
Outcasts of the Gods? The Struggle over Slavery in Māori New Zealand

HAZEL PETRIE

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‘Slavery’ is a loaded word, and the images it conjures up are complex and contested. A recent case in point is the children’s book *A Birthday Cake for George Washington*, which caused controversy and a Twitter campaign against it for depicting a smiling African-American slave on its cover. The term and its resulting imagery are not neutral; it has a painful history and a very real association with the horror of African-American unfreedom.

But is ‘slavery’ the right term for the experience of captivity in Māori society? Hazel Petrie opens her remarkable and insightful study with this very question. “Despite the wide variety of forms of slavery or bondage throughout world history” writes Petrie, “familiarity with African-American history, acquired through books, films and television documentaries, has led many Westerners, including New Zealanders, to comprehend ‘slavery’ in a particular way—as black people, bought and sold, labouring on plantations, beaten, abused, and dehumanised.” Over the course of her book, Petrie shows in considerable detail that the reality in Aotearoa New Zealand has been relatively unexplored, constantly misapprehended, and was far more complex.

An experienced researcher with numerous Waitangi Tribunal reports and the award-winning *Chiefs of Industry* under her belt, Petrie brings her strong knowledge of sources and an understanding of Te Ao Māori to *Outcasts of the Gods?* Indeed, it was her research for *Chiefs of Industry* and examples of ‘ex-slaves’ becoming independent entrepreneurs that led her to explore the experience of freedom and unfreedom in Māori society. The result is a book rich in stories and balanced with analysis. It is a significant contribution to the study of what Petrie describes as war captivity in traditional Māori society, filling a substantial gap in the literature. Apart from contemporary accounts tainted by particular bias or understandings of slavery, one or two theses that touch on the topic, and references in various Waitangi Tribunal reports, *Outcasts of the Gods?* stands alone as an in-depth analysis of captivity, its economic and spiritual context, and its eventual transformation.

The book begins with an investigation of the word ‘slavery’ and how it has been understood by both Pākehā at the forefront of colonisation (traders, missionaries, Crown officials) and others since. Petrie also analyses the words for captives in te reo Māori and finds

that their use and meaning in that language is also complex. For Petrie, “‘slavery’ is an all-purpose word, rarely to be trusted. So the key to much misunderstanding appears to lie in how it is defined and how systems of slavery are perceived.” Using this cross-cultural approach to theorising (what she calls a “parallel history approach”) Petrie shows how captivity was influenced by “time, place, values, kinship and economic structures, social stratification, and spiritual implications.”

For Petrie, war captivity or other forms of bondage cannot be understood through a framework debased from Māori society, and therefore the term ‘slavery’ is inappropriate in this context. “Being captured in Māori warfare was not necessarily the route to a predetermined new life but a kaleidoscope of potential conditions.” Some captives were free to trade, had access to land and resources, and fought side-by-side with their ‘masters’. Others like Treaty-signatory Ihaia Kaikoura of Rangitāne retained their mana and leadership role over both their own hapū and that of their ‘captors’. While Petrie does not shy away from the potential violence or toil associated with Māori captivity, she stresses that the experiences of war captives were not universal and were influenced by mana and tapu, the social position of the captive, whakapapa, regional differences, and a vast array of other factors. *Outcasts of the Gods?* highlights these factors in considerable detail—so much so that, at times, they get in the way of her central argument. Nonetheless, it is the use of such examples that paint a clearer picture of captivity in its various forms.

The opening chapters on mana, tapu and the social stratification of Māori society place warfare and captivity into a local and cultural context. It is clear from these chapters that comparisons with slavery as practiced by Europeans are not useful, and are indeed harmful. We also learn how race and class influenced colonial thinking about captives in Māori society, and how the relatively abnormal period of the 1830s impacted on the practice. While Petrie explores the intersection of the anti-slavery movement in Europe with British colonists in Aotearoa New Zealand, *Outcast of the Gods?* takes aim at the idea that British influence – namely Christianity – put an end to captivity in Māori society. She convincingly demonstrates that a myriad of factors led to the decline of the practice, of which Christianity was just one of many. She also debunks the idea that British society itself was free of bondage at that time, comparing notions of British liberty with colonising practice (enslavement of Māori through land loss or wage labour, the use of servants, the denial of tikanga Māori and the imposition of colonial law, to name just a few).

Beautifully designed and featuring a strong selection of images, *Outcasts of the Gods?* is a pleasing read and an important addition to Aotearoa New Zealand's historiography. While some parts feel 'bitsy' and over-laboured (excuse the pun), the depth of examples from both Māori and Pākehā history pave the way to a better understanding of Māori captivity in its cultural and international context

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