Urban Māori
by Paul Meredith

The movement of Māori from their traditional homelands to the cities was among the fastest of any population. In 1926, 84% were living in rural, tribal settlements. By 1986, just under 80% were in urban centres. Such a dramatic displacement into a strange new world led to isolation and a sense of loss. But with the revival of their language and culture from the 1970s, urban Māori have forged a new and vibrant pan-tribal identity.

Urbanisation

In 2013, 84% of Māori lived in urban areas. Most are in the main metropolitan centres: a quarter live in the region of Auckland, New Zealand's largest city. Many continue to associate with their tribes 'back home'. However, in 2013, one in six people with Māori descent did not know their tribal affiliation, and many have come to regard themselves as 'urban Māori'.

The beginnings of change

Before the Second World War, over 80% of Māori were living in rural areas, primarily within their own tribal districts. From the 1920s there had been a trickle of people moving to the cities, but that was largely checked by the economic depression of the 1930s.

During the war, however, young Māori not eligible for military service were 'manpowered' into industries to support the war effort. Thus began a visible movement of Māori to the larger provincial centres.

The post-war wave

This so-called 'urban drift' increased after the war. New Zealand, like many other countries, was experiencing prosperity and there was a growing demand for labour in the towns and cities. Rural growth, on the other hand, had slowed and employment prospects for young Māori in the countryside were limited. Despite efforts to develop Māori

Departures

Former Governor-General Sir Paul Reeves tells the story of his parents' move to the city: 'My parents shifted from the country to the city in 1921. Theirs was not so much an urban drift as a conscious decision to go where the work was, to be city rather than rural people. My mother had grown up on the edge of the pā … For my mother, to marry and move to the city was to move away

land holdings, family farmlets were too few to support a rapidly growing Māori population.

from the world of her home and her Māori relatives to a situation where she could not do Māori things in a Māori way.' [1]

'Work, money and pleasure'

For most Māori it was not a drift, but a deliberate migration in search of what has been described as 'the Big Three': work, money and pleasure. In the beginning, the majority of migrants were unmarried young Māori looking for a more 'modern' life. Many saw their home communities as too conservative and slow. The bright lights of the city offered adventure.

Government policy

By the 1960s families had also begun to migrate in significant numbers. The government had come to recognise that the economic future of most Māori lay in the larger towns and cities. After the Hunn Report of 1961, which made recommendations on social reforms for Māori, the 'relocation' of Māori became official policy. Rural Māori families were encouraged to move to the cities with the provision of accommodation, employment and general assistance in adjusting to a new life.

Shifting demographics

The urban migration of Māori has been described as the most rapid movement of any population. In 1945, 26% of the Māori population lived in the towns and cities. By 1956 this had increased to 35%. Mass migration continued into the early 1960s. The urban population grew to 62% in 1966, and reached nearly 80% by 1986. As a result, many rural villages were depopulated.

Pākehā attitudes

For the first time, many Māori came into close contact with Pākehā. Initially there was a determination by many Pākehā to discourage the migration. It was thought that city life was not for Māori – that they should stay in their settlements where they could pursue their own way of life. This attitude arose from the belief that the Māori, with different social and cultural mores, would become a problem in what were more or less Pākehā communities.

Over time, it became accepted that the urbanisation of Māori was inevitable and even desirable. Friendships between Māori and Pākehā developed through jobs and social contacts. The 'integration' of the two races was advocated by the government as the quickest and surest way of coping with the mass influx.

Intermarriage

Inevitably, with more contact, intermarriage increased significantly during the 1960s. The greater mobility of Māori people also gave rise to more intermarriage between members of different tribes. In the larger towns and cities Māori met a wider range of potential companions than in their own home communities, where marriage was mainly based on kinship and locality.

By the 1960s the children of these marriages were the first generation to grow up in the city. Many of these children could claim affiliations to more than one tribe, but nonetheless their upbringing was quite different from that of their migrant parents.

Footnotes

- Paul Reeves. 'Te kupu tuatahi: the first word.' In He matapuna: a source: some Maori perspectives. Wellington: New Zealand Planning Council, 1979, p.10. › Back

Hopes and reality

The move to towns and cities provided new opportunities for Māori, but there were drawbacks as well.

Employment and education

Urban centres offered better paid jobs, although in the main, the first wave of arrivals were poorly educated and took up unskilled manual work. Such jobs would always be vulnerable in times of economic downturn. Māori found themselves engaged in clothing factories, on the wharves, in the freezing works, in the transport services, and the city municipal works. Others went into the teaching services, and into government departments, particularly the Department of Māori Affairs. A number of young school leavers found their way to the cities through educational opportunities, including the trade training schemes promoted by the Department of Māori Affairs until the 1970s.

The challenges of city life

The change from life in small communities where everybody knew what everybody else was doing, to the strangeness and anonymity of the city, called for rapid re-adjustment. Some people flourished, establishing successful careers and enjoying the advantages that the city had to offer, but never losing links with their home communities. Others, however, had more of a struggle.

Housing

Harsh realities

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the major difficulty was finding suitable accommodation. In Auckland numerous migrants were forced to live in the then depressed inner-city areas of Freemans Bay, Ponsonby and Herne Bay. Guest houses and hostels, such as Waipapa in Auckland, Te Rāhui in Hamilton and Rēhua in Christchurch, were established. The Department of Māori Affairs also made housing available in the better suburbs of Auckland and elsewhere, in accordance with a policy of 'pepper potting' or scattering and integrating individual Māori families among Pākehā neighbours. This was preferred to placing Māori together into one area.

However, the numbers burgeoned and eventually families were allocated state-built homes in large housing estates such as Te Atatū, Ōtara, and Māngere in Auckland, and Porirua, Hutt Valley, and Wainuiomata in Wellington. These suburbs grew into Māori communities.

Social problems

Having to take on permanent jobs and meet financial commitments, many Māori had difficulty in accepting the constraints of their new situation. With no extended family to fall back on, the growing and predominantly young group inevitably faced problems. Unemployment, loneliness and antisocial behaviour came to characterise city life for far too many young people. Some ended up on the streets and in gangs. This social dislocation was depicted in Alan Duff's 1990 novel, Once were warriors (which was made into a film in 1994).

Maintaining identity

From the beginning, people brought with them their traditions and values. They kept in contact with their home communities, made occasional return visits and took their dead home for burial. Increasingly though, the demands of city life and the pressures of conforming to Pākehā ways made it difficult for many to maintain that relationship over long distances, often hundreds of kilometres. Others had firmly planted their roots in the city and were less disposed to keep up that contact.

The new generation

The connection was even more tenuous for countless offspring of the migrants who were far removed from, and thus out of touch with, the tribal origins of their parents and grandparents. In the city they were separated from their

In 1961 the magazine Te Ao Hou gave the following warning to its Māori readers:
'Life in the city is not easy: you have to work regularly, be very careful with money, accommodation often gives trouble, and friends and relations have a habit of getting themselves into difficulties you have to help them out of.' [1]

Social upheaval

Pita Sharples, one of the founders of Hoani Waititi urban marae, describes the social problems he observed among Māori who came to live in Auckland in the 1950s and 60s:
'The change from the rural to an urban way of life was a huge culture shock. So many families were soon run down and the children were in trouble. They were broke, they had their power and water cut off, they owed rates and stuff like this. The discipline of the city was totally different from

marae and all the traditions that constituted their tribal
identity. They generally did not have their elders to guide
and instruct them in 'being Māori'. Because they had not
grown up within the tribe they did not have the same sense
of yearning to 'go back home'. A rising generation looked Māori, but could not speak
the language and knew little or nothing about their heritage and traditions.

the discipline of the country. So
there were huge problems.' [2]

Footnotes

1. Te Ao Hou, no. 36 (September 1961): 29. › Back
2. Quoted in Te Whānau: a celebration of Te Whānau o Waipareira. Waitakere City:
   Te Whānau o Waipareira, 2001, p. 12. › Back

Urban networks

As the realities of life in the bigger centres hit home, many Māori people turned to
various groups for support and fellowship. New associations were formed, where
Māori could meet and share activities, concerns and interests. Most of these
voluntary groups were not kin-based but had a common purpose of perpetuating
Māori identity, values and culture, and helping people with the demands of city life.
These groups included Māori clubs, councils, welfare committees and wardens,
Māori Women's Welfare League branches, youth and church groups.

Cultural groups

Māori cultural clubs became popular among the young, who were keen to recapture
and develop their knowledge of Māori culture as well as enjoy the social and family
focus they provided. For instance, the Ngāti Pōneke Young Māori Club, formed in
1937 under under the tutelage of Kīngi Tāhiwi, became a well-known Wellington
institution. It was, as one member commented, 'a place where the search for a Māori
face in the city could stop'. [1]

Numerous other urban cultural groups have been formed since. In the 1950s, many
young Māori men from the East Coast of the North Island moved south to
Christchurch to attend trade courses. In 1961, the group Te Roopu Haka o Te
Kotahitanga was set up to bring them back together by teaching them about their
cultural roots. Another, Te Waka Huia, was formed in 1986 in Auckland to provide
an opportunity for Māori to meet and express their cultural values in the city. This
and other urban-based groups have gone on to dominate cultural festivals and
competitions over the years.

Political groups

By the 1970s, new generations were also producing the leaders of the modern Māori
protest movement. At the forefront was an Auckland-based action group called Ngā

Tamatoa. It sought the teaching of Māori language in schools and more than symbolic acknowledgement of the Treaty of Waitangi. It also initiated annual protests over Crown breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi, at Waitangi Day celebrations.

Tribal affiliate groups

Many Māori living in the cities have retained tribal ties, and continue to participate in tribal life. In some instances they may serve on the marae committee or even as urban representatives on tribal trust boards.

Some tribes have also made concerted efforts to connect with city members, particularly through affiliating groups, commonly referred to today as 'taura here' (bound ropes). These groups represent the members of a tribe living outside their tribal domain, and reinforce tribal identity.

The Tūhoe tribe of the Urewera has an extensive network of tribal affiliate groups in the cities. They are known as Te Tira Hou in Auckland, Te Hono-a-te-kiore in Hamilton and Tūhoe-ki-Pōneke or Tū-te-maunga-roa in Wellington. Every two years at Easter, these groups make the journey 'home' to compete with other kin in Te Hui Ahurei, a festival of culture, sports and other activities. The event was established to ensure that contact with the traditional communities is maintained.

In Wellington, people of Tainui descent have come together as Waikato ki roto o Pōneke (Waikato people living in Wellington). The group endeavours to maintain links with Waikato people in Wellington and with the home tribes. They meet to develop their knowledge of tribal culture and traditions, and often return home to participate in tribal festivals.

Looking after your own

John Rangihau, an elder of Tūhoe, remembers the establishment of Tūhoe affiliate groups in the city: 'My own tribe, Tūhoe, moved to the city later than most ...We believed that these young Māori kids who were so lonely in the cities needed to know that their own people were concerned about their plight ... And so the formation of our own tribal societies in the city was an attempt to bring them together'. [2]

Footnotes

1. The silent migration: Ngāti Pōneke Young Māori Club, 1937–1948. Wellington: Huia, 2001, p. 2. › Back
2. John Rangihau, 'Being Māori.' In Te Ao hurihuri: aspects of Māoritanga, edited by Michael King. Auckland: Reed, 1992, pp. 184–185. › Back

Urban marae

Central to Māori culture and community activities is the marae. In the early years of migration the suburban state house and the community hall served as temporary marae. They were the venues for tangihanga (ceremonies of mourning) and

gatherings to mark significant occasions such as birthdays and marriages. Some purpose-built halls such as the Auckland Māori Community Centre provided a gathering place, but were not really suitable for the demands of a tangihanga, or the full expression of Māori culture and hospitality. Many Māori had firmly planted their roots in the city, but they still needed a tūrangawaewae – a place to stand and express their cultural identity.

Urban marae

The 1960s witnessed the widespread beginnings of 'urban marae' projects. These were to serve as traditional marae but were built within an urban environment. In many cases, Māori and Pākehā worked together in community fundraising efforts.

Pan-tribal marae

Many of these marae are pan-tribal, like Hoani Waititi marae, which was opened in 1980 through the efforts of the large Māori community of West Auckland. This marae started up one of the first kōhanga reo (Māori language preschools) in Auckland, and now provides language immersion at primary and secondary levels. It is also home to the renowned cultural group, Te Roopu Manutaki.

The Ngā Hau E Whā national marae in Christchurch is New Zealand's largest urban marae. Others have religious affiliations, such as the Anglican Tātai Hono marae in Auckland, and Catholic Hui Te Rangiora in Hamilton.

Tribal marae

In some cases tribal kin living in the cities have established marae outside the tribal boundary. Mataatua in Rotorua and Te Tira Hōu in Auckland are both affiliated to the Tūhoe tribe and the wider Mataatua confederation.

Marae at educational institutes

In more recent times many marae have also sprung up at schools and other educational institutes to teach the language and culture to students. Some are prefabricated classrooms, others are purpose-built and fully adorned with carvings and other fine art: Te Herenga Waka at Victoria University is one excellent example.

A place to stand

These marae have become a locus of pride and a sense of belonging for many Māori in the city. They provide opportunities to reaffirm and rediscover culture. Marae in

A city resting place

In the past most Māori in the cities took their dead home for burial in the family urupā (cemetery) alongside their ancestors. Today, the Waikumete cemetery in West Auckland has an area known as the Urupā, where anyone who can trace their Māori ancestry, or is a partner or adopted child of a Māori, may be buried. This is another example of recreating traditional structures within the urban setting.

the towns and city have also provided facilities where Māori and Pākehā can learn and participate in all aspects of Māori culture.

Urban and tribal authorities

A new way of life

By the 1980s, the proliferation of Māori committees, clubs, and marae complexes had created a new kind of community life for city Māori, and stimulated a growing sense of being Māori in a pan-tribal and urban context. Leaders emerged who were committed to urban Māori addressing problems in their own way. A range of community-based programmes provided those in the city with skills and techniques to reorganise themselves, and better co-ordinate efforts.

Urban Māori authorities

Te Whānau o Waipareira Trust (West Auckland), founded in 1984, is one of a number of multi-tribal organisations or urban Māori authorities. Others include the Manukau Urban Māori Authority (South Auckland), Te Rūnanga o Kirikiriroa Trust (Hamilton), Te Rūnanganui o te Ūpoko o Te Ika (Wellington), and Te Rūnanga o Ngā Maata Waka (Christchurch).

These organisations have fostered the economic, social and community development of urban Māori, forging links with central government and local bodies. They are active in education, commercial ventures, health, pre-employment and other social services.

Tribal authorities

Māori tribal organisations, on the other hand, have increasingly advocated tribal self-management of resources and delivery of services. The government introduced its devolution of services to tribal authorities in the late 1980s. The short-lived Rūnanga Iwi Act 1990 empowered tribal authorities to deliver government programmes. This approach was criticised for overlooking pan-tribal organisations in urban areas.

Legal recognition for urban authorities

Urban Māori leaders have dismissed the 'tribal' approach as inadequate to serve the interests of many people who have no real relationship with the tribe. Urban Māori authorities have sought to be recognised as iwi (tribes) or tribal authorities in their own right so they can qualify to deliver government services. They have argued that they are better equipped, with their local knowledge and proximity, to cater for Māori in the city.

In 1994 the Whānau o Waipareira Trust made a claim to the Waitangi Tribunal for recognition as a legitimate representative of urban Māori. Subsequently there were law changes allowing the trust to assume welfare responsibilities from government agencies. This case heralded a change in the way the government viewed urban Māori authorities.

Fisheries assets

Urban Māori authorities have also challenged the proposed allocation models for the Māori Fisheries Settlement of 1992, which resulted from a claim to the Waitangi Tribunal. The distribution model favoured traditional tribes. The long-standing claim has been to the highest courts in New Zealand, and to the Privy Council on several occasions.

National representation

Individual authorities have been at the forefront of advocating the rights of urban Māori. And in 2003 a National Urban Māori Authority was formed as a political voice for city-dwelling Māori.

Urban Māori as an identity

Many Māori who are third- and fourth-generation urban dwellers have lost their tribal identity. There are many more who are aware of their tribal affiliations, but have little to do with their tribes in everyday life. 'Urban Māori' or 'non-tribal Māori', therefore, is an identity increasingly being claimed.

This new identity has challenged traditional institutions, generating the sometimes divisive debate on the position of tribes and urban Māori bodies and their influence in Māori society. Urban Māori have become the 'unmarshalled force' which calls for fresh understandings of what it means to be Māori.

External links and sources

More suggestions and sources

> Mead, Sidney Moko. Te whakapakoko o Manene-nui – An image of the urban Māori. Wellington: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1982.

> The silent migration: Ngāti Pōneke Young Māori Club, 1937–1948. Wellington: Huia, 2001.

> Te Whānau: a celebration of Te Whānau o Waipareira. Waitakere City: Te Whānau o Waipareira, 2001.

Walker, Ranginui. 'The urban Māori.' In He
matapuna: a source: some Maori perspectives, 32–
41. Wellington: New Zealand Planning Council,
1979.

How to cite this page: Paul Meredith, 'Urban Māori', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/urban-maori/print (accessed 13 August 2024)

Story by Paul Meredith, published 8 February 2005, updated 17 February 2015