

5. TE REO O TE REPO THE LANGUAGE OF THE SWAMP

HĒMI WHAANGA (NGĀTI KAHUNGUNU, NGĀI TAHU),
TOM ROA (WAIKATO, NGĀTI MANIAPOTO)
TE PUA WĀNANGA KI TE AO – TE WHARE WĀNANGA
O WAIKATO

Introduction

The origin of repo

He oriori mō te Whakataha-ki-te-rangi

**Te reo: the origin of words for describing a wetland,
swamp, bog or marsh**

Pūrekireki Marae – Pirongia, Waikato

Considerations for developing wetland knowledge

Want to learn more?



'Ki te hiki au i tōku wae i tēnei whenua, ka moanatia i muri i a au, pūrekireki wīwī māna tātou hei hutu ake ki uta, ko Te Atua tōku piringa, ka puta ka ora.'

'If I were to lift my foot (of influence) from this land, it would be flooded (by unwelcome influences). The pūrekireki sedge grass will be a sanctuary for us from the swamps, and as God is my refuge, I will survive.'

Kīngi Tāwhiao (Waikato)

*It is 'by language that the Māori are able to know the will and mind and power of the Gods ... [It has] a life force, a power, and a living vitality. Language has a spirit and also a mauri (that gives it its unique structure and function).'*¹

The name 'repo' is a term that many of us are familiar with for describing a wetland or swamp – it is also the term that is used in the title of this wetland series: *Te Reo o Te Repo – The Voice of the Wetland*.

The language and kōrero (narratives) we use to describe our relationship with this water system has its origins in our mātai tuarangi (cosmology), whakapapa (genealogy), and understanding of te reo (language). Te reo is often described as a vehicle that carries our whakapapa, tikanga (customs), hītori (history), pūrākau (mythology), waiata (songs), karakia (prayers), mātauranga (knowledge), whakaaro (thoughts and ideas), tūmanako (hopes, dreams, and desires), and whakararu (frustrations and anger). Language constantly changes and evolves over time. We consider language as tapu (sacred) because of its connection to ngā atua (founding elements) as it was gifted to our tūpuna (ancestors) by ngā atua.

¹ Barlow, 1991: 112



Paru (mud rich in iron salts, valued mud for black dye in weaving) in the lower Waikato River, Waikato. Photo: © Swampfrog Environmental

Māori have always interacted and had a close connection with oceans and waterways, from our journey from Hawaiki (ancient homeland) to the time we transitioned from iwi moana (people of the ocean) to tangata whenua (people of the land). When our tūpuna came to Aotearoa New Zealand, they encountered a landscape of floral, faunal, and geographical diversity whose richness was matched only by its unfamiliarity. As we observed and interacted with new land- and seascapes and the various species that occupied these environments, our language and naming practices evolved. Our mātauranga of the waterways – awa (rivers and streams), roto (lakes), repo (wetlands and swamps) systems grew over time and was methodically imbedded and incorporated across our oral traditions in whakapapa, pūrākau, waiata, karakia, mōteatea (laments), whakataukī (proverbs), and interwoven into our practices and beliefs. This connection and relationship between these water systems and people in the environment are described as the principle of 'ki uta ki tai' (to the mountains to the sea).

In this chapter we talk about some of the features of our language and the various ways we describe this relationship with repo from the origin of kupu (words) and whakapapa. Also, how this mātauranga was embedded in many of the names and places scattered throughout the land- and seascape.



The native water spider (*Dolomedes* spp.) found in swamps, is well camouflaged against the autumn leaves.
Photo: © Swampfrog Environmental



At poukai, gathering mātauranga Māori about wetland birds. Ngā Tai e Rua Mārae, Tuakau, Waikato. Photo: © Swampfrog Environmental

THE ORIGIN OF REPO

There are various versions describing the origin of repo; and many of them centre around ngā atua wāhine (founding female elements) and the important role in their creation. In particular, narratives point to ngā atua wāhine such as the three depicted in the following images:





Wai-nui-atea: The Clear Mighty Waters



Para-whenua-mea: The Muddy Soil of Mother Earth

One version describes the time following the separation of *Ranginui* (Sky Father) and *Papatūānuku* (Earth Mother). When *Tāne* (God of the forests and birds) separated his father and mother he set about providing means for his mother to be protected and cared for. One of those means was the great forest of *Tāne* and repo plays an extremely important part in Te Waonui a Tāne (forest mythology). In this account, Tāne created the repo as the kidneys for *Papatūānuku*, acting as a natural cleansing mechanism for her body. These were named *Ngā Whatukuhu o Papatūānuku*, the kidneys of Earth Mother.

In terms of the whakapapa of repo there are various versions. Many of these whakapapa accounts describe the relationship between the numerous atua and various water systems. One version by Tupai Whakarongo Tarawhare – the last tohunga (expert) from the Tokitoki Whare Wānanga in Tūranganui-a-Kiwa,

Gisborne (North Island) – includes a description of the whakapapa of repo in an oriori (lullaby) he composed for Te Whakataha-ki-te-rangi (the child of Tu-rere-i-ao and Ana Taka-waerea).

In this oriori, *Wai-nui-ātea* is the tupuna of inland waters – awa, roto, repo:

- *Rangi* (Sky Father) married his second wife *Wai-nui-ātea* (Clear Mighty Waters), and their union created *Te Moana-nui a Kiwa* (Great Ocean of Kiwa).
- *Te Moana-nui a Kiwa* married *Para-whenua-mea* (Muddy Soil of Mother Earth), and their union created *Moana-nui* (Mighty Ocean), *Moana-roa* (Open Seas), and ngā repo *Tū-i-te-repo* (Oozy Swamp), *Tu-i-te-wao* (Oozy Forest Swamp), and *Tū-te-hemo-rere* (Oozy Putrid Swamp). *Rangi-tahuri* is known as the originator of whītau (harakeke fibre).

HE ORIORI MŌ TE WHAKATAHA-KI-TE-RANGI

Ka noho Wai-nui-ātea, ka noho i ā Rangi,
The Mighty Waters did abide with the Sky Father,

Putā mai ki waho rā Moana-nui a Kiwa;
And unto them was born the Great Ocean of Kiwa;

Ka maringi kei raro ko Para-whenua-mea,
Poured down here below was the Muddy Soil of Mother Earth,

Nā Moana-nui, e, nā Moana-roa, e.
Begotten, too, by the Mighty Ocean were the Open Seas.

Nā Tū-i-te-repo, nā Tū-i-te-wao,
The Oozy Swamp, the Oozy Forest Swamp,

Nā Tū-te-hemo-rere, nāna Rangi-tahuri;
Oozy Putrid Swamp begat Rangi-tahuri;

Nāna te whītau, ka roia hei kaka,
She grew the flax from which cloaks were woven,

Ka mahana i ahau.
That now keep me warm.

In an explanation to clarify some of the links contained in the oriori, Hēnare Ruru (Rangatira (chief) of Te Whānau o Taupara, Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki, Tairāwhiti – Gisborne) provided the following whakapapa of ngā atua (Fig. 1) which outlines the connection between *Rangi* and *Wainui-ātea* to the primary water bodies of *Moana-nui*, *Moana-roa*, *Moana-pōtango*, *Moana-hakere*, *Tū-i-te-repo*, *Tū-i-te-wao*, and *Tū-i-te-hemo-rere*.² This version omits *Te Moana-nui a Kiwa* and *Para-whenua-mea* but it is exactly the same as the version collected by Edward Tregar (19th Century surveyor, linguist and writer) from Wiremu Wī Pere (19th Century politician from Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki and Rongowhakaata, Tairāwhiti):³



Figure 1. A version of repo whakapapa as told by Hēnare Ruru²

In other versions, *Te Moana-nui a Kiwa* and *Para-whenua-mea* created *Moana* (Ocean) and *Wai* (Water). In this example, *Kiwa* is also described as the father of *Onepū* (sand) and *Te Parahua* (fresh alluvial deposit).

In a version from the Waikato region (North Island), *Tangaroa* (God of the oceans) had three wives:

- *Hine-i-te-huhi* – the union with Tangaroa descend repo
- *Hine-Moana* – the union with Tangaroa descend roto and awa
- *Ikatere* – the union with Tangaroa descend ika (fish)⁴

A version from Te Waipounamu (South Island) notes that *Hine-i-te-huhi* and *Hine-i-te-repo* are the personified versions of swamps. *Hine-tū-repo* one of the wives of *Māui* (Polynesian demigod), was ravished by *Tuna* or *Puhi*, personified form of the eel.⁵

Other versions credit *Hine-Moana* with creating all the species of the moana, including tuangi (cockles), kina (sea urchins), ngōiro (eels), kanakana (lamprey), kanae (mullet), tāmure (snapper), gurnard, hapuku (groper), haku (kingfish), kahawai, tarakihi and the wheke (octopus). Together with *Kiwa*, *Hine-moana* birthed *Rakahore* (Rocks), *Taumata* (Stones), and eight other children (refer to Hirini Moko Mead (Māori anthropologist)).⁶

And finally, Aroha Yates-Smith (Māori academic) notes that *Hine-o-te-repo* is a sister of *Māui* and a kaitiaki (guardian) of swampland, and *Hine-Moana* is the personified form of the ocean, daughter of *Hinerauwhārangī*, as well as the second wife of *Kiwa*.⁷

What is important to note with these few examples is the diversity of stories relating to the origins of these water systems. Each has its own kōrero and whakapapa to describe the relationship to these important waterways – awa, roto, repo.

² Ngata & Jones, 2006: 222

³ Tregar, 1898: 113

⁴ Hopkins, 2018: 658

⁵ Best, 1982: 327

⁶ Mead, 2003: 344

⁷ Yates Smith, 1998: 253

TE REO: THE ORIGIN OF WORDS FOR DESCRIBING A WETLAND, SWAMP, BOG OR MARSH

Te Reo o Te Repo (the language of the swamp) is a language that describes our intimate relationship with both land- and seascapes. Mātauranga regarding repo has been built over millennia of interactions, and this knowledge was integrated into our oral traditions, practices and beliefs, and immortalised in the names, places, and stories.



Jubille Park swamp, Hamilton, Waikato. Photo: Beverley Clarkson



Waipapa mire, Pureora, Waikato. Photo: Beverley Clarkson



Mangaiti Gully swamp, Hamilton, Waikato. Photo: Beverley Clarkson

The term 'repo' in te reo Māori has various meanings. One meaning refers to repo as a 'swamp, bog, marsh (noun)', another means 'dirt, dust (noun)'. Another description provides a clue to its origins in Polynesia. In some of the many Pacific languages the term 'repo' and its various spellings refer to 'dirt, dirty and earth' (Table 1).

Table 1. Word search for *repo 'dirt, dirty, earth'

Language	Name	Meaning
Rarotongan	Repo	Dirty, soiled, foul; dirt, muck, mud; to shit
Pukapuka	Lepo	Mud, wet taro bed
Penrhyn	Repo	Dirt, filth; soil; excrement, faeces; to be dirty; to evacuate
Tuamotu	Repo	Dirt
Rapanui	Repo/Rapo	Clay
Hawaiian	Lepo	Dirt, earth, ground; dirty, soiled

Pollex is a comparative dictionary of Polynesian languages. Ref: Greenhill, Clark, & Biggs, 2020

Another name that many of these languages have for a swampy area is the word 'huhi' or 'husi; fusi; uwi; vuci' (depending on how you spell it in the various islands) (Table 2). In many of these examples, 'huhi' is used to describe a swampy area that is used for cultivating taro (*Colocasia esculenta*), the starchy root crop with edible leaves. The word hūhi is also another name we have in te reo Māori for wetland or swamp.

Table 2. Word search for *swamp

Language	Name	Meaning
Fijian	Vuci/Levu	Swamp
Nuguria	Huhi	Swampy area where swamp taro is cultivated, taro gardens
Nukuoro	Husi	Swamp, taro bog
Pukapuka	Uwi	Taro swamp
Samoan	Tau/Fusi	Swamp, marsh; piece of swamp
Rennellese	Husi	Swamp, especially wet-land taro patch

Pollex is a comparative dictionary of Polynesian languages. Ref: Greenhill, Clark, & Biggs, 2020

We also have many other names in te reo Māori, as described in Table 3.

Table 3. General names in te reo Māori for describing a wetland, swamp, bog or marsh

Name	Description
<i>Hawai</i>	(adjective) shallow of a lagoon or swamp
<i>Hīwai</i>	(noun) open water in a swamp
<i>Hū</i>	(noun) mud, swamp, mire, quagmire
<i>Kōrepo</i>	(noun) shallow swamp
<i>Kōreporepo</i>	(adjective) swampy
<i>Kūkūwai</i>	(noun) wet, swampy land
<i>Mātā/mātātā</i>	(noun) deep swamp
<i>Mato</i>	(noun) deep swamp, deep valley
<i>Monoku</i>	(noun) wet
<i>Ngae, ngaengae, ngahengahe</i>	(noun) swamp
<i>Ngaeki</i>	(noun) swamp
<i>Oru</i>	(adjective) boggy
<i>Papawheki</i>	(adjective) firm, solid (of a swamp with a good bottom)
<i>Paru</i>	(noun) mud
<i>Pipīwai</i>	(adjective) damp, humid, swampy
<i>Po(w)haru</i>	(adjective) soft, boggy, sodden
<i>Poharu/ pōharuharu</i>	(noun) bog, mud, quagmire
<i>Pūrekireki</i>	(noun) tufts of sedge in a swamp
<i>Rawa, rarawa</i>	(noun) swamp
<i>Rei</i>	(noun) swampy ground, peat
<i>Repo</i>	(noun) swamp, bog, marsh
<i>Reporepo</i>	(noun) swamp, marsh (adjective) be swampy, marshy
<i>Roto</i>	(noun) bog, swamp
<i>Tāpokopoko</i>	(noun) bogginess, bog
<i>U(w)hi</i>	(noun) covering (applied to vegetation in a swamp, etc.)
<i>Wairepo</i>	(noun) swamp waters, bog, marsh
<i>Waro</i>	(noun) deep swamp, deep hole, pit
<i>Wharu</i>	(noun) mud, quagmire, bog, mire

There is also a group of words that describe different types of activities and states associated with wetlands and swamps (Table 4).

For example:

- Describing moving and movement: *kautū* (to wade), *po(w)haru* (to sink, be stuck), and *tapoko*; *tāpokopoko* (to sink, get bogged down; soft, boggy).
- Describing methods used to catch food in *repo*: *rami*, *rapu*, *takahi* (to catch eels in marshy places by feeling for them with the hands).
- Describing how *repo* move when you walk on them: *ngaere* (to oscillate, quake, shake, tremble (as a bog)).

Table 4. General names in te reo Māori for describing activities

Name	Description
<i>Kautū</i>	(verb) to wade
<i>Ngaere</i>	(verb) to oscillate, quake, shake, tremble (as a bog)
<i>Ngapu</i>	(verb) to oscillate or undulate, as swampy ground
<i>Po(w)haru</i>	(verb) to sink, be stuck (into mud, bog etc.)
<i>Rami</i>	(verb) to catch eels in marshy places by feeling for them with the hands
<i>Rapu</i>	(verb) to catch eels by feeling for them with the hands in marshy places
<i>Takahi</i>	(verb) to catch eels by feeling for them with the feet in marshy places
<i>Tapoko; tāpokopoko</i>	(verb) to sink (into mud, etc.), get bogged down (adjective) soft, boggy

These examples highlight the connection Māori have to our Polynesian origins, including the variety of names we have, and the different types of activities and ways of describing a wetland, swamp, bog or marsh. There are also many examples of place names, land features and *kōrero* that have a direct link to *repo*, for example, *Pūrekireki Marae* in *Pirongia* (Waikato, North Island).

PŪREKIREKI MARAE PIRONGIA, WAIKATO

Pūrekireki Marae takes its name from a tongikura by Kīngi Tāwhiao (Waikato):

'Ki te hiki au i tōku wae i tēnei whenua, ka moanatia i muri i a au, pūrekireki wīwī māna tātou hei huti ake ki uta, ko Te Atua tōku piringa, ka puta ka ora.'

'If I were to lift my foot (of influence) from this land, it would be flooded (by unwelcome influences). The pūrekireki sedge grass will be a sanctuary for us from the swamps, and as God is my refuge, I will survive.'



Marutehiakina whare tupuna, Pūrekireki Marae, Pirongia, Waikato. Photo: Supplied by Tom Roa

The pūrekireki (*Carex secta*) is a grass-like sedge that grows in swamplands. When crossing swamps you can stand on 'pūrekireki' to prevent sinking into the muds of the swamp, thanks to the 'trunk-like' mass they form at their bases from their dead and dying leaves. Ducks also use the protection offered by pūrekireki for their nests and resting places.

'Stand on the pūrekireki and you don't sink!'



Pūrekireki, *Carex secta*, at Lake Kanohirua, Te Uruwera. Photo: © Neil Fitzgerald

The Waikato region was invaded by the Colonial Forces in 1863, and by 1864 Kīngi Tāwhiao (the Māori King 1860–1894) and his people were expelled from their tribal lands and took refuge primarily with their Ngāti Maniapoto (Waikato-Waitomo region) whanaunga (family relatives). This is what became known as the King Country. With that expulsion, Kīngi Tāwhiao and Ngāti Maniapoto rangatira (chiefs) established the aukati (a boundary marking a prohibited area) – an area from Kāwhia on the West Coast, across to Cambridge via Pirongia, southward to Taupō, across to Mōkau on the West Coast back to Kāwhia. For two decades from 1864, only those who were friendly to the Kīngitanga (Māori King Movement) were permitted into this rohe (area). Surveyors and non-Māori settlers who entered the King Country uninvited were expelled, were warned of dire consequences, and some were even executed after persistent infraction. In composing this tongikura (prophetic saying Tainui dialect), Kīngi Tāwhiao was stating that if he removed his protection as Kīngi Māori from this rohe, it would be flooded by non-Māori settlers. The pūrekireki would therefore, be a sanctuary in the swamp where mana Māori motuhake (self-determination) would hold.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR DEVELOPING WETLAND KNOWLEDGE

As highlighted earlier in the chapter, Te Reo o Te Repo describes our intimate relationship with culturally important land- and seascapes. For many iwi Māori, it is becoming all the more important to regenerate and continue to use our distinctive mita (dialects) to prevent the imbedded observations, knowledge, whakapapa, and narratives from disappearing.

Some considerations when considering your journey with *Te Reo o Te Repo – The Language of the Swamp*:

1. **Kōrero with your kaumātua (elders) and key whānau (family) members about the ways your people describe waterway systems** – awa, roto and repo, as well as whenua (land). Remember that language is expressed as much in our whakairo (carving), raranga (weaving), and waiata as it is in kōrero.
2. **Learn and record your unique names for the native plant and animal species found around your repo and associated landscapes.** Many of the Māori names used for species are currently based on a generalised dialect, which means localised experiences and understanding of those species and places can be diluted or overwhelmed by the mita of other iwi (tribes).
3. **Whakataukī (proverbs) are a koha (gift) from our tūpuna to help guide us in our activities and decisions.** Considering that the modern world we live in is highly modified and very different from our tūpuna, we mustn't be afraid to create our own whakataukī based on our learning in wetland restoration, for example, to be shared with our mokopuna (descendants). These form important kete mātauranga (baskets of knowledge) that help to facilitate and enhance growth in the way we speak about, to, and with our repo.

Harakeke (NZ flax), raupō (bulrush) and pūrekireki (swamp sedge) thrive at Otauria Wetland, Hannah's Bay, Rotorua. Raupō shows typical winter dieback. Photo: Beverley Clarkson



WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Note: If you are having problems with the hyperlinks below try copying and pasting the web address into your browser search bar.

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