

Hakka [sic] by Alasdair Massie.  
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### Note on this Case Study:

Dimensions of religious experiences can be found in unexpected places deeply embedded in culture. While reading this case study about Māori Indigenous communities of Aotearoa/New Zealand and their relationship to rugby, think about how sporting contexts can mirror and/or intertwine with cultural landscapes. What features of culture are being highlighted in sports that are or are not being highlighted in daily life? Who has the power to decide what is being featured? And how do sports catalyze and/or stagnate the realities of Indigenous communities? When thinking about sports and religion, consider how religion is not a unitary enterprise, but is rather internally diverse, continuously evolving and changing, and found embedded in all cultures.

## Māori History in Aotearoa/New Zealand Rugby Traditions

For over 100 years, the Aotearoa (pronounced au-tee-uh-row-uh)/New Zealand All Blacks rugby team have performed a haka before every match.<sup>1</sup> Haka are traditional dances of the Māori people, who are Indigenous descendants of Polynesian peoples. Haka typically signify conquests of life over death.<sup>2</sup> They are performed by groups/teams to generate collective inspiration in preparation to challenge competitors. The use of haka in rugby invites viewers to examine the relationship between the Māori people and sports. Sports are a component of public life that can highlight society's values and beliefs. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, rugby is a sport that reflects complex histories of violence and peace vis-a-vis legacies of colonization for the Māori people.

Rugby's introduction in Aotearoa/New Zealand coincided with British colonialism. The British colonial settlers were looking for prosperous economic opportunities. The islands of Aotearoa/New Zealand had viable resources and land attractive to Europeans. During early colonial settlement, rugby became a colonial officers' pastime. Rugby made its way into Indigenous communities after the enforcing of the colonial ban on the Māori sport called *ki-o-rahi*, which is based upon Indigenous spiritual beliefs.

*Ki-o-rahi* was believed to reveal lessons from *atua*—supernatural beings from the spirit world<sup>3</sup>—as a *waka*, or a vessel, that transported philosophies of dynamism and the pursuit of excellence amongst Māori communities. The nature of the game demonstrates that multiskilled coordination (running, passing, and kicking) between team members will produce communal success in the attempt to enter a spiritual realm of peace. The common idea that sport brings diverse people across divides together supports the power of this Māori spiritual belief.

<sup>1</sup> Eva Corlett, "Aotearoa or New Zealand: Has the Moment Come to Change the Country's Name?" *The Guardian*, August 10, 2022. Aotearoa is the Māori language name for the country of New Zealand.

<sup>2</sup> "The Haka," [www.allblacks.com](http://www.allblacks.com), New Zealand Rugby, October 20, 2024, <https://www.allblacks.com/the-haka>.

<sup>3</sup> Ross Calman, "Traditional Māori Games — Ngā Tājaro - Sports and games in traditional Māori society," *Te Ara - The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, September 5, 2013, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/traditional-maori-games-nga-takaro/page-1>.

In the centuries leading up to Aotearoa/New Zealand independence, Christian missionaries ran many boarding schools in charge of sporting practices and diligently adhered to the ban on *ki-o-rahi*. They believed that the sport was a feature of pagan culture.<sup>4</sup> The ban effectively cut off many children as well as adults from participating in traditional Māori practices. Despite the ban's contribution to cultural erasure, it is often thought that the Māori people were receptive to rugby because of its resemblance to *ki-o-rahi*.<sup>5</sup>

Decades after Aotearoa/New Zealand became a colony, the first official men's rugby game took place in the region of Nelson on the southern island in 1870.<sup>6</sup> The game can be interpreted, in part, as initiating the unification of a national identity amongst the Europeans and Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa/New Zealand because rugby was considered the site in which many cultures could attempt to peacefully coexist. Both the European ball-kicking influence and the Māori ball-passing inclusion in rugby combined to unify in the sport's early iterations. While the Māori were largely excluded in the first game, their contribution to revamping the rules of rugby made the sport what it is today—dynamic and full of excitement.

The deepening integration of the European settlers with Māori people continued when the New Zealand Natives, the premier men's touring national rugby team, performed a haka at an away match in Wales in 1888. The haka invoked Māori spiritual beliefs and values and symbolized a profound appreciation for Indigenous Pacific heritage and culture.

One of the first haka, and now the most frequently performed, is the *Ka Mate*, which roughly translates as, "It is death." There are thousands of haka that can be performed, all of which evoke different Māori messages. In addition to the *Ka Mate*, the most well-known haka include the All Blacks original *Kapa-o-Pango*, which translates as, "team in black," and the Black Ferns Women's Premier Team original *Ko Ūhia Mai*, which translates as, "Let it be known."<sup>7</sup>

By the 1980s, two major shifts in Aotearoa/New Zealand society became evident in public life. First, the Māori were calling for the government to commit to Indigenous autonomy as was declared in the Treaty of Waitangi. Their primary demand was territorial sovereignty. Second, in 1987, the frequency of performing haka before sports games increased, the dance now preceding every All Blacks match and many amateur matches as well.<sup>8</sup> These concurring shifts catalyzed a reckoning with colonial histories and legacies in Aotearoa/New Zealand because the peoples of the country had to start making sense of both Māori historical erasure and their contemporary rise in visibility.

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<sup>4</sup> Ross Calman, "Traditional Māori Games — Ngā Tājaro — Suppression and Revival," *Te Ara - The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, September 5, 2013, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/traditional-maori-games-nga-takaro/page-8>.

<sup>5</sup> Harko Brown, "The Queen of the Ball," *Journal of Physical Education New Zealand* 46, no. 1 (April 2013): 30.

<sup>6</sup> "Introduction to Rugby," [www.experienceallblacks.com](http://www.experienceallblacks.com), *New Zealand Rugby*, October 20, 2024, <https://www.experienceallblacks.com/insider-information/introduction-to-rugby/>.

<sup>7</sup> "The Haka," [www.allblacks.com](http://www.allblacks.com).

<sup>8</sup> "The Haka," [www.allblacks.com](http://www.allblacks.com).

Despite international recognition in the sporting world, the Māori have continued to feel the impact of centuries' worth of British colonial authority. Along with other Indigenous communities, the Māori are the most economically, politically, and socially disadvantaged group in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The Māori people disproportionately occupy low-paying jobs and have been constrained to high levels of unemployment, which has contributed to their poor living conditions and increased criminal activity. Out of Aotearoa/New Zealand's five million residents, the Māori community comprises approximately 900,000 people. Roughly 18% of the Aotearoa/New Zealand population, the Māori are the most overrepresented group living in poverty, incarcerated in prison, and at risk of lower life expectancy.<sup>9</sup>

Sonny Bill Williams, a former Pacific Islander All Black, a player on the All Blacks rugby team, said during an interview that “for so long from a sporting context [Māori and Pacific Islanders] put on a mask where we are so strong, and we show a picture of masculinity [to prove] we've got everything worked out.”<sup>10</sup> Williams explained that a common reality is that many people in Indigenous communities struggle with not only rough material conditions but also battle with self-confidence issues due to diluting their heritage.

The former All Black identifies one racial and ethnic paradigm within sports—that Māori, Pacific Islanders as well as those from other Indigenous communities typically sacrifice their own needs in exchange for benefits linked to operating within the white hegemony. One example is that those who grew up in poverty forgo lucrative rugby contracts overseas so that they can be eligible for national team selections as stipulated under New Zealand Rugby statutes.<sup>11</sup> This implies that many players are given the ultimatum between representing their heritage at the highest level possible or generating an income worth the value of their work. Many Māori, Pacific Islanders, and people from other Indigenous communities have cut their national team careers short to generate wealth that will bring them out of their socioeconomic disadvantages.

Even though Māori rugby players have a visible presence in Aotearoa/New Zealand, including having a dominating impact in All Blacks Squads—the Māori All Blacks (a team comprised of rugby players proving Māori descent), the Black Ferns (the Premier Women's Team), and other professional and amateur teams—they still lack representation in managerial and power-holding positions. Currently there is no permanent Māori representation in New Zealand Rugby, the top governing board in the country.<sup>12</sup> The lack of representation generates institutional inequalities within New Zealand Rugby.

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<sup>9</sup> Stats NZ - Tatauranga Aotearoa, “2023 Census population counts (by ethnic group, age, and Māori descent) and dwelling counts - Download data - 2023 Census National and Subnational Usually Resident Population Counts and Dwelling Counts,” Microsoft Excel Table 3, 29 May 2024, <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/2023-census-population-counts-by-ethnic-group-age-and-maori-descent-and-dwelling-counts/>.

<sup>10</sup> Tamati Tiananga, “Sonny Bill Williams: Māori and Pasifika players must stay resilient,” *Te Ao Māori News*, October 14, 2021, <https://www.teaonews.co.nz/2021/10/14/sonny-bill-williams-maori-and-pasifika-players-must-stay-resilient/>.

<sup>11</sup> Liam Napier, “Aaron Smith in favour of changes to All Blacks overseas eligibility as debate swirls,” *The New Zealand Herald*, May 23, 2024, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/sport/rugby/all-blacks/aaron-smith-in-favour-of-changes-to-all-blacks-overseas-eligibility-as-debate-swirls/LLVJXFRJOZG43CU5BZWWWMN7IE/>.

<sup>12</sup> NZ Herald, “Why we need a Pasifika seat on New Zealand Rugby board – Dr Dion Enari,” *The New Zealand Herald*, July 21, 2024, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/kaahu/why-we-need-a-pasifika-seat-on-new-zealand-rugby-board-dr-dion-enari/LOYG2NPUE5B4PA764XFIQURZE4/>.

Today, the sport of rugby in Aotearoa/New Zealand remains a complex lens to view the histories and issues surrounding settler colonialism and Māori traditions. On one hand, the colonial instrumentalization of rugby has periodically used the sport to control Māori communities by creating power differentials between the Europeans and Indigenous peoples. On the other hand, rugby has been a facet of public life where the Māori community has gained upward social mobility and symbolically transformed the relationship between settlers and Indigenous peoples.<sup>13</sup>

The haka in rugby remains one of the most visible reminders of Aotearoa/New Zealand's diverse history and encourages viewers to explore the extent in which sports has the power to liberate or subjugate Indigenous communities.

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<sup>13</sup> Graham Hingangaroa Smith and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "Foreword: Indigenous Sport and Development — Decolonising Sport in Aotearoa New Zealand," *Journal of Sport for Development* 11, no. 1 (November 2023): 1-10, December 21, 2023, <https://jsfd.org/2023/12/21/foreword-indigenous-sport-and-development-decolonising-sport-in-aotearoa-new-zealand/>.

## Additional Resources

### Primary Sources

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## Discussion Questions

- Watch the 2015 All Blacks Rugby World Cup Team perform the *Ka Mate* haka. What are your reactions? What does the performance express about Māori beliefs? And why do you think it continues to be performed before every All Blacks match?
- Read "A History of Colonization in Aotearoa/New Zealand." Compare and contrast this history to the history of colonization in the United States.

- Read the Radio New Zealand article about Pakilau Manase Lua's resignation. What are your reactions? In what ways does the sporting world reflect and/or connect with our cultural, political, economic, and spiritual worlds?
- Read "From the Vaults: The Rise of the Black Ferns." What does the history of the Black Ferns tell us about the roles of women in sports? Who are some female athletes or women's sports teams that are comparable to the history and impact of the Black Ferns? How so?
- Read the Treaty of Waitangi. Reflect on how British colonial authorities and Māori leaders could have misinterpreted each other. Which groups involved in the creation of this Treaty were disadvantaged? Explain.
- Looking at the United States, what are some examples of religion intersecting with sports? What is the role of religion? In the American context, what are some values and concerns with religion playing a bigger public role in sports?