

## **MOKOMOKAI: COMMERCIALIZATION AND DESACRALIZATION**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

As modern genetic research proceeds, hastened on by large national grants and sometimes grandiose visions of the future of molecular genetics, we come increasingly into contact with complex issues about the implications of genetic research to human society. Especially important to this discussion are the affects of genetic research on indigenous peoples throughout the world. Their cultural and geographical isolation (often imagined) has created distinct population with unique genetic characteristics. This makes indigenous societies ideal candidates for genetic research. The purpose of this project is to present one case study of an alternative indigenous understanding of the body and some of the implications of these different worldviews.

Indigenous societies often see the body as sacred, something more than a mass of molecules. The imposition of a Western capitalist economic paradigm can lead to commodification of the body and subsequent desacralization, in direct contradiction of indigenous worldviews. This is illustrated with the Maori moko, or tattoos of the Maori people and the trade that developed in mokomokai, or tattooed heads in the early nineteenth century. This paper details the significance of the moko and mokomokai in Maori culture and the events that led to the trade in tattooed heads.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF MOKO AND MOKOMOKAI IN MAORI CULTURE**

Maori moko are tattoos that are unique in appearance, design, and significance. There were two methods involved in the creation of moko: in one the flesh was carved away and the pigment placed inside the grooves, resulting deep, dark lines. The second method was similar to most of Polynesia with the pigment inserted underneath the skin with a sharp-toothed comb (Gell 1993: 246-7). The carving method was limited to the facial moko while the rest of the body was tattooed in the more conventional method.

The men were tattooed on the face, the backside, thigh and lower torso. The women were also tattooed on the body, but the facial design was usually limited to the lips and chin. However, there are examples in history and in traditional carving in which important women had full-face moko (Starzecka 1996:47). These women were of equal or higher rank than the male chiefs of their generation and their full-face moko was representative of that status (Simmon 1999:127). They were symbolically men and usually never married. "Moko sites and design, as well as extent, varied between men and women, though in both sexes it marked rites of passage and significant events in one's life" (Starzecka 1996: 40). For women of chiefly rank, tattooing was an important ceremony that accompanied puberty and marked the entry into womanhood (Lewis 1982: 60). The tattooing ceremony was done individually, not as a group ceremony or initiation (Gell

1993: 244). Ta moko, the art of tattoo, was much more than mere body decoration; it was intricately connected to the social, political, and religious life of the Maori.

The moko contained information about a person's lineage, tribe, occupation, rank, and exploits. They were unique to each individual and told about their life and history (Blackburn 1999:15, Simmon 1999: 50). Some authors suggest that early 19<sup>th</sup> century Maori society was highly stratified with eight different levels of hierarchy; these levels were indicated through the moko designs (Simmon 1999: 129-130). Others argue that the social structure was less rigid structure and had fewer social strata but in both cases, moko, or lack thereof, was an important signal of position in the sociopolitical structure (Gell 1993:240-1.) Disregarding all other reasons, obtaining a moko was expensive and the heavy financial constraint prohibited all but the chiefs and warriors from commissioning an elaborate moko (Gell 1993: 246).

The moko also showed mana, or divine personal power and status of an individual (Starzeck 1996: 61). The moko not only indicated mana but contained mana itself. The mana of the moko was such that, later, when slaves were tattooed so that their heads could be traded, they were given tattoos whose patterns were meaningless. If they were given correct moko, the virtue of the moko would render them tapu, and they could not be killed (Simmon 1999:140).

Each moko was completely unique to that individual (Robley 1998: 15, 91). Maori chiefs knew each line of their moko and could draw them from memory. They were often used as marks of identification and were used to sign treaties, land grants, and deeds during the period of European colonization (Gilbert 2000:67, Robley 1998:11). More importantly, the moko served not only as a means of identification of an individual, but through the moko, an individual "achieved identification with the ancestors through donning an ancestral (tattooed) mask" (Gell 1993:251). The moko symbolically connected an individual to his ancestors and lineage.

Not only the tattoos, but also the art of tattooing- ta moko, was very sacred and surrounded by strict tapu and protocol. The most prominent tale of the origin of ta moko involves a mortal, Mataoro, who is married to the daughter on the chief of the underworld. One day he beats his wife and she returns to her father's realm. Mataora journeys to the underworld to regain his wife, and while there learns the art of ta moko from his father-in-law (Starzecka 1996: 35, Neich 1994:21, Gell 1993:254-259). This was a sign of reconciliation between divinity and man. Ta moko was a gift from the gods, and as such, was considered sacred. On a more practical level, the moko made Mataoro worthy of marrying above his status and serves as a reminder to avoid evil action (the beating of his wife) (Gell 1993:255).

Tattoo experts were trained in special schools and the practice was controlled and surrounded by numerous tapu (Neich 1994:20). A tattoo expert was a position of respect and prestige (Hiroa 1982:299, Robley 1998:100).

During the tattooing process, the individual receiving the tattoo was subject to a number of strict rules due to the sacredness and importance of the ritual. This tapu came from the bleeding that necessarily accompanied the ritual (Robley 1998:62). The ritual was done out of doors in a temporary shelter built for that purpose (Best 1934: 223). The person receiving the moko could not speak, feed himself, or be touched by anyone else. He was also limited in the kind of vessels he could eat from and the food he could eat (Robley 1998:58-59). An elaborate carved funnel was used to feed the person being tattooed so that they could eat without touching any contaminated substance (Starzecka 1996: 40). After the procedure was complete, the person who received the tattoo abstained from sex and washing for several days until the tattoo began to heal (Blackburn 1999:13,15). At the end of the ceremony a collective ritual was held “in order to ‘recompense’ (utu) for the bloodletting (i.e. degradation) of their chief, a slave or captive would be killed and the chief’s supporters would be given a feast (at the chief’s expense)” (Gell 1993:248). A similar festival was held at the tattooing of chief’s eldest daughter (Gell 1993:246). All of these tapu indicate the importance of tattooing and its cultural significance.

Often the tattooed heads of the deceased were dried and smoked in order to preserve them from decay. These dried heads are the mokomokai. The process of drying the heads was also accompanied by tapu. The people performing the ceremony and the relatives of the deceased were not allowed to touch food until the process was complete (Robley 1998:146).

The mokomokai were an integral part of Maori society. They served as personal remembrances of the deceased and reminded the family of his good character and leadership (Robley 1998:134).

The Maori took heads as trophies during war, and heads were embalmed and preserved during peace as well as war. This honor was usually reserved for persons of importance and their loved ones, including women and children. The heads remained with the families of the deceased, who kept them in ornately carved boxes. They were protected by strict taboos and brought out only during sacred ceremonies. (Gilbert 200:67)

The children and widows of the deceased used the head to remind them of the deceased, but also to signify that to some extent the presence of the departed chief was still a part of tribal and family affairs. This kind of close kinship and identification with ancestors is an important part of Polynesian society (Gell 1993:251-252).

The heads of slain enemy chiefs were also kept and played an important role in the rituals and ceremonies relating to war and peace. They were trophies of war and were displayed on posts to testify of the success of the tribe’s warriors (Robley 1998: 136). These heads of enemy chiefs were treated with great disrespect (Lewis 1982: 93). However, these captured mokomokai were also important in the rituals of peace negotiations. When a side was conquered, it surrendered the heads it had captured and the return of the heads signified that the grievances had been settled (Robley 1998: 134-5). In other circumstances, heads would be traded between both sides to peacefully end intertribal

wars and disputes. Because of their essential role in negotiation of peace they were very valuable and would never be traded. Because without returning the mokomokai of the chiefs, peace could not be achieved (Robley 1998: 138).

### **COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE MOKOMOKAI**

The first head obtained by westerners, was ironically, on only the second voyage to land in New Zealand. Joseph Banks, the naturalist who traveled with Captain Cook, bought a head of a 14-year-old boy on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1770 (Robley 1998: 167). The Maori were extremely reluctant to part with the head and there is no information about the rank of the youth or if the preserved head was tattooed.

The first record of a mokomokai traded in Sydney was in 1811. The head was stolen and not a regular trade item. It was not until the 1820's that the trade in tattooed heads was commonplace and " 'baked heads' acquired a separate entry among the imports at the Sydney customs" (Robley 1998:169, 171). The story that led up to the regular trade of the mokomokai began when Thomas Kendall invited Hongi, a Maori chief who had been converted to Christianity, to England in order to aid in the creation of a bilingual dictionary and the translation of the Bible into the Maori language.

While in England, Hongi was presented to polite society, where his dignified bearing and his elegantly tattooed face excited great admiration. King George granted him an audience and presented him with a large trunk full of gifts as a reward for his efforts in spreading the gospel.

On his way back to New Zealand, Hongi stopped off in Sydney, where he exchanged the King George's gift for several hundred muskets and a large supply of ammunition...and used his muskets to launch a series of highly successful raids against his traditional tribal foes (Gilbert 2000: 68).

War has long been a part of traditional Maori life, but the introduction of guns changed the nature war. Before muskets and other trade items entered the economy, wars were started to gain women, slaves, greenstone, and mana. Later wars were fought to kill the enemy, conquer his land, take tattooed heads, gain access to trading areas, and grow economically (Lewis 1982:8).

As some tribes obtained guns they gained an enormous advantage over their neighbors. The other tribes in the region were forced to obtain guns to defend themselves and went to any means to obtain them.

The destruction caused by the new warfare engulfed not only the defeated chiefly families but their people as well, on a scale never seen before. ...Maori fighting chiefs with the well-armed taua lay waste the populations of their rivals. Only the possession of sufficient muskets could save a tribe from this fate. (Evison 1997: 50)

Chiefs traded flax, potatoes, slave women, and tattooed heads for guns and ammunition in order to protect their tribes from destruction (Evison 1997:50). The trade in the mokomokai grew because of the increasing demand by European museums and private collectors. Other trade items were considerably less valuable: for example, it took a ton of flax to purchase one musket (Gilbert 2000: 68). Later the demand rose and “European traders demanded two such heads, a ton of potatoes, or a shipload of flax for one musket” (Lewis 1982: 93). The heads, however, were a valuable trade items and the trade expanded. After one battle, ten of the most desirable enemy heads were sold to an American ship for guns and ammunition (Evison 1997:69).

Once the arms race began, muskets were so essential to survival that many raids were started with the sole purpose of obtaining heads to trade (Robley 1998:167-8). The mokomokai, once essential objects in the establishment of peace, became the source of guns and the cause of wars.

Traders could sell the heads to museums and private collectors in Europe for large profits (Gilbert 2000: 68) It is estimated that hundreds of these heads were bought and sold during the peak years of the trade in mokomokai from 1820-1831 (Blackburn 1999:18) Of course captured warriors and slain chiefs could not provide sufficient heads to meet the demand so soon the Maori found other ways to fulfill the market demand. Slaves were tattooed and killed because their head was worth more than their living body (Lewis 1982: 93).

The tattooing of slaves was another example of the denigration of Maori moko. The moko was a mark of rank and importance. Slaves were never tattooed until a market was created for tattooed heads (Robley 1998: 24). Furthermore, tattooed slaves and the heads created for commercial purposes were done carelessly and without attention to detail and the tattoos that resulted were a “jumble of meaningless motifs” (Simmon 1999:66). Understanding the mana associated with a proper moko explains the conscious errors in the commercial mokomokai. Thus the commercial demand for the art not only desacralized the mokomokai but destroyed their aesthetic value as well (Hiroa 1982:301). This seems to be a trend with western demands on indigenous art.

### The End of Commercialization

The trade in heads was always considered a sacrilege. An early account tells of Captain James Kelly, who, when landing near Otakou Bay, was attacked and three of his crew members killed because “One of the victims ...[was] recognized as having sold tattooed Maori heads in Sydney, a sacrilege known to the relatives since every facial tattoo was distinctive and recognizable” (Evison 1993:30). Another example is given where a trader refused to surrender the head of a chief to the dead chief’s relatives. When the trader was leaving the area the relatives attacked and killed his party and their heads were dried (Robley 1998:178). In these instances, the desecration of the head of a friend was a capitol offense.

European society and law institutions, on the other hand, were slow to react to the atrocities committed by those involved in the trade. People prosecuted for the massacre of innocent people were let escape, allowed free on bail, and generally not punished for their activities against the Maori (Evison 1997: 55) The ineptitude of the legal system in prosecuting those clearly guilty led, in part, to Governor Darling's proclamation on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1831 prohibiting trade in preserved heads in Sydney. By taking out the middlemen the traffic in human heads was greatly decreased (Gilbert 2000: 68).

The trade, however, continued to some extent for at least another decade. In 1837 on Kapiti Island, Evison writes that the trade in mokomokai was still "thriving." Live slaves were shown to potential buyers and when the purchase was made, the slave was killed; his head was dried and traded for muskets (Evison 1997:92). And in 1838, a US expedition purchased two heads from a European, indicating that both Maori and Europeans continued to sell the mokomokai (Robley 1998:181).

Eventually the trade began to die out, Robley attributes this to the eventually saturation of Maori society with muskets and the slow but growing discontent of 'civilized' society to the trade in dried heads. Robley describes how,

Slowly but surely the traffic became a public scandal. The Maori too had become possessed of all the arms they wanted, and discontinued a practice which was repulsive to their instincts and which they adopted as a desperate measure to preserve their tribes from annihilation. (Robley 1998: 178)

Around this same time the Maori altogether stopped preserving the heads of friends and relatives out of respect, because the general trade in mokomokai made this dangerous and uncertain (Robley 1998: 170). Mokomokai and ta moko, once important and essential elements in Maori culture, were disappearing.

There are numerous explanations for the discontinuance of the moko. The most obvious is directly linked to the trade in tattooed heads. Rev. G. Woods writes, "In the first place, no man who was well tattooed was safe for an hour unless he was a great chief, for he might be at any time watched until he was off his guard and then knocked down and killed, and his head sold to the traders" (Robley 1998:169). This is the most obvious disincentive to have a moko but it is not the only factor involved in their discontinuance.

Gilbert attributes the decrease in Maori tattooing, not only to the trade in heads, but the loss of Maori lands and the accompanying cultural degradation and forced incorporation into European society (2000: 69). As Robley states "European civilization...obliterated the distinction which prevailed, upset all their social order, and reduced the entire race to one dead level of social inferiority to the Pakeha" (Robley 1998: 123). Gell agrees, "Thus the moko disappeared, not because it was unpopular with the whites, but because it had lost its political rationale" (1993:263). The moko was a product of the Maori social structure, and once that social structure disappeared, the need and rationale for the moko

disappeared as well. The loss of the moko was a part and parcel of the larger degradation of Maori society.

Blackburn, on the other hand, links the decline of the moko to the growth of Christianity and the disapproval of the missionaries of this “heathen practice.” Interestingly enough Christian converts sometimes had their baptismal names tattooed on their arms to mark their conversion, indicating the continued importance and cultural significance of the tattoos in general (Blackburn 1999: 15). Obviously, there were a variety of factors involved in the disappearance of male moko. All of these reasons, however, are directly linked to European colonization and the imposition of new economic, political, and religious structures.

Whatever the cause, by 1840 the male moko were becoming increasingly rare (Simmons 1999:150). Although the male moko was almost completely discontinued, it was begun again in the 1860’s around the time of the Maori Wars as a sign of assertion of cultural and political independence. After the wars, however, the moko once again fell out of use (Hiroa 1982: 300). The female moko, however, continued throughout this period and into the present, sometimes growing and sometimes decreasing in popularity. It is interesting to note, however, that there is only one female tattoo among all the heads traded and now deposited in museum (Blackburn 1999: 18). This seems to link the trade of mokomokai directly to the decrease in importance of the male moko.

#### **MODERN WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARDS MOKOMOKAI AND THE MAORI CULTURAL RENAISSANCE**

The original attraction of Europeans to the mokomokai seems to be a fascination with the exotic and noble savage. An early commentator wrote that, “There is no doubt that to arrive at such pre-eminence of such complete tatuing a man must have killed and eaten many of his fellows” (Lewis 1996: 93). The connection of tattoo to cannibalism, sex, and war is often stressed, while ignoring the more complex and nuanced cultural, political, and religious meanings. This depiction of moko is typical not only of early western colonialism, but also of modern writings about the moko. In 2000, Gilbert writes that, “An elegantly tattooed face was a great source of pride to a warrior, for it made him fierce in battle and attractive to women” (Gilbert 2000:67). And Starzecka comments that the moko made warriors “intimidating” and “enhanced the carrier’s erotic appeal quite considerably” (Starzecka 1996:42). The stereotypes of the fierce and erotic savage continue to this day.

One original Maori reaction to European fascination is described in Robley’s account of Hongi’s visit to England. He writes that “Hongi’s bearing was dignified when treated as a great man, but when regarded merely as an object of curiosity he never failed to show his disgust and even indignation” (Robley 1998:107). Of course the European fascination continued and later an English showman brought two Maori with moko to show them off and make money in England (Robley 1998: 109). The number of books on Maori moko, as well as their depiction of ta moko indicates that by and large European fascination with moko continues.

This fascination with indigenous cultures is visible in popular culture (tattoos, fashion design, photography, television, and video) and modern genetic research. Campenhausen, a modern tribal enthusiast, notes that the both western and as well as Pacific Islanders are gaining a renewed interest in traditional arts (1997: 2). Camphausen romantically continues that what he terms “Return to the tribal” is the beginning of a “global village” and a return to “the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy have divorced us” (Camphausen 1997: 5). He writes that, “Stimulated by the new appreciation of, and demand for, their arts and knowledge, people from the Pacific to Africa are now recovering and reviving what was almost lost, motivated and helped by a new kind of tourist who is interested in these practices” (Camphausen 1997: 5). 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. Furthermore, Camphausen praises the western tourist’s fascination with the indigenous and even credits this fascination with indigenous art for the cultural renaissance occurring throughout Africa and the Pacific. In doing so he fails to recognize the political, economic, and cultural battles fought by indigenous activists, motivated by a desire for sovereignty and the right to cultural self-determination, not, as Camphausen imagines, “a new kind of tourist who is interested in these practices.” Western popular culture and accompanying capitalism inevitably desecralize the important rituals and symbols they seek to imitate.

Of course the issues are much more complex, and modern Maori continue assert their right to represent themselves and strongly disapprove of being made a spectacle for western curiosity. Nicole MacDonald writes,

Maori are prepared to fight to protect their traditions, to hide them, if necessary, from the bored, fascinated eyes of a world hungry for the ‘exotic.’ Though they do not feel compelled to share their culture with those who do not respect it, they are eager to educate others who are willing to understand. They want to show them that there is important, sacrosanct meaning behind the beauty of the design, in order to further protect the art from those who look purely out of horrified curiosity or who attempt to appropriate the patterns for uses other than those that are personal and sacred. (Neleman 1999:13).

Interest in Maori tattoo is growing due to the Maori cultural renaissance (Blackburn 1999:15). Pita Turei describes how “In the 70’s, young urbanized Maori in search of powerful symbols of ethnic identity rediscovered the art, and moko found a new generation of skin” (Neleman 1999:11). The female chin moko has continued to some extent up until the present day and since the 1970’s has become “a potent symbol of Maori identity and cultural resilience” (Starzecka 1996: 41).

Harry Sangl, a modern artist, worked for several years to document the chin moko of many Maori kuia, or elderly women. Some allowed her to, but many also refused, due to the belief that if the moko were reproduced the wearer would die. Strong beliefs continue,

even until the present day to surround the moko (Sangl 1980:13) Tame Wairere comments,

The resurgence of ta moko among Maori is a direct means of reasserting our tonu rangatiratanga (absolute sovereignty). It is in defiance of past and present political agenda, laws and regulation that continually deny access to our lands, language, customs and beliefs.

The impact of colonization has seen many of our taonga (treasures) taken to private collections and museums throughout the world. Ta moko and mokomokai are testimony to our tipuna (ancestors), are links to our past, and are therefore extremely important to the continuation and promotion of our culture. They must be returned to where they rightfully belong—Aotearoa. Wearers of the art of ta moko ensure that this tradition continues into the new millennium. (Neleman 1999: 9)

The correct understanding and portrayal of sacred symbols embodied in the Maori moko has much broader implications than just respect for another worldview. Moko are an important part of the modern Maori political, cultural, and religious identity. The threat of commercialization is still relevant and real.

The key issues here are the proper respect for Maori cultural and intellectual property, for the right of the Maori to determine how they will view and understand the body and how this understanding will translate into correct protocol for genetic research. The danger lies not in the research itself, but in the imposition of western paradigms, of western legal and economic structures. As illustrated in the history of the mokomokai, commercialization and the introduction of new economic paradigms threaten the cultural and social fabric of the Maori way of life. Through attempts of modern popular culture to commercialize the moko, we can see the continuity of western cultural imperialism. More importantly, the response of the Maori to this commercialization highlights the demand by the Maori people for the right to determine their participation in modern society—be it popular culture or genetic research.

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