

Matariki Returns

by Moira Wairama and Rupert

What Is Matariki?

Ten years ago, many New Zealanders knew very little about Matariki, the Māori New Year. In recent times, however, Māori who cherish the ancient ways have breathed new life into Matariki. Nowadays, Matariki is an important festival in our national calendar – and its popularity is increasing year by year.

In a physical sense, Matariki is a cluster of seven stars within the constellation Taurus. (In fact, Matariki is made up of several hundred stars, but only seven of them can be seen with the naked eye.) The word Matariki directly translates as “little eyes” (mata riki) or “eyes of god” (mata ariki).

Towards the end of May, the seven stars of Matariki sink below the horizon and disappear from New Zealand's night sky – but not for long. If you keep a close eye on the sky in June, you might be lucky enough to witness a special sight. Shortly before dawn, you can see Matariki return. The seven stars rise above the horizon exactly where the Sun will appear about half an hour later.

When you have spotted Matariki in the early morning sky, watch out for the next new Moon. (A new Moon is actually invisible, but soon after this stage, it appears as a tiny crescent of light that grows steadily night by night.) When you have seen Matariki at dawn and the new Moon at night, you'll know that the Māori New Year is beginning.



Matariki

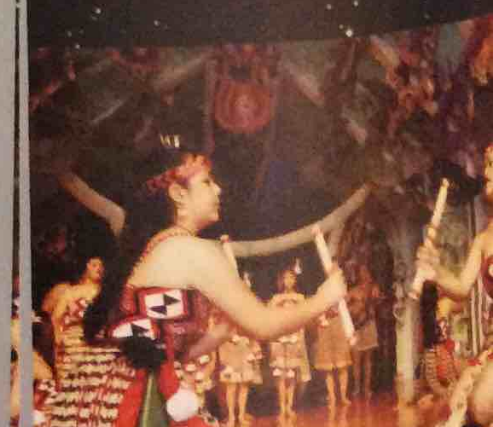
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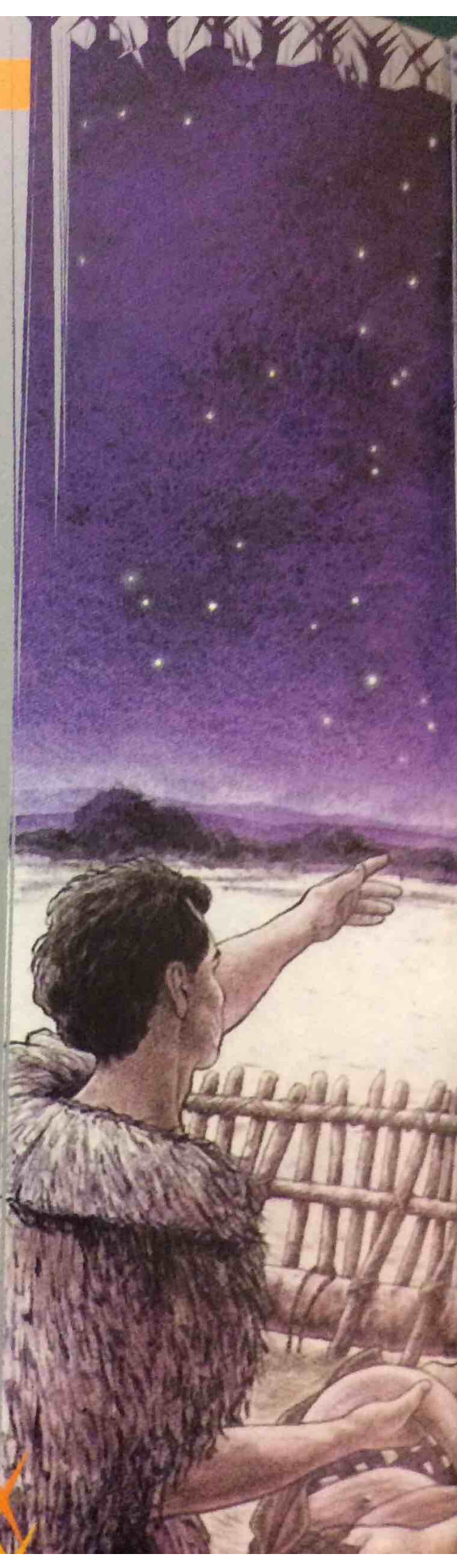
Plentiful Times to Come?

It is said that if the stars of Matariki are faint, hazy, and hard to see separately, then a cold, lean season will follow. However, if each star is bright enough to be seen clearly and separately, then the coming season will be warm, and crops will flourish.

Traditionally, the dawn rising of Matariki was a sign to Māori that the hunting season was coming to an end and the planting season was about to begin. Māori hunted many bird species and, in some areas, kiore (native rats). In the months before Matariki, the tūī, kererū, and kākā were plump and juicy from eating forest berries.

There were no freezers in those days, so birds were often preserved and stored for long periods in their own fat. The word “hinu” means fat. There is a proverb about this: “Ka kitea a Matariki, nā ka maoka ngā hinu.” This means “When Matariki is seen, the hinu is ready.” So, when Matariki appears, the hunting and preserving season is in full swing. Matariki was also a time for catching fish, especially korokoro (lamprey eels).

In mid-winter, the land lies cold and dormant, but Matariki is a time for looking ahead and planning your spring planting. Ritual crops were planted during Matariki to please the gods Uenuku, Rongo, and Whiro. If the gods were content, a fertile growth season would follow. Matariki is still a time for learning about nature and for planning activities that will nurture and protect our environment.





Matariki Legends

Various iwi have their own legends about Matariki. One legend says that the stars of Matariki are members of Te Whānau Mārama – the children of light, who were taken from their parents, Tangotango and Wainui, and placed in the sky by Tāne, the god of the forest. Another legend says that Raumati (the summer) and Raro (the underworld) were the parents of Puanga, Takurua, and Matariki. Puanga is called Rigel in English. This spectacular star is a blue-white supergiant in the Orion constellation. Takurua is called Sirius in English. It's the brightest star in the sky. Sirius is also known as the Dog Star because it's part of the Canus Major constellation. (*Canus major* is Latin for "big dog".)

The Matariki star cluster is special to people all over the world. The ancient Greeks named it the Pleiades, after the seven mythical daughters of Atlas and Pleione. The sisters were raised into the night sky by the god Zeus. He wanted to keep them safe from the hunter Orion, who was chasing them. In English, Matariki is sometimes called the Seven Sisters, and Orion is one of the most easily recognised constellations in New Zealand's night sky.

Matariki Rises Again

For a long time, Matariki faded in people's minds, but the festival has risen again! Nowadays, Māori New Year celebrations are becoming more and more common around the country. Why not become involved? Members of your local iwi might be able to tell you about celebrations that you could take part in. You could also contact a local museum or astronomical society to find out whether anything has been organised. Of course, there's nothing to stop you planning your own special celebration of Matariki. So think about how you and your classmates might honour this very special time.