

Memento Mori : Memento Maori – moko and memory

Professor Ngahuia Te Awekotuku

School of Maori and Pacific Development

University of Waikato

PB 3105, Hamilton

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Email: awekotuku@waikato.ac.nz

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Tāia o moko, hei hoa matenga mōu. (1)

Moko patterns, mau moko, “wearing ink” is often explained as an act of remembrance, a symbol of honour or success, of grieving or loss. Many people in the Maori world take moko to mark a significant moment in their lives; the birth of a new baby, the joining in marriage, the loss of a loved one, the achievement of a special goal, and the attainment of a degree or success in sport. Dreams can be worn upon the skin, and so can memories; past events, past successes, past ordeals, past lives. These ideas are considered by George who observes that moko,

can be about hurt and loss, about separation and death. Even doing it is like that, about rejoining after cutting the flesh, spilling the blood... making us whole again, but different. (2)

In this changing world, moko is about memory; it is about remembering a place, a time, a person; it is also about remembering those ancestral treasures that have been under threat the threat of oblivion for many decades. By this active remembering in designs upon their skin, contemporary Maori assert a strong sense of identity, of survival and resilience, and by doing this, they also defy the colonial agenda. It is about being in the face of the other.

Considering moko in ancient times, the practice was essentially about vanity, about looking good, or looking fierce, as stated below

Most meditated on desire and beauty, vanity and being desirable. Transforming the body, transforming the face, was primarily about pleasing one’s self, and then pleasing others. And that pleasure, intrinsically, was about pride. (3)

Such compulsions remain contemporary; most modern Maori with ornamented forearms, artfully inscribed thighs or lower backs, or elegant ear pieces are as concerned with the aesthetic as they are with the meaning. It is an affirmation of identity, of who you are, where, and whom, you come from. And as Netana Rakuraku Whakaari observed above, moko also predicts where you will ultimately go...into death, but with a companion imprinted forever in your flesh.

Often the design symbolizes someone special, beloved but dead, engraved upon the skin; this enduring farewell and remembrance is known as memento mori . Even the process itself, taking the moko in a ritual gesture of mourning and release, may be an active form of memento mori, so what does it mean? According to Howarth and Leaman

‘Memento mori’ (Latin, meaning ‘remember death’) refers to visual reminders of death incorporated into a wide range of decorative, fine art and practical items in Western culture in the late medieval and early modern periods. (4)

For Maori, the dictum of “memento mori” is not new. And it is shared with many other cultures and societies as a prominent Death Studies scholar, John Troyer, states

...one kind of experience remains constant in (human) history : the memorial tattoo. A technology of memory...it produces a historical text carried on the historian’s body. A memorial tattoo is an image but it is also (and most importantly) a narrative. (5)

To be reminded of our mortality when our youth death rate is relatively high, and our life expectancy is relatively low, (6) to be conscious of the passing of whanau and engagement with wharemate, with pani and pouaru, is an everyday experience for most of us. Maori live with death. It is around us all the time. For fear of “karanga aitua”, the calling down of misfortune we avoid frivolous discussion, just as we prefer not to consider death too closely. One may be tempting fate; attracting tragedy or malevolence by consciously drawing attention to one’s own – or someone else’s – mortality. These risks need to be managed, or more sensibly, avoided. Death threatens every waking hour, so we take care. And if we share our tangi stories and death narratives, it is usually only with close kin and trusted friends; it is not taken lightly.

Apart from rare but eloquent book chapters, (7), and two learned exegeses on formal oration and performance (8), the Maori voice has been mute in this scholarly discussion. There have been decades of published outsider commentary and observation (9), but the two comprehensive scholarly monographs are now very dated. (10)

Yet Maori do talk about death all the time; catching up in conversations with whanau from home, the most important news if you live away from the hau kainga is who has gone, usually received with a mixture of guilt (“but I couldn’t go anyway”), acute disappointment (“nobody told me!”) and simple grief, sometimes tempered by unspoken incidentals like satisfaction, relief and speculation. Maori talk, and think, and share ideas about death. Tangihanga, or tangi, are a focus of community expression, and assertive hapu identity. Cultural precepts are considered and enacted; it is usually assumed that “people know what to do”. Most of this knowing is an engagement in aspects of not only performative (karanga, whaikorero, waiata), but also visual, culture. This latter form determines the correct display of appropriate portraits, the careful layering of kakahu across the casket, and the deliberate placement of significant objects like mere pounamu and hei tiki upon these textiles. Beyond the Mataatua region, the whare mate or site of mourning is the whare tupuna, the ancestral house. Often its carved and painted embellishment is reflected on the skin of the mourners, or the mourned; though the mourned usually do not prepare themselves for their demise. In one instance in which the writer was involved, a severely ill person was enhanced by ink to look fine for viewing at the tangihanga,

but this is rare indeed. The intent is to look good in life, with the living; and death one hopes will come much later.

For the Maori of earlier times, death was a constant presence, mediated by a range of sanctions, behaviours, and prohibitions; and regulated by a passionate commitment to and fascination with war; premeditated and planned combat that required strategic thinking, athletic prowess and martial excellence. (11) Related to this was the preparation and curing of upoko tuhi, or preserved heads.

Such items were memento mori – venerated, cherished, and wept over. They were the comfort of widows and grieving families, and the silent counselors of young chiefs. They were in themselves exquisite works of art, and objects of profound fascination...the ancient Maori morticians perfected their craft. (12)

Upoko tuhi were the ultimate memento mori – the engagement of the dead directly with the living. The process, known as pakipaki mahunga, ensured the perfection of the designs upon the face and brow. Through this tender mortuary intervention, the gentility and valour of the person continued to inspire the survivors, the descendants, the whanau, the iwi. Walsh records

The curing of a head was an acknowledgement of the nobility of its original owner, and it is more than probable that many a young brave was supported under the pain of tattooing by the thought of the handsome and warlike appearance that it would give to his countenance whenever his head came to be preserved. The principal object of the custom seems to have been to keep alive the memory of the dead...(like) statues and pictures and monumental records. In the case of a departed chief...(it was) a visible sign that in some mysterious way his presence still dwelt among his people, inciting them to emulate his virtues and follow in his footsteps...(13)

And Best confirms this, stating

Heads of relatives were thus kept for many years, and occasionally exhibited to be mourned over...(they) were often carried about for some time after death, and frequently wailed over. (14)

Closely guarded by their descendants and protected by the intricate wards of tapu, upoko tuhi challenged outsiders by their very manufacture and existence. They were also coveted trophies of war, frequently offered or exchanged to negotiate an enduring peace. Cruise, an early traveler, wrote in his diary

The features, hair and teeth as perfect as in life; nor have they since shown any symptoms of decay...they bring them back from their wars, in the first instance as a trophy, and, in the event of peace, to restore them to the party from whom they had taken them, an interchange of heads being a common article in their treaties of reconciliation. (15)

They also became a desirable trade item after Banks' first purchase in 1770 in Queen Charlotte Sound (16). This degraded commerce and its appeal to the decadent European market in the macabre and marginal is discussed elsewhere. (17); but it is necessary to note that the harvesting and export of upoko tuhi were undertaken by Maori for Pakeha agents, dealers, and collectors, and the slain were dehumanized as enemies, and deliberately objectified as potential sustenance. That was their world.

Marking the skin anticipated death, actively prepared for its eventuality; the face itself became the evocative memorial, and its patterns a silent yet powerful narrative.

Haehae was a more primal form of modifying the body, including the face, in response to grief and death. (18) Unlike ta moko, which was an erudite art form applied by an expert tohunga with chisels and pigment, haehae was a spontaneous expression of intense grief. Inflicted with tuhua, or obsidian flakes, sharp mata or whaiapu stone, or razor shells; you did this to yourself. It was not seen as mutilation, as self harm; it was a visceral compulsion, still occurring today, but usually misread and misunderstood in modern times. Many waiata tangi, or songs of lamentation, allude to this practice as a vivid demonstration of loss. More females than males tended to do this, yet men also engaged in haehae. In the example below, Te Wharepapa Te Ao grieves for his father, Te Watene Te Ao. His poignant lyrics describe their level of intimacy.

Homai he mata kia haehae au e,

Kia kotia te kiri piringa mai o te hoa e...

Give me a blade to slash myself

Slicing into this skin that clung to the beloved...(19)

Laceration of the arms, the chest, the thighs, the shoulders, and sometimes the cheeks, facilitated the release of emotional pain with each swift stroke. As the blood spilled, fresh ngārahu or blackening soot was rubbed in to the wounds. This coloured them permanently. Although artless and crude in their application, these haphazard but indelible patterns sustained the memory of the departed, as a constant reference to their passing, and as another mark of honour. The urgency of death, its confrontation and resolution, prevailed, to be effectively recorded on a living human body.

In contrast, the deep application of colour to skin – the art of ta moko –has always been a sophisticated and chiefly technology, and an arcane knowledge system. Related to the puncture traditions of the wider Pacific, the art form in Aotearoa evolved into a style of cicatrisation. By this technique, the lines and curves were raised and scarified with smaller instruments that were manipulated like scalpels, defining the contours of the face. To acquire the desired effect, the procedure was painfully repeated over a number of sessions.

Originally made from albatross and human bone, by the 1840's, uhi or chisels were fashioned with slim metal blades; and by the end of the nineteenth century, Maori moko practitioners again embraced new techniques, and the thin needle clusters were introduced. All these techniques – haehae, uhi, needle-clusters – required no external power source, just human skill; but in contemporary times, the electric machine dominates the realm of ta moko practice. (20)

Over the last thirty years, modern machines used in the prison and gang environments, and taken later to marae, art schools, and independent studios, transformed the re-presentation of Maorians we approached the new millennium. This technology has caused an efflorescence of finely marked Maori flesh, proclaiming to the world who and what and how and why we are, as Maori people. Such issues of culture, identity, history and resilience concerning this art form are discussed in comprehensive detail elsewhere (21).

Staining the skin to commemorate a particular event or to memorialize a deceased loved one has remained a popular contemporary practice. Haehae also occurs, but it is rarely discussed, always concealed, and never talked about, except in shuddering whispers to a close confidante. This is a secret practice that adult Maori will not disclose. Shedding blood, penetrating and permanently marking the flesh with moko to alleviate emotional pain, is something different, something noble; but also not a gesture to be discussed openly with inquiring strangers, or even sincerely motivated researchers on first meeting them. Death is too close, and too worrying. Three people chose to share their personal stories with the writer; each event occurred in the last ten years. Two are concerned with the loss of children, and one is about an aunt.

In describing one aspect of her body art, Waiaria recalls her pain.

I had this one done when my mokopuna was born; and then he died five weeks later. I wanted something special for him, and I wanted that pain and mamae to come out, to be released in my ta moko, so I made an appointment (with the ta moko artist) when he died. To me, my ta moko are connected to this mokopuna; I have to live with it, and him, everyday.

The dead are always present with the living. Rua tells her story.

I miscarried my baby, so I took ta moko. For me, it was a totally healing process, part of my own rebirthing. For me, (this) moko is now my own personal kaitiaki; so I always walk with a friend.

Mako reveals the narrative behind her elaborate forearm, which tends to attract a lot of attention. She prefers not to tell other people the “real story”, as it is so personal, but she has agreed to in this context. Usually she says it is just a kowhaiwhai inspired moko design; but it is actually much more.

My auntie was in a serious accident, and her right arm was crushed and mangled. I wanted to help her, be there for her, but I was living hundreds of miles away, and the next plane was the following morning. This pattern surfaced on my arm, while I was thinking about her. I drew it on. By chance (maybe), my favourite tattoo artist was free that same day! He had a cancellation. So he could do it, and he did. I went home, and my auntie died. This marking is for and about her.

Others also refer to a small shadowy piece within in much larger back work, or contained by long thigh design; this may be a lost relative or child, a loved one who has left this world; some people quietly point out a tiny koru, or a heart-like shape, and confide that this is a “tohu aroha” for a special person, and sometimes even for a deeply missed mokai, or pet animal. In this way, the notion of memento mori is sustained today, by the humble and the bereaved, for the beloved; and by the humble and the bereaved, for the illustrious.

After a lingering illness, in August 2006 Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu, affectionately known by many as the Maori Queen, passed away in her home at Turangawaewae Marae, Ngaruawahia. She had often expressed her interest in moko, fondly recalling the rūruhi mau moko (elderly moko-wearing ladies) of her own life, especially from her early years “in the job”. She recalled how much she enjoyed their company. Eventually, they all faded away, though some from that generation, their faces unmarked, thought about taking the kauae, as a mark of respect, and as an honouring of memory. One kuia, a close aunt to Te Arikinui, had expressed this fervent desire well into her eighties, and her regal niece supported her yearning. The only problem was finding an appropriate artist, as all the traditional practitioners were no more. Because of this, it did not happen. Time moved on. A few Māori (including trained carvers) learned to tattoo, and thus some Tainui women took their kauae moko at Te Awhitu, at Waitomo, at Purekireki, at Otaki, at Whaingaroa. Aware of them all, Te Arikinui mentioned that to see moko women again from the heart of Waikato, from Turangawaewae, would be a wonderful thing.

And then we lost her.

In the months of deep mourning which followed, different people talked with each other, and the tribal policy makers, and other community leaders in various fields, about a fitting tribute to her extraordinary life. Their ideas included a memorial rose garden, a school-based conservatory of theatre and music, a prestige arts award, orchestral compositions, a purpose-built cultural centre, and numerous tertiary scholarships.

Some of her immediate family, her surviving aunt and a few first cousins, were considering a more intimate gesture. The idea was raised.

‘Wouldn’t it be nice to do something special and meaningful for Te Ata’, observed one kuia over coffee with friends one day. Taking kauae. Something personal. Something small. Something remarkable. And so an idea was expressed, circulated and explored in

whanau, with groups of kuia ruruhi, (elderly women) and kaumatua (elderly men) then in whispers around the edges of various tribal gatherings and events....there was a strong desire for having moko kauae, for worthy reasons, and it had the sanction of the kaumatua, it now required the blessing of the King. This occurred in an informal conversation. (23)

They were thinking about moko kauae as a fitting memorial; they were aware of an earlier event in Waikato history, of the kuia Ngakahikatea Wirihana, and how she became a wahine mau kauae, with reference to someone passing away. Ngakahikatea, whom all the women knew about, was marked by the koroua Te Aho o te Rangi Wharepu in the 1890's,

At the request of the Maori King Mahuta, after Mahuta's daughter had died in her arms. The King wanted Ngakahikatea to commemorate her passing by taking the moko. (24)

Thinking about this story inspired the women, and they called a hui. Ten hopefuls turned up, as well as one whose face was already beautifully adorned. Te Rita fielded many excited questions that day; the women mulled over the meaning, the designs, the health risks, the process, the implications for their whanau and their lives afterward. Some women from another marae also expressed the wish to take kauae to honour the succession of Tuheitia Paki to the role of King, and their representative also attended this meeting. The story continues

Three artists were chosen...Haki Williams is from Tūwharetoa and contributed to the house, Manunui a Ruakapanga where the earlier conversation with King Tuheitia took place. Manunui a Ruakapanga also connects to Te Aitanga a Hauiti of Uawa whose tupuna is also Ruakapanga, and whose principal whare whakairo carries the same name. Mark Kōpua is from there, and Rikirangi Manuel, the third practitioner also hails from Te Tairāwhiti. For these artists and their communities, being able to work with these kuia ruruhi was one way that they too could connect with the kaupapa of the Kingitanga and with the new King Tuheitia. (25)

During a long midwinter weekend, 9-10 June 2007, sixteen women were adorned with moko kauae in the house, Pare Waikato, on Turangawaewae marae. It was an interlude of laughter, tears, music, celebration, pain, haka, apprehension, waiata and most of all, remembering. Portraits of all their beloved dead hung carefully arranged upon the walls, each picture offering comfort and ease, especially those kuia whose framed faces proudly showed the tohu, the moko kauae of another time. Watching, crying, singing, weeping, stroking feet and holding hands, the mokopuna, sisters, nieces, daughters, and close whanau of the women all participated in the experience; and a strong contingent of wahine mau moko came from Te Aitanga a Hauiti. Twenty magnificent Tai Rawhiti women were there to support Waikato; to alleviate the sixteen who had chosen to follow the moko path as a memento mori in honour of our late, beloved, inspirational leader, Te Arikinui Te Atatorangikaahu.

Te Aroha Herangi Tai Rākena, the visionary kuia who called that first meeting, writes of the women's decision to do this as a fitting commemoration.

He tohu aroha mo Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu, naana nei te moemoea kia ara ake te tā moko kauae i waenganui i nga wāhine o Waikato/Tainui. Ko puawai te whakaaro; no reira moe mai ra te manu rere i te ata hāpara. E kore koe e warewaretia.

A sign of love for Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu, whose dreams will forever inspire moko kauae among the women of Waikato Tainui. The idea flourishes; so sleep now, soaring bird of the dawn. You will never be forgotten. (26)

In the same publication recording the weekend event, Paratai reveals her clear intention

He mahi miharo, he kaupapa hirahira i kapi katoa ai te tinana, te hinengaro, me te wairua. He hōnore mōku ake ki te mau i te tohu nei hei whakamaumaharatanga ki Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu.

A wonderful process, a prestigious project that involves everything – the body, the mind, the soul. I do feel deeply honoured to carry this symbol in memory of Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu. (27)

Their ongoing sense of loss, and the reminder of that loss for the women, and for Waikato, is described vividly by Raiha

He maimai aroha ki te kaupapa i taa mokongia ai mātou. E mihi ana, e kore e mutu te tangi me te mihi ki Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu e whakaata atu nei i runga i taku kauwae hei maumaharatanga mo ake tonu.

As an expression of heartfelt love, we took our moko. We acknowledge that our grieving for Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu will not cease; it is inscribed here on my chin as a memorial forever. (28)

Memento mori, remembering the dead and remembrance of death, pervades the Maori world, and is profoundly expressed in customary practice – haehae, upoko tuhi, and ta moko. These embodied and visceral experiences are described in waiata tangi, in whai korero, in moteatea, in the traditional context, and graphically recorded on the living flesh in our contemporary world .

Mau moko celebrates identity, so modern memorial ornamentation mourns and reflects on this in 'memento mori'; and also reinforces and engages reality in the correspondent notion of 'memento Maori'; an assertion that claims dominion and understanding across generations, across time, across space. Across lives. Pai marire.

Notes

1. James Cowan 'Maori Tattooing Survivals. Some Notes on Moko.' *Journal of Polynesian Society* 30 (1921): 240–45.

2. Ngahuaia Te Awekotuku, Linda Waimarie Nikora, Mohi Rua & Rolinda Karapu (2007) *Mau Moko : the world of Maori tattoo*, Auckland, Penguin page 150
3. Prev. cit., page 90
4. Glennys Howarth and Oliver Leaman, eds. (2001) *Encyclopedia of death and dying*. London ; New York : Routledge. Page 301
5. John Erik Troyer (2009) *A Labor of Death and a Labor against Death : Memorial tattoos in Late Modernity*. Paper presented at the “ENVISAGING DEATH : Visual Culture and Dying” Conference, 26 June, University of Birmingham (Egbaston campus), U.K. This is emphasized in the work of Don Ed Hardy (1988) *Tattootime Number 4 : Life & Death Tattoos*, Honolulu, Hawaii : Hardy Marks Publications.
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27. Prev. Cit. Page 18.
28. Prev. Cit. Page 28.