

*A Whakapapa of Tradition: 100 years of Ngāti Porou Carving, 1830-1930*

By Ngarino Ellis. Auckland University Press, Auckland (2016)

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Reviewed by Nēpia Mahuika

A DECADE AGO I asked one of our leading Ngāti Porou artists about his views on tradition and modernity. This was his reply: ‘Traditional art and modern art. For me there’s no such thing. It’s about continuum of movement because tomorrow my art will be tradition.’<sup>1</sup> I have frequently pondered that statement and its implications, seeking to find its resonances and deeper meaning in the many histories of indigenous negotiations in this country and beyond. For me, *A Whakapapa of Tradition* provides one of the most recent instalments relevant to this statement, contextualised in a discussion of how Ngāti Porou art and architecture underwent ‘radical’ change in the century from 1830-1930. Focusing on the Iwirakau school of carving based in the Waiapu valley, Ngarino Ellis (Ngāti Porou and Ngā Puhī) argues that during this time Māori art in Ngāti Porou territory underwent a radical transformation, in which the dominant forms of waka taua (war canoes), pātaka (decorated storehouses), and whare rangatira (chief’s houses), were replaced by whare karakia (churches), whare whakairo (meeting houses), and wharekai (dining halls).

This timeframe covers a familiar period of upheaval in Ngāti Porou history, felt on the coast through mass conversions to Te Haahi Matua, negotiations of invading Māori and Pākehā movements and monarchies, unrest and internal conflicts, and constant reassertions of local mana. Ellis writes that the Iwirakau story is a ‘plural’ history, which is an apt way to describe the creative breadth and depth of transmitted styles and forms encapsulated in a sprawling whakapapa of closely related peoples. This history, grounded in its analysis of art tradition, provides an important interpretive archive in Māori and Ngāti history. It is chronologically structured and divided into six chapters that explore the origin histories of carving on the coast, the establishment of the Iwirakau style, the advent of new forms, and the work of key artists and patrons from Te Kihirini and Hone Ngatoto to Henare Potae and Apirana Ngata.

The introductory chapter, ‘Te Ao Hurihuri o Iwirakau’ (‘The Changing World of Iwirākau’) addresses some of the key terms of reference interrogated within the book, particularly ‘tradition’ and ‘tikanga’. Here, Ellis turns to Hirini Moko Mead and Mason Durie to furnish her working definitions (3). This is likely a reflection of her disciplinary obligations to the field of Māori art history, but a curious decision: why use the explanations of other, albeit renowned, Māori scholars to define tikanga and tradition in a study about Ngāti Porou? Ellis draws on Ngāti Porou commentators, most notably Jahnke, Taiapa and Tawhai, but neglects some recently important and significant voices like Derek Lardelli, for instance, whose immense knowledge of the history of whakairo (carving) on the coast is a glaringly obvious omission. Ellis’s introduction asserts the idea that Ngāti Porou defined tradition for themselves, with carvers some of the ‘key transmitters of culture’. She points out that while there is writing on artists and their works, there is an absence of writing regarding the ‘wider dynamics’ of ways in which new ‘work’ operated and changed over time. This book seeks to illustrate these creative negotiations, beginning in Chapter One, ‘Iwirākau Visual Culture to 1830’ where she shows how Ngāti Porou carving and art evolved over centuries. Here, Ellis argues that the ‘acceptance and reuse’ of traditional concepts in newly invented work served as a basis for the emergence of a new tradition in the nineteenth century. Whakairo, she notes, was an integral part of daily life and culture leading up to the 1830s that survived through the devastating raids of the 1820s, with traditional forms such as the waka taua, pātaka and whare rangatira still intact. Carving traditions in Ngāti Porou, Ellis points out, can be traced to the origin histories

of Ruatēpupuke, through the lives of practitioners like Hingangaroa, and in the teachings at wānanga like Rāwheoro. Ellis draws on mōteatea and kōrero to tell these histories, outlining the complex and sophisticated cultural world in which Ruatēpupuke, Hingangaroa, and Iwirakau came to prominence as historical figures in the story of East Coast whakairo. Following this whakapapa of tradition inherited by the “super six” master carvers she deals with in later chapters, Ellis explores how Iwirakau ‘sites’ of carving portrayed in waka taua, pātaka, chiefs houses, and palisade posts were steadily replaced during the social and political turmoil of the first half of the nineteenth century, during which native chapels became new spaces for community activity and culture. Chapter Two examines the building of chapels in the Waiapu from 1830 onward, noting them as the first new forms of architecture seen by locals for 200 years. Disrupted by the Ngā Puhī raids of the 1820s, Ngāti Porou, in ‘survival mode’, converted to Christianity in large numbers and began to build whare karakia that reflected a radical change in tribal identity, evident in the carving and art work themselves.

Early whare karakia erected at Whakawhitira in 1839 and again in 1840 included secular as well as religious instruction. These were followed by churches in Rangitukia and other parts of the Waiapu valley, where these new art forms became ‘prime’ places where key figures could articulate political, cultural and religious ideas. Ellis argues that in the period between 1830 and 1850, the first wave of church building became normalised in the landscape and part of Ngāti Porou identity and tradition. In Chapter Three, ‘Tradition and the Meeting House’, Ellis shows how the whareniui became the ‘new form’ and focal point for communities from the 1850s onward. She explores the ways in which whareniui drew on old chiefs houses, and became deeply contested political sites. Whareniui, she points out, were also casualties of internal conflicts, sometimes destroyed in the rejection of Kingitanga and Hauhau influences. Here, Ellis refers to Ngāti Porou as ‘Kupapa’ and loyalists, largely ignoring Monty Soutar’s criticism of these terms as reductive and inaccurate assumptions about Ngāti Porou contemporary aspirations and identity.<sup>2</sup> Whare whakairo, she argues, became a site in which to engage with modernity (through techniques, tools, and imagery), as well as to negotiate the past through the inclusion of select ancestors. These meeting houses retained many of the stylistic features of earlier chiefs’ houses, but were communally rather than personally owned. Ancestors depicted on the palisades in the 1830s were transferred to meeting houses in the 1870s, while by the 1850s the waka taua had outlived their practical symbolic function. By Chapter Four, Ellis turns her attention to the six major Iwirakau carvers who she asserts individually and collectively created a distinctive style of carved meeting houses. Considering their whakapapa connections and the social and cultural milieu of their time, Ellis explores the ways in which they continued and parted with tradition, arguing that they reinvigorated a practice dormant since the 1830s. Ellis argues that while these master carvers were ‘dominant personalities’, none of them were ‘chiefs in their own right’, which is an odd statement to make. Had she spoken to some of the descendants of those carvers, she would have found that figures like Te Kihirini, for instance, exercised immense chiefly influence. Indeed, his son Hāmāna is explicitly referred to in this way by Rewiti Kohere in the history of Mokena Kohere and his forebears.<sup>3</sup>

Chapter Five turns its attention to ‘patrons’ rather than artists, exploring the influence of Henare Potae and Rapata Wahawaha in the ‘orchestrating of new meeting houses that sought to reflect their own mana and as well as to make grand statements about the integrity and unity of their people’ (187). Patrons consciously drew on the concepts of tradition as a guiding principle for the new art products they commissioned. Māori patrons, she observes, concerned themselves with the needs of their communities and encouraged a creative mix of new and old, while

Pākehā patrons, often providing for museum audiences, sought out an image of the culture at its ‘pinnacle’ with change often considered detrimental.

The sixth and final chapter examines the impact of Ngata as a ‘prime mover’ in Māori art and carving in the twentieth century through his reenergising of new projects, his advocating of the use of carving in new sites, and his role in new architectural structures like wharekai. Ellis argues that Ngata encouraged the transition of the Iwirakau tradition, supporting new artists like Hone and Pine Taiapa from the 1920s onward. This chapter serves as a conclusion to the main body of the book, and is followed by some short appendices, including a glossary, list of other artists and whare carved under the Iwirakau style. This abrupt closing left the book with an unfinished feel. It would have been preferable to have an explicit section or chapter that returned to Ellis’s main ideas and tied together some of the key points made in earlier chapters. This is a wonderfully illustrated book, with photographs from Natalie Robertson and an excellent use of images and sketches from contemporary diaries and letters. For Ngāti Porou it offers a rich history of carving, which opens up room for further exploration at the hapū level and through the Māori Land Court Records. It sits within a historiography that already includes some excellent work on East Coast meeting houses and carving, including studies by Phillips (1944), Simmonds (1973), Tawhai (1978), and Jankhe (2006). *A Whakapapa of Tradition* highlights the depth of possibilities evident in Māori art history and is a valuable source for Ngāti Porou. More inclusion of local voices would certainly have brought more of these stories to life, especially those who are now tasked with the ongoing kaitiakitanga of these whare. Likewise, an inclusion of the perspectives of those who have inherited and revived the traditions of carving on the coast would have added immensely to this study, providing, I suspect, spectacular examples of how this whakapapa of tradition remains a living phenomenon in the hands of present day Ngāti Porou artists.

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Lardelli, Interview, 2007, 36.10-36.15.

<sup>2</sup> Monty Soutar, “Ngāti Porou Leadership; Rāpata Wahawaha: ‘kei te ora nei hoki tātou mo to tātou whenua.’” PhD thesis, Massey University, 2000, 1; 24.

<sup>3</sup> Rewiti Kohere, *The Story of a Māori Chief, Mokena Kohere and his Forebears* (Wellington: A. H & A. W Reed, 1949), 47.