



Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month: The Indigenous Maori Peoples of the Pacific Islands

As we continue our observance of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, this week we will learn about the Maori people of New Zealand, which is part of the Pacific Islands.



Māori, the indigenous Polynesian population of New Zealand have a rich history of art, culture and tradition. The Māori people arrived in New Zealand by way of waka or canoe voyages during the early 1300s. These early settlers developed their own culture with their language, mythology, and artistry which is distinctive from other eastern Polynesian cultures.

Traditional Māori beliefs originate from Polynesian cultural concepts such as tapu (sacred), noa (non-sacred), mana (authority or prestige) and wairua (spirit) which govern everyday life of Māori deities. Many Māori people still observe spiritual traditions of tapu and noa. Objects or building that are taput must be made noa by practice of ceremonials actions. A common practice within the Māori culture is the removal of one's shoes before entering a whareniui or meeting house as a token of respect for the ancestors who are represented and spiritually present in the whareniui.

Kapa Haka or performing arts are an important part of Māori culture. Kapa Haka literally means to form a line (kappa) and dance (haka). Cultural performances of waiata (song), haka (dance), tauparapara (chants), and mōteatea (poetry) are used to express and share knowledge and understanding of history, communities and relationships.

Haka

Māori culture is rich in mythical legends known to the Māori people as pūrākau. Māori mythology describes the haka as the dance that celebrates life. It is also said that the haka comes from the story that the sun god, Tama-nui-te-rā, and one of his wives, Hine-raumati, the god of summer had a son named Tane-rore. On hot summer days, Tane-rore would dance for his mother, resulting in a quivering of the air. This movement was the foundation for which all haka originates.

The haka is a ceremonial Māori dance performed with passion and consists of loud chanting, strong hand movements, foot stomping, and thigh slapping and tongue protrusions. Haka is usually performed in a group and typically represents a display of a tribe's pride, strength and unity. Performers may choose to incorporate traditional weapons, such as taiaha (spears) and patu (clubs) into their haka.

Haka are performed by both men and women to welcome distinguished guests, acknowledge achievements, or for occasions such as family events, birthdays, weddings or funerals. Anyone can learn the haka but it is important to respect the culture and tradition behind the day. It is also important to learn and understand the words behind the chants, the significance of the haka you are performing and what you are trying to express when you perform it.

The most widely known performance of the haka comes from the New Zealand rugby team the All Blacks to signify their strength and physical skill. The Blacks performance of the haka has gained in popularity around the world and other sports team have since adopted the haka as a pregame ritual despite criticism.

Now that you know a little more about the haka, let's take a moment to view this cultural dance and listen to the tauparapara (chants). You are now invited to view the [haka ka mate](#) as performed by the All Blacks.