

Story: Whakapapa – genealogy

Page 1. What is whakapapa?

Whakapapa is a taxonomic framework that links all animate and inanimate, known and unknown phenomena in the terrestrial and spiritual worlds. Whakapapa therefore binds all things. It maps relationships so that mythology, legend, history, knowledge, **tikanga** (custom), philosophies and spiritualities are organised, preserved and transmitted from one generation to the next.

Whakapapa is the core of traditional mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge). Whakapapa means genealogy. Other Māori terms for genealogy are *kāwai* and *tātai*. *Kauwhau* and *taki* refer to the process of tracing genealogies.

East Coast elder [Apirana Ngata](#) explained that **whakapapa** is ‘the process of laying one thing upon another. If you visualise the foundation ancestors as the first generation, the next and succeeding ancestors are placed on them in ordered layers.’¹

Types of whakapapa

Ngata listed different forms of whakapapa and their names.

Whakamoe, taotahi

Whakamoe includes the intermarriages on the lines of descent, whereas taotahi gives the names on the lines without those of wives or husbands.

Tararere

Tararere gives a single line of descent from an ancestor, without showing intermarriages, or giving other kin on the line. This is the usual method of tracing whakapapa.

Tāhū

As the term suggests, tāhū (also meaning the ridgepole of a house) is setting out the main descent lines. In another sense it refers to the common ancestors of a tribe. Thus Paieka, Pāoa, Ira, Toi, Uepōhatu and Ruawaipū would be called stock ancestors of Ngāti Porou and kindred tribes.

Whakapiri

The literal meaning of whakapiri is to seek to establish connections. To define a person’s position in respect of another, a common ancestor was traced, counting down the generations to both people. If the two are found to be from the same generation, a speaker would have to consider whether the other was from a senior branch, and should be called *tuakana* (descended from a senior line), or from a younger branch, so should be called *taina* (from a junior line). If he stood in the position of *pāpā* (father or uncle) then the other person was called *tamaiti* (child).

Tātai hikohiko

Tātai hikohiko omitted names from different generations to form an abbreviated whakapapa designed to emphasise the most important **tīpuna** (ancestors). This was also known as āhua hikohiko.

Uses of different recitations

Historical genealogy did not list all individuals, marriages and tribes, but focused on those that were important and relevant for the time. Most genealogies were taotahi or tararere (without spouses), each ending in the name of one important family figure rather than a list of all siblings.

A knowledgeable person meeting a new acquaintance would only need to know the name of a father, mother, brother, sister or grandparent to link that person into the wider tribal genealogy. Whakamoe lines (naming marriage partners) and siblings were sometimes given in order to make connections to other important collateral lines.

Whakapiri were included to trigger the names of key ancestors, related groups, other genealogical lines or to invoke important histories. For example there were important tribal alliances through marriage, such as Ueoneone from Ngāpuhi to Reitū from Ngāti Pou in the Waikato; Ruapūtanga from Taranaki to Whatihua of Waikato; and Tūrongo from Waikato to Māhina-a-rangi from the East Coast. Te Huki's net, using family members to mark tribal boundaries, is another example. Whakapiri lines can vary between tribes.

Footnotes:

1. A. T. Ngata, Rauru-nui-ā-Toi lectures and Ngati Kahungunu origin. Wellington: Victoria University, 1972, p. 6.

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