



## **Eastern Bay Villages Te Kokoru Manaakitanga**

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### **Introduction to our organisation**

Eastern Bay Villages/Te Kokoru Manaakitanga is an Eastern Bay of Plenty community development organisation run by seniors/pakeke, supporting one another to stay well as we age. We have a two whare structure, with Tāngata Tiriti and Tāngata Whenua co-chairs and coordinators.

Many members have been concerned by aspects of the funeral industry, so I (Ruth Gerzon, co-ordinator) have been tasked with setting up mechanisms that enable whānau to remain in charge of funeral processes, with the support of funeral guides. Our mission is to

*Support choice: providing guidance on family led, affordable and eco-friendly funerals/tangihanga in the Eastern Bay of Plenty*

From 29 October to 8 November 2020 three hui were held in the Eastern Bay of Plenty to discuss traditional practices for funerals and tangihanga. On 29 October, in Te Kaha, 22 people, from each of the hapū of Te Whanau-a-Apanui, shared ideas on how they have already begun to care for their own people. On 31 October, in Whakatāne, 45 people already supporting families to care for their own came from many parts of the country to share ideas and work to make new options available to all. On 8 November, in Te Teko, weavers and builders of puhirere (alternatives to coffins) shared their skills with over 50 participants. This paper backgrounds the issues discussed at three hui. In the appendix photographs taken at these hui show both traditional practices and the Atamira Matao (cooling pad).

There is a clear groundswell of people seeking to return to traditional funeral practices, among both Māori and Tauīwi. It is essential that people are enabled to continue to develop these whānau led practices that are more healing, more eco-friendly and more affordable.

### **Issues facing families/whānau**

#### **1. Cultural changes**

Dying was once viewed as natural and expected in Europe and in Aotearoa. Yet in recent decades, European/Pākehā culture has brought forth an industry of professionals with the responsibility to provide after death care. This removes death as a natural part of life, making people more fearful of death, of dead bodies. Reclaiming traditional rites of death and burial, with family led processes and

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community involvement, enables a deeper expression of grief. With it also comes a greater understanding of our own mortality, an essential aspect of who we are as human beings.

We see the cultural contexts of funerals/tangihanga as rapidly changing. Many families/ whānau want to care for their own, harking back to traditional practices before the rise of the funeral industry.

For Māori this is part of the process of decolonisation, as former practices and rites are remembered and reclaimed. In our area people are weaving whāriki to wrap tūpāpaku, building puhirere and taupoki to use instead of coffins.

Pākehā too are recalling and reviving their former traditions in this country and in their countries of origin. Women used to lay out the bodies in their villages, and communities would come together to bury their dead. Our hospice movement has enabled people to die at home surrounded by their loved ones. This has taken the process of dying back from the hands of medical professionals and hospitals with the support of a compassionate family focussed organisation. We plan to work in parallel to hospice, enabling families to play the central role in after death rites.

This contrasts with the current accepted practice for our loved ones after they have taken their last breath. The usual practice is for the body to be removed from the home and cared for by strangers. However loving and respectful funeral directors are, the family takes a back seat to what has become the domain of professionals. Yet we believe it is our fundamental human right to care for our own, both before and after death. Those who have undertaken this process in recent years have found it positive and healing for their mental health and for community well-being.

Right now we are at the beginning of a renaissance of traditional community practices in caring for and honouring those who have died. In coming decades funeral services will be increasingly family led and personalised, with families and friends actively seeking to spend more time with the deceased while they express their grief.

Significantly, some Pākehā families are beginning not only to use more traditional practices, but also to include other elements more common in tangihanga, such as an open casket, speaking directly to the tūpāpaku and blessing the home after the deceased has been taken for service or burial.

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### 2. Costs

Members have long been concerned by the way the rising cost of funerals exacerbates poverty in our communities, especially when a whānau may experience two or three tangihanga within a year or two. Ours is one of New Zealand's most deprived regions, with high levels of unemployment and a legacy of inherited disadvantage. The social services represent the largest industry sector by value.<sup>1</sup> The two funeral directors in our area provide quality services but they have extensive premises, full time staff and processes that result in costs that are unaffordable for many whānau. Both have reported high levels of unpaid debt by whānau.

Some families now eschew a service completely and go for a simple and quick cremation because that is all they can afford. This does not enable the community to come together to mourn, nor the family to express the grief they feel at the passing of a loved one.

Rites of passage enable communities to share their grief, to mourn their loss, and to celebrate the life of the one who has died. They play a central part in all cultures, bringing people together, reaffirming relationships. Without such rites communities become more fractured, people more isolated and the mental health of families and friends is at risk.

Almost everyone turns to a funeral director at a time of death. Funeral directors are seen as having indispensable expertise in health and administration requirements; they have access to equipment (gurneys, coffins, suitable vehicles) and provide embalming, which is still standard. People do not know that they can arrange a funeral themselves and complete the administration requirements. At a time of grief, especially in smaller Pākehā families, completing tasks and learning the needed skills can be insurmountable obstacles. This is why we are pleased to be part of a growing movement of people willing to act as funeral guides or kai atawhai.

In Pākehā communities we have seen a move to more personalised funerals where the interests, passions, and contributions to the community made by the deceased are brought to the fore. We see this as a better and more healing way to demonstrate love and loss than through the purchase of an expensive casket. It is also a more fitting way for a community to honour those who have passed.

In Maori communities the value of the person is demonstrated through the rituals on marae, and here there is a return to traditional ways that also lower costs. In our district, instead of being placed in a coffin, some tūpāpaku are honoured through

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<sup>1</sup> Eastern Bay of Plenty: Regional Development Report 2019

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wrapping in whāriki and being placed on a puhirere with taupoki, decorated with leaves and covered with korowai.

We see a need for these practices to be shared and spread throughout the country. Our concern is that most families and whānau still do not know that they can use these low-cost alternatives that honour and dignify their loved one. We know funeral practices are changing and that this decade will see the adoption of new practices that are more family and community centred and healing.

### 3. Environmental concerns

Our members are also concerned about the environmental effects of cremation and burial. They successfully lobbied for a natural burial cemetery which our local Whakatāne District Council has now established. One member said she would rather 'nourish a tree when she leaves this earth' than cause pollution through embalming or cremation.

We understand that currently 90% of bodies in our country are embalmed and we are just beginning to understand what this means for the environment. Embalming fluids are detrimental to the environment, with formaldehyde a known human carcinogen. This has been banned in Holland and the European Union (the latter, in 2018, allowed three years for adjustment before implementing the ban). Yet one of our local cemeteries (in Taneatua) is close to the river that provides the Whakatāne water supply.

Māori are also beginning to express concern about embalming 'waste', taken from the body when embalming, that enters our sewage system. Some now asked for this to be placed in a container in the casket. Gisborne Council is considering a by-law that would set up a culturally appropriate alternative to such 'waste' disposal.

Cost was the main consideration for Moetatua Turoa of Whānau-a-Apanui, who imported a cooling pad for use on marae up the East Coast. The cost of transporting tūpāpaku to Whakatāne and back for embalming was prohibitive and it also made it harder to practice the Māori cultural tradition of the whanau staying alongside the tūpāpaku until burial.

Moetatua redesigned the cooling pad so it is more robust for use on marae, and it is now known as an Atamira Matao. If a coffin is placed on this the tūpāpaku does not need embalming. This was used successfully on the East Coast and in Minginui in February this year, has been welcomed in other Māori communities and has already been used for a Pākehā funeral in Whakatāne. It will support people wanting to be buried in the natural burial cemetery as embalmed bodies cannot be buried there.

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Other groups are now using techni-ice packs or frozen salt water to keep the body cool.

## Our plans

We plan an on-line presence only. We will not embalm nor have any premises, apart from a storage shed for Atamira Matao, gurneys, coffins and other equipment. We will support whānau to prepare tūpāpaku in homes, and to arrange farewell services on marae, in churches, community halls or in their homes. In this way we can ensure our work is family led and costs are substantially reduced.

We are now approaching communities and hapū suggesting that they nominate a couple of people to receive such training as funeral guides. Already a number have expressed their interest in both Māori and Pākehā communities. We will gather expertise and develop training and a website with all relevant information to enable funeral guides to safely do this work.

## Our mission

- The Trust will facilitate, and coordinate services for whānau wishing to provide a more traditional and affordable burial for their loved ones.
- The Trust will be the conduit to join whānau need with the available skilled people, specific resources etc (e.g refrigerated surface to preserve the body)
- The Trust will arrange training of guides who will, when qualified, assist whānau through traditional and affordable burial processes. They will be engaged by the whānau directly without influence from the Trust, other than providing the introductions.
- The Trust will maintain a comprehensive computer-based directory of individuals and groups who are interested /qualified to help with aspects of the burial process.
- The Trust's financial commitment will be limited to providing the technology required to support a well co-ordinated, user friendly service to whānau. It will also invest in resources and equipment that will be available on a rental basis.
- The Trust's activities will be funded by way of grants, donations, and income from the rental of equipment.
- The Trust will not employ people, other than those needed to ensure a smooth running coordination service.
- The Trust is not to become a funeral director, nor compete directly with others in the funeral sector, but be complementary and where appropriate openly supportive, sharing knowledge on traditional funeral rites and resources.



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Moetatua Turoa talks about the Atamira Matao  
at the Te Teko hui, 8 Nov 2020



Kutiwera demonstrates the weaving  
of whāriki to wrap the tūpāpaku.  
Te Teko 8 Nov 2020



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A workshop to teach the making of puhirere and taupoki.



The taupoki.  
Te Teko, 8 Nov 2020



Decorating the taupoki.  
Te Teko hui, 8 Nov 2020