1000 Years of Maori History

NGA IW I O TE MOTU

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In the mid-1980s, after more than a decade in the field, I announced that I was vacating the arena of Maori history. This was in the wake of a television documentary series, a doctoral thesis, three biographies, books on tattooing and reporting Maori activities, a general history, contributions to other volumes and the editing of two books by Maori authors.

I did not take this decision lightly. Nor was it a result of dissatisfaction on the part of iwi or individuals with whom I had worked in partnership. On the contrary, Maori colleagues remained friends and professional associates. But I viewed the Maori renaissance at that time as implying a wish to take control of analyses and expressions of Maori culture. I also hoped that by stepping aside I would encourage the emergence of more Maori authors.

Another decade on and that latter hope has scarcely been realised. In spite of promising books by Ranginui Walker, Buddy Mikaere and Lindsay Cox, most Maori history is still being written by Pakeha — albeit by scrupulous and well-equipped Pakeha such as Judith Binney, Anne Salmond and Angela Ballara. I have no complaint about this. The standard of their work is excellent. But I do regret that the resource claim industry, particularly the activities of the Waitangi Tribunal, has
swallowed the talents of so many potential Maori authors. I take some comfort from the fact that Tribunal work has generated sufficient research for dozens of books on iwi and hapu history; and I trust that in due course they will be written and published.

For myself, I have for the most part kept the promise I made in 1985 — although I did write a book on Moriori of the Chatham Islands at their express request; and I participated in the Moriori claim to the Waitangi Tribunal. I have agreed to the publication of this present book because there is still no single-volume overview of Maori history and Maori-Pakeha relations based on professional research and readily available to general readers and students. It is a revised version of the text I wrote for the rather more elaborate Māori, A Photographic and Social History, first published in 1983. It represents not so much a re-entry into the field as a continuing interest in what was my first specialist subject. It has been updated to take into account the work of the authors I have mentioned, and that of Professor James Belich.

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Maori have long been amused or offended by the notion that Maori history began with the arrival of Pakeha in New Zealand — as if there was no such thing as history until literate Europeans observed and recorded it. This notion has been strengthened by scholars’ use of the expression ‘prehistoric’ to describe the years prior to Maori-Pakeha contact.

It is, of course, nonsense. History does not come into existence with the birth of literature, although literature may well be part of the historical process. History is the story of the human occupation of a place compiled from surviving evidence. The three key features are occupation, evidence and story. New Zealand has had occupation, evidence of it and stories about it for at least 1,000 years. The evidence survives in the artifacts and structures of New Zealand Polynesian technology, and the stories in the oral traditions of surviving tribes, many of them committed to paper in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many of
them still orally transmitted. The resulting combination might not be exhaustive and definitive, but what history is?

The apparently dismissive attitude to the earliest years of New Zealand settlement is reflected in the inadequate attention scholars have given it. Part of the explanation for this neglect lies in Western concepts of history, especially the insistence on working with contemporary documents; part in an unwillingness or an inability to tap Maori oral sources and documents written in Maori; part in the absence of professional Maori historians; and part in the relatively recent introduction of archaeology and anthropology to New Zealand and the small number of researchers in these disciplines. Consequently, the most pressing need in New Zealand historiography is a work which addresses itself to the earlier period; which locates, collates and analyses all the traditional, linguistic and archaeological evidence relating to the country’s initial occupation, and the tribal movements and settlement patterns which followed that occupation and preceded European rediscovery. So-called prehistorians began working towards such a synthesis in the 1950s and 1960s. But since then the relatively few people working in archaeology have tended to turn their attention to more localised considerations. As an overview, this book can merely note the imbalance, not rectify it.

In this context, it is perhaps misleading to speak of ‘Maori history’. Paradoxically there were no Maori in New Zealand before there were Europeans; or, at least, there was no race of people called ‘Maori’. New Zealand Polynesians do not appear to have begun to use this expression until the 1840s; and they did not do so on a wide scale until early in the twentieth century. ‘Maori’ meant ‘normal’ or ‘usual’ — as in ‘tangata Maori’, an ordinary man. There was no need to distinguish such ordinary people from others until the land was shared by others; a group long separated from other races and cultures had no concepts of race or culture, nor, initially, the vocabulary to express them.

Pre-European New Zealanders identified themselves by hapu (sub-tribe) and by iwi or tribe. They had personal names. But the name of the founder of the hapu or iwi to which they belonged by descent, preceded by the prefix ‘Ngati’ (meaning ‘descendants of’) determined their identity, as did the place where they lived. The first question they would be asked by strangers was not who they were but where they were from. This was an inquiry about both place of habitation and identity. A person who lived on the banks of the Waikato River in the central North Island would announce this fact. He might then recite his genealogy back to Tamaoho, progenitor of his hapu; and then — if he
was of senior lineage and well equipped in tribal knowledge — back to Hoturoa, captain of the Tainui canoe. He might then emphasise his wider affiliation to the Waikato confederation of tribes and their association with the river by reciting a whakatauki or tribal saying such as ‘Waikato taniwharau, he piko he taniwha’ — Waikato, river of a hundred bends, and on every one of them a taniwha. Metaphorically this also referred to Waikato the tribe, and the taniwha to the number of powerful chiefs belonging to the tribe and the number of fortifications along the river. Thus the whakatauki was an assertion of group pride as well as of personal identity.

The pre-tribal origins of the New Zealand Polynesians cannot be established with any precision from traditional sources alone. They had a series of myths and legends to account for the existence of New Zealand, which most referred to by using the names given for the North, South and Stewart Islands (Te Ika-a-Maui, Te Wai Pounamu, Rakiura). They also had a repository of mythology to account for their existence as men and women, and for the origin of the natural elements.

The Maori creation myths were shared in broad outline with Polynesians in other parts of the Pacific. Rangi the Sky Father had been joined in amorous embrace to Papa, the Earth Mother. In this clasp the world was in perpetual darkness, and the nakedness of Papa was covered with vegetation that thrived in dank moisture. The sons of Rangi and Papa constantly lamented the miserable conditions in which they were forced to live between their parents. Eventually they resolved to do something about them. One, Tu-matauenga, god of war, suggested that the parents would have to be killed to be separated. Tane-mahuta, god of the forest and later father of mankind, objected. No, he said. It would be sufficient to prise them apart and let the Sky stand above us and the Earth lie below. Let the Sky become a stranger but the Earth remain our nurturing Mother.

All but one of the sons agreed to this course and they took turns trying to bring about the separation. None succeeded until Tane-mahuta placed his shoulders against the Earth and his feet upon the Sky. Slowly and powerfully he straightened his body and his parents began to give way. The sinews with which they held each other tore and they cried out in pain. But Tane persisted. And in the end he succeeded in fixing the Sky above and the Earth below. As soon as this was done the children of Rangi and Papa knew light for the first time; and the children of Tane — the trees, birds and insects of the forest — were able to breathe, to see and to move.
The one son who had objected to the separation, Tawhiri-matea, was angered by the pain his parents had suffered and the regard with which Tane-mahuta was now held by other living things. So he followed Rangi to the realm above and there he begot his own offspring: wind, rain and storms. He unleashed these on the children of Tane in retribution. Then he hurled himself down from the skies as a hurricane and uprooted Tane’s trees. Eventually, after attacking all his other brothers, Tawhiri-matea returned to the Sky whence he and his children would continue to descend from time to time to plague the Earth and her occupants.

It was Tane-mahuta who then created the first woman out of earth, Hine-hauone, and procreated with her. Their descendants, who also procreated, produced a line of men-like gods and god-like men. One of these, Maui, was credited with fishing up the North Island of New Zealand — an especially appropriate myth in the light of the island’s relatively recent volcanic history. Maui was an archetypal hero throughout Polynesia. He was the last-born in his family so that in theory his rank was low. But he compensated for this by being far more resourceful and cunning than his brothers.

In the fish story (and there are many others) Maui smuggled himself aboard his brothers’ canoe in Hawaiki, the traditional Polynesian homeland. They were annoyed by his trickery and wanted to return to shore. But by this time land was too far away so they continued with their planned fishing expedition. After the brothers had filled the canoe with their catch Maui produced his own hook, the barb of which was made from a fragment of his grandmother’s jaw-bone. The brothers refused him bait so Maui struck his own nose and smeared the hook with his blood. He lowered his line and almost immediately hooked a fish of unimaginable magnitude. The only way he could haul it up was by reciting a chant to make heavy weights light.

When the great fish had at last reached the surface Maui left the canoe to find a priest who could make an offering to the gods and perform the appropriate ritual. He warned his brothers not to touch the mighty creature until this was done. The brothers, however, ignored him. They leapt from the canoe and began to scale the fish and to hack bits off it. The fish raised its fins and writhed in agony. The sun rose and made the flesh solid underfoot, its surface rough and mountainous because of the brothers’ mutilation. It remained that way, and the name given to it was Te Ika-a-Maui, the fish of Maui.

The name for the South Island was drawn from its jade deposits: Te Wai Pounamu, greenstone water, or Te Waahi Pounamu, place of
greenstone. The story of its origin told by the Ngai Tahu people was a variation of the creation myth. According to their account, Rangi the Sky Father had a union with Pohato-te-po before being joined with Papa. One of the children of this first marriage was Aorangi, rendered Aoraki in southern dialect. Aoraki and his brothers were opposed to the second marriage. In protest they left Hawaiki by canoe. In the vicinity of the South Island, however, their vessel struck a submerged reef and was wrecked. Aoraki and his brothers climbed to the higher side of the canoe so as not to drown. They waited so long for rescue that they turned to stone and became the Southern Alps. Aoraki or Mount Cook, the eldest, is the highest of the peaks; the others are the remaining brothers in descending order of seniority according to size. In this version, the Place of Greenstone is actually Te Waka-a-Aoraki, Aoraki’s canoe. The Marlborough Sounds at the northern end represent the shattered prow, and Bluff Hill in the far south is the stern. The broken ranges of Southland and Otago are the jumbled remains of the vessel’s cargo. Stewart Island (Rakiura) is the anchor stone.

Such mythology served the purpose for which it evolved. It gave meaning and continuity and therefore a measure of security to the lives of the earliest New Zealanders. Recounted, it conveys some of the textures of their collective imaginative life, their ‘public dreams’. It offers clues to the manner in which they viewed the world and the puzzle of their existence in it. It is no substitute for what Western scholars understand by history, however, nor should it be confused with history.

The European writers at the turn of the twentieth century who converted Maori myths and legends into a chronological and so-called historical narrative took enormous liberties with the stories they used. They collected a number of migration traditions from different sources, merged them, transferred names from one to another, excised information that did not fit the pattern they created, and came up with an entirely new tradition — a Pakeha account of Maori history. Its basic outline was that New Zealand was first settled by a Melanesian race named Moriori, who were exterminated by the later Polynesian colonists. The country was discovered for the Maori and named Aotearoa by a navigator named Kupe in about AD 950. He was followed by Toi and Whatonga in about 1150, and they in turn were followed by a ‘great fleet’ migration of canoes in about 1350.

Examination of the nineteenth century sources for this account shows that there is no justification for believing the resulting story. There was a Kupe, but he was not first and he did not come in 950. Toi and
Whatonga might also have lived, but not in the times and circumstances ascribed to them. There might well have been six canoes — and more — with the names assigned to them, but there is no evidence that they sailed together from some point outside New Zealand. Some of their individual stories are now thought to be figurative accounts of tribal migration within New Zealand. Oral traditions of this kind are important and they can reveal a great deal about the origins of tribal units, about inter-tribal relationships, about internal migrations, and about the bases for land claims. But they have to be read correctly. The major difficulty about using tribal traditions is that they are rarely simply accounts of what happened: they are selective attempts to explain and justify to the hapu things that have happened. They are frequently the stories of and the rationalisations of victors. They say little about the vanquished. They cannot and should not be used to provide absolute answers to objective questions such as who were the New Zealand Polynesians, where did they come from and how did they develop the characteristics that distinguish them from other peoples. Clues to these answers — and still only tentative ones — lie partially in tradition and far more in studies of linguistics, biological anthropology and archaeology.

The avid search among nineteenth-century scholars for the origin of the Polynesians is now known to have been an historical irrelevance. The Polynesians themselves never came from anywhere: their characteristics and their culture are now thought to have evolved in the central Pacific some two-and-a-half to three thousand years ago. The ancestors of these people, however, burst from the shores of South-East Asia and the South China Sea between four and five thousand years ago. Some went south-west, ultimately to Madagascar; others south-east along the Malaysian, Indonesian and Philippine chains. This much can be deduced from linguistic and archaeological features, and from the origins of the cultivated plants and domestic animals that these people carried with them into the Pacific.

What made these mighty journeys possible, indeed, what probably led to them, was the introduction of the sail to South-East Asia and the invention of the outrigger to stabilise craft on ocean voyages. Among the Austronesian languages shared by the people of the Pacific and the South-East Asian archipelagos the words for mast, sail, outrigger float and outrigger boom are among the most widespread and therefore among the oldest.

The Pacific Austronesians who made their way along the Melanesian chain of islands, reaching Fiji by 1200 BC and Tonga before 1100 BC,
left behind fragments of pottery with distinctive decorations. It has been called Lapita after one of the places where it was found, and the same name has been given by archaeologists to the people who made it. With their pottery they also carried pigs, dogs, rats, fowls and cultivated plants. All these originated on the South-East Asian mainland with the exception of the kumara, which came from South America. (The latter proving that at some point Polynesians reached South America — where even the word for sweet potato is the same — and returned to the central Pacific; or that some South Americans travelled west into the Pacific. But the initial theory of Thor Heyerdahl that Polynesians originated in South America runs counter to all other evidence.)

A combination of excavation, radio-carbon dating and a study of language and adze forms has led scholars to the conclusion that Polynesian culture was generated by the Lapita people in the central Pacific islands of Tonga, Samoa, Uvea and Futuna. Some have gone further and postulated that the Polynesian language developed in West Polynesia and the distinctive adze types in Samoa in particular. In addition, it is deduced that the Polynesian systems of kinship and social structure of aristocrats, commoners and slaves, and pervasive concepts such as mana and tapu, also evolved at this time.

Two further movements of Polynesians appear to have taken place in the last two millennia. Some sailed back to the west and settled the ‘outlier’ islands in the Melanesian chain, such as the Santa Cruz group, Tikopia and Rennell; others moved east again, peopling the Cooks, the Society and the Marquesas Islands. Here Polynesian culture was further differentiated and it was from this region that the eventual migrations to the farthest points of the Polynesian triangle were launched: to Hawaii in the north, Easter Island in the east and New Zealand in the south-west. The characteristics of early Eastern Polynesian culture, the earliest carbon dates and the subsequent rate of growth and spread of population all suggest that the New Zealand landfall was made before AD 1200.

The Pacific Ocean covers one-third of the globe. The area traversed by the Polynesians and their immediate ancestors is equal to that of China and the Soviet Union combined. Voyages of this magnitude have led to a debate among scholars as to whether they were deliberate or accidental. Did the Polynesians always set forth blindly into the unknown? Or did they move with some assurance in the direction of tiny land masses and — as they discovered them — move among them with a degree of deliberation and confidence? Traditional accounts speak of voyagers departing from one island or set of islands because
of population pressure, or because of political or military defeat. There is little doubt also from traditional evidence that the Polynesians became adept at recognising the signs and locations of distant land in unexplored directions (cloud formations, for example, lagoon reflections, and — for far larger distances — the movements of migratory birds or the appearance of drifting vegetation on ocean currents).

With their twin-hulled or outrigger canoes and their considerable navigational resources Polynesians were able to make controlled journeys of hundreds and even thousands of kilometres. The navigational techniques included steering by stars, reading currents and swells and understanding how these were affected by contact with unseen land, use of the ‘lapa’ or underwater luminescence and awareness of the patterns of bird migration. The settlers who reached New Zealand — or at least those whose presence and descendants effectively colonised the country — are unlikely to have been simply blown off course on a voyage to somewhere else. Computer analysis of wind and current movement and the imperatives of sailing techniques suggest that an accidental landfall was far less likely than a voyage of controlled navigation. There would have been signs (bird movements and floating debris) of a large land mass to the south of the central and eastern Polynesian islands. Further, to establish themselves in the manner they did, the colonising canoe or canoes would have had to carry men and women, cultivated vegetables, the Polynesian dog, the rat and a range of tools for practical use and for prototypes for those made subsequently from New Zealand materials. Bones of kiore or Polynesian rats in New Zealand have been dated at more than 2,000 years old — which could mean that the first human landfalls occurred even earlier than previously believed; but they may not have led to colonisation.

It is possible that an earlier exploratory discovery of the country was followed by a return journey to Eastern Polynesia, and that this led to a planned colonising expedition. Indeed, some of the discovery traditions assert that this is what transpired. Although some scholars have scoffed at the notion, the increasing information that comes to light about Polynesian navigation and recent successful experimental voyages demonstrate its probability. And excavations on Raoul Island — halfway between New Zealand and island Polynesia — uncovered New Zealand obsidian left there between AD 960 and 1360. This establishes at least one ‘return journey’; and the probability is that it was one of several. Further speculation awaits further evidence. And the only incontrovertible evidence of return voyaging would be the discovery of New Zealand materials on the islands of East Polynesia.
The land that the ancestors of the Maori found their way to more than 800 years ago was unlike anything that Polynesians had encountered elsewhere in the Pacific. As a fragment of the ancient super-continent of Gondwanaland it was far larger — more than 1,500 kilometres north to south — and more varied than islands colonised previously. It was temperate rather than tropical and sufficiently cold in much of the South Island to prevent the growing of crops. The three major islands had been formed by volcanic activity over 500 million years and much of the interior ruggedness reflected this former turbulence. Great wrinkles in the earth’s crust had formed chains of mountains from the centre of the North Island to the Coromandel Peninsula, and from the East Cape down to the Southern Alps.

The land had largely settled by the time the Polynesians arrived, however, with the exception of the North Island plateau, Mount Taranaki and two offshore volcanic islands. Some people have speculated that it was the sight of one of these volcanoes — Whakaari or White Island — that gave the country one of its Maori names, Aotearoa, land of the long white cloud. This would suggest an initial landfall in the Bay of Plenty. The coastal lowlands were covered with broadleaf trees — pohutukawa in the north; karaka, ngaio and nikau; and in the south the southern rata. Inland, the forest was a mixture of broadleaf, podocarp and beech with a luxuriant bed of fern beneath. Some of the names given the trees, such as ni-kau (literally ‘no coconut’), emphasise the origins and expectations of the earliest settlers.

Other than bats, there were no mammals ashore until the Polynesians released their rats (kiore) and dogs (kuri). It is possible that they also brought pigs and fowls with them but that these did not survive. This lack of meat was compensated for to some extent by the proliferation of seafood: fish, shellfish, crayfish, crab, seaweed, sea-egg and the sea mammals, whales, dolphins and seals. The forests contained fern root that provided a staple food when pounded, and there were more than 200 species of bird, many of them edible, some of them flightless. Inland waterways provided additional resources: waterfowl, eel, fish and more shellfish. To all these Polynesians added the cultivated vegetables they had brought with them — taro, kumara and yam, and the paper mulberry for cloth. For meat, in addition to fish and birds, there were limited supplies of dog and rat. Human flesh, a Maori anthropologist has noted, was eaten ‘when procurable’.

The forest also offered larger trees than the first settlers had seen previously. With these they built bigger dugout canoes and evolved a complex tradition of carving. Later too they used wooden beams in the
construction of houses. Materials such as raupo and nikau made excellent house walls and roofs. Flax plaited well into cords and baskets and provided fine fibre for garments. And there was an ample sufficiency of suitable stone materials for adzes, chisels and drill points, varieties of bone for fish-hooks, spear-heads and ornaments, and obsidian for flake knives. Through these artifacts and crafts the New Zealand Polynesians developed one of the world’s most sophisticated neolithic cultures. The land contained metals too, but these remained undiscovered.

Perhaps the most spectacular of the country’s resources was the giant flightless bird, the moa, of which there were originally some twelve species. They ranged from the chicken-sized *Anomalopteryx* to the 3.7-metre-high *Dinornis gigantus*. They offered a food supply on a scale never before encountered in Polynesia (drumsticks the size of bullocks’ legs) other than when whales were cast ashore. And some early groups of New Zealand Polynesians largely based their economy around them in areas where they were relatively plentiful until intensive exploitation drove the birds to (and perhaps caused) extinction.

The history of the first New Zealand colonists from the time of their arrival until the advent of Europeans is a history of their adaption to the environment just described — the matching of their skills and cultural resources to it, and the evolution of new features and emphases in their culture in response to the conditions that the environment imposed. Ethnologists now recognise at least two distinguishable but related phases of that culture. The first is New Zealand East Polynesian or Archaic, that displayed by the archaeological remains of the earliest settlers and their immediate descendants. The second is Classic Maori, the culture encountered and recorded by the earliest European navigators to reach the country. The process by which the first phase evolved into the second is a complex one, and one on which scholars are not yet in agreement. It is complicated by enormous contemporaneous regional variations in culture, and by the fact that in many regions quite different cultural trajectories occurred, resulting in considerable variation by the time of European contact.

What can be said with more confidence is that when James Cook and his men observed New Zealand Polynesians in the eighteenth century they had settled the land from the far north to Foveaux Strait in the south (although Cook himself, believing Stewart Island to be joined to the South Island, did not actually observe Maori in Foveaux Strait). The language these inhabitants shared was similar enough for one speaker to be understood anywhere else in the country, although dialectal differences were pronounced. And while other regional variations were
apparent in the details and traditions of the culture, there were aspects of it that appeared to be practised by most of the population. Many of these were inheritances from or elaborations of earlier Eastern Polynesian features.

Competitive tribalism, for example, was the basis for what was later to be called Maori life. The family and the hapu (sub-tribe) were the units of society determining who married whom, where people lived, where and when they fought other people and why. Tribal ancestors were venerated along with departmental gods representing the natural elements. The whole of life was bound up in a unified vision in which every aspect of living was related to every other: art, religion, war, food gathering, love-making, death — all were an integrated part of a single fabric. And the universal acceptance of concepts such as tapu (sacredness or prohibition), mana (spiritual power, prestige), mauri (life force), wairua (spirit), hara (faults), utu (reciprocity) and a belief in makutu (sorcery) regulated these aspects of life.

Society was stratified, although not as rigidly as in some other Polynesian cultures such as Tonga and Samoa. People were born into rangatira or chiefly families or they were tutua (commoners); in practice, almost everybody could trace genealogical links to a rangatira line. They became slaves if captured in or as a consequence of battle. Immediate authority was exercised by kaumatua or older heads of families. Whole communities, sharing descent from an identified ancestor, were under the nominal jurisdiction of rangatira families whose authority was in part hereditary and based on the achievements of their forebears. In practice this authority had to be activated and reinforced by talent, performance and regard to the feelings of the kaumatua and followers. Occasionally federations of hapu and tribes would come together under a recognised ariki (paramount chief) for joint ventures such as making war or foraging for resources. The more common relationship among hapu, however, even closely related hapu, was competition mitigated by the cooperation of trading arrangements.

Communities ranging from a handful of households to over 500 lived in kainga or villages with a hapu base. Usually these were close to water and food sources, and to cultivations if the hapu possessed them. Sometimes the settlements were fortified, although fortifications were by no means universal. Most were in the North Island and dated later than AD 1500. More often villages were adjacent to a hilltop pa to which whole communities could retreat under threat. Where such pa existed they were elaborately constructed with an interior stronghold, ditches, banks and palisades. Some proved impregnable to siege;
others were taken and lost several times in the course of a lifetime. Such defences were one of the features of Polynesian life that evolved in a more extensive and more complex manner in New Zealand than elsewhere in the Pacific. Some scholars speculate that the concept of the hilltop pa originated in the possession of kumara tubers and the need to protect them from marauders. Others see them as a result of increasing rivalry and as a visible statement of status.

Life was mostly organised around food gathering, food growing and (in areas where fighting was common) warfare. Cultivation was carried out communally, and foraging too was done in parties on a seasonal basis, to conserve supplies. When certain items were scarce or out of season they often had a rahui or prohibition laid on them by the community tohunga or priest. Warfare evolved as an important competitive element in Maori life in most (although not all) parts of the country. It was sometimes conducted to obtain territory with food or other natural resources (stone for tool making, for example); sometimes to avenge insults, real and imagined; sometimes to obtain satisfaction from hapu whose members had transgressed the social code; and sometimes as a result of disagreements about authority. One group that rejected warfare was the Moriori of the Chatham Islands, 870 km to the east of New Zealand. These people, descendants of early New Zealand Maori, outlawed group violence as a means of resolving disputes and focused instead on discussion or single-combat. They also evolved a more level society than Classic Maori and a modified language.

On the mainland, reasons for war were often flimsy and could be nurtured from generation to generation. The more important factor, perhaps, was that war or the threat of war kept successful communities and individuals alert, strong and resilient. It also brought about the annihilation of some hapu who did not display these qualities. For the most part, however, warfare was not totally destructive prior to the introduction of the musket. It was carried on more in the nature of competition for status. It often involved only individuals or small raiding parties, and ambush or sporadic attacks of short duration. Even when larger groups met in head-on confrontation or siege the dead rarely amounted to more than a few score. Most fighting occurred in summer months only and, except when an actual migration was under way, fighting away from a hapu’s defined tribal territory was not common. For individual males as for tribes, the concept of mana was paramount; it was intensified and enlarged by the status of victor, diminished by that of vanquished. Courage and proficiency in combat were also vital ingredients in initiation and acceptance by male peers, especially in
the case of rangatira who expected to exercise authority. And the weapons most favoured were taiaha (long wooden-bladed swords) and short clubs, the latter most commonly called ‘patu’ or ‘mere’.

Non-combatants were able to achieve high standing in the arts or in the exercise of esoteric powers as tohunga or chosen specialists (‘chosen’, it was believed, by the gods). Carving was highly prized and the working of wood, bone and stone in New Zealand reached heights of intricacy and delicacy seldom seen elsewhere. The best of the work in wood was to be seen on door lintels, house gables and canoe prows, and in stone and bone in personal ornaments such as tiki, pendants and necklace units. New Zealand jade or greenstone was especially valued for this latter purpose, and for fashioning into fine carving chisels. Like other Polynesians the New Zealanders had no access to metals prior to the eighteenth century.

Personal decoration in the form of moko or tattooing was also a feature of Maori art. Men were marked primarily on the face and buttocks, women largely on the face and breasts (exclusively chin tattooing on females is thought to have been a post-European development). Only in the Marquesas Islands did such decoration achieve comparable intricacy, with patterns apparent in both positive and negative aspects — a factor strengthening the case for the New Zealand link with East Polynesia. The Maori practice of the art was distinguished by the use of a straight blade in preference to a serrated chisel. This served not only to inject pigment into the skin, it also left a grooved scar which was more like carving in appearance than tattooing in other parts of the world.

In spite of competition, warfare and regional and tribal demarcations among the New Zealand Polynesians, trading was also extensive. South Islanders exported greenstone to other parts of the country for use in patu, adzes, chisels and ornaments. Bay of Plenty settlers distributed a high-quality obsidian from Mayor Island for flake knives. Nelson and D’Urville Island inhabitants quarried and distributed argillite. Food that was readily available in some districts but not in others, such as titi (mutton birds) from the far south, was also preserved and bartered. People were prepared and able to travel long distances for materials and food. And although ocean-going canoes appear to have disappeared from New Zealand by the eighteenth century — possibly because climatic changes had caused sea conditions to deteriorate — canoes were still used extensively for river, lake and coastal transport in the course of trade or war. Some of these craft were impressively decorated.
The gauze of romance that fictional and some ethnological accounts later threw over New Zealand Polynesian life was misleading. In many of its aspects that life was brutish and short. There was always the danger (for men, women and children) of being tortured or killed as a result of warfare. There was some ritual cannibalism. There was the possibility of disinheritation and enslavement in defeat. Further, medical examination of pre-European remains reveals that the natural life span was unlikely to exceed 30 years. From the late twenties most people would have been suffering considerably as a consequence of arthritis, and from infected gums and loss of teeth brought about by the staple fern root diet. Many of the healthy-looking ‘elderly’ men whose condition Cook commended at Queen Charlotte Sound in 1770 may have been, at the most, around 40 years of age.

There were many elements of life that New Zealand Polynesians shared from the Aupouri people in the north to the Ngati Mamoe of the far south: a basic language, religious concepts, competitiveness, conventions of warfare, ways of giving and receiving hospitality. But it has to be stressed that the tribal basis of life and the size of the country had generated innumerable local variations. Settlements varied in size, construction, materials and layout; legends altered from district to district and incorporated local geographical features; dialects had evolved; some areas tattooed extensively, others not at all; clothing varied according to location and climate, as did the patterns of food gathering.

Such were the contours of life that James Cook and other European navigators encountered towards the end of the eighteenth century in the people they called New Zealanders, and who later (from the middle of the nineteenth century) began to call themselves Maori. Their numbers were then around 100,000. They had no concept of culture as such, nationhood or even race. They were tribal beings who were fiercely assertive of the identity that they found in their hapu membership. Their links to other Polynesians to whom they were related were almost as tenuous as those to the Europeans soon to invade their land.