

# Anthropological and Linguistic Contextualisation of *The Whale Rider*: Māori Origin, Social Relatedness and Cultural Identity

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**Abstract** *This article discusses the story of “The Whale Rider”, published by Witi Ihimaera in 1987, in the context of Māori culture and history. The focus lies on Māori origin and the settlement of the Pacific region, on social relatedness of people to each other, to the gods and to the natural environment, and on cultural identity after European contact – three aspects that are closely linked. The societal structure and the connectedness with the sea and its creatures are deeply rooted in the history of settlement and the mythology of origin. As a result of European contact, these core values of Māori identity came under serious threat, and “The Whale Rider” tells the story of reconnection and realignment. This entire development is also reflected in the history of Te Reo Māori (the Māori language), its emergence, endangerment, and reclamation.*

**Keywords** *Oceania; Austronesian languages; settlement of Polynesia; genealogical bonds; kin groups; chiefly rank; divine ancestors; connectedness; Māori language; indigenous concepts; language contact*

## 1 Introduction

The novel “The Whale Rider” (1987) by Witi Ihimaera tells the story of a Māori chief called Koro Apirana, his family and their whale-riding ancestor Paikea. This deep connection between the people and the whales is rooted in the worldview of Māori descent, as expressed in origin myths and genealogies. This worldview becomes particularly understandable in the context of its development, the settlement of the Pacific by the Polynesian voyagers who travelled great distances by their boats in the search for new land. This required close social bonds and mutual support under strong leadership, and it explains the people’s strong connectedness with the sea and its creatures as well as the great importance of land and its life forms. The novel also addresses conflicts resulting from the colonial history and adaptations to modern life in contemporary New Zealand society. The stranded whales are a sign of losing

the connection to the ancestors and the chief struggles to find a male successor with *mana* and leadership qualities. To avoid the loss of cultural identity and belonging, he fights for the transmission of traditional knowledge, values, and customs as well as for Māori language classes. However, he does not accept his granddaughter Kahu, who is of senior descent, as a future leader, because she is a girl. Thus, the people's future is also at risk until Kahu saves the whales by riding the leading bull back into deep water. As a new whale rider, she restores the connection with the ancestors and her grandfather finally recognises her leadership qualities.

The author Witi Tame Ihimaera-Smiller, son of a mother of Māori descent and a father of Anglo-Saxon origins, is well-known for his extensive literary work on topics of Māori customs, history and identity, particularly conflicts between cultural traditions and contemporary life in New Zealand society. He published numerous short stories and novels including "The Whale Rider" in 1987, which he wrote while living as a diplomat in New York. Inspired by the true incident of a whale getting lost in the Hudson river, the author tells the story of Māori people with a whale-riding ancestor and their deep connection to whales (see Fig. 1).

*Fig. 1: Carved figure of Paikea in Whāngārā*



Source: with kind permission of New Zealand Embassy The Hague, <https://www.facebook.com/NZthehague/photos/a.1492231187732277/2068676560087734/?type=3>

The story plays in a small village called Whāngārā which is located on the North Island at the coast of the East Cape region, north of Gisborne where the author was born (see Fig. 2). The novel is one of his most famous works. It was made into a film by Niki Caro in 2002. Furthermore, a children's theatre play, a musical, and a children's picture book were created based on the story. Until now the novel has been

translated into more than 20 languages, among others 1995 into Māori language by Tīmoti Kāretu and 2003 into German by Sabine Schulte.

Fig. 2: Map of New Zealand



Source: author

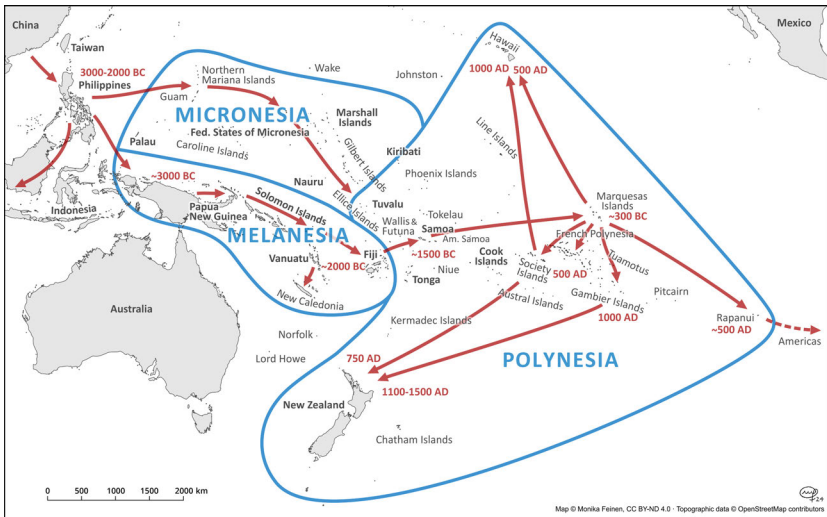
This paper aims at an anthropological and linguistic contextualisation of the book. Using text passages from the novel, fundamental aspects of Māori origin and the settlement of New Zealand (Section 2), social structure based on relatedness with the gods and the natural environment (Section 3), and the impact of European con-

tact on language and cultural values (Section 4) are discussed. Some concluding remarks follow in Section 5.

## 2 The Pacific region, Māori origins and the settlement of Aotearoa

The Pacific region is also known as the cultural region of Oceania which is divided into Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia (Mückler 2009, 14–20; see Fig. 3, areas indicated in blue).

Fig. 3: Oceania – cultural regions and settlement



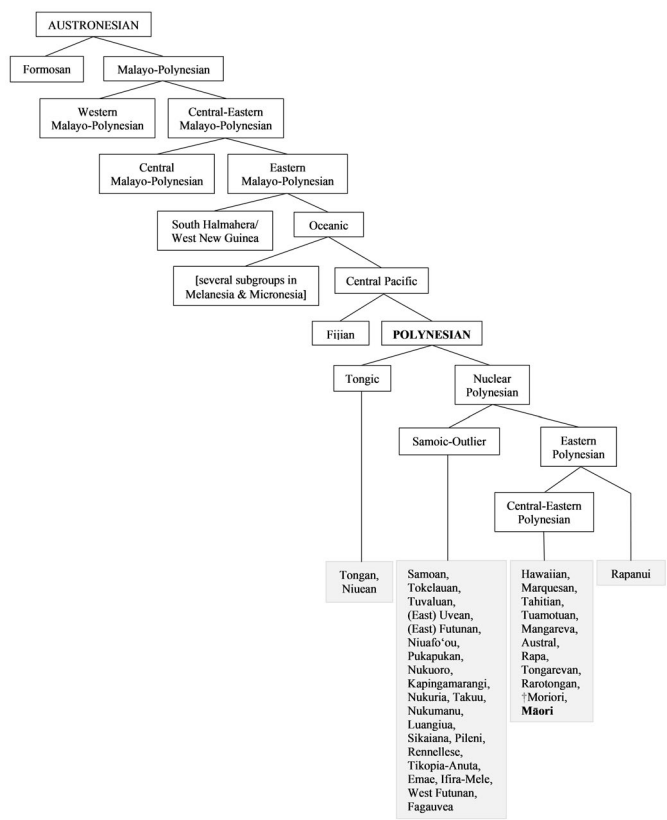
Source: Open Street Map, adapted by Monika Feinen for author

Māori people culturally belong to the chiefly societies of Polynesia, more precisely to the East Polynesian cultural area. The Polynesian triangle is the largest area of Oceania, covering the Pacific region between Hawaii, New Zealand (also called Aotearoa), and Easter Island (also called Rapanui). The name Aotearoa literally means ‘land of the long white cloud’ in Māori (*ao* ‘world, cloud’ + *tea* ‘white’ + *roa* ‘long’). According to a story, it was named after the first sign the early settlers saw when they reached the islands—a long white cloud on the horizon (see Stafford 2002, 15). The Western Polynesian cultural area includes Tonga, Niue, Samoa, several Polynesian Outliers (which are situated outside the Polynesian Triangle to the west in the regions of Micronesia and Melanesia), and part of Fiji (in particular

the Lau archipelago). Apart from the Māori in Aotearoa, the Cook Islands, French Polynesia (Tahiti, the Tuamotus, and the Marquesas), Hawaii, and Rapanui also belong to the Eastern Polynesian cultural area (see Fig. 3).

As compared to Melanesia (Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and part of Fiji) and Micronesia (the Mariana Islands including Guam, the Caroline Islands including Palau, the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Kiribati), Polynesia is relatively homogeneous in terms of traditional social systems and ritual-religious ideas (see Section 3) as well as languages. Linguistically, all languages spoken in the Polynesian Triangle plus the Outliers are classified as Polynesian languages, which belong to the Oceanic branch of the Austronesian language family (see Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Austronesian language family



Source: author

*Te reo Māori* (lit. 'the language Māori'), is one of the 35 Polynesian languages (Lynch 1998, 27, 50f.). With around 1,250 languages, the Austronesian language family is one of the largest language families in the world. It extends over a huge geographic area, from Madagascar in the west to Easter Island in the east and from Taiwan and Hawaii in the north to New Zealand in the south. This region essentially includes the island states of Southeast Asia (including Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia), Melanesia (only Papua New Guinea's coastal region, while all other languages spoken in Papua New Guinea belong to the Papuan language family), Micronesia and Polynesia. The Pacific region consists of a relatively large area of water compared to the insular land area. Polynesia extends over a marine area of around 50 million km<sup>2</sup> with a land area of just around 312,200 km<sup>2</sup> of which New Zealand makes up the largest part (269,650 km<sup>2</sup>). New Zealand consists of two large islands (North Island and South Island) and around 700 small islands (see Fig. 2). As will be shown, the unique geography of Oceania has been a crucial factor in shaping both the settlement history and the dispersal patterns of the Austronesian languages. The relative homogeneity of Polynesia as a cultural and linguistic area also results from the late settlement of this remote region (see Section 2), and thus, the relatively little time for diversification. However, due to the colder climate in New Zealand as compared to the other Polynesian islands, adaptations took place, e.g., with regard to food crops and clothing.

The Pacific region has long been uninhabited and the fundamental question in science has been where the people who reached these remote islands came from and how this settlement took place given their widely dispersed location in the vast ocean area. Especially the origin of the first settlers in Polynesia was highly debated. While Thor Heyerdahl (1914–2002) proposed settlement from the Americas, Robert von Heine-Geldern (1885–1968) and others argued for settlement from South/Southeast Asia. The prevailing wind direction in the Pacific (from the southeast) and the presence of the sweet potato (an import from the Americas) seemed to support Thor Heyerdahl's theory, which he tried to prove with his trip on the *Kon Tiki*. This was a raft made of balsa wood, with which he sailed from Peru to French Polynesia in 1947. However, this theory is now considered disproven and the settlement of the Pacific from the opposite direction in several waves of migration is widely accepted (see Fig. 3, red-coloured migration marking). There is a combination of evidence from various disciplines including archaeological finds (Lapita pottery), genetic engineering and blood group analyses, climate science findings (frequent El Niño phenomena, i.e., strong winds from the west, during the settlement period), and linguistic evidence about genealogical relatedness. As Figure 4 shows, it can be assumed that the origin of the Austronesian language family lies in the area of Taiwan, where the Formosan languages are native. From there the language family developed in an easterly direction, as its right-branching structure indicates. According to archaeologist Peter Bellwood (1978), the Austrone-

sians started migrating from the Southeast Asian mainland towards Taiwan and the Philippines around 5000 BC, from where they left around 1500 BC towards Malaysia, Indonesia and then further advanced into the coastal regions of Papua New Guinea and also Madagascar. In a next migration wave, the speakers of Proto-Oceanic reached the islands of Melanesia up to Fiji, what required an advanced technology in boat building and navigation skills. From there, they finally started around 1000 BC with even more sophisticated seafaring knowledge to settle Polynesia, first the islands of Tonga and Samoa, then the area of French Polynesia and the Cook Islands, and finally the remote islands of Hawaii, Easter Island, and New Zealand. Despite the main direction of migration, travel in the opposite direction also occurred, for example from the Americas to Polynesia (explaining the presence of the sweet potato in the Pacific region) and from Polynesia to Micronesia (explaining the Polynesian Outliers as a result of back-migration). However, these contacts with Micronesia and the Americas had no serious impact on Polynesian societies. For more detailed information on the first settlement of Oceania, see Bellwood (1978, 1987) and Kirch (1984, 1997), while Mückler (2009, 31–42) provides a great summary of the different theories and academic approaches that have dealt with the history of settlement.

The first Polynesian settlers only arrived in New Zealand/Aotearoa between 800 and 1350 AD (depending on the respective research approach). Their arrival is described in the following text passage (1) from “*The Whale Rider*”. It refers to the place of origin, the direction of origin, the way of travelling, and the settlement of the new land uninhabited by humans.

(1) In the old days, in the years that have gone before us, the land and sea felt a great emptiness, a yearning. [...] This is not to say that the land and sea were without life, without vivacity. [...] Suddenly, looking up at the surface, the fish began to see the dark bellies of the canoes from the east. The first of the Ancients were coming, journeying from their island kingdom beyond the horizon. (Ihimaera 2002 [1987], 10–11)

The place of origin is described as the ‘island kingdom beyond the horizon’ in the (north)east. This corresponds to the above described theory that the Māori ancestors have reached the previously unsettled islands coming from Central Polynesia, more precisely from the Society Islands and Mangareva (see Fig. 3). Many Māori narratives speak of a mythological place of origin, called Hawaiki, such as in text excerpt (2) from “*The Whale Rider*”. It refers to an ancestral homeland, the place of the divine ancestors. The designation and its cognates are widespread across Polynesia

and many islands bear that name, e.g. Savai'i (island in Samoa) and Hawai'i (island in the archipelago of the same name).<sup>1</sup>

(2) Far beyond the horizon is Hawaiki, our ancestral island homeland, the place of the Ancients and the Gods, and the other side of the world. (Ihimaera 2002 [1987], 32–33)

The first settlers had travelled across the Pacific by their great canoes, called *waka*. Overcoming such a great distance by sea also explains the strong connection with the sea and its creatures, the great importance of land that Polynesians hoped to find through their voyages, and the need for mutual support and reliable social ties (see Section 3). Māori people still trace their ancestry to the first *waka*, on which their ancestors reached the shores of Aotearoa. This social connection is passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition (Williams 2004, 27f.; see also Section 3).

### 3 Societal structure and social relatedness in traditional society

Polynesia is known for their highly stratified chiefly societies with a class-like social structure, inherited titles, and the ideas of *mana* (supernatural power/energy of life) and *tapu* (restrictions/taboos and sacredness related to people and other entities of higher *mana*).<sup>2</sup>

The social units of interaction in Māori society are the following three kin groups: the *whānau* (extended family), the *hapū* (sub-tribe/clan), and *iwi* (tribe). The *whānau* describes the extended family living together (mostly three generations). In simple terms, a *hapū* consists of several *whānau*, and an *iwi* consists of several *hapū*. These larger social units of *whānau* related through a common ancestor are under the leadership of a common chief (*rangatira* or *ariki*). The characters of “The Whale rider” story belong to a big tribe called Ngāti Porou at the East Cape in the region of Gisborne (North Island). The name Ngāti Porou derives from their ancestor Porourangi who descended from the epic key ancestor Paikea (see text passage 3). Their tribal song tells the story of Paikea’s journey to Aotearoa on the back of a whale (audio file

1 Taumoeofolau (1996) describes a plausible linguistic origin of the name, having developed in Tongan and being retained in *hou'eiki* (‘chiefly, higher ranked’).

2 The English word ‘taboo’ is a Polynesian loanword that is derived from *tapu*. However, it has lost part of its original meaning. In English it only means ‘forbidden/prohibited’ but not ‘sacred/holy’ any more. For more information on the concepts of *mana* and *tapu* see, for instance, Greschat (1980) and Shore (1989). As fundamental concepts, they shape cultural practices as well as linguistic structures such as the honorific registers in the languages of Western Polynesia (Völkel 2021).

in Muturangi Reedy n.d.; see also stories on Nati, the *iwi*'s website). Witi Ihimaera, the author of the novel "The Whale Rider", is related to the Ngāti Porou through his mother (personal communication, 24 April 2023) and Karyn Paringatai, a colleague at the University of Otago who also participated in the Mainz–Dunedin lecture series, traces a descent line to this *iwi*, too.

Apart from the kin groups, people trace relationships to the *waka*, the boats of the first Polynesian settlers who reached the shores of Aotearoa (see Section 2). Thus, *waka* does not only refer to the canoes but also to a social group, the descendants of the first settlers.

(3) Our whakapapa, of course, is the genealogy of the people of Te Rawhiti, the people of the East Coast; [...], our ancestor was Kahutia Te Rangi, who was a high chief in Hawaiki [...] and [...] who travelled here on the back of a whale. [...], astride his tipua, [...] Four generations after Paikea [i.e. Kahutia Te Rangi<sup>3</sup>], was born the great ancestor Porourangi, after whom my eldest brother is named. Under his leadership the descent lines of all the people of Te Tai Rawhiti were united [...] Many centuries later, the chieftainship was passed to Koro Apirana and, from him, to my brother Porourangi. Then Porourangi had a daughter whom he named Kahu. (Ihimaera 2002 [1987], 32–34)

Traditional Māori society consisted of the following fundamental classes with different rank: *manahune* (population engaged in land cultivation), *rangatira* (chiefs), and *ariki* (paramount chief) (Mückler 2009, 150–152). The higher a person's status, the more *mana* they possess and the more *tapu* they are (Greschat 1980, Shore 1989). Māori chiefs were mediators to the ancestors and they have a direct line of descent all the way back to the gods. Rank and *mana* were determined by birth order: *tuakana* 'elder same-sex siblings' who constitute the senior line vs. *teina* 'younger same-sex siblings' who constitute senior lines. Chiefly titles were passed on to senior kin of a chief (patrilineal primogeniture succession), preferably to a man but not necessarily. Leadership qualities such as economic skills, warrior skills, kindness and the ability to care for the people were also required. Thus, firstborn women retained their chiefly status, but the active political leadership role was often carried out by their husbands (Ka'ai and Reilly 2004, 91–93).

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3 Traditionally, name changes are very common in Polynesia. Traditional names given at birth derive from lexemes or lexical phrases which refer to personal characteristics, circumstances at birth, or good wishes, but during life people could get a new name which generally points to a remarkable event having triggered the name change (Völkel 2023b). In the story of "The Whale Rider" the new name (Kahutia Te Rangi, lit. 'close to the sky') coincides with the landing in New Zealand, as the following text passage shows: (3) "And Paikea, you landed at Ahuahu. You changed into Kahutia Te Rangi, aue. You gave your embrace to the daughter of Te Whironui, aue, who sat in the stern of the canoe." (Ihimaera 2002 [1987], 58)

(4) The trouble was that Koro Apirana could not reconcile his traditional beliefs about Maori leadership and mana with Kahu's birth. By Maori custom, leadership was hereditary and normally the mantle of mana fell from the eldest son to the eldest son. Except that in this case, there was an eldest daughter. (Ihimaera 2002 [1987], 20)

The book's character, Koro Apirana, who is the current leader in the story, searches for a male successor, but his eldest son has a daughter: Kahu (see text passage 4). However, she is genealogically senior (the eldest child of the eldest son; see text passage 3) and ultimately accepted by Koro Apirana when he realises that she has demonstrated leadership qualities (comparable to Muriwai in text passage 5). While tasks and social roles are highly gender-specific in Polynesian societies (e.g., fishing is a male task), gender assignment is not fixed. There are basically four genders (women, men, men behaving like women, women behaving like men; see for instance Besnier 1993), and in text passage (5) Muriwai becomes *whakatane* (*whaka*- 'be like' + *tane* 'male') and performs a men's task (commanding a *waka* crew).

(5) Even though she [i.e. Nanny Flowers] had married into our tribe she always made constant reference to her ancestor, Muriwai, who had come to New Zealand on the Maataatua canoe. When the canoe approached Whakatane, which is a long way from our village, Muriwai's chieftainly brothers, led by Toroa, went to investigate the land. While they were away, however, the sea began to rise and the current carried the canoe so close to the rocks that Muriwai knew all on board would surely perish. So she chanted special prayers, asking the gods to give her the right and open the way for her to take charge. Then she cried, 'E-i! Tena, kia whakatane ake au i ahau!' *Now I shall make myself a man*. She called out to the crew and ordered them to start paddling quickly, and the canoe was saved in the nick of time. (Ihimaera 2002 [1987], 24)

Genealogical bonds (*whakapapa*) and kinship ties play a central role in Māori society. People trace genealogical relationships with their kin back over generations. Text passage (3) from "The Whale Rider" describes Kahus relatedness all the way back to the divine ancestors in Hawaiki, the mythological place of origin (see Section 2). Thus, genealogies even go beyond human kin and include relatedness with the *taiao* (the natural environment) and *atua* (the gods) (Ka'ai and Higgins 2004, 14). The creation narratives describe genealogical connections between the creative beings such as Rangi (the sky), Papa-tūā-nuku (the earth) and their offspring, the gods of the people, the wind and the elements, the forest and the birds, the fish and the reptiles, the sweet potato, and the fernroot (Reilly 2004b). Thus, the people are descendants of the senior line of Father Sky and Mother Earth. Several *iwi* ('tribe', see below) trace genealogical bonds to whales (see text passage 6) and whale-riding ancestors such as Paikea (see text passage 3; see also Lythberg and Nagata 2022).

(6) The whale has always held a special place in the order of things, even [...] way back, after the Sky Father and Earth Mother had been separated, when the God children of both parents divided up between themselves the various Kingdoms of the Earth. It was the Lord Tangaroa who took the Kingdom of the Ocean; he was second in rank only to the Lord Tane, the Father of Man and the Forests, and so was established by them the close kinship of man with the inhabitants of the ocean, and of land with sea. This was the first communion. [...] (Ihimaera 2002 [1987]: 42)

This worldview of relatedness explains the deep inner connection between the people, the spiritual world and the natural world, as in the epilogue of “The Whale Rider” that describes the intertwined fates of the whales (the *tipua* ‘guardian spirits’) and the people. People also trace genealogical connections with the land, particularly *maunga* (mountains) and *awa* (rivers), as the heading on the website *Ngāti Porou* shows: “Ko Hikurangi te maunga, ko Waiapu te awa, ko Ngati Porou te iwi!” (lit. ‘The mountain is Hikurangi, the river is Waiapu, the tribe is Ngati Porou!’). They are perceived as living entities and even given legal rights (e.g., Hutchison 2014 on the legal status of the Whanganui river). The connectedness with the natural world is also described by Salmond (2015) and Salmond, Hikuroa and Robertson (2023) in relation to the protection of the ocean and maritime creatures. In “The Whale Rider” Ihimaera describes the consciousness of being connected to all beings as ‘oneness’ (see text passage 7). Even things like *whare tipuna* (meeting houses) or *tekoteko* (carved ancestor figure on the gable of a meeting house, see Fig. 1) are ascribed *mana* and spiritual identity, as they represent the ancestors themselves (see Higgins and Moorfield 2004 for a description of the *whare tipuna* as an analogy of the ancestor’s body). The *tekoteko* of Paikea at the American Museum of Natural History in New York was also treated as a legal person, the registered owner of a gift from the descent group (see Lythberg, Ngata and Salmond 2019; Lythberg and Nagata 2022).

(7) Kahutia Te Rangi [...] brought with him the mauri, the life-giving forces which would enable us to live in close communion with the world. The mauri that he brought [...] were the gifts of those houses in Hawaiki to the new land. They were special because among other things, they gave instructions on how man might korero with the beasts and creatures of the sea so that all could live in helpful partnership. They taught *oneness*. (Ihimaera 2002 [1987], 33)

Social relationships of any kind (e.g., between kin or between chiefs and the people of lower descent lines) are reciprocal in nature and characterised by mutual support. *Manaaki* (solidarity, care) and *aroha* (love, affection) are important concepts to honour relatives, establish social bonds, strengthen the community, and maintain *mana* (Reilly 2004a, 67f). Social care through mutual support and love/affection are

core values of kinship bonds across Polynesia which are, among others, expressed by gift exchange (Evans 2001 and Völkel 2010, 77 ff. on Tongan). Text passage (8) from “The Whale Rider” shows that the fundamental concepts of mutual support, respect, and reciprocity also shape the idea of relationships between humans and gods or the natural environment.

(8) ‘In our village,’ Koro Apirana told us, ‘we have always endeavoured to live in harmony with Tangaroa’s kingdom and the guardians therein. We have made offerings to the sea god to thank him and when we need his favour, and we have called upon our guardians whenever we are in need of help. We have blessed every new net and new line to Tangaroa. We have tried not to take food with us in our boats when we fish because of the tapu nature of our task.’ (Ihimaera 2002 [1987], 50–51)

In Māori society any type of event, particularly formal gatherings, begins with a *mihi* or *mihimihi*, an introductory speech of greeting in which people provide information about who they are (their name) and where they come from (their genealogical descent and place of origin). This serves to connect oneself with the ancestors and the natural environment, and to create social connections with other people as foundation for interaction.

#### **4 Language endangerment, the struggle for cultural identity, and the risk of social dis-connectedness**

The European discovery of Oceania took place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The explorers were followed by traders and missionaries, and by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the region was divided between the colonial powers Germany, Great Britain, the United States of America and France, and later also New Zealand. With the arrival of the Europeans in New Zealand about 400 years after the arrival of the first Polynesian settlers (see Section 2), a period of severe language and culture contact started. Colonisation and missionisation changed the ideas, customs, and lifestyles of the Pacific people. Major issues arose about land ownership. Traditionally, land was claimed by social groups and it was inherited in a line of descent from the Polynesian ancestors who first occupied it, or it was conquered in tribal conflicts over territorial rights. European land tenure and private sales of land resulted in major conflicts/disputes.<sup>4</sup>

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4 The situation was thought to be resolved by the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 (an agreement between the British Crown and numerous Māori chiefs to acknowledge British sovereignty in return for civil rights and the allowance to keep their lands). See Salmond (2010) for an analysis of discrepancies between the English and the Māori version of the document which

This was a clash of different cultural attitudes to land and dealing with land tenure (relatedness to land through ancestors vs. land as a commodity; see Section 3).

Another major impact of European contact concerns *Te reo Māori* (Māori language). Māori was an oral language without writing prior to the arrival of the Europeans. Writing was introduced by the missionaries in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Traditional genres are orally transmitted texts, such as poems, songs, and prose stories on local history, genealogies or cosmologies, and other social values. Genres at a *pōwhiri* (formal welcome ceremony onto the *marae*, the ceremonial meeting space of a community) are *karanga* (call of welcome, generally performed by women, e.g., in text passage 11), *whaikōrero* (oratory, i.e. highly formulaic speeches), and *waiata* ([traditional] songs) and dances (e.g. *haka*) (Higgins and Moorfield 2004). Thus, oral texts are to be understood in a broader sense in Māori, including the interplay of language and performance. In this sense, carvings and tattoo patterns (*moko*) can be regarded as traditional written records, telling stories about tribal history, ancestry and family affiliation. The first books were collections of written oral genres. Over time, genres like newspaper texts, children's literature, textbooks and novels were also adopted. The first novel published by a Māori author was 'Tangi' by Witi Ihimaera in 1973.

(9) [...] he was a good fighter for the Maori people. [...] The hui that Koro Apirana had attended was about the establishment of Kohanga Reo, or language nests, where young children could learn the reo. The adult version was the wananga, the regular instruction [on history and customs] of the kind which Koro Apirana had established a year before in Whangara. (Ihimaera 2002 [1987], 41)

The dominance of English language also resulted in the severe endangerment of *Te reo Māori*. Māori and Moriori (an extinct Polynesian language, formerly spoken on the Chatham Islands) were the only languages of the early Polynesian settlers in New Zealand until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Then, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Māori became severely endangered and was on its way to extinction through bilingualism and the shift to English, the language of the colonial powers. Finally, towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reclamation efforts arose (see Benton 1996; Moorfield and Johnston 2004; Rewi and Rātima 2021 for details on these developments). *Tikanga* (Māori values and customs) and *Te reo Māori* (Māori language) which play a central role for social identity were reclaimed. Māori was granted official language status through the Māori Language Act of 1987. It also became a language of instruction in some schools and is now used in the media, for example on the TV channel MĀORI+. However, its future is still unsure and dependent on further efforts, as it is mostly

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reflect a lack of linguistic translation skills as well as the poor communication of cultural concepts, understandings, and interests.

a secondary language and even though it is used extensively in formal contexts, the majority of people claiming Māori descent are not able to have an everyday conversation in *Te reo Māori* (Harlow 2006, 10 ff.). For additional measures aimed at preserving the language, see King (2018). The book “The Whale Rider” was written in 1987, at a time when attempts were being started to re-establish the Māori heritage: education (*mātauranga*) in *tikanga* (customs, traditional values) and *te reo* (language). It was a context of tension between tradition and modernity – the effort to find a way for Māori society and life within Western contexts. Text passage (9) shows the efforts of the character Koro Apirana in teaching cultural knowledge and language skills not only to the younger generation but also to older generations. The aim is to prevent social dis-connection from their origin (as expressed in text passage 10). On the other hand, he is stuck in his traditional view of finding a future male leader and does not perceive his granddaughter’s *mana* (see text excerpt 4).

(10) ‘[...] But I do know the old man had the power to talk to the beasts and creatures of the sea. Aue, we have lost that power now. [...]’ (Ihimaera 2002 [1987], 38)

With his work, Witi Ihimaera is a great ambassador of the Māori world. At the age of 80, he now plans to attend *Te Wānanga Takiura* (immersion schools in New Zealand which aim at the revitalisation and training of Māori language and cultural knowledge) to become a fluent Māori speaker and then to write his first novel in *Te reo Māori* (personal communication, 24.4.2023). Although “The Whale Rider” was written in English and only translated into *Te reo Māori* in 1995 (see Section 1), the English original includes a lot of Māori terms for key cultural concepts, as the text passages illustrate. They are usually not translated but their meaning can be inferred from the co-text. As a result of language contact, not only has Māori borrowed many words from English, but many of the Māori terms used in the book have also become loanwords in contemporary New Zealand English (e.g. *iwi*, *mana*, *mihi*, and *waka*; see also Note 2).

Indigenous languages are not only a way to express cultural identity but also to transmit cultural ideas and concepts. *Rangi*, for instance, is not just the ‘sky’ (as translated in the glossary of the 2002 edition) but a forefather of the physical world, just as *mana* is not simply ‘prestige’, but a spiritual power passed down through senior descent lines.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, linguistic practices have social functions, e.g.,

5 Another example for the different meanings expressed by different languages is the book’s title. “The Whale Rider” as well as the Māori title, translated as “Te kaieke tohorā” (*te* ARTICLE, *kai*- HUMAN AGENT + *eke* ‘get on/ride’, *tohorā* ‘whale’; lit. ‘the whale rider’), do not include a gender distinction, and thus, they refer equally to the male ancestor Kahutia Te Rangi who was a high chief in Hawaiki, the mythological place of origin, as well as to the girl named Kahu, Koro Apirana’s granddaughter. The German translator, Sabine Schulte (personal communication, 22 June 2023), therefore retained the English main title in the German transla-

the *mihi* (introductory speech; see Section 3) is a cultural ritual to establish social bonds and to get connected with the ancestors. This is expressed in excerpt (11) which appears repeatedly throughout the book in Māori words (in both the English and German editions); it can be translated as ‘Let’s unite, let’s gather, let’s support each other’.

(11) Haumi e, hui e, *taiki e*. (Ihimaera 2002 [1987], 97, 148)

## 5 Conclusion

The story of “The Whale Rider” is deeply rooted in Māori tradition and worldview as well as its time. It tells about the origin of the ancestors, the mythological homeland Hawaiki, somewhere located in the region of French Polynesia, from where the first Polynesian settlers arrived in their great canoes (*waka*) in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Hawaiki is the land of the divine ancestors to which Māori people trace their genealogical relationship (*whakapapapa*). The descent line goes back to the *waka* of the first Polynesian settlers and beyond human kin to the divine ancestors from which humans descended, being the offspring of Rangi (Father Sky) and Papa-tuā-nuku (Mother Earth) and the siblings of the elements, the forest, fish and reptiles, and multiple other natural entities. This worldview of relatedness explains the deep inner connection between the people, the spiritual world (*atua*) and the natural environment (*taiao*). The importance of social connection becomes evident in numerous oral narratives and songs about genealogies and in the *mihi* practice, a way of expressing affiliation and creating social bonds at the beginning of formal gatherings.

The story’s characters trace their ancestry back to Paikea, a whale-riding ancestor. As all chiefs, Koro Apirana derives his *mana* (spiritual power) from his senior descent line and his leadership qualities. In times of severe endangerment, marked by impending language loss and dwindling cultural identity as a result of European contact, he tries to lead his people into a promising future. He fights for maintaining the connection through the transmission of traditional knowledge, values, and customs as well as Māori language skills. However, he struggles to find a future leader, as he does not accept his granddaughter Kahu, who is of senior descent, because she is a girl. The stranding of the whales is a sign that the connection to the ancestors is at risk. Finally, when Kahu saves the whales by riding the leading bull back into deep water, her grandfather recognises her leadership qualities. She has restored the connection with the ancestors and is the bond to the future.

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tion of the book in order to avoid the necessary gender distinction in German (*der Walreiter/die Walreiterin*; *der/die* MALE/FEMALE ARTICLE, *-in* FEMALE PERSON).

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