

Flax weaving thrives at Te Hapua

The first flax weaving exhibition of its kind opened in Auckland at the Outreach Gallery recently. It was called "Te Roopu O Te Harakeke — Te Rerenga Wairua" (Flax weavers of the Far North) and ran for two weeks.

The exhibition included boiled and green flax kits, hipora and tamata (mats), and shoulder bags as well as puipui and other flax articles. Kits made from pingao and kiekie fibre were displayed together with fine raupo poi stuffed with dried mullet weed, gathered from the shores of Parengarenga Harbour.

The articles were made by a group of women at Te Hapua, North Auckland. The flax used in the woven articles was collected from Spirits Bay, 15km from the marae at Te Hapua where most of the group worked.

The exhibition was the culmination of several years' work and enthusiasm of Mrs Neta Brown, an elder of Te Hapua. In 1978, a Kaitia general practitioner, Dr W.F. Parkes, offered to find buyers for kits if the women at Te Hapua wanted to make them. Neta Brown decided to try it and encouraged and taught others with the help of her sister, Mrs Mary Neho.

Dr Parkes sold the first consignment to Modern Bags Ltd, who then undertook to buy on a regular basis. But income was sporadic and money was needed on a continuing basis to pay for petrol to drive to and gather the flax. Upon hearing of the project, the Department of Maori Affairs in Whangarei gave an initial small grant to keep it going.

This was then followed by an approach to the Labour Department and in May, 1980, a group of ten women was employed at Te Hapua under the Marae Enterprises scheme. Some were employed to teach and others to learn the art of flax weaving. After six months, several were very proficient and the group was producing numerous good quality boiled flax kits. The scheme was extended for a further six months and ended in May, this year.

As the women's skill increased, more and better kits were produced and the focus turned to marketing. Apart from continuing casual sales from the marae, the relationship continued with Modern Bags Ltd who, for several months more bought the kits to sell through their chain of shops.

At the end of last year, the Auckland Committee on Racism and Discrimination undertook to sell the kits to fine craft shops and tourist shops in Auckland and Wellington. They found a ready market for the kits which quickly gained a reputation for strong, handsome articles and sold for a consistently higher price than under previous arrangements. While most kits have been sold in Auckland, they are also on sale in Wellington and Christchurch and national distribution is at present under consideration.

Because the women were weaving under the Marae Enterprise scheme, they were paid by the Labour Department. Money from the kits' sales went into a fund for the building of a craft centre at Te Hapua. Together with money from other sources, enough has now been raised for building to commence.

Minute books reveal legal past

Valuable minute books of the Tai Tokerau district lay undisturbed for many years until a recent research programme of the Whangarei office of the Department of Maori Affairs showed their importance.

Jane McRae, an MA student from the University of Auckland, studied the papers which were minutes of the Tai Tokerau District of Committees of the Treaty of Waitangi, and of Native Committees and Patupatu Block Committees.

The committees were set up primarily to settle claims to land before they went to the Native Land Court which had the legal authority to award title to Maori land.

Judges had had difficulty in assimilating Maori land rights to European title, and from the 1870s, petitions and letters to Parliament, to the different Governors, the Queen, and within their own tribal ruunanga (councils), asked that Maori Committees be formed to regulate Maori matters, including decisions on the allocation of title rights.

The Committees of the Treaty of Waitangi worked independently of European law, and were instituted during a meeting in 1881 at Waitangi when a monument was erected as a reminder of the Treaty's guarantees.

From the minute book it appears that they were formed to represent and protect Maori opinion and rights, and to establish their own authorities, such as chiefs and policemen to keep the peace.

The committees also carried out the functions later given to Maori Committees to settle local disputes and investigate ownership of land.

In 1883 the Native Committees Act allowed Maoris to sit as a Court of Arbitration to settle disputes in matters not

over 20 pounds (£20) in value, to determine the owners of any block of land to be passed through the Native Land Court; to ascertain the successors of deceased land owners, and to investigate disputes between Maori claimants as to land boundaries. The Committees' findings were to be passed in writing in Maori to the court.

For many reasons, both political and administrative, the Native Committees met for only a few years. The Ngapuhi are recorded as being effective in settling some disputes, and defining ownership of land — one minute book showed that they worked until 1889.

Throughout the 1890s support continued for committees of this kind and the Maori Lands Administration Act of 1900 made a modified attempt to satisfy this demand.

Patupatu Block committees were elected to investigate claims to a block of patupatu land (i.e. customary land or land to which title had not been ascertained) according to Maori custom.

The first of the committees were at work in 1902 and in the Tai Tokerau ran until 1908 when again land legislation renovated the system.

Some 40 minute books are held at the Whangarei office, although considerably more committees were elected than these records account for.

The books are an important record and are hand written in Maori for meetings which were called and conducted by Maoris. The bulk of the contents are the discussion of land claims (similar to the Maori Land Court Minute Books), and as such are valuable descriptions of tribal history and tradition.