The Maori people inhabited New Zealand for nearly 1000 years before the first European explorer to the island nation, the Dutchman Abel Tasman, sailed up the west coast and named it Niuew Zeeland, after the province of Zeeland in the Netherlands. Maori culture has always been an integral part of New Zealand, and an understanding of the Maori’s vividly chronicled history is critical to an understanding of New Zealand today.

The original inhabitants of New Zealand were Polynesians who arrived by canoe in a series of migrations. Among these were the Moriori, or moa hunters, early ancestors of the Maori, who arrived in a later migration. Historians estimate the first Polynesians arrived over 1000 years ago, possibly as early as 800 AD. Whether the islands were discovered by accident or design is uncertain, but the original peoples found a plentiful food supply and larger, more varied islands than anywhere else in the Pacific. They named the islands Aotearoa, or the land of the long white cloud.

In the early “Archaic” period of Polynesian settlement, inhabitants depended on the plentiful sea life and the large and spectacular moa, a flightless bird, now extinct, for their food supply. Later, in the “Classic Maori” period, agriculture became increasingly important, with kumara (sweet potato), taro, and yams the most important crops. Maori civilization was centered on the warmer North Island, with expeditions mounted to the South Island to search for jade

Maori societies were hierarchical, and revolved around the *iwi* (tribe) or *hapu* (sub-tribe). The hapu were further divided into *whanau* (extended family groups) that joined with each other to form communal villages. Positions of leadership were largely hereditary, and local chiefs of the whanau were under the authority of the *ariki*, the supreme chief of the entire tribe.

Maori religion was complex. Ancestor worship was important, and a variety of gods representing the sky, sea, mountains, war, agriculture, and so forth, were prominent. The notions of *mauri* (life force), *wairua* (spirit), *mana* (spiritual power or prestige), and *tapu* (taboo) were important. War, which had its own sacrifices, worship, rituals, and dance and art forms, was one of the ways to best promote the mana of a tribe. Wars were waged over territory or other things, with the losers often becoming slaves or food.

In 1642 the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman sailed up the west coast of New Zealand, but did not linger after his only landing attempt resulted in several of his crew being killed and eaten. New Zealand was left alone until Captain James Cook sailed around it in the Endeavor in 1796. Cook circumnavigated New Zealand on three separate voyages, making friendly contact with the Maori. After determining that New Zealand was not the fabled large southern continent Europeans were certain existed, Cook claimed it for the British Crown and sailed on to Australia.

It was not until the early 19th century that missionaries and other European settlers began to arrive in New Zealand. In short order the Bible was translated into Maori, tribal warfare was abated, cannibalism was stamped out, and the health and number of Maori people were in decline. By 1838 lawlessness abounded and a rampant grab for Maori land together with the threat of a French colonizing effort moved the British to seek annexation of New Zealand. In 1840 a group of Maori chiefs signed the Treaty of Waitangi, relinquishing the sovereignty of New Zealand to the British Crown. The treaty guaranteed Maori ownership of their land and stipulated that land could only be sold to the Crown, who would then sell the land to settlers in a fair manner. When settlers arrived and the Maori didn’t want to sell their land, conflict invariably resulted, beginning a long series of conflicts between the Maori and European settlers.

Though short and simple, the controversial Treaty of Waitangi is still hotly debated in modern-day New Zealand, an independent nation since 1947. While New Zealand grew through immigration during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Maori population declined steeply, and with it Maori culture, language, and traditions. The 1970s and 80s saw a resurgence of Maori culture, and young activists joined forces with traditional leaders to press the government to address Maori grievances. In 1975 parliament passed the Treaty of Waitangi Act, which established a Waitangi Tribunal to investigate Maori claims against the British Crown, and financial reparations were made to some Maori tribes whose lands were unjustly confiscated. Today the debate over the treaty continues, along with overall good relations between the two communities. New Zealand’s track record on race relations remains one of the strongest in the former British colonies.