

# Of Mahommet and Maraes

Slowly I stumble, the beginnings of a mumble, so the learning process continues... for I am learning the language of my forebears. I left New Zealand as quickly as I could, those many years ago, and now I have returned. When I finally cleared the dust of travelling from my shoes, found a place to stay and sat back I could feel the suppressed excitement and gentle whispering from a direction I could not focus on. About me the rustling of activity, nothing tangible but very potent. Maoritanga... maoritanga... what was it, what did it mean. Like a bumbling idiot, not knowing which way to ask, I questioned those around.... What is maoritanga?

The answers came reluctantly at first, hesitantly then briskly and sometimes belligerently. "We are a people, an ancient people and we will pass into obscurity, not being fully understood or appreciated unless something is done now before it's too late." Like a spring that bubbles to the surface in some secret location, drop by drop, it slowly gathers momentum and will become a raging torrent as it slowly carves its way to the sea.

And so it is with our people. Line upon line, precept upon precept, we are awakening to our heritage. It is within this small bubbly spring that the Maori people are truly beginning to understand themselves and where they fit into this cosmos of humanity.

I enrolled in the nearest available course, and so it comes, the protocol, the knowing, the understanding, the pride, respect and awareness that has not been tapped before. The sounds are familiar, echos of my childhood, yet they form, become part of me and surge to the surface like a flower struggling to the sun. Around me there are others, trusting in the rightness of it all, and slowly unfolding like some gentle shy rose, afraid of being bruised, or plucked to early, yet knowing that there are other buds on the same bush that will, in time, flower and blaze, open to the sun.

Tribally I find myself in another territory, another country, linked not only by the colour of my skin, but by the rich heritage that is ours, our rightful brightlight we thought to leave for other more pressing things. Surely it's not too late?

The wonder of being taught my native language by others, the pride with which they do so, and the dedication and devotion that they continue to instil in us the meaning of being a Maori.

Pearl Croft

I have never been to a marae before. But one day recently a marae fed up with my neglect, came to me. The setting was a very ordinary, standard design school hall — not a touch of Maori culture about it. The occasion was a regional secondary schools Maori speaking competition. As a teacher from the host school I had been asked to assist in the judging — the English speaking section that is.

The opening ceremony was my first introduction to the marae. Uncertain where to stand (up there — behind the men!), only a vague idea of what was to happen, only a smattering of Maori and Maori customs, nervously preoccupied, anyway, about my role as decider of winners and losers, I was not feeling altogether comfortable. But as the powhiri began and the manuhiri answered, as competitors, supporters, teachers filed in slow, dignified fashion into the hall, I began to realise it didn't matter. It is a place of welcome, of dignity and respect, of warmth and understanding, of politeness and good manners, of everybody feeling right about themselves.

The challenge and invitation had been definite and strong but now lone voices, rising and falling in gentle tones, overlapping each other reassured the marae that they came in peace and friendship. Quietly and without haste or hassle the group filled up the seats and waited. Our Maori Club, as the host group performed the welcoming action songs with feeling and pride. And they were rewarded, not with applause but with murmurs of appreciation and recognition.

Of the welcoming speeches I recognised only a word or two here and there but what impressed me was the power and expressions of the voices of the speakers, the body language and facial expression — language was a living expression of self, of beliefs. As representatives of the visitors got up to reply, I was aware of a form, an accepted and known order and manner of doing things without an overwhelming and oppressive preciseness about structure. Again the speakers spoke with dignity and feeling. And often, after they had come forward to place their offering, their gift (this day it was money or a cheque in an envelope, but here was the link with the feather cloaks, precious greenstone or baskets of food in the past) each group would gather together and perform an action song — it was not an 'item', this was not part of the competition but a feeling and expression of the unity, the oneness of all, an integral part of the greet-

ing. Again there was no applause. Each time the groups were reassured of welcome, thanks given as the gifts were accepted, gathered up.

Finally when everyone had had their say it was time for morning tea — or rather a generous feast, a mountain of food. Visitors must be welcomed properly, when they come on a long journey to see you (even if it is only across town)!

By this time the school type timetable to which the competition was supposed to be run was way behind schedule. Last minute instructions, introductions to fellow judges, frantic quick consultations about priorities to look for and we were into the speeches.

They were only youngsters — 14 to 18 year-olds and their nervousness often showed. And yes they varied in their abilities — their organisation and depth of ideas, tone expression and variety of voice, ability to hold an audience etc. etc. and in the end it was not difficult to sort out who had the overall edge on others. But that is not important — what is important is the general impression that they left 37 speeches later...

A fierce pride and belief in the Maori way of life. A feeling that here, on the marae, among the people, the oneness, they were not afraid to express their views, to express the feelings they keep hidden from the pakeha world. Hidden not from a sense of shame but from a feeling I suspect that it has no place and would not be understood. Some were on the defensive, some were resentful, some were aggressive and some were gently persuasive. Some were strong in their opening salutations in Maori, some were hesitant but trying hard with newly-learned, old-forms of language.

Thus I learned. I learned the importance of the whanau — the family life — of the tangi and hui when everyone gathers together in a support system of family and friends, a strong framework for your life. I learned of the importance of your whakapapa and tipuna — of knowing who you are, where you belong and who has gone before. I learned of how a young maori often has to remind him/her self of how to make use of the modern world without letting go of the maori way and how difficult this is.

The call to hold on to the maori way came often, an appeal to peers not to lose sight of what was worth preserving among the temptations of modern confusion, not to let Aotearoa become completely absorbed by New Zealand.

I heard too of fears, of injustices, of mistrust and resentment, of anger, of