

WHAKAPAPA AS A TE AO MĀORI-CENTRED ECONOMIC EPISTO-METHODOLOGY

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Abstract

Māori economies have unique foundations, which differ fundamentally from Eurocentric economies, making it difficult to identify appropriate epistemological and methodological approaches to understanding them. Critical Māori economies scholars emphasise the importance of whakapapa-based approaches to understanding Māori economies. In this article, whakapapa is conceptualised as a way of both knowing (epistemology) and coming to know (methodology) Māori economies. It introduces a whakapapa-based episto-methodological framework based on four key tenets—dimensionality, relationality, obligations, and multi-temporality—to understand Māori economies from a te ao Māori perspective. The article then outlines how the use of this whakapapa-based framework can lead to decolonised economic possibilities and add value to Māori livelihoods by enabling inclusive economic decision-making, re-establishing unseen economic dimensions and recognising relations as central to Māori economies.

Keywords

Māori economies, whakapapa, epistemology, methodology, decolonisation

Introduction

The notion of the Māori economy was popularised in the late 20th century following a notable increase in the Māori asset base in Aotearoa New Zealand. Media and policy documents commonly

refer to the Māori economy as the asset base of iwi (Tau & Rout, 2018). Today, this asset base is estimated at around NZ\$126 billion (Schulze et al., 2024), up from NZ\$68.7 billion in 2018 (Nana et al., 2021), and NZ\$36.9 billion in 2010

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(Nana et al., 2011). Such a measure captures the significance of Māori asset holdings relative to national assets. However, purely financial measures inflict epistemic violence on both financial and non-financial Māori economic activity. Moreover, the notion of a singular Māori economy fails to recognise the diversity of economic practices enacted by Māori historically and today. This article examines these critiques in a reframing of Māori economies.

The critical Māori economies scholarship questions the notion that Māori economies can be understood purely through a Eurocentric lens, making two key related arguments: (a) Māori had their own economies well before European contact (Henare, 2014), thus their own economic understandings based on a *te ao Māori* worldview; and (b) Māori economies differ fundamentally from Eurocentric economies in terms of their organisation, practices, and motivations. Consequently, Māori scholars have called for policymakers and iwi leaders to approach Māori economies in a way that reflects *te ao Māori* rather than capitalist practices (Amoamo et al., 2018; Bargh, 2011, 2012; Dell et al., 2018), which are based on private enterprise and property, exploitation, extraction, waged labour, commodity production, and institutional finance (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020). This article proposes that *whakapapa*, a foundational concept in *te ao Māori*, may be used to examine and understand Māori economies from a Māori perspective and create decolonised economic possibilities in Aotearoa. The article borrows from Scobie and Sturman's (2024) definition of decolonisation as “dismantling unjust colonial structures, reimagining and reconstructing Indigenous lifeways (ways of meeting physical, spiritual and social needs), and establishing just relationships among peoples of Aotearoa into the future” (p. 8).

This article is drawn from the lead author's doctoral thesis, which explores *whakapapa* as a tool for decolonising Māori economies and uses Whakatōhea kuku economies as a case study (McLellan, 2025). The lead author is of Whakatōhea and Ngāi Te Rangi descent; however, she grew up firmly grounded in *te ao Pākehā*, disconnected from her Māori *whakapapa*. Her doctoral research was a means of reconnecting with her Whakatōhea *whakapapa* and learning more about *te ao Māori*. The lead author holds *whakapapa* connections to her research participants—people of Whakatōhea descent as well as the kuku, whom Whakatōhea view as one of *ngā tamahine a te Whakatōhea*, or “the daughters of

Whakatōhea”. The co-authors of this article are the lead author's doctoral supervisors and have expertise in Māori economies, political economy, geography, and food sovereignty.

Whakatōhea is an iwi comprising six hapū situated in the Bay of Plenty in the North Island of Aotearoa. Whakatōhea have a long-standing relationship with kuku, which provide them with an essential source of protein and are a useful rongoā (Lyall, 1979; McLellan, 2020; R. Walker, 2007). Whakatōhea people consider kuku a taonga because they enhance their intellectual, physical, and spiritual wellbeing (Whakatōhea Iwi, 1993). Kuku have always been an important part of traditional trade relations for Whakatōhea. For example, prior to European contact, Whakatōhea people traded kuku with inland Māori groups, who were unable to access coastal resources (R. Walker, 2007).

The recent engagement of Whakatōhea in commercial aquaculture has led to a change in their relations with the kuku. In the late 20th century, in recognition of the importance of the Aotearoa kuku industry, Whakatōhea kaumātua shared their aspirations for a kuku aquaculture venture to generate a livelihood for their iwi. This aspiration has recently materialised with a fully operational aquaculture farm and kuku processing factory in Ōpōtiki. Te Tāwharau o te Whakatōhea, the mandated iwi organisation of Whakatōhea, owns the aquaculture farm space and 7.38% of Whakatōhea Mussels Ōpōtiki Ltd, the company that operates the farm and processing factory (McLellan, 2025; New Zealand Companies Office, 2024).

This article begins by outlining a *whakapapa*-based episto-methodological framework that may be used to examine and understand Māori economies from a *te ao Māori* perspective. This framework is based on four key tenets drawn from the *whakapapa* literature: dimensionality, relationality, obligations, and multi-temporality. The article then outlines how using the framework to practise Māori economies from a *te ao Māori* perspective may generate decolonised economic possibilities. Many of the grounded examples in this article are based on the lead author's doctoral research.

A whakapapa framework for understanding and examining Māori economies

Whakapapa is commonly viewed as physical genealogical connections; however, Mikaere (2011) argues that it is better understood in practice as the

lens through which Māori view the world, where all phenomena that have ever existed and ever will exist are connected. Whakapapa can serve as both a methodology or “a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed” and an epistemology, “a theory of knowledge” (Harding, 1987, p. 3). The use of whakapapa as a methodology, or theory of analysis, is not new (Graham, 2005; Mahuika, 2019; Royal, 1998). Royal (1998) asserts that whakapapa is a methodological tool used by Māori to understand phenomena, including their nature and origin, connections to other phenomena, and their future relations. As an epistemology, whakapapa deals with questions such as “Who can know?”, “What can be known?”, and “What is knowledge?” (Harding, 1987). Tau (1999) claims that, for Māori, the world is ordered by and understood through whakapapa, which acts as “the skeletal structure to Māori epistemology” (p. 13). In this way, whakapapa is not knowledge itself but provides a structure within which to situate knowledge. Whakapapa is all-encompassing because it connects all things and people that have ever existed and will ever exist (Roberts, 2013; Roberts & Wills, 1998).

A whakapapa episto-methodology is appropriate for acquiring knowledge about Māori economies from a te ao Māori perspective. When applied to the examination of Māori economies, whakapapa asks questions useful for their examination, such as “Who are the economic actors?”, “Who has economic agency?”, and “How is economic agency enacted?” It also insists on a particular form of place-based relationality grounded in genealogy and Māori worlds. A whakapapa lens is also useful for uncovering, analysing and representing Māori economic worlds that are often hidden when examined using Eurocentric epistemological or methodological frameworks.

The whakapapa-based episto-methodological framework presented in the following section was inspired by the literature on whakapapa, particularly the book chapter by Painting and Burgess (2020), who argue that whakapapa is the basis for Māori ways of being, knowing, doing, and futuring. The following sections present the notions of dimensionality, relationality, obligations, and multi-temporality respectively as the foundational tenets of a te ao Māori-centred economic episto-methodology.

Dimensionality

Viewed through a whakapapa lens, Māori economies comprise multiple dimensions of

practices and relations that contribute to Māori livelihoods. The word “whakapapa” consists of the root “papa”, which translates to “base”, “foundation” or “layer” (Painting & Burgess, 2020), and “whaka”, which translates to “becoming” (Yates, 2018). Thus, “whakapapa” can be thought of as “placing in layers” (e.g., generations layered one on top of another). Many scholars have discussed whakapapa as a performative process of layering (Barber, 2020; Edwards, 2009; Forster, 2019; Mahuika, 2019; Mika, 2013, 2014, 2015; Mikaere, 2011; Ngata, 1944; Nicholson, 2020; Roberts, 2013; Roberts et al., 2004; Te Rito, 2007; Yates, 2018). For example, Barber (2020) states that “whakapapa expresses a horizontal interrelation of all things, as well as their intergenerational layering” (p. 47). However, the terms *layering* or *layers* imply a flatness that fails to reflect the multi-dimensional nature of whakapapa, which maps the Māori world over multiple times, places and species. Therefore, rather than working with the idea of layering, this article understands whakapapa as *multi-dimensional*.

Understanding Māori economies as multi-dimensional enables the uncovering and examining of the multiple dimensions that make up these economies. There are synergies between this multi-dimensional view of Māori economies and critical perspectives from the Māori economies literature, which see Māori economies as made up of all the practices and relations involved in stewarding Māori and kin livelihoods (Amoamo et al., 2018; Dell et al., 2018; Scobie & Sturman, 2024). These combined perspectives create a powerful reimagining of Māori economies as made up of multiple dimensions of practices and relations that generate Māori and kin livelihoods. Māori economies as practices and relations materialise in a myriad of different ways, and therefore there are multiple Māori economies (Amoamo et al., 2018; Scobie & Sturman, 2024; W. Walker, 2020).

Kaitiakitanga, defined as “the obligation, arising from the kin relationship to nurture or care for a person or thing” (Forster, 2019, p. 3), is an important dimension of Māori economies. *Kaitiakitanga* is often misrepresented as the one-way guardianship and stewardship of the environment by humans; however, Hutchings et al. (2020) argue that it involves a reciprocal relationship between Māori and their “more-than-human” kin. The phrase “more-than-human” refers to non-human beings and emphasises their power and capacities (Rogers et al., 2013). *Kaitiakitanga* rarely generates financial value but contributes significantly to Māori livelihoods in

other ways. Removing invasive predators from a shellfish bed, for example, not only enhances the mauri of the shellfish but also provides current and future whānau with better access to kaimoana.

Kaitiakitanga is a key dimension of Whakatōhea kuku economies. Whakatōhea enact kaitiakitanga to maintain the mauri of kuku; tend to their physical, spiritual and intellectual wellbeing; and ensure that high-quality kuku are passed on to future generations (Whakatōhea Iwi, 1993, p. 9). What makes kaitiakitanga so important for Whakatōhea kuku economies is that the wellbeing of Whakatōhea taonga reflects the wellbeing of Whakatōhea people and vice versa (Whakatōhea Iwi, 1993). If the wellbeing of Whakatōhea kuku is diminished, then the wellbeing of Whakatōhea people will also diminish. Whakatōhea people are obligated to carry out kaitiakitanga to enhance the mauri of the kuku but also themselves and their mokopuna (McLellan, 2025). Māori economies are made up of a number of dimensions of relations and practices that contribute to Māori lifeways.

Relationality

Through a whakapapa lens, Māori economies can be understood as infinitely and inextricably connected and in relation. Painting and Burgess (2020) argue that whakapapa illustrates the relationality between all things and is essentially a theory of everything. Through a whakapapa lens, “isolation is a fallacy” and “everything in existence is infinitely and complexly in relation all the time” (Painting & Burgess, 2020, p. 210). Relationality allows individuals to make sense of the world and their place in it (Painting & Burgess, 2020). Barlow (1994) suggests that this relationality is inclusive of all phenomena, where all past, present, and future human and more-than-human beings relate to each other through whakapapa. We elaborate further on the multi-temporality of whakapapa in a subsequent section. Yates (2021) suggests that whakapapa relationalities are non-hierarchical, and humans are no more or less animate than more-than-human beings. The notion of animacy, defined as the state of being alive and having spirit (Lorimer & Hodgetts, 2024), reflects Indigenous ontologies, including whakapapa, which often paint all human and more-than-human beings as animate (Hoskins & Jones, 2017; Kimmerer, 2013; Painting & Burgess, 2020; Yates, 2021). Understanding Māori economies as interconnected and relational helps reveal the key relations that are foundational to Māori livelihoods and therefore their economies.

There are strong and binding relations between

Whakatōhea people and kuku. The people of Whakatōhea have existed in reciprocal relation with kuku for centuries. This connection originates in their relations with Ranginui and Papatūānuku, whose lines of descent pass through Tāwhaki, Wekanui, and Muriwai, eponymous ancestors of Whakatōhea (Whakatōhea Iwi, 1993). Whakatōhea also have long-standing practice-based relations with kuku, having gathered and protected them for centuries. The people of Whakatōhea consider kuku alive and with spirit and aspire to treat them in the same way that they treat people (McLellan, 2025).

The Whakatōhea aquaculture venture has fundamentally changed the relations between the Whakatōhea people and kuku because the former now extract financial value from the latter. In some ways, the venture has improved these relations because Whakatōhea people who are unable to gather wild kuku now have access to farmed kuku. The venture has also meant that some Whakatōhea people have been able to move back to the region and live in closer relation with whānau—both people and kuku. However, the people of Whakatōhea have raised concerns about how to balance their long-term relations with kuku against the infrastructural and environmental changes brought by the aquaculture industry (McLellan, 2025). The development of the new Ōpōtiki Harbour, for example, involved significant changes to both land and sea, including the dredging of a new channel, the construction of two new seawalls, and the closure of the old harbour entrance (Ōpōtiki District Council, 2023), altering spatial relations, access to place, and the sense of connection and history to those places and spaces. The emerging aquaculture industry in Ōpōtiki has the potential to cause environmental damage and adversely affect wild kuku beds because of contamination from the new marina and the increased number of boats (McLellan, 2020, 2025). Therefore, it is of utmost importance that the Whakatōhea people ensure a balance between meeting the financial goals of the aquaculture venture and maintaining healthy relations with both wild and farmed kuku. Extracting financial value from kuku grown and processed in the region remains secondary to Whakatōhea people’s desire to maintain healthy reciprocal relations with wild kuku stocks (McLellan, 2025). Through a whakapapa lens, Māori economies are inherently interconnected, and certain relations, such as those between tangata and whenua, are fundamental to Māori lifeways.

Obligations

In Māori economies, whakapapa-based relations incur a particular set of obligations that ultimately change behaviours (Forster, 2019). For example, Māori are obligated to make decisions and take actions that maintain positive relations with kin, including mokopuna and tīpuna (Painting & Burgess, 2020). Scobie et al. (2023) suggest that part of what emphasises whakapapa-based obligations is the collapsing of time that whakapapa infers. Whakapapa-based time collapses “intergenerational obligations into a present accountability” and therefore “contemporary decision-making carries obligations from ancestors to future generations” (Scobie et al., 2023, p. 13). Painting and Burgess (2020) propose that one way that Māori can “collapse time” and learn about their obligations is by seeing through the eyes of their mokopuna and tīpuna, enabling them to see how mokopuna futures are shaped by current actions. This urges Māori to take actions that create healthy relations with past and future generations and fulfil their whakapapa-based obligations to them. In “looking with” their tīpuna, Māori can learn about their aspirations and concerns for mokopuna (Painting & Burgess, 2020). Current generations can look to their past and future generations of human and more-than-human kin for guidance on their obligations.

Liboiron (2021) proposes that when it comes to relations between humans and their more-than-human kin, “different relations make different obligations” and that “some relations matter more than others” (pp. 137–138). Although it is not discussed in the context of te ao Māori, Liboiron’s understanding of obligations may be applied to contemporary Māori contexts, where many Māori do not live on their ancestral whenua surrounded by their human and more-than-human relations, to identify relations that matter more than others. The lead author, for example, has connections to Ngāi Te Rangi, and her ancestral maunga in Mount Maunganui is Mauao. Therefore, her relationship with Mauao differs from her relationship with Maungawhau, the maunga nearest to her current home in Tāmaki Makaurau. While she has a responsibility to respect and care for Maungawhau as part of te taiao and her local residential area, she has a whakapapa-based obligation to respect and care for Mauao because it is her tīpuna.

Understanding that all relations entail a specific set of obligations and that some relations matter more than others helps to reveal the key obligations in Māori economies. From a whakapapa perspective, obligations between Whakatōhea

people and kuku are fundamental to Whakatōhea kuku economies. Both Whakatōhea people and kuku are obliged to enhance each other’s well-being through reciprocal relations grounded in whakapapa. The mauri of kuku depends on the mauri of Whakatōhea people and vice versa. If Whakatōhea people work to uplift the mauri of kuku by carrying out their kaitiakitanga obligations, kuku will uplift the mauri of Whakatōhea, such as by providing them with a healthy source of protein or fertiliser for their gardens. It is of utmost importance to Whakatōhea kuku economies that these obligations and healthy relations are maintained alongside the emerging financial aquaculture venture. The people of Whakatōhea seek to exist in healthy relation with both wild and farmed kuku and balance their obligations to kuku with the financial goals of the aquaculture venture (McLellan, 2025). Through a whakapapa lens, Māori economies are underpinned by healthy obligations between Māori groups and their kin.

Multi-temporality

Through a whakapapa lens, Māori economies are multi-temporal—that is, they exist across multiple times. Te ao Māori conceptualisations of time are based on whakapapa (Lo & Houkamau, 2012; Painting & Burgess, 2020). Whakapapa-based time is circular, relational, and linked to events, their meanings, and their relations to other events (King et al., 2023; Lo & Houkamau, 2012). Mikaere (2011) argues that in whakapapa-based conceptualisations of time, there is no distinction between past, present, and future. King et al. (2023) refer to this converging of the past, present, and future as “pūtahi”, meaning “intersection”. In contrast to linear conceptualisations of time, which can create a sometimes painful separation between the living and non-living, these circular conceptualisations of time allow Māori to remain intimately connected to past and future relations (King et al., 2023; Painting & Burgess, 2020). Painting and Burgess (2020) suggest that conceptualising time in this way creates a deep connection between past, present, and future generations because ancestors and descendants can be seen, heard, and felt in the present. The multi-temporal nature of whakapapa-based time decentres the present and elevates the importance of past and future relations and phenomena (Lo & Houkamau, 2012; Painting & Burgess, 2020).

Painting and Burgess (2020) propose that by decentring the present, whakapapa can act as a key to seeing and shaping the future. Just as whakapapa holds the knowledge of the origin

of all living things and the relationships between them, it also holds knowledge about the future of all living things and their relations. Whakapapa connects the past to the future by linking tīpuna and mokopuna, which are reflections of tīpuna. This means that the more connected Māori are to their tīpuna, the more connected they are to their living mokopuna and those who have not yet been born (Painting & Burgess, 2020).

Understanding Māori economies as multi-temporal assists in the understanding of important practices and relations within these economies. Obligations, for example, are an important multi-temporal practice in Whakatōhea kuku economies. Whakatōhea people have always held whakapapa-based reciprocal obligations to past, present, and future human and more-than-human kin. Practising kaitiakitanga is vital to how Whakatōhea people have carried out these obligations over time. Whakatōhea tīpuna, for example, practised kaitiakitanga at wild kuku rocks in the Whakatōhea region. This simple act had multiple implications because it fulfilled their obligations not only to kuku but also to their tīpuna and mokopuna, who also carried out (or will hope to carry out) these practices in the same

location. In practising kaitiakitanga, Whakatōhea people are inherently decentring the present to exist in positive relation with both their tīpuna and mokopuna and their more-than-human kin (McLellan, 2025). Māori economies consist of a myriad of intersecting, multi-temporal relations and practices that produce livelihoods in important ways.

A whakapapa-based episto-methodological framework

The theorisation or conceptualisation of whakapapa as an episto-methodology may be seen as somewhat divorced from the common practice of whakapapa, which for centuries has been practised as an oral tradition, kept alive through socialisation among whānau. One such example is whānau events where people discuss their genealogical ancestry. This article does not attempt to take away from the common understandings and (re)invigoration of whakapapa. Rather, it attempts to apply whakapapa concepts to contemporary scholarly and political pursuits to enhance Māori self-determination and the application of mātauranga Māori. It is critical that whakapapa, as a vital Māori lens, continues

TABLE 1 Whakapapa-based episto-methodological framework for Māori economies

Tenet	Epistemology	Methodology	Grounded Example from Whakatōhea Kuku Economies
Dimensionality	Māori economies comprise multiple dimensions of practices and relations that contribute to Māori livelihoods.	Exploration of the multiple practices and relations that contribute to Māori lifeways.	Kaitiakitanga is an important and often overlooked dimension of Whakatōhea kuku economies, which produces high livelihood value.
Relationality	Māori economies are interconnected and relational.	Exploration of the key relations involved in generating Māori lifeways.	Healthy relations between Whakatōhea people and kuku are paramount to Whakatōhea lifeways. Whakatōhea people seek to balance these relations alongside the emerging kuku industry.
Obligations	There are obligations associated with the relations involved in Māori economies.	Examination of the key obligations involved in Māori economies.	Healthy reciprocal obligations between Whakatōhea people and kuku are fundamental to Whakatōhea kuku economies.
Multi-temporality	Māori economies are multi-temporal—they exist across multiple times at any given moment.	Identification of past, present, and future practices and relations that are important to Māori economies.	Obligations are an important multi-temporal practice in Whakatōhea kuku economies. Practising kaitiakitanga fulfils obligations across multiple temporalities.

to be conceptually applied in ways that enhance Māori self-determination, including towards decolonising Māori economies.

Whakapapa serves as an effective episto-methodological framework for understanding and examining Māori economies in a te ao Māori way. Table 1 summarises the four key tenets of the whakapapa-based episto-methodological framework, showing how each may be applied both epistemologically to understand Māori economies and methodologically to acquire knowledge of Māori economies. Importantly, these delineations should be viewed as interrelating and mutually reinforcing rather than exclusive. The table also provides grounded examples from Whakatōhea kuku economies.

Decolonising economic possibilities through whakapapa

Understanding and practising Māori economies in a way that is guided by the whakapapa-based framework discussed above can generate decolonised economic possibilities. This section outlines three key ways in which the whakapapa-based framework may work to dismantle unjust colonial structures and reconstruct Indigenous lifeways (Scobie & Sturman, 2024) through three key mechanisms: (a) enabling inclusive economic decision-making, (b) re-establishing unseen economic dimensions, and (c) recognising relations as central to Māori economies.

Enabling inclusive economic decision-making

Understanding and practising Māori economies through the lens of the whakapapa-based framework enables inclusive economic decision-making that can lead to decolonised economic possibilities. Through a whakapapa lens, Māori economies are inherently multi-temporal, where practices, value flows, relationships, and obligations intersect across multiple temporalities. The circularity of time implied by whakapapa means that tīpuna and mokopuna are animate stakeholders in current economies. Whakapapa-based thinking enables current Māori generations to understand Māori economies, alongside our tīpuna and mokopuna. This economic agency extends to more-than-human kin, who are no more or less animate than humans and therefore also key stakeholders in Māori economies. Through a whakapapa lens, the lives, aspirations, practices, and relations of past, present, and future human and more-than-human kin are relevant to contemporary economies. Whakapapa positions tīpuna, mokopuna, and more-than-human kin as key stakeholders in

contemporary economies, and thus in economic decision-making.

Including mokopuna, tīpuna, and more-than-human kin as key stakeholders and decision-makers in contemporary Māori economies contributes variously to Māori lifeways. It directly adds value to the livelihoods of mokopuna, tīpuna, and more-than-human beings because their wants, needs, aspirations, practices, and relations are centred in current economic decision-making. It also adds value to current Māori livelihoods because, through whakapapa, current generations live in symbiotic relation with past and future ones. Uplifting the wellbeing of Whakatōhea tīpuna and mokopuna, for example, inherently uplifts the wellbeing of currently living Whakatōhea people (McLellan, 2025). Crucially, this means that economic decisions are informed by collective, intergenerational, and interspecies knowledge. When Māori include the knowledge and aspirations of more-than-human kin, tamariki, mokopuna, and tīpuna within their contemporary economic decision-making, they can draw from a wide knowledge base, leading to just decision-making for all. Grounding economies in the whakapapa-based framework outlined above has the potential to enhance Māori lifeways because it includes past, present, and future relations in economic decision-making processes.

Re-establishing unseen economic dimensions

Understanding and practising economies in a way that is guided by the whakapapa-based framework can enable Māori to re-establish unseen economic dimensions and produce decolonised economic possibilities. The whakapapa framework understands Māori economies as made up of various dimensions of practices and relations that produce Māori livelihoods and enables the uncovering of these dimensions. This framework can be used to identify and resource specific economic dimensions that might otherwise remain unseen through a Eurocentric lens, such as the non-financial dimensions of Māori economies.

Much of the livelihood value within Whakatōhea kuku economies is generated from non-financial practices. The acts of stewarding and eating wild kuku abundantly enhances Whakatōhea livelihoods in ways that purchasing kuku from capitalist markets does not. Gathering wild kuku enhances the physical, spiritual, and intellectual wellbeing of Whakatōhea people. This kind of wealth is immeasurable, reconnecting the people of Whakatōhea with one another, kuku, and

Tangaroa (McLellan, 2025). From a Eurocentric perspective, wild kuku stocks are located outside of Whakatōhea kuku economies, but from a whakapapa perspective, they are central to these economies. Through making visible the various practices and relations that contribute to Māori lifeways, the whakapapa framework can also enable inclusive and generative resource allocation for enhancing Māori livelihoods. For example, investing in Whakatōhea kuku economies might mean enabling more Whakatōhea whānau to gather and protect wild kuku in the region. Investing in livelihoods within Whakatōhea kuku economies in a way that is guided by the whakapapa framework laid out above means resourcing all financial and non-financial practices that contribute to the lifeways of kuku and the people of Whakatōhea.

Using the whakapapa framework to guide economies may help to re-establish Māori lifeways by revealing the diversity of practices and relations that enhance Māori livelihoods and shifting away from the predominantly Eurocentric perspective that economies are purely financial. Economic activities that bring only financial benefits to Māori ignore the diversity of practices and relations that contribute to Māori livelihoods, while whakapapa-based thinking enables te ao Māori-informed resourcing and investments.

Recognising relations as central to Māori economies

Practising economies in a way that is guided by the whakapapa-based framework enhances Māori lifeways through recognising relations as central to Māori economies. In whakapapa-based thinking, relationships are fundamental to Māori reality and economies; therefore, if Māori apply the whakapapa framework to their economies, they can acknowledge and protect these foundational relations. Further, whakapapa-based thinking can be used to decipher the relations that matter more than others in specific contexts. Whakatōhea kuku economies, for example, are dependent on the reciprocal relations between Whakatōhea people and kuku as well as other relations within the moana, such as those between Tangaroa and kuku (McLellan, 2025). Relations that are significant to Māori economies can include those between different groups of tangata whenua, between tangata whenua and their more-than-human kin, and between different groups of more-than-human beings.

Nurturing healthy people-to-people, nature-to-nature, and people-to-nature relations through economic activities will have compounding effects

on the livelihoods of generations of human and more-than-human beings. For example, the more Whakatōhea people uplift the lifeways of kuku through kaitiakitanga, the more capacity kuku will have to uplift the livelihoods of Whakatōhea. As the livelihoods of both Whakatōhea people and kuku improve, they are able to pass additional benefits of this reciprocal relationship on to others. For example, Whakatōhea people will be able to share any surplus kuku they have gathered with elders. If kuku populations in the region are more abundant, there will be more available as food for fish. Further, as Whakatōhea people uplift the livelihoods of kuku, they are also inherently enhancing the livelihoods of their mokopuna by granting them greater access to wild kuku. Multi-temporal people-to-nature, nature-to-nature, and people-to-people transactions exist in a relational state of compounding returns within Whakatōhea kuku economies because enhancing one set of relations will enhance the wellbeing of all (McLellan, 2020; Scobie et al., 2025).

Practising economies in a way that is guided by the whakapapa framework also means shifting away from practices that might harm whakapapa-based relations, such as forcing whānau off their whenua or generating pollution that hinders long-standing food-gathering practices. Through a whakapapa lens, practices that harm relations between tangata whenua and their kin are detrimental to the very foundation of Māori economies and therefore have no place within them.

Using the whakapapa framework to guide economic activities means recognising and upholding the whakapapa-based relations that are foundational to Māori economies. Whakapapa not only enables Māori to see economies as relational but uncovers the relations on which economies depend and teaches us how to decipher which relations matter more than others in specific contexts. Practising Māori economies in a way that acknowledges and protects these relations will enhance Māori livelihoods because it means prioritising healthy and reciprocal people-to-people, nature-to-nature, and people-to-nature relations.

Conclusion

A whakapapa lens incorporates time and relationality at multiple scales and anchors economic analysis in human and more-than-human genealogy, intergenerationality, and reciprocity. Whakapapa may be used to not only examine and understand grounded Māori economies from a te ao Māori perspective but also create decolonised economic possibilities.

This article introduced a whakapapa-based episto-methodological framework to examine and understand Māori economies and outlined how this framework can be used to enable decolonised economic futures. The framework is based on four tenets drawn from the academic literature: dimensionality, relationality, obligations, and multi-temporality. It has the potential to inform an Indigenous political project to decolonise Māori economies through three key mechanisms: enabling inclusive economic decision-making, re-establishing unseen economic dimensions, and recognising relations as central to Māori economies.

This article makes three key contributions. The first is the introduction of whakapapa as both a way of knowing (epistemology) and a way of coming to know (a methodology), or as an episto-methodology for examining and understanding Māori economies. The second is the introduction of a whakapapa-based episto-methodological framework as a novel approach for examining and understanding Māori economies from a whakapapa perspective, changing the way these economies are understood in a world dominated by Eurocentric economic ideas, which do not acknowledge economic practices or relations beyond the capitalist market. The development of this particular framework provides critical Māori economies scholars with a new tool for understanding Māori economies from a te ao Māori perspective. The final contribution is the introduction of a whakapapa-based framework to dismantle unjust colonial structures and re-establish Māori economies by enabling inclusive decision-making, re-establishing unseen economic dimensions, and recognising relationships as central to Māori economies.

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Glossary

Aotearoa	New Zealand
hapū	subtribe
iwi	tribe
kaimoana	seafood
kaitiakitanga	guardianship or stewardship
kaumātua	Māori elder/s
kuku	green-lipped mussel, <i>Perna canaliculus</i>
Māori	Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa
mātauranga Māori	Māori knowledge
Mauao	mountain in the Bay of Plenty
maunga	mountain
Maungawhau	mountain in Auckland
mauri	life force
moana	the ocean
mokopuna	descendant
Mount Maunganui	suburb of the city of Tauranga in the Bay of Plenty
Muriwai	eponymous ancestor of Whakatōhea
ngā tamahine a te Whakatōhea	the daughters of Whakatōhea
Ngāi Te Rangī	iwi based in Tauranga
Ōpōtiki	region in the Bay of Plenty
Papatūānuku	Earth Mother
pūtahi	intersection
Ranginui	Sky Father
rongoā	Māori medicine
Tāmaki Makaurau	Māori name for Auckland, the biggest city in Aotearoa
tamariki	children
Tangaroa	god of the ocean
tangata	people
tangata whenua	people of the land, Māori
taonga	treasured tangible or intangible phenomena
Tāwhaki	eponymous ancestor of Whakatōhea
te ao Māori	the Māori world or worldview
te ao Pākehā	the European world
te taiao	the natural environment
Te Tāwharau o te Whakatōhea	the mandated iwi organisation of Whakatōhea

tīpuna	ancestor
Wekanui	eponymous ancestor of Whakatōhea
whakapapa	genealogy; the Māori epistemology, which sees all as beings interconnected
Whakatōhea	iwi based in the eastern Bay of Plenty, centred around Ōpōtiki
whānau	family
whenua	land

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