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A Taste of the Maori Culture!

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Journals from New Zealand (University of Waikato)

2010-09-09 A taste of the Maori culture!

I'm taking a Maori course here at the uni, and as part of the class, we got to attend a welcoming ceremony at the uni's marae called Te Kohinga Marama. The Maori marae has many purposes and is a crucial part of both the traditional and contemporary Maori society. It is the place where meetings and important events of a Maori family take place. The physical meaning of marae has changed since the olden times. In New Zealand today, marae refers to the vicinity including the different buildings of the marae as well as the surrounding area. In traditional times, the marae only referred to the verandah in front of the wharehau (main house), which has been given the modern name, marae tea. Before we began the ceremony, our class was divided into two separate groups, the tangata whenua (those who had been welcomed onto the marae before) and the manuhiri (visitors). Of course, I was a manuhiri. The ceremony of hosting visitors is special and understanding the protocol of the specific marae is important. When visitors first enter a marae, a pohiri (welcoming ceremony) is performed. The tangata whenua all gathered at the front of the marae and everyone else, the manuhiri, gathered at the end of the street to start off the ceremony. Our teacher, who stood on the tangata whenua side, started to perform a karanga (a call made by women to start the pohiri), which signified the start of the ceremony. We began walking down towards the entrance to the marae and as we did, the female leader of the manuhiri responded with a karanga. The two women took turns with their calling until we reached the entrance to the marae. We all took a seat and male speakers from each side gave their whaikorero (formal speeches). To signify that we were now tangata whenua, part of that particular marae, we gave a gift and exchanged our breath through a hongi. Our breath was very sacred in the Maori culture and the hongi reflects an old Maori legend. Afterwards, we were invited to eat in the wharekai (eating house). We were given orange soda, cheetos, potato chips and some pastries very traditional, huh? Prior to beginning the ceremony, we weren't given instructions on what to do or what was going to happen, but it was very easy to follow. The entire ritual was delivered in Maori, therefore nearly all of the manuhiri had no clue what was being said, but somehow we understood through the actions. The interesting thing about Te Kohinga Marama is that it welcomes students from all over the world and that is reflected in the drawings and carvings found throughout the area. After the completion of the ceremony, a new student from Germany stood up and gave thanks in German. He was so moved by this experience- he didn't understand Maori, and perhaps our teacher didn't understand German, but they both understood each other's intentions. How great is that?

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