



Nepia Takuirā-Mita, a Tamaki Māori warrior, proudly displays his traditional Tā Moko. His tattoos represent his relationship with his sister, mother and father.
Photo by Mary Kathryn Carpenter

THE STORY OF MĀORI

Visitors to New Zealand may catch glimpses of Māori culture, tattooed on passersby and tucked around every corner, never realizing the strong influence the culture has had on the past, present and future. Through chatting with locals and immersing themselves in tourist attractions, visitors can see all the Māori have to offer.

Story by Elayne Smith + Madison Sullivan

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HISTORY DOCUMENTED

By Elayne Smith

Some people choose to etch their story on their skin, mixing ink with blood. A select few of those people choose to etch their life's journey on their body's canvas with *Tā Moko*, Māori for the body art, to honor their ancestors and continue a Māori tradition hundreds of years old.

New Zealand's indigenous population, the Māori, use nature-inspired designs to create sacred tattoos. Like fingerprints, Tā Moko identifies his/her and their story using unique combinations of patterns. Different symbols represent different aspects, such as knowledge, skills or new beginnings.

Often, Tā Moko incorporates lineage with different sections dedicated to different family members. In the end, the ink is a personalized scrapbook crafted from the partnership of artist and client.

"The bark of a tree identifies what kind of tree it is just as his Moko identifies who he is," said Elias Tyro, a tattoo and Moko artist for Expressions tattoo studio and art gallery in Christchurch.

Up a flight of creaky stairs, looking down onto the colorful buildings of New Regent Street, Tyro worked on an intricate design for his Māori client, Ricky Bidois. Rock music filtered over the buzzing noise of tattoo pens at work as the chemical smell of disinfectant hung in the air.

Tyro bent over Bidois' right leg as he textured the tan skin. Tyro put in more than 50 hours into Bidois' Moko as lines swirled from above his knee up above his glute, a history book curling along his contours.

"My life has been a long journey," Bidois said. "[This] represents it."

Tyro was mostly self-taught, starting Tā Moko after getting his own Moko on both his legs. Some symbols printed into Bidois' leg included a trail of triangles representing shark teeth and strength or swirls for water. Depending on different iwīs, or Māori tribe, symbols will have different meanings and uses. Tyro has created Tā Moko for seven years now and said he still has a lot to master.

"It's a visual language," he said. "I still consider myself a student. I have a lot to learn, which I guess we all are students of life."

Pip Hartley became a Moko artist at Karanga Ink in Auckland out of a desire to learn. She said she never aspired to be a tattoo artist, but followed her path.



A Māori warrior of the Tamaki tribe performs a welcoming ceremony for visitors to the village. Tā Moko-like paintings decorate his face. Today, Māori do not typically get facial tattoos because of discrimination they may experience. Photo by Mary Kathryn Carpenter

"I wanted to learn more about my culture and my roots, then one thing led to another," she said.

Hartley had an apprenticeship on the South Island where she learned the art and how to do it with the traditional tools. Unlike the modern pen, an *uhi*, the traditional chisel used to create Tā Moko, engraves the skin. Using an uhi can take twice as long and is rarely used.

Hartley said she likes using the traditional method even though most people do not request it. She said getting Tā Moko has a spiritual element to it. Typically it is earned and symbolizes some type of passing, whether through a personal challenge or the loss of a loved one.

"We are translating their story and showing what they hold close to their heart," she said. "The biggest challenge is when people are in their mind too much and not trusting the process."

At Karanga Ink, Hartley gave Kevin Swank Tā Moko using a mixture of the old and new tools. Swank, an American, had studied in New Zealand and learned about Māori culture through his time abroad. He wanted to commemorate his experience and the culture by getting a tattoo at the Auckland parlor.

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“It’s cool to know the stories, then to take home something to show and share the culture,” Swank said.

While Tā Moko is a Māori art form, there is an increasing popularity of the tattoo with tourists and mixed feelings about it in the Māori community.

Tucked across a bungee jumping store and off a sidewalk busy with foreigners, Otautahi offers lasting Māori souvenirs in Queenstown. Tamararo Raihania has been doing Tā Moko for the past 10 years and is part of the staff at Otautahi tattoo parlor.

Raihania said he is not bothered by people without Māori heritage getting their style of tattoo. There is a version of Tā Moko called *khitori*, which Raihania said means to draw on skin, that still uses elements of Tā Moko without the sacred significance.

Raihania knows some people who are upset by foreigners getting the tattoo because they feel like people are stealing the cultural meaning.

“It’s sort of getting our art form out there,” Raihania said. “The symbols do have meaning. Don’t just come over and get it done because it looks cool—try to respect it.”

Dani Jaric decided to get a small piece on the back of her left calf from Raihania, wanting have a meaningful matching tattoo with her friend. She said they did not know about Tā Moko before they came to New Zealand but thought it was beautiful. Once they learned more about it, they loved the cultural depth.

“We had to pick what words we wanted represented and it got deeper and more meaningful from there,” Jaric said.

At the Auckland Museum, some of the Māori traditions can still be seen as warriors and Māori women perform dances, songs and weaponry displays. Teina Arama is a warrior from both the Ngapuhi and Tainui iwis who performs daily at the museum.

Stretched across his back, a stingray comprised of twisting lines and shapes pieced together like a puzzle shows a part of who he is. Arama got Tā Moko when he was 16 years old after earning it from mastering certain fighting skills. His Moko represents the guardian of the far north to protect him, his family members and his level with martial arts and weaponry.

“It’s similar to being given an I.D.,” he said. “I’m proud of having

my Tā Moko as it shows a little bit of my identity.”

Arama got his tattoo done with modern tools because he did not want it to take as long. He said he still feels there is a lot for him to learn before earning more Moko on his body or a full-face tattoo. The facial tattoo is not as common today, but experiencing a rise in popularity as well as representing a big step in the Māori community.

This tradition comes from a Māori legend, where Mataora, a chief, bring it to humanity. Mataora married a spirit, Niwareka, and one day grew jealous and enraged, so he struck her. She fled, and he followed after her in guilt to the underworld. He left with his face painted and discovered Moko in the underworld. When he returned forgiven by Niwareka, he had permanent ink on his skin and introduced the art form to his people.

Arama said displaying their culture such as with Moko or speaking in Māori has become a lot more accepted in New Zealand. When his parents grew up, they were punished in school for speaking Māori or showing their culture.

Now he feels a lot more respect from the government and people of New Zealand for their heritage. For him, tourists getting Tā Moko are not an issue, as it helps spread their stories and art beyond New Zealand.

“People come with their own stories and their own ideas,” Arama said. “I’m proud to be Māori. I have yet to learn a lot more of the history and stories as well.”

While Arama has grown up learning the traditions of his iwi and exploring his heritage, he still feels like there is a lot in their culture that he has yet to learn and understand.



HISTORY CELEBRATED

By Madison Sullivan

Loud, frantic chanting rushes in waves over the crowd. Visitors are gathered together just out of the rain, slanting through the carved doorway. Tattooed warriors

appear, fierce on their canoes, cutting through low hanging trees. Agile, they hop out of the boat and approach the chiefs, chosen from the group of visitors. The warriors punch the air; slap their legs, wide eyed with their tongues out, backlit by the torches hung high in the trees.

No one under the shelter moves, no one speaks or cracks a smile. It would be disrespectful to do so.

This ceremony, a traditional *haka*, is a far cry from the boisterous crowd found a few hours later in the Māori’s dining hall, chatting with warriors, chowing down on a buffet-style *hangi*, a traditional meal prepared over volcanic rocks and wood in the ground, by gracious hosts. The *haka* isn’t meant to scare away its recipients. Not anymore.

While the *haka* was once performed for many things, ranging from war, funerals, battle or simply anger, in present day Tamaki Māori Village, it sets the stage for an evening of immersion into Māori culture.

The Tamaki Māori Village, located just outside of Rotorua, is a highly-ranked New Zealand tourist attraction with a unique twist; it was created to be completely authentic. Each person working the ceremonies was raised in, or has a tie to, the Tamaki.

Tourism for the Māori people is rooted deeply within their culture, reaching as far back as the 1800s.

“We’ve got this value of *manakitama*, which means, ‘look



(Left) Pip Hartley, a Māori artist, tattoos Kevin Swank, an American who fell in love with the Māori culture and traditions. Photo by Lane Stafford
(Right) The chief of the Tamaki Māori village touches foreheads with Bo Forsberg, a visitor to the village from Sweden. Touching of foreheads is a sign of respect in Māori culture. Photo by Mary Kathryn Carpenter



“Whenever people would come over, we would always look after our visitors, put them up and feed them. Tourism just evolved from our natural values.”

(Above) The Tamaki Māori Chief answers questions for visitors to the Tamaki Village, explaining different aspects of his culture. (Left) A Māori warrior performs a welcoming ceremony for visitors to the Tamaki village. Photos by Mary Kathryn Carpenter

after people,” Tania Tapsell-Bennett, a sales and marketing person for the Tamaki Māori Village, explained. “So whenever people would come over, we would always look after our visitors, put them up and feed them. Tourism just evolved from our natural values here.”

Tapsell stated that the Māori got along so well with their visitors they didn’t sign the Treaty of Waitangi, the Māori and European equivalent to the Declaration of Independence.

“It was to say, ‘let’s get along and be peaceful,’” Tapsell stated. “But we were already peaceful and we had really well established businesses.”

According to oral history, the Māori originally came to New Zealand in seven canoes, each with hundreds of people aboard. Upon arrival they branched into countless tribes, and from there Māori tradition rooted itself deeply.

In some instances, Māori traditions and stories aren’t common knowledge, as many are passed down orally. While in recent years, full immersion Māori schools are more common, and Māori teachings have made their way into public curriculum, for many the best way to learn about the fascinating ins and outs of Māori culture is a tourist venture.

“When the Europeans arrived, our race was rapidly becoming a dead language, a dead culture,” Rawhira Tekeeti, a Tamaki Māori Village tour guide explained. “We couldn’t really hold onto all the knowledge, and so now, the knowledge that we do have, people feel like they can’t share it because it’s too sacred.”

Despite how far relations between the Māori and other Kiwis have come since recent years, the Māori people do still face discrimination from some outside of their culture. Tapsell said that statistically, Māori are convicted of crimes more often than other New Zealanders.

“There is still discrimination even going through school,” Tekeeti said. “People just are not wanting to understand. I don’t dwell in the past. In this environment, being here and moving here has definitely helped.”

For the Māori there is a lost generation. Grandmothers, grandfathers, even

parents were not allowed to speak the Māori language growing up. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, there was a resurgence of Māori culture and language through the arts. Youth’s today will not experience the cultural drought that plagued the previous generations.

“That’s how fresh our culture is,” the Tamaki’s chief explained to visitors.

Those in the Tamaki Māori Village are excited to teach willing visitors the intricacies of their past.

“It means the world to me,” Rangiatea Simon, a cultural performer for the Tamaki Evening Experience stated proudly. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. It’s something to be proud of really. To be able to stand and portray our culture to people around the world and for them to take it back to their homeland is a big thing for me. Not only am I a face of Māori, but I’m a face for my people and my tribe. So for me it’s everything. It’s not only a part of me, but it’s pretty much all of me.”

Being involved in the ceremonies help the Māori stay connected to their traditions.

“We get to practice our own culture and our language every single day,” Nepia Takuira-Mita, a Tamaki Māori warrior, said of the Tamaki Village Evening Experience holding out his weapon. “It challenges us to find new ways to portray our culture and to find better ways. So I will go back home after this and I’ll practice [the performance] with this weapon and find new ways to do things. I think doing that helps me find out a little bit more about who I am and where I fit in my culture.”

In the tribe, there is a specific role for everyone; this is how it has always been. Tourists can involve themselves in the three and a half hour experience with the tribe by purchasing a ticket at tamakimaorivillage.co.nz. The ticket price includes a traditional hangi dinner and transportation to and from your Rotorua accommodation. An overnight stay is also an option for an additional fee.

“Those of my friends who don’t do this stuff [tourism], do contribute to the Māori world in other ways,” Takuira-Mita said. “They teach at schools or those sorts of things. I think we all, as a Māori people, are doing something to help promote the Māori culture.”



Scan here to watch Māori traditions, including the haka, performed live