Kāpiti Island: A Sacred Landscape

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Abstract

Te Waewae Kāpiti o Tara rāua ko Rangitāne is a 20 km² island just off the coast of Te Ika ā Māui in Aotearoa New Zealand. For centuries it was a plentiful source of food and a strategic defensive position for many Māori tribes, and is covered with ancestral and sacred places. At the time of European arrival in the early 19th century, it became a stronghold of the Ngāti Toa Rangatira tribe, who used it for as a base for conquest, trade, and whaling. The majority of the island was forcibly purchased by the government from 1897 in order to create a bird sanctuary. The northern end remained in the ownership of Māori, who have established a lodge and nature tours company. The Māori concept of kaitiakitanga, or traditional custodianship, is examined as a useful term to negotiate the tension between the protection of natural and cultural values on the island.

KEY WORDS: Kāpiti, Indigenous, Ancestral, Sacred, Reserve, Heritage.

1. Introduction

1.1 The history and cultural landscape of Kāpiti

Te Waewae Kāpiti o Tara rāua ko Rangitāne, generally known as Kāpiti Island, is an island around 10km in length and 2km in width situated just off the western coast of Te Ika a Māui, the northern half of Aotearoa New Zealand [Fig. 1]. It rises out of Te Moana o Raukawa, the strait separating the northern and southern islands, reaching 521m at its highest point.

Aotearoa is one of the last places on earth to be reached by human settlement. Some time around the 13th century A.D., our Polynesian ocean voyaging ancestors explored the last remaining frontiers of the Pacific (known to us as Te Moana nui a Kiwa). They travelled thousands of kilometres, going as far north as Hawaii, as far east as Rapanui, and as far south as Aotearoa. Perhaps the earliest record of Kāpiti appears in an ancient oriori or lament recounting the exploits of the famed explorer and ancestor Kupe, who is said to have separated Kāpiti from the mainland with the blow of his weapon:

‘Ka tito au, ka tito au, ka tito au,	I sing, I sing, I sing,
Kia Kupe te tangata	Of Kupe the man
Nana i topetope te whenua,	Who cut off the land
Tu ke a Kāpiti...	Kāpiti stands apart...’

(Mitchell H. & J. 2005)

In the later 13th and 14th centuries, large scale migration took place by ocean voyaging canoes (waka hourua) from the Society and Cook Islands, and Aotearoa was settled in its entirety. The migrants brought with them their language, culture, genealogies, and tribal identities from Eastern Polynesia, and adapted these to their new environment in different locations around the comparatively larger islands of Aotearoa. They became the people now known as “Māori”. Many generations of tribes lived on or around Kāpiti over centuries. Their legacy lives on the name of the island Te Waewae Kāpiti o Tara raua ko Rangitāne, the boundary between Tara and Rangitāne, and in some of the ancestral burials and associated placenames such as Tuteremoana, the name of an ancestor given to the highest peak of the island after his burial there. These places all have some element of tapu,

or sacred nature, and are important to the many descendants of the Māori tribes that have at one time inhabited Kāpiti Island. Many other pā (hillforts) sites and archaeological sites provide evidence of the ancestral occupation of the island and have the character of wāhi tūpuna, ancestral sites (Maclean 1999).

Kāpiti Island was last conquered by the tribe of Ngāti Toa Rangatira and its allies in 1824. Other tribes further north had obtained guns from the European traders and whalers arriving in the two decades prior, and had threatened the survival of Ngāti Toa in their homeland. Rather than face slavery and conquest, the tribe migrated over 500km south on foot, and fought their way to supremacy over Kāpiti Island and surrounds. One of their leaders, Te Rauparaha, had earmarked Kāpiti as a strategic base for access to trade with the European ships passing through the strait, and a defensible position within reach of both of the large landmasses of Aotearoa. Kāpiti was taken in 1824 during the battle known as Te Umupakaroa, after which many of the vanquished were ritually cooked and eaten, adding another layer of tapu or sacredness to this area. Ngāti Toa and its allies quickly developed a small empire by conquering swathes of both northern and southern islands [Fig. 2]. They invited Europeans to set up whaling and trading stations and grew wealthy from the resulting commerce.

After the Treaty of Waitangi formalised Aotearoa as a British colony in 1840, small tracts of land on Kāpiti Island began to be sold to immigrant farmers. Relative peace had alleviated the need for a defensible position, the whaling stations closed down, and most Ngāti Toa moved to the coast of the mainland facing Kāpiti. Although many deceased Ngāti Toa had been placed in the burial caves at the southern end of the island, the last Ngāti Toa chieftain on the island, Te Rangihiroa, was buried on the battlefield he had fought on to secure the island, as a statement of mana whenua (authority over the land). Some of Te Rangihiroa's descendants still maintain his grave, own the land around it, and live in its vicinity (Forde X., 2017).

In 1846, the colonial government kidnapped Te Rauparaha and held him as ransom for 18 months without trial until Ngāti Toa had sold much of their land to the government. From that point on, Ngāti Toa began to lose its land and economic resources, leaving it virtually landless only a century later.

By 1850, there were only a few European farmers left who lived on the island full time, on large properties leased from Māori owners. The isolation would prove too much for these farms, and by the late 1870s, the island was void of permanent inhabitants, although local Māori continued to fish and hunt there. The government effectively confiscated some 90% of the island between 1897 and 1907 in order to create a bird sanctuary. Volunteers and government rangers contributed over decades to the revegetation and pest eradication efforts. The island was declared pest free in the 1990s and is home to many endangered species of birds native to Aotearoa New Zealand that are either very rare or absent from the mainland. Visiting the nature reserve is restricted to no more than 100 visitors per day, and visitors are subject to biosecurity inspection to prevent unwanted arrivals of pests, weeds, or disease (Maclean C., 1999).

The remaining 10% of the island at its northern end is still owned by Māori who descend from the original owners and is restricted to 60 visitors per day. They own a boat and nature tours company as well as a private lodge where visitors can stay overnight. In Māori cultural terms, they are the ahi kaa (people who keep the home fires burning, maintain occupation of the land) and kaitiaki (guardians over the land and the sustainability of its resources).

There is also a marine reserve around part of the island, established in 1992, in which no fishing is permitted.

Some vestiges of the whaling stations are still in existence but for the most part no visitor facilities have been installed around these (Forde X., 2017; Maclean C., 1999; Collins H., 2010).

2. Current management arrangements (Legislations, institutions, resources)

2.1 Heritage Status

Only one site is listed for its cultural significance to

Māori on Kāpiti island (in August 2017): The grave of Te Rangihiroa at Waiorua Bay has been recognised as a Wāhi Tapu, a place sacred to Māori, under the national legislation for cultural heritage (the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014) [Fig. 3]. Some whaling stations that were formed by local Māori and European whalers have been recognised as Historic Places under this legislation (Forde X. 2017).

A new category, National Historic Landmark, has recently been introduced under this legislation, and Kāpiti island has been suggested as a potential candidate for this based on both its cultural / historical values and its natural heritage value as the first major bird sanctuary in this country.

It has not been put forward for inscription on the World Heritage List.

It figures as a site of national importance for its natural heritage as the Kāpiti Island Nature Reserve, a status governed by the Reserves Act 1977.

As a result of the settlement under the Treaty of Waitangi to compensate the tribe of Ngāti Toa Rangatira for the past misdeeds of the Crown, the role of Ngāti Toa as kaitiaki (guardian) has been recognised by statutory acknowledgement. A Strategic Advisory Committee made up of representatives of both Ngāti Toa and the Department of Conservation (the government department for natural heritage) has been created in 2015 to inform the management of the Kāpiti Island Nature Reserve. This statutory acknowledgement also makes Ngāti Toa an affected party at Kāpiti Island under the Resource Management Act (which governs the use of the land).

An Overlay Classification also acknowledges the traditional, cultural, spiritual and historical association of Ngāti Toa with the Kāpiti Island Nature Reserve administered by the Department of Conservation. This Overlay Classification status requires Ngāti Toa to develop and publicise a set of principles that will assist the Minister of Conservation to avoid harming or diminishing values of the tribe with regard to that land (Ngāti Toa Rangatira and the Crown 2012). It involves Indigenous systems only insofar as Ngāti Toa are able to express their attachment to their land in the terms of their own culture, albeit directed in such a manner as to satisfy the terms and processes of a western legal framework.

3. Current State of Conservation and Challenges for Continuity

As a nature reserve established for over a century, a pest-free island with mature regenerating forest, with controlled access and sustainable tourism, Kāpiti Island is in a great state in terms of its natural heritage. There is always a danger of biological contamination from the mainland but the risk would seem relatively low.

In terms of its cultural heritage, 150 years of colonial neglect of Indigenous values for sacred and cultural sites and landscapes are only just beginning to be reversed. Some of the archaeological sites on the island have been recorded and are thus known as well as protected by law. Fortunately the longstanding natural reserve status and controlled access to the island has kept much of the damage of humankind at bay, although revegetation may well have damaged evidence of former habitation sites. Many of the archaeological sites are not recorded, and hardly any of them have any recognition for their intrinsic value as forming part of the cultural heritage. The greatest challenge to the conservation of these values is fostering the capacity of the traditional

Figure 1: Location of Kāpiti Island (Forde X., 2017)

Figure 2: Kāpiti Island at dusk (Theresa McMillan, 2009, cropped, CC0)

Figure 3: The grave of Te Rangihiroa on the battlefield of Waiorua Bay, Kāpiti Island (Forde X. 2017)

conservator and custodian of the island, the local tribe, Ngāti Toa, and its associated kinfolk, to access, record, manage and care for their many sites that contribute to forming this cultural landscape.

3.1 Interdependency of nature and culture

From a Māori perspective, the key link is in the concept of kaitiakitanga, or guardianship, of these sites as taonga, treasures or resources, for Ngāti Toa and associates, most particularly for those families who still maintain their association with the island by deriving a livelihood from it. As long as Kāpiti remains both a dwelling place and an economic resource for Ngāti Toa, it remains a valued cultural landscape in which the maintenance of the many natural resources (particularly the wildlife, as a bird sanctuary) is a source of modern livelihood (tourist revenue) as well as traditional subsistence (food source).

The existence of many wāhi tapu (sacred

places) and other taonga, linked to ancestors and their occupation, is a powerful driver for continued kaitiakitanga over the natural and cultural features of this island, regardless of government ownership. Altogether, the past imprinted on the land by ancestors meshed with the future potential for subsistence and self-determination provide a meaningful environment in which to live as Māori. In this cultural landscape, the Indigenous people can continue to occupy the land and "keep the home fires burning" (the concept of ahi kaa), to live a way of life defined by traditional gathering of food on their own land, and be present to remember the whakapapa (layers of genealogy of their ancestors) imprinted on the land in cultural and sacred sites, by practicing traditional rituals and adding their own layers of history to Kāpiti. In this respect, it is crucial that Ngāti Toa maintains its own private land at the northern end of the island without restrictions on its way of life, and discovers ways to raise the profile of its cultural heritage on all of the island to a point that continuing traditional cultural practices are not hindered by factored into the rules of the Nature Reserve. Raising the profile of its cultural heritage on the whole island through on-site physical interpretation, tour guiding, official recognition and explanation in media associated with the Nature Reserve will raise a wider public consciousness of the cultural and historic importance of the island to Ngāti Toa. This should in turn foster goodwill towards their continuation or revival of cultural practices such as gathering food (and notably birds and sea food) in reserves in which these activities are otherwise now prohibited. As stated by kaumatua (elders) such as Ngarongo Iwikatea Nicholson in the past, they already reserve the right to do so. This will require further adjustment by government agencies overseeing these reserves with the input of the new Strategic Advisory Committee and Overlay Classification principles, so that their management is in closer alignment with international principles around natural heritage in indigenous territories such as those in IUCN's "Indigenous and Traditional Peoples and Protected Areas" (Beltran 2000).

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