

## The Story Behind The Legend Of The Seven Maori Canoes And The Descending Maori Chiefs by Vernice Pere

The migration legend of the coming of the Maori to New Zealand in a Great Fleet of seven voyaging canoes has its origin in ancient chants. As in other claims laid against oral historical evidence, the legend has its detractors. Some refute the idea of a migratory fleet of canoes, usually laying claim to descent from an earlier, single voyage that establishes their older history in the new land, and hence earlier claim to land titles.

Kupe is named as the Maori discoverer of New Zealand in "...about the middle of the tenth century." <sup>1</sup> He returned to Hawaiki, the ancestral home of the Maori thought to be Ra'iatea in Tahiti but described only as "central Polynesia" by Te Rangī Hiroa, the famous Maori anthropologist. He relates that Kupe's sailing direction in the lunar month of November-December was "...a little to the left of the setting sun,..." <sup>2</sup> and that

From various traditions, there is little doubt that subsequent voyages were made on these sailing direction that were handed down orally in Polynesia." <sup>3</sup>

Buck further suggests that voyagers blown off-course by storms eventually reached New Zealand and became the Tangata Whenua (People of the Land). Then, in the twelfth century, legend has it that Whatonga, the grandson of Toi became lost in a storm while participating in a canoe race in central Polynesia. His grandfather, sailing south to search for him, landed at what is now called the Bay of Plenty in New Zealand and settled there. In the meantime, Whatonga arrived safely home, having found shelter for a period of time on yet another Polynesian island. He then provisioned his canoe and sailed south in search of his

grandfather. Whatonga also made it to New Zealand where he was reunited with his grandfather and both men settled there permanently, intermarrying with the Tangata Whenua.

The Great Fleet legend persists today and tribes still trace their lineage to crew members of certain canoes in the fleet. The legend dates this major migration at 1350 A.D. It is thought that conflict in Hawaiki prompted the exodus for the purpose of colonizing Kupe's known land far to the south. These canoes were well-stocked with provisions for the voyage, and also with foods for cultivation in the new land. Songs, chants, and ancient poetry record the names of these canoes. Buck points out, however, that:

...the fame of particular canoes depends upon whether or not they have been recorded in song and story by bards and historians. A continuity of dominant chiefs and supporters is further required to bring the record down to modern times. <sup>4</sup>

The seven canoes named in most chants as comprising the Great Fleet are: Tainui, Te Arawa, Mataatua, Tokomaru, Takitimu, Kurahaupo, and Aotea. In many respects, the information we have today, derived from the oral traditions, is very specific: The Tainui canoe, under the leadership of Hoturoa, prepared to sail from Hawaiki on the Orongo night (27th) of the lunar month corresponding to October-November. But the old men advised Hoturoa to delay sailing until the stormy Tamatea's (6th to 9th nights) of the following months had passed. Hoturoa replied: "I will sail out now and meet the Tamatea's on the open sea." He surmounted all storms and trials to make safe landfall at Cape Runaway. <sup>5</sup>

An interesting point here is that legend further documents the

arrival in New Zealand as being a season when the native pohutukawa were in bloom. Their scarlet flowers cover the large trees and make their appearance in November or December. The story goes that as the canoes approached the new land, one of the chiefs saw the brilliant red of the trees and took off his head ornament of red feathers, (a prized Polynesian symbol of leadership) to throw it into the sea saying that the chiefly red of Hawaiki is cast aside for the chiefly red of the new land. Hence we can reckon the sailing time to have been about four to six weeks from Hawaiki to Ao Tea Roa (New Zealand).

Some events surrounding the story of the voyage are known today. One tells of <sup>hōu</sup> Tama-te-kapua, the chief of the Te Arawa canoe kidnapped the priest of the Tainui canoe, forcing him to sail with Te Arawa. Misbehavior between Tama-te-kapua and the priest's wife further enraged the priest and he summoned a storm which almost sank the Te Arawa. The Tainui made landfall before the Te Arawa and the two crews went separate ways.

The Tainui sailed south from Whangaparaoa to the Tamaki Strait, just outside Auckland. The crew members went ashore to explore, and found that only a narrow isthmus separated them from another harbour, which they named the Manukau. They hauled the Tainui across the isthmus, and sailed down the West Coast to Kawhia, where they finally settled. Their descendants spread out and became the Waikato people, occupying a large section of the North Island from south Auckland to Te Kuiti. Many generations later, when Te Rauaparaha led a joint expedition of Ngati Toa and Ngati Raukawa warriors south in the 1320's Tainui descendants were established in the southern part of the North Island as well. <sup>6</sup>

Te Arawa landed at Cape Runaway, turned up the coast, and landed its passengers at Maketu near Tauranga, whereupon they spread inland.

The descendants of Tama-te-kapua occupy the coastal and thermal lands around Rotorua while those of Ngatoroirangi became the Tuwharetoa people of the Lake Taupo area. The Mataatua was captained by Toroa and sailed upriver in the Bay of Plenty to beach on the shore. Toroa's daughter was ill and she lay on the beach near the canoe to rest while the crew explored inland. As the day passed, the tide rose and the canoe began to float away. The woman, saying to herself, "I must act like a man," exerted all her strength and managed to save the canoe from floating away. To this day, that river is called Whakatane (Act-like-a-man), and the descendants of this canoe spread from Cape Runaway to Whakatane and inland over the rugged Urewera country.

The Kurahaupo went north and its people settled north Auckland and later Taranaki and an area between Wanganui and Lake Horowhenua. The Tokomaru, captained by Manaia, navigated by the priest Rakeiora, sailed around North Cape and beached at the Mohakatino River in North Taranaki. The people spread from the Mokau River to south of today's city of New Plymouth. Takitimu, captained by Tamatea, landed on the east coast of the North Island, and its people are the Gisborne tribes today. The Aotea canoe is said to have left the ancestral homeland in an off-season and was driven west to the Kermadec islands where the crew gathered karaka berries which they later carried to New Zealand. The month of March in the Kermadecs is when the karaka (*Carynocarpus laevigata*) is ripe. Landing on the west coast of the North Island, they moved inland to Wanganui. The names of the canoe, captain, and the steering-paddle are recorded in chant translated by James Cowan as follows:

**The Paddle Song of the Aotea Canoe**

Aotea is the canoe,  
Turi is the chief,  
Te Roku-o-whiti is the paddle.

Behold my paddle!  
It is laid by the canoe side.  
Now it is raised on high - the paddle!  
Poised for the plunge - the paddle,  
Now we leap forward.

Behold my paddle, Te Roku-o-whiti!  
See how it flies and flashes,  
It quivers like a bird's wing,  
This paddle of mine.

Ah, the outward lift and the dashing,  
The quick thrust in and the backward sweep,  
The swishing, the swirling eddies,  
The foaming white wake, and the spray  
That flies from my paddle.

Other canoes are mentioned in other chants, one being the Horouta which peopled the east coast from Cape Runaway to Gisborne, its descendants becoming the Ngati Porou of today. Sub-tribes throughout New Zealand trace ancestry to different personalities on the voyaging canoes, an example of this is the Ngai Tahu tribe of the South Island who are descendants of Tahu, a younger brother of Porou-rangi, the ancestor of Ngati Porou. Some of the difficulties in pinpointing dates with names in these legends lie with the multiple sources reporting the genealogical chants. Some recorders were more concerned with establishing their identity and ancestry as chiefly than they were with probing out the facts. An example of conflicting information is the following:

Tainui Lines from Moturoa:

Hanlin  
20 generations to Moturoa

Ngapora composite  
23 generations

Te Rangihaeata  
17 generations to Moturoa  
18 generations to Moturoa  
15 generations to Tamatekapua

Iwikau  
34 generations ago to Moturoa (which is too long)

Wilkinson  
20 generations to Moturoa

Tamamutu  
18 generations to Ngatoroirangi and Puhikakariki

The Heuheu genealogy obviously contains extra names and was perhaps not correctly understood by Grey. The others vary from about twenty-three to seventeen generations. Other genealogies show a fair agreement on about twenty generations before 1850; this would suggest a possible maximum date of about 1000 or a minimum date of about 1450, with about 1300 being likely. Dr. Robertson in the work cited gives a date of 1290 for the birth of Moturoa

Such conflicting information is present in all reports of the legends of Kupe, Toi, and the Great Fleet. However, the legends persist. Maoris today are not so much concerned with establishing exact dates of birth or events, - a task which becomes increasingly impossible as the language is further lost with the passing of time, - as they are with emphasizing the point that these people did live and did accomplish many of these migratory feats. In this the whole concept of the origin of the Maori is at question. Modern scholars have suggested the origin of the race as being Asia, Malaysia, Melanesia, America, and even recently, - another planet! For most Maoris, Hawaiki is in Tahiti, although there are also those who suggested quite recently that Hawaii is actually the Hawaiki of the legends.

In 1978, a small group of Maoris from Rotorua visited Hawaii. In the course of their visit, they asked especially to be taken to the area of Ka'u on the Big Island of Hawaii. They wished to hold a memorial service there before returning home to New Zealand, for they believed that Ka'u was the place of their beginning, the Hawaiki of the old chants and legends. At Ka'u there are several holes carved in the lava rocks that line the cliffs. The Maoris believed these holes to have been for the purpose of mooring the canoes of the Great Fleet before their departure. In Hawaii, it is accepted as certain that the Ka'u area was one of the first areas settled by the early Hawaiians who arrived from somewhere south. Ka'u is the southernmost point of the Hawaiian chain. The area has never been considered in Hawaii to have been a departure point for any migratory fleet heading south, and it is my opinion that any study of the geographical area leads to disbelief that the location could have supported the stocking of voyaging vessels. The area is one of severe drought. Anciently, the Hawaiians lived in family groups and are known to have been either planters high on the slopes of Mauna Loa, or fishermen scattered along the coast.

On Hawaii the area that was most subject to severe famines was Ka'u. All the slopes below the forest line through the district were well populated, and the carefully cultivated land was dependent entirely on rain. The winter season was certain to produce ample rains from southerly cyclonic storms, therefore, one crop of sweet potatoes could be counted on as sure, and also one crop of the peculiar dry taro typical of the plains of Pakini and Kama'oa. Later crops often failed. We have records of severe famines, when many of the people would find refuge elsewhere, mainly in Kona and in Puna. Some provision against hard times was made in stores of dried fish and dried sweet potatoes. Also the uplands here were

a real reservoir of emergency provender. But the seashore had little to offer in hard times; there was almost no shallow water, and there were no reefs. Shellfish and seaweed were never plentiful.<sup>9</sup>

Handy further records that "... all legendary and archaeological evidence points to Ka'u as a landing place for Polynesian settlers 'from Kahiki (not necessarily Tahiti)' who came as early as A.D. 700."<sup>10</sup> Owing to the ruggedness of the shore, food was obtained from the sea only at great risk and with difficulty. There were no lagoons, and few beaches. The area is a good deep-sea fishing spot, for the currents come around both the east and west sides of the island to meet and merge at Ka'u. An interesting event is recorded by Handy:

A few years ago a group of malihini formed a fishing hui for deep-sea fishing off Ka Loe, (in Ka'u) and against the emphatic advice of Hawaiian old-timers, they proceeded to build, at considerable expense, a concrete landing-stage for their boats just below the cliffs just to the west of the point. Previously the only course had been to haul the canoes up over the cliff by means of block and tackle. The malihini were serenely confident of their strongly anchored landing. But in the first heavy kona storm the gigantic waves crushed it like so much crockery, and piled the concrete up against the cliff in broken shards. Hawaiians shook their heads in sorrow that anyone should so misjudge the mighty forces of their land.<sup>11</sup>

Such research leads us to several questions of Ka'u as a suitable departure place for a voyaging fleet. First, the holes carved in the rocks definitely exist. Some Hawaiians say they are of recent origin, cut for the convenience of fishermen who tie their lines to them. Others say that Kamehameha I had them carved in the rocks so that he could moor his canoes there as he sailed around the island. Kamehameha's canoes were not voyaging canoes, however, and there is a great difference

between a fishing canoe and a voyaging vessel. A voyaging canoe is estimated to weigh at least five tons by the Polynesian Voyaging Society who built the Hokule'a which has made several trips to Tahiti in the last two years. What size (thickness) sennit would be required to moor a canoe weighing that? How many times would such sennit be wrapped around a mooring in order to secure that weight in the kind of cross-currents described above by Handy? Are the holes large enough for such sennit to be wrapped and tied more than once? Further, the subsistence nature of the area would not be very helpful in the refurbishing of a voyaging canoe, and there are other places along the coast much better suited to such a venture. The Hawaiian legends do not mention the departure of a migratory fleet, and where Ka'u is concerned, such an idea goes against existing data which names the area as the first landing-place for travellers coming from the south.

Maori chants give differing descriptions of the type of canoe used for migration purposes. Both double and single canoes are mentioned. The very large, elaborately carved and decorated single canoe of the Maori, (waka taua) were mainly war canoes hewn from a single tree. New Zealand is one of the few Pacific islands where large, straight trees that are suitable for building this kind of canoe grow. The double-hulled canoe is shorter in length with a platform between. Information regarding this type in early New Zealand is meagre, although both Abel Tasman (1642) and Cook (1769-73) mention seeing them.

Any discussion of Polynesian voyaging requires mention of a vast body of knowledge about currents, winds, seasonal weather changes, stars,

etc. Early Maoris, like all early Polynesians, knew these things intimately. This knowledge was necessary to the survival of island dwellers. An example is commented on in a recent book by Herb Kane:

A brotherhood of experts (tohunga or kahuna) trained to acute powers of observation and memory. Polynesian navigators were also priests in the sense that they could invoke spiritual help and conduct the rituals of their profession. Unlike the modern navigator whose instruments enable him to fix his position without reference to his place of departure, the Polynesian navigator used a system that was home oriented. He kept a mental record of all courses steered and all phenomena which affected the movement of the canoe, tracing these backwards in his mind so that at any time he could point in the approximate direction of his home island and estimate the sailing time required to reach it - a complex feat of dead reckoning. In 1769, in Tahiti, Captain James Cook took aboard the navigator Tupaia, who guided Cook 300 miles south to the island of Rurutu. Cook sailed to New Zealand by a zig-zag course, then to Australia, then northward through the Great Barrier Reef, touching at New Guinea. He then sailed on to Batavia, where Malaria and dysentery killed Tupaia and many of the Endeavor's crew. Throughout the entire voyage Tupaia had been able, upon request, to point in the direction in which Tahiti lay! 12

In his reference notes, Kane goes further to explain that a controversy exists between two schools of thought, 1) those who believe that the Polynesians possessed sufficient maritime skills to make deliberately navigated voyages over great distances, and 2) those who believe that such skills did not exist, and that the scattered islands of Polynesia were populated by drifting canoes. He concludes that in the present day, the drifting canoes theory is not accepted, and study centers on the body of knowledge necessary to the long voyages undertaken by these early navigators and sailors.

At this point it should be added that many contemporary scholars in New Zealand do not hold the theory of long ocean voyages to be correct. In his recent (1976) book, The Great New Zealand Myth, D.R. Simmons discusses many sources of the Great Fleet legend and compares notes thus:

The European tradition of a fleet of "six large sea-going pahi, with their living freight of over five hundred people - men, women, and children - put out to sea from the shores of Rai'atea..." has been shown to be a rationalisation of disparate canoe traditions which gradually became more and more accepted as "factual" and "historical" as time passed. This arose out of the desire of European scholars to provide a coherent framework by which to interpret the prehistory of New Zealand. <sup>13</sup>

Many of the old chants name birds, flora, and fauna in both Hawaiki and the new land, Aotearoa. The fact that the plants named are native to New Zealand and in some cases, to no other place gives rise to his observation:

The traditions, if they are to be taken as they are and not pruned to fit preconceived notions, include native plants, birds, pa and other specifically New Zealand items as an integral part of the total tradition. This would suggest very simply that the tohunga knew what they were saying and that the Hawaiki of the tradition is not outside New Zealand. The mention of pa and kumara storage, both of which are New Zealand items, reinforces this view. <sup>14</sup>

This writer sees the Hawaiki of the Arava, Tainui and Aotea canoes as being in Northland, New Zealand. He does concede that earlier, migratory canoes arrived in New Zealand from elsewhere, but believes that the Great Fleet of recorded chants merely applied the names of the earlier canoes to others in the ancestry of the tribes known to have travelled to other places within New Zealand from Northland.

Even Kupe is seen to be a much later personality than the classic legends tell us, and here Sir George Grey is quoted from a paper titled "Peoples of the Pacific", written in 1893 and published in The Auckland Star from 13 October to 24 November 1928:

Some of the old chiefs stoutly maintained that their ancestor Kupe had originally discovered Aotearoa, had navigated its coast and Cook's Strait and had then returned to Hawaiki and had persuaded his relatives to go to New Zealand and settle there. They cited an ancient song in proof of this.

Other chiefs, however, disputed the occurrence of this tradition alleging that it together with the poem related simple to the successive discoveries made by early arrivals and settlers of New Zealand in coasting from one part of its shores to another. The tradition is thus involved in too much doubt to allow any reliance to be placed on it. <sup>15</sup>

What remains, of course, is the fact that the Polynesians existed before Captain Cook, and lived a highly ordered life with firm religious beliefs, a highly developed art, philosophy, and body of local knowledge. They were scattered on all known islands that could support life. They knew of the existence of other islands where dwelt other people, and their languages were linked by a common bond of linguistics. Even today, it is possible for Cook Islanders, Hawaiians, Maoris, and Tahitians to all converse together and understand one another. When we consider the thousands of miles of ocean that separate these particular groups, it is difficult to rule out a common connection between them. The contention of Simmons and others of his view is that the traditions that were first recorded in New Zealand were not really the ancient chants and legends, but referred only to recent knowledge of genealogies that laid claim to land areas in the country. That they were invested with antiquity by the

elders is further proof that the underlying reason for their preservation was ownership of the lands identified as tribal areas. The greatest difficulty that faced early students of Polynesia was the lack of a written record of the culture. In New Zealand, carving explained, in a stylized manner, some of the history of the people, but even in the islands that continued to make tapa which the people decorated with small hala brushes dipped in dye, no written language evolved. To this must be added the fact that in New Zealand, the genealogies were surrounded by many tapus. They were considered sacred and entrusted to the elders of the tribe. They were recited with care because the making of a mistake in the recitation was considered an evil omen. Because of the tapus associated with all form of record-keeping, early Europeans seeking to write down the old chants were very often misinformed by the elders. In summarizing the work of his book, Simmons states:

The traditions given in this study are those of the tribes of the 19th century whose traditions have been recorded. They refer specifically to the origins of those tribes from the time they became corporate social groups. They do not and cannot be taken as referring to events of preceding periods when the original ancestors of the Maori settled Aotearoa from Polynesia. The social groups who took part in the original settlement no longer exist. The increase of population in prehistoric times led to new groups being formed each of which was concerned to validate its own mana, chieftainship and claim to land. Archaeology can suggest what these groups were and how they each adapted to the conditions as they found them. Archaeology can also throw light on the material and social development of the late Maori tribes.

Tribal traditions exist to justify claims to mana and land. They are what the tribes themselves believe about their origins and history and as such are extremely interesting in their own right. <sup>16</sup>

In his book The Story of New Zealand, A. H. Reed outlines the movement of peoples from Jerusalem in 1000BC. These he identifies as Aryans, of which 8 tribes scattered. Six of these tribes went to Europe from which the Anglo-Saxons descend, one went to Persia and were the ancestors of the Iranians today, and one went to India. From this group have descended the peoples of the Malay peninsular, Indonesia, Sumatra, Java, Borneo, the Philippines, New Guinea, Micronesia, the Marianas, the Carolines, the Marshalls, the Gilberts, Ellice Island, Fiji, Tonga, the Society Islands, and from there (Tahiti/Ra'iatea) to New Zealand.<sup>17</sup> A Maori lament is recorded as:

The fame of your canoes can never be dimmed,  
The canoes which crossed the ocean depths,  
The purple sea, the Great-Ocean-of-Kiwa,  
Which lay stretched before them. <sup>18</sup>

This great Ocean of Kiwa is the 70 million square mile Pacific Ocean. Given the size of the tiny islands scattered across this vast expanse of water, it is no wonder that men have always been curious as to how the area became populated. Some groups, such as the Maoris of New Zealand, have been isolated for some five centuries, yet the old legends have persisted in the culture. These legends tell of an ancient homeland lost in the memory of only the old. From this land men sailed sturdy vessels onto the ocean, following known stars, carried by known currents towards unknown lands. The history of the Maori in New Zealand is another large body of information and yet another chapter in the continuing story of the race. The Great Fleet is referred to often by

Notes

the Maori, especially on all important ceremonial occasions. The persistence of the legend lends credence to it, for without it, who can answer the question of the origin of the Maori people? And who can explain the scattering of a Polynesian nation across half of the globe except by some planned voyaging? In the modern day, it is significant that the first question one Maori asks another when meeting him for the first time is not "Who are you?", but "Where are you from?" The reply will list tribal area and pa, and possibly canoe. Thus, by asking for origin, identity is established. It is the same in the larger perspective. The Maori quotes his legendary home as place of origin, and thereby reveals his identity in all its cultural heritage. He is secure in this knowledge. Scholars may never know the geographic location of the homeland, for the Maori it is enough to know the name:

I ahu mai tatou i Hawaiki nui, Hawaiki roa,  
Hawaiki pamao.

Vernice Pere

- 1 Peter H. Buck, Vikings of the Pacific (Chicago: The University Press of Chicago, 1938). p. 277.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., p. 279.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 279-80.
- 6 Anne Salmond, Hui A Study of Maori Ceremonial Gatherings (Wellington: A. H. & Reed, 1975). pp. 155-56.
- 7 Buck, p. 283.
- 8 D. R. Simmons, The Great New Zealand Myth (Wellington: A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1976). p. 286.
- 9 E. S. Craighill Handy and Elizabeth Green Handy with Mary Kawena Pukui, Native Planters in Old Hawaii (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1972). pp. 276-77.
- 10 Ibid., p. 547.
- 11 Ibid., p. 567.
- 12 Herb Kawainui Kane, Voyage The Discovery of Hawaii (Honolulu: Island Heritage, 1976). p. 105.
- 13 Simmons, p. 105.
- 14 Ibid., pp. 320-21.
- 15 Ibid., p. 321.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 A. H. Reed, The Story of New Zealand (Auckland: Fontana Silver Fern, 1974). pp. 24-27.
- 18 Buck, p. 3.