

MAORI PRISONERS AND SLAVES IN THE  
NINETEENTH CENTURY\*

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In a discussion of Maori warfare written in 1823, the missionary, Samuel Marsden, stated: "Prisoners of war are seldom killed but are kept as slaves. . . ." <sup>1</sup> Yet in 1772, just 51 years before Marsden made this observation and just three years after the first landing of Europeans in New Zealand, M. le St. Jean Roux, a French voyager sojourning with the Maoris at New Zealand's Bay of Islands, had said: "As to the way in which they treat their prisoners, they gave me a very clear explanation. As soon as the prisoners are in their power they are killed." <sup>2</sup> Captain James Cook, another of the very early European visitors to New Zealand, also had come to the conclusion that to give quarter was no part of Maori military practice; Maori warriors, in Cook's opinion, killed everyone indiscriminately—whether man, woman, or child—and they took no prisoners at all. <sup>3</sup>

The statements by Roux and Cook, based on somewhat limited opportunities for observation, probably are not tenable as blanket generalizations, but they do support the view that the enslavement of prisoners, perhaps especially the male ones, was no more than an occasional episode of pre-European Maori warfare. If we adopt this view, a likely explanation of the disparity between Marsden's statement and those of the earlier voyagers is that enslaving prisoners rather than killing them became more

common in Maori warfare in the half century or so after the first landing of Europeans in New Zealand. This would be consistent with remarks such as the one made by Richard Hodgskin: ". . . they [the Maoris] used formerly to put to death most of the prisoners taken in battle. . ." <sup>4</sup> Hodgskin was in New Zealand in the 1830's when Maori warfare was still going on.

If then we accept the suggestion that the enslavement of prisoners became more common after European contact, we need to account for the change, and my object in the present paper is to try to do this.

It is necessary, first of all, to have some idea of the traditional setting of Maori slavery. The separation of the "traditional" from the new is often difficult in ethnohistorical studies. However, there appear to be no grounds for supposing that the following statements, drawn from my study of Maori warfare, do not apply to pre-European as well as to later times:

. . . they [Maori slaves] were individually owned, mainly by the leading chiefs, and their masters had the power of life and death over them. The slaves were liable to be killed in order to serve as a human sacrifice or as the relish in a feast. Some were slain by their masters in a fit of anger, which the victims may or may not have been responsible for. . . Yet the condition of Maori slaves was not a severe one physically. As a general rule, they ate well, were forthright in their speech, were kindly treated, and were not expected to overwork themselves. Their work, including tapu-less tasks connected with cooking and burden-bearing, helped the chiefs to accumulate the supplies necessary both for the entertainment of travellers and for the initiation of major economic and military undertakings. In providing labour that produced some of the supplies and in joining their masters on some war expeditions, the oldtime Maori slaves were useful to the community. <sup>5</sup>

It should be mentioned also that a severe stigma was attached to slavery. Even if a slave escaped and returned to his own people, the deep disgrace of having been a slave clung to him and also to his descendants.<sup>6</sup> A number of slaves, as well as their descendants, are said to have preferred remaining with their captors rather than returning to their own people.<sup>7</sup> For some of the slaves, the sundering of ties with their people was fortified by intermarriage with free persons belonging to the masters' communities. The offspring of such unions generally became free members of their free parent's descent group, although they and their descendants were liable to be taunted about having an ancestor who had been a slave.<sup>8</sup>

This, it seems to me, was the traditional situation. What then were the conditions that might have contributed to an increase in the extent of Maori enslavement and slavery? The introduction of firearms in the first decades of the 19th century was, I think, of outstanding importance.

In the first place, guns provided the means of capturing more prisoners than ever before. As long as the principal weapons were the native clubs and spears, direct assault seldom was successful against the strong defenses of the Maori fortified villages called pa and direct assault seems indeed to have been but rarely attempted. Sieges also were apt to be unsuccessful, mainly because of the problems of organization and commissariat confronting any party of besiegers. It appears that Maori warriors, when attacking forts in pre-European times, relied primarily on surprising the enemy. When intended surprises failed, the warriors would often abandon their objective. Elsewhere<sup>9</sup> I have discussed in detail the modes of attack employed by the Maoris before the advent of the Europeans.

We must now ask what changes resulted from the introduction of firearms and what effect these changes are likely to have had

upon the taking of prisoners. When the northern Maori tribes first used guns against the people of the Taranaki coast of New Zealand's North Island in 1818, their method was to shoot the chiefs of the enemy pa with the two old flint-lock muskets that they had and then to storm the place. The mysterious action of the guns and the loss of the chiefs was apt to cause a panic among the defenders and they would be defeated easily.<sup>10</sup>

There are some accounts of the mode of attack employed by the famous northern chief, Hongi Hika, after his return from abroad with firearms in 1821. Hongi's practice was to have one of his warriors go up to the enemy pa to chop away the flax tied against the fence and to clear a space for Hongi to fire at. If anyone from the pa showed himself, he was potted off at once. When two or three pa-dwellers had fallen in this manner, the rest would be panic-stricken and a breach would easily be made in the pa.<sup>11</sup>

As the use of guns became more widely known and their possession more general among Maori tribes, the taking of a pa became somewhat more difficult than it had been during Hongi's expeditions in the early 1820's. However, the Maori pa, although modified in some ways in response to the new conditions,<sup>12</sup> never regained its virtual impregnability to direct assault. As archaeologist James Golson<sup>13</sup> points out, an upland fort strong against pre-European offensive equipment might well become untenable in the musket era because of its being commanded at a short distance by higher ground.<sup>14</sup>

It may be concluded that the introduction of guns made it possible for attacking forces to gain victories over the inmates of Maori pa more readily than had been the case in pre-European times. The guns enabled war parties not only to defeat more enemies than before but also to keep more of them as prisoners who could be returned to the home villages of the victors. An

indication of the numbers involved is provided by Barnet Burns,<sup>15</sup> an English sailor who in the early 1830's was a tattooed warrior with the East Coast and Bay of Plenty tribes in New Zealand. He tells of the capture of a pa where all the inmates, about 400 in number, were taken prisoner. All of the prisoners, according to Burns, were "regularly shared between each tribe." He himself saw about sixty of them being killed and eaten. Presumably many of the remainder were kept for enslavement. With guns in the hands of the captors, prisoners could be retained more effectively than in earlier times. C. O. B. Davis,<sup>16</sup> describing some 19th century expeditions, says that the mode of securing prisoners was by tying their hands behind their backs with cords and putting ropes around their necks. It is remarked by Davis that if the ends of the ropes were tied together, a whole band could be led forward with comparatively little difficulty. A Maori eye-witness has provided us with an account of the capture of many women by the northern tribes in the southern part of the North Island in 1819 and 1820. The prisoners were made to scrape flax and to make rope from the fiber. One end of a rope was then plaited into the long hair of each woman, and the women were led about by means of these ropes.<sup>17</sup> Maori scholar Elsdon Best's notes on the art of war mention that it was often the case that prisoners were led by a cord woven into their hair.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, we must consider some of the new conditions that seem to have made it not only possible but also advantageous to keep fairly large numbers of prisoners for enslavement. I have already in this paper made some suggestions about how Maori slaves may have been useful to the community in pre-European times. It is necessary to point out now that slaves in the 19th century acquired new value in a number of ways. The introduction of guns has significance in this connection also. To the slaves in the early 19th century was assigned the laborious work

of growing, cutting, and scutching the flax that was traded to European vessels in return for guns and ammunition. In time, the slaves came to be used also in cutting timber, rearing pigs, and planting provisions for trade with the Europeans.<sup>19</sup> Some chiefs kept their prisoners as slaves for a while and then killed them in order to help meet the European demand for tattooed Maori heads.<sup>20</sup> Judge F. E. Maning<sup>21</sup> even tells of a live man's head that was sold and paid for beforehand and delivered afterwards per agreement. The Europeans sought the preserved heads as curiosities, and slaves whose heads were not sufficiently decorative to satisfy the exacting tastes of European collectors might be subjected to some facial tattooing before being killed.<sup>22</sup> In return for heads, the Maoris got guns and other European goods.

For women slaves, there was a distinctive employment. One Maori chief at the Bay of Islands is said to have kept 96 slave girls for prostitution during the early 1830's.<sup>23</sup> For their services the women slaves becoming prostitutes on board the European whale-ships received European goods, including guns and ammunition for their masters.

It should be noted that even in this period Maori slaves were not systematically exploited, and their condition bore, as Reverend Thomas Buddle observes,<sup>24</sup> no resemblance to the slavery of what are called civilized nations.<sup>25</sup> Yet Maori communities at the beginning of the so-called musket era benefited from having many slaves even though the organization and other means for systematically exploiting and controlling slaves were lacking. That the free people often worked harder and longer than did the slaves did not matter so long as the slaves' work, like the free people's, resulted in an increment to the goods and services capable of being traded for guns and ammunition. Any such increment, big or small, was not merely advantageous but

literally vital to the community, because those who lagged behind in the race for arms faced destruction at the hands of those who forged ahead.

This was an entirely new situation. In the earlier times, the population size of Maori village communities depended not upon the extent of foreign demand for goods and services but rather upon local food supply. Not many slaves could be added to the numbers of a pre-European community that already was, in Maning's words, "never far removed from necessity or scarcity of food."<sup>26</sup> It may be said that advantages probably derived in pre-European times from having a few slaves but not from having many. In order to make intelligible an increase in Maori enslavement between Cook's time and Marsden's, we must take into account not only the greater ease of capturing and retaining prisoners in the musket era but also the greater advantages that their enslavement in fairly considerable numbers afforded in this period.

#### Notes

\*This paper was read at the 59th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Minneapolis, Minnesota, November, 1960.

1. Elder, *The Letters and Journals*, p. 409.
2. Roux, *The Journal of the "Mascarin,"* p. 401.
3. Cook, *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*, pp. 137-138.
4. Hodgskin, *A Narrative of Eight Months' Sojourn*, p. 21. (*Italics mine.*)
5. Vayda, *Maori Warfare*.

6. Cf. Best, Notes on the Art of War, p. 163 and The Maori, p. 299; Buck, The Coming of the Maori, pp. 401-402; Earle, A Narrative of a Nine Months' Residence, p. 124; Gudgeon, The Maori People, pp. 187-188 and Maori Wars, p. 31; Johnstone, Maoria, p. 72.

7. Best, The Maori, p. 299; Buck, The Coming of the Maori, p. 402; Scherzer, Narrative of the Circumnavigation of the Globe, pp. 116-117; Thomson, The Story of New Zealand, p. 150; Walton, Twelve Months' Residence, p. 68.

8. Best, Notes on the Art of War, p. 163; Firth, Primitive Economics, p. 95; Tregear, The Maori Race, pp. 158-159.

9. Vayda, Maori Warfare.

10. Smith, History and Traditions of the Maoris, p. 286.

11. Carleton, The Life of Henry Williams, pp. 63-64.

12. Cf. Best, The Pa Maori, part 5.

13. Golson, Field Archaeology in New Zealand, p. 102.

14. Cf. Best, The Pa Maori, p. 283.

15. Burns, A Brief Narrative of a New Zealand Chief, pp. 12-13.

16. Davis, The Renowned Chief Kawiti, p. 11.

17. Cf. Best, As it Was in the Land of Tara, p. 839 and Notes on the Art of War, p. 163; Smith, Maori Wars, p. 118; White, John White Papers.

18. Best, Notes on the Art of War, p. 163.

19. Cf. Polack, Manners and Customs of the New Zealanders, p. 79.

20. Cf. Angas, *Savage Life and Scenes*, p. 48.
21. Maning, *Old New Zealand*, p. 63.
22. Yate, *An Account of New Zealand*, p. 131; Letter of Henry Williams, April 24, 1834, cited in Wright, *New Zealand*, p. 146.
23. Thomson, *The Story of New Zealand*, pp. 284-285.
24. Buddle, *The Aborigines of New Zealand*, p. 46.
25. Cf. Shortland, *The Southern Districts of New Zealand*, pp. 296-297; Thomson, *The Story of New Zealand*, pp. 149, 150; Wade, *A Journey in the Northern Island*, pp. 83ff.
26. Maning, *Old New Zealand*, p. 208.

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