

Te Papa Museum and The Preservation of Māori Art and Culture: A Preliminary Observation

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will give a brief account of the Māori people and their art and culture, highlighting the role played by the Te Papa Museum, in particular and other concerned organisations in their efforts to preserve the Māori art and culture¹.

Origins

Who are the Māoris?

We are not sure for certain from which islands the Māoris came. Hawaiki and Rangaitea, which occur again and again in the ancient chants, are places of myth rather than geographical locations. Archaeological studies are still at its infancy stage. According to a general believe the Māoris belong to the Polynesian race, whose origin has long been a subject of much argument.

New Zealand still has two cultures at present; of these the British one is extremely well-documented. The Māori culture, however, in spite of many efforts by scholars over recent years, is still seen confusedly and often unduly childishly, as though it properly belongs to a fairy tale. In fact the image of the Māori does not look like a fairy tale, but as one of the many viable products of human spirits – beliefs, behaviour, attitudes, a social structure providing a large human community with the conditions of survival and leaving behind a remarkable philosophy, many powerful and beautiful works of art and a rather underestimated body of literature.

Migration and Ancestry

However, modern scholarship has Māori people exploring the islands that now make up New Zealand from around 1300 AD, though some date their arrival as far back as 1000 AD. There may have been canoe journeys back and forth to other Pacific islands, but it is almost certain that contact with other Pacific peoples stopped at least five hundred years ago. Māori tradition tells of their ancestors' arrival from homelands in Hawaiki, most likely around the Cook Islands or Tahiti. Exploratory probes by

the legendary explorer Kupe resulted in the discovery of New Zealand, and Kupe's wife Kuramarotini named the land Aotearoa – land of the long white cloud. This was followed in 1350 by the staggered arrival of the seven fleet canoes or *waka*, from which most Māori trace their descent.

An individual's genealogy, or **whakapapa**, is fundamental to the Māori sense of place. It is still recited on formal occasions when speakers may also identify their *maunga* (mountain), *awa* (river), *iwi* (tribe) and *tupuna* (special ancestors). Even in day-to-day contact it is not uncommon for one Māori to question another with the phrase *kei whea koe?* (where are you from?), in an attempt to flag the individual's tribal identity.

Māori Culture and Customs

Māori culture and customs have become an intrinsic part of the New Zealand way of life. You will often hear of Māoritanga, the embodiment of Māori lifestyle and culture it is the Māori way of doing things, embracing social structure, ethics, customs, legends, art and language. All Kiwi kids, for example, grow up learning some Māori words, while opposing rugby teams quiver in the face of the New Zealand All Blacks performing the ferocious challenge dance, the *haka*. Māori artists are renowned for their intricate designs and patterns in carving, sculpting, weaving and painting, while the *hangi* (a feast cooked in an earth oven) remains a central part of communal celebrations. However, Māori culture embraces a lot more than just these outward manifestations. Characterised by the spiritual and social values of generosity, sharing, caring and service, it is derived from an oral tradition whose customs and practices predate the arrival of Māori in New Zealand.

Identity and Family

To Pakeha (non-Māori) New Zealanders and the rest of the world, New Zealand's native people are Māori, but in the Māori world, "Māoriness" is of secondary importance. Traditionally, people's identity is more closely linked with their **whanau** (extended family), the most fundamental and tightest division in Māori society. More than a mere family social unit, the *whanau*, was (and to a large extent still is) based on kinship ties, and provides an environment within which certain responsibilities and obligations are maintained. On a wider scale, people associate themselves with their **hapu** (subtribe) and their **iwi** (tribe) and its associated *rohe* (tribal area), its geographical boundaries passed down through oratory. The indigenous inhabitants of each *iwi* are the **tangata whenua** (literally "the people of the land").

Contemporary family structures still centre on the **marae** (community meeting place), which are helping to promote traditional arts, crafts and culture amongst urbanised Māori. Here, the basic tenets of Māori tradition remain strong, and formal protocol still reigns for ceremonies as diverse as *tangi* (funeral wakes), *hui* (meetings) and Māori exhibition penings. Wherever they reside, Māori are still more likely than non-Māori to live in extended families, indicating the continued importance of traditional living arrangements. Around twenty percent of Māori live in private dwellings with extended *whanau*, and more than half of those feature three familiar generations under one roof.

On the Marae

The rituals of tribal life are conducted on the **marae**, a combined community, cultural and drop-in centre (and much more). Strictly, a marae is simply a courtyard, but the term is often applied to the whole complex, comprising the *whare runanga* (meeting house), *whare manuhiri* (house for visitors) and *whare kai* (eating house). Visitors may not enter *marae* uninvited, so unless you have Māori friends or are staying with Māori you are likely to visit only, on a commercially run tour. Remember that the marae is sacred and due reverence must be accorded the **kawa** (protocols) governing behaviour you will be instructed as to what is required of you. First, visitors are ritually challenged to determine friendly intent. This might involve a fearsome warrior bearing down on you with twirling *taiaha* (long club), flickering tongue and bulging eyes. The women then make the **karanga** (welcoming call), which is followed by their **powhiri** (sung welcome) which acts as a prelude to ceremonial touching of noses, a hongi. On commercial trips, the welcoming ceremony is followed by a concert comprising songs, dances and chants, and by a **hangi** (a feast cooked in an earth oven).

Art and Crafts

Because Māori is an oratory language, **carving** in particular became a means by which Māori could record their history and *whakapapa* (genealogy). It reached its most exalted expression in the production of **waka taua** (war canoes), formidable vessels that were the focus of community pride and endeavour. Later, the *waka taua* was superseded in importance by the **whare whakairo** (carved meeting house), which came to be seen as the tangible manifestation of the *whakapapa*, usually representing a synthesis of the ancestors: the ridge-pole is the backbone; the rafters form the ribs; the gable figure is the head; and the barge boards represent arms, often decorated with finger-like decoration.

When not using wood, Māori carvers worked in **pounamu** (greenstone, or hard nephrite jade) and in pre-European times complex trade routes developed to supply Māori throughout the land from the greenstone sources on the South Island's West Coast and in Fiordland. The *pounamu* took the place of durable metals for both practical and decorative uses: adzes and chisels were used for carving, and clubs for hand-to-hand combat, while pendants took on a ritual significance and demanded decoration. Ornamental pieces ranged from simple drop pendants worn as earrings or neck decoration, to *hei tiki*, worn as a breast pendant and, for women, serving as a fertility charm and talisman for easy childbirth.

Meanwhile, the **weaving and plaiting** of flax and other natural fibres had long been used to create clothing, ropes and domestic implements². Plaited flax leaves formed the basis of *kete*, handle-less baskets used for collecting shellfish and *kumara* (sweet potatoes), as well as canoe sails, sandals and patterned floor mats. Both natural and coloured fibres were used in **whatu kakahu** (cloak-weaving), the crowning achievement of Māori women's art, while more robust **para** (rain capes) were made using the water-repellent leaves of the cabbage tree. Cloaks are still an important element of formal occasions, whether on the *marae*, or elsewhere, for receiving academic or state honours.

Carving, weaving and plaiting have all seen a modern resurgence, with old forms reproduced directly, and also raided as inspiration for contemporary designs. However, while it's tempting to assume that everything on sale is New Zealand made, much of the cheaper stuff is actually produced elsewhere. Consequently, the Māori arts community promotes the **toi iho** trademark, which identifies work that not only uses with a cultural understanding of what they mean. Work by individuals and groups of Māori descent is labeled "Māori made", with groups of predominantly Māori descent being entitled to use the "mainly Māori" logo. Stockists of *toi iho* products around the country are listed on the website www.toiio.com.

Music and Dance

Music and dance play a vital role in Māori culture, passing on values and traditions from generation to generation through song, story-telling and recitation. Best known of the many so-called posture dances is the intimidating **haka** (as performed by the All Blacks), a graphic example of indigenous culture on display. While the *haka* is commonly referred to as an act of war or defiance, it is also performed to welcome, to grieve and even to protest. At commercial Māori concerts (predominantly in Rotorua but also in Christchurch, Queenstown and elsewhere) there will always be some form of *haka*, which is almost always performed by men. Though women are not excluded from the *haka*, they normally concentrate on **poi dance**, where balls of *raupo* (bulrush) attached to the end of strings are swung around in rhythmic movements originally designed to improve co-ordination and dexterity.

The drums of eastern Polynesia seem to have been little used in Aotearoa, and both chants and the *haka* go unaccompanied. To the traditional bone flute has been added the guitar, which now accompanies **waiata** (songs), relatively modern creations whose impact comes as much from the tone and rhythm as from the lyrics. The impassioned delivery can seem at odds with music that is often based on Victorian hymns: perhaps the most well known are *Pokarekare aria* and *Haere Ra*, both post-European contact creations. Outside the tourist concert party, Māori music has developed enormously in recent years to the point where there are tribal and Māori-language music stations almost exclusively playing music written and performed by Māori.

The Haka

The thigh-slapping, foot-stomping, tongue-poking, eye-bulging chant *Ka mate, Ka mate, Ka ora, Ka ora* ("It is death, it is death, It is life, it is life") is from the **Te Rauparaha Haka**, designed to demonstrate the fitness and prowess of warriors. It was reputedly composed in the nineteenth century by the warrior Te Rauparaha, as he lay in the *kumara* pit of a friendly chief trying to avoid detection by his enemies. Hearing noise above and then being blinded by light, he thought his days were numbered, but as his eyes became accustomed to the light he saw the hairy legs of his host, and was so relieved he performed the *haka* on the spot. Touring rugby teams have performed the *haka* at least since the 1905 All Black tour of Britain. The performance is typically led and spurred on by a player of Māori descent.

Maori Food

The best place to sample traditional Māori cooking methods is at a **hangi**, where meat and vegetables are steamed for hours in an earth oven and then served to the assembled masses. First the men light a fire and place river stones in the embers. While these are heating, they dig a large pit, place the hot stones in the bottom and cover them with wet sacking. Meanwhile the women prepare lamb, pork, chicken, fish, shellfish and vegetables, wrapping the morsels in leaves, then arranging them in baskets (originally of flax but now most often of steel mesh). The baskets are lowered into the cooking pit and covered with earth so that the steam and the flavours are sealed in. A couple of hours later, the baskets are disinterred, revealing fabulously tender steam-smoked meat and vegetables with a faintly earthy flavour.

Hangi aside, Māori food has not really crossed over into mainstream New Zealand dining. However, there are a small number of restaurants specialising in Māori fare, and some top-end restaurants (especially those with Māori chefs) are beginning to use ingredients long cherished by Māori. More commonly, you will see **kumara** (sweet potato) made into chips or mashed (much like normal potatoes), and you may occasionally come across *puha*, a kind of thistle. Otherwise, fish and shellfish are a big part of the diet of this sea-girt nation.

Language

The ability to speak Māori is an intrinsic part of Māori culture. For the 50,000 native speakers and 100,000 who speak it as a second tongue, it is very much a living language and forms the basis of a huge body of magnificent songs, chants and legends, lent a poetic quality by its hypnotic and lilting rhythms. The language itself shows a remarkable versatility—Don Selwyn, a Māori film director, arranged an unconventional marriage of Māori and Elizabethan English when recreating Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* for the big screen in 2002. Meanwhile, English speakers in New Zealand involuntarily pepper their speech with Māori, including greetings like *kia ora* (hello), childhood words such as *puku* (belly), *kai* (food) and *e hoa* (friend), and cultural terms like *whanau* (extended family or a bunch of friends) and *mokopuna* (grandchildren).

Although never on the brink of extinction, a survey in 1995 revealed only seven percent of Māori youth had a medium to high level of fluency in Māori. However, initiatives such as Te Kohanga Reo (Māori-language pre-schools), Te Ataarangi (new language teaching methodology), Māori-based courses and directed educational finding have provided a base from which Māori can assert their cultural distinctiveness. There are also government agencies set up specifically to develop policies and strategies to encourage widespread use of the Māori language. Meanwhile, Māori media workers in radio, television, newspapers and magazines are active in providing a Māori viewpoint, bolstered by the arrival in 2004 of the free-to-air Māori Television channel. (Currently there is a campaign in New Zealand for the people to speak Māori language, especially in mass media. The campaign called Māori Language Week. It reminds me of the similar campaign of the use of Bahasa Malaysia in Malaysia a few decades ago.)

Museum and the Preservation of Māori Art and Culture

There are about 300 museums in the whole of New Zealand. Te Papa – the Museum of New Zealand – is a national museum and Wellington’s star attraction, a purpose-built five-storey building right on the waterfront, which opened in 1998. The hub is on Level 2, where there are all manner of interactive experiences, including the chance to watch Mount Ruapehu erupt on screen and hear the Māori explanation of the causes of such activity. Level 4 is the excellent Māori section, which incorporates a thought-provoking display on the Treaty of Waitangi dominated by a giant glass image of this formative document. There is also an active marae with a modern meeting house painted in a rainbow of pastel colours and protected by a sacred boulder of *pounamu* (greenstone); you are not allowed to enter the meeting house unless invited. Colonial history is covered in the “Passports” section, while the “Mana Whenua” exhibit has a great collection of *taonga* (treasures) supplemented by a rotating programme of displays by individual iwi or tribes.

Conclusion

Efforts are made by the staff of this museum and other concerned organisations and individuals to continue preserving Māori art and culture to supplement other efforts made by the New Zealand Ministry of Culture and History; the New Zealand Ministry of Tourism; and a number of NGOs in the development of Māori art and culture (Landscape Tourism run by Pure Business, a company managed by Tania Harris is one of the programmes related to Māori tourism. Māori tourism involved in bringing the tourists to the Māori village, sample their food, observe their art and culture interactively.), blending it with the mainstream development of New Zealand, especially in Māori tourism. (With the assistance from the Ministry of Culture and Heritage, Johnny Edmonds and his colleagues is encouraging the Māoris to take part in the development projects, especially a number of projects related to art, culture and tourism, in order to bring the Māori people into the mainstream of development of New Zealand.)

Note

1. Information included in this paper were mainly supplied by Johnny Edmonds, Tania Harris, Rhonda Paku, Huhana Smith of the Te Papa Museum and Phillipa Tocker of Museums Aotearoa. My heartfelt thanks to them for their willingness to share their knowledge and experience with me.
2. The appearance of some of the motifs on these arts suggests that there are some similarities with the motifs of basket and mat of Sarawak which suggest strong connection between Māori and the natives of Borneo.

Appendix

A Māori Glossary

NB: In Māori “wh” is pronounced like an aspirated “f”, as in “off”: and words do not take an “s” to form a plural.

Māori Words	English Meaning
Aotearoa	New Zealand
Awa	River/valley
Haka	Posture dance
Hangi	Earth-oven feast
Hongi	Formal greeting (pressing noses)
Iwi	Tribe
Kai	Food
Kainga	Village
Karanga	Welcoming call
Kawa	Behaviour protocols
Kete	Woven basket
Kumara	Sweet potato
Mana	Prestige/status/esteem
Manuhiri	Guest/visitor
Mere	Fighting club
Māoritanga	Māori culture and custom
Marae	Tribal meeting place
Maunga	Mountain
Moko	Traditional tattoos
Pa	Fortified settlement
Pakeha	Non-Māori
Powhiri	Sung welcome
Rohe	Tribal area
Taiaha	Long fighting club
Tangata whenua	People of the land, local/original inhabitants
Taonga	Treasures, prized possessions
Tapu	Sacred, forbidden or taboo
Tiki	Pendant shaped like a distorted human figure
Tupuna	Ancestors
Wai	Water

Waiata	Songs
Wairua	Spirit
Waka	Canoe
Whakapapa	Family tree/genealogical relationship
Whanau	Family
Whare kai	Eating house
Whare manuhiri	House for visitors
Whare runanga	Meeting house
Whenua	Land or country

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