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(Jacobs, M., 2021)

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Aotearoa, Nu Tīreni, New Zealand — it's a complicated issue

Maxine Jacobs . 05:30, Oct 09 2021

CAMERON BURNELL/STUFF

Māori and Pākehā alike take up the chance to learn Kupe Hautoa, a haka written specifically for the Wellington region inspired by the first tipuna to arrive at the motu. (First published in 2018)

Growing up in the Far North, Sam Napia never thought Pākehā would embrace te reo Māori. The nation coming together to sing the Māori version of the national anthem was beyond his imagination. A stadium of Kiwis performing haka in the stands alongside the All Blacks on the international stage was unthinkable.

The indigenous culture of the nation is being pushed to the forefront of our identity. It's in our presentation to the world, but not in our name, he says.

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The land was branded by colonising forces who, after a bit of trial and error, settled on naming the new area they had found New Zealand, but it was discovered long before Dutch explorer Abel Tasman arrived in 1642, or Englishman Captain James Cook set foot on the whenua in 1769.

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In this Nigel Brown painting, Māori watch from the shores as settlers arrive.

In homes across the motu, discussions are being held between whānau as the nation edges closer to a Māori name than ever before.

Some iwi are thrilled, but others are concerned.

the true Māori name of New Zealand, it's important to demystify the perspectives of mana whenua and ask: Is Aotearoa the most appropriate name for this land?

To answer this requires look back to the name's origins.

There are many versions of this story, differing among iwi, but the general consensus is that it was a wahine who fired the first shot.

Aboard his waka, Kupe and his ope (travelling party) set out from Tahiti to find new land in about 950 AD.

But on their quest of discovery, they became disheartened.

No land had been seen in days, the food was running out, the water drying up, and stagnation was a shadow that hung over them, ready to engulf the waka.

As the desperation for land weighed down on them, a wife of Kupe scanned the horizon for the escape from death.

It was then that she spotted their salvation.

"He ao! He ao!" she shouted from the waka. A cloud! A cloud!

As they drew nearer, the clouds rose higher, and Kupe and his whānau were elated they had reached their goal.

“Aotea! Aotea!” or the white cloud, the white cloud, they shouted.

“Then beneath the fleecy whiteness appeared a dark streak of bush-clad hill and valley, and they knew that before them lay the land they had seen in their dreams, and for which they had braved tempests and faced even death itself,” Michael King wrote in his book *The Penguin History of New Zealand*.

The story of Kupe as the rangatira to discover the motu is well known among iwi, but it's what follows that leads to difference in perspectives of the validity of Aotearoa as the name of all the land.

The land in this case meaning the North Island, South Island, Stewart Island and Chatham Islands.

Was the name Aotearoa referring to all of these islands as a whole, or was it just the North Island that Kupe's wife was trying to indicate?

A statue of Kupe stood out the front of the Odins building in Wellington in 2003.

It's complicated, says Dr Ruakere Hond, key supporter of Parihaka, longstanding advocate of te reo Māori revitalisation and Waitangi Tribunal member.

pou tiaki

Hond (Taranaki, Te Ati Awa) is confident Aotearoa refers to the cloud that covers the cluster of islands that became the home of his tīpuna, he's aware there are other names out there for the motu.

Take his Taranaki iwi, for example. To them, this country is Hawaiki Tautau, indicating where their tīpuna came from and to burn or burning, following the volcanic nature of the whenua.

Hond's whānau are engaged in kōrero about the petition and other restorations of names across his rohe.



ANDY JACKSON/STUFF

Taranaki Maunga is cradled by clouds, reminiscent of the origins of the proposed name for New Zealand, Aotearoa.

Name changing is not foreign to him, he says. Everyone used to call it Mt Egmont, but now [Taranaki Maunga is the popular name for their mountain.](#)

Hond sees it like this – the significance of New Zealand is that it is an area that is together.

“There isn't really any other name that represents the land, and I don't think that Aotearoa was ever meant to represent just the North Island.

“I don't think they were ever describing the land, they were referring to the area. It was to represent the land mass that interrupted the weather pattern.”

~~of the voyage rather than an intention to name a particular area.~~

And while the intention may not have been there to name the nation at that moment from the waka, it has become a force within Māori and Pākehā to take on this kupu as a word with whakapapa connecting to the origins of the nation's settlement.

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ANDY JACKSON STUFF

Dr Ruakere Hond of Taranaki says all iwi have their own stories and names, but Aotearoa refers to all the islands.

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This kōrero has been bubbling for years, Hond says, and with the political climate of embracing Māori history in schools and celebrations such as Matariki, the catalyst for change has arrived.

“That discussion was always there, and even though people have always used the name New Zealand. I think what's happened is the concept of localised identity has given us a place in the world, and Māori can now be recognised properly.”

For Napia too, restoration or not, Aotearoa has always referred to all islands.

Ngāphui has a strong connection to Kupe and his story, and have always called all the whenua that falls under the New Zealand banner Aotearoa, he says.

DEREK FLYNN/STUFF

From left, Sam Napia sits on the marae with Bunch Bradley. Napia believes Aotearoa is the true name for the nation.

The first that comes to mind is the wahine who brought te reo Māori to the world in a swiftness and refusal to keep her language hidden.

Hinewehi Mohi's performance of the national anthem in te reo at the 1999 Rugby World Cup All Blacks match in Twickenham was brave, and paved the way for others to celebrate their histories without fear, Napia says.

"Aotearoa New Zealand society is slowly coming into itself. We are a nation that is starting to embrace its history.

"She blew everyone away, singing it in te reo. Now you see it exhibited all around the country with pride and unity."



In a September Colmar Brunton poll, 58 per cent of the respondents voted to keep the name New Zealand, however, 41 per cent voted for a mix of Aotearoa and New Zealand.



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When Europeans arrived, Māori had been living here for generations.

Of those, 31 per cent wanted a double-barrelled name, and 9 per cent wanted to see just Aotearoa representing the nation.

Napia is careful not to speak on behalf of all Ngāpuhi, as he's aware Māori, regardless of vi, are as diverse as the trees that cover the globe. But he sees the restoration of Aotearoa as an opportunity to further embrace the histories of the nation's indigenous people. 

“There are different views, and we are into respecting different versions, I'm not saying we have to agree.

“But Ngāpuhi will say ‘Aotearoa’ as we please.”

Concerns other iwi may have about the name should be heard between iwi, he says, adding that hui should be held for all to come together to discuss differing views to further enhance the local histories of our indigenous people.

“It's a name that's becoming accepted as a name in Māori origin. Different iwi have different views, but it's the name for which this land is called.”

ALDEN WILLIAMS/STUFF

Ūpoko of Ngāi Tūāhuriri Dr Te Maire Tau says Te Waipounamu will never accept Aotearoa.

But Ngāi Tahu, the largest iwi in the South Island, see it differently and **staunchly hold the view that their whenua is called Te Waipounamu**, or Te Waka ā Māui.

“There is nothing to argue on this,” says historian and director of the Ngāi Tahu Research Centre at Canterbury University Dr Te Maire Tau. “Nu Tireni is the name for our tribe.”

Nu Tireni is a transliteration of New Zealand, which is the preferred Māori name for Tau, the ūpoko (head) of Ngāi Tūāhuriri.

In 1835, **34 rangatira signed He Whakaputanga o te Rangatira o Nu Tireni**, the Declaration of Independence of the United Tribes of New Zealand.

Anton Matthews gives the correct pronunciation of Māori place names in Te Waipounamu/South Island.

It's these early documents, and transcripts prior, that form part of his argument.

Aotearoa has been popularised by Pākehā, he says. As one of Ngāi Tahu's historians, the transcripts are clear, the south was never referred to as Aotearoa, and it never will be.

"The North Island has always been Te Ika ā Māui, the fish of Māui, and we were Te Waka ā Māui, the waka of Māui.

"Aotearoa has been popularised by Pākehā. There's no way we will be taking the name."

In an [interview in 2003](#), the late Michael King detailed the issues with the name Aotearoa as a popularisation by Europeans who enjoyed the Kupe narrative.