

Our Ancestors

Our wāhine ancestors were strong, influential and valued

If we look at Māori sources of information passed down through the generations – waiata, whakataukī, haka and iwi histories – we get an interesting sense of how wāhine participated in and influenced traditional Māori society. Powerful women feature strongly in our earliest stories, highlighting their importance in sustaining the well-being of the whānau, hapū and iwi.

Mana wāhine – women had power and influence in traditional Māori society

“Māori cosmology abounds with stories of powerful women... The tales of Māui-tikitiki-a-Taranga are particularly instructive as to the influential roles that women held. Māui acquires fire from his kuia, Mahuika. It is with the jawbone of his kuia, Muriranga-whenua, that he fishes up Te Ika a Māui (the North Island) and makes the patu with which to subdue Rā (the sun). And it is to his ancestress, Hine-nui-te-pō, that he eventually succumbs when he fails in his quest to attain immortality.”

Ani Mikaere (1994) 'Māori Women: Caught in the Contradictions of a Colonised Reality', Waikato Law Review (volume 2)

The mana and influence of our wāhine ancestors and their role in nurturing life and enriching whakapapa and whanaungatanga is also reflected in our language and cultural concepts:

Māori refer to women as **te whare tangata** (the house of humanity)

Whenua means both placenta and land (the two are linked through the burial process)

Hapū means to be pregnant and it also means a large kinship group

The ancestress of all Māori, **Papatūānuku**, is the earth (land is intrinsically tied to the social, cultural, spiritual and economic well-being of Māori)

The presence of women was seen as a potent form of **whakanoa** (to remove tapu, or make normal).

Women performed a wide range of roles, including leadership roles

The experiences of early Māori women were not universal, with social status and other factors having an impact. However, there is a range of evidence suggesting that wāhine Māori actively participated in and influenced many aspects of life. Some have described our early ancestors as being “extremely liberated”. The collective whānau model meant that childrearing and other domestic tasks were shared and Māori men had a key role in parenting. Unlike Western women at that time, our wāhine ancestors had a degree of flexibility, independence and a wide range of roles.

“She considers her Māori ancestresses, prior to the impact of Christianity, to have been ‘extremely liberated’ in comparison to her English ancestresses. She points out that Māori women were not regarded as chattels or possessions, that they retained their own names upon marriage, that their children were free to identify with the kinship group of either or both parents, that they dressed in similar garments to the men, and that conception was not associated with sin or child bearing with punishment and suffering but that these were seen to be uplifting and a normal part of life...”

Ani Mikaere (1994) talking about Rose Pere in: Māori Women: Caught in the Contradictions of a Colonised Reality

In pre-European days and throughout history there are countless stories of Māori women who occupied important positions as composers, military strategists, powerful landowners and mediators. Māori women had a say in the affairs of the tribe and could inherit land. They continued to fight for recognition of these rights following colonisation and the imposition of English laws and thinking which undermined their status.

“A newspaper editorial in 1861 noted the participation of Māori women in the rūnanga: ‘Ta te [M]aori, me hui katoa, te iti te rahi, te tāne te wāhine, te koroheke te ruruhi ... e uru katoa ana ki nga Runanga [M]aori, me o ratou whakaaro me o ratou korero; e whakatika ana tenei wāhine me ana korero ano ...’ (but with the Māori Runanga, all must assemble together, the small and the great, the husband, the wife, the old man, the old woman these all obtain admittance to the Runanga Māori, with all their thoughts and speeches ... this woman gets up and has her talk ...)’

Traditionally land was bequeathed to women, as the mana of women to give birth to descendants meant that mana whenua (authority over land) was not lost through marriage. During the Kotahitanga movement women argued that the law should recognise Māori women as land owners and leaders in their own right. The 1897 petition from the Kotahitanga to Queen Victoria was signed by Māori women and men.”

Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand

This sense of equilibrium between men and women was no doubt surprising to early English settlers who observed and commented through a Western lens:

“In many instances... I have seen the wife treated as an equal and companion.”

Augustus Earle (1793-1838) – Artist, traveller, writer

“When speaking of the dexterity of the fishermen, I should have mentioned that of the fisherwomen also; for the women here are as expert at all the useful arts as the men, sharing equally the fatigue and the danger with them upon all occasions excepting war; in which though they undergo considerable fatigue, they do not participate in the danger.”

John Savage (1807) – Traveller, writer, surgeon

“A number of women were in the heat of the action, amongst whom was Tippahee’s old wife, not much less than seventy years of age and Duaterra’s [Ruatarā’s] wife [Rahu] bearing in her hand a patoo about seven feet long, made out of the jawbone of a whale. This weapon she brandished about in the very centre of the battle, and went through all the various movements of the men, whether in retreating or advancing.”

Reverent Samuel Marsden (1765-1838) – Chaplain, magistrate, agriculturalist, missionary

“At the battle of Ōrākau in the King Country in 1864, Ahumai Te Paerata famously responded to the suggestion that the women and children should be allowed to leave, ‘Ki te mate ngā tāne, me mate anō ngā wāhine me ngā tamariki’ (if the men die, the women and children die also).”

Rawinia Higgins rāua ko Paul Meredith, ‘Te mana o te wāhine – Māori women’, Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand

“Most missionaries and settlers struggled to recognise the leadership of Māori women, preferring instead to deal with their male counterparts. Only 13 Māori women signed the Treaty of Waitangi (out of some 512 signatures). The daughter of Te Pēhi, a Ngāti Toa rangatira, was not allowed to sign as it was believed that women were not important enough. Angered at the insult, her husband also refused to sign.”

Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand¹

There are many examples of women as poets and composers of waiata throughout history – central to the exchange of tribal history and traditions and as expressions of social commentary. Women’s dominant role as composers in traditional Māori society is testimony to their vital role as knowledge bearers and leaders at this time.

“...Rangi Topeora, of Ngāti Raukawa and Ngāti Toa descent. She was a signatory to the Treaty of Waitangi, a powerful landowner, and a prolific composer of waiata. Her mother, Waitohi, was Te Rauparaha’s sister, a leader in her own right and a known military strategist.”

Ani Mikaere (1994)

Survival depended on harmony and collaboration – wāhine and tāne valued each other’s roles within the collective

The roles and relationships between tāne and wāhine were highly valued in traditional Māori society. They were an important part of the collective whole and maintaining the balance was vital to whānau strength and survival.

“Pere describes her childhood as being full of very positive female models, and how her elders set the example of men and women respecting and supporting each other, and working alongside one another.”

¹ It has also been pointed out that while the low numbers of female signatories is in large part due to colonial influence and bias, it may also be that some women have not been counted as Māori names are “gender-neutral” and therefore not obvious.

The roles of men and women in traditional Māori society can be understood only in the context of the Māori world view, which acknowledged the natural order of the universe, the interrelationship or whanaungatanga of all living things to one another and to the environment, and the over-arching principle of balance....

Both men and women were essential parts in the collective whole, both formed part of the whakapapa that linked Māori people back to the beginning of the world, and women in particular played a key role in linking the past with the present and the future. The very survival of the whole was absolutely dependent upon everyone who made it up, and therefore each and every person within the group had his or her own intrinsic value. They were all a part of the collective; it was therefore a collective responsibility to see that their respective roles were valued and protected."

Ani Mikaere (1994)

Tikanga and collective responsibility prevented violence

Some academics have pointed out that this collective responsibility served to limit violence within whānau. Violence from men towards women and children was unusual, and if it did occur there were harsh punishments according to local tikanga. The survival of the whānau and wider collective was dependent on there being harmony and collaboration.

"Instances of abuse against women and children were regarded as whānau concerns and actions would inevitably be taken against the perpetrator."

Ani Mikaere (1994)

"In pre-colonial Māori society a man's house was not his castle. The community intervened to prevent and punish violence against one's partner in a very straightforward way."

Stephanie Milroy (quoted in Ani Mikaere 1994)

"I saw no quarrelling while I was there. They are kind to their women and children. I never observed either with a mark of violence upon them, nor did I ever see a child struck."

Reverent Samuel Marsden (1765-1838) – Chaplain, magistrate, agriculturalist, missionary

Our wāhine ancestors were strong, influential and valued members of the collective

Our language and the stories and histories that have been passed down through the generations reflect a traditional society where wāhine Māori actively participated in and influenced many aspects of life. We know that:

- Everyone had a part to play in maintaining order and balance within the universe, including our wāhine ancestors who had an influential role in the functioning, well-being and survival of the collective.
- Transgressions against this harmony, in the form of violence against women and children, were prohibited and dealt with harshly according to tikanga.
- Women had a vital role linking the present with the past and with the future; the mana associated with this is reflected in our language (*hapū, te whare tangata, whenua, Papatūānuku...*).
- Domestic duties including childrearing were shared with tāne and other members of the whānau and hapū, freeing women to perform other roles.
- Wāhine held leadership and military roles, inherited land, were revered as composers and had a say in important iwi matters.
- The power and strength of our wāhine ancestors is reflected in numerous waiata and stories which are repeated and passed down with pride through the generations.
- Māori women continue to be at the forefront of critical Māori issues such as Treaty rights, education, water and social justice.