

(Davis, D. & Solomon, M., 2017)

Story: Moriōri

Hundreds of years ago, the Moriōri of the Chatham Islands took a solemn vow of peace known as Nunuku's Law. Their decision to uphold this sacred law in the face of Māori aggression in 1835 had tragic consequences. Moriōri were slaughtered, enslaved, and dispossessed of their lands. Nevertheless, the Moriōri people survived.

Story by Denise Davis and Māui Solomon

Main image: Carved planks from a Moriōri house

Story summary

Moriōri ancestors

The Moriōri lived on Rēkohu (Chatham Island) and Rangihau (Pitt Island) – two islands in the Chatham Islands group, about 700 kilometres south-east of Wellington.

In Moriōri tradition, their ancestors included people of the Wheteina and Rauru tribes of Hawaiki, who came to Rēkohu by canoe. They intermarried with people already living at Rēkohu. These people were the Hamata tribe, descended from the founding ancestor, Rongomaiwhenua.

Nunuku's Law

Isolated from mainland New Zealand, Moriōri developed a unique culture based on a law of peace. This was called Nunuku's Law, after the ancestor Nunuku-whenua. After seeing bloody conflict between the Hamata people and later arrivals, he banned murder and the eating of human flesh forever.

Later arrivals

After 1791, when the British ship *Chatham* called at Rēkohu, Moriōri came into contact with Europeans and Māori who came as crew on sealing and whaling vessels. Some settled on the islands and lived alongside the Moriōri. This relative peace was shattered in 1835 when Māori of the Ngāti Mutunga and Ngāti Tama tribes, both from Taranaki, arrived in the Chatham Islands in search of new territories and resources.

Moriōri under attack

Ngāti Mutunga and Ngāti Tama immediately began killing and enslaving the Moriōri people. Although Moriōri outnumbered them almost two to one, they chose to obey Nunuku's Law and did not fight back. Approximately 300 were killed, and the rest were enslaved. The tribe was in danger of being destroyed completely. Following several Moriōri petitions, the New

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Zealand government finally stepped in after 28 years. However, a land court in 1870 decided to give most of the Chatham Islands to Ngāti Tama and Ngāti Mutunga, despite the fact that most Māori had by this time returned to their homes in Taranaki.

Revival

It was once thought that Moriōri were a Melanesian people. Many believed that Tommy Solomon, who died in 1933, was the last Moriōri simply because he was the last known Moriōri of full blood. In the 1980s it began to be accepted that Moriōri shared the same Polynesian ancestry as Māori, and had living descendants. In the 1990s, Moriōri began to rebuild their culture and identity. As a result of their claim to the Waitangi Tribunal, the Moriōri were recognised as the indigenous people of the Chatham Islands.

Chatham Island Moriōri are active in conservation, commercial fisheries, tourism and other ventures. The Moriōri language is gradually being revived. In January 2005 Moriōri celebrated the opening of their marae and cultural centre, Te Kopinga (meaning 'kopi grove'). In the 2006 census, 945 people said they were of Moriōri descent.

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