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# Te whānau tamariki – pregnancy and birth

by Hope Tupara

Māori women traditionally gave birth in specially built shelters. There were rituals to observe and [karakia](#) to recite. Mothers sang oriori to their babies – lullabies which told [whakapapa](#), legends and tribal history.

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## Birth in Māori tradition

Hineteiwaiwa, along with Hinauri, Hina and Rona, Hine-kōtea, Hine-kōrito, Hine-mākehu and Hine-korako, are ancestral names in Māori cosmology, associated with the procreation of life and the rhythms of life. They are commonly linked to pregnancy and birth, as well as navigation, fishing practices, the cultivation of food, weaving and other traditional activities. All of these are guided by, and explained by, the phases of the moon, the configuration of the stars, and seasonal weather patterns. Hineteiwaiwa is perhaps the most widely known [atua](#).

## The first birth

The original parents were Ranginui, the sky father, and Papatūānuku, the Earth mother. Papatūānuku gave birth to children, who remained in the dark because their parents were locked in an embrace. The children, led by Tāne, separated their parents, so they could live in the light.

## Hineahuone

In tradition, the first woman was not born, but made. Her name – Hineahuone – means earth-formed maiden. Tāne, god of the forest, formed her and then breathed life into her. Hineahuone married Tāne and they had a daughter, Hinetītama. Tāne later married Hinetītama and recited a long [karakia](#) to cause her to conceive. Her child was Hine-rau-whārangi and she was the first to undergo the tohi ceremony. When Hinetītama found that Tāne was her father, she fled to the underworld. She became Hine-nui-te-pō, the goddess of death.

## Tiki

Tiki is also associated with the first woman. In some traditions, he was a brother of Tāne and Tūmatauenga, the god of war; in other versions he was formed by them.

Tiki was an atua. He had a wife, Marikoriko (twilight), who was formed out of earth by the Arohirohi, the shimmering heat of the sun, or an echo. Their first-born daughter was Kauatata.

## Māui

In one tribal tradition the ancestor Māui was either miscarried ([whānau](#) karukaru) or stillborn (kahu). He was wrapped up in the tikitiki (top knot) of his mother Taranga, hence his full name, Māui-tikitiki-a-Taranga. Taranga cast him into the sea, but he washed ashore and was tended to by his grandfather. People believed stillborn children became malignant spirits (atua kahukahu).

## Childbirth

One ancestor, Tura, laid down the practices for childbirth. He landed on an island inhabited by strangers and married a woman named Turakihau, who became pregnant. When it was time to give birth Turakihau's relatives arrived with gifts of matā (obsidian), and began to weep for her. Tura asked why, his wife explained that her child would be cut out with the obsidian, and she would die, because that was how her people gave birth. Tura built a house for her to give birth in, with two posts inside. The first (pou-tama-wahine) was for her to hold on to and the second (pou-tama-tāne) was for her to lean against. Once the child was born Tura cut the umbilical cord and offered the [whenua](#) (placenta) to the atua (god) Mua. The child was named Tauriaahua and underwent the tohi rite.

## Whakapapa of the natural world

Whakapapa linked Māori ancestors to the natural world. Rongo-māui stole kūmara from his brother Whānui (the star Vega). He impregnated his wife Pani, who gave birth to kūmara. Though she cooked the kūmara to remove its [tapu](#), she was discovered. She fled in shame to the underworld with her daughter Hinemataiti, who was the ancestor of kiore (rats).

## Whakapapa

Whakapapa (genealogy) forms the foundation of Māori philosophy. Birth is the instrument by which [whakapapa](#) is created. All things are related through whakapapa – the gods, natural phenomena, humans and all other living things. Whakapapa provides a way of understanding the universe and its past, present and future.

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## Traditional practices – pregnancy and birth

The word [whānau](#) means both to give birth and family, and [hapū](#) means both pregnant and clan, illustrating the significance of pregnancy and childbirth to Māori. The proverb 'Mate i te tamaiti he aurukōwhao; mate i te wahine he takerehāia' (the death of a child may be overcome, but the death of a woman is a calamity) shows the importance of producing children. When a family line was in danger of disappearing through lack of children it was called a [whare](#) ngaro (lost house).

## Conception

When a woman had difficulty conceiving she would go to a [tohunga](#), who would carry out the rite of whakatō tamariki. When Paratene and Katerina Ngata feared that they could not have children, they went to a tohunga and underwent a ritual. Afterwards Katerina became pregnant and gave birth to Āpirana, who became a Ngāti Porou politician.

In one tradition the hei tiki talisman was said to help with conception. The first tiki was given to Hineteiwaiwa by Tāne for this purpose. There were trees and stones known as tipua which were said to help people conceive. Examples include a supernatural rock, Uenukutuwhatu, at Kāwhia, and a tree, Te Hunahuna-a-pō, at Galatea, in the Bay of Plenty.

A woman who was not pregnant would stand over the [whenua](#) (placenta) of a new-born child to help her conceive. If a woman wanted a particular sex she would stand over the whenua of a male or female child. Some women chose to whāngai (adopt) children, which sometimes caused them to conceive.

## Contraception

For natural contraception supplejack and flax root were used, or toetoe and poroporo leaves.

The whakapā rite, involving [karakia](#) by a tohunga, was said to be a practice to avoid pregnancy which evolved after the arrival of Europeans.

Breastfeeding was a form of contraception – babies were breastfed for a long period, and women typically could not conceive another child until babies were weaned. Whakapapa show that women had fewer children before Western infant feeding practices were introduced.

## Cravings

During pregnancy a woman might begin to kumama (crave) or wainamu (dislike) certain foods. It was believed that these likes or dislikes came from the child.

## Place of birth

Due to the [tapu](#) of childbirth women did not give birth in ordinary dwellings. Confinement took place in the open, or in purpose-built shelters, called whare kōhanga by some tribes. During birth, mothers would usually squat and hold on to

### An error of judgement

‘Huatea’ is a Te Tai Rāwhiti (East Coast) word used specifically by Ngāi Tāmanuhiri to refer to childlessness. Their tipuna Hinenui said, ‘Taku hē ki te huatea, nō muri kē ko Te Huauri.’ (The blame fell on me for childlessness, yet now I have a child.) Hinenui was married to Tawakewhakatō, but to her distress she did not become pregnant. She left him for Tāmanuhiri, and soon became pregnant. One meaning of huatea is ‘without substance’, and the word is also used to describe other situations.

handposts. The house used for birth, together with mats and other objects used, would be burned after labour.

## Labour

If childbirth was prolonged then a tohunga could recite a karakia to bring about the birth. Hineteiwaiwa had a difficult birth – the karakia to help her was ‘Ko te tuku o Hineteiwaiwa’. This karakia was also said over Rangiuru, wife of Whakaue, on Mokoia Island in Lake Rotorua, when she was giving birth to Tūtānekai.

When a baby was born by breech presentation (whānau whakawae) it was considered the child would be smart and coordinated. A good athlete was described as a whānau waewae.

The umbilical cord was tied with flax fibre or thin stems of makahakaha, a creeper which grows on sandy beaches. The cut end would be smeared with oil (titoki).

## Types of birth

There were three types of birth: rauru nui (large umbilical cord), an uncomplicated birth; rauru whiria (tangled umbilical cord), a long and difficult birth; and rauru maruaitu (umbilical cord of disaster) a difficult birth that led to a stillborn child.

## Mana and tapu

Mana and tapu were inherited at birth. In one story, Uenuku, a high chief, was angered that his son Ruatapu (a product of a slave wife) used the comb of his son Kahutiaterangi (the son of his high-born wife). He said to Ruatapu that he was a pōriro or tama meamea (bastard) and was conceived on a ‘moenga rau-kawakawa’ (bed of leaves), whereas with Kahutiaterangi, ‘I aitia ki runga i te takapau wharanui.’ (He was conceived on a ‘wide woven mat’ – within a lawful marriage.)

## Footnotes

- Quoted in Hugh Laracy, ‘The French connection’, New Zealand Listener, 27 February–5 March 2010, p. 24. [Back](#)

## Spare the rod

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Babies born in Tauranga in the mid-19th century could look forward to a childhood free of physical discipline. French missionary Jean-Simon Bernard wrote home in 1844 complaining, ‘The children here are completely free; the parents never do anything to them. They never beat them and do not allow anyone else to beat them.’<sup>1</sup>

## Whenua – afterbirth

The word for the placenta, ‘whenua’, is also the word for land. The umbilical cord close to a baby’s body is the pito. The part nearest the placenta is the rauru, and the central cord is the iho.

The [whenua](#) was taken after birth and buried on ancestral whenua, which linked the baby with their tribal land. This practice continues in the early 21st century among some [whānau](#). The iho was carefully disposed of in a [tapu](#) hollow tree, or at the foot of a boundary post. A famous tree where numerous iho were buried is known as Te Iho-o-Kataka, a renowned hīnau tree.

## Rites of birth

There were a number of rites performed for babies. In the tohi ceremony a child was sprinkled with water and dedicated to an [atua](#) – Tūmatauenga or Rongo in the case of a boy, and Hineteiwaiwa in the case of a girl. Following this was the ‘pure’ ceremony. Karakia and speeches were made, and then the parents and their relations had a feast. Those involved in the ceremonies underwent whakanoa, a ceremony to remove tapu.

While circumcision occurred in Polynesia, in New Zealand it was largely abandoned.

## Baby care

Mosses such as angiangi and kohukohu were used as diapers. Then a kope (type of nappy) was made for the child. Babies slept in flax sleeping baskets.

A mother would carry a baby on her back.

## Feeding

Wai ū (breast milk) and whāngai ū (breastfeeding) appear as metaphors in Māori literature and art in a range of ways, from mōteatea (traditional chants) to [whare](#) whakairo (structural carving).

Before European settlement breastfeeding was the only option for feeding babies. Breastfeeding has significant health benefits for babies, and allows a mother to develop a unique bond with her baby.

To wean a child off breastfeeding, mothers would sometimes rub their breasts with the bitter-tasting sap from the kawakawa tree.

## Baby milestone

Māori had a word for a baby who has just learnt to roll over: owhaowha. There was a saying, ‘Kia owhaowha te tamaiti, katahi ka tohia’ – once the little one can roll over, it is time for the tohi ceremony.

## Too late

Among some [iwi](#) it was traditional to blow the tātara (conch shell) at the birth of the eldest son. When the first child of Tūwharetoa chief Horonuku Te Heuheu and Tahuri Te Tuaki was born, the tātara was blown as it was believed the baby would be a boy – but the baby was a girl. When the next child was born he was named Tūreiti Te Heuheu, because he came ‘too late’ (Tūreiti) for the conch-shell blessing.

To introduce children to solids, mothers would chew taro or sweet potato and then feed it to the child. There were [karakia](#) to soothe babies who were teething.

## Oriori

Oriori were sung to babies. These differ from lullabies because they contain the [whakapapa](#), histories and legends of a newborn baby's whānau. Oriori are still composed to celebrate the imminent birth or arrival of a new baby.

If the conception of a child consummated the joining together of different tribal groups, oriori celebrated this union. Two widely sung oriori are 'Pō! Pō!' about the origin of the kūmara, composed by Enoka Te Pakaru of Te Aitanga-a-Mahaki, and 'Pine pine te kura'. composed for Te Umurangi of Ngāti Kahungunu who was descended from Te Whatuiāpiti.

## Whāngai

Whāngai is a child adoption tradition in Maori society that continues to be practised. It emphasises a child's connection to whānau and iwi, the collective from whom their identity comes. Children are raised by close relatives, openly in contact with their birth parents.

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## Baby care, 20th and 21st centuries

### Birth figures

In 2015 just over 61,000 babies were born in New Zealand. 28% were Māori. The same year the Māori fertility rate was 2.50 per woman, compared to an overall rate of 1.99. Māori women had their babies at a younger age than women of other ethnic groups. They were more likely to have a natural birth, without intervention such as a caesarean section, and less likely to have pain relief such as an epidural anaesthetic.

### SIDS

The incidence of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is particularly high for Māori babies. A lot of work has been done in Māori communities to lower the figures, alerting people to the risk factors for SIDS, and how to prevent it, for example not smoking around the baby, and not putting babies to sleep on their stomachs. There was a 25% drop in Māori SIDS in 1997. However the Māori figures were still disproportionately high in the 21st century. Between 2008 and 2012, 100 out of 162 infants who died from SIDS were Māori.

### Wahakura

A wahakura is a woven sleeping bassinet for a baby up to six months of age, based on a traditional design, which has been revived for modern use by Māori doctor David Tipene-Leach. A wahakura is made using the traditional art of raranga (weaving). Maori parents can maintain the cultural tradition of keeping their babies with them in bed, but provide a protected space for a baby. Sleeping in the same bed as young babies puts them at greater risk of SIDS.

## Medical access

In 1937 only 17% of Māori births took place in hospital, but by 1947 it was around 50%. By 1959 the proportion of Māori births occurring in hospital had risen to about 90%, and the figure continued to increase.

Hospitals were increasingly sensitive to Māori practices, such as keeping the [whenua](#), and hospital births became more popular.

There are a number of Māori midwives who work individually, or as collectives. Midwives have a national collective, Ngā Maia o Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu.

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## External links and sources

### More suggestions and sources

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