

The Loss and Revival of Moriori Culture and Identity

Oceania

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Abstract: In this paper, I discuss the loss and revival of Moriori Culture. I look into the history of the Moriori and explain their historical and cultural roots. I also look into the cultural and natural aspects of their heritage and explain the importance of their cultural practices. Furthermore, I delve into the events that led to the loss of the Moriori people and their culture in the late nineteenth century, and how we are currently seeing a revival of the Morioris and their culture due to technological advancements and preservation of records. I gathered my information from Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, a Moriori case study, and online journals such as The Journal of the Polynesian Society. The journals and encyclopedia gave me an insight into the Moriori people and their

cultural practices, the causes of their loss, and how the culture is being revived. The Moriori case study in ‘Bridging the Divide: Indigenous Communities and Archaeology into the 21st Century’ helped me understand how archaeologists and institutions contributed to the loss of Moriori culture. I argue that the revival of Moriori culture and identity benefits the Moriori descendants as there is a restoration of what was once lost, allowing them to reconnect with their cultural identity and ancestors. This revival empowers Moriori people to take control and have a better understanding of their own culture and history. I also urge museums and institutions across the world to return cultural artifacts to the descendants of the Moriori.

Within the past decade, there has been a revival of the once lost Moriori culture. The Morioris are the indigenous people from Rēkohu and Rangihauate, or otherwise known as the Chatham and Pitt Islands (Solomon and Thorpe 245), that consists of nine tribes, the “Hamata, Wheteina, Eitara, Etiao, Harua, Makao, Matanga, Poutama and Rauru” (Davis and Solomon). The decline in population, the physical removal of the people away from their homeland, and the theft of their culture led to the loss of Moriori culture and identity. With technological advancements and development in genealogy, there has been a revival of the Moriori identity and culture. Museums that currently hold cultural artifacts should return them to the institutions that represent the Moriori culture and descendants. In current times, there is no need to preserve these artifacts away from their homelands. This revival serves as a benefit to those who are descendants of the

Moriori since there is a restoration of what was once lost, allowing people to reconnect with their cultural identity and ancestors.

The Morioris were once believed to have Melanesian roots and were considered pre-Māori settlers. It was later proven that they were descendants from “Polynesian settlers who traveled 800 kilometers from the south-eastern Pacific Islands of Aotearoa (New Zealand) to... Rēkohu and Rangihauate” (Solomon and Thorpe 245). They traveled to Rēkohu somewhere between the “ninth and sixteenth century” and lived in isolation from the rest of the Polynesian race (Barnett). The conditions of living in isolation allowed the Moriori to cultivate their own distinguished culture, which differentiates it from other cultures found within the Polynesian region. An important aspect of the Moriori culture is the Rākau Momori, tree carvings of ancestors and events that are used as “memorials for departed loved ones... and... for inspiration,

communication, meditation and reflection” (Pisupati and Subramanian 330). The peace covenant is another valued tradition that the Moriori held to their culture. This peace covenant is known as Nunuku’s Law, which outlawed warfare and cannibalism (Pisupati and Subramanian 328). The law originated from a notable chief named Nunuku-Whenua, who settled a conflict between two men from different tribes by stating that all “man-slaying and man-eating should cease forever,” and for any who disobeyed the law shall be haunted by Nunuku’s curse: “May your bowels rot the day you disobey” (Shand 78). The law was obeyed, making it a distinctive trait of the Moriori as they lived a pacifist lifestyle.

This pacifist lifestyle led to innovative ways to punish those who committed crimes. Those who have committed crimes like incest or theft would be banished to another tribe. Whereas, crimes such as murder would be punished

by the person being shunned and ostracized by the community, which, at times, leads the person to take their own life (Fry 254). To express anger or resolve any disputes, “people sometimes carried out curses and antagonistic rituals against other groups” (Fry 253-254). The social structure of the Morioris is unique as it was more egalitarian. Similar to the Māori, they “maintained a social distinction between chiefs and commoners,” but the Moriori did not have a class of slaves (Fry 251). Initially, chiefs were chosen on a hierarchical system, where the “eldest born of the principal family” of each tribe became chief, but over time those who were skilled hunters or fishers became chiefs (Fry 251). There was a lack of leadership amongst the Morioris. Instead of having the chief act as the sole decision-maker, decisions were made collectively by senior members. The chief’s status was one that was to be respected but not obeyed (Fry 252).

The cause of their demise was due to their pacifist life. The Māori took advantage of the Morioris, and the British took advantage of their land and resources. In 1791, the British first came in contact with the Moriori when Lieutenant Broughton's ship "was blown off-course and landed on Rēkohu," leading him to plant the British flag, "claiming the island in the name of King George III," and naming the island after his ship, the Chatham (Solomon and Thorpe 246). Broughton's discovery would eventually lead to the introduction of British sealers and whalers in Rēkohu in the early 1800s. Their presence on the island introduced illnesses, which would lead to the decline of the population of the Morioris. Before the British arrival, the population was around 2,500 people, but around 1830 the population diminished to 2,000 (Pisupati and Subramanian 328). Their presence also led to the decline of marine mammals, which served as the Moriori's main source

of food and clothing (Solomon and Thorpe 246).

Two Māori tribes, Ngāti Mutunga and Ngāti Tama invaded Rēkohu in November 1835. They arrived from Aotearoa (New Zealand) using an English sailing ship, the Wellington (Solomon and Thorpe 246). The younger Moriori men believed that they had to fight back against the Māori and defend their land, claiming that the "edict of Nunuku did not apply in these circumstances," and they could break their peace covenant (Fry 255). Unlike the younger men, the "older leaders considered nonviolence to be a moral imperative, necessary for the mana (spiritual power and integrity) of the people" and decided to engage in peacemaking efforts with the Māori (Fry 255). This decision would lead to the Māoris slaughtering and eating around 230 Morioris, and the enslavement of the rest of the population (Barnett). Those who were enslaved were displaced, with a

majority of them being taken to Aotearoa (Solomon and Thorpe 246). This event is known as the Moriori Genocide, as it was a deliberate act to exterminate the Moriori people and repress and destroy the identity and culture of the Moriori people. By 1862 there were about 101 Morioris left (Solomon and Thorpe 246), and in 1933 the last full-blooded Moriori, Tame Horomona Rehe (Tommy Solomon), died (Welham).

Their culture was further lost and stolen by archaeologists and institutions that tried to preserve the Moriori culture. The decreasing Moriori population motivated archaeologists and institutions to go to Rēkohu and preserve any traces of Moriori culture by taking what was left from them. The Moriori often buried the dead in sand dune burials called the urupā with taonga (treasures) such as “associated adzes, necklaces, bone pendants and other symbols of importance to assist them during their journey in the afterlife” (Solomon and

Thorpe 250). The *taonga* were taken from the burial sites and are now located in “collections in museums throughout Europe and the United States” (Solomon and Thorpe 250). The dead were often buried with their skulls exposed as well, making them “vulnerable to grave robbers and those determined to collect up the remains of a dying race” (Solomon and Forbes 217). The destruction of urupās and the removal of *koimi*, human remains, started when “naturalist Henry Herbert Travers carried out collecting work on the islands in the 1860s and 1870s, selling many of the *koimi* he removed” (Solomon and Forbes 217). Most of the *koimi* lie in The Natural History Museum in London and museums and medical college collections around the world (Solomon and Forbes 217). The *rākau momori*, important natural heritage to the Moriori, were also removed and reside in “British museums and Canterbury, Auckland, and Otago museums in New

Zealand” (Solomon and Thorpe 250).

Furthermore, the *rākau momori* images were copied and “appeared in publications and on clothing and jewelry,” commercializing the sacred spiritual carvings (Solomon and Forbes 216-217).

Despite the loss and theft of Moriori culture, there has been a revival during the twentieth century. Two scholars, Hiruwanu Tapu and Alexander Shand helped contribute to the revival. In the early 1900s, they recorded the language and lifestyle so that it would not be forgotten (Richards 399). Hirawanu Tapu was a Moriori who survived the invasion and compiled a list of names of “118 men and 108 women [that] had been killed [during the invasion] and also named 1,336 Moriori who died subsequently from despair” (Pisupati and Subramanian 328). He also “wrote a list of 1,561 names compiled by Moriori elders in 1862,” which was used to trace the future descendants (Pisupati and Subramanian

328). The spark of the revival for Moriori culture led to the creation of “Te Iwi Moriori Trust Board and Tchakat Henu Association of Rekohu Trust Inc,” two organizations that represent the descendants of the Moriori (Welham). A documentary on the Moriori featured the grandchildren of Tame Horomona Rehe (Solomon and Thorpe 246), which contributed to the growth of the revival. This documentary led to the creation of Hokotehi Moriori Trust in 2001, an organization that merged the two previous organizations (Welham).

The trust was named Hokotehi, as it stands for unity. The name represents the desire to bring the Moriori together. The trust built the Kōpinga Marae (a gathering house) "to re-establish a central base on Rēkohu in which Moriori could meet, celebrate, debate, and just be together" (Davis and Solomon). The Hokotehi Moriori Trust is “actively preserving, reviving and promoting Moriori identity, culture,

language and heritage for present and future generations, using digital technologies to record their cultural landscapes, elder stories, traditional practices, and other taonga” (Solomon and Thorpe 246). The trust aims to recover and rebuild their cultural and natural heritage by reestablishing the language, traditional activities, practices, and also by retaining and rebuilding the *rākau momori*. They have cultural databases that are involved in rerecording “archaeological evidence in a way that combines elder knowledge and experience, oral traditions and recollections of past land use and events” (Pisupati and Subramanian 330). These are electronic databases that store records of Moriori ancestors, written records of oral traditions such as tales and ritual chants, and important text that accurately explains the history of the Moriori. The databases also include photos of the *rākau momori* and artifacts that are located in museums across the

globe. The Hokotehi Moriori Trust uses these databases to promote the Moriori culture and help educate the descendants on their ancestral past. Their goal is to use these databases and restored information to accurately represent their history and culture. These databases allow descendants to learn about their cultural roots. The Hokotehi Moriori Trust holds *wānangas* (meetings), which helps reconnect and educate the descendants to their cultural roots. Currently, there are over “1,000 people who are officially registered as Moriori,” and it is estimated that about 8,000 more “may have connections to Moriori ka rāpuna (ancestors)” (Solomon and Thorpe 251).

Despite the tragic events that lead to the decimation of the Moriori and loss of culture and heritage, records and technological advancements allow for the revival of the Moriori identity and culture. This revival is very beneficial for the

Moriori as it serves as a resurgence of a lost culture and identity. The revival allows people to understand their ancestral roots and reconnect with the identity of being Moriori and the cultural traditions that come with it. The revival brings back a sense of belonging; this can serve as a rebirth for the Moriori as they were once believed to be 'extinct'. Museums that currently hold artifacts such as *taongas*, *koimi*, and *rākau momori* should be returned to the Moriori as there is no need to preserve them anymore. Moriori communities and the Hokotehi Moriori Trust expressed their desire for the return of ancestral belongings to help restore what was once lost. This action will allow descendants to reconnect with their heritage and cultural background (Welham). It might

be difficult to retrieve such belongings as some institutions may refuse to give away what they 'own' and believe that the cultural artifacts would be much safer in their established institution. Despite the given setbacks, I think it is important to bring awareness to the Moriori's cultural revival and help them retrieve their cultural belongings. It should go back to the descendants of the Morioris and be in the hands of the Hokotehi Moriori Trust for preservation. These artifacts have cultural value and are a part of their heritage, so by returning these artifacts, it can help strengthen the revival of the Moriori identity and help restore the culture that was once lost.

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