

Nicole Atareta Poananga freely admits that she did not have a so-called traditional Maori upbringing, spending most of her formative years overseas. "I have been accused of being Pakeha in my thinking but more and more Maori people are going to be brought up like me — in urban areas and even overseas. There are going to be less and less Maori people who will have had 'traditional' upbringings."

Nicole, who works for Foreign Affairs, believes that no culture is ever static and that the roles within cultures are always evolving. "From when I was about ten to fifteen years old," she relates, "I lived in the Middle East. Here, in countries like Syria, women were covered from head to toe in heavy dark veils. Most never left their houses. Those middle-class women who did go out occasionally were always chaperoned by parents or older women. Women had no public role whatsoever." Such influences made her very aware of women's position in society at an early age. "I cannot accept the argument so often put forward," she says, "that women have equally complementary roles to the men in traditional Maori society. Men and women have their roles but they are not equal."

Maori women throughout the country are becoming more and more involved in groups, from so-called activist groups combating sexism, capitalism and racism to groups who come together to discuss other common problems. Most of the groups are mixed racially and have both men and women, but in all the groups Maori women play dominant leading roles. The problems associated with their roles in Maoridom are often voiced. Merata Mita from Te Arawa, for instance, talks of the roles in the home and the effect on roles on the marae. "So many Maori men are in the pub that their women are in effect playing the role not only of mother but father too. Why, therefore, should they not be able to play the so-called man's role on the marae?"

And even when he's not in the pub but they share their jobs in the home, surely then they should share their roles on the marae."

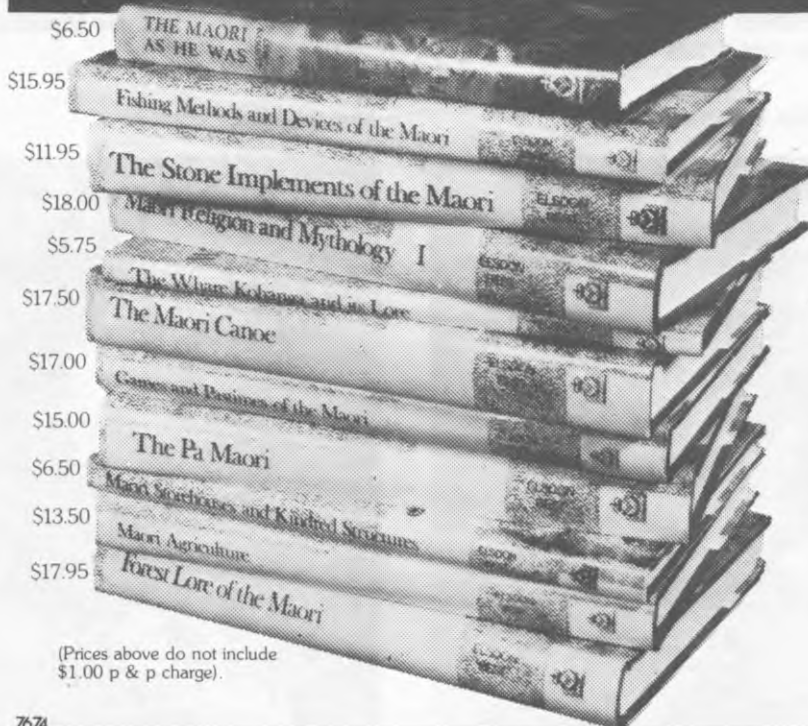
Nearly always the roles on the marae are questioned. Rosina Huriwai from Palmerston North is an advocate for women speaking on the marae. She considers it belittling and offensive that even if she was the greatest speaker in the world and had something of vital importance to say, she would have to have a man say it for her. Worse still, "Pakeha men with only a poor grasp of the Maori language or who can only say 'tena koe', and then mispronounce it, can speak on a marae while our own women are denied this right."

Traditionally it is the women who are responsible for bringing up children; it is from their mothers that children learn to speak. While the Maori language is not used and taught in the home as much as it used to be for a number of other reasons — the fear that it is an impediment to social, educational and economic progress, for example — another reason has been put forward. This is that at a ceremonial level at least Maori is fundamentally a men's language.

Throughout this article the changes in Maori society have been emphasised. What we must be asking ourselves is, do we as Maori people fit ourselves around a rural small village culture, or does our culture fit itself around us?

Some of the issues raised here are currently the subject of much heated debate on and off the marae, particularly among young people and particularly (of course) among women. What do you think? We invite your comments, whatever your sex. Drop us a line (address on page 1) and we'll print the most interesting letters.

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