

A Maori Perspective on Disaster Recovery in New Zealand


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CULTURAL RECOVERY?

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to the various ways in which communities recover from disaster¹. For disaster-affected communities, recovery entails pulling together resources and knowledge to overcome adversity. Together these aspects make up the culture of a community.

MANA is a Polynesian word, best translated as 'prestige' or 'status'. It symbolises the kinship by which traditional Maori society operated². The kinship principle is not exclusive to Maori, but by collecting evidence of disasters which have affected Maori communities, it may reveal a pattern by which mana can be contextualised.

CASE STUDY: 1931 HAWKE'S BAY EARTHQUAKE



Right: Map of North Island of NZ showing Hawke's Bay (green) (Wikipedia); Below: Earthquake damage in Napier (Nat. Lib. of NZ)

- 3rd February 1931; 7.8 M_s³
- Killed 256 people; caused extensive structural damage throughout the region³
- Maori communities in Hawke's Bay were based mostly in the hinterlands
- Little is known about the effects and recovery from the earthquake from a Maori perspective

UNDERSTANDING MANA

I. Celestial

The prestige of living life according to a higher authority. Traditional Maori conceived gods or deities (*Atua*) as abstractions of higher thought. Today, celestial prestige may include the multitude of poly- and monotheistic faiths.

Spirituality was a significant element in processing the losses of the 1931 earthquake. Some Maori who held on to traditional spirituality attributed the earthquake to the anger of the gods.

II. Ancestral

The prestige of being aware of, and being able to draw from ancestral lineage. A disaster thought to be a punishment by the gods was in equal measure considered shameful for the ancestors. Conversely, ancestral feats and exploits were often expressed in order to inspire the living.

Following the earthquake, Maori communities in Hawke's Bay fed and sheltered stricken locals in their traditional meeting houses (marae), which were constructed as the physical embodiments of the spirituality to which they adhered.

III. Communal

The prestige of family, as well as wider community links. Adversity brings people together, and from such adversity often emerges a community spirit that manifests itself in pragmatic ways such as providing hospitality to others.

Offering one's physical dwelling to another for refuge is a prime example of community spirit in practice. The Maori meeting houses in Hawke's Bay became a communal focal point in the aftermath of the earthquake.

IV. Individual

The prestige of self-worth, honour, integrity and discipline. An individual's prestige is enhanced by personal achievement. Individual prestige is the inward base through which *mana* operates.

Recognition of an individual's spirit is no less vital to the process of recovery. Survivors of the 1931 earthquake, as well as their descendants, attribute their own prestige and enterprise to a foundation that was laid and enhanced by the broader links as schematised.

The 1931 Hawke's Bay earthquake provides a cultural perspective of recovery. The earthquake uplifted the Napier Inner Harbour (below: before and after), much of which was a significant fishing ground. The physical change in landscape gave rise to spiritual matters which are still contested today.



(Photos: National Library of New Zealand)

THE SPIRIT OF RECOVERY

The depth of community spirit in the face of adversity may be better realised through an understanding of the culture behind it^{1,4}. If material objects, such as goods, buildings and infrastructure, are the tangible markers of prosperity, then culture is the intangible marker. To that end, the Maori culture has much to offer—with respect both to its practices and its philosophy—to the conception of disaster recovery.

REFERENCES

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