

WHO OWNS MĀORI TRIBAL TRADITION?

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At a history conference in the late 1980s at Victoria University of Wellington, Michael King asked the question: 'Should Pākehā academics write about Māori topics?' He answered himself in the negative, saying that Pākehā historians should stand back from 'Māori history', and wait for Māori historians to come forward to write their own. While King's concern was with the times when European academics, often ill-informed, imposed their views of Māori events on the reading public, in fact Māori academics have been coming forward, writing their own, since the nineteenth century. In that century there were Mōhi Te Ātahīkoia, Mohi Tūrei, Takaanui Tarakawa, Hoani Nahe, Hoani Parāone Tū-Nui-ā-Rangi, Te Kāhui Kararehe, and many others. In the twentieth century the works of Āpirana Ngata, Te Rangi Hiroa [Peter Buck], Māui Pōmare, Pei Te Hurinui Jones, and others were followed in recent times by the published writings of Ruka Broughton, Hirini Mead, Joe Pere, Pou Tēmara, Ranginui Walker and many others, and countless younger, recently qualified people. These people were and are the public face of Māori academia (see the list of references for more details of the works of some of these authors).

But in the Māori cultural world there are ways to preserve the past other than by academic publication. In both centuries there have been tribal historians and whakapapa (genealogy) experts working privately, at hui whakapapa (meetings to discuss genealogy and tradition), or for such institutions as the Komiti o Tūpai, a sub-committee of the Tānenuiārangi Committee, which functioned in the early 1900s in Wairarapa and southern Hawke's Bay. Its informants were those who had written accounts of tribal history or whakapapa

books, and its members checked and endorsed them; the resulting approved books were intended to be repositories of taonga (treasured knowledge) for their people. The written work of many expert elders was often neither published nor known outside their kin group, and was passed on, often only reluctantly, and only to carefully screened and trained descendants. This reluctance demonstrates the nature of Māori cultural attitudes to the sharing of tapu (restricted or forbidden) information. Those working from inside a culture, or way of life and system of thought and belief, functioned within its rules.

Since Michael King's remarks the debate has moved on from merely questioning Pākehā involvement. Some Māori academics are questioning the existence of anything called 'Māori history'. They are saying that there is only Ngāti Porou-tanga, Tainui-tanga, Kāi Tahu-tanga and Tākitimu-tanga; in other words, that the only genuine knowledge of the Māori past is confined within discrete tribal cultures, as preserved in oral and written tradition. In some cases, the cultural boundaries are even smaller, being based on hapū (descent groups of relatively recent origin), or even local marae communities. These Māori are saying that only local, tribally-based histories can have any validity, that unique kawa (etiquette), unique hapū actions and reactions to outside stimuli, and regional variations in traditions mean that attempts to write about 'the Māori experience' are necessarily doomed to failure. Even such efforts at pan-tribalism as the Kīngitanga and Kotahitanga movements in the nineteenth century, and the Rātana movement in the twentieth century, are sometimes seen as the history of the resistance of the various tribal groups to attempts at Māori nationalism and central leadership.

A tendency to exclude Pākehā academics from the field of tribal history is another aspect of the same debate. A 1992 hui for writers of Māori tribal history was restricted to writers of Māori descent. One of the main topics of discussion was tribal history as the intellectual property of its respective descent groups. At first glance such a debate seems totally opposed to the 'Western' tradition of academic freedom that has been the objective of a painful struggle since the middle ages. Peter Munz reminded us a few years ago that tertiary education is supposed to be critical, secular and objective.¹ To quote Newman's *The Idea of a University*, 'that alone is liberal knowledge which stands on its own pretensions, is independent of sequel, . . . refuses to serve any end . . . The most ordinary pursuits have this specific character if they are self-sufficient and the highest lose it when they minister to something beyond

them' (1976:101). To discourage anyone, Māori or Pākehā, from studying anything unless it serves the culture of a specific Māori community is seemingly a sacrifice of that academic freedom that is one of the few, slender guarantees the world has of honest appraisal, comparison and criticism of human behaviour.

Is it not the basic stuff of the university to subject all cultures, religions, political and philosophical creeds to the searching light of rational analysis, criticism and comparison? Should academics of any ethnic background have to justify such comparisons and criticisms? If, in general, we attempt to deny to any particular class of academics the right to study any human phenomena, and, in particular, if we attempt to restrict the study of tribal history not only to people working with the consent and support of the elders but also to descendants of those tribes, then it might seem that we are subjecting the knowledge gained to control in the service of a specific group. Is it not true that we have not made much progress from the days when Galileo was forced to kneel at the altar rails and recant his heretical theory that Earth was not at the centre of the universe? When, in other words, the Church could dictate the limits of human knowledge in the interests of one particular belief system?

An extreme view of the western tradition of academic freedom has been given expression here. It begs the question of professional ethics, which has the practical effect of limiting academic freedom, and brings the whole 'Western tradition' much closer to the Māori position than at first seems apparent.

Māori cultural attitudes to tribal knowledge have yet to be outlined. I am not Māori, so instead I shall quote the words of a writer of Māori descent. Graeme Gummer—a non-academic engineer and a gentle elder of Ngāti Maniapoto descent—speaks of the 'intrinsically private nature of information derived from Māori sources'. He advises Pākehā who have in mind some research project involving Māori tribal history to ask themselves:

- Who are the tangata whenua in this location?
- Have you a connection with these people?
- Have you a standing on this marae?
- What sort of information are you looking for? And why?
- Are you entitled to be privy to that information? . . .
- Will the research be done in the company of tangata whenua?
- With their blessing and prayers?
- Will you be careful not to desecrate wāhi tapu with food or wastes? . . .
- Where is the information to be held?

- Who can access it?
- Will its mana be diluted and dissipated by publication?
- Who gets the benefit of this knowledge?
- Who are to be the guardians of it?

His final series of questions and summing up are as follows:

Must it really be written down? How vital is it? For this is private information. It is ours, and we may not reveal it. You might not understand it, might not value it. Even amongst ourselves, we are cautious about sharing it—that should tell you something . . . Our approach to the past is different. The further we get back into history, the closer we get to the Creation and to the Creator. A very tapu area. Not for everyone. That might help you understand our reluctance, our wish that our taonga (treasured things) should be respected (Gummer 1990:21).

The 'straw men' set up here, 'academic freedom' versus 'closed Māori culture', need not be a contest between a modern and a medieval approach. The fact of the apparent opposition does not mean, necessarily, that one cultural attitude to tribal knowledge is 'right' and the other is 'wrong'. This is so not least because in the best liberal tradition there are no rights and wrongs, only points of view. There are other more serious reasons, discussed below. But there are also serious difficulties.

Academics will know that in practice some of the rules laid down by Gummer for Pākehā wishing to study and write about the Māori past are difficult to follow. Many of them run counter to that academic freedom to probe and analyse already discussed. All of them fall outside the usual methods of research: these include examining and analysing relevant documents in libraries and archives, or artefacts and other material phenomena in the ground, and coming to conclusions based on observed patterns of human interaction, as displayed in those documents or artefacts. Gummer tells us that Māori tribal information is private, that its mana might be dissipated by publication, that it should not be available to everyone, that the benefits, including financial rewards resulting from publication, should be shared by the owners of the information, that such study inevitably trespasses on tapu. For Pākehā that last concept, tapu, is difficult; they are asked to accept that there are areas of Māori information that are literally forbidden, because to break tapu is to risk or cause spiritual damage, even death.

But Gummer's prescriptions are not impossible to follow. The visits to marae and tangata whenua have been and can be done. Pākehā scholars such as Joan Metge (1964, 1976, 1995), Judith Binney (Binney, Chaplin and Craig 1979; Binney and Chaplin 1986; Binney 1995), Anne Salmond (1975, 1980), Jeffrey Sissons (Sissons, Hongi and Hohepa 1987), and others have based large research projects on extended interviews with their subjects, with their blessings and prayers on the project. Gummer requires the writer to 'be entitled to be privy to that information'. That is impossible for Pākehā if interpreted to mean 'entitled by descent'. But if that entitlement is interpreted to mean 'with the blessing and permission of the elders' the problem is not impossible of solution.

But is the academic with a large project—let us say, the changes throughout the eighteenth century to social organisation of a tribal confederation, Tākitimu perhaps—bound to visit every marae from Rangitoto (D'Urville Island) to Tūranganui (Gisborne) to explain the project before they start, and get the consent and blessing of every elder? It would be a logistical nightmare. And what if the elders refuse their consent, or some agree and some refuse? Where is academic freedom then? How can academics contribute their mite to the study of the human condition in all its multifarious adaptations to different environments and circumstances if they are forbidden to begin on the basis of their ethnic background?

Even to ask such a question is to misunderstand the basis of the blessing and consent offered. Charles Royal has pointed out that Māori elders sometimes refuse to share their knowledge with their own descendants. Such a refusal might be temporary: the elder perceives that the would-be students have not yet acquired sufficient knowledge and wisdom to make proper use of the information gained; that misuse of it by insufficiently informed descendants could be dangerous for the tribe or hapū; or that their attitudes to tribal knowledge have not yet outgrown the proprietorial or the egotistical search for personal mana through publication (Royal 1992:12–13, 38–43). Pākehā in these circumstances are in a similar situation. In a sense things can be simpler for them; the factor of danger to the descent group by one of its own is eliminated. If elders approached for help can see that the knowledge and attitudes of the Pākehā academic are sufficiently informed and infused with the desire to serve rather than exploit, then very often the relationship develops into a true cultural exchange.

Other rules mentioned by Gummer are also relatively easy to follow. The requirement that tapu material should not be in contact with food or human wastes is perfectly possible, if not always easy to practise. In work spaces or domestic situations, if space allows, a room, or even a cupboard separate from daily living can be used to keep materials that might be considered to fall into that category; copies of whakapapa books and other manuscripts, copies of Land Court records containing whakapapa and waiata. Family members and colleagues can be persuaded to avoid these spaces. With modern sanitary methods, the issue of contamination by human wastes including menstruation need not arise. It becomes a question of the attitude of the academic to his or her material. The palpable sense of awe, of *wehi*, that arises from contact with Māori whakapapa books and similar manuscripts is akin to the reverence felt by professionals of any ethnic background when handling ancient manuscripts or artefacts of any culture. It is on such shared experience that Māori and Pākehā can move forward together.

Modern technology raises further difficulties. Are photocopies of whakapapa books tapu? Are whakapapa that emanate from public records of court hearings tapu? Does the tapu automatically extend to any material that contains whakapapa or *karakia* (ritual prayers)? While opinions seem to be divided on these issues, it seems safest for the Pākehā academic, in the cause of sensitivity, to assume that it does.

Recently, a faint aura of scepticism about the tapu nature of Māori material has been discernible, not only in cheap shots fired by comedians in the media, but in the halls of senior academia. There are the mutterings that 'one didn't hear so much about *wāhi tapu* (sacred sites) before the setting up of the Waitangi Tribunal'. It is similar to the debate about the meaning of 'taonga' in the Treaty of Waitangi. But just as the word 'taonga' carried meanings other than those pertaining to material treasure—such as language, whakapapa, tribal traditions or waiata—in the nineteenth as well as the twentieth centuries, there is no doubt that the concept of tapu played and plays a crucial role in Māori society before and after European contact. There are many earlier accounts of tapu in the records, but the following is Donald McLean's 1849 record of a Whanganui account of its origin:

[The sacred house] Wharekuru was built by Kāhui-rua, Kāhui-pō, Kāhui-kapu, Kāhui-kauika, Kāhui-wata, Kāhui-ihi, Kāhui-kaowai, Ika-o-wainui, Ika-o-wai-roa . . . when the house was finished the priests and sacred people were placed in it, and those on one side of the house quarrelled with those on the other, and Tama-ahuroa took the end pole or support of the house down which caused the house to fall in and the people inside were crushed a few only escaping. Momori-kiki, Momori-kaka, [and] Mitihaenga-te-kore, three great priests were killed which caused the first bloodshed . . . Rangiao tells me that the tapu was brought up from te Rēinga or hell by Ruamokoroa who got it from Miru, he got it from Keuea [spelling?] from the lower regions to kill Uenuku but it did not take effect . . . nothing killed Uenuku till they tried . . . mākutu [use of rituals invoking supernatural powers for harm].²

This is not a simple story of a quarrel in a house, followed by banishment. Humans have often explained mysteries and origins by parable and allegory. This story is one of them. Although there are many elements of McLean's account wholly Māori in origin, parts may have been influenced by the biblical parallel in the quarrel of Lucifer with God in Heaven, the origin in Christian theology of all evil. This strand of the story's derivation may be interesting, but does not affect the fact that at least as early as 1849 (and earlier in the nineteenth century) it can be documented that from ancient times Māori believed tapu to be the spiritual dimension of a great intangible force, and that it was deliberately introduced into the world. The story goes on to show that once in the world, priests of great powers learn to control and use tapu by the practice of mākutu. In 1849 McLean came to the conclusion that the imposition of tapu was a religious rite rather than a device to maintain the dignity of chiefs, because otherwise 'why would it be so strictly observed and feared by all [?] . . . it is connected with their prayers and appeals to invisible deities & is derived from a place unknown'.³

Another illustration of the perceived force of tapu and the dangers inherent in ignoring its power is the account recorded by Te Whatahoro Jury of the Wairarapa whare wānanga (school of learning) conducted in 1865 by Moihi Torohanga, also known as Te Mātorohanga. The events have been translated and summarised:

Moihi Torohanga and others were living at Hauturu, clearing the forest for a cultivation. Now at that time Te Ura said to Moihi, 'Sir, tell us some of the stories of the elders so that both we and our children may listen'. It took a long time for Rīwai to persuade Moihi to make these treasures available. At last he said, 'very well, but there will have to be a special house for it. Rīwai then offered the house of Te Rei and Pene at Mangarara.

Now, on the 5th of January 1865 Moihi, Rīwai, Te Kukutai and Te Whatahoro sat down together. Moihi saw their books, and asked what they were for. They replied that they were books to write down his teachings. Moihi said that it would take years to get through if written down, but Rīwai replied that they would write quickly. Moihi then said that the procedure would be that they would talk from early morning till sunset each day; they would not be able to eat or drink while the teaching was proceeding. On the 6th of January they met at the house of Te Rei; karakia were said before the door was opened or closed, and a ceremony was performed both outside and inside the house.⁴

Te Whatahoro recorded at length the details of the ceremonies and the karakia, and it was only after all these elaborate precautions had been taken that Moihi Torohanga felt able to commence the teaching. In spite of the precautions he had taken, at intervals during the whare wānanga session Moihi became upset, agitated at the potential danger of imparting the knowledge. He was angry when his pupils suggested mitigating the conditions of their teaching. He said:

Now, from the words you have spoken here, you have not realised the depth of these matters. When you and your brother-in-law⁵ asked that the teaching be given you, I then said, and you heard my demand, it would do if it was completely separate in a special house. The reason for this is that this teaching is a great matter going to the roots; it is not proper to have it within people's living quarters, lest the teaching fail. Moihi appeared angry; he finished abruptly, and postponed the teaching to the 14th of May 1865.⁶

At the end of his teaching, Moihi was still unhappy. In spite of all the precautions he had taken, he insisted that the books in which Te Whatahoro had recorded his teachings were tapu, and therefore dangerous. He carried out a ceremony that involved a cooking fire and cooked food (which render objects noa, or non-tapu) and laid the books to rest amongst their ashes.

From this account can be seen the perceived force of tapu, and the depth of awe or wehi felt by people whose systems of thought and belief are permeated by this concept. There is no evidence that the force of this tapu, this wehi, has diminished in Māori lives today. All over the country there are whakapapa books containing priceless information kept in boxes and trunks, which their owners sometimes fear to open let alone make available to academics, Māori or Pākehā. They prefer that they risk eventual destruction of the books by fire or damp, rather than allow such contact. One prominent Māori politician once wrote down for me, from memory, a long, complex genealogy, his own, to illustrate a point he had made. But there was one line of descent he would not write down—his descent from Ruawharo, tohunga of the Tākitimu canoe. It was a tapu, tohunga line, not for Pākehā academics. My dilemma is that access to that tohunga line, through the papers of former Pākehā academics preserved in Turnbull Library, was already available. How to handle such a problem? The only intellectual solution in such cases is to regard the information as confidential.

The problems of Pākehā academics are compounded because there is evidence that many Māori have extended the field of tapu to cover some nineteenth and early twentieth century published works. There are a number of books that are often regarded as outside the competence of modern Pākehā scholars to study critically. The irony is that some of them were written by Pākehā. There was a day when many Māori people tended not only to accept but to revere the works of such Pākehā ethnologists as S. Percy Smith and Elsdon Best. Only a few years ago a local elder refused to accept a whakapapa given by one of his own ancestors, preferring instead a version given in S. Percy Smith's history of the Taranaki coast. If it is there, he argued, then you may not touch it. The historian M. P. K. Sorrenson has shown that Peter Te Rangi Hīroa Buck possessed something of this attitude towards Elsdon Best's work, at least when aspects of it were criticised by H. D. Skinner (Sorrenson 1986:100–01). In a different vein, some Māori regard Āpirana Ngata and Pei Te Hurinui Jones's collection of Māori songs, *Ngā Mōteatea* (1959–61), as

outside the competence of Pākehā academics. There was Māori criticism when new translations were made of some of the waiata from the collection, even though, to many modern ears, some of the earlier translations now sound dated, over-romantic, and over-inclined to bow to European social and moral conventions.

Some of the tribal histories written in the first half of the twentieth century are similarly revered. But they are in the same class as Ngata's and Pei Te Hurinui's work. They were not written by Pākehā, but by descendants of the tribal groups that form their subject, who also happened to be descended from prominent Pākehā families. Examples are J. Te Herekiele Grace's history of Ngāti Tūwharetoa, *Tūwharetoa* (1958), and Leslie G. Kelly's book, *Tainui* (1949). While the material in this book was derived, at least to some extent, from the work of Pei Te Hurinui Jones and published as Kelly's own, its source was impeccable and accepted by Tainui people (King 1977:237–38). In Hawke's Bay and northwards towards Tūrangānui, the work *Tākitimu* by Tiaki Hikawera Mitchell is often regarded as sacrosanct (1944). Its author had the backing of the Ngāti Kahungunu Tribal Association, and a long list of Mitchell's informants in the preface reads like a list of Ngāti Kahungunu chiefly families—Ōmana, Whaanga, Te Rito, Rōpata, Niania, Christy and Carroll.

To many Māori, especially to non-academic Māori, these are the only legitimate tribal histories. Problems arise when Pākehā work to revise these past writings. But some Māori of great status have successfully challenged them. Sorrenson has shown through the publication of their letters that Āpirana Ngata and Peter Buck were aware of and dedicated to the need for review of tribal traditions. In the case of Buck this stance was a natural flow-on effect of his chosen career of anthropology. But Ngata too wished to review such matters as the 'Fleet' theory in the light of genealogy. In one passage he stated that he did not believe that 'the fleet people could have multiplied so quickly in the time that elapsed since the fourteenth century without . . . commingling with a pre-existing people' (Sorrenson 1987:22). His letters are studded with many similar passages. In 1979 Ruka Broughton's study of the Taranaki people, Ngā Rauru, reviewed his people's traditions, arguing against the position that their founding ancestors came on the Aotea canoe as popularly believed. He demonstrated through genealogy that they were, rather, tangata whenua who settled the land, and who later intermarried with the Aotea strain (Broughton

1982). Contact with tribal historians and knowledgeable elders almost invariably demonstrates that a similar position would be found in most tribal areas. Even in the absence of critical academic examinations, these apparently new hypotheses are well known to those many expert genealogists who are the *kaumātua* of different tribal groups around the country.

The elements for a future solution to the problem of tribal history are all there. Critical examination of Māori tradition and *whakapapa* have been admitted to be necessary, desirable and practicable by Māori whose standing on their own *marae* and in the wider community was such that their judgements still stand unquestioned. There seems to be no quarrel with the entry of women into the field. Some of the greatest genealogical experts in Tākitimu genealogy, for example, have been and are women. Examples are Niniwa-i-te-rangi of Pāpāwai in the nineteenth century, Ema Lemuel and Lena Manuel in the twentieth century. Many contemporary Pākehā scholars are accepted by Māori as having shown both depth and sensitivity in their studies of the Māori past, or the interaction of Māori and Pākehā in the past. We have all the elements for a working compromise; the accepted need, the admitted roles. Why then is there still a problem?

Many Māori have in the past accepted that some Pākehā academics have played a vital role in preserving and analysing much that would otherwise have been lost. They have accepted, in other words, that Pākehā with the right attitude and training can legitimately work within Māoritanga, while the shallow superficiality and insensitivity of other Pākehā can be legitimately criticised. Such insensitivity has not been confined to abuse of physical evidence and artefacts. It abounds also in the written word. Even when the intentions are good, offence can arise through ignorance and the unconscious patronage of the academic towards 'his' or 'her' 'subject'. Academics can get quite a shock when they emerge from their offices and find that the theoretical problem they have been toying with over the last few months has living, breathing descendants sharing the common room, whose standing on *marae* can be affected by their disinterested speculations.

The call by some Māori academics for the exclusion of Pākehā from tribal history need not be a blow against academic freedom. It can be interpreted as a protest and a plea. A protest against the insensitive denigration of the unique elements in tribal tradition by many past would-be experts in 'Māori history'. A plea that in the future, before they deem themselves qualified to

describe any Māori pasts, Pākehā learn the true meaning of the words wairua, tapu, mana and taonga.

Notes

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1. Munz, an academic historian, 'did his thing' in the media, very publicly. He was annoyed that the Department of Māori Studies at Victoria University of Wellington was planning to confer its degrees on the university marae rather than with the other students at the annual capping ceremony.
 2. Donald McLean, *Diaries and Notes, 1848–1850*, entry for 26 March 1849, Wellington, Alexander Turnbull Library, MSS 32. The macrons have been added.
 3. *ibid.*
 4. New Zealand Māori Purposes Fund Board, Wellington, MS Papers 189, folder 73.
 5. Or other male connection by marriage.
 6. New Zealand Māori Purposes Fund Board, MS Papers 189, folder 7, the 'Pukapuka whakapapa a Moihī Te Matarohanga', p.284. My translation.
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