

Moriori (Te Rē Mōriori)

Moriori is the formerly extinct language of the Chatham Islands (*Rēkohū* in Moriori, *Wharekauri* in Maori), belonging to New Zealand, and is at the moment in the process of being revived by some of the descendants of the Moriori people.

The post-contact name of the language (and the people) is variously spelled *Mouriuri*, *Maioriori*, *Maoriori* and *Mooriori* or *Mōriori* but the most common form in English is probably *Moriori* (although the first vowel is long). Apparently there was no name for the people and the language in precontact times.

The linguistic lineage for Moriori is: Austronesian, Polynesian, Nuclear Polynesian, Eastern Polynesian, Central Polynesian, Tahitic. Moriori, therefore, is closely related to the Maori language of New Zealand, Cook Island Maori and Tahitian, among others, and more distantly to Rapanui and Hawaiian. In fact, there are some that regard Moriori as a dialect of Maori. On purely linguistic grounds, however, it seems to be justified to classify Moriori as a separate language.

Some of the characteristic features of Moriori – in comparison with Maori – are: Numerous vowel permutations, such as Moriori *a* for Maori *e* (preposition), *ka* for *ki* (preposition), *eriki* for *ariki* (lord, chief), *reimata* for *roimata* (tear), *wihine* for *wahine* (woman) etc. Word-initial vowels before consonants are often dropped: *na* for *ena* or *ha* for *aha*. Unstressed word-final vowels following vowels are often dropped and the preceding vowel is lengthened: *ingō* for *ingoa* (name), *rē* for *reo* (voice, language). A vowel preceding another vowel can be dropped and the remaining vowel is lengthened: *kā* for *koa*, *hēre* for *haere*, and so forth.

Whole syllables can be dropped, too: *ma* for *mate*, *mo* for *motu*. Unstressed word-final vowels following consonants are often devoiced: *mot(u)* for *motu*, *hok(i)* for *hoki*. The consonants /k/, /h/ and especially /t/ are sometimes aspirated and/or palatalized. However, devoicing of vowels and aspiration and/or palatalization of consonants can be considered allophonic and are not phonemically relevant. Compare the following sentences:

Kitē ko Tū i rari i ri papa o ro waka. (Moriori)

I kitea ko Tū i raro i te papa o te waka. (Maori)

Tu was found beneath the flooring of the canoe.

Note the two different forms of the definite article singular in the Moriori sentence, *ri* and *ro*. This article can also appear as *ta*, *te*, *ti*, *to*, *tu*, *ne*, *re*, *ru*, *i*, *ka*, *ki*, *ko* and others. It is not known whether all these variants reflect dialectal, idiolectal or other differences in Moriori. The usual form of the causative prefix is *hoko-*. In morphology and syntax the differences between Moriori and Maori are less pronounced but by no means negligible. After centuries of isolation the Moriori lexicon also differs to a considerable degree from that of Maori.

Moriori alphabet and pronunciation

A a	E e	I i	O o	U u	Ā ā	Ē ē	Ī ī	Ō ō	Ū ū
[a]	[ɛ]	[i]	[ɔ]	[u]	[a:]	[ɛ:]	[i:]	[ɔ:]	[u:]
P p	T t	K k	M m	N n	Ng ng	Wh wh	H h	W w	R r
[p]	[t]	[k]	[m]	[n]	[ŋ]	[ϕ]	[h]	[w]	[r]

(Information mainly based on: Herbert William Williams, *Some Notes on the Language of the Chatham Islands*, Transactions of the New Zealand Institute, vol. 51, art. xxxvi, 1918.)

Moriori sample text

Ko ta umu a huirangi

Taku umu nei kia tao ki te tihi o ta rangi,
Kai tao atu ki te pehore o ta rangi.
Ka hinga ta umu, ka mate ta umu, ka takato ta umu -
Ta umu te Wairua-Nuku, te Wairua-Rangi,
Te Wairua-Waho, te Wairua-Hu-te-rangi-oro.
Tangohia ta umu ko Huirangi, ko Huirangi mamao;
Mata o tuapaka, te Wairua-Hu-te-rangi-oro.
Tangohia ta umu ko Huirangi,
Tangohia ta umu ko Huirangi-te-Tauira.

The Oven of Huirangi

This, my oven, let it roast the crown of heaven,
Let it roast the bald pate of heaven.
The oven subsides, the oven dies, the oven lies prostrate -
The oven of the Spirit of Earth, of the Spirit of Heaven,
The Spirit beyond, the Spirit of Hu-te-rangi-oro.
Take the oven, it is Huirangi, it is Huirangi-mamao;
Countenance of ardent heat, the Spirit of Hu-te-rangi-oro.
Take the oven, it is Huirangi,
Take the oven, it is Huirangi, the Acolyte.

(Adapted from: Alexander Shand, *The Moriori People of the Chatham Islands, their History and Traditions*, Memoirs of the Polynesian Society, vol. 2, p. 200, 1911.)