

OUTCASTS OF THE GODS?

THE STRUGGLE OVER SLAVERY
IN MĀORI NEW ZEALAND

HAZEL PETRIE



‘Us Maoris used to practise slavery just like them poor Negroes had to endure in America . . .’ says Beth Heke in *Once Were Warriors*. ‘Oh those evil colonials who destroyed Māori culture by ending slavery and cannibalism while increasing the life expectancy,’ wrote one sarcastic blogger.

So was Māori slavery ‘just like’ the experience of Africans in the Americas and were British missionaries or colonial administrators responsible for ending the practice? What was the nature of freedom and unfreedom in Māori society and how did that intersect with the perceptions of British colonists and the anti-slavery movement?

A meticulously researched book, *Outcasts of the Gods?* looks closely at a huge variety of evidence to answer these questions, analysing bondage and freedom in traditional Māori society; the role of economics and mana in shaping captivity; and how the arrival of colonists and new trade opportunities transformed Māori society and the place of captives within it.

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FIGURE 17. An 1844 portrait of Toea, daughter of Te Awaitaia, by George French Angas, who explained that 'the boy is an attendant, the son of an individual of inferior rank' and that both Toea and the young boy were members of Ngāti Mahanga, which implies that he was not a captive but born into the tribe. *George French Angas, The New Zealanders Illustrated, London, 1847: PUBL-0014-54, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington*

FIGURE 18. Portrait of Nga Waka Te Karaka and 'attendant', by George French Angas, c. 1852. Again the status of the attendant is ambiguous. The boy, who appears to be wearing a high-quality cloak, may well have been a free-born member of Nga Waka Te Karaka's tribal group. Alternatively, he might have been designated 'attendant' because Nga Waka Te Karaka was Christian and assumed not to have any slaves. *C-114-005, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington*



INTRODUCTION

JAKE ‘THE MUSS’ (OR MUSCLES) HEKE, LEAD CHARACTER IN THE novel and movie *Once Were Warriors*, has acquired almost iconic status in popular New Zealand culture. He represents the stereotypical hard-drinking, wife-beating, irresponsible, disenfranchised Māori male of modern times. Apparently by way of justifying his bad behaviour, Jake tells his family that his violent nature is a consequence of his slave ancestry and the family’s 500 years of humiliation. Māori used to fight each other, he explains, and, because his line was defeated, they were taken as slaves. For his wife Beth, that revelation conjures up images linking Māori slavery with that suffered by Africans in America, so she tells their children:

Us Maoris used to practise slavery just like them poor Negroes had to endure in America Yet to read the newspapers, on the TV every damn day, you’d think we’re descended from a packa angels, and it’s the Pakeha [New Zealander of European descent] who’s the devil. Clicking her tongue: Just shows, we’re all good, and we’re all bad.¹

Despite the wide variety of forms of slavery or bondage throughout world history, familiarity with African-American history, acquired through books, films, and television documentaries, has led many Westerners, including New Zealanders, to comprehend ‘slavery’ in a particular way — as black people, bought and sold, labouring on plantations,

beaten, abused, and dehumanised. Strands of New Zealand popular culture emerged crediting the arrival of British colonists with putting an end to slavery — as well as intertribal warfare and cannibalism — among Māori.² Some have made the additional claim that Māori sought a treaty with Britain ‘as a means of protection’ from those customs.³ One research scientist (in mathematics and physics) went so far as to claim that ‘Maori culture was not just dysfunctional but mad, criminally insane’, and, presumably, hell-bent on self-destruction.⁴ But because the history of Māori ‘slavery’ and the place of war captives in Māori society has been largely unexplored thus far, popular assumptions relating to Māori so-called slavery, its function, and British impacts on it have not been subject to scrutiny and may have been too readily accepted.

The trans-Atlantic trade in Africans and debate over the possibility of abolishing it were at the forefront of Western, especially British, minds as the colonisation of New Zealand was being contemplated. Consequently, that system became the key point of reference for understanding the place of those people already referred to as slaves by missionaries and others who reported on New Zealand affairs. That loose labelling of war captives in Māori society as ‘slaves’ has had the effect of conflating two, quite different, institutions and led to these captives being perceived in much the same way as African slaves in the Americas rather than as the prisoners taken in intertribal warfare that they almost always were.

Misapprehensions began early. Even contemporary observers could not agree on the general tenor of what was referred to as Māori ‘slavery’. Some said it was benign but others referred to cruelty, the degraded status of ‘slaves’, and the tenuousness of their hold on life. In later times, the victory achieved by Christianity and English law in securing their freedom through the introduction of new moral and legal codes appears to have been an assumption made without supporting evidence.⁵

Nevertheless, it is the shock-horror descriptions of the ‘slave’ experience recorded by some outsiders that continue to resonate especially loudly today.⁶ Their inability to return home, abandonment by their kin, and the misery of precarious lives that could be snuffed out at any moment because their master or mistress was having a bad day are recurring themes. Yet while the despair, the drudgery, and the fragility of life that are said to have been the captive’s lot have frequently

been stressed, oral traditions tell of slaves as faithful companions, who risked life and limb to save their masters and mistresses or facilitate the path of true love. Such stories contain their own biases, of course, but nineteenth-century accounts confirm the great variety of experience. There is also evidence that those who abused war captives could be subjected to severe censure or even banishment from their community, implying that such behaviour, without just cause, breached accepted codes. As will be seen, captives elicited different responses and lived in varying degrees of comfort or discomfort. Cruel, inhuman treatment was not a universal standard.

Even when free to go home, some captives chose to stay where they had settled. Their individual responses almost certainly related to their personal situations. Remarkable differences in their lives after capture related to a number of variables, including the circumstances of their acquisition, their pre-captive rank, and their capacity to improve their position through their abilities or attitudes.⁷ Status could be enhanced by marrying members of their 'host' tribe, especially members of rangatira (chiefly) families, but highly respected skills such as those of the carver, the tattooist, or even the military strategist could have the same result. In a variety of times and places, some slaves have been treated harshly, while others have enjoyed better lifestyles than the free – and such was the case in Māori society.⁸

Glimpses of what life was really like for war captives in Māori society appear in a variety of sources and provide a foundation for considering whether 'slavery' is an appropriate term for each situation and whether it should be universally applied. 'Slavery' is an all-purpose word, rarely to be trusted. So the key to much misunderstanding appears to lie in how it is defined and how systems of slavery are perceived. Possibly 'the most misused word in the English language', slavery 'has become a metaphor for extreme inequality, for subordination, deprivation and discrimination'.⁹ The fact that it continues to be used rhetorically to argue against various institutions or circumstances considered to be major moral evils has been credited to the ongoing power of abolitionist language.¹⁰

Despite the multitude of applications of the word 'slavery', it has all too often been assumed that those many institutions (if that is what they were historically) can be discussed and theorised cross-culturally.

Yet different environments produce entirely different products, which are liable to alter as the environment changes. Therefore, understandings need to take account of time, place, cultural values, kinship and economic structures, social stratification, and spiritual implications.¹¹ The last, which is rarely discussed and which may often be immaterial, is particularly relevant with regard to Māori — as it was in other Pacific societies.¹² That was recognised by early ethnographers who described Māori ‘slaves’ as ‘[o]utcasts of the gods’ or said that they had ceased to count ‘in things spiritual’.¹³

Given that slavery, being a nebulous concept, is a difficult word to define, it should not be surprising that translations of Māori text have served to confuse the historical record even further. Political and ideological impulses may also be responsible for distortion in translation, but cultural differences go some way towards explaining why English words such as slave and slavery have been applied to a variety of situations and circumstances that are not necessarily analogous to English meanings. When a word from one language is translated into another, its original connotation may not be conveyed with the translation. Instead it may conjure up quite different meanings that are not appropriate or relevant.

A wide vocabulary of words referring to people of low status, including war captives, has been used by Māori historically, many of them being translated, apparently randomly, into English as ‘slave’ (see Chapter 11 and Appendix). More significantly, the use of those words has altered over time. Changes in usage appear to reflect the adoption of new moral values, especially those associated with Christianity. While that has had the effect of distorting some of the written history pertaining to Māori war captives, it also indicates the extent to which those new values became embedded in the Māori psyche. However, that is only one factor that needs to be kept in mind when drawing on written records for clues to lived experiences.

The wide variety of impressions in the contemporary record not only highlights the different qualities of life experienced by Māori captives but also reminds us of the need to read the observations of early explorers, missionaries, and other Westerners with an appreciation of their likely preconceptions. Besides their religious, social, and political agendas, time and place — where they were and when — surely influenced their

observations. Attitudes were not fixed — either among Māori or those who commented on or sought to alter customary practices.

The writings of eighteenth-century explorers provide some clues to the extent and nature of captive taking prior to Western contact, but the most substantial body of eyewitness accounts relating to war captives or ‘slaves’ comes from the missionaries, sailors, and others who lived in or visited New Zealand from the late 1810s and into the 1830s. The fact that the first missionaries arrived in late 1814 means we have access to many of their letters and journals from that time on; but because their presence encouraged more Western shipping to visit New Zealand ports, we can also draw on the writings of a variety of British and French ship’s officers during that period as well. Other works written by Westerners who either lived in or visited New Zealand in the nineteenth century, but especially those who arrived before 1840, provide valuable information along with insight into the ideologies and beliefs they carried with them. Artists like Augustus Earle, who visited in the 1820s, and George French Angas, in the 1840s, as well as adventure-seeking travellers like John Nicholas and Edward Markham with the privileges of spare time and money, have left their impressions, which are pious or ribald, supporting or at odds with those of the missions.

While we can access many of these accounts and glean much about the ways in which war captives were employed and treated as well as the personal reactions of the writers, we must also remember that the very presence of these observers — missionaries, mariners, and others — set a period of very rapid economic and spiritual change in motion. Nor were their writings entirely spontaneous. They were reporting their observations and work among Māori communities for the mission societies or naval authorities at ‘home’ or recording impressions for books they intended to publish for audiences hungry to hear about exotic peoples in far-flung corners of the world.

Yet another factor skewing the evidence is that prior to the mid-1830s, mission stations were limited to the northern part of the North Island, the region most visited by overseas shipping. The upshot is that most of the observations left to us as ‘evidence’ of Māori practices come from that region, and other areas, including the lower North Island and entire South Island, are less well endowed with written records. The extent to

which that imbalance affects the overall picture is unclear. According to Atholl Anderson, there is little evidence of slavery in southern New Zealand. He suggested that because there was little horticulture in the south, there would have been no continuing demand for large labour forces, or the means to feed one. Moreover, enslaving one's own kin was usually carefully avoided, and given the smaller population, there would have been fewer opportunities to capture genealogically distinct people within the South Island.¹⁴

The fact that a disproportionately large body of writing about Māori warfare and captive taking comes not only from a fairly limited geographic area but also an abnormal period in New Zealand history surely added to the false impressions and distorted understandings of earlier practices. To counter those problems somewhat, a parallel history approach, placing Māori records and perceptions beside Pākehā or European ones, is used in the chapters to come. There is a significant body of Māori writing from the 1840s onward, but examples from earlier times, when captive taking was more common, are thin on the ground. Some Māori letters mentioning slaves or captives are available from the 1830s; and oral traditions recorded in the Māori language during the early years of settlement offer some correctives to the written record and glimpses of what might loosely be referred to as 'customary' practices and attitudes towards 'slaves'. Māori proverbs or sayings, oral traditions, waiata (songs), karakia (incantations), and extracts from Native Land Court minute books indicate changes to the ways in which those people fitted into the social framework. They also offer further clues to the spiritual and psychological impact of captivity, as do associations revealed figuratively through metaphors, language, and the symbolism of colour.

As others have noted, historiography — especially that which was produced prior to the second half of the twentieth century — tended to overemphasise the virtues and successes of missionary and colonial endeavours. In the later twentieth century, however, the pendulum swung the other way and their role was placed under a far more critical light.¹⁵ Heightened tensions between Māori and settler as the latter swamped the former by sheer force of numbers, and the hostilities that broke out in 1860 were neither the only nor the first factors that impacted

viewpoints in the written record.¹⁶ An example of that process is offered by Alexander Maxwell and Evan Roberts's analysis of multiple accounts of a single event that occurred in 1824 but which were published over the following half-century. That study revealed how those many reworkings reflect changes in Western perceptions of Māori as well as the writers' standpoints at the time of reworking.

The incident forming the basis of their analysis took place while a ship named the *Endeavour* was visiting Whangaroa Harbour and trading with the local Ngāti Pou people. Cultural misunderstanding appears to have instigated an altercation in which the crew and three missionaries were held hostage for some two hours. The standoff ended peacefully thanks to intervention by neighbouring chief Te Ara of Ngāti Uru, but some 30 subsequent accounts of the events reveal a pattern of shifting portrayals of the various actors and the parts they played in those proceedings.¹⁷ Whereas the earliest published narratives stressed Māori savagery, setting that characteristic beside the writers' confidence in their innate potential for civilisation, conversion, and redemption, those published during the 1830s no longer needed to persuade their readers of that potential. As many had now been converted, accounts shifted to depicting 'the pre-Christian Māori in the darkest possible terms so as to draw a dramatic contrast with the happy Christian present'.¹⁸ Versions published from the 1850s, however, 'exaggerated the importance and accomplishments of European missionaries', overshadowing the part played by Te Ara in achieving a peaceful resolution. As Maxwell and Roberts explained, 'various incarnations of the story', told from different perspectives, at different times, with different purposes in view, enabled the authors 'to draw diverse moral lessons' and provide a window into the variety of Western attitudes towards Māori as well as more general shifts over time. Much the same process — of shifting attitudes and shifting heroes — appears to explain why conclusions relating to Māori 'slavery' drawn from post-1850 accounts are often at odds with what was said by those who were present during the earlier events these accounts purport to describe.

Quite apart from misapprehension and bias in the records is the fact that a very large proportion of the evidence for the situations that war captives found themselves in comes from a period of unprecedented

captive taking. Because the so-called ‘musket wars’ were a very atypical period of New Zealand history, they have played a significant part in misunderstandings of Māori ‘slavery’ to date. During this time, from around 1820, the balance between economic and spiritual imperatives for Māori shifted dramatically. The advent of foreign trade, the arrival of British missionaries, and the new cultural and religious ideas that came with them had set off a chain of adaptations to Māori society — economically, spiritually, socially, and politically — as Māori attempted to take maximum advantage of exciting new opportunities.

My previous research into the ways in which Māori engaged with the new commercial opportunities arising from European contact indicated that one consequence of the process was the ability of one-time war captives or ‘ex-slaves’ to become independent entrepreneurs while hereditary chiefs struggled to sustain their role as effective providers for their people.¹⁹ That circumstance aroused my curiosity and highlighted the dearth of existing studies relating to the lowest section of Māori society.

The only specific study of New Zealand practices, ‘Maori Prisoners and Slaves in the Nineteenth Century’ by Andrew P. Vayda, was published more than 50 years ago. Associated with a broader examination of Māori warfare,²⁰ his pioneering paper noted the significant discrepancy between reports from eighteenth-century visitors to New Zealand that Māori took few captives in warfare and those from the early nineteenth century who observed the taking of large numbers. He suggested that two factors might account for this apparently dramatic change: the introduction of muskets and the newly acquired value of war captives in producing goods for overseas trade.²¹

In his subsequent 1970 article, ‘Maoris and Muskets in New Zealand: Disruption of a War System’, Vayda put forward the argument that aggressive expansion for fertile land, which encouraged the dispersal of the population over underexploited territory, had been the key driving force behind Māori warfare before European contact.²² His ideas were challenged by Angela Ballara’s 2003 book *Taua: ‘Musket Wars’, ‘Land Wars’ or Tikanga?*, which investigated the subject in much greater depth and offered a different perspective on the causes of warfare among Māori. Ballara argued that the term ‘musket wars’ should not be applied to the



FIGURE 19. Whatever their original status, the dress and demeanour of the two 'attendants' on the previous page are much brighter than the subject of this 'Portrait of an aged slave woman, at Pouketouto, in the interior, beyond Mokau [Waitomo]', which is also by Angas. Taken together, they suggest very different circumstances and positions in society. *'Implements and domestic economy'*, George French Angas, *The New Zealanders Illustrated*, London, 1847: PUBL-0014-55, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington



FIGURE 20. Portrait of three young Māori women, c. 1827–28. ‘The older two were about 25 years of age; the third, Hepee, was a 13-year-old girl, one of Amoko’s slaves. Amoko was the daughter of one of the chiefs living on the Mongo-Mongo River.’ *Augustus Earle, Sketches Illustrative of the Native Inhabitants and Islands of New Zealand, London, 1838: PUBL-0015-010-a, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington*

FIGURE 21. ‘Old Mihaka’, the slave Te Rauparaha left behind when retreating from Kāwhia. *V.S. Jackson letter to Miss Wilton: [c. 1919?], MS Papers-1052, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington*





FIGURE 26. This scene of a courtyard in Pipitea pā in 1842 also shows a man pounding fern root. *William Mein Smith, from illustrations to Edward Jerningham Wakefield, Adventure in New Zealand, from 1839 to 1844, London, 1845: PUBL-0011-04-1, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington*

FIGURES 27 AND 28. This ‘aged woman of Te Mutu making a basket of the leaves of the tawara’, whom Angas described as ‘reduced almost to a skeleton’, may or may not have been a captive. Everyday items such as these could be made in the open, but it was important that fine weaving was done under shelter. The women working beneath the shelter of the porch (right) were likely to have been free women of status. ‘Interior of a house at Rangihaeata’s pa at Porirua, with women engaged in manufacturing flax garments’, ‘Domestic sketches’, from George French Angas, *The New Zealanders Illustrated*, London, 1847: PUBL-0014-59, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington



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