Whale Song: The Significance of Whales in Māori Instrumental Music

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Abstract *Taonga pūoro (Māori musical instruments) play a key role in Witi Ihimaera's novel "The Whale Rider" (1987). Their voices enable the Māori characters to communicate and commune (or 'interlock' to use Ihimaera's term) with whales, and by extension with ancestors and deities – particularly with Tangaroa, God of the Ocean. This contribution explains some of the uses and meanings of taonga pūoro in connection with whales, which helps contextualise and deepen understanding of how they are discussed in Ihimaera's classic novel.*

Keywords *taonga pūoro; musical instruments; whale song; whale bone*

Introduction

Tēnā koutou kātoa. Kō Jennifer Cattermole toku ingoa. Greetings. My name's Jennifer Cattermole, and I'm a lecturer in ethnomusicology at the University of Otago. I'm Pākēka (New Zealand European), but today I'll do my best to represent Māori cultural perspectives on the significance of whales in Māori instrumental music. My aim is to deepen understandings of some of the content presented in the text of *The Whale Rider* (1987).

Communicating and communing with whales using taonga pūoro

My first encounter with *taonga pūoro* (traditional Māori musical instruments) was in 1998 when revivalist Richard Nunns gave a class for a paper I was taking as an undergraduate studying at Otago University. I vividly remember him standing at the front of the classroom before a table covered with a black velvet cloth, upon which rested several *taonga*. He joined his breath with those instruments, demonstrating their voices for us. He also shared stories – one of which so fascinated me and captured

my imagination that it led me to tread *te ara pūoro* (the pathway of sound), taking me on a journey of exploration of *taonga pūoro*.

Nunns spoke of an experience he had while attending a world music festival in Patagonia. There was a beach just across the road from the hotel where he was staying. He spoke of getting into a boat, voyaging a short distance out to sea (the seabed plummeted to a great depth a short distance offshore), and playing a flute (a *pūtōrino*, if I remember correctly). Three whales swam up to the boat, and remained poised with their heads out of the water, listening to him play. Only when Nunns ceased playing did the whales sink beneath the waves, and continue gently on their journeys. Upon hearing that story, there was nothing I wanted more than to have an experience like that! I longed to be able to communicate with whales in the same way he had, and to speak their language.

This story resonates strongly with Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, which – in a curious coincidence – contains a narrative set in the same place, and which similarly describes a musician communicating to a whale by playing musical instruments:

> The Valdes Peninsula, Patagonia. Te Whiti Te Ra. The nursery, the cetacean crib … the ancient bull whale was swept up in memories of its own birthing. His mother had been savaged by sharks three months later; crying over her in the shallows of Hawaiki, he had been succoured by the golden human who became his master [i.e. Paikea]. The human had heard the young whale's distress and had come into the sea, playing a flute. The sound was plangent and sad as he tried to communicate his oneness with the young whale's mourning. Quite without the musician knowing it, the melodic patterns of the flute's phrases imitated the whalesong of comfort. The young whale drew nearer to the human, who cradled him and pressed noses with the orphan in greeting. When the herd travelled onward, the young whale remained and grew under the tutelage of his master … In the early days his master would play the flute and the whale would come to the call. (Ihimaera 2003, 22–23)

> Once, he had a golden master who had wooed him with flute song. Then his master had used a conch shell to bray his commands to the whale over long distances. As their communication grew so did their understanding and love of each other. (36)

The reference in this excerpt to using "a conch shell trumpet to bray … commands" finds support in other stories concerning this kind of instrument (*pūtātara* or *pū moana*). For example:

> A southern informant has spoken of the onomatopoeic sound of the *pūtātara* as 'oaro – oaro – oaro', giving rise to the placename Oaro, on the east coast of the South Island [nearby Kaikōura is famous for its whale watching], where the shell

> trumpet was said to have been used to call whales. It should be noted however that *kaumātua* and *tohunga* Bill Solomon of Kaikōura had not heard this story, so it might be apocryphal. (Nunns and Thomas 2014, 94)

I heard a similar story recently, however, when attending a *taonga pūoro* workshop connected with the opening of an exhibition at the Otago Museum called Ngā Hau Ngākau – so perhaps the above story was not apocryphal after all. Robin Slow, who created the paintings for this exhibition, spoke about walking with Brian Flintoff, Richard Nunns, Hirini Melbourne, and local *mana whenua* along Onetahua (Farewell spit) – a site renowned for whale strandings. The locals wanted them to play to the whale trails, and so Hirini played *pūtātara* (conch trumpet). Five days later, three sperm whales stranded and died – an event deemed by local Māori to have been a direct result of his call. For Māori, "[b]eached whales are respected as gifts from Tangaroa, the god of the sea – a *taonga* and literal body of resources that should be used from tip to tail" (Lythberg and Ngata 2022, 246–47) – and that was indeed the fate of these particular whales. Hirini grieved their death, his grief mirroring that of the character Kahu in *The Whale Rider* when she learns about whaling (Ihimaera 2003, 52, 59–60).

In *The Whale Rider* story, Ihimaera (39) describes how the first Kahutia Te Rangi (subsequently called Paikea) brought from Hawaiki life-giving forces in the form of spears. One of these instructed humankind in how to speak with creatures of the ocean, "so that all could live in helpful partnership. They taught *oneness*." The ability to speak with whales (or to 'interlock', using Ihimaera's (49) term is not just about communication but *communion*. In *Whale Rider*, Ihimaera indicates that this 'oneness' can result from communication in the form of human speech; human vocalisation (descriptions of Kahu making a mewling sound; or making eerie sounds in her throat and lamenting sighs; Ihimaera 2003, 63, 112, 120); as well as the voices of musical instruments. It is particularly noted as an ability of people like Paikea who, "[i]n various versions of his story … is described as a whale (*he tohorā*), and as being matrilineally descended from whales. His transformation chant, *Te karakia whakakau a Paikea*, describes the mutuality of his breath and that of his whale ancestors – "Ko tō manawa, ko tōku manawa"; "Tis your breath, and mine also" (Lythberg and Ngata 2022, 248–249). This refers to the *hongi* (the pressing of noses in greeting) described in the above excerpt from *Whale Rider*, which involves the exchange of *ha* (the breath of life) and *wairua* (spirit). While there are special individuals descended from whales and whale-riders who have the ability to 'interlock' (or act as interlocuter) with whales, this kinship also extends to all humankind – as indicated in the lines, during the first mass stranding event in *The Whale Rider*: "the word went down the line of helpers. *Talk to the whales. They understand. They understand*" (Ihimaera, 2003, 109).

According to Māori creation narratives, humans are kin with all beings; moreover, as the last beings to be created, we are responsible for nurturing and looking after our *tuakana* (older relatives). At the heart of *The Whale Rider* is the idea of balance and complementarity, which is a core philosophy in Māori culture. Ihimaera's book emphasises the need to recognise our shared kinship, our oneness, with whales (and, by extension, all of creation); and to re-forge relationships based on love, care, respect and gratitude. We must be *kaitiaki* (guardians) of Tangaroa's progeny. If we are greedy and arrogant (like the men with chainsaws ruthlessly butchering stranded live whales for their prized jawbones), then we commit a *hara* (a transgression of *tapu*) that must be redressed. One of the key messages of *The Whale Rider* is: when all of creation is in balance, all life thrives: "*The ocean was alive with noises: dolphin chatter, krill hiss, squid thresh, shark swirl, shrimp click, and, ever present, the strong swelling chords of the sea's constant rise and fall*" (Ihimaera 2003, 142). When there is a state of imbalance, "*listen how empty our sea has become* [italics in original]" (58).

The spiritual importance of whalesong in Māori instrumental music

The whistle-/flute-like sounds of whalesong are important to Māori in a spiritual sense, and to explain why we need to understand the meanings attributed to whistling sounds in general. As ethnologist Augustus Hamilton (1972) states:

> Maori [sic] rarely or never whistled, and generally objected to Europeans whistling when in their company. Maoris [sic] of the older generation always felt uncomfortable at hearing Europeans, boys and men, whistling. Possibly this aversion to the sound was connected with the idea that a demon or *atua* manifested his presence by a sound somewhat resembling a long drawn whistle. (388)

Kaipara people associated whistling sounds with *atua*, while *whiowhio* was a term that meant "to speak in the whistling voice used by a priest when the medium of a deity; ventriloquial" (Hamilton 1972, 405; see also Komene 2009, 34, 110–111). Communications from *ngā atua* are sometimes described as half whistling, half whispering; or as a low-pitched whistle (Ngata 2014, 84–85).

As *taonga pūoro* scholar Jo'el Komene (2009) notes, Māori always listened out for such sounds in the world around them:

> People listened carefully to the many sounds in everyday life to discern the presence of *atua*, which might be conveyed through forest noises, the calls of birds, sounds that result from changes in the weather, including sounds created by the blowing of the wind, especially whistling sounds. (110)

Other such natural sounds include *kurī* (dogs) howling, kauri snails angling their shells into the wind, marine molluscs being frightened and suddenly withdrawing into their shells, and the captivating melodies of whalesong. Whalesong, therefore, is associated with the voices of deities and ancestral spirits; as Ihimaera (2013, 18) describes, it is "a song with eternity in it". Those musical instruments (such as flutes and conch shell trumpets) whose voices resemble whalesong play an important role in relaying communications between living people and supernatural beings such as *ngā atua* and the spirits of *tupuna* (ancestors).

In *The Whale Rider*, the character Koro Apirana makes a speech about the both/and versus either/or nature of the supernatural and natural worlds (*he ira atua* and *he ira tangata*). That essential unity, and the way these worlds interpenetrate (see Irwin 1984, 10, 17), is represented metaphorically by the umbilical cord (*pito*) (Ihimaera 2003, 121). Applying this metaphor to *taonga pūoro*, the voices of these instruments are the *pito* that links or bridges the entire span of creation, from Te Kore (the realm of unlimited potentiality) to te Ao mārama (the world of light).

Readers can find a video online, showing myself playing a nguru (a type of flute) made from a sperm whale tooth (niho parāoa), so you can hear the kinds of sounds that have been described [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OWFiPpNZSU].

The spiritual significance of using whale bone and teeth to make instruments

A variety of instruments are made from whale skeletal remains, which are invested with the *mana* (efficacy) and *iho* (essence) of Tangaroa. Sperm whale teeth (*niho parāoa* or *rei*) are highly prized, and associated with strength, endurance and chiefly qualities (Lythberg and Ngata 2022, 265). *Nguru* (a type of flute) made from whale teeth (especially the curved front teeth) are often worn around the neck by high-ranking people. Whalebone (*parāoa*) – particularly rib bone – is used to make a variety of instruments, including: flutes (*kōauau*), swung and spun instruments (*porotiti, pūrerehua*), the mouthpieces of a type of trumpet (*pūkaea-iwi*), and percussion instruments (*pakuru,* strikers for *pahu* or *pakuru*, *tōkere*). *Kauwae upokohue* (pilot whale jawbones) are used as *tumutumu*, and slivers of jawbone to make a type of mouth percussion instrument called *rōria*.

Māori regard skeletal remains as particularly sacred, and as being important for giving strength and form – both physically and spiritually. An instrument made from the bone of a deceased individual provides a spiritual as well as a physical link to them, resulting in increased mental and physical strength and endurance for those that hear its voice and thus playing an important role in healing (Best 1925, 141, 143; Komene 2009, 103–105; Nunns and Thomas 2014, 58–60). From a Māori perspective, being is about belonging, hence the use of the word *iwi* for both 'tribe' and 'bones'

(*kōiwi*), and the importance placed on *whakapapa* as a way to understand the universe and the place of Māori within it.[1] Whalebones and teeth are thought of in this way, as Maia Nuku, Māori curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Arts (cited in Lythberg and Ngata 2022, 266) explains: "the bones of one were also deemed to be the bones of all … work[ing] metonymically to index the entire lineage and all its members."

Historian Billie Lythberg and educator Wayne Ngata (2022, 245) state:

> In Aotearoa-New Zealand, whales are revered by Māori in *whakapapa* relationships of kinship and affinity and through carvings, songs and oratory that instantiate these ties. These connections span deep ancestral time to the present, with many *iwi* (tribal groups) celebrating descent from whales and whale-riding ancestors who brought people to Aotearoa from the Māori homeland of Hawaiki

– ancestors such as Paikea, who is central to Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*. Instruments made from whale bone are one way of instantiating such *whakapapa* relationships. Those kinship relationships are affirmed in *whakairo* (carvings) that decorate musical instruments, such as examples carved by master carver Brian Flintoff (2004, 121) that feature instruments carved in the shape of whales, but where the pectoral fins depict human hands – including fingers and fingernails.

Conclusion

I hope you've enjoyed this contribution, and perhaps gleaned a deeper understanding into the spiritual and material importance of *taonga pūoro* in connection to whales as presented in Ihimaera's book *The Whale Rider*. While not everyone can 'interlock' with whales – that being a privilege granted to few (such as the fictional Kahu in Ihimaera's novel) – those who can are able to communicate and commune with their whale kin. For those who have not been so blessed, whales can listen to and understand us at least, and instruments and other *taonga* made from their physical remains provide a means of spiritually connecting with them as well as with their ancestors. The gifts afforded by whales who sacrifice their lives when they strand are counterbalanced by the grief we experience at their passing and the duty we have to care for and protect their species.

1 See Whakapapa. n.d. Online: https://www.otago.ac.nz/maori/world/tikanga/whakapapa/.

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