

Wearing Moko: Maori Facial Marking in Today's World

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*I tiaria mai to mata whakarewa
Kia whakatauria te uhi a Wharawhara*

They have adorned your radiant face,
To enhance the fine chiselling of Wharawhara¹

The Europeans who made landfall on the shores of Aotearoa-New Zealand nearly 250 years ago encountered the tattooed face for the first time. Joseph Banks, having met and looked closely at Maori men with engraved skin, records his early impressions in his *Endeavour* journal:

There faces are the most remarkable, on them they by some art unknown to me dig furrows in their faces a line deep at least and as broad, the edges of which are often indented and most perfectly black. This may be done to make them look frightfull in war; indeed it has the Effect of making them most enormously ugly, the old ones at least whose faces are intirely covered with it . . . Yet ugly as this certainly looks it is impossible to avoid admiring the immense Elegance and Justness of the figures . . . which in the face is always different spirals, . . . all these finishd with a masterly taste and execution.²

These words reflect a fascination, curiosity and repulsion. Confronted by such faces, Banks's focus engages the aesthetic much more than the grotesque. The face is the site of all of our senses. It is where we receive the world, where we taste it, smell it, touch it and see it. It is where we express or display our emotions and more subtly, where we show signs of age, stress and gains or losses in weight; it is where we reveal who we are.³ We read faces and the messages they express, and make assumptions about what we are seeing. Comparisons are made, judgements reached. In some instances, a face may be utterly foreign, a new experience for the viewer to consider, manipulate, avoid or meet head on.

Bank's comments on the unique Maori technique were extended by the missionary Yate a few years later:

There is a remarkable difference in the tattoo of the New Zealanders, and that of the Navigators', Fiigee or Friendly Islands. In the latter, the skin is just perforated with a small pointed instrument, and the staining matter introduced; so that, in passing the hand over the part that has been tattooed the skin is



107 John Sylvester, *Portrait of Te Pehi Kupu, with full tattoo on face and wearing European clothes*, c. 1826, watercolour.

smooth, and the surface is fair; whilst in the former, the incision is very deep, and leaves furrows and ridges so uneven, that in some places, when long enough, it would be possible to lay a pin, which would be nearly buried in them.⁴

Another early admirer was the wandering artist Augustus Earle, whose response was similar to Banks, describing one encounter with a frisson of horror:

their faces rendered hideous by being tattooed all over, showing by the fire light quite a bright blue.⁵

He later befriended a *ta moko* artist, whom he considered a great natural genius, and thus

emerged the following rather breathless account:

The art of tattooing has been brought to such perfection here, that whenever we have seen a New Zealander whose skin is thus ornamented, we have admired him. . . . I was astonished to see with what boldness and precision Aranghie drew his designs upon the skin, and what beautiful ornaments he produced; no rule and compasses could be more exact than the lines and circles he formed.⁶

Ambivalence, a mix of horror and admiration, pervades this early writing. As the colony was established, a more condemning, sanctimonious attitude prevailed, when the *moko* of the Maori face, however chiefly, became a metaphor for what must be confronted and removed. Or, if at all possible, reconfigured to suit the colonizing norm.



108 Charles Rodius, *Chief of Otago, New Zealand*, 1834, pencil and charcoal.



109 Charles Rodius,
*Edanghe from Long
Island, 1834, pencil.*

One of the first to pass judgement and actively condemn the practice of *ta moko* was Samuel Marsden of the Church Missionary Society. He arrived in 1814, and recorded in his journal:

Tooi informed us that his brother Korro Korro wished him to be tattooed. We told him that it was a very foolish and ridiculous custom, and as he had seen so much of civil life he should now lay aside

the barbarous customs of his country and adopt those of civilized nations.⁷

To adapt successfully to ‘civilized life’, the Maori male had literally to change face – or at least refuse to modify or mark the one he was born with. Another pioneer missionary, John Leddiard Nicholas, observed that it merely served:

The absurd and preposterous notion of its being a most elegant embellishment, while on the contrary it makes them appear truly hideous . . . It is hoped that this barbarous practice will be abolished in time among the New Zealanders, and that the missionaries will exert all the influence they are possessed of to dissuade them from it.⁸

By the mid-nineteenth century, in those trading and missionary centres where Maori and Pakeha engaged with each other, their efforts seemed to be gaining ground.

Tattooing is going out of fashion, partly from the influence of the missionaries, who described it as the Devil's art, but chiefly from the example of the settlers.⁹

MOVING INTO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

During the period of the Land Wars in the 1860s, there was an active resurgence. The charismatic Tawhiao Matutaera Te Wherowhero, paramount chief and second Maori king, personified resistance to Pakeha invasion; his face was exquisitely adorned, and he encouraged the art's revival.¹⁰ But towards the close of the nineteenth century, the *pukanohi*, the fully marked face, was seen less and less. This prompted a series of souvenir cartes visites by various photographers, and powerfully crafted portraits by artists like Goldie¹¹ and Lindauer.¹² Maori storytelling also offers this complex *whakatauki*, or saying:

*Kei muri i te awe kapara, he tangata ke
Mana e noho te ao nei, he ma.*

After the tattooed face, someone with
unmarked skin
May claim this world.¹³

For at least two generations into the twentieth century, the *pukanohi* was rarely seen, although there are still aged Maori who recall their childhood and teenage years looking in awe at the faded markings on a venerable old man's face.

For women, the situation was different; their tradition continued, uninterrupted, though the technology witnessed a subtle shift from the scarification of chisels to the flatter technique of needle clusters bound to a punching stick. Over the first four decades of the twentieth century, many women were thus marked, as Michael King observed:

A full *moko* was more obtrusively Maori and less easily reconciled with the pervasive process of Europeanization and newly acquired aesthetic tastes. Women, however, were less vulnerable to these pressures, and female tattooing continued for another century. There was no association of their *moko* with fighting. Female *moko* had connotations of beauty, sex appeal and marriageability, and they became very much an assertion of minority group identity.¹⁴

This celebration of identity, of *whakapapa* – kinship, belonging – remains with Maori today, treasured in the photographs of those beloved *kuia*, and resonant in the contemporary practice and revival of the *pukanohi*, the *mataora* – the fully tattooed face of the contemporary Maori male.

110 Josiah Martin, *Susan*.
Rotorua c. 1885, black
and white, albumen
paper print. Half-length
portrait of a young Maori
woman with a tattooed
chin and wearing a
korowai (cloak decorated
with tags). She is wearing
a large *hei tiki* (figure)
neck ornament and a
hūia feather in her hair,
and she is holding a
wahaika (curved short
club) carved with a figure.
Her *moko* has been
recoloured by the
photographer.





111 Gottfried Lindauer, *Ana Rupene and her Daughter*, 1878, oil on canvas.

THE PRESENT DAY

Our traditions did not die, nor did they disappear. *Mataora* – the living face continues with vigour, force and pride. Electric machines have replaced the bone chisels of earlier times, marking the face with the metal needles of a contemporary artist. As a team of researchers, we are interested in the face that is marked, the face that is seen, that is challenged and feared and admired and demonized. And, more vitally, we are interested in recording the experiences of those that have chosen to carry *moko* upon their faces, to live this commitment.

When the face is patterned, and, in this case, permanently patterned with traditional marks of Aotearoa, the wearer and their newly acquired ‘face’ is transformed from one identity to another. The transition is instantaneous. They are a new person. The wearer must find a way to integrate their ‘new look’, their new being in the world, along with the assumptions, expectations and reactions they receive from others.

As part of his graduate research, Mohi Rua¹⁵ gathered the opinions, experiences and views of contemporary wearers as they transformed from being unmarked to marked – the process of becoming a wearer of *moko* and living with *moko*.¹⁶ In his work, Rua noted a series of phases in the transformation process. They were: the desire for *moko*; the process of preparing to be and then becoming a wearer; the reactions of others, and the effective coping strategies worked out by the wearer. In the remainder of this chapter, we focus on the reactions from Maori and Pakeha encountered by seven wearers.

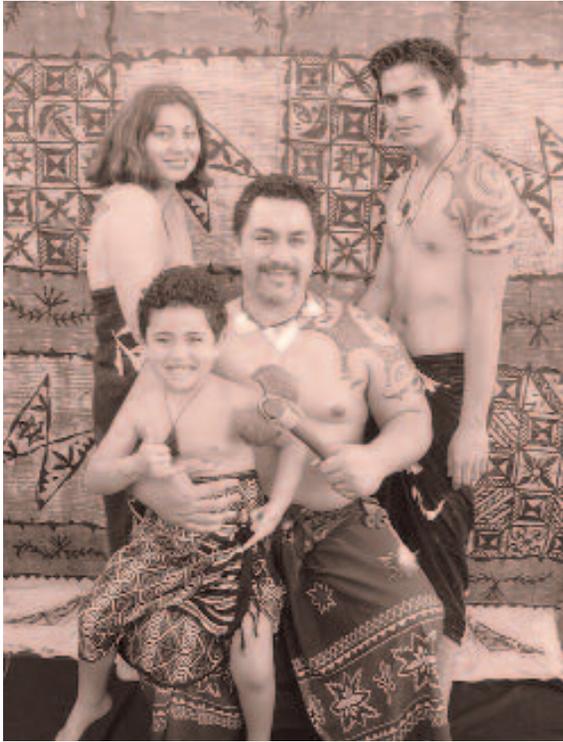
These seven included three women with *moko kauae* – inscribed chins – and four men with *pukanohi* – full facial tattoo. It is also notable that the women were all mature – more than 40 years of age and active in the tribal community – and the men were comparatively young, between 25 and 35 at the time of interviewing. Two of the men had tertiary training, and two were between jobs. Six of the seven participants were residing in the rural eastern Bay of Plenty during the study. The thoughts and experiences of these wearers are presented below under pseudonyms to protect their privacy, a position chosen by them.

THE EXPERIENCES OF MOKO WEARERS TODAY

Physical difference and modification such as the facial *moko* can invite blatant and piercing stares. Those being viewed can be considered objects of curiosity; to be admired, respected and, for some people, abhorred. Whatever the reason, curiosity abounds as wearers are confronted with the reality of looking different. Hotewa and Korere are both middle-aged Maori women, now used to the probing attentions of the public in response to their *moko kauae*. In a shopping centre, Hotewa was stopped by an elderly Pakeha – European – woman, who commented, after a good long look,

Oh. Sorry I didn’t mean to [stare]. I just had to have a good look. Is it real? How long have you had it?

Hotewa was startled by the woman’s abruptness and surprised at the number of probing questions. Many wearers believe, however, that Pakeha viewers are genuinely curious about the stories



112 Benjamin, Janice and family, Brisbane, 2003. Benjamin is Samoan, but wears Maori *ta moko* to affirm his links with his wife's family. Tattoo artist: Tangaroatuane.

behind *moko* and the fascination it presents, an attitude that often alleviates unintended offence.

For some viewers, *moko* wearers have sparked a sense of nostalgia, with elderly viewers remembering back to earlier events and people in their lives. Hotewa, like many wearers, is humbled by such occasions and embarrassed too. None more so when an elderly Pakeha man quite spontaneous and forthrightly approached Hotewa in a café as she lined up to pay for her food. He said 'Oh, you've brought back a lot of beautiful memories for me and I went home last night and dreamed about you'. The statement, the environment and the many shoppers overhearing the comment

made the situation awkward for Hotewa, yet she reflects upon it as a vivid and fond memory. Although the elderly man had seen, recalled and remembered, she had forgotten the potential impact of her *moko* as she negotiated the usually effortless task of buying café food. Similarly, Korere remarked, 'you get a lot of curiosity stares . . . I forget sometimes until they stare'. It is the forgetting that is important here; for both Korere and Hotewa, their living as *moko* wearers is an ordinary everyday experience; for others, it is not. Wearers admit that people are apologetic about their intrusiveness and genuinely interested in the *moko*. But they become a novelty, to be stared at; as Putaringa remarks: 'some people look at me, European people; they look at me like I'm an alien!' Putaringa feels people's ignorance and comforts himself in knowing that his *pukanohi* is a reminder of past days. He claims: 'what they don't realize [is] that this *moko* was here before them or before their forefathers'. In an attempt to deal with curious stares, Putaringa is receptive to dialogue, discussion and the education of his viewers. He has come to internalize this behaviour for personal reassurance and in response to the reactions, curiosity and expectations of others.

Expectations reflect those historical experiences and impressions that people have formed, correctly or incorrectly. For wearers, their primary motivation for becoming so may have been a rite of passage or to mark a significant event or simply a premier fashion statement.¹⁷ However, it is fair to say that irrespective of motivation, having become wearers, most have also become familiar with the diversity of expectations that viewers hold of them.



113 Waiteahoaho Te Ruki, of Te Kawa, Aotearoa / New Zealand, aged in her 50s; tattoo artist, Rangi Skipper.

When Ngarahu took her *moko kauae*, she was suddenly elevated to *kaikaranga* – the female ritual chanting role performed during a formal welcome of visitors to her *marae*. On the occasion of being handed this role, she looked about her and noticed a much older Maori woman, not marked, but who was just as capable. Ngarahu approached her and asked her why she hadn't been considered, to which she replied 'No! Because Koro [male grandparent] said I haven't got the number plate!'

The number plate obviously being her *moko kauae*. Ngarahu saw the humour in the comment and came to understand the significance of her *moko* and the expectation to be a cultural leader. Many wearers are expected to be fluent in the Maori language and to have a high degree of cultural competence – an expectation all too familiar for Tiwhana and Putaringa: 'They sort of relate to me as a Kaumatua [Maori elder], just by my facial' [Tiwhana],

for me being young and I wear the *moko*, people have expectations of me . . . they expect me to know everything. [Putaringa]

Rewha, a university graduate with a *pukanohi*, has had similar experiences:

People . . . assume you know heaps. Can sing 500 *waiata* and *Whaikorero*. Lucky some of us can or we'll be blowing the bubble on us if we couldn't.

The transition from being unmarked, to marked is one that takes place relatively rapidly. Some wearers may have obtained their *moko* over a period of hours, while others may have received the work progressively over a period of weeks or months. In contrast, though, becoming culturally and linguistically competent is an age and experience-related process. For young men like Rewha, Putaringa and Tiwhana, the expectations that their cultural communities hold of them are significant, at times burdensome, and often unrealistic. Yet these are the abilities by which their merit, their standing, their worthiness to have *moko*, is judged. Indeed, most Maori elders are doing well to know just 20 *waiata*, let alone 500!

Having felt the weight of expectation, most wearers believe that it is important to have a degree of cultural competency and to demonstrate a commitment towards this end. For the wearer, this commitment serves to counter, or at least hold off, concerns or challenges about merit that viewers may express. Rewha, in a warning to other wearers, succinctly summarizes this when he says: 'You best be on to it!'

In contemporary Aotearoa-New Zealand,

Maori continue to encounter unfavourable opinions and hostile attitudes based on preformed and unsubstantiated judgements.¹⁸ Prejudice towards Maori and the tattooed face is not a new phenomenon and it continues today. Rewha's encounter with a clothing retailer quick to assume his economic status was revealing. He observed:

I think they must think I'm unemployed or something. They'll always suggest cheaper things for you . . . Appearance is everything [Rewha].

Wearers who live in small rural communities and townships are usually known to others. Viewers see wearers not simply in terms of their changed physical appearance, but as people embedded in family and friendship networks. Although a wearer's physical appearance may have changed, their history has not. Poniania's comments about living in Whakatane, a small seaside town, therefore are not surprising.

Around Whakatane they're used to us. But going to places like Hamilton [a large city] and that . . . They freak all right!

'Freaking' may take all manner of form. It may be an expression of surprise, of astonishment, fear, joy or of curiosity, as Putaringa comments:

I get a lot of good response from Pakeha. A lot of them go to me, 'gee that's beautiful. Well balanced and there's not too much.' That's what they're saying . . . Some *moko* . . . you can't see the person. You can't see the face . . . But with mine you can see my face. You can see who I am.

114 Shane Te Ruki of Waitomo, Aotearoa/New Zealand, aged 34; tattoo artist, Rangji Skipper.



This seeing is about difference as well, and how it allures and attracts others. Another male participant, Tiwhana, observes:

Pakeha people think it's too much. They want to come up to me and meet me and some of them are . . . just shy. Whakama. Yeah, but some Pakeha people they come up to me and talk to me. Ask questions.

But what exactly are they being attracted to? Is it the exotic, the erotic, the mystery, the threat, the transgressive, the savage? Not the modern primitive, but the primitive who is actually modern, alive, today?

The tattooing and modification of the face, rather than any other part of the body, can engender for the viewer strong feelings of intimidation, and this was certainly the experience recorded in the historical narrative cited earlier in

this chapter. Putaringa recounts his experience on meeting a Black Power gang affiliate and reports the gang affiliate saying to him: 'Gee you're intimidating with your *moko!*'. For Putaringa, this was a rather ironic statement, considering that the gang affiliate carried symbols of gang association that were just as intimidating, if not more so, than Putaringa's *pukanohi*. When he highlighted this to the gang affiliate, he thought nothing of it in contrast to what he read as 'a face from the past'.

The reactions and feelings of children in seeing their parent, in this case their father with a *pukanohi*, is something that was not spoken about much at all by those wearers we spoke with. Tiwhana was the only person who commented on the reactions of his children, highlighting their need to make adjustments and his desire to help them.

The only thing that really changes in my life is . . . I've got kids. They have to look at me, wake every



115 Tangaroatuane, the Ngapuhi (Maori) tattoo artist, 2003.

morning and eat with me, sleep with me, bath with me, in a different face. . . . But it's just getting them back to know that their father is still the same person.

There is preliminary evidence to suggest that children are far more accepting and encouraging of the transformations that their parents and

grandparents are choosing than other family members. In this regard, Rewha, a young man, comments:

Their reaction was one of just complete, straight away not even go near it. It was not even, Wow! It was, Oh, how's it going? Turn away and talk to

you. They just won't look at you in the face anymore.

The level of acknowledgement or the lack of it could also suggest non-acceptance as well. A notion supported by Rewha and other wearers is that some viewers found it difficult to voice their disapproval.

Not all responses are negative; and this appears to be less prevalent as the number of people reclaiming and wearing *moko* with pride increases. There is now a growing sense of celebration, renewal and increasing strength within communities. Putaringa reflects upon the acceptance shown by his elders and the comfort he feels. 'A lot of *kaumatua* that I don't know, they will say, *pai ki ahau!* [That's fine with me]'. Tiwhana reports that others have said to him: 'Far . . . too much! Can't wait to get my one!'. Both Putaringa and Tiwhana are encouraged by these words as the art form continues to revitalize itself. For wearers in general, such comments reflect the ultimate accolade, a genuine and enthusiastic affirmation.

CONCLUSION

What do we face? We face everything. We face our own [people]. We face the Pakeha and attitudes. You can just look at them and you know what they're thinking in their mind. We've adjusted to it [Ponania].

The early voyagers, missionaries, settlers all reacted to the *pukanohi*, to the marked faces of the Maori people, during the period of first contact, and the century following it. Their accounts are vivid, judgemental, revealing, telling us as much about them as they do about the people they described. Curiosity and horror are mixed with a genuine fascination; where sternly evangelizing words failed, armed confrontation occurred; and we now live with the results, *te ao hou*, a new world.

In this world, today, *wahine mau kauae, tangata mau moko, pukanohi* – wearers – are speaking for themselves, about themselves, and commenting on how others view them. Unanimously, they insist that the decision to take the marking is about continuity, affirmation, identity and commitment. It is also about wearing those ancestors, carrying them into the future; as their *moko* becomes a companion, a salient being with its own life force, its own integrity and power, beyond the face.

Taia o moko, hai hoa matenga mou. You may lose your most valuable property through misfortune in various ways. You may lose your house, your *patupounamu*, your wife, and other treasures – you may be robbed of all your most prized possessions, but of your *moko* you cannot be deprived. Except by death. It will be your ornament and your companion until your last day.¹⁹