

Kupe and the Giant Wheke (Octopus)

Kupe was a rangatira, a great fisherman who lived in Hawaiiki. Surrounding Kupe's settlement were the traditional fishing grounds where Kupe and his tribe caught their fish. When the moon and tides were right, the fishermen headed out to sea and always returned with waka laden with fish of all colours and sizes- gifts from Tangaroa and Hinemoana which the whole tribe celebrated. The people gathered at the shoreline to greet them when they returned, to divide the catch so that each whanau had an even share. One morning when the fishermen lowered their lines at one of their favourite fishing grounds, they didn't get the expected tug on their lines. Instead, when they pulled their lines from the water, their bait had vanished. This continued through the morning and into the day, and not one fisherman caught a single fish. This had never happened before. Many of the tribe were upset when they returned. They secretly accused the fishermen of disrespecting Tangaroa and therefore causing their misfortune.

Once Kupe had considered the happenings of the day, a hui was called. The whole island gathered around the evening fire to discuss the fate of their village. Kupe firstly spoke of his respect for the sea, of Tangaroa and Hinemoana, and how they had sustained their village since time began. Kupe also spoke of the fishermen who had generously fed and looked after their tribe since he was a young man, and how respected they were within the whanau. He committed himself to finding out exactly what had happened. Early the next morning, Kupe and the fishermen lowered their lines at their favourite fishing grounds only to have their bait taken as had happened the day before. Kupe tried reciting a karakia that would draw fish to his line, but when he pulled it from the depths of the ocean, his bait was gone. Kupe noticed a slimy substance covering his hook and recognised it as belonging to an octopus. He knew it would be useless to continue fishing and ordered the others to pull their lines from the water. Once more they headed back to shore empty handed.

That evening Kupe set out to the other side of the island where a chief called Muturangi resided. Kupe knew that Muturangi had a pet octopus renowned for its huge size and influence in the sea world. Kupe described to Muturangi what had been happening at their fishing grounds, stating that it was the work of an octopus. He asked if perhaps Muturangi's pet could possibly know who was responsible. Muturangi looked at Kupe and laughed, "I don't tell my pet when to eat or what to eat. If it chooses to eat your bait or your fish for that matter, then that's what it does." Muturangi asked Kupe to leave. "Then I will slay your pet, Te Wheke o Muturangi, and it will never trouble my people again," Kupe stated as he left. "Unless it kills you first," was Muturangi's reply.

Kupe gathered his people and began to build a canoe, a large ocean going canoe, which he called Matahorua. When the vessel was complete, Kupe stocked it with supplies, readying it for a lengthy sea journey. Kupe's wife, Hine-te-Aparangi, their whanau, and many warriors and fishermen from the tribe boarded the new canoe and set out on their journey. Te Wheke o Muturangi's tentacles broke the surface of the water first searching blindly for food, each one of its arms much longer than Kupe's waka. A tentacle with huge suckers gripped onto the side of their waka, threatening to capsize it. Kupe grasped his mere and slashed at the tentacle, cutting a huge hunk from its flesh. The wheke thrashed its arms in agony but Kupe struck out again. Te Wheke o Muturangi's enormous head emerged from the sea looming over the waka, as the warriors continued to attack the huge tentacle. Kupe pointed his mere at the wheke and chanted a spell, ensuring it would never again be able to dive to the depths of the ocean and hide.

Te Wheke o Muturangi was forced to flee across the surface of the sea. Kupe ordered his warriors into their sailing positions and the chase was on. The chase continued for weeks, across the vast Pacific Ocean. Kupe was running out of supplies and still Te Wheke o Muturangi managed to keep a distance between them. Finally, one morning Hine-te-Aparangi saw a long cloud in the distance, a sign that land was near. Hine-te-Aparangi named the land, Aotearoa, land of the long white cloud.

Hine-te-Aparangi, Kupe, and the whole whānau were amazed by the beauty of the new land they discovered. The stories they'd known as children of Maui fishing a great land from the sea were true.

Kupe landed his waka on the east coast of Aotearoa. His people explored the new land and gathered much needed supplies. Kupe took his dog, Tauaru, across land to the Hokianga harbour. They left footprints in the soft clay while walking around the shoreline. Over many years the footprints turned to stone and have remained there to this day.

When Kupe returned, the pursuit resumed down the east coast of the North Island to Rangiwhakaoma (Castle Point), where Te Wheke o Muturangi sought refuge in a cave known as Te Ana o te Wheke o Muturangi.

Kupe realised the wheke was trapped, but because it was late in the evening, he decided to wait for dawn before launching an attack. During the night Te Wheke o Muturangi slipped, undetected, through the black water of the night and back out into the open sea.

Kupe continued the chase, down the east coast until arriving at a huge open harbour, Te Whanganui-ā-Tara (Wellington Harbour). Kupe's whānau rested at the head of the fish, as Kupe and his warriors continued on the wheke's trail.

Kupe sailed into Te Moana o Raukawa (Cook Strait), a turbulent and potentially dangerous stretch of water between the North Island and South Island of Aotearoa. Knowing the turbulent waters would be an advantage to the wheke, Kupe chased it into the calmer waters of Totaranui (Queen Charlotte and Tory Sounds). Because of the many waterways and islands around those areas the pursuit continued for many days.

Kupe finally caught Te Wheke o Muturangi at the entrance to Te Moana o Raukawa from Totaranui, and the great sea battle began. The wheke lashed out with its huge tentacles at Kupe's canoe. Kupe and his warriors manoeuvred their canoe to avoid being overturned. Bracing himself with his legs, Kupe struck at the tentacles with his mere, but the giant wheke fought back, smashing another of its arms into the side of the canoe causing a huge gaping hole in the hull. Kupe threw a bundle of gourds overboard which the wheke mistook for a person and attacked. Kupe then jumped from his canoe onto the back of the giant wheke and struck a fatal blow to its head. Te Wheke o Muturangi was finally defeated.

The eyes of Te Wheke o Muturangi were placed on a rock nearby, which to this day is called Ngā Whatu (The Brothers).

During Kupes long absence, Hine-te-Aparangi and her whanau were worried that Kupe had been slain by Te Wheke o Muturangi and would never return. Matiu and Makaro, his two mokopuna, slashed their breasts with shells as a mark of mourning. Their blood stained the rocks where they stood. These rocks are near the entrance to Te Whanganui-ā-Tara harbour, and are now named Pariwhero (Red Rocks).

Kupe did return safely to his whanau at Te Whanganui-ā-Tara after successfully defeating Te Wheke o Muturangi. They all travelled further up the west coast of Te Ika a Maui (The North Island) naming many places as they went, finally settling in the Hokianga to replenish their supplies and to ready themselves for their return to Hawaiiki.

Te Wheke o Muturangi, which was thought of as a bad omen, had lead them to a new land they now called Aotearoa, a land Kupe knew future generations would call home.

This is the story of Kupe and the Giant Wheke.