

Tracking the Australian-resident Maori population

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There have been Maori present in Australia since the late eighteenth century, but tracking the size of their population has always been difficult, and remains challenging even today.

According to James Belich, by 1840 the best part of 1000 Maori had traveled overseas, and most went to Sydney. This was a significant number given the size of the Maori population and the transport links of the day. Thereafter there were always Maori in Australia, with Maori a notable exception to the 'White Australia' policy and thus allowed entry to Australia where other Polynesians, for example, were not.

The numbers, however, were small. Jeremy Lowe, in a 1990 report, established that various Australian censuses in the twentieth century had noted the number of those 'racially' Maori (half Maori or more): 197 in 1933, 247 in 1947, 257 in 1954, 449 in 1961, and 862 in 1966. No Maori population figures could be established from the 1971 and 1976 censuses and in 1981 the Australian census only asked if one was an indigenous Australian or not.

Thus it was not till the advent of an ancestry question in the 1986 Australian census that a more accurate tally could be produced. For a start, this instantly revealed the drawbacks in the earlier race question, with Lowe noting that there were over 2000 Maori census respondents who had been born in Australia before 1966. Lowe estimated that there had probably been around 4000 Maori in Australia in 1966.

The 1986 census revealed approximately 26,000 Maori to be in Australia, but the figure needs quite some deconstruction. This is because Cook Island Maori and New Zealand Maori were conflated in the total, and because census respondents only had two ancestry responses counted, without being advised to prioritise their most important two. Allowing for these factors as well as underenumeration and temporary visitors from overseas, Lowe concluded that there were approximately 26,000 Maori in Australia in 1986, but they were not the same 26,000 enumerated in the census. He later revised this upward to 27,000 on the basis of above-average undercounting of the New Zealand-born in 1986.

The census did reveal one fascinating insight: the New Zealand-born and Australian-born proportions of the Maori population in Australia were inverses of each other in terms of age range, with three times as many Australian-born as New Zealand-born in the 65+ age bracket – which showed, again, the longstanding nature of the Maori presence in Australia.

The ancestry question was dropped from the 1991 and 1996 censuses. The place of birth and language spoken at home questions – while enough to identify some ethnic groups – failed entirely to identify the numbers of Maori. For example, 447 of the 1643 persons over 5 who said they spoke Maori in the 1991 census were born in the Cook Islands.

In the absence of reliable data – particularly also with the dropping in 1986 of the ethnic origin question on New Zealand arrival and departure cards - and at a time of ongoing net out-migration of New Zealanders to Australia, speculation about the size of the Maori population in Australia got a bit carried away, as noted by the late Paul Bergin in a journal article in 2001. The most extreme example he cited was a 1995 estimate of 200,000 Maori in Australia that was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The 2001 census reintroduced the ancestry question, and produced an official figure of 73,000 Maori. While the Cook Island Maori issue had been largely resolved through a new Australian Standard Classification of Cultural and Ethnic Groups (which had separate codes for Maori and Cook Island Maori), there were still 654 individuals in this total born in the Cook Islands (who would only have written 'Maori' on the form).

The bigger problem by far, however, lay with lost ancestries, with again only two responses per person being recorded. Once again, respondents were not advised to prioritise their responses. Indeed, they were encouraged to trace their ancestry back as far as their great-grandparents. A 2003 Australian Bureau of Statistics sampling of nearly 370,000 census forms indicated that an overall total of 17,500 responses of 'Maori' were thus not counted in the official tally. Many 'Maori' responses would have been lost because of a bias towards the seven tick boxes of common ancestries, which were counted before written answers (Maori had a relatively high multiple ancestry response rate of 45% - ie 32,653 out of 72,956). What this means there were in fact around 90,000 Maori in Australia in 2001.

The power of the tick boxes can clearly be seen in this example: in 2001 the official total of those reporting Scottish ancestry was 540,000, but the 2003 ABS research revealed no fewer than 333,000 lost Scottish ancestries. In 2006 Scottish was made a tick box option at the expense of Greek, and the official Scottish tally went from 540,000 to 1,501,000.

In response to the issue of lost ancestries a 2003 Australian Bureau of Statistics report recommended that four ancestries be coded and that this limit should be clearly spelled out on the census form and guide. I'll leave discussion of the 2006 census question and result to the end of this presentation.

In 2006 Te Puni Kokiri ran a survey for Maori in Australia that asked, amongst other things, how people would answer the census ancestry question. Of the

1205 respondents 14 per cent answered that they would not enter 'Maori' at all, but would instead just answer either 'New Zealander' or 'Australian', or another ancestry altogether. The Maori identity of these people cannot be questioned, which means that many mistake the ancestry question for a nationality one or prefer – for example – to self-identify principally as New Zealanders when living overseas.

What this suggests is that a previously unconsidered issue needs to be factored in when interpreting the raw census result for Maori in Australia. Aside from screening out Cook Island Maori and temporary visitors from overseas, and adding in numbers for underenumeration and lost ancestries, we also need to add further numbers to address the way that a surprisingly large number of Maori answer the ancestry question. My guess is that the amount to add should be at least 10 per cent and probably more. This suggests that there were probably around 30,000 Maori in Australia in 1986 and 100,000 in 2001.

Maori may also be more under-enumerated than is officially estimated, given the following factors:

- their mobility – of those Maori in Australia in 2001 who had been there in 1996, only 26 per cent had not moved to a new address;
- their self-perception as temporary residents – according to the Te Puni Kokiri survey, around 60 per cent of the New Zealand-born (who are still the overwhelming adult majority) intend to return to New Zealand to live;
- the 'missing' Maori men in the 20-49 age bracket in New Zealand – in 2006 there were nearly 16,000 more Maori women than men in this category. Some may well be in Australia (there was a small excess of 200 Maori women over men in this age range in Australia in 2001); and
- their unwillingness to partake in the Australian polity – nearly 80 per cent of Maori in Australia do not become citizens, for example.

On the latter point it is worth giving a few examples to show the flavour of what I'm referring to:

- Last year I asked a woman in Cairns if she had become an Australian citizen so she could vote. 'No', she exclaimed, 'who cares what government they've got?'
- In Sydney I mentioned the census to a man at a Waitangi Day festival. He replied 'Why should I fill in the census? What's the Australian government ever done for me?'
- In Hobart a man told me he didn't think Maori would be eligible for multicultural funding grants because, he said, 'we're not from here'.
- An informant of Paul Bergin in his 1998 anthropology PhD on Maori in Australia said his people should not seek that sort of funding because 'Maori are not bloody ethnics'.

- Finally, another informant of Bergin's confidently said that the census figures would be quite unreliable because 'Our people don't bother with those sorts of things'.

The Te Puni Kokiri survey asked respondents if they had filled in the last Australian census they had been present for. It wasn't ideal to ask such a question 5 years after the last census, and the fact that 20% of those who answered the question said they had not answered the census is unreliable given the passage of time. But the response for those who answered the survey after census night in August 2006 should be more reliable, and fully 15% of these people said they had not answered the census.

The 2006 at last instructed respondents to enter two ancestries only. It should, therefore, have provided the most accurate indication to date of the Australian-resident Maori population. On the basis of the analysis of the 2001 census result, and the steep rise in the total since 1986, I was anticipating that the official total would have risen to as much as 100,000 or more, thus meaning that the real total when one had made some allowance for those not entering 'Maori' on the census form would have probably been at least 115,000. I drew a graph to depict this in my report.

I was quite surprised to see last Wednesday, therefore, when the 2006 Australian census results were released, that the official Maori population total had only risen to 92,912. While this represents a 27 per cent increase over the official 2001 figure, we know that nearly as many people as this wrote Maori on the census form in 2001. The 2006 result could mean one of several things. Three possibilities are:

- there has been a significant amount of return migration in the last few years, or a significant drop-off in the numbers of Maori leaving New Zealand (certainly 2000 was a year of big net out-migration of New Zealanders to Australia, and there was a decline in subsequent years before sharp increases again in 2004 and 2005); or
- there has been a decline in the proportion of those of Maori descent in Australia who choose to state this on the census form; or
- many people ignored the instruction to provide two ancestries only the Maori total thus still suffers from lost ancestries.

It will be interesting to investigate this further to see what the reason may be.

Ultimately, however, the key message is that Maori society increasingly has, in part, an Australian future. We can see that the proportion of the overall Maori population in Australia has risen from around one in 50 in 1966, to approximately one in 15 in 1986, to around one in seven in 2006. It's a remarkable rise and it's not far-fetched to foresee one in 5 Maori in Australia in twenty years. This of

course raises all sorts of policy issues for Te Puni Kokiri and other agencies besides.