

COMMENT

Aotearoa: What's in a name?

As the Māori Party prompts debate around whether New Zealand should be officially named Aotearoa, Professor Kerry Howe examines our common usage and understanding of the term



by Kerry Howe

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There are now long recognised problems with accepting at face value early European interpolations of tribal 'traditions' this country, writes Kerry Howe. Photo: Getty Images

As the Māori Party prompts debate around whether New Zealand should be officially named Aotearoa, Professor Kerry Howe examines our common usage and understanding of the term

Should the name New Zealand be replaced by, or co-exist with Aotearoa? For Aotearoa, is it widely assumed, is the original 'indigenous name' for New Zealand. It is certainly the 'modern' name favoured by many Māori and others. But our current common use and understanding of the name was probably not in existence before Western contact.

This is not to argue that it should not be used. I'm in favour of its co-use as our country's name. But we should be aware of the cultural and historical complexities of its derivation. Nor is this an argument that applies exclusively to the term Aotearoa. All words evolve through usage over time.

Māori appear not to have had a name for what is now called New Zealand. The North Island was Te Ika a Maui – the fish of Maui – and the South Island Tewaipounamu, or the rivers of greenstone. The latter also had other names in legend, including Te waka a Maui, or Maui's canoe, from which he hauled up his great fish.

The origins of Aotearoa are obscure. George Grey's *Polynesian Mythology*, 1855 is sometimes credited with the first written use of the term when he recounted the legends of Maui, saying that the "greater part of his descendants remained in Hawaiki, but a few of them came here to Aotearoa... (or in these islands)".

But there are now long recognised problems with accepting at face value early European interpolations of tribal 'traditions'. So many traditions were generalised and homogenised and even fictionalised for Western consumption by nineteenth century interpreters of the Māori world such as George Grey, John White, Edward Tregear, Percy Smith, Elsdon Best.

And care needs to be taken too with attempts at literal translations of words or phrases. Aotea can mean many things depending on context, such as a cloudy-white greenstone, light, or 'east', or a cloud, or a specific place such as Great Barrier Island, or an ancestral migrating canoe.

However, there are some traditional generic notions common through much of eastern Polynesia, such as the idea that islands were hauled up from the dark depths into the light, which is where the term Aotea, or dialectical equivalent, as light may have some relevance – perhaps not so much as a specific island name, but as a place that become light. So it is possible the words Aotea, or Aotearoa, were sometimes used, but not in the sense they are commonly used today.

For example, it is revealing that the Māori Declaration of Independence of 1835 which asserted the authority of the 'Independent Tribes of New Zealand' has both Māori and English versions. The Māori version of New Zealand is 'Nu Tereni', a Māori pronunciation of the English name. Aotearoa is not used.

The English version of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi has several references to the 'Tribes of New Zealand', 'Chiefs of New Zealand', 'Natives of New Zealand'. The Māori version, it might be expected, would use the word Aotearoa, if it was in common usage. Instead it translates 'New Zealand' as 'nu tirani'.

William Williams' Māori dictionary, first published in 1844, has no entry for Aotearoa.

The earliest reference I have found in New Zealand's newspapers is in the Māori language *Māori Messenger*, 1855, which mentions Aotearoa which it equated to 'Nui Tirenī'.

So it is likely that the word Aotearoa may have had *some* currency, though it seems not to have been in widespread or specific use. And maybe Grey's poetic hand is there somewhere?

But the increasing usage of Aotearoa from about mid-century does have traceable origins in Māori tribal locations and politics in the colonial period, and particularly with the emergence of the Māori King Movement in the Waikato in the late 1850s, early 1860s. Some of the major King Movement meetings were held at a village called Aotearoa, some eight kilometres east of Te Kuiti. It was still known by that name at the end of the century – but not in more recent times? The village was also then, and is now still called Rangitoto.

Michael Belgrave in *Dancing with the King* locates a village called Aotearoa east of Otorohonga, on the boundary of Ngāti Maniapoto and Raukawa territories, with associations with both Tawhiao and Rewi

(personal communication). On the current topographical map there is an 'Aotearoa marae' east of Otorohanga, and there is also a north/south running Aotearoa Road.

So the precise location of 'the' King Country Aotearoa village remains slightly cloudy, though the general locality seems established? There is also an Aotearoa in Northland, and Taranaki.

Aotearoa in the King Country seems to have morphed from just a location (or even locations) and took on a wider identity meaning. Some flags used by the Hau Hau had 'Aotearoa' on them. One was captured by Major Jackson in the Waikato in 1863. It was still being displayed proudly as a trophy in military mess gatherings late in the century. By the 1870s 'Aotearoa' became synonymous for the region widely known as the King Country. One King Movement flag also has the words Niu Tirenī on it. It all indicates a growing need by Māori towards more collective responses to colonisation, especially during and after the onslaughts of military battles and land legislation of the 1860s, and this required new identity terminology.

Also in the 1860s there are examples of the use of the phrase 'the island of Aotearoa' meaning the North Island. This usage continued throughout the century. The setting up of King Tawhiao's Great Council, or Kauhanganui, in 1892 comprised, it claimed, 'the Kingdom of Aotearoa and the Waiponamu', meaning both North and South Islands.

It is likely that King Movement political aspirations may lie behind the claimed increasing geographic size of the region purported to be Aotearoa. But it was mostly wishful thinking in practical terms. While many Maori throughout New Zealand may have been in support of the King Movement's general aims, most were far too independent to kowtow to its mana. At least one acerbic commentator noted Tawhiao's nation-wide 'constitution' for 'the Maori Kingdom of Aotearoa' amounted only to 'practically what is termed the King country.'

Thomas Bracken's New Zealand anthem of 1878 was translated into Māori by T.H. Smith. New Zealand he called Aotearoa. This meaning was further entrenched with W.P. Reeves' 1898 history of New Zealand with the title *Aotearoa. The Long White Cloud*. James Cowan's 1907 version is entitled *New Zealand, or Ao-te-roa (The Long Bright World)*. Johannes Anderson, in the same year, published *Māori Life in Aotea*.

The now common specific 'translation' of Aotearoa as 'the land of the long white cloud' probably became more established from the 1920s or 30s.

Both Bracken and Reeves are commonly credited with first inventing the word Aotearoa. They did not, but they helped embed the modern view among both Māori and Pākehā that Aotearoa means and is the 'indigenous' term for *all* of New Zealand. Their timing is not coincidental.

New Zealand in the later nineteenth century saw many non-Māori efforts to give it another name that best suited the perceived emerging national character, now that most of the non-Māori population had been born in the country – suggestions included Maoria, Maoriland, Zealandia, Aotearoa. There is an irony that many Māori were at the same time seeking their identifying name for their country.

The suggested Aotearoa, first popularised among Pākehā by Bracken's translated anthem, and Reeves' history, drew similar sorts of conflicting responses to those we still hear today. Some newspaper correspondents at the time thought Aotearoa was "euphonious and beautiful, and is not a change, but a reversion to the original..." A counter to that was "'Aotearoa!' Fancy a new chum trying to roll his tongue round that." Another thought the name "Cannot fail to strike the uninitiated [overseas reader] at least peculiar ... a stumbling block and a rock of offence."