

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 80: Board Games. This podcast is supported by our amazing Patrons, such as Chris. If you want to support HANZ go to [patreon.com/historyaotearoa](https://patreon.com/historyaotearoa). Last time, we talked about Māori games that required your brain to be good rather than your muscles. Today is going to be a bit of a shorter episode cause I wanted to dedicate some focus to one game in particular.

Throughout this topic we have discussed a range of games but the one thing we haven't talked about, and possibly what you have been wanting to know is, did Māori play any board games? I'm a huge board game fanatic so things like the royal game of Ur and hnefatafl, games from Mesopotamia and the viking era respectively, are a really nice intersection of my interests. So naturally when looking into this topic, board games is something I wanted to investigate and find out whether Māori had any board games of their own. The short answer is yes, Māori had three board games that we know of, or at least that I could find information on.

Well, in saying that, the first of these games may not be considered a *board* game in the technical sense given it doesn't actually have a board. It was essentially a Māori version of knucklebones, though Best calls it jackstones. To Māori it was known as koruru and seems to have been played in roughly the same way to the knucklebones game that most of you probably know, the main difference being no actual knucklebones were involved since there aren't really any native animals in Aotearoa with you know knuckles, instead they used pebbles. The idea was to take a pebble in one hand, throw it up and then catch it in the same hand, while it was in the air you had to pick up another pebble. Then you would throw those two pebbles in the air and pick up a third and catch them and so on. Again, all done with the same hand and was done up to 15 pebbles. Another version of the game was played with five stones, one stone was repeatedly thrown and caught and while it was in the air the other four stones would be moved into a central circle. Once all four stones were in there, the fifth stone would be thrown, the other four picked up and the fifth caught, the phase would then be repeated and then all five stones thrown up into the air and tried to be caught on the back of the hand with any falling off having to be picked up while a pebble is thrown, the final phase follows the same route as standard knucklebones. Different iwi had different order of operations for this game but by in large it seems to have been the same with a couple of added phases.

The other two games were more 'true' board games in the sense that they had a board so they fit the two requirements of being a board game. Kurapakara, or mengamenga, is probably one of the oldest board games that Māori played. It could be played with a fairly large amount of players, each one playing as a different set of coloured rocks, which acted as a way to distinguish everyone's pieces but also gave a nice effect on the board when the game was finished. This effect actually represented the celestial cloak of Rangi, as it is said the stars are part of the cloak that the sky god wears. The board itself was made of woven harakeke and contained around 121 squares or sometimes more with nine central squares, which were called menga. These squares were also differently coloured, in the same way a chessboard is and in fact similar techniques used to give different patterns in kakahu were used to make the board. In keeping with the theme of stars, the nine central squares were meant to represent Matariki, Puanga and Whānui, arguably the three most important constellations in Te Ao Māori.

How the game was actually played differs as there were a few different variations on the rules but in general they mostly revolved around the grouping of coloured stones on the board. One ruleset had the players taking turns placing stones in an attempt to get them in a straight line outside the central squares. Once this was achieved, they would place one stone in one of the eight central squares that surrounded the ninth square. Initially they would need to achieve a row of four stones before able to place one in the central area but after they achieved this it would then ramp up to five before

another could be placed in the centre, then six and so on, making the game gradually harder for those were in front. Of course as one player was trying to achieve this, other players were trying to deny them a line and create their own, as another rule said that on your turn you could pick up an opponents stone, hand it back to them and replace it with your own. The ultimate goal of the game was to have more of your stones in the central area than anyone else, at which point you win the game. The catch was that the ninth square in the very middle, the pūtahi, could only be occupied when when one player had placed so many stones on the central eight squares that it would be impossible for their opponents to individually get more pieces than them onto the other squares. In other words, you had to have a majority of the central eight occupied by your coloured stones. Once the pūtahi was occupied, the game ended and a winner declared. The only problem I see with these rules is that there doesn't seem to be any sort of catchup mechanic. No source I read made mention of whether a stone could be removed from the central squares once it had been occupied, such as if a player's line is broken, would that mean they lose a stone in the centre? That would make sense to me since otherwise it wouldn't really incentivise players to keep playing when someone was dominating the board, so it's possible that some rules were missing in the sources. Another version had the players try to create squares of nine stones in a three by three grid but otherwise play was the same. Sometimes after someone had won the game, they would yell 'mengamenga' meaning 'the stars have filled the heavens'.

Mengamenga eventually kinda developed or at least heavily inspired this next board game as it shares a lot of similar mechanics and continues with the constellation theme, though this game also expands on this with the theme of a wheke and its eight legs. Mū torere is a much smaller game played with only two people and as such the board is much smaller as well, consisting of a central node that is connected by radials to eight outer nodes in circle. That's it! This is where the idea of the wheke comes from in the game and also how the theme of a constellation is continued. In particular, this constellation was usually Matariki. The rules are pretty straightforward and give the illusion of a much more simple game but like all good board games, while the rules may be easy to learn, the depth of the game is much deeper. In fact, players who were very good at mū torere could predict and plan up to 40 moves ahead. These two factors led to a few stories of Europeans being suckered in thinking they could beat Māori literally at their own game, only to have their ass handed to them, often losing a large wager in the process. The board for mū torere was often a piece of bark from totara. The various markings on the board would be cut when the bark was 'green' so that they became permanent when the bark dried. To stop the bark curling as it dried, sticks would be laid on either side and tied together. Later planks would be used as boards. If they didn't have a board, the design could just be drawn in the ground.

So what are these deceptively simple rules? As mentioned there are eight outer nodes, called kēwai or kāwai. These nodes are in a circle and each player has a set of four same coloured stones to place on those nodes. At the start of the game the stones are all placed next to each other on the nodes, so essentially each player controls one half of the board. The game then starts with one player moving a stone into the centre node, the pūtahi, freeing up the space it was just in. The opposing player can then move the stone adjacent to the free space to occupy it. Play then continues where stones are moved in and out of the one free space on the board that is freed up each time a stone is moved. To move, your stone needs to be adjacent to the free space, whether that be cause it is sitting next to the space on the outside nodes or if it is in the central node it is connected to all eight other nodes, so any stone can move in and out of the centre. The other key rule here is that for a stone to be able to move into the pūtahi it needs to be adjacent to an opponents stone as well, so for example the first move of the game can't be to have one of the two inner pieces on your half of the board move into the pūtahi because they are only next your pieces, not the opponents. So the

two conditions to make a legal move are, is your stone next to the free space and is your stone next to an opponents stone if mo? Keeping in mind that for both of these conditions, the central space is considered to be adjacent to every other space. The object of the game was to try and block your opponent from being able to make a legal move. If they are unable to make a move due the centre space being occupied and the only free outer space being blocked, you win. If these rules are a bit confusing in the audio format, I have put up a video on my Youtube channel with me playing a game to show you how it works. Just search for History of Aotearoa New Zealand Podcast and you should find it pretty easily!

One of the interesting things about the history of mū torere, which many consider to be a pre-European game, is that Best thinks it may have only come about after Europeans arrived in Aotearoa. He mentions that the Hawaiian word for draughts, a European game, is mu or konane, so there is a resemblance there that may indicate a European influence on the creation of mū torere. Additionally he says that there isn't any evidence that links mū torere to other islands in the Pacific, as they don't have similar games native to them, which is something that we would potentially expect if mū torere came to Aotearoa via the Great Fleet. Best goes even further to say that mū torere was only known around East Cape on the North Island, other iwi didn't have any knowledge of it. Again, we would expect other iwi to probably know of the game if it pre-dated Europeans, it would make sense if some didn't know about it if it was much more recent. However, I would counter that these points don't necessarily mean that mū torere is post-European. We have seen many unique aspects of Māori culture develop due to their relative isolation from the rest of the Pacific, so I'm not sure that it would be that unusual for Māori to have a game that is specific to them and had no easily discernable lineage elsewhere in the Pacific. Communication in this time was also somewhat limited so it isn't that unreasonable that if mū torere originated say on the East Cape that some iwi further away on the island or deep in the bush didn't know about it. Particularly if they weren't near the coast or any major waterways where communication would be easier via waka, it does depend a bit on who Best was talking to when he says that others didn't know about it. Additionally, the crux of Best's argument is that mū torere was heavily influenced by European draughts, or checkers if your American. This doesn't really make sense though since mū torere doesn't have the squared checked board, something that we assume would be retained if it was inspired by draughts, though that isn't certain. Plus, Māori already had a game with a board pretty much exactly like draughts or chess so the concept of a checked board wasn't unusual to them. Then again, I may be talking out my ass here, as far as I can tell, we don't have a totally definitive answer on whether it was pre or post-European. Even Māori that Best talked to in his time gave conflicting answers, with some saying it was definitely pre-European and others saying it was brought to Aotearoa by early whalers. It is also important to note that Best was doing this work in the early 20th century so although the information he got from his interviewees is useful, it had been about 100 years since Europeans arrived which is a lot of time for knowledge and stories to be influenced.

In the modern day, mū torere has had a few interesting evolutions. There is a larger adaptation of the game designed to be played on a small court, using a person's body and feet rather than small stones. The game board/court is set up in the same manner with rubber pads acting as the nodes and played with two teams of two, resulting in a game that kinda looks like Twister. Mū torere is also apparently really popular at universities as it has various applications in mathematics. Some games companies even sell the game as like an actual board game that you can just go out and buy. I wasn't able to find one of these copies but the game is listed on Board Game Geek with pictures of the board in various styles, so that would indicate that it was sold at one point. My first encounter with the game though was actually unintentional and I initially didn't realise it was even a Māori game when I played it! The PC game Mount and Blade 2: Bannerlord has you roaming around as a

medieval mercenary or lord, raising armies, fighting battles and generally just being a feudal person. The fictitious land of Calradia has a number of factions inspired by real life cultures, those being the Celts, Romans, Mongols, Scandinavians, French and Arabs. Each culture has a unique board game that can be played as a minigame and these are drawn from real historical games, such as the Roman faction having a version of the Scandinavian game hnefatafl. As you can tell, the developers weren't super concerned about the games being historically relevant to their associated factions, given they gave the Scandinavian game to the Romans when there was already a Scandinavian faction. As such, when you go to a tavern or castle in Vlandian territory, the French inspired faction, you may just find a board game, that you can play, that is EXACTLY the same as a game from the South Pacific, which goes by the name of mū torere.

Next time, we will talk about games for the tamariki, for the kids. So games that are more straightforward than what we have talked about and involved some back and forth between them. We will also discuss a bit about European's interaction with Māori games when they arrived on the scene.

If you want to send me feedback, ask a question, suggest a topic or just have a chinwag you can find my email and social media on [historyaotearoa.com](http://historyaotearoa.com). You can also find helpful resources there like transcripts, sources and translations for some of the Te Reo Māori we have used. You can help support HANZ through Patreon, buying merch or giving us a review, it means a lot and helps spread the story of Aotearoa New Zealand. As always, haere tū atu, hoki tū mai. See you next time!