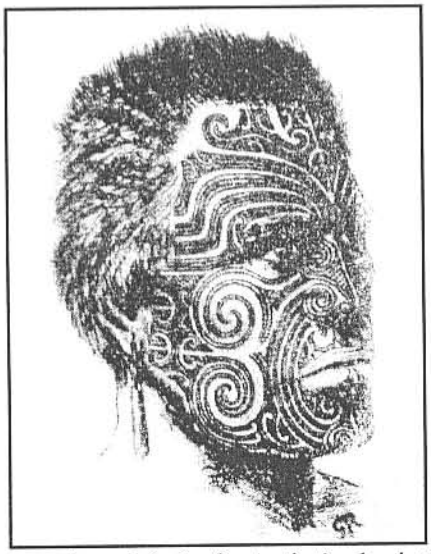
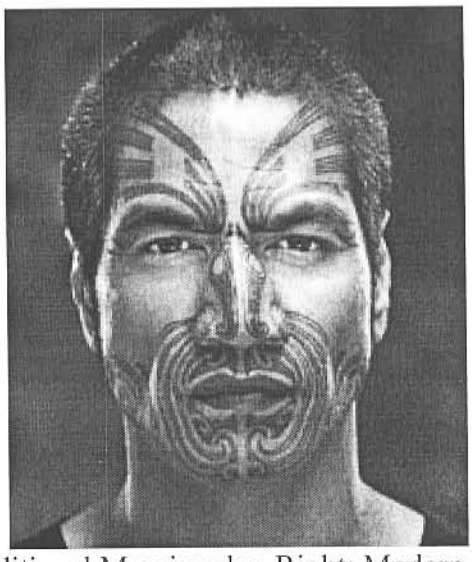
Maori Moko: *Facial Tattoo in the Modern World*

Introduction

The Maori tattoo, or *moko*, is a traditional form of facial and body art from the islands of New Zealand. Worldwide it has received attention due to the powerful feelings it creates within those who view it. The moko was alive for centuries before European arrival, after which it was outlawed due in part to European custom and the religious conversion of the Maori peoples by missionaries. It is said that Maori heads were often taken as curios by traders thus the Maori stopped practicing the moko in fear of these "modern" head hunters. There has always been a strong European fascination with the moko which is typical of a similar fascination with the exotic and noble savage (Palmer and Tano 2008), as told by early 20th century anthropologists.

While the powerful feelings these tattoos invoke may help indicate what the Maori traditionally tattooed their faces for, it certainly has led to many modern stereotypes surrounding the practice of the moko (Palmer and Tano 2008). With the recent revival of this practice we look at why young people in the modern world are deciding to tattoo their faces as their ancestors did, and what implications this may have in the 'global village'.





Figures 1 and 2. Left: Artist's depiction of a traditional Maori moko. Right: Modern moko of a Maori male.

In Figure 1 we see a visual recording of the moko of a Maori male. This drawing was completed prior to 1900 AD, when elders still actively tattooed in the traditional form, and for traditional purposes. To the right we see the revival of the moko, on a young Maori male. This moko may have been tattooed in the traditional form with wooden implements, or may have been done by a modern tattoo gun.

Tradition of the Moko

The origination of the moko is told in Maori mythology in the story of the underworld princess Niwareka and the young man Mataora. After being abused by Mataora, Niwareka left him and returned to the underworld or "Uetonga". Mataora traveled long and far to find her, after which his face paint was smeared and his appearance was ragged. After much ridicule by Niwareka's family, and thus much pleading and convincing by Mataora, Niwareka accepted the apology. Her father then gave to Mataora the gift of the moko in order to prevent his paint from smudging in the future.

Hidden within this myth is the likely truth that the Maori peoples were painting their faces long before the moko became custom. Faces may have been painted in order to represent their clan, rank, and lineage much in the same way as seen in the Coat of Arms for European countries. It was likely that faces were painted for many years before tattooing became practice, with tattooing used to permanently mark their identity. Where the practice of tattooing traditionally came from is not known, however it is likely it spread from other Polynesian islands. For a detailed documentation of the moko, as well as its associated tools and traditions, see Roth 1901.

The tattoos themselves are based on spiral and curvilinear patterns that hold deep ritual significance to the Maori peoples. It had been revealed that the position of the tattoo on the face will give information about the wearer- essentially express their identity in written form (see Table 1)(K.T. Riria and D.Simmons 2000). The moko for men shows rank, status, and virility; and for women it generally symbolizes rank.

Position on Face	Associated Meaning	Word in Maori
Center forehead area	Rank	Ngakaipikirau
Around the brows	Position	Ngunga
The eyes and nose area	Hapu rank	Uirere
The temples	First or second marriage	Uma
The area under the nose	Signature	Raurau
The cheek area	Work	Taiohou
The chin	Mana	Wairua
The jaw	Birth status	Taitoto

Table 1. Sections of the Moko and their associated meaning. (K.T. Riria and D.Simmons 2000).

As we see in the above table the moko has no intention of invoking intimidation or aggression, as its patterns are meant to display everything you would need to know about an individual upon first meeting, and as a way to recognize those you know. The way the moko is seen traditionally by the Maori is significantly different from how Westerners and non-Maori see the moko.

Moko and the Western World

A modern (and historical) western perception of the moko is that it was used to make Maori peoples fierce and intimidating in battle and attractive to women (Palmer and Tano 2008). We often see a connection of the moko with cannibalism, sex, and war while neglecting its cultural, political and religious meanings (Palmer and Tano 2008). For example the inherent feeling of intimidation and war that the moko invokes in many westerners is part of our cultural upbringing and not representative of the feelings of the wearer or their culture. While this may seem obvious, it is continually a subject for debate even today.

Even without stereotypes there is a global as well as local interest (or curiosity) in traditional arts, something the moko is not apart from. There has been a transformation from those satisfying curiosity to those wanting to imitate. Lately we have seen a renewed appreciation for cultures that have traditional beliefs and practices, however this appreciation may act to suffocate the strides taken by indigenous peoples towards political, economic, and cultural sovereignty. "This romantic view of the modern tribal movement places modern indigenous people as the heroes of some pre-literate past,

instead of recognizing their role as modern actors in the global community" (Palmer and Tano 2008).

Figure 3. Jean Paul Gaultier's take on the *moko* as seen in French fashion.

An example of the romance of the moko in pop culture is seen in Jean Paul Gaultier's ad campaign featuring models adorned with Maori moko-inspired face paint. This blending of a sacred and traditional practice with a western fashion statement is something the Maori peoples are trying desperately to prevent. "Western population, culture, and accompanying capitalism inevitably desacralize the important rituals and symbols they seek to imitate" (Palmer and Tano 2008). What feeling is Gaultier attempting to invoke in incorporating the moko in his ad? Whether he intended to or not, many westerners viewed the faux moko as identification to the savage, primitive and cannibalistic individual. It was the notion of cultural evolution that was well alive in the early 20th century. Some individuals interpreted it as: *even the exotic savage could look fabulous in these sunglasses*. That statement is something that one would not expect to find in the educated 21st century public, and quite likely Gaultier did not expect some westerners to still have those thoughts and feelings surrounding indigenous peoples.

Another issue present in the Gaultier ads is the use of the moko by non-Maori peoples, and the perception of the moko worldwide. In response to the ad campaign Victoria University's Aroha Mead states: "It's more vogue to be Maori outside New

Zealand than it is to be Maori inside New Zealand" (Field 2007). Imagery aside, people are not recognizing the deep cultural and religious significance the moko represents and displays. As discussed above the moko is more than a visually appealing set of lines. It is a written account of an individual's status, and the tattooing of this onto an un-initiated individual is potentially disastrous. There is a belief amongst the Maori that if a moko was reproduced the wearer would die (Palmer and Tano 2008). Gaultier's ads almost make a mockery of the moko, regardless of if they are not traditional designs. It is a representation and an association. If a moko can be used as a fashion statement by Europeans then it demoralizes the requests of its culture to not practice it if you are not Maori. Their moko becomes a fashion statement, which it most clearly is not.

Humans recognize each other by their faces, thus having a facial tattoo invokes strong feelings in humans. For cultures where this practice is rare or taboo a facial tattoo may be associated with a mask. It will appear striking and scary, indicating that the wearer has undergone some form of transformation. This westerner view of the moko has presented a problem for the Maori culture since European arrival in New Zealand. The issue Maori peoples have with the moko becoming popular revolves around this problem: tattoos and body art imagery in the western sense are often used on a superficial basis. The moko is not, thus Maori peoples fear the moko will be associated with the western notion and reduced to its stereotype: a striking and aggressive mask used to intimidate on a purely superficial level.

Modern Moko

The modern moko and its place in Maori society is something that is under discussion today amongst the New Zealand culture. How the moko was revived into the 20th and 21st centuries reflects how it is perceived today in the western world as well as within its own culture. Gordon Hatfield, a moko tattoo artist, states that in the 70's and 80's there was a resurgence of the Maori moko by gangs seeking a means to mark membership, while looking fierce and intimidating (Altieri and Omori 2003). This is not far from the traditional use of the moko, where tribes would use it to distinguish rank, status, and genealogy. Hatfield points out that the moko has again made a transition from

gangs to Maori peoples in all professions seeking a means to identify themselves with their heritage (Altieri and Omori 2003).

Another tattoo artist from New Zealand is Chaz Te Puehu, who uses the moko as a common cultural denominator within Maori tribes, since moko is something that was practiced by all (Altieri and Omori 2003). The revival of this practice indicates a similar revival of traditional Maori values. Maori peoples, not unlike many other cultures, do not want to share their culture with those that do not respect it. However for those willing to understand, the Maori want to show that there is meaning behind the design, and in so doing help to prevent the use of the designs by those who look out of curiosity or those who attempt to use the patterns for reasons other than personal or sacred (Palmer and Tano 2008). This sharing of the moko pattern and design has helped to keep the tradition alive, and allow modern Maori to practice it.

Having traveled to Auckland, New Zealand, several years ago I witnessed the frequency of the moko in everyday life. I was slightly alarmed when I first saw a Maori with full facial moko, it is something that is so different to our 'western culture' eyes that we immediately notice it. Daily, after seeing more and more moko, I came to be extremely interested in the individual design. Whether it was just a chin moko or a full facial, every design was different. This is a main part of the moko, its individuality. Had I been informed of the meaning behind each pattern, I may have been able to understand more about each person, their place in society, their rank, their family lineage. But in the modern world, the 'global village', their society and culture has become intrinsically interwoven with others. How will the Maori use the moko to express their place in a society that is arguably no longer just their own? This idea has taken interest of many younger Maori seeking to better understand and connect with their past. The moko may have to evolve in order to find its place amongst the western world, along with the culture that the Maori are now trying desperately to protect.

Conclusion

The struggle the Maori face with keeping their moko alive and true reflects a struggle by many aboriginal or indigenous populations worldwide. The history and tradition of the moko reveals it is a practice that has been part of the Maori culture for

hundreds of years. Its responsibility within traditional culture was to record and display an individual's place in society. With so many young Maori seeking to identify with their traditional culture, and attempting to find a place in modern society, many of them are turning to the moko to help symbolize their heritage.

Maori of today want to revive and practice the moko, yet want also to be accepted into a society that is continually evolving. These social changes will happen despite the efforts by many peoples to prevent it. The moko practice that is displayed proudly by the people whom hold it sacred will need to be protected in order to keep it so. The greatest challenge the Maori and their moko face is the ability to keep it respected in light of a western society that focuses mainly on the superficial.

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