The Moko’s Revival: But Who Can Wear it?

When you see someone with tattoos, what is your first impression? Do you think about the person's character, or are you observing their tattoo? Many people will associate that person with antisocial characteristics or may believe that their tattoo is a disfigurement to their body. Few people may contemplate the artistic or personal value that the tattoo may hold. In the last few centuries, Pākehā, a New Zealand reference to non-indigenous people, have viewed tattoos negatively and have created biased judgments toward bearers. In the 20th century, the Māori culture in New Zealand had their moko—a Māori tattoo that portrays a person’s entire life and includes their ancestry and religion—banned due to prejudices. Since then, the art has been revived; however, new issues have arisen. Some people outside of the culture are getting designs that imitate the moko, which may potentially offend the Māori due to a lack of education and respect. Thus, although the moko is being revived, it may be at risk for cultural appropriation.

Historically, the moko has been misinterpreted by non-Māori. The origin of the moko is tied to a Māori myth that involves a mortal chief who lives in the natural world and a woman from the underworld. To summarize, the chief Mataora tries to convince his lover Niwareka, a spirit from the underworld, to come back to him after he abused her. He begs her and her family to forgive him while his temporary face paint becomes muddled with his tears. He promises to treat Niwareka better and receives the moko from Niwareka's father in place of his face paint. In exchange for his promise, he is taught tā moko, which is the process of applying the moko. He brings the moko back to the mortal world and thus becomes a part of the Māori culture (Awekotuku 208-209). The moko evolved from the myth to become a physical representation that displays the wearer's entire life and spirituality. The wearer's allegiances, religion, values, and more are all packed into the symbols that the moko contains. Since the moko's genealogy is

personal to the bearer, it also makes it very sacred ("The Cult" 00:26:52 - 00:27:06). Although the moko's purpose is culturally rich, it was not perceived as such by many missionaries that considered Māori "inferior and barbaric" (Nikora et al. 479). These missionaries enforced the idea of the moko being "evil and ungodly" (Nikora et al. 479), and in the 20th century, the 1907 Tohunga Suppression Act outlawed the moko along with other cultural practices ("The Resurgence"). This act prevented cultural educators from teaching younger generations and if it had been successful, may have destroyed the entire culture. However, the act's goal was never accomplished because it was repealed in the Māori Community Development Act 1962 (Te Puni Kōkiri), and in the late 1970s, the Māori renaissance invoked a new sense of pride and appreciation for the culture ("The Resurgence"). During this time, a rebirth of Māori practices took place, and the people freely exercised their art. As a fault of this renaissance, Māori gangs adopted the moko to incite a sense of connection among members (Shelton). However, the moko has gained acceptance from people outside of the culture.

The moko has made social and professional progress towards acceptance. Younger Māori generations have felt inclined to reconnect with their culture through the moko. Gary Harding has experienced being an advisor for young Māori at correctional centers (Quinlivan). He has been informing younger Māori people in these centers about their culture and is working to destigmatize the moko by addressing misconceptions. Clyde Peri, a Māori, has been a tattoo artist since 1996 (Shelton). He serves as another example of an educator who enjoys teaching his moko-receiving clients—Māori or not—about the art's purpose (Shelton). Peri and Harding are examples of people who are teaching others who may not be knowledgeable about the moko, and their efforts have led to a better understanding of the culture to people beyond Māori natives. As a result of this education, there is more representation of people wearing the moko in

professional settings. On November 30, 2020, an article was published that celebrated Tūmanako Silveira, and he is considered "the first Māori man with a mataora [the male facial moko]…to be admitted to the bar as a lawyer" (Dewes). In 2016, Nanaia Mahuta "became the first Māori woman to display a moko kauae [sacred facial tattoo] in parliament" (Roy). Nanaia Mahuta and Tūmanako Silveira show that they are able to spread awareness of the moko and still be able to attain occupations in highly professional settings. These four individuals, along with many others that support the moko, have continually worked to gain more acceptance and appreciation for the art.

The moko's growing acceptance in society has led to the issue regarding who can wear it. Due to this rise in popularity, many Pākehā have also grown interested in the designs. Some of these non-Māori individuals are getting the moko, but there have been some debates amongst the Māori community about if they should be allowed to. Some Māori believe that the moko is a birthright. One example is a writer named Julie Kipa, who considers the moko and tattoo as separate arts (Kassem). She believes that if the moko is "available to non-Maori a message is being sent that Moko is freely available for anyone" and disregards its sacredness. Yet, others disagree. Those individuals may argue that it would be wrong to deny a person outside of the culture from receiving the tattoo. The moko artist Inia Taylor argues that it would be "'artistic racism'" if Pākehā were denied to wear the moko (Kassem). Finally, other individuals suggest that the practitioner should act as an educator and inform the potential recipient of the sacredness of the tattoo and the responsibility they incur once they receive it. Peri exemplifies this suggestion since he ensures that his clients understand the art. Another example is Turumakina Duley, who is also a tattoo practitioner. In addition to his expertise in the moko, he has earned a bachelor's degree in Māori business development. He is very welcoming of non-Māori people

who want to get the moko as long as they know what it means. However, he believes that "it really needs to be a community decision to gift facial moko to a non-Māori person" (Duley and Howarth 32). Although he welcomes anyone who is educated on the moko to receive one, he still thinks that it should be a collective decision of his people.

The Māori and the moko are nothing to play with. This culture made some major breakthroughs to destigmatize their tattoo, and I am sure they will continue to persevere. There is a high level of respect that should be given to the moko and it is important for people outside of the culture to understand that. It is especially important for citizens of the United States to respect the art or practice of any culture because we are part of a melting pot. So many cultures contribute to our society that we should show gratitude for the benefits we gain from them. The goal is to appreciate cultures, not appropriate them. If there is an art or practice that you want to be a part of, then learn about it and understand why it exists or where it came from. Learn so that you can pay the respects that are due.

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