

Kisses, Mum: Histories and home as told through letters

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Abstract

The Whakapapa Research Project, hosted by Te Atawhai o Te Ao, aims to gather whānau narratives from eight whānau, led by a researcher from each whānau. The stories that have unfolded provide an insight into the organisation, perseverance, preservation and healing centred engagement of whānau and whakapapa over time. Methods employed by each whānau researcher allow for innovation, and the research topics are set by whānau researchers at regular hui and workshops. Research topics include: matriarchs; connection to whenua (ancestral land); kai (food, nourishment); whāngai (customary child-rearing practices); an event-related story; taonga (a treasured item); deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) and genetic codes; and methodology. Whānau researchers are free to interpret these topics in the context of their own whānau understandings and realities. Of interest are the ways in which whānau researchers engaged with their whānau and each topic, and also how whānau responded to challenges that were evident within their own whānau narratives.

This presentation focuses on the research findings of one of the whānau researchers, on her grandmother, Kataraina Marshall (née Pātena Māriu), of Ngāti Tūwharetoa and Whanganui descent. In particular, a number of hand-written letters from Kataraina to her daughter have been analysed, which provide a glimpse into life within a rural, hapū-based community on the Whanganui River during the 1950s-1960s, from the perspective of a wife, mother, and grandmother. The importance of staying connected with whānau and sharing news from home, despite physical separation, is apparent. Typical news items included details of hapū community events, challenges of managing the farm, whānau

relationships, faith-based gatherings (including church and school), and a proposal to dam the Whanganui River for electricity generation. The letters also contain a *tono* (plea) to contribute towards the purchase of new crockery for Rānana Marae, as well as details pertaining to several *hui* (meetings, gatherings) that allowed for connections within the community to be maintained, whilst also allowing an opportunity for those who had relocated to urban areas for employment and education to return 'home'. Furthermore, the impact of technology, and the poignancy of leaving ancestral land while maintaining *whānau mana*, is evident in her writing.

Whānau narratives stemming from the Whakapapa Research Project will be shared in various ways, with dissemination being determined by the whānau researcher, who has a pivotal role in the research approach of the Whakapapa Research Project. The presentation contributes to Kaupapa Māori research by not only gathering whānau narratives, but furthering definitions, understandings, and *tikanga* of whānau-led research.

Biography of presenting author/s

Rachael Tinirau

Rachael Tinirau is one of eight whānau researchers, involved in the Whakapapa Research Project, hosted by Te Atawhai o Te Ao. Hailing from Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangi and Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Rachael has an interest in whakapapa and the numerous connections between people and place. Under the auspices of Ngāti Ruaka and Ngāti Hine hapū of Rānana, Whanganui River, Rachael was responsible for conducting a number of interviews with *kuia* and *koroheke* of the hapū as part of the He Morehu Tangata research project, which sought to gain insights into social, cultural, and environmental well-being from elders' perspectives.

Rāwiri Tinirau

Dr Rāwiri Tinirau is the Director of Te Atawhai o Te Ao, an independent Māori research institute in Whanganui, focused on health and environment. Rāwiri serves on a number of governance and advisory boards, and has several research interests, including Māori health, community development, performing and literary arts, environment and land custodianship, education, and economic development.