

HISTORY, IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY:
THE HUIA SETTLERS' MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT

The ways in which local inhabitants respond to and mediate pressures upon their community reflects the resources available to them (Day and Murdoch 1993). Focussed on the rural, seaside community of Huia, West Auckland, this essay examines the concepts of community, history, and identity as resources a group of older residents have mobilised to resist perceived pressures on themselves and their community. I propose that their involvement in the establishment and maintenance of the Huia Settlers' Museum is a symbolic representation of their collective and individual identities. External pressure in the form of change, for this group of older residents, arises from a combination of ethnicity, locality and ageing that is resisted through the expression of their genealogical connections to Huia in the form of the local Museum.

INTRODUCTION

Day and Murdoch (1993) suggest the ways in which local inhabitants respond to and mediate pressures upon their community reflects the resources available to them. In a vein reminiscent of Marilyn Strathern's (1981) study of Elmdon Village in England, I want to examine what a group of older residents of the rural seaside settlement of Huia, in West Auckland consider the pressures in their lives and ways in which they cope with them using the example of the local Museum. Strathern suggested that to see what was really going on in Elmdon, the village had to be seen as more than a geographical entity evoked in notions of belonging, a way of life, or length of residence or association, but also in terms of English culture. In Elmdon it was the English class system. In Huia it is age and ethnicity.

Community is an important concept when considering ways in which people symbolically and materially express belonging both collectively and individu-

ally; often through specifically constructed identities mobilised in different ways in different contexts. The concept of community identity used in this essay is influenced by Anthony Cohen's definition:

A reasonable interpretation of the word's use would seem to imply two related suggestions: that the members of a group of people a) have something in common with each other, which b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups. 'Community' thus seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference. The word thus expresses a *relational* idea: the opposition of one community to others or to other social entities.

(Cohen 1985:12)

To investigate the variety of meanings placed by Huia's residents on their museum and why the Huia Settlers' Museum was established in the first instance requires a consideration of both collective action and individual agency. 'It is at the interface between local and external institutions that the meaning and salience of community and locality becomes manifest' (Day and Murdoch 1993).

Identity is socially constructed of emotional, symbolic and material components incorporating the concept of ethnicity. A useful definition is Jenkins' (1996) idea that ethnicity is a way of talking about a collective identification that forms part of what people draw upon in their daily lives for a sense of themselves and an understanding of others. Ethnic identity is created by the individual and others for the self and others, and consists of a series of traits which mark either an individual or a collective as distinct in a society. Ethnicity is constructed from representations and available resources of ideas about how the past, present and future are constituted. Continuity through notions of ethnicity and of a chronological, linear representation of time is a way for New Zealanders of European descent to make a connection to their ancestors. It is a function of the living to ensure this continuity is preserved as a constant reminder to themselves and others, and in the case of the community at Huia, of Huia's public identity – one to which a particular group of residents lay claim for themselves individually and collectively. These are also people whose grandparents (even if born in New Zealand) would have referred to the United Kingdom as 'home'. A 'New Zealand' ethnicity is a generic term which incorporates a range of meanings (Hughes *et al.* 1996), and I have not used the term 'Pakeha' because the residents with whom I spoke about

the Museum consider themselves New Zealand Europeans. As Pearson and Sissons (1997) point out, a person may choose to term themselves of 'Pakeha' ethnicity for political or relational reasons, but most New Zealanders do not tend to make the distinction between ethnicity and nationality (Barber 1999). Furthermore, 'Pakeha' '...is assumed to have negative connotations in Maori and/or it doesn't adequately link people to their European or British ancestry' (Pearson and Sissons 1997:78).

The Huia Settlers' Museum purports to represent New Zealand culture, but in its very name, signals its preoccupation with the colonial settlers of a predominantly British ancestry who settled in the area in the mid nineteenth century. This museum is a physical and symbolic construction, created by people who have a specific sense of community and collective sense of identity, informed by a Western or European concept of history, whereby representations of the past impact on a contemporary sense of belonging. Cohen (1986) argues the efficacy of symbols is their malleability, they provide media through which individuals and groups can remain attached without compromising either collective or individual identity whilst appearing to outsiders as a bounded unit with a common purpose. The materiality of the Museum is important as a tangible and visible structure upon which meanings for a particular group of Huia residents have form.

THE SITE

Huia is located on the shores of and close to the entrance of the Manukau Harbour, which can be reached in only a 20 minute drive from the township of Titirangi in Auckland's Waitakere City, and on a good day in only 40 minutes from Auckland City's Central Business District. The origins of Maori settlement in the Waitakere Ranges is unclear, but is believed to date from about the fourteenth century. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, the area was only sparsely populated, serving as a refuge for those fleeing from fighting on the Tamaki isthmus and home to an estimated fewer than 500 remaining Kawerau people (Diamond 1966; Hayward and Diamond 1978). In 1835, Te Kawau, a Ngati Whatua chief who had built Karangahape Pa at Cornwallis on the Puponga Peninsula, sold the isthmus from the Waitakere Ranges to the Tamaki River to a Pakeha named Thomas Mitchell, a Sydney trader he had allowed to establish a store. Later, Te Kawau became unsatisfied with Mitchell's services, and sold the land on the isthmus to the Crown (Diamond 1966).

The first European settlers arrived in 1853, settling on land bought from or granted by the Crown. Timber cutting rights were included with the land and

most settler families were involved in logging or farming (Laing 1985). Between 1854 and 1857, the whole of the land around the shores of Huia Bay and far up the Huia Stream was purchased by William Kilgour and John Gibbons, Kilgour to farm and Gibbons to mill timber (Diamond 1977). In the 1890s the Manukau Timber Company built a mill to extract logs from the Karamatura and Marama Valleys which were then shipped from Huia up the Manukau Harbour to Onehunga. For many years access to Huia by road was treacherous and difficult, especially during winter, and harbour transport was both more viable and more reliable until as late as the 1950s. When, for example, the Huia Dam was under construction from 1924 to 1929, the entire construction project including men and equipment was transported by boat from Onehunga rather than by road. Although Huia's infrastructure began to develop only slowly due to its isolated position, it also happened at a much slower pace than for the rest of Auckland. A telephone system was introduced in the 1920s, but it was not until 1954 that an electricity supply was laid on and the area waited until 1967 for all weather road access to be finally assured with the reconstruction and sealing of the main Huia Road from Titirangi to the Huia Bridge (Laing 1985). Since then, other improvements have meant that today Huia is serviced by all available utilities except for a sewage system but even so retains its unique character. There is a shortage of available land for housing, and most farmland has been bought by or gifted to the local regional authority to become part of the Waitakere Ranges Centennial Park. The nature of the landscape (a mix of wetland and high, sloping hills) has also meant that new buildings on new sections of land, rather than on existing sites, have been few in recent years. In 1995, the population was estimated at approximately 500 people (Harvey 1995).

Tom: ...that's one of the reasons it doesn't change, because it can't. I'm sure the old money aspect would come into it and if there was land here that could be developed for private housing, somebody else would do it in spite of everyone else or our efforts to prevent it, it would happen, but it's just not possible.

I am personally connected to Huia through my great-great grandparents, Thomas Barr and Eliza Woodward, who settled in the area in the mid-1800s, rearing ten children all of whom grew up, married and reared their own families at Huia or very close by. Their portraits currently hang in the Huia Settlers' Museum. My mother's father was born and raised at Huia, and passed his memories of this place on to his children and in turn his grandchildren through stories about his boyhood and extended family. He related these often so that today I, who have never lived at Huia and rarely visit, also feel a

connection with the place and will assert that Huia is also part of my identity as a Pakeha New Zealander. In essence, it helps me to be me knowing from whence and from whom I came.

In October 1996 I interviewed three people (identified here by the pseudonyms Sam, Tom and Alice) all long standing Huia residents. They were of the same generation and aged from their early 70s to their middle 80s; Tom and Alice a married couple, and Sam a single man. All of them had been involved with the Huia Settlers' Museum from its inception and were descended from some of Huia's first settler families. The focus of my conversations with them was directed toward their involvement with the Huia Settlers' Museum's past, present and future; what they believed the Museum represented to them as individuals and as a community; and what living at Huia meant to them. In these conversations I also referred to two magazine features as discussion points, one a nostalgia piece (Harvey 1995), the other an article about a house that had recently been built in the area (White 1996). From these interviews and published sources, I wanted to explore the link between the idea that the Museum, as a representation of the area's colonial past, was more than just a material presence, that it was also a symbolic representation of these residents' concepts of individual and collective identities. I also wanted to consider the idea that the Museum was a public statement about what Huia meant to these people, that it was a way of marking a boundary between them as insiders (that is, the 'real' people of Huia) and others.

THE MUSEUM

Collecting, although a form of subjectivity, is also influenced by institutional practices and the Huia Settlers' Museum has similarities to the French eco-museum. This concept was designed as a mirror for ideas linking collections to the culture of a specific region, the aim not to attain knowledge, but to achieve communication (Poulet 1994). The task of the eco-museum was to alleviate crises of identity in new and changing economic times, and to help populations in transition, but the museum at Huia is more than a restatement or glorification of the past and more than a renaissance of the 'traditional' (although it is also these things). It is a restatement of the past for contemporary purposes and represents notions of the individual and of community. James Clifford (1994) argues that some sort of gathering or collecting around the self and group to mark boundaries between self and other is probably universal, however, the notion that this identity as a kind of wealth is probably not. In the West '...collecting has long been a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture and authenticity' (Clifford 1994: 260).

Csikszentmihalyi (1993) argues that artefacts help objectify and stabilise views of the self in three major ways: 1) by demonstrating the owner's power and place in the social hierarchy; 2) by revealing continuity through time by providing foci of involvement in the present; and 3) by giving concrete evidence of a place in a social network of symbols. Moreover, connections made between material culture or artefacts and life histories or genealogies are one way of revealing the past and laying claim to history (Leone and Little 1993). It is this claim to history that forms the philosophy and founding principles of the people involved in the creation and continuing maintenance of the Huia Settlers' Museum wanted to state – that they are the original or 'real' residents as opposed to incomers who have no connection to past generations of the area. By virtue of birth, but not necessarily residence, community ranking is allocated to 'real' residents for their prior connection to Huia.

At a public meeting on October 25, 1981, a committee of ten was established to set the project of constructing a pioneer or settler museum in motion. Through the voluntary efforts of these people and others, building commenced adjacent to the Huia Hall in June 1983 and the Huia Settlers' Museum opened in March 1984 (Laing 1985). For Museum volunteers, involvement is both a privilege and a right.

Sam: ...we began to think about a museum, a place of our own...

Alice: ...I'll always regret not going on the Foundation Committee. I was asked and I thought oh no, get some other family in, you know, get another family involved, but I've regretted it ever since.

A commemorative booklet was produced and in it the Museum committee established several aims and objectives. Although this booklet acknowledges previous Maori occupation of the area, this presence is peripheral to the specifically white settler world which the Museum seeks to represent. The items and artefacts in the Museum are representations or relics from previous years and previous residents of the area, but their meanings have been renegotiated by their new context. No longer is an iron Sam's mother used just an iron any longer, it is much more. Incorporated into the material object are ideas about the past and history, memories associated with the people who may have used the item, and other memories from the time when it was used in its original functional form.

Claudia Bell (1997) argues that the pioneer legend is an important contribution to New Zealand's rural mythology that romanticises the success with

which colonial settlers tamed the New Zealand wilderness. This controlling of an unruly 'nature' implies, argues Bell (1997), a strong work ethic, a moral wholesomeness supposedly absent in towns or cities, conservative values and no desire for change. Although the Huia Settlers' Museum is not a commercial project like the examples Bell uses in her argument, the appropriation of objects from the past converts them into tangible symbols of the past that imply positive values about the present. This visible statement of belonging solidifies a local identity and belonging for local people whose family connections are represented in the Museum exhibits. As Bell (1997) argues, displays such as these don't seek to change popular perceptions of the past, and instead seek to affirm and illustrate existing assumptions. A positive image is conveyed that attaches to the present residents who are connected to this past by genealogical links. This visual documentation and display of the local past insists the place was significant even if it may not seem so today.

HISTORY, COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

History, in the form of the Huia Settlers' Museum, is specific to descendants of colonial settler families of Huia's past and represents what Vansina (1986) terms a 'golden time'. It is not only a physical manifestation of material culture, but also incorporates other forms of history such as stories, written reminiscences and photographs. As Denning (1991:362) notes, 'the transformation of the past that is a history is always made in social circumstances', so that the circumstances of the telling ensures the survival of what is being told and has its own social rules for the telling. Denning (1991) also suggests that we are 'entertained' by the meanings we place upon the past, but by being entertained we are not amused by, but rather engaged with the past, in that we have our attention focused upon the past in order to accommodate or harbour ideas and thoughts. The Huia Settlers' Museum is a history manifested visually, aurally, materially and symbolically.

The Western notion of time accommodates only a one-way history incorporating the perception that time is an evolutionary and linear phenomenon, a chronological concept. It is also one that is a public Time which articulates time and space into a 'natural' law of a theory of change. This theory of change, says Fabian (1983), is our praxis or the way in which the West produces knowledge so that a particular way of remembering can be made the measure of the development of human consciousness. Reminiscences are one such product of the human memory that produces meanings that have come to be associated with the artefacts of the past and form part of a tour of the Huia Settlers' Museum. For all three interviewees, the colonial past, accessed through mem-

ories of their own childhoods, was a time of stability, security and certainty.

Sam: Although the old people, they had so little, they seemed to be so generous with everything. Because they've got more competitive today.

Tom: ...we don't really want to be like somewhere else, we want to be as we were.

Sam: ...they had a great attitude to life, no regrets.

Tom: I wouldn't want to go into the future, I'd much sooner go back 100 years and live in an earlier past.

Geoffrey White (1991:3) says that 'histories told and remembered by those who inherit them are discourses of identity; just as identity is inevitably a discourse of history'. That is not to say that the past represented by the Huia Museum is inauthentic, but only that there can be more than one history mobilised for different purposes by different groups or individuals at different times. Even in publications not written by those with a specific interest in Huia, authors seem unable to resist waxing lyrical about the place. For example, 'It's only a half-hour drive out of Auckland, but the solemn, hushed beauty of Huia can make you believe you're at the farthest end of the earth' (White 1996: 23). The sentiment or nostalgia for a 'golden time' is not a feeling unique to rural communities but forms part of one of New Zealand's myths upon which its colonial history has been written.

Friedman (1992:837) suggests that identity is a question of empowerment and that people without history are people who have problems identifying themselves to others so that 'making history is a way of producing identity insofar as it produces a relation between that which supposedly occurred in the past and the present state of affairs'. He also argues that in this context, Western practices of truth-value history and the practices of groups themselves create an inevitable confrontation in the construction of histories, linking the practice of self-identification in specific social conditions to the way in which the past is actively constituted. The identity associated with the Huia Settler's Museum is a specific kind of identity and a reflexive history, one for which some community members is true and which defines them as insiders and others as outsiders. The struggle for an unchanging Huia is not one of a struggle against colonialism, but one against change, a chronological evolutionary time, of a resistance to concepts such as development and progress and an anxious fu-

ture in which a sense of well-being is felt to be uncertain and under threat from outside forces. A way of resisting the threat of change or development is to construct an identity incorporating history, or what White (1991: 5) terms a 'retrospective narrative [to] create the present through terms of remembrance'. It is also an effective means for reproducing community selfhood in that these narratives represent more than a collection of identities or events but also 'constitute moral parables' or 'codes with which to live by' (White 1991: 6–7).

Changes Tom, Alice and Sam face are the inexorable and inevitable facts of ageing and of a rapidly encroaching 'outside' as global events and processes shrink and shape the world. As they age, they feel their world is neither safe nor certain. The waters of the Manukau Harbour are now so polluted swimming is often banned over summer at some beaches and shellfish gathering is not advised.

Sam: It's really like a Dead Sea today compared to what it used to be.

People, their behaviour and expectations of others' behaviour, have also changed and near neighbours are not always the people on whom a person will rely in times of trouble.

Sam: One time you had to be concerned when your neighbours – I can think of the old folk going round to stay with someone, they were ill or that sort of thing, they used to go and sit with people and do something for them, but they don't have to now.

New residents coming to the area express similar ideas about what Huia represents as a place to them, but have different ways of representing them. For example, there is little in the way of housing development at Huia due to the lack of available land and comment from interviews on a recently built house in the area was not particularly favourable. The house referred to was built high on a narrow ridge overlooking the bay at Huia by an architect and his wife who both work from home. In a magazine feature on the house, the owners stated their reasons for living at Huia as very similar to other residents, that they '...wanted to build an unpretentious place that would be in keeping with all the baches and seaside bungalows in the area' (White 1996: 26). The magazine (White 1996: 28) described the house thus: 'with its red batten-board exterior, ...[it] looks like an old-fashioned boat shed, or a barn. It could have easily been built 30 years ago...[and] The red colour and barn-yard look [is]... also a nostalgic reference...' It is exactly the barn-like colour that was the issue for

Alice because it clashed with the green of the surrounding bush. This observation illustrates Cohen's (1985) ideas about how people may hold the symbol in common, in this case the image of what the buildings in their community and locality should represent, but may differ in individual interpretations of how they should look. In common is the desire to keep Huia's character intact as unique and rural as possible, but the difference is in the detail of just how such a notion is realised. These newest of residents also have specific ideas about the place and why they want to live there. 'It's the sort of view that sends you religious' (White 1996: 28) they say, and are at pains to point out that they have no microwave or dishwasher in keeping with the place they feel '...displays that simple, bygone New Zealand feeling' (White 1996: 29), feelings similarly expressed by Tom, Alice and Sam when talking about their community and the Museum. Cohen (1985) suggests that communities often respond assertively to encroachments upon their boundaries, be they physical or mental boundaries, as if change inevitably means loss - he believes that what change represents to a rural community is not just a loss of a way of life, but a loss of a sense of self. The reality of community lies in its members' perceptions of the vitality of its culture, so that 'people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity' (Cohen 1985: 118). For the older residents of Huia, this response has been the creation of the Museum.

The manner in which local inhabitants respond to and mediate outside pressures reflects the resources available to them (Day and Murdoch 1993). History, identity and community all interconnect to mean belonging, both to place and to others in specific locations and places in time. Change in any form can be interpreted by a community as a threat not only to its collective identity but to its members' sense of self and can be met by assertive responses. In the village of Elmdon, (Strathern 1981) the influx of 'outsiders' into the area was seen as a threat to a way of life. In Huia's case, after the road improved and more and more people began to move in and out of the area with relative ease, one response has been to construct a museum - a symbol of all that was good and right and certain about Huia for many older residents.

The Huia Settlers' Museum represents not only community and individual identity through the use of a specific European concept of the past and of history, it is also a symbol of resistance to change. For one section of Huia's community, those older residents who have family connections to the area's colonial past, and whose resistance to change as an abstract concept is embodied in the Huia Settlers' Museum, have other very real concerns that come with age. This is reflected in the way they speak of the Museum, their insistence

that the colonial past was a 'golden time', that the 'old people' knew how to live and how to die in a proper manner, and in the way they tell their stories of Huia. Coming to terms with one's own mortality and the economics of living on a fixed retirement income with often limited capital resources, is a fact of life for many of New Zealand's ageing population today. The older residents of Huia for whom the Museum represents part of themselves, cope with present day anxieties about their declining physical and economic well-being by connecting in a symbolic and material way with their past. Their involvement in the establishment, maintenance and furthering of the Huia Settler's Museum is part of a continuing process of negotiating change on an individual and collective level. These people of advancing years are also living in a time when many New Zealanders are involved in a re-negotiation of the meaning of what it is to be a European New Zealander as the Crown negotiates and settles with Maori for past grievances. The Huia Settler's Museum is a statement of belonging to an 'us' that is not 'them', a place that shows and tells their own stories as they want to have them told. Huia has remained isolated far longer than other settlements in the same area. This circumstance has contributed to a heightened sense of change as something to be resisted and even feared. The Huia Settlers' Museum is some older residents' response to that change which they believe threatens their sense of what constitutes themselves as individuals and as a community. Change is often simply beyond an individual's or a community's capacity to resist so that the struggle to maintain boundaries is constant. However, with efforts concentrated on the Museum and its future, these older residents ensure a sense of continuity for themselves in their lifetime.

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