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A brief history of Tuhoe

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Activist Tame Iti's iwi is renowned for its staunch independence, as well as its path of isolation and harrowing loss. **Ruth Laugesen** reports.

Guerrillas in our midst? No says Rawiri Taonui

Tuhoe people, says Maori broadcaster Willie Jackson, radiate toughness.

"They are known for their staunchness, around the Maori language, about their land," says Jackson, who is related by marriage to Tuhoe activist Tame Iti.

"You know straight away when Tuhoes are in town, or working for you. Their Tuhoetanga is so prominent; there's a certain pride. They just exude it," he says.

The tribe, immortalised in Elsdon Best's 1925 history Children of the Mist, have a mystique as powerful as the remote and rugged Urewera region that is their home ground. But now, in the wake of allegations of a series of armed training camps in the Urewera, the tribe is gaining a new notoriety, with headlines such as "Guerrillas in the Mist".

Such talk is nonsense, says Jackson. But he says there is something special about this tribe who, for longer than any other iwi, stayed out of the reach of colonial control and British cultural influence.

Even today, children growing up in the remote valley of Ruatoki, where Iti has a property, see the world through a distinct cultural lens.

"It's one of the last areas where, if you meet someone from Ruatoki, nine times out of 10 you expect them to be a Maori speaker. They come out to the cities and come across Maori who haven't had the language for a couple of generations," says Jackson.

Tuhoe people led the national Maori language renaissance, says Jackson, and Tuhoe broadcasters were at the forefront when the first Maori radio and television services were launched.

Tuhoe staunchness crops up in other ways too. Starting about a decade ago, some began calling themselves members of the "Tuhoe Nation". Such sentiments are strongest in the Urewera area, where a small minority of Tuhoe's 33,000 still live. The rest have scattered around New Zealand and into Australia in search of economic opportunity.

In Tuhoe land though, signs mark the borders. The reason for talk of nationhood, says Tamati Kruger, head of Tuhoe's treaty negotiations team, is that an iwi is indeed a nation, not a tribe. Does that mean it has its own borders, should collect taxes, have its own defence force and even a seat at the UN? Indeed, says Kruger. "Those would be seen as the characteristics of nationhood," he says.

But Matt Te Pou, who led some of the Tuhoe claims before the Waitangi Tribunal in 2005, says Tuhoe are not a state within a state. Tuhoe nationhood is "just a statement that we know our borders".

"I went to Vietnam and fought under the (New Zealand) flag and saw my mates die. I have no difficulties with the flag. I felt hurt when people shot at it on the ground," he says, referring to Iti's much replayed shooting of the New Zealand flag during the tribunal hearings.

He says the iwi's economic future lies in gaining a treaty settlement. The tribunal report was due early next year, but has since been delayed. It should provide a basis for negotiating a settlement.

THE REPUTATION of Tuhoe for a strong sense of self has a long history. The lasting impression Elsdon Best left is that the children of the mist had chosen to remain apart in their impregnable mountains. But Best did his research at the turn of the 19th century, when Tuhoe had already been through a cataclysm. The Ureweras were always a refuge in an area bristling with competing tribes. But Crown confiscations had left Tuhoe more isolated, marginalised and hemmed in.

This cataclysm began unfolding in 1865, when Anglican priest Rev Carl Volkner was killed at Opotiki by locals from the Te Whakatohea tribe. At the instigation of Kereopa Te Rau, from Taranaki, Volkner was

hanged, before his eyes were scooped out and eaten.

Tuhoe had nothing to do with the killing, but Te Rau fled to the Ureweras and Tuhoe were accused of involvement. The government reaction was overwhelming. In 1866 181,000ha of land was confiscated by the government from Tuhoe, Te Whakatohea and Ngati Awa. Ultimately, Tuhoe lost 5700ha on their northern border. The Crown took Tuhoe's only substantial flat land and their only access to the coast. This was most of their fertile, cropping land, and the pathway to rich sources of kaimoana in the sea.

The Tuhoe people were left with harsh, more difficult land, setting the scene for later famines.

Tuhoe were left with "encircled lands", in the words of historian Judith Binney in her evidence to the Waitangi Tribunal.

Even now, the confiscation line looms large for the locals. Kruger says when driving past it feels to him "like it would if you had to travel every day past a point where your family was murdered".

It was inside the Tuhoe side of the line that police chose to set up their roadblock last Monday, prompting outrage among the locals.

But the 1866 confiscations were only the beginning. Tuhoe's isolation and loss was to intensify. Two years later the Maori leader Te Kooti and his followers began what Michael King has called "the most effective guerrilla war ever waged in this country". Te Kooti killed about 30 Europeans and at least 20 Maori men, women and children in raids on Poverty Bay settlements.

When the government gave chase, Te Kooti took sanctuary in the Ureweras among Tuhoe, provoking a bitter, three-year campaign by the government: "In a policy aimed at turning the tribe away from Te Kooti, a scorched earth campaign was unleashed against Tuhoe; people were imprisoned and killed, their cultivations and homes destroyed, and stock killed or run off. Through starvation, deprivation and atrocities at the hands of the government's Maori forces, Tuhoe submitted to the Crown," says Te Ara, the online encyclopaedia of New Zealand.

Te Kooti was never handed over. But according to Binney, Tuhoe's peace compact with the government accepted Tuhoe as a "self-governing realm" in exchange for Tuhoe's active assistance in the last stages of the colonial war.

By 1872 the chiefs of a governing council made a historic decision to protect themselves from the land-hungry Pakeha. They closed access to their lands. Signposts went up warning strangers, especially Pakeha, not to enter. On the northern confiscation line, one chief, Eru Tamaikoha, put up signs warning "Trespassers will be eaten".

"The encircling boundaries that they proclaimed were intended to enable them to choose who entered their realm, and on what terms," says Binney.

Remarkably, for a time at least, it also looked like the New Zealand government would give Tuhoe a form of independence. The Urewera District Native Reserve Act of 1896 was drawn up by Premier Richard Seddon to allow the Urewera people to be regionally autonomous, in his words a "self-governing" people.

That act "was unique in that it recognised the encircling boundaries of a tribally defined zone in the centre of the North Island," says Binney. "The act was presented as an experiment in tribal self-government; it thus allowed for other possibilities than the discourse of `one nation, one law'."

But as Tuhoe tried to hold the government to its perhaps insincere promise, tragedy was unfolding on a staggering scale. A wave of disease, extreme frosts, crop failures and famine sent Tuhoe reeling. Census figures indicate that between 1896 and 1901, 23% of the Tuhoe population died, says Binney. A high proportion were children under 15. With Seddon's death in 1906, the Tuhoe dream of self-governance that still lives for some today began to be torn down. The Liberal government abandoned attempts at partnership, says Binney, and reverted to the view that a separate Tuhoe "realm" contradicted the uniformity of laws.

There was to be a final crushing of hope. In 1907 the messianic pacifist leader Rua Kenana offered a new path to a people in despair by establishing a "City of God" for around 600, deep within the Ureweras. Trade, agriculture, even banking and mining, were part of his plan.

But the government saw Kenana as subversive, and in 1916 a large military force was sent in to crush him, using minor charges of supplying liquor as a pretext for what historians now consider to be an illegal armed invasion. Kenana was arrested deep in the Ureweras at Maungapohatu by 57 constables from Auckland,

and more from Gisborne and Whakatane. Kenana was unarmed, but a shot was fired, and in the resulting gunfight two Tuhoe were killed, including Kenana's son.

Kenana was taken to Auckland and tried for sedition, but was in the end only found guilty of "moral" resistance to arrest. He served an excessive sentence a year's hard labour followed by 18 months' imprisonment. And when police arrived in the Ureweras again last week, the traumatic intrusion of 1916 came alive all over again.

Outside the courthouse in Rotorua, where Tame Iti's bail application was being heard last week, protesters held aloft placards bearing the name Rua Kenana.

According to Bernice Tai, who lives in the Matahi Valley in the Ureweras, Kenana was the last leader Tuhoe had who was able to secure them the economic base to be a nation.

"He was the only one to set about to achieve what the Pakeha have today," she says.

And she says the invoking of the Terrorism Suppression Act last week reminded her people of the Tohunga Suppression Act that was used against Rua Kenana.

"It really pisses me off. It's come to a point where it's shown our people have never assimilated to the system. For the whole 200 years, whatever that they've been here in our faces, trying to assimilate us.

"What is wrong," asks Tai, "with our people achieving what we were from the start? Which was a peaceful, loving people."

- **Ruth Laugesen is political editor of the Sunday Star-Times.**

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