



## **Iwi Research and Development – Nga Tahuu o te Taiao Te Mauri o Te Ukaipo Summary of Findings: The Ahi Kaa workforce**

In 2007 a number of Te Rarawa people contributed to a research project under the banner of Ngā Tahuu o Te Taiao. This paper summarises the key findings of the Mauri o te Ukaipo research and may be read in conjunction with other Iwi Research and Development summaries that will be produced throughout 2008. This summary focuses on the ahi kaa workforce as a central theme drawn from the Mauri interviews.

Ahi kaa is a term used to describe the home people – the ones that live on their whenua, that keep the home fires burning, that keep their place - particularly the marae - alive. Ahi kaa and kaitiakitanga are therefore closely intertwined. They include notions of wellbeing, leadership, authority and management of marae, hapu and local issues, and cultural and environmental knowledge and practices required to undertake the role. There is a basic understanding that the ahi kaa will maintain 'home' so that whanau living away always had a place to return to. The many and significant roles of the ahi kaa were easily seen throughout the interviews, and led to the idea of the ahi kaa as a workforce.

### **Becoming Ahi kaa**

People had different experiences of becoming ahi kaa. A few whanau became ahi kaa by default, it was a natural part of them - they had known no other life, they were born and bred and remained on the same whenua all of their lives. For many other whanau becoming ahi kaa was a new experience and one that often followed the death of a parent – sometimes whanau members were told by elders to take up the ahi kaa role and sometimes it was a personal sense of responsibility to take over from a whanau member. Others became ahi kaa on their return home after years away working in other parts of the country.

*..in those days nobody wanted to go back and the only reason why [Dad and Uncle] were there was because they were told by their tupuna that they were the two that had to stay and look after that land ... the others could go ...*

## **So what do the Ahi kaa do?**

People do not see themselves as having a particular expert role as ahi kaa - they just do things because they are on the spot, they know their environment well and respond as best they can – just common sense. The ahi kaa are grounded in local knowledge and are the 'first response' people for anything happening in their rohe. They keep alive the local, growing up, and childhood stories of the area; pass on their intimate knowledge of the special places; know about the water sources; protect the environment; initiate the re-seeding of kaimoana stocks; show visiting whanau how and where to fish and collect kaimoana; advise about beach safety; remove rubbish from the beach; initiate whale stranding strategies; deal with drowning; place rahui; get involved with local government issues; run the marae; and provide manaakitanga to manuhiri – the list is extensive.

All ahi kaa whanau members have roles to play. Children are taught to help from an early age, quickly becoming part of the collective workforce helping to gather kaimoana, look after the younger children, and work on the land. Upholding the functions of the marae was a major and ongoing part of ahi kaa work. There was ongoing maintenance of the facilities, preparation for hui, including the taumata, ringa wera, gathering kai moana, butchering, shopping for supplies, awhi throughout the hui and cleaning up afterwards. The small numbers of whanau living at home in some *communities* means that the younger generation move up the marae workforce ranks at an earlier age. A young adult noted that,

*..I used to be in the kitchen but at the moment I'm slowly backwards and forwards between the wharenui and wharekai.*

Whether for planned marae events or for casual occasions, visitors are made welcome and looked after by the ahi kaa. Whanau seemed to favour different jobs at different times when preparing for manuhiri, however if help was scarce there was no choice.

*Just depends who was around, who was available at the time. If you were there, you go and get the mussels, you can fry the bread and you can do the veges. Just depends who wanted to do it I guess. Some of us didn't want to go to the beach. Some of us didn't want to fry the bread. So we just choose what we wanted to do, or mind you there were times when we had to do it because nobody else was around.*

*..we've got some visitors coming down we better go down and get some tuna, go down and get enough for a feed.*

Food was commonly associated with the ahi kaa workforce and whanau manaaki roles.

*..if we we're getting visitors we'd go down and do some netting and get some mullet and smoke them, or go out fishing for snapper. Or if they had something [a function] at the school or a tangi.*

Gathering kaimoana was a collective effort for whanau or community events and although individuals had their favourite kaimoana, the species did not matter too much as people were satisfied with whatever was available. There seemed to be a duty to preserve, bottle, pickle and make jam with local fruit and vegetables for marae and community functions.

*I just recall her [my mother] doing a lot of bottling of jam, baking cakes, taking them down to the marae and she actually did catering for weddings back then with our aunty who lived next door ...*

### **Leadership and Ahi kaa**

The ahi kaa system was also seen as a model of leadership and a way of doing things. One person explained how not having an ahi kaa system had impacted on them as *"..part of the dysfunction ... we didn't understand the roles"*. This loss of leadership was particularly evident in the wake of death,

*When he [ahi kaa leader] died there was a period of real uncertainty ... there was no traditional leadership ... not a very good state of being for our people ... a way of living that wasn't conducive to a happy place.*

*We were never ahi kaa, we weren't the ones living there ...*

### **Te ao hurihuri**

Changing whanau dynamics, lifestyles and employment trends have created challenges to the concept of ahi kaa – whanau may not live at home but are able to some extent to support the ahi kaa from nearby, in other instances whanau return home but do not stay long, or maybe stay but have their own reasons or challenges for not actively engaging in the ahi kaa workforce.

*..it has had a huge impact on kaitiakitanga and ahi kaa, we haven't got people who will stay there for longer than six months or a year ... It's not a lifelong commitment to be there [home], so we're now in a*

*situation where we have a new meaning for ahi kaa.*

Recent government policies requiring people to move from their communities for employment has reduced the marae ahi kaa workforce and sometimes it is a struggle for the few locals to keep their marae functioning.

*..the hau kainga , they've all got to go and work now you know so there's not many people left to keep the home fires burning ...*

Issues of transience have led to innovative and practical ways of managing the ahi kaa roles within community realities. In one example whanau over the years have been forced to rethink how they could maintain the ahi kaa roles without moving home permanently - they created a rostered ahi kaa workforce system, sharing the jobs amongst the whanau for different periods to ensure that someone was at home to keep things going.

*..traditional roles have taken a huge shaking and we're now in the time where we have to try and adapt our thinking and our way that we do things so we can meet everybody's needs*

*We're such transient people. In society today you don't get our young people staying in this one area and living though there as adults like in my father's day. For whatever reason people come and go ...*

*..we've redefined ahi kaa, we have and it's a case of having to, a roster system it is.*

These perceptions highlight the stability and connection that ahi kaa provide to the whenua and the whanau – including whanau who live away from home.

Being the holders of local knowledge of everything from whakapapa to fishing spots makes them key resource people at whanau, marae/hapu and iwi levels. This broad scope of work often results in heavy workloads for a few home people. Therefore, strategies for hapu and marae developments need to acknowledge the fluid nature of modern models of ahi kaa to support this important voluntary workforce. Just thinking about the home people or ahi kaa as a workforce helps to shift and revalue their crucial contributions to our Te Rarawa communities'.