

# Ta Moko: Culture, body modification, and the psychology of identity

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*Patterned skin, permanently coloured; high relief incised and scarified; chiselled features, chiselled, literally, actually...the Pacific arts of permanent body adornment gave the eighteenth century English speaking world a new word, and a new arts practice - tattoo, skin adornment, there, forever.*

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## He Timatanga

This paper outlines the context of Ta Moko in the Māori world, and locates the practice in the Pacific, and in the twenty first century. It describes the resurgence of the practice, and comments on the aims of the Marsen project. The three principal aims are:

1. To complete a comprehensive survey of the chant record and oral history with reference to archaeological, archival and artefactual materials.
2. To examine traditional whakairo carving in relation to Ta Moko.
3. To explore the nature of social relationships and ecologies that are supportive of, or resistant, to contemporary Ta Moko.

Ta Moko is a process unique to the Māori people. The skin was not only punctured to insert pigment, but also cicatrised, with the raising, particularly on the face, of deeply furrowed grooves. Acute pain, and in some instances risk to life, were inevitable.

So why did people do it? What was it for? And later, we will consider, why do they continue to?

Ta moko had many functions: it was worn to fascinate, terrify, seduce, overcome, beguile, by the skin; it was carried to record, imprint, acknowledge, remember, honour, immortalise, in the flesh, in the skin; it was also affected to beautify, transform, enhance, mutate, extend the flesh, the skin, and the soul itself. It was, and still is, about metamorphosis, about change, about crisis,

and about coping too; and for many contemporary wearers, the descendants of those first illustrated chieftains encountered by Cook, painted by Parkinson, Ta moko is a strategy too, a means of encounter, an expression of self.

In all Pacific traditions, tatau/tau was laden with talismanic properties, and perceived as embodying transformative magic. For Māori art makers particularly, in both the traditional and contemporary worlds, this transformative magic engaged and often challenged others. This transcendence is understood by the tohunga ta moko - the traditional skin artists - and also by the proud carriers of that art form, as Netana Rakuraku, one of the very last of the elders with an inscribed face, told Cowan in 1921:

*Taia o moko, hai hoa matenga mou.  
Of your moko, you cannot be deprived.  
Except by death. It will be your  
ornament, and your companion, until  
your last day.*

What are the issues concerning Ta Moko, as practice, as art form, as creative expression, as cultural survivor today? We begin at one beginning:

## *Onamata: Early Origins*

Throughout the Pacific, this art begins with myth, and spirit - an august or accidental event, a time of crisis. For Māori, Mataora, whose name means "The Living Face", brought the art up from the underworld, where he was taught by

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Uetonga, the father of his wife Niwareka, whom he abused. She fled; he followed, begging forgiveness; they reconciled; he endured the pain and gained the permanent beauty and knowledge of the art of Ta Moko.

The Māori people settled Aotearoa from the islands of the eastern Pacific, coming in successive waves over many centuries. They brought with them the languages, music, belief systems, and technologies of their cultures of origin; they also brought the practice of permanent skin adornment. Tattoo chisels similar to those used in western Polynesia have been found in some of the earliest excavations.

With the new environment came new resources: massive hardwood forests, nephrite and argillite stone, countless new fibre plants, and prolific bird life. A unique culture evolved in the more temperate islands of Aotearoa, demonstrated by a differing form of facial adornment.

William Yate, of the Church Missionary Society, noted this in 1835:

*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.*

Yate was but one of many commentators from the period of first Māori-European encounter, addressed in the following section.

#### *Hinatore: Colonial Encounters*

Captain James Cook made his historic landfall in 1769, and the islands were never the same again. The first impressions were romantic, the Māori idealised, their body adornment captured in both watercolours and words, as Cook enthuses:

*The marks in general are spirals drawn with great nicety..(they)... resemble the foliage of old chased ornaments, convolutions of filigree work*

The traveller Bidwill continues almost a century later in 1851:

*...I have seen the arms and bodies of the New Zealand women so covered with these powerful blue marks, that they looked as if they had on them a tight fitting chintz dress...*

However, with major whaling and sealing operations, the passionate and relentless efforts of Christian missionaries, and the escalating settler incursions on coastal and inland tribal territories, the romance soured quickly, if it ever really occurred. For a few rare Pākehā-Europeans, the romance endured as they chose to assimilate, to live as Māori warriors, and to assume the full face and body markings of the Māori fighting chief. Two such famous personalities were Barnet Burns and John Rutherford, the latter being an especially glamorous figure with work from Hawaii and the Marquesas also adorning his skin.

In 1840, the Treaty of Waitangi was signed between the many (but not all) Māori chiefs, and the British Crown. It is significant that a number of the signatories actually chose to inscribe the document with a small pattern from their facial moko, this subtle glyph effectively conveying their mana, or chiefly authority, to the process. Other legal instruments, particularly land deeds, were similarly authorised. Within a few years of its signing, the settlers breached the treaty, and decades of conflict, aggression, distrust, atrocity, and invasion ensued.

The tattooed face became a powerful symbol of resistance for many Māori, whereas for others it seemed in decline. Writing in 1859, Thomson reflects:

*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.*

By the end of the nineteenth century, the scourge of foreign diseases, the extensive land confiscations after the land wars, and the sheer demographic weight of settler numbers, had all reduced the Māori population to 42,113 in 1896, a fraction of its earlier size.

Colonisation, settler greed, racist land and language policies, and the fabrication of a mild and mannerly English environment in the South Seas had dire consequences for the Māori people.

Yet they rallied, and in subtle ways, they resisted. Māori women continued to have their chins inscribed late into the twentieth century so that there has always, been a tattooed Māori face seen upon the marae - the ceremonial courtyards - of this land.

#### *Onaianei: Contemporary Realities*

Ta moko - Māori tattoo - manifests pride, celebration, and identity for Māori people now, in the twenty-first century. For many decades, it was regarded as outmoded, unnecessary, somehow barbaric, certainly by colonising Pākehā, and to an increasing degree by urbanised and relocated Māori. Meanwhile, Māori language, culture and lands continued to be threatened by government policy, and the inertia caused by dispossession and the colonial process. Yet these same Māori, urbanized and relocated, still marked their own arms, or thighs, or hands, or ankles, and occasionally, faces. At school, in prisons, at youth camps, on rugby trips, it was something that Māori simply did: the inscribing of the skin. Through this text, stories of defiance and survival were recorded, emerging emphatically with the reappearance of the tattooed face, and patterned hips. The marking of this dynamic resurgence occurred in the late 1980's. Many of the leading figures, including Laurie te Rangikaihoru Nicholas and Toi Gordon Hatfield, were trained in classical Whakairo (Māori wood sculpture) with which it has a discernible graphic and technical relationship.

This relationship is not a coincidence. As Hatfield once remarked to the writer:

*We never stopped doing Ta Moko. We were just hitting our chisels into wood*

*instead of skin. Therefore, the tradition never stopped.*

Amster Reedy reinforces this sense of continuity. A well known tribal leader, and one of the first national figures to assume the adornment of raperape, puoro and pakipaki, the extensive lower body work now beneath his impeccable business suit, he comments in Mana Magazine:

*It's a powerful statement, because it's there forever. Once you've done it, you've made the commitment. What more appropriate way to commit yourself to tikanga Māori than to get a moko?*

In addition, while many Māori are patterning their bodies so that they may choose when and how their moko may be visible and admired, others are literally taking it on the face, and presenting this visage or power and pride to an often alarmed and anxious world.

Over the last ten years, the face of Māori protest in the popular press and news media has been the karu tiwhana, the face inscribed. One of the country's most celebrated and charismatic protest leaders, a veteran of over three decades of land campaigns, parliamentary resistance, and Treaty claims, Tame Wairere Iti, reflects on the art:

*The thing for me is to let the image of moko speak for itself... the revival of moko for many of us is really exercising our rangatiratanga - our fundamental right to exist*

Rangatiratanga also infers the right to control, to own, to have authority; and with Ta moko, that authority is ironically and openly being undermined by the burgeoning appropriation of Māori tattoo design as a fashion accessory, a fetish item, and a global commodity. Curvilinear Māori rafter and Ta Moko patterns have appealed to the European gaze for over two centuries. Currently a number of Anglo-American entertainers and at least one African American, as well as a famous British rock star, flaunt dazzling Māori design as part of their image. One of these

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men has a kauae moko, a gendered chin design worn only by women.

In more than one instance, the work itself was that of a Māori dermographic artist. This remains a hotly contentious issue, with some arguing that what Māori do for each other, with each other, is Ta Moko, as it inscribes narratives and infers genealogy, and has spiritual significance; and what Pākehā and non-Māori have and do, or what they wear even if done by a Māori practitioner, is something else. It is not Ta moko, but another form, categorised by some as "Kirituhi", which means painted skin.

A further question often raised concerns gender roles, and the sex of the practitioner. Recent ethnography and oral history assert that men exclusively practised whakairo and ta moko: that they were arts forbidden to women. Yet the chant record contradicts this, and as recently as the 1930's women were working as ta moko artists. At the time of writing, there is only one outstanding independent Māori female Ta Moko practitioner, Christine Harvey of Rekohu. She began with a rotary machine

she made as a thirteen year old from her parents' stereo turntable. Her work attests to her talent, and to her commitment. Is her work, done by a woman, Ta Moko or Kirituhi? Who decides? Even as these words take shape, this debate runs on.

Ta Moko is the process of inscribing, of marking the skin, of placing the narrative; Moko is the outcome, the finished work, the textured story, the pictorial memories permanently engraved. For Māori, subjecting the body to such trauma is more than the recognition of adulthood, and self, it is the proclamation of that self as belonging - to a particular descent line, family, or kinship network; to a special and unique group, to a community. It is about being Māori in today's world, and creating a visibility that will never ever fade into the tomorrow anticipated by the proverb:

*Ma wai e kawa taku kauae ki tawhiti?  
Who will wear my chin tattoo in the  
future?  
Who will remember me?*

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