

Conference on Ageing and Spirituality

31 August 2009

The Rt Rev'd Te Kitohi Pikaahu

There is a Maori proverb that is uttered when an elder dies,

“Kua hinga te totara o te wao nui a Tane”

“A great totara tree of the Forest of Tane has fallen.”

This proverb refers to the impact that one the great trees in a great forest has on the rest of life in the forest.

This really means that the fall will be so great that it will be felt in every part of the forest. In its wake it will leave an empty space that everyone will notice and a void that will be felt by all.

"Elders are kin accountable. They need to know the intergenerational traditions and be able to pass them on." Prof Paul Tapsell, 2009

Kaumatua and Kuia – He Taonga / Valuing Our Elders

Kaumatua and Kuia remain a key guiding force in Maori society.

Kaumatua and Kuia walk with us through our lives? Their contribution to Maori communities is significant.

According to the latest research, we are facing the prospect of a six fold increase in Kaumatua and kuia over 85 years, by 2050.

The richness of whakapapa; the wealth of whanau; means we are never truly alone.

And it is in that special realm between this world and the next, that I believe our elders are to be accorded every respect.

It is our elders who are uniquely situated to tell us stories of their tupuna, which we duly pass on to our mokopuna.

Our elders have that treasured insight into a world far beyond that which our children inhabit.

But it is a world which provides the key to ensuring the foundation for future life is sound. Indeed, our elders are the secret to our success.

That world that our elders live in, is also made real through the kaupapa and the tikanga that we uphold.

We are so proud that the Maori organisations are driven by kaupapa tuku iho which encapsulate the very essence of Maori worldviews.

These kaupapa and the tikanga which spring from them, reflect the dreams and aspirations of tangata whenua mai ra ano.

They remind us of the drive to achieve self-determination for whānau, hapū and iwi within our own land.

And most of all, they are the framework by which we live according to the values handed down by our ancestors.

E kore au e ngaro, he kakano i ruia mai i Rangiatea.

This statement encourages us to focus on the long-term survival of Maori. We are a people who have withstood the threat of extinction – and we will continue, defiantly, passionately to do so.

Maori communities maintain, that kaupapa and tikanga that have been handed to us from generations gone, provide us with an ongoing source of challenge, of knowledge, of courage.

We know the true meaning of these kaupapa because of kaumatua and kuia who embody these principles and practices.

It is this model, the lives of Kaumatua and kuia their inspiration, that lead us onwards.

It is through their encouragement, their leadership and their example that we know the paths of prosperity for Maori.

It is in their kupu / words; in their tautoko / support; in their waiata / songs; in their karakia / prayer; in their turanga / presence – that we believe our survival is in good hands.

And most of all, we acknowledge each kaumatua and kuia, for the taonga / gift they are to their tamariki / children, their mokopuna / grandchildren, their whanau / family, their hapu / sub-tribe, their iwi / tribe, people.

Kaumatua and kuia are our living treasures and the gentle encouragement that they provide to all of us, is the source of a strong future. They are our guiding light onwards, their legacy inspires us to reach for the stars.

Kaumatua and Kuia - Valuing Our Elders

I was strongly influenced by my grandparents, and the rest of the elders who lived in our district. Our Maori elders fascinated us their 'mokopuna', with stories, speeches, songs, chants, and hakas.

These kaumatua could entertain and control us for hours on end, and were always very popular. There always seemed to be plenty to eat when one visited an old 'kuia' or 'koroheke.'

Many of our families had very few material possessions, and were denied so many of the luxuries we enjoy today, and yet what I remember most vividly was the ring of laughter, song and music, the obvious happiness we shared as a people, because of the abundance of aroha—goodwill. There was a deep appreciation and respect for the human element above all things, the laws of conservation, including the natural environment and resources. Mind you, seeing other people's problems has made me realise all these things.

The best traditions and values of the Maori culture including te reo / the language, have been held by the Kaumatua and kuia and then passed on to the next generation.

(10 mins per panel member and allow time for wider discussion)

1. What is it like to be a member of a minority ethnic group growing older in Aotearoa-NZ?
2. How does your culture view older people? Is this view challenged by majority / Pakeha views on ageing?
3. What is the dominant religious/spiritual understanding of the role of the older people in your culture?
4. Is there a gap in local services for older people in your culture, especially around spiritual care? How can this be addressed?