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Maori

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I. Introduction

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Maori, native inhabitants of New Zealand. The Maori, a people of Polynesian origin numbering over 500,000 (according to a 1996 census), constitute over 14 percent of New Zealand's population. More than 95 percent of Maori live on New Zealand's North Island. Many Maori live in the East Cape area, where they form the majority of the population. Others live in the large cities of New Zealand such as Auckland and Wellington. Most Maori speak the Maori language, a branch of the Austronesian languages, as well as English.

II. Traditional Maori Culture

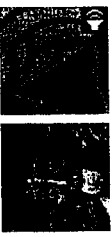
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Archaeological evidence shows that the Maori originally immigrated to New Zealand probably around 1200 A D from the Cook Islands, Society Islands, and Marquesas Islands in the Pacific Ocean, although oral accounts often place the settlement at an earlier date. It is not known whether the settlers planned their immigration or landed accidentally in New Zealand. According to legends of the Maori, however, their ancestors set out together from a place in Polynesia in a fleet of large canoes. The first inhabitants fished

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along the coastlines and hunted marine mammals such as fur seals, dolphins, and pilot whales. They also cleared forests for timber, opening up new land to farming in the process.

Before the arrival of European colonists in the late 18th century, the Maori settled throughout New Zealand and developed a distinctive culture. The Maori economy varied from region to region. In the North Island area where the soil was fertile, cultivation of the sweet potato, or *kumara*, provided the staple food supply. In other parts of the interior, roots, birds, rats, and freshwater fish made up their diet. On the seacoast, fish was the principal food.

In most Maori communities, men hunted and plowed, while women weeded, wove, and cooked. Group activities included food gathering, food cultivation, and warfare. Individuals specialized in different arts: poetry, oratory, tattooing, and the carving of wood, bone, and stone. Communal buildings were elaborately decorated with wood carvings. Many Maori wore highly decorative personal ornaments such as amulets and carved stone pendants.

The Maori lived in villages that were generally guarded by a fort. The people were divided into several tribes, or *iwi*, each made up of descendants of a common ancestor. Groups of tribes were allied in confederations called a *waka*. Each tribe was made up of a number of *hapu*, or clans, which in turn were composed of family groups called *whanau*. Primogeniture, or inheritance by the firstborn son, was basic to the social system and determined the succession of the highest chief, the *ariki*.

The Maori held many beliefs in common with other Polynesians, including concepts such as *tapu* (taboo), *mana* (prestige or honor of a social group or individual), *mauri* (life force), *utu* (revenge), and *makutu* (sorcery). The Maori

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believed in a number of gods, including Tane-mahuta, lord of the forest, and Tangaroa, a Polynesian ocean god. Tribal dignitaries, such as the higher priests and the chief, also believed in a supreme god, Io, whose existence was not revealed to the community. All Maori believed in a great number of *atua*, or spirits, who responded to magical spells and punished people for breaking taboos.

III. History

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Dutch navigator [Abel Tasman](#) was the first European to encounter the Maori. Four members of his crew were killed in a bloody encounter with Maori on the South Island in 1642. In 1769 British explorer [James Cook](#) established friendly relations with some Maori. By 1800 visits by European ships were relatively frequent. Maori quickly learned to read and write, and they highly valued books and printing presses. They also prized muskets, which they used to devastating effect in tribal wars. In 1840 representatives of [Britain](#) and Maori chiefs signed the Treaty of Waitangi, which established British rule, granted the Maori British citizenship, and recognized Maori land rights. Although many of the treaty's provisions are still disputed, it became the basis of official relationships between Maori and British settlers.

In 1841 New Zealand officially became a colony of Britain. Many European settlements were soon established. Between 1843 and 1872 violent conflicts between the Maori and European colonizers, known as the New Zealand Wars, arose over conflicting claims to land. In 1856 Maori elected their first intertribal leader, King Potatau I, also called Te Wherowhero. The movement to unite Maori under a single ruler, known as the Maori King Movement (*Kingitanga*), enjoyed mixed success. Although its authority

was never universally acknowledged, the King Movement was influential in encouraging Maori unity. The descendants of Potatau I, formed the Te Wherowhero dynasty, and continue to lead the Maori King Movement today.

After the New Zealand Wars, many Maori lands were confiscated. Remaining Maori lands were generally very poorly suited to farming. Unlike European settlers, Maori were not given government assistance to finance agriculture. Generally they lived in small rural communities separated from the European settlements. The Maori population declined rapidly as a result of the wars and European diseases, such as [influenza](#), [measles](#), and [whooping cough](#), to which they had little resistance. The Maori population fell from about 120,000 in 1769 to 42,000 in 1896. In the late 19th century, European settlers spoke of the Maori as a "dying race."

IV. Maori in the 20th Century

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In the 20th century the Maori population recovered. A cultural and political revival accompanied the increase in population. Some leaders, educated in both European and Maori traditions, formed the Young Maori Party at the beginning of the 20th century. The Young Maori Party quickly became adept at working within Western institutions, including the New Zealand Parliament, to achieve Maori aims. However, these leaders also supported many European attitudes and activities, including the purchase of Maori land by settlers. Ultimately, this led to their rejection by many Maori.

Other leaders soon emerged who owed little to European traditions. Most of these leaders worked exclusively in their own tribes. Maori unity, which had been exemplified by the King Movement, became an almost obsolete concept.

The new generation of tribe-based leaders increased pride (*mana*) in their tribes through social and cultural work and achieved practical advances in sanitation, education, and economic activities. In the late 1920s, carving, oratory, and other Maori arts flourished. Maori who felt ill at ease with the increasing tribalism often joined the Ratana Movement, a religious organization that gradually became more political. The Ratana Movement formed an alliance with New Zealand's left-leaning Labour Party. This alliance contributed to Labour's parliamentary success in elections held in 1935 and encouraged government policies aimed at improving Maori living conditions.

Although the New Zealand government exempted Maori from conscription during World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945), Maori volunteers served with distinction in both wars. This participation revived something of the warrior spirit that had been dormant since the 1870s and led to increased Maori pride in their identity and heritage. Many of those who did not join the military moved from their villages to cities to work in "essential industries" to help the war effort, beginning a trend toward urbanization that has continued ever since. Only 11 percent of Maori were city dwellers in 1936, but by the 1980s more than 90 percent of the Maori population lived in urban areas.

The proximity of Maori to New Zealanders of European descent has increased racial tensions. Maori leaders have struggled to replace or complement tribal political structures with new entities representing all Maori. At the same time, there has been a strong revival of cultural activity. Maori claims to lands unjustly taken from them in the 19th century are still being debated. Since 1980 the Waitangi Tribunal, a government body established to settle legal

claims based on the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, has examined Maori grievances. In 1995 the Queen of Great Britain, Elizabeth II, offered a formal apology and a promise of compensation to Maori tribes for "the loss of lives [and] the devastation of property and social life."

Today, most Maori in rural areas still adhere to their cultural traditions. In urban areas, more assimilated Maori have taken up professional occupations. Many Maori are now doctors, lawyers, businessmen, entrepreneurs, and government leaders. Nonetheless the Maori community continues to struggle with high rates of unemployment, imprisonment, alcoholism, drug dependency, and violence. These problems are being addressed in many different ways. Maori activists have issued calls for greater acknowledgment of cultural differences in the justice and education systems. Each tribe (*iwi*) has social service programs, including educational grants, for its members. There are also community centers for urban Maori who do not belong to a tribe.

[See an outline for this article.](#)

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