

Contemporary Attitudes to Traditional Facial Ta Moko: A Working Paper

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Until it came under serious attack from nineteenth century missionaries, ta moko was an integral part of traditional Maori society. Facial moko conveyed important information about identity, whakapapa and status. The process of receiving a moko was tapu and highly regulated. Recent years have seen an increase in the number of Maori receiving ta moko. Moko have been seen as a symbol of Maori pride and identity and have often been associated with political activism. This study set out to investigate the contemporary meaning of ta moko, the reactions wearers encounter from others and the ways wearers cope with those reactions.

Three case studies are presented. These show that the issues of personal identity and whakapapa were central to the meaning wearers attached to their moko. Receiving a moko was often associated with significant personal changes and an increased political commitment to Maori self determination. On the whole, positive reactions were more common than negative reactions but wearers did find themselves subjected to racist and antagonistic responses. Wearing moko was also reported to mean that others, particularly other Maori, placed certain expectations on the wearer, notably to be fluent in te reo and to be able to exercise leadership. Participants considered that there was a need for education about the significance of ta moko and recommended that those contemplating receiving a moko ensure that they are reasonably fluent in te reo.

The tattooed face of the Maori has always attracted attention. Moko, a specifically Maori term for tattoo – diverged from Polynesian tattooing into an art form that belongs uniquely to New Zealand (King, 1992). Tattooing (ta ki te moko) was lengthy and painful. The tools were known as ‘uhi’, small sharp bone points tied together in the shape of a matarau (spear) with four or five prongs, hit with a hammer of wood, called a whao. The points were arranged in a straight line for tattooing, and an expert operator (tohunga ta moko) could do it much more quickly than a beginner (Tikao cited in Beattie, 1990).

The place of moko in traditional Maori society, “served to identify rank, to give recognition to achievers and to provide identifiable authority structure” (Simmons, 1989, p.25). The practice of moko was not only an important custom in itself, “it also became a focal point for all that was idealised and valued in Maori culture” (King, 1992, p.5). Simmons (1989, p.25) describes the moko as a “system of giving information as well as supporting the status system”. The Moko transforms the wearer, defines one’s identity and each is as similar yet unique as a fingerprint. The lines of the Moko are perpetuated with meaning. Recorded in the design are the wearer’s whakapapa, ancestry and the essence of ones identity. Accordingly, the moko was such a clear statement that it was considered bad manners to ask a person who they were. An inability to, “recognise a great chief could be regarded as an insult, even if the people had never seen him before. Insults were avenged by war” (Simmons, 1989, p.26). The power of the full facial Moko can not be denied.

The male moko came under severe attack from the missionaries in the early 19th Century. Simmons (1989, p.27) quotes J.L Nicholas of 1817, “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”. A transcript from A.S Thompson in 1859

reports upon both the missionary and settler influence on Maori culture. “Tattooing is now going out of fashion, partly from the influence of the missionaries, who describe it as the devils art, but chiefly from the example of the settlers” (Simmons, 1989, p.27). It is claimed that the Maori moko made a brief revival during the nationalistic wars of 1864-68. However it is also claimed that the last of the traditional tattooed men of old died in the 1920’s.

Because traditional tattooing involved marking the face and the shedding of blood, it was considered highly tapu and the process was associated with extensive rituals and regulations. The degradation of Maori culture over the past 150 years has seen a substantial change in ceremonies and relaxation of conventions about who is allowed to give the Moko and who is entitled to wear it. To many people associated with it today however, the custom is as authentic and sacred as it has ever been (King, 1992). The last 15-20 years has seen the increase of people acquiring the facial Moko as a symbolism of Maori pride and identity. It is at the forefront of Maori activism and a focus for media attention. This resurgence has often been met with societal scepticism and trepidation. It’s these types of attitudes that I will attempt to assess as a means of highlighting the prevalent attitude towards Maori facial Moko in Aotearoa today.

Aims of Study

The specific aims of the study were to:

1. Explore the significance of ta moko in modern Aotearoa society
2. Explore the prevailing attitudes faced by wearers of moko as a result of their moko
3. Identify patterns in which moko wearers cope with prevailing attitudes

Methodology

A case study approach is being used. 10 wearers of traditional Maori facial moko will be interviewed. Each participant will be interviewed using items based on thematic areas of concern for the research. The overall research findings remain in their preliminary

stages so a presentation of only three case studies will be made. All three participants have full facial moko. To respect their anonymity, alias have been developed.

The following are three case studies of research participants. Each participant lives in a rural setting and generally close to family and iwi. Each case study has a brief background of the participant followed by themes that are evident as a result of the interviews. The themes are arranged as follows:

1. Significance of moko:
2. Prevalent attitudes:
3. Coping strategies:

For each theme, participant quotes have been inserted to emphasise each thematic point.

Case Study One: Tio

Tio is in his early to mid twenties. He is married with a wife and children and they all reside within the rural confines of his tribal area. Tio is actively involved with his local marae and strives to provide for his whanau, hapu and iwi. Although he is unemployed, he often finds himself in many of the main centres around the North Island in support of those with moko, those about to acquire moko and Treaty of Waitangi issues.

Significance of moko: The acquisition of the moko for Tio relates to be identified as a Maori person with traditional Maori ideals and values. The death of his father further increased his wanting of the moko. Tio states:

...My father was meant to have a moko before he died. It was then passed from my mother and older brother that I carry the tokotoko (in the form of a moko). To identify who I am, instead of hiding...I've got a lot of friends who are (Pacific) Islanders. It's hard to know if their Maori or (Pacific) Islanders. That's the other reason I did it. So when they look at us, they know straight away who we are! I just wanted to be known as a Maori at the end of the day...I didn't put it on for going out there and protesting...although I'll support that.

Prevalent attitudes: In acquiring the moko Tio understood the attention he would receive from his Maori community and general public.

...Some of my own (whanau, Maori) are the worst to be honest. Only because they are harawene (jealous) cause they haven't got the moko on their face and they don't want to go through the take (in this case the circumstances that revolve around his having a moko). We face everything. We face our own, Pakeha and attitudes. You can just look at them and you know what they are thinking in their mind. When we first got it done, I didn't give a damn in the world...but there are some that are racist, but they don't worry us one bit. So long as they don't try anything silly.

Tio suggests that in his experience, the general public of the Bay of Plenty, are more accepting of the moko than places such as Hamilton and Auckland.

...Well some Pakeha react sweet as. Some don't know what to say...whether they like it or not we are here to stay. Around Whakatane they are used to us (moko wearers)...in Hamilton they freak all right. Especially those red-collars (rednecks), they freak bro!

...I don't know what they think, I don't know whether they think, 'ah there's those people that are bloody kicking us off their lands and all that' (laughs). It's not all about that. Some of them got it the wrong way.

Tio acknowledges the controversy surrounding moko and attributes a proportion of the blame to the media.

...Yeah well I reckon it's the media. The media is there to make us look like bad people. They try and act like they are there to catch the good parts, but their only there for the sad parts. Wait for someone to make a bad mistake, egg-out, and they are there to go, 'I'm putting that on the news!' And it's not like that. There are a lot of cheeky people out there on

the streets when there are occupations going down. There to provoke you.

Tio is very keen to educate the uneducated. Whether they are Maori or non-Maori. A key aspect to resolving a lot of issues surrounding moko is education according to Tio although how this is achieved is uncertain.

...Like I said before even our people need to educate themselves to work with Pakeha. Talk with better understanding. Kindness, aroha, because that's what our old people had, aroha.

...To help that you've got to talk to them (Pakeha) and educate them in our (Maori) ways because we've educated ourselves in the way they think, in their ways. They don't know our tikanga...than they'll understand where we are coming from.

Coping strategies: An important issue for Tio is that people are educated to the significance of the moko for Maori people and wearers in particular. He foresees his role as an educator as a coping strategy.

...I've got three alternatives. I'll either talk to them and if they don't want to listen than I'll just walk away. If they want to come and nag me about it (after trying the first two alternatives), we'll go on the (marae) atea (settle it with a fight)...There is no win or lose, it's just sorting it out.

...Right from the time you get done (ta moko) it starts...the next day your out their facing the world. You get a lot of negatives but you just walk around with your head up high...I won't let my head down or I'll be letting myself and my wahine (wife) down.

The moko has meant subtle changes in lifestyle and viewpoint on life. A greater commitment to Maori issues, the language and marae duties in particular.

Case Study Two: Neweru

Newaru was a whangai (adopted) to his koroua (grandfather) and kuia (grandmother). During his fourth form year (year 10), Newaru

left school and associated himself with gangs eventually becoming a patched up gang member himself. Newaru has since left the gang and currently resides in Whakatane. He is aged between 20-30 years. He is in the first year of a three-year Bachelor of Maori Studies degree. Newaru has had his moko for approximately 5 years although it is still incomplete.

Significance of moko: Neweru commented

The meaning of the moko for me is my truth to Io Matua Kore...through the Ira Atua down to the Ira Tangata, down to me. My right side is te taha tane (male side) and the left side is te taha wahine (female side). On my moko it explains my mothers people and my fathers people.

The life Newaru had led has provided extra impetus to acquiring the moko.

...I guess I prepared myself when I was a child really. I went through a stage of rebellious teenage life. I've been to jail before. I spent 28 months in jail. I was classed as an alcoholic and a drug user...I don't drink now, I don't smoke cigarettes and I don't smoke marijuana any more.

Prevalent attitudes: In assessing the attitudes Newaru is faced with he assures himself that ignorance and fear play an important role in people's reactions.

...I get a lot of good responses from Pakeha. A lot of them go to me, 'gee that's beautiful. Well balanced and there's not too much'. You know what I mean? Some moko when you look at them you can't see the person. You can't see the face you know what I mean. But with mine you can see my face, you can see who I am...Some people (Pakeha) look at me as if I'm an alien. Some of them don't realise that this (moko) was here before them and before their forefathers...I know there are a lot of them (Pakeha) that are really ignorant and arrogant. I can see it. Just the way they dominate the town, but I don't let that affect me.

In response to the reactions from Maori people Newaru has mixed views as well.

...My own whanau, they are okay with it, they are fine with it...I have talked to a lot of gang members or they have come up to me because I know a lot of them and they have said to me, 'gee you're intimidating with your moko'. They feel that I intimidate them and I go to them, 'ah look at you fullas, big, black and ugly' (laughs). They then say, 'nah, your intimidating' because they understand the concept of the ta moko. They know that its tapu and they know that it's a spiritual thing.

However the historical representation and significance of the moko has caused a few dilemmas for Newaru.

...For me being young and wearing the moko, people have expectations of me. And I say to people when I first meet a lot of people, 'don't have expectations, because I might not be able to meet them'. They think I know everything but I don't.

Coping Strategies: In response to coping with situations that confront Newaru, humility and education appear to be his main strategy.

...Before I had my moko I wasn't a humble person. Anyone that would look at me I would say, 'what are you f... looking at' that sort of thing. What the moko has done for me is made me humble. When people are looking at me I just go, 'ah, their looking at the moko'. I just have to look at them and don't take offence. They have to look because I have a moko.

...I have to humble myself...I will let them come and ask me. Open myself up to people to come and ask me about my moko. If I can explain what their asking, well I will, if I can't then I'll say, 'can't answer it'.

With respect to the ignorant few Newaru finds it easier to simply walk away.

...I just leave it there because its not my problem, its theirs and they have to work that out. I know who I am, but they don't know who they are. Some of the Pakeha people I say to them, 'now this is old. This was here before you people were here'.

Case Study Three: Rihari

Rihari is aged between 25-35 years. He is currently in his final years of his Bachelors degree with the intention of completing a Masters. As a child, his father who was a carver exposed Rihari to the different elements of moko. Kapa haka however really allowed him that freedom to express his interest in ta moko. Rihari has a full facial moko.

Significance of moko: Throughout Rihari's life he has never had the desire to get a moko despite his heavy involvement and interest in the art. However, the overall moko represents for Rihari the personal experiences in his life. Moko on the kauae is significant to the passing of his first wife and child. The moko (nose and mouth) represent his current relationship with his wife and children. The rae (forehead) is a reflection of his developments as a person within te ao Maori (Maori world). The right and left sides of the face represent tribal affiliations. The moko also represents his history in terms of having had gang relations and Maori political ties, although these are not as apparent in the designs.

Prevalent attitudes: Rihari comments

...Straight away people are looking for faults and to see if their wairangi (crazy) until they see the person's really changed (internally and externally)

...Before the moko I was just the same as everybody else. As soon as I got the moko there was a change. I've got the upper hand in the way I speak and conduct myself. The person has a different feel for me. They look at the way I'm dressed and speak and think (to themselves), 'gee, this person's educated. Look at the way he's

dressed and speaks'. Stereotypical view is blown away really quickly.

Rihari found that shopping for clothes was a prime situation of being cast in a stereotypical role.

...In the shops I'm always taken to the cheap section of the shop. Cheap jeans and shirts. I don't know what you call it but they always suggest cheaper things for you. They'll always suggest the cheapest stuff! I think they must think I'm unemployed or something as soon as they see me. It must be the unemployment issue, the economic issue, social issues associated with moko...has to be.

Different people from society treat me differently. Like professional people treat me different...They think I'm gonna attack them or I'm anti-government, pro-Maori...I think their first impression of me changes when they speak to me. They get a first impression of how much education I've had.

...Our people tend to think you 'on to it' (clever) straight away because you've got one (moko). It's a little presumption they have...they think you can sing 500 waiata (songs), whaikorero. Lucky some of us can or we'll be blowing the bubble on us if we couldn't. There's the pressure to start doing things before you get one. They (people in general) expect things.

Coping strategies: The biggest challenge for Rihari was accepting this physical change.

...I had to get used to having it myself. That was the biggest thing I've ever had to deal with. The biggest challenge was having this permanent addition to my appearance.

The acceptance and support from family members was the reassurance he sought and with this Rihari has coped really well.

...I was okay with my family. The past history was there. There was no argument about, 'what are you doing?' They had seen my change. There was a change in what I was doing in my life. I

was leaving the gang. They could see I was pulling away from it.

Treating people with a lot more civility and educating people about ta moko are the primary ways of coping. Rihari understands the provocation his moko will stir but is undeterred in his belief in educating.

...I started changing the way I treated people. I used to set them up so they could take the fall. I don't play that game anymore so I just get straight to the point when dealing with people...Say it with authority so any negative suggestions are averted. That's one philosophy I've maintained about Pakeha people and other people that don't know about moko, or haven't got a moko. They are having these thoughts as untrained people. Lets teach them something while we're having this little experience. Try not to be rude and being polite.

Conclusion

It must be noted that the paper presented is a summary of preliminary findings from a study still in progress. The findings do however provide a starting point for further research.

Life experiences for research participants have ensured the moko act as a catalyst to their personal growth and development within Maori and mainstream societies. The significance of the moko is twofold. It marks a transition from one period in each participant's life to another. The moko has physically marked a time of grief and experience alongside personal change and direction. Secondly, participants have reassessed what is of value to themselves and their whanau and appear positive in their approach to realising those ideals. This is a significant step considering the background experiences of some of the participants.

The attitudinal reactions from the three case studies are similar in experience. The participants enjoy the many positive comments and support they receive from the public and are convinced about the sincerity. These types of attitudes appear to be a lot

more prevalent than the ignorance, racism and intimidation that has also been encountered. A feature of Maori attitudes in particular relates to the traditional and historical expectations of moko wearers. For Maori, there are issues of fluency in te reo (Maori language), oratory, and the ability to recite whakapapa (genealogy), myths and legends; in essence showing the characteristics of a potential leader. This attitude, although not necessarily negative, is fairly widespread and demanding.

In an attempt to cope with these situations, all three participants have advocated for education and dialogue, as a means to reducing public scrutiny and individual stresses. In dealing with expectations participants have warned of at least knowing, or learning, to speak the reo. This has been advised, as some moko wearers are not taken seriously.

References

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