

# The Hawaiian experience a sobering one for Waikato lecturer

by Charlton Clark

IF New Zealanders don't pull their socks up, the Maori language will soon be where Hawaiian is now — practically extinct — according to Waikato University Maori studies head Sam Karetu.

Mr Karetu recently returned from a year's sabbatical leave, part of which he spent looking at the state of Hawaiian music and dance — and the language.

He discovered there are now fewer than 2000 speakers of Hawaiian, a Polynesian language closely related to Maori, and only a small minority of those are native speakers. The rest have learnt Hawaiian as a second language to English, or the Hawaiian pidgin version of English, which most Hawaiian-born people speak.

There are approximately 115,000 ethnic Hawaiian — or 175,000, depending on what statistics you use, according to Mr Karetu — out of a population of 900,000 of varying racial backgrounds.

By contrast, there are something like quarter of a million Maori people in New Zealand, whom 70,000 claim to be able to speak Maori, and another 30,000 or 40,000 understand it.

That may sound like the Maori language is in a fairly healthy state compared with Hawaiian, but Mr Karetu warns that Maori cannot afford to rest on its laurels.

He points out that most of the 70,000 Maori speakers are over 40 years old, and the old people are dying out faster than they can produce fluent younger speakers.

In Hawaii, there is only one small island, Ni'hau, where children still grow up with Hawaiian as their native language. This has been ensured by the fact that the island is privately owned, and few outside influences have interfered with the way of life there.

But of the 250 Ni'hauans, 200 have left to work on Kaua'i Island, where the children go to a school which provides an interpreter for them.

But Mr Karetu said the danger was that the children, by fraternising with English-speaking children outside the classrooms, would have relegated Hawaiian to their second language by the time they are teenagers.

In a sense, there are parallels in New Zealand. Most of the Maori children here who speak Maori as their first language now are those in small, isolated communities, like the villages in the Urewera and others in Northland and around East Cape.

But the heavyweight influence of the English language at school on television, radio and anywhere else outside their homes and marae tends to ensure that English becomes their preferred language as they get older, especially if they move away to work.

Fortunately, there are signs that the swamping tide of English monolingualism may be slowing with the advent of kohanga reo, bi-lingual schools, Maori language programmes in schools, and less formal Maori language activities.

And in fact Mr Karetu says the core of dedicated Hawaiians are green with

envy at the facilities and support the Maori language enjoys.

They almost "flip" when they hear, for example, that Television New Zealand allocates four minutes a day, five days a week for a Maori language news broadcast, as well as a weekly Maori-oriented current affairs programme which sometimes uses the language.

And the daily news broadcasts in Maori on the radio leave the Hawaiian language contribution to Hawaii's airwaves in the shade. Mr Karetu says there is a radio station which broadcasts only Hawaiian music, but announcing and advertising are all in Eng-

**Sam Karetu... "already many haka and songs are being mutilated because people do not really know what the words say". Photo Tim Koller.**

