

Taha Maori



PHOTO: AMANDA SNOW

Film maker looks for lost heritage

by Amanda Snow

A generation of Maori men unable to assume traditional roles on their marae is the theme of a documentary by veteran actor and producer Pete Smith.

The Lost Tribe, which will be made in the Far North for Maori Television, explores issues surrounding men in their mid 30s to mid 60s who were discouraged from speaking te reo because they were told it would not get them a job.

Now, they are unable to perform Maori roles, traditionally expected of their age group, such as speaking on the taumata, the formal welcoming of visitors, and initiating debate in te reo.

The lack of experience in this age group has put increasing pressure on an already diminishing pool of kaumatua who have few people to pass their responsibilities down to.

Based on his own experiences as a limited speaker of te reo, Smith says some men feel dissatisfaction, nervousness, and trauma when asked to carry out traditional duties on the marae.

"There's nothing like leading from the front and not being equipped. If you haven't got the language or the tikanga you don't go there."

He says many men experience huge feelings of loss because they are unable to assume roles as speakers on the marae and leaders of their whanau.

Smith was approached by his

iwi to ask a family if their deceased father, a distant relative of Smith's, could lie in state on his marae.

"There was no-one else available to do it and I had no idea of the procedures to follow. I thought I could just sidle up to his wife and ask her."

But Smith was greeted by a large group of kaumatua who were there to defend the body from such requests.

"I couldn't put in place the reason I was there in a way they would understand," he says.

Despite a nervous start, Smith got permission to have the body at his marae for an hour: "That was the biggest coup, as far as I know I was the only one whose request had been successful."

But Smith says the diminishing involvement of middle-aged Maori men on the marae has meant very young men, who have learned te reo, are performing roles traditionally reserved for their older counterparts.

At 29, Shaun Stevenson says he is often called upon to undertake formalities on the marae in te reo, but at times feels uncomfortable performing the role of a kaumatua when he hasn't really "moved through the ranks".

"It's a privilege and an honour but it's tough because you are learning in the baptism of fire."

"I'm the youngest of all my brothers but am called upon to speak before them because I can

speak te reo. It's sad, but it's a sign of the times."

The young principal of Ahipara School in Northland says he was raised to never speak before his elders.

Ngaphuhi kaumatua and former Labour MP Dr Bruce Gregory, who is in his late 60s, is also regularly called upon to perform formalities on the marae.

"A lot of the younger generation are coming in to fulfil that role, it just means we have to shift the definition of kaumatua down to a young age group. We're now getting them down to their 30s, which means to some extent the experience is not there."

Dr Gregory says the "lost generation's" diminishing involvement has sparked a myriad of social problems.

"I think it made some people a bit angry and depressed. They blamed the system or blamed their parents and it all had an affect on the smoothness of the family."

But he says that despite the lack of te reo many still maintained a strong connection with their marae and their hapu.

Dr Gregory also points out that it is never too late to shine, to learn the language and to participate in the marae.

"I think Maori mature later in life than their European counterparts. So I wouldn't dismiss all the 40-year-olds because they are not assuming formal roles on the marae."

PETE SMITH: "Nothing like leading from the front."

Boosting workplace profile for the moko

by Anna Rutherford

Hundreds of Maori are getting traditional moko done each year and advocates of the art expect this will help it become more accepted in the workforce.

Moko artist Mark Kopua says he has a steady flow of clients, and on average does one moko a day.

"If you take into account that there are a lot of other artists who are popular and busy too, you can see there are many people getting moko," he says.

In Maori culture, the moko is much more than a tattoo as it signifies identity, genealogy and accreditation.

Many Maori are confident that previous negativity surrounding the moko will change with the help of education.

Kopua says moko artists are aiming to get the tradition aligned with other cultural habits accepted in the workforce.

"We are now getting some high profile people wanting to be a part of this, so no longer is it just associated with the gangs and other groups looked upon in a negative light," he says.

AUT University art and design lecturer Chaz Doherty got his moko 10 years ago and says he has never found it to be a disadvantage in the workplace.

Doherty believes moko will also become more accepted the more it is seen.



PHOTO: JOHN ASPDEN

RANGI MCLEAN: Proudly wearing his moko for the Maori Party.

"Once upon a time everyone in this land had a moko and it was a shock if you didn't have one," he says.

"Getting back to that point would be the ultimate."

However Kitea Tipuna from AUT Maori liaison services is sceptical about the public's acceptance of the tradition.

"Within its context it's a beautiful thing to see. However, out-

side of its context it's misunderstood," he says.

Only Maori can wear moko. Kopua says the cultural elements of whakapapa and kaupapa evident in the designs make up 99.95 per cent of moko's significance and the small remainder is about tattooing.

Tipuna says that educating people is crucial for moko to be appreciated by employers.

"Many people don't look at Ta Moko as a piece of art, they look at it as a political statement which is sad."

Despite this reality, Tipuna says students at AUT would not be discriminated against on the basis of moko.

Kopua teaches children from as young as five years old about moko and their genealogy.

"The youngest person I've ever

given moko to was 11 at the request of his parents," he says.

The artist says he knows of instances when teachers have treated children with moko differently, but he is confident that this will not be a problem.

"I am trying to shift the focus. I am trying to make it more cultural rather than fashion," says Kopua.

The rise in moko wearers has been due to a renaissance of Maori culture since the late 1970s.

"A lot of the renaissance is about impact and reaction to exploitation," says Kopua.

Doherty says "during this time people had the political motivation to raise Maori consciousness and get first nation people back on the map."

"Moko was a part of that package," he says. "For me it was a turning point. Being Maori was more of a positive than a negative."

Concerns to protect the exploitation of moko have led to the development of an ancient concept known as kirituhi.

Once referring to the temporary nature of charcoal body art, kirituhi now describes any tattoo with a Maori flavour but one that lacks the cultural significance of moko.

Kopua says kirituhi was put in place to help people satisfy their desires without the concern of offending Maori.