

# A Whakapapa of Tradition

100 Years of Ngati Porou  
Carving, 1830–1930

Ngarino Ellis

With new photography  
by Natalie Robertson



Māori carving went through a rapid evolution from 1830 to 1930. Beginning around 1830, three dominant art traditions – war canoes, decorated storehouses and chiefly houses – declined and were replaced by whare karakia (churches), whare whakairo (decorated meeting houses) and wharekai (dining halls). In *A Whakapapa of Tradition*, Ngārimo Ellis examines how and why that fundamental transformation took place by exploring the Iwirākau school of carving – an ancestor who lived in the Waiapu Valley around 1700, Iwirākau is credited with reinvigorating carving on the East Coast. The six major carvers of his school went on to create more than thirty important meeting houses and other structures, which Ellis explores to tell this story of Ngāti Porou carving and a profound transformation in Māori art. *A Whakapapa of Tradition* also attempts to make sense of Māori art history, exploring what makes a tradition in Māori art; how traditions begin and, conversely, how and why they cease. Beautifully illustrated with new photography by Natalie Robertson, and drawing on the work of key scholars to make a new synthetic whole, *A Whakapapa of Tradition* will be a landmark volume in the history of writing about Māori art.

**Ngārimo Ellis** (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Porou) is a senior lecturer in Art History and co-ordinator of the Museums and Cultural Heritage Programme at the University of Auckland. and co-editor with Deidre Brown of *Te Puna: Māori Art* from Northland.

**Natalie Robertson** (Ngāti Porou, Clann Dhònnchaidh) is a photographic artist and senior lecturer at AUT University. She has exhibited extensively in public institutions throughout New Zealand and internationally.

# Contents

---

Introduction: Te Ao Hurihuri o Iwirākau	1
One: Iwirākau Visual Culture to 1830	21
Two: He Tikanga Hoū: Chapels in the Waiapu, 1838–1860	39
Three: Tradition and the Meeting House	61
Four: Ngā Tohunga Whakairo o Iwirākau	99
Five: Patronage	187
Six: ‘Ka pū te ruha, ka hao te rangatahi’: Apirana Ngata, Hone Ngatoto and the End of the Iwirākau Carving School?	231
Select List of Iwirākau Meeting Houses	247
Occasional Carvers of the Iwirākau School	250
Glossary	259
Notes	266
Bibliography	280
Acknowledgements	287
Index	290



## Introduction

---

# Te Ao Hurihuri o Iwirākau

*Titiro ki muri kia whakatika ā mua.  
Look to the past to proceed to the future.*

**B**ETWEEN 1830 AND 1930 MĀORI ART and architecture underwent a radical transformation. Three dominant art forms – waka taua (war canoes), pātaka (decorated storehouses) and whare rangatira (chiefs' houses) – were replaced by whare karakia (churches), whare whakairo (decorated meeting houses) and wharekai (dining halls). This book, *A Whakapapa of Tradition*, examines how and why that fundamental transformation took place by focusing on the Iwirākau School of carving, based in the Waiapu Valley on the East Coast of the North Island. Iwirākau was an ancestor who lived around the year 1700 and who is credited with reinvigorating the art of carving in the Waiapu region. Between the 1860s and the 1920s, six major carvers of his tradition

created more than thirty meeting houses and other structures. These carvers and their patrons renegotiated key concepts within Māori culture: ideas such as tikanga (tradition), tapu (sacredness) and mana (power, authority) became embedded within the new architectural forms, while established rituals were repurposed around the new buildings' creation and use. The importance of whakapapa (lineage) and whenua (land) remained paramount, but these concepts were newly articulated in a way that allowed creativity to flourish.

The visual culture in the northern East Coast even before 1830 was complex and sophisticated. Chapter One maps out this territory, introducing the key historical figures Ruatēpupuke, Hingangaroa, Te Ao Kairau and Iwirākau, and the whare wānanga Te Rāwheoro and

**Figure 1:** Reneti Church, Mangahānea Marae, Ruatōria. *Photograph by Natalie Robertson.*

Tāpere-Nui-a-Whatonga. It then moves on to survey the main contemporary sites of Iwirākau carving: the waka taua, pātaka, chiefs' houses and palisade posts. But new art traditions often emerge at a time of socio-cultural upheaval, and the early nineteenth century on the East Coast was just such a time. After the building of the first 'Native Chapel' in the Waiapu Valley in 1839, local chiefs competed for mana by building bigger and more ornate churches. Decoration from pātaka and waka taua was transferred into churches, and within a single generation, from 1830 to 1855, chapels came to be traditional within the community, as explained in Chapter Two. They became central to hapū culture and reflected the strength of leadership, both tribal and religious.

Many social practices, such as those marking significant events like marriage, began to take place in chapels rather than on the ātea (area in front of a structure) of chiefs' houses. And from the mid-1850s many chapels were rebuilt into larger ones, demonstrating their continuing importance within communities. During the growth in church-building from the 1840s, Waiapu Māori drew on tradition selectively, maintaining older ideas and applying them to new situations. Traditional building practices were used in the chapels both practically (in terms of structure and materials) and symbolically (in that each phase of construction was marked with karakia [prayers] and hākari [feasts]). This flexibility of approach would be drawn on again in the 1850s and 1860s when another disjuncture occurred.

In the period from 1860 to 1900, the whare whakairo became the dominant architectural structure within Māori communities. Part I of Chapter Three tracks how existing elements of chiefs' houses, waka taua, pātaka, pou whakarae (large carved posts on the palisades of pā, or

fortified settlements) and chapels all contributed to the style and function of the meeting house. Part II describes the type of meeting houses built by Iwirākau carvers. This style was recognisably different from those of other iwi, and soon became a distinctive marker used by carvers from outside the region to reference the East Coast in their own work. The meeting house was not a static entity based in a timeless era but, like the chapel, became another vehicle with which to articulate change and innovation in the community.

The carvers themselves were the key transmitters of culture in this community, simultaneously retaining and breaking with tradition. Chapter Four examines the genealogical relationships, social organisation, reputations and styles of the Iwirākau carvers and the ways in which they were paid. One group of artists – the 'Super Six' – became the primary exponents of a style which came to be known as Iwirākau: Te Kihirini, Hone Taahu, Hone Ngatoto, Riwai Pakerau, Tamati Ngakaho and Hoani Ngatai. The chapter also analyses the concept of tradition in relation to the carvers and considers the ways in which they embraced innovation within the context of their communities and their patrons – the subject of Chapter Five.

The patrons of Iwirākau carvers made deliberate choices about the type of architecture they commissioned and which artists would create it for them. They wanted to demonstrate visual links with the past, but they also defined tradition for themselves in a fluid way. Carving in particular was paramount in the creation of new buildings; ancestors were depicted in order to emphasise and reinforce whakapapa and ties to the land. Part I of Chapter Five discusses the general nature of both Māori and Pākehā (New Zealand European) patrons of Māori carving; part II

focuses specifically on patronage of Iwirākau carvers in the nineteenth century. I consider the range of arts patrons, beginning with local Ngāti Porou and moving outwards to other iwi and lastly Pākehā. Two case studies are presented in the last section: the building of Porourangi and Hau Te Ana Nui o Tangaroa. For both, patrons called on the concept of tradition because of specific political and cultural agendas.

Finally, the concluding chapter examines the period from 1900 to 1930 and in particular the work of Tā Apirana Ngata. The renovation of Porourangi (1908) and the building of Ngata's carved study (1916), St Mary's Memorial Church (1925–26) and the Arihia Dining Hall (1930) are the four key moments here. The Arihia Hall formed the basis for one final art tradition – the dining hall – and thus its date of construction acts as the book's cut-off point. Ngata emphasised the continuing importance of carving as a marker of identity, and acted as both artist and patron, vacillating between the two roles – much as he did between tradition and modernity.

## The place of tradition within Māori culture

The mission of this book is to find ways to discuss transformations in Māori art and architecture between 1830 and 1930. These can tell us much about the role of tradition and innovation in Māori culture.<sup>1</sup> In te reo, 'tradition' might be translated as 'tikanga', which derives from the word 'tika', meaning 'just', 'fair', 'right' or 'correct'. According to the *Ngata Dictionary*, 'tradition' can be translated as 'kōrero tipuna' or 'tikanga a iwi', and 'traditional' as 'tikanga' or 'tuku iho'.<sup>2</sup> Tikanga is a crucial aspect of Māori culture and society. Mason Durie explains the concept:

Tikanga are used as 'guides to moral behaviour' and within an environmental context refer to the preferred way of protecting natural resources, exercising guardianship, determining responsibilities and obligations, and protecting the interests of future generations . . . the most appropriate tikanga for a group at a given time, and in response to a particular situation, is more likely to be determined by a process of consensus, reached over time and based both on tribal precedent and the exigencies of the moment. Tikanga is as much a comment on process as it is on fixed attitudes or knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Durie emphasises both the significance of tikanga for Māori and, critically for this study, the way that tradition *changes* over time in response to the group for whom it has relevance. One of the most thorough discussions of tikanga is by Hirini Moko Mead in his book *Tikanga Maori*. He asserts that tikanga is

. . . the set of beliefs associated with practices and procedures to be followed in conducting the affairs of a group or an individual. These procedures are established by precedents through time, are held to be ritually correct, are validated by more than one generation and are always subject to what a group or individual is able to do.<sup>4</sup>

He provides a practical way of thinking about tikanga:

Tikanga are tools of thought and understanding. They are packages of ideas which help to organise behaviour and provide some predictability in how

**Figure 2 (overleaf):** The mouth of the Waiapu River, East Cape. *Photograph by Natalie Robertson.*









## Chapter One

---

# Iwirākau Visual Culture to 1830

**O**UR RICH ORAL HISTORY DEMONSTRATES the ongoing importance of carving and carvers on the East Coast. The story of Ruatēpupuke is a critical narrative for Ngāti Porou and tells us that carving first came to us from another realm. The story begins with Te Manu-Hauturuki, the son of Ruatēpupuke, who was out on the ocean one day when Tangaroa, God of the Sea, became angry with him and carried him down to his house, Hui-te-ananui, which was under the sea. Ruatēpupuke started to worry about his son, and began searching for him. When he found him, Te Manu-Hauturuki had been transformed into the tekoteko (figure-head, see Fig. 6) of Tangaroa's house. Incensed,

Ruatēpupuke killed those belonging to Tangaroa's house, grabbed his son and some of the exterior carvings from the house, and fled home. In doing so he not only avenged the kidnapping of his son, but also brought the knowledge of carving to this world – 'which has been passed down to the present generation'<sup>1</sup>

In this narrative Tangaroa's house is described as being fully carved on the interior, and outside in the porch poupou. The carvings inside could talk to one another while those in the porch were silent. Thus, as Ruatēpupuke took only external poupou, carving today is silent. Once home, Ruatēpupuke kept the carvings for his children and grandchildren 'to admire'. This work later became the prototype for all carving.

**Figure 8:** The ancestor Iwirākau as represented on a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century poutokomanawa now at Auckland Museum (AM.163). *Photograph by Natalie Robertson with the permission of Te Morehu Te Maro and Auckland War Memorial Museum.*



HINEPARE

PUTARANGA

## Chapter Three

---

# Tradition and the Meeting House

**F**ROM 1850 TO 1900, COMMUNITIES focused on a new form, the whareniui. Specific traits from earlier art traditions were selected by carvers and patrons and used as the basis for the whareniui which, within a single generation, became a new tradition and has remained so to this day. The first part of this chapter outlines the functions and forms of chiefs' houses and examines the ways in which they contributed to the final style and function of the meeting house that emerged on the East Coast in the 1870s. The second part identifies the style of meeting house that became popular among Iwirākau carvers by the 1880s. Tradition was at the same time retained and yet broken in order to create a structure that made explicit hapū and iwi identity

in new and meaningful ways. Finally, an account of Ringatū houses on the East Coast is given to show a particular application of Iwirākau figurative painting for religious and social purposes.

### Origins of the meeting house

The meeting house in form and decoration resembled the chief's house. The main designers, the carvers, retained the rectangular floor plan of the chief's house, with its low sliding door and window leading out to a porch. Oral history reinforced existing models of chiefs' houses. East Coast narratives as outlined in Chapter One were known to carvers. These revealed information

**Figure 19:** The ancestor Hinepare depicted on the left amo of Rongomaianiwaniwa meeting house, Rāhui Marae, Tikitiki. *Photograph by Natalie Robertson with the permission of Ginny Reedy on behalf of the Trustees of Rāhui Marae.*

about earlier chiefs' houses which had carvings on the interior and porch poupou (carvings on the walls of meeting houses), tāhuhu (ridgepole), pare (lintels), whakawae (door surrounds) and kōrupe (lintel above a window). They also featured tukutuku and kōwhaiwhai. The use and placement within the chief's house of these decorations was retained by carvers of the 1860s. Significantly, the representation of ancestors on individual carvings, such as on the kōruru, remained. The practice of naming wharenuī after events or major ancestors was also kept.

From 1840 to 1870 ownership of major structures in the community shifted from personal to public. Carol Ivory notes that the function of the chief's house began to change in the 1840s with the introduction of houses for 'accommodating visiting chiefs'.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, the private homes of chiefs were used to host manuhiri coming to discuss pressing issues of the day, such as land sales and law and order. That this hosting function was noted by contemporary commentators, such as Joel Polack in 1840,<sup>2</sup> as *new* seems unusual, given the fact that Māori frequently visited one another as part of normal social relations, such as arranging marriages, with visits that could last several months. This particular use of the chief's house continued through to the 1850s and 1860s, taking on even more significance during times of turmoil when negotiation and mediation were pertinent. By 1870 it was hapū who were organising the building of new wharenuī and who considered them to be communally owned, even though patrons continued to have their names linked with particular buildings, such as Rapata Wahawaha with Porourangi.

Whether wharenuī built in the 1850s and 1860s were considered to be principally a chief's residence or a meeting house is unclear. Certainly over time some wharenuī came to be considered

as meeting houses, even though when they were built they were regarded as the private property of a specific chief. One case in point is Te Hau ki Tūranga. When the artist/chief Raharuhi Rukupo organised for the building of the house, its function was linked intimately to his role and status within his hapū, Ngāti Kaipoho.\* However, after the house was seized by the Crown in March 1867 as part of their land confiscation programme,<sup>3</sup> Rukupo's pleas for its return were founded on the basis that the house was not his to sell, but rather belonged to his entire hapū.<sup>4</sup> In relation to the upper East Coast, several houses from the early 1860s were similarly considered to be the private property of the patron: in the case of the house organised by Te Kihirini, this was intended as a private space, built to celebrate the birth of a son. Likewise, Henare Potae's house at Tokomaru Bay was built to be a private whare, and was sold as one.

The pātaka's significance as a major asset of the chief was retained and reformatted in the wharenuī. The concepts governing carvings were transferred into the wharenuī, specifically the tekoteko, maihi, raparapa and paepae, as well as poupou along the walls of the porch and epa (slanted-top carved panel in a meeting house) on the back wall. In building wharenuī in favour of pātaka, carvers reconfigured the symbolism in pātaka carvings into those in the wharenuī. For the ancestral figure depicted on the pātaka kūwaha, carvers reconfigured the composition and placed the figure as either the tekoteko or the base

---

\* Distinctions between hapū and iwi are nebulous around the middle of the nineteenth century. Steven Webster notes that while those signing the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 were identified, according to the English translators certainly, in relation to 'iwi', in actual fact these were more like hapū: see Steven Webster, 'Maori Hapu as a Whole Way of Struggle: 1840s-50s Before the Land Wars', *Oceania* 69/1 (1998): 8.

of the poutokomanawa in the whareniui. Some aspects of the pātaka were not continued, however. Its function as a storehouse of things, such as tools and equipment, was not brought through to the whareniui structure. Similarly, the symbolism on the pātaka maihi was not retained as that was specific to the function of the pātaka.\*

Waka taua, like pātaka, had also been an important indicator of a chief's mana. In the 1850s these, like pātaka, were deliberately not built in favour of whareniui, and at the same time that this transference of expressions of mana was occurring, canoe-building waned for other reasons.† Indeed, by the middle of the 1850s waka taua had outlived both their practical and symbolic function.<sup>5</sup> Although many were still used in the New Zealand Wars of the 1860s, very few new waka taua were being constructed. Rather, chiefs and their hapū preferred to spend their valuable time and money on building something that the whole community could use, and which could serve to demarcate physically and permanently their tūrangawaewae, their home space. The carvers who worked on the canoes soon shifted their focus to meeting houses.

Sometimes carvers of waka taua (called tohunga tārai waka) were different from those who carved architectural forms such as chiefs' houses and pātaka. Whilst in some areas this distinction between house and canoe builders was maintained through to the 1840s at least,<sup>6</sup> in other areas they were one and the same. Kahungunu, for instance, was known for his knowledge of canoe-building as well as other forms of carving. Neich considers the

move towards the meeting house from the carvers' point of view when he notes, "The larger flat surfaces of a meeting house provided more unconstrained areas for innovation and experimentation than the restricted, clearly prescribed surfaces of a war canoe."<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, several traits of waka taua were retained and reused.<sup>8</sup> Like waka taua, whareniui were named after ancestors.<sup>9</sup> The symbolism inherent in various parts of the waka taua was transferred into the structure of the whareniui: the body of the ancestor symbolised in the keel of the waka became the tāhuhu of the whareniui. That body usually embodied Tane Whakapiripiri, a concept transferred to or retained in the meeting house. The trait of bringing together different parts of the structure as one unit was deployed in the waka taua by the takere (keel), from which branches of family descent were traced. The takere was reconfigured by carvers of the whareniui as the tāhuhu; the kāwei (lines of descent) were likewise reconfigured as the heke. These heke were usually painted with kōwhaiwhai designs which encapsulated stories about the local community and their history. Such patterns had earlier adorned the prow of the waka taua.

The ancestors who were depicted on the palisades of the 1830s were transferred to the meeting house in the 1870s in a number of ways. The three-dimensional form was retained and reconfigured in various carvings, including poutokomanawa, poupou, epa, tāhuhu, pare and tekoteko, all of which, like the earlier palisades, depicted named ancestors. One of the challenges for the whareniui carver was to devise a way of showing a hierarchy of ancestors in the house. Whilst on the palisade posts, important figures may have been emphasised using size, within the whareniui, as Neich outlines, senior ancestors were usually placed at the front and juniors at

---

\* Nonetheless, carvers retained the story in another less figurative way – the surface pattern taratara-a-kae was used in various spaces in the whareniui.

† Hapū had become specialised in canoe-building, and received commissions from important chiefs such as Te Rauparaha.

AUCKLAND  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS



*\$69.99*

*248 x 200mm, 312pp, hardback*

*colour photographs*

*ISBN: 9781869407377*

*Published: 21 March 2016*



9 781869 407377