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Paul Hamer: Living and dying in the lucky country

5:00AM Tuesday February 12, 2008
By Paul Hamer

More than 100,000 Maori now live in Australia – that's at least one Maori in every seven. They seldom make the news, although two stories in particular have attracted attention in the past three months.

Sadly, both involve the violent deaths of Maori men. However, behind the sensational headlines of ethnic violence and racially-motivated murder lies an untold story of largely successful Maori integration into Australian society.

On November 6, 18-year old Jon Warena died after being beaten during a street brawl between groups of Maori and Aborigines in the Perth suburb of Lockridge. The confrontation apparently followed a dispute over alcohol or drugs.

Local media were quick to speculate that the fight was part of a "race war", a suggestion soon quashed by the police, the Maori community, and Maori participants in the brawl itself.

Despite this, the local paper continued to report rumours of likely violent retaliation by Maori for Warena's death.

His death shone the torch on relations between Maori and the indigenous people of Australia. Sadly, the Lockridge brawl was not the first incident of its kind, particularly in Western Australia.

In October 2006, the ABC reported a "racially motivated brawl" between "two large groups of Aboriginal and Maori people" in Kalgoorlie. On New Year's Eve, a brawl between Maori and Aboriginal families in the Perth suburb of Midvale involved more than 20 people armed with knives and baseball bats.

If one accepts that these clashes do occasionally occur, and are not simply a media beat-up, what is the reason for their occurrence? There is clearly a degree of tension in the relationship between Maori and Aborigines. Some Maori look down on Aborigines in the same way much of the rest of society does, and enjoy having a relatively elevated social position. From the earliest times of colonial contact, some Maori have bought into European notions of a descending order of races. By contrast, many Aborigines resent Maori success and – in a wealthy mining town like Kalgoorlie – their willingness to flaunt it.

Some even feel the entire presence of Maori in Australia, as a fellow indigenous people, is something of a threat, especially when Maori talk of setting up marae. Often the two groups come face to face in pubs, with Maori bouncers sometimes manhandling Aboriginal drinkers.



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Despite this, relations between Maori and Aborigines are generally good, and the "race war" talk was inflammatory. Much of the good relationship can be put down to a fair amount of intermarriage and a majority Maori consciousness about indigenous rights and the impact of settlement brought from New Zealand. Many Maori in Australia are drawn to working with Aborigines, in social services, in remote communities, in prisons.

It is likely that Maori consult Aboriginal people over their community projects and gatherings more than any other immigrant group in Australia would even imagine to.

On December 27, father of four James Tautari, 50, died in hospital after being savagely beaten by a gang of European youths while walking home from McDonald's the previous afternoon in western Sydney.

Tautari's mother told the media the attack was "definitely racist" and that "this is happening too much to our people over there. I never want to go back to Australia again".

While the circumstances of the attack on Tautari remain a matter for the courts, it rather begs the question as to whether Maori are afflicted by racism in Australia. There certainly have been other high-profile incidents recently. In 2001, a Liberal MP referred to a "Maori plague" affecting Bondi Beach, while last year it was revealed that a Sydney pub had a policy of denying entry to those of Lebanese and "Islander" appearance (which inevitably included Maori).

The reality is, however, that most Maori in Australia report experiencing racism only rarely.

The surprising thing for many Maori when they move to Australia is that they are seen first and foremost as Kiwis and are usually undifferentiated from their Pakeha compatriots. There certainly is racism in Australia, but most of it is directed towards Asians, Aborigines and, increasingly, the Lebanese.

Results from a 2006 Te Puni Kokiri survey of Maori in Australia illustrate the point. One respondent said he felt more fairly treated by his European Australian bosses than he had felt working for Pakeha in New Zealand.

Others reported that their ethnicity had largely ceased to be an issue and felt liberated as a result. They expressed relief at other ethnic groups making the news headlines and Maori seldom gaining a mention, and they reported that the Kiwi reputation for hard work meant that Australian employers were falling over themselves to offer them work.

Perhaps surprisingly, nearly a third believed that Australians saw Maori culture as either pretty or very important.

If Tautari's death is shown to have been an unprovoked racist attack it is an alarming development, even if it is an isolated case.

For most Maori in Australia the reality is likely to be closer to that contained in the comments of a Te Puni Kokiri survey respondent in Toowoomba: "Australians in general don't care whether you are Maori or not, to them [you're] just another Kiwi and gonna get crap about sports regardless."

*** Paul Hamer, now a contracted writer for the *Waitangi Tribunal*, previously worked for Te Puni Kokiri, where he wrote a report about Maori in Australia.**

This story was found at:

