

‘Fighting to reclaim our language’: Māori names enjoy surge in popularity

More parents in New Zealand are giving their babies indigenous names to foster links with their ancestry and culture



Julia Whaipooti, Ruataupare Whiley-Whaipooti and Emma Whiley. The number of babies given Māori names in New Zealand has almost doubled in ten years.

by Eva Corlett in Wellington
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Nine-month-old Ruataupare Te Ropuhina Florence Whiley-Whaipooti will grow up speaking the names of her ancestors. She will learn she comes from a line of strong Ngāti Porou women, and that her ancestor, who was a staunch tribal leader, is her name-sake. She will grow to understand that her Māori name links her to whenua (land), her whakapapa (genealogy) and her Māoritanga (culture).

Ruataupare is one of an increasing number of babies in New Zealand to be given a Māori name. While Māori have never stopped giving their children indigenous names, there has been a marked increase over the past 10 years – a near doubling of Māori names registered since 2011.

Parents Julia Amua Whaipooti, who is Ngāti Porou descent, and Emma Whiley who is Pākehā (New Zealand European) chose Ruataupare’s name to ensure she is connected with her Māori identity.



Ruataupare Whiley-Whaipooti and Julia Whaipooti.

“It was a deliberate decision to name her after where she’s from but we also know it is political. We live in a country that actively oppressed Māori culture, naming her is statement that her identity is something to be proud of,” Whiley says.

Whaipooti was named after her grandmother’s anglicised name Julia. “It was an intentional decision to give me the English name by my parents at the time because New Zealand has been pretty bad at pronouncing our names, and suppressing Māori culture and identity.”

“We knew we will bring a Māori baby into the world and ... our dream, as I think it is for many people, is you want your kids to live freely as themselves and confidently.”

In 2011, 1.5% of names registered were Māori. While overall, the percentage of Māori names is still small – 2.6% of all names in the country registered in 2020 – the actual figures are believed to be higher.

To be included in the data, at least one parent must be Māori and the name must fit the Māori Language Commission orthography. There must be at least 10 children given the same name within a year for it to be logged. Many Māori names will not be captured, including Ruataupare’s, either because there are under 10 registrations of the one name, or the name is not yet listed as an approved Māori name.

Nikau and Mia remain the most popular Māori boys' and girls' names in 2020, having topped the list for the past several years.

Whaipooti said this increase could be linked to previous generations fighting to reclaim the language. “There’s been a real platform that’s been laid, that says we should never apologise for being Māori in the land that we come from. I think many of us feel more comfortable with giving our next generation the comfort of being us.”



Dale Dice, (left) partner of Damaris Coulter and father to Hinekōrako, sailing a waka, a Māori ocean-going vessel.

When European missionaries and settlers arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand, they brought with them their own patronymic naming traditions, which were superimposed on to the indigenous Māori population. Along with the changes in name format, came the anglicisation of Māori names, and then, as settlers became the dominant power of economy, bureaucracy and culture, bearing a Māori name could lead to racism and discrimination, particularly when it came to seeking jobs and housing.

Whaipooti and Whiley said giving Ruataupare her name “would possibly come with a bit of work”.

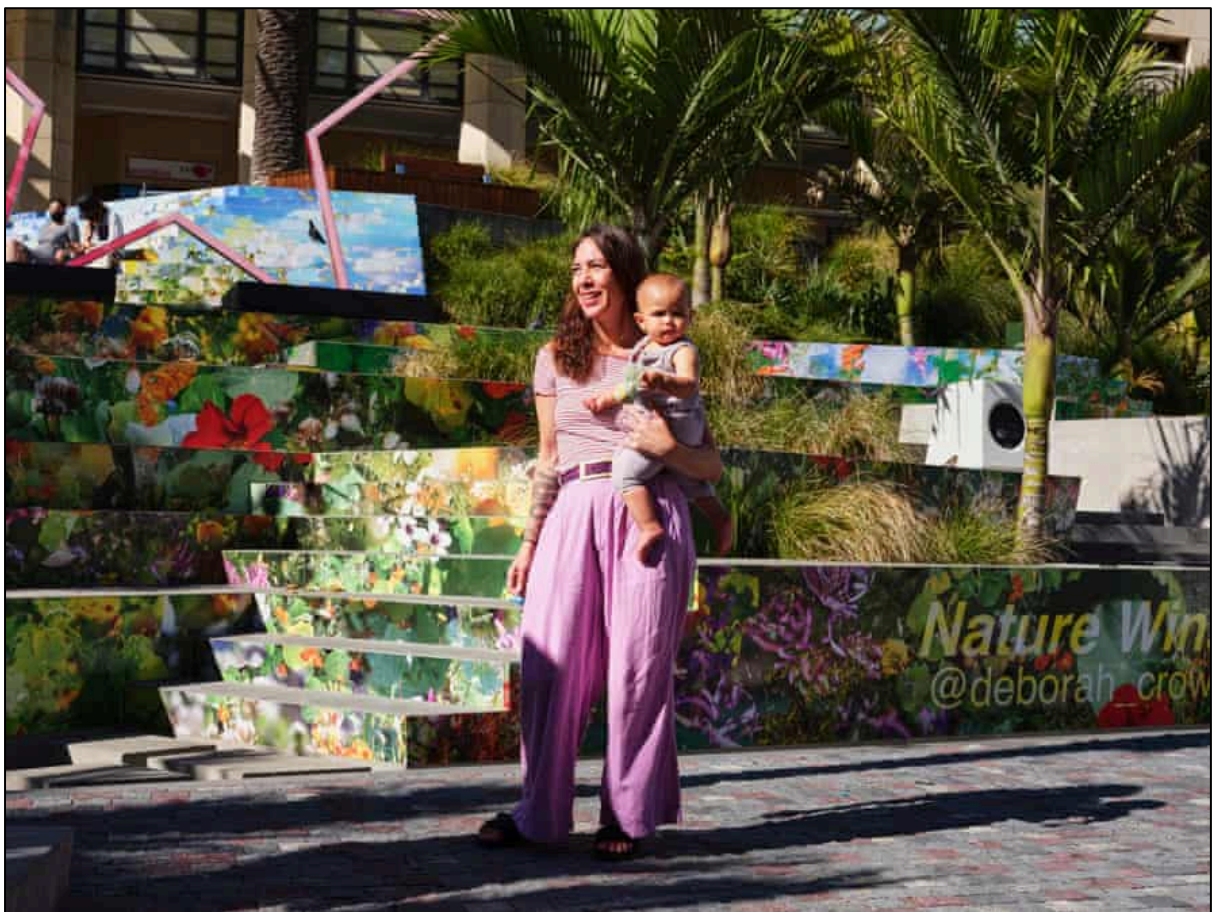
“We know she’s going to experience racism in her life, and we know that there are going to be people that butcher her name. We can’t stop that from happening. But what we are doing, and I think any parent would do, is to give your kids all the love that you can so that they know that they are loved and know where they belong.”

After discovering a paucity in information on Māori naming practices and colonisation’s impact, historian Dr Joeline Seed-Pihama set out to dedicate her PhD to

this body of knowledge, with a focus on the Taranaki, where one of her tribes is from. Her thesis “stresses the need to intervene in the continued denial and denigration of our names”.

“It quickly became unsafe for our tamariki [children] and whānau [family] to carry those names in the colonial world ... These impacts of assimilation meant that the many whānau began to feel that Māori names were not beneficial to have within an imperialist society.”

Seed-Pihama’s thesis is also a personal story, one which weaves in her own experiences and discusses giving her own children Māori names. “[It] was integral to the life we wanted for them as a symbol of their whakapapa, and of our aroha and pride in being Māori.”



Damaris Coulter and her daughter Hinekōrako.

Māori names connect and create a sense of belonging for every individual, Seed-Pihama said, adding that decolonisation is key to Māori liberty and the resurgence of Māori names. “In other words, it requires a calling back of our names from the margins.”

Damaris Coulter of Ngāti Kahu descent and Dale Dice of Ngāti Hine, Te Aupōuri and Ngā Puhi are honouring this decolonisation practice, by giving their one-year-old daughter Hinekōrako just one name, as was usual pre-colonisation.

Hinekōrako's name came to Dice as he was navigating a waka, a large traditional Māori sailing vessel, from Rarotonga in the Cook Islands back to Aotearoa. "It was coming up to midnight. We came into a little storm. The temperature had dropped ... there was thunder ... Once we got through the storm we all turned around and just behind us there was this massive white rainbow ... It was a lunar rainbow."

"I told our navigator about it and he goes 'oh yeah, that's a tohu (sign), that's Hinekōrako'." In myth, Hinekōrako is also a taniwha (a water spirit), who lives between the spirit and living worlds. Dice wrote the name in his diary and decided that night, were he to ever have a daughter, she would be named Hinekōrako.

But Coulter says when it came to deciding on a surname, the couple found it difficult to settle on a last name that would capture all of Hinekōrako's whakapapa (genealogy). And so they decided against one altogether.

Coulter said Māori have never stopped using those traditional practices or naming rights, and that it may be that only now is data capturing the number of names registered. But she says various societal movements led by Māori and the recent Black Lives Matter movement, have perhaps compelled people to introduce more indigenous reclamation practices into their lives.

"To be committed to decolonisation, you have to start doing some things that may be a little bit inconvenient at first. [But] it makes sense to me to apply as many things as possible into our lives, and into Hinekōrako's life, that would complement undoing some of the colonisation practices."