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Billie Lythberg and Wayne Ngata (Te Aitanga a Hauiti)

Te Aitanga a Hauiti and Paikea: Whale People in the Modern Whaling Era

In Aotearoa New Zealand, whales are revered by Māori in *whakapapa* (ties of kinship and affinity) and through carvings, songs, and oratory. Māori relationships with whales span deep ancestral time to the present, and the commercial whaling era is a mere blip in this *longue durée*. Here, we introduce a whale-riding ancestor called Paikea and his instantiation as a late nineteenth-century *tekoteko* (gable figure) now in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. We describe the relationship between Paikea and a gift made to him by his descendants from the tribal group Te Aitanga a Hauiti, of Ūawa on the east coast of the North Island, as an example of what it means to be whale people in the “modern whaling” period.

Paikea is an ancestor of many *iwi* (tribal groups) of the eastern seaboard of Aotearoa New Zealand. The Paikea story is known in other parts of the Pacific and provides an explanation for how this particular ancestor reached Aotearoa from the ancestral and spiritual homeland of Hawaiki. There are several versions of the story, but it is commonly accepted that he was the sole survivor of a marine disaster and through his endeavors reached shore at a place called Ahuahu. This was achieved through the mobilization of his marine ancestors, his family of whales, who helped him reach Aotearoa. Paikea is described as riding on the back of a whale, or transforming into a whale, and is referred to accordingly as *he tahito*, *he tipua*, *he taniwha*, *he tohorā*, *he tangata*, *he tekoteko*—an ancient being, an extraordinary being, a denizen of the deep, a whale, a man, a sentinel for his people. *Paikea* is also the Māori name for southern humpback whales.



Ūawa and Te Aitanga a Hauiti rohe (tribal area), North Island, Aotearoa—New Zealand. Courtesy of Kaaterina Ker-ekere, KEdesign © 2019.

The Paikea narrative underpins a certain type of relationship with whales, one of *kaitiakitanga*—care or stewardship. This is conceptualized in *whakapapa* terms, whereby whales are identified as ancestors and kin. The *kaitiaki* relationship underpins voyaging knowledge contained in oral histories. Whales guide *waka* (canoes/vessels) to land, through dangerous seas and channels, and are called upon to smooth rough waters for safe passage. Ocean-going *waka hourua* are double-hulled to replicate the physical qualities of a pair of whales cresting waves in tandem. *Tere tohorā, tere tangata*—where whales journey, people follow—is a *whakataukī* (proverb) that encapsulates the essence of this synergy.

Yet Māori also had a visceral relationship with whales, not only harvesting drift whales but also forcing the beaching of individuals or pods when it was possible to do so. Whales were a gift from Tangaroa, the guardian of the sea and progenitor of fish. They offered many important resources, all identified in Te Reo Rangatira (the Māori language), and examined and understood by Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge systems). These included meat (*kiko*), which could be eaten fresh or dried for future use; milk (*waiū*), if the whale happened to be a mother still suckling her calf; oils (*hinu*) for polish, scent and *rongoā* (healing); baleen (*hihi*), sinews (*uaua*), and blubber (*ngako*). Whale bones (*parāoa*), with their characteristic grain, were harvested for weaponry and adornment, and the creamy, slightly translucent ivory of their teeth (*rei*) was reserved for high-status *taonga* (treasure).

During the commercial whaling period that interrupted centuries of Indigenous whale harvesting practices, many Māori embraced both new ways of whaling and the whalers who brought them to Aotearoa. They boarded whaling ships and traveled the world, created *whakapapa* bonds with whalers through marriage and bloodlines, and joined European and American crews in the flensing of whales in such quantities that, for example, by 1840, right whales had been practically eliminated from the waters of the Southern Hemisphere. They also hosted onshore whaling stations from 1820, including one at Māhia, south of Ūawa—a *tapu* (sacred) site associated with whales and whale beachings. In 1837, Māhia became the principal whaling station in the mid-eastern section of the North Island, conflating *whakapapa* and more viscerally-based whaling traditions for local Māori, and committing Māhia and its people to the commercial whaling period after generations of Indigenous relationships with, and harvesting of, whales.

The timing of the death of the last whale in Aotearoa New Zealand for commercial purposes, at 4:00 p.m. on 21 December 1964, is noted with specificity on government websites, drawing a bold line under such practices. For a short time thereafter, the flesh of beached whales continued to be harvested by locals. One of this paper's authors, Wayne Ngata, recalls his father traveling to Gisborne following a stranding there in 1969 and bringing home whale meat, which he enjoyed as a delicacy (though the younger members of his family did not). Hunting whales in New Zealand waters was finally made illegal in 1978.

Paikea the *Tekoteko* in Ūawa and New York

In the late nineteenth century, a carved meetinghouse was erected in Ūawa. At this time, sporadic whaling was still taking place south of Ūawa in Māhia and Tūranga (Gisborne) as a seasonal activity. To the north of Ūawa, shore whaling remained an important occupation for the people of Te Whānau ā Apanui until the mid-1920s.

The *whare whakairo* (carved ancestral house) was named after a charismatic leader of Te Aitanga a Hauiti, Te Kani a Takirau (ca. 1790s–1856), a descendant of Paikea. He is said to have carried a whalebone *mere* (a striking weapon and oratory aid), and the whalebone *heru* (standing comb) he wore in his hair is now in the collection of the British Museum. Paikea stood at the apex of the Te Kani a Takirau *whare*: a naturalistic carving of a man atop a figurative face, or *koruru*. Carved from a single piece of wood, he stands 164 cm tall. Paikea is well proportioned, facing forwards, his hands—each with five fingers—clasped across his lower abdomen. His legs are foreshortened; he was made to be looked up to. At the top of his head, a projection suggests a topknot of hair. His face is carved and painted with a distinctive *moko* (facial tattoo), and his name is written across his chest in elegant script, leaving no doubt about his identity.

Atop the *whare* of Te Kani a Takirau, Paikea commanded a view across the windswept and driftwood-strewn beaches of Ūawa, past the bay's spectacular cliffs and out to sea, to the great ocean he had traversed from Hawaiki. He looked out at this view for about 20 years before he was taken from Te Kani a Takirau to join the collection of Major General Robley in the United Kingdom, a man known for his interest in Māori *moko* and his collection of not only artefacts but also preserved Māori heads.

Robley was a regular petitioner of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), who purchased Paikea from him in 1908, along with a whalebone *patu*, several cloaks, canoe prows, and other fine examples of Māori carving. Records associated with this acquisition are scant, and we do not know the circumstances that led to the dismantling of Te Kani a Takirau and the removal of Paikea by Robley. We do know that at some point before 1907, Paikea was shipped to England, before being sold and shipped to New York where he has remained ever since.

Visits and Gifts

In April 2013, Paikea the *tekoteko* was visited by a group of his Te Aitanga a Hauiti descendants, delegates of the tribe's arts management group, Toi Hauiti, who were eager to reconnect with the ancestor who had once graced Te Kani a Takirau. To instantiate their reconnection after an absence of more than one hundred years, Toi Hauiti presented a *taonga* to Paikea: a *rei puta* pendant carved from a sperm whale's tooth. The tooth itself had come from Māhia, the sacred site temporarily dedicated to shore whaling.



Whakakau,
a named *rei
puta* (whale
tooth pendant)
carved
by Lance
Ngata (2012).
Photo cour-
tesy of Lance
Ngata.

Since commercial whaling activities ceased in 1964, Aotearoa New Zealand has been a staunch advocate of whale conservation. The Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978 regulates cultural access to and use of whales that continue to beach; Māori are now usually allowed only their teeth and bones, precluding their respectful use of the entirety of this precious resource. Meanwhile, international conventions restrict the movement of *taonga* made from whalebone and teeth across borders, circumventing the gifting of prestigious items within and beyond kin groups.

This was the case with Paikea's pendant. It was rejected by the Museum due to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), an international treaty drawn up in 1973 to ensure that international trade

in specimens of vulnerable wild animals and plants, such as whale bones and teeth, does not threaten their survival.¹ In addition to not being able to stay with Paikea, it could not stay in the United States. It was instead delivered into the hands of another of Paikea's descendants, who was visiting New York for talks concerning the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, and carried home to Ūawa.

It is a testament to the goodwill of Toi Hauiti, and their genuine interest in long-term relationships with the museums caring for their *taonga* and ancestors such as Paikea, that this incident was handled with sensitivity and grace. However, to begin to frame this event and the intention of a future return, Wayne Ngata offered the following *whakatauki* (proverbial saying/teaching): *He taonga tuku noa tē hoki mai ai*—A gift given freely, not to be returned.

We might infer from this not only that the refusal of the whale tooth pendant was a slight, but also that the circumstances that lead to Paikea's acquisition by the American Museum of Natural History in 1908 did not tally with such a sentiment.

Some 14,000 kilometers, two flights, a full day and night of travel, and thousands of dollars per person separate Ūawa and the AMNH. The logistics required to return the *taonga* would include multiple airfares in order to bring an adequate group to New York to make good the gift (both for Paikea as the recipient and for Toi Hauiti as donors), not to mention time away from jobs, school, and family. The return would also require considerable research, paperwork, and fees in order to identify and satisfy the requirements of not only CITES, but several other acts and conventions enacted to constrain precisely the procurement and movement of an item made from whale tooth.

In 2015, an opportunity arose to revisit New York as part of a documentary series being made for the Māori TV broadcaster in Aotearoa. A storyline was developed that featured the return of the *taonga* for an episode of ARTEFACT focused on Māori ancestors and blue water navigation.² Resources became available for both the research required to secure permissions for the *taonga* to travel and for Toi Hauiti to travel with it.

1 "What is CITES?," Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, accessed 4 February 2019, <https://www.cites.org/eng/disc/what.php>.

2 "Star Travel," ARTEFACT, Māori Television, accessed 4 February 2019, <https://www.maoritv.com/shows/artefact/star-travel>.

To determine which acts would apply to the *taonga*, we needed to ascertain with absolute certainty the history of the tooth itself and its association with Māhia. Toi Hauiti member Lance Ngata told us that he had carved the *taonga* in 2012 from a whale tooth given to him by his tutor, master carver Clive Fugill. The whale was a mature *parāoa* that beached on the Māhia Peninsula in the late 1960s. This allowed us to trace the tooth back to a sole sperm whale bull that had beached on Māhia on 1 May 1967. Its records were surprisingly detailed; the whale was 55 feet long, it is number 385 in the NZ Whale Stranding Database, and the coordinates of its stranding were S 39°5'2", E 177°52'19".

Thereafter, the paperwork amassed to travel with Paikea's pendant included: a "Permit to Export" from the Management Authority of the Department of Conservation, New Zealand, to satisfy the Trade in Endangered Species Act 1989 and CITES; an email from the U.S. Fisheries and Wildlife Service advising the inspection process required at the U.S. border and other required documentation; a "Declaration for Importation or Exportation of Fish or Wildlife" from the U.S. Fisheries and Wildlife Service; a "Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978 Permit to Hold, Import and Export" from the New Zealand Department of Conservation, granting the right to export the tooth and including a photograph of the pendant so no substitution could be made; a letter from the United States Department of Commerce National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, acknowledging receipt of an affidavit and supporting documentation from Wayne Ngata to establish that the whale had died and the tooth had been procured before the effective date of the U.S. Marine Mammals Protection Act (21 December 1972), and that the tooth had been held in a secure environment since 1967 and had not been involved in commerce. As a condition of this import permit, the tooth was not allowed to enter into commerce in the United States; therefore, it must never be sold. Finally, a cover letter from the Senior Museum Registrar of the AMNH outlined the importation process and associated inspection at the U.S. border, listed the permits attached, and confirmed that the pendant would be accepted by the AMNH into its collection as a gift to Paikea.

After months of paperwork and international collaboration, the *taonga* was finally able to return to Paikea in July 2017. In New York, flanked by members of his extended family—all of them descendants of Paikea—Wayne Ngata addressed their ancestor, collapsing the distance of four years since their last reunion, and introducing him to other members of his kin. The pendant was once again placed around his neck, but this time with the certainty that it would never be taken off.

Whale People Today

Being whale people in the modern whaling era requires the maintenance of relationships with whales that exceed and transcend the short-term aberration that was economic whaling and the skillful navigation of national and international laws introduced to address their subsequent economic extinction. The many Fijian *tabua* (smoked whale tooth valuables) confiscated each year by NZ Customs are further examples of the impact CITES is having on the movement of the ancestral valuables of Indigenous peoples. More than 90 percent of specimens seized at New Zealand's border under CITES are destroyed, but after a request from Fiji authorities in the early 1990s, *tabua* have been collected and stored by the Department of Conservation. On 29 May 2017, just two months before the pendant was returned to Paikea, 146 *tabua* were returned to Fiji by NZ Customs in the first repatriation of its kind.



Descendant Mikaia Leach with Paikea, 2017. Photo courtesy of Greenstone TV.

For Toi Hauiti, their relationship with Paikea the *tekoteko* in New York and the people that care for him there has been strengthened by the return of the whale tooth pendant. The *rei puta* is a materialization of the living relationship between Paikea and his kin. It is a demonstration of Toi Hauiti's curatorial approach to their *taonga* in museums far from home and a prompt for further conversations about Paikea's rights, as an ancestor and a living face of Te Aitanga a Hauiti, to receive guests and retain gifts that are his due, even if these are not easily accommodated by international treaties.

Further Reading

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