

Te Rūnanga Whakawhanaunga i ngā Haahi

End of Life Choice Referendum

*Kai hea?
Kai hea te pu o te mate?
Kai runga, kei raro
Kai te hikahika nui no Hine nui te po.*

*“Where is the cause or origin of death?
It is above and below.
It is in the organ of Hine nui te po.”¹*

Māori mythology offers a Māori rationale for human mortality, articulated through the story of Maui and Hine nui te pō². According to oral tradition, Maui attempts to acquire the source of life by attaining the manawa (heart) of Hine nui te pō. Maui is unsuccessful in his pursuit to achieve immortality for humans, as a result we are resigned to our inevitable mortality.

Introduction

The narrative of Maui and Hine nui te pō defines the nature of human mortality from a uniquely Māori perspective. The story is described in intimate detail, as Maui attempts to reverse the birthing process in order to attain immortality. Maui manifests as a *mokomoko* (lizard) and enters into the slumbering body of Hine nui te pō, in pursuit of her *manawa* (heart), thought to be the source of life. Hine nui te pō is awoken by the fluttering of the *tīwaiwaka* (fantail) and crushes Maui to death, cementing human mortality in his own fate. Despite Tane’s plea that humanity might share the fate of the moon that is revived each day, Hine nui te pō declared, “. . . Let man die as earth-born creatures die; let him return to our Earth-Mother, even that he may be mourned and lamented.”³ The account reinforces the role of Hine nui te pō as a conduit for *wairua* (spirit) as they pass from their earthly bodies to the Māori spiritual homeland of Hawaiki.

¹ Best, “Māori Eschatology: The Whare Potae (House of Mourning) and its Lore; being a description of many customs, beliefs, superstitions, rites &c., pertaining to Death and Burial among the Maori people, as also some account of Native Belief in a Spiritual World – Myth of Maui and Hine nui te pō,” 155.

² Maui features in Māori mythology as a hybrid of both the human and divine, a legendary, ancestral figure. Hine nui te pō most often features in Māori mythology as the shamed Hine Titama, daughter of Tane and Hine ahu one who retreats to Rarohenga (underworld) when she learns her husband and Father are one-in-the-same.

³ Best, 150.

The discussion and debate around the End of Life Choice has been considered by many Māori to be a largely Pākehā *kaupapa* (policy). There have been very few Māori perspectives on the issue that have been shared in a public forum. Some believe it is not a part of our *tikanga* (custom) and advocates an individualistic Pākehā approach to dying. The inevitable truth is that this referendum will impact Māori, whatever the decision may be. Therefore, we need to bring an essential Māori perspective to the discussion and use our *tikanga* as a guide.

As we consider the upcoming referendum, we draw from the wisdoms of our past to inform and engage our present. In a Māori context, *tikanga* underpins our ethical practice, and we are guided by our judgements about what is *tika* (correct) and *pono* (true). We espouse the principles of *tapu*⁴ and *mana*⁵ which are fundamental to understanding Māori religious and spiritual thought. We are reconciled to consider the value we place on the *tapu* and *mana* of human life and whether Euthanasia, is in keeping with our *tikanga*. Our responses as Māori, as *hapu* (tribal group), as *whanau* (family) and as individuals, are as diverse as our interpretation and practice of *tikanga*. Therefore, what we hope to offer here is an informed view, informed by a Māori worldview and by *tikanga* Māori.

Te Rūnanga Whakawhanaunga i ngā Haahi⁶ is a Māori ecumenical body that seeks to uplift the prophetic voice of Māori communities of faith. Our Māori lens captures an authentic vision of life and death, through which our perspectives can be filtered and focused. Te Rūnanga affirms ‘*te tapu o te ira tangata*’ (the sanctity of human life) and acknowledges life is a precious gift and is sacrosanct. We accept and are deeply conscious of our collective responsibility and duty of care for the preservation of human life, as we grapple with the End of Life Choice.

As Māori, we have always understood ourselves to be a communal people, a tribal people. The preservation of *whakapapa* (genealogy) has always been paramount. Our *whanau* and *hapu* by-in-large, have taken responsibility for one another in birth and in death. Our *marae* have served as gathering places of community, of faith, and of celebration, of both life and death. It is not inconceivable that the decision to end a life could potentially be both an

⁴ Tapu refers to something, someone that is set apart from the ordinary or mundane, or in a Christian context can also mean sanctity or sacredness.

⁵ Mana, meaning authority, status, power or influence.

⁶ The Māori Council of Churches, hereafter to be referred to as Te Rūnanga.

individual and a collective choice. The fundamental principle of *whanaungatanga* (relationships) prescribes the obligation determined by whakapapa to maintain our kinship relationships. The importance of whanau involvement in a life-changing decision is a major consideration, and unfortunately that does not appear to be reflected in the framing and implementing of this act.

The tradition and practice of the *whare mate* (house of death) refers to a passive approach to dying. This approach involved the withholding of treatment and or food and drink intended to bring on death. The concept of the whare mate was to make provisions for the waning of life as a natural course. However, it was not universal and not all hapu shared in this tradition and practice. What was and still is universal is a whanau approach to sharing in the transition of loved ones from life to death, effectively the beginning of the *poroporoaki* (farewell) process. This phase of transition is often marked with *waiata* (song), *karakia* (prayer), *korero* (narrative), *rongoā* (medicine), and *mirimiri* (massage), these are considered precious moments that offer a sense of freedom to the dying and solace to the living. This process for Māori is not regulated or legislated it is simply another way of exercising and living out our tikanga.

We give due consideration to the medical implications of the practice of Euthanasia or physician-assisted dying. Medical interventions and palliative care have been created to facilitate comfort and minimise suffering for the terminally ill. There are significant health disparities that indicate more Māori are likely to die with palliative care needs than Pākehā. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the government to address these disparities in access to quality palliative care and pain management particularly for Māori. The existing healthcare systems are under increasing pressure and hospitals are consistently under-resourced and under-funded. The potential for marginalisation and manipulation of vulnerable members of society, including the physically and mentally impaired, is of grave concern as we debate the practicalities of Euthanasia.

Finally, we encourage Māori to ensure that they are enrolled to vote so that their voices can be counted in the major decisions facing our country at this time.

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About Te Rūnanga Whakawhanaunga i ngā Haahi

Te Rūnanga Whakawhanaunga i ngā Haahi is the Māori ecumenical council of churches in Aotearoa New Zealand. Established in 1982, our mission is to serve the one ecumenical movement, uplifting the prophetic voice of Māori communities of faith, and promoting Maori unity, witness and service in our churches and communities.