

The Death Of Maori Medicine?

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For hundreds of years Maori have accessed the botanical flora of this country to use in traditional healing. Yet just as such indigenous healing is undergoing a renaissance in popularity and use, Maori say their herbal medicine is under serious threat.

Maori liken the effects of the proposed Therapeutic Products and Medicines Bill to the 1907 Tohunga Suppression Act that tried to end traditional Maori healing and language.

They say the Bill sells sovereignty of New Zealand flora to foreign rule and fails to recognise the value of Maori indigenous healing systems.

Kaiwaka man Pene Hita is a representative for the Ngati Whatua ote Kaipara and over the past two years he has rallied Maori across the country to fight the Bill.

What has particularly irked Maori such as Pene is the rushed nature of the introduction of the Bill and what they say is a sham consultation process.

I understand for consultation to have actually taken place the Minister must have demonstrated an open mind at the time the consultation commenced. This clearly did not occur, says Pene.

Contrary to the views of the Select Committee then considering the issue, Annette King (then Health Minister) signed an agreement with Australia in 2003 under which New Zealand was committed to the process now contained in the Therapeutics Bill.

The so-called `consultation process which followed was merely a sham. There was never any opportunity given to us to be meaningfully involved in any discussion on the issues covered in the Bill, rather we, like others, were talked at by officials who just were not interested in modifying their position at all.

I have no doubt that this was always a given in the minds of both the Minister and her officials. It is little wonder that Annette King is now fighting for her survival as the true nature of what she has signed us into becomes exposed.

This has all the appearances of games being played to rush through this legislation and not giving New Zealanders proper access to their democratic rights.

Background

When Captain Cook arrived in New Zealand in 1769 the Tohunga or priest/healer played a central role in Maori culture. It was the Tohunga who gave edicts for reasons of health and safety of the tribe and the Tohunga who knew the herbal uses of plants and how they were to be used in conjunction with karakia (prayer) for healing.

This herbal lore was highly valued and passed down by the older members of the tribe who continue to use ancient and proven remedies to the present day.

Western academics have written extensively about the special healing nature of New Zealand flora that they say is due particularly to the long period in which plants have been isolated from other floras . Early Europeans recorded sophisticated healing by Maori, including an English sailor who was wounded by a spear in his thigh.

`The spear was cut out by two Maori women with an oyster shell which left a wound as large as a teacup. Then green herbs were applied to the wound which immediately stopped bleeding and provided significant pain relief wrote observers.

It was known that the first European medical practitioners turned to Maori traditional remedies when their own scanty stock of drugs failed.

In 1907 the Tohunga Suppression Act worked to try and decimate traditional Maori healing by making it illegal. The tradition survived, but in secret.

Now when there is noticeable resurgence in Rongoa Maori and of Maori interest in traditional methods of healing, it is not acceptable for some offshore body relying on the Western `scientific model of medicine to have any role in determining how Maori seek to use or develop a part of their culture, says Pene, especially given Australians dire history regarding treatment of their own indigenous culture.

Rongoa Maori healing is still practiced and valued in New Zealand today. It sits alongside orthodox European medicine and is a precious resource that plays an important part in the growing attention our young people are paying to our culture.

It is accepted worldwide that indigenous people have rights to special protection for the exploitation and knowledge of the useful properties of fauna and flora. Maori understand that commercial interests cannot be allowed to trample over such rights.

Our Rongoa Maori is part of the indigenous culture, knowledge and beliefs of this country. It is of vital concern that Parliament must recognise the need to respect, preserve and maintain this system not just for Maori, but for all New Zealanders.

Pene says Maori experience of contacting the Prime Minister and government officials over the Bill has shown not only a lack of interest in any concern we as Maori express, but a determination to rush this legislation through come what may .

I do not know what the real motivating issues are behind this Bill. The process that has surrounded it means that it is something quite distinct from the claimed issue of public safety. I have heard this is really driven by trade considerations and foreign policy issues - especially with Australia and the United States.

It seems our precious indigenous culture and our spiritual values don t even get a look in when some foreign policy or trade issues compete.

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