Who Owned the Puketoi Kete?

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People: Ngāi Tahu, Waitaha, Ngāti Māmoe, weavers
Places: Te Waipounamu, Puketoi
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Tangata Whenua: An Illustrated History charts the sweep of Māori history from ancient origins through to the twenty-first century. Through narrative and images, authors Atholl Anderson, Judith Binney and Aroha Harris offer a striking overview of the past, grounded in specific localities and histories. For more information visit www.bwb.co.nz

What's the Story?
Derived from the book, Stories from Tangata Whenua are short, lively essays written by Melissa Matutina Williams and Kerryn Pollock. Perfect for the classroom, they provide students and teachers with accessible, illustrated introductions to diverse episodes in Māori history.
Sometime between 1680 and 1730, a woven flax kete was placed in a cave at Puketoi in Te Waipounamu (the South Island). Mystery surrounds the kete’s owner, but it contained pieces of evidence – clues – about the owner and the prehistoric world of southern Māori.

The kete was discovered in 1895 by a rabbiter employed at Puketoi Station in Central Otago. It was tucked into a crevice inside the cave, which was located near the Taieri River. Although the cave was fairly isolated in 1895, it appears that the area was well known, named and travelled by southern Māori.

The tribal narratives of Waitaha, Ngāti Māmoe and Ngāi Tahu, all independent yet interrelated iwi groups of Te Waipounamu through marriage, tribal alliances and warfare, record their relationships to the landscape. Their narratives emphasised its special features and acted as ‘oral maps’ that were shared between different communities and generations. Whānau groups of the Waitaha tribe were the earliest to migrate across the land. In the late sixteenth century, pressure on land and resources in the North Island were probably what pushed Ngāti Māmoe into the south, where they settled among Waitaha. Tribal feuding meant boundaries were renegotiated between these iwi and later migrants of Ngāi Tahu. It was not until the late eighteenth...
century that Ngāti Māmoe and Ngāi Tahu reached a truce, and conflict still flared occasionally after that.\(^7\)

It was during this period of renegotiation that the kete was placed in the cave at Puketoi, an area of expansive high country with resources well-known to its people, who regularly travelled inland from their primary settlements on the Otago coast to hunt, fish and gather plants for textile production.\(^8\) The clean, dry conditions of the cave’s interior made it the perfect place to store the kete for safekeeping, ensuring its contents were still in ‘excellent condition’\(^9\) in 1895. We know this because ethnologist Augustus Hamilton examined and catalogued these items soon after the kete was discovered. In 1896, he published a detailed account of its contents.\(^10\) Among them were weaving materials – prepared harakeke (flax) and tikumu (Celmisia or mountain daisy) leaves – along with dog skin, shells used for dressing flax, two pairs of pāraerae (sandals) made from tī kōuka (cabbage tree) leaves, a pūkoro kete (tutu-berry bag) made from kiekie, bird feathers, a pāua shell filled with ochre for painting, and parcels of sweet-smelling plant gum.

Describing most of the items as materials for ‘fancy work’, Hamilton surmised that the contents of the kete were ‘probably, the treasures of some industrious old Maori lady who had been up to the alpine country to collect the Celmisia tomentum for a mat for her lord and master’.\(^11\) Indicative of the times, Hamilton’s description of the kete’s owner tends to romanticise and undervalue the role, status and daily community experiences of Māori women and weavers. While it is probable that the kete belonged to a mature woman with weaving expertise, it might also have been associated with a man – one of the pairs of pāraerae, which was well-worn, would more likely have fitted a man.\(^12\) It was generally, but not always, women who undertook the work...
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of making textiles from materials they had sourced and prepared for future weaving.

Whether the weaver was local to the Puketoi area is also unclear. After the kete was found in 1895, the intricately woven pūkoro was quickly recognised by the people of nearby Puketeraki, giving credence to the assumption that the owner was local. However, the kiekie plant from which the pūkoro was made grew on the West Coast and the upper South Island, hundreds of kilometres away from the cave, and even further away in parts of the North Island. The weaver may have been part of a group passing through the area, perhaps on a trading expedition to or from the coast for more kiekie, or may have simply been travelling close to home to source local plants like tikumu.

Either way, it is likely that long-distance travel was associated with the kete. Other forms of evidence support this. It was not common for Māori to wear pāraerae, yet there were two pairs in the kete. Pāraerae were typically used by southern Māori on long journeys to protect their feet from the prickly tūmatakuru (matagouri) that grew throughout Central Otago. The weaver would have been fit from regular travel but probably had the degenerative bone diseases that were common signs of habitual physical exertion.

The contents of the kete indicate the weaver was highly knowledgeable in the sourcing and preparation of textile materials, and skilled in the often physically demanding job of preparing materials used to make a wide range of objects, from cloaks to mats and puoro (musical instruments). Preparation of the kiekie for weaving the pūkoro, for example, was long, hard work, with the leaves being stripped, boiled and dried in the sun to bleach the fibre. This breadth of knowledge and skills was often passed down through the generations, so it is probably accurate to assume the owner was a mature
woman when she left her kete in the cave, that she may have had a younger companion with her at Puketoi, and that her kete would have been very important to her.

While the person who left the kete in the cave remains unknown, an investigation of its contents provides an insight into the identity, skills and knowledge of the owner – no doubt a much-valued whānau member and mentor. Without the discovery of pieces of the past like the Puketoi kete, many of the intimate details of New Zealand’s prehistory would be completely lost.\textsuperscript{18}

In fact, the owner of the kete left a gift to the future, the ‘dynamic components ... of a unique material culture associated with the late prehistoric southern New Zealand Māori lifestyle’.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Endnotes}

1 This story reproduces and/or draws on text and themes in Atholl Anderson, Judith Binney and Aroha Harris, \textit{Tangata Whenua: An Illustrated History}, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 2014. Additional sources are referenced as such.


6 Ibid., p.23.
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7 Ibid., pp.51–57.
10 Ibid., pp.174–75.
11 Ibid., p.175.
12 Anderson et al., Tangata Whenua, p.139; White et al., ‘Māori Textiles from Puketoi Station’, p.223.
14 Anderson et al., Tangata Whenua, p.143.
16 Anderson et al., Tangata Whenua, p.38.
18 For examples of artefacts, see Anderson et al., Tangata Whenua, pp.70–98.
19 White et al., ‘Māori Textiles from Puketoi Station’, p.213.