

NGĀ PEPEHA A NGĀ TUPUNA

The Sayings of the Ancestors

by Ross Calman

It can be easy to think we've always had written language. But our ability to speak came long before our ability to write. People have been around for almost a million years, yet we've only had writing for the last five thousand. Within Māori culture, that time is even less: te reo Māori was first written around two hundred years ago. Before then, spoken language was the main way Māori communicated their knowledge and ideas and passed them on to the next generation.

Te ao Māori has a rich tradition of oral literature, with a number of different forms. These include waiata (songs), pūrākau (narratives), whakapapa (genealogy), pepeha (tribal sayings), and whakataukī (proverbs). Each of these forms shares features that weren't usual in everyday speech, such as poetic language, imagery, and a repetitive structure. These features all made oral literature memorable. They helped knowledge to "stick".

Pepeha: A Connection to Place

A pepeha is a statement of belonging that usually follows the same pattern. It connects a person to a mountain, a body of water, and a tribe, "grounding" them to an environment that is unique to their iwi or hapū. For non-Māori, a pepeha connects a person to a place. A pepeha is a good way to introduce yourself. It lets other people know where you're from.

Shared pepeha

Iwi and hapū also have their own pepeha. Māori from Ngāi Tahu, for example, sometimes use the following pepeha:

Ko Aoraki te maunga	Aoraki is the mountain
Ko Waitaki te awa	Waitaki is the river
Ko Ngāi Tahu te iwi	Ngāi Tahu is the tribe

AORAKI TE MAUNGA

WAITAKI TE AWA

Aoraki (also known as Mount Cook) is Aotearoa New Zealand's highest mountain. The Waitaki River is the large river that flows from the base of Aoraki to the ocean north of Ōamaru.

Ngāti Tūwharetoa are from the central North Island. Their pepeha references the landscape in that part of the world:

Ko Tongariro te maunga	Tongariro is the mountain
Ko Taupō te moana	Taupō is the lake
Ko Ngāti Tūwharetoa te iwi	Ngāti Tūwharetoa is the tribe
Ko Te Heuheu te tangata	Te Heuheu is the famous ancestor

TONGARIRO TE MAUNGA

TAUPŌ TE MOANA

TE HEUHEU

Personal pepeha

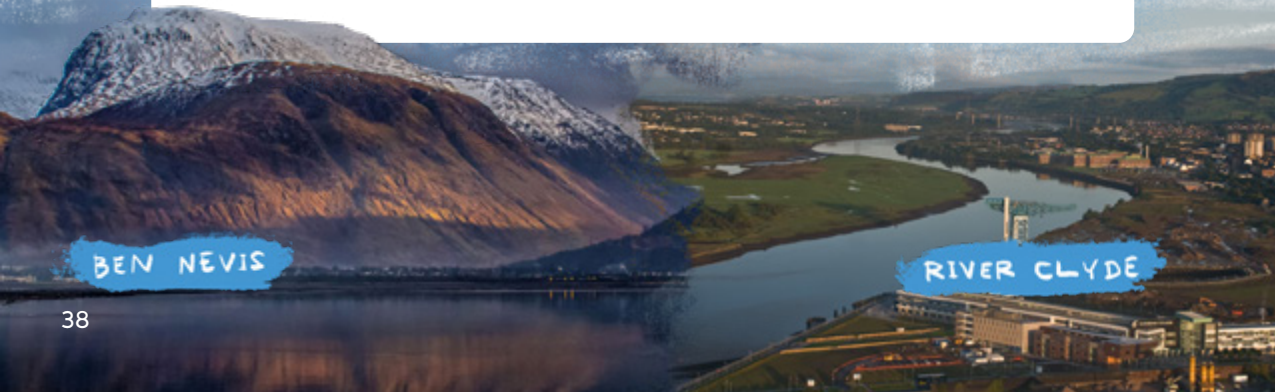
A pepeha can be made more personal by including names. Referring to your parents acknowledges the importance of whakapapa in Māori culture. For example, on my Ngāti Toa side, this is my pepeha:

Ko Whitireia te maunga	Whitireia is the mountain
Ko Parirua te awa	Parirua is the harbour
Ko Raukawa te moana	Raukawa is the ocean
Ko Ngāti Toarangatira te iwi	Ngāti Toarangatira is the tribe
Ko Allan rāua ko Hilary ōku mātua	Allan and Hilary are my parents
Ko Ross Calman tōku ingoa	Ross Calman is my name



People who aren't Māori can also use pepeha to express their identity, even if they're from another country. Start by identifying the mountain and river that are meaningful for you. Someone from Scotland could say:

Ko Ben Nevis te maunga	Ben Nevis is the mountain
Ko Clyde te awa	The Clyde is the river
Ko Ngāti Kōtimana te iwi	Scottish is the tribe



Whakataukī: Ancient Wisdom

Whakataukī are proverbs or short poetic expressions that shed light on human behaviour and shared values. Many whakataukī are very old, dating back to pre-European times, and they often use metaphor, repetition, and other poetic techniques. When sayings are incorporated into formal speech-making, they lend power to the speaker's arguments. There are many different examples of whakataukī and the kind of wisdom they share.

Human behaviour

Kōanga tangata tahi, ngahuru puta noa.

At planting time a single person, at harvest time a multitude.

Long ago, when the tūpuna first came to Aotearoa, the kūmara was an essential crop. Neat gardens were planted throughout Te Ika-a-Māui and in the upper half of Te Waipounamu. Kūmara required a lot of care and attention to produce a good yield, including regular weeding. This whakataukī refers to a universal aspect of human behaviour: people are reluctant to put in the hard work of tending a crop when the reward lies a long way in the future, but everyone wants their share when the crop is harvested and ready to eat.

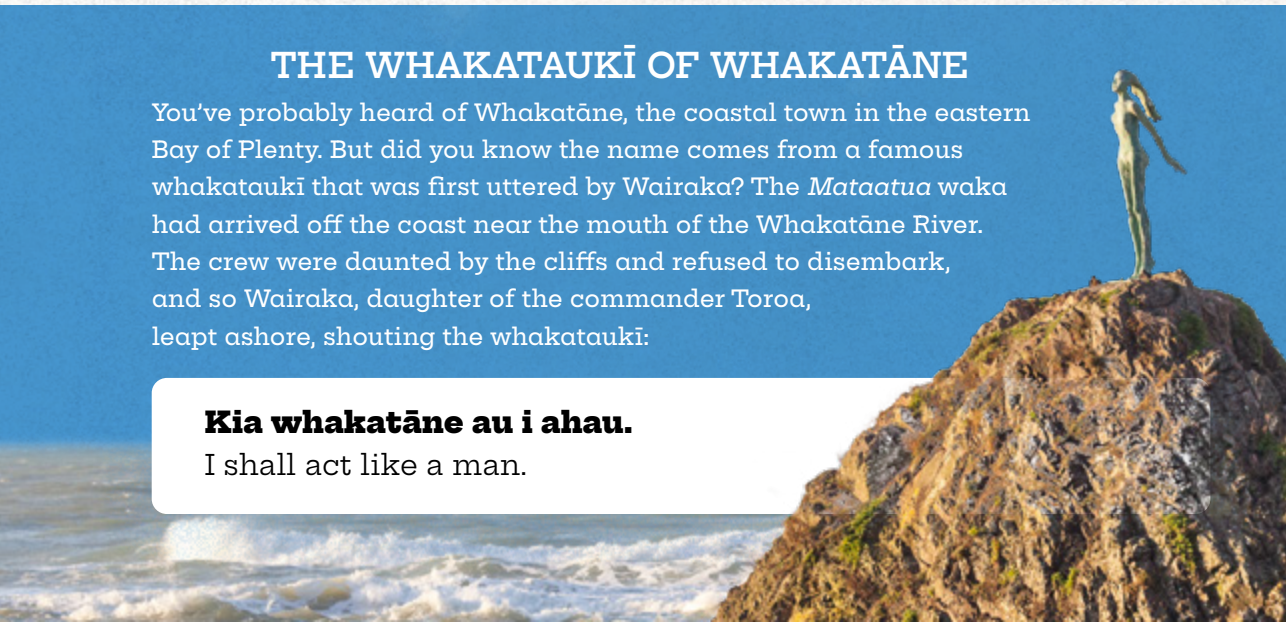
This proverb is not just about crops. It can be applied to any situation where the reward for effort takes time to come about. There's a direct parallel in Western culture with the story of the Little Red Hen.

THE WHAKATAUKĪ OF WHAKATĀNE

You've probably heard of Whakatāne, the coastal town in the eastern Bay of Plenty. But did you know the name comes from a famous whakataukī that was first uttered by Wairaka? The *Mataatua waka* had arrived off the coast near the mouth of the Whakatāne River. The crew were daunted by the cliffs and refused to disembark, and so Wairaka, daughter of the commander Toroa, leapt ashore, shouting the whakataukī:

Kia whakatāne au i ahau.

I shall act like a man.



Matariki

Matariki is an important event in the maramataka Māori (Māori calendar), when the constellation of Matariki (also called the Pleiades) is visible above the horizon at dawn. Matariki is a time for people to come together for feasting and storytelling. It's also a time to reflect and to remember the people who have died during the year. There are many whakataukī associated with Matariki.

Matariki hunga nui

Matariki when crowds of people gather



A Legacy

You too can do your bit to ensure that pepeha and whakataukī stay with us in the future. Memorise your own pepeha and learn some whakataukī – you never know when they'll come in handy. For starters, I recommend learning two of my favourites:

E kore au e ngaro, he kākano i ruia mai i Rangīātea.

I shall never be lost, for I am a seed that was sown from Rangīātea.

Rangīātea is the Māori spelling of Ra'īātea, an island in the Society Islands, near Tahiti. This is one of the places where the ancestors of Māori came from. It reminds us that no matter who we are and where we go, we take our heritage – our whakapapa – with us.

He aha te mea nui o te ao?

He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.

What is the most important thing in the world?

It is people, people, people.

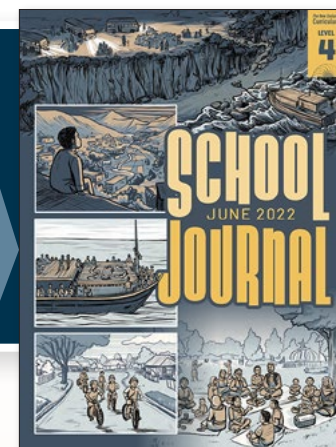
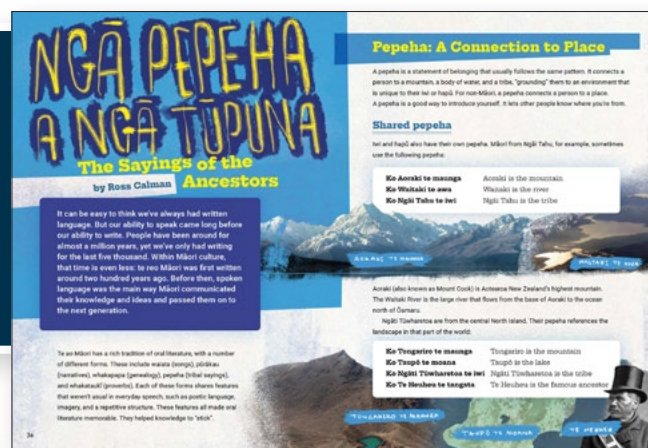
Many of the pepeha and whakataukī in this pito kōrero are from Ngā Pēpeha a Ngā Tīpuna by Hirini Moko Mead and Neil Grove.

Whakataukī to Learn

Whakataukī	Translation	Explanation
E kore a muri e hokia.	<i>There is no going back.</i>	What's done is done. An English equivalent is "Don't cry over spilt milk".
Ahakoā he iti, he pounamu.	<i>Although small, it is precious.</i>	People might say this when they are making a small gift or an offering that is from the heart. Another way of saying this is "He iti nā te aroha" (a small gift, given with love).
Ahakoā he iti te matakahi, ka pakaru i a ia te tōtara.	<i>Although the wedge is small, it is able to split the mighty tōtara tree.</i>	A small force, properly applied, can yield great results.
Arero rua!	<i>Two-tongued!</i>	Used for someone who is disloyal or changes sides in an argument. The English equivalent is "two-faced".
Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, he toa takitini.	<i>My strength is not of a single warrior, but of many.</i>	There is strength in numbers.
Iti rearea, teitei kahikatea ka taea.	<i>Although the bellbird is small, it can fly to the top of the lofty kahikatea.</i>	Small actions can yield remarkable results.
Whatungarongaro he tangata, toitū he whenua.	<i>People disappear, but the land remains.</i>	This is a reminder that we must look after Earth, which nourishes us and will still be here long after we are gone. This is even more pressing now in the time of climate change.

Ngā Pepeha a Ngā Tūpuna

by Ross Calman



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