

# THE MAORIS OF NEW ZEALAND: A HISTORICAL VIEW OF CULTURE AND FAMILY<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract:**

The Maoris of New Zealand have an interesting history and culture. In this selected review of literature supplemented with data from limited interviews with Maoris is described their history of settlement, oppression, and rebuilding of their cultures. The Maoris make up approximately 12% of New Zealand's population, which is predominantly white. The Maori family has moved from tribal form to extended family to nuclear family, and is currently moving back in the direction of extended family. There is a renewed effort by Maoris to assist their own people to rise from their predominantly lower socioeconomic class and to rebuild their culture. Maori women appear to be playing the major role in these rebuilding efforts.

## **Article:**

While visiting New Zealand recently to attend the International Congress on Women's Health Issues, I was impressed with the Maori people: their history, culture, customs, and particularly their practices related to childbirth and child rearing. A culture determines, at least in part, its members' behaviors, beliefs, values, and attitudes. One of the functions of a culture is to socialize its members to accept its attitudinal and behavioral norms. These are transmitted from one generation to the next through familial interactions such as child-rearing behaviors (Fu et al., 1984). The culture of the Maoris of New Zealand, including their history, education, employment, housing, and families, can help us better understand their childbearing and child-rearing practices. What follows is a review of literature on the Maoris supplemented with limited interview data.

## **HISTORY AND POPULATION**

The Maoris are dark-skinned Polynesian people who have dark, coarse, fairly straight hair. Their native language is Maori, which is still spoken today, even though all Maoris speak English, the official language of New Zealand. Maoris began arriving in New Zealand as early as the 10th century, but their exact origin is unknown. By the 13th century they were well established in tribal communities. When the European invasion started in the 19th century, there were 200,000 Maoris (Cashmore, 1988). Before the end of the 19th century, they seemed to be dying out. Many had succumbed to European diseases for which they had no immunity, were shot by other

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Maoris using imported muskets, or were killed in intertribal wars and in wars with the Europeans. The Maoris numbered only 40,000 by 1900 (McLintock, 1966).

Then, in the 20th century, Maori cultural pride began to revive, and regeneration began. The birthrate began to rise. In 1936 the Maori birthrate per thousand was 44; it had risen to 46 by 1961 but dropped again to 39 by 1967 (Osborne, 1970). Although these fluctuations in Maori birthrate were mirrored somewhat by the *Pakeha* (white) birthrates, the Maori rate, although considerably lower than during the post—World War II years, continues today to be higher than that of the Pakeha. In 1961 the Maoris made up 7.4% of the New Zealand population. By the year 2000, the Maoris may number 700,000, or 14% of the New Zealand population (McLintock, 1966). Today Maoris estimate that they represent 10% to 12% of the population. A high percentage of Maoris are in younger age groups, and relatively few are in older age groups.

A great deal of intermarrying of Maoris and other groups has occurred, because there has been no formal segregation. For census data, all that is required to be a full Maori is a verbal statement that one has half or more Maori blood. In 1962, 62% of the total Maori population made such a claim. However, based on previous census returns it has been suggested that this is a deliberate overstatement (McLintock, 1966). Careful examination might reveal that, for many Maoris, their census declaration reflects a feeling of cultural identity rather than ethnic origin (Osborne, 1970). Interviews with three Maori women who participated in the International Congress on Women's Health Issues revealed that one had 6 children, only 1 of whom had married a Maori; another had 4 children, 2 of whom had married Maoris; and one was the oldest of 6 children, 4 of whom had children or were pregnant, although only 1 sibling's mate was a Maori. These cases illustrate the mix of other races with the Maoris and also how proud the Maori are to be Maori. There appears to be little, if any, stigma attached to intermarrying. For instance, a young mother readily volunteered that she was from Australia but married a Maori from New Zealand.

#### EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION

The Treaty of Waitangi (1840) guaranteed the Maori people all the rights and privileges of British subjects and full and undisturbed possession of their lands. However, the treaty was violated and the British, through war and subterfuge, took millions of acres of land. The Maoris sold other millions of acres. After World War II, the unit farms tended to be too small and rugged, especially with an exploding population, to maintain Maoris as farmers, so the Maoris migrated to urban areas. Maori employment today is predominantly in low-skill jobs in urban areas. Very few earn their living on a farm.

Maori education was undertaken by missionaries from the time missions were first established in the late 1700s. The Maoris proved as receptive to formal education as they were to Christian teaching, and it has been claimed that in the early 19th century there were more Maoris literate in the vernacular than Europeans. The wars disrupted the educational efforts of the missions, and in 1867 the government set up native schools in Maori settlements. The general aim of English instruction was to create brown-skinned Europeans as quickly as possible (Osborne, 1970). The Maori schools were essentially the same as the Board of Education schools in that all spoke English. Maori and Pakeha children went to the school nearest them regardless of the race the school was originally intended to serve. Today in all of New Zealand, education is compulsory to age 15. On the whole, Maori morale and performance appear to be low. With a very rapidly

increasing Maori minority population, this social maladjustment may contribute to racial misunderstandings and perpetuate inequalities. For this reason a Maori Education Foundation Fund was established in 1961 to help the Maoris take greater advantage of the educational facilities in New Zealand (McLintock, 1966).

An outgrowth of renewed interest in Maori education in the 1960s was the redevelopment of Maori schools. However, under the new system students were taught the Maori language. In November 1990, the Maoris reported that two previous generations, those currently aged 25 to 65 years, had not learned the Maori language. Children had been forbidden to speak the language in schools. Grandparents were the only ones left to teach the Maori language in the schools and to teach their grandchildren.

The Maoris I talked with seemed to have more interest in preserving the Maori culture and language than in advancing formal education. The Maoris seemed proud that they had Maori schools, although relatively few of the those with whom I spoke had children or grandchildren in Maori schools. One example was a grandmother who had had six children, but who had only one set of grandchildren in a Maori school. Also, a 32-year-old-single Maori woman who had an 11-year-old daughter had quit school after Grade 10. She was the oldest of 8 children, none of whom had completed high school. When asked if she wanted her daughter to complete high school, she responded, "That would be all right, but it's more important for her to learn Maori and know what being a Maori means." The daughter's father was not Maori.

Until recently, the Maoris were not represented in the upper forms of secondary school or in universities in numbers proportionate to the size of their population. The result is that while a few Maoris are to be found in all skilled trades and professions, the majority are engaged in unskilled and semi-skilled trades and in farming (Osborne, 1970). As well, Maoris have considerably less income than the Pakeha (McLintock, 1966).

## HOUSING

The average Maori house contains 4.1 rooms occupied by 5.5 people, whereas the average non-Maori house has 4.9 rooms occupied by 3.5 people. It is estimated that 30% of Maori people live in grossly overcrowded conditions, mainly in Northland, Waikato, Bay of Plenty, East Coast, and urban Auckland (McLintock, 1966). One Maori woman reported that the Family Benefit and Family Support money she received from the state every 2 weeks was enough (every 2 weeks she received over \$400 [\$280.00 U.S.] after her rent was deducted).

## FAMILY

The Maoris were a tribal people until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Tribes, determined by ancestral descent, were divided into *hapus* or smaller ancestral units. Within the *hapus* were *whanaus*, the extended families: a patriarch, his wife or wives, their unmarried children, some married children (usually sons), and the tatters' spouses and children, and possibly slaves. Within the *whanau*, the elementary family of parents and children was not clearly defined as a structural unit. However, evidence exists that for many social programs in everyday life, including much of the care of children, the elementary family was the operational group. Moreover, the fact that persons could inherit land rights from their mothers as well as from their fathers meant a specification of ties in individual family terms rather than a merging of them indiscriminately to

the extended family. However, in residence, land rights, exchange of goods, and many other social and economic actions, the elementary family of parents and children did not stand out as a separate entity as is characteristic of European families.

Traditional Maori society emphasized the rights and obligations of persons as members of a village, *whanau*, and *hapu* rather than as discrete individuals (McLintock, 1966). Even though the Maoris developed into primarily nuclear and three-generation families during the 20th century, they still live almost exclusively in Maori communities.

An increasing problem in both the Maori and Pakeha populations of New Zealand is the rapidly rising number of out-of-wedlock births (*New Zealand Official Yearbook*, 1980). Out-of-wedlock Maori births increased from 5,227 in 1962 to 10,254 in 1978, whereas births among married women decreased from 59,789 to 40,775. Unmarried mothers are frequently de facto wives with comparatively stable relationships. A frequent topic of conversation throughout New Zealand is the rapidly increasing number of solo parents (typically women), especially adolescent solo parents, and the problems these families are experiencing as well as the societal and economic problems they are creating. The typical solo parent is not gainfully employed, receives a government subsidy, has not completed high school, and lives in substandard housing and communities. For the most part, the Maori extended family is very supportive of solo parents and their children. One single mother captured the family view and support in this way: When asked how her parents felt about their children having children and not being married, she stated, "They would prefer that we get married, but family is what is important to us and any children we have, regardless, are part of the family. Our parents take us all in. We are all Maori." The rapid rise in the number of solo parents seems to be a phenomenon of the past two generations.

Tribal history manifests itself today in the form of tightly knit Maori communities that are making a gigantic comeback to engage in Maori customs and practices. One of the most striking features in modern Maori society is the importance attached to the *marae* and its meeting house as a place of assembly and symbol of local unity and pride. It is thought by Maori leaders that every Maori community should have its *marae* or some form of civic center. "Maori people have practically severed ties with their tribal home, using a *marae* or hall of assembly, or both, as their focus" (McLintock, 1966, p. 463).

Most noteworthy is the manner in which Maoris have preserved their individuality. Increasingly, they have entered into modern New Zealand life at every level and in every aspect. However, they have not simply been assimilated. There is, indeed, no simple word that can satisfactorily describe their place in the society. Apart from a very few who have aligned themselves with the Pakeha majority, the Maoris have retained much of their own culture, adapted and transmuted it, and fit it into the general pattern of their living. It is recognized that there are positive values in "being a Maori." Thus, far from rejecting more and more of their cultural heritage, the Maori people of today see that much of this heritage can be used constructively, providing them with standards and patterns of behavior that give a richer meaning to their lives and give them individuality as a community within the wider framework of New Zealand society. The participants with the International Congress on Women's Health Issues were privileged to participate in a Maori welcoming ceremony with Maori language and customs (e.g., touching

noses and foreheads in greeting). We also took part in a *hangi* (meal) ceremony followed by a Maori performance.

## SOLUTIONS

The Maoris are making a concerted effort to help themselves. During World War II, the exploits of the Maori Battalion greatly enhanced the *mana* of the Maori. The period since has been marked by increased recognition by both Maoris and non-Maoris of the significance of the Maori in national affairs. The Maori Social and Economic Advancement Act of 1945, using in part existing social organizations, set up Tribal Committees and Executives in 77 areas. These Maori committees have since elected members to District Maori Councils, from which are chosen the New Zealand Maori Council, established in 1962. The Maori Women's Welfare League, another national body, formed in 1951, is a voluntary organization that had more than 3,000 members in 1970. Both groups are concerned with stimulating welfare activity and representing the Maori viewpoint to the New Zealand people. The Department of Maori Affairs instituted a vigorous housing and welfare program in the postwar years and, in the 1960s, devoted much of its activities to easing the transition of Maoris from rural to urban life.

An example of Maori efforts to assist themselves was presented by Coney and Bennett (1990) at the congress. They described a project in Northland to produce networks of community health workers for grassroots community development and support. The group of mainly Maori women formed a *whanau* called *Ringa Atawahi*, or "caring hands," which now has approximately 30 members. These women undertake projects and family support in their home communities. The projects include running health *hui* on local *marae*, establishing resource centers, setting up groups interested in discussing health issues, and establishing *Papakainga* housing programs for their areas. They assist the elderly with Department of Social Welfare benefits; care for terminally ill community members; work with depressed, abused, and suicidal people; and support solo parents and the unemployed. Volunteers are trained to work with public health nurses on a specific focus within the community. Women appear to be assuming leadership in every area of Maori life. For example, one Maori woman who attended the congress is supported entirely by social welfare, but instead of doing only housework she works with women who are victims of abuse, usually spouse abuse. She called herself a social worker and said she was trained and worked almost exclusively with Maori women. Her perception was that she was able to relate to Maori women in a way that Pakeha nurses would not have been able to and that she was accepted by clients and by the public health nurses.

A great advantage of the program is that the Maoris working as volunteers with their own people allow a bicultural approach to health-care provision and enable the public health nurse to have access to families with health needs. Securing funds to pay for training volunteers and for their travel is sometimes difficult, however.

## SUMMARY

The Maori constitute approximately 10-12% of the population of their country. They occupy a much larger percentage of the lower class than their percentage of the population. Maori culture evolved from a type of group familial living, to extended family living, and then, for some, to a nuclear family structure. As difficult times and poverty have set in, they have tended to return to extended family patterns. Since World War II, the Maoris have secured more education, better jobs, and better housing. The health of the group has improved, but is still not as good as that of

the white culture. Single parent births are more prevalent in the Maori culture than in the white culture. The birth of a child to an already compromised, lower class teenager greatly increases the chances that she will continue in the poverty cycle and produce children who will in turn repeat her lifestyle.

The Maoris seem to be regressing socioeconomically, except for the few who have made it into the middle class. The center of the problem appears to be the changing structure of the home and, therefore, the values being transmitted through tight family networks. There was a higher percentage of two-parent families 20 years ago. Currently young Maoris depend on the stability of their parents and grandparents for assistance with children, support, guidance, and to some extent, economics. One should ask, "From whom will the young children of today get their guidance, support, and values when they are young parents themselves?" Because the Maoris tend to live close to others of their culture, they will surely depend very heavily on that ethnic family group. This finding supports the view that ethnic boundary maintenance and kinship interdependence are functions of the sociocultural environment.

The Maoris seem to have a fairly short history of solo parenting and of the poor getting poorer. As McLintock (1966) noted, it is only slowly being realized by the Maoris that the immature and poorly equipped person who leaves school early, who so often becomes a fickle employee, remains a loss economically and socially to the community.

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