Notes on Tāone Hapū – Māori Gangs

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Abstract

This paper aims to promote discussion on the complex issue of Tāone Hapū (Māori Gangs), recognising the substantial literature which already exists but adding two further directions which tend to be downplayed:

– while it is accepted that the urban Māori migration was traumatic, that Māori have been adapting successfully to their new circumstances is frequently overlooked;

– one of those adaptations was Tāone Hapū – Māori Gangs.

The paper argues that there is a need to reframe the analysis of Tāone Hapū towards a sociological and anthroponomical perspective as a social form responding to the trauma of Māori urbanisation and the resulting social pathologies rather than to focus only on their own difficulties – especially criminality.

Keywords:

Māori urbanisation, Gangs, Tāone Hapū, crime.

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Introduction

This paper aims to promote discussion on the complex issue of Māori Gangs, recognising the substantial literature which already exists but adding two further directions which tend to be downplayed:

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The Urban Migration of Māori

Heke Tangata (2018) records the post-war Māori migration from the rural outback of New Zealand to the large urban centres. The analysis is extended in Chapter 36 of *Not in Narrow Seas*. (2020). While I have continued to explore the issue, my thinking was accelerated recently by the statistical work of Len Cook on incarceration rates of Maori and non-Maori cohorts through time.

Cook (2023) found that the rates of Māori imprisonment peaked in the 1970s and 1980s but have fallen dramatically for more recent cohorts. Māori rates are still higher than non-Māori rates but the relativity has also fallen markedly. (The aggregate rates remain high because older cohorts have high imprisonment rates.)

The peaking and recovery suggests the following. Māori were ill-prepared for their migration into the urban centres. Their rural lifestyles were different, their skills were appropriate for country living but not particularly relevant for urban employment, their education attainment was not high (there is a long history of criticisms of Māori rural education), their health indifferent (as indicated by life expectation) and they were poor, lacking assets (which affects access to housing). Institutions central to their rural life did not exist in the cities. Indeed, the move often broke up existing social networks.

To compound the difficulties, about the time or shortly after when many Māori arrived in the cities, the New Zealand labour market moved from its exceptionally low levels of unemployment in the post-war period – with its high demand for unskilled workers – to more moderate levels, which would impact most on demand for the unskilled. (The structural shift in unemployment seems to have occurred in about 1968, shortly after the 1966 wool price collapse, and became more serious in the late 1970s.)
The inevitable consequence of such a migration was social disruption and dysfunction, evident in high youth pregnancy (especially outside stable families) among Māori women and high criminal behaviour among men. I have not been able to find a suitable data base to explore the former (or, better still, find someone who has done it already). But Cook's work on Māori incarceration rates is very useful for exploring the latter.

It points to rising Māori criminality as a consequence of the disruption from urbanisation. Crime was attractive to Māori not just because of the social dysfunction but because it offered a more remunerative form of employment than poor quality work in the formal labour force with its intermittent unemployment. (The rising availability of drugs at this time added to opportunities.)

As Cook shows, shortly after the migration was in full flight Māori imprisonment rates rose. On the whole it continues to be relatively higher than that of non-Māori as the cohort ages, apparently because the experience of prison leads to further imprisonment later in life.

Post-Migration Adaption

Even more intriguingly, the Cook data shows that Māori incarceration rates have been falling for recent cohorts. It is also true for non-Māori, but the fall is not as fast as for Māori, which suggests that their (relative) fall may not be entirely due to changed penal policies.

While Māori may have arrived in our cities into disrupted and dysfunctional living conditions, we might expect some adaptation over time and generations. In which case, social malfunctioning such as criminal behaviour would decline, which would (partly) explain the falling relative incarceration rates.

While it might be obvious that urban Māori would adapt to their new circumstances, the degree and rapidity of adaptation is not so predictable. At the very least, there would be new social networks as they settled into urban life, their children would receive better education than their parents had in rural areas, and in employment they would obtain on-the-job skills to replace rural ones.

There has also been the development of various Māori-specific institutions including urban marae, some refocusing of the Māori Women's Welfare League to urban issues (when it was formed in 1951 it was conceived as rural support), kohanga reo, the Māori broadcasting network, Māori Urban Authorities ... (Recent initiatives for whanau to take over responsibilities from Oranga Tamariki may be another instance.)

Another adaptation was the creation of what are known today as 'Māori gangs'.

Gangs in An International Context

Newbold and Taonui (2011) place New Zealand gangs in an international context:

> The modern gang is often linked to urban poverty, and social exclusion on the basis of class, religion, or ethnicity. Gangs usually form among groups of young men who lead otherwise uneventful lives, but are denied decent job prospects, have poor parental role models, and have lacked structured adult involvement during their developmental years. The youth gang is a form of demonstrative rebellion by young

> men who feel excluded from mainstream society. Gangs provide these men and their female associates with a sense of family and belonging that has frequently been absent from their childhoods. Membership gives meaning to life, shelter in times of need, and protection from other gangs and from abusive or predatory adults. Gangs also provide cheap drugs and alcohol, parties, and involvement in various forms of criminal activity.

There has been a tendency – especially by the general public – to compare gangs with foreign groupings such as the mafia. Local gangs drawing inspiration for overseas counterparts have chosen foreign names for themselves – such as 'Mongrel Mob' – thereby reinforcing the public perception of them as being alien. But we need to see Māori gangs as an indigenous response to indigenous situations.

Māori Gangs – Tāone Hapū

The informed literature on Māori gangs tends to focus on their criminal and related aspects. (An excellent summary is Gilbert (2013) – although there have been numerous smaller studies since; see also Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor (2023).) They mention the urbanisation but do not develop its implications.

An urbanisation framework might see the gangs as urban forms which evolved to substitute for the rural networks that Māori left behind. Typically, the rural networks would be hapū which were genealogically connected communities of up to about 150 living in close proximity and offering social and economic support within the group. Their urban equivalents are unlikely to be as genealogically connected. (Not quite as an aside, during the Musket Wars it was not uncommon for two hapū from the same iwi – i.e. they were related – to clash.)

This suggests that we might treat Māori gangs as urban (or town) hapu – tāone hapū. (They exist in localities but have connections with other tāone hapū elsewhere. Perhaps these broader coalitions of chapters – such as the Mongrel Mob's – might be thought of as tāone iwi.)

There is a hint of how the conventional urban forms – nuclear families – can fail and gangs be an alternative from a series of interviews of women who joined gangs. Dennehy (2000) observed that

> For many, gangs were an escape from the traumatic family circumstances. Gangs provided a form of protection from domestic/family violence, and physical/sexual abuse. For others, gangs offered excitement, fun and adventure.

(Dennehy concluded that '[f]or most of the women interviewed, however, their escape from abuse or drudgery turned into a cavern of despair.')

This approach is not to ignore that many tāone hapū have been involved in criminal activity (and inter-hapū strife). As already explained, that too was a consequence of conditions

resulting from the urban migration. What we do not know is how important crime has been in the life of the gangs; the importance probably varies between tāone hapū and has varied over time.

Unfortunately, their criminality has become most prominent in the public mind and it characterises the majority view of tāone hapū. The public might well be astonished by the report of Winter (2000):

> In 1992 the Mongrel Mob Advisory Panel (MAP) was formed to provide Mob members with the means of pursuing 'legitimate channels to success' through better access to social services, employment, recreation, education, and vocational training. MAP provided assistance even to Mob members who were in prison. While the MAP 'positive development' initiative has had some success in reducing offending and improving the quality of life for its members, desistance from crime by gang members is dependent upon their being allowed the opportunity to find a place within society. Reconciliation and healing require a commitment on both sides.

In contrast the public tends to see gangs only in terms of crime and violence. For an example the leader of the opposition, Christopher Luxon, who is both a significant opinion former and sensitive to public opinion, stated 'that's not an excuse for saying you don't be tough on crime and tough on gangs, you need to ... have both stick and carrot, it can't just all be carrot.' (5 July, 2023) To see the inherent mislogic, observe that there are criminals in the National Party (and in all the other political parties). It does not follow that in order to be tough on crime, we should be tough on National.

The Parliamentary Library (2019) reports 'Historically, suppression and intervention strategies have been used to combat New Zealand gang problems.' Newbold and Taonui (2011) add 'prevention'. The strategy closest to that reported by winter hardly appears.

In 2014 the Government announced the Gang Action Plan with four initiatives:

> - A multi-agency Gang Intelligence Centre led by Police to collect and combine intelligence on real-time gang activity to support investigation, prevention and enforcement, while identifying vulnerable children and family members who may need social service support;
> - Work to refocus existing social initiatives, and develop new programmes, to address inter-generational gang life, to support families and members turn away from the gang lifestyle, and to help support communities with a large gang presence, by reducing gang tensions;
> - Establishment of two multi-agency dedicated enforcement taskforces (the Outlaw Motorcycle Gang Border Protection Taskforce and Criminal Asset Confiscation Taskforce);
> -Strengthen legislation.

Even the second initiative, which is the most 'interventionist', fails to recognise the

possibility that gangs are a 'legitimate' social form fulfilling social functions where other social institutions have failed. Basically, gangs are seen as social pathology, rather than seen as a response to social pathology. The focus is on their suppression.

The same issues occur in *Toward An Understanding of Aotearoa New Zealand's Adult Gang Environment*. (Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor 2023) There is much in the report to be commended. However its what to do list only considers prevention (discouraging children and youth from joining gangs), suppression (attempting to stop gangs from existing), supporting exiting from gangs, and what it calls 'desistance' (discouraging young people from joining or taking up criminal activity). The perspective is that the gangs are a bad thing with little attention as to whether they are an integral urban form and the extent and role of criminal behaviour involved with them.

The approach involves the underlying assumption that other urban forms are functioning satisfactorily and do not need attention. That is not what the young women which Dennehy interviewed reported.

What Next?

The inevitable conclusion is that we need to know more about tāone hapū, particularly approaching the issue from a sociological and anthropological rather than a criminological perspective. We especially need to know a lot more about their non-criminal activities and its relative balance with criminal activities. Moreover, we need a breakdown of those activities. While not condoning mild violence it is very different from, say, drug dealing.

In the interim, it might be worth attempting to change general public perceptions, as I have done here by referring to 'tāone hapū' rather than 'Māori gangs', although effective rebranding is not easy.

For unless the public perception changes, we are left with a distorted view of what tāone hapū/Māori gangs are, which is of little value to a healthy society or addressing the real issues.

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