FamilySearch: Māori, Mormon & whakapapa

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Abstract

For Māori members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (known hereafter as the Church) in Aotearoa, whakapapa is as much an integral part of their everyday life as it was for their ancestors. In their quest to become tohunga whakapapa (experts) in their own families, scores of Māori members utilise the Church's online genealogical programme, called FamilySearch (FS), as a digital platform for recording and preserving that knowledge for current and future generations. This paper will discuss some aspects of whakapapa and also raise an awareness of issues associated with the FS software, its impact on Māori members, and users in general.

The concept of whakapapa

Whakapapa (genealogy) is regarded as "most important to a Māori" the Indigenous people of Aotearoa, New Zealand (Makereti, 1938, p. 37). As the quintessential force pulsating at

Figure 1 Hēni Pawhatai te kuia o te whānau a Taiapa (Maheno te pēpī) Tikitiki, 1916. Taiapa Archives©

the heart of Māoritanga (Māori culture), it can provide a framework for tracing "the genealogical descent of all living things from the gods to the present time" (Barlow, 1991, p. 173); and is a basis for the organisation of such knowledge. Whakapapa embraces cosmogenic origins and creation stories, including historical and oral narratives borne out of 'myth' and 'traditions' (Walker, 1993, p. 1). It transcends generations of kinship ties embedded within iwi (tribe), hapū (kinsfolk) and whānau (family) and "should be carefully examined in conjunction with the history" (Jones, 1958, p. 162). As one of the most prized forms of knowledge, great efforts are exerted to preserve whakapapa (Barlow, 1991, p. 174).

The preservation of whakapapa

The recording, delivery and preservation of whakapapa was carried out by Tohunga or Priestly experts who "were often specially trained as genealogists" (Tregear, 1904, p. 383). It may be emphasised that records were kept in the heads of men selected for the work using a system of word perfect repetition (Roberton, 1956). Demonstrating "phenomenal memories", they were highly skilled repositories of oral lore possessing the ability to recite hundreds of names of interconnecting genealogies (Ballara, 1991; Taonui, 2015). This responsibility was not wholly limited, however, to their charge alone, but included a

collective effort by "all the people in a community" both "chief and free man" to know at least their own descent lines (Barlow, 1991; Tregear, 1904). In truth, the Māori knew his or her whakapapa and exact relationship to every relative, partly due to the older people teaching their children the genealogies, histories and legends of their race (Makereti, 1938, pp. 37, 42). The recitation of whakapapa was often delivered through oral mnemonic devices, such as waiata (song), oriori (chanted to children) and/or kōrero (stories) to store and recall whakapapa information. Visual representations of this knowledge was also captured in the elaborate carvings, motifs, and symbolic messages encoded within and without the wharenui (ancestral house). A traditional practice which is highly atypical of whakapapa as a whare (Taonui, 2015). Indeed, whakapapa is the bloodline that binds tīpuna (ancestors) and mōrehu (descendants) to their culture, language and identity reminding them of their ancient origins, present conditions and future aspirations.

The LDS Church and genealogy

For members of the LDS Church, the concept and preservation of genealogy is also regarded as most important, a sacred work[1] and a fundamental tenet operating at the heart of the Mormon religion. It is the lifeline which binds them to who they are, where they come from, why they are here and, most importantly what happens to them after death. It connects them to both the living and the dead stretching back to the first parents, Adam and Eve, and to an omniscient and omnipotent god. In this respect, members regard the work of whakapapa as a covenant responsibility grounded in scripture[2] to seek out ancestors and provide for them the saving ordinances of the gospel through family history research, building temples and then performing vicarious ceremonies within these edifices (Bednar, 2011). In support of this goal, members of the Church are often called and trained to serve, as genealogists, to provide assistance. As a result, individuals and whole families can gain both intellectual and spiritual rewards by becoming more informed about their ancestors, and giving them a deeper sense of those ancestors as real people, who lived real lives. This has been a major focus since the organisation of the LDS Church in America, during the early 1800s.

The organisation of the LDS Church and a record keeping people

When the LDS Church was formally organised in Fayette New York, on 6 April 1830, the founder of the new religion, Joseph Smith Jr., proclaimed "*there shall be a record kept among you* [emphasis added]" (Smith, 1948, p. 75). In 2017, this belief is still in force and underpins the Church's aspirations for its members to be a '*record keeping people*'. They are counselled to write personal histories as valuable records in order to preserve and transmit their culture within each family including dates of birth, marriages, ordinations and deaths (Norton, 1992). By the time the Church arrived in Aotearoa during the mid 1800s, Māori were already a record-keeping people with much experience in reciting and preserving whakapapa information as an integral part of the culture. This would have become apparent to Mormon missionaries sometime after meeting and living with Māori.

Mormons meet Māori

The first LDS missionaries[3] arrived in Auckland, New Zealand, on 27 October, 1854. After some years of proselytizing among European settlers, a more concerted effort to take the Church's message to Māori began in the 1880s (Britsch, 1986).[4] The Book of Mormon (BoM), one of four canonical texts of the Church, was central to that message.[5] For many Māori, they tended to view the information contained within it as an account of their own ancestors and the past of a people similar to themselves describing patterns of events parallel to their own experiences that reflected their kind of history. It contained numerous references to the importance of genealogy. For example, Jarom, a BoM figure, stated "Now behold, I, Jarom, write a few words according to the commandment of my father, Enos, that our genealogy may be kept" BoM Jarom 1:1. Māori too kept whakapapa and accompanying accounts of noted ancestors . . . where much of their lore was directly or indirectly related to stories of families (Midgley, 1999, pp. 2-4). It is no surprise then, that many Māori seemed to recognise themselves in the Church's messages when it was first presented to them. As a result, thousands had been converted within a few years following the 1880s (Underwood, 2000, p. 107). Around this time, the Māori population was estimated to be less than 50,000 (Statistics New Zealand, 2017) or 43,143, a more specific number provided by (Britsch, 1986, See Chapter 16). By the 1900s, the Church recorded about a tenth of the total Māori population as members (Underwood, 2000, pp. 107-108). Today, the total church membership[6] in New Zealand is 112,366 with 52 Family History Centers (FHC) operating throughout the country (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2017). It is within this historical context that many Māori have joined the Church and now do whakapapa work as an integral part of their everyday lives. Where tradition meets technology, scores of Māori members are now using the Church's online genealogical software called FamilySearch as a primary tool for the organisation of their own whakapapa information. This work is carried out on a scale that their ancestors could not have predicted.

A background of FamilySearch

The LDS Church has been a world leader in genealogy research since the inception of its 'Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU)' in 1894. Today, it is now known as FamilySearch. Over time, the Church has pioneered industry standards for gathering, imaging, indexing, and preserving records. With advancements in technology and the emergence of the digital world, it provides an opportunity to share these resources with people of all nations to help them connect with their ancestors through accessible historical records (FamilySearch, 2017a). The GSU was established by Wilford Woodruff in 1894.[7] By the 1930s, the GSU had pioneered the use of microfilm technology to preserve and provide access to genealogical records. These records are kept in the Granite Mountain Records Vault, which was completed in 1963, for preservation and protection. Over the next fifty years the GSU pioneered desktop genealogy by launching software called 'Personal Ancestral File' in 1984. However this is now discontinued. The Church launched FamilySearch.org in 1999. To increase production, FS.org began crowd-sourcing in 2007, allowing volunteers to index

Figure 2: Genealogical Society of Utah
building & logo, 1894.

records and make them searchable. In 2013, they introduced the 'Family Tree' and 'Memories' as major features of the software. The following year, in 2014, FS.org was made available to the general public by allowing them to create a free online account, become a registered user and then start using the software (Lloyd, 2014) (see *Table 1* below).

Whakapapa timeline of GSU and FS 1894-2014

1894-----------GSU Established

1930-------------GSU pioneers microfilm technology

1963------------------GSU complete Granite Mountain Records Vault

1984--------------------GSU launch Personal Ancestral File (discontinued)

1999---------------------Church launches FamilySearch.org

2007-----------------------FS.org begins crowd-sourcing

2013-------------------------FS.org introduces Family Tree and Memories

2014--------------------------FS.org available to general public via free account

Table 1: Key dates in genealogical developments in LDS history 1894-2014

From Table 1 above, it is important to note that:

1. Non-members will now be able to create a free account to become registered users and start using FamilySearch without any obligations to the LDS Church;
2. They will now have an opportunity to compile, share and edit their own family history and genealogical information on a single, worldwide online tree and become part of a global family; and
3. They will also be able to collaborate with other family members, relatives and/or others to confirm, to reconcile and/or to discuss their own genealogy information.

As the largest genealogical organisation in the world, FamilySearch maintains a collection of 5.66 Billion searchable names in historical records; 1.23 Billion digital images of historical documents published online; 356,663 digital books; and 2,220 collections of historic records in its database (FamilySearch, 2017b) (see *Figure 3* below).
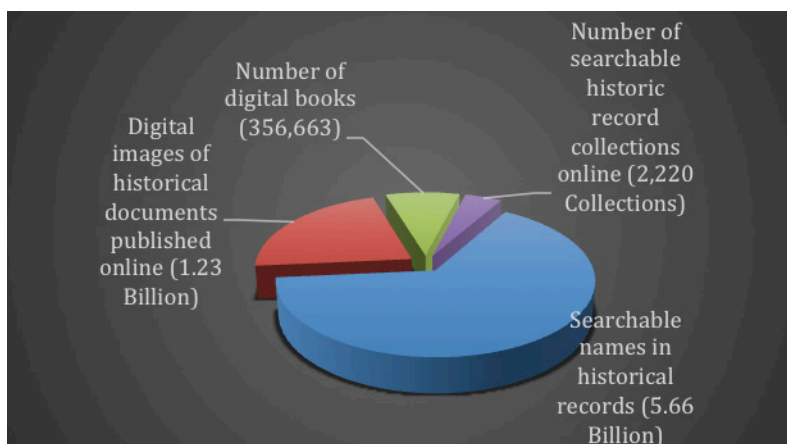
Figure 3: FamilySearch facts as of 2017

Using FamilySearch

When users open the FamilySearch homepage, they are presented with a graphical user interface that displays icons and related information to facilitate easy navigation of the site's contents. The most significant features are:

1) The option to create a free account;
2) The 'Tree' feature where most genealogical information of recently deceased family members and ancestors is recorded; and
3) The 'Memories' feature where users can compile their family history with the options to add images, text files, audio and other media to preserve and share their stories with related family members and future generations.

FS also provides audio, visual and video aids located in the self Help Center including, a site Blog where users can collaborate with each other to contribute Q&A, ideas and post messages and/or advice about a topic. Registered users or non-registered interested parties can also visit a Family History Center and speak with an on-site professional consultant about genealogical research and/or using the FS software. If registered non-members prefer, they can access FS at a public library (as part of the Church's affiliate programme) or at home on their own computers through the FS website and logging on to their accounts for a non-threatening, comfortable environment (Higgins, 2017).

The 'Tree' feature

The 'Tree', a critical feature, allows users to view data about their deceased family members and ancestors in a range of pre-designed schematic charts, such as the 'fan' view option. As information is added to the tree, it will become populated and expand showing the different relationships and generations such as grandparents, parents and siblings. Here, users can

access and edit their own or other users' information, such as names, birth dates, death dates, including the option of adding new data categories to existing ones. For example, dates of christenings (see *Figure 4* below).
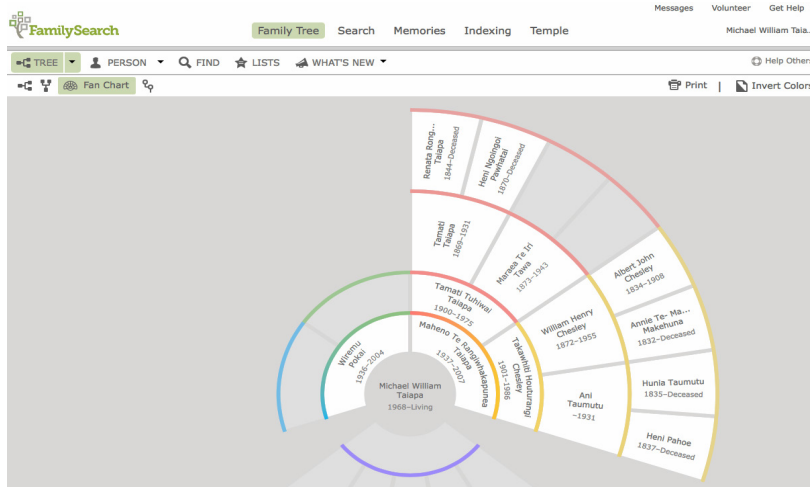

Figure 4: Fan view in the 'Tree' showing four generations of my whakapapa (FamilySearch.org).

The 'Memories' feature

The 'Memories' gallery allows users to compile their family histories and stories then enhance them by adding photos, stories, documents, and audio recordings related to individuals identified at the 'Tree' level. Although living[8] users' personal information is private, anyone can potentially see their photos, documents, and stories contained in the memories gallery (see *Figure 5* below).
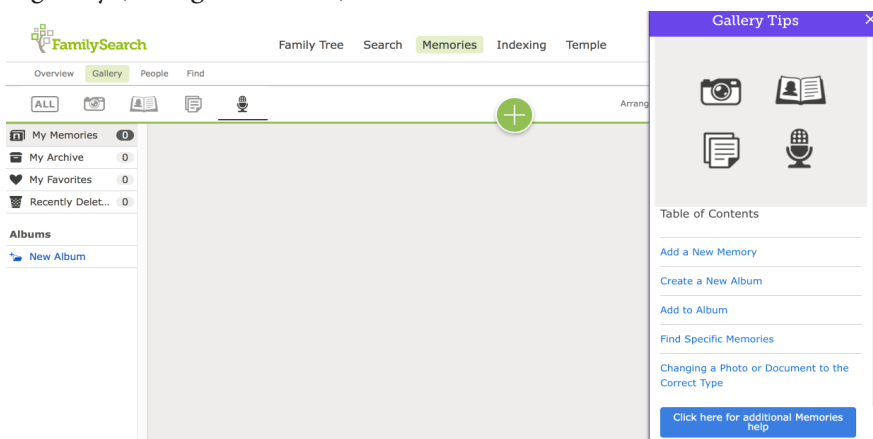

Figure 5: The Memories feature for compiling family histories (FamilySearch.org).

Some ethical issues about using FamilySearch

As a Māori and user of FamilySearch, this space has become increasingly interesting for

a number of reasons, raising some critical issues and questions associated with ethical practices as well as concerns around the use of some features in the software. As Church leaders become more informed about emerging issues, they will often release statements or policies to guide members and users on codes of conduct and proper use of FS. These issues are usually voiced through member discussion forums, information updates on the FS site with accompanying blog, official church and news announcements. FamilySearch allows registered users to collaborate with each other at two corresponding levels:

1) Users can correct or edit each other's genealogical data; and
2) Users can discuss and reconcile any aspect of the data that has been edited or other related topic.

Level 1: Correcting or editing information

The following principles outlines Church policies for correcting or editing information in an attempt to specify as accurate as possible data submitted by different users, and to reconcile that data where discrepancies and/or gaps may occur (For more details, see FamilySearch.org):

1) You can correct information that is in the *Vital Information* and *Other Information* sections of a *Person's* page;
2) You can edit the information for a record in Family Tree regardless of whether you created the information;
3) Family Tree uses a 'change history' to keep track of all changes to a record. If you disagree with a change, you can use the change history list to restore a previous version of the information;
4) You can undo changes on a record regardless of whether you entered the information or made the change;
5) If possible, attach a source to show that your information is correct. See Sources in Family Tree; and
6) Every time you make a change, you have a responsibility to enter a detailed reason that explains why you believe the information you entered is correct.

Level 2: Discussion forum

The following principles outlines Church policies for forum discussion (For more details, see FamilySearch.org):

1) You (user) can comment regarding a particular deceased individual and provide details regarding that individual;
2) You (user) acknowledge that any items you submit through the discussion feature will be viewable by anyone able to access this site; and
3) The discussion feature is intended to help collaboration efforts, to coordinate the

correction of errors, and to facilitate additional research with other interested users.

Points of issues

Taking all these things into consideration, the collaborative feature of FamilySearch can raise more issues than addressing them. In the first instance, there is the potential to create confusion where order should be paramount as users come to terms with internalising and making sense of edited or added information to their records as performed by other users. When users have an open access platform to edit each other's genealogical data, then it brings into question issues around informed consent, conflicts of data accuracy, the validity and reliability of both user and data, the effectiveness of the discussion forum and other issues.

- *Informed consent:* Despite FS guidelines, it is not clear how users should seek and get approved consent when editing each other's sensitive information or even if it is a necessity. This is extremely important if participants are going to experience "any stress, pain, invasion of privacy, or if they are going to lose control over what happens … such informed consent requires full information that outlines possible consequences and dangers" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 52). If consent was a requirement, then what would be the process to obtain it? Would it be in writing or some other electronic form? Would this attract a positive or negative reaction? What would be the pros and cons of informed consent? And how might this impact on takahi mana (i.e. trampling on one's mana-authority) as a closely guarded characteristic of Māoritanga? In the meantime, it seems that consent is implicit whenever current and new registered users log into and then start using the actual software as they automatically conform to the FS Terms of Use.
- *Conflicts of data:* It was reported that some members who were concerned about changes made to their data decided to restore it back to its original state due to the intrusive nature of their information, and, believing that their knowledge and data was more accurate. It is often the case that users may not be known to each other but by virtue of linking to one's lineage can give users a sense of right to change other peoples' data. Where changes to data cannot be reconciled or resolved, then it will remain in a state of conflict of accuracy. This can lead to disagreements and feelings of animosity rather than appreciation being counter-productive to Church's teachings to respect one another. As previously mentioned above, Māori come from a long history of oral traditions where whakapapa information handed down can become corrupted and eroded overtime. Some users may find it useful that their data has been edited by others, therefore filling information gaps. However, there is always a tendency for conflicting parties to debate as to who is right or wrong.
- *Validity and reliability:* Any changes made to a user's data can raise doubts about the validity of the information in question. Cohen et al. (2007, p. 135) says is not made up, selective or distorted and subsumes reliability being akin to the notion

of 'truth' of what actually happened or, in other words, objectively factual. This not only challenges but also calls into question the reliability of the user and the data if discrepancies are found in information that has been edited or added to the original. Again, what are the consequences to the whānau involved? How will this affect long held beliefs of whānau knowledge if new or edited information is introduced? Attempts to validate the reliability of whakapapa information must not be based wholly on accepting edited or added data alone, but meaningful discussion should take precedence in these matters by all parties involved.

- *Discussion forum:* Users can collaborate and reconcile records as far as their research and knowledge allows but reconciliation of information can be difficult to affirm when trying to establish contact and meaningful dialogue with the parties involved. In fact, as indicated above, it appears that users are responsible but not strictly obligated to provide sources and reasons or to participate in discussions or add notes when editing data. This can foster an environment of anonymity and avoidance. FS does, however, caution users not to give out personal identifiable information about themselves, such as names, contact or address details in the forum section but to converse through private email or other forms of communication.

- *Other issues:* Registered users who have not read the FS terms of use and/or are not aware of the issues associated with using the software will be the most vulnerable. At length, it appears that users will be left to work out the finer details as they engage with the FS environment.

Conclusion

How, then, did the message of the LDS Church, in particular its emphasis on genealogy, impact on Māori in the late 1800s? When Māori and Mormon came into contact over 150 years ago, it revealed some surprising parallels and differences in whakapapa beliefs and practices. It resonated something deep within Māori and many joined the Church as a result. For thousands of their descendants today, they have become not only more aware of their own family whakapapa, but are also guardians of that knowledge in their own right. With advancements in technology, the Church's online digital software, FamilySearch provides a platform for these members to record and preserve their whakapapa knowledge and enhance their work. In its intention to do good, FamilySearch, however, presents a range of ethical issues as previously mentioned. It is recommended that the Church explore more robust and advanced software applications to address the issues raised here. Although FamilySearch has a potentially bright future, in some respects, it is still largely uncertain.

Endnotes

[1.] Here, the notion of 'work' refers to researching, recording, and preserving one's own whakapapa.

[2.] A call "to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers" (See King

James Version, Bible, Malachi: Chapter 4, Verses 5-6).

3. These initial missionaries were, Australian Mission President Augustus Farnham, Elder William Cooke (an Australian convert) and Thomas Holder (a priest).

4. The Māori land wars of the 1860s and 1870s would have limited missionary efforts to share the LDS message with Māori. Hence, the gap in time between 1854 to 1880s.

5. The other three texts include the King James Version, Bible, The Doctrine and Covenants and The Pearl of Great Price.

6. Over time, it seems that keeping statistical information about any one specific ethnic group has fallen out of practice, if officially practiced at all during Church history. One reason seems to suggest avoiding discrimination against members ethnical backgrounds and by keeping in harmony with scriptural guidelines that treats all people as one in the gospel (Higgins, 2017). As a result, it is not known how many Māori make up the total New Zealand membership given here notwithstanding an initial consensus count taken by the Church, in the early 1900s.

7. The fourth President of The LDS Church from 1887-1898. (See https://www.lds.org/churchhistory/presidents/controllers/potcController.jsp?topic=facts&leader=4).

8. The term 'living' refers to the user who created the account and, therefore, is identified as a living person at the time of creating it.

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