

The Legend of
Te Moko-ika-hiku-waru

told by
Robert Prins

The Legend of **Te Moko-ika-hiku-waru**

told by
Robert Prins

© February 2026

Te Moko-ika-hiku-waru was one of the taniwha (water spirits), that accompanied the Tainui waka (canoe) as it travelled from Rangiātea (Ra'iatea), Hawaiiki, to Aotearoa New Zealand. Te Moko-ika-hiku-waru was a powerful kaitiaki (guardian) taniwha, a great fish-lizard or serpent-like water spirit with eight tails, known for its protective nature over the people and the area.

Taikehu, a chief and priest in the Tainui waka, travelled up the Wai-o-taiki river (Tamaki estuary) and came to a lagoon (the Panmure Basin) called Te Roto (the lake). There they found their taniwha, Te Moko-ika-hiku-waru swimming and eating fish. Thereafter the lagoon became known as Te Kai o Hiku (the food bowl of Hiku). Taikehu's group also drank from a spring there which they called Te Waipuna o Rangiatea in memory of their old home.

Some of the Tainui people disembarked and settled at Tamaki to become the Ngati Hura iwi (people), a hapu (sub tribe) of the Ngati Paoa iwi, setting up a pa (fortified settlement) on the northern headland between the mouth of Te Kai a Hiku, (the Panmure basin) and the Tāmaki River in the early 1800s. The settlement became known as the Mokoia pa. Its earlier name was Mokoika.

The taniwha then left the Tainui waka permanently and made his rua (lair) in a deep pool at the entrance to Wai-roto-o-Mokoika (the lake of Mokoia, Panmure Basin) where it would corral fish into the lagoon to eat. The pool Te Moko-ika-hiku-waru lived in subsequently became known as Te Kopua o Hiku (the deep pool of Hiku).

The lagoon was abundant with aua(herrings), tuna(eels) and patiki(flounder) and became the feeding ground for Te Moko-ika-hiku-waru. For this reason, the lagoon was named Te-kai-a-Hikuwaru (the food of Hikuwaru) and was off-limits to ordinary people, which ensured a balance in ecological stability. Te Moko-ika-hiku-waru also dwelled within the lagoon to drink of the spring waters of Te Waipuna o Rangiatea.

And so Te Moko-ika-hiku-waru became the taniwha, a water spirit, that guarded the mouth of the Tamaki inlet.

The Ngāi Tai tribe named the upper area of the Tāmaki Estuary beyond Te Wai o Tāiki the name, Te Wai Mokoia (The Waters of Mokoia). This was derived from the shortened name of Moko-ika-hiku-waru.

In the time of Te Waiohua, Te Kai o Hikuwaru (the Panmure Basin) was used as a waka (canoe) carving and landing site

where expert carvers worked on and maintained tribal waka. Entire fleets of canoes were sculptured and maintained at the whare waka (canoe house) for the chiefs of Te Waiohua through to the time of Kiwi Tāmaki.

A number of Ngāti Paoa iwi resided along the foreshore of the Wai-o-Taiki, and it was very well known for its māra (gardens). Te Waiohua also occupied and cultivated the nearby lands at Waipuna through to Ōtāhuhu to take advantage of both the Manukau Harbour to the west and Te Wai o Taiki to the east.

If life had continued in the way it was, all would have been well. But a sudden change was coming.

When Koperu, a close relative of Hongi Hika came to Tamaki to visit relatives in late 1820 or early 1821, he was invited into the pa nearby. While he was there, members of the Ngati Paoa iwi rose up and murdered him. As news of the murder spread around the village, the taniwha swam about the river, lashing the waters in distress. Then in despair he swam away to the outer sea of Tikapa (the Hauraki gulf), where he disappeared and has never been seen since.

The taniwha who guarded the waterways of the Tamaki estuary and the Makoia pa had left. With the taniwha gone, the people of the Mokoia tribe were unprotected and vulnerable.

Soon after, in late September 1821, without Te Moko-ika-hikuwaru as the guardian of the inlet and tribe, the Makoia pa was attacked by Hongi Heka and his war party from a northern tribe. The attack lasted several weeks but finally the pa was destroyed and its inhabitants killed.

Never upset a taniwha.

Glossary

Aotearoa – the Māori name for New Zealand

Hapu – sub tribe

Hawaiiki – the general name of the groups of Islands from which the Māoris came to Aotearoa New Zealand

Iwi – a Māori community or people

Kaitiaki – guardian

Mara – gardens

Mokoia – a Māori settlement on the headland between the Panmure basin and the Tamaki estuary.

Pa - fortified or defensive settlement or village

Patiki – flounder

Tainui – the name of a waka (canoe) on which the a tribe of Māori people came from Hawaiiki to New Zealand

Taniwha – mythical and powerful water creatures that guards the waterways of New Zealand

Te Kopua o Hiku – the deep pool of Hiku, in the neck of the Panmure basin under the bridge

Te Moko-ika-hiku-warū or **Te Moko-ika-a-hiku-warū**, the name of the guardian Taniwha of the Ngati Hura people, a hapu (sub tribe) of Ngati Paoa. The name translates to "The Eight-Tailed Lizard-Fish" (Moko = lizard/reptile, ika = fish, hiku = tail, warū = eight)

Te Roto – the lake

Te Wai Makoia – the waters of Makoia, the upper area of the Tamaki estuary beyond Tuhuna Torea

Te Waiohua – a powerful 17th century Māori tribe who dominated the Auckland region

Te Waipuna o Rangiatea – the freshwater spring that feeds into the Panmure basin

Te-kai-o-hiku or **Te-kai-o-hikiwarū** – the Panmure basin (the food bowl of Hiku) also known as **Wai-roto-o-Mokoika**

Tuna – eels

Wai-o-taki river – the Tamaki estuary

Wai-roto-o-Mokoika – (the lake of Mokoia), Panmure Basin; also known as **Te Kai-o-hiku** or **Te-kai-o-hikiwarū**

Waka – a boat or canoe

Whare – a house or building

Whare Waka – canoe house

About the author

Robert Prins is a New Zealand author who lives in Pakuranga, Auckland. He is a member of the Botany Writers Group which meets in the Botany Library twice a month on Tuesdays at 10:00am.

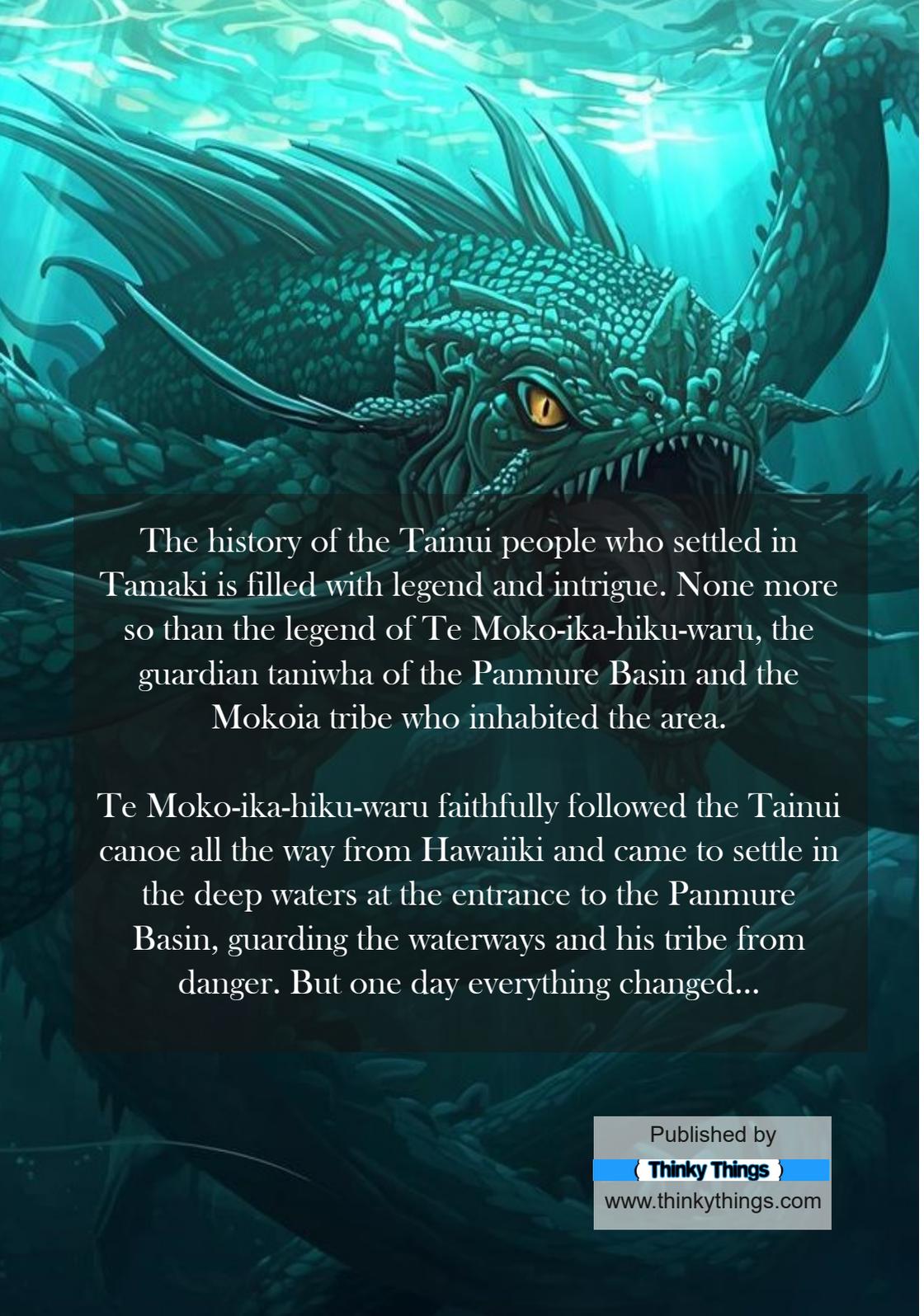
Robert enjoys writing and publishing a variety of material, but is especially known for writing and sharing *Thinky Things - Bible meditations for every day of the year*. Recently Robert has been thrilled to release his third *Thinky Things* book along with a practical *Thinky Days* diary/journal for 2026 so you can record your own thoughts.

Robert Prins is also the author of several more books including *The Dragon of Peakay*, *Resisting the Devil* and *That We May be One*.

Find out more at www.thinkythings.com and sign up for the free weekly emails.

Robert





The history of the Tainui people who settled in Tamaki is filled with legend and intrigue. None more so than the legend of Te Moko-ika-hiku-waru, the guardian taniwha of the Panmure Basin and the Mokoia tribe who inhabited the area.

Te Moko-ika-hiku-waru faithfully followed the Tainui canoe all the way from Hawaiiki and came to settle in the deep waters at the entrance to the Panmure Basin, guarding the waterways and his tribe from danger. But one day everything changed...

Published by

Thinky Things

www.thinkythings.com