

Kupe and Giant Wheke

Kia ora! I hope you enjoyed that telling of the story of Kupe and the Giant Wheke. I am hoping to do more of these retellings every so often to break up the information dumps between episodes as I think the stories are not only fun but also shed light on how Maori interpreted and explained the world around them. It would be great if you could let me know if you liked this, or didn't like it and why, what I can improve on and all that as ultimately you are the ones who have to listen to this! I should add that this is only one version of the story, there are lots that have their own style and differences depending on who is telling them or what iwi the story comes from. I also thought I would clarify a few things from the tale as there were some terms that we haven't covered yet. I didn't want to be giving you too many definitions during the story as I thought it would break the flow and then those who don't want to listen the 'boring' bits can switch off.

First is that wheke, if you didn't work it out from the story is the Te Reo word for octopus. So Kupe fights a giant octopus. This particular octopus is Te Wheke o Maturangi, the octopus of Maturangi on account of the animal being his guardian spirit or kaitiaki, sometimes described in other versions. Kupe is also described as a rangatira, which basically means he is of high rank, something like a noble but isn't a chief and that he lived in Hawaiiiki, the mythical ancestral homeland of Maori. Tangaroa and Hinemoana are also mentioned, the male god of the sea and the female personification of the sea, respectively. So it makes sense that fishermen would give thanks to these deities after a they came back with heavy nets to be divided amongst the whanau. Whanau meaning family, one of the key social units in Maori society. When the fishermen didn't catch any fish, Kupe called a hui, a meeting or assembly of the people to discuss issues. After this, when fishing, Kupe recites a karakia, a prayer, in this case to earn the favour of the gods of the sea and catch more fish. I briefly mentioned it in Episode 2 and you may have seen it in the Herman Sporing sketch, Kupe is described as wielding a mere during the initial fight with Te Wheke, a type of patu. Patu are teardrop shaped weapons usually made of bone or wood meant to be used like a club. Mere are a specific type of patu, made of pounamu or greenstone that were hard to make, thus were also a symbol of high status, particularly chieftainship and were possibly passed down through generations. They did sometimes have sharp, filed edges so Kupe cutting flesh off a tentacle isn't totally outside the realms of possibility. The next part of the story has another nice tidbit from Episode 2, Kupe's wife spots land via the cloud formations, even though she can't actually see the land itself. You see this sort of thing throughout the tale which just goes to show that these weren't just tall tales or myths, they were a way of preserving history in a totally oral tradition. It's mentioned at this point that Maui brought up the fish, which is the North Island and we will do the Maui myths at a later date. Hopefully we can get Dwayne Johnson to do some voice overs but I'm not sure I can afford him. Anyway, so when they say Kupe's whanau rested at the head of the fish, they mean the North Island in Wellington harbour. Eventually we get to the final battle in the Marlborough Sounds and Te Wheke's eyes are turned into islands, The Brothers. This is a theme we find across Maori mythology, objects or even people turning into features of the landscape. As a side not, the Brothers are the only place where you can find the Brothers Island Tuatara, of which there are less than 500 left. When Kupe returns, he discovers two of his mokopuna have slashed their breasts in mourning, thinking him dead. Mokopuna are grandchildren so it stands to reason Kupe is likely fairly old in this story.

That more or less brings us to the end of the tale. There are other tales of Kupe that we will do, possibly next or we may do the Maori creation myth next, depending on what you guys prefer. Again, let me know what you thought of this and if you want to hear more, it would be great if you could recommend some you want to hear. To do that you can contact me through email at historyaotearoa@gmail.com or Twitter at HistoryAotearoa or Facebook at History Aotearoa New Zealand Podcast. We also have a website! historyaotearoa.com although it's a bit rough at the moment so I do apologise! Haere tu atu, hoki tu mai. See you next time!