

# History of Ki-O-Rahi

---

## Origins of ball games in New Zealand

Ball games were brought to New Zealand from the Pacific Islands in various forms in the original Polynesian migrations over 1000 years ago. The earliest landfalls where those games developed into ball games uniquely Maori are on the East Coast of New Zealand in the region of Uawa / Tolaga Bay.

A fully carved traditional Ki-o-Rahi field is under construction at Uawa to celebrate a millennium of ball game playing by the Ngati Porou tribe in 2010. Other regions commonly known to have shared knowledge of their ball playing whakapapa are situated in Northland, Taranaki and parts of the South Island.

Ki-o-Rahi is the twentieth century 'umbrella' term for ancient forms of ball play on fields with central tupu and boundary pou. There were over twenty names used in ancient times to describe the game balls, and often those names also applied to the games. Ancient names for the balls included ki, kui, ra, o-ra, ta, hi, ponga, pei, poi and ra-hi. There are many other traditional games which involve throwing, catching and running, including: horohopu (using 'poi toa'), ti-uru (using 'rakau-ure') and tapa-rahi, tapa-wai and haka-riki which all use 'ki' (woven flax balls).

## Origins of Ki-o-Rahi in Europe

Traditional Maori ball games were introduced into Europe before 1940 but it is the game Ki-o-Rahi that is best remembered from WW2 when Maori soldiers, including those of the 28th Maori Battalion, demonstrated the game and are known to have passed on knowledge of the game traditions to French and Italian soldiers and civilians.

Some of the French soldiers took the game 'Ki-o-Rahi' back to their homelands in the Seine-Maritime region. They kept a vestige of the Maori ball game alive by intermittently playing it the unique circular fields. In 2006, the people of Dieppe invited a Maori contingent to play three tackle Ki-o-Rahi games. The New Zealanders won the

women's (37 - 11) and mixed game (28 - 22) but lost the men's game 19 -17.

In Italy, local historians in the Tagliata/Ravenna area say Maori soldiers are remembered for flying kites and playing 'Palla Maori' (Ki-o-Rahi) on the beaches of Ravenna on sand-marked circular pitches during the later stages of WW2. In 2008, a team from NZ played locals as part of the festivities of the International Cervia Kite Festival on those very same beaches.

## Legend

Rahi Tu Taka Hina was married to Te Arakurapakewai (or Ti Ara in some accounts). Te Arakurapakewai was kidnapped by patupaiarehe (the fairy people) and taken away to live with them. Rahi started searching for Te Arakurapakewai and decided to make a manu tangata (a kite that can carry a person) in order to get a better view of the area - this is also a link to traditional *manu* (kite making).

Rahi took eggs to eat for sustenance and carried these eggs in a basket called a "ki". Some people say that the eggs themselves were the "ki". Some of the eggs fell out and landed on a Hokioi bird (giant eagle) named Namu. The Patupaiarehe saw Rahi coming and cast a spell upon him which, some say, put 2 suns into the sky in order to try to scorch him. Thus, the manu tangata (*kite*) was burned and Rahi fell to the ground. Close to death, Rahi found a rock which he lay upon. The rock had a special wairua that helped sustain Rahi while he recovered. (In the game, the rock is the "tupu" and the area below the tupu is the "wairua").

The patupaiarehe saw that Rahi was gaining his strength so they sent in a Ngarara (reptile) to defeat Rahi. Meanwhile, Namu, the Hokioi bird saw what was going on and flew in to protect Rahi (represented by *ki-oma* players defending the *tupu*). Others say the patupaiarehe made the area extremely cold and so Namu embraced Rahi to keep him warm. The Ngarara frantically ran around the tupu, forming what is now the "pawero" zone. His speed was so fast that he turned the area into sand (nowadays, some of those pawero zones are made of sand).

Rahi's father Eru had heard his son was in trouble so cast a spell to build a pathway for Rahi to walk out of the danger area (now seen as "te Ara"). Rahi looked to the heavens and saw the seven stars of Matariki (hence the seven pou). At once he realised that his father was trying to help him and made his way to te ara. Once Rahi was on safe ground he gained enlightenment (Mārama) from seeing his father (hence te Mārama zone).

The whakapapa ends by Rahi chasing the patupaiarehe into a volcano and the main kidnapper being blasted out due to Rahi blocking up the entrance. Te Ara is saved and the two iwi (patupaiarehe and Rahi's people) negotiate to allow each other to coexist which also connects to the rules being agreed on before a game so that both teams understand the expectations of the other - a process of tatu.