Ko Au Tënei – This is me

Marama Davidson

Ko te tuatahi, he mihi tënei ki nga atua wähine, nga tüpuna rangatira. Ara ko Papatüänuku, ko Hine-ahuone, ko Hine nui te pö, koutou ko Mururangi Whenua. Nö reira e tu wähine mä, tihei mauriora!

He mokopuna ahau no nga iwi o Ngäti Porou, Ngäpuhi me Te Rarawa hoki. Kia ora tätou katoa.

With a focus on mana wahine I hold in reverence those female figures of our Mäori creation stories. They are the genesis of my standing as a Mäori woman, and it is with that standing that I share with you today, a little bit of my story.

I am the product of two young lovers who met while on a protest march for land. They were teenagers then, and not long after, I was born.

To be precise, my parents met while camped outside the steps of Parliament in Wellington. Their world, I am told, was a bit different from mine.

I want to acknowledge the turbulent 1970s that I was born into. With the heart and mind of a pepi I watched my young 'radical' parents fight with the mamae of what seemed like inevitable spiritual death. Oh how they yearned for the protection of Te Tiriti to combat that!

I saw violence, racism, abuse and injustice.

My children have not seen those same things that I did in their upbringing. Why?

It is because my time is different. It is because I am different. It is because the feelings are different. But it is not because things are better.

I can never speak for all Mäori, not even for all Mäori women. My stories are about me and through them will emerge the different colours of the many käkahu I wear; that of Mäori, that of wähine, that of mother, that of aspiring career woman, and that of friend.

But one käkahu I wear vigorously is that of a young Mäori woman choosing to live in the city. It is a käkahu which saw me growing up all over Aotearoa and attending a range of schools.

I attended the all-Päkeha South Island city schools ('say a Mouwry word for us!'), the small rural Mäori Area schools, the 'elite' urban Mäori girls' boarding school, and finally the huge city high schools hosting many different ethnicities and races. My käkahu was all encompassing and offered me beautiful – if sometimes cruelly honest – experiences.

I would like to remember two women who helped weave that spiritual käkahu of mine. The first is my nanny, Patricia Charlotte Broughton.

I was the first moko to come into her life and I was born on her and my grandfather's 25th wedding anniversary. She has been dead for nearly 20 years and I miss her like she left us yesterday. I was only a young girl when she joined my papa and left our lives, but I feel her wairua eternally. She is inside me more than my own heart is.

When her mokopuna were born she would pull our flat noses with her fingers to try and make them pointier – like the Päkeha ones. Her efforts were in vain because here we all are today with the flattest noses ever! If Päkeha people were to visit her home she would put on bright red lipstick and purse her lips in a way that would make them smaller – like Päkeha ones. It is to her that my siblings and I owe our gloriously large juicy lips. When her children were born she uprooted them from their kainga tüturu to bring them to the city so they could grow up – like the Päkeha. So what does her son – my dad – do, he takes us kids away from the city and back to where our bones are from!

My nanny was a fluent and eloquent speaker of my rangatira language, te reo Mäori, and also of English. She was skilled in poi, waiata, haka, and karanga. Her faith in the Catholic Church was a pinnacle in her way of life. She was the best cook ever and she loved her mokopuna like there was no tomorrow. She was also fierce in the protection of her whänau; I am sharply reminded of the time when she took me to her work to help out and her boss refused to pay me. There is no anger like that of a nanny for her unfairly treated grandchild. Needless to say I received a very good pay for that day.

In all her fierceness my grandmother was whakamä, sometimes, of being Mäori.

My nana was punished at school for speaking Mäori, whereas my siblings and I show off among each other who can speak Mäori the most. My nana chose not to teach her children the Mäori language; I fought hard to put my baby in Kohanga Reo to learn her Mäori tongue. My nana was raised in the traditions of her hapü and her marae from the day she was born. It wasn't until I was seven I went to my first marae and found out where my kainga tüturu is.

Nana loved her children so much that she cut the cords that connected them to their spiritual homeland in the rural countryside, and took them to receive the best of the Päkeha world in the city. For the most part my father flourished, but he would inevitably feel a sense of disconnection also …

… and so would my mother. She would yearn to be Mäori but not always know how, being a born and bred Wellingtonian. My mother – Hanakawhi Alexandra Paraone Nepe-Fox – also weaves herself through the käkahu that protects and nourishes me. As a women raising a family I begin to fully appreciate her strength, her dignity, her honesty and her wisdom. She is godly, and yet simple and real. She is genius, and yet left school with nothing but her name. She is worldly, and yet has rarely left Ruatoria! She is a wealthy provider, and yet receives what could be called a third world income. To analyse why she emanates such goodness is near impossible due to the beast of

the task. People cannot help but fall in love with her. It is her manner, her words, her manäki for people – it just is!

My father and mother felt the loss that many of their cohorts did – the loss of language, the loss of land, the loss of mana. Spiritual death seemed too close to them.

I am thankful for their 'radical' antics I spoke of earlier – I face no such spiritual death. But I face things my parents and grandparents never did as young people trying to negotiate their way in this new world.

The Aotearoa I live in has been forced – albeit grudgingly – to acknowledge our unique status as tangata whenua and the promises of protection made under the Treaty of Waitangi.

Today I can access any number of Mäori educational learning services, from Kohanga Reo for my babies to wänanga or universities to receive tertiary qualifications. More career opportunities are available to me as a speaker of te reo Mäori than as a Mäori who cannot 'talk the talk'. Today I am called on in my central city corporate office building, for my knowledge and experience in Mäori ceremonial welcome, my skill in karanga and my ability to perform waiata. Indeed, my mates and I constantly compete with each other on how 'Mäori Mäori' we have managed to become. It comes down to the number of Mäori art pieces on our walls, the size of the taonga around our necks, the number of syllables we've managed to include in our child's Mäori name, how long we can stand up for and mihi in Mäori without faltering, and how many items of clothing we own with a Mäori design on them. We are staunchly proud of who we are, while all too well aware of the backlash that has arisen over the rise and rise of Mäori culture within New Zealand society.

There may not be the overt violence and racism that I witnessed as a child but the fear and insecurity of many is more underlying, and more dangerous. The movement of incorporating Mäori cultural practices into everyday New Zealand life and policy has been labelled many things: separatism, racism, ridiculously 'pc', unfair, and infringing on the rights of 'ordinary New Zealanders'.

I choose to ignore these underlying tones, be it a lean towards blissful ignorance or the realisation that some people are too 'far gone' for me to worry about.

I instead make good use of the opportunities that are available to me as a young Mäori woman. I took part in a four week-long kayaking voyage that retraced the traditional waterways of my tüpuna. I have been on climbing expeditions to summit snowy Tongariro and Ngauruhoe mountains. I modelled in the Pasifika Fashion Show which has become a first class professional performance. I have scaled cliffs in rock climbing expeditions around Aotearoa. I embarked on study at Auckland University as a teenage mother. I recently completed a qualification in International Diplomacy for Indigenous Studies, two days before I gave birth to my third child. I was chosen as the Auckland 2006 Mana Wahine role model by Te Hotu Manawa Mäori and Mäori Women's Welfare League. I work with pride and passion at the Human Rights Commission where I strive to affect the lives of people everyday. I am raising three stunning children. I am proud of all of that.

The negative numbers that show themselves in the social, economic and cultural reports concerning the Mäori people mean very little to me. I am not in those numbers; they do not define who I am or who my people are. They are only guidelines for where my work lies, but I don't need reports to tell me that.

One thing that does define me, though, is the work of my weavers; those who have contributed to the making of my spiritual käkahu. Most importantly they are my nanny, my mother and my father.

I began this account with the whakapapa of our atua wähine, so I find it appropriate to finish with reference again to my mother who for me heralds the strength of women.

With all my mountains and rivers conquered, my university degree obtained, my fashion modelling achievements, my meaningful and rewarding career, and my vast worldly experiences, I can only hope to reflect some of the wondrous woman that is my mother. With none of the above to put next to her name, she is mum, wife and grandmother extraordinaire and my eternal source of wisdom, knowledge and soul food. She needs nothing but herself to be great, and she has guided me through my life as a Mäori woman. As a shaper of people she is the most fantastic artist I know, carving within me a love for my whänau, hapü and iwi. The mana within wähine manifests itself in many different – often hidden – ways!

Na reira, nga mihi nui ki a koutou, tënä koutou, tënä koutou, tënä tätou katoa.