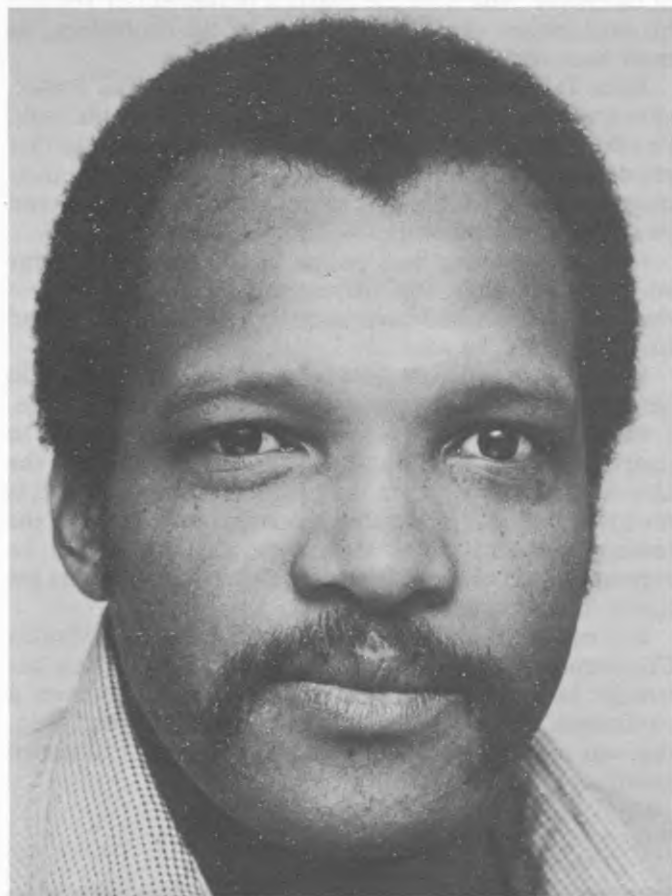


MAORI ARTISTS & WRITERS Tauranga 1980

Lewis Scott

One of the many hui to occur on Queen's Birthday weekend this year was the annual conference of the Maori Artists and Writers Society. It is discussed here not by a Maori writer (or even a Maori artist), but by a special visitor to the hui, black American poet Lewis Scott. Lewis Scott is an Afro-American poet-writer. He's been travelling around the world since 1974 and is presently living in Wellington, where his fifth book of poetry was published by Voice Press earlier this year.



How much life can a person live in three days? Most would no doubt say — three days out of your life. Others, however, might agree that three rare days may encompass three score and ten years of your life.

From 30 May to 1 June 1980 I spent three days in a situation that carried with it the emotion and power of what not only seemed like a full life span, but also a new birth — for at the end of three days it seemed that that was what had taken place in the souls of those who had been there.

Over Queen's Birthday Weekend I had the privilege of attending the Maori Artists and Writers Conference, held on the Huriā Marae in Tauranga. The Maori Artists and Writers Society came into being in 1973 and since then a yearly conference has taken place on different marae.

For me, as a Black American, it was a rare and moving experience to be a part of the conference in a small way, and to feel close to what is surely the heart of Maoridom itself — the marae. It was my first time on a marae and the experience could best be described as spiritual.

By sitting, talking, living, and sleeping inside the meeting house, with no walls between the souls of the brothers and sisters, it began to feel as if the meeting house was one big heart pumping the blood of life to the people inside.

While listening there and being sustained by the heart of the meeting house, my mind's eye looked back to the meeting house of my people: the Black Church in America. And as the marae is the centre of Maori life, the Black Church in America is in many respects the centre of Black American life.

When my people were brought from Africa and forced into slavery, the only place where the white man would let them gather together was in the church. The white man did not do this out of kindness or any belief he had in humanity. Rather, he was trying to use the image of God as a control element. Black people accepted the belief in God, but not in the same light as the white man wanted them to. The Black Church was actually called the meeting house during slavery, and instead of it becoming a tool for the white man to use as a form of control, it became in fact a source of strength for Black people. The meeting house became a place where the slaves gave each other the strength to endure the hell on earth that the white man had forced upon them.

As I sat in the meeting house and listened to the conversation flow among the artists and writers it became very clear that the Maori race had also known a hell on earth at the hand of the "Pakeha".

The conference itself involved a full range of activities. There were over a hundred artists and writers from all over New Zealand, and from Australia. Given the scope of this event, it is not possible to mention by name all of the artists and writers who gave so much to the conference.

Darcy Nicholas, a well-known artist from Lower Hutt, presented a paper entitled "The Future of the Society". In his paper Darcy proposed that Maori artists should be investigating the possibility of having their work exhibited on a world scale. He feels that if artists do not channel some of their work towards international exhibitions there is the very real possibility that a one-sided picture of New Zealand art will be seen on the world market.

Darcy's paper was followed by a very lively discussion led by Katerina Mataira (author, artist and educator). Katerina expressed concern about artists letting their best work leave the country, and the Maori people not being able to share in their artists' creations because their work would be locked away in the homes of the rich. She also expressed concern about artists gearing their work towards the commercial market.