

In the film *Whale Rider*, created by Niki Caro, we as viewers are given insight into the unique culture and beliefs of the Maori people of New Zealand. While watching this film, I found that it would have been very easy to let my views as an “outsider” to the culture influence the way that I felt about the characters within the story. It was important to apply what Mary Catherine Bateson stated in *Peripheral Visions* about being a participant observer when she said, “I found that I had to untangle two different reactions, writing a description of the conversation and, carefully separated, an expression of my feelings as a member of another culture.” I found myself struggling to separate these two things while watching the film, but rewatching the scene titled, “Our Ancestors” helped me gain more insight and understanding.

“Our Ancestors” is a very short and simple scene in which Paikea, the main character of the film is helping her grandfather, Koro, tie a rope around a motor in order to fix it. In this interaction with her grandfather, Pai asks where their ancestors came from. Koro tells her that they all came on the whale. The Maori people have a deep connection with whales that I found to be beautiful while watching the film. This scene helped me to understand where that connection comes from. After telling Pai that before the whale, their ancestors came from “Hawaiiiki”, Koro presents to her an analogy that really helped me to better understand him and his deep roots in the Maori culture and beliefs. He has Pai look at the end of the rope and asks her what she sees. She tells him that there are lots of bits all twisted together. Koro then tells her that the Maori people are like those individual strands of rope and that they, “weave together the threads of Paikea so that our bond remains strong.”

This idea of the Maori people being represented by the rope helped me to empathize with Koro in some of the things that he did and said in the film as opposed to judging him. For instance, Koro is incredibly hard on his son, Pai’s father. Initially I thought that this was unfair because his son had been through and lost a lot, and he also had a career that he was passionate about. In Koro’s perspective though, this unique career and the losses that his son had suffered pulled him away from his home. In this way he is “weakening the rope” so to speak. Koro also places some blame on his son for only providing a daughter to him and even goes as far as to say, “she is of no use to me.” It was hard in this moment to be on Koro’s side at all. Again, the idea of this rope helped me to understand a bit better. The way that Koro views this is that he is in desperate need of a new chief to guide his people out of a darkness that he speaks of. Both of his sons have failed to be this leader and now have failed to provide him with another potential leader. Pai is “of no use to him” because he truly believes that she cannot be the one to strengthen his rope and help save their people. Niki Caro points out in her article with “Indie Wire” that, “If you're realistic at all, you have to acknowledge that there are problems (for the modern Maori communities).” While Koro is illustrated as one of the major problems, I do not

believe that he is truly this cold or cruel, but rather that he is so deeply rooted in his beliefs that he cannot see another way.

This rope analogy from “Our Ancestors” also helped me to understand the motivation behind some of Paikea’s actions. At one point in the film, Pai leaves to go and live with her father after hearing that she is useless to Koro, or as she calls him, Paka. On her drive she hears her ancestors (the whales) calling to her and she returns home. I struggled initially to understand how she could want to go back to someone who didn’t want her, but could later see that she knew she was meant to lead her people. The desire to strengthen their community was what brought her back. Finally, Pai was consistently put down by her Paka. He was not excited when she returned home, he blamed her when he was not able to find a new leader, and he also blamed her when the beached whales appeared. Even through all of that, Pai constantly tried to mend the relationship. Again I wondered how a young girl could handle that kind of treatment and choose to stay around it. Much like her grandfather, Pai is deeply rooted in the beliefs of the Maori community. She knows that she was meant to be their leader and she knows that the Maori people need her. Keeping the pieces of the rope in mind, she continues to persevere in convincing her grandfather that she can be a leader.