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HOW MĀORI PRECARIAT FAMILIES NAVIGATE SOCIAL SERVICES

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We are living in a period in which the increasingly precarious nature of employment and welfare support systems has dramatically amplified the hardships faced by many people.[1] Correspondingly, much still needs to be written about the rise of the precariat.[2] International literature asserts that post World War II paid employment was commonly full-time and secure up until the 1970s, when the rise of more insecure work increased as neoliberal policies and globalisation began dominating public deliberations regarding work and social life.[3] Subsequent recessions across many OECD countries contributed to labour market transformations back towards increased 'flexibility' and the casualisation of employment. These labour market shifts have resulted in insecure work and income situations for many households, which for some means frequent cycles of paid employment and welfare dependency. People experiencing such insecure employment face insecure and unliveable incomes while grappling with inadequate state support — these are the people increasingly known as 'the precariat'.

In the previous chapter, Thomas Stubbs and his colleagues provided information on the size (one in four) and composition of the contemporary Māori precariat. Although the notion of the precariat is quite recent, Māori experiences of precarity extend back well before the 1970s changes in the labour market. Māori have experienced precariousness since at least the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in

1840, when increased European settlement and eventual confiscation of Māori lands resulted in an oppressed and marginalised people come the beginning of the twentieth century. For almost two centuries now, colonisation has created what we now term the Māori precariat, populated by whānau who not only live with the loss of traditional lands, resources and social structures, but also suffer from insecure work and unemployment, as well as housing and food insecurities. For many Māori, this has required them to engage with welfare and social services to survive.

This chapter derives from an investigation of precarious Māori households that was funded by Ngā Pae of te Māramatanga (New Zealand's centre of excellence for Māori-focused research, www.maramatanga.co.nz/). The focus of the chapter is on how a Māori Women's Refuge worker assists a single Māori mother in navigating an increasingly uncaring and punitive welfare system.[4] To contextualise the experiences of these participants in our research, we first consider the historical rise of the Māori precariat, including changes to Māori trade and labour that accompanied colonisation.

INITIAL EMERGENCE OF THE MĀORI PRECARIAT

Any history of the Māori precariat will be incomplete. The historical developments that shaped the emergence of the Māori precariat are nuanced and often specific to particular iwi and hapū. Here, we focus on some of the general historical developments, and the sources we cite offer lengthier accounts of Māori histories of precarity. Historical developments associated with colonisation made Māori dependent on the monetary system of the settler society. This posed a major threat to Māori ways of life and sovereignty. With the loss of land via events such as the New Zealand Wars, many Māori were increasingly forced to participate in the emerging settler economy as labourers.

Initial contact between Māori, European whalers and the colonial British offered opportunities for trade and the acquisition of various technologies. Many chiefs encouraged participation in trade with Pākehā to provide subsistence, wealth and security for their collectives.[5] In the decades that followed the initial contact, many Māori acquired new technologies and opportunities within the emerging capitalist

economy through extractive industries such as sealing, whaling and enhanced agriculture, as well as in the shipping and milling industries.[6] In Northland, for example, Māori engaged in sealing and whaling with Pākehā, were cultivating and producing settler-introduced potatoes and pigs, and in the early 1800s went on to produce flax and timber.[7] As other hapū and iwi learned of such ventures, they too engaged in larger-scale cultivation and trade. Examples of this expansion include the production of flax, taken up in the Waikato and the Bay of Plenty, timber in the Coromandel, and potatoes and greenstone in the South Island.

Māori collectives involved in trade not only provided for their own people, but also played a large role in the trade and provision of goods for British settlers and other colonies. Māori success and growth in early trade added to the mana (authority), resources and political power of many tribal groups, which allowed Māori to be leaders in the early capitalist economy.[8] Growing Māori economic success was met with a mixture of encouragement and discontent from different settler groups and officials. Although Governor Grey proposed the use of parliamentary funds to support Māori agricultural and commercial expansion in the late 1840s, by the 1850s settler self-interest sought the removal of Māori from the economic market as, '[t]here is little chance of [wheat growing] remaining profitable. The Natives . . . must necessarily undersell us.'[9] Māori economic trade, production and profit were also resented by settler officials as they reduced Māori appetite for selling land. The ability of Māori to understand the dynamics of supply and demand and to adapt to the ebbs and flows of the market, and their continued control over land and related resources was perceived by many newcomers as a threat to the political and economic dominance of the colonists.[10]

With the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 came new Eurocentric governance structures that offered more security to members of the settler society than to Māori.[11] Trade initiatives that had proved highly successful in generating resources and offering some security in the new economy for Māori were subsequently disrupted by the colonial government, military incursions and legislation. For example, the 1862 Native Land Act individualised land titles, which

allowed for easier purchase of Māori land by settlers. The 1863 New Zealand Settlement Act legalised confiscations, and the 1866 Oyster Fisheries Act prohibited Māori from using their own resources for trade.

These are just three examples of government attempts to assert economic authority over Māori. These acts also contributed to the replacement of a previous bartering system with a monetary system that necessitated Māori access to capital to pay the rates and taxes being levied on them by the settler society. Māori who did not have access to money often lost their land as payment of debts.[12] This period also saw a dramatic increase in the number of settlers who desired Māori land. Māori resistance to selling land also sparked armed conflicts such as the Taranaki and Waikato land wars of the 1860s. These conflicts were followed by substantial land confiscations.[13]

The legacy of land and resource loss in the growth of precariousness among Māori cannot be underestimated. As well as affording Māori strong spiritual, cosmological and cultural links to place, land comprised a key resource that allowed whānau to hunt, gather, cultivate and trade food independently. The loss of land resulted in the loss of traditional food sources, including harvesting and fishing rights,[14] as well as social upheavals and cultural precarity.[15] With the tightening grip of the new colonial government and the reduction of Māori sovereignty over land and other resources, the nature of Māori trade, labour and everyday cultural life was changing. Cultural precarity or systematic dislocation from collective traditions also came with these social upheavals.

A development in terms of the cultural precariousness was the Tohunga Suppression Act of 1907. Tohunga were spiritual and cultural leaders, experts in the Māori world who were afforded responsibility for maintaining and continuing tikanga Māori (cultural knowledge and practices). Such developments had a negative impact on the continuance of Māori culture and undermined the whole cultural structure from which Māori drew strength and security. Subsequently, links to tūrangawaewae (traditional and ancient homelands) and the social and political structures of their ancestors were forever disrupted.[16]

In order to adapt further to the new economy and reap benefits

from it, from the mid 1800s onwards Māori increasingly moved into different industries such as kauri gum, forestry and road construction.[17] Increasing numbers of Māori came to rely on casual, seasonal and precarious work in the settler economy. As European settlement increased so did precariousness for many Māori, and Māori access to natural resources was severely diminished over time. Consequently, many Māori gravitated to urban centres where they experienced decreased self-reliance on collective crops and increased dependence on paid labour in the settler society.[18]

This shift from rural to urban settings became particularly pronounced again in the mid 1900s, which further intensified Māori reliance on income from casual and insecure labour.[19] Over generations, insecure paid employment has shaped the lives of Māori workers to whom we refer today as the Māori precariat. Due to the precarious nature of our work and loss of contact with tūrangawaewae and associated economic and social supports, Māori have become the economic shock absorbers for society in austere times. Māori are often the first to be laid off from low-skilled and casual employment or to have employment hours cut back.[20] The neoliberal economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s have had an additional detrimental impact on Māori health and life expectancy by removing or degrading key aspects of the social safety net.[21]

NAVIGATING THE CONTEMPORARY WELFARE SYSTEM

Māori have long been skilled navigators. Early Māori explorers successfully navigated Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa (the Pacific Ocean) to Aotearoa; Māori then navigated processes of colonisation; and we continue to navigate the tides and intricacies of the Māori world and settler society. Māori navigational skills are again being tested in the form of whānau efforts to access resources for survival and participation in contemporary society. This section briefly foregrounds some of the navigational dilemmas faced by precariat Māori households in accessing resources to simply survive day-to-day and the support provided by Māori service workers in this process. This material needs to be read in the context of the historical upheavals Māori people have faced during colonialism and more recent economic reforms in the

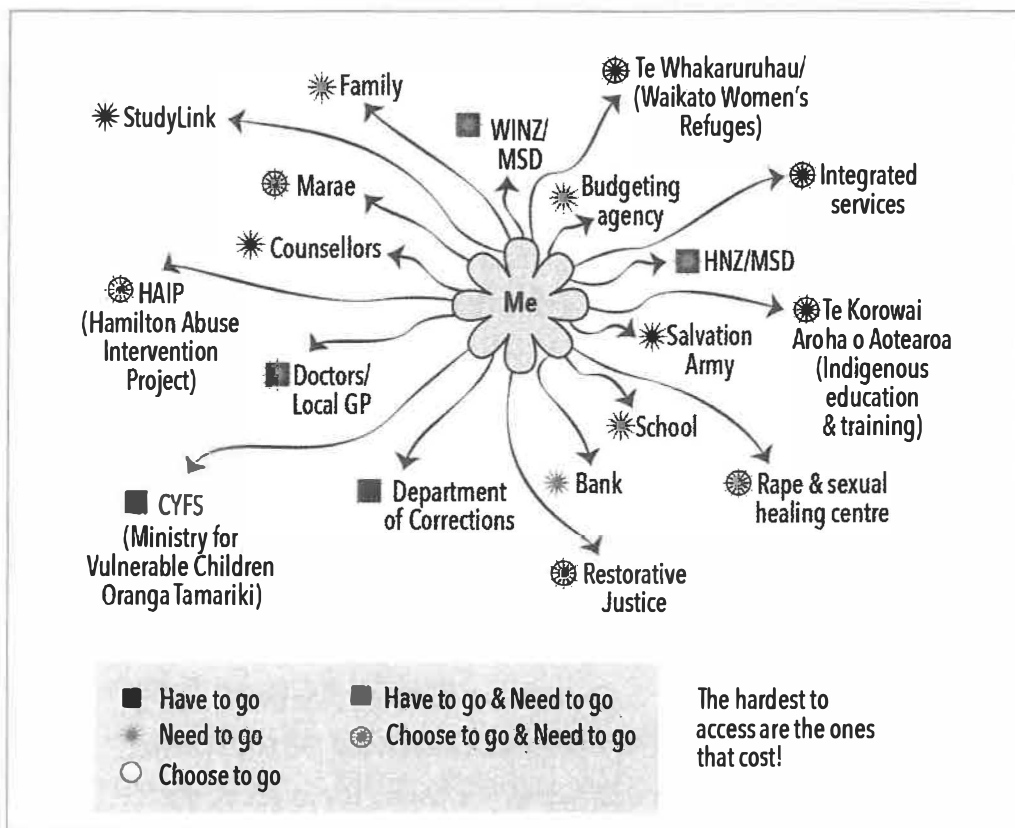
1980s and 1990s that saw increased unemployment among Māori, the retrenchment of the welfare state and development of a less caring approach to families in need.[22]

Today, there is no longer a coherent or responsive 'welfare system' oriented to meeting the needs of Māori and other citizens.[23] Instead, whānau are faced with a chaotic and uncoordinated cluster of public and private services. Precariat whānau must respond to an 'obstacle course' that requires well-honed skills to navigate such services.[24] The development of less caring and more punitive welfare systems is not unique to Aotearoa.[25] For example, reflecting on the consequences of a move to punitive welfare provisions for people of colour in the USA, researchers such as Vicki Lens and Colleen Cary raise several issues that are relevant to the situations whānau face in Aotearoa: 'For welfare participants, welfare means the web of relationships, rules and bureaucratic pathways they must navigate to secure its benefits and avoid its penalties. That pathway is often strewn with hurdles.'[26] In their attempts to navigate the contemporary service landscape in Aotearoa, Māori whānau effectively have to piece together their own welfare systems with the help of various organisations, including Māori Women's Refuge.

We will now ground our account of Māori navigating the welfare system in the experiences of one whānau and an advocate from Māori Women's Refuge who helps them. The whānau and the advocate took part in the first author's thesis research in which whānau experiencing precarity were asked to map their engagements with agencies that make up the welfare landscape over a two-week period. In the case of Miriama,[27] this involved her interacting with 19 separate services (see Figure 1). Miriama distinguished these services in terms of those they 'have to go to', those they 'need to go to', and those they 'choose to go to'. Those services they 'have to go to', include Work and Income (WINZ). These agencies were identified as being less caring, more punitive, and to be avoided if possible. As Miriama states: 'I try to avoid getting any sort of extra assistance from Work and Income (WINZ) because I suppose of the pressure or the strain that you feel when you have to go through their processes. So I [try] to avoid that service all together. I [try] to use other services if I can.'

Those they 'need to go to' include budgeting services, and were identified as treating whānau with more dignity and care. Those they 'choose to go to' are more supportive and holistic in orientation and treat whānau with more respect and care in contrast to services they 'have to go to' like WINZ. Whānau often choose to go to these more supportive services because staff understand what they are going through and take their lived situations into consideration in deciding what assistance is warranted. Many of the services identified by Miriama are also Māori-focused agencies that engage whānau in culturally informed ways.

Figure 1. Miriama's service map.



When engaging with services, people in Miriama's situation talk about having to pretend to be someone they are not, in order to be acceptable to agencies they '*have to go to*' and in order to access their entitlements. As Miriama states, this involves preparing oneself by 'getting into character, visualising appropriate appearance level and expected behaviour and attitude'. Such statements reflect how whānau navigate

the landscape of 'services' by learning how to 'play the game'. Playing the game means people like Miriama learn how to behave in a manner that enhances their chances of getting their entitlements without penalties or sanctions from agency staff.

Despite many people developing specific strategies for accessing resources from agencies they 'have to go to', whānau regularly need to access advocates from agencies they 'choose to go to' in order to ensure they are treated humanely and gain access to their entitlements. Tahu, an advocate from Māori Women's Refuge who supports Miriama, stated that if whānau 'haven't got some really good people around to support them, it's hard out there'. Tahu also indicated that the general life situations of whānau are getting a lot more desperate, and at the same time the agencies that people like Miriama 'have to go to' are becoming a lot less supportive. As Tahu states:

> It's definitely gotten worse over the last five years in terms of our whānau navigating the Social Services. A lot of red tape, you know, a lot of penalising. It's gone real punitive in terms of, if you don't have the form by this time then we're going to take 25 per cent off or nothing . . . High, high stats on whānau that are homeless. That are living in, you know, sharing houses and garages and how living standards, all of those things are raised, you know, gone dearer. The income, the benefits that aren't meeting that. Just all over the place. More numbers of families that are worse off. Things are harder. And we've seen the effects of that in our mahi [work] every day. It's the same stuff, not enough kai in the cupboards, incurring more debt . . . Families are just on their bones. Just surviving. So the system, it's just getting harder and harder for them. It can get really deflating when you've been declined or rejected or judged or looked at a certain way when you've walked in there.

The work advocates in this area do in supporting struggling whānau appears to be situated within a cultural continuation of traditional roles among Māori collectives to manaaki or care for people. As Tahu says: 'The mahi that my mum was involved with and with the communities

around Hamilton, Huntly, Ngāruawāhia, come quite naturally in terms of how we manaaki [care for] and how we awhi [help] people. It [the work] didn't feel foreign because it was just something we were always brought up doing. It was just a part of who we are.'

Advocacy work is often associated with Māori activist movements that have responded throughout history to, as Tahu says, 'injustices and the rights and needs of our people'. In these accounts we can see how Māori resistance to punitive control by agencies of the settler society is alive today in efforts to assist others in navigating the welfare system.

CONCLUSION

Although the contemporary Māori precariat shares many socio-economic similarities with the emerging global class, Māori also have a unique history in terms of economic exclusion, inequalities and experiences of precariousness since the early contact period. Māori have experienced precariousness in economic, cultural, social and political aspects of life since early colonial governments worked to strip Māori of land and resources and to decimate Māori traditions and collective support systems. With the rise of urban living, particularly in the mid twentieth century, came disconnections from traditionally sovereign ways of being and living. Many Māori continue to struggle with the everyday consequences of colonisation and the more recent welfare system that is increasingly designed to punish people in need, rather than support precariat whānau. As noted by Darrin Hodgetts and his colleagues in Chapter 4, we need to move back from a penal welfare system to an anti-oppressive welfare system that is more responsive to the needs of precariat whānau.

Finally, with the contemporary regrowth of precarious living in Aotearoa and with Māori forming a significant population of the precariat, it is important to understand how precariat whānau attempt to survive and navigate the provision of services. This chapter has scratched the surface of this topic by focusing on how one member of the Māori precariat and her advocate attempt to navigate the welfare service landscape. More work needs to be done in this area if we are to target and support initiatives for change to address the needs of precariat whānau.

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19 Coleman et al., 'Māori Economic Development'; Linda W. Nikora, Bernard Guerin, Mohi Rua and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, 'Moving Away from Home: Some Social Consequences for Tuhoe Migrating to the Waikato', *New Zealand Population Review* 30, nos. 1 & 2 (2004): 95–112.

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21 Ibid.

22 See Chapter 4, 'Penal Welfare'.

23 Hodgetts et al., 'Urban Poverty'; see also Chapter 4.

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27 Pseudonyms are used here to protect the privacy of the participants in this study.