

## The Traditional Marae

This is a summary of information about the traditional marae. The best information will, however, be gained from talking to a kaumatua or kuia of a traditional hapu or iwi marae about the role it plays in their lives and the lives of their people.

The marae often stands near the outskirts of a small rural village that might be mainly Maori or might be of mixed Maori and Pakeha population. Strictly speaking, the word marae refers to the open ground found in front of the carved (usually) meeting house; commonly, however, the word is used to refer to the whole complex of buildings, the most important of which is the meeting house or *whare nui*.

Marae complexes are the sites of ceremonial gatherings called *hui* at which many people come together, often for several days, as guests of the people to whom the marae belongs, usually a family group. Hui may be called for any number of reasons: to discuss political matters, to pass on genealogical information and other sorts of traditional knowledge, as part of religious observances by Maori churches, or to celebrate weddings and twenty-first birthdays. The most important are funerals, *tangi* or *tangihana*. At tangi in most parts of New Zealand the body of the deceased is laid out for three days either in the meeting house or on its front porch. People may come from all over the country to pay their respects to the deceased. They are received by his or her relatives and put up in the meeting house, along with the body, until after the burial.

In addition to the meeting house a marae complex will almost always include a dining hall (*wharekai*) in which the guests are fed. The bulk of this building is devoted to the dining area, usually with long tables and. If the dining hall is too small for a particular event, guests are fed in shifts, or tents are set up outside to accommodate the overflow. A large kitchen, capable of providing food for several hundreds, is connected to the seating area by a window through which the food is served. Cooking facilities may range from open fires to restaurant ranges and industrial steam kettles.

Many marae today are also equipped with such amenities as walk-in refrigerators, but the older practice of storing meat “on the hoof” until guests require it is also widely practiced. Most marae will also have a space set aside near the dining hall in which food may be cooked in *hangi*. Hangi are a convenient way to provide food for large numbers of people and the food has a distinctive taste from the earth. It is usually only the climactic meal of the hui—on the next to last day, usually Saturday—which is prepared in hangi pits. This meal is referred to as the *hakari* (feast), a word which was used in the mid-nineteenth century to describe whole gatherings at which the provision of food was at least partly the reason for meeting.

Besides the two main buildings, the meeting house and the dining hall, which are named (sometimes for a husband and wife from the home group’s past), a typical rural marae may have a few storage buildings, and will have toilets and facilities for showering in a small separate unnamed building behind the meeting house. A final structural feature of a marae is its boundary: the whole complex is surrounded by something which marks it off from the area around it. This may be nothing more than a wire fence or a row of stones on the ground. The boundary is usually broken in two places: in the back, so that local people may get to the facilities, and by a more elaborate gate opening onto the marae courtyard across from the entrance to the meeting house. Guests gather at this gate to await their formal welcome onto the marae in the powhiri ceremony.

Marae such as these usually belong to a hapu or whanau and stand on land belonging to that group. The marae is the embodiment of the mana of the tangata whenua and stands as a sign of the claims such a group has to the land around it. Any carvings on the house will usually represent the tangata whenua and their ancestors. The *whare nui* is itself regarded as an ancestor. In this way the marae is a kind of museum of family history as well as an integral part of daily life.