

Te Motai restored

One of what is believed to be the last two remaining Pai Marire "niu" poles in the country has been dedicated after two years of preservation treatment.

It stands at Kuranui, near Matamata, and was one of the few survivors of the British Army's efforts to stamp out the Pai Marire faith in the 1860s.

The only other known surviving Pai Marire niu is believed to be a much shorter one in the Wanganui region.

"Te Motai" stands on the site of an old kainga, which within living memory had about 500 people living in it. Only one old house, the home of Motai Te Pakaru the niu's last guardian still stands as a reminder of those days, and sheep graze around the niu.

The area is within the northern boundary of Ngati Raukawa territory, right at the foot of the Kaimai ranges and close to the main Hamilton-Tauranga highway.

It was regarded as neutral area during the inter-tribal wars of the first half of last century between Ngati Haua, led by Te Waharoa, against the Hauraki tribes forced into the Waikato by Ngapuhi invaders led by Hongi Hika.

Later Ngati Haua engaged Te Arawa in a battle in the Raukawa regions, and again Kuranui was treated as a neutral area.

In the mid-1860s Kuranui became a place of refuge for the tribes following the invasion of the Waikato by British troops under General Cameron, and at the same time it became a meeting and rallying place for Pai Marire adherents, followers of the prophet Te Ua Haumene.

The niu is known as Motai, after the hapu of Ngati Raukawa most closely associated with the site.

According to local tradition there was a whare wananga of Ngati Raukawa on the site of Kuranui, so it had been an important site for that reason long before the 1860s.

It seems most likely that the niu was erected early in 1865. Made of totara, it is 14 metres high, and may in the past have had cross-trees, stays and blocks and tackle attached. These may have come from a coastal trader called the Mary Jane, wrecked near Whangamata, on the Coromandel coast, in March 1865. It was not uncommon to use the rigging from wrecked ships for Pai Marire niu.

Pai Marire had by that time stretched its influence right across the North Island from its origins in Taranaki to the Bay of Plenty, and there were many villages which erected niu poles, complete with flags and streamers, in the area.

But British troops, calling Pai Marire



Noel and Cindy Kinred and the restored niu at Kuranui, near Matamata.



The tekoteko at the base of the niu, Te Motai. It is considered unique because it is part of the same block of wood as the niu.

the Hau Hau religion, destroyed the vast majority of them as they conducted their sweeps against Maori "rebels" in the Bay and the Waikato.

But it seems they never got as far inland from Tauranga as Kuranui, and the niu there managed to survive, and it stands as a monument both to the faith,

and to the military and civil efforts to stamp out Pai Marire.

Ngati Motai elder Rangipukea (Cindy) Kinred remembers growing up at Kuranui, when there were about 500 people living there. No one lives there now, Motai Te Pakaru having died in 1968.

But the owners of the site decided two years ago to preserve the pole. Henry Tuwhangai from Kihikihi lifted the tapu at a ceremony before the pole was removed from the ground.

Auckland University anthropologist Karel Peters directed the preservation treatment, using techniques and materials perfected in his native Holland.

The programme was held up some months when the preservation chemicals got lost on the way from Holland to New Zealand, more had to be sent out.

About three metres of the rotten base, which had been underground, were cut off, and a steel "shoe" with a rubber base was fitted to the base of the niu for its re-erection.

The rest of the pole was treated with epoxy resins and "Everdure" paint to protect it from the elements, and fibreglass rods were inserted into the four corners of the main section to strengthen it, according to Mrs Kinred's husband Noel, who helped Dr Peters with the work.

Knot holes were filled with resins and the whole pole was finished in red.

Matamata County Council engineering department undertook the lifting out and the replacement of the pole, now with guy ropes to hold it up, as only about 5cm are now below ground level.

The dedication ceremony was held on ANZAC Day, and conducted by Campbell Clark of Maungatautari in the name of all the churches, rather than just Pai Marire.

It belongs to all the tribes, said Mr Kinred.

"We're just the guardians," he explained.

The pole boasts a tekoteko, believed to be unique among niu poles in that it is part of the same piece of wood as the rest of the pole.

Other niu tekoteko were carved separately and attached to the poles.

The tekoteko is in human form, but having the face of a bird.

It represents Rupe, also known as Maui-mua, who took the form of a pigeon and climbed the various levels of the heavens in search of Rehua, whom he wanted to consult in his search for his sister Hinauri. Hinauri had gone to live with her husband Tinirau, and she returned with Rupe.

The owners of the site at Kuranui hope to restore Motai Te Pakaru's old house and eventually to re-establish a marae on the site, which has been vested as a Maori reserve by the Maori Land Court, according to Mr Kinred.