**ACTIVITY: Kupe and modern voyaging**

**Activity idea**

In this activity, students read a legend of Kupe. They compare this with modern-day voyaging without navigational instruments to work out what might have happened during the Polynesian migration.

By the end of this activity, students should be able to:

* explain who Kupe was and where he was touted to have travelled
* briefly describe the voyage of the Waka Tapu
* explain how and why legends such as Kupe may be based on actual events.

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**Introduction/background**

People have been on the move throughout human history. They impact the cultures and traditions of places they settle in or pass through – often long after their own lifetimes. These imprints on a region include its ethnic make-up, languages, traditions and stories. Though stories – myths and legends – may develop and change over time, they often originate from real situations and therefore may hold clues to the past.

In this activity, students explore an ancient myth – the voyaging story of Kupe – for clues about migration. These are compared to outcomes of modern research about migration – in particular, navigation without instruments – to work out possibilities about early Polynesian migration.

[The voyaging story of Kupe](#Story) that accompanies this activity is condensed from a version translated by S Percy Smith. The full version can be found at <http://pvs.kcc.hawaii.edu/ike/moolelo/kupe.html>, and other versions can also be found online.

**What you need**

* [The voyaging story of Kupe](#Story)
* Access to the articles [The Waka Tapu voyage](https://www.sciencelearn.org.nz/resources/619-the-waka-tapu-voyage) and [Navigating the Waka Tapu](https://www.sciencelearn.org.nz/resources/620-navigating-the-waka-tapu).

**What to do**

1. Read [The voyaging story of Kupe](#Story) to the class. Discuss what the story is about. This story has become a legend. Legends are often developed over time from real situations. Look for the clues that relate to a possible real situation in this story. What aspects of this story could be true? How do you know? What evidence do you have for this? Reread the story and ask students to listen very carefully thinking about possible answers to the preceding questions.
2. Divide the class into groups of about 3–4. Write these questions on a board: What aspects of this story could be true? How do you know? What evidence do you have for this? Give the groups a copy of the story and a set time to explore the questions. Depending on their reading ability, they could also have access to the website <http://pvs.kcc.hawaii.edu/ike/moolelo/kupe.html> (see notes by Smith at the end of the story). Each group writes down as many ‘clues’ from the story that reflect a plausible scenario as they can in the time given.
3. As a class, ask each group to read out one clue. Write that clue on the board. No group can repeat a clue. Keep going around the groups until all the clues are written up. Some possible clues:

* A navigator called Kupe may have existed – if not Kupe, navigators and seafarers did exist and travelled on the sea. The navigators in this story not only sailed to New Zealand but returned and passed their navigational knowledge on to others. Navigators are mentioned several times – Muturangi and Ngake were both described as great navigators.
* People knew about fishing and took their canoes out to fish.
* There may have been a famine at that time – at least it seems food was scarce. This could have been a reason to find another land.
* People seemed superstitious and seemed to rely on priests telling them what to do. This could have given them the courage to sail – believing they would be protected. The giant octopus may have been a metaphor for a fear of the sea – which Kupe overcame (shown by the killing of the octopus).
* They used canoes and a number of people (in this case 72) sailed on one canoe. This shows they had big, ocean-going canoes.
* Another navigator (Ngake) with a canoe full of people appears to have made this voyage as well.
* A new land was reached, which they named Aotearoa. That this was New Zealand can be supported by detailed descriptions of various places in New Zealand in different versions of the story of Kupe.
* Kupe named some places in New Zealand (after family members) that have been retained (at least by Māori) until today.
* There is mention of him finding pounamu (greenstone), which is only found in the South Island of New Zealand.
* There are other detailed accounts of Kupe’s reports of the good land and the food they found to people in Rarotonga (who then sailed to New Zealand in search of new lands using Kupe’s navigational instructions). One historian wrote that Polynesians were instructed to follow the sunset (SW direction) in November from Rarotonga. By doing this, they reached New Zealand.

For more clues and details, see <http://pvs.kcc.hawaii.edu/ike/moolelo/kupe.html>.

1. In groups or as a class, read the articles [The Waka Tapu voyage](https://www.sciencelearn.org.nz/resources/619-the-waka-tapu-voyage) and [Navigating the Waka Tapu](https://www.sciencelearn.org.nz/resources/620-navigating-the-waka-tapu). How did [Jack Thatcher](https://www.sciencelearn.org.nz/resources/634-jack-thatcher) prove the journey was possible? (By navigating without modern instruments and using what his ancestors could easily have used – the environment.) Identify and talk about some examples of what Jack did to measure direction, distance and speed using ancient methods.
2. Groups (or class) then discuss how the research articles may relate to the Kupe legend.

What was Jack able to do? How does that compare to what Kupe was touted to have done? Some ideas from the research articles:

* Long-distance voyaging in canoes in the Pacific is possible.
* You can travel by canoe to islands successfully and intentionally using only clues from your surroundings to navigate (Sun, Moon, stars, waves, wind, clouds, birds etc.).
* You can work out speed, distance, time, direction and destination using methods other than western techniques.
* You can know your destination, deviate from it and return to it using ancient navigational skills.
* The Polynesian people had a lot in common with Māori – as they shared stories, they recognised common ancestors, showing Māori had either come from those islands (such as Rarotonga) or passed through them at one stage.
* Many Māori can trace their origin back to canoes that left Rarotonga over 800 years ago
* Scientists believe kūmara came from the Americas (South America), indicating an ancient ocean voyage across the southern seas.

1. Ask students to imagine they are a TV reporter for TVNZ and give them this scenario:

As you sit at your desk, you find yourself slipping back through time some 800 years. You realise you’re in Tahiti and that the local chief’s name is Kupe. You spend the next few years accompanying Kupe on his seafaring voyages. Eventually, you return to Tahiti where you are transported forward into your own time (where no time has been taken up at all). Write a report suitable for a TV story or documentary (no longer than a page) giving an account of what really happened so long ago. Use your imagination but make sure it can be supported by what scientists and researchers have discovered in recent years.

1. Students could present their stories to the class or in groups.

**The voyaging story of Kupe**

Tribal narratives suggest Kupe was the first Polynesian to discover New Zealand. Kupe was a great chief and warrior of Hawaiki (Tahiti – though some sources say it was Ra’iatea). His mana extended to the islands his mother and father were from (Ra’iatea and Rarotonga respectively).

Legend has it that Kupe’s fishermen found that their bait was repeatedly taken from their hooks so that they were not able to catch anything. The matter was reported to the tohunga (priests) who blessed the lines and hooks. On the next fishing expedition, the fishermen saw that octopi were taking the bait from their lines, and they noticed the great octopus of Muturangi floating on the sea nearby. They realised that Muturangi (a great navigator) was causing the trouble.

They reported what was happening to Kupe, who confronted Muturangi and told him to restrain his octopus (his familiar or kaitiaki spirit). At that time, food was scarce, so the fishermen went out again. But again the bait was taken. The priests were unable to help, so Kupe decided to slay Muturangi. The priests suggested it would be better to kill the octopus, because even if Muturangi was slain, the octopus would still retain his power.

Kupe told Muturangi to restrain his octopus or he would kill it. Muturangi retorted he did not want the fishermen fishing in the sea and he would not stop the octopi from taking the bait.

Kupe then returned and prepared his canoe for the sea. He and his fishermen set out. They put out their lines but hauled them up quickly before the bait reached the bottom. The octopi followed them up. The fishermen began slaughtering them until a priest said that the octopus of Muturangi was inciting them to take the bait (through magic) and further slaughter would lead to the death of all small octopi.

The fishermen then tried to catch the great octopus, but it disappeared out to sea. Kupe returned to shore to collect provisions saying that he would follow the monster and kill him. Kupe took his wife and five children so that anything happening to him would happen to all of them. Altogether, there were 72 people on board the canoe.

Kupe caught up with Ngake (another great warrior and navigator) in another canoe and asked him if he had seen the octopus. Ngake directed Kupe towards the giant octopus, and both canoes followed him until they reached a new land. Kupe’s wife called it Aotearoa (long white cloud) when she saw the land for the first time. Kupe told Ngake to keep following the octopus while he stopped at what is now the North Cape.

Kupe explored the area to Hokianga. It is said his footprints and that of his dogs can still be seen today in the clay – since turned to stone. His dogs ran off into the bush to hunt, so Kupe left them behind. An incantation he gave turned them into stone. To this day, two rocks at the mouth of the Whirinaki River, Hokianga, are said to be Kupe’s dogs.

Finally, Kupe sailed to Rangi-whakaoma where he found Ngake. Ngake told him the octopus of Muturangi was in a cave giving birth to offspring. Kupe broke into the cave, but the octopus escaped. Kupe and Ngake gave chase as far as Te Kawakawa (Cape Palliser). Kupe named this place after one of his daughters.

After mending a broken sail, Kupe and Ngake continued their pursuit of the octopus. Kupe left his wife and daughters on Mana Island and headed to Te Wai Pounamu (South Island). As they drew near, the octopus came at them, and there was a fierce battle. Eventually, Kupe made a death-blow with his axe to the monster’s head. The octopus was hidden so that Muturangi would never find it and revive it.

It is said that, after this, Kupe and Ngake continued to explore the South Island to see what resources there were. While doing this, Kupe discovered the valuable pounamu (greenstone). He reached the end of the South Island and then ventured back up north. After staying some time at Hokianga, the entire party of people left to go back to Rarotonga and eventually to Hawaiki. In both places, they reported the discovery of the distant cloud-capped country.

Kupe gave a good report of a land full of food – plants, fish and birds – but had no people living in it. There had been quarrelling among the people at home, and some were keen to settle in a new country. Kupe explained to these people how to get to Aotearoa (which winds to follow) and where the best places in Aotearoa would be to live.

(Condensed from a version translated by S Percy Smith. The full version can be found at <http://pvs.kcc.hawaii.edu/ike/moolelo/kupe.html>.)



Cliff Whiting’s illustration depicts Kupe slaying Te Wheke-o-Muturangi (the octopus of Muturangi), which he pursued across the Pacific Ocean to Aotearoa.

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