

Maori Burial Chests to be Destroyed

Alan Taylor

Recently the Auckland War Memorial Museum consented to return to northern Maori a unique collection of carved burial chests or waka tupapaku.

Originally found in caves about 80 years ago the chests are decorated with figures that include tribal ancestors and Hine-nui-te-po, the mythological goddess of death and protector of the sacred bones contained in the chests.

Believed to be several hundred years old, the burial chests are restricted to the Tai Tokerau or northern tribal area. And are the only ones known to exist.

The chests are being claimed by Maori of Waiomio and Waimamaku who, Sir James Henare states, intend reinterring some of the chests in the original burial caves. Others, he says, may be preserved, while the museum will be allowed to keep two of the 63 at present in the museum collection.

Where the burial chests will be preserved has not been decided upon. Nor has any statement been made about provision for conservation-which is important if the chests are to survive outside the museum with its technical facilities and trained staff.

Representing the various styles of early Northland carving, and consequently of major importance to a continuing carving tradition, the art of the chests could be completely lost to future generations. This is a real possibility according to Sir James, particularly in respect to chests returned to burial caves.

Commenting on the probable loss of some, at least, of the burial chests the Director of the Auckland Museum, Mr Stuart Parker, said that the Tai Tokerau people could not be forced to preserve the chests. The Maori people of Waiomio and Waimamaku have legal title to them. They were placed on loan to the museum in 1903 and 1927.

The burial chests are expected to be returned to their owners after authorisation by the Minister of Maori



Affairs, Mr Wetere.

Given the great importance of the carved burial chests, and their place in the ideology of Maoritanga (preservation of traditional art and culture) it is remarkable that the chests are under threat. Although Tai Tokerau has *legal* title to them, *moral* title lies with the Maori people: the chests are a common inheritance-taonga o te iwi Maori; the legal owners having claim only to *custody* with all the responsibilities (and mana) of trusteeship.

No society can claim for destruction any part of its cultural inheritance-whatever the motive. The burial chests are an out-standing creative achievement. So much so, that one of them is represented in the *Te Maori* exhibition.

There is no question that Tai Tokerau Maori have a right to the burial chests. They contained the honoured bones of tribal dead. However, the waka tu-

papaku must be preserved: not some, but all of them. And, ideally, in a regional tribal museum: the dead are remembered by the achievements of their descendants. Until the whare waka tupapaku is built, the chests should remain safely where they are for a while longer.

Maori burial chests were traditionally highly tapu. They were ritually interred in caves by tribal tohunga or priests. Before the Waiomio and Waimamaku chests were placed in the Auckland Museum, the tapu was lifted in a special ceremony called whakanoa. In the course of removing the Waimamaku chests, one of the men involved stepped over a lizard-carved chest and was 'bitten by the spirit of the mokomoko'. Later he died. The carver of the chests was a famous Ngaitu chief, Kohuru.

Some of the museum chests are in the form of skull containers decorated with ancestral masks.