua represent the disconnected whānau and whānau ahi kā; the whānau who moved away and those who have remained on the whenua with unbroken or re-established connections to the whenua, marae and each other. The two whānau groups have linkages that both connect them and hold them apart, shown as the planking that joins and separates the hulls. These represent: tinana, the physical body; whenua, the land; hinengaro, thoughts and emotions; and whakapapa, genealogy. The movement of the waka towards a

unified future is either supported or hindered by ngā hau e whā (the four winds of the Atua Tāwhirimātea, the guardian of the winds) and ngā roma moana (ocean currents).

The elements of the model are described below, with illustrative pūrākau (stories) alongside each.

## Disconnections

Our whānau disconnection began in the mid to late 1800s, when our tūpuna Ruiha married Samuel Kerakena/Calkin. Samuel had been something of a wanderer, born in England but travelling to the US, where he served in the Civil War from 1864, to some years spent in South America, and ultimately to New Zealand on a whaling boat. We have many letters that were sent to Samuel, so we have some insight into his life as a teacher in a Northland ‘native school’<sup>2</sup> and as a storekeeper and musician in Whangārei. We have much less personal knowledge of Ruiha, so we can only wonder how she felt about her life of change. They had nine children, the eldest of whom was Hayward, our tūpuna. Hayward married an English woman, Maude Hill, and they moved their family to Auckland in 1913, where most of their seven children and many grandchildren remained. Our own line moved away, though, in 1968, going firstly to Australia and then to a range of different North Island towns.

Migration to the city was a feature of Māori life throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Cram & Pitama, 1998), but our whānau started considerably earlier than that. We lived away from our homelands and marae since 1889 and have no evidence that we ever returned except for some of our aunts attending two whānau reunions in the 1980s and '90s. This is certainly the case within the memory of living whānau members, who can track our complete disconnection from at least the early 1900s when the whānau moved to Auckland.

Interestingly, although we did not return to our roots, we maintained a connection by hearing stories of our whakapapa from our elders and sharing historical artefacts. We never forgot who we were.

## Whānau ahi kā

Three of our whānau arrived at Rāwhitiroa Marae on a Friday night for a hapū wānanga, with two of us (JK and DK) having travelled approximately 700 kilometres and the other (CP) 400 kilometres. We each assured the others that we weren't nervous, but in fact, we were slightly wary. The whānau ahi kā were completely new to two of us, although our third (CP) had been to a previous wānanga. Her experience there was mixed because she had attended alone, so everything and everyone was new, but she nevertheless had a sense of belonging as a result and, in fact, was greeted by name and with smiles. Along with the wariness, we felt a good dollop of hope that we would be welcome.

There are layers of complexity about going to ‘our’ marae as adults for the first time. The wānanga was offered as a way to inform and reconnect whānau, but also to build the capacity of the hapū to support each other, our marae and whenua. There were expectations on both sides, but also questions and challenges. There were five of the whānau ahi kā involved with organising the wānanga. In our hesitancy about our welcome, we wondered whether we would be perceived as people who were just taking, who were going to absorb resources while we learned our places, if we ever did. We knew that we were one of the whānau who hadn't

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<sup>2</sup> Native schools were established to provide education for Māori children as an assimilation tool to reinforce the use of English language and culture.

contributed to our home region for at least five generations since Ruiha lived there, not even to pick up a tea towel or wash a mug. Did the whānau ahi kā worry that we were only turning up at this point in time because we hoped to get something out of a potential financial and land claim against the government? While such claims had been raised and settled by other iwi over the previous decades, our own iwi and hapū claims had not been resolved. As it was getting closer to an outcome, if the ahi kā held those fears, we thought they would not be unreasonable. We believed that our welcome there among the wider hapū was not assured.

However, those concerns were in the background, as the wānanga itself offered us the opportunity to align with and support whānau ahi kā. The laughter, shared work and genuine interest in each other's lives created bridges between our two realities that have a very tangible potential to bind us more closely together.

### **Tinana: physical body**

As a whānau, we're white. There's no getting past it. Some of us have blue eyes and blonde hair, others have darker hair and brown eyes, but we are undeniably kiritea, or white-skinned. That puts us in a strange, but not unusual, position of having to choose to identify as Māori when we interact with other people. No matter how we think or behave in public settings, strangers cannot immediately identify our heritage. In later sections, we will unpack that more, especially in relation to being 'socially assigned' as white, but for the moment, suffice to say that attending the wānanga was a part of a consciously visible reconnection and reconciliation process as we actively engaged with strangers who were also whānau.

From this perspective, the colonisation of Māori through the systematic (and often violent) erasure of culture and whakapapa (Jackson, 1992) is embodied in our whiteness. That so many of our tūpuna chose to marry and have children with European partners inevitably raises questions about how they thought about and experienced their own culture. Early letters between our tangibly Māori whānau refer to themselves as Pākehā, even while they were using te reo Māori and suggesting tūpuna names for new babies. Is this what internalised racism (Jones, 2000) looked like a century ago? From our 21st-century position, it seems that way.

Our colouring presents an internal barrier to our homecoming and living our whakapapa. We clearly embody our Pākehā ancestry, and rarely need to articulate it because we wear it so visibly. Our tinana or Māori body, on the other hand, is less visible and requires us to express it through our ahua or character, language and behaviour. Two of our whānau have chosen to wear tā moko on their arms as an indelible claiming of whakapapa on their skin. However, our visible difference understandably led one or two of the whānau ahi kā to ask us how we happened to be there. Making whakapapa links 'oh, you're through Ruiha's line' was the common ground that resolved any confusion, and led to sharing stories that explained our appearance and connections to the questioner.

### **Whenua: land and geography**

Aotearoa is not a big country, yet the physical distance from Hawke's Bay and Waikato to our whenua in Taiamai can feel prohibitive. A nine-hour drive or two expensive flights means we haven't chosen, or can't afford, to travel to our marae. It means taking time off work and away from whānau activities like school sports, justifying spending money when budgets are tight, leaving other whānau behind, and returning to our everyday lives exhausted. On the other hand, reconnecting brings the rewards of grounding ourselves in the land our tūpuna walked. In this sense, the whenua is its own reason to overcome the barriers geography presents.



However, there is a tension between honouring our existing lives and our haerenga that affects those around us so cannot, and arguably should not, be resolved quickly. The disconnection has taken place over the span of six generations, with the seventh generation of mokopuna being our current focus. We judge ourselves harshly when we expect that we can simply reconnect within a few years. Finding ways to reconnect and live our whakapapa while respecting our current circumstances is a challenge we continue to work on. Hinemoa Elder (2022) offers some inspiration in her stories of calling her maunga to her even when she is away, and of carrying a small stone from her home beach to maintain her connections and remind her to return. Similarly, she cites the whakataukī “Uenuku tū wae rua”; Uenuku (the rainbow) stands in two places (p. 51). This has resonance for us, not only for standing in two places on the whenua of Aotearoa, but also because Uenuku is the name of the tūpuna our hapū are descended from. He, too, stood in two places throughout his early life, one with each of his parents. He, too, went through a difficult and challenging process of finding his home. It is because of Uenuku’s struggle that our hapū have enduring connections to Tai Tama Wahine, the east coast of the Northland region of Aotearoa.

### **Hinengaro: thoughts and emotions**

As we discussed above, being socially assigned as white is a part of our whānau reality. Stepping into our Māori identity is disruptive to the perceptions others have of us. In Pākehā settings, we are often derisively challenged to tell people our ‘percentage’ of Māori. In Māori settings, we are challenged in different ways to explain our presence. Although our pepeha (recitation of genealogy given as a part of formal greetings) will usually answer those challenges, there can also be a self-imposed sense of not being enough, of feeling shame for decisions our tūpuna made to disconnect us from our home and reo, and of being diminished for our lack of confidence in te reo and tikanga. Sometimes, it can feel tempting to let our whakapapa drift away as a historical anomaly, but that thought doesn’t generally last long. Such erasure of our tūpuna would render us lost and without anchorage in our shared whānau values. Whakapapa exists as a living part of our identities, so although in a superficial sense we could deny its power, in a deeper sense we all feel a need to acknowledge, honour and connect with it.

### **Whakapapa: genealogy**

The imperative that sits alongside knowledge of whakapapa is, as one of our whānau said at the wānanga, ‘a door that, once it’s opened, you have to go through’. Despite having genealogical charts, old letters, books and tūpuna journals, we recognise that whakapapa knowledge is a privilege. In the context of the model, we are using for this reflection and the wānanga we attended, whakapapa is entirely a bridge between our disconnected whānau and the whānau ahi kā with no aspect that maintains our separation. During the wānanga, sharing stories of our recent, post settlement history as well as the precolonial whakapapa pūrākau joined us together as we shared our knowledge, and speculated about motives and conversations that might have shaped the world our tūpuna moved in.

### **Ngā roma moana: ocean currents and ngā hau e whā: the four winds**

We have identified several factors that are influencing our haerenga. Although it isn’t an exhaustive list, from our perspective we recognise the barriers imposed by colonisation and racism alongside the uplifting aspects of ahua and wairuatanga (personal experiences and the spiritual aspects of te ao Māori).

Historical colonisation in Aotearoa has taken many forms, from the direct violence of war, to land theft through colonial courts, and the forcible suppression of te reo and tikanga (Jackson, 1992; Reid et al., 2018). These have directly affected our hapū lands, economic and political resources, knowledge base and cultural confidence, with their consequences still being experienced today (Healy et al., 2012). Contemporary colonisation strategies continue to be based on the doctrine of discovery and the tenets of white supremacy (Miller et al., 2010), and impact Māori through actions such as imposing colonial structures on the historical redress process, maintaining systemic barriers to accessing Crown resources and relentless delays in achieving social justice (Boulton et al., 2020).

For our whānau, these barriers are experienced as reinforcing the distance between us and the whānau ahi kā. We have not been present to see our marae fall into disrepair over the years with no funds to maintain them, or our urupā filling with whānau who have passed away from preventable or treatable illnesses. When we have visited, we experienced the shock of recognising the unmet need, but the mechanisms for working alongside our hapū were lost to us, along with our reo and tikanga. The proactive, intentionally supportive actions of hapū members in establishing these wānanga have begun the process of rebuilding the way back for our whānau through the shared kaupapa or purpose of coming together to build a thriving collective future.

The currents and winds propelling us back to our hapū are less tangible than the barriers, but no less compelling. For example, the knowledge of whakapapa connections is alive within our tamariki, and they have all shown an interest in knowing their pepeha and thereby claiming their full whakapapa. The ahua, or personal experiences and attributes of being Māori are similarly evidenced for us through the subtleties in our use of language and humour, what issues we consider to be politically important, and how we offer manaaki (hospitality and generosity).

The wairua aspects of our haerenga are still showing themselves, with tohu (spiritual signs) such as manu and huruhuru (birds and feathers), serendipitous timing and the surfacing of additional whakapapa pūrākau a part of our process. These were recognised ways of knowing, and of supported decision making for our kuia (grandmothers) in generations past, but were lost to us in recent decades when technology and media took precedence. That they are reappearing in our lives and conversations is a welcome and reassuring factor in our return home.

## **Whakaterere: navigation**

The most important feature of our waka hourua is its movement; where is it taking us? During both hapū wānanga, the overarching feeling was one of welcome and manaaki. However, some of the whānau ahi kā also questioned us more closely about our lives and work. While remaining kind and curious, the conversations were nonetheless personally challenging as we explored how we might contribute through our work in practical ways to benefit our hapū.

Challenging conversations such as these, and among us as a whānau, have been important factors in our own understanding of the central place of reciprocity if we want to move beyond a kind of voyeuristic knowledge of whakapapa into the unknown potential of living it. From a broader perspective, our collective whānau mahi is across a range of Māori professional fields associated with health, education and whānau ora, so we contribute to the overall national struggle for social justice and equitable wellbeing. However, belonging to our hapū is a privilege and it takes intention and deliberate action to honour that. It takes a commitment to being a part of hapū growth and development. While there is the potential for one of our whānau



to return to Taiamai, the rest of us are more likely to continue to live in our more distant geographical spaces. However, we believe we can contribute to our hapū thriving through being a visible part of Ngā Hapū o te Ahuahu and being a part of hapū kōrero, wānanga and hui where we attend to support rather than only receive. We can also live our whakapapa through sharing our tūpuna and haerenga stories with our tamariki and wider whānau.

It is timely to note, however, that when a draft of this paper was shared with whanaunga who were a part of organising the wānanga, we were gently queried from the other perspective. Is some of this need to explain our whakapapa in largely imaginary conversations also a feature of imposter syndrome? Āe, yes, now that it's been pointed out, it is an important part of this haerenga to understand the consequences we are still experiencing from the internalised and interpersonal racism experienced by our tūpuna and down through the generations since. The concept of not feeling Māori enough has been explored in many different fora, from the perspectives of skin colour, lack of reo and tikanga, and being disconnected from our whenua of origin (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2022; Bailey-McDowell, 2024) For the purposes of this paper, we recognise that some of our responses are shaped by these feelings, and we are rightfully grateful that our whānau are supported in understanding and changing our thinking.

## Landing places

The recent hapū whakapapa wānanga involved walking the lands our tūpuna walked, and listening to the stories of their environment, conflicts, movements and connections. While the recorded histories are available to anyone who cares to use Google or a library, the stories we heard included nuance that is not readily available. We not only discussed who of our direct line signed Te Tiriti o Waitangi, but who did not and what we know of the circumstances around their decisions. We visited sites of religious significance to our tūpuna and some of the whānau ahi kā, and talked with care about the connections between Christianity and colonisation, while also recognising the important place of religion in some of our lives. Two of us attended a service in a church that was erected on the whenua where our tūpuna had fought and prevailed during the land wars. We all walked among the urupā of our tūpuna. We were all nourished by our attendance, and brought back more stories to share.

This paper has focused on the movement of our waka hourua, and as a consequence there is also attention to those things that hinder it. However, the missing factor in our reflection is the relief of being in the company of our hapū, on our marae, on our whenua. So our waka hourua comes to rest in this reflective space, with our haerenga underway and the sense of being, at last, kanohi kitea.

## Acknowledgement

Our appreciation goes out to the whānau ahi kā for their mahi in providing a safe and warm way for our whānau and many others to reconnect.

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