

## April 2021 Entry (on Survival & Ethical Dilemmas)

“Lacking resources of cultural significance such as greenstone and plentiful timber, they found outlets for their ritual needs in the carving of dendroglyphs (incisions into tree trunks, called rakau momori). ... As a small and precarious population, Moriori embraced a pacifist culture that rigidly avoided warfare, replacing it with dispute resolution in the form of ritual fighting and conciliation. The ban on warfare and cannibalism is attributed to their ancestor Nunuku-whenua. ... This enabled the Moriori to preserve what limited resources they had in their harsh climate, avoiding waste through warfare, such as may have led to catastrophic habitat destruction and population decline on Easter Island. However, this lack of training in warfare also led to their later near-destruction at the hands of invading North Island Māori. Moriori castrated some male infants in order to control population growth.” – from Wikipedia article, “[Moriori](#),” captured September 15, 2020.

In 1835, displaced [Māori](#) living in [Wellington, New Zealand](#), hijacked a ship, the brig *Lord Rodney* and used it to invade the [Chatham Islands](#) which were occupied by the pacifistic hunter-gatherer Moriori culture. The Māori were ferocious, perpetually warlike and armed with clubs, axes, and with muskets that they had bought from the Europeans; they were organized for warfare.

The Moriori were distantly related to the Māori, but had migrated long ago to the Chatham Islands which were abundant in resources, but also cooler and harsher than their original home in New Zealand. To avoid overpopulation, they engaged in limited ritual [castration](#) of infants; to avoid destructive warfare, they had developed a system of ritual conflict attributed to their chief [Nunuku-whenua](#) in which men thrashed each other in single combat with rods no more than a thumb thickness and arm length, but were required to stop upon infliction of any abrasion or sign of blood. The Māori had no such compunctions, they killed with glee:

“They proceeded to enslave some Moriori and kill and cannibalise others. With the arrival of the second group ‘parties of warriors armed with muskets, clubs and tomahawks, led by their chiefs, walked through Moriori tribal territories and settlements without warning, permission or greeting. If the districts were wanted by the invaders, they curtly informed the inhabitants that their land had been taken and the Moriori living there were now vassals.’

A hui or council of Moriori elders was convened at the settlement called Te Awapatiki. Despite knowing that the Māori did not share their pacifism, and despite the admonition by some of the elder chiefs that the principle of Nunuku was not appropriate now, two chiefs – Tapata and Torea – declared that ‘the law of Nunuku was not a strategy for survival, to be varied as conditions changed; it was a moral imperative.’ Although this council decided in favour of peace, the invading Māori inferred it was a prelude to war, as was common practice during the Musket Wars. This precipitated a massacre, most complete in the Waitangi area followed by an enslavement of the Moriori survivors.” Id., citing to Michael King, [Moriori: A People Rediscovered](#) (2000).

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Tapata and Torea choose for their people to die for cultural pacifism. Where they confused? Because modern cultural and environmental analysis concludes that pacifism developed in Moriori culture precisely as a survival strategy. Just as warfare developed among the Māori precisely as a survival strategy on a more abundant and crowded island. But after dozens of generations, Moriori pacifism had arched to a '[moral imperative](#)' greater than survival and [self-determination](#) in the face of warlike invaders.

“A Moriori survivor recalled : ‘[The Māori] commenced to kill us like sheep.... [We] were terrified, fled to the bush, concealed ourselves in holes underground, and in any place to escape our enemies. It was of no avail; we were discovered and killed – men, women and children indiscriminately.’ A Māori conqueror explained, ‘We took possession... in accordance with our customs and we caught all the people. Not one escaped.....’” Id., citing to Jared Diamond, [Guns, Germs and Steel](#) (1997), p. 53.

By 1862, 95% of the Moriori population had been killed. The Māori had done to the Moriori the very same that the British had just done to the [Aboriginal Tasmanians](#) during the [Black War](#) three years earlier or the Spanish had done to the [Mesoamerican](#) population centuries earlier. Doubtless this was of great interest during the [Cold War](#); in a [nuclear war](#), would one side refuse to retaliate, refuse [M.A.D.](#), and accept annihilation, martyrdom that humanity may survive in a relatively uncontaminated half of the Earth? Doubtless, this is also the seed of many a sci-fi story either promoting or warning against pacifism, or trying to make a greater philosophical point about survival vs. moral imperatives, or how moral imperatives disappear in the existential threat.

Naturalist author [Loren Eiseley](#), clearly warning against nuclear weapons, concluded in “The Hidden Teacher” (1969) that “... nature is full of traps for the beast that cannot learn” (see fuller quote, [1 Disruption](#), p. 255). Oddly, perhaps ironically however, this observation applies equally to the leadership of the Moriori on the Chatham Islands facing a vicious Māori invasion; the trap being perhaps confusing a culturally codified ritualized pacifistic conflict resolution system for survival with an overriding, enlightened moral imperative.

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