Tikapa: archaeological and ancestral landscape

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Abstract: Sir Apirana Ngata once said that realising knowledge of Māori culture, history and traditions is necessary to our education as people of Aotearoa, and that we as Māori are expected to have and maintain that knowledge. For those of us with Māori ancestry who were not brought up in the tikanga, it is up to us to seek it out. We can meet with our kaumātua, kuia and koroua and learn as much as we can about the history of the people and the place. We can search through literature, recorded oral histories and traditions, and the Māori Land Court records. We can also engage in archaeological research, with the permission, encouragement and involvement of the local community. Learning the history of our ancestors teaches us much about ourselves and can raise self-esteem and empower. Knowing our connections and where we come from gives us a sense of belonging and well-being. This is the driving force behind my doctoral research on Tikapa as an archaeological and ancestral landscape.

Keywords: archaeology, landscapes, Ngāti Porou, Waiapu River Valley

Archaeological and Traditional Landscapes

All landscapes carry history. In Aotearoa New Zealand, there are many archaeological sites invested with strong traditions, and a large number of these are represented in the East Coast of the North Island. Lines of ancient agricultural fields, house sites and campfires have left distinctive marks on the land. Terraces, pits, ditches and banks found at river mouths, along coastal strips and inland hills, although now overgrown with scrub and grass, serve as reminders of ancient earthworks. These physical places represent far more than the sum of their practicality, for here the spirit of the iwi, the mauri, rests. People of the past who moved through the landscape and used the land gave names to places and embedded them with historical meaning and spiritual value. These landscapes are important because they represent this engagement between people and their environment and tribal gestures today can rekindle an ancient association, giving continued life to the old meaning of the land.

Sir Apirana Ngata said that to understand Māori history of the East Coast or Ngāti Porou people one must see for oneself and reconstruct the environment and scenes in which its leading events were enacted (Kaa, 1987). Archaeological research can help reconstruct the East Coast past, and combined with history and tradition give valuable insight that can enhance tribal identity. Knowledge of our connections and ancestral past fosters a sense of belonging and well-being. We can learn much about people and land by searching through recorded oral histories and traditions, by meeting with kaumātua, kuia and koroua, local landowners and residents, and by engaging in archaeological research with the permission, encouragement and involvement of the local community.

During his lifetime, Ngata spent much of his talent and energy on promoting the revival and the preservation of Māori tribal traditions. He became a prominent politician and lawyer, worked on Māori land development and management, helped improve the social and economic conditions of Māori across the country and in 1923, he instigated the East Coast Ethnological Expedition. The expedition involved Te Rangi Hiroa (Sir Peter Buck), James McDonald who was photographer for the Dominion Museum, anthropologist Elsdon Best and J.C. Andersen who was librarian at the Alexander Turnbull Library.

Buck, McDonald, Best and Andersen made their base at Ngata's home at Waiomatatini and from there visited much of the district, recording traditions and skills such as making fishnets and traps, methods of netting and catching fish, weaving, hand games, music making as well as the digging and storing of kumara, and cooking food in a hāngi. There is also footage of fishing for kahawai at the mouth of the Waiapu River, whereby a young man demonstrates how shoals of kahawai were scooped up in a net as the fish worked their way into the river mouth. Ngata specifically requested for the group to visit the East Coast to make these records on the crafts, activities and tribal lore retained in the area and this footage still exists as an invaluable reminder of Ngāti Porou traditions.

Waiapu River Valley

The Waiapu River Valley lies on the East Coast of the North Island of New Zealand about 145km north of Gisborne. The main population centre of the region is Ruatoria. Smaller centres north of Ruatoria are Tikitiki and Rangitukia towards the mouth of the Waiapu River on the northern bank. The range of Te Kautuku acts as a navigation point for fishermen and travellers. It also comprises a plateau that was once a famous battleground known as Te Nuku, which has seen many tribal wars.

On the south side of the river on the coast lies Port Awanui, which was once a booming little port and in its heyday boasted two hotels, a blacksmith, a shoemaker, three general stores, a courthouse, police station, post office, and a wool shed (MacKay, 1966). Just north of Port Awanui on the southern bank of the Waiapu lies Tikapa, a small settlement remaining rural and isolated but representing a significant part of the landscape for my whānau who descend from this place. Local residents know the land well and recall the history of the area with passion, trepidation and respect. They remain fiercely protective of the land, and justifiably so as many sites represent battlefields where blood has been spilt in territorial defence and where the bones of buried ancestors lie still. Much of this area in general has remained in Māori ownership and has been farmed by different members of the local families.

The Waiapu continues to play a vital role in the lives of Ngāti Porou. Lands about the Waiapu Valley have been suitable for the cultivation of kumara and taro. Fertile land and abundance of food from both the forest including birdlife, rats, tawa berries, karaka berries, tāwhara and fern root, and the sea such as kina, pāua, kuku, pipi, probably made the Waiapu Valley an ideal area to settle. In East Coast history, Ngāti Porou lived in large villages and marae along valleys and streams and on the coast, including at Tikapa and Te Kautuku. By the beginning of the 19th century the Waiapu Valley was well-populated. Every small hill could be found to be under cultivation of some degree. Much of the land had been cropped for potatoes and maize. Now the land is used mainly for farming and fattening of cattle.

The Waiapu River Valley was first intensively surveyed by Anne Leahy and Wendy Walsh in 1979 (Leahy & Walsh, 1979). At this time 100 sites were recorded including pā, pits, terraces, agricultural field systems and middens. The survey was carried out for the New Zealand Historic Places Trust as part of a programme for the identification and preservation of archaeological sites. Their survey confirmed that there was considerable settlement along both sides of the Waiapu River Mouth and that the river system probably served as a communication link. Leahy and Walsh ascertained that although sites are spread out, the highest density of sites is along the south bank of the River Mouth. They suggested many of the sites recorded were probably large storage places for flat land pā and villages that have since been destroyed by farming and erosion.

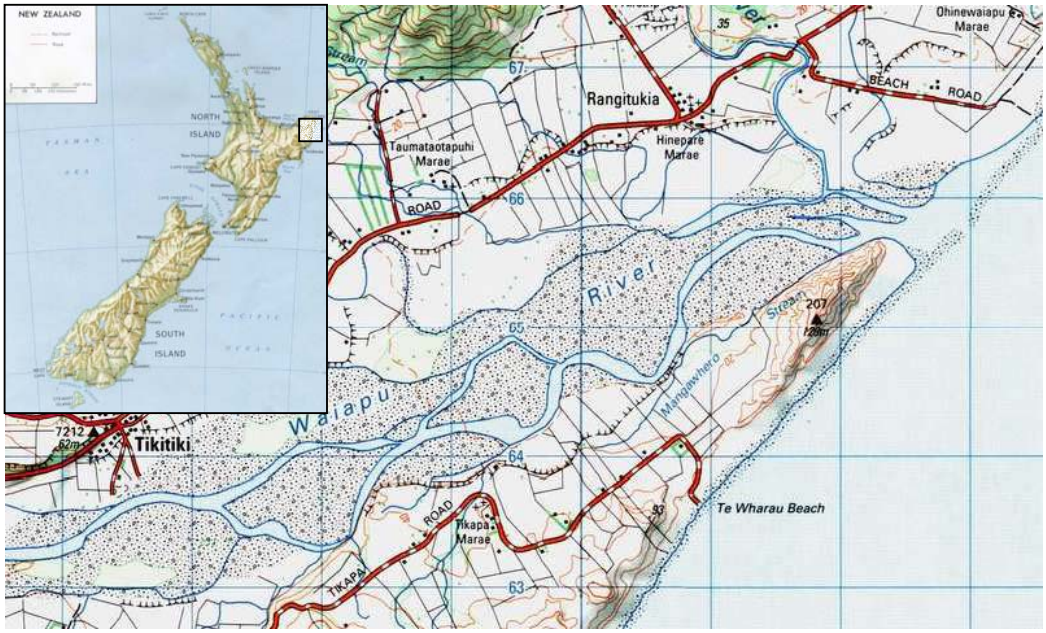

Figure 1. Site location, Waiapu River Valley.

Pōkai Marae

This project grew out of a personal desire to know more about the history and ancestry of the Banks whānau. For me, the place of Tikapa has special significance as it is where my nan grew up and I whakapapa to Pōkai marae and to Ngāti Porou through her. Pōkai marae was once described in 1942 as a building needing reconstruction and "nothing very striking", but for many descendants of Ngāti Pōkai it represents a place to gather and reconnect with the past through the ancestors who are represented in the carvings in the house.

In June 2005 I travelled to the East Coast to undertake my fieldwork. I met with Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Porou and presented my intended plan to the local community. Local residents responded with varying levels of encouragement, from those who gave permission for me to walk over their land to those who wanted to walk the land with me. Following the presentation, we sat down to a fine feast, during which many elderly women of the marae gathered round to quiz me on my family connections and set my place within the grand genealogical structure. Then with permission from the local landowners I headed out around Tikapa and Te Kautuku to engage in a site survey. This involved walking over the land with a GPS, locating sites recorded by Leahy and Walsh in their 1979 survey and looking for any unrecorded sites. We visited 28 sites including pā, pits, terraces and agricultural features.

Archaeological Site Survey

For New Zealand archaeology, pā sites are one of the more striking forms of archaeological field evidence. Pā describes a fortified place, constructed by Māori, often built on hills and ridges. Pā acted either as defended settlements that could be retreated to in times of conflict, or as fortifications that were permanently lived on. Common identifying features of pā are earthwork defences such as ditches and banks, scarps and wooden palisades. Ditches, banks and scarps may be combined in different ways to form the defence system and are often cleverly engineered to withstand prolonged assault from

enemy tribes. Pā are numerous within the lands of Ngāti Porou, of varying size and in differing states of preservation.

At Te Kautuku we explored a narrow ridge pā running east to west about 200m in length. The main features were worn by stock but terraces and raised rim pits are still visible. The hillsides were gorse-covered and steep, while there was erosion on the northern scarp of the pā to the west. A second, hexagonal-shaped pā was situated on the north side of Tikapa Road, about 60m by 60m in size with a ridge running from the pā to the road. On this ridge were two pits and a lateral terrace ran around the outside of the pā. There was also an inner bank cut by transverse ditches and a fenced off urupa on the north ridge, still visited by family to this day.

Figure 2. Hexagonal shaped pā at Tikapa with pits on ridge, facing west.

The third pā we visited was separated from the main plateau by a gully. The pā site comprised transverse ditches and inner banks, terraces on the eastern and southern sides and several raised rim pits in the southeast corner. Two trenches on this pā were situated on a strategic defensive position overlooking the river, an ideal position to fire on enemy attackers. There were also more long ditches and banks further west of the pā, which may have been part of the overall defensive system.

Pits were the most common feature in the survey; some pits existed in relation to a pā while others were isolated features. Some may have been damaged by animal or vehicle tracks, or erosion, or were hidden amongst rampant gorse or scrub. While many of the sites were surrounded by gorse and many may have been trampled by stock, there is still much information that can be gathered from exploring these archaeological sites. Kumara pits were a form of underground house, accessible through one end, in which harvested crops and seed for the coming season were kept viable through the cold of winter. Pits were a metre or two deep often found on the terraces of pā adjacent to garden areas. Some pits have raised edges or rims, which presumably gave extra depth and protection. One pit discovered during the survey also had a drainage area.

Figure 3. Raised rim pit.

Figure 4. Raised rim pit with drain.

In their 1979 survey, Leahy and Walsh suggested the Waiapu Valley pā were not strategically placed to dominate an area, however, I found that the pā visited during my survey offered commanding views of the Valley. The pā situated on the south bank of the Waiapu River offer strategic views both up and downriver and also of pā on the north bank. The pā at Te Kautuku also had a commanding view down the Valley and out to sea. The number of pits found also suggests that a high population once inhabited the now isolated area.

Remembering the Past

In his most famous proverb, Sir Apirana Ngata laid a challenge before us,

> *"e tipu, e rea, mō ngā rā o tō ao; ko tō ringaringa ki ngā rākau a te Pākehā hei oranga mō tō tinana; ko tō ngākau ki ngā taonga o ō tïpuna Māori hei tikitiki mō tō māhunga; ā, ko tō wairua ki tō Atua, nāna nei ngā mea katoa."*

He challenged us to seek all that is good in the past, in the world of our ancestors, and place it alongside all that is good from the Pākehā world, thereby creating a new and better world. With this in mind, my research involves the bringing together of Māori and Pākehā knowledge to build a rich history of the East Coast by combining oral histories, ethnographic and historic accounts and archive materials with archaeological and geographical information.

My thesis is more than an academic project; it is also a personal story in which I am exploring and engaging with my own identity as a New Zealander with East Coast Māori ancestry. I have engaged in the task to seek out the knowledge and bring it together because I believe we can learn much about ourselves from the history of our ancestors. Generations of ancestors have left behind

a rich legacy, which should remain an integral part of our cultural heritage. Interacting with the landscape is a way of remembering our ancestors, following in their footsteps and making a connection between the past and the present.

The relationship between people and the land in the past has relevance today, especially in terms of identity. Established in a community at birth and by relationships with others over time, identity has become an increasingly relevant issue for modern society. For Māori there are further ways of identifying ourselves, such as by naming our mountain, river, tribal ancestor, tribe and family. Through this form of introduction we locate ourselves in a set of identities, which have been framed genealogically, politically and geographically. From this identity we gain a sense of knowledge and sense of belonging. Today, a strong tribal consciousness continues to be fostered and promoted within the Ngāti Porou region and one of the main drives of the Rünanga o te Ngāti Porou is to facilitate optimal development of future generations of Ngāti Porou as Ngāti Porou. One of the best ways to achieve this is to understand where we have come from. This knowledge gives us the power to assert our place in the world and gives us strength to move forward into the future.

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Author Notes

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