

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 33: Meaning Behind the Moko. This podcast is supported by our amazing Patrons, such as... If you want to support HANZ go to [patreon.com/historyaotearoa](https://patreon.com/historyaotearoa). Last time we talked about Europeans in regards to tā moko, discussing a bit about what they thought of it, what they had seen and written down as well as some of the stories of the Europeans who were tattooed, consensually or otherwise. This time we will discuss what moko meant to Māori in terms what the motifs indicated and generally why they would want to put themselves under this large amount of injury and duress for something that at first glance only has cosmetic ramifications.

This is quite a large and regionally specific topic that we aren't really going to cover all of it in any level of great detail I'm afraid. The information is out there and I encourage you to seek it out if you want to know, just note that what we talk about here is a surface level look, more so than probably any other episode we have done thus far. For example, there are entire books just on the different motifs various European explorers wrote about, detailing what they looked like sometimes with sketches, what they meant, what region they saw them in and so on. As much as I would like to recount these books in detail it probably wouldn't make for a hugely interesting episode so we will keep it a bit higher level. Before we can really understand what the motifs meant though, we really have to understand what moko means to Māori back in the pre-European era.

We already know that moko was started in the teens and at least some was needed to be considered a full adult and be eligible for marriage. We also know that moko was highly prized as people would travel long distances to be tattooed by a particular person along with the fact it had great cost in material wealth as well. In fact, moko could be so prized that we hear of a man called Rawiri Te Motuere of Puketapu hapu of Te Ati Awa iwi. He actually took a gourd and made a mask out of it to cover his face and protect the skin of his moko. This seems to have been used mostly when travelling but was also brought out for festive occasions as well cause it decorated with feathers at the sides and actually had an exact replica of his moko carved onto it! For men, moko was a sign of martial strength, mana and his virility, all of which was attractive to the opposite sex and garnered much respect from comrades in arms. To let it fade later in life and not have it redone would cause these traits to diminish in himself. A person from Ngāti Maniapoto iwi felt this saying "No mua ra, e Pa ma, i taia ai aku reherehe. Ka pai au te haere I te one I Te Piu. Tis long since, o sirs, when my buttocks were decorated. And I strode proudly along the beach at Te Piu," Clearly it was a point of pride to be tattooed and to let it fall into disrepair kind of showed the sort of person you were. For men moko was also something to be used to look intimidating for battle, not only showcasing how hard you were having undergone so much pain to get the tattoos but the moko itself would show off your whakapapa and achievements. In fact, it was said that full body moko looked like the person was still wearing clothes or pantaloons as Europeans sometimes mention when referencing the legs. This was also seen on the battlefield as some soldiers preferred to strip down to the minimal amount of clothing as an intimidation tactic, part of which was showing off their tattoos. In saying that though, there were some European military men that weren't phased by it, such as Lieutenant Colonel Godfrey Munday who said "There are even in these islands some fat or jovial faces that this savage operation fails to invest with ferocity." I guess sometimes no matter what you do, sometimes you can just never look tough! Whakapapa is often what you will hear moko represents, it tells the story of that person's lineage but it also tells the story of their own whakapapa. What I mean is that it tells how that person got to where they are now with moko often being added to over the years as a person gained various achievements, commands or inherited some sort of status, such as being considered a tohunga of a particular profession. This, along with the fact that facial shape changed what a tattoo would look like, meant that moko were so unique to a single person that the primary way of identifying a figure in a carving was through their moko.

In general, moko was meant to make someone look more attractive, as we have mentioned in previous episodes, as well as more appealing as warriors, dancers and lovers. One woman even made a waiata that laments not being able to the man of her dreams. In the song she mentions her desirable characteristics, I guess kinda like Avirl Lavigne's 'Skater Boi'. Wow, that's a dated reference. In the song, the woman specifically mentions her moko as being one of her desirable traits so obviously it something she valued highly and thought potential partners would value highly too. Part of this need to look attractive made have lead to the tattooing of ones, uh, junk. And not by just men but women too. Though they didn't use the chisel method, they tended to use methods that involved dragging the implement across the skin so it wouldn't result in the classic groove we have seen on facial moko. Clearly men weren't that keen to be permanently grooved for her pleasure... Elsdon Best also writes "among the Ngati Porou tribe a man's 'ure' was occasionally tattooed as was also the tongue... for effect in battle." Ure is Te Reo for penis but it's interesting that he mentions the tongue as this is only referenced in one other source so it is likely a regional thing rather than being widespread.

What kind of markings you put on your body, and where, was just as important as having them at all though. For example, in males, thigh tattoos were considered chiefly so tutua wouldn't generally have them. Tattoos on both lips and lines on the forehead were the female equivalent of this with tattoos on the back of the legs down to the calf, space between the eyes and middle forehead always being indicative of rank in women. Slaves were generally distinguished by their moko on the back and often didn't have facial moko. Certain tohunga would may have also been forbidden from wearing moko or at least only had minimal moko, typically around the eyes. Keep in mind this was region specific though. Overall though, Cook, his crew and other explorers like de Surville observed that moko was mostly restricted to the nobility. However, Elsdon Best would later refute this by saying that tattoos weren't restricted to rangitira or that they weren't used for identification. So either one of these is wrong or times had changed from Cook's and de Surville's in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to Best's time in the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The thing is, kind of neither of them were wrong or right, as you find with history and just most things in general really, the reality is a lot greyer. What I mean is, moko could be earned, say in battle but some markings were required to hold some sort of leadership position. Even the gender lines blurred sometimes with women who outranked men due to their ancestry would be seen as more chiefly and as such be recognised with what you might call typical male moko, both facial and thighs. This would be potentially to show how tapu the woman is and that she is not eligible for marriage or having children, or at least none that would be recognised in an ariki line of descent, since there would be no one else who could equal her rank. If there was, that person would likely be the ariki instead. As a side note, other Polynesian societies seem to have solved this problem through brother-sister marriage. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that the lines were so blurry what you might call male moko couldn't even be called male specifically, it was more like chiefly moko which really showcases that wider point that moko was something very unique and couldn't exactly be slotted into simple boxes. To further illustrate how unique yet interconnected moko was, Joseph Polack did a bit of an experiment. He sketched the moko of a rangatira, something which was quite common when Europeans arrived in Aotearoa, and took it to a far distant hapū about 650km or 400miles away. This hapū was unlikely to have had any contact with the man or his family so the experiment was whether these people he showed the sketch to could recognise who it was just by reading the moko. What he found was that they were quickly able to identify not only where he was from and what hapū he belonged to but also his name! So although there was some regional and inter-artist difference, there was clearly some common similarities and motifs that made moko somewhat universal in being able to read it.

So what are the sort of things that they were actually reading? And I say reading because that is basically what it is, reading the symbols and motifs on the skin to discern what the story is of the individual and their whakapapa. As mentioned earlier, to go through all the different motifs would be long and tedious so I'll go over some of the things that a moko could mean. We have talked lots about whakapapa being represented in moko and sometimes this was seen in a split of the face, one side being their father's line and the other side being their mother's. The sort of things this could indicate that the father is from a Whanganui tribe as shown by some nose motifs or that the father belonged to the female line of descent. Naturally some designs were only for rangatira such as generally just showing high rank or showing that they were first in line for a chieftanship or that they had moved from the fourth to the third line of descent, potentially due to the death of someone or that they had been in command in a war involving waka, which could be indicated by spiral cheek designs. Then there was all sorts of other stuff that could be shown like mouth rays indicating they were a warrior, their association with something tapu, to indicate that they were a servant to tohunga or personal slave to a rangatira, to mark those of high rank who had been captured particularly women, to indicate a contract made by parents to give their child to another tribe, that the right to marry had been approved, to indicate protection of the ariki or rangatira and that this protection was a right by descent, their occupation and so on it goes ad infinitum. Again, like I said I found whole books on this dividing them through space and time so if you are interested in learning more about what moko would actually show and what it looked like you can head over to the website and check out the sources page where all the books I used to research this topic and all the other ones will be listed.

Moko also had other social functions other than being a permanent life history of the person wearing it that they took with them everywhere. For example there was an account that if a chief wanted another chief to join a war party they would tattoo a potato, indicating the enemy was Māori and not Pākehā. They would send the potato with a spliff of tobacco, representing smoke and therefore guns. The receiving chief would roast the potato and smoke the tobacco to show his acceptance that he would join the war party. Now, I do question the validity of this as I couldn't find much in the way to support it as it was taken from Robley's book as a second hand source but I think it definitely shows some of the wider uses moko could have had post-European arrival and perhaps even before then. The use of moko also changed post-European arrival. Before Europeans, it was done for beauty, mana and everything else we have discussed, however after Europeans came to these shores, it was done as an expression of Māori culture and identity as they started to become a minority in their own land.

One of the most interesting uses of moko though was as a signature and almost as heraldry. You can probably already guess how the heraldry aspect worked as we know the symbols and motifs were often indications of a person's whakapapa, ancestry with one person being recorded as pointing to a design on his forehead and said no one else but this family could use that design as it was only for them and no other were illustrious enough to use it. This might give you the idea that the more complex the moko, the more highly ranked or esteemed someone was but that wasn't always the case. Such as in the case of the second Māori King, he had what you might consider less elaborate moko than some of his subordinate chiefs, despite the fact that he was in theory meant to be the top bloke. This idea of symbols as whakapapa was so ingrained into Māori culture that it was recorded that someone once asked a British officer if the coat of arms on his uniform was the moko of his family. Which, in a sense, they were correct, coat of arms do indicate ancestry and history of the area or nation. It's one of the things I find kind of amazing in how two very different cultures on opposite sides of the planet could solve the same problem in very similar ways. I think it really highlights how we humans have much more similarities than we do differences. Their use a

signature might be less obvious though but it makes sense when you remember that post-European arrival Māori were trying to communicate and trade with a culture vastly different to theirs. What I mean specifically is a culture that didn't value anything that wasn't written down, especially in the realms of law and commerce which was pretty much an anthesis of their own culture. Europeans needed paper documents to ensure any agreements, trade, land purchase or anything else was binding and legal to the government, either local or back in Europe and of course you had to have a way for each person to indicate their willingness to enter the agreement on this piece of paper and that method had to be unique to each person and somewhat difficult to make a forgery. Europeans solved this issue through the use of signatures, given most people had a unique name that could then be written in a unique way. Māori seem to have decided not to opt for this method, perhaps because they already had something that fit all of those criteria, the very thing on their face that they carried around with them everywhere they went. So instead of writing their names, they would draw their own moko onto the paper when signing documents. The really great thing about this is that it was probably a much better system than that of writing your name. For starters, it was far more unique, imagine how many John Smiths there are versus how many people would have the exact same moko, I mean you would essentially have to have the same ancestry and have lived the exact same life to have the same moko. It would also be much more difficult to forge, the likelihood of someone remembering another person's tattoo well enough to draw it out would be rather unlikely. Probably most importantly though, it would be easy to identify the person who it belonged to. For example, if you imagine a hypothetical situation whereby you are trying to prove who a piece of land belongs to. You has the land deed with their name and the person's mark but of course you need to figure out who that physically is cause the land ownership is in dispute. If the owner was European and had signed his name, he would need to prove his identity through birth records, addresses, bank documents and so on. He would essentially need to prove he had been using that name for most of his life, building a background of who he was. If the owner was Māori and had signed their moko, all they would have to do is point to their face where the tattoo had been engraved likely for some time. If the patterns matched, you found your man! If not, it would likely be fairly straightforward to tell that he was lying. In saying that though, just like Western signatures, moko ones could range from elaborate, full recreations to just simple scribbles. What made this even more amazing I that they were often drawn completely from memory, no mirror was used. Which is pretty amazing when you consider that they likely didn't look at their moko all that often given it was, you know, on their face. I'll put an image up on the website of a drawing made by a chief, Te Pehi Kupe in 1815 who recreated his moko from memory. Moko signatures were actually so widely used that we see a number of them from rangatira on the Treaty of Watangi, the founding document of New Zealand. Te Pehi, a rangatira and war leader of Ngāti Toa, an iwi based in the lower North Island and upper South Island, said in 1826 when he was in England "Europee man write with pen his name – Te Pehi's is here" at which point he pointed at his moko. Another fun fact about Te Pehi is that he was the uncle of the very famous Te Rauparaha. For most of you overseas, that name won't mean anything but I'm willing to bet nearly all of you have heard the haka he made during the Musket Wars. Ka mate ka mate, ka ora ka ora.

Although we have talked about all of these really deep, interesting, spiritual, personal, practical and social functions of moko, there is one reason that seems to kind of underlie why Māori would subject themselves to the pain of moko in all the research I've done. It just looks bloody cool! And I don't say that to diminish what moko is or what it means to people, it absolutely has a deep personal connection for many people that cannot and should not be diminished. I say that cause it is simple things like this that I think bring us closer to those who came before us. The fact that our ancestors or those who walked the land before we did wanted to tattoo themselves cause they

thought it made them look more awesome. It's something we do today, with tattoos, clothes or anything else. To do something because you think it will make others look at you with awe and say 'phwa, doesn't he look mean!' is something that I find profoundly human.

Next time, we will be looking at something a little different in our discussions on moko. We will be talk all about moko mokai or as they are known today, toi moko. What are those I hear you ask? Preserved heads. We will be talking about how they were made, why they were made and what Māori were doing with them! Bet you didn't see that one coming!

If you want to send me feedback, ask a question, suggest a topic or just have a chinwag you can reach me through email at [historyaotearoa@gmail.com](mailto:historyaotearoa@gmail.com) or Twitter at History Aotearoa or Facebook at History Aotearoa New Zealand Podcast. This podcast is a one man band, if you enjoy listening to me talk history, you can support us through Patreon, buy merch from [historyaotearoa.com](http://historyaotearoa.com) or rate us on iTunes or your preferred podcast platform, it means a lot and helps grow, spreading the story of Aotearoa New Zealand. As always, haere tu atu, hoki tu mai. See you next time!