

Pānui ki te iwi

‘We must take drastic measures to survive, just as our tīpuna did 100 years ago’

COVID-19 Pānui – 31 March 2020 Edition

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Imminent iwi death shocks have come to test and taunt us every 100 years over the last two centuries. In the 1820's the murderous Āmiowhenua musket raids and subsequent tribal invasions forced most Ngāti Kahungunu hapū to seek combined refuge in Ōkurarenga now known as Kaiuku, Māhia.

Our ancestors were forced to suck on clay for sustenance to combat starvation and annihilation by well-armed enemies. Most of the Kahungunu lands were left vacant hence the saying "Heretaunga takoto noa" - the abandoned plains of Heretaunga. These lands were quickly occupied by other tribes wanting to claim conquest and permanent ownership. However our leaders of that time put their tūrangawaewae status on hold and their mana whenua prestige on the back burner while they regrouped, gathered resources and energy, purchased weapons and made strategic alliances.

When the time was right after several years under Pareihe and others, Ngāti Kahungunu retook the rohe from Wairoa to Wairarapa reinforcing Kahungunu tikanga and kawa across the region. We are the 3rd most numerous Iwi with the second largest Iwi rohe next to Ngāi Tahu today. We could have been staunch and got wiped out or enslaved back then but our leaders told us to put a rāhui around ourselves by self exiling.

In today's context then it is ok to withdraw from formal kawa and tikanga and face to face practices for the survival of the masses, especially the coming generations. To reiterate then it's OK not to hongī, harirū, hug, hākari or hui.

In 1919 during the Spanish flu epidemic where over 8000 people died in New Zealand, about 700 in the Kahungunu rohe, mainly in Hastings, Dannevirke and Marsterton, perished. Hastings had a separate Māori Emergency Hospital given the high numbers infected. Death rates were 6 per 1000 Pākehā whereas it was 42 per 1000 Māori. Many Māori deaths were unrecorded but vast areas of unmarked graves in our marae urupā are a testament to this devastating event. In many cases Ngāti Kahungunu marae shut down, leaving one person or whānau in charge of burying all tūpāpaku dumped at the marae gate. They were called tahua, gravediggers. In some cases tūpāpaku were piled up until a mass grave could be dug for them. The tahua were quarantined for the entire period and were often the only ones on the marae.

Again, normal kawa and tikanga were suspended until whānau and hapū had regrouped and regathered strength and determined whether it was safe to practice these protocols again.

Tā Apirana Ngata led the cultural renaissance of carving, waiata, kapa haka, oral traditions, weaving and so on after this debilitating period as much of the traditional knowledge went to the grave as well.

Now, today, 100 years later we face the same quandary with COVID-19. Ngāti Kahungunu have put out guidelines relating to tangihanga and other occasions. We have urged people to use the Kahungunu wave, the raising of the eyebrows in greeting rather than physical contact. There has been much handwringing about whether to comply to strict quick whānau farewells for instance directly from the undertaker to the urupā. This seems cold hearted and mechanical and we won't really feel it unless it happens to us up close and personal, but we are saving lives here. Our people are most at risk, just like we were during the Spanish flu.

The fact is that the Coronavirus has been borne by travellers to and from all parts of the world and from every exotic continent to our lands. They are in the main 'well off' and 'can afford' speedy treatment. The ominous irony is that most Māori have a travel circumference of a few kilometres daily yet are the most susceptible to infection due to homelessness, overcrowding, low income, multiple health issues and are least likely to get timely treatment.

That is why we must take prevention measures and suspend our tikanga and kawa, self rāhui and take drastic measures just as our tīpuna did 100 years ago and 100 years before that to ensure we exist today. Our aroha, manaaki, wairua can be executed in every possible way bar physical contact. Kia toa tātau katoa. Stay positive, for this is our breath of life into the future.

Tihei mauri ora!

Sent on behalf of Chairman, Ngāti Kahungunu Iwi Incorporated

Ngahiwi Tomoana

<https://www.kahungunu.iwi.nz/covid-19-coronavirus>