Ngā tamariki

by Rawinia Higgins me Paul Meredith

Māori children were always cherished members of the tribe, watched over not just by parents, but by their whole extended family. When this pattern was disrupted in the 20th century, whānau faced many challenges.

Traditional Māori childhoods

In traditional Māori society, children were seen as belonging to, and being the responsibility of, the wider whānau and hapū. Children quickly learnt to identify with their hapū community. The natural parents were not the sole caregivers – child-raising involved grandparents, uncles, aunts, great-uncles and great-aunts. This collective responsibility and these kinship ties ensured the safety and welfare of children, who were seen as representing the future heritage of the tribe. This principle was conveyed in the proverb: 'He kai poutaka me kinikini atu, he kai poutaka me horehore atu, mā te tamaiti te iho' (pinch off a bit of the potted bird, peel off a bit of the potted bird, but the inside is for the child – save the best for the child).

Children indulged

Māori children were, by and large, cherished and indulged. The pōtiki (last-born) was often a particularly favoured child. This care and affection was observed by several early travellers and missionaries. The French explorer Julien Marie Crozet, on his visit to the Bay of Islands in 1772, remarked of Māori: 'They seemed to be good mothers and showed affection for their offspring. I have often seen them play with the children, caress them, chew the fern root, pick out the stringy parts, and then take it out of their mouth in order to put it into that of their nurslings. The men were also very fond of and kind to their children.' [1]

The missionary Samuel Marsden commented in 1820: 'There can be no finer children than those of the New Zealanders. Their parents are very indulgent, and they appear also happy, and playful, and very active.' [2] The travelling painter George French Angas found: 'Both parents are almost idolatrously fond of their children; and the father frequently spends a considerable portion of his time in nursing his infant, who nestles in his blanket, and is lulled to rest by some native song'. [3]

Waiata oriori

A waiata oriori was often composed for a child of rank. This class of waiata is often translated as 'lullaby'. However, unlike European lullabies, the waiata oriori contains complex whakapapa and histories specifically related to the child. From infancy these songs were chanted to children as part of their early education. One classic example which is still sung is 'Pinepine te kura', composed for the young Te Umurangi, a descendent of the great Ngāti Kahungunu chief Te Whatuiāpiti.

He wāwāhi tahā

The nature of children is to explore their world and the objects in it, which can lead to them breaking precious items. This is highlighted in the proverb 'Ko te mahi a te tamariki, he wāwāhi tahā' (the activities of children break calabashes). This whakataukī (proverb) also served to remind families that it was their responsibility to teach children, and not to respond to accidents with anger – children might not always appreciate the value of taonga, but should not be punished for being inquisitive.

The birth of a child

The birth of a child represented the continuation of whakapapa or genealogical lines. This was particularly important for those of chiefly status eager to ensure that the mana and tapu of their ancestral lineage did not die out.

Pregnant women, particularly those of high rank, were moved to a special place away from the communal areas of the village. This was called a whare kahu (birthplace), and it was a tapu place under the guidance of a tohunga. The tohunga cut the umbilical cord (pito) which, along with the afterbirth (whenua), was laid at a chosen site, either buried in the land or placed in trees or caves. This fixed the newborn to that place. The land provided a tūrangawaewae (a place to stand) part of tribal identity.

Tohi

Boys born to chiefly parents were often dedicated to the god of war, Tū. Girls orinially were dedicated to the goddess of childbirth, Hineteiwaiwa. This dedication of the child's life was part of the tohi rite. It was conducted at a sacred stream by the tohunga or priest. The tohi ceremony dedicated children to their life's work, and strengthened and protected their mauri (life principle). Male children were expected to follow in the footsteps of their fathers and female children in those of their mothers. This is reflected in the proverb: 'Ngā tamariki tāne ka whai ki te ure tū, ngā tamariki wāhine ka whai ki te ūkaipō' (boys should be manly, girls should be motherly).

Karakia tohi

Whano koe – tāngaengae,
Ki te hopu tangata – tāngaengae,
Ki te piki maunga – tāngaengae,
Me homai – tāngaengae,
Mō te tama nei.
Sprinkle with the water of Tū!
Go thou – navel cord,
To catch men – navel cord,
To climb mountains – navel cord,
Let these be given – navel cord,
For this male child.
Tohi ki te wai nō Tū!
Whano koe – tāngaengae,
Ki te mahi kai māu,
Ki te whatu pūweru mōu,
Ki te whatu kaitaka mōu
Ki te karanga pahī,
Ki te waha wahie, māu
Ki te keri mātaitai, māu
Me homai
Hei whakatupu
Mō te tapairu nei.
Sprinkle with the water of Tū!
Go thou – navel cord,
To prepare food for thyself,
To weave garments for thyself,
To weave fine cloaks for thyself,
To welcome visitors,
To carry firewood on the back, for thyself,
To dig for shellfish, for thyself
Give these
To help growth
For this first-born girl.

Footnotes

- Julien Marie Crozet, Crozet's voyage to Tasmania, New Zealand and the Ladrone Islands and the Philippines in the years 1771–1772. London: Truslove & Shirley, 1891, p. 66. Back
- John Rawson Elder, ed., The letters and journals of Samuel Marsden. Dunedin: Otago University Council, 1932, p. 283. Back
- George French Angas, Savage life and scenes in Australia and New Zealand. London: Johnson Reprint, 1967 (originally published 1847), p. 313. Back

Māori children's upbringing

Tamaiti whāngai

The fostering and adoption of children is a long-established Māori customary practice. Traditionally it was not uncommon for children to be tamaiti whāngai (reared by other members of the family), often by those who could not have children, or who

wanted more children. Children were treated as the natural children of their whāngai parents and could inherit possessions and land. In some cases children were given to strengthen family ties. Children's connections to their natural parents were often maintained so they could move between families.

Grandparents, in particular, would raise children so parents could provide for the family. As a result of this nurturing, grandparents were the first educators of the children, and in particular were responsible for imparting traditional knowledge to them. This is highlighted in the stories of the demigod Māui, where all his knowledge comes from his grandparents' generation. Kuia (female elders) Murirangawhenua, Mahuika and Hine-nui-te-pō, and his koroua (grandfather) Tamanuikiterangi, provided Māui Pōtiki (Māui the last-born) with knowledge to undertake the feats he is noted for. Grandparents would often raise the first grandchild, whose first-born status made it important that they be versed in tribal traditions and genealogies.

Education

Children were provided with lessons which prepared them for the daily tasks of life. They learnt through observation and participation, as they tended gardens, gathered seafood or snared birds. Some children noted for their natural talents were assessed to see if they should attend houses of higher learning, where sacred rites, genealogy and karakia were taught.

Games and amusements

Māori children amused themselves with singing, dancing, story-telling and an array of games including kite flying, top-spinning, string games, knuckle bones and dart throwing. Children gathered at night in the whare tapere, a house used especially for amusement. During the day, they might be found playing on the moari (swing) described and painted by George French Angas: 'A pole, generally the trunk of a kahikatea pine, is erected in the centre of an open space adjoining the village; flax ropes are suspended from the top, and, holding on to these, the natives swing themselves round and round.' [1]

Betrothal

In some instances a child might be promised as a future husband or wife for another child, a custom known as taumau or tomo. Such requests were ceremonial and took place at public assemblies. These arranged marriages were often for political purposes, to strengthen bonds between families or tribes. A betrothed girl was known as a puhi and was carefully watched over during her adolescence. In most cases the arrangement was accepted by the children concerned. Their betrothal was a point of honour and it was incumbent on both families to see that the marriage took place when the child grew up.

Tā moko

Many historical accounts of tattooing indicate that people who received these were pre-pubescent. Their moko symbolised a rite of passage into adulthood for both boys and girls. Early observers noted that until moko had been acquired a boy could not be referred to as a warrior, or a girl as ready for marriage. Moko kauae (chin tattooes) were often done in groups of sisters, or of related members of a hapū. Often these young women were chosen by their elders to receive the moko as markers for their future roles amongst the people.

Footnotes

1. Quoted in Elsdon Best, Games and pastimes of the Maori. Wellington: Government Printer, 1976 (originally published 1925), p. 47. Back

European influence on Māori childhoods

Mission schools

The mission stations set up throughout New Zealand from the early 19th century were the major influence in changing the traditional pattern of Māori childhood. As part of their project of "civilising" Māori, missionaries paid close attention to child-rearing practices and aimed to adapt the behaviour of both children and their parents. The missionaries set up the first schools for Māori and, as well as teaching new skills such as literacy and new religious beliefs, introduced new forms of discipline such as physical punishment. The mission schools taught mainly in the Māori language and many pupils became highly literate in their own language. These early schools were almost all abandoned by Māori during the land wars of the 1860s.

Native schools

A new system of primary schools for rural Māori was set up by the state in 1867, and ran in parallel with the public school system for almost a century. At these native schools (renamed Māori schools in 1947) English was the only officially permitted language, although Māori language was sometimes tolerated. Many Māori parents actively encouraged the education of their children and contributed to the cost of land, buildings and teachers for new schools.

Māori also contributed to the school curriculum, methods of discipline and teaching staff. For example, Mary Tautari became one of the first Māori to lead a native school when she was appointed head teacher of Taumārere Native School in the Bay of Islands in 1875. A visitor found that the girl pupils were learning instrumental music and household duties, 'in order that they may be Europeanised as much as possible, and in all respects rendered fit to become the wives of settlers'. [2]

Eager to read

Merimeri Penfold of Ngāti Kurī was a pupil at Te Hāpua Native School in the Far North in the late 1920s. She remembered, 'We did not have homework. Reading, however, was very much an attraction. It was common practice to stuff books and journals in our clothes and trouser pants to read at home … I often resorted to reading secretly in the maize crop, in bed, by moonlight at night hanging out the window, or under the beds.' [1]

Learning new ways of life

Both public and native schools had a wider function than teaching academic or practical skills, and introduced Māori children to a new way of life, values and attitudes. Hamiora Hei, a member of the Te Aute College Students Association, said in 1897, 'In order that Maori girls may become good, useful wives and mothers, it is essential that a knowledge of the most simple rules of health and medicine should be imparted to them. They require it to break down traditional superstition and the power of the tohungas.' [3] However some traditional elements of Māori childhood were also introduced to the new education system. For instance the 'tuakana–teina' system of encouraging older pupils to support younger ones was adopted in many native schools, and popularised internationally by the teacher Sylvia Henderson, who, under the pen name Sylvia Ashton-Warner, wrote the novel Teacher, published in 1963.

Survival of traditional child-rearing

In the home as well as at school, some traditional features of Māori childhood survived or were adapted. The whāngai system of customary adoption was banned by the Native Land Act 1909, but many Māori children continued to be raised by adults other than their birth parents.

By the mid-20th century a semi-traditional pattern of child rearing was still evident in Māori families, especially in rural or mainly Māori communities. In those families, new babies lived in a 'golden world, the focus of continuous, loving warmth and attention; they were fed on demand, continually picked up, nursed and carried around by parents, siblings and surrounding adults.'[4]

The new net

One of the names for young people, rangatahi, also means a new net. A proverb 'Ka pū te ruha, ka hao te rangatahi' (when the worn out net lies heaped up, the new net goes fishing) refers to the way each generation is succeeded by the next.

Māori families tended to be larger than those of non-Māori, and older children were expected to take responsibility for their younger siblings. Māori parents could also rely on child-rearing help from relatives and other adults in the community. 'For the Maori child, there is always someone to turn to. He is rarely alone, and other children become an extension of the family. Sometimes the home of an uncle or grandparents becomes like a second home.'[5] Respected elders such as kuia (women elders) remained the watchful guardians of their extended families and community, and the conveyors of traditional knowledge to new generations.

Footnotes

- Quoted in J. Simon and L. Tuhiwai Smith, eds, A civilising mission?: perceptions and representations of the New Zealand native schools system. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001, p. 92. Back
- Quoted in A civilising mission?, p. 72. Back
- Quoted in A civilising mission?, p. 229. Back
- Quoted in Joan Metge, New growth from old: the whānau in the modern world. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1995, p. 138. Back
- Quoted in Jane and James Ritchie, Child rearing patterns in New Zealand. Wellington: A. H. and A. W. Reed, 1970, p. 130. Back

Māori childhood changes

Te Aute students

In the 20th century members of Te Aute College Students' Association (later the Young Māori Party), led by Apirana Ngata, challenged Māori youth to take leadership roles in improving the welfare and living conditions of Māori families and children. Their slogan was 'Ka pū te rūhā, ka hao te rangatahi' (the old net is cast aside, the new net goes fishing).

Urban migration

Large-scale Māori migration from rural to urban areas during the mid-20th century further disrupted traditional patterns of child-rearing. Native schools were based in rural and mainly Māori districts, and became less important to Māori education as their pupils migrated to towns and cities. Parents of young children found themselves living in unfamiliar and often cramped urban surroundings, far from their relatives and facing new social expectations from mainly non-Māori neighbours and landlords. In these difficult circumstances, many traditional child-rearing practices either disappeared or were greatly adapted. The effect of these social changes, combined with the generally low economic status of Māori people, meant that Māori children had poorer health and worse rates of accidents and youth suicide than non-Māori. The Māori Women's Welfare League was formed by Māori women to address issues of housing and health.

E tipu e rea

In 1949 Apirana Ngata wrote in the autograph book of schoolgirl Rangi Bennett, 'E tipu, e rea, mo nga ra o tou ao, ko to ringa ki nga rakau a te Pakeha hei ora mo te tinana, ko to ngakau ki nga taonga a o tipuna Maori hei tikitiki mo to mahuna, a ko to wairua ki to Atua, nana nei nga mea katoa.' (Thrive in the days destined for you, your hand to the tools of the Pākehā to provide physical sustenance, your heart to the treasures of your ancestors to adorn your head, your soul to God to whom all things belong.) This became much quoted as a vision for Māori youth.

Child abuse

Experts on tikanga Māori agree that incest (kai-whiore or ngau-whiore) and rape (pāwhera) are abhorrent to traditional Māori values. Until the period of mass urban migration by Māori, the physical or sexual abuse of children was limited both by these traditional values and by the constant presence of other adults. However by the early 21st century the rate of sexual and physical abuse of Māori children was nearly 12 per 1,000, double the rate for non-Māori. In some cases offenders were tried on a marae, rather than in a court, and their sentences have included traditional punishments such as losing speaking rights on their marae. In 2007 Māori, led by Dr Hone Kaa, began to develop a strategy to end child abuse, forming Ngā Mana Ririki (the power of the little ones).

Working with offenders

A 1988 Department of Social Welfare report, Puao te ata tu, called for a system for dealing with young Māori offenders that recognised Māori customs, values and beliefs. The resulting Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1989 required social workers to consider the views of a Māori child's whānau, hapū and iwi. The family group conference, in which extended families work with welfare professionals to plan safe outcomes for their children, became the basis for state decision-making on the care or protection of children. These conferences, first introduced in New Zealand, were later adopted in other countries.

Te reo Māori

In response to evidence in the 1970s that Māori was becoming an endangered language, Māori kaumātua (elders) formed Te Kōhanga Reo (Māori-language pre-school). The first kōhanga opened in Wainuiomata in 1982. This was followed by the development of Kura Kaupapa Māori and Whare Kura (Māori-language primary and secondary schools). A speech competition, Te Korimako (later Ngā Manu Kōrero), encouraged children to pursue excellence in the language.

Sport

Young Māori have had notable success in national and international sports. Lui Paewai was the youngest ever All Black rugby player at 17, on a famous side known as the Invincibles. George Nepia was another notable young rugby player. A side from Te Aute College won the Moascar Cup for secondary schools rugby in 1979. The Silver Ferns national netball team has also had prominent young Māori players, including Louisa Wall who joined the team at 17 years old. Michael Campbell played in Māori golf tournaments as a youth and went on to win the US Open in 2005.

Iwi

Iwi and hapū have many initiatives to assist Māori children. Tribes offer scholarships to descendants for secondary and tertiary education. The Tūhoe tribe run Te Hui Ahurei giving youth the opportunity to return to their traditional lands and participate in tribal traditions. Other tribes also offer youth opportunities to immerse themselves in tribal language and culture.

External links and sources

More suggestions and sources

Metge, Joan. New growth from old: the whānau in the modern world. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1995.

Penetito, Kim. Whānau identity and whānau development are interdependent: an experience of whānau. Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008.

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