Maori Essay, Research Paper

MAORI

Maori are the host people of Aotearoa – New Zealand (land of the white cloud). Maori actually means natural, normal or local. The Maori call themselves Tangata Whenua, meaning people of the land. According to the 1996 census, Maori population is well over 500,000, which is around 15 percent of the population of New Zealand. More than 95 percent of Maori live on the North Island.

Maori language is still an endangered language. English is taught in schools as primary language (compulsory subject). Many Maori today are fighting to have the Maori language taught as a compulsory subject thus ensuring its survival.

In most Maori communities men hunted and ploughed, while women weeded, wove, and cooked. Art was and is very important to Maori community. They are interested in poetry and oratory, but also in tattooing and the carving of wood, bone, and stone. Many Maori wear highly decorative personal ornaments such as amulets and carved stone pendants.

Maori religion and mythology

According to Maori mythology the world was created by Rangi and Papa, the male sky and the female earth. They stayed in a tight embrace because Rangi wanted to prevent the creation of the world. Their divine children were trapped in this embrace and tried to separate them. At last Tane, the god of the forest succeeded in splitting his parents.

The sky and the earth assumed their present position, while their children were free. Only Tawhiri, the storm god, was very angry with Tane for having separated their parents. He still expresses his anger by creating storms and hurricanes that damage the forests.

Interestingly enough, this creation story is quite similar to that of Uranus and Gaea in Greek mythology.

Arrival of the Europeans

The first European explorers arrived at New Zealand in the mid 1600’s but in general most people refer to the European discovery of Capt. James Cook towards the end of the 17th century.

Initial contacts were filled with misunderstandings between the Maori and the new arrivals:

In his novel “Behind the Tattooed Face Heretaunga Pat Baker describes an incident where a Maori accidentally cuts himself with a bayonet belonging to an English sailor. According to his beliefs he had to take and bury it now. But the owner who thought he was trying to steal it promptly shot him.

However not all first contacts were like this and Maori soon became accustomed to those strange looking people and began to invite them to their villages.

Lots and lots of Europeans made their way to New Zealand with the lure of gold, seal furs and free land. Some French colonists wanted to make an independent state out of New Zealand but the country stayed in Maori hands. But more and more of the Maori s land was taken. Promise after promise was broken and now Maori were even forced to pay taxes and land rates.

With the break down of trust between Maori and the British Government war spread from the north to further south. Many villages and its inhabitants were wiped out and as a result of this war many Maori tribes were dispossessed of the land they desperately needed. Sometimes the era from 1860-1869 is termed as the “New Zealand Civil War”.

The Maori population fell from about 120,000 in 1769 to 42,000 in 1896.

The causes for the decrease were: alcohol, diseases that were brought in by the explorers, war.

Maori Today

In 1897 the “Young Maori Party” was formed. This group of young students was able to influence legislation so medical assistance would be given to the Maori and British doctors would treat Maori patients. This act became a turning point and helped Maori people make a comeback.

Nowadays many Maori are well known for their success in the field of art, sport or politics. Kini Te Kanawa arguably one of opera s brightest stars today and author Keni Ilulme, who won Britain s coveted Booker prize, are excellent examples of Maori success. Sir Paul Reeves, a Maori from the Tamnaki tribal region is a former Governor General of New Zealand. Dame Geongina Kirby is noted for her leadership in Maori women s issues, Maori art and business. Also, Maori are significant contributors to New Zealand s international sporting achievements.