

ENIGMA OF THE NGATI HOTU

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ABSTRACT

Polynesian origins have been the subject of wide-ranging speculation since the Age of Discovery. The colonial era in which the theory of diffusionism was in vogue subjected Polynesian origins to whatever source was regarded as the source of a “World Civilization.” One notable feature recorded by the earliest explorers and colonial settlers alike, was the enigmatic presence of “golden” and “red hair” among Polynesians. These red haired individuals and entire families were called among the islanders “kehu,” and among the Maori of New Zealand “Urukehu”, giving rise to wide ranging speculation as to Polynesians origins, ranging from the Lost Tribes of Israel to South American Indians. In recent years, with indigenous claims being settled under the Treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand among the claimants are remnants of the mysterious Ngati Hotu, thought to have long been extinct prior to European colonial settlement. This essay examines this enigmatic “urukehu” people, whose continued existence has been hitherto unrecognised.

Keywords

Kehu, Maori, New Zealand, Ngati Hotu, urukehu.

KEHU

Kehu is the term for red and associated fair-haired individuals throughout Polynesia, where it becomes *Urukehu* among the New Zealand Maori. Edward Tregear wrote of the term’s widespread use among the Polynesians:

“I have not yet found kehu in Maori standing alone, but it may be traced in its compounds -viz., makekehu-, light-haired, and urukehu, light-haired. The Polynesian shows this to be a strong secondary meaning. Samoan, 'efu, reddish-brown: Tahitian, ehu, red or sandy-coloured, of the hair, roureuhu, reddish or sandy hair: Hawaiian, ehu, red or sandy hair, ruddy, florid; ehuahiahi, the red of the evening, or old age; ehukakahiaka, the red of the morning, or youth: Tongan, kefu, yellowish, applied to the hair: Marquesan, kehu, fair, blonde; hokehu, red hair; oioikehukehu, daybreak: Mangarevan, keukekura, blonde, fair: Paumotan, kehu, blonde, fair-haired.” (Tregear, 1890, 536).

URUKEHU

The folklorist James Cowan who, along with John White, probably did more than any other

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“Polynesianist” to collect the legends of the Maori, considered the Maori folktales to have had a basis in reality, of iwi “who left a strain of *uru-kehu* in most ancient tribes.” (Cowan, JPS, Vol.30, Part 2).

Some of the scholarly accounts of the Maori early in the 20th century depict photographs of *urukehu* individuals. James Cowan in *The Maori: Yesterday and Today* shows a picture of a girl with the caption: “Urukehu girl, of the Urewera tribe at Mataatua (Ruatahuna). This is the ancient fair-haired type, pure Maori.” (Cowan, 1930).

The early New Zealand painter G F Angas reproduced in his book *The New Zealanders* a painting entitled: “Children of the boiling springs by Taupo Lake.” The painting depicts three Maori children, the centre boy having blond hair. Angas wrote of his painting:

“In the very heart of the interior, light or golden hair may occasionally be observed... The boy whose portrait is given in the centre figure... is the son of one of the chiefs of Tukano, a settlement near the boiling springs of Taupo Lake, where no intermixture with Europeans could have taken place.” (Angas, 1847, Plate 22, 54).

One of the most striking pictures of the type is that of a photograph of a Maori family of mother, father and son, the son in the centre, bedecked in a feather cloak, being strikingly light haired. The son as well as the father – although not obviously so from the depiction – were both described as *urukehu*. The photograph appears in a book by Mākereti Papakura, a celebrated Maori guide, author and folklorist. She believed that the *urukehu* were the result of intermixture between Maori and the mysterious fey-like *Patupaiarehe*. (Papakura, 1938).

Physical evidence for the *urukehu* existed and was once on public display, but apparently is no longer to be found. Sir Peter Buck, the celebrated Maori anthropologist, writing of his study on “Maori somatology,” commented on several braids of reddish hair that were at the time exhibited at the Auckland Museum:

“(...) The general colour is black, but brown and reddish hair occur. Certain tribes have been stated to have had more than their share of red hair, and in these tribes it is said to occur in certain families. It was supposed to be more prevalent amongst the Tuhoe, Maniapoto and Upper Whanganui tribes. Red hair is known as Urukehu, and was popularly supposed to be another Patupaiarehe inheritance. Warahoe was a red-haired ancestor of the Urewera people at Te Whaiti, hence the proverb, “Ka urukehu te tangata, ka kiia no Warahoe.” “If a person is red haired, it is said to be from Warahoe.” Percy Smith quotes a saying from Mangaia in the Cook Group, “Te anau keu a Tangaroa.” “The light-haired descendants of Tangaroa.” Anau keu is the Mangaian equivalent of the Maori whanau kehu. In the Auckland Museum there is a hank of beautiful wavy red hair, obtained from a rock shelter near Waitakerei. That it belonged to pre-European days is proved by the root ends being plaited together and bound round with fine braid prepared from the same hair. Curiously enough, the only other specimen of hair in the same case is also bound round with fine hair braid and is dark-brown in colour. It was obtained from the same cave as the very old carved coffins from Waimamaku. Words denoting very fair or flaxen hair are korito or korako, the latter being the same word as used for an albino. As another example of the Maori belief in the inheritance of fair hair from certain ancestors, we have the proverb, “He aha te uru o to tamaiti? Kapatau he uru korito, he korako, he uru ariki no Pipi.” “What is the hair of your child? Were it flaxen hair or whitish, it would be the hair of high chieftainship from Pipi.” Pipi was a woman of the highest rank who flourished twenty-four generations ago and was an ancestress of the Ngati-

Ira tribe.” (Buck, JPS, 1922, 37).

In recent years enquiries by this writer and others regarding the exhibits of braided hair mentioned by Dr Buck have been met with incomprehension by Auckland Museum staff. Apparently they are not even indexed in archives.

NGATI HOTU

The *Ngati Hotu* are described not simply as manifesting the *urukehu* strain of red or fair hair, but as being an *urukehu* folk per se. *Ngati Hotu* is regarded as extinct as a distinct people. However, representatives have in recent years come forward to affirm their continued existence.

F O V Acheson wrote of *Ngati Hotu* in a novel in 1938, where much historical information was given. Acheson related the conflict between the *Ngati Hotu* and *Te Arawa*, part of a process that saw the *Ngati Hotu* being reduced from inhabiting the entire central North Island from coast to coast, with their centre around Lake Taupo, to their virtual extinction at Kakahi, Whanganui, in the 14th Century, as they were progressively driven south-westward. (Acheson, 1938).

The most detailed account from a Maori scholarly perspective seems to be provided by Sir John Te Herekiele Grace in his history of the Tuwharetoa, who occupied the Taupo District after having displaced the *Ngati Hotu*. Sir John writes:

“Ngati Tuwharetoa was a tribe that originally settled on the Bay of Plenty coast and during the 16th Century found its way into Taupo. It found there tribes in occupation of the district, but by gradual absorption, diplomatic alliances and aggressive warfare, finally took complete possession of the land. The original occupants of the land were a tribe of the fair skinned and flaxen haired people called Ngati Hotu. They lived by the lake in company with another fair skinned tribe, Ngati Ruakopiri. The third tribe was Ngati Kurapoto...” (Grace, 1992, 19).

Sir John gives the origins of the *Ngati Hotu*, although “somewhat obscure,” as having settled the Bay of Plenty during the 12th Century, arriving from central Polynesia. Sir John encountered difficulty in obtaining information from the old chiefs because of their reluctance to relate descent “from a tribe defeated and absorbed by their forebears.” (Grace, *ibid.*, 113).

A large section of the *Ngati Hotu* moved to Hawke’s Bay along the East Coast, coming into conflict with the *Tini O Mamoe* in the Napier district, and being forced back toward Taihape, while others resisted for a generation, eventually fleeing southward into the Wairarapa district. Those that remained in the Bay of Plenty eventually were forced to migrate to the Taupo district, where they entered into alliance with the *Ngati Ruakopiri* which are also said to have been *urukehu*. (Grace, *ibid.*, 114). At Taupo they are said to have reached very large numbers. (*Ibid.*). Sir John described the *Ngati Hotu*:

“Generally speaking, Ngati Hotu were of medium height and of light colouring. In the majority of cases they had reddish hair. They were referred to as urukehu...” (Grace, *ibid.*, 115).

The last stand of the *Ngati Hotu* took place at Kakahi, in the Whanganui district, during the 14th century, known as the Battle of the Five Forts, as they had constructed five pa (Maori fort) around Kakahi, where the Whakapapa and Whanganui rivers join. The pa were captured one by one and the

final battle was fought on the flats between Kakahi and the Whangauni River. The limbs of the slaughtered *Ngati Hotu* were hung on poles, hence the name of the stream at Kakahi, Whataraparapa, “the hanging of the legs in a line,” a final insult to the *Ngati Hotu*. Some *Ngati Hotu* escaped into Patea. (McIntyre, 1972).

TREATY CLAIMS BRING FORTH NGATI HOTU REMNANTS

The *Ngati Hotu* were assumed to have been extinct for centuries until the lodging of claims under the Treaty of Waitangi by *Ngati Hotu* in 2008.

The “briefs of evidence” submitted to the Waitangi Tribunal on behalf of *Ngati Hotu* and *Ngati Hinewa* lay claim to a humble portion of land that is of spiritual significance in the Whangai District. (Matamua et al, 2008). The most detailed brief to the Tribunal in regard to *urukehu* is that of Monica Matamua, stating under the subtitle “Ngati Hotu and Kakahi” that the area was once populated by *Ngati Hotu*, “*who descend from the Urukehu, a people renowned for their fair skin, green eyes and red hair.*” (Matamua, Wai 903, no. 19, paragraph 36, 5). “*Kakahi was named after a Ngati Hotu chief.*” (Ibid., paragraph 37).

“Our Ngati Hotu ancestry is something we hold dear to, although our whanau never really spoke of it. Growing up at school, the tribe was ridiculed and I was teased for my red hair. I remember once being called a urukehu. I told my mother about it and she told me of our Kui Te Mihi Terina who had red hair and green eyes, green eyes inherited from her grandfather, Te Pikikotuku.” (Ibid., paragraph 41, 6).

It is apparent from the above anecdote that the *Ngati Hotu* and their *urukehu* character were (and presumably still are) well-known among Maori of the Whanganui District. Matamua states that despite the supposed disappearance of the *Ngati Hotu* centuries ago, they have in fact always been here.

“There are many stories of attacks that were made upon the Ngati Hotu people. One thing I am clear of though, is that my tupuna never left the land, nor were they wiped out.” (Ibid., paragraph 42, 6).

The *Ngati Hotu* remained an extant people and was aligned with Te Kooti who was in conflict with the Government colonial forces. The *Ngati Hotu* fled from Takapuna back to Kakahi to avoid military confrontation. It was not until “the late 1880s” that the *Ngati Hotu* was permanently forced from the area. (Ibid., paragraph 42, 8). Mrs Matamua also mentions in her submission the association the *Ngati Hotu* had with the mythic mountain folk, *Patupaiarehe* and the *Turehu*, despite the “ridicule” these claims receive.” (Ibid., paragraph 87, 11). She reiterates the continuing existence of the *Ngati Hotu*:

“Nevertheless, the blood still thrives in our veins; it hasn’t been extinguished and absorbed. Some might be embarrassed by the fact that their ancestors lost a few battles, but it’s who we are. We have no choice, it is our identity. (Ibid., paragraph 89, 11-12).

“That does not mean we should be ignored and made landless. (Ibid., paragraph 90, 12).

“We are tired of being ignored and that we are extinct. Because of this, every time we seek recognition in Kakahi and Te Rena, we are ignored. (Ibid., paragraph 93, 12).

“Our historic losses in battle does [sic] not mean that we don’t have wahi tapu where our dead are buried and places that we seek to care for. (Ibid., paragraph 94, 12).

“We should be able to do this in our own right and not be forced to be part of some other Maori group to have this achieved.” (Ibid., paragraph 95, 1).

Janet Olive Te Ahuru submitted a brief that is also of interest to this essay, in this instance relating her childhood experiences as an *urukehu*. Born in 1962, she relates her experiences as a 6 year old, having taken after her mother in looking *urukehu*. She states that one day at her school in Tokoroa her teacher did a count of the different nationalities, asking all Maori to stand. (Te Ahuru, Wai 903, #122, paragraph 7, 2). *‘I stood up and was told to sit down. I told the teacher that I was Maori. She told me, “No Janet, you’re not.”’* When insisting, she was told to leave the room for her disobedience. (Ibid., paragraphs 8-10, 2). The gossip from parents of other children at the school was that she had been adopted, because of her red – *urukehu* – hair. (Ibid., paragraphs 12 and 13, 2). Her mother told her that parents were jealous because they didn’t have children that looked like Janet. The following day the children at the school tried to pull her hair out. She was left with a bald patch. (Ibid., paragraph 14, 2). Subsequent research showed her that she was of *“Ngati Hotu and Ngati Hinewa Pikiaio Descent.”*

URUKEHU PERSISTS

Despite the manner by which such folk as the *Ngati Hotu* as defeated *iwi* have been denigrated, there are many Maori who claim *urukehu* descent as an important factor in their *whakapapa* (Genealogy). A high profile example is the co-leader of the Maori Party, one of the coalition partners in the present New Zealand Government, Dr Pita Sharples, Member of Parliament, and a former Race Relations Conciliator. In relating his ancestry in his maiden speech before Parliament he stated that he is descended from Te Whatuiapiti: *“He was a great chief, he had red hair. These are the eponymous ancestors of the subtribe Te Whatuiapiti...”* (Sharples, 2005).

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