

## Searching

Queues shift slowly round the crowded room — dark skinned and dark-haired or auburn with freckles, a smattering of pale European features.

The wooden walls echo with shrieks of pleasure as new relationships are unearthed — and despairing sighs at the monumental intricacy of old family records.

An old woman cackles and shakes her head, heavy earrings weighing down a face straight from a Goldie frame. "My father — he had six wives, I can't find which one it was. He was descended from five canoes," she tells anyone who wants to listen.

Round the edge of the room the elders sit, quietly observing, already well versed in their past.

### Questioning priorities

Outside on a bench Chris Otene is talking, questioning, analysing.

A purchasing officer and now a Maori warden in Wellington he heard about the marae meeting at the last moment and cancelled his weekend sports to come.

"It's a matter of priorities," he says.

Chris' youth was marked by a series of devastating changes of circumstance.

The eldest child in a traditional family, he was sent to live with his grandparents in Taranaki where he grew up "in a pa-like system with the old families" speaking mostly Maori.

When he was 12 he was sent to a Catholic boys school in Auckland. In the big city, he says, he made the traumatic



**Arapata te Maari, great grandson of Piripi te Maari who first began negotiations over Pouakani in the 1880s. Already well versed in his genealogy back to the canoes and beyond, Arapata, a Mormon elder, came to the wananga to observe and meet friends.**

discovery that colour did make a difference.

His English was poor. "I was a typical Maori kid," he says, giving a quick imitation of his mumbling, headbent younger self.

### Pighunting

Wanting to succeed, though knowing

he really preferred "pighunting, eeling and all that" he took elocution lessons, gaining articulate fluency in English but almost losing his Maori in the process.

Later he joined the Stormtroopers and got tattoos, which to this day he refuses to remove or hide. "They're nothing to be ashamed of."

Chris survived, met and married an English girl, went overseas, came back and went on the Maori land march, became a Maori warden.

He got interested in anthropology — among other things. "I always enjoyed reading about how people interrelate, and about their authority bases."

### Natural simplicity

He was struck by the "natural simplicity" of many attitudes of Maoris and other races and by Western lack of comprehension of these. Western society isn't geared to these ideas but they're pure commonsense."

Chris believes that knowing one's ancestry is vitally important and he has had his complete genealogy drawn up.

He nods toward the dark interior of the meeting house. "I couldn't get up in there and recite my whakapapa — but I've got it all here." He slaps a sheaf of papers in his hand.

Typed lists and filing cabinets may be more governmental than traditional, he says, but anything is better than letting the knowledge die.

"I haven't got kids, but my brother in Auckland has. If one of his kids comes knocking at my door I'd be a bloody fool if all I could say was 'I'm your uncle.'"

## The past

The saga of the Mangakino Township Incorporation goes back to the 1890s when the Maori owners of Lake Waikararapa ceded it to the Crown.

In recompense they were paid £2000 and given the Pouakani Block on the banks of the Waikato, 300km to the north — "a waste of scrub and swamp" according to a brochure on the land, covering about 14,000 hectares.

It lay idle, unused, till the late 1930s when two events transformed land values.

The first was the discovery of cobalt treatment to make volcanic and pumice soils productive.

Second was the Government decision to build the Mangakino hydro electric plant and a town to house construction workers.

Mangakino Incorporation lawyer John Stevens says there are all sorts of tales about the move but it seems likely that the planners were unaware the land had been given to the Maoris till planning had been under way for 18 months.

In 1945 they offered to buy the land but the owners mostly absentee, preferred to lease it to them on the basis

that when building was finished the town would be handed to the Maoris as a going concern.

About the same time the Maori Affairs Department began assisting owners to develop the land, in particular two big sheep stations, Mangakino and Mangatahae which make up the Pouakani development scheme.

In 1947 the first families moved into Mangakino township and by 1961 it had a population of 5025. But in 1963 the population began to drop as construction workers moved out on completion of the project and gave up the leases of their land.

The Maori owners then formed the Mangakino Township Incorporation and leased the 600 to 700 residential properties privately.

Residents bought their own houses and paid about \$40 a year in rents to the incorporation and another \$40 in rates to the Taupo County Council. Today these have increased to round \$200 a year on average for rates and slightly less for rental.

Theoretically the incorporation was picking up about \$60,000 a year in rents but with massive arrears and poor management almost all money collected went in administration costs.

Large sums were also eaten up in unsuccessful ventures including a vineyard and a tourist lodge.

So to date, profits have been minimal. Shareholders have received one dividend of \$12,000 divided among 1500.

Today land in Mangakino township is worth about \$4 million and the two stations — managed by Maori Affairs — another \$7.5 million.

With these now healthy economic units Maori Affairs wants to hand them back to the incorporation — the original owners — but before this can happen at least 40 per cent of shareholders have to vote to take control.

The aim of the weekend wananga was to trace enough owners for a vote to be taken and management committee vice-chairman Tom Johnson says it looks as if this will definitely be able to go ahead.

For instance he said before the weekend shares from nine of the 139 original owners had not been succeeded to.

Now only two or three were still unknown and newly discovered descendants of the others, spanning several generations, would make a significant difference to the number of voters.

But most important he said, was the interest in family and tribal ties generated by the weekend.