

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

By Hazel Petrie

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Reviewed by Angela Ballara

In some ways, Hazel Petrie's new book is an enigma. Having read it, readers might have a problem in pin-pointing just what constituted the 'struggle' over slavery in Māori New Zealand. Were inter-Māori wars fought to end the practice? No. Did early European missionaries condemn it as non-Christian, or, after 1840, did colonial authorities impose strict sanctions to end it? No. Missionaries were inclined to accept the existing Māori social status quo as they found it. Colonial and imperial authorities made noises about inhumanitarian practices, but tended to ignore what was obviously a disappearing phenomenon. Was the Māori practice a brutal exercise in human trafficking? No. Was it exploitation by one strata of society over another for economic benefit? Only rarely, explains Petrie, and this was in the exceptional circumstances of the trade with European shipping in the 1820s and early 1830s, mainly in the Bay of Islands. As she points out, 'slavery' in Māori New Zealand cannot be compared to contemporary slavery in the United States, Jamaica or around the world where this practice was - and sometimes still is - accepted. If readers are expecting a series of anecdotes about chains, whips and slave markets they will be disappointed. Petrie shows that so-called 'slavery' in the Māori world was a unique phenomenon.

In other ways the book will be a revelation for readers approaching the subject for the first time. They will discover that the 'struggle' was a spiritual and mental one among Māori, brought about by contact between two worlds. Before the early 1830s, slavery was ultimately a condition deriving from defeat and capture in war, either in the immediate generation or in the previous ones. It was rare for a slave to be purchased from his or her community by other Māori.

Slavery, usually deriving from capture in war, in turn resulted in the loss of *utu*, *tapu* and *mana* in the individuals concerned. Although slaves were set to work, they suffered comparatively little deprivation. Missionaries and visitors to New Zealand in the 1820s and earlier reported no slave compounds or even separate quarters for slaves. They were treated little differently to low-ranked commoners in their communities, save that they were subject to their masters in terms of life and death. Death would be imposed, usually, only for their own crimes, such as theft of food from *tapu* places, or for social or religious necessity, such as slaves killed to accompany their masters after death. In pre-Christian times, slaves were ultimately the prisoners of their own values: Petrie explains that if they escaped, they knew they would often be unwelcome back in their own communities because of their loss of *mana* and *tapu*.

But after the introduction of the European and Christian ideals of personal liberty, and of individual guilt rather than communal responsibility, a mental and spiritual struggle between the two sets of values developed in many Māori who were in authority over slaves. Some of these 'slave masters' were converts to Christianity, but others were not. This clash between the cultural mores of two ways of life in the contact and Christian eras saw many if not most war captives liberated by their spiritually-traditional or Christian masters in the 1830s, decades before colonial authorities had any practical authority in Māori Aotearoa. The clash had other serious consequences: the power of *tapu* as a sanction was being eroded by Christianity, and social consequences were spreading through the Māori world. For the sake of baptism, many chiefs were reducing their wives to only one. Where each wife of rank had her own set of slaves

or servants, Petrie thinks these too were reduced: the net result of this down-sizing of the household was that many chiefs had lessened power to entertain their guests as custom dictated, and their mana suffered accordingly.

But in some respects Petrie's book as a serious work of history fails to satisfy. Too many assumptions are made without evidence. In many of her statements 'logic suggests' rather than 'evidence shows.' Occasional crudities are combined with this speculation (146, 168). Petrie has gathered up interesting morsels of information from here and there, but then presents patterns of behaviour as representative of the whole of Māori society from essentially disconnected, anecdotal evidence. The thematic pattern of chapters also leads to disconcerting leaps in subjects; one moment Petrie is discussing attitudes in Parihaka in 1881; the next she is leaping back in time to the Bay of Islands in the pre-Christian era; and on the next page to a consideration of Grey's 'new institutions' of 1861. This uncomfortable literary tactic leads to a number of apparent anachronisms, deriving in the main from sharp changes of period. European seaman knew about the anti-scurvy properties of potatoes in the 1820s, but did they know they possessed Vitamin C at this time (129)? The existence of vitamins was discovered only in the early twentieth century.

Petrie has gathered up scraps of information from a wide variety of sources, including secondary sources, and has endeavoured to organise them on a thematic basis. But it might have been preferable for the book to be built on historical periods and on a regional basis. I do not suppose that slavery in the Bay of Islands in the 1820s had much similarity to slavery in Whanganui, Waikato or Te Whanganui-a-Tara in the same period. The differences are mentioned, but not explored systematically. Sequential shifts of behaviour in different regions are important, especially when the quite dissimilar periods of pre-contact behaviour should be contrasted to post Christian and then post-colonial eras, developing at different rates in the various regions. It might have been preferable to study all the available literature for Whanganui, for example, to contrast what happened sequentially to slaves in that region, as compared to developments in Hawke's Bay, Waikato-Tainui or in Southland, and especially in the Bay of Islands.

On the other hand, covering the whole country as one laboratory has its advantages. There are fascinating snippets of information from around the whole country not commonly known: the terms, for example, for 'dependent groups after warfare' preserved by Elsdon Best's eastern Bay of Plenty informants, or examples of the sexual manaakitanga normal in pre-contact society, as well as later. This set of terms does not include the possibility of dialectal variation, however (118, 161). There are many revelatory gems of Māori writing, such as that of Tāmāti Ngāpora who wrote: 'Our slaves were taken in battle; we kept them as a payment for our relatives who fell in battle...' (268).

Some interesting statistics are discussed as well; for example, in her discussion of the changing terminology of slavery among Europeans, Petrie comes up with the fact that the term 'slave' or 'slaves' is mentioned in various more modern editions of the bible only twice, reflecting the abolitionist history of the times. 'Slaves' were increasingly translated as servants, attendants or milder terms, and a similar trend can be noted in Māori literature: political correctness was not confined only to the twenty-first century.

Such a discussion, like many others in Petrie's book, has an important message: Māori and Pākehā could talk past each other not just in land transactions, but also in human transactions such as the 'redeeming' of 'slaves' as converts, as servants of the mission or as human

sacrifices saved from the oven. 'Ownership' had not passed. Petrie also makes the important point that redeemed slaves could return to their homelands with no loss of land rights: they had not been away for more than a generation, if that. She speculates that one reason for the release of slaves was that the extreme economic need for them was vanishing; by the late 1830s, northern and Waikato chiefs were getting rid of the economic burden of their surplus slaves, while also returning to earlier, more normal tikanga in relation to war captives.

This book has faults, like all books, but it is valuable. Its 341 pages, many illustrations and copious notes reveal, for example, that early missionaries tended to accept the social order they discovered in Māori New Zealand as it was, without criticism, as they accepted their own. For example, Marsden paid chiefs to hire their slaves to carry his baggage: he did not seek to emancipate them. Similarly with the colonial authorities: towards the end of the book, Petrie asks the important question, 'Did the Treaty of Waitangi free slaves?' After all, people promised all the rights of British citizens could not be slaves. Her conclusion was that in practice it did not, and that if anything, the rights which were protected were those of slave owners and chiefs. The British administration recognized and made use of the existing Māori social order.