

In your face: wearing Moko – Maori facial marking in today's world

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Introduction

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 face is an important site because it 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 process and seek to understand information, and where we prepare mentally to negotiate those obstacles that confront our everyday lives. It is where we express or display our emotions² and more subtly, where we show signs of age, stress, and gains or losses in weight; it is where we reveal who we are³.

It is also an important site for other people; those with whom we interact. Faces (and bodies) are readable and people readily extract information from faces about qualities such as personal and social identity⁴, gender⁵, age⁶ and emotional state⁷. We read faces and the messages they express, and make assumptions about what we are seeing. To the sensitive observer, the face is a site that prescribes behaviour – actions and reactions, to and from others.

¹ “He Tangi Mo Te Rangihiroa of Tuhourangi: A Lament for Te Rangihiroa,” in *Nga Moteatea - He Maramara Rere No Nga Waka Maha : The Songs - Scattered Pieces from Many Canoe Areas*, ed. Apirana Ngata (Wellington: A. H & A. W Reed for the Polynesian Society, 1928). p48.

² Nico H Frijda and A Tcherkassof, “Facial Expressions as Modes of Action Readiness,” in *The Psychology of Facial Expression*, ed. J. A Russell and J. M Ferná'ndez-Dols (Cambridge, England and Paris: Cambridge University Press & Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme., 1997)., pp 78-103.

³ Diane. S Berry, “What Can a Moving Face Tell Us?,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58, no. 6 (1990)., pp 1004-1014.

⁴ Richard W Brislin, *Cross-Cultural Encounters: Face to Face Interactions* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1981).

⁵ Glynis M. Breakwell, “Strategies Adopted When Identity Is Threatened,” *Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale* 1, no. 2 (1988).

⁶ J. T Todd et al., “The Perception of Human Growth,” *Scientific American* 242 (1980).

⁷ Michael Lewis and Jeannette M. Haviland, *Handbook of Emotions* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993).

Along with being readable, the face is something that is also assessed⁸. Comparisons are made, judgements reached. Is that face like mine? Is it dark, light or in between? Is it muscular, hairy, wrinkled? Is the nose flat or pointy? Is there a high or a low brow? What is the angle of the jaw line? And what has been my experience with these characteristics in the past? The characteristics of the face, coupled with a viewers previous experience with these characteristics will result in different actions and reactions⁹. In some instances, a face may be utterly foreign, a new experience for the viewer to consider, manipulate, avoid, or meet head on. Such was the experience of those first Europeans who made landfall on the shores of Aotearoa/New Zealand nearly 250 years ago.

Early Encounters and Reaction

Joseph Banks, in his Endeavour Journal, records his early impressions, having met, and looked closely at, Maori men with engraved skin.

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 frightful 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.¹⁰

These words reflect a fascination, curiosity, and repulsion. Confronted by such faces, Banks' focus engages the aesthetic much more than the grotesque, and his comments on the unique Maori technique are extended by the missionary Yate a few years later

⁸ Berry, "What Can a Moving Face Tell Us?."

⁹ Gernot Horstmann, "What Do Facial Expressions Convey: Feeling States, Behavioral Intentions, or Action Requests?," *Emotion* 3, no. 2 (2003).

¹⁰ John Cawte Beaglehole, *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks, 1768-1771*, vol. 2 (Sydney: Public Library of New South Wales, 1962). p.13-14

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 feels 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.¹¹

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.¹²

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.¹³

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

¹¹ William Yate, *An Account of New Zealand and of the Formation of the Church Missionary Society's Mission in New Zealand* (London: Church Missionary Society, 1835). p????

¹² Eric Hall (Editor) McCormick, *Augustus Earle : Narrative of a Residence in New Zealand Journal of a Residence in Tristan Da Cunha* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966). p71.

¹³ Ibid. p124.

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.¹⁴

To adapt successfully to "civil life", the Maori male had to literally change face - or at least refuse to modify or mark the one he was born with. Another pioneer missionary, John Lediard Nicholas, observed that it was 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

Moving into the Twentieth Century

During the Land wars period of the 1860's, there was an active resurgence

¹⁴ *The Letters and Journals of Samuel Marsden 1765-1838*, ed. John Rawson Elder (Dunedin: Coulls Somerville Wilkie Ltd & A.H.Reed for the Otago University Council, 1932). p167.

¹⁵ John Liddiard Nicholas, *Narrative of a Voyage to New Zealand Performed in the Years 1814 and 1815 in Company with the Rev. Samuel Marsden, Principal Chaplain of New South Wales*, 2 vols. (London: James Black, 1817). Vol 1, pp360-361.

¹⁶ Arthur Saunders Thomson, *The Story of New Zealand : Past, Present, Savage and Civilized* (London: John Murray, 1859). pppp??????.

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.¹⁷

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 Goldie¹⁸ and Lindauer¹⁹.

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.²⁰

For at least two generations into the twentieth century, the pukanohi was rarely seen, though 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 observes

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

¹⁷ Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, "Ta Moko: Maori Tattoo," in *Goldie*, ed. Roger Blakely and David Bateman (Auckland: David Bateman, 1997). p.112.

¹⁸ Roger Blakely and David Bateman, *Goldie* (Auckland: David Bateman, 1997).

¹⁹ Gottfried Lindauer et al., *Maori Paintings; Pictures from the Partridge Collection of Paintings, Auckland Art Gallery by Gottfried Lindauer* (Honolulu,: East-West Center Press, 1965).

²⁰ Te Awekotuku, "Ta Moko: Maori Tattoo.," p113.

moko had connotations of beauty, sex appeal and marriageability, and they became very much an assertion of minority group identity.²¹

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.

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. Which brings us to this paper's title “In your face: wearing Moko – Maori facial marking in today’s world”. 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 Rua²² 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. His study was the precursor to our much more ambitious, comprehensive, and current Marsden

²¹ Michael King, in *Face Value : A Study in Maori Portraiture* (Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1975).

²² Mohi R. Rua, “Moko : Maori Facial Tattoos : The Experiences of Contemporary Wearers” (MSocSci, University of Waikato, 2003).

Funded Project, *Ta Moko – Culture, Body Modification and the Psychology of Identity*²³.

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 paper, we focus on the reactions from Maori and Pakeha encountered by the 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 - over 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. What ever 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]

²³ Linda Waimarie Nikora and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, *Ta Moko - Culture, Body Modification and the Psychology of Identity* (2001) available from <http://psychology.waikato.ac.nz/mpru/moko/index.htm>.

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 behind moko and the fascination it presents, an attitude which 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 – European – 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 [Korere].

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]

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.²⁴ 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.

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! [Ngarahu].

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 [Rewha].

²⁴ Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, "Maori: People and Culture," in *Maori Art and Culture*, ed. Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, et al. (Auckland : London: David Bateman : British Museum Press, 1996).

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 twenty 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 be demonstrating 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 summarises 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 judgements²⁵. As detailed in the opening sections of this paper, 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

²⁵ Augie Fleras and Paul Spoonley, *Recalling Aotearoa : Indigenous Politics and Ethnic Relations in New Zealand* (Melbourne ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

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! [Poniana].

'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 [Putaringa].

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 [Tiwhana].

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 paper.

Putaringa recounts his experience on meeting a Black Power gang affiliate. This is what Putaringa reports the gang affiliate saying to him:

Gee you're intimidating with your moko! [Putaringa].

For Putaringa, this was a rather ironic statement considering that the gang affiliate carried symbols of gang association which were just as, if not more intimidating 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 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 [Tiwhana].

In our study that is currently in progress, there is preliminary evidence to suggest that children are far more accepting and encouraging of the transformations 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 [Rewha].

An interesting observation is that the level of acknowledgement or the lack of it could also suggest non-acceptance as well. A notion supported by Rewha and other wearers in 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) [Putaringa].

Tiwhana reports that others have said to him:

Far...too much! Can't wait to get my one! [Tiwhana].

Both Putaringa and Tiwhana are encouraged by these words as the art form continues to revitalise itself. For wearers in general such comments reflect the ultimate accolade, a genuine and enthusiastic affirmation.

Summary

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 [Poniania].

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 it does 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 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 become 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.²⁶

²⁶ James Cowan, "Maori Tattooing Survivals - Some Notes on Moko," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 30 (1921), p241.