

# Into the Arms of the Ancestors

## Entrance to the Sacred Space of a Maori Marae Requires a Song

By Virginia A Sheridan

Be careful what you touch in a Maori *wharenui* – you might accidentally poke an ancestor.

The *wharenui* (pronounced ‘far ay noo ee’) is the central focus of any *marae*, the meeting ground for a tribe of Maori (the collective name for New Zealand’s indigenous inhabitants). It is a place of discussion, a place of reunion, a place of remembrance. The interior’s paintings and carvings relate the tribe’s history. The framed photos on the wall honour its deceased members. And its very structure is said to be the embodiment of the tribe’s main ancestor: the gable is the head, the two eaves are the arms, the main ceiling beam is the backbone, the rafters are the ribs and the central column is the heart.

The symbolism is at once comforting and cautionary. Inside the *wharenui*, one feels protected, but also prohibited. The space commands respect – shoes, food and ‘bad tempers’ are not allowed inside. During a Maori funeral, for example, when emotional displays are necessarily loud and cathartic, relatives may rant about the deceased outside the *wharenui*, but may only enter once they have made their peace. The *wharenui* also requires protocol. Members of the home tribe automatically greet the ancestors with a special *karakia* or invocation upon entering the wooden structure. All other visitors gain admittance only after being accepted by the *marae* chief in a formal *powhiri* welcoming ceremony.



A wharenui, photo by Roger Wong (Flickr)



A raised food and treasure storehouse, photo by the author

A tradition that harkens back to the days when Maori warriors battled other Polynesian tribes for resources, territory and women, the *powhiri* is a way of discerning friend from foe. The incoming party enters the *marae* led by the women. Hands are open and empty of weapons. Women on both sides call back and forth to each other to establish intent, a process likened to “weaving a mat

upon Mother Earth” that binds the sides together – a buffer to the potential physical and emotional outbursts of the men. The group then sits in front of the *wharenui* while speakers from each side exchange greetings.

Far from a polite hello, these lengthy speeches reflect the importance of oratory skills in Maori custom and ideally convey a sense of genealogy, mythology, language skill and perhaps most importantly, a dramatic sensibility. (Let us not



The interior of a wharenui, photo from Wikimedia Commons

forget that the Maori developed the *Haka*, an ear-splitting, eye-popping, tongue-thrusting, wholly intimidating war dance – a milder version of which was introduced to the world stage by the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team, who have performed it before every match since 1906).

But while the oratory is critical, the acceptance of guests onto the *marae* often depends upon... a song. Not just any old tune will do: the *waiata* needs to reflect the tone of the oratory, the wisdom of the culture and respect for the home tribe, otherwise the chief may throw back the *koha* offering and ban the group from the *marae*. If the song is accepted, however, the group is welcomed as *whanau*, family, and the two sides come together in a *hongi* – a pressing of noses symbolising the mingling of “the sacred breath of life.” A shared meal seals the deal.

Ironically, although food is prohibited inside the *wharenui*, the structure was inspired by the raised food and treasure storehouses of early Maori villages. At that time, meetings were held in living quarters and the communal space was unnecessary – until the arrival of the European settlers and the subsequent need for Maori to meet in larger groups and to strategise with neighbouring tribes.

But this evening, at Roimata *marae* in Kutarere, a visiting group of students peacefully settles into the *wharenui* for a night of sleep. Accepted as *whanau* after a lovely rendition of *Amazing Grace*, they rest beneath the portraits of ancestors past, beneath the stylised waves and animal motifs painted in white, red and black – the colours of the Maori creation story. The air hums with the quiet respiration of sleeping teens – and the breathing of one large ancestor. A *marae* visit or overnight stay is an excellent way to experience authentic Maori customs. Search the Internet for *marae*s in the places you plan to visit and be sure to pre-book – and have a song prepared.



A tattooed dancer in front of the painted portico of a wharenui in Rotorua, photo by the author

---

**Virginia A Sheridan** is a docent at the ACM. She also teaches journalism at the Singapore American School and is completing a Masters in Education.

---