

# Language Preservation: The Rise of Māori-Language Picture Books in Aotearoa

Lawa Iwan

**Abstract**—This paper presents an overview and analysis of Indigenous-language<sup>1</sup> picture books in Aotearoa.<sup>2</sup> The Māori, the Indigenous people of Aotearoa, underwent a long period of colonisation and experienced culture and language loss. Indigenous movements demanding human rights and revitalisation of the Māori language remained prevalent until the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Several scholars proclaim that literature in the Indigenous language is one avenue that effectively preserves language and suggest printing more than educational materials [1–3]. However, Māori attempts to increase Indigenous-language literature to safeguard their native tongues have been constrained by the limited number of language speakers and writers. Currently, Indigenous-language picture books are the primary Indigenous-language literature in Aotearoa. This paper analyses the history, authors and translators of Māori-language picture books, as well as the ethnic identity, language and subject of these books.

**Index Terms**—picture book in Māori language, Indigenous language, language preservation

## I. INTRODUCTION

This section provides a brief introduction to the historical background of Aotearoa and the rise of Māori-language books. It then details this paper's methodology.

### A. Historical Background

#### 1) Restriction of indigenous languages in Aotearoa

After the Māori people signed Te Tiriti o Waitangi<sup>4</sup>, the British Crown proclaimed colonisation of Aotearoa in 1840. Due to colonial coercion, Māori people were not allowed to speak their mother tongues, which has influenced their culture and ethnic development. The British colonial government passed the *Education Ordinance 1847* for Māori and English instruction in Mission Schools. The outcome was inefficient, and the government passed the *Education Act of 1867* for government administration of English instruction in schools. The *Native Schools Amendment Act of 1871* established village schools for solely English-language instruction. This Act initiated prohibiting the Māori language in school and replaced Māori with English in all situations. The Māori language was confined and neglected by the

national system for a long time. As a result, the Māori language's role in Aotearoa was significantly reduced [4]. Only in 1987 was te reo Māori recognised as an official language in Aotearoa, with the passing of the *Maori Language Act 1987*.

#### 2) The rise of Māori-language picture books

The aforementioned political suppressions caused Indigenous people to be alienated from their language and reshaped their perspective of their culture. However, Māori used the dominant language, English, to allege injustices and discrimination and to present their thoughts in literary works up to the 1970s. As a result, literature in the Indigenous language was relatively neglected. The majority of pre-1970 Māori-language literature is material for Kōhanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Māori, the Māori-language preschool and primary school [5].

Post 1970, scholars and Indigenous writers became concerned about the paucity of literature in Māori. However, there are financial barriers to publishing in Indigenous languages. Dennis Cahill claims that ethnic marketing to Indigenous groups in the postcolonial context is pointless due to rapid assimilation into the dominant culture. Ngulube [6] indicates that the market depends on the availability of readers willing to buy books—a demand that publishers attempt to assess and meet. Publishers seek to invest in books expected to have wide distribution. Even today, most Indigenous publishing relies on government funding or private sponsorship because Indigenous literature is a niche market.

Therefore, financial viability and returns tend to guide the publication of Indigenous-language books. As of January 2020, the prevailing Māori-language publication type is the picture book, comprising nearly half of the published Indigenous-language books in Aotearoa. Daly [7] identifies the picture book's benefit for language preservation, record keeping and, more recently, encouragement of intercultural understanding. Indigenous-language picture books thus play a fundamental role in Indigenous publishing.

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Lawa Iwan is with the University of Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand.  
E-mail: aslawa7@gmail.com (L.I.)

<sup>1</sup> 'Indigenous' is the most commonly used term in an international, transnational, or global context. Based on the University of British Columbia's Indigenous Foundations, during the 1970s, Indigenous activists formed the understandings of 'Indigenous'. Consequently, the term was frequently present in the United Nations (UN), which later formally adopted it as meaning, 'peoples of long settlement and connection to specific lands which have been adversely affected by invasions by industrial economies, displacement, and settlement of their traditional territories by others'. The term is capitalised to show high regard.

<sup>2</sup> 'Aotearoa' is the Māori name for New Zealand.

<sup>3</sup> The *Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975* (NZ) established a mechanism and platform, the Waitangi Tribunal, by which to address historical injustices perpetrated against Indigenous people of Aotearoa. In 1987, Te reo Māori was recognised as an official language via passage of the *Maori Language Act 1987* (NZ).

<sup>4</sup> Te Tiriti o Waitangi is the Māori version of the 1840 agreement between the Māori people and British Crown. However, the Māori text is not an exact translation of the English text (Treaty of Waitangi). In the English version, Māori cede the sovereignty of New Zealand to Britain; however, in the Māori version, Māori retain the right to manage their own affairs. Different understandings of the treaty have caused conflict and debate.

## II. MATERIAL AND METHOD

This study collates and analyses Māori-language picture books up to January 2020.

### A. Picture Book

This study attempted to identify all Māori-language published picture books via a search of online libraries (Auckland Libraries, Auckland War Memorial Museum Research Library and the National Library of New Zealand), bookstores (The Children's Bookshop, Huia Publishers, Scholastic New Zealand, Reed, Reo Pēpi Tāpui Ltd, Gecko Press and others) and websites (World Cat, Google and others) (up to January 2020). Picture books were identified as comprising almost half of all Māori-language publications up to January 2020, hence the analytical focus on them.

### B. Indigenous/Ethnic Literature Element: Identity, Language and Subject

This study offers an overview of Māori-language picture books, including their writers, translators, identity, language and subject. The elements of identity, language and subject are commonly used when discussing Indigenous or ethnic language literature in Ethnology.<sup>5</sup>

*Studies of Ethnic Literature* (1986) demonstrates that identity, language and subject are the core of ethnic/Indigenous writing. Aotearoa Indigenous identity retains a strong tie with its ethnic culture. For example, Makereti [8] notes that Māori literature is any writing produced by the Māori, a cultural identity. The native language is a central component of that culture. Per Mita [9], choice of language is also a choice of world. She reasons that English is not the chosen language for Māori writers and Māori literature requires resurrection, declaring, 'any true Māori literature must be written in the Māori language'. The Indigenous writer expresses the Indigenous life with an ethnic value, particularly in oral tradition and traditional myths. Indigenous authors underscore the aesthetic value and cultural critique of their ethnicities, and their writings often extend beyond the scope of their own culture [10].

## III. OVERVIEW OF MĀORI-LANGUAGE PICTURE BOOKS

Picture books comprise 48% of Māori-language publications and so have a crucial role in preserving the language. These books are primarily translations from English. There are some notable translators, such as Ngaere Roberts, Kāterina Mataira and Hirini Melbourne, who have also engaged in language revitalisation. Notable Māori writers include Manu Te Awa, Oho Kaa and Kararaina Uatuku, who have published many Māori-language picture books.

Fig. 1 shows the number of Māori-language picture books published per year from 1980 to 2020. As of January 2020, there are 1048 Māori-language books in circulation in Aotearoa. Of these, 504 (48%), almost half, are picture books. The first Māori-language picture book was *Te hope a Maui i a te raa* (*How Maui slowed the sun*), written in English by Peter Gossage and translated by Māori educator Merimeri Penfold in 1982. The book is bilingual, in Māori and English,

telling one story of the Māori mythical figure Maui. The number of Māori-language picture books grew smoothly from 1982 to 1994, with an average of three books published annually. In 1995, the number abruptly increased, as 38 picture books were published that year. The number of picture books grew progressively over the next two decades, with an average of 20 books published per year. Forty-five Māori-language picture books were published in 2020.

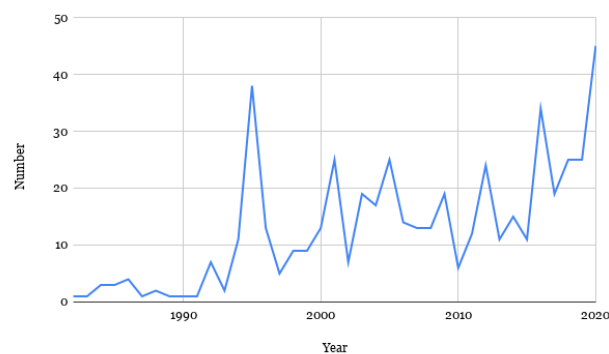


Fig. 1. Number of Māori-language picture books published per year (1980–2020).

### A. Authors Whose Books were Translated into Māori

Of the 504 Māori-language picture books, 312 (62%) were translated. The majority are translated from classic literature or published non-Māori cultural books. For example, publishers often translate Beverley Randell, Jill Eggleton and Te Aorere Riddell's works into Māori. Beverley Randell is a distinguished children's book author in Aotearoa. Dennis McEldowney comments that Randell's works are 'genius for devising [...] infant readers which used minimal vocabularies to tell actual stories' [11]. Publishers and Sophie Te Aumihī Paekau translate most of Randell's books. Jill Eggleton has devoted her career to education and literacy and authored over 800 children's books. Te Aorere Riddell is a Māori educationalist and has written several children's books. Te Aorere Riddell began his Māori language journey later in life; thus, his books are translated into Māori.

### B. Notable Translators of Picture Books

Ngaere Roberts, Kāterina Mataira and Hirini Melbourne are distinguished translators. They are Māori native speakers and have significant roles in preserving the Māori language.

Ngaere Roberts is one of the most prolific translators of children's books into Māori. She has translated work from Joy Cowley, Gavin Bishop, Ruth Paul and others [12]. At the time of writing, Roberts has translated 27 picture books into Māori. She recalls, 'Māori language was the only language spoken, not only in our family home but also with extended family members, who all lived nearby. This was the only language we heard until we attended school' [12].

Dame Kāterina Mataira (November 1932–July 2011) translated 19 picture books into Māori. Māori was her first language, and she was in the vanguard of Māori language revival and teaching for many years. In 1985, she established the first Māori-language immersion school, Kura Kaupapa Māori, at Hoani Waititi Marae, Auckland. She was a

<sup>5</sup> Ethnology is the comparative and analytical study of cultures and ethnic groups. It is also known as Cultural Anthropology in the United States and

Social Anthropology in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth countries (Welz, 2001).

foundation member of the Māori Language Commission.<sup>6</sup> She published several award-winning picture books in Māori [13].

Composer Hirini Melbourne (July 1949–January 2003) was a vital figure in the revival of the Māori language in music and translated nine picture books. He stressed the necessity of encouraging the use of Māori, otherwise, ‘language would become a living fossil [...] Māori needs to survive as a language of prestige, power, and, above all, use’ [14].

### C. *Authors Who Write Picture Books in Māori*

Manu Te Awa, Oho Kaa and Kararaina Uatuku have written many picture books in Māori. Their works focus on Māori language learning and storytelling. The picture book format is ideal for achieving both purposes.

Manu Te Awa primarily writes young reader literature, including juvenile work, fiction, picture books and children’s audiobooks [15]. At the time of writing, he has written 34 Māori-language picture books. His Māori language learning books introduce things or items for readers to familiarise themselves with the use of the language. For example, *Whakarākei Taraihikara* (2005) presents the numbers one to 10, where children dress in various costumes and ride around on tricycles. His *He Kararehe* (2009) introduces different kinds of animals, and *He Reka!* (2009) describes different kinds of vegetables. His storytelling works include *Te Wāhi Pai* (2000), which depicts a young boy who makes his little sister feel at home by showing her where things go on her first day at Kōhanga Reo, and *James Henare Te Tuhi: te kaitiaki toheroa* (2008), about a young girl’s grandfather whose work involves taking care of the toheroa and other natural resources found ashore. Manu Te Awa is also a mentor in the Te Papa Tupu writing programme, organised by Huia Publishers.

Oho Kaa has written 26 Māori-language picture books. He commenced Māori writing in juvenile work, fiction, picture books and biographies in 1997. His language learning picture books introduce specific topics. For instance, *Nō wai tēnei whare?* (1999) introduces different types of animal houses and asks which type of animal lives there, and *Ko te apu kai* (2003) describes the foods and eating customs of people around the world. His storytelling books are *Te mokomoko* (1999) and *Ngā kano huri noa* (2000); the former tells a story about a student bringing a lizard to school, and the latter is about a grasshopper embarking on a journey.

Kararaina Uatuku has written 10 picture books. She is also a translator. For example, she translated Melanie Drewery’s *Ngā rongoa a Koro* (2004) and *Ngā ō rangaranga a Pāpā* (2007). Most of her books are for Māori language learning. Her language learning books introduce animals, including the earthworm, snail, Korimako (Bellbird) and morepork. Uatuku has adapted traditional Māori mythology in her two storytelling picture books. Her *Rongomaiwahine* (2007) depicts the traditional story of Rongomaiwahine and Kahungunu—how they met and how Kahungunu wooed Rongomaiwahine and impressed her people with his food-gathering skills. Her *Hinemoa rāua ko Tūtānekai* (2007) retells the traditional love story of Hinemoa and Tūtānekai.

## IV. ANALYSIS: IDENTITY, LANGUAGE AND SUBJECT

Identity, language and subject are at the core of Indigenous language literature. Indigenous identity relies on ethnic culture and ethnic attributes [16], and Indigenous writers often write with ethnic aesthetic values and cultural judgement. Ethnic language hinges on Indigenous life, character image and the writer’s thought [10, 17]. Even if a writer uses a dominant language (e.g., English), different ethnicities will write differently because of their diverse thinking and expression, reflecting various ethnic characteristics [18]. In other words, ethnic writers (identities) create Indigenous stories (subject) in the ethnic language (language). This section evaluates Aotearoa Indigenous picture books using the three elements of identity, language and subject.

### Ethnic Identity

#### A. *Ethnic Identity*

The definition of ‘Indigenous author’ underpins the relation between ethnic language and identity. Indigenous or ethnic literature generally means Indigenous writing written by Indigenous authors—that is, authors who mostly or entirely grew up using their mother tongue in ethnic regions. They are thus influenced by their native language when they express their thoughts in a second language, such as the selection of vocabulary, grammar, semantic accuracy and so on [10].

Aotearoa publishers mainly translate picture books from acclaimed domestic or internationally renowned works. Of the 504 Māori-language picture books, 284 were written by non-Māori authors and 220 by Māori authors. In terms of picture books, the most translated non-Māori authors are Beverley Randell (38 books) and Jill Eggleton (19 books). Translated works from globally renowned authors include Eric Hill’s *Spot* series, Dr Seuss’ *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The most prolific Māori authors are Manu Te Awa (34 books), Oho Kaa (26 books) and Katarina Uatuku (10 books).

#### B. *Language*

Authors who write in ethnic language present the worldview of their ethnicity, containing ethnic values and social and historical development. Since 1985, Aotearoa publishers have translated a large amount of non-Māori picture books to encourage children to read in Māori.

Hadaway and Young [19] suggest that Māori-language picture books reflect an ethical responsibility to preserve the language. Recently, multilingual and bilingual picture books have been proliferating. The increased demand for Indigenous-language books demonstrates support for preserving and learning Indigenous languages from different ethnicities. Māori-language picture books can be seen as an instrument to maintain and revitalise the Indigenous language. Many publishers undertake large print runs of translated books with this goal in mind.

As of January 2020, only 38% of Māori-language picture books were written by Māori authors (62% were translated). The small number of Māori writers may correspond to Māori

<sup>6</sup> The Māori Language Commission is an independent New Zealand Government commission set up to promote and expand the Māori language.

Its activities include administering exams for people wanting formal certification as translators and interpreters.

language capability. The 2018 *Te Kupenga*<sup>7</sup> offers detailed statistics of Māori language proficiency among Māori people (see Table I). It surveyed people aged 15 years and over of Māori ethnicity and/or descent. For the self-rated ‘Able to speak Te reo Māori’ item, 7.5% replied ‘Very well/well’, 10.4% ‘Fairly well’, 30.6% ‘Not very well’ and 51.5% ‘No more than a few words or phrases’. For the item ‘Able to write Te reo Māori’, 9.3% replied ‘Very well/well’, 9.8% ‘Fairly well’, 26.3% ‘Not very well’ and 54.6% ‘No more than a few words or phrases’. In other words, nearly 18% of Māori can speak fluent Māori, and 19.1% can write in Māori (Stats NZ, 2018). Such a small distribution of the Māori language inevitably influences the Māori literary field. Thus, only certain Māori writers publish Māori language works, and the rest of Māori-language books are translations.

TABLE I: MĀORI LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG MĀORI PEOPLE

Measure	Able to speak Te reo Māori (%)	Able to write Te reo Māori (%)
Very well/well	7.5%	9.3%
Fairly well	10.4%	9.8%
Not very well	30.6%	26.3%
No more than a few words or phrases	51.5%	54.6%

### C. Subject

Indigenous/ethnic authors often write about Indigenous or ethnic life [16], invariable involving the cultural values and ethnic worldviews of the author’s ethnicity. Māori-language picture books cover diverse topics. Some are about Māori legend, folklore and traditional culture, while others are about a one-day trip, going out with family and friends, or introducing certain things. Lynette Evans notes that ‘what we have witnessed in recent years is a shift from traditional myths and legends focus to a mainstream one, as Māori festivals, such as Matariki/Māori New Year, culture and language have become more fully integrated into the everyday Kiwi lifestyle’ [20].

TABLE II: CATEGORIES OF MĀORI-LANGUAGE PICTURE BOOKS

Category	Percentage	Content
Māori culture	12%	Māori
Language learning	42%	Non-Māori
Storytelling	14%	Non-Māori
Translation	32%	Non-Māori

There are four categories of Māori-language picture book (see Table II): 1) Māori myth, legend, folklore and culture; 2) language learning; 3) storytelling; and 4) translation. Twelve per cent are of the ‘Māori myth, legend, folklore and culture’ category, depicting Māori mythology or stories of Māori culture. Many are adapted from Māori myths and presented in modern writing techniques to suit the picture book format. For example, Peter Gossage and Merimeri Penfold’s *Te hopu a Maui i a te raa* (*How Maui slowed the sun*) and *Te ika a Maui* (*The fish of Maui*) tell Māori traditional stories in picture book format.

The other three categories of picture book are non-Māori

content. The majority (42%) of Māori-language picture books are for ‘language learning’. These picture books depict stories in the Māori language but focus on language learning. They usually introduce a specific topic. For instance, Robert E. Fischer’s *Nga Huarahi haerenga he rereke* (1992) presents several vehicles, including a truck, tractor and bus, for preschool, junior and primary student language learning. His *Nga Ture o te huarahi* (1992) introduces basic road safety tips, including road crossing, wearing a safety belt and observing the school patrol. Those books focus on a particular topic to help children learn and understand the usage of the language. Conversely, works in the ‘storytelling’ category focus on story depiction.

Storytelling picture books are often written in Māori by Māori authors, such as Oho Kaa, Paora Tibble, Kararaina Uatuku and Karena Kelly, among others. These authors are often also engaged in translating literature into Māori.

Picture books in the ‘translation’ category are those translated from other languages (mainly English). Some are internationally acclaimed stories, such as Eric Hill’s *Spot* series and Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*. Some are well-known books in Aotearoa, such as works from Beverley Randell and Gavin Bishop.

### V. FINDINGS

Developments in Māori-language picture books reflect Indigenous publishing trends and the use of the Māori language in Aotearoa. This section presents findings based on the preceding analysis.

The declining Māori language proficiency among Māori people inevitably affects the literature. The small number of Māori writers and speakers means producing Māori-language publications is challenging, and publishing houses must weigh required investment against expected returns. Aotearoa publishing houses have thus preferred to translate into Māori various books written by Māori or non-Māori authors. Thus, picture books have become the predominant Māori-language literature in recent years.

Publishers often translate existing picture books into Māori. Translation is a relatively quick and inexpensive way to increase the number of high-profile texts with a proven sales track record. In terms of circulation, Māori edition picture books broaden the readership to non-Māori readers. For example, Kotahi Rau Pukapuka, a Māori language book project, attracts readers by translating well-known literature. Kotahi Rau Pukapuka Chief Executive Pānia Papa states that readers are more likely to choose a book if they are familiar with the storyline [21]. Regarding cultural considerations, translation preserves and develops a minority language by encouraging the speakers to learn their language, initiating the creation of new vocabulary and invigorating those domains of language that have seldom been used.

Therefore, current Māori-language picture books are often translated non-Māori writers’ works, and the content is unrelated to Māori culture. The picture book has a strong tie to educational purposes — the idea being that young readers

<sup>7</sup> *Te Kupenga* is a survey conducted by Tatauranga Aotearoa Stats NZ on Māori wellbeing. See <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/te-kupenga-2018-final-english>.

and children learn the typed language(s) while reading the book. However, Māori-language picture books, especially those with Māori content, are rare outside of Aotearoa. Further, all current Māori translators are Māori native speakers. Brian Morris, an executive director of Huia Publisher, a leading Māori publishing house, notes, ‘there is a pool of translators here in New Zealand, but the pool is shrinking’ [22]. A new generation of Māori writers and translators is needed.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Several scholars in ethnology and anthropology have indicated that language is a fundamental ethnic representation<sup>8</sup> of identity for Indigenous people [23]. Colonisation suppressed Aotearoa’s Māori for an extended period—and some would argue that it and its legacies continue to do so. Māori perceive language preservation as a vital issue in their ethnic development. In the literary field, writers employ Māori-language literature to increase the learning, practice and use of Māori.

Producing Indigenous-language publications is an important avenue for sustaining Indigenous development. Māori authors and translators have a strong sense of Māori identity and are engaged in language preservation. Consequently, Aotearoa Indigenous language literature has developed substantially since 1980, especially in the picture book format—the predominant Māori-language literature as of January 2020. However, the comparatively low number of Māori writers and speakers means most Māori-language books are published independently by Māori people and select private publishers. Publishing houses’ financial considerations have resulted in various picture books, written by Māori and non-Māori authors, being translated into Māori, with an educational purpose also in mind. Māori editions attract non-Māori readers, thereby broadening circulation. Māori-language literature, including picture books, strengthens the use of language and supports ethnic development.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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<sup>8</sup> In ethnology, language, religion and blood/linage are the three principal ethnic representations. Language is the primary and distinct attribute to identify ethnicity. Thus, it is common to notice ethnologists and

anthropologists classify an ethnicity through language. Moreover, they often treat language boundary as corresponding to the boundary of an ethnic group.