

Forum: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Issue: Preserving Māori Cultural Heritage and Indigenous Knowledge Systems in New Zealand

Name: Shreyas Agarwal

Position: Deputy Chair

Introduction:

“A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.” (1) The Māori are indigenous people of New Zealand, with their origins being traced to Polynesia. (2) Their culture is extremely diverse, with some aspects of it including their language, Te reo Māori, which is recognized as an official language in New Zealand, the Māori strongly emphasize the importance of oral traditions with Whakataukī (traditional proverbs to convey wisdom, values, and knowledge) and Pūrākau (Myths, legends, and traditional stories). In addition to this, they have systems in place to decide hierarchy, such as the idea of Mana, which is prestige gained from ancestry, achievements, and conduct. Another important part of Māori culture is the focus on the guardianship and responsibility for protecting the natural world, which is called Kaitiakitanga. (3)

However, Māori culture has faced historical and ongoing challenges due to many issues, but mostly due to colonization, urbanization, and globalization. These challenges have led to the Māori population drastically shrinking and becoming a minority while struggling with issues pertaining to health, housing, and political rights, among others. (4)

Today, there are efforts both domestically and internationally to revitalize the Māori population and protect their rich cultural heritage. This topic falls under the mandate of UNESCO as it promotes the safeguarding of cultural heritage and the protection of indigenous populations and traditions. In this committee, the focus will be on how member states can help New Zealand, in cooperation with UNESCO, effectively preserve Māori cultural rights and knowledge systems.

Definition of key terms:

Māori: The Māori are indigenous people of New Zealand, with their origins being traced to Polynesia. (2)

The Pākehā: This is a word originating from Te reo Māori and refers to white people who live in New Zealand, but more specifically, people whose ancestors came from Europe. (14)

Te Reo Māori: Te reo Māori is the language spoken by people of the Māori. It was officially recognized as a language in New Zealand in 1987. (2)

Indigenous people: Indigenous people cannot be firmly defined, but usually share some characteristics such as the self-identification of indigenous people at the individual level, historical continuity with pre-colonial or settler societies, strong links to territories and natural resources, distinct social, economic, and political systems, along with distinct language, culture, and beliefs. (5)

Background:

One of the first challenges faced by the Māori was the effects of colonization on them. Evidence shows us that before James Cook's visits to New Zealand, the Māori had a life expectancy close to that of many privileged European societies of the time. Unfortunately, colonization had a largely negative effect on both the life expectancy and the population of the Māori, causing it to become less than half after over a hundred years of colonization. There were many reasons for this, such as musket warfare with the European colonizers, which caused around 700 deaths a year. In addition to this, there were many introduced diseases due to the European settlers, who increased after the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, which the Māori didn't have immunity to, and caused an average of 4000 deaths a year. Along with these two, the loss of Māori land to settlers caused the Māori to live in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions, which caused deaths and a lower mortality rate, which limited future population growth. (6)

Despite numerous efforts by the government of New Zealand and the Māori themselves, there are still numerous issues which their population faces in today's world. Certain diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancers, are still major threats to their vulnerable population.

The Māori are still predominantly illiterate despite some of them becoming educated. Housing has consistently been an issue for them, and their unemployment rates have also been higher than those of the Pākehā. Along with these issues, the integration of Māori culture and their language in modern New Zealand has also remained an issue due to the distinct culture of theirs. (7)

The preservation of the Māori is essential not only for the country of New Zealand and its indigenous populations but also for global cultural diversity. The loss of such heritage would include the death of unique languages, traditions, and knowledge systems that can never be replaced. As UNESCO, it is of great importance to help preserve their culture and allow them to maintain authenticity and self-determination.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Event
1769–1777	First contact with Europeans
1840	Treaty of Waitangi
1896	Lowest point in Māori population
1982	First Kōhanga Reo established
1987	Te reo Māori being recognized as an official language
2003	Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage is ratified
2007	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People

Major parties involved:

New Zealand: New Zealand is the main stakeholder. The issue of the Māori is an issue for their indigenous populations and their national policies. The government is responsible for legislating, funding, and implementing measures to preserve the Māori cultural heritage with help from other parties. New Zealand seeks to uphold its Treaty of Waitangi, promote its national history,

and address historical injustices. The government has already taken action, such as the recognition of Te Reo Māori as an official language (1987), support for Māori-medium education (Kōhanga Reo, Kura Kaupapa Māori), and the establishment of institutions such as the Māori Language Commission.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): UNESCO is a major party in safeguarding cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge systems on a global scale. Their main goal is to protect cultural heritage and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO has already taken actions on a global level that help with the preservation of many indigenous populations, such as the Māori. This includes the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (29 September – 17th October 2003), United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (13th September 2007), and the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples (22nd and 23rd September 2014).

United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII): The UNPFII is a key advisory body addressing specifically indigenous issues globally. It focuses on the promotion of rights, well-being, and cultural preservation of indigenous peoples worldwide. Its primary actions include issuing recommendations to UN member states, raising awareness of indigenous rights violations, and supporting indigenous participation in decision-making. (8)

Relevant UN treaties, resolutions, and reports:

Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (29 September – 17th October 2003): This convention focuses on protecting intangible cultural heritage and covers oral expressions, performing arts, and knowledge systems, encourages governments to identify and safeguard intangible heritage, and promotes community engagement in preservation efforts. (9)

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (13th September 2007): This is one of the most important international frameworks for indigenous rights as it affirms indigenous peoples as being equal to all people, reaffirms that they shouldn't be discriminated against, recognizes the urgent need to respect and promote their rights, among many other important clauses. (10)

World Conference on Indigenous Peoples (22nd and 23rd September 2014): This UN conference was held to share perspectives and some practices to help realize the rights of

indigenous peoples. This includes emphasized protection of indigenous cultures, stronger international cooperation, and more. (11)

Previous attempts to solve the issue:

Previous Attempt #1: Māori Language Act (1987): The Māori Language Act in 1987 recognized Te Reo Māori as an official language in New Zealand. They also established institutions such as the Māori Language Commission to promote its use. They also discussed strategies to increase the number of speakers by broadcasting in Māori and national language plans. This was held on a national level and was initiated by the government of New Zealand. The main reason this act didn't work is due to the lack of funding and limited access to Te reo Māori learning. (12)

Previous attempt #2: Kōhanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Māori: The Kōhanga Reo movement was a response to the state of the Māori language. It was driven by the Māori themselves and was backed by the New Zealand government. This movement helped make schools with an emphasis on total Māori-language immersion. The first one was opened in 1982, and in the following year, over 100 more were established. In addition to this, the Kura Kaupapa Māori is another movement with a similar goal of teaching in Te reo Māori with a focus on whānau-based Māori philosophy. (13)

Possible solutions:

Possible Solution #1: Integrate Māori culture and the Te reo Māori language into the New Zealand education system: Unlike previous attempts, make this widespread across all schools to ensure there is national cultural understanding. Additionally, the funding needs to be sufficient to ensure that the program is carried out as it is envisioned, unlike previous programs.

Possible Solution #2: Strengthening legal protection for the Māori: The New Zealand government can make legislation to ensure that the rights of the Māori are respected. This includes their rights to intellectual property, to ensure that their cultural symbols or knowledge aren't being misused.

Bibliography:

“BrainyQuote.” BrainyQuote, BrainyQuote, 2019, www.brainyquote.com/quotes/marcus_garvey_365148. (1)

Wallenfeldt, Jeff. “Maori - Maori Culture in the 21st Century.” Encyclopedia Britannica, 17 Sept. 2024, www.britannica.com/topic/Maori/Maori-culture-in-the-21st-century. (2)

“Exploring Maori Culture and Traditions.” Superprof NZ, 2024, www.superprof.co.nz/blog/maori-culture/. (3)

Pearson, David. “Ethnic Inequalities.” Teara.govt.nz, 5 May 2011, www.teara.govt.nz/en/ethnic-inequalities/print (4)

Centre, UNESCO World Heritage. “Indigenous Peoples - Glossary.” UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025, www.whc.unesco.org/en/glossary/275 (5)

Pool, Ian. “Effects of Colonisation on Māori.” Govt.nz, 5 May 2011, teara.govt.nz/en/death-rates-and-life-expectancy/page-4 (6)

Taonga, New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage Te Manatu. “Urbanisation and Renaissance.” Teara.govt.nz, 8 Feb. 2005, www.teara.govt.nz/en/maori/page-5 (7)

“Research Guides: Indigenous Issues: Quick Guide.” Un.org, 2025, www.research.un.org/en/indigenous (8)

United Nations. “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.” 13 Sept. 2007, www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf (9)

UNESCO. “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.” Unesco.org, UNESCO, 2003, www.ich.unesco.org/en/convention. (10)

“World Conference on Indigenous Peoples | Indian Law Resource Center.” Indianlaw.org, 2025, www.indianlaw.org/projects/world-conference-indigenous-peoples (11)

<https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1987/176/en/latest/#DLM124186> (12)

Calman, Ross. “Māori Education – Mātauranga.” Govt.nz, 2009, www.teara.govt.nz/en/maori-education-matauranga/print (13)

Cambridge Dictionary. "Pākehā." @CambridgeWords, 8 May 2024,
www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/pakeha (14)

Robinson, Dr John. "Maori Nineteenth Century Population: Model Estimates." Nzcp.com, 2025,
www.nzcp.com/maori-nineteenth-century-population-model-estimates/. (15)