

Chapter 8. In/visible Sight

The Maitapapa families' experience of colonialism and colonisation was, in many respects, very similar to the pathways of numerous Ngāi Tahu families over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These similarities centre on land alienation, the erosion of mahinga kai, poor quality reserve land, poverty, mobility and cultural loss. However, their experience is also characterised by a sustained pattern of interracial marriage which may have contributed to the 'disappearance' of the community, thus distinguishing the history of Maitapapa and its mixed-descent families from the general trajectory of Ngāi Tahu histories. Interracial marriage not only shaped culture contact at Maitapapa, and in southern New Zealand more broadly, it was also an essential part of the lived experience of families and individuals.

As a result of interracial marriage, Ngāi Tahu experienced transformations of various kinds over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Physical transformation took place as interracial families emerged out of the contact era; new identities and cultural affiliations followed, as communities, alliances and kinship networks were forged out of intimate encounters. Physical 'disappearance', an outcome strongly associated with interracial marriage, was traced by state mechanisms such as the national census. From 1874, the census was informed by racial beliefs, which defined racial categories and boundaries. Interracial marriage was regarded as a tool of assimilation, and officials used the census to monitor and comment on its success. That 'success' was dependent on racial categorisation, but in many cases the census categories were arbitrary and imprecise.

Quite often, census-takers relied on physical features, style of dress, and living conditions, rather than 'blood quantum', in deciding whether to categorise people of mixed descent as Māori or 'European'.

Despite official claims of successful assimilation, the reality experienced by interracial families was very different. In the latter half of the late nineteenth century, the growing mixed-descent population in southern New Zealand was accommodated within Ngāi Tahu tribal identity. Participation at hui and Native Land Court hearings, and the maintenance of important customary activities such as muttonbirding, are evidence of this identity, alongside the contribution of money to the Ngāi Tahu Claim/Te Kereme from the 1890s. Paradoxically, while interracial marriage contributed to the development at Taieri of a mixed-descent population that identified as Ngāi Tahu, it also contributed to the eventual loss of community and an erosion of cultural ties to Maitapapa and to Ngāi Tahu. The result was the dispersal of families in search of better economic opportunities, and their assimilation into mainstream New Zealand society.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, the Maitapapa families were overwhelmingly 'quarter-caste' or less. As the photographs in this book illustrate, physical appearance was important to those living as mixed descent. As 'quarter-castes', many of those who left the village were able to pass as 'white'. While there was little mention of 'passing' in the oral histories used in this book, informants did indicate that dress and respectability were important to their grandparents. Successful assimilation into local communities is evident in the deliberate attempts by some to deny their Ngāi Tahu ancestry. By 1940, members of the former Taieri families appeared 'European' and had integrated into towns, suburbs and cities.

A history of interracial marriage has given rise to generations for whom mixed-ancestry was a source of shame. This has certainly been the case for the Maitapapa families. For most of the families, assimilation meant the loss of cultural knowledge in the form of language and cultural traditions, the inability to identify with Maitapapa as a site of cultural significance, and the erosion of ties to a Ngāi Tahu identity, at both whānau and tribal level. Cultural poverty did emerge in the oral histories as a strong narrative; it was indeed a function of interracial marriage and migration; and it

did contribute to a kind of 'disappearance'. But the evidence shows that the mixed-descent families of Maitapapa never became truly invisible.

In/visible Sight is not really about loss; it is a story of survival. Today, the generation who were born in urban spaces, and often with few physical ties to Maitapapa, are determined to reforge cultural links with Ngāi Tahu. With the hearings of the Ngāi Tahu Claim before the Waitangi Tribunal and its successful settlement in 1998, many people of Ngāi Tahu descent have discarded the shame and even anger associated with their mixed ancestry and have chosen to reclaim their whakapapa. My experience of readily finding these families, and their willingness to tell their stories, demonstrate quite clearly that, despite a history of overwhelming loss and dispersal, the spirit of the community has survived. The informants who contributed to this book shared their personal experience of shame and anger, the culmination of decades of dislocation from Maitapapa and the deliberate denial of Ngāi Tahu ancestry by earlier generations. Significantly, their accounts also demonstrate that cultural identity has survived, and that the Maitapapa community, while no longer bound geographically to the reserve, still exists today.