



# The role of Elders in strengthening Indigenous rights in New Zealand

*Turoa Kiniwe Royal*

## Introduction

The intention to write an article on this subject has been on my mind for some time. Maori elders figure prominently in all walks of life in the past present and no doubt in the future of New Zealand. It has been given some impetus lately since New Zealand has recently signed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Whereas in September 2007 144 countries signed the Declaration in support, four countries – Australia, Canada, United States and New Zealand declined to do so. At the time I wrote as Chairman of WINHEC to our Prime Minister Helen Clarke expressing our concern that no consultation had taken place with the indigenous peoples of New Zealand and further that New Zealand has not followed the lead of 144 countries. Her reply indicated that our government could not support a number of articles despite the fact that it was made clear that the Declaration was to be used as guidelines, as minimum requirements that were not legally binding on any country.

The party in power – the Labour Party lost the following elections and the National Party under John Key on behalf of New Zealand approved the signing of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We know that Australia and Canada have also signed the Declaration. At the time of writing this article it is understood that the United States has indicated that they intend to sign the Declaration.

It is interesting to note that the development of the Declaration has had a long history. After many years of discussions within the United Nations a Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was accepted in 1993. It was not until 2007 some 14 years later that the word “Draft” was taken out of the title presumably because 144 countries felt it was no longer necessary.

The Declaration has over 45 Articles and the recommendations have been designed after consultation with Indigenous Peoples. There is a widely held view that some of the articles have been “watered down” somewhat to

appease those who have questioned some of the articles. Be that as it may it is to the credit of the United Nations Organisation that they have achieved after fourteen years what many indigenous races had dreamed of for many decades.

## Who are the Indigenous peoples of the world?

The United Nations suggests a number of features that define Indigenous Peoples within a world setting. Indigenous Peoples tend to self identify on an individual basis and are accepted by the community as one of their members. They know their historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or presettler societies. They have strong and historical links with their territories and surrounding natural resources. Each indigenous group have a distinct language, culture and beliefs and live within distinct social, economic and political systems. Furthermore most indigenous groups resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities.



Unfortunately most indigenous communities have a history of colonising powers imposing their will over them as indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples represent about 4% of the world's population. There are at least 5000 indigenous groups in the world; and they live in every region of the world. It is interesting to note that about 70% live in the Asian region.

Indigenous peoples suffer high rates of poverty, landlessness, malnutrition and internal displacement than the rest of society. They do not enjoy high attainments in education nor in employment.

International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples is observed on August 8 every year.

### **The Maori people of New Zealand**

In many ways the above description and history of the indigenous peoples of the world mirrors the history and condition of the Maori people as indigenous peoples of New Zealand. British colonisation beginning in the 1800s has changed

the existence of the indigenous people of New Zealand.

In 1350 A.D. the Maori people migrated south from Eastern Polynesia to Aotearoa/New Zealand. They set up a new homeland for themselves and once the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing were satisfied they developed a high level of artistic endeavour that forms part of our present day art world. In addition they developed centres of higher learning – the whare wananga – a feature that has been redeveloped nowadays to meet the current needs of tertiary education for Maori in particular. The wananga movement provide opportunities for Maori aspirants to become truly bilingual and bicultural.

The original name of this country was Aotearoa. That name came from a Polynesian explorer around the period of 950 A.D. Abel Tasman a Dutch explorer in 1642 sailed around the islands and named the country - New Zealand.

In 1769 Captain James Cook sailed around New Zealand. His view was that it was fit for British settlement. Edward

Gibbon Wakefield of Britain organised a planned settlement of New Zealand. At the same time British missionaries were spreading the christian message throughout the world. British settlers in New Zealand were anxious to ensure that New Zealand became a British colony. Pressure was put on the British government to set up a Treaty with the indigenous people so that a formal relationship could be formed and at the same time ensure that the country would not fall into the hands of the French. The French had set up a mission station in Akaroa in the South Island of New Zealand.

The advance guard of modernity not only included traders, but also christian missionaries who were charged with carrying the Christian message to all corners of the earth. Holding the Bible aloft they proclaimed the way to salvation. They wanted Maori to give up their unchristian ways for they were considered unchristian and abhorrent.

It is understood that the first school for Maori children was built in 1816 by Thomas Kendall. The aim of the

school was three fold – to convert Maori to Christianity, to teach the English language and to show them how to use European materials and tools. Even though the missionaries were the first to document and use the Maori language as the medium of instruction the goals of education were clear. No Maori language was taught in school that were controlled by the government. The missionaries played a crucial role in persuading tribal chiefs to sign the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, They proclaimed the benefits under the kindly rule of Queen Victoria as well as the advantages of British citizenship.

## The Treaty of Waitangi

In 1840 the Treaty of Waitangi was signed by the British Crown and about 500 Maori chiefs most of whom came to Waitangi a place in the Bay of Islands in North Auckland.

- Article One gave the British Crown the right to govern Aotearoa/New Zealand.
- Article Two – in return the Crown agreed to recognise

and protect Maori ownership over their lands, forests and all aspects of Maori life that Maori valued –such as language and cultural attributes and treasures.

- Article Three – Made provision for the Queen of England to protect all peoples of New Zealand and to provide equal rights and privileges for all citizens in New Zealand
- The fourth Article dealt with the freedom of worship.

## The unfulfilled promises

Article One of the Treaty was accomplished almost immediately. The British Crown set up their form of government soon after the signing of the Treaty. That eventuated almost immediately. It is sad to relate that the promises to Maori under the Treaty of Waitangi (Article 2 and 3) remained unfulfilled for over 135 years. One of the main roles that Maori elders assumed after 1840 was to pursue all the promises that both parties had signed up to in the Treaty. It was felt that the

fulfilment of the Treaty of Waitangi lies the basis of Maori wellbeing. That vision is still uppermost in their minds.

The British Crown set about governing all people who lived in New Zealand. Schools were used to establish the moral position of the British. One technique was to use the curriculum and the English language as part of the new order. The Native School system was set up in a way that outlawed the use of Maori language on school grounds. Eventually the new order became the only world that provided new rewards. At the centre of the reproductive process of schooling was the curriculum. Its construction by British educationalists served to invalidate Maori knowledge by determining what constitutes knowledge. Maori language and culture was ignored indeed outlawed in schools for over 100 years.

Land laws were developed almost immediately to advance English settlement and when Maori objected to the unfairness of land ownership transfers they fought back but the British military quickly put down the uprisings. Large

areas of Maori land was confiscated as a result of the uprising. The loss of land and introduced diseases took its toll on Maori population. Many indigenous peoples in other countries suffered the same fate. History records the fact that there were attempts made by Maori to seek audience of the British Crown in London to report the unacceptable nature of British governance in New Zealand. Their requests were refused.

In 1840 Maori owned over 66 million acres – by the turn of the century only 11 million acres was registered in Maori ownership. The Crown did not consider that the Treaty was binding as the Treaty was not incorporated into the laws of New Zealand. Maori people had to wait until 1975 some 75 years later for the Treaty to be enshrined in law. Other difficulties became apparent. Deprived of their capital resources and land on which prosperity could be built Maori had to eke out a living with limited resources. Tribal warfare using muskets also had disastrous effects on Maori population. In 1849 it was estimated that the Maori population was over 100,000.

By the turn of the century the population was estimated to be about 43,000.

Circumstances changed over the decades for the better. Over the years during the 20th century the changes in circumstances and the dedication of indigenous elders had a marked effect on the Maori population. “We have a future in Aotearoa/New Zealand” was the understanding to the extent that the Maori birth rate began to climb higher than the Pakeha population. The present census indicates that the Maori population is about 215,000 (about 16% of the population of New Zealand).

The Maori people never loss sight of the intentions of the Treaty of Waitangi that remained unfulfilled for many decades.

### Maori Elders

It can be claimed that the role of Maori elders, men and women, has been determined to a large degree by the circumstances of British colonization. The main thrust of Maori protests was and still is to ensure government would honour the terms of the Treaty in every aspect. In doing so it was believed that

it would achieve equity in many, if not in all aspects of life in New Zealand. The achievement of equality and justice and the maintenance of the Maori cultural heritage continue to be the hall marks of a just society from a Maori point of view. The history of New Zealand has been written in the main by Pakeha New Zealanders including Professor Sinclair and Michael King. In some respects they paint a historical picture that is a little more rosier than that of a Maori historian. Professor Ranginui Walker an academic and a Maori elder wrote the history of New Zealand from a Maori point of view. He named his book *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou – Struggle Without End*. It has helped Pakeha New Zealanders (and Maori youth) to understand the way in which Maori understands the history of New Zealand since 1840.

While the role of Maori elders has been diverse there is no question about their leadership in pursuit of these ideals. They all saw the pursuit of the fulfilment of the Treaty of Waitangi as an important function in life. But many had different

ways of fulfilling the recognition of Treaty. Some stood outside of government and began protest marches on parliament or they marched to Waitangi in the north where the Treaty was initially signed in 1840. Others joined political parties and worked inside parliamentary processes. The land, the well being of the people, the language and culture in a fast changing world have always been the focus of Maori elders.

This article defines an elder as mature indigenous men and women who in many vocations worked for the benefit and well being of the Maori race of New Zealand.

### Elders as visionaries

Surprisingly, despite the unfulfilled promises of the Treaty by the Crown, the Maori men formed a battalion and fought valiantly in World War 1 and 2 in north Africa, in Crete and in Europe. They knew who they were fighting for, according to their well known song:

*“For God for King and for  
country – Aue Ake ake kia kaha e  
(Forever be strong!)”*

Many soldiers were lost in the war. They were highly regarded by Army commanders and were highly decorated for their bravery. They gained much goodwill from the British people and the citizens of New Zealand. But they did not influence the fulfilment of the Treaty of Waitangi. “At what price is freedom?” One of their number - Rangi Logan - voiced his feelings in the 1946 general election campaign;

*“We more than did our share at  
El Alamein and elsewhere (We)  
shed our blood in two world wars. If  
these acts had done nothing else,”  
he declared, “they had at least  
purchased the right to equality of  
opportunity’.*

When they returned to New Zealand they faced issues related to landlessness, housing, employment education, urbanisation and community development. With these issues in mind and the dwindling loss of the Maori language and culture Maori needed a vision and a direction as they struggled to face the future.

It is my view a significant statement that I call a vision came when Sir Apirana Ngata an academic, a politician and a

statesman in 1948 wrote in an autograph book of a young girl. The quote continues to be stated in many Maori gatherings for it encourages Maori people to shape their lives accordingly – Sir Apirana Ngata wrote in the Maori language:

*E tipu e rea mo nga ra o tou ao  
Grow up in the days of your world*

*Ko to ringa ki te rakau a te Pakeha*

*Taking hold of modern Pakeha (English)  
society*

*Hei ara mo tou tinana  
For your wellbeing*

*To ngakau ki nga taonga o nga tipuna,  
Your heart to the treasures of your  
ancestors,*

*Hei tiketike mo tou mahuna  
As a plume for your head*

*Tou ngakau ki te Atua  
Your heart given unto God*

*Nana nei nga mea katoa  
The author of all things.*

In addition the writer of this article took note of the challenge that John Waititi (an elder at University in my time). He said to us;

*You are here to be informed. Information leads to transformation*

*For those who are training to be teachers you need to ensure that Maori language and culture is accessible to all.*

*Some of you will need to go to Wellington to work in the Head Office of the Department of Education in Wellington where new policies are developed.*

He was, at that stage, contracted by the Department of Education to write Maori language text books for the teaching of Maori language in schools. Little did I realise then that 20 years later I moved from Auckland to Wellington having been invited to apply for a position at Head Office of the Department of Education dealing with new policies related to Maori education.

### Elders in the Public Service

One of the skills that Maori brought home from the war was the ability to manage – to set targets and organise the manpower and resources to achieve an outcome. It is understood that many senior Maori battalion commanders on returning to New Zealand were encouraged to join the Public Service

particularly in serving the Maori people. Among them included Colonels Arapeta Awatere and James Henare both of whom commanded the Maori Battalion and Charles Bennett, Moana Raureti, Bill Herewini and Monty Wikiriwhi and many others. In addition to these officers were Rangi Royal and George Marsden (both uncles of the author of this article). All of those named were commissioned officers of the Maori Battalion and they led their troops with distinction. All of these men joined the Public Service to serve Maori people and some like Charles Bennett who was appointed to positions representing New Zealand. Many worked in the regional offices of the Department of Maori Affairs and they were instrumental in improving the well being of the rural and urban Maori people.

Other well known leaders came after them and while I would not class them as elders in an age sense nevertheless became extremely successful in developing policies that were made to improve Maori living conditions. I refer to Kara Puketapu and Tamati Reedy

later to be employed as a Professor in a university and on retirement was knighted for his great foresight and dedication to his people.

### Elders were also community leaders

Probably the most effective Maori groupings that were formed soon after World War 2 were the Maori Womens Welfare League (MWWL) and the New Zealand Maori Council. Such people as Dame Whina Cooper, Ruiha Sage, Dame Mira Szasy, Hine Potaka along with others led the League for many years. They formulated more precisely the vision for Maori in respect to equity in education, family/whanau development, housing, health, employment and linguistic and cultural support. Sir Graham Latimer led the New Zealand Maori Council for many years. The two bodies worked closely with government departments, preschool centres, the local Maori communities and schools. They were consulted by Government departments in developing new policies – in education, community affairs, health, environment, housing,



land development and law. Maori people have always acknowledged the voluntary work of these organisations.

### **Elders as political leaders**

Many Maori elders were effective politicians over many the years. Some, not all, that come to mind include The Honourable Sir Apirana Ngata, Ben Couch, Matiu Rata, and Koro Wetere. They all served their people with distinction in many facets of life and every day living. They advised governments of the day to day needs of the people. They travelled widely to many parts of the country to meet people who wished an audience with these Maori leaders. Many Maori elders in their political roles also took time to attend the annual general meetings of Maori groups. They used the occasions also to carry the views and policies of government. In return they received the views from many communities.

Probably the politician that will be remembered when talking about the Treaty of Waitangi is Honourable Matiu Rata. In 1975 he, as the Minister of

Maori Affairs, introduced a Treaty of Waitangi Bill into parliament that would have far reaching effect on the country in the future. The passing of the bill resulted in the setting up of a body – the Waitangi Tribunal. The Tribunal could make recommendations to government on how to resolve issues that had arisen from breaches of the Treaty incurred by the Crown. The articles of the Treaty of Waitangi were recognised in full. Maori tribes could bring cases to the Waitangi Tribunal where the Crown had breached the articles of the Treaty.

### **Elders as political activists**

While there were many political activists – young and old probably the most effective was Whina Cooper. She had served as the first President of the Maori Womens Welfare League and she was once called the “mother of the nation” by the media when she was asked to welcome sportspeople from around the world to join in the Commonwealth Games in New Zealand. Over the years she became annoyed at the Governments lack

of protection of Maori ownership of their lands. She organised a protest march in 1975 to Parliament starting at the northern tip of the North Island of New Zealand. While only a handful of protestors marched the whole distance of some 900 kilometres on the day she led the march of over 40,000 people to parliament in Wellington. Her catch cry was “Not one more acre of land must be lost by Maori...” The Prime Minister came out and received the petition that had gathered signatures throughout the North Island.

The protest march had a profound effect on parliament for it assisted Hon. Matiu Rata, Minister of Maori Affairs to introduce a Bill that recognised all the Articles of the Treaty. The Act further provided the opportunity for a Tribunal to be set up eventually to investigate actions by government that contravened the intentions of the Treaty from 1975 onwards, as noted above. Some years later the Act was changed so that the Waitangi Tribunal could hear cases contravening the Treaty as far back as 1840.



In 1987 the Maori language was recognised as an official language of New Zealand English and sign language had already been recognised as official languages of New Zealand. It meant that government had to promote its value and its use. Government structures – Te Taura Whiri i Te Reo was developed accordingly. It was not surprising to note that many regional radio stations were developed with government funding for Maori. One of the major emphasis was to ensure that Maori language was supported and promoted.

It was not long after that funding was made available for the development of a free to air Maori television station. This station is very popular for it caters for those with varying degrees of Maori language fluency.

### Elders as human rights advocates

Another cry from Maori this time from the young and old and this time also from European (Pakeha) New Zealanders relates to race relations in New Zealand and South Africa. New Zealanders both Maori and non Maori

objected to the all-white All Black team that left New Zealand in 1960 to play an all-white South African rugby football team. The “No Maoris No Tour” call signified to both Rugby Unions that race based rugby football teams was not to be tolerated in the future. The next time the All Blacks went to South Africa the non white All Blacks were classified as “honorary whites” Again the objectors both Maori and Pakeha made it known that calling non white rugby players in the New Zealand team as honorary whites was an insult to their true identity. When the South African all white rugby team arrived in New Zealand in 1981 the public both Maori and Pakeha protested at every match. In Hamilton the objectors occupied the rugby grounds. They refused to move off the rugby field. The game was eventually cancelled. Some years later the South African Rugby Union changed their rules and selection is now based on merit and not on race.

Interestingly the objections to race based rugby was the beginning of the call to improve race relations in New

Zealand. Many groups, while objecting to race based rugby found a platform on which to question the poor race relations in New Zealand and the unfair treatment of Maori in many spheres of endeavour. The Citizens Association on Racial Equality (CARE) mainly associated with Pakeha citizens brought their concerns to the politicians in Wellington over many years. They argued that statistics on the positioning of Maori education, health, employment, housing and life expectancy was far below that of European/Pakeha and it was hypocrisy to object to race relations and conditions in South Africa when it could be demonstrated that the treatment of the indigeous race in New Zealand was far below that of the European/Pakeha. The government of the day also felt the ire of the National Council of Churches as they noted the views of CARE. Maori organisations also joined the movement. The Maori Organisation on Human Rights (MOOHR) while mainly a movement of younger Maori nevertheless had an appreciable number of Maori elders. They joined with the CARE group and marched





to Waitangi every year to object to the Crown celebrating the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi on the 6th February 1840.

*"You come to celebrate –we come to mourn the broken promises..."*

was the message that the government and diplomats received at Waitangi during the contrived celebrations.

On the other hand the government and their agencies, the Governor General and overseas diplomats came together to celebrate 6 February, Waitangi day 1840 as the day that the British and Maori came together to make New Zealand one of the best countries in the world in respect to good race relations. Pakeha politicians trumpeted this message at every possible opportunity. They seemed to be incensed at Maori wilfully misbehaving for it showed something less than gratitude expected of them for the gift of civilisation. And so the agitation by Maori and Pakeha to have the Treaty fully enshrined in law continued.

### Elders as educational and cultural rejuvenators

Elders have been exposed to cultural experiences including the language of years gone by. Their knowledge is likely to be more expansive than those of the younger generations. Many have helped in Play Centres, in local schools, in Maori medium schools, in tertiary institutions including wananga (indigenous Maori universities), in publishing of the written word and providing advice to Government on policies related to Maori language and culture. Importantly they have upheld the status of Maori language and culture on the 900 marae (community centres) around New Zealand. They have been and continued to be well respected for their contribution to the perpetuation of the native culture of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

### Elders as recent learners of the new information technology

As noted above elders have been visionaries for they have given the Maori people direction on which to base their

lives in a fast changing world. While it was important to advance ones' own life chances in the modern world it should not be at the expense or loss of one's own cultural identity. The social reality for Maori was not only to live in modern English society but also maintain and enjoy the reality of modern Maori culture. For Maori it is the essence of being Maori.

But it is at one's own peril to ignore modern society that has become a world society. While Maori have learnt to live as a Maori in terms of language and culture they are aware that they need to live in a global society, to enjoy good health and a high standard of living. They have inherited a dual heritage – both Maori and Pakeha.

To do that many Maori elders have seen it necessary to undertake courses in computer training. The indigenous tertiary institutions – wananga, continue to run computer courses specifically for elders with the aim of learning how to use computers.

The motivation in the main has come





from calls from the younger generations to their grandparents and other elders to write and to to publish their life histories. The life stories are then stored in wananga libraries and other public libraries. A new service has been found for elder members of society. It is one way of maintaining and passing on Maori knowledge, Maori language and culture and Maori history.

I, as an elder and the author of this article, I am bound to follow the call of the younger generation. I have written (as a reflective practitioner) nine chapters of a ten chapter book on *The Transformation of Maori Education - From Assimilation to Self Managment.* As I have been in education as a teacher, a school principal, a Chief Executive of a Polytechnic, a senior lecturer at a university, a co-founder of a wananga (indigenous tertiary institution in New Zealand) and a co-founder of the World Indigenous Nation Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) I think I can claim the right to do this and accept the challenge of the rangatahi (youth). My last chapter yet to be completed

is entitled "Unfinished Business" for there is much more to be achieved in a multicultural country in the South Pacific.

Greetings to you all.

