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Reclaiming Indigenous Ecologies: Kaitiaki – Spiritual Guardians, Deities, and Beings

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Abstract

This article draws on research undertaken for the study, Kaitiakitanga: Māori experiences, expressions, and understandings. Four main themes were identified in that research: whānau, taiao, taonga tuku iho, and tino rangatiratanga. This article draws on one component from the larger study that concerned Kaitiaki—spiritual guardians and beings. The research was undertaken through a Kaupapa Māori methodology, which carried an obligation to apply Māori ways of knowing and being across all areas of the study. Participants discussed how Kaitiaki brought them messages and information that helped inform their lives and that these relationships gave them confidence, strengthened life balance, cultural connection, and spiritual awareness. The findings demonstrate how Māori express, experience and understand their Kaitiaki. These insights offer a way to record how Kaitiaki shows up in our contemporary lives and how we articulate why they show up. This research identifies that Māori continue to be in relationship with Kaitiaki despite the severe impacts of colonization on these understandings and practices. The article begins by briefly outlining how Māori discuss whakapapa relationships which is the context that binds humans to our relations in our environment. Kaitiaki are then discussed and defined. Finally, the methodology, methods, findings, and discussions are offered.

Indigenization Statement

This article is informed by Indigenous knowledges, experiences, and tribal relationships across Aotearoa New Zealand, specifically with the tangata whenua—people of the land—Māori. The author is Māori and is from the tribes of Waikato Maniapoto, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Rereahu and Tūwharetoa, and currently teaches within the Māori health education sector. The author resides as a visitor on Rangitāne lands in the Manawatū region of Aotearoa. As a Kaupapa Māori researcher, they approach the work with an understanding of their obligation to intragenerational knowledge transmission, future generations and relationships with all that exists. The values and principles that inform this work include aroha (compassion, lasting endearment, love, commitment, practice of care), manaakitanga (responsibility to care and generosity, kindness and care), tika and pono (behaving truthfully, honestly and with integrity). They confirm their ethical responsibilities to Indigenous communities and commit to ensuring that this work contributes to strengthening and transforming Māori and Indigenous communities. The article draws on Māori sources in ways that honour tino rangatiratanga (sovereignty, self-determination), mana motuhake (autonomy, self-governance) and acknowledges the diversity of theory and practice across tribal peoples.

Introduction

In her seminal work, Kawharu (1998) discussed kaitiakitanga (sustainability and environmental ethic) as a recent philosophical position that was brought into being during the development of the Resource Management Act 1991. Kaitiakitanga has since become an accepted and widely used term to discuss Māori responsibilities and obligations concerning land, water, wāhi tapu (sacred places and spaces) and treasures of consequence, or taonga. It is considered an environmental and sustainability ethic employed by Māori to protect and care for all parts of our earth and universe and has been an invaluable position with which to fight for Māori rights to self-determination and autonomy against the State, local government and big business (Forster, 2012; Henwood & Henwood, 2011; Kawharu, 1975, 1989; Mataamua & Temara, 2010; Muru-Lanning, 2016; Ruru et al., 2011; Te Aho, 2011; Waitangi Tribunal, 2011). Although kaitiakitanga is regarded as an environmental ethic and strongly connected to the physical realm, there is a much broader understanding within te ao Māori which includes the metaphysical and human dimensions (Marsden & Royal, 2003; Waitangi Tribunal, 2011).

This article draws on research undertaken for the study, Kaitiakitanga: Māori experiences, expressions, and understandings (Beverland, 2022; Lipsham, 2023). Four main themes were identified: Whānau (extended family structures), Taiao (the wider environment), Taonga Tuku Iho (bequeathed treasures) and Tino Rangatiratanga (sovereignty and autonomy). This article relates to one sub-theme identified in Taonga Tuku Iho concerning Kaitiaki—spiritual guardians, deities, and beings. Where Kaitiakitanga is the human practice of taking care of and protect all that exists and which is regarded in law as an environmental ethic (Beverland, 2022), Kaitiaki are our relations in the environment who communicate messages and information to us, and with whom we communication across many contexts. Whakapapa is briefly discussed, which sets the relational and spiritual context that binds us to

our human and non-human relations and to the cosmos. It is the discipline of these relationships that creates the caretaking and guardianship responsibilities we have to everything on earth and beyond. Kaitiaki will then be discussed and defined. Finally, the methodology, methods, findings and discussion is presented.

The Foundations of Kaitiaki

From mountains and rivers to streams, seas, land, sky, and all that is in between, Māori have whakapapa relationships with each other as well as with everything on the earth and universe (Beverland, 2022; Marsden & Henare, 1992; Marsden & Royal, 2003; Pihama et al., 2023). Simmonds (2014) states that "whakapapa, then, is not only about positionality, it is also about connectivity, history and geography" (p. 25). Penetito (2021) adds that we are all "creatures of te taiao" (creatures of our environment) (p. 37) alongside trees, plants, insects, water, creatures that fly and crawl, swim and breathe. Whakapapa is the way through which our people organise ourselves and our world, and how we understand the relationship between all things (Gloyne et al., 2020; Potter, 2020; Te Aho, 2011). Whakapapa is more than the terms often used in translations such as genealogy, family tree, lineage, or descent (Durie, 1998; Forster, 2019; Pere, 1994) as these terms are human centric and fail to recognise that everything in the world is related and relational. The relationships that Māori have with all that exists are based on belonging and connection, rather than ownership and control, and this extends to an economic foundation, tribal identity and a spiritual base (Che's Channel Te Paepae Waho, 2020; Durie, 1998; Gloyne et al., 2020; Hond et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2011; Muru-Lanning, 2016; Mutu, 2010; Potter, 2020; Te Aho, 2011).

Throughout history, Māori have cultivated and protected multiple knowledge systems. These systems span astronomy, oceanic navigation, plant medicine, timekeeping, metaphysics, and physics (Elder, 2025; Henwood & Henwood, 2011; Hutchings, 2015; Kawharu, 2002; Marsden, 2011; Marsden & Henare, 1992; Marsden & Royal, 2003;

Matamua, 2017; Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019; Murphy, 2024; Pihama et al., 2023; Tapiata, 2024; Te Aho, 2011; Waitangi Tribunal, 2011). This knowledge was precise, intentional, and sophisticated. These achievements were never solely the product of tools, skills, technique or even human beings. Life was founded on relationships and constant dialogue with the unseen realms, with deity, spirit beings, ancestors who had passed and spirit animals who guided, empowered, and co-created.

Reclaiming our relationships with Kaitiaki means reactivating this suppressed literacy including our spiritual, sensory and emotional intelligence. Although many of our oral narratives of Kaitiaki have entered literary genres and print, such as stories about Ranginui and Papatuanuku (the sky and earth) and their children, generally our narratives about Kaitiaki remain within tribes, subtribes and community. The reclaiming and sharing of Indigenous knowledges such as kaitiaki, contribute meaningfully to the survival, health, and well-being of Indigenous peoples (Jackson, 1987; Kopua et al., 2025; Pihama et al., 2023; Pihama & Lee, 2019; Pihama et al., 2020; Smith, 1999). Cultural regeneration and revitalisation of knowledges support the pursuit of sovereignty, cultural identity, self-determination, liberation, and realizing equitable and just outcomes for Indigenous peoples. A further objective of reclaiming knowledge is the redress of inequities across social, cultural, economic, political, ecological and educational spheres (Smith, 1999). Knowledges connect with what it means to be Indigenous and live in an Indigenous way and are therefore crucial to building capacity for future generations, transforming systems and structures and creating alternative pathways. Motivations are also intertwined with broader movements to decolonise and Indigenize contexts for Indigenous peoples (Smith, 1997, 2020).

Kaitiaki

Kaitiaki are discussed in the literature as animals, deities, birds and other forms such as mountains, rocks and trees (Che's Channel Te Paepae Waho, 2020; Gloyne, 2017;

Kawharu, 2000; Marsden & Henare, 1992; Roberts et al., 1995; Selby et al., 2010; Tapiata, 2024). The word Kaitiaki can be broken down to mean something or someone that takes care of. 'Kai' meaning the something or someone that carries out the action, and 'tiaki,' to take care of, guard, and protect. They are the minders of areas that are dedicated to them, such as oceans, forests, the weather, plants, the dead, the living and waterways. Kaitiaki can be as large as the sky and as small as a fly or not a physical manifestation at all. People acknowledge and communicate with Kaitiaki through practices such as dreaming, thoughtful and verbal acknowledgements, being in their presence, ritual chants, incantation, song, oratory, and art (Elder, 2025; Matamua, 2017; Murphy, 2024; Pihama et al., 2019; Smith, 2019; Tapiata, 2024). Communicating with Kaitiaki and the way that Kaitiaki communicate with us is also largely discussed via the concept of tohu.

Tohu are more commonly discussed as a sign, mark, indication or a distinguishing feature. Within a pre-colonial context, tohu were critical to safety and navigating across all contexts which included whenua (land), universe, oceans and within the home. Tohu whenua for example are landmarks associated with regions where Māori had whakapapa connections and these could be physical, like mountains. Tohu concerning people could be symbols that Rangatira (chiefly people, people with status) wore, like a feather, which would mean leadership and chiefly status. Other tohu could appear as rainbows, creatures or spirits which could be a sign of good passage, impending death, weather, illness or misfortune (Smith, 2019). Tohu is both a noun and a verb, which means it can be both a state and an action. Smith (2019) explains tohu below and makes clear that tohu strongly relate to the way in which Māori navigate, negotiate, and relate to the environment, which is critical to Kaitiaki discussions.

> An active tohu might be a particular wind that indicates a change in weather conditions… yet another example might be an element within the environment: a mountain, stone, tree, river, or natural feature… in pre-colonial narratives tohu are not only signs, marks or indicators that are in the daily environment but are also

> verbalised as kupu tohutohu (words of importance, advice)… non-verbal tohu include actions or gestures that communicate shared understandings for survival. (Smith, 2019, p. 14)

Pere (1994) extends the description of tohu by including omen and proof and that learning how to understand, read, and see tohu is an important parts of traditional Māori learning. She indicates that there are tohu that are familiar within tribes as a whole, but that there are also tohu that are familiar within whānau only. Tohu can also "manifest within the emotions, perceived by the human body and relayed by their various means to the ngākau, to be rongo (sensed)" (Smith, 2019, p. 15).

In today's contemporary explanations, Kaitiaki has become somewhat human centric and used more often in relation to people, moving from its original understandings as related to the metaphysical and physical (Beverland, 2022). Gloyne (2017) argues that being a Kaitiaki was never the role of a human being as it is in today's contemporary explanations, but that a Kaitiaki is something spiritual. Although Kaitiaki carries the prefix 'kai,' which can mean a person, deity, or spirit carrying out the action, many consider that a Kaitiaki cannot be an ordinary human being. In Roberts et al. (1995), Wihongi challenges the idea that humans act as guardians of nature, stating that "it is wrong to think that we humans act as 'Kaitiaki' of nature – that is a Pākehā view. The earth Kaitiaki's us, what we must do is respect and nurture the kaitiakitanga of Papatūānuku" (p. 14). To extend on the assertion by Roberts et al. (1995) that Kaitiaki are spiritual beings or manifested within physical forms, Marsden (2003) offers this:

> The gods placed guardian spirits over places or things to watch over the property dedicated to them. These guardian spirits (Kaitiaki) manifested themselves by appearing in the form (ariā) of animals, birds, and other natural objects as a warning against transgression, or to effect punishment for breach of tapu. (p. 173)

Further explanation is given below regarding Kaitiaki that take the form of birds, insects, lizards, fish, or other guise that could host the Kaitiaki.

> Because these gods dwelt in both animate (e.g., a person; a tree) and inanimate objects (e.g., a mountain; a river; a rock) all these things could be said to possess

> mana, and thus also to be tapu (set apart; possessing the potentiality for power and sacredness) when or if imbued with an indwelling spirit animal Kaitiaki frequently take the form of birds, insects, lizards or fish and of reptilian-like forms commonly found in rivers and the sea where they are referred to as taniwha. In this guise the host animal becomes the aria (manifestation) of the god. Others dwell within particular rocks or caves, trees, or inlets of the sea. They can also enter persons who thus become the medium or interpreter of the family Kaitiaki or guardian spirit. (Roberts et al, 2003, p. 12)

Kaitiaki dwelt in, or manifested through, animals; when this occurred, they could be known by other, more specific names, such as 'taniwha' (water spirit, water creature). There are several different elements that align with being a Kaitiaki, which includes mana (spiritual and influential power), wairua (spiritual components), mauri (energy) and tapu (sacred, prohibited, restricted) (Marsden, 2003, 2011; Marsden & Henare, 1992; Pere, 1994; Pere, 1997; Roberts et al., 1995). These elements are often acknowledged within our reciprocal communication patterns with Kaitiaki.

Recent research has highlighted that Kaitiaki are people such as Kuia or tūpuna who have passed, and beyond this, they are Māori and they are nominated by Māori collectives (Beverland, 2022). When understandings such as Kaitiaki are utilised outside of Māori contexts and when there has been no Māori involvement in its design, it is often misrepresented, permissions are not clear, and it becomes debased, diluted, transactional and detached from its original understandings (Beverland, 2022; Waitangi Tribunal, 2011). Contemporary and human-centred uses of kaitiaki typically position people as guardians, supervisors, or managers acting *on behalf of* the environment or others. Such uses often align with Western stewardship discourses that emphasise human agency, responsibility, and intervention. In contrast, Māori understandings of kaitiaki are grounded in relational ontologies in which kaitiaki, as explained, are more-than-human beings who traverse metaphysical, physical, and human realms. Within these frameworks, humans are not generally understood as *being* kaitiaki, but as existing in reciprocal relationship with kaitiaki, with responsibilities shaped by whakapapa, obligation, and respect rather than authority or

control. Making this distinction explicit is important, as human-centred interpretations risk obscuring the foundational relational and spiritual dimensions of *kaitiaki* and may unintentionally reproduce colonial assumptions about human dominance over land and living systems. When Māori thinking is removed from the context of tikanga and mātauranga Māori they become redefined, commodified, and reduced to western concepts that do not reflect the meanings that are understood within the Māori world (Williams & Victoria University of Wellington Institute of Policy Studies, 2001).

Colonisation, including Christianity, legislation, education, war, and the theft of land, has worked to displace Kaitiaki practices through active suppression of roles such as tohunga (skilled or chosen in areas of healing or specialist vocations) who were spiritual healers and matakite (special clairvoyant, visionary, prophetic leader) as described below (Department of Social Welfare, 1988; Marsden & Henare, 1992; Roberts et al., 1995; Selby et al., 2010; Waitangi Tribunal, 2011). This had a devastating effect on the way that Māori were able to carry out their obligations to the metaphysical, physical and human realms, as well as it had great bearing on the way that Māori interacted with each other, and the spiritual and physical environs.

Christianity supplanted the ancestral atua or spiritual Kaitiaki, and active suppression of the role of the tohunga (person with superior knowledge or learning in a particular area), was effected by various means including the Tohunga Suppression Act of 1907. Allied with loss of land, Māori traditional relationships with the environment were seriously impaired. Contemporary Māori have therefore had to fight not only to regain their land but also to obtain recognition of their traditional customs and values relating to the management of environmental resources. This has not been easy to achieve.

Debate regarding the validity and legitimacy of Kaitiaki has been encountered in many areas, such as infrastructure developments where tribes have raised concerns about the

destruction of sacred sites where Kaitiaki are located. In a landmark Planning Tribunal decision in 1981 (A116/81) for example, tribes clearly articulated cultural and spiritual concerns regarding Kaitiaki, but the Tribunal made comparisons to religion and narrowly interpreted that the beliefs were personal and 'purely metaphysical concerns,' thereby dismissing the legitimacy of Kaitiaki and setting a precedence for other cases for some years. Although the decision was later overturned, relegating Kaitiaki as purely metaphysical and therefore irrelevant, meant several years of legislatively enforced land theft, dislocation, and knowledge disruption. The 1907 Tohunga Suppression Act worked to displace what was regarded as the 'regressive' practices and understandings of Māori. Traditional healing practices that involved 'supernatural' elements were made illegal. Tohunga, people whose expertise lay in being able to bring balance between the human and spiritual world, were called heathens and their roles made illegal.

Today it is argued that many of us as Māori do not know Kaitiaki generally or tribal Kaitiaki and we cannot identify their messages. A reason for this is that we have lost the ability to communicate and be in relationship with them. However, time is being spent re-learning, validating, and recovering these knowledges. This is evident across the country where practitioners, community, tribes, and academics are focusing on revitalising knowledge systems and bringing them into practice (Henwood & Henwood, 2011; Kopua et al., 2025; Murphy, 2024; Tapiata, 2024). Kaitiaki are not passive symbols of culture, they are active agents in ecological, spiritual, and communal wellbeing as they guide, warn, protect, provide information, and correct.

Kaupapa Rangahau Me Ngā Tikanga: Methodology and Methods

Kaupapa Māori Theory (KMT) (Smith, 1997) provided the platform to carry out this research. Its main purpose as a methodology is to effect transformation and promote tino rangatiratanga and mana motuhake. This meant honouring, privileging, and applying Māori

ways of knowing and being across the research. The principles of KMT provided signposts to analyse and organise ideas, views, and experiences in a way that carried cultural integrity. The principles of KMT utilised were: Tino rangatiratanga, Taonga tuku iho, Ako Māori, Kia piki ake i nga raruraru o te kāinga, Whānau, Āta, Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Kaupapa. These principles are explained by the foundational writer Distinguished Professor Graham Smith (1997) and several other scholars (Beverland, 2022; Lee, 2015; Lipsham, 2012, 2016, 2020; Nepe, 1991; Pihama, 2001; Pohatu, 2004; Smith, 1999, 2015).

Twenty-four participants shared conversations in this study. All 24 participants identified as Māori and spanned a range of contexts. These contexts included: education, environment, rongoā (healing, medicines, remedies), rangatahi (youth), whānau (extended families), tauira (students), te reo (language experts), social work and mātauranga (knowledge experts). The participants' age ranged from 16 to 75 years. All participants identified their tribal areas, and these spanned the North Island of Aotearoa.

The process for identification and recruitment was approved by the Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director Massey University (Southern B), ethics number: 19/24. Through the process of whanaungatanga (already established relationships and building relationships), I identified and invited most participants. The exception was the social work supervisors and social work practitioners who were recruited through the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW).

Individual and group hui were held with Participants. The whānau (n = 7), tauira *(*n = 4*),* and kaiako *(*n = 3*)* each gathered for a group hui, while mātanga (n = 5), social work practitioners (n = 2), and social work supervisors (n = 3) all participated in one-to-one hui. All hui included tikanga processes, such as mihimihi (introductions, greeting, and engagement processes); whanaungatanga; the process of building rapport and getting to know one another; kaupapa or explaining the reason that the hui has been called in conjunction with

formal paperwork; offering kai (food); koha (gifts and contributions); and the poroaki or closing the session. Confidentiality and whakapapa-specific sensitivities were upheld through the use of pseudonyms and careful removal of any details that could identify particular Kaitiaki, whānau, or places.

A Kaupapa Māori Analysis Process was designed and constructed through the framework Āta (Beverland, 2022; Lipsham, 2012; Lipsham et al., 2024; Pohatu, 2004). In the ethics application, two companions to the research were named to assist with translation of te reo and with the analysis of kaupapa and co-construct the framework. The kaupapa Māori analysis process included being able to interpret te reo Māori, not just English. It required recognition that the information gathered holds aspects of tapu (sacredness), whakapapa and kare-ā-roto (emotions and feelings) and therefore, te tuakiritanga (the inner being) became a central consideration alongside the work of theming. The framework was used to action and guide the analysis process, to discuss issues, debate kaupapa and construct themes and ideas. In line with this process, patterns, linkages, and connections from the kōrero were discussed and finalised. Finding patterns, linkages, and connections, through a Kaupapa Māori lens meant that understanding pūrākau was critical. This concerns unlocking epistemological constructs, cultural codes, philosophical thought, and worldviews that underpin our identity as Māori (Lee, 2015).

In that vein, repetition, kaupapa, whakataukī, analogies, similarities and differences, dialect, and theory were all important. Seven positions are presented in Figure 1 that were used to thematically analyse data within the larger study, and although numbered, were not linear in use. A summary of the seven positions is noted below.

Figure 1

Kaupapa Māori Analysis

The analysis process starts with collective thinking and practice, shown by the line above the seven points: I mahi ngātahi mātou ko ngā hoa haere i ngā āhuatanga katoa e pa ana ki ngā mahi Arohaehae. This refers to the collective discussion throughout the study regarding extracts, chapter construction, theming, te reo, progression of analysis, keeping the study on track, and maintaining focus on aims and objectives.

The analysis process centres Māori identity values (Te Tuakiritanga), shown in the middle. ‘Te Tuakiritanga’ encompasses a person’s identity, personality, attributes, qualities, and kare-ā-roto (feelings and emotions). Working through the information gathered from the participants involved canvassing information that crossed psychological, physical, and spiritual experiences. Protecting and tending to the participants’ needs was important, as was considering the depth of the sharing of information.

1. Āta Mahi – Kia mōhio he aha ngā whakaaro i puta mai i ngā puna kōrero – to become familiar with kōrero. Āta Mahi began the process of analysis by looking holistically at what was being discussed by the participants and highlighting initial thoughts.
2. Āta Titiro – Āta Titiro ki ngā kōrero e hāngai ana ki ngā mātāpono o Kaupapa Māori – to identify, look for, and consider Kaupapa Māori-related themes that align with Kaupapa Māori principles named within the methodology.
3. Āta Whiriwhiri – Kimihia ngā whainga i roto ki tēnā ki tēna o ngā uiui. This step pinpointed discussions regarding the themes and the themes tentatively decided upon. Plaiting or weaving together ideas and then moving on to discuss, negotiate and decide upon them.
4. Āta Whakaingoa – Kātahi me whakaingoa ngā kaupapa kōrero, kaupapa āpiti rānei. This process closely follows the last, whereby themes are named, labelled, and coded. For example, throughout the kōrero there were several themes related to whanaungatanga, connection, wairua, disconnection, and so on. During this part of the process, there was a need to negotiate the placement of these themes and place them accordingly
5. Āta Whakaaro – Whakarōpūhia i ngā kaupapa kōrero kātahi me āta whakaaro. This was an opportunity to bring together the structure of the thesis and decide on the themes and sub-themes within the individual chapters. This āta related to chapter construction which included naming the chapters and finalising sub-theme names. Each of the sub-themes identified at this stage was carefully considered within larger concepts or philosophies to lay down a clear path toward final chapter construction.
6. Āta Wetewete – Me arohaehae ngā whakaaro i roto i ngā kōrero. Āta Wetewete is the process of carefully unravelling, releasing, and setting free, as well as writing up the themes, their relevance, considering new contributions, what relevance and

significance the kōrero had to kaitiakitanga and how the chapters related to other chapters and themes. Here, there is an opportunity to change themes and reconstruct sub-themes.

7. Āta Tuhi – Tuhia te tuhinga kairangi. Āta Tuhi is the point at which the study is typed, finalised, and prepared for review. This process of writing, review, and reflection was ongoing as themes presented themselves. A process was followed to introduce the theme, link, and then connect the theme to kaupapa.

Ngā Hua: Findings

This research highlighted Kaitiaki as being tūpuna (ancestors who have passed), atua (deity or higher beings), animals, birds, and spiritual guides and guardians. The study showed that Māori continue to understand Kaitiaki similar to traditional ways and that whānau (extended families), hapū (sub-tribes) and iwi (tribes) intergenerational knowledge transmission underpins their understanding. Participants shared that Kaitiaki is strongly connected to protection, guidance, connection, safety wellness, care, and healing, as well as described tohu as being central to the ways that Kaitiaki communicate with them.

Feelings and emotions were talked about during the interviews, and this was identified as central to experiencing, understanding and expressions of these relationships. Kaitiaki relationships were explained as healing and comforting, as a way to cross into the spiritual dimension and engage in relationships that were normal and accepted. During the interviews, I also observed the transforming of mood, including anxiety, when discussing the Kaitiaki. Kaitiaki conversations and experiences seemed to nourish the mind and body, provide grounding, helped to clarify issues, and helped with stress and burnout. Participants' own tribal understandings of Kaitiaki remained important and relevant, aligning with the literature.

Kaitiaki in Their Varying Forms

Manu (Birds) as Kaitiaki

Participants described birds as some of their most significant Kaitiaki, emphasising that birds are deeply embedded in Māori spiritual, cultural and everyday practices. Many birds were discussed during the study in the form of whakataukī (proverbial sayings), waiata (song), and pūrākau (narratives), demonstrating the birds' longstanding presence as guides, messengers, and spiritual beings. They also highlighted how many birds are represented in practices and art forms such as whakairo (carving), raranga (weaving), toi (art forms) and pōwhiri (ceremony), showing that birds are not only symbolic but materially and ritually woven into the Māori world. Traditional cloaks, for instance, incorporated feathers from different birds, each carrying distinct significance, for example kākā feathers signaled chiefly status. One participant described their Kaitiaki as the kāhu in our discussions and clearly identified their Kaitiaki within the hapū and iwi context of Ngāti Kāhu, "My hapū is Ngāti Kāhu named after the kāhu and so I see that as being my Kaitiaki in that world, in that environmental world."

The participant describes the kāhu as their Kaitiaki in a spiritual and cultural way. In our conversation they said that if the kāhu was observed during travel, that this provided a sense of safety and an indication that the trip will be a good one. The participant explained a particularly tough client case they were working on, and during this time their overall wairua was being affected. At that time, the kāhu made more appearances than usual, which seemed to indicate that the Kaitiaki had an awareness or consciousness about the participant's spiritual and psychological energy and the safety she needed to process her work. Kaitiaki showed up as a mechanism to support spiritual heaviness associated with different stresses.

> I have noticed Kāhu more ... I will see a kāhu swoop down in front of me when I am driving, and I know I am driving too fast, and I have to slow down. Ten years ago, I would have thought, oh that's a nice bird ... but actually now I know that it is something more ... I think I have a whole lot of tohu that have been given to me along that way and I haven't necessarily seen them for what they are, or I haven't trusted in them.

This Participant identifies their Kaitiaki as providing safety and protection and understands the kāhu as being intimately connected to them now, although that has not always been the case. Both participants' descriptions regarding the kāhu show a personal, cultural, tribal and spiritual connection. They both described their Kaitiaki as responsible for balance, connection, whakapapa relationship, protection, safety and providing messages.

The bird named in the following examples is the Ruru, a native owl that is often associated with death for Māori because of its connection to darkness, as it is nocturnal, as well as to wisdom. In some tribal areas, if a Ruru appears during the day, this is understood as a tohu that must be thought about and understood. One participant shared, "In my whānau the ruru was sighted before the death of my great grandmother, in the daytime, sitting on her fence. This was the first tohu that there may be impending death of someone we all knew." Another participant said, "There is a spiritual dimension there and you don't determine yourself as a Kaitiaki but something else is Kaitiaki of you ... mine is a ruru."

The participants are describing experiences that highlight how Māori ways of knowing are relational, spiritual and embodied. Their kōrero shows three different points, firstly that their experiences affirm Māori worldviews showing the embedded belief that the metaphysical, physical, and human realms are interconnected. This locates Kaitiaki as active and not passive symbols as previously mentioned. These accounts reflect Māori ontology where relationships in the spiritual dimension are constant, reciprocal, and alive. The Ruru is a relative who bears messages and understands their relations' needs. Secondly, this connects to the broader assertion that humans have obligations to continue to commune with Kaitiaki and have an awareness of these relationships. Finally, these accounts show that Māori spiritual literacy is a complex mix of sensory, emotional, embodied and inherited understandings and experiences. Feelings, emotions, and intuitive knowing are central to these understandings. The Ruru appearance, the atmosphere of death, the inner responses and

the sense of being cared for is an intelligence that sits at the heart of Māori epistemologies and cosmologies.

Birds are described by the participants as integral to ceremonial practices associated with Kaitiaki. In this context, the act of eating Kererū is not an act of taking from Tāne, a Kaitiaki responsible for many domains, including forests. Rather, it is understood as an act of honouring Tāne and the birds themselves, who are considered children of Tāne and embody his protective authority within the forest. As one participant explained, "Eating the kererū was a way that they would honour ... it wasn't taking from Tāne … Tāne is Kaitiaki for Tūhoe, that is our Kaitiaki." This reflects a worldview in which human engagement with the natural world is grounded in reciprocal obligation of acknowledgement and respect. This knowledge and practice remain important to tribes such as Tūhoe. Comparable practices exist across other Māori tribes. For example, when gathering food from Tangaroa (the ocean), acknowledgement is offered through prayer, incantation, or acknowledgements. In this way, Māori are required to seek permission and offer acknowledgements before entering the domains of Atua (deity, Gods) or Kaitiaki. These practices embody the relational ethic of whakapapa and recognise the interdependence between people and the non-human world. As illustrated by this participant "In Ngā Rauru, manu are our Kaitiaki. We have different Kaitiaki."

Many participants illustrated that Kaitiaki can be shaped by distinct histories, landscapes, pūrākau, tribal, and whakapapa relationships. While many Māori recognise birds, animals, atua or tūpuna as Kaitiaki, each tribal group maintains its own specific connections to particular beings who protect, guide and communicate with them. Each tribe honours Kaitiaki that dwell within their lands, waters, forests, and genealogical lines. These diverse Kaitiaki can be contextual and embedded in specific ecologies and stories.

Tūpuna (Ancestors) Who Have Passed as Kaitiaki

Moemoeā, or visions/dreaming, are understood by Māori as an important medium through which tūpuna may appear with messages, offering insight into the spiritual dimension and serving as a way of learning and receiving information. (Elder, 2025; Murphy, 2024; Pihama et al., 2023; Tapiata, 2024). The tūpuna discussed by the participants, are relatives who have passed on, but who return in spirit form to provide affirmation, send messages, and provide protection and guidance by way of appearing in different ways and forms. Tūpuna visits seem to be idiosyncratic, personalised to the individual, in ways where the individual can mostly identify and understand the tohu. Participants expressed their understandings in ways that affirmed their identity, traditional narratives and practices. For example, one participant said, "Kuia returning in spiritual form… my kuia… she's here with me all the time in my mahi and corrects me and tells me things… I'm mindful of when I'm working with people, the worst thing I could ever do is something that would shame my kuia." This participant reflects on their deeply held belief that tūpuna return after passing away to continue to guide, protect, and communicate with the living, often appearing in forms that are recognisable and meaningful, such as a Kuia (Grandmother or elderly woman). This includes returning in dreams, sensations, or spiritual presence to offer correction, affirmation, or direction. The Kuia here function as a Kaitiaki whose role extends beyond death and remains grounded in whakapapa. The participant's awareness illustrates what they describe as their moral and ethical responsibility to act with dignity and respect in all areas of their life, including their work. The quote demonstrates how guidance, accountability, and care continue to flow from tūpuna to descendants, shaping wellbeing, identity, and practice. It affirms Māori understandings that spiritual beings remain active and maintain whakapapa continuity.

In the following example, the Ruru (bird) represents either the father or kuia. Tohu are being relayed, through the Ruru, to the participant offering guidance and support. This

practice depends on the person being open to receiving and interacting with the tohu, rather than treating them as passive signs. As the participant explained, “Every now and then a Ruru will call, and I get up and open the window and talk. It's either my dad or my kuia and I say, it's okay I hear what you're saying, it's okay. So, I get up and do something when the Ruru calls.” The participant further described physically sensing their presence, stating,

> I always get it here on my shoulders… when my mother was alive, she always used to say to me, your kuia is on your back, what have you been doing and I go what, and she goes, your kui is sitting on your shoulders, what are you up to?

The messages above, similar to the last quotes, are communication with tūpuna after death, and in the first example the Kuia or Dad have returned manifested as the Ruru who acts as the intermediary. These participants agree with the previous in terms of the Kaitiaki offering grounding, clarity and support, especially when it is needed. The action by the first participant is both emotional and physical. It required the participant to be open to receiving the tohu and to engage in relational dialogue. The second quote demonstrates that the Kaitiaki is felt through the body, consistent with Māori understandings of kare-ā-roto (emotional experiences and points at which you feel). The wider research revealed that these spiritual experiences can be felt through sensations, emotions and intuition. The following participant normalises the spiritual communication, rather than talk about it as exceptional. It is discussed as being part of interacting with whakapapa and a part of everyday life. “I love connecting with our kuia who have opened themselves, who are matakite. If you have that insight, I'm a bit māngere when it comes to some of that I've been told, but I know, I think I will stay on this side.”The final quote here shows the enduring spiritual presence of Kuia who, as matakite, possess the clarity and capacity to engage with what lies beyond the human realm. This affirms the role of matakite as having heightened intuition and foresight to mediate between realms. Although the participant indicates they are not always confident to act on information, these experiences reinforce that the metaphysical and physical realms are

integral to the transmission and practice of the relationships with Kaitiaki. This theme overall shows the ongoing spiritual and protective roles tūpuna play in the lives of the living.

Atua (Gods/Deity) Interchangeably Identified as Kaitiaki

The term Atua is often described as God or deity and is generally used in religion to translate the word God, but for many Māori this understanding is flawed and is dismissed as wrong because as Māori understandings of Atua are in stark contrast to religious beliefs. The following quotes show that Māori have several different Atua, which affirms a broader understanding of the term 'God' and that it is often used interchangeably with the term Kaitiaki. The participants below discussed atua through whakapapa and the beginning of the earth. The first says:

> Io Matua Te Kore made Ranginui and Papatūānuku, who are Kaitiaki of the Taiao. They in their eternal embrace of love, made all of the Atua, they are Kaitiaki themselves of certain parts of everything. So, the forest, the trees, the sea, the earthquakes, the wind. Everything. They are Kaitiaki of that.

The second participant follows with, "now you go to a doctor, whereas before you went to Hinemoa and Tangaroa, they are Kaitiaki, they are also atua."

These two participants said that atua have responsibilities and obligations over several different domains which are named as the forest, trees, the sea, earthquakes, and the wind. In the second quote, the participants describe how the environment used to be the way that people healed themselves. The word atua is being used interchangeably with the term Kaitiaki, showing its duality. Papatūānuku (the earth) and Ranginui (the sky) are named as Kaitiaki too, and their domain is the entire environment (taiao). Another participant added:

> I think there are all those things within the taiao that are Kaitiaki… When we were growing up if you weren't well, if you had any kind of hakihaki or you just didn't feel good, we would be sent down the beach. It was always the easiest thing, go to the beach, get in the water. The moana has always been the healer for us, but it has also been a food basket, so it is kai on multiple levels. It is kai rongoā, it's kai, it's Kaitiaki, it is all those things.

The above participants relate Kaitiaki to physical and spiritual health. They specifically name hakihaki (sores) as a particular area that could be healed by ocean water. Kaitiaki is seen as both a conceptual and applied practice drawn from a traditional knowledge base and which is still regarded today. The quotes add to the belief that the water provides many healing properties which are described as kai rongoā (treatments, solutions and remedies) and kai (food for sustenance and health) where the ocean provides physical and spiritual care, wellness qualities and properties, and nurtures us as humans.

Participants went on to talk about how, as Māori, we build relationships with the Atua or Kaitiaki, and the acknowledgements that are part of the processes. One participant said:

> That is not our realm. We can't breathe under that water. If something happens to us – that's it, we are over. So, we ask for permission to go in. The same with Tangaroa, you can't barge in. The same with visiting the forest, me tuku mihi, me tuku karakia ki a Tāne Mahuta. For the volcanologist, me mihi ki a Ruaumoko. All the different realms. Even if you fly, you might have a talk to Ranginui and Tāwhirimātea.

And another, "In my karakia I always acknowledge Papatūānuku, Ranginui and ngā whanau atua." Several other Kaitiaki or atua are named above including, Tāne Mahuta, Ruaumoko, Ranginui and Tāwhirimātea. Practices related to being in relationship with the atua are described including 'tuku mihi' and 'tuku karakia' which are both ways in which you offer acknowledgement, and which involve rituals steeped in traditional knowledge and practices. These two practices involve asking for permission, acknowledgement of the Atua and the environment, and keeping protection and safety at the forefront of all the interactions with the atua. Moving into the realms of Atua and Kaitiaki is considered in many contexts to hold sacredness. Tikanga is an important precursor to being safe spiritually, mentally, and physically. This assertion is further confirmed by the next participant who offered this:

> So Rongo to me is the atua of ease, peace, calm, also of uncultivated kai. Rongomātāne, Rongo-marae-roa, has that āhua and is Kaitiaki of that space… So, through that āhuatanga, Rongo then seeps down into all aspects of what it is that maintains people, whānau, animals, everything, land, ease, peace, and calm in its simplicity.

Rongo is described here as an atua, but whose name is extended depending on their different āhua or attributes. Ease, peace, and calm and identified here which can be attributed to consciousness, psychological, spiritual, and physical wellness. Rongomātāne is utilised when discussing kūmara and uncultivated kai, whereas Rongo, on its own is generally known to represent peace and calm and when in practice with humans, rongo also represents senses or sensory practices. This is explained by the participants as seeping down into all aspects of what it is that maintains people.

Often in today's contexts, patriarchy and imperialism have all but wiped out the role of women in place of stories attributed to men in positions of power, status and authority. The following participant highlights the amount of wahine (women) we have and alludes to the tight seven, which refers to the male figures who are most often discussed in the literature. "So, we have thousands of atua wahine. We've got the tight seven of course, but there's so many others within their different areas of influence." And lastly, this participant discussed two important female deity related to rain and mist:

> Rangi and Papa being far apart, hence the rain, and hence Hinepūkohurangi, and when you see the mist, you cry because that is Papatūānuku mourning for her partner. Looking at it from a Māori perspective … it just helps you understand that you have got to look after in order for them to look after you.

Hinepūkohurangi is named here as an atua wahine who is responsible for mist which is understood by us as Māori as the mourning and tears of Papatūānuku for her partner Ranginui. The Rangatahi participant discusses reciprocal relationships, the ability for us as people to think about our own obligations and responsibilities to atua.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Kaitiaki and our relationships with them are not abstract but active. The study described sensory, physical, spatial, emotional, and spiritual encounters that affirmed the continued presence of deity, birds, and ancestors in our daily

lives. These experiences and relationships challenge Western dichotomies that separate the physical and metaphysical environments and ask for validation of the realms that Māori consider are interconnected, relational, and interdependent. Across the findings, participants' ability to receive tohu, engage in thinking and dialogue and interpret that, reinforces Māori knowledge systems as being reclaimed, worked upon, with some information remaining intact, dynamic and that we are attuned to what is in existence. These insights emphasise however, the need for further research and to continue to highlight and legitimize Māori understandings, particularly as they can provide distinctive ways of navigating contemporary challenges.

The Centrality of Whakapapa

A prominent theme was relationships. Participants understood the presence of Kaitiaki as relational, environmental, spiritual, and whakapapa based. This enabled many participants to identify with their Kaitiaki, and this strengthened their ability to receive tohu and then to communicate in return. This confirms existing literature that positions whakapapa as the base and the structural framework of all that exists and how we as Māori understand our place in the world. Further, it confirms that whānau, hapū and iwi understandings are still being recounted.

Kaitiaki Understandings Contribute to Wellbeing

Across the stories shared, what was emphasised was that the encounters contributed directly to emotional, physical, spiritual, and psychological wellbeing. The presence of Kaitiaki provided grounding, reassurance, and protection—particularly during times of stress, grief, vulnerability, needing connection, and decision-making. Participants described experiences of comfort, clarity, and renewed strength when interacting with Kaitiaki. This

agrees with the literature in that it is crucial to engage with ancestral, environmental and spiritual realms. Such insights challenge clinical, biomedical, and secular models.

Embodied Experiences

A significant contribution of this study is that it demonstrates how Māori experience Kaitiaki through sensations, such as weight on the shoulders, dreaming, sudden intuitive clarity, emotional shifts, or changes in their wairua (spiritual energy) when Kaitiaki are present. These responses align with the concept of ngā kare-ā-roto and reveal the sophistication of sensory and emotional experiences. These findings suggest that the relationship with Kaitiaki is felt in the body and then interpreted through a cultural lens to find meaning.

Revitalising and Reclaiming Ecologies

The research raises important considerations about the future of Kaitiaki knowledge. Although in the last two years, Māori women have contributed strongly to this space (Elder, 2025; Kopua et al., 2025; Murphy, 2024; Tapiata, 2024), participants in the larger study expressed concerned that shifts toward secular worldviews have weakened communal awareness of Kaitiaki. For example, some participants noted a growing tendency to prioritise biomedical approaches to healing, such as going to a doctor, over Māori healing methods and relationships with Kaitiaki. The stories shared here show knowing and, in many cases, revitalisation. Participants are actively re-learning how to recognise tohu, how to trust their intuition, and how to articulate their experiences—but this must be done with validation and without fear of dismissal. This will then open pathways for knowledge exchange and revitalisation. There is a need to incorporate these understandings into educational, cultural, and community contexts to support the legitimacy of this knowledge, in contrast to historical

moments where Kaitiaki were dismissed as irrational, illegitimate, merely metaphysical, and not scientifically proven.

Concluding Statement

This study demonstrates that relationships with Kaitiaki are active, embodied, and relational, expressed through sensory, emotional, spiritual, and whakapapa-based encounters that affirm the continued presence of various Kaitiaki in everyday life. These experiences challenge Western separations of the physical and metaphysical and highlight the resilience, dynamism, and ongoing reclamation of Māori knowledge systems. Collectively, the findings show that Kaitiaki relationships contribute directly to Māori wellbeing and offer culturally grounded ways of navigating contemporary challenges.

The contribution of this research to Indigenous social development lies in its articulation of how Kaitiaki understandings strengthen identity, relationality, and holistic wellbeing, while revitalising ecologies of knowledge that have long been marginalised. Future research could explore how these understandings can be further embedded within education, policy, legislation, and community practice, and how intergenerational knowledge exchange might continue to support the legitimacy and flourishing of Kaitiaki relationships.

The findings hold important implications for social development practice, particularly for practitioners working with whānau Māori, hapū, and communities. For social development practitioners, this suggests the importance of recognising and making space for Indigenous relational frameworks that extend beyond human-centred models of care and intervention. Practice approaches that acknowledge spiritual, metaphysical, and more-than-human relationships can better align with Māori ways of knowing and being, supporting forms of engagement that are governed by whakapapa, reciprocity, and respect rather than assessment, management, or control. Such alignment may contribute to more culturally sustaining and ethically grounded forms of practice, particularly in contexts where

wellbeing is closely bound to land, water, ancestry, and place. At a policy level, these findings challenge dominant social development frameworks that prioritise individualised, human-centric measures of wellbeing and progress—both human and environmental. The continued presence of kaitiaki in participants' lives points to alternative ontologies of wellbeing that are relational, place-based, and the needs are more-than-human. Māori have consistently highlighted that policies that seek to engage meaningfully with Māori communities require a re-orientation that acknowledges spiritual and ecological relationships as foundational rather than peripheral. This has implications for the design and implementation of social, environmental, and community development policies, particularly where Indigenous knowledge systems are referenced but not substantively engaged. Making space for Māori understandings of kaitiaki within policy contexts requires including frameworks that recognise relational accountability, collective responsibility, and the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge systems as guiding social development futures.

Resuming or starting our relationships with Kaitiaki involves more than merely reviving historical narratives. It entails reactivating knowledge systems that are alive, dynamic, intelligent, and responsive, and renewing our trust in sensory, emotional, and spiritual literacy. This research shows that Māori continue to be in relationship with Kaitiaki, and that although these understandings and practices have been severely impacted, we have continued to reclaim and reconnect to these important ways of knowing and being—and in many ways we cannot continue as our Kaitiaki are in communication with us regardless. These insights provide nuance to just talking about who or what Kaitiaki are, which are normally present in pūrākau or narratives, it offers a way to record how Kaitiaki show up in our contemporary lives and how we articulate why they show up. This knowledge is important to build upon and transfer intergenerationally so the information can provide tools

to future generations to enrich relationships across the physical, metaphysical and human realms–with each other as well as with all that exists in the world.

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