

Discovering **Maori Culture**

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Whale Rider:

An Interdisciplinary Guide for Teachers



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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Prologue	6
Letter from Liam Neeson	7
<i>Journeys in Film</i> Advisory Board	8
Introducing <i>Whale Rider</i>	9
To the Teacher	11
Additional Suggestions for Assessment	15

PRE-VIEWING LESSONS:

LESSON 1: Social Studies (Geography/World History) Who Are the Maori?	17
LESSON 2: Media Literacy Viewing <i>Whale Rider</i>	33

POST-VIEWING LESSONS:

LESSON 3: Social Studies (World History)/Language Arts The World Outside, The Spirit Within	35
LESSON 4: Language Arts (Visual Literacy) Maori Roles and Relationships	47
LESSON 5: Film-Specific Cross-Cultural Understanding Insights Into Maori Culture	57
LESSON 6: General Cross-Cultural Understanding Culture and Gender	89
LESSON 7: Media Literacy Special Effects and Music: How Filmmakers Evoke Emotion in an Audience	95
LESSON 8: Science Echolocation	101
LESSON 9: Mathematics Counting the Uncountable	131
LESSON 10: Art Markings of the Maori: <i>Ta Moko</i>	141
APPENDIX: New Zealand Country Profile	153

Introducing *Whale Rider*

The award-winning feature film *Whale Rider* is a brilliant and sensitive adaptation of Witi Ihimaera's 1985 novel, depicting the challenges faced by a small rural New Zealand community as old traditions are challenged in order to keep Maori culture alive.

Witi Ihimaera wrote *Whale Rider* in a three-week period, from his New York City apartment overlooking the Hudson River. The inspiration for this story came to Ihimaera as the result of an accident in 1985, wherein a misguided whale found himself caught in the river. Watching the drama unfold from his window, Ihimaera witnessed the rescue attempts with helicopters overhead and emergency vehicles on the scene trying to avert a potential calamity. Ihimaera began to think back to his ancestral roots and to Whangara, the northeastern coastal village in New Zealand where he grew up. The famous Maori legend of Paikea tells of the first chief who was said to have been rescued and brought to the shores of New Zealand by riding on the back of a whale. According to folklore dating back over a thousand years, the Maoris are direct descendants of the legendary "whale rider."

Whale Rider reveals the struggle between Koro, the old chief of the community, and Pai, his young and determined granddaughter. The stern and very traditional grandfather tirelessly searches for his successor among the young boys of his village. Although none of the boys live up to his expectations, Koro refuses to accept that a girl, his own granddaughter, may in fact be the most capable new leader. Displaying unconditional love, courage, and wisdom far beyond her years, strong-willed Pai must gain his approval in order to fulfill her destiny.

It is no coincidence that just before Ihimaera started to write this story, his daughters asked their father why all the movies they were seeing seemed to champion boys and men as the heroes. The question of gender bias in film led Ihimaera to make the heroine of his story a girl. This story is an empowering example for girls around the world and has certainly contributed to *Whale Rider's* overwhelming popularity.

Keisha Castle-Hughes, a 12-year-old newcomer to film-acting, is dynamic and completely believable in her role as the young Maori girl. Director Niki Caro explains that she selected Castle-Hughes over thousands of other students who were auditioning for the role because of her unaffected style. Castle-Hughes was nominated for Best Actress in a Leading Role at the 76th Annual Academy Awards for her performance as Pai.

Both the director and the producers of *Whale Rider* were dedicated to representing the story as accurately as possible on film. So, when the decision of location for shooting was to be made, Whangara, the original setting of the novel, was an obvious choice. *Whale Rider* draws so much richness from the Maori culture that the actual location would have been very difficult to replicate. Hollywood-style movies are often shot on sets or locations that are "dressed" to resemble the authentic location. The natural settings, expansive beaches, traditional architecture and artifacts of Whangara provided a richness and realism that no other location could have offered. In addition this allowed the producers an opportunity to use actors from the local community to play many of the smaller roles and be on film as "extras."

Although several of the actors are relative unknowns, the crew includes some decorated members. Lisa Gerrard, winner of a Golden Globe for Best Score for the movie *Gladiator*, composed the film's score. Grant Major, the production designer, received an Oscar nomination for Best Art Direction for *Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring*.

Whale Rider has received many nominations and awards internationally for cast and crew.

For more information and a behind-the-scenes look at *Whale Rider*, visit www.whaleriderthemovie.com.

PRODUCERS: Frank Hübner, John Barnett and Tim Sanders
DIRECTOR: Niki Caro
CAST: Keisha Castle-Hughes, Rawiri Paratene, Vicky Haughton, Cliff Curtis
TER/ASSOCIATE PRODUCER: Witi Ihimaera
PRODUCTION DESIGNER: Grant Major
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: Leon Narbey
COMPOSER: Lisa Gerrard
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: New Zealand – Filmed in Whangara and Auckland
RUNNING TIME: 101 minutes



Background Note: New Zealand

PROFILE [Adapted from the U.S. Department of State at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35852.htm>]

OFFICIAL NAME: New Zealand

GEOGRAPHY

Area: 270,500 sq. km.; about the size of Colorado.

Cities: (as of June 30, 2003): Capital – Wellington (363,400). Other cities – Auckland (1,199,300), Christchurch (358,000), Hamilton (179,000).

Terrain: Highly varied, from snowcapped mountains to lowland plains.

Climate: Temperate to subtropical.

PEOPLE

Nationality: Noun – New Zealander(s).

Adjective – New Zealand.

Population: (2003): 4,010,000.

Annual growth rate (as of June 30, 2004): 1.3%.

Ethnic groups: European 75%, Maori 15%, other Polynesian 6.5%.

Religions: Anglican 15.22%, Roman Catholic 12.65%, Presbyterian 10.87%.

Languages: English, Maori.

Education: Years compulsory – ages 6-16. Attendance – 100%. Literacy – 99%.

Health (2000-2002): Infant mortality rate – 6.1/1,000. Life expectancy – males 76.3 yrs., females 81.1 yrs.

Work force (March 2004, 1.98 million): Services and government – 65%; manufacturing and construction – 25%; agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and mining – 10%.

GOVERNMENT

Type: Parliamentary.

Constitution: No formal, written constitution.

Independence: Declared a dominion in 1907.

Branches: Executive – Queen Elizabeth II (chief of state, represented by a governor general), prime minister (head of government), cabinet. Legislative – unicameral House of Representatives, commonly called parliament. Judicial – four-level system: District Courts, High Courts, the Court of Appeal, and the Supreme Court, which in 2004 replaced the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London as New Zealand's highest court of appeal. There also are specialized courts, such as employment court, family courts, youth courts, and the Maori Land Court.

Administrative subdivisions: 12 regions with directly elected councils and 74 districts (15 of which are designated as cities) with elected councils. There also are a number of community boards and special-purpose bodies with partially elected, partially appointed memberships.

Political parties: Labour, National, Progressive Coalition Party, New Zealand Green Party, New Zealand First, ACT, United Future, and several smaller parties not represented in Parliament.

Suffrage: Universal at 18.

ECONOMY

GDP (March 2004): US\$76.42 billion.

Real annual GDP growth rate (March 2004): 3.6%.

Per capita income (2002): US\$12,804.

Natural resources: Timber, natural gas, iron sand, coal.

Agriculture (9.7% of GDP): Products – meat, dairy products, forestry products.

Industry (46.1% of GDP): Types – food processing, textiles, machinery, transport equipment.

Trade (2003): Exports – US\$19.02 billion: meat, dairy products, forest/wood/paper products, fish, machinery

& equipment, metals, fruit. Major markets – Australia, U.S., Japan, China.

Imports – US\$20.89 billion: vehicles, machinery & equipment, mineral fuels, petroleum, plastics, medical equipment. Major suppliers – Australia, U.S., Japan, China.

PEOPLE

Most of the 4 million New Zealanders are of British origin. About 15% claim descent from the indigenous Maori population, which is of Polynesian origin.

Nearly 75% of the people, including a large majority of Maori, live on the North Island. In addition, 231,800 Pacific Islanders live in New Zealand. During the late 1870s, natural increase permanently replaced immigration as the chief contributor to population growth and accounted for more than 75% of population growth in the 20th century. Nearly 85% of New Zealand's population lives in urban areas (with almost one-third in Auckland alone), where the service and manufacturing industries are growing rapidly. New Zealanders colloquially refer to themselves as “Kiwis,” after the country's native bird.

HISTORY

Archaeological evidence indicates that New Zealand was populated by fishing and hunting people of East Polynesian ancestry perhaps 1,000 years before Europeans arrived. Known to some scholars as the Moa-hunters, they may have merged with later waves of Polynesians who, according to Maori tradition, arrived between 952 and 1150. Some of the Maoris called their new homeland Aotearoa, usually translated as “land of the long white cloud.”

In 1642, Abel Tasman, a Dutch navigator, made the first recorded European sighting of New Zealand and sketched sections of the two main islands' west coasts. English Captain James Cook thoroughly explored the coastline during three South Pacific voyages beginning in 1769. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, lumbering, seal hunting, and whaling attracted a few European settlers to New Zealand. In 1840, the United Kingdom established British sovereignty through the Treaty of Waitangi, signed that year with Maori chiefs.

In the same year, selected groups from the United Kingdom began the colonization process. Expanding European settlement led to conflict with Maori, most notably in the Maori land wars of the 1860s. British and colonial forces eventually overcame determined Maori resistance. During this period, many Maori died from disease and warfare, much of it intertribal.

Constitutional government began to develop in the 1850s. In 1867, the Maori won the right to a certain number of reserved seats in parliament. During this period, the livestock industry began to expand, and the foundations of New Zealand's modern economy took shape. By the end of the 19th century, improved transportation facilities made possible a great overseas trade in wool, meat, and dairy products.

By the 1890s, parliamentary government along democratic lines was well-established, and New Zealand's social institutions assumed their present form. Women received the right to vote in national elections in 1893. The turn of the century brought sweeping social reforms that built the foundation for New Zealand's version of the welfare state.

The Maori gradually recovered from population decline and, through interaction and intermarriage with settlers and missionaries, adopted much of European culture. In recent decades, Maori have become increasingly urbanized and have become more politically active and culturally assertive.

New Zealand was declared a dominion by a royal proclamation in 1907. It achieved full internal and external autonomy by the Statute of Westminster Adoption Act in 1947, although this merely formalized a situation that had existed for many years.

GOVERNMENT

New Zealand has a parliamentary system of government closely patterned on that of the United Kingdom and is a fully independent member of the Commonwealth. It has no written constitution. Executive authority is vested in a cabinet led by the prime minister, who is the leader of the political party or coalition of parties holding the majority of seats in parliament. All cabinet ministers must be members of parliament and are collectively responsible to it.

The unicameral parliament (House of Representatives) has 120 seats, seven of which currently are reserved for Maori elected on a separate Maori roll. However, Maori also may run for, and have been elected to, non-reserved seats. Parliaments are elected for a maximum term of 3 years, although elections can be called sooner.

The judiciary consists of the Supreme Court, Court of Appeal, High Courts, and District Courts. New Zealand law has three principal sources – English common law, certain statutes of the UK Parliament

enacted before 1947, and statutes of the New Zealand Parliament. In interpreting common law, the courts have been concerned with preserving uniformity with common law as interpreted in the United Kingdom.

Local government in New Zealand has only the powers conferred upon it by parliament. The country's 12 regional councils are directly elected, set their own tax rates, and have a chairperson elected by their members. Regional council responsibilities include environmental management, regional aspects of civil defense, and transportation planning. The 74 "territorial authorities" – 15 city councils, 58 district councils in rural areas, and one county council for the Chatham Islands – are directly elected, raise local taxes at rates they themselves set, and are headed by popularly elected mayors. The territorial authorities may delegate powers to local community boards. These boards, instituted at the behest of either local citizens or territorial authorities, advocate community views but cannot levy taxes, appoint staff, or own property.

PRINCIPAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

Chief of State – Queen Elizabeth II

Governor General – Her Excellency the Honorable Dame Silvia Cartwright

Prime Minister – Helen Clark

Foreign Minister – Phil Goff

Ambassador to the United States – John Wood

Ambassador to the United Nations – Donald James MacKay

ECONOMY

New Zealand's economy has been based on a foundation of exports from its very efficient agricultural system. Leading agricultural exports include meat, dairy

products, forest products, fruit and vegetables, fish, and wool. New Zealand was a direct beneficiary of many of the reforms achieved under the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations, with agriculture in general and the dairy sector in particular enjoying many new trade opportunities. The country has substantial hydroelectric power and reserves of natural gas, although the largest gas field – supplying 84% of New Zealand’s natural gas – is expected to be tapped out by 2007. Leading manufacturing sectors are food processing, metal fabrication, and wood and paper products.

Since 1984, government subsidies, including for agriculture, were eliminated; import regulations liberalized; tariffs unilaterally slashed; exchange rates freely floated; controls on interest rates, wages, and prices removed; and marginal rates of taxation reduced. Tight monetary policy and major efforts to reduce the government budget deficit brought the inflation rate down from an annual rate of more than 18% in 1987. The restructuring and sale of government-owned enterprises in the 1990s reduced government’s role in the economy and permitted the retirement of some public debt. As a result, New Zealand is now one of the most open economies in the world.

Economic growth has remained relatively robust in recent years (i.e., around 3%), benefiting from a net gain in immigration, rising housing prices, strong consumer spending and favorable international prices for the country’s exported commodities. New Zealand did not experience the slowdown in growth seen in many other countries following the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent fall in overseas share markets. The prolonged period of good economic growth led the unemployment rate to drop from 7.8% in 1999 to a 17-year low of 4% in mid-2004. The growth has also helped to substantially narrow the current account deficit, which stood at 4.5% of GDP in 2003.

New Zealand’s economy has been helped by strong economic relations with Australia. New Zealand and Australia are partners in “Closer Economic Relations” (CER), which allows for free trade in goods and most services. Since 1990, CER has created a single market of more than 22 million people, and this has provided new opportunities for New Zealand exporters. Australia is now the destination of 21% of New Zealand’s exports, compared to 14% in 1983. Both sides also have agreed to consider extending CER to product standardization and taxation policy. New Zealand has had a free trade agreement with Singapore since 2001.

