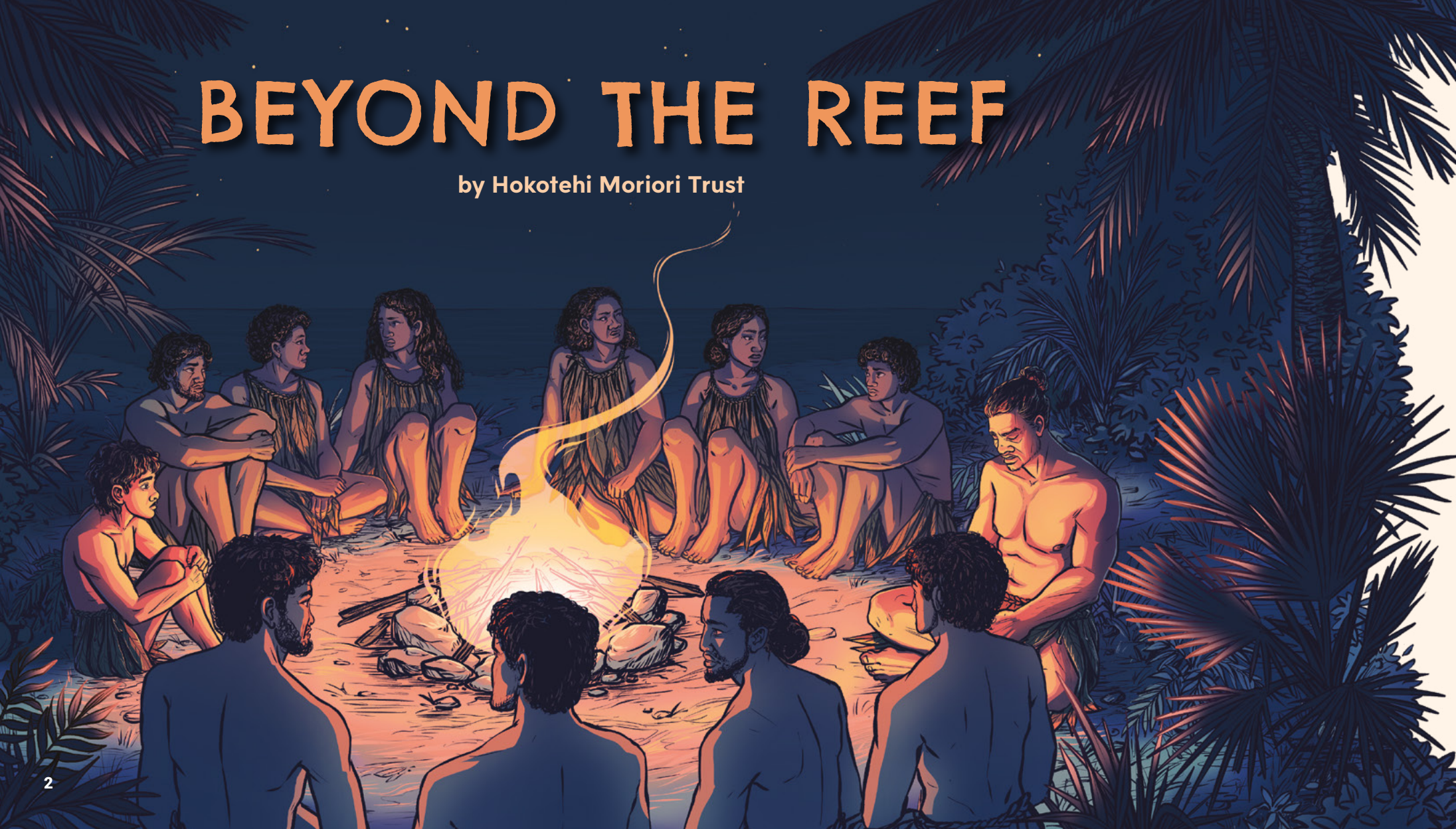


BEYOND THE REEF

by Hokotehi Moriori Trust



Moriori are the waina pono, or first people, of Rēkohu / Chatham Islands. Their origin traditions state that they arrived directly to Rēkohu from East Polynesia over several waves of migration. This story recounts some of the events during that time. It is based on Moriori oral histories that have been handed down for hundreds of years.

It's night-time, and Ri'i feels sick. He sits with his family around the fire, their shadowy faces flickering in the orange light. The constant fighting on the island has worn everyone down. And now there is talk of leaving. Ri'i has never sailed beyond the big reef. Only a few from the village have ever tried, and two of them never returned. The familiar sound of waves crashing has taken on a new, ominous tone.

Even worse, Ri'i is leaving without his best friend, Moe. According to Ri'i's mother, Hinekohu, Moe's family are part of the reason that the fighting keeps happening. Hinekohu said that leaving the island is the only way to avoid more deaths. Until then, nobody is allowed to know their plan – including Moe. Ri'i can't imagine leaving his friend behind.

On the other side of the flames, Ri'i watches his great uncle Horopapa muttering to himself. He can't hear the words, but he knows what he is saying. Horopapa will tell anyone who listens about Hokorongō T'ring, a period of peace that took place long before Ri'i was born. He wants his people to return to that time. Recently, Horopapa dreamed of an island filled with large birds, where people lived in harmony. He sees it as a sign. To Ri'i, it sounds like a fantasy.

Horopapa has more reason than most to feel angry. The fighting started when his daughter, Pāpā, was killed by another villager. Yet while Horopapa's sadness makes him dream of a new way forward, others in the village can't let the past go ...

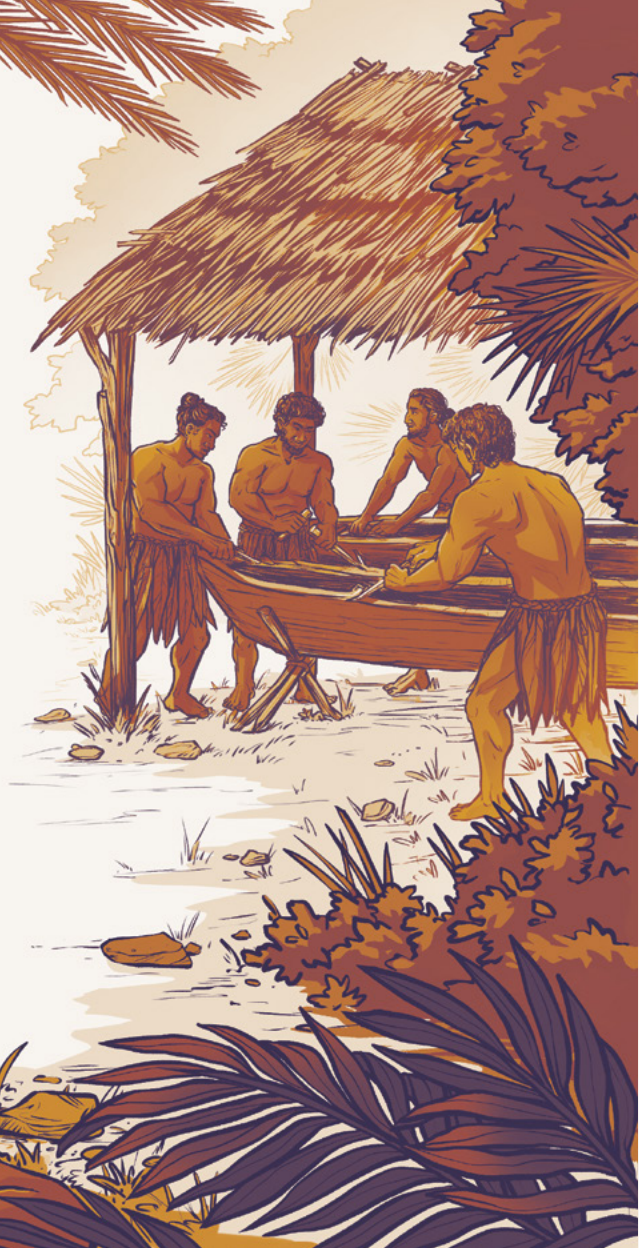
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Last month, Ta Uru o Monono was burnt to the ground. The sacred meeting house had stood tall for hundreds of years. Generations of people had left offerings to the **etchu** under its roof. All that remained now were ashes and rubble. Ri'i couldn't keep track of who was to blame. The longer the fighting went on, the harder it was to understand.

In the days that followed the burning, the whole village was on edge. Even Ri'i's uncle Nunuk' was acting differently. Ri'i was always watching Nunuk'. He made him feel safe and calm. Like Horopapa, Nunuk' spoke up at the village council about the other way, the way of no more fighting. Most men laughed. Fighting is how warriors were made, they said.

etchu: spiritual beings
hunau: family
paihihi: canoes

While most of his **hunau** were working in the garden, Ri'i noticed Nunuk' quietly walk off towards the beach. He decided to follow him. Nunuk' led Ri'i through the bush and around the coast to where a small group of men were working, their heads low and hands busy. From a distance, Ri'i could see that they were building four huge **paihihi**. His mother later told him that they were *Rangimata*, *Rangihoua*, *Pouariki*, and *Poreitua* – the four canoes that would take them from this land.



The men weren't the only ones working in secret. Hinekohu and her sister Kimi had spent months weaving sails. They disappeared at any spare moment to stitch the fine lines that would show the navigators the direction of the wind. Kimi was a high chief and her paihihi, *Rangimata*, was almost ready. Mihiti, Kimi's husband, would be its captain.

In time, even Ri'i was called in to help with the preparations. His mother had told him that it was time to start contributing like the older men.

"We will use your full name – Matari'i," she said. "You've become too old for pet names." But Ri'i didn't want to be like the older men. Nothing good seemed to come from getting older.

"We need you to take some of the dried food stores from the village," said Mihiti. "You are so little that no one will notice you."

Ri'i took his job seriously, sneaking little pieces of dried food each day. Small amounts at a time, he thought, would not be noticed. Soon, his baskets were full of uwhe, kumala, talo, and the fresh seeds of special plants – the kōpi, the arapuhi and his mother's favourite, the delicious marautara vine.

The days went on, and tempers started to fray. Arguments broke out between the navigators of each waka. Rū said the canoes were good enough for a long voyage. Ūtangaro said they needed more work. Ri'i knew that they couldn't carry on in secret much longer.

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Horopapa's leathery hands pull Ri'i from his thoughts. "My little Ri'i. Your face is even more wrinkled than mine," he says. "Come." Horopapa leads Ri'i away from the fire and towards the beach. "I hear you've been helping your uncles get the paihihi ready. I'm proud of you."

They stop a few metres from the sea. Horopapa places his hands on Ri'i's head and recites a **karakii** – a chant for strength and a safe journey.

"Does this mean we are close to leaving?" Ri'i asks, his voice soft and wobbly.

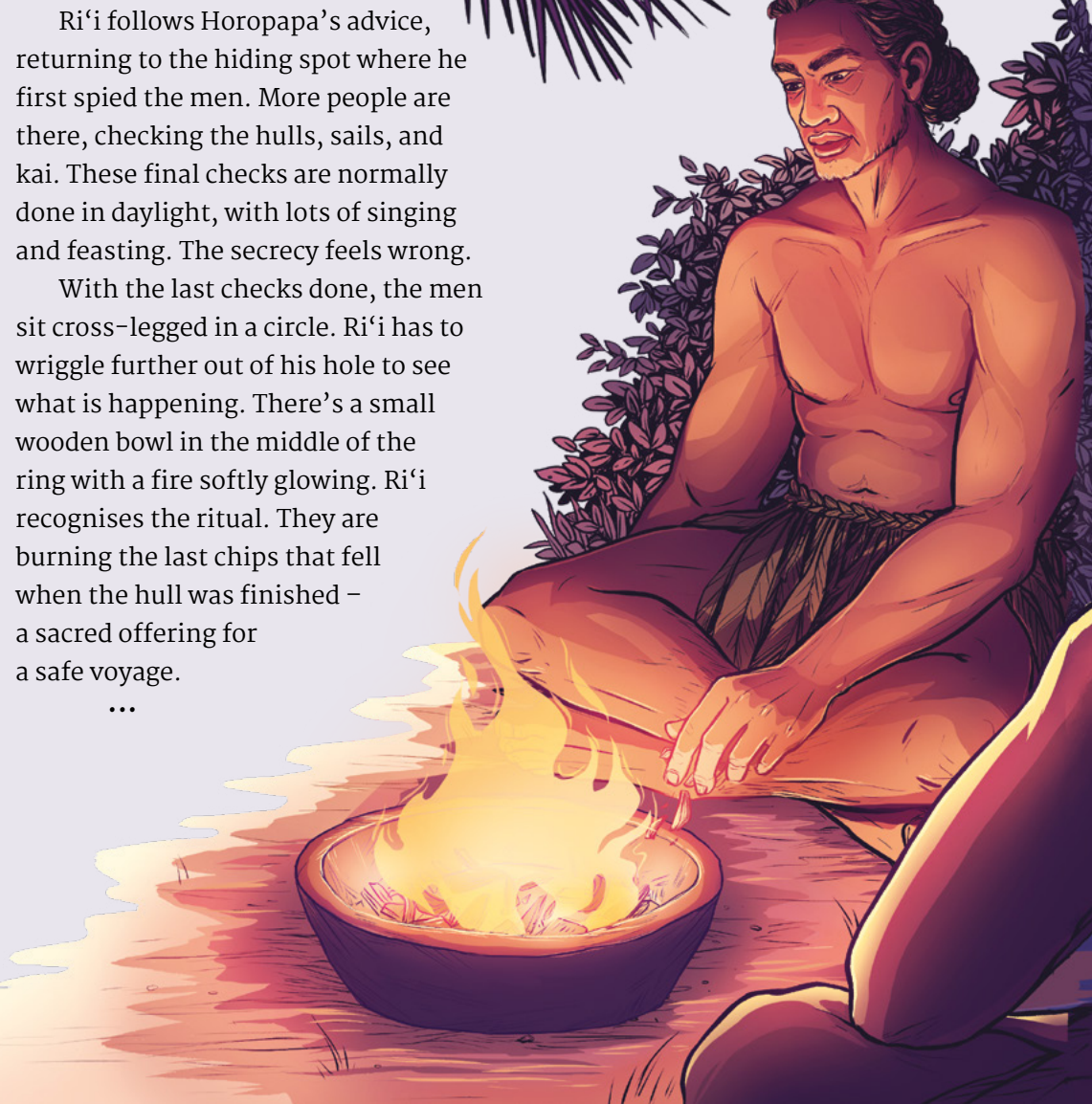
"Yes. Tomorrow is a new moon," says Horopapa. "You and your family will leave in the dark after the **umere**." Horopapa points towards the canoe house. "Your uncles are doing the final preparations. If you leave now, you may still be able to watch them."

karakii: incantation
umere: chants

Ri'i follows Horopapa's advice, returning to the hiding spot where he first spied the men. More people are there, checking the hulls, sails, and kai. These final checks are normally done in daylight, with lots of singing and feasting. The secrecy feels wrong.

With the last checks done, the men sit cross-legged in a circle. Ri'i has to wriggle further out of his hole to see what is happening. There's a small wooden bowl in the middle of the ring with a fire softly glowing. Ri'i recognises the ritual. They are burning the last chips that fell when the hull was finished – a sacred offering for a safe voyage.

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Later that night, Ri'i struggles to sleep. He knows he can't leave without saying goodbye to Moe. When morning comes, he meets his friend at their fishing spot by the reef.

"I have to tell you a secret," says Ri'i. Moe nods, his gaze fixed on the water. "My family are leaving for the new lands. Tonight." Ri'i pauses. "I don't think we'll be coming back."

Moe looks up. "I can follow you," he says. "One day. I'll join you in the new lands, even if I'm an old man."

Ri'i wants to believe him. He can't help but smile.

"We will be friends together again," says Moe.

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Evening comes quickly. The families eat in silence, each person sad and scared in their own way. After most of the village has retired to their sleeping mats, the departing families make their way to the canoe house.

As quietly as they can, Ri'i's uncles slide the paihihi into the water. Horopapa lifts Ri'i onto the navigator platform and holds him close. "Quick, go into the hull," he says. "Look after

your mother, and I will think of you when the small stars appear on the horizon in a few months' time. By then, you will be safe and settled in your new home. Never forget the old ways, and they will never forget you."

Ri'i scampers into his sleeping place. As the canoes cross the reef, the sails are unfurled, and the paihihi build up speed. Ri'i pokes his head above the deck and watches the reef disappear into the foam. His heart is heavy and full of fear.



illustrations
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