

Kupe and the Giant Wheke

*a traditional story, retold by Steph Matuku
(Ngāti Mutunga, Ngāti Tama, Te Ati Awa)*



Kupe pulled his waka up onto the beach. His face was grim. For the third time that week, his fishing lines were empty – and now he knew why. His hooks and nets were covered in a thick slime; the kind of slime that could have only been made by ...

“An octopus!” said his wife, the clever Hine-Te-Aparangi.

“It’s a big one too,” said Kupe. “It’s been stealing fish and bait from all the villagers in Hawaiki.”

“And who keeps a giant octopus as a pet?” asked Hine-Te-Aparangi.

“Maturangi,” Kupe replied. “He has a pet octopus called Te Wheke.”

Maturangi lived on the other side of the island. Everyone knew he was selfish and unkind.

“What if I tell Maturangi that the villagers are going hungry,” Kupe said. “Will he stop his octopus from stealing our fish?” Kupe decided to find out. The next day, he went to visit Maturangi.



“No!” roared Muturangi. “I will *not* tell Te Wheke to keep away from your fishing lines. He has to eat.”

“He’s your pet,” said Kupe. “You could train him to keep to your side of the island. My people need to eat, too.”

Murangi didn’t like this idea at all. If Te Wheke stayed on his side of the island, he would eat Muturangi’s fish and bait. Then Muturangi would starve!

“No,” said Muturangi. “Te Wheke does as he likes.”

“Fine,” snapped Kupe. “Then I’ll just have to kill him.”

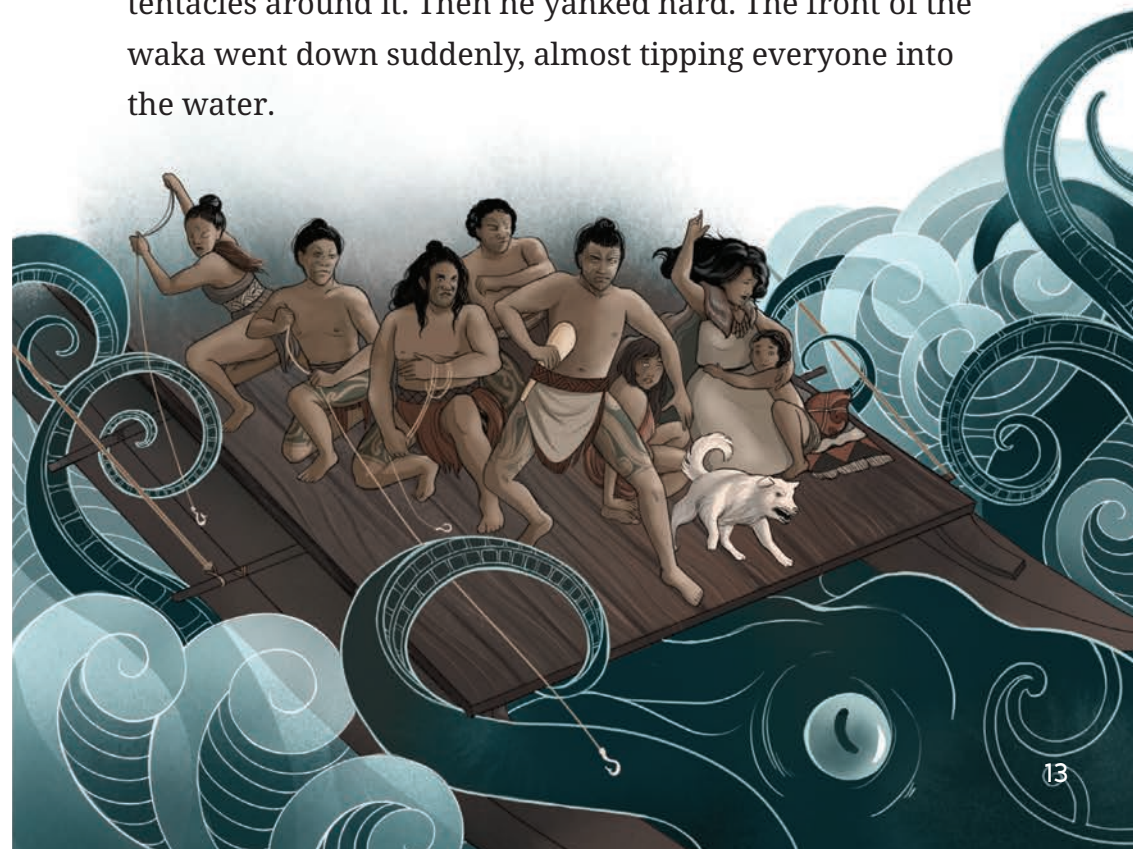
“Fine,” mimicked Muturangi. “But I bet Te Wheke kills you first.”

Kupe returned home and told his wife what had happened.

“We’ll take the big waka,” Hine-Te-Aparangi said. “Te Wheke will be hard to catch at sea. A giant octopus can travel a long way.”

Kupe, Hine-Te-Aparangi, and their children loaded up the waka with food and plenty of drinking water stored in calabashes. Kupe asked some warriors to join them, and he took his pet dog, Tauaru.

They sailed far out to sea and dropped their fishing lines to tempt Te Wheke to come closer. But Muturangi must have already told Te Wheke what Kupe was planning because Te Wheke didn’t go for the bait. He went for the waka instead! The giant octopus wrapped his long, slimy tentacles around it. Then he yanked hard. The front of the waka went down suddenly, almost tipping everyone into the water.



Kupe hacked at the tentacles with his mere, and Te Wheke fell back. Quickly, Kupe chanted an incantation to stop Te Wheke from diving. The spell made the octopus swim across the surface of the ocean so it would be easy for Kupe to follow him.

For weeks they chased Te Wheke. They chased him under the burning hot sun and beneath black nights filled with stars. They followed him through huge storms and towering waves that almost smashed the waka to bits. The supply of food and water was running low, and they were almost ready to give up, when Hine-Te-Aparangi saw something unusual.

“Look there,” she said, pointing. “A long white cloud. It must be land!”

It was! They landed on what we know today as the East Coast. There was no one in sight – they were the first people ever to reach Aotearoa. Kupe and his dog walked across the island to the other coast, to what is now called Hokianga. Then they walked around the shore of the harbour. Their footprints turned to stone that can still be seen there today.

Everyone was tired after the long journey, but there was no time to rest. Te Wheke was still on the loose. They got back on board the waka and chased the octopus to Rangiwahakaoma. As night fell, Te Wheke hid in a cave. Kupe decided to wait until dawn to attack him, but wily Te Wheke slipped out of his cave during the night and escaped.

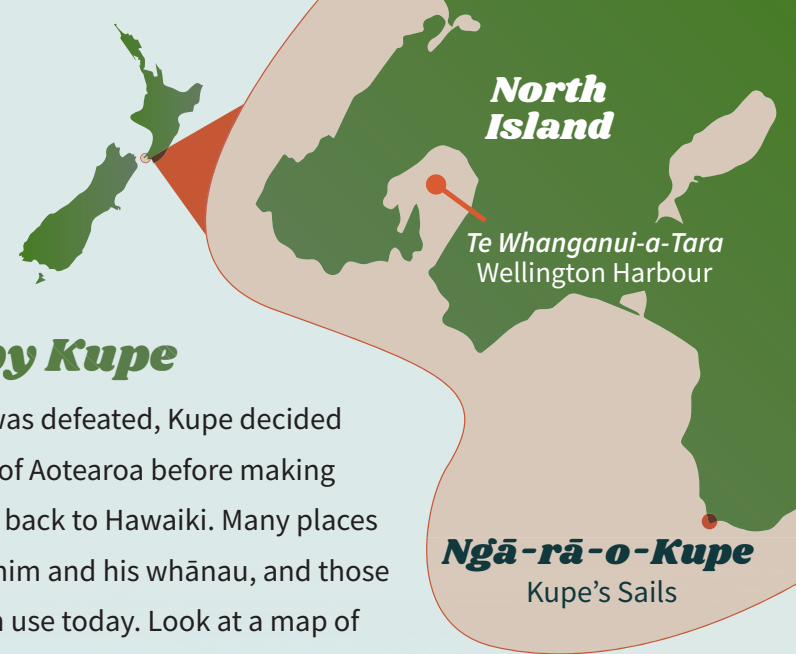


Kupe realised that Te Wheke was headed south, so he set sail. Hine-Te-Aparangi and their children waited at Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington Harbour) while Kupe and his warriors chased the octopus through Te Moana o Raukawa (Cook Strait). There, Te Wheke was finally cornered.

Even though the octopus had been on the run for weeks, he was still strong and quick. He grabbed the waka and tried to flip it over. Wood splintered in his grip, and the waka began to fill with water.

Kupe had to act quickly. He picked up the calabashes and tossed them into the sea. Te Wheke thought a man had fallen overboard. He let go of the waka and grabbed the calabashes. Kupe leant over the side as far as he could and smashed Te Wheke with his mere, right between the eyes. With a tremendous shudder, Te Wheke fell limp. Finally, the giant octopus was dead.

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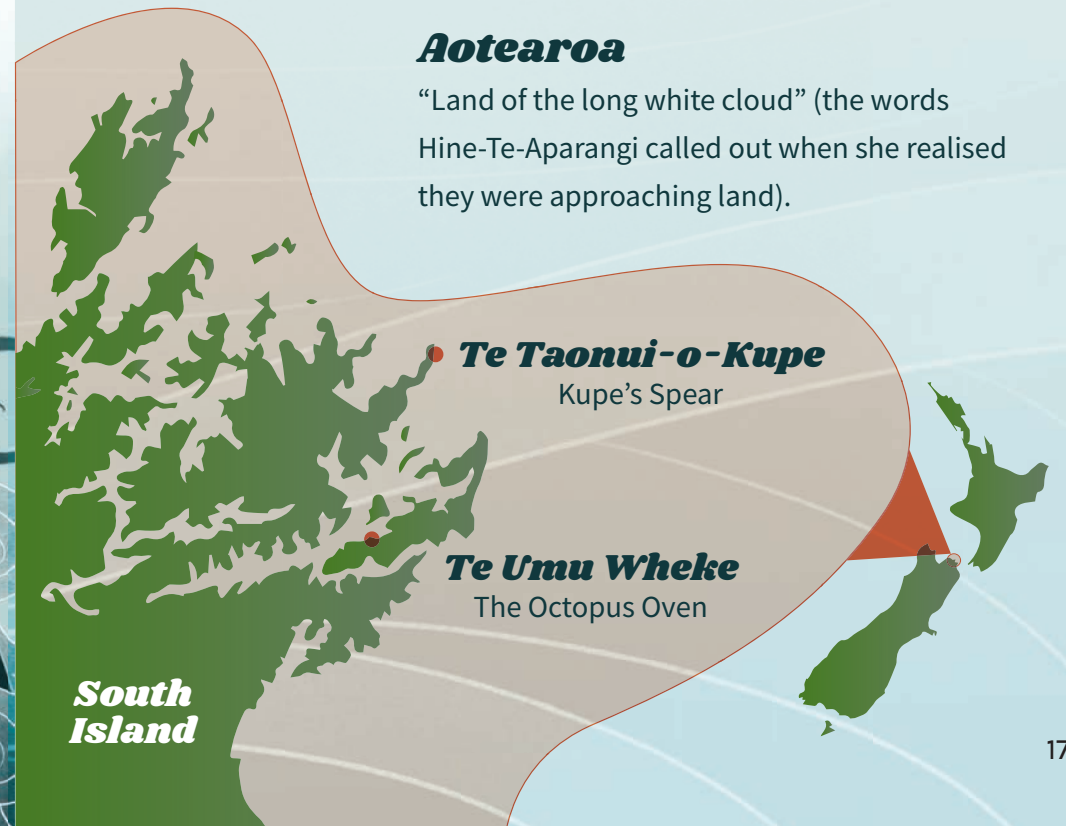


Named by Kupe

After Te Wheke was defeated, Kupe decided to explore more of Aotearoa before making the long journey back to Hawaiki. Many places were named by him and his whānau, and those names are still in use today. Look at a map of Te Moana o Raukawa/Cook Strait, the Marlborough Sounds, or Hokianga. You will see many more.

Aotearoa

“Land of the long white cloud” (the words Hine-Te-Aparangi called out when she realised they were approaching land).



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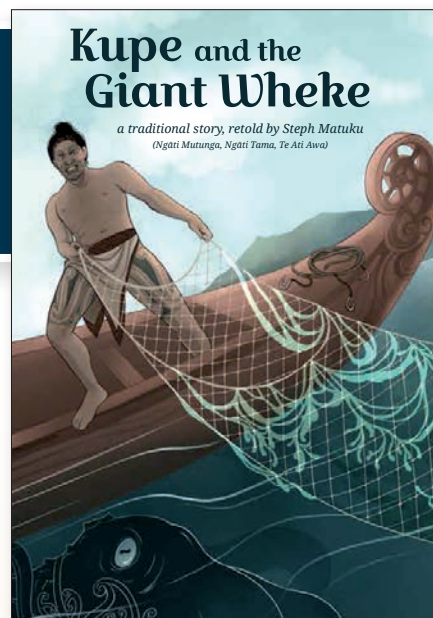
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