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Māori Women in Southern New Zealand's Shore-Whaling World

From the 1790s to the 1840s, a range of newcomers arrived in New Zealand, drawn to the southern shores by seals, whales, and trade opportunities with Māori communities. In southern New Zealand, it was the presence of southern right whales (kewa, or tohorā) in the bays between April and October that attracted shore whalers to the region, who established whaling stations on Kāi Tahu tribal territory (see map). Southern New Zealand hosted shore-whaling stations from 1829 until the industry declined from the 1850s onwards due to over-exploitation.

An important site of cross-cultural encounter, the shore-whaling station was a vanguard of colonialism and capitalism in the Pacific. Inter-marriage was a vital component of the shore-whaling world: it operated to fold new members into Kāi Tahu relational economies and networks and fostered the development of long-standing, cross-cultural settlements. Such relationships cemented the rights of whalers to establish stations on Kāi Tahu land, guaranteeing their protection but also a “right to use the small areas on which they dwelt.”¹

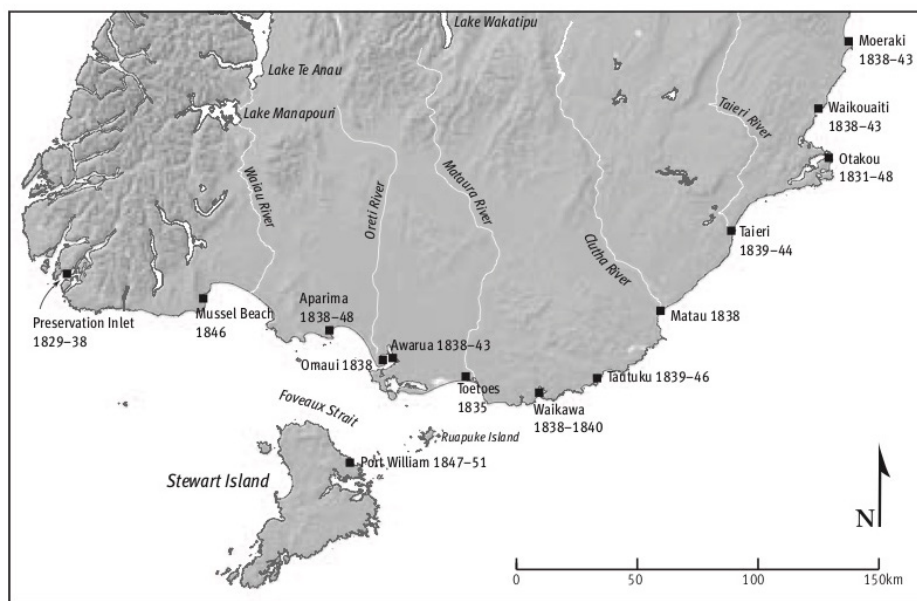
Māori women and men played crucial roles in the development and success of the industry. Recent scholarly work, for instance, has identified shore whaling as a key site of interracial marriage, and of expanding global capital in which Māori made significant contributions as employees.² As such, stations were a liminal space, both between and connecting different communities. Yet, as Jonathan West has highlighted, the whaling station was also a site of environmental encounter, straddling the marine and terrestrial, and human and nonhuman.³

1 Atholl Anderson, *Race Against Time: The Early Maori-Pakeha Families and the Development of the Mixed-Race Population in Southern New Zealand* (Dunedin: Hocken Library, 1991), 28.

2 On interracial marriage, see Kate Stevens and Angela Wanhalla, “Intimate Relations: Kinship and the Economics of Shore Whaling in Southern New Zealand,” *The Journal of Pacific History* 52, no. 2 (2017): 1–21. On links between shore whaling, capital, and the “imperial global economy,” see Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand's Colonial Past* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2012), 124–36.

3 See Jonathan West, *The Face of Nature: An Environmental History of the Otago Peninsula* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2017), which dedicates a chapter to the Ōtākou shore-whaling station and its fisheries.

Figure 1:
Map of Foveaux Strait and Rakiura/ Stewart Island, showing locations of key whaling stations and settlements in the area. Note that Kāi Tahu rohe (tribal territory) extended further north to encompass other shore whaling areas in present-day Otago and Canterbury. Image from Wanhalla, *In/visible Sight*.



Kāi Tahu women made an important contribution to the whaling station—as both wives and workers. Here, we move beyond these roles to examine women’s knowledge work, focusing on their role as intermediaries between humans and the marine world. We argue that indigenous understandings of the ocean, which have gendered dimensions, are a critical and under-examined element of the shore-whaling industry. Different sets of knowledge and values were embedded in these environments and shaped the operation of the whaling community and its activities. Whalers brought their skills in chasing whales and transforming these leviathans into tradeable oil. Aside from access to land, however, they also relied on Kāi Tahu knowledge about the land and ocean. The interplay of these environmental knowledges underpinned the emerging industry.

Kāi Tahu Women and the Ocean

The European division between nature and culture was blurred from a Kai Tahu world-view. As such, understanding the whaling economy requires an examination of the interconnections between peoples, species, and environments operating within this resource industry, which relied upon local knowledge and ways of managing relations.

Whakapapa (genealogy) is a key framework for ordering the Māori world. It is “a way of being based on complex networks that encompass all forms of life, interlinked and co-emergent,” that Anne Salmond argues “might assist in exploring relational ways of understanding the interactions between people and the land, other life forms, waterways, and the ocean.”⁴

Centering Māori relational models that encompass all forms of life brings to the fore relationships and knowledge that can easily be obscured when whaling is examined solely on economic terms. It also situates the whaling station within a broader environmental context. Though these mammals were at the heart of the industry, shore whaling relied also on significant engagement with, and knowledge of, the wider environment as a source of sustenance, trade, and identity.

One reason why Kāi Tahu women’s contributions to shore whaling have been read in limited ways is that their link to the sea and the maritime environment is little recognized. It is acknowledged that Māori women held important economic roles and were political leaders, but they also played significant roles in voyaging traditions as navigators and helped create marine life. Some traditions depict the sea as female, as Hine-moana, who with her husband Kiwa, are the progenitors of certain kinds of fish, shellfish, and seaweed.⁵ In some accounts the ocean’s protectors or guardians are female.⁶ Women feature as archetypal figures associated with the ocean in accounts found across Polynesia, which were applied to particular local circumstances to help explain the world and its creation, including its natural features and the creatures that populate it. Traditions relating to Hina, who is said to have given fish their special characteristics, are found throughout Polynesia, where she is known variously as Sina, Hine, or Ina.⁷ In a southern New Zealand version, collected by the ethnographer James Herries Beattie, Hina is known as Hine-te-iwaiwa, who stomped the sole, trampled the sandfish, and scratched the paikea (southern humpback whale), creating the distinctive markings on its front.⁸

4 Anne Salmond, *Tears of Rangī: Experiments Across Worlds* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2017), 3.

5 Margaret Orbell, *The Encyclopaedia of Maori Myth and Tradition* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 1995), 86 and 129.

6 Angela Wanhalla, “Maori Women in Waka Traditions,” in *Shifting Centres: Women and Migration in New Zealand History*, ed. Lyndon Fraser and Katie Pickles (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2002), 21.

7 Christine Tremewan, *Traditional Stories from Southern New Zealand = He kōrero nō Te Waipounamu* (Christchurch: Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury, 2002), 121.

8 Tremewan, *Traditional Stories*, 151.

Given their strong relationship with the oceanic environment, it might be expected that women feature in historical treatments of shore whaling. Associations between Māori women and the sea, however, are rarely noted in most accounts of the nineteenth-century shore-whaling industry, where the dominant narrative remains focused on stations as masculine spaces and the ocean as men's work.

Oceanic Relationships in the Whaling Era

Women's role as guardians continued into the whaling world of the nineteenth century. An account recorded by ethnologist James Herries Beattie in the early twentieth century demonstrates the role of Kāi Tahu women and their knowledge of and relationship with the environment during the shore-whaling era:

Woman's Island for the titi (muttonbirds) of Rakiura belonged to Tuhawaiki-Parapara, who conveyed it to Puna, the wife of Chaseland or Tame Titireni, and she became the boss of the island. Her husband and she went to Chatham Islands and were wrecked. They built a boat and put sufficient food on it and came back here. She was a great tohunga [expert] and pulled one of her hairs, said a karakia [prayer] and put it in the sea, so they had a safe voyage and landed at Moeraki.⁹

The marriage between Puna and Australian Aboriginal whaler Tommy Chaseland was a partnership in which both were active participants. In particular, this narrative demonstrates Puna's status and knowledge through her ability to bring the pair to safety, while also highlighting the continued importance of Māori knowledge and traditions in interracial relationships formed around sealing as well as whaling stations. The arrival of whaling as a commercial activity did not displace these enduring forms of engagement with the natural world.

Puna's actions, though, also recalled the role of women in traditions in which human beings triumph over external forces by calling on the spiritual world through karakia.¹⁰

9 Ellison, quoted in a notebook entitled, "Casual allusions to the whalers made by Maoris in interviews given to Herries Beattie between 1900-1950," 2, James Herries Beattie Papers, MS-582/G/9, Hocken Collections, Dunedin.

10 Tremewan, *Traditional Stories*, 16.

Puna may have been thinking of Pūpū-mai-nono, who features in southern traditions. She ritually protected her siblings on their quest to avenge the death of a brother through a karakia, used to calm the stormy seas, so that they could cross the ocean safely.¹¹ An account collected by Beattie from Kai Tahu leader Magda Wallscott in 1910 relates to Puna's role in protecting a crew, including her husband Tommy Chaseland, on a journey to New Zealand from the Chatham Islands. Magda told of how Puna "sat in the bow of the boat from Chatham Island karakia-ing to keep the storm down."¹²

Given their spiritual significance, accounts also show whales as kaitiaki (or guardians), as well as tūpuna (ancestors) (see Lythberg and Ngata in this volume). The continued role of whales as kaitiaki appears in Beattie's ethnological project that he conducted for Otago Museum in 1920, in which he interviewed elders across the southern region about all aspects of Kai Tahu life. Beattie recorded:

A well-informed old man referred to the traditional lore that in storms at sea an efficient tohuka (or tohunga) could call up a great fish to protect the canoe. [...] Any whale, or shark, or big fish, or taniwha, or monster of the deep thus called up was called a takaroa, or tangaroa, and all were "paid with a hair from the human head".¹³

The account has clear parallels to the protective actions taken by Puna. More generally, karakia and related rites were used to ensure good fishing with the acquiescence of Tangaroa.

Whales are also a tohu (sign) that represent positive omens. George Robert, the first child of Kohikohi and her whaler husband John Howell, was born on a whaleship in 1838 as the family returned from visiting relations on Centre Island in the Foveaux Strait. Betsy, an old Māori woman, and Kohikohi's young servant were also on the boat. After the birth, which was aided by Betsy, they spotted a whale:

Betsy was very superstitious, and thought this was a good omen. Better still, if the Captain could get it. Father thought this would be impossible, but egged on by the

11 Tremewan, *Traditional Stories*, 185.

12 Cited in Lynette Russell, *Roving Mariners: Australian Aboriginal Whalers and Sealers in the Southern Oceans, 1790–1870* (New York: SUNY, 2012), 58.

13 J. H. Beattie, *Traditional Lifeways of the Southern Maori*, ed. Atholl Anderson (Dunedin: University of Otago Press/Otago Museum, 1994), 154.

women made the attempt, and with the help of the women was successful. There was great jubilation, when he returned from his visit with a whale—and a son.¹⁴

The account suggests that the women were adept at sea, and maintained knowledge and beliefs that informed the practices of the whaling communities. The affective aspects of the shore-whaling economy thus went beyond cross-cultural relationships to include cross-species ones. Maintaining such knowledge and connection with the wider environment helped ensure the success of the industry.

Māori Women: Intermediaries of the Sea

Māori accounts of the natural world and its formation highlight the importance of looking beyond a solely economic framework for interpreting Kāi Tahu engagement in the shore-whaling world. These accounts reveal patterns of kinship that encompassed animals and the landscape, and how people related to them. The cross-cultural worlds of maritime communities drew upon personal connections forged through marriage and kinship as well as enduring connections to the whenua (land) and moana (sea). Indeed, the shore-whaling station was not simply an economic resource, but a cross-cultural and environmental space where land, sea, and people met and related to each other.

Māori women often took roles as intermediaries between humans and the environment in this maritime world. Kāi Tahu relationships to the sea set the foundation for their economic and political roles in the southern whaling world. While many Kāi Tahu women provided formal and informal labor on the whaling station, their interactions with the maritime world were more than economic or affective. Their connections to the ocean built upon traditional accounts of female ancestors, who provided models for women's roles and activities in the shore-whaling world. Yet their knowledge and engagement with the natural world are largely invisible if whaling is framed as a quintessential masculine and colonial economic activity.

14 Eva Wilson, *Hakoro ki te iwi: The Story of Captain Howell and his Family* (Orepuke: E. Wilson, 1976), 16.

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