

# **‘Moko Kauae**

## **Reclaiming our birth right as**

### **Wāhine Māori’**



**Riria Pere (1864-1923)**

For wāhine Māori, “the moko kauae, or traditional female chin tattoo, is considered a physical manifestation of their true identity. It is believed every Māori woman wears a moko on the inside, close to their heart; when they are ready, the tattoo artist simply brings it out to the surface” (Duff, 2017, para 2).

**Gender Studies Assessment**

**By Kirri Lopati (Ngati Kahungungu)**



In my whare tīpuna, I see beautiful images of my kuia wearing their moko kauae. This image represents her as wāhine Māori, our whakapapa, culture, and a symbol of our distinct identity, as Māori women in Aotearoa. However, today the picture is painfully obvious following the impact of colonisation, and the imposition of a worldview that has been completely different to our own. As such, from the onset of undertaking this investigation, culture, and gender cannot be separated due to the intersectionality of both influences. The term wāhine Māori will describe my gendered lens, which incorporates both. This essay will consider the impact colonisation has had on Māori identity and wāhine Māori rights to wear moko, using a wāhine Māori lens, and analysis.

Consideration will be given through a historical, cultural, social, economic, and political analysis, to provide context and understanding of why wāhine Māori are reclaiming their right to wear Moko Kauae. Drawing on my lived experience as a wāhine Māori, I will describe and analyse how a mana wāhine framework, has informed my gendered lens. Finally, links to social practice will be identified in relation to the increase of Māori women reclaiming their birth right.

Indigenous people all over the world can be identified by what Taouma (2019) calls 'Marks of Mana' that they wear on their bodies as a symbol of identity and whakapapa of their people etched onto their skin. These cultural 'Marks of Mana' tell a story of their heritage and their personal story of who they are and where they came from. Like the precious photo of my kuia and tīpuna I choose to share in this space of my paternal great, great Grandmother Riria Pere Rangatira of Ngatiporou, born in 1864 and passed away in 1923. This sadly means it has been, roughly 100 years since someone in my whānau wore moko kauae. As a direct descendant, I question what obstacles and challenges my people and my whānau have had to face, and what this might mean for future generations.

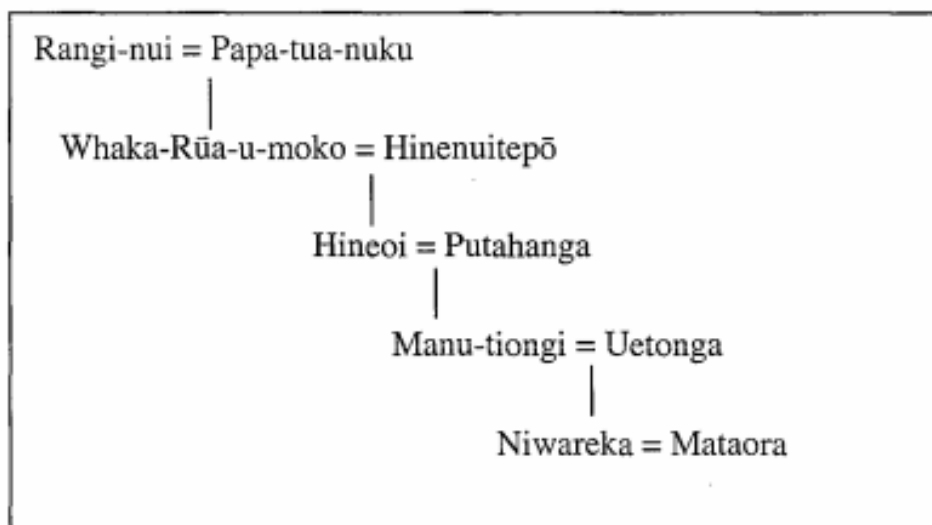
### **What is the issue and why is it an issue?**

Moko kauae is the right of wāhine Māori, however the impact of colonisation and the imposition of western legislation, has resulted in this cultural tradition being

marginalised, and not been continued through generations. King (1992) explains moko is the general word used to refer to Māori cultural tattooing. Originally, moko was used to refer to male facial tattooing but, with its decline the term moko started to refer to the female facial tattoo (moko kauae), which still retains the same meaning today (Ka'ai, 2004).

### **Historical context**

Tamoko can be seen within our cultural narratives, and history. Thus, it is important for us to understand the whakapapa of Moko, to provide a historical, and cultural lens in discussing this taonga, and its link to wāhine Māori. Whakapapa shows the link from our first primal parents, Ranginui and Papatūānuku who had Rūaumoko who had Manu ongaonga, who had Uetonga, who had Niwareka (Higgins, 2004). It also indicates that Mataora and Niwareka brought the practice from the spirit world into the natural world to our homeland, Hawaiki. This whakapapa explains where the practice came from and the mana that is associated with it.



Kopua (2001) tells us that just like other Māori practices, tā moko has come from the world of the atua. He also tells us 'moko' originates from Rūaumoko's name "the trembling current that scars the earth" (Higgins, 2004; Ka'ai, 2004 p. 129). Sources say the god of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions – Rūaumoko the son of Ranginui and Papatūānuku, was the reason for leaving "the deep uneven grooves left within the surface terrain of " his mother Papa "a natural form of moko" (Ka'ai, 2004 p.129).

The practise of tā moko originates from the (spirit world) where Mataora from the natural world married Niwareka from the spirit world. One day out of anger, he struck her, she fled home to her father, Uetonga. Mataora followed witnessing Uetonga giving tā moko. Fascinated as Mataora wears a temporary facial tattoo, Uetonga wipes the temporary tattoo off of Mataora's face in an attempt to show the worthlessness of the temporary tattoo. Mataora asks Uetonga for facial moko, and Uetonga finally agrees. The process so unbearable had Mataora chanting to Niwareka, who fled to his side. Once Mataora's moko healed, they both returned back to the natural world, taking the



taonga of tā moko and raranga back with them (Higgins, 2004; Higgins, 2013; Ka'ai, 2004; Penehira, 2019; Te Awekotuku, 1997).

*(My great, great, great grandfather*

*Ihaka Whaanga rangatira of*

*Ngāti Rākaipaaka/Ngāti Kahungunu Born  
1808 – 1875)*

### **Cultural context**

Tā moko was an integral part of traditional Māori society (Buttle, 2008), which both men and women received it. Men were tattooed all over their body including the face, thigh and lower torso, and the backside. While women were tattooed on their face, more specifically, the facial design was usually kept to the chin and lips. However, history tells us that there were important women who were given full-face moko using traditional carving methods. They were women of the same or higher rank than the men chiefs of the same generation, and the moko showed the significance of that status (Palmer, & Tano, 2004).

However, the arrival of European settlers and colonisation would oppress and marginalise our culture and traditions, which included moko kauae. In 1769, Captain Cook and his crew were the first to witness tattooing in the Pacific. Many of his men observed and were fascinated by moko (King, 1992). The influence of religion through

the missionaries who arrived in Aotearoa, chastised all forms of body modification rituals who “demonised tā moko as a pagan and unspeakable perversion” (Hart, 2019, p. 42).

### **Social and Political context**

However, despite Article two of Te Tiriti o Waitangi guarantying Māori to maintain their cultural traditions (taonga), legislation forced colonial practices upon them (Ruwhiu, 2013). Given the significance of our whenua, and the direct link to whakapapa, The Native Lands Act 1862, and The New Zealand Settlements Act 1863 disconnected Māori from their tribal lands (Wirihana, & Smith, 2014). Moreover, the Native Schools Act 1867 was used as a colonial tool to assimilate Māori children, stripping them of their cultural knowledge, language, and traditions (Pihama, Jenkins, & Middleton, 2003). Finally, the Tohunga Suppression Act 1907 meant that our cultural experts were no longer able to apply these cultural practices (Durie, 1998; Durie, 2001). These anti-treaty acts, would subsequently see a decline in moko kauae which of course, was the intent of these assimilation policies. As such, this reinforced to Māori women that Moko Kauae was no longer viewed as normal, or acceptable. On the other hand, moko kauae whilst not as prominent as it had been traditionally, our women have maintained these cultural traditions, but not at the same level as we would have seen traditionally.

Nonetheless, the cultural renaissance and resurgence of moko kauae can be seen not only within historical, and cultural context, but as a political movement to challenge these colonist views of our taonga. As such, it has enabled us as wāhine Māori to reclaim our cultural identity, change the narratives of our colonisers, and to assert our tino rangatiratanga. Our Māori women have been prominent in reclaiming our identity as wāhine Māori within a contemporary context. Wāhine Māori are often described as the power, dignity, and importance of women in Māori society. Many Māori women are considered wāhine toa, through the courage, and bravery that many of them have undertaken to normalise and reaffirm our place in society (Taonui, 2011). As such, moko kauae has been prominent in reclaiming our identifies, decolonising our minds, and the revival of our cultural practices, which were integral to who we are, as mana wāhine. Some of our Māori women who have received their moko kauae believe this is a part of the healing process for them (Penehira, 2011).



On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge the challenges and obstacles we have faced, with the powerful dominant discourses, which have informed, our identity as Māori women. Nevertheless, these western gendered ideas have equally penetrated the minds of Māori. There is a perception that you can only wear a moko kauae if you are worthy or deserving, or hold significance within your hapu, or iwi, or the ideology that

you must be a fluent speaker of the Reo, and steeped in tikanga to wear one (Parahi, 2018). However, this ignores the fact that through colonisation, many Māori cannot speak Te Reo me ona Tikanga and as a consequence, we find ourselves muttering the same words as a colonised master, and further contributing to the assimilation of our people. According to Pihama (2018), for Māori women, it is “our fundamental right to wear the symbols of our ancestors” (para 2). Sadly, these ideas had once informed my own views about whether I was ever able to wear moko Kauae (Pihama, 2018). Through undertaking this research, it has supported me to decolonise these ideas.

### **Economic context**

This then raises the issue whether the cultural appropriation of Pākehā women wearing moko kauae, is right or just. If we understand that moko kauae is linked to whakapapa, then the intent of why Pākehā women chose to wear one comes into question. Regardless of their cultural intention, this is driven by neo liberal influence, they take what they want, to benefit themselves financially. As Pihama (2018) asserts, Pākehā women use their privilege to claim their right to wear our moko kauae, without a lack of understanding of the dominance, and inter-generational trauma, which Māori women carry. Accordingly, moko kauae is a reclamation of mana wāhine, not a commodity for Pākehā women (Parahi, 2018). Cultural appropriation, whilst we are trying to reclaim our own right, we see the power of the colonisers trying to claim this taonga as well.

In addition, the influence in the media, including social media, perpetuates the racist views around the right of our women to wear moko kauae. Racist slurs such as “bar codes” highlights and reinforces cultural dominance over our taonga, and right to identity as wāhine Māori (Makiha, 2020). Even so, it could also be argued that our wāhine Māori who have shown courage and asserted their mana Motuhake such as the Honourable Nanaia Mahuta the Minister of Foreign Affairs, has



reinforced, reclaimed, and normalised our cultural identities (Quince, 2021). Despite the prejudice and discrimination she has faced, her bravery at this time is of great significance to the Mana Wahine Movement. It is the aspiration that in Aotearoa, our rangatahi will see moko kauae, as an integral part of who they are in the future. Thus, normalising and affirming our identifies and right to wear moko kauae.

### **Social practice links**

Within the field of social practice, it is important that we understand how colonisation has impacted on wāhine Māori, and the dominant discourses that have influenced the marginalisation of our right to acknowledge our whakapapa. It also highlights the need to support our people to decolonise and dismantle the oppressive structures, and ideologies, which have permeated our minds. Moreover, reclaiming our traditional practices, and our rights as wāhine Māori, challenges that Pākehā views of feminism, and the right of indigenous women around the world, are not the same. Therefore, it is important that as practitioners, we have a sound understanding of what gender represents within the diversity of the cultures here in Aotearoa. In doing so, this will ensure that we do not impose a western lens, which has been the same colonial arm that has shaped and defined who we are as wāhine Māori. It is evident that we can draw from tikanga Māori, the values of mana and tapu within the realm of moko kauae, that reinforces how significant these are within the field of practice.

Colonisation of the mind, that Māori women have adopted these dominant discourses, indicates the need to decolonise (Smith, 2012), and understand the true intent, and purpose of Māori women wearing moko kauae. Cultural renaissance is done on purpose, to assimilate us to act, and be Pākehā. Moko kauae, the visible and invisible:



For wāhine Māori, “the moko kauae, or traditional female chin tattoo, is considered a physical manifestation of their true identity. It is believed every Māori woman wears a moko on the inside, close to their heart; when they are ready, the tattoo artist simply brings it out to the surface” (Duff, 2017, para 2).

In conclusion, moko and moko kauae have been integral to our culture and is linked to our whakapapa. Mythologies, passed down through colonial and religious beliefs have seen the significance and importance of wearing our whakapapa on our faces, diminished. However, although these attempts have tried to marginalise our traditions, through the resilience, and resistance of Māori, even in the face of adversity our moko kauae is not only just seen in our whare, but also seen within our communities. As a Māori woman, we wear our moko kauae close to our hearts, however, it is my aspiration to one day acknowledge my whakapapa on the outside and be proud to assert my right as mana wāhine.

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