

Māori Views of the Waikato River

Carmen Kirkwood

Carmen's Koro instilled in his whanau that the river is a living entity. That it is alive.

And he'd talk about the taniwha, about how the river gives healing, and what he'd seen.

How at times of crises, people would go to the river at dawn. They'd face the rising Sun, pat the water, sprinkle themselves, call on their tupuna – and draw inspiration and healing from that. And there were other river rituals and karakia were a part of life.

There was always a bottle of river water in the house, too. Carmen grew up with her father sprinkling it around to keep his family safe, and the house clean.

"You could say that in its purest state, water comes from God Himself. Directly.

"All races in the world... indigenous people, and white people in their own way, are clear in their stance that water is sacred.

"It's almost like a sacrament – and it's used that way in the daily lives of the river people, no matter where they live.

"And our nannies, our koros and aunties are trying to maintain the relationship they've had all their lives with the river – but all these things are being poured into it, and all this water is being taken from it.

"It's bad enough they're living the raupatu. But how do you explain to them what's happened to the river?"

These abstracts are taken from "One More River to Cross" an article in Mana No 35 August – September 2000. Carmen Kirkwood and Henare Johns give their views on the Waikato River to Lloyd Ashton and Irene Kereama-Royal.

Henare Johns

When the old people talked about the landscape, they would imbue the features with personality.

"For example, the Waikato Stream has its own personality, its own identity, and therefore its own wairua, or spirit. But even before that, it has mauri or life essence.

"Mauri is derived from two sources. It either arrives as rain from Ranginui, or it comes as a spring, breast milk, from Papatūānuku.

"Different waterways became known for particular characteristics and properties, and Māori used them according to those properties.

"Some were used for food. Others were known for healing or cleansing powers, and would be used in that way – I mean for ritual cleansing, and the washing of corpses.

"When a stream flows into other streams – for example, the Tongariro River, the Waitahanui River and so on, there is a coming together of these different identities, and personalities and properties.

"In other words, the stream accumulates in stature, and it accumulates in mana. "Taupō-nui-a-Tia is a collection of a whole lot of different water bodies, and is obviously very important to the Tūwharetoa people.

"And when the Waikato emerges at Nukuhau, on its journey from the lake to the sea, still more streams and rivers and adding to its vitality and life.

"This is why the water of the Waikato River is as important to us as the Ganges is to the Hindus.

"It provides for our spiritual and physical needs.

"So if someone was troubled, or sick, or needed some sort of help, either physically



or spiritually, the saying was: Haere ki te wai. Go to the water.”



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