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Table of contents →

LEVEL
2
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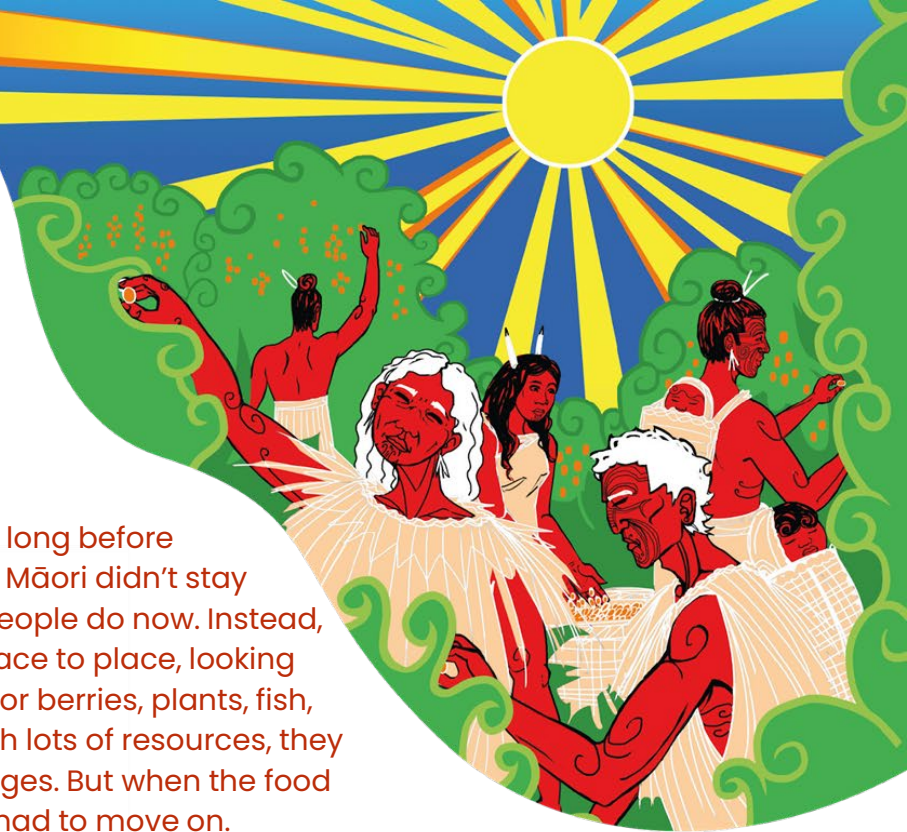
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Whakaotirangi and Her Kete of Kūmara

by Dr Diane Gordon-Burns

Long ago in Aotearoa, long before Pākehā arrived, many Māori didn't stay in one area the way people do now. Instead, they travelled from place to place, looking for food. They looked for berries, plants, fish, and birds. In areas with lots of resources, they set up temporary villages. But when the food sources ran out, they had to move on.



Tainui iwi have an **oral tradition** that tells the story of Whakaotirangi (say *far-car-or-tee-ra-nee*). Whakaotirangi was a chief. Like scientists today, she could read the earth, skies, and weather. When Whakaotirangi arrived in Aotearoa, she brought with her a kete of kūmara. This simple basket would change the way people lived in Aotearoa forever.

Following Kupe

Whakaotirangi grew up hearing stories about her famous **ancestor** Kupe. Kupe had travelled across the sea to a new land called Aotearoa. One day, Whakaotirangi asked her father, the chief of their island, if she could follow in Kupe's footsteps and travel to Aotearoa. He agreed. She would take a group of their people with her. A great waka was built, and when they put it into the sea, they named it *Tainui*.

Whakaotirangi and her friend Marama organised food for the voyage. They also gathered plants that could be grown in the new land – plants that could provide food and clothing. Whakaotirangi took plants and seedlings of the hue (rock melon), taro (a root vegetable), para (a fern), aute (a plant used to make cloth), and karaka (a tree that grows fruit). She also took the most important plant of all: the kūmara.

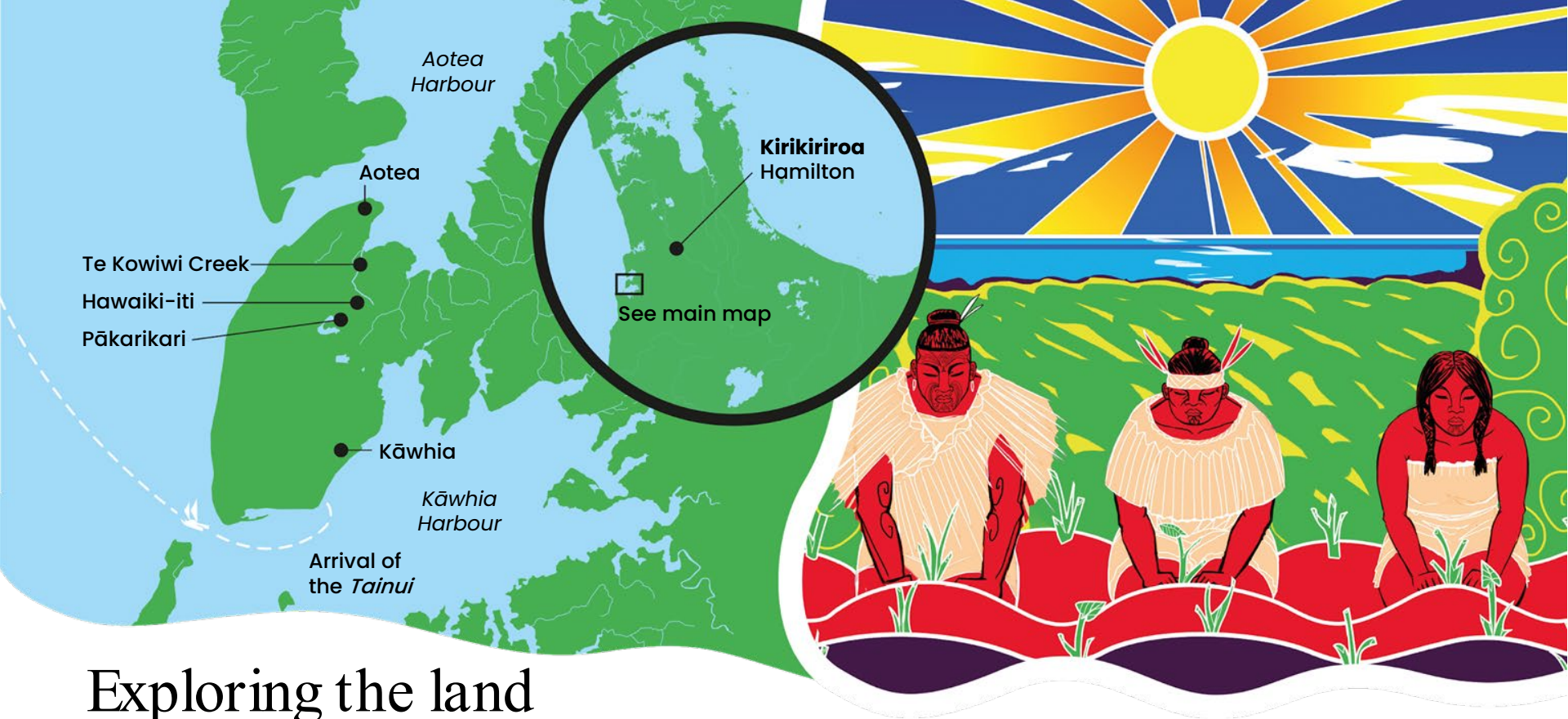
All the plants needed to be carefully looked after during the trip. Whakaotirangi kept them in shade to protect them from the sun. She wrapped their roots in soil and leaves. From time to time, she dribbled fresh water on the soil to stop them from drying out. Whakaotirangi knew how important it was that the plants survived the voyage. If they died, they couldn't be replaced.



Caring for her kūmara

Whakaotirangi learnt how to care for plants when she was a young girl. She listened carefully and watched her elders. She noticed the look, feel, and smell of good soil and learnt how to feed the earth to grow strong plants. Her elders showed her how to read the stars, moon, clouds, planets, and seasons. These would tell her when to plant her crops and when to **harvest** them.





Exploring the land

The people on-board *Tainui* saw signs that land was near. First they saw long clouds and seabirds. Then they spotted Aotearoa. They explored the coastline until they arrived at a place they named Kāwhia. The area was rich with trees, fish, birds, and berries.

Whakaotirangi knew what she had to do. She made a kūmara garden, but only a few kūmara plants grew. Those that did grow were so small that people were still hungry. The plants needed a warmer place.

Whakaotirangi explored further north, walking over land she named Aotea. During her travels, she planted taro at a place she named Hawaiki-iti. She kept searching until she finally found the perfect place to build her garden. It was an area protected by clumps of forest, where the soil was dark and crumbly, and a nearby creek provided running water. Whakaotirangi called the creek Te Kowiwi and got to work planting her garden. She called the area Pākarikari.



Preparing the first gardens

A successful garden needs a lot of care. Whakaotirangi made mounds of soil, like rows of little hills, to plant her seedlings in. The soil had to be light and soft, so she added sand to it. She knew sand would also attract heat from the sun, which was important for the **tubers**. Whakaotirangi gathered bracken fern from around the area and tied it together with tree branches to build shelters. They would protect the plants from strong winds.

Whakaotirangi burned branches and bushes that she didn't need. Then she sprinkled the ash over the mounds to add extra **nutrients** to the soil. She gathered **pipi** shells from the beach and placed them around the mounds. The hard shells would stop the plants from washing away in the rain. When all this was done, Whakaotirangi planted her kūmara plants in the mounds and called on her husband Hoturoa, leader of *Tainui waka*, to say a karakia to protect them. She named the garden Hawaiki.

Storing the harvest

Whakaotirangi asked her people to dig pits in the hillside at Pākarikari. These pits would keep the vegetables dry and cool after harvesting. Whakaotirangi knew that too much moisture would rot the kūmara. If it was too warm, or if there was too much light, the kūmara would sprout and spoil.

The people tended the kūmara plants as they grew, walking between the rows to pick off grubs and moth eggs. They cleared away unwanted leaves to protect the plants from rotting. After a few months, the kūmara were ready. Whakaotirangi and her people loosened the soil, lifted the kūmara out, and placed them in the pits.



Spreading the seed

The gardens in Aotea were some of the first gardens in Aotearoa. The steady supply of food they provided allowed Tainui to stay in one place and grow strong. Whakaotirangi's grandson, Hāpopo (say haa-por-por), took his grandmother's kūmara plants and planted them further north at places they named Te Akau and Angaroa. These plants became the markers for Tainui's land boundaries. When other iwi saw the plants, they traded with Tainui for kūmara of their own. Soon, gardens filled with kūmara, taro, aute, karaka, and hue spread across the country.



Te rukuruku a Whakaotirangi

Whakaotirangi's people put a huge rock at the Angaroa gardens to remember her. The rock was named Te rukuruku a Whakaotirangi, which means "the food basket of Whakaotirangi". This **whakataukī** acknowledges Whakaotirangi as a woman of **mana**, a wise and respected leader, and an important scientist. For Tainui, the saying also means "the memory of knowledge". Whakaotirangi brought knowledge of how to grow kūmara all the way to Aotearoa, helping her people to settle in a new land. Next time you eat a kūmara, think of how hard Whakaotirangi worked to grow her first plant. Thanks to her skills and knowledge, we can continue to enjoy eating kūmara today.

Glossary

ancestor – a person from the past whom you are related to, such as a great-grandparent

harvest – gather crops that are ready to be eaten or used

mana – power, status, importance

nutrients – substances such as minerals that organisms like plants and animals need in order to grow and be healthy

oral tradition – a story from the past that is passed down through talking

pipi – a shellfish that lives in shallow sea water

Tainui – Māori ancestors who came on the waka Tainui and settled the areas of Waikato, Hauraki, and the King Country

tubers – underground parts of plants that new plants can grow from

whakataukī – a proverb or important saying

Did you learn any new gardening knowledge from Whakaotirangi? Maybe you could try using some of her methods and tips in your own garden!

illustrations by Taupuruariki Whakataka Brightwell

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