Cloaked in Life and Death: Tangi and Taonga in a Contemporary Māori Whānau

Dr. Vincent Malcolm-Buchanan

Half a century ago in Aotearoa, New Zealand anthropologist Dame Joan Metge noted “Death is the occasion above all others which brings Māori together.” This research articulates reflexions of specific case-studies of death and tangihanga (funerary processes) within a singular family or whānau; memorable events spanning four generations, involving a multitude of simultaneously occurring religious realities, and various transformations of indigenous life for the Māori, and their western counterparts, the Pākehā. The foci of this presentation are treasures from the past, taonga tuku iho that are tangible repositories which reveal much about their owners, those owner’s families, and their histories. At the same time, tangihanga practices now allow for beloved personal belongings including nightwear and reading glasses; novelty items such as dice and bingo cards; and the presence of treasured portraits and photographs of the deceased; Western introduced aspects that reveal the extent to which Māori and Pākehā have mutually come to effect each other’s lives, and deaths. As indigenes of Aotearoa there is much we have to learn from each other and still much more we might share with our Pacific and other global contemporaries.

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