



A Maori chief, as drawn by artist Sydney Parkinson on his voyage with English explorer James Cook in 1769

Tumanako Keepa received *moko* when she was 15 years old. A tattoo artist trained in the Maori tradition applied it to her chin, using ink-filled electric needles. The design was one that Tumanako inherited from her great-grandmother, who most likely had received *moko* the old-fashioned way—with a chisel dipped in pigment.

Maori is the name given to the first people to reach New Zealand's two islands. They had sailed there from East Polynesia sometime around the A.D. 1200s. The Maori tell stories about the origins of their elaborate—and painful—*moko*. In one tale, a woman flees to her parents' home in the underworld to escape her husband, who beat her. Wanting her to return,

# Moko!

by Cynthia Levinson

For the Maori,  
the body is the  
perfect paint  
palette.

he paints his face with many colors and follows her. When she sees him, she laughs because his paint has smeared. The decorations her relatives wear, however, are beautiful and permanent, and he begs them to teach him the designs. He and his wife then bring them to the world above.

## 'Read My Lips!'

In the centuries that followed, some young Maori, when they reached puberty, began designing a pattern and receiving *moko*, a process that can take years. They consulted with relatives, friends, and the *tohunga* ("artist") to create a pattern that complemented their bodies and their family history. Although every person's *moko* was unique, patterns were passed down from generation to generation.





Maori could “read” each others’ *iwi* (“tribe”), *hapu* (“clan”), rank, and locale in their *moko*.

Complicated designs developed from two basic shapes: spirals and *koru*, which resemble folding waves. *Tohungas* would combine, double, stack, flip, and turn the designs for variety. Can you see these shapes in the photographs at left and below?

Many men had tattoos that covered their entire bodies, from the scalp to the feet—including the ears, nails, and eyelids.

Women generally received *moko kauae*,

tattoos only on their chins and around their lips (opposite bottom), but also sometimes on their foreheads. An Englishman visiting New Zealand in 1839 reported, “I have seen the arms and bodies of...women so covered with these...marks, that they looked as if they had on them a tight fitting...dress.”

### Pass the Chisel, Please!

To create these marks, *tohungas* used *uhi*, chisels with blades of sharpened bird bones or sharks’ teeth. Razor-like *uhi* carved the skin. Serrated ones that were lashed to a handle, like a comb, pricked the skin

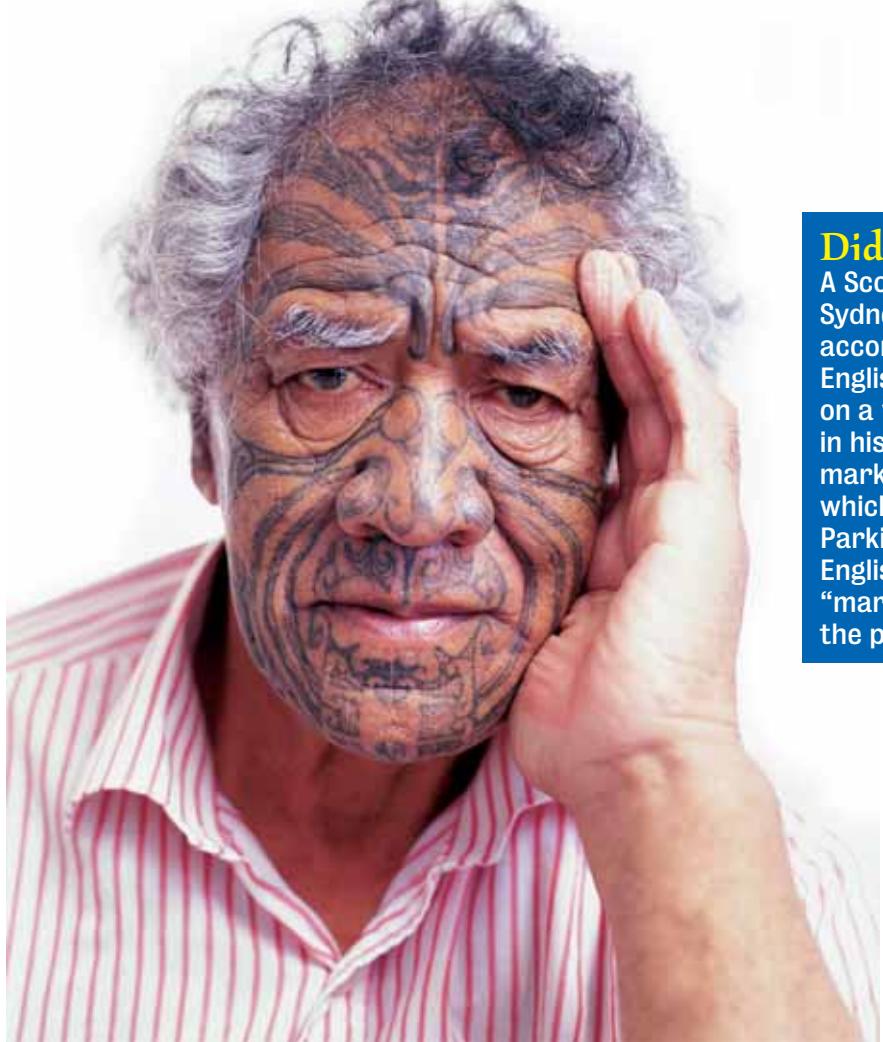




when tapped into lips and other body parts with a mallet. *Tohungas* dipped the *uhi* into vegetable ink, filling incisions with black dye or powder.

Kauri tree gum produced the darkest pigment, which Maori especially prized for their faces. It would turn their lips blue. In a special bowl, made of pumice or carved wood, they mixed the gum with water, sap, and berry juice. These ingredients also contained chemicals that helped heal wounds. "Vegetable caterpillars" provided another dye. After unearthing the dead larvae, the Maori would let them dry before burning them to reduce them to soot. Buried larvae were easy to locate because of the plants that naturally sprouted from them. Since these dyes were permanent, *tohungas* could make no mistakes. Yet, they did not sketch the pattern on the skin first.

As *moko* caused excruciating pain and swelling, friends and relatives gathered for support. They would



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### Did You Know?

A Scotsman named Sydney Parkinson accompanied the English navigator Captain James Cook on a voyage to Polynesia in 1768–71. He wrote in his journal, “The natives are accustomed to mark themselves in a very singular manner, which they call tataowing.” It was probably Parkinson who introduced the term to the English language. *Tatau*, he learned, meant “mark” or “strike” in the language spoken by the people on the Polynesian island of Tahiti.

The photographs on pages 26–29 were featured in the 2009 exhibition “Body Politics, Maori Tattoo Today” at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. For more information about the museum, visit <http://pem.org>

chant, hold hands, and feed the person being tattooed through a funnel. At the end of a session, the person who had received *moko* emerged a changed individual.

### Down With Bans

When the British colonized New Zealand, they tried to eliminate the Maori culture, language, practices, and beliefs. In 1907, they banned *moko*. For decades, the Maori clamored for their rights, and the ban was finally repealed in 1962.

Today, many Maori have tattoos. They believe that the practice connects them with their ancestors and shows the world that they are Maori. As in centuries past, some discuss designs with relatives. Some also set goals for themselves, such as learning to speak Maori, which is now an official language.

A Maori named Aneta explained, “*Moko* is about reclaiming a lost *taonga*—a part of us that was taken away.... It is my external way of showing that I’m proud to be Maori.”

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Cynthia Levinson enjoys writing and traveling. She learned about *moko* during a visit to New Zealand.

