

waka kuaka

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THE CALL OF THE WAKA KUAKA: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR THE *JOURNAL OF THE POLYNESIAN SOCIETY*

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ABSTRACT: The *Journal of the Polynesian Society* has been renamed as *Waka Kuaka: The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, heralding a new direction for the journal metaphorically reimagined as the waka kuaka ‘godwit on the wing’ traversing the Pacific. These new directions are explored here within this vision of the waka kuaka as a bird that symbolises collective vision and purpose. The authors, as members of the Council of the Polynesian Society including the editor of the journal, reflect on the history of the journal and discuss what this change means going forward, finally calling on scholars in and of the Pacific to fly with us as part of this new journey.

Keywords: anthropology, ancestors, Polynesian Society, leadership, kuaka

Te kuaka mārangaranga, kotahi manu i tau ki te tāhuna: tau atu, tau rā.

The godwit flock has arisen; one bird has come to rest on the beach:
others will follow.

Our new journal name, *Waka Kuaka: The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, is inspired by the flight of the kuaka ‘godwit’. Waka kuaka refers to the kuaka on the wing or in flight. This bird circumnavigates the entire Pacific in an annual migration observed by our tīpuna ‘ancestors’ when they lived in our homelands in Hawaiki, the Pacific. The intrepid explorer Kupe is believed by iwi ‘tribes’ in the Far North of Aotearoa New Zealand to have followed

the kuaka on its journey to these islands. The oral histories and collective memories of Ngāti Awa and Ngāi Tāhuhu maintain that when they lived in ancient Hawaiki, they observed that every year, the kuaka migrated in a southerly direction and returned to the same point. In time they calculated land was to be found in the south, and canoes were furnished to follow the flight of the kuaka. During daylight hours the ancestors followed the course of their flight. At night they were guided by the kuaka's loud cries as they flew south high above the canoes.

Our early Polynesian ancestors were highly skilled voyagers using technology and science, star navigation and intimate knowledge of waves and winds. They had long deduced that predominating easterlies would always guarantee a safe return to their islands in the Pacific. The preeminent Māori anthropologist Te Rangihiroa (Sir Peter Buck) proudly stated the early ancestors of the Polynesians surpassed the voyaging achievements of the Phoenicians in the Mediterranean and the Vikings of the North Atlantic.

The extraordinary kuaka departs the tundra of Siberia and Alaska on an epic nonstop flight across the Pacific Ocean following the breeding season to reach Aotearoa in early September. It is a journey of 11,000 to 12,000 km and takes eight or nine days to travel with an average flight speed of 56 kilometres per hour. They come to feed on Aotearoa's rich fertile tidal flats, estuaries and coastal marshes teeming with marine worms, bivalves, crustaceans and terrestrial invertebrates. They begin departing on their northern migration from early March, heading for refuelling sites around the Yellow Sea before heading back to Siberia and Alaska to breed.

There are many implicit metaphors and lessons we can take from the kuaka. When about to take flight, one kuaka, the kahukura or tute, takes the initiative by flying up into the air first to assess conditions. If all is well the kahukura calls the rest of the whānau 'family' to join it in a vortex-like spiral called poringi and embark in a considered, orderly and organised fashion. As they rise to the thermal air currents, they form a V or crescent shape in order to fly in a solid group formation. The kahukura takes the lead role and responsibility for the safety of the whole flock and for flight direction and destination. The lead can change during flight according to some traditions. The kahukura remains an example of selfless leadership for the benefit of whānau and hāpori 'community'. In flight formation the kahukura, as lead, pierces the air ahead but also gets uplifting support from the rest of the formation with the combined wing effort of the group.

The flock of kuaka remind us of the importance of the collective. Working cooperatively with a plan ensures the destination will be achieved. The power of the group combined with effective leadership ensures that many obstacles can be surmounted. The kuaka speaks of determination, strength and collective intelligence.

Ka ngau ki te turikākoa te paringa o te tai, e tika te rere o te kuaka.

The spinifex (seaside grass tuft) wanders along the beach like the incoming tide, the kuaka flies direct.

This whakataukī ‘proverb’ speaks to the purposefulness of the kuaka. It is the call of *Waka Kuaka* as it traverses the Pacific Ocean to bring tangata moana ‘people of the sea’ and tangata whenua ‘people of the land’ together, our whānau of Te Moana-nui-ā-Kiwa ‘The Great Ocean of Kiwa’ (Pacific Ocean). It is a call to be purposeful and resolute in presenting our narratives, our histories, our collective memories and connections together in future publications not as the researched but as the researcher. Ranginui Walker once lamented that we have for far too long been “research fodder” (pers. comm., 1998). This sentiment has been expressed by a number of scholars (Bishop 2011; Kaa cited in King 1999: 184; Wolfgramm *et al.* 2022). Now is the hour for us, the people of the Pacific, to become “supreme navigators of history”, as Te Rangihiroa iterated (Buck 1938).

REFOCUSING THE POLYNESIAN SOCIETY

The adoption of the new name for the journal signals a moment of renewal for both the journal and the Polynesian Society. The Society has had a long and storied history as a repository of knowledge of Te Moana-nui-ā-Kiwa, having been led and patronised by important scholars and leaders of the Pacific, both of Pacific ancestry and not. The first patron of the Society was Queen Lili‘uokalani, the last Indigenous sovereign of Hawai‘i and one of three women amongst the original membership of the Society. From 1981 to her passing in 2006 the patron of the society was Dame Te Atairangikaahu, who led the Kīngitanga for over 40 years. Since 2006 the patrons of the society have been Sir Tumu Te Heuheu (Te Heuheu Tūkino VIII) and former Head of State Afioga Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta‘isi Efi in acknowledgement of the society’s place in Aotearoa and its reach into the Pacific. While this shows important leadership from influential Māori and other Pacific thinkers, this leadership has been somewhat inconsistent in terms of governance of the society. In line with this broader whakapapa ‘genealogy’ and kaupapa ‘foundational principles’ committed to holding Indigenous knowledge, the Society has moved to ensure that these aims are better reflected in the kaitiakitanga ‘stewardship’ aspect of governance and leadership structures. We are pleased to have welcomed our first editor of Pacific ancestry in the history of the journal—who is also a scholar of the Pacific—to help guide our vision for the future. Pacific membership in the Society council is the highest it has ever been; *Waka Kuaka* honours ideas theorised by Tongan scholar Epeli Hau‘ofa (1993) who envisioned the Pacific as a network of islands connecting Pacific people through shared whakapapa and histories.

In line with revitalising the journal, the Society aims to expand by engaging wider communities and emerging scholars, as well as established scholars, of the Pacific. The Council of the Polynesian Society and the family of the late Dr Bruce Biggs (Ngāti Maniapoto), who made significant contributions to the Society by serving previously as president (1979–1992) and journal editor (1962–1963; 1965–1967), continue to offer a fund in his name that supports emerging scholars in their postgraduate and doctoral research in the Pacific. Other awards include the Elsdon Best Memorial Medal for scholars with outstanding contributions to Māori knowledge and the Nayacakalou Medal recognising significant contributions to scholarship relevant to the interests of the Polynesian Society and the late Dr Rusiate Nayacakalou. The 2022 winners of these medals are featured in this issue of *Waka Kuaka*. Recent medal events have provided an opportunity to engage wider communities and recognise important contributions in these areas. In addition to awards and public events, the Society intends to grow networks and collaborations aligned with its core mission.

REVISIONING THE *JOURNAL OF THE POLYNESIAN SOCIETY*

The inaugural meeting of the Polynesian Society was held at the Colonial Museum on 8 January 1892, motivated by the desire of Pākehā ‘New Zealand European’ scholars, led by S. Percy Smith, to capture and memorialise the Indigenous people of the Pacific before their traditions, cultures and people were inevitably lost. The aim to preserve the “records of the Polynesian race” so that “many obscure points in connection with the history of the race would be cleared up and valuable matter placed on record” (Smith 1898: 137) motivated Smith and his fellow amateur scholars to pursue their “manifest duty”¹:

Time was pressing—the old men of the Polynesian race from whom their history could be obtained were fast passing away—civilisation was fast extinguishing what little remained of ancient lore—the people themselves were dying out before the incoming white man—and, to all appearances, there would soon be nothing left but regrets over lost opportunities. (p. 138)

As was widely espoused at the time, the Polynesian Society was founded on colonial convictions of racial superiority and a mission to save and preserve those fated to disappear from history due to their contact with Pākehā. The *Journal of the Polynesian Society* was the vehicle for this preservation of knowledge by, and more often *about*, Māori and Pacific peoples. This legacy has faced some criticism over the last 50 years with the wave of Indigenous Māori and wider Polynesian peoples and scholars reclaiming and reasserting our Indigenous knowledges in academic spaces.

There has been and remains a tension between the colonial foundations of the journal and its scholarly focus. This is inescapable in a space that has long expressed the priorities of non-Indigenous peoples and their presumed academic “rights” to pursue knowledge of “the other”. This is a tension evident today in many academic disciplines developed to study and understand Indigenous cultures and peoples, and the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* is no exception. In 1992 at the centenary celebration of the journal’s founding, there was both praise for the journal and critique. In a letter, an esteemed non-Indigenous academic of the Pacific asked the Society to consider broader membership on the executive and generally throughout Polynesia, alongside a suggestion that they need to make the journal “of interest to Polynesia”:

This might include adopting processes to ensure more Polynesian authorship. One hundred years ago, the first issue of *JPS* contained more material by Polynesian writers than the latest issue I received. Could we, during the next 100 years, make an effort to catch up with the world, and advance at least as far as we got 100 years ago? Perhaps we need to consider the possibility of two *Journals*—the esoteric one by and for a handful of overwhelmingly non-Polynesian academics around the globe, and a Polynesian Journal. (Crocombe 1992)

With these words 30 years ago, Crocombe demonstrates the shifts evident in academia in that period led by Indigenous academics to claim space within the academy for Indigenous knowledges and peoples not just as the researched, as was common by mid-century, but as authors and scholars engaging across disciplines and with accountability to Pacific communities. As Judith Huntsman indicates in her account of the last 25 years of the society, this was not taken well by the Council in 1992, which defended itself against such critique, claiming three of eight council members at that point were of Polynesian ancestry (Huntsman 2017). Bruce Biggs, a significant Māori scholar and linguist, proclaimed as president of the Council that ethnicity should not be a consideration and the Society should belong to all who have a scholarly interest (Biggs as cited by Benton 1993). While their defence of the Society is to be expected, it denies at a fundamental level the impact of academic imperialism and knowledge trauma that non-Pākehā academics still feel deeply in Aotearoa and throughout the Pacific (Hereniko 2000). Today we are still reckoning with this impact and the power relations embedded in knowledge production, even as we weigh the totality of contributions made to scholarly knowledge in the past.

Over the past 125 years the journal has been a place for the preservation of Indigenous Māori and Polynesian knowledges and has done well to serve this purpose. It is a significant journal in discussions of peoples,

places, histories and cultures, but while it has always been *on* the Pacific, it has not always been a place that is comfortable or attractive for scholars who are *of* the Pacific. This must change, not by undermining the stellar achievements of the Society and journal but by moving forward to a more inclusive future, embracing this tension and working through it in the aim of excellent scholarship. The renaming of the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* to *Waka Kuaka: The Journal of the Polynesian Society* signals renewal and reclamation. This reimagining will develop *Waka Kuaka* into a more inclusive space that continues to include excellent scholarship on the Pacific far and wide, as it has traditionally done, but also shifts the focus beyond this to showcase the exciting ways that Māori and Pacific scholarship continues to be rewritten and reimagined.

This is not the only way *Waka Kuaka* is being renewed and reimagined. From March 2023, the journal will be exclusively online with a vision to showcase knowledges, and knowledge development and presentation, in more dynamic ways. This will engage a wider audience by allowing contributors to envision and present their research in multiple formats. While we aim to continue our strong representation from archaeology, anthropology, linguistics and history, among other traditional disciplines, we anticipate including more submissions that address Indigenous Māori and other Pacific thought in different disciplinary and transdisciplinary areas.

Te Rangihira “likened the Polynesian Society to a canoe venturing uncharted seas” (Hughes 1992). We find ourselves once again in uncharted waters, but know it will be a journey that, like that of the kuaka, will reflect collective effort and purpose. This is a call for scholars of the Pacific, from the Pacific, and in the Pacific to see *Waka Kuaka* as a place that values their scholarly contributions, where their research can traverse the Pacific like the kuaka but also have impact on its return home.

NOTES

1. S. Percy Smith, in a circular dated 19 June 1891, proposed that the Polynesian Society and corresponding journal be founded as a “manifest duty” (Sorrenson 1992: 3, 24–25).

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