

Maori History & Culture

The ancestors of the Polynesian peoples originated in Asia. Conflict over land and available food probably led them to cross the Pacific and settle on Tahiti and other nearby islands. When conditions on Tahiti could no longer sustain their population, groups once again took to the sea in search of a new home.

One group of Polynesians traveled southwest and became the first inhabitants of New Zealand. They called their land Aotearoa (long white cloud) and themselves Maori (a person of this place). In their myths, they refer to their land of origin as Hawaiki (homeland). Although another group of Polynesians traveled east to the islands of Hawaii, whose name is derived from Hawaiki, scholars have concluded that the Polynesian land of origin was not the Hawaiian Islands.

Although the first Christian missionary, Samuel Marsden, arrived in New Zealand in 1814, Maori mythology shows little Christian influence. The earliest written collection of myths from the Maori oral tradition is Sir George Grey's *Polynesian Mythology and Ancient Traditional History*, published in 1855.

The Maori creation myth is unusual in its emphasis on the development from nonbeing to thought to the creation of the universe and human beings. The myth focuses on the relationship between nature and human beings. The behavior of Father Rangi and Mother Papa's six sons explains physical aspects of the environment while reflecting important characteristics of human nature.

Maui is the trickster-hero of Polynesia. Like many of the great heroes in mythology, he is a demigod, the son of a goddess and a mortal father. Maui can be compared with other trickster-heroes in mythology, such as Hermes, Loki, and Raven.

The cycle of myths that depicts Maui's exploits traveled with the Polynesian people to their new lands, including Tahiti and Little Tahiti, New Zealand, Samoa, and the Hawaiian Islands. The cycle includes Maui's mysterious birth, his theft (in another version, his capture) of fire, his taming of the sun, his fishing for New Zealand (in other versions, Tahiti and Little Tahiti or the Hawaiian Islands), and his quest for immortality (in another version, his introduction of death). These episodes may be very similar, or they

may vary considerably from one island to another. Their broad distribution is an indication of their great age.

This is a complex and expansive mythological system that many experts believe is the one of the oldest continuously practiced cultural forms surviving in the world today, dating to well over 40,000 years ago. The people continue to fight for land recognition and for their culture, language, and history to be protected and restored.