

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 34: Preserving the Past. This podcast is supported by our amazing Patrons, such as Lance. If you want to support HANZ go to [patreon.com/historyaotearoa](https://patreon.com/historyaotearoa). Last time we talked about what moko meant to Māori from why they decorated their faces and bodies with moko to what it could actually mean. Hopefully it has given you a bit more of an appreciation as to why this was such a big deal and why it still is today.

This will be our final episode on tā moko, closing out our roughly nine month look into the Māori arts. I've saved one of the most interesting topics for last, something that you have probably never heard of. Today we will be talking about mokomokai or as they are known today, toi moko, preserved heads.

Preserving heads is something that was common in pre-European Māori society as a way to preserve the memory of an individual, whether that be for good or ill. Part of the idea behind it was that if you could preserve someone's moko, you preserved a significant part of their identity and history, especially in a culture without writing. It wasn't something that had significant negative connotations as you may assume, at least not unless your head was captured by an enemy. What I mean is that it was usually a great honour to have your head preserved and families were often very keen to have their loved ones head preserved. It was meant to increase the mana of the person and was usually reserved for people of high rank, who also consequently would often have the most complicated and eye catching moko.

Before we get into their significance and why Maori were doing this, let's talk about the actual process of how these heads were preserved. As you might expect, depending on who you ask depends on what answer you get with Robley, our main primary source, giving three different accounts from three different people. Though those three people are all Europeans, two of them missionaries so there is perhaps a grain of salt to be taken here. In saying that, they do generally follow the same sort of line on how it was done so what I'll do is combine their descriptions together to give you an overview of how a toi moko was made.

Once your subject is dead obviously the first problem encountered is that in general the head would still be attached to body. Since they weren't interested in those pesky things like the torso and limbs, the head was removed. As soon as possible, immediately after removal if they could, a perforation is made in the back of the skull through which the brain is removed along with any extra gooey, fleshy stuff that is cleaned out. The tongue is then removed and the eyes scooped out. I couldn't find anything as to what happens to the brain and tongue but the eyes have an interesting fate depending on whether the subject was a friend or enemy. Maori believe that each eye contains essentially a part of your soul and that when you die the part in the right eye goes on the journey to Hawaiki and the part in the left eye goes into the sky to become a star. The eyes were often buried to ensure this would happen, essentially preparing them for their journey into the afterlife. However, this process could be halted if the eyes were eaten, which happened often if the subject was an enemy chief. Eating the eyes would give the swallower that person's soul and as such their power, skills and the like along with increasing their mana and perhaps somewhat deify them if the eye swallowed belonged to a very powerful ariki. Even if the eyes belonged to an enemy though, they were usually afforded some respect of only eating the left eye as this would still ensure their soul would reach Haiwaiki. Though, if the person was particularly hated the right eye might be eaten as well, which naturally would be a pretty big insult to the person's whanau, who would often try to stop either of the eyes being eaten.

Anyway, at this stage the eyelids would be sown shut or sometimes have fake eyes put in them. Like with most Māori beliefs, there was a practical reason to every spiritual reason, in this case it may

have been that eyes are really hard to preserve so they just got rid of them. The lips would also sometimes be sewn together as well, although they could be left open to show off the teeth. The brain cavity and nostrils and any other holes that were exposed were then filled with harakeke. This was to remove moisture from the cavities as well as fill them out so that the features of the person were still retained when the head was preserved. The head would then be boiled in water for a bit before being plunged into cold water to stop the process. This apparently led to the term upoko kōhue, literally meaning boiled head, which according to Robley was the deepest insult known in te reo. From there it would be wrapped in leaves and put into a hangi to steam. This would be done several times with the head being wiped with kākaho or reed flowers between each steaming. A small mānuka stick would also be placed through the nose to preserve its shape. Once the steaming process was complete, the head would be placed on a stick to dry in the sun. Reverend William Yates, one of Robley's sources, says that at this point after the boiling, steaming and drying, the top most layer of skin would be coming off on its own so it would be peeled off. It was likely somewhere around this stage that part of the base of the skull would be removed and a sort of flax drawstring put in. This would leave a hole about the size of a hand at the bottom of the head. If the preservers weren't satisfied with the job they had done at this stage the head may be steamed again, though this was not often needed. Otherwise it would be hung up in a whare to be smoked making the skin hard. Again this had a dual purpose, first that things that were smoked tended to last a long time, such as smoked meats and the other was that it stopped insects from eating the head as the smoke added pyroligneous acid which insects aren't too keen on. Sometimes animal fat was also rubbed onto the head during the smoking process with the smoke itself giving the head a brown, yellow or kinda red colour depending on what kind of wood was burned. The final stage of the process was to just sort out the hair, which would usually be put into a topknot and some feathers added to indicate status and add some colour. This whole process would leave the head with pretty much all of its features intact, including the moko which was enough to figure out who the person was, something has been used with great success by modern day historians. It should also be noted that if you are anything like me, when you heard preserved head you may have thought of the shrunken heads of South America. This process didn't shrink the heads, it just preserved them so they were still roughly the same size as they were when the person was still alive. Again, this process may have been different between iwi or perhaps even just between people doing the preserving and some processes may have changed depending on the rank of the person so it's just a rough, general overview of how it was done.

Regardless of how it was done, the preserving process was quite involved and required a lot of effort so they wouldn't just do it for funsies. There had to be a wider reason and purpose to it, otherwise they would just bury the head with the rest of the body and be done with it. We have talked a little about why Māori would preserve a head but there are some other interesting aspects, such as that it depended on whether the head belonged to a friend or an enemy of those doing the preserving. Naturally a friendly head would be treated with a lot of respect, usually being buried in a secluded spot that only a few knew about and was protected by strict tapu. Sometimes they would also be kept in a box. The heads would often be exhumed on special occasions, such as the disinterment of a chief's bones, the departure of a taua, war party or a hui. The head would have praises sung about it and dressed with feathers, perhaps being presented to a rangatira on a pole with great ceremony. This could do a number of things such as remind those gathered of the person, what they stood for and why that binds them together or perhaps more to do with that person's spirit is with them as a sort of physical manifestation of the person's mana and connection to their whakapapa. This was especially so if the person was a great warrior, tohunga, rangatira or someone else of great mana. The principal wife of a chief would also sometimes sleep with his head near her for similar reasons.

On the other hand, people that they weren't terribly fond of, didn't get the same respect and reverence. For example the preserved heads of warriors were often used to keep the memory of a grievance alive or as utu for a grievance that their death satisfied. In other instances the heads would be put on top of whare or even set on poles around the marae to kind of show off. These poles could sometimes have a cross bar on them and have kakahu draped over them to make them look more lifelike. So lifelike in fact that according to one account a European saw a group of Māori on a nearby hill and decided he would go over and introduce himself, he tells the tale, "As I approached, one of these splendid individuals nodded to me in a very familiar sort of manner, and I, not wanting to appear rude, returned the salute. I stepped into the circle formed by my new friends, and had just commenced a Tena koutou, when a breeze of wind came sighing along the hill top. My friend nodded again -his cloak blew to one side. What do I see? Or rather what do I not see? The head has no body under it! The heads had all been stuck on slender rods, a cross stick tied on to represent shoulders and the cloaks thrown over all in such a natural manner as to deceive any one at a short distance, but a green pakeha, who was not expecting any such matter, to a certainty," Now, I don't want to disparage how lifelike these heads are, they are very well done with some people even becoming famous for their skill in preserving but you would have to be pretty bloody thick to not realise when you are standing in front of them that these people very clearly aren't alive. I mean, at the end of the day, they were just a head, a pole and a cloak. Anyway, when these heads were placed around the marae they would often be subjected to jeers and insults by passers by as if the person was still alive. In one such instance one person said "you wanted to run away, did you? But my mere overtook you, and after you were cooked you were made food for my mouth? Where is your father? He is cooked. Where is your brother? He is eaten. Where is your wife? There she sits, a wife for me. Where are your children? There they are, with loads on their backs, carrying food as my slaves." The stories of how the heads were acquired were often retold, especially as they usually involved battles and victories, even reenacting some parts for effect. Hair was also taken from killed enemies and preserved instead of just the whole head. A more specific example of the use of heads is an account that tells of a chief who took the preserved head of a "obnoxious party" on fishing trips where he would fix it to the gunwale of the waka, basically over the edge. He would then tie the line to the ear which would make the head nod any time he got a bite which I think is one of those cool little middle fingers you sometimes see historical figures giving. Of course all of this was only if you were of any actual significance when it came to whakapapa and mana. Any heads that weren't tattooed, and thus didn't belong to someone of high rank, were beaten and crushed, without even bothering to preserve them. Obviously all of this was, shall we say, less than ideal for a prospective captured combatant so it is reported that when retreating, some people that were too injured to escape would ask their friends to kill them and cut off their heads to take with them. The intention being to ensure their head didn't fall into enemy hands.

One of the more unexpected and interesting things that these heads were used for was in diplomacy between iwi, particularly in the ceasing of hostilities. For example, when a chief was killed in battle that his side lost, the victorious tribe would request the chief's body, if they didn't have it already, which the losing tribe would do if they wanted to end the conflict. Once acquired, the head would be cut off with much ceremony and the presiding tohunga would declare an end to the war, or sometimes its continuation if they were so inclined. The head would then be preserved and sent to relatives of the chief who was the main war leader, essentially those who had a stake in the conflict in seeing some sort of utu through ensuring that everyone knew that justice had been done and the war concluded satisfactorily. The head would then be kept by the war leader if there was multiple rangatira involved. Even after going through all of this though it was rare for hostilities to fully stop as the losing tribe would of course want the head back of their rangatira, especially knowing what he

was likely being subjected to. Over multiple conflicts this would mean that each iwi had heads from the other and peace would never truly be achieved until all heads had been exchanged, bought or otherwise returned to their whanau. As part of this important diplomatic function, during times of war, any and all heads were meant to be kept in case of needing them to exchange for a peace treaty. However, if a chief was to get rid of any heads from the opposing tribe, it would indicate to them that he had no real intention of making any sort of lasting peace. Robley describes their use in diplomacy as their most important function, which is arguable but it is certainly up there on the list.

As you might expect, Europeans had quite a bit to say about the practice of preserving heads and also as you might expect, they generally just didn't get it. Robley in particular is quite bad for this as he sort of compares it to the preserving mummies of Egypt and says that the Scythians, Gauls and First Nation peoples from the Americas used to have similar practices. He doesn't expand on the thought any more than that, other than referencing Egyptian mummies repeatedly, which to be fair to him isn't an unfair comparison all things considered but I can't help but think that this is perhaps where some of the wilder theories of humanity's arrival in Aotearoa originate. Robley also mentions that he thinks the veneration Māori had for these heads was a result of war destroying "every feeling of humanity," which as I mentioned, really shows how for some Europeans, they didn't just miss the point, it flew over them and went into goddamn orbit.

For some, there was just pure revulsion at the idea, particularly as some Europeans were preserved as well. In one instance, this resulted in British soldiers using a Māori soldier's head as a football, until it was discovered by an officer, who scolded them and had it promptly buried. Keep in mind although we can't know for certain, the officer may have done so for more practical reasons of their relationship with local iwi rather than a feeling of sympathy. A similar case was of Captain P. W. J. Lloyd, who had his head cut off by Māori as it was thought that a medic of his regiment had done the same to one of their own. They also allegedly drank the captain's blood and buried the head before preserving it, something that isn't outside the realms of possibility but it does smell a bit like a barracks rumour. Either way, the head was placed on a pole at a village on the Whanganui River with some people biting at it. Robley doesn't say why but the head of the captain was eventually returned to the regiment, or at least a head that the British soldiers believed was their captain. We also hear of another captain of a ship when asked about preserved heads said "never to mention again such shocking brutality, nor to bring any specimens of this inhumanity on the vessel."

Something else that European navy vessels sometimes did was use head preservation as a threat, as in the case of Captain Dillon, who was on an expedition to Aotearoa and at some point had his carpenter refuse to work, instead saying he was going to desert by going ashore. We aren't told what caused this argument but Dillon asked the man if he had seen any heads for sale since their arrival in New Zealand, to which the carpenter replied that he had. Dillon then went on to say "Then sir, if you attempt to desert from the ship I will pay the natives to preserve your head and bring it here as a curiosity." This apparently scared the carpenter enough as he abandoned the idea and promptly got back to work.

If you were listening carefully there, you would have heard mention of heads that were for sale, which was something that was very big after the arrival of Europeans. Even during one of the first interactions between Europeans and Māori, the voyage of James Cook, a great interest was taken in the heads, particularly by Joseph Banks. He bought one of a 14 or 15 year old boy who had been killed by a blow to the back of the head that had fractured his skull. In return, Banks gave a pair of white linen undergarments. He also observed three other heads that were brought on board the *Endeavour* but weren't for sale which had false eyes and ornaments in their ears.

As more and more Europeans came to Aotearoa they tried to purchase these heads as personal curiosities. Initially though, Māori were quite reluctant to trade them away as during this period of early interaction it seems that the only heads being preserved were those of friends, it wasn't until there was a heavy economic incentive that enemies were preserved as well. That economic incentive you may have already guessed, was the muskets, along with the shot and powder to use them, that greatly interested Māori, among the other European goods. What seems to have happened is that the apprehension of trading away their loved ones was outweighed by the tactical advantages of this new technology. As such, in the first decade of the 19th century a rangatira of the Ngāpuhi iwi by the name of Hongi Hika launched a devastating campaign against his neighbours, thus starting the Musket Wars. This led to a deadly spiral as the head trade fuelled the conflicts since it was discovered that the schooners coming into trade didn't care if the heads were made recently or were very old, or at least if they did, they couldn't tell. This meant that chiefs were attacking their neighbours more and more to acquire heads to trade for guns, which they would then use to get more heads and so on. Iwi were also campaigning further than they ever had before which resulted in a concentration of power to fewer individuals across the regions as time went on.

In saying all of that though, the head trade was still reasonably low key during the earlier period. The heads being traded were mostly just interesting souvenirs for captains or sailors on small trading or whaling ships. However, once the museums and private collectors got wind of what was happening, shit got real. They naturally wanted in on the action so demand shot through the roof. The problem was that these institutions and collectors were only interested in the heads that were the most eye catching, the ones that had the most elaborate moko. That of course meant the people they were looking for were the nobility and chiefs, which only served to drive up the price if you could give the buyers a good story of the individual. The thing is though, they could just lie about who the person was and it wasn't like Europeans could read moko like Māori could so they had no way to verify, not that they likely cared, it was the moko they were primarily interested in. So to fulfill the demand, instead of going to the effort of trying to capture hard to reach nobles, what ended up happening was Māori forcibly tattooed slaves before killing them and preserving their heads, handing them over to Europeans, who were none the wiser. Raids were still conducted to acquire more slaves so every old grudge and casus belli was dug up to justify these increasing small, local wars. It was also around this time that the preservation of friendly heads was stopped, in case they were accidentally traded away. What else was interesting though was that the head trade started to enter popular vernacular among Māori in regards to insults. It was recorded that Te Pahi Kupe, who if you remember could draw his very elaborate moko from memory and was the uncle of Te Rauparaha, well he took offence at someone who objected to his taking of a block of pounamu greenstone, so he replied "badly tattooed, badly tattooed... what use would your ugly head be to me if I was to carry it to Kapiti; it would be worth nothing towards the purchase of a musket. (he then turns to another person) But there is a man his head would be worth having; but you, with a valueless head, how dare you call into question the doings of Pahi tu a te range?" What Te Pahi was essentially doing there was calling this man's whakapapa and mana into question. Saying that his moko, or lack thereof, indicates he is of lower status and that he should not question his betters.

It also seems like some toi moko were essentially bespoke as a Reverend J. G. Wood records an incident, "One of my friends lately gave me a curious illustration of the trade in heads. His father wanted to purchase one, but did not approve of any that were brought for sale, on the ground that the tattoo was poor and not a good example of the skill of the native artists. The chief allowed the force of the argument and pointing to a number of his people who had come on board, he turned to the intending purchaser saying, 'Choose which of these heads you like best, and when you come back I will take care to have it dried and ready for your acceptance.'" There is even a drawing

provided in Robley's book of this interaction. There are other accounts similar to this indicating that this probably was reasonably common. What is interesting about this though is that it seems to maybe imply that the chief may have directly interacted with the buyer which was something that only occurred during the later period of the head trade. Initially people who had deserted or were described as 'ne'er do wells' were sent from ships to purchase heads, although to me it sounds like they were potentially Pākehā-Māori, those Europeans who lived in New Zealand in Māori society. I presume these middlemen were trusted because they spoke both English and Te Reo Māori. Once the museums and collectors got involved though, they sent over their own agents and as demand increased, the quality went in the opposite direction. In hindsight, this was probably to be expected as the tattooing of slaves was often a bit more of a rushed job, sometimes with the moko being added post-mortem. What was interesting about this though is that Māori still wanted to retain the mana certain designs had. So even though they were tattooing the slaves, some designs were distorted to make it look like the person was a chief to the untrained eye but still preserve the mana and tapu of a certain motif. Anyway, this decline in quality led to the middlemen being cut out and the agents, or potentially the actual buyers themselves, heading into villages to inspect the toi moko or slaves themselves, which sometimes ended rather poorly for them. Robley for his part was also a prolific collector of toi moko. In fact, you have probably even seen him with his collection. There is a pretty famous photo that makes the rounds on the internet every so often of a man sitting in front of a wall that is holding a whole bunch of heads from people of all ages. Well, the bloke in that photo is our source, Horatio Gordon Robley. I'll put the picture up on [historyaotearoa.com](http://historyaotearoa.com) if you want to see it.

With this massive increase in trade for heads, the first one reached the port of Sydney in 1811. It was said that it came from Murihiku, Southland, and was apparently stolen which nearly cost the ship's crew their lives, something that would eventually kill the head trade all together. In the next few years toi moko gained a separate import entry at Sydney Customs under the name 'baked heads' though they were still a pretty rare sight in Sydney streets up until about 1820, when it was common to see them for sale. An article in the Sydney Gazette writes "Passing through George Street my attention was arrested by a very extraordinary sort of bundle under the arm of a man who was passing me on the foot path. I called to ask him what the bundle contained, when I beheld on his opening the covering a human head with long black hair, in a state of perfect preservation. I asked the man if what he showed me was really a human head, when the man replied that it was the head of a New Zealander, which he had purchased from a person lately arriving from that country and that he was going to dispose of it for two guineas to a gentleman who was about to embark for England."

By 1820, the museums were full and the private collectors satisfied with the toi moko they had acquired so demand plummeted, which was only compounded by the decrease in demand from individual traders as well. This kind of didn't matter though as the trade was naturally dwindling on the Māori side as well as once they had enough muskets they didn't really need to trade for much more, they could now easily defend against any threats from their rivals on an equal footing. In other words, the arms race had stopped since everyone had gotten to gunpowder in the Sid Miers Civilisation tech tree. No arms race, no need for heads. Although, Robley says that Māori "discontinued a practice which was repulsive to their instincts and which they only adopted as a desperate measure to preserve their tribes annihilation." He is sort of right. The quote is obviously sprinkled with a hint of his own racial views but the general idea that Māori started trading heads as a means of survival is mostly correct. He does somewhat miss the mark though in that Māori were preserving heads before Europeans arrived so it hadn't started out as a means to acquire muskets.

What you probably wondering though is why the decrease in demand from individual traders. Well, the short answer is that *toi moko* was slowly becoming a bit of a scandal due to some incidents that occurred when they were acquired. The first was in 1831 where a man called Joe Rowe bought a couple of heads in Kapiti. The heads had belonged to a pair of chiefs from the Taupo region in the centre of the North Island and when Rowe was down that way some relatives of the people that the heads had belonged to asked for them to be returned. Rowe laughed at this and went on his way. Unfortunately this would come to bite him in the ass as when he was camped along the Whanganui River they were attacked. Everyone was killed, including Rowe, except for an Andrew Powers. He was captured and eventually rescued by being purchased for 25 pounds of tobacco. Powers then relayed the incident to someone else, which is how we know of it. Another incident occurred in the same year that was brought to the media and public interest. This time it was a man called Jack who was the master of a trading schooner. Similar to the Rowe/Powers story, Jack had purchased some heads in the Bay of Plenty which had belonged to people that had lived in the Bay of Islands. When he was next in the Bay of Islands, some of the locals came on board. Jack, for some reason, decided to show them the heads by pouring them out of a sack on the deck. It's not clear whether they had taken offence to the blatant disregard to *tapu* or that they knew the heads, though my money is on both. Either way, a "great commotion" ensued which resulted in Jack and the schooner having to flee. He obviously got away with the heads though cause they were sold in Sydney, which is where the story got much interest.

Not long after this, the governor of New South Wales put out a decree pretty much saying 'please don't do that, it's not very nice' which, shockingly, didn't work. Instead the governor later banned the sale of heads from New Zealand and required anyone who still had them to return them to their rightful owners or relatives. There was also a 40 pound fine for anyone now caught with them along with publishing their names in the local paper. The public reception to this was pretty positive as the loss of life needed to get the heads was felt to be too great, as well as the just general repugnance they felt towards the practice. As such the trade finally died out in Sydney, but not in New Zealand. You see, although New Zealand was technically under New South Wales jurisdiction at the time, they kinda didn't really care what was happening here so the practice still continued for other reasons with even some little trade happening as well, such as with a ship from the United States in 1838. Funnily enough though, the law was still occasionally enforced in Aotearoa as some local Māori complained to the governor that the Canterbury Museum held one head in its collection and unless it was removed the full force of the law would come down upon them. Again though, the preservation of heads still continued and no real attempt was made to stop the practice until after New Zealand was made a British colony in 1841 and even then, we know that Māori were still making *toi moko* until 1870.

Today we know that there are somewhere around 200 *toi moko* in museums, both here in New Zealand and overseas. There is a big effort being made by the people at Te Papa, our national museum, to get these and other *taonga* back home. They even have a whole team dedicated to the repatriation of *toi moko*, skeletal and other remains of Māori *tūpuna*, ancestors. It was also this team that changed the name of the preserved heads. I have been referencing them as *toi moko* for this episode but if remember to the start I also called them *mokomokai*, the name they had been previously called. Those of you who have been paying very close attention will remember that *mokai* is a derogatory term for slave so not really the nicest way to refer these heads who were living, breathing people, slaves or not. So instead Te Papa changed their name to *toi moko*, tattooed works of art, in an effort to restore some *mana* to them.

Another topic down, that rounds off our look into tā moko, the very interesting art of Māori tattooing. This has probably been my favourite topic we have done so far so hopefully you have found it enjoyable as well.

Next time, we will be doing another Māori legend but since March is Women's History Month, we are going to do something that centres a bit more around, well, women if you hadn't guessed. From there we will be doing something a bit different, or a bit the same depending on how you look at it...

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!