

VIEWPOINT

Te Āo Māori “Accountability”: Indigenous Ways Toward Partnership and Restorative Practice Globally

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Different worldviews conceptualize accountability differently. Western models of accountability tend to be individualistic and revolve around legal responsibility, compensation, and punishment. In contrast, Indigenous worldviews tend to emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings, the importance of historical context, and the restoration and prioritization of relationships underpinned by lore, rather than law.¹

Look at Te Āo Māori—the Māori worldview—as an example.² Rather than being punitive, Māori accountability is fundamentally about restoring harmony, seeking pathways for healing, reconciliation, and the protection of collective mana (innate human authority). Kawa and tikanga Māori (Māori values, customs, and protocols) provide the framework for this approach, focusing on reciprocity, restoration, and respect for all relationships, human and non-human alike. Accountability is both a personal commitment and a shared responsibility. It flows through whānau (family), hapū (extended families that together comprise iwi), iwi (people, tribe, or nation), and across generations. Accountability is inseparable from the land, waters, ancestors, and living community.

From the perspective of Te Āo Māori, accountability is not a finite event but a living cycle, guided by utu (reciprocity and balance) and muru (ritual redress). It always seeks to restore the well-being of whānau (family), whenua (land), and the taiao (natural environment). Another key concept or value designed to hold Māori society in balance is manaakitanga. Manaaki is the act of giving to, hosting, or caring for others, recognizing that everyone is needed and deserves care. The ultimate generosity, manaakitanga raises the mana of others because it is generosity that exists without the expectation of receiving in return. All beings are connected, and utu (reciprocity) is inbuilt; therefore, it does not need to be demanded. This is the balance that keeps society in order.

It is beyond the scope of this viewpoint to fully explore Te Āo Māori, accountability, and concepts of hauora (health), but the starting point is the settler colonization of Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Te Tiriti o Waitangi, which is the country’s foundational document agreed in 1840 between many iwi and

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hapū, on the one hand, and the British Crown, on the other.³ Te Tiriti has not been honored, and while steps are being taken to hold the Crown, and its bodies, accountable, this journey has been erratic, contested and often tokenistic. Genuine accountability requires far more than apologies or symbolic reparation. True commitment is measured by sustained action and the transformation of power relationships, which is inextricably connected with honoring the holistic nature of health of ngai iwi Māori.⁴ Māori health is Māori identity—culturally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. This necessitates:

- Recognition of Te Tiriti o Waitangi: honoring Te Tiriti as a living covenant, not just a historical artifact, and actively upholding its promises of tino rangatiratanga (Māori sovereignty) and authentic partnership.
- Restoring power and authority: Māori-led decision-making in all areas that directly impact Māori lives, resources, and futures, not least health and the environment. This is not consultation; it is genuine, long-term structural change and a shift in the dynamics of relationships to reflect equitable citizenship and an understanding of First Nations guardianship.
- Addressing, preventing, and not perpetuating ongoing injustices: committing to responsibility and obligations for ongoing harms and structural inequities, including disparities in health, education, land ownership, and justice. To redress historic and contemporary wrongs, systemic reforms must be implemented and enshrined in a constitution.⁵
- Meaningful partnership: building authentic, enduring partnerships where Māori voices, leadership, and knowledge are equal in influence and resource. This involves policies, equitable co-governance, and prioritizing and embedding Te Āo Māori and expertise at the heart of decision-making processes in all areas.
- Restorative practice: proactive measures of healing such as returning land, compensating for historical wrongs, and properly resourcing and

supporting the revitalization of Māori language and culture.

From the perspective of Te Āo Māori, accountability is a journey of continuous learning, reflection, and courageous action. It demands humility, patience, and openness to uncomfortable truths. Restoring balance means not only upholding justice but actively acknowledging and honoring the mana of Māori people, communities, and the land. The well-being of Aotearoa depends on nurturing these relationships now and consistently over time by reordering the social understanding of the place and mana of Indigenous peoples as First Nations rights holders and gift givers.

In this ongoing process, accountability demands not only reparations for the past but also a shared commitment to a future built on equity, mutual respect, and genuine partnership. The path forward is one of co-creation, where Māori and non-Māori work together to realize a flourishing, just, and inclusive nation, an Aotearoa where the promise of Te Tiriti o Waitangi endures in practice, not just in principle.

There are lessons to learn, beyond health and Aotearoa, from this conception of accountability that resonates with the worldviews of many Indigenous peoples globally and can be a model for a world in need of deep rebalancing.

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