

Interactive comment on “Māori oral histories and the recurring impact of tsunamis in Aotearoa – New Zealand” by Darren N. King et al.

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Maori oral histories and the recurring impact of Tsunamis in Aotearoa- New Zealand.

Given that this manuscript has been submitted to NHES, one can assume that the aim was to add to our understanding of a hazard, in this case tsunami. In New Zealand, where the historic / written record is so short, the opportunity to extend the information base by exploring orally transmitted stories of the pre-European Maori is certainly worth investigating. The authors thus found an appropriate story that contained reference to three catastrophic waves (the story was written-down by Grace (1907) from a conversation with Karepa te Whetu, who lived for sometime in the north of the South Island). They then asked members of two Iwi with residential history in the north of the

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South Island, essentially ‘was it their story?!’ First, none had heard the story, nor could any specific location of the three big waves be unequivocally determined. However, the original Maori source used by Grace, Karepa te Whetu, was known of by some of the respondents of one of the Iwi, and they were also familiar with people’s names used in the story. After sifting through the respondents’ comments and dealing with apparent contradictions by resorting to a number of reasonable devices such as identifying miss-spellings, different concepts of what constitutes a place, and changes of meaning (e.g. ‘sound’s and ‘arms of the sea’ could conceivably represent the rivers referred to in the story) the authors considered that they had the general location of the story right. However, I must say that using the presence Kahawai and sharks to point to the proposed location in the story was stretching credibility, as they are abundant in many widespread parts of New Zealand; and I would have expected critical comment on this aspect. Convinced that they had the general area of NZ correct, if not the specific locality of the big waves, it followed that they must be talking to the right Iwi. So therefore what did we learn about Tsunami from this story? If the three big waves in the story were in fact a reference to a tsunami (rather than a literary devices, or representation of some super natural force, or a physical manifestation of an emotion such as revenge) what information did we gain from this form of discourse analysis. The least we could hope for is some understanding of magnitude, date and location of the assumed tsunami. The study could not convincingly provide this or indeed much else about a proposed paleo-tsunami (thus I believe the first sentence of the abstract greatly overstates what the study revealed about the ancestral experience with tsunamis). So is the study worth recounting? The answer is yes, for the following reasons. This paper is not really about hazards and Tsunami. Rather, it is about a methodology for cross-cultural, cross-temporal investigation. It is about exploring and relating two different approaches to understanding the world in both the human and natural settings. In this sense it makes an excellent well-written contribution to our pursuit of knowledge. The study presented here shows a very sensitive and thorough approach to investigating a record that is different from the ones normally resorted to by modern western sci-

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ence. It outlines the pitfalls of working without an understanding of epistemology. On the whole, the claims and 'confirmations' are treated with adequate caveats and the authors are acutely aware of the mistakes that can be made by not fully understanding the purpose and power of the narrative and the disposition of the narrator. This paper will provide useful guidance to future investigators of pre-European oral histories irrespective of whether credibility can be ascribed to this story as account of a Tsunami.

Whether the paper would have more impact and value in a journal devoted to the philosophy of science; or indeed cultural studies or social anthropology is a question for the editor.

Note: Incidentally, there does not appear to be any reference to recurring impact of tsunamis in the study – therefore the title should be modified. Perhaps the methodological value of this paper could also be reflected in the title. Note: suggest reformulating the abstract to reflect better the aim, method, findings and principal contribution made by your study (see comment in papa 2 above). Michael Crozier 12 December 2017

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