'Hine's Once were warriors hell' - the reporting and racialising of child abuse

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In recent years, some literature has appeared which examines the historical nature and development of ethnocentric prejudice in New Zealand, principally as displayed towards Maori people.[1] Angela Ballara for example has traced the presence of ethnocentric journalism through our colonial history, right into the 1980s. Ballara concluded that Maori people were long seen as inferior, and the 'bases of their inferiority were legion.' For example, Maori were originally seen as a primitive race, awaiting civilisation and the European in order to extend and enrich their lives. Further, Maori were to be assimilated into the new European society and polity being established in New Zealand. Assimilation was implicit therefore in the very notion of 'progress'; and the new European state being established here was if nothing all about progress and development.[2]

However, despite the foregrounding of 'racial amalgamation' as the state's native policy,[3] Maori people remained clearly identifiable, throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. As a result of the post-war migrations after 1940, Maori people increasingly moved into the 'line of sight' of most European New Zealanders, some of whom were now grappling with the word *Pakeha*.[4] As New Zealand approached the watershed year of 1990, many fears were expressed about the future prospects for good race-relations in New Zealand. Maori and Pakeha seemed at times to be headed in different and competing directions. However, once adopted by the government as underpinning its Maori policy, 'biculturalism' brought many new challenges.[5] But many New Zealanders still harked back to the 'assimilation' policies of earlier generations, still based on lingering notions of European superiority and Maori inferiority. These notions harked back to the simplistic racial dichotomies as seen by Ballara in our earlier newspapers.

As a consequence, there is still evidence of a strong newspaper and media tendency to see complex social and political issues in clear racial terms, where Maori are somewhere involved in the mix. Old and discredited notions of Maori behaviour still inform how the media report such complex issues. Paul Spoonley has represented this ongoing tendency of the media as playing 'an important and highly questionable role in the process of colonisation.' Newspapers, for example, seek to convince both 'coloniser and colonised' that most issues involving Maori, as reported by them, can be so simply categorised so as to represent the interests of both parties.[6] The recent spate of child abuse cases involving Maori people serves as a good example of this - of newspapers seeking to convince both 'coloniser and colonised' that this issue, which most certainly involves Maori people, can be simply categorised as 'Maori and other' in such a way as to represent the best interests of both parties.[7]

The purpose of this brief article is to point to the tendency of newspapers in particular, to report cases of domestic violence involving Maori families by laying undue emphasis on a predetermined set of notions about Maori people and their behaviour. In so doing, we can see that the simplistic racial dichotomies that were such a feature of our colonial press are being preserved and maintained.

On August 2, 2000, the Evening Post gave front page treatment to a tragic story about child abuse and death. The story was sourced from family informants, and told of the last days of a young toddler caught up by 'rampant violence, alcohol abuse and sexual violation.' The child's name was Hinewaoriki Karaitiana-Matiaha. Because she was obviously Maori, her short life and last days were likened by the Post to Alan Duff's book, *Once Were Warriors*. As press stories go, this story had clear categories and dichotomies and it was therefore very neat and simple.

Thus, the Post found family informants who were willing to provide lurid accounts of life within the Karaitiana-Matiaha family. One unnamed informant stated that;

> I've seen kids get hit; I've seen them around alcohol. We all went through it. That was no accident what happened to Hine, that was just a timebomb that was going to happen in our family.

According to other reports, Hinewaoriki had died at least five or six hours before her family took her to Masterton hospital. A homicide enquiry was established once it was discovered that the little girl - who was just before her second birthday - had been sexually violated, scalded with hot liquid, and 'bashed about the head and stomach.'[8] In the hours leading up to her arrival at hospital, Hine had been staying at a Charles Street house in Carterton with an aunt,

an uncle, their four children and other family members. Hine normally lived with her mother, grandmother and other family in Masterton.

The Evening Post source recalled whipping and sexual abuse and said that pleas for help were ignored.[9] The source, which was unnamed, therefore provided the Post with just the words and phrases it needed - including a fortuitous reference to a 'timebomb' - to give this story its most telling and appropriate angle; that this abuse had occurred within a Maori family.

The large headline used by the Post was eye-catching, as it was indeed supposed to be - 'Hine's Once Were Warriors Hell'. This headline invited readers to make logical connections between a young child's troubled life, and tragic death, and a recent work of pure fiction. The work of fiction - *Once Were Warriors* - was notable for its intensely negative portrayal of Maori. It was written in a kind of derogatory English and it depicted Maori in a quite derogatory way. The book drew upon its author's anger and seemingly intense loathing of all things Maori to convey a fictional account of a Maori family falling apart, attended by unrelieved abuse and violence. This was a fictional family breakdown from which there was to be no escape, nor redemption, for those involved.[10]

Yet Hine Karaitiana-Matiaha was not a character in *Once Were Warriors*. She was a real person. Her treatment by adults around her was and remains typical of the life stories of too many New Zealand children, spanning many cultural divides. But Hine was different - she was Maori. Therefore, the Post thought little of drawing the expression 'Once Were Warriors' into its headline as a kind of cultural signifier for the purposes of feeding a racial element into the story.

The Post did not have to deal with this story as if it were entirely a Maori problem. Yet it chose to do so. Therefore, the connection drawn between Hine's life and Duff's book was hardly a subtle one. But it did serve the purpose of tritely emphasising a number of highly debatable propositions that many New Zealanders believe to be true - that child abuse is a particularly Maori problem, that it is rife within Maori families, that Maori are the primary offenders, whereas Pakeha families are not so affected, and that Maori are in fact predisposed to violence. After all, Maori people were once warriors, to coin an over-worked cliche. The Evening Post headline said so.

This reporting of child abuse as a Maori issue was not confined to the Evening Post. Most other newspapers also ran stories of child abuse as if they were a singularly Maori phenomenon. As a consequence, the short but sharp media focus on child abuse soon became quite disjointed. The strong media tendency to see issues in racial terms with old notions of Maori behaviour was still being exhibited.

For example, on Saturday, September 30, 2000, the Dominion ran a headline story loaded with racial signifiers. This story reported that two sisters had been charged with Hine's manslaughter. As expected, the sisters were Maori. The partner of one of the women who also faced related charges of failing to assist, was also Maori.

Alongside its front page story, reporting the women appearing in Court, the newspaper reproduced a photograph of one of the accused defiantly striking a 'warrior position' with her tongue protruding. Outside of the Court, about 15 supporters of the two women were said to have created angry scenes whilst Maori onlookers described as 'tattooed men in torn jeans' hurled abuse at reporters. They also tried to put their hands over television cameras as the 'sobbing grandmother' of the accused women was escorted from the Court.

A summary of evidence was read to the packed Courthouse. Police provided full details of the circumstances of the child's death, but these were suppressed. A bail application for the partner was heard. Because he was the father of five children and had not been a primary caregiver of the child, as had the two women charged, bail was sought. In fact, said his lawyer, he had encouraged the accused women to get medical aid for the child.

As it turned out, this particular case had severe and tragic ramifications for the families involved, with anger and confrontation attending further court sittings. But again this was not a singularly Maori story. It therefore, did not deserve the hostile coverage given to it by most newspapers. The hostility of the Dominion towards Maori however, is often in evidence and is seldom left to operate at the level of subtext. In a recent editorial, for example, the newspaper had this to say about Maori feelings of historic loss and land dispossession;

> ...some Maoris seem to find it strangely satisfying to portray themselves as eternal victims, as if they would be lost without their mantras of doom.[12]

Another high profile child abuse case to emerge at this time was that of the 28-month old toddler from Palmerston North who ended up on life support in Auckland's Starship hospital. According to the child's Palmerston North neighbours, the young girl had once had a 'loving home in Palmerston North.' By this, the neighbours were referring to their own home, since they had unofficially adopted the toddler who was often to be found wandering alone. The neighbours concerned had even offered to foster the child, when it became clear the toddler was not being well attended at home. However, they said, they were turned down by the Palmerston North Child Youth and Family Service. Yet, according to the neighbours who featured in an Evening Standard front page story, 'we taught her to walk and everything - it was us who did that' said the neighbours. 'We took her on holidays - she was a part of our family.'

The local Child Youth and Family service was reported to have declined the placement and instead sent the child to Whangarei to be with whanau, as required by normal procedures. However, the neighbours stated that this was 'a family and a grandmother that she hardly knew.' The child was later severely beaten by her grandmother and was admitted to Auckland Starship hospital in a coma. The 52 year old grandmother would now face serious charges of assault, with possible charges of

manslaughter or murder to follow. The child concerned had critical head injuries and possible brain damage. She was also suffering from severe cuts, bruises and burns about her body.[13] She was in a coma in hospital whilst the grandmother was being held at Mt Eden Women's Prison.

Like most child abuse cases, this Palmerston North case was a complex case. It involved many actors at many levels, including some very public tussles between caregivers and state agencies, lavishly reported by the local press. However, throughout the reporting of this case, the Maori element was consistently highlighted, simply because the young child concerned, and her family, were Maori. Of all the elements involved in this case, it was the Maori dimension that most interested the press.

And so the story grew with the telling, so much so that the Prime Minister herself was moved to respond to the controversy surrounding this case, and the earlier case of Hine Karaitiana-Matiaha. Helen Clark very reasonably stepped carefully around and through the issue of child abuse and Maori families. The level of child abuse was unacceptable, she said. The government was considering a review of the effectiveness of all state and community health services as a result.

Ms Clark said she was especially horrified at the two cases in Carterton and Palmerston North / Whangarei. However, most importantly, she pointed to one fact that should have been obvious to most people - that child abuse was not specific to Maori families, though many Maori people had 'fallen through the cracks after years of economic change.' The overwhelming majority of Maori families, said Ms Clark, 'love their kids and are absolutely appalled at this kind of behaviour.' She concluded: 'I do not accept any theory that suggests that there's any cultural tolerance of this whatsoever.'[14]

However, cases of child abuse linked to Maori families continued to be reported. One case that received little attention was that of Mereana Edmonds, who was found dead in her Boundary Road home, near Hamilton in May, 1999. This child's mother was sentenced to prison for five years, whilst her partner was sentenced for 18 months. Both had committed sustained and aggravated cruelty. An autopsy had revealed 30 wounds, cuts, abrasions, and other injuries. Death itself had resulted from injuries to the neck.[15]

Though not widely reported in the press, this was another case of child abuse involving Maori families where readers were invited to draw logical connections between domestic violence and Maori families. And now, the genie was well and truly out of the bottle, so to speak. For example, under the headline 'Child Abuse Rife Among Maoris', the Dominion reported that the Department of Child Youth and Family had researched figures which showed that Maori children were five times more likely to be abused than Pakeha children. According to the Department, in the years 1998 and 1999, 2405 children said to be Maori were assessed by the service as abused. This compared with 2467 cases for Pakeha Children. Though the figures were similar, more New Zealanders of course identify as Pakeha, than they do as Maori.

Not to be outdone, the Children's Commissioner, Roger McLay, also had figures of his own dealing with family abuse and Maori families. According to McLay, Maori women aged between 15 and 24 were seven times more likely to be admitted to hospital with broken bones or severe abrasions.[16]

Then the head of the Women's Refuge Movement, Merepeka Raukawa-Tait began to publicise her own views about Maori families and abuse. In large part, however, Raukawa-Tait was responding as much to the news media-generated moral panic about Maori families and child abuse, as she was pointing to what was, or was not, a real problem. The fact that she was taken to task, as a Maori person, for so willingly lending publicity to such a media-generated moral panic was instructive. The Minister of Maori Affairs, Parekura Horomia, and his Associate Minister, Tariana Turia, were more than annoyed at Raukawa-Tait's public flogging of this difficult and complex issue, and for so publicly making these connections between child abuse and Maori families.

Largely as a consequence of this, Merepeka revealed to a National Party conference that the Women's Refuge movement was facing funding cuts because of her outspoken comments, linking the issue of child abuse so closely with Maori families. Horomia and Turia both strongly denied that cuts were ever contemplated. But the damage was done. Raukawa-Tait had re-energised the issue - and once again, child abuse and Maori families made it to the editorial columns and the front pages of our newspapers.[17]

As an interesting aside, Merepeka Raukawa-Tait's views clashed sharply with those of Tariana Turia. Ms Turia preferred to explain in part, Maori domestic behaviour as an intergenerational response to the 'trauma of colonisation.' Her comments were reasonable but they provoked an enormous outcry with the Race Relations Conciliator threatening an investigation.[18]

To some extent, the frenzy of media interest in child abuse cases in New Zealand earlier this year may have been sparked by a number of tragic cases overseas. For example, there was the recent English case of Sarah Payne. Sarah was an eight year old who disappeared from her home in Guilford on July 1st. Her body was found 17 days later, and the hunt continues for her abductor and murderer. This case received widespread international publicity and was well-covered throughout New Zealand. It undoubtedly raised fears for the safety of children.[19]

The Sarah Payne case in England provoked an outpouring of grief and questioning. The complexity of the issues was soon evident and many people committed themselves to discovering answers. New Zealand cases of child abuse are also complex and deserve committed people willing to explore all aspects of these cases in search of answers. For example, a significant number of Maori families have committed themselves to 'breaking the cycle' of domestic violence and abuse.

Many have accepted that positive change is required. Tribal and hapu groups are now increasingly involved in dealing with domestic issues, and are seeking to draw from lessons learned across the entire social and cultural spectrum of New Zealand. The fact that many of the cases involve Maori people should not of itself suggest that these cases are any less complex, nor deserving of any lesser standard of enquiry and questioning.

Footnotes

1 A very good recent example is Augie Fleras and Paul Spoonley (1999). *Recalling Aotearoa. Indigenous Politics and Ethnic Relations in New Zealand*. Auckland: Oxford University Press.

2 Ballara, A. (1986). *Proud to be White? A Survey of Pakeha Prejudice in New Zealand*. Auckland: Heinemann Publishers, pp. 1-7.

3 Ward, A. (1995). *A Show of Justice. Racial 'Amalgamation' in Nineteenth Century New Zealand*. Auckland:Auckland University Press (first published 1973).

4 See King, M. (Ed.) (1991). 'Being Pakeha,' in *Pakeha. The Quest for Identity in New Zealand*. Auckland: Penguin Books, pp.9-22. See also King, M. (1999). *Being Pakeha now. Reflections and Recollections of a White Native*. Auckland: Penguin Books.

5 The literature on biculturalism is extensive. One of the first publications was Vasil, R. (188). *Biculturalism. Reconciling Aotearoa with New Zealand*. Wellington: Institute of Policy Studies. See also Durie, M. (1998). *Te Mana, Te Kawanatanga. The Politics of Maori Self-Determination*. Auckland: Oxford University Press.

6 Spoonley, P. and Hirsh, W. (Eds) (1990). *Between the Lines. Racism and the New Zealand Media*. Auckland: Heinemann Publishers, pp. 8-9.

7 ibid.

8 *New Zealand Herald*, July 29, 2000, p. A5.

9 *Evening Post*, 2 August 2000, p.1.

10 Many of Alan Duff's strong views on topic pertaining to Maori are set out in Duff, A. (1993). *Maori. The Crisis and the Challenge*. Auckland: Harper Collins.

11 *Dominion*, September 30, 2000, p.1.

12 *Dominion*, September 1, 2000, p. 8.

13 *Evening Standard*, August 8, 2000, p.1.

14 *Dominion*, August 1, 2000, p.3.

15 *Dominion*, August 12, 2000, p.12.

16 *Dominion*, August 1, 2000, p.1.

17 *Dominion*, August 19, 2000, p.1.

18 *Evening Standard*, September 1, 2000, p.1.

19 *New Zealand Herald*, August 14, 2000, p.B1.

Puao-Te-Ata-Tu

A brief history and reflection

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IN JULY, 1986, a Ministerial Advisory Committee presented the report *Puao-Te-Ata-Tu (daybreak)* to the then Minister of Social Welfare, Ann Hercus. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on how that important document might be seen in the context of its time. By way of contrast, the report is also located within a broad view of the Maaori past.

Puao-Te-Ata-Tu grew out of a long series of earlier hui convened by the Department all over the country. The hui were called to discuss the concern, felt by most Maaori, that Social Welfare had ceased to function as a neutral focus for Maaori aspirations where access to State Welfare and income support resources were concerned. Put another way, the Department was a racist and hierarchical institution which reflected the values of the dominant Pakeha society of New Zealand. This was certainly the view of a group of Auckland staff established in 1985 as the Women's Anti-Racist Action Group.

Views like these were strong stuff, conveyed at a time when the Department of Social Welfare, like all Departments, was learning to live with Roger Douglas, no small feat. Social Welfare soon found itself riding unwittingly in the vanguard of change forced onto it by Maaori people. These were people greatly emboldened in their dealings with central Government by the much understated Tu Tangata ideas and programmes instigated by Kara Puketapu in the late 1970's.

Direct and extended consultation with Maaori communities was substantially uncharted territory for State agencies, even as late as the 1980's. The Department of Maaori Affairs was really the only other player on that field, one onto which all Departments would ultimately be compelled to run, or walk.

The Advisory Committee which entered into these direct consultations was headed by the much-respected Tuhoe kaumatua, John Rangihau. Other members included John Grant, probably the last of the self-made Social Welfare Directors-General. Also pressed for service was Dr Tamati Reedy of Maaori Affairs though much of the onerous travel fell to his Director of Community Services, Doug Hauraki. Other Maaori members included Lena Manuel, Hori Brennan and Maaori Affairs Deputy-Secretary, Neville Baker. Maaori staff assembled to support the consultations included Moana Herewini, Kim Workman and Social Welfare solicitor Donna Hall.

John Rangihau's recruitment was a coup for Social Welfare. He was a popular figure in social service agency circles in Wellington at the time, and was much applauded for his masterminding of a *Maatua Whangai* comeback. This involved an inter-Departmental attempt to revive that floundering but innovative programme which placed funding into whanau hands for the care of their young. *Maatua Whangai* was however at the time regarded by Maaori communities with some hostility (see report, page 34). While on the road with *Puao-Te-Ata-Tu*, Rangihau frequently acknowledged that hostility in a broader context, an hostility directed at his team by Maaori who put the view that radically different approaches and structures would be needed if the Department and its programmes were ever to address the needs of its Maaori client group. This was a group disproportionately represented in national welfare statistics, and in front of District Office counters.

The Advisory Committee's consultations were in the end an enormous undertaking, comprising some 60 hui. They were overtaken for sheer size only by the immense *He Tirohanga Rangapu* consultations of Koro Wetere and Maaori Affairs, two years later.

Puao-Te-Ata-Tu was a complex report, couched in unequivocal language. It contained commentary, statistics and thirteen recommendations which at heart sought a commitment from Social Welfare to a programme of reform founded on partnership principles as validated by the Treaty of Waitangi. That the Treaty was the driving force behind contemporary Maaori protest, said the report, could not be overemphasised. As a consequence, the report argued for significant procedural and legislative change. It especially argued for a greater recognition of Maaori customary support networks as conduit for State assistance to Maaori communities. It also sought an end to racism, pure and simple.

One of the most compelling parts of the report was its historical appendix. This appendix provided in robust style a basis in history for the report's essential representation of Maaori people as colonised, or 'domesticated', before a Pakeha ethos of conquest and subjugation. Recurring cycles of conflict and tension were said to have 'drained the Maaori, spiritually and physically'. Deprivation and ongoing material vulnerability were seen as the 'taproot' of a modern Maaori dependency on the State.

The report's Maaori writers were not wrong to advance this representation of the Maaori past since the connections between colonisation and adverse levels of social dependency are difficult to deny. In context, *Puao-Te-Ata-Tu* appeared at a time when Maaori all over were increasingly preparing such representations of the past from their own perspectives. Forums like the Waitangi Tribunal provided opportunities for Maaori to present specific accounts of their histories in the context of seeking redress for believed past breaches of the Treaty. The Treaty of Waitangi became the driving force behind contemporary Maaori resistance to the Crown. As a consequence, the writers of *Puao-Te-Ata-Tu* confidently tapped into the Treaty polemics as valid basis for its particular construction of the Maaori past, and present.

As Keith Sorrenson has suggested, these new Maaori histories generated a 'radical re-interpretation of New Zealand history'. Mainstream histories, and historians, were compelled to acknowledge the breadth and extent of these many tribal accounts of the last century, especially as New Zealand approached the great 1990 watershed.

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For some Maaori historians, however, the issue was not so clear; and remains so. Maaori historiography generally operates from the basis of kinship group (iwi, hapu or whanau) as centre of past and present. Inherent structures like whakapapa organised all Maaori knowledge, including knowledge or the past, with mana serving as primary organising principle.

For the Maaori of old, mana was everything. The Treaty of Waitangi was not the driving force here; it could not and did not validate mana. Whakapapa was the key, with kinship groups continuing to mediate their knowledge into histories of mana. These mana histories rendered their descent as authentic, validated their occupation of the land and, even across the colonial era, validated their particular social and political strategies and choices.

John Rangihau possibly had such thinking in mind when he repudiated 'Maaoritanga' in preference to his own 'Tuhoetanga' as source of his mana. However, as he also knew, the story of Maaori interface with settlers and the State was quite another history, one of colonisation and continuing conflict within which *Puao-Te-Ata-Tu* needed to be located. Perhaps Rangihau was alluding to a useful theoretical cross-over between the two histories when he wrote that future planning in all areas needed to show awareness of all people and their shared interests. Such awareness for Maaori first involved the harnessing of values, identity and mana history.

Much of the substance and spirit of the report, these days, is not in dispute. The case for structural reform, changed attitudes and a shifting of resources to Maaori communities was well argued. Generally speaking, Social Welfare responded constructively to the report, though opinions of course will vary. *The Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act (1989)*, for example, was substantially developed out of the report with Recommendation 4 proposing the reform of existing legislation to include, among other things, a greater recognition of customary Maaori support structures, and a closer adherence to customary iwi forms of conflict resolution. However such responses as were made by Social Welfare were significantly offset by the new constraints imposed by wholesale economic and Public Service reform. As Jane Kelsey has argued, these reforms have effectively resulted in a greater centralising of State functions, accompanied by an increasing withdrawal from social services delivery.

For Maaori people, *Puao-Te-Ata-Tu* was an important report. It was one of a host of reports and papers produced in Wellington at the time, all seeking to inform from the flaxroots an evolving Maaori public policy. However, given that in the end public policy is not generated by the flaxroots but is mediated to Government through its Departments and Agencies, it was appropriate that, for the purpose of the report at least, *Puao-Te-Ata-Tu* would turn for its historical basis to New Zealand's history of Government - Maaori relations. This was, after all, as much as history of Social Welfare and its antecedents as it was a history of the Maaori people.