

ABSTRACT

Mahika Kai - The Hinge of Heritage

Te Waipounamu's 19th century history requires a number of historiographical leaps which relatively few professional historians have shown themselves capable of. This deficit in intellectual gymnastic capacity is principally derived from the more general intellectual and cultural amnesia which characterises most colonialist cultures founded on invasion of indigenous societies.

Amongst these required '*Historiographical Leaps*' is one that is capable of explaining the sheer durability of *Te Kereeme o Kai Tahu me Kati Mamoe* - The Ngai Tahu Claims - which had their beginning in 1849 and were brought to settlement in 1998. Whilst one can easily draw a retrospective (although necessarily partial) time line listing people and events, that cannot explain how a small, widely dispersed and impoverished tribal community was able to keep the torch of resentful grievance burning for some seven generations. It defies the laws of historical gravity.

To comprehend how the Ngai Tahu grievance was kept alive, one has to understand the nature and status of *mahika kai*, the gathering and processing of traditional foods. In a culture defined by seasonality and hunting, gathering and storage, together with the status of freshwater and the inherited rights of access to it, were central and, arguably, more important than those pertaining to sea fisheries.

Systematically dispossessed of land and the capacity to participate in the new agricultural economy, Ngai Tahu communities had a near total reliance on *mahika kai* and the cultural practise surrounding it. At the heart of that practise was inherited customary rights of access, a factor which drove the intensive focus within Ngai Tahu on *whakapapa* and the systematic knowledge of descent rights. This, in turn, fuelled and reinforced the unifying sense of kin-based unity which characterised the political momentum of intergenerational grievance.

The status of *mahika kai* in the case brought to the Waitangi Tribunal between 1986 and 1990 and its continuing role in a resurgent Ngai Tahu culture underlie the much contested public and political discussion of rights in natural waters. To the wider society, the national water debate is about economics and environmental propriety. To Ngai Tahu, it is about identity and place and heritage. It is a central element in that cluster of factors which define who and what we are as a tribal people.