

MAORI CULTURE

LOCATION

Today, there are some 300,000 – 400,000 Maori living in what is now New Zealand. Most live on the North Island.

HISTORY

The ancestors of the Maori migrated to New Zealand some 1000 years ago, when Polynesian sailors found this land during one of their expeditions. This expedition sailed south from the island of Hawaiki. It is said that when the leader of the expedition, Kupe, saw the land in front of him it appeared as a huge white cloud. He then called the land Aotearoa, or Land of the Long White Cloud.

Several hundred years later many chose to follow Kupe's route, probably due to food shortages and overpopulation on Hawaiki. As they arrived they either mixed with or displaced the people already living there. The Maori were warriors and many wars took place between tribes. The losers often became slaves or were eaten; the Maori believed that they could gain the enemy's power by eating the body of the enemy.

The Maori first encountered Europeans in 1642 when the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman anchored offshore. Several of his crew were killed and eaten and he quickly left. He decided to call the land Nieuw Zeeland, after the Dutch province Zeeland. It was not until 1769 that the next ship arrived. This time it was a British ship with Captain Cook, who actually got to know the Maori. When Captain Cook arrived there were probably about 100,000 – 200,000 Maori. After his visit, the English decided it would be a good idea to colonize the island.

The Maori quickly learned the ways of the English (language, customs, etc.) but resisted their efforts to colonize the country. There was a lot of fighting that led in the end to the treaty of Waitangi in 1840. In this treaty the Maori agreed to be ruled and protected by the British Queen, but were allowed to keep their land. They would also become full citizens of England. The new settlers, however, wanted the Maori land for themselves. The Maori refused and fighting broke out again. There was full warfare between the Maori and the English from 1860 and 1865. Because of their superior weapons the English were victorious and the Maori had to give up most of the land they had been promised. Within twenty years, the Maori had lost the culture and ancestral lands they had cherished for centuries.

The Maori people suffered severely after the war with the English. Disease and prostitution came with the new settlers. There was a demand in the West for severed heads and the Maori chiefs started to cut off the heads of their slaves to sell them. Also, the Europeans brought guns with them and the Maori often used them against each other. The Maori not only lost their land, but had to give up much of their culture and language. Due to these changes their population dropped to about 42,000.

The 1840 treaty is still a political issue for the Maori today because they believe that the English tricked them out of land that was rightfully theirs. Since the 1970's the Maori have tried to get back some of the land that was taken from them, and focus more on their traditional culture. They had almost completely lost their language, religion and way of living. The struggle to survive culturally and to regain what was taken some 150 years ago continues today.

RELIGION

Ancestor worship is important in traditional Maori society. Their religion is complex, with many gods that represent the sea, sky, mountains, war, etc. A very important part of Maori religion is what they call the life force (Mauri), spirit (Wairua) that can be found in all people and spiritual power or prestige (Mana). Christianity has had a large influence on the Maori in the last 200 years. By 1840, almost all had become Christians.

The more powerful Maori men were decorated with tattoos – or moko – from head to foot, especially on their faces and buttocks. Women mainly had tattoos on their faces, shoulder blades and stomachs, depending on what their moko was communicating. Today, Maori body tattoos are no longer prevalent on a wide scale, although in recent years facial tattoos are making a slight comeback as a statement of cultural pride.

In their many proverbs, the Maori stress the importance of growth and change, and the human community is urged to cooperate with nature.

SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS

Maori society is traditionally divided up into tribes that are named after the canoes with which their ancestors arrived. There are about 50 tribes. In fact, the word Maori was introduced by the Europeans, and means “normal”. The Maori called the Europeans Pakeha. Both words are still widely used.

Although they were warriors, the Maori were very involved in agriculture. Some also hunted. All the land was owned by the entire tribe, not by individuals. Each tribe or sub-tribe had its own meeting house Whareniui. This is the most important place in any tribe, and it where it is believed the ancestors resided.

In the past there were clear class separations in Maori society: the nobility, priestly and slave classes. Now, the Maori participate fully in broader New Zealand society.

CULTURE

The Maori language closely resembles Hawaiian and Samoan. It was widely spoken throughout New Zealand until the twentieth century.

Maori society is traditionally an oral one. There is a long tradition of singing and storytelling. History is passed on through the many stories that are passed on from generation to generation. This is done with song, dance and chants. Poetry is also an important part of Maori culture. Poems are presented with music and gestures. In the twentieth century the Maori have developed what they call “action-songs”. These are bright, catchy tunes with graceful movements of the hands and arms.

The Maori often used dog fur, flax and feathers for their clothing in the past. The warm fur cloaks were very useful on the South Island, which can get quite cold.

The Maori have always been artistic. Woodcarving has been a favorite cultural activity among the Maori for centuries, but was especially popular before the appearance of the Europeans. They also made beautiful jade ornaments, war clubs and canoes. Other traditional art forms are lattice-work panels, and weaving. Red, black and white colors are especially popular.

The meeting houses, Whareniui, were intricately decorated with paintings and carvings. Every carving and painting tells a story of their ancestors. The Whareniui represents the body of the tribe: the roof represented the spine, and the carvings of ancestors around the walls were seen as ribs.

Traditionally, the Maori greet each other by gently rubbing noses, rather than shaking hands or bowing.

