

# Moriori: A Story of Survival

*In memory of Hirawanu Tapu  
and all Moriori before him and after*

Imagine being told that who you were was a myth, that your people no longer existed – or even that they never had. This is exactly what happened to Māui Solomon. As a boy, he was taught in school that the Moriori were a fiction, a phantom people. But Māui knew that his grandfather Tommy, who died in 1933, had been a full-blooded Moriori. Māui also knew that he too was Moriori, and he was proud of his heritage. But because Māui, like many generations of New Zealand schoolchildren, had been badly misled about his people, he knew nothing about their history or customs. Even the *School Journal* failed to represent the truth.

Over the last thirty years, many Moriori families have struggled to revive their culture and identity – and to have their story finally told. In parts it is a tragic story, but it's also one of inspiration and hope. Because when Tommy Solomon died, the culture didn't die with him.

Māui Solomon with a photograph of his grandfather Tommy



## Tame Horomona Rehe (Tommy Solomon)

Tommy Solomon was full of fun and mischief as a youth. He was also immensely strong and once pulled a verandah post from the ground to show off his strength! He was a very good rugby player and a fast runner. He enjoyed hunting and shooting and was an excellent marksman, winning competition shoots. He rode to school on horseback and helped out his dad on the family farm at Manukau.

Tommy liked a good laugh and a good time – and he sometimes wound up in trouble as a result. At sixteen, he survived a boat accident after he and his mates were told not to go out in rough seas. Later, Tommy became a successful farmer and was the first to have electricity connected to his home on Rēkohu. He was a very popular man and famous for being “the last full-blooded Moriori”.

To read more about Tommy Solomon, go to the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* website.  
[www.dnzb.govt.nz/dnzb/](http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/dnzb/)



Tommy Solomon in New Zealand about 1925



## A People of Peace

Moriori are the original people of the Chatham Islands. Like Māori, they come from a long line of Polynesian voyagers who settled the scattered islands of the Pacific over several thousand years. One of the last places these voyagers reached was Rēkohu, between eight hundred and a thousand years ago. (Rēkohu is the Moriori name for the main island in the Chatham Islands group.)



This drawing, by Rita Angus, shows traditional Moriori clothing: a seal-skin cloak (held in place by a bone pendant) and a marowhara (flax girdle). The man is holding a tupuari, and he wears his hair in a traditional topknot.

“... their numbers once exceeded the flax stalks on the Island or the Wild Ducks on the lake ... they were then a very happy people ... in entire isolation from the rest of the world.”

Archibald Shand, the first magistrate on Rēkohu, 1855–1863, and father of the ethnographer Alexander Shand

\* See the glossary on page 28.

Whalers in the South Pacific, 1861



## First Contact

In 1791, the British ship HMS *Chatham* arrived at Rēkohu, driven off course by a storm. To the Moriori of the time, the British sailors, with their mighty ship, unfamiliar clothes, and pale skin, must have seemed like strange beings from a very distant place. The ship's captain, Lieutenant William Broughton, wrote in his journal: "... they pointed to the Sun, and then to us, as if to ask whether we had come from thence."

In the following years, more strangers were to come: sealers and whalers – and the Moriori welcomed them. But these newcomers were to wipe out the seals, an important source of food and clothing for the **tchakat henu**, and they brought diseases such as measles and flu, which the Moriori had little resistance to. Some visitors treated the Moriori as "little more than beasts". In just forty years, their population plummeted from around 2500 to as low as 1600. Worse was to come.

By the early 1800s, communities on Rēkohu had become very mixed.





## Invasion

Two Māori iwi, Ngāti Mutunga and Ngāti Tama, had heard about this small group of islands to the east. In November 1835, they commandeered a British sailing ship from Wellington harbour, and armed with guns, they set out to invade Rēkohu. When the two iwi first arrived, seasick and hungry after a rough, week-long voyage, Moriori nursed them back to health, as was their **toho**. But the new arrivals (or “New Zealanders” as they were called by Moriori) had plans to take over the island. They began to takahi – the Māori custom of walking the land to claim possession – killing as they went.

Moriori men came together at Te Awapātiki to discuss their response. The young men urged fighting back. However, because of the vow of peace their ancestors

had taken long ago, the elders forbade warfare. To break the Law of Nunuku would be a violation of their customs and a loss of mana as a people. So the Moriori decided to stand by their vow and offered to share their home with the new arrivals.

The invaders rejected the offer. For them, mana increased through conquest. Hirawanu Tapu, who was eleven at the time, later recalled: “[and so they] commenced to kill us like sheep ... wherever we were found.”\* Another Moriori survivor, Minarapa, an elder from Kāingaroa, remembered: “We were terrified, fled to the bush, concealed ourselves in holes under ground, and in any place to escape our enemies. It was of no avail; we were discovered and killed, men, women, and children indiscriminately.”

\* To read more about Hirawanu Tapu, go to the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* website.

They were forbidden to marry other Moriori, to speak their own language, and to follow their own beliefs.

## Despair

Those Moriori who weren't killed were enslaved. They were forbidden to marry other Moriori, to speak their own language, and to follow their own beliefs. A group of survivors later wrote: “... men were separated from the women, parents from children, older children from younger children, and the strings of their heart quivered ...” Many died of despair – for what was there to live for?



Hirawanu Tapu and his wife, Rohana, outside their house at Manukau, Rēkohu, sometime at the end of the nineteenth century

By 1870, one hundred Moriori remained – and only six of them remembered the language well. The Moriori population was on the brink of extinction. Some had managed to escape the island; others had been traded in New Zealand as slaves. Those who remained pleaded with the New Zealand government to protect them and return their land, but they were ignored. Because Moriori were looked down on and ill-treated, many began to hide their true identity, choosing instead to say they were Māori or Pākehā. It was to stay this way for generations.



## Grave Robbers

Researchers from New Zealand and around the world began to hear about this “dying race”. From the mid-1800s, they made the long journey to the Chatham Islands to collect “specimens” to help with their research and fill their museums.

Skeletons were easy to unearth because the Moriori, like many Polynesians, buried their dead sitting upright in the sand dunes, their heads exposed and facing the sea. Bodies had also been left on the beach after the massacre, and collectors viewed the bones as public property.

These **tchap** remains were plundered along with the adzes, pendants, and other taonga buried alongside them. In some cases, teeth were even knocked out of skulls to make dentures for British aristocrats. As late as the 1960s, collectors used chainsaws to obtain rākau mōmori – sacred trees on which Moriori had made carvings to represent their ancestors. For the Moriori people, each thing taken was one step closer towards their culture being lost forever.

A collection of Moriori artefacts, photographed between 1900 and 1920



Rākau mōmori

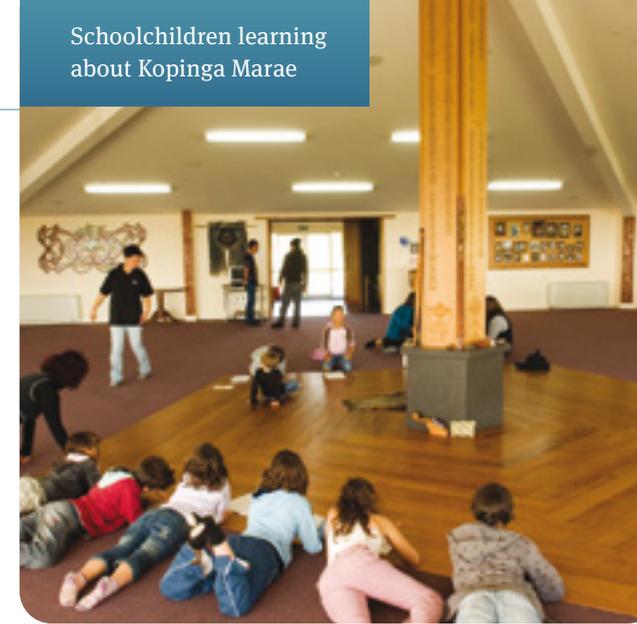
## A New Beginning

These days, when someone asks Māui Solomon about his Moriori ancestry, he likes to say he’s full-blooded, just like his grandfather. If a person expresses disbelief, he smiles and says, “I am Moriori, and I am full of blood.” For Māui and other Moriori, it’s not about being a quarter or a sixteenth Moriori – or whatever the case may be – it’s about the fact that they identify as Moriori.

Natalia Solomon with the statue of her great-great-grandfather Tommy



Schoolchildren learning about Kopinga Marae



In the 1980s, Moriori set out to revive their culture. In 1986, a statue of Tommy Solomon was unveiled near his farm at Manukau Point; in 2005, Kopinga Marae was opened near Waitangi and has become one of the most visited places on the island. Through a Treaty of Waitangi settlement, the Hokotehi Moriori Trust (established in 2001) has also helped to win back a small share of the Chatham Islands’ fishing resources. And a \$6 million gift from the government is helping to revive the people’s language, culture, and identity.

... Moriori set out to revive their culture ...

## The Journey Continues

A fiction, a phantom people? Nothing could be further from the truth. Today, around a thousand people officially identify as having Moriori **hokopapa** – and there are many more.

Like Māui Solomon's ancestor Tommy, today's Moriori are a resilient people, survivors against the odds.

While in many ways their journey has only just begun, Moriori continue to look to the past for inspiration. As Māui Solomon says, "Six hundred years of living in peace – now there's something to be proud of. It's a record that people from around the world, not just Moriori, are inspired by. And we all know the world could certainly do with more peace."



### "Give our stuff back"

Jacob Hill lives in the tiny fishing settlement of Kāingaroa. His karapuna are Moriori – and unlike earlier generations, Jacob has always been encouraged to think of himself as Moriori and to find out about his people's past.

One of the things Jacob has learnt is that many ancient Moriori artefacts have gone missing from the islands – and he wants these taonga returned. "All kinds of things have been taken from the Chathams, like adzes, patu, mako shark teeth, whale teeth, bark carvings, crystals. Some of these taonga have gone to museums, and others have just gone missing," he says.

Jacob feels strongly about the fact that precious things belonging to his people have been taken. "Visitors shouldn't be stealing things that are part of the islands' heritage. They're just greedy – and I'd like to tell them to give our stuff back. It goes way back to the olden days, and it belongs to the islands, which is why I don't think our taonga should be in museums in other countries, either. People there don't really understand the meaning of them or what they're for. They'd be devastated



if something that belonged to them was taken away."

Some visitors to the islands still dig around burial sites looking for Moriori artefacts, although fortunately, these people are now in the minority. Moriori and the Hokotehi Moriori Trust are working with museums in New Zealand and around the world to help bring these taonga – and their ancestors – back home.

## Reviving a Culture

- **1863**  
The enslavement of Moriori is abolished.
- **1890s**  
Hirawanu Tapu and Alexander Shand work together to publish articles about Moriori in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*. These articles become an important record of Moriori culture and language.
- **1963**  
The first attempt is made to preserve the Moriori dendroglyphs (tree carvings) at Hapupu.
- **1986**  
The statue of Tommy Solomon is unveiled. The event draws the largest crowd to Rēkohu since the 1800s.
- **1988**  
Moriori file a claim with the Waitangi Tribunal seeking the return of land and fishing rights and recognition of their language and culture.
- **1989**  
*Moriori: A People Rediscovered* by Michael King is published. It reaches a wide audience and goes on to win New Zealand's most important book award the following year.
- **2000**  
The documentary film *The Feathers of Peace* is released.
- **2001**  
The Waitangi Tribunal upholds the claim of Moriori as tchakat henu of Rēkohu and Rangiaurii. The Hokotehi Moriori Trust is established to officially represent Moriori people.
- **2004**  
Moriori win back a share of their fishing rights from the Treaty of Waitangi Fisheries Commission.
- **2005**  
Kopinga Marae is opened by Prime Minister Helen Clark.
- **2008**  
Hokotehi Moriori Trust and the Crown establish a \$6 million trust fund to help restore and promote Moriori culture.
- **2009**  
The National Peace and Conflict Studies Centre opens at Otago University with help from Moriori.
- The Hokotehi Moriori Trust website goes live. ([www.moriori.co.nz](http://www.moriori.co.nz))

# Moriori: A Story of Survival

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