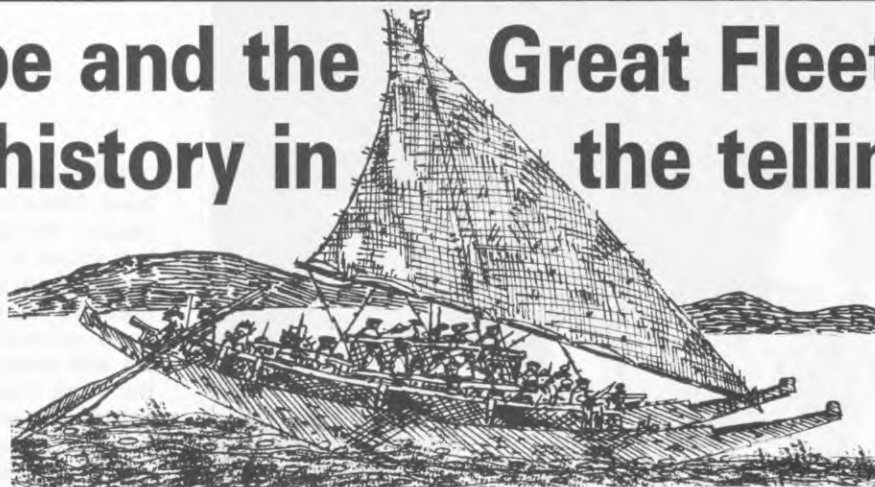


# Kupe and the Great Fleet: history in the telling



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Traditional Maori history, *namata*, was taught in a special house of learning; its students being selected on the basis of social status and *pumanawa*: proven intelligence, along with a facility for memorising detailed information. On graduation, following years of training, pupils were termed *ahorangi*. For the most part highly esoteric, the learning was not exclusive to the *rangatira* class, but was also made available to the wider tribal community — in a simpler form than that taught in the *whare wananga*. Particularly was this so in respect to the younger generation, who were instructed in tribal history in a generally more vivid, dramatic form.

Since the 1820's, the teaching of tribal history by *ahurewa* has declined; the authority of teachers being undermined by European contact, with its hostility toward traditional Maori thought and values. Ironically however, about mid-19th century an interest in traditional Maori culture suddenly arose among certain Europeans. And an extraordinary (almost obsessive) search for *matauranga maori* was the result; particularly *matauranga maori* relating to Kupe and Great Fleet. Additionally, the Polynesian Society was founded, with its *Journal* and enthusiastic membership, which included few Maori members — but many informants, some trained in tribal schools of learning.

As a consequence of the pursuit of traditional Maori learning among such *Tohunga pakeha* as S.P. Smith, Elsdon Best and J.M. Brown, a surprising number of books and monographs were published in which theories both complex and bizarre were often propounded; particularly when the Kupe-Fleet traditions came under learned scrutiny. Equally disturbing was the distortion of recorded material, and the impulse to extensively comment on, or to explain Maori historical themes.

A fiercely competitive field, early Maori studies had a rigid hierarchy of 'notable experts' who, among the greater of their achievements, formulated a rather plausible standard history of the Maori, which was widely at variance with later research. Unfortunately, the history was widely adopted by Maori as an accurate account of the past (*namata*) as preserved by *tupuna*, and documented by European experts in *matauranga maori*... Europeans for the most part, did not

question the history; it must be genuine history, it was reasoned, otherwise it would not be taught in schools for, as it turned out, almost a hundred years!

Complexity and controversy characterises much of contemporary revised Maori history: theories of Maori origins, the interpretation of related traditional material (*korero tupuna*), flourish with remarkable vigour. Scholarly books and monographs are relentlessly published in great volume; each one propounding the truth for our times — with conviction, with (fulsomely) 'sincere appreciation of the contribution of *kaumatua* to the work: *tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou*'.

Given the nature of much modern scholarship, with its generally daunting and querulous exposition of Maori history, there is possibly great merit in a return to the teaching of *matauranga maori*, to the younger generation, along simpler, traditional lines. Such traditional history as the discovery of Aotearoa by Kupe can be both *namata* and inspiration, as the extraordinary voyage of *Hawaiki Nui* recently demonstrated. *Matauranga maori* should be taught simply, but with feeling for *taha maori*!

The following early Kamira account of Kupe, and Notes on the Kupe-Fleet traditions illustrate two distinct approaches in recording *matauranga maori*. Both represent scholarship — but differ markedly in cultural perception of history, legend.

## NOTES

Controversy over the possible initial discovery of New Zealand by Kupe (about 950 AD) and traditional Maori claims of a later arrival of a fleet of canoes from *Hawaiki* in mid-fourteenth

century AD, dates to as early as 1868, when William Colenso (1) described the fleet migration as myth. He assented that Maori denied knowledge of a Great Fleet; the concept being wholly European.

Later however, S.P. Smith (2) compiled a narrative of Maori (east Polynesian) voyaging relating to Kupe and the Great Fleet which for many years became the standard source of reference for both Maori and European. According to Smith the fleet comprised of seven canoes, from which various tribes traced descent.

As a result of modern archaeology Kupe-Fleet traditions have come under close scrutiny, and the chronology for both has been systematically dismantled (3).

Writing in 1984, archaeologist Janet Davidson (4) states that: 'modern scholarly investigation of the sources of Maori tradition has shown conclusively that the commonly accepted tradition based on Kupe... and the Great Fleet is an unreal synthesis of many strands of more complicated regional traditions of the tribes to whom they belong'. She adds however, that the canoes may have existed.

Bellwood (3) comments that traditional dates for Kupe-Fleet, despite archaeological criticism, correlate with initial settlement of east Polynesians in New Zealand and the beginning of North Island Classic Maori culture.

In summary: opinions vary on Kupe and Fleet migration. Smith regarded Kupe-Fleet historical fact; Colenso was critical. Bellwood and Davis suggests caution.

**Bibliography:** The recording of traditional Maori history and its interpretation (particularly in respect to