

A Tribute to Te Kapunga Matemoana (Koro) Dewes

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Abstract: This is a tribute to this late Māori elder statesman or kaumatua Te Kapunga Matemoana ‘Koro’ Dewes (1930 – 17 August, 2010) who left a significant legacy with his stalwart defence of the rights of Māori and, as an intrinsic part of this, a firm commitment and call for the recognition of Māori language and traditional Māori literature, particularly its oral formats. Koro was an important figure across all contexts of Aotearoa New Zealand life, and the tribute examines in further detail as to why.

Keywords: indigenous & Māori rights; language; Māori leadership; tribute

Introduction

The term ‘koro’ in the Māori language means an older man and is a respectful term of address. Koro Dewes was known by this name not only because he was indeed an elder statesman of his Ngāti Porou tribe (from the sub-tribes of Te Whānau a Rakairoa, Te Whānau a Hunaara, Te Whānau a Hinerupe, Te Whānau a Te Aopare and Tūwhakairiora), but more especially because throughout his life he earned the respect of his peers, both Māori and Pākehā, due to his unceasing advocacy of the rights, aspirations and vital culture of Māori people throughout Aotearoa New Zealand.

Koro Dewes was forceful and vocal in his commitment to Māori, right up until the sad day of his demise at his sister’s home in Te Araroa. I can vouch for this from personal experience, being a resident of Te Araroa myself. He made it clear that Māori had their own unique and vibrant language, literature and worldview, and that Māori had indeed suffered historically and contemporaneously from being treated as second-class citizens in their own country, to the extent that much of their land, as just one example, had been lost to their colonisers.

*Kua horonuku a Hikurangi, pā noa ki te take o Te Whetū Matarau!
Kua tītaha a Whangaōkena, toka tū moana o te Tai Rāwhiti!
Kua waipuke te riu o Waiapu i ngā roimata o Ngāti Porou, o te ao Māori, ki te rangatira,
tohunga rongonui ki a Te Kapunga Dewes, kua tīraha mai i te ata nei.
E Koro, takoto mai i te poho o tō whānau, i tō marae o Hinerupe, takoto mai, takoto mai.
Hikurangi has shifted, so too have the slopes of Te Whetu Matarau, Whangaokena.
The standing rock of the eastern seas, has tilted on its base.
The Waiapu River has flooded with the tears of Ngāti Porou and all of Māoridom for this chief,
this renowned man of knowledge, Te Kapunga Dewes, who lies in state this morning.
Koro, may you rest in peace in the bosom of your family in Hinerupe Marae – rest in peace, rest
in peace!*

In a farewell speech for Koro, the Minister of Parliament Dr Pita Sharples said:

As we reflect on the progress we have made in revitalising Māori language, we must acknowledge the seminal contribution made by Koro Dewes, who established the philosophical and political foundation for so much of what has followed. Koro has been an inspiration for language activists from every iwi, and for indigenous peoples around the world. (2010)

We should, therefore, all recognise the importance of Koro Dewes. There are several specific reasons why.

Harbinger

Firstly, Koro Dewes was a precursor, a harbinger and a brave one at that, given the tenor of those times before the Māori Party, before the advent of the Māori youth group 'Ngā Tamatoa', before the historic Māori land march (Te hikoi roa o te whenua). It is important to recognise that he was among the first to be so staunch as regards demanding Māori equality in all things and as regards recognising their unique cultural traditions: as Dr Pita Sharples' tribute above so clearly indicates. He remained steadfast and as excoriating and iconoclastic as he always was, right up to that sad day of 17 August 2010. Consider the following anecdote about Koro Dewes, which helps reveal his distinctive personality:

Koro Dewes, a Ngāti Porou elder, demonstrated the tribe's particular character at a gathering at Hinerupe marae in 1995. Lining up for the customary greetings, one of the visitors reached Koro and opened with the usual 'Kei te pehea koe?' (How are you?). Instantly Koro responded, not without a hint of disdain in his tone, 'Eta, you're in "Kei te aha country" now!' 'Kei te aha' is known as the most distinctive greeting of Ngāti Porou.

We must consider that Koro Dewes was doing and demanding, well over 40 years ago, in print and face to face, many things that not only have since become realities, but also have become the bases of consistent rallying cries for many Māori nationwide. Over 40 years ago the Government of New Zealand was not particularly willing to face the inequalities imposed on Māori, preferring to follow official mandates of assimilation and integration, such policies necessitating a sublimation of Māori in many aspects of their lives.

If we consider his life from his educational and cultural growth through childhood to elder statesman, we can see he was also at the forefront in so many areas other than standing up for the rights of his people, given that for Koro Dewes, everything was bound together. His was a holistic vision of how things should be – not only for Māori either.

As a secondary schoolboy, before 1949, Koro attended Wesley College, south Auckland, where he became dux and head prefect. He had early on established himself as a spokesman and leader. Indeed he had won a scholarship to Wesley from his rural primary school at Horoera Native Primary School in Te Araroa.

In 1949 Koro Dewes attended Ardmore Teachers' College, also in south Auckland, and then taught at Tikitiki District High School in the East Coast region, and later at St. Stephen's Anglican Māori boarding school in south Auckland once again. He was of course fluent and cogent in the Māori language. It should be noted too that Koro Dewes was also a fine sportsman in his younger years, representing East Coast, Auckland and Counties in rugby.

From 1962 to 1966 he lectured in the Māori language in the University Extension Department (adult education) of The [University of Auckland](http://www.review.mai.ac.nz). He also organised the first Māori meeting centre (marae) visit for European (Pākehā) students in the Waikato region during this time. In 1966, Koro was appointed to the Victoria University of Wellington as a lecturer in Māori language. His commitment to this language was pronounced and he further established several 'firsts' while there. For example, in 1971, he ensured that Māori language became a new degree subject at Victoria University. He was also a founder and key member of the Māori Language Society, which organised the 'Te Reo Māori' petition in 1972 (Te Rito,

2008). More, he was a driving force behind the one-year teacher training course for native speakers of Māori at Wellington Teachers Training College. As part of their year, he tutored these students in Māori Studies at Victoria University.

In 1972 he wrote the first-ever successful MA thesis that was entirely in the Māori language. The subject was Henare Waitoa's original songs (waiata haka) and it was later published by Massey University in 1974. No one else had ever done this; and it was a major milestone in the academic world of Aotearoa New Zealand.

As noted above, in 1972 Koro also presented the 'Te Reo Māori' petition to Parliament, with several other Māori leaders, such as Hana Jackson. As outlined by Te Rito (2008) this petition called for recognition of Māori as an official language of the country, which was something that Koro Dewes felt was long overdue.

From 1976 onwards Koro returned to his birthplace in the [East Cape](#) area, where he had grown up, to farm. He became a very respected kaumatua and was tireless in his devotion to Ngāti Porou in particular. For example, in 1987 he helped form the local tribal council or '[Te Runanga o Ngāti Porou](#)'; he was also a distinctive voice on Radio Ngāti Porou and at marae throughout the entire district.

As a measure of the esteem his peers held him in, 2004 saw Victoria University of Wellington award him the degree of Honorary Doctor of Literature. His voice had remained unstilled with regard to the rights of Māori and to the need to nurture and maintain Māori literature resources as is evidenced by the following statement:

Mr. Dewes challenged the prevailing, and what he later recounted as the 'culturally patronising' view, that the Māori language lacked any real depth, says Vice-Chancellor, Professor Stuart McCutcheon. He actively sought and encouraged a range of iconic figures to contribute to his archive of recordings of Māori oratory and waiata, which were used as a teaching resource. He also collected, edited, translated and annotated the contemporary song poetry of his iwi, Ngāti Porou, while he was at Victoria. (Anonymous, 2004)

Māori rights and recognition of independence

Koro Dewes consistently called for recognition of Māori and indigenous ways of doing things – not only with regard to language, but to all aspects of life:

...my plea is for the recognition of the existence of minority groups, that their languages and cultures are alive and real, that this means cultural diversity in New Zealand, and that not enough is being done to draw these culture assets into our educational system, our entertainment world, into our way of life generally. (1970, p. 5)

He referred to the treasure of cultural heritage from our ancestors (Tāonga tuku iho, na ngā tipuna) (Dewes, 1975, p. 70)

"Māori culture is well worth preserving because it contains many riches not found in European culture" (Dewes, 1968a, p. 4) he noted as another example. Pākehā too therefore could learn from and be nourished more fully by an understanding and appreciation of Māori culture "...one who knows the language or the customs of the Māori people, is a more complete New Zealander than he who has no such knowledge" (1968a, p. 4)

Yet for Dewes, Māori were oppressed and suppressed by Pākehā. After 1844, for example, the language policy of Aotearoa was changed “so that the native population might be assimilated as rapidly as possible into the Pākehā...the aim to Europeanise the Māori people...” (1968a, p. 2) This resulted in massive loss of land; physical punishment if Māori were ‘caught’ speaking their own language in schools and a race so subjugated as to lose self-respect: marginalised except in terms of crime statistics, unemployment rates, low income levels, lower life expectancy, low rates of home ownership and high rates of state dependency! “Are we not cultural refugees in our own country?” Dewes cried out (1975, p. 66)

He categorized the relationship between Pākehā and Māori as unfair and unequal, what he termed a ‘shark–kahawai’ relationship. The kahawai is a native fish. “The voracious appetite of the shark has made many Māori cultural refugees with neither language nor culture, it has left many Māori virtually landless...” (1970, p. 5)

His was a consistent clarion call for recognising the linguistic and cultural imperialistic plays of the majority racial grouping in Aotearoa. His seminal pieces were ‘*The Pākehā Veto*’ (Dewes, 1970) where he referred to “... the English speaking Pākehā majority having the power of veto at every level of New Zealand’s multi-cultural society” (1975, p.56) and ‘*Waitangi Day 1968 – some food for thought*’ (Dewes, 1968b). In the latter he delineated these deleterious Pākehā ploys by directly stating that:

In brief, the Treaty can be described in this way: *It is not worth the paper it is written on* [his emphasis] ... I am convinced that from 1840 until the present there has persisted in New Zealand Pākehā society a type of imperialism which carries with it the conviction that anything in that society, culture or language is superior to Māori and other non-English tongues and cultures. (1968b, p. 13)

Dewes believed in effect, that the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi was a fraud, in that Pākehā had no intention to honour it in his time, and indeed had never done so historically either. It is to his credit that he so steadfastly railed against the injustices he perceived and so strenuously also provided ways and ideas to even up the loads. As just one example, he spoke out strongly and early against the 1960 rugby tour to South Africa, where Māori players were not entitled to represent their country due to the notorious apartheid stance of the South African regime. He continued to speak out strongly on many issues affecting Māori, including a lack of support for Māori farmers, the threatened closure of a local hospital, fisheries laws, and the importance of retaining the Ngāti Porou dialect and customs. He never stopped either – continuing right up to his demise, to stand tall for Ngāti Porou in particular, for all Māori per se. So he regularly spoke on Radio Ngāti Porou, as well as appeared at Seabed and Foreshore hearings in Wellington. He was a busy and active man, very much in demand in his East Coast district. I recall seeing Koro in his later years frequently at the Hinerupe marae (which is next to my own home in Te Araroa) where he was conducting classes in Māori language and culture.

Māori language

For Dewes, the Māori language is paramount and must be recognised as such. It is the heartbeat of Māori, the vehicle of their culture, of their essential being. He wrote a piece entitled *The Place of Māori Language in the education of Māoris* [sic] in 1968. In this paper he noted that: “Māori language is an integral part of a great heritage. It stimulates pride of race, self respect and a self confidence...Many ideas, deep feelings, patterns of thought can be expressed adequately in Māori, but would sound banal in English. (1968a, p. 4). And later he wrote that: “Māori is a living language, it is the medium of communication in Māori hui and other official occasions on rural and urban marae and in informal settings” (1970, p. 5)

In 1975, he wrote:

*Ko te pūtake o te Māoritanga
Ko te Reo Māori
He taonga tuku iho nā Te Atua*

*The tap-root of Māori culture
is Māori language
A gift from God.*

(Dewes, 1975, p. 55)

Such was his persistent striving to re-engage interest in and support for te reo Māori, he was seen by other Māori as being right at the forefront of the successful revitalisation of the language in the late 1960s, the 1970s and much later. Thus: “Koro has been an inspiration for language activists from every iwi, and for indigenous peoples around the world,” said Dr. Pita Sharples in the days after Koro’s passing (2010).

Koro Dewes further called for the recognition that “We must accept the validity of regional variations in Māori language, which means variations in the oral arts also” (1975, p. 80) He recognised, then, that there were and remain regional discrepancies in dialects and the concomitant cultural nuances involved, and called for respect for tribal or iwi identities. As Mahuika noted:

...he was passionate about idiomatic differences between iwi, especially his beloved Ngāti Porou. He was not a fan of homogenising the Māori language and was known to make a phone call to the runanga radio station, Radio Ngāti Porou, to remind announcers of correct local pronunciation. (2010)

Māori literature, poetry and oral art

In calling for the recognition of indigenesness, Dewes spent a good deal of time focusing on Māori literature, with especial emphasis on poetry, which was a specifically oral genre and indeed was not necessarily – in more recent times, written in the Māori language, but which always had been very significant to Māori. Poetry, in a variety of formats, has always been at the crux of the world of the Māori. In his call for recognition, fairness, equality, balance, redress, power for Māori, Koro was concomitantly pointing out that Māori have always had their own culture, their own literature – pronouncedly oral – their own poetry. Theirs’ was a culture that was *already* spoken.

Therefore, following his demand for the recognition of te reo Māori – and remembering his earnest efforts to promote it, as outlined frequently above – he also stressed that Māori (oral) literature had to be recognised as a relevant, consistent and mature body of work and that it also needed to be nurtured:

Oral proficiency in Māori should be the basic aim and should permeate all language and literature courses, because the bulk of our literature (history and music) is oral ... (Dewes, 1975, p.62)
Far from being irrelevant, the traditional arts challenge us to create with artistic integrity and seriousness, and in a manner relevant to contemporary experience and dimensions. (Dewes, 1975, p.72)

Dewes incorporated these views in a piece entitled ‘*Māori Literature: A Tentative Framework for Study*’ (1974). However, he was disappointed that it was not discussed until the very end of a special inter-

university meeting that was called that year to discuss Māori tertiary education. Nevertheless, Koro ceaselessly collected his own archive of Māori literature, oratory and song (waiata), which was used as a teaching resource.

He also wrote a series of book reviews, chapters and papers calling for recognition of traditional Māori poetry and especially sung-poetry (moteatea) as being particularly distinctive. Dewes also maintained that more recent Māori poetry, whilst perhaps written in English, could still maintain the existential themes of being Māori and, depending on the poet, could be delivered, sung or chanted in the traditional Māori fashion. He stated for example, that:

Māori oral literature as an art form is characterized by the significance of the actual performance and the actual delivery, the manner of rendition, the exploitation by the oral artist of tone in language as a structural element in literary expression, the use of the various visual resources in the face-to-face situation with the Māori public, such as gesture and dramatic bodily movement, a spontaneous dance or song in which the group or audience participates, thus combining words, music and dance, or the employment of other devices to manipulate the audience's sense of humour or susceptibility...[it] is also characterized by improvisation. (1974, p. 5)

The tradition in poetry in Māori culture seems far richer than that of prose. Poetry is sung, intoned, chanted, recited and shouted: the whole body 'talks' with gestures and dance movements when they accompany renditions by individuals or groups. Sung-poetry is the most significant category that has been published, with Sir Apirana Ngata's anthology of moteatea being the most Māori and scholarly...he was 50 years ahead of his time. (1974, p. 5)

Dewes also frequently quoted the work of composer Tuini Ngawai, especially her dance-poems, which he noted: "... amounted to 300-plus compositions...composed between 1930 and 1970; Mrs Ngoi Pewhairangi and the Te Hokowhitu-a-Tū Group have agreed that it be published eventually. (Dewes, 1974, p. 9). Indeed it was (Pewhairangi, 1985).

The need for a bicultural Aotearoa

Koro Dewes did not demand a separate existential realm for Māori, given that Māori do have their own sui generis ontological base, but he did insist on equality of opportunity and respect for all things Māori. Indeed he made was immensely proud of his own racial identity: "I am a privileged New Zealander because I am bilingual, bicultural, of Māori-Pākehā descent" (1970, p. 5)

Thus his reconciliatory acclamation of the words of Pākehā Governors General – that Māori and Pākehā should get together:

Our first Governor-General, Hobson, said: '*He iwi kotahi tatou*' *We are a nation* Our last but one Governor-General continually proclaimed 'Māori and Pākehā should make conscious efforts to get together.' It is time we all put these words into practice. [original italics.] (1968b, p. 14)

My plea is for the recognition of the existence of minority groups, that their languages and cultures are alive and real, that this means cultural diversity in New Zealand... (1970, p. 5)

No longer should the kahawai be gorged on by the shark. All fish should be free to swim in their own streams within the mighty ocean of Aotearoa.

Conclusion

In this tribute, I have let the words of the man speak for themselves. Te Kapunga Matemoana Dewes had a vision and never let up on sharing it. More, he never let up on attempting to bring it into reality. And essentially, he succeeded. His dream was that Māori be treated as people with their own vital living culture incorporated in their own holistic worldview or – to use another language entirely – weltanschauung, channelled via their own language and literature, that years of suppression and oppression be overturned, that Māori once again stand tall forever.

He was out at the front, so to speak, well ahead of many others, Māori or Pākehā, and never let up once. Perhaps it was his destiny. As his own relation Api Mahuika intimated, Koro Dewes was born into a long line of senior spokespeople. His was a role he had to play. “For that reason I think that he found leadership an easy take and it wasn't something that he learned but it's something he was born into and he handled it with great acclaim” (Mahuika, 2010).

Api Mahuika also stressed “that without Dr. Dewes there would be no Māori Language Society, and no Māori Language Week, and the fortunes of the East Coast iwi Ngāti Porou would have been vastly different” (2010).

*Kia ora Dr. Koro Dewes. Kia ora mo tāu mahi. Kia ora mo tōu kaha.
Kia ora mo tāu kupu mōhio te tāima katoa hoki.*

Thank you Dr. Koro Dewes. Thank you for your work. Thank you for your resilience. Thank you also for your intelligent words, always.

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Author Notes

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This article also has a related Poem '*Enter the Ouroboros*' to accent this piece in our Poetry section.

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