Chapter 10

Stories of continuity, times of change? Māori oral histories of twentieth-century urbanisation in New Zealand

Erin Keenan

Abstract: *Urban migrations were a widespread and rapid phenomenon for Māori populations in New Zealand in the decades after the Second World War. Māori oral histories of this time of rapid change direct researchers to the ways that Māori urbanisation experiences were a combination of new encounters and the maintenance of Māori social and cultural forms in urban spaces. A result of this emphasis on continuity during times of change that is accessed through Māori oral histories is that variations in understandings of the meanings of urbanisation are revealed. Although urbanisation was a significant demographic phenomenon for Māori populations, reflected in several key scholarly resources which helped define Māori urbanisation literature in New Zealand history, Māori deny urbanisation as an important theme in personal histories that instead prioritise* whānau *(family) and* iwi *(tribal) themes. Māori oral histories of urban migration direct us away from narratives of urbanisation and towards narratives that prioritise connections and relationships instead.*

Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi; engari taku toa he toa takitini.
My strength is not my strength alone; it is the strength of many. (Māori proverb)

The urban migrations of generations of Māori after the Second World War were an important phenomenon in post-war New Zealand. They remain an important consideration in historical conversations on Māori in the post-war period. In Wellington after 1945 Māori interacted with one another and with non-Māori in ways that adapted lifestyles for urban living, as well as maintaining identities through connections with home places.[1] By using oral histories to review aspects such as these in our recent histories, it is possible to revisit discussions on urban social lives as sites of Māori

adaptation and change, as well as cultural affirmation and continuity. In this chapter I argue that new urban spaces were places where change occurred, but they were also spaces where continuities were emphasised.

This chapter is based on preliminary research observations made for my doctoral thesis in history at Victoria University of Wellington. It describes how researching Māori experiences with reference to the urban migrations of the twentieth century requires present-day researchers to reconsider understandings of urban identities. Particularly interesting is a comparison of past academic usages of urbanisation terminologies with 'ground level' Māori understandings of urbanisation, especially from the very people who experienced those urban migrations. For Māori men and women who urban-migrated to Wellington after the Second World War, I have found that urbanisation is most often ascribed a peripheral narrative in oral histories. The *whakataukī* (Māori proverb) at the beginning of this chapter illustrates one important explanation for this: an individual's successful experiences are not the result of his or her own doing, but the result of the support of many other people. In oral history research, I have observed that urban migration was not described as an individual experience, nor was it simply a geographical process. Instead, the term 'urbanisation' encompasses many layers of experience and meaning.

In a strictly demographic sense, Māori urbanisation during the twentieth century was a process of dramatic population change that was possibly unparalleled in the world due to its rapidity. In 1973, for example, demographer Campbell Gibson (1973:82) described the pattern of urbanising change in New Zealand as a remarkable case, writing that 'to this writer's knowledge, the urbanization of the Māori population since 1936 has been more rapid than the urbanization of any national population or of any other sizable ethnic subpopulation at any time in history'. Indeed, between 1926 and 1971 the vast majority of the Māori population switched from living in rurally defined areas to urban living. In 1971 almost 71 percent of Māori were urban dwellers (Figure 1), and we have remained a relatively high urban-dwelling population to this day.[2]

Urbanisation of Māori, therefore, has been a significant phenomenon in the New Zealand past, with factors comparable to the diverse urbanisation experiences of Aboriginal populations in Australia. Yet there are many interesting conversations yet to be held between New Zealand and Australian Indigenous populations regarding urban experiences. One meeting point in the trans-Tasman histories raised during the AIATSIS National Indigenous Studies Conference in 2009 involved a mutual concern about ambiguous usages of the language of urban migration, and the effects of the applications of these usages on Indigenous peoples. A result of this concern was some consensus that 'urban' and 'urbanised' are words that, as tools for our work, possess distinct ranges in applications and variety in effects and consequently require academic caution.[3]
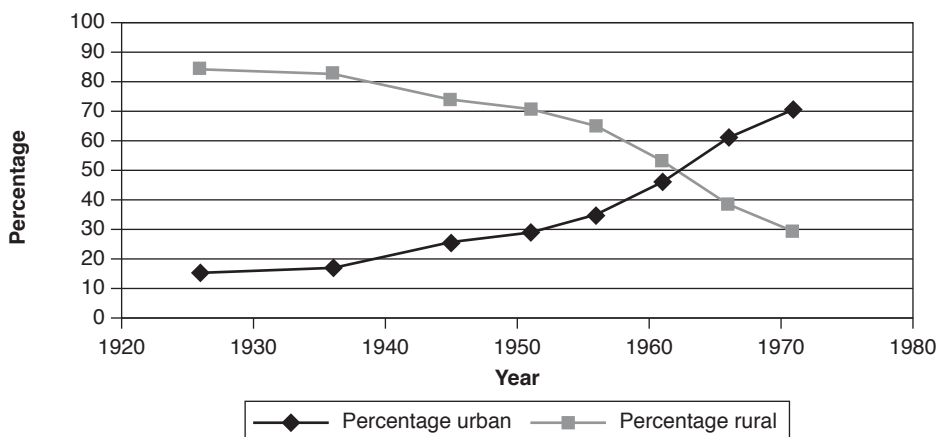
Figure 1: Rural and urban distributions of the Māori population in New Zealand, 1926–1971 (New Zealand Department of Statistics 1977:3)

For historians, writing is a primary tool of our trade and to accommodate a broad accessibility for our work, we often write in English. The prominent Māori parliamentarian during the early-mid twentieth century, Tā Āpirana Ngata, once advised young Māori to stay strong in their cultural heritage but to also 'keep their hands to the tools of the Pākehā' (New Zealanders of European descent) (Aotearoa 1958:56).[4] Although his message was intended to encourage Māori achievement in education and employment, among other things, as a Māori historian I have found that an examination of the tools of language provides a window into Māori perspectives of the post-war period. Scholarly considerations of Māori urban migrations in the first half of the twentieth century, for example, often relegated Māori experiences to broad terminologies that included 'urban drift' and 'urban acculturation'.[5] Although such terms are used sparingly in scholarly writing today in both New Zealand and Australia, academics have nonetheless become aware that there are certain challenges in writing about combining ideas about urban spaces and identities with more traditional expressions or understandings of Indigenous life.

History writings of Māori twentieth-century experiences have, then, often rightly identified urban migrations as a significant factor impacting upon changing race relations in New Zealand during the twentieth century. Consideration of the language used provides an interesting insight into Māori perspectives of urbanisation. General histories of New Zealand, for example, commonly begin their discussions on Māori during the second half of the twentieth century by referencing urban migrations and the 'push-pull' factors that spurred this overhaul of population distribution. Much of this knowledge is influenced by a number of important resources that have been frequently cited by historians.[6] The two most prominent of these authors were perhaps demographer Ian Pool and anthropologist Joan Metge. Ian Pool's expertise on Māori

demographics during the twentieth century is unparalleled in New Zealand writing, and Pool is most often cited as providing the 'how' of urban migrations. His long contribution to population and demographic work on Māori began to be published as early as 1961 and he is one of the most frequently cited authorities in this area.[7] In the early 1960s another important scholar on urban migrations was Joan Metge, who also conducted early work on the processes of urbanisation. In particular, she conducted the first on-the-ground study of Māori urbanisation experiences during the 1950s, comparing a rural Northland community with urban Māori communities in Auckland. Importantly, Metge made suggestions as to the 'why' of Māori urban migrations. According to Metge (1964:128), moving into the cities was based on at least three motivations that she called the 'big-three': movements that were inspired by the pursuits of work, money and pleasure. To this day her explanation of urban migrations remains a broadly accurate and largely unchallenged hypothesis on the rationale behind many Māori urban migrations.

James Belich is an example of a New Zealand historian who has written a general history of New Zealand and referred to Pool and Metge's work on Māori urban migration. In his history of New Zealand from the 1880s to the year 2000, Belich stressed that twentieth-century Māori urban migrations were a significant phenomenon for Māori history. He argued that urban migrations were a foundation of what he called the fifth-biggest revolution in Māori history, which led to a renewed 'renaissance' of political and cultural endeavours for and by Māori (Belich 2001:467).[8] As a historian, he balanced a comprehensive range of sources discussing this renaissance that he called 'resurgent Māori', and he offered a commentary on not just the demographic changes in which Pool specialised or the particular experiences of two localised communities as explored by Metge but also general Māori social, cultural, economic and political developments during the twentieth century. Belich's work in this area constituted a thorough and thoughtful treatment of the diverse field of scholarship.

However, although there is no doubt that urban migrations meant dramatic material and geographical changes for Māori after the Second World War, focusing on changes risks obscuring Māori narratives that locate their histories with reference to ongoing identities and connections. A Māori understanding of scholarship such as that presented by Belich, especially including perspectives on language used and its meanings, provides an interesting case demonstrating how Māori urban identities are layered and complex in oral history research on urbanisations. In the first few pages of his chapter, Belich used urban-based words frequently and mostly in the demographic sense as a tool for explaining urban-based residency. This included the statement that '[a]round 1960, the Māori became a predominately urban people' (Belich 2001:472). In this simple and to-the-point sentence, Belich described a time when Māori became a majority urban-living population. In its context, the statement made no judgement on Māori social or cultural experiences in being an 'urban people', and it was probably never intended to be used as a commentary on individual or group Māori identities.

But in considering this statement from a Māori worldview perspective, the question was raised — what did it mean to become an 'urban people'?

In my research I have chosen to take questions like this one back to Māori communities to ask about their experiences and understandings of urban migration to the Wellington area. In the Māori language, the word 'people' is often synonymous with the word for 'tribe', that is, *iwi*. An implied (but not intentional) meaning of Belich's statement, therefore, is that Māori became a predominantly urban people or *iwi* in 1960, and this idea does sit easily with many Māori who have resisted being defined in a relationship to 'urban'. In my research I have talked with Māori men and women who are active members of the present-day Māori community in Wellington and who were also active members of the Māori community in Wellington in the years after the Second World War. In all interviews, those Māori men and women recounted their experiences of urban migration as personal and *whānau* (family) stories. In doing this, they refocused discussions of urbanisation as stories of connections to family and descent, rather than stories of individual journeys. This was especially clear when discussing 'urbanisation' as a concept for history.

A particularly interesting question in this theme was 'who or what is urban Māori?' Although one consistent reply was that 'urban' is a concept that applies to material experiences, lifestyles and relationships within the city, another resounding reply was that to be referred to as 'urban Māori' did not adequately communicate the breadth of the layers of identities that were active in urban-located Māori lives. I will describe one of those instances here.

The limit to using words like 'urban' was demonstrated to me in an interview with a participant who moved to Wellington with *whānau* in the early 1950s. She said that the idea of 'urban Māori' meant little if anything to her, especially for her identity, explaining that '[i]t's only a title; it's only a name. I still prefer to be called Māori rather than urban Māori. That title doesn't really concern me. To me, it has no meaning. It has nothing' (WP, interview with author, Lower Hutt, Wellington, 15 July 2009).

Two of this woman's adult daughters were present at this interview. Despite their mother's reluctance to accept urban word terms, her daughters believed that the terms 'urban' and 'rural' were indicative of the connections of their mother's generation to *hapū* and *iwi* (tribal areas and people). On this point the woman agreed, but she directed the conversation back to the connection of individuals to meaningful systems of *whakapapa*. She explained that she was brought up with strong connections to land and *kaumātua* (elders), and her parents made sure that she would know *tikanga* Māori (Māori cultural practices).

By directing me back to the role of *iwi* and *hapū* in Māori relationships within the city, this woman emphasised that the location of living was less important to urban Māori than the relationships between people and back to home places and home identities. By referencing *tikanga* and *iwi* (or by talking back to their *whakapapa*),

the narratives of this woman and other people I have interviewed about moving into and living in urban areas, as a part of what was a mass migration of people, had only a peripheral role in their personal pasts. Ideas of being an 'urban person' or a 'rural person' were consistently rejected; instead, it was important to recognise the primacy of *whānau*-based narratives. In talking about urbanisation, people I have interviewed have emphasised that although they have moved into the city, they are not a city people.

So, if the people referred to by historians as 'urban Māori' do not necessarily accept 'urban' as any kind of personal or group identifier, what then might be said about the limitations of 'urbanisation' as a subject of study for Māori? Well, there are very few general Māori histories of New Zealand, but Ranginui Walker's 2004 counter-narrative of the New Zealand past, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Mātou: Struggle without end*, provides an example of a Māori approach to discussing Māori urban identities. In *Ka Whawhai Tonu Mātou*, Walker used urban words that accommodated Māori perspectives. In particular, he used urban words that encompassed the wider contexts of urban living, rather than only an explanation of the location of residencies, thereby hinting at holistic Māori understandings of urbanisation as a concept with social and cultural applications. When writing about the concept of 'rural', he stated that the 1956 New Zealand census reported that '[t]he rural tribal hinterlands were being depopulated at the rate of 1 percent, or 1,600 people per annum' (Walker 2004:197). When discussing statistical evidence, a Māori view of history had him incorporate into a concept of 'rural' the *mātauranga* Māori (Māori worldview) concepts of *iwi* and *whenua* (land). In doing this, Walker wrote against the language that characterised urban-migration writing in the 1950s and 1960s and advocated for Māori views. This has been reflected by other Māori and non-Māori historians since, and many writers have shied away from giving too much weight to any urbanisation terminologies.[9]

Thus as a Māori historian researching urban migrations, I was also challenged to make decisions on how to approach such a significant event in personal stories from and about Māori in the twentieth century. I do find discomfort in the ambiguous wording of some texts and as a result have found that oral histories provide an important vehicle for prising open the social and cultural meanings of Māori experiences in urbanisation during the post-war era. Despite the significant and rapid changes in the widespread demographic transitions experienced by Māori during this time (and discussed by historians in New Zealand), Māori narratives and histories of the same period reveal varied constructions of the past that sideline urbanisation as a narrative feature. Ultimately, Māori understandings of the meanings of urbanisation suggest that to research Māori urban migrations, a holistic approach is necessary.

Evident in the early findings of my research, therefore, was that understandings and narratives of the past accessed through oral histories with Māori who moved into the urban areas of Wellington after the Second World War can contrast with what has been discussed in written histories. Instead of stories of change, Māori oral histories of urbanisation display clear and continued relationships with ancestral homes, despite

those people moving into the Wellington region and leading rich and full lives within the city. Although these lives in the city were structured physically, materially and economically by urban lifestyles, a Māori history of urbanisation that uses Māori oral histories must also accommodate the layers of meanings and identities that rest upon Māori values, including descent and *whakapapa*.[10] As the *whakataukī* at the beginning of this chapter demonstrates, we must recognise that many Māori perspectives of urbanisation during the twentieth century do not just stem from independent, individual experiences. Instead, a person's strength, path and journey are not his or hers alone: they are the result of many.

In researching Māori experiences during the twentieth century, therefore, it is important for scholars to be mindful of their tools of research and their connections with the people most likely to be affected by those research practices.[11] By taking the concepts of urbanisation and urban migration back to the people who experienced those phenomena, I have begun an exploration of Māori urban migration in New Zealand history beyond its definition as a process of change. Using Māori oral histories to talk about urbanisation experiences allows us to recognise that despite the significant transitions experienced by Māori after the Second World War, it was through memories of *whakapapa* and descent that important Māori cultural concepts have been maintained. Despite the changes that have defined twentieth-century Māori histories, continuities have remained significant factors in enduring Māori identities in urban areas.

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Notes

1. This phenomenon was not exclusive to the time period cited here. For my thesis, to be submitted in 2013, I argue that Māori internal migration practices from the nineteenth century had effects upon Māori migrations of the twentieth century, including both pre- and post-war Māori urban migrations. For an example of early twentieth century migrations to the Wellington arrea see also *The Silent Migration*, which recounts the experiences of the founding members of one of the first urban Māori clubs, the Ngāti Pōneke Young Māori Club (Grace et al. 2001)

2. In 2006 the Māori urban population was 84.4 percent of the total Māori population in New Zealand. Nearly one-quarter (24.3 percent) of all Māori lived in the Auckland region (Statistics New Zealand 2010).

3. For example, the plenary discussion by Colleen Hayward, Rachel Perkins, Len Collard, Gillian Cowlishaw and Jason Glanville on 29 September 2009, which asked 'Who is urban?'

4. This version of the *whakataukī* was said to have been originally written by Āpirana Ngata in the *mita* (dialect) of Tūhoe.

5. There are many examples of the usages of urban terms in the first half of the twentieth century, but for a demonstration of usages alongside contemporary attitudes and discussions on Māori populations, see McQueen 1945, Hunn 1961 and Baird 1964.

6. Beyond the key resources, the scholarship on Māori urban migrations is multidisciplinary, covering a range of focuses and publishing periods.

7. Pool's most comprehensive and well-known work on Māori was published in 1991, a culmination of three decades of research (Pool 1991).

8. This 'revolution' included an increasing public consciousness and revitalisation of Māori social, cultural and political forms. Belich wrote that this revolution was an ongoing one, which the New Zealand population was still in the middle of (Belich 2001:467).

9. In 2009, for example, Nepia Mahuika argued that histories on Māori urbanisation were based in a historical tradition founded on nationhood as a defining feature for our past. Instead, he suggested a Māori understanding of New Zealand history could be structured around the notion of Te Ika A Māui (a historical Māori name for the North Island), connecting Māori experiences with longer narratives of descent (Mahuika 2009).

10. An important worldview perspective in historical discussions of Māori identity and continuities in urban migration is the ongoing relevance of *Te Tino Rangatiratanga* (self-determination) concepts operational among Māori communities (Hill 2009, 2012).

11. Some good sources exploring this foundation idea for Māori historical practice include Selby and Laurie 2005, *Te Pouhere Kōrero (The Māori History Journal)* 1999–2010 and Royal 1992.