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## Kākahu as Cultural Identity

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**Kākahu as Cultural Identity:**

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***Ngati Maniapoto – Raukawa: Ngati Whawhakia:***

***Ngati Pikiao***

*Ko Matawhaura te Maunga*

*Ko Rotoiti i kite a Ihenga te Moana*

*Ko Haumingi te Whenua*

*Ko Taurua te Marae*

*Ko Ngati Te Rangiunuora te Haapu*

*Ko Ngati Pikiao te Iwi*

*Ko Christina Hurihia tōku ingoa*

*Tēnā koutou, Tēnā koutou, Tēnā koutou*

***Whakatauki: (Maori Translation)***

*Hutia te rito*

*O te Harakeke*

*Kei hea*

*Te Komako e ko*

*Ki mai ki au*

*He aha te mea nui*

*O te ao*

*Maku e ki atu*

*He tangata: He tangata: He tangata*

***Whakatauki: (English Translation)***

*If the centre shoot*

*Of the flax bush were plucked*

*Where will the bellbird sing?*

*If you should ask me*

*What is the greatest thing on this earth?*

*Should answer*

*T'is People T'is People T'is People*

Discussion will begin with my interpretation of this *whakatauaki* (proverb.) I liken the centre shoot of the flax bush to the *kaitiaki* (guardian of weaving knowledge) referencing the creation of *Kākahu*, the traditional cloak and customary dress of Maori people.

Nurture this (the flaxbush) and it will flourish for many generations. The sustainability of the flaxbush will ensure a constant supply of natural fibres required to create Kākahu.

The *kaitiaki* will inspire the singing birds and witness the weavers nimble fingers engaging the *aho* (weft thread) and *whenu* (warp thread), when forming the *kaupapa* or foundation of a Kākahu.

Kākahu can unfold several identities, assisted by the weaving processes and the nominated attachments applied to adorn the outer surface. The *kaitaka*, described as the unadorned surface with finely woven geometric and horizontal pattern borders, *kahukiwi*, a fully adorned kiwi feathered surface and *kahukuri* a fully adorned surface using strips of dogskin, all disclose a narrative which will be discussed throughout my presentation, placing emphasis on Kākahu as Cultural Identity..



Figure 1. Map of New Zealand.

### Introduction:

As Maori of Aotearoa, New Zealand, we recognise ourselves as *Tangatawhenua*, literally meaning people of the land. We acknowledge our Earth Mother, *Papatuanuku* and Sky Father, *Ranginui* as *kaitiaki*, guardians of our natural world. Our natural world has contributed in various ways to the art of weaving, offering a range of fibres and creating options for the weaver to choose.

My intention is to discuss the most favourable fibres, highlighting how these fibres are manifested when making traditional cloaks, Kākahu, such as the *kaitaka*, *kahukiwi*, and

kahukuri, mentioned earlier. I will extend the discussion and underline the role of Kākahu within a cultural context and how Kākahu can be a representation of social status, Kākahu – as Cultural Identity

### **Harakeke, Common Weaving Material**

*Harakeke*, known as *Phormium Tenax* - NZ Flax, is pivotal to the Maori people, the most commonly and extensively used in the production of traditional clothing, fishing nets, lashing, baskets, mats and medicine.

The growth structure of harakeke is the representation of a *Whanau* (family concept). The weaver is guided by this structure and informed of the appropriate blades to harvest.

The *kuku*, mussel shell, is the principal tool that Maori used to assist with the extraction of *muka*, fibres from harakeke. It is not uncommon to witness the use of the *kuku* shell in other indigenous cultures throughout the world.



**Figure 2 (left).** Flax bush. **Figure 3 (right).** Harakeke, New Zealand Flax.

The process of extracting the fibres (*muka*) from harakeke continues to fascinate the weaver of the magical moment when witnessing the release of *muka* fibres from being laminated between the outer cellulose layers of the harakeke. The *muka* fibre can be described as a white silky hair-like thread that forms the *kaupapa* or foundation when making Kākahu. This silky hair-like thread can also be referenced as *makawe*, hair of our *Kuia* (grandmother,) our *tupuna* (ancestor.) It is in this context that I make reference to Kākahu as traditional textile.

Post – European, Maori reached the highest peak in Polynesia in the manufacture of clothing satisfying the immediate needs for protection against cold, but with a high artistic sense revealed by the decorative techniques.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Buck, 1974, p.177.

There are several varieties of harakeke, not necessarily all having muka fibre required for Kākahu making, the preference of the weaver is to source the longer blades which are best suited for length.

As previously discussed, using a *kuku* (mussel) shell, which has been carefully selected, specifically to accommodate the right or left handed person and sits comfortably in the hand to make the extraction process happen with ease.

### **Kākahu as Cultural Identity:**

Appropriate Kākahu were often chosen to serve a particular occasion or event within *Iwi* (tribe), *Haapu* (sub-tribe), *Whanau* (family) and *Aotearoa* (for official dignitaries that visit New Zealand). Techniques and processes have contributed to define the difference between one Kākahu to the other.

Colonisation has impacted on many facets of traditional Maori Clothing making, with the inclusion of wool and other manmade fibres. As *kaitiaki*, guardian, it is my responsibility to ensure the retention of traditional weaving techniques and processes are retained. This presentation has a direct reference to Kākahu as an expression of Cultural Identity, a long term responsibility that is required of Kākahu weavers to sustain for the culture of Maori people.

### **Social status:**

Kākahu garments worn by Maori signalled social status, wealth and were often presented as prized gifts within family. The social status and wealth were not only for the living but also the dead; the passing of a loved one would often see these prized gifts placed over the coffin. Women have always continued to weave Kākahu long after the introduction of European clothing. The influence of alternative materials to create Kākahu was capitalised by Maori weavers, an opportunity to explore and divert from preparing the fibres of harakeke for these garments.<sup>2</sup>

### **Kākahu:**

The time of Captain James Cook's arrival to Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1700's there is little evidence of change in dress style and weaving techniques.<sup>3</sup> Examples of Kākahu from this period can be viewed more extensively outside of Aotearoa, New Zealand; further reference will be made at the conclusion of this presentation. Kākahu were created with elements of well-executed techniques and processes and stood out from one to the other.

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<sup>2</sup> Te Rangi Hiroa, 1974

<sup>3</sup> Pendergrast, M: Te Aho Tapu; The Sacred Thread Traditional Maori Weaving: Reed Methuen: Auckland: 1987



**Figure 4 (left).** *Taaniko, fine, decorative, multi-colored Māori weaving technique.*

**Figure 5 (right).** *Kaitaka*

There are several techniques, which highlight features of Kākahu, *taaniko* being one of these, commonly evident on Kaitaka. *Taaniko* is a fine decorative Māori weaving technique where more than one colour strand can be used to execute pattern. These patterns were very geometric and articulated in the hands of the weaver. The first changes from the classical period were the addition of intrusive weaving materials for decorative purposes, extending the colour range in patterns. *Taaniko* process is not uncommon and can be seen in many woven forms of other indigenous peoples. (Figs. 4 and 5)

There are two styles, tradition in *taaniko* weaving. The first, *Te Tipunga* Style covering the period 1500 – 1700, showed evidence of intricate and very fine execution of contrast using no more than two colours. The second, *Puawaitanga* Style was in fashion at the time of Cook’s visit 1700 – 1800, where the emphasis was placed on the use of geometrical shapes the foundation of *Puawaitanga* continues to be the basis of *taaniko* to this day.<sup>4</sup>

The period *Te Huringa* or Transitional Period (1800 – 1900) was a platform to showcase elaborate patterns and the introduction of more than two colours. Symbols used in pattern making often made reference to elements of nature or events in history and were a significant visual record for *Iwi, Haapu, and Whanau*.

The adoption of wool brought major changes to the *taaniko* processes, along with other manmade materials such as, macramé thread, copper and coloured silk threads. The occupancy of New Zealand by Europeans gradually saw tapestry materials and techniques displace the *taaniko* techniques.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> (Hirini Moko Mead).

<sup>5</sup> Mead, S M: *The Art of Taaniko Weaving*: A.H & A.W Reed: Wellington: 1968

**Kaitaka:**

Kaitaka are cloaks of finely woven *muka*, among the most prestigious forms of traditional dress, usually adorned with broad and narrow *taaniko* borders.<sup>6</sup> The unembellished surface of the Kaitaka was technically well executed using a double pair twining process known as *whatu aho rua*.

A chiefly person who has a position of high rank within the tribe commonly wore Kaitaka. The weaver, considering both the height and body dimensions of the person the Kaitaka was being made. Its simplicity and beauty showcased the integrity and elegance when worn.

According to Mead, from the time of Cook (1769 – 1777) onwards, Western styles of clothing began to have an effect on the indigenous styles of the Maori. Preferences and values started to change.<sup>7</sup>



*Figure 6. Kaitaka cloak.*

**Kahukuri:**

The most valuable type of Kākahu at the time of European contact was the *KahuKuri*, the dog-skin cloak worn only by men of the highest status. The surface was completely covered with narrow strips of dog skin, and arranged into pattern according to the colour of the dog skin. The native dog or *kuri* brought from Polynesia by Maori, was a highly valued animal and the property of a *Rangatira*, Chief, hence the status placed on the Kākahu.

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<sup>6</sup> Maori Material Culture, clothing and Adornment An Encyclopedia of New Zealand 1966 (<http://www.teara.govt.nz/1966/M/MaoriMaterialCulture/ClothingAndAdornment/en>) retrieval date: 30 July 2008

<sup>7</sup> Hirini Moko Mead 1997

KahuKuri are prestigious garments possessing great *mana* (status) and were highly prized heirlooms. Each garment had its own personal name and its histories were carefully preserved up to the time they passed out of Maori ownership. However, most are in museums collections around the world and have lost their provenance.



Figure 7 (left). Kahukuri cloak. Figure 8 (right). Kahukiwi cloak.

The possession of a KahuKuri immediately identified the owner as a Rangatira (chief) or someone who possessed prestige and high position within the *hapu*<sup>8</sup>.

### **Kahukiwi:**

*Kahukiwi* are cloaks of finely woven muka fibres adorned with kiwi feathers (flightless bird protected by the New Zealand Crown), covering the entire cloak. Kākahu were articulated in the hands of the weaver working independent of a loom, with an eye for immaculate precision also viewed on the reverse side of the garment. A Kahukiwi, formerly belonging to King Tawhiao, who was bestowed as the second Maori King in 1860, was photographed in this Kahukiwi during his visit to England in 1884 when he led a deputation to England to seek redress for the confiscation of Waikato lands.

Earlier this year (2008) the people of Aotearoa participated in the centennial of the *Kingitanga*, the 150 years celebration of the Maori *Kingitanga* movement held at Ngaruawahia, south of Auckland. The *Kingitanga* movement was formed by Maori tribal groups from throughout

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<sup>8</sup> Maori Material Culture, clothing and Adornment An Encyclopedia of New Zealand 1966 (<http://www.teara.govt.nz/1966/M/MaoriMaterialCulture/ClothingAndAdornment/en>) Retrieval date: 30 July 2008.

Aotearoa, New Zealand, to support Maori sovereignty.<sup>9</sup> The Kahukiwi worn by King Tawhiao in 1884 was on loan by Auckland Museum specifically for the celebration, positioned on Turungawaewae Marae, Ngaruawahia, for people to view.

The kiwi feathers are prepared in groups of two or three, inserted and arranged according to the weavers preference, executing volume, mass, which is appreciated upon completion.

### **Famous Maori Guide**

The Kākahu referenced in this discussion was worn by the famous Guide Rangi, born as Rangitiaria Ratema, of Rotorua. Rotorua is the hub of Maori Tourism and a well-known global place to visit when in Aotearoa. With its geothermal activity, the famous Tourist resort, Whakarewarewa engaged the services of local men and woman as guides, assisting Tourists around the geothermal reserve as well as emerging them in local knowledge and tradition. She was a precious little child and her childhood years were dominated by this powerful belief. Rangi married Aonui, the son of one of the most celebrated Maori Women, Maggie Papakura, a well-known Maori performer of cultural dance and tourist guide.

Maggie was born *te aho ariki*, the first born of the eldest line of noble and sacred ancestors. (Dennan 1968)<sup>10</sup>



*Figure 9. Guide Rangi wearing Kākahu, painting.*

<sup>9</sup> Lawless, M. pers.com. 30 July 2008. Making reference to self-governance

<sup>10</sup> Richards J.H. (1952) Rangi and Rotorua. Reed, A.H & A.W

Like the Kahukiwi worn by King Tawhiao, Guide Rangi's Kākahu still embraces descendants of Whakarewarewa and has pride and place in a small meeting house called Hinemihi, often referenced as the small museum governed by her direct descendants, acting as custodian for the collection of gifts including *taonga* given to her during her guiding days.<sup>11</sup> Her *mokopuna* (great grandchild) says:

*“it was something she always wore when guiding, especially for the VIP, although she treated all her manuhiri (visitors) with respect. The cloak is still in the whanau (family collection) now; just very fragile, as expected from it's over use.”*<sup>12</sup>  
(Pahewa, E., July, 2008)

### **Kākahu Puputu**

Woven Kākahu, process associated when making baskets and mats, were not commonly seen in Aotearoa, the process of *whatu* (double two ply weave) was more common and available for viewing. The Bernice P Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawai'i, is custodian of a woven Kākahu Puputu, which I had the opportunity to first view in 1989. A small bundle wrapped in brown paper positioned in the corner of a drawer drew my attention, once unwrapped revealed a very fragile woven Kākahu. I was particularly fascinated with the woven sections of this Kākahu Puputu, which clearly showed evidence of the *hiki, hono, maurua*, (joining technique) commonly seen in *whariki* (mats making). I often question how many other beautiful Kākahu such as this have gone unnoticed by our Maori people and are held in collections around the world.



*Figures 10a and b. Kākahu Puputu, Bernice P Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawai'i.*

### **Kākahu - Hurihia:**

<sup>11</sup> Dennan, Rangitiaria. (1968) guide Rangi of Rotorua. Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd, Christchurch

<sup>12</sup> Pahewa, E. (2008) Conversation with Grandniece of Guide Rangi

In 2005, my mother, Matekino Lawless Q.S.M., completed her fifth Kākahu, after uncountable hours extracting *muka* from *harakeke*, two-ply twining for *whenu* (warp thread) and *aho* (weft thread) to achieve this mammoth project.

Sharing in the delight of this achievement I participated and witnessed her recite *karakia* (prayer) and lightly sprinkle water over the Kākahu, which was openly positioned in a special section of her lounge, a blessing to celebrate the completion.

Following her *karakia*, she fitted the Kākahu over my shoulders and said.....



*Figures 11. Kākahu presented to author by her mother, Matekino Lawless.*

“In your *mahi* (work), you are in contact with many people who expect a great deal from you. This Kākahu is my gift, to protect and embrace you. It is times like this that you will require the Kākahu.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Lawless, M. (2006) pers. com.