

**Te Awekotuku, N. (1997). Ta moko: Maori tattoo. In R. Blackley, *Goldie* (pp. 109-114). Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland Art Gallery; David Bateman.**

---

## TA MOKO: MAORI TATTOO

By Ngahuia Te Awekotuku

You may lose your most valuable property through misfortune in various ways... your house, your weaponry, your spouse, and other treasures. You may be robbed of all that you cherish. But of your moko, you cannot be deprived, except by death. It will be your ornament and your companion until your final day.

Netana Whakaari of Waimana, 1921

Mataora was the husband of Niwareka, who came from the underworld. He abused her and she fled back to her people. Remorseful and distressed, Mataora set out looking for her. He dressed in his finest garments and enhanced his already handsome face with colour; he wanted her forgiveness, he missed her and so he followed her trail.

She was with her father, Uetonga, when Mataora arrived, desperate, exhausted, dishevelled, and pigment running with the sweat from his face, smeared and unsightly. Everyone laughed at him. Their skins were incised with rich patterns; their adornment was forever. And though he was embarrassed and angry, Mataora was humble, too. He begged forgiveness of Niwareka and her family; he begged knowledge of her father. They relented, teaching him the art of ta moko, while Niwareka learned that of taniko, weaving with coloured fibres. And so two important art traditions, taniko and ta moko, were brought back to the world of light and celebrated by humankind for their magic and their beauty.

Ta moko is the Maori form of a tradition that extends throughout the islands of Polynesia; tattoo chisels have been found in the earliest excavations in Aotearoa, and the Eastern Pacific. This archaic material includes wider combs, suggesting a relationship to the implements of Samoa and the possibility of more geometric designs and blocks of solid colour; it may also be argued that the ta moko recorded so graphically by Goldie and documented by Robley was developed with the introduction of metal. The works of Parkinson, de l'Horne and other eighteenth-century artists, present the ta moko as a series of flat incisions into which pigment was inserted as the chisel cut, rather than the sculpted and highly textured scarification procedure assumed in later decades and which Goldie so meticulously detailed.

Ta moko is related to the tatu of Eastern Polynesia, and the uninterrupted, superlative tatau of Samoa. Though the patterns taken by the skin vary dramatically from one island group to another, the technique of rhythmically tapping a bone chisel lashed to a small wooden haft remains the same. At least two artmakers – one, the tohunga or accomplished expert, the other an apprentice/assistant – were engaged in the operation, as each section of skin being worked on required manual stretching, so the chisel pierced a taut surface. Graphic representations of the ta moko process, notably by Steele and Landauer, present an artist working on his own, yet this was most

unlikely – tohunga ta moko worked with a number of helpers, as the process required a lot of careful attention.

Robley also noted the use of shark's teeth, and the manipulation of a single slashing instrument which opened the skin for the application of pigment; a tool like this exists in the British Museum collection, and is currently the focus of some debate.

The conventional toolkit of the original tohunga ta moko comprised a series of hafted chisels (uhi) made in varying widths from albatross bone. While the narrowest (2mm) were honed to a flat edge and thus served as 'cutters', the wider blades had a serrated, comblike edge which penetrated the flesh and inserted pigment at the same time. The larger type was known as 'uhi matarau' – the chisel of a hundred faces. Set in handles of kauri, totara or maire wood, often elaborately ornamented, they were struck by a mallet of mahoe which also varied according to the blade size and type. As well as the chisels and mallets, the kit contained a small pot – usually of wood, sometimes pumice, always carved – of pigment, or awe kapara. The ingredients of this pigment differed from one tribal region to another, but it always included a mix of soot and oil or water. Differences arose in the material burned to make the soot – the awheto caterpillar, kauri gum, or vegetable matter. The darkest and the most permanent substance was the most desirable. Containers holding decades of lovingly concocted pigment were highly prized and closely guarded heirlooms. Also remarkable for their beauty were the korere, or broth and water feeders, finely carved funnel-shaped objects designed to distract the patient from the pain while giving some liquid food safely by minimising all contact between the traumatised skin and the food itself. These too were precious objects, greatly admired.

Healing concluded the process. Clear, clean, spring water – wai maori – is still regarded as the most effective healing agent, but Robley's collection included a karaka leaf – dry, flat and beige one hundred and thirty years later, but still visibly a karaka leaf of the kind which continues to be used on wounds, cuts and skin infections in the Maori world today. It is particularly soothing on traumatised and infected skin.

Ritual was an essential component of ta moko, to safeguard both the operator and the patient. Most basic of all was the tapu of hygiene – no one involved in the process handled food, and any necessary sustenance was provided by helpers at the appropriate time. The patient had to refrain from intimate contact until the healing was complete, and was earnestly warned against looking at her or his reflection – originally in water, more recently, in mirrors. This was sound psychology and common sense.

Despite the current belief that only male artists practised as tohunga ta moko, Maori oral history as revealed by moteatea or chant poems, Dumont d'Urville's account and events of more recent decades dispute this. King notes that two women were practising between the First and Second World Wars in the Waikato district, and people in the Rotorua/Bay of Plenty area recall two women also adept at the art.

With the introduction of metal, and more specifically iron, the technology changed, and it is believed that the patterning and design reflected this. Much finer work was produced; a specialist in one branch of Polynesian tattoo suggests that the grooved shape of sailmaking needles reworked into a tattoo blade could easily cicatrise the

skin and effect the raised skin art so intimately associated with the nineteenth-century images of Maori mau moko.

Different parts of the body were ornamented in the different sexes. Women were usually adorned on their lips and chin, taking this around the time of their first menstruation; until the late nineteenth century, the central forehead, nostrils and upper lip were also marked. The thighs, hips, lower abdomen, neck, breasts and arms were tattooed and the tara whakairo, or *mons veneris*, was also marked. Such instances, in contrast to the kauae moko or chin tattoo, were local variations; full-facial or half-facial work on women, while recorded in both oral and Pakeha accounts, were rare indeed.

The full-facial moko of the Maori male, balanced by the complex patterning between lower back and knees, were designed and presented to inspire fear, excite admiration and arouse erotic interest. All of this occurred when such moko were first encountered by the eighteenth-century voyagers.

... it is impossible to avoid admiring the immense Elegance and Justness of the figures in which it is form'd, which in the face is always different spirals, upon the body generally different figures resembling something the foliages of old Chasmg upon gold or silver; all these finished with a masterly taste and execution, for of a hundred which at first sight you would judge to be exactly the same, on a close examination no two will prove alike.

Joseph Banks, 1769

One can imagine the impact of Maori man moko in the streets of Sydney, New South Wales, or in the port cities of Britain. They were applauded and objectified; followed around and pestered. They included adventurous crewmen on brigs from that park of the world; or visitors, like Hongi Hika, to the court of St James; and young noblemen sponsored by missionaries or colonists like Titore and Te Pehi. The latter obliged his Liverpool hosts by drawing his own moko, and those of his family members, many times over – the English were fascinated. Such drawings were regarded as signatures, and the inscription of moko designs on early land settlement papers and the Waitangi Treaty indicates that they were thus perceived as seals of honour.

With the arrival of whalers, runaway convicts, explorers, remittance men, flax traders and eventually missionaries and land 'speculators' came irrevocable change – in technology, indigenous economies and religion, and many other elements of Maori cultural practice and belief. Warfare was transformed by firearms, and their acquisition was inevitable. Subsequently, a particularly gruesome and vicious commerce emerged. Decapitation, and the preservation of tattooed heads, were an integral part of mourning and memorial traditions in the ancient Maori world – the visage of a beloved spouse, relative or exalted chief was kept close and cherished, brought out to converse with and admire, dressed and elevated to inspire and motivate. Even those of old enemies were accorded respect.

The morbid fascination of Pakeha collectors changed this, and between 1811 and 1831 (when it was outlawed by order of the Government of New South Wales), a grisly traffic conveyed scores of tattooed heads, many supposedly 'done to order' or posthumously incised, to foreign shores. A large number have since come home, primarily through the incomparable efforts of the late Maui Pomare; nevertheless

their presence as ethnological specimens in the American Museum of Natural History, the British Museum and other institutions remains a contentious and bitter reality. Work continues for their repatriation and appropriate demise; most ironically, their tragic beauty and haunting artistry inform us, their descendants, of technique and pattern, of excellence in design and prevision of symmetry. *E Koro ma, moe mai koutou; maringiringi noa nga ruimata o te iwi, moe mai.*

By 1840 and the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, Christian missionaries had established stations throughout the islands and the demonising of ta moko as a pagan and unspeakable perversion was well under way. The decline began, although ta moko was resurrected vigorously and effectively during the Land Wars of the 1860s. 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. This was, alas, shortlived – with the illegal and unjustified confiscation of millions of acres, the pestilence of northern hemisphere diseases, and the burgeoning encroachment by Pakeha, Maori vitality waned and the tattooed face seemed to fade away. According to Cowan, the last traditional full-face operation occurred in 1865, and by the century's turning these venerable faces were few indeed.

For this reason, despite their gravely inappropriate titles and often highly disturbing arrangement or aspect, the portraits by Goldie are immensely important – as images of our own koroua and kuia, and as a record of a profoundly troubled period in our people's history. Despite being the graphic perception of a single white man, these portraits for just about every Maori person, and certainly for all of the descendants, resonate with an integrity, a sense of spirit, that draws tears and makes the heart ache. Because by 1930, the fully inscribed face of the chiefly Maori male of te ao tawhito, the ancient world, had passed into the realms of Hinenui I te Po, the Goddess of Death.

Kauae moko – the treatment of women's chins – persisted until the 1950s, with some innovation. While such persistence may be due to conservatism, it is also likely that Maori women in the rural areas were seldom engaged in activity beyond the marae or home. They did not mix with Pakeha often, and they rarely worked for wages. Their world was relatively confined and contact with Pakeha judgment or approbation was minimal. However, it is interesting to note that kauae moko was worn with great pride by tourist guides in Whakarewarewa, Rotorua, until the 1960s. Working with metal and bone, at least eight tohunga ta moko from throughout the North Island were practising before the First World War. At this time needle tattooing was introduced, and its practitioners included women from Waikato and Rotorua. It produced a markedly flatter finish but was nevertheless regarded with huge awe and admiration – as a child growing up in the early 1950s. I remember well the mixed feelings of amazement, fear and curiosity the Kuia mau moko stirred in me. My two favourites were Kuia Maraea, whose chin felt and looked gouged – I know hers was done by uhi matarau, probably Taiwera's of Tuhoe; and Kuia Makarita, whose patterning was wide and smooth, but very blue. Kuia Hera, who brought me up, affected her moko on her arm – her name is subtle Times Roman capitals, sadly faded, always intrigued me.

he tangata ke.  
mana e noho te ao nei;  
he ma

After the tattooed face,  
someone with unmarked skin  
may claim this world  
(Maori saying)

Perhaps that seemed so for a while; but no more! Generations of young Maori in boarding schools and state schools, in offices and army barracks and gaols and ships at sea, mark their skins. It has always been the most natural thing to do, printing colour into the body's surface with a compass point or pins tied to a matchstick or fine needles or even a sharp lead pencil. Despite the active loathing of teachers, and the confused reactions of parents, most of us did it. And our own children continue this manifestation of the heritage of memory. Many argue it is programmed in the genes. Proudly framed portraits of very recent forebears adorn the walls of meeting houses and private homes, their tattooed faces considered and revered. They lived and worked and loved, producing today's Maori, not so very long ago – four or five, or for a few from one to three, generations. The mere pounamu of a majestic blue-chinned dance leader still sings in the hands of her great-granddaughter; the engraved face of a notable nineteenth century orator shadows the eloquent gestures of his grandson as he wields his ornate walking staff. The past is recent, and the past is today – which is why Maori are wearing it now. On our bodies – and increasingly, on our faces too.

As a fine art form, with formally trained exponents who sustained the original tradition, ta moko endured almost two decades of decline; the last kauae moko, by the needle technique, were done in the 1950s. Almost twenty years later, thanks to the courage and commitment of individual women and the visionary talent of two professional tattoo artists, Merv O'Connor and Roger Ingerton, the kauae moko was seen, blue-black, crisp and beautiful, on the marae once again, just as the last of the Kuia mau moko were passing on. Those involved in this first wave of revival were active in women's rituals and performance, famous as composers and chanters, weavers and oral historians. Motivated by an assertion of identity, they reclaimed the art form and reinforced their mana whenua in highly visual, indelible terms. Soon after this, the first male, a colourful and passionate orator, began work on his face.

One hundred and fifty years after the Treaty, ta moko was being actively reclaimed, albeit with electric machines; patterns reappeared on faces, buttocks, thighs, backs, arms – all over the Maori body. Much of the finest and most inventive work is being done in goals, and as part of the contemporary pantribal culture of rural and urban gangs; the tattooed face, or 'mask', intentionally achieves the same impact – ferocious, menacing, aggressive, yet often aesthetically elegant and attractive, too.

As in ancient times, the artists travel, moving as required from one community to another. Currently only a handful are practising. They include Te Wharemanuka Lardelli, a graduate of Ilam School of Fine Arts, and Te Rangikaihoru Nicholas, a protégé of the late tohunga whakairo Hone Taiapa; both are training apprentices, and acknowledge the wise guidance and generosity of Pakeha practitioners, including the famous Danish Celt Jorgen Kristiansen, who gave informal workshops in Aotearoa over the summer of 1990-91. While they work with electric machines, both men are also committed to reintroducing the uhi technique, and Te Wharemanuka manipulates

both steel needles and uhi and mallet with a confident and exacting grace. In at least two rural communities, this latter practice is preferred. With the quietly disciplined research and well-informed reconstruction and manufacture of chisels and associated equipment, they maintain a conscious privacy, but their work is unmistakable.

Ta moko today is much more than a fashion statement, a passing fad for Maori. It is about who we are, and whom we come from. It is about where we are going, and how we choose to get there. And it is about for always, forever.

Charles F. Goldie may have assumed he was doing future generations of a great service by recording 'the Maori as he was'; by picturing, for posterity, the vanishing times of a noble race. He misjudged his sitters. He misjudged their descendants. He assumed too much. The world has moved on, indeed

And their time is done.  
But their blood moves in our hearts.  
Their voices rise in our throats  
Their song glows in the pigmented surface  
Of our skins. In this time. Now  
I'm Maori.