

Me aro koe ki te ha o te Hine-ahu-One

Maori women are grappling with the double challenge of being Maori and being female, of preserving their culture and gaining sexual equality.

The question this poses and the tensions it creates came to the fore during this years Maori Womens Welfare League conference held at Aucklands new Sheraton Hotel.

Taking as its theme "Pay Heed to the Dignity of Woman" the four day gathering reflected both the strengths of the league and its divisions.

Many league members want to preserve the status quo, including all aspects of traditional culture but an increasingly vocal group believe that, if they are to have dignity as women, some of the traditions must change.

The conference theme was explained in a powerful address by former league president Mira Szaszy, aided by two younger league members, one of whom, Sharon Hawke, is well known as a land activist and member of the Maori Womens movement.

Mrs Szaszy told the conference the theme was taken from a waiata composed by the late Hori Mataiawhewa and recited by him at the 1980 Timaru conference as a tribute to the wisdom and teachings of his grandmother.

His actual words were: "Me aro koe ki te ha o te tangata" or "Pay heed to the dignity of man."

However because of strong feelings expressed by Sharon Hawke and other younger members the word "tangata" was changed to "Hine-ahu-One" to leave no doubt as to the intent of the theme.

Mrs Szaszy said that sexism and racism were blood brother of the same attitude of mind.

"If you believe racism exists in our society and it is evil — believe also that sexism is equally evil and as damaging to the dignity of women."

"My take is sexism. The challenge is therefore to those people in our society at large and in Maori society in particular whose prejudices and unlawful discriminatory practices deny equality to women purely on the basis of their sex."

She said, to her, the marae was a patriarchal institution pervaded by assumptions of male domination.

"This position of women in our political family (whanau) mirrors the role of women in the larger society. The custom which disallows women from speaking on that forum with the assertion that men and women have complementary roles is in fact a denial of equality as such roles are certainly not equal."

She said Maori women who acquired leadership roles in the community "receive the full force of male resistance."

They are denied access to decision-making but are expected to carry out decisions made by others.

"Maori women who are seen as serious threats to male security leadership usually become subjects of the "quiet put-down" — at social functions in important places for example."

Mrs Szaszy said the league was set up as a separate organisation because of the sexist nature of tribal structures.

"In order to give Maori women decision-making powers on the issues which affected them very closely — as mothers, and their children and their homes — it was necessary to set up a structure which was not dominated by men i.e. on non-Maori lines."

But she said she had the powerful feeling that marae kawa had followed women, and now intruded "even into the house of the league."

She said the Human Rights Commission and Race Relations Conciliator which had come up with a book called "Race Against Time" should now produce a sister publication called "Women's Time Has Come."

Her strong speech got a mixed reception — interest coupled with unease creating an uncertain atmosphere which hovered over the rest of the conference.

Many league members oppose change and shy away from controversial topics like sexism and Maori sovereignty (Maori Mana Motuhake).

Still fiery foundation president Dame Whina Cooper is one of those adamantly opposed to moves by some league members to replace the men who sit on the welcoming paepae, with women.

At the conference some members objected to what they considered was domination of the junior forum by young non-league court workers. They stopped one young man as he outlined the Maori struggle from the coming of the European.

But all delegates unanimously ap-

plauded the schoolgirl members when they took the stage for a series of funny, touching skits pointing to the problems of modern youth.

This atmosphere of warmth and solidarity was often evident, particularly during presentation of the area reports in song and skit form, and during the schools oratory competitions when delegates threw their support behind the sometimes shaky competitors.

As always the remit sessions were lively, though here too divisions became apparent.

This year's remits included calls for protection of traditional food sources, government policies aimed at checking female Maori unemployment, changes to rape laws, changes to autopsy procedures, education in Maori culture for tourist staff and amendments to the Town and Country Planning Act to give control of Maori land to the Maori Land Court.

As always the serious business was interspersed with songs, laughter and much good humoured ad libbing.

Lack of time unfortunately forced cancellation of the open forum session but an unexpected, though sombre bonus was the showing of a film by anti-nuclear activist Dr Helen Caldicott after which delegates reaffirmed their opposition to nuclear arms.

Overall the conference had successful but inconclusive feel — heightened by the elections for a new executive following expiry of the three year term.

Retiring president Mrs Violet Pou from Whangarei was replaced by 83 year old Ngati Porou elder Mrs Maaraea Te Kawa from Ruatoria — a strong traditional figure whose election appeared reaffirmation of faith in the leagues more conservative element.

The first vice president is Maori Artists and Writers secretary Mrs Georgina Kirby from Auckland and second vice-president in Mrs Rose Hurst from Wellington.

Next year's conference is in Whangarei and by then, perhaps, the future directors of the league will be more apparent.