DECODING THE COLOURS OF RANK IN MĀORI SOCIETY
WHAT MIGHT THEY TELL US ABOUT PERCEPTIONS OF
WAR CAPTIVES?

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The status of war captives or “slaves” in Māori society has received scant scholarly attention to date and the little that has been published suggests that the topic is subject to much confusion. There are likely to be a number of reasons for this but problems with the sources is an issue that stands out. One difficulty is the wide range of terms in Te Reo Māori which might be applied to these persons and other people of low status—a problem compounded by what appears to be a shift in the way that those terms have been used over time.

Moreover, the most substantial body of material commonly used as evidence for the position of war captives has been the writings of early English missionaries and merchants. Their observations and reactions, however, were surely coloured by their own ideological or religious beliefs. That is evident in their use of the English word “slave”, which has particular connotations, especially during the early 19th century when abolitionist sympathies were prominent in Britain. This is in itself likely to provide false impressions of Māori attitudes towards war captives but so, too, may the fact that those records come predominantly from the years of the so-called “musket wars”. That period was almost certainly an aberration in terms of the scale of warfare and of captive taking. For these reasons, more traditional sources of evidence, including oral traditions, pepeha and whakataukī or proverbs, could be expected to offer deeper insight into Māori perceptions of taurekareka ‘war captives’ before European contact and thereafter also as ‘slaves’. Although the origins of proverbs or traditional sayings are often lost with time, it might be expected that common usage would ensure that they conveyed meanings once widely understood as “common sense”. But, as will be shown, that may not necessarily be the case.

“Ma pango, ma whero, ka oti”, which literally translates as “With black, and with red, it will be done” or the work completed, is probably the best-known Māori whakataukī relating to people from the bottom of the social heap. Perhaps the earliest published explanation, from missionary Richard Taylor’s 1855 book Te Ika a Maui, refers to the combined efforts of “gentlemen” [rangatira ‘chiefs or people of high rank’], represented by the colour red, and “slaves”, represented by black. Taylor wrote that it referred “to the custom of chief’s [sic] painting themselves with red ochre and slaves with charcoal,
before they went to war” (Taylor 1855: 127). In an 1879 article, William Colenso also used the word “slave” to explain the reference to black but modified the terminology and the reason for the metaphor of colour somewhat by saying, “The slaves and plebeians, naked and unwashed, were black enough” (Colenso 1879: 116). Those differences aside, it is generally agreed that the whakatauki’s essential message is that all members of a community must contribute for communal wellbeing. However, although the dichotomy of red and black is (or was) clearly meaningful and suggests one potential pathway into past understandings, disentangling their metaphorical, spiritual and physical associations is a formidable task. Nevertheless, disentanglement is necessary if the social structure of Māori society, including the status of war captives, is to be fully understood. Initial research indicates that shifts in the explanations of the axiom may relate to concurrent shifts in attitudes towards that section of society and the language pertaining to it. Therefore, the implications of Western ideas relating to skin colour and how these may have changed the connotations of colour when applied to human beings in the post-European contact era warrant examination.

The colours red and black (as well as white), which are commonly used in Māori art and iconography, carry cosmological significance. Consequently, their use should throw light on the relative positions of war captives and rangatira in terms of mana ‘authority, prestige, psychic force’, tapu ‘spiritual restriction’ and social status, and how each was perceived. So, taking the whakatauki as a starting point, the discussion that follows is an exploration of inherent meaning associated with red and black to consider what they may tell us about perceptions of war captives and the lowlier members of Māori society. It will examine ways in which Māori ascribed colour to different sections of society before European contact as well as apparent changes in those connotations during the 19th century. In doing so, it will consider the extent to which semiotic shifts hinder the 21st century scholar’s ability to understand past perceptions, particularly with regard to war captives.

It must be borne in mind though, that so-called slavery in Māori society bore little resemblance to the trans-Atlantic trade in Africans, and that a number of different Māori words have been translated into English as ‘slave’. A similar lack of precision occurs in some Te Reo Māori texts, wherein one individual may be described by more than one term so that the precise nature of their identity cannot always be clearly determined. Less frequent use of the word taurekareka in late 19th-century texts, suggests, perhaps, a growing discomfiture with its use. Therefore, although the word “slave” will often be used for the purposes of this discussion in order to avoid unnecessary complexity, it should be taken as applying to someone of low status, who the surrounding text or context implies was most probably a war captive.
The notion of race from which modern popular understandings have evolved derives from a period of colonial expansion when scientific developments in Europe provided a means for classifying people into racial groups. These ideas assisted the ideological justification of colonial exploitation but also served to justify slavery, especially in the United States, as well as colonisation more generally (Spoonley 1993: 1-2). Skin colour, a key marker for identifying different social and cultural groups, proved to be a useful mechanism for classifying people into races and for ranking them as either superior or inferior. This in turn implied their innate suitability for positions of either servitude or domination. As Bronwen Douglas (2006: 3) has pointed out, the consolidation of the Atlantic slave trade in the 16th century encouraged a set of purportedly “Negro” characteristics which became the negative standard for describing and comparing human beings. Such theories are also likely to lie behind the perception of some early European observers that Māori slaves belonged to a different and inferior race from their masters.

These connotations of skin colour are assumed to have evolved from earlier ones that attributed positive characteristics such as purity and goodness with white and death and evil with black. The use of black and white as metaphors for dark and light in the English language is often said to have derived from the Bible. Yet, as the Bengali theologian Mukti Barton pointed out, the origins of the Bible lie in the East, not Europe, and he has argued that these metaphors are not evident before being translated into English. Barton explained that in his Bengali language “darkness and blackness are not the same thing” (Barton 2004: 168). Andhokar, the Bengali word for darkness, refers to blindness or something that impedes vision; it is not a colour as kalo ‘black’ is. He therefore reread the Bible to consider whether the association of darkness with blackness originated there or was a purely European concept. Having done so, he concluded that European interpreters have sometimes read black and white into the texts when they were not present previously and, on other occasions, have interpreted less specific terms through the lenses of their own prejudices. That tendency, he suggested, began with Greco-Roman culture which associated black with death and the devil and is evidenced by representations of Africans and “Blacks” as “demons or the devil throughout Christian writings from the 1st century CE” (Barton 2004: 185). In other words, white is normative in European ways of thinking and to describe people as “coloured” carries negative connotations. But does Barton’s thesis concerning the connotations of black hold with regard to Māori understandings and symbolisms and did those pertaining to red alter over time?
As the *whakataukī* indicates, the lowest members of Māori society were connoted by the colour black whereas people of rank are associated with red. Explanations of this saying often refer to the chiefly practice of smearing the body with a mixture of red ochre (*kōkōwai*) and oil.\(^2\) Although it is sometimes said to have been only those of rank and, therefore, with a considerable degree of *tapu* (or the spiritual restriction they were under) whose bodies were besmeared with *kōkōwai*, there is evidence to suggest that it was sometimes more widely available.\(^3\) However, ashes, soot and charcoal were more often associated with “slaves” or lowly folk, perhaps as a corollary of their role as fire makers and cooks. Food preparation was very much the work of these people as cooked food represented a serious danger to the chiefly classes whose *tapu* was vulnerable to contamination or neutralisation by such contact. So *kauta* ‘cookhouses’ were built away from the sleeping quarters and other buildings to allow the *rangatira* to keep a safe distance from them. The lowliest members of the community, consequently, were more likely to have skin discoloured by the smoke at close quarters. What is not immediately evident, however, is whether the symbolisms of colour derive from body adornment, the nature of the work associated with their status, cosmology, or all of these things.

**COSMOLOGY**

The origins of the metaphorical association of war captives with the colour black and people of rank with red appear to lie in the realms of cosmology. Red is the colour of the gods in much of Polynesia and, to a lesser extent, other parts of the Pacific. In Māori society, *mana*, the fundamental basis of chiefly leadership, is derived from the gods and since the *rangatira* represented the most direct lines of descent from the ancestor gods, it follows that red would also be considered a chiefly colour.

But whereas red signifies *tapu* or spiritual restriction, power, rank and the gods, in cosmological terms, black is the opposite of light or the world of life. As in Greco-Roman culture, it represents the world of death. In Anne Salmond’s words, black signifies “a dark, defeated underworld of the ill, the dead and the beaten” (1978: 12). Yet, somewhat paradoxically, black also represents Te Korekore, the realm of potential, the heavens and the male element whereas red represents the earth mother Papatuanuku, gestation and the female element (Te Puni Kokiri 2009). Simon Holdaway’s 1984 MA thesis includes a detailed overview of the symbolic associations of the colour red in New Zealand and other parts of Polynesia, suggesting that the association of red with women relates to *tapu*, extensions of *tapu* and the power of women to *whakanoa* or neutralise *tapu* (Holdaway 1984: 148-49). Serge Tcherkézoff’s (2009) discussion of the ritual defloration of Polynesian
virgins in early encounters with European men may also be relevant in this connection. However, their work, like that of Hanson (1982), Sahlins (1985) and others relating to the tapu of Polynesian women, serves to remind us that while comprehension of past understandings and practices is an ongoing pursuit, as a goal it remains elusive. That said, however, it might be posited that the all-encompassing aspect of the whakatauki’s message also relates to men and women working in partnership.

RED FEATHERS

In a number of Pacific societies, red feathers have been used to indicate chiefly status. Captain James Cook might have gained an inkling of how significant the colour was when his ship was off the east coast of the North Island in October 1769. He had offered an old black coat in exchange for a cloak worn by the headman of a canoe, but its owner spotted a piece of red baize and made it clear that it was the preferred trade item (Cory-Pearce 2005: 73-74). But neither he nor his men had grasped the particular significance of red feathers nor appreciated their especially high value until one of his crew naively gave an unwarranted quantity in exchange for a pig during their visit to the Marquesas in 1774 (Thomas 1991: 94). The Bounty mutineers were similarly surprised that they were able to purchase a bull and a cow “on which [they understood the locals to] set little store” for just a few red feathers when they visited Tahiti 15 years later (Morrison 1935: 52).

Memories of the significance of red feathers appear in Māori traditions such as recorded by Te Rangi Hiroa (Peter Buck) in Vikings of the Sunrise (1938: 269-70):

In the fourteenth century, owing to conflicts in the homeland of Hawaiki, the Maori form of Havai‘i, a number of voyaging canoes set out on Kupe’s sailing directions with the definite object of colonizing the land that lay to the south. Most of the voyagers made their landfall in the Bay of Plenty near Cape Runaway in November or December when the Christmas trees (pohutukawa) were in bloom. One of the chiefs, on seeing the scarlet colour of these trees, took off his red feather headdress and hurled it into the sea, saying, ‘The chiefly colour of Hawaiki is cast aside for the chiefly red of the new land that welcomes us.’

According to Walter Buller, the red-tailed tropic bird was well-known to Ngāpuhi but its rarity was such that they set a high value on its long red tail-feathers, which they exchanged with southern tribes for pounamu ‘greenstone or nephrite jade’. Almost every year, following easterly gales, a few would be washed ashore (generally dead) at North Cape or Spirits Bay and the local people would set out to look for them systematically. So rare
were they that these plumes were more highly prized than those of the *huia* or *kotuku*. Buller claimed that, in one instance, a valuable slab of *pounamu* was given by a Hawke’s Bay chief in exchange for just three of these feathers (Buller 1877: 219).

Where the local biota has not provided ample supplies of red feathers, other sources of colouration have often been employed to indicate chiefly status. It may have been the lack of indigenous sources of red feathers and the new land’s distance from other trade sources that encouraged the use of *kököwai* as a replacement for feathers and, together with a cooler climate, the adoption of cloaks instead of headdresses as signifiers of rank in New Zealand. A shift from cloaks to other forms of red clothing would be a logical next step.

Māori traditions tell that *kököwai* is the blood of the sky parent Ranginui that soaked into the body of the earth mother Papatuanuku. This came about when the primordial couple were being separated by their children and Ranginui clung so fast to his wife that they had to cut off his arms causing his blood to flow (Best 1934: 233). Hence, its use as body paint is generally understood to have signified high social status. William Brougham Monkhouse, the surgeon aboard James Cook’s ship *Endeavour* on its first voyage to New Zealand, referred to the men in a canoe that approached their vessel as being “most ridiculously daubed with patches of red paint in different parts of their face”. But, despite the perceived ridiculousness, he also implied that the reddening heightened the effect of their “black” facial *moko* ‘tattoo’ (1988: 576).

**RED CLOTHING AND CHIEFLY GARMENTS**

The connotations of red clothing were such that Moehanga, a Māori of lowly rank who had joined a British whale ship and reached England in 1806, asked Captain Peter Dillon to take him to Calcutta over 20 years later. He hoped that, once there, he could obtain a red soldier’s jacket to complement his old cap (Chappell c.1997: 49). The associations of *tapu* with red clothing are evident in the recollections of Edward Markham, who spent a few days at Waitangi in 1834 while the British naval ship HMS *Alligator* was in port. He reported that Māori had “much greater fear of the Red [soldiers] than the Blue Jackets [sailors]” (Markham 1963: 46-47).

In New Zealand red garments indicated *tapu* and rank. So, in the story of *Tamainupō* written by Wiremu Te Whēoro of Ngāti Mahuta, the hero, who was the son of a rape victim, humiliated his father by stripping him of the red cloak that symbolised his chiefly status (Mokena 2005: 300).

Some fine cloaks made for persons of high birth were made from fibres that had been coloured with *kököwai* before being woven as opposed to
colouration after the weaving was completed. James Barry’s famous painting of Hongi Hika with Waikato and Thomas Kendall shows him wearing a red cloak but it can also be discerned that the gannet feathers in his coronet have red kaka feathers at their base (Lander, pers. comm. 2006).

In Hawai‘i, on the other hand, yellow became the chiefly colour and the yellow feathers of the *mamo* bird were preferred for the cloaks of the *ali‘i* or chiefly men as well as for the leis worn by *ali‘i* women (Pratt 2002). The *mamo* had only a few tufts of yellow on their bodies and gathering those was the job of professional bird hunters who released them after plucking (Gillis 1998). However, ‘*ahu‘ula*, the word for the Hawaiian feather cloaks made from the black and yellow feathers of the *mamo*, is cognate with the Māori *kahukura* and translates literally as ‘red garment’, retaining linguistically the memory of the formerly recognised chiefly colour (Buck cited in Pratt 2002).

**VARIETIES OF RED AND THE MEANINGS OF KURA**

It may also be the case that Māori had a particularly extensive lexicon of terms to represent shades of red. In response to an earlier article by James West Stack (1879: 153-58), who argued that, as a relatively primitive people, Māori had an “imperfect perception of colour”, William Colenso protested that *whero* was not the only Māori word for the colour red. He listed 13 terms indicating “pure, clear, strong, brilliant, and lasting red colours”, 13 for lessening or lighter shades, 21 for fainter shades, 14 for dark-red or red-brown colours, 5 for faded red colours and at least 6 for “ugly, disagreeable, bad red colours”, together with ways in which Māori had refined their descriptions of these hues (1881a: 49-76). Colenso also mentioned that “*kura, kurakura, ngangana, pakurakura, ura*, etc.” were other Māori terms for red. Subsequently, in another paper on the same topic, he continued his critique of Stack by quoting the latter’s claim that “*Kura* (red) is used very often instead of *whero* to describe redness in any inanimate object”. He went on to write: “Mr Stack evidently never heard of any of their (many) old supernatural beings, still believed to be existing, called *Kura*; and was not *Kura* a common term for the chief of men in the old time? eg.—“‘I te oranga o tenei motu, he *Kura* te tangata’” (1881b: 481).

*Kura* has multiple meanings which may or may not be related. In some senses, it represents the colour red and its associations with *mana* and *rangatiratanga* but it can also mean ornamented with feathers (such as a cloak) and may apply to charms or treasured possessions with magical qualities including important, esoteric knowledge, and even to a “variety of red kūmara reserved for *tohunga* and *ariki*” (Holdaway 1984: 135). Yet, as the naming of a rare white *kiwi* chick born in May 2011 indicates, *kura* does not necessarily
indicate redness. The bird was given the name Manukura to recognise its chiefly status (New Zealand Herald: 24 May 2011). Nevertheless, the spiritual aspects of *kura* and its associations with *kōkōwai* or red ochre are also evident in some of the usages of that substance. When explaining that red was a “sacred colour”, missionary Richard Taylor wrote:

> The way of rendering anything tapu, was by making it red. When a person died, his house was thus painted; when the tapu was laid on anything, the chief erected a post and painted it with the *kura*; wherever a corpse rested, some memorial was set up; oftentimes the nearest stone, rock, or tree served as a monument; but whatever object was selected, it was sure to be painted red. (Taylor 1855: 95)

The paint did not, of course, “render” the object *tapu* but indicated its status to passersby.

**MĀORI TRADITIONS RELATING TO SKIN AND HAIR COLOUR**

Further insight concerning attitudes to physical attributes including skin and hair colour can be gleaned from oral traditions. A number of these refer to a people who inhabited New Zealand before the arrival of the Māori, variously known as *patupaiarehe* or *türehu*. Indeed, one of the *patupaiarehe* tribes was called Pakepakeha which, according to some, was the origin of the modern term Päkehā. It seems quite probable that the skin colour of early explorers and traders may have offered some advantage in terms of initial reception. Although there appears to be no clear evidence of this, Māori’s memories of their first meetings with Europeans indicate that their unusual appearance, if nothing else, suggested a supernatural origin for them. Patuone used the term ‘*tupua*’ to describe his father’s first impression of Europeans (*Te Ao Hou* 1965: 15) but a Ngāti Porou account recorded by Mohi Turei was even more explicit. He wrote: “They were *turehu* [fair people], punehunehu [misty-looking], *ma* [fair], *ma korako* [pale, like albinos], *whero takou* [red, like red ochre]” (Salmond 1993: 62).

However, Ngāti Hotu, the tribe remembered as already living in the Taupō area when Ngātoroirangi and Tia arrived on the *Arawa* canoe, were described as *urukēhu* or fairy people because of their unusual red hair and fair skin. A Ngāti Ira *whatatauki* or saying cited by Te Rangihiroa also links fair colouring with descent from an ancestor of high rank:

> *He aha te uru o to tamaiti? Kapatau he uru korito, he koraki, he uru ariki no Pipi.*

What is the hair of your child. Were it flaxen hair or whitish, it would be the hair of high chieftainship from Pipi. (Hiroa 1922: 3)
Mead and Grove cite the same whakataukī, translating the second part as “If it is flaxen hair, a chiefly blond, then it is the noble hair of Pipi”, and explaining that blond hair was said to be inherited from Pipi, an ancient chief, and denoted nobility (Mead and Grove 2004:179). Traditions relating to the patupaiarehe vary but generally suggest that cooked food (which has the power to whakanoa or neutralise tapu) was offensive to them. Others state that albino birds and eels as well as red flax and red eels were considered the property of the patupaiarehe and that trouble would befall any Māori who took them (Wikaira 2009).

Other writings from the early 20th century imply or refer directly to fair-skins as signs of chiefly status. For example, in 1905, Paora Haenga described the people who came on the waka Tainui, Te Arawa, Takitimu, Matatua [sic], Kurahaupo, Tokomaru, Aotea, and Nukutere as being “he Tohunga katoa, he tapu, he urukehu katoa ‘all experts, tapu and all fair (or reddish) haired’” (Te Puke ki Hikurangi, 1 September 1905: 6).

The association between fair skin and chiefliness was again made explicit in an article published in the Māori language newspaper Te Toa Takatini in 1926, in which Reweti T. Kohere described Te Kani Takirau as being:

he tangata tu rangatira, he roa, he kiritea, he ataaahua. He urukehu ona makawe, he mingimingi. Kaore he tohu o te rangatira i ngaro atu i a ia. I te mea he tangata tino rangatira ia ko tona ahua ki tona iwi he tangata tapu.

(De Toa Takatini 1 June 1926: 413)

a man of high rank, tall, fair-skinned, handsome. His hair was fair (or reddish) and curly. He lacked no chiefly attributes. Because he was of very high rank, he was considered by his people as a tapu person. (My translation)

But was it the fairness of his skin and hair or the intimation that he was descended from urukēhu that represented his chiefly attributes, or are they one and the same?5

Rawiri Te Motutere, also known as Rawiri Koheta, a Puketapu (Taranaki) chief and warrior who died about 1860 or 1870, was so proud of his fair complexion that he went to great lengths to protect it and the particularly beautiful moko that adorned his face. According to his granddaughter, Mere Ngamai of Te Atiawa, he was both a fair skinned and light haired man, referred to as an urukēhu, who protected his face from the sun by wearing a type of mask, known as a mata-huna. Te Motutere wore the mask on special festive occasions as well as when he travelled. Made from the thin but strong rind of the hue-gourd and tattooed exactly like the moko on his face, the mask was decorated at the sides and top with black and white feathers
and fastened at the back of his head with flax cords. It is said that his tall, straight, martial appearance was much admired at public gatherings when he paraded up and down with his taiaha (hand-held weapon) in his hand, addressing the assembled crowds through the mouth-opening in his grim, black-tattooed mata-huna, waving with feathers (Cowan 1930: 148-49). So there is something of a contradiction here in that not only are moko a way of blackening the face but Te Motutere covered his apparently desirable pale face with an exceptionally dark mask.⁶

**RANGATIRA DISGUISE THEMSELVES AS SLAVES**

Such contradictions aside, the contrasts between the bodily appearances of rangatira and taurekareka are evident in a number of oral traditions in which ancestors of high-rank sought to disguise themselves as slaves, not only by messing up their hair and wearing old, dilapidated clothing, but also by besmearing themselves with charcoal, ashes, or soot. So ridiculous was the idea that these tales were considered to be very humorous. Demigods and rangatira using these means of disguise to infiltrate another community is a motif that occurs in a number of traditions including the stories of Tāwhaki, Whakatau, Paowa, Tama, and Tinirau. The comic aspect is made specifically in one version of the story of Whakatau, the son of Tuwhakararo and Apakura. In an attempt to avenge his father’s death, Whakatau had his hair cut short before rubbing his face all over with charcoal in order to conceal his chiefly identity and mingle unobtrusively among the workers in the village of his enemies. The effect was so amusing that they said: “What a black-looking fellow he is!” and his quarry, Poporokewa “burst out laughing at his appearance” (Grey 1855: 106).

In Christine Tremewan’s translation of the story of Paowa, as recorded by the missionary Johann Wohlers, the hero was hiding inside a log that was washed ashore. Some firewood collectors almost took the log for fuel but rejected it as too heavy and wet. When they left the area, Paowa emerged from hiding and left his ‘kura’ or treasures elsewhere. At the same time, he “made himself look dirty and insignificant, just like a slave” (2002: 349, 353). Based on Wohlers’ original manuscript, which recorded the tradition from Māori on Ruapuke Island about 1850, Tremewan translated kura loosely as ‘treasures’ but the missionary was somewhat more specific in a later English language rendition published in the Transactions and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New Zealand in 1875. In that version, he referred to the kura as a precious red substance with magical powers and recounted that Paowa “washed himself clean, tied up his hair, and put the feathers in it. Then he dressed and anointed himself with oil mixed with the charmed kura, and so he was transformed into a most handsome Maori gentleman”.
This description is in line with the idea that he was initially concealing his rangatira or chiefly status by hiding his kura as well as dirtying himself to give the impression of being a slave and that, when he chose to reveal himself as the rangatira he was, he smeared himself with a magical—possibly red—substance. In this later version, Wohlers (1875: 115, 120-21) also mentions that his hair was dressed into a topknot and adorned with feathers as part of his transformation back into a rangatira.

The account of Tama’s attempts to find his wife who had left him for a better-looking man refers to a similar disguise. In Wohler’s version, having gone through the painful process of acquiring a moko to make himself more handsome, he then “disguised his newly acquired beauty with dirt and ashes, and made himself look like a mean man” (1874: 51). In this case, when he finally revealed his true self, Tama washed off the dirt, dressed his hair into a topknot, and “clothed himself in his treasures” (Tremewan 2002: 271).

Similarly, when Tinirau’s son Tūhuruhuru wanted to find his mother, he was advised to disguise himself by rolling around on the ground where some fern had been burnt off in order to gain entry into her village as a stray slave (Mokena 2005: 124, Taylor 1885: 111).

In Ngāti Wai’s account of the circumstances surrounding Manaia’s discovery of his wife’s adultery, as told by Taipari Munro, the identity of his wife’s lover was exposed by the ashes transferred from his body to hers. Her infidelity was discovered when Manaia returned home from a fishing trip and called to his wife to help him haul his canoe to shore. Because the water was deep, she hitched up her clothing to swim out towards him and, when she did so, her husband saw that her body was covered in ashes. That was Manaia’s proof that she had lain with his slave (pononga) because, as Munro explained it, the slave was in the habit of sleeping in the embers of the fire to keep himself warm on cold nights (Munro, Waka Huia, October 2005).

It seems from the way that dirt, soot, ashes, and charcoal were used as a means of disguise that it is not the skin colour itself that equates with status but that slaves and those of the lowest orders were the ones obliged to light and maintain fires and take care of cooking and that their skin was blackened as a result of those activities. John Turnbull Thomson, who came across a female slave in the early years of European settlement, described her as having “dark brown skin… blackened with smoke, and her eyes were red with the fumes of the manuka and black pine” (1867: 65).

The nature of their work, combined with fewer opportunities for personal grooming, would have exacerbated the dirty and unkempt look of slaves. In other words, doing the dirty work caused one to be black or the black ones did the dirty work. So, while the superficial skin colorations of kōkōwai or
ashes indicated status, the latter might also be a consequence of roles assigned to those in a low social position.

Yet, although a connection between dark skin and fires or cooking is apparent in the term *kirioke*, which translates literally as oven or hangi-skinned, the word may also have more than one level of meaning. Putoto Kereopa explained that the Ngāti Tautahi and Ngāti Whakaeke *whakataukī* “Ngā papa kino o Kirioke” (The dark rocks of Kirioke) refers on one hand to the black skin of the people and the blackness of the Kirioko rocks, but is also a reference to their bravery (Kereopa cited in McRae 1987: 59). Some early Pākehā writers, including Richard Taylor, referred to Māori warriors smearing themselves with charcoal when going into battle, as indicated by his explanation of the *whakatauki*. It is a suggestion supported by missionary William Yate’s recollection of an occasion when he and two of his brethren broke up a fight between some of the Ngāpuhi chief Moka’s slaves. Having entered the fray with a clean white jacket and nankeen trousers, he left “covered from head to foot with charcoal [?] and hair oil” (Yate 1 Nov 1833). Richard Cruise, who visited Waitangi in 1820, reported warriors with their bodies painted red and their faces smeared with a kind of blue paint (1874: 186). The blue was likely *pukepoto*, a rarer product formed from the decomposition of fossil bones (Walsh 1903: 5). Perhaps less reliable is a description by the novelist Captain J. C. Johnstone, who wrote in his 1874 fictional story that 300 “choice young men and the noted warrior that commanded them were all smeared with charcoal in preparation for battle” (Johnstone 1874: 155). Red likely indicated the *tapu* state of the warriors but was charcoal applied for merely practical reasons—such as camouflage—or did its blackness signify the male element or their bravery?

While questions remain, the evidence suggests that, prior to European contact and, perhaps, for some time after that, Māori may have associated a fair skin with high rank, although the link between dark skin and low status may be related more directly to the nature of the work typically done by slaves. In post-contact times, however, Māori appear to have absorbed something of the Western attitude which associated black-skinned people with slavery and perceived slaves as people less worthy of humane treatment than may have previously been the case. So, in order to consider how Māori understandings related to skin colour altered following European contact, this discussion turns to review some outsider impressions from the 18th and 19th centuries.

PHYSICAL SKIN COLOUR IN WESTERN THINKING

Skin colour was a matter of great interest to early European explorers and travellers. For example, George Robertson, who visited Tahiti in 1767 as master of HMS *Dolphin* described “three distink colours of people” there,
“the red or Indian Colour”; “the Whitest sort”; and “the Mustees”. He
described that last as being of a colour that sat between the whitest and the
red (Robertson 1948: 179). His remarks that the “Servents” who paddled the
great canoes were of “a coper [sic] colour” and that “the whole of the fair
people sit under the Canopys” imply that he considered fairer skin and thus
status to be the result of less exposure to the sun (p. 227).

Taking a more matter-of-fact approach when he accompanied James Cook
to New Zealand in 1789, W.B. Monkhouse (1988: 586) reported that although
Māori “almost universally” had black hair, he had seen two men with brown.
But physical appearance continued to be a matter for observation and record
well into the 19th and 20th centuries. Ferdinand Hochstetter, who led an
expedition to New Zealand in the late 1850s, described the Māori people in
the context of the wider Pacific but linked their colouring to other attributes
and higher “rank” on the scale of human civilisation:

Two human races differing widely in physical and mental qualities, in
language, manners and customs, inhabit the islands scattered over the Pacific
Ocean. One race of very dark complexion, almost black, of ungainly make,
of an extremely low grade of mental faculties, savage and for the most part
incapable of civilization, occupies the southwestern part…. They are generally
designated as Melanesians or Papuas.…
The second race, of a lighter complexion, in all the various shades of brown,
of an admirably regular make, ranks much higher. (von Hochstetter 1867:
199-200)

With regard to the second group, Hochstetter continued:

To these Polynesians proper the natives of New Zealand belong; they are
moreover the most important family of the Polynesian race both as to number,
and mental and physical faculties. (p.201)

Still later, in 1868, William Colenso was less inclined to categorise,
reporting more simply that Māori varied more in colour than any other
Polynesians:

Various hues of olive, of yellow-brown, and of an approach to the copper-
colour were common. A few were of fair complexion; while others were very
dusky, particularly of the more Northern tribes. Such colours, however, were
not invariably perpetuated by descent; seeming rather to follow the abnormal
law of all domesticated animals. (1868: 5)

Richard Taylor agreed that complexions and hair colour varied. For him,
Māori were “decidedly a mixed race”, some of whom had “woolly hair, others
brown or flaxen; some are many shades darker than others”. Taylor added: “So dark are some of these natives, that they are joked by others as being Pokerekahu, which is a name for a very black kind of kumara; in fact, they have many terms of reproach amongst themselves for these dark persons, such as kiwakiwa, pangopango, signifying black” (1855: 203).

Taylor’s use of the word “reproach” implies that he considered darker skin to be less esteemed than fair. It is possible that Taylor was conditioned to interpret remarks which, in reality, were neutral as being negative or insulting when they were not, but a pepeha relating to Punga, a son of Tangaroa, tends to support his perception:

*Kātahi ka auraki mai ki te whānau a te mangmangu kikini, i te aitanga a Punga i a aue e!*

Now you come back here to the family of the ill-favoured dark one, a descendant of Punga such as I. (Mead and Grove 2004: 185)

This apparently sarcastic expression was uttered by a man whose lover returned after deserting him. Punga was said to be the progenitor of repulsive lizards, so ugly people were referred to as his progeny. The pepeha is said to remind us that appearance is not the only basis for judging people but, again, there is an intimation that dark people were ill-favoured.

Colenso and Taylor’s impressions that there was significant variation in Māori skin tones are supported by the evidence that pre-European contact Māori had a number of terms for differentiating people on the basis of complexion. In 1893, Ngāti Porou’s Tuta Tamati explained dark-skinned people were referred to as kiri-parauri, light-coloured people as kiri-tea, and those considered to be red-skinned as kiri-waitutu, the last term being derived from the colour of the juice of the tutu berry (Tamati 1893: 62). However, although there are suggestions that whiteness or fair skin was highly esteemed in Māori society, those connotations may have related to the greater cleanliness of the rangatira class and/or suggestion of descent from the earliest races of people to have settled the land which may have conferred greater status or rights as tangata whenua or first settlers.

During the 19th century, however, Western ideas of race were often conflated with class. A number of societies and cultures have historically associated skin colour with social rank. Often, this has related to the idea that the lower classes, being the workers, spend more time in the sun and are consequently darker skinned than their more leisured compatriots. Paler skin is thus a sign of wealth and status. That idea was not only evident when George Robertson visited Tahiti in 1767 but also in Edward Tregear’s *Maori-
Polynesian Comparative Dictionary, published in 1891. With regard to the word whero meaning red or reddish brown, Tregear noted that the Hawaiian proverb “He weo ke kanaka, he pano ke alii” or “Red is the common man, black is the chief” was in direct contrast to the Māori conception of colour and rank. He sought to account for this by suggesting that:

The Hawaiian proverb, speaking of black as a chief’s hue, probably refers to the heavy tattooing of a noble…. The Polynesian chiefs of ancient descent were often very fair, probably owing to long lines of ancestry descending through ladies kept in close seclusion, and protected from the heat of the sun, in which the common people worked almost naked.

That idea, perhaps combined with contemporary associations of race with class, may have supported the belief of some European observers that Māori “slaves” were an inferior race to “free” or rangatira Māori.

However, another reason for these perceptions is the idea espoused by missionary Richard Taylor and early European ethnologists that the Māori had conquered and dispossessed a Melanesian people who had settled New Zealand before them. That alleged earlier race was often conflated with the Moriori people of the Chatham Islands. According to Taylor, Māori enslaved New Zealand’s “first sable colonists” just as the descendants of Shem (ancestor of the Jews) and Japheth (ancestor of Europeans) had enslaved the children of Ham (Africans). Despite his rejection of biblical analogies, Elsdon Best was influential in promoting much the same understanding: that Māori had enslaved the Moriori and other Melanesian settlers (Holman 2010: 87-89). They were ideas that gained considerable traction by way of justifying the Pākehā ‘conquest’ of Māori. By waging war and confiscating Māori land, the settlers claimed to be acting just as the Māori had before them.

Robert Carey’s poor opinion of Wiremu Kingi’s people at the Waitara, as well as those of Taranaki and Ngāti Ruanui more generally, was surely influenced by his being a military man involved in the hostilities described in his 1863 book. In Narrative of the Late War in New Zealand, he wrote of the Taranaki people as “men whom the Waikato looked down on as slaves, and whom our own people acknowledged as an inferior race, in customs, independence, build, and courage” as compared to tribes from Waikato and elsewhere (Carey 1863: 36). However, Reverend Abraham, the Bishop of Wellington, wrote similarly when he compared the conquered Moriori to Waikato Māori:

I have had the teaching of some of the Ma-ori-oris, and found them duller of intellect and heavier in body and mind than any other Polynesians I have ever seen—in fact, more like some of the Australian Papuens [sic] whom I have had to teach, and whom I observe Mr. Wallace connects with Polynesians.
But as with the Maoris, so with the Australians, I have seen and taught two perfectly distinct types of mental and bodily structures in both races. One Australian was as heavy, thick-lipped, broad-featured, and amiable as a Mo-ori-ori; the other was as keen, sharp-featured, and self-willed as the highest type of Maori; I say the highest type, because the chiefs generally, and some of the finest tribes, such as the Waitakos [sic], have the intellectual haughty expression of what is, or used to be, called the Caucasian race; while the great mass of the people have the crisp woolly hair, the thick lips, the broad face, and the good-humoured look of the negro, though highly improved and developed. (Bishop of Wellington 1869: 395)

WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARDS AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

The ranking of racial types inherent in the Bishop’s comparison had a long history by 1869. Western visitors to the Pacific in the late 18th and 19th centuries often compared Melanesians and Australian Aborigines unfavourably with Polynesians including Māori. Their responses, partly based on skin colour and partly on cultural and environmental factors, were candidly expressed to Māori. The Maori Messenger: Ko te Karere Maori, a bilingual newspaper published by the government, followed that tradition, seeking to explain why Māori were “a superior race of men, whilst the Australians, unhappily, [were] a very inferior” one. In an 1849 editorial, Māori readers were told: “[Australians] are a most savage race of people. They go entirely naked (unless in towns, where the whites have taught them decency), and paint their bodies with various colours, and ornament themselves with beads and shells…. They are too ignorant and too indolent to dig the ground.”

The item went on to explain more fully why the Aboriginals were both pitied and held in contempt for the various attributes it ascribed to them (MM: TKM 19 Jan 1849). These ideas would not have been new to Māori, though. Sealers and whalers, who had previously spent time in Australia, resided in a number of New Zealand coastal areas and shared their impressions of the indigenous inhabitants of that country with them.

MĀORI ATTITUDES TOWARDS MORIORI AND ABORIGINES

So it should not be surprising if Māori absorbed something of the Western attitude which associated black-skinned people with slavery and as lesser human beings. A case in point is the way that the Moriori people of Rekohu (the Chatham Islands) were treated by the Māori tribes Ngāti Tama and Ngāti Mutunga who invaded their homeland in 1835. Several scholars have argued the Moriori were treated with unusual brutality—much more so than appears to have been the case in other times and places. Of particular interest is that these slaves or conquered people were not referred to by any pre-existing
words in the Māori language but by the newly coined “paraiwhara”, a transliteration of the English term “black fella” (Belgrave 2005: 295). The name is said to have been adopted because the conquerors had heard the term used by sealers and traders to refer to Aboriginal Australians. And, that they treated the Moriori in the harsh ways they understood Europeans to have treated indigenous Australians. Because the phrase was used regularly with evident contempt, and from the impressions gained during their own visits to Australia, Māori understood their Australian counterparts to have been enslaved by the British. Within this mindset, Māori might have apprehended that their status was so degraded it would have been unthinkable to intermarry with them—for the British and, therefore, for Māori too. Having said that, there were cases of intermarriage between Māori and half-caste Australian Aboriginals in South Island whaling communities but possibly not with full-blooded Aboriginals (Prickett 2008). Indeed, the author of one article about the half-caste whaler Tommy Chaseland was asked by an informant not to publish her name as “members of her family were not ‘terribly impressed’ that they had Aboriginal ancestors” (Russell 2008: 11). Such responses may also explain why the Māori conquerors forbade intermarriage with Moriori, contrary to customary practice. Moriori were not only debarred from marrying Māori but also prohibited from marrying within their own community. Again, the existence of some half-castes attests to relationships having occurred, but their Moriori mothers appear to have been considered more as concubines than wives (Waitangi Tribunal 2001: 3.12, 7.1). Another aspect of the Rekohu situation that differed from norms on the mainland was the fact that the Moriori were not taken back to the lands of their masters or conquerors but enslaved on their own lands. It would seem then, that in this context, the term “Black fella” and its equivalents implied status rather than skin colour.

However, while the origin of the word paraiwhara as applied to the Moriori has been acknowledged, another name, recorded by Elsdon Best, may have similar roots. In a version of “The Legend of Rata”, Best recounted that:

The Maori folk of New Zealand have preserved a long traditional account of voyages made by Rata, Manu-korih, and others in past times. These must have taken place before the Maori left eastern Polynesia to settle these isles. The voyages are said to have been made to the south-west, and to have occupied four months. Manu-korih was a chief of the clans Pakau-moana and Te Ahi-utu-rangi, who led a party of his people from Whiti-anaunau to a strange land in the south-west, where two chiefs named Matuku-tangotango and Pou-hao-kai lived at a place called Pariroa. Hine-komahi, daughter of Turongo-nui, Te Rara-a-takapu, Whakaauapa, and Mohokura were other important persons of
Pari-roa. The folk who lived at that place were pakiwhara—that is, a shiftless people who lived in poor huts not good houses, and scattered about. They subsisted on fish, shellfish, birds, and vegetable products, but did not cultivate food. They often moved their place of abode, hence they did not construct good houses. (Best 1923: 38)

This description of a nomadic, non-agricultural people accords with 19th century European ideas relating to race which typically categorised such societies as “savage” (see, for example, Clayworth 2001). Therefore, it might be wondered whether the term pakiwhara was another transliteration for black fella? Was Best’s informant describing a people he expected the ethnologist to recognise as inferior to Māori?

Preconceptions work both ways, however, because George French Angas reported in 1844 that an Australian Aboriginal, known, ironically, as Black Charley, had “heard much of the cannibal propensities of the New Zealanders”. Charley worked on a schooner and was, according to Angus, “afraid to go ashore for fear of being devoured”.

[H]e always exhibited the most violent signs of fear whenever any of the natives came on board the schooner, fully expecting they would purchase him for a ‘cooky’, or slave, to be killed and eaten. The young New Zealanders, on the other hand, were greatly amused at the dark colour of his skin, and laughed at him for being so ugly; calling him ‘Mango, Mango’ [sic] or ‘black fellow’. (Angas 1847: 280)

The idea that Māori treated the Moriori as they understood the British to treat indigenous Australians is also supported by the fears articulated by Māori rangatira when they were being asked to sign the Treaty of Waitangi. Rewa, one of the first chiefs to speak on that occasion, was initially unwilling to sign, saying: “No, no, no; return. What! This land to become like Port Jackson and all other lands [located] by the English” (Colenso 1971: 19).

Similar sentiments were expressed at the Hokianga gathering arranged to obtain further signatures to the Treaty eight days later. On this occasion Taonui, who had previously visited Sydney, asked: “How do the Pakehas behave to the black fellows of Port Jackson? They treat them like dogs! See! A Pākehā kills a pig; the black fellow comes to the door, and eats the refuse” (Shortland 1845: 10).

The Maori Messenger newspaper did little to counter the impressions Māori may have acquired from those early whalers and sealers, who characterised the Australians as unworthy savages, and from their own experiences of the way they were treated. The 1849 editorial sought to flatter its Māori readers by explaining that Aboriginal Australians belonged to a lower order of people.
Seeking to allay fears about the rapid alienation of their land and suggestions that they would be reduced to a position like that occupied by the indigenous Australians, the paper told Māori readers that those on the other side of the Tasman Sea did not meet the prerequisites of land ownership:

Bad and designing men may tell you, and we believe have told you, that Englishmen are anxious to strip you of your lands. They may, to induce you to believe them, point to Australia where the natives occupy no land. It is true they do not—but why? Because they are savages with no brains —no industry—no intellect and, like brutes, they but roam the surface of the earth, instead of (as you do) rendering it the means of supplying them with food and habitations. …

APPARENT CHANGES IN ATTITUDE OR PERCEPTION

When speaking of Māori, however, the language tended to be gentler. In 1857, for example, Governor Robert Gore Browne responded to a letter of appreciation from the Māori people of Rangiaowhia, referring to the two peoples as kiritea ‘fair-skinned’ and kiri parauri ‘brown-skinned’. Rangiaowhia, which had been a highly productive and flourishing settlement until this time, was one of the areas closely associated with the rise of the Kīngitanga or Māori King Movement. The idea of a Māori king had been put forward in the early 1850s as a means of stopping or slowing the alienation of Māori land, preserving Māori mana and authority, and maintaining law and order internally. Tensions between the Māori and settler communities had been building from the time that settler self-government was introduced in 1852 and became more evident when the Māori economy collapsed over the summer of 1855-56. In order to deal with these many issues, a number of tribal groups from the Waikato area had formed the Kīngitanga and selected the first Māori king, Pōtatau Te Wherowhero, in 1858. However, the racialising of tensions is apparent. As Governor George Grey advised the Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1862, “the hatred of race” among some of the settler community was allowing Māori little confidence in his government. Offensive terms like “nigger” or “black nigger” were being used too often for Māori comfort (O’Malley, Sterling and Penetito 2010: 85, Pearson 1964: 21).

Lachy Paterson’s study of the government’s Māori-language newspapers published between 1855 and 1863 found that although Pākehā writers used various terms to describe the skin colours of different races, they typically referred to kiri ma ‘white-skinned’ and kiri mangu ‘black-skinned’ as a means of differentiating between Pākehā and Māori. The Kingitanga adopted a similar usage when it produced its own newspaper, Te Hokioi, in response to government propaganda. However, Paterson suggests that the dichotomy of
colour was employed here to promote exclusivity from Pākehā as concepts of “black pride” or “black consciousness” have been in more recent times (Paterson 2002: 89).

At an 1856 gathering when another candidate for the kingship, Tūwharetoa’s Iwikau te Heuheu, flew a flag given him previously by then Governor Sir George Grey, two other flags, fluttered beneath it. Having declined the kingship, Te Heuheu nonetheless urged those assembled to abide by the Treaty saying:

Chiefs assembled, hearken! You see the flags on each arm flying side by side. The white is the Pakeha and the red is the Maori. The white ropes are the Pakeha and the black ropes are the Maori. Altogether they suspend the pole, and all is well. If any of the ropes break away, then the pole is weakened! (Waitangi Tribunal 1993: 4.4)

This is relevant because similar references to Māori as red were evident when other tribal groups, not aligned with the Kingitanga, met with Governor Thomas Gore Browne and other officials at a politically significant conference held in 1860.

That gathering was held at a crucial time in the relationship between European settlers and Māori. Many settlers and politicians saw the establishment of the Kingitanga in 1858 as a challenge to European authority. Then, when war broke out in Taranaki in April 1860, some believed the movement to be behind the resistance of Wiremu Kingi and his supporters. The settler government was therefore anxious to bolster Māori loyalty, discourage other disaffected groups from aligning with the King, and to ratify or gain wide endorsement of the Treaty. With those aims in mind and in an endeavour to draw attention away from the Kingitanga and the war, Browne convened a meeting at Kohimarama, Auckland, which began in July 1860 and continued over a month. It was attended by other government officials and over 200 leading Māori chiefs, but neither the King nor Wiremu Kingi, whose refusal to cede his land in Taranaki had led to the war, were invited to attend. It may be significant, therefore, that on this occasion, two distinguished leaders from tribes not then associated with the King, each referred to the Māori people generally as ‘kiriwhero’ or red-skinned. These were Te Keene of Ngāti Whātua, and Eruera Patuone of Ngāpuhi.

Having remarked that British laws were given him merely to look at but not to participate in (Homai ana enei ture hei matakaitaki noa maku—kahore he ture) Te Keene said:

_Tena pea ki ture ki muri atu, ka rite ai te kiritea te kiriwhero_
Hereafter perhaps we shall have a law whereby the white skin and the red skin shall be equal. (MM:TKM, 14 July 1860:24)

Eruera Patuone, on the other hand, quoted the words of Porokuru:

*E mahara ana au ki te kupu a Porokoru, i mea ra, ‘Ahakoa kotahi taku wai ko Waikato, ma taku ringa e kapu te kiri whero, te kiri ma.’*

I remember the words of Porokuru when he said, ‘Although I occupy but one river, Waikato— my hand will slay both the red skin and the white skin.’

(MM:TKM, 1 September 1860:7)

Patuone supposed the latter’s threat referred to him on the basis that no other tribe had identified itself as closely with the Pākehā as his, hence Porokuru’s enemies were Māori as well as Pākehā.

Mokena Kohere’s reference to skin colour was somewhat different, however, when he wrote to the gathering from Waioratane, saying:

*Ko te hepara mo tatou, e nga iwi katoa, ko te Karaiti anake, ahakoa Pakeha, Maori ranei, kirimangu, kiriwhero ranei kotahi ano te toto i hanga ai tatou katoa.*

The shepherd for us all, O people, is Christ only — whether Pakeha or Maori, black skin or red skin, we are all of one blood. (MM:TKM 15 December 1860: 12)

In this example, Kohere appears to be using ‘kiriwhero’ or red-skin to refer to the Pākehā and black to Māori.

But Ngāti Toa’s Hohaia Pokaitara saw it quite differently again. He said that when a person is Māori they are spoken of as having black skin and black thoughts. But since they had become attached to the Pākehā, Pokaitara suggested they should all be white: “*E Māori ana te tangata ka kiaa he Māori, e pango ana te kiri, e pango ana nga whakaaro. Ka apititia nei tatou ki te Pakeha kia ma ano hoki tatou katoa.*” (MM:TKM, 2 September 1860: 24).

While his meaning may no longer be transparent, these words suggest that Pokaitara felt that by changing from being black or dark, along with their thoughts, Māori people were moving towards enlightenment or Christian ways of doing things, which was surely a reflection of missionary teachings.

The question remains as to whether the Kohimarama speakers were distancing themselves from the Kīngitanga by deliberately employing a different self-identification or quite independently asserting their greater chiefliness as compared to Europeans by applying a chiefly metaphor to
themselves? As Lachy Paterson pointed out, the “black white dichotomy” served to “usurp from Maori the noble qualities of their chiefly society” (Paterson 2002: 87). So, were the references to themselves as red-skinned alluding to their mana and tapu, especially in the context of the politically-charged Kohimarama Conference, or because identifying themselves as black was an ill-omen suggesting that they had succumbed?

The contrast between light and dark was evident at a hui at Motupipi in the Nelson Marlborough area in August 1860 when Marino, a local rangatira, referred to Queen Victoria as his parent or guardian. He said that he would trust in God and the Queen and sleep under her wings. “[W]e have daylight when we have the Queen”, he said, “she is the author of all good from her we have our own present wealth take her away and all will return to darkness — I will have no one but the Queen the sun shall shine on me.”

Other speakers supported his sentiments on that occasion including Te Koihua who said “… let me be warm, let the sun shine” and Takarei Pairata who, confirming his intention to remain in Te Tau Ihu, said, “See this Kotuku (white crane) feather I have taken it from my head and stuck it in the ground before you—Here I am let the dark works remain at their own place, do not bring them here” (Mitchell and Mitchell 2007: 45).

Pōtatau’s successor, King Tāwhiao, who had not been present at the Kohimarama conference, used the Kīngitanga’s preferred term for Māori skin colour when he welcomed “the people of the east, north, west and south” to Waikato in 1862, saying, “In the past we were noble (rangatira) people. Now, although the skin is black, let the business of those who organise things be clear (marama), to cleave to the law, love and faith” (Paterson 2002: 89).

A Southern Cross newspaper correspondent had perceived a new attitude at a gathering held at Tāwhiao’s home area of Ngāruawāhia on 24 May 1860. He reported being “painfully convinced that the general feeling of the natives in regard to white men [had] undergone a great change—proved not only by the distinction frequently made in speeches as ‘Kiri mangu’ (black skin), and ‘Kiri ma’ (white skin); but by their general demeanour and conversations” (DSC 5 June 1860: 3).

* * *

So what are we to make of all this? Clearly there are many apparent contradictions. For example, if fair skin was desirable, why were those of rank the most elaborately tattooed? Questions remain, too, with regard to the association of red with female elements and black with male. And what were the implications for the initial responses of Māori to early European visitors to New Zealand? There is much work to be done in these and other
areas but where does it leave us with regard to those people referred to as slaves? A myriad of inconsistencies could certainly suggest a fruitless quest but an optimist might see it differently.

It is in the nature of sayings and metaphors that they are typically multi-levelled in their meaning. But, as proverbial sayings evolve to serve new purposes so, too, are oral traditions reshaped to meet contemporary needs. As Ranginui Walker put it: “The moral truths which are the myth-messages are relatively stable but points of detail may be altered to suit local circumstance” (Walker 1992: 182).

Local, in this case, may also mean contemporary. So should these matters confuse us or might the contemporary scholar be able to take advantage of the shifts to gain insight into changing societal modes and perceptions? To quote Walker again: “In some cases the myth-messages are so close to the existing reality of human behaviour that it is difficult to resolve whether myth is the prototype or the mirror image of reality” (ibid.).

There can be little doubt that cosmology, a lack of mana and tapu, and the common physical condition of taurekareka or slaves were all embodied in explicit perceptions of slaves as black. Therefore, it may be assumed that, conceptually, they were all connected. However, although semiotic connotations are ever shifting, it does seem that in many, if not most, contexts black has been a colour with negative connotations for Māori. Barton may well be correct with regard to Bengali understandings, but connections between black and darkness on the one hand and white and lightness or clarity are apparent in the Māori worldview. Red, on the other hand, is clearly associated with mana and tapu.

Yet, despite being deeply embedded concepts, essential to the Māori social order, 19th-century missionaries typically denied the existence of mana and tapu. Moreover, from the 1830s, if not earlier, Western religious and secular authorities have referred to the situation of Māori war captives as slavery and thus evidence of a barbaric institution. Few historians would fail to recognise that allowance must be made for the cultural, political and spiritual baggage inherent in the observations of Europeans as well as the context of their time. But can we assume that the words of Māori were any less affected by these things? Presumably not, since no society is static. Beliefs and attitudes are ever evolving as are sensitivities to the beliefs and attitudes of other cultures. It would seem, then, that Christian teachings, British law, and the settlers’ hostile attitude towards using war captives as a labour force may have influenced what Māori have said at different points in time, as well as how they have said it, and even how they understood past practices themselves. Sources suggest that Western ideas of skin colour, race, and class were obliging Māori to rethink the ways in which they referred to
themselves as a people — albeit not necessarily in a uniform way—and that these, too, brought about changes in mindset. Those circumstances may have altered the terminology applied to war captives from the second half of the 19th century which often saw terms such as mokai and pononga replace the more demeaning or even hostile taurekareka. They may also help to explain the different ways in which the whakataukī “Ma pango, ma whero, ka oti” is used today. Richard Taylor’s explanation that the black represented “slaves” smeared with charcoal became “slaves and plebeians … naked and unwashed” in Colenso’s 1879 article, and “[t]he rank and file workers (plebians)” who “looked black by comparison” in Te Ao Hou magazine (Parker 1966: 10). Over time, the application of the saying appears to have broadened, too. For the Canterbury District Health Board’s Health Promoting Schools magazine in 2007, it meant “Working together to achieve healthy outcomes” (May 2007:1) and for Marlborough Girls’ College’s Kohinewhakarae in 2011, it meant: “with red and black the pattern is completed” (http://www.mgc.school.nz/extra-curricular/interest-groups/maori). The essential message that everyone should pull together seems to remain but the symbolism of the colours is less static.

Decoding the colours of Māori social rank and comprehending past perceptions of people at the bottom of the social heap remains a precarious task. Questions may remain for some time to come but inconsistencies can be informative. They reveal that change was occurring over time, place, and as a political response. Therefore, careful consideration of evidence from multiple sources, with the context of their source and their time in mind, may eventually shine some light on a currently murky aspect of Māori society.

NOTES

1. It should also be noted that some captives gained a considerable degree of status and respect on account of their skills or special abilities.
2. See, for example, Mead and Grove 2004: 282-83.
3. Archdeacon Walsh suggested that it was used by “minor rangatira… on festal and ceremonial occasions” (Walsh 1903: 8) and George French Angas described “a young slave woman” he encountered gathering flax, saying: “Her only garment was a coarse brown mat, extending from her waist to her knees, and her limbs were anointed with kokowai, or red ochre, to keep off the attacks of the sand-flies” (Angas 1847: 101).
4. Warriors in the Marquesas wore red cloth garments called kahu ku’a (Holdaway 1984:142). However, it appears that both red and yellow may have had significance in Hawai’i and renga (turmeric) had associations with the spiritual domain in the Marquesas, Tikopia, Mangareva and Mangaia (Reilly 2009: 85-86).
5. Fair skin appears to be associated with rank in other parts of the Pacific. In Mangaia, for example, light skin and the linguistically similar rauru ke’u (fair, reddish-brown, or brunette) hair colouring was associated with the exiled atua Tangaroa. (Reilly 2009: 145).

6. It may be the case that, in other parts of the Pacific, people of the highest possible rank were not necessarily tattooed. In Mangaia, those with the greatest spiritual authority, referred to by Gill as ‘kings’ and the mouthpieces or priests of Rongo, could not be tattooed: “So sacred were their royal persons that no part of their bodies might be tattooed”. (Gill 1876: 293).

7. Although the word pononga implies a person more like a servant, the information that he was in the habit of sleeping in the embers of the fire suggests he was a very lowly person, most probably a war captive.

8. Browne did not speak Māori himself so the words in Te Reo would have been those chosen by his interpreter.

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Abbreviation:
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Decoding the Colours of Rank in Māori Society


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