

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

1996

MAORI WEAVING: THE INTERTWINING OF SPIRIT, ACTION AND METAPHOR

Suzanne Mac Aulay
Wanganui Polytechnic

Kura Te Waru-Rewiri
Massey University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>

Mac Aulay, Suzanne and Te Waru-Rewiri, Kura, "MAORI WEAVING: THE INTERTWINING OF SPIRIT, ACTION AND METAPHOR" (1996). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 858.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/858>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

MAORI WEAVING: THE INTERTWINING OF SPIRIT, ACTION AND METAPHOR

SUZANNE MAC AULAY

Senior Lecturer, Fine Arts Department, Wanganui Polytechnic, Wanganui, New Zealand.

KURA TE WARU-REWIRI

Lecturer, Maori Visual Arts Department, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

*Ko koe ki tēnā, ko ahau ki tēne kīwai o te kete.*¹

Kura Te Waru-Rewiri and I stand positioned here like the two weaving sticks, *turuturu*, which are thrust into the ground to support Maori weaving as it emerges from repeated separations, twists, insertions, and alignments. Our words crisscross and overlap to form a rich verbal weaving embellished with our experience and expanded through our respective interpretations.

Our discussion examines Maori textiles in Aotearoa/New Zealand as elements in a continuum of sacred experience unbounded by the temporal and spatial limitations of a particular ceremony. The fusion of creative practice, ritual action and ceremonial presence in weaving Maori cloaks, *kakahu*, typifies a cultural attitude in which the sacred and the secular are inseparable.

Maori art is sacred, and by extension the artist, the weaver, is considered the medium. Thus, the weaver and the action of weaving incarnate the life force, *mauri*, the authority, *mana*, and the sacred, *tapu*. Maori weavers are also linked over time with the ancestors, *nga tupuna*, and with future generations.

THE KAUPAPA A Maori weaver transmutes the tough and fibrous leaves of the flax plant of the species, *Phormium tenax*, or to Maori, *harakeke*, into a soft, pliable textile by a series of ritually prescribed actions. After gathering and preparation, the weaver works these fibres, *muka*, between her fingers moving horizontally from left to right, manipulating and intertwining the strands of *aho* and *whenu*, weft and warp. Each weaving session is initiated with a prayer to focus one's vision and engage one's talent, to acknowledge the skills inherited from the ancestors, *Nga Mahi Tuku Iho*, and for creative inspiration. The materiality of the weaving process is offset by ritual practice acknowledging the sacred, *tapu*, with its potency as well as its prohibitions.

---

¹"You at that, and I at this handle of the basket."

The novice's first weaving is usually given away. Sometimes it is buried as a gift to *Papatuanuku*, the earth (who reclaims her "own"). But more often it is presented to a family elder - thus, releasing the weaver from the work so that more weaving can be created, and launching the woven piece into the public arena of family, friends and destiny. As it circulates, the object accrues value through its different associations and its travels over space and time. These dynamics underscore the concept of the transmission and embodiment of sacred power and add to the intrinsic value of Maori cloaks.

The spirit of the piece, the history of the weaving's source, its resultant lineage, and the apparent tracings of descent and ownership, contribute to the idea of the woven cloaks as reliquaries - not primarily objects of devotion but containers of the relics of time, cultural survivals, aesthetic decisions, past use and former contexts. This is the notion behind the cloaks as treasures, *taonga*, as sacred and collective history.

TPOLOGY The designation, *tatara* or rain cloak, suggests a possible utilitarian antecedent but belies the complexity of making such a garment. The amount of work and detail evident in its manufacture is one indicator of its status as a prestige item. The other indicator is the cape's associative power derived from its relationship to its owner, *Te Iho-o-te-rangi*, who is believed to have been a formidable Taranaki priest or *tohunga*, and from the fact that it was also worn during a decisive battle which successfully defended the Taranaki region in 1833.

Interestingly, the cloak's efficacy as a protection against rain is inversely proportional to the involved technical processes of scraping away epidermal layers, dyeing fibres and rhythmically inserting decorative strands of flax in order to achieve the subtle visual transitions of alternating areas of colour. The more work that went into this cape to increase its aesthetic value and status, the less rain-resistant it became. It was undoubtedly, more suitable for armour.

As part of the Taranaki Museum collection, this cloak is effectively "out of ceremonial circulation." However, its connection to a powerful *tohunga*, a wizard priest, elicits feelings ranging from awe to fear and discomfort in the reactions of different Maori viewers. These responses are compatible with the notion of *taonga* (treasures) embodying ancestral spirits, transmitting the forces of history or acting as immortal reminders of the owner's presence and life force. Appropriately, dust and loose fibres from this *tatara* are kept in an envelope in the storage drawer with the cloak because the same associative powers are also thought to extend to these virtually microscopic elements.

In New Zealand a number of Maori cloaks with specific tribal affiliations and family connections are held in trust by museums. According to various agreements made with families these can be borrowed for special occasions such as *tangis* (funerals), graduation ceremonies, etc. In addition, the Whanganui Museum lists loans for a language competition and, at another time, for a performance by a special Maori cultural group.

When pakeha or European descendants donate or sell Maori cloaks to museums, they are usually concerned with preservation and safe keeping. However, when these cloaks are acquired, if they have appropriate Maori family and tribal connections, they are regarded as lost "relatives" and allowed to circulate again subject to certain contractual conditions between the curatorial institution and the local tribes - conditions which monitor accessibility and use. For Maori it is the reality of accessibility and the consequent authorization of their interaction with objects that rejuvenate, replenish and sustain the *taonga*.

There have been other situations when a tribe aware of the history and reputation of a particular cloak believed it to be lost forever until it "surfaced" in a public exhibition like a relative who has long been out-of-touch. For instance, there was an early nineteenth century dog skin cloak created as a *kahu mamae* (a garment of pain and revenge) to mark the outcome of a tragic battle. This cloak passed through several powerful hands until at the end of the nineteenth century, it was given to a New Zealander who in turn sold it to the Auckland Museum. Years later in 1982 it was featured in a travelling exhibition at Rotorua, and groups of the original weaver's descendants came to greet and honour the *kahu mamae* of their ancestress (Pendergrast 1987:94).

The *kaitaka* is also an older form of the cloak probably contemporaneous with the rain capes. It is basically a finely worked *kaupapa* or foundation with little adornment except for the contrast provided by the decorated borders of geometric designs, *taniko* (Fig.1). Similar to the prestige rain capes, this cloak is a showcase of virtuosity and skill. Sparse designs of coloured wool from unravelled blankets are sometimes present along the outer margins of the design field. They repeat enlarged zigzag motifs from the *taniko* border below. Their presence and the frugal but elegant use of material, is not only an aesthetic measure of the preciousness of the cloak but an inspired response to the sacredness of this garment as well.

Other types of cloaks are the *korowai*, with its flax tags, *hukahuka* or corkscrew curls, *karure*, and the feather cape, the *kahu huruhuru*. The tags of the *korowai* add a kinetic dimension - enhancing or amplifying the slightest movement, suggesting breezes rippling over grass. Even when

the cloak is still, the tags appear to vibrate and visually activate the space in front of it (Fig.2).

SACRED CONTINUUM The feather cloak is especially valuable for its association with *Tane* the forest god, progenitor and protector of birds and plants. Photographs from 1922 show the young women of the Potaka family sharing the same feather cloak that was used to cover their father, Arapeta Tapui Potaka's, coffin in 1919. Nukutiaio, Utanga, and Wera Potaka pose literally enfolded in their father's *mana* and the *mauri*, the life force, of the cape, indicating the seamless extension of *tapu*, uniting the realms of the living and the dead (Figs. 4-6).

Similar oscillations between ritual behaviour and realism surround the numerous tasks associated with the conversion of flax into weaving. This duality also extends to specialized vocabulary with its shared pragmatic and spiritual meanings. Words derived from *kakahu* or *kahu*, cloak, generate a series of sacred analogues such as *kahu*, the membrane surrounding the fetus, *whare kahu* the birth house, *whakakahu* the person who cuts the umbilical cord, and *kahukahu* as the essence of a human being or the spirit of a deceased ancestor (Weiner 1985:215). *Takapau* is a woven floor mat. The term also appears in prayer, *karakia*, and oratory to convey separate facets of *tapu*. Additionally, during *tangis* the mat is placed under the coffin, but the expression "turning the floor mat" refers to *tapu*-lifting ceremonies.

Flax gathering is prohibited during menstruation and times of inclement weather. It is also considered an ill omen to leave a row of weaving unfinished. The secular obverse of these actions is grounded in practicality. Flax plants should not be harvested during storms because it adversely affects fibre quality, preparation, and ultimately, the construction of the garment. Weaving that has been abandoned in mid-row, creates frustration and a headache the next time it is resumed.

Sensibility, however, does not detract from the inherent sacred power of flax, *Tane's* plant. People speak of the tribes around Lake Taupo wearing blinders woven from flax when they travelled near the volcano, Ruapeho, so their eyes, and by extension themselves, would be shielded from its *tapu* and they would not be tempted to sneak a glance at the sacred mountain.

KURA TE WARU-REWIRI:

"In my paintings I try to weave without touching the paint....Like meditation, you have to visualize before you do it. You do it and then something better happens."

My collaborative contribution to this paper is to

discuss the customary basis of Maori weaving in my work as a Maori painter - especially with reference to the *kakahu* (cloak) of my people, specifically, the *korowai*. The *korowai* is symbolic of *mana*, status and power. The idea of the *korowai*, metaphorically, became for me the symbol of protection and shelter.

The making of the *korowai* is a long process. Today the *korowai* takes at least eight months to complete. Ceremonially, prayers are offered to the gods at the beginning and at various stages of the development of the *korowai*. Protocol is still adhered to and one is conscious of the psychological consideration given to the source of the material gathered, the maker and the wearer of the completed work. Embodied in this journey is the concept of spiritual "care." The sacred and ceremonial use of the *kakahu* is out of respect for the people and the land, and is incorporated into blessings and ritual openings of buildings and special occasions. At the *tangi* (funeral) to have a *korowai* draped over the deceased is the highest form of respect given.

It is the idea of fibre and the *kaupapa* (basis or foundation) of the *korowai* that has inspired a large part of my art giving the dimension required to strengthen the connections with our Maori customary base, traditional beliefs and the practice of those beliefs.

The connection of "fibre" and thought in my paintings occurs on three levels: the physical, the mental and the spiritual (Fig.7). Maori culture is undergoing reconstruction, remodification, and readaptation. Fibre in Maori society is engendered with meanings that refer to a sophisticated aesthetic base incorporating the ethereal and the intangible: one that requires no justification.

History provides us with a model of excellence that has been recognized and protected by time and space (Fig.3). We are aware of the presence of that level of excellence in our sacred and ceremonial cloaks as an aesthetic that has not been surpassed by modernity and civilization.

It is from this point that I have gravitated toward the expression of fibre, its spirit and the action of painting/weaving. The idea of fibre is metaphorically associated with the place of my people, where we come from, where we are now, and where do we go from here? (Fig.8).

With the advent of colonization and Christianity, Maori people have been assimilated at great expense. As an artist, I feel a responsibility to remind us of the strengths of our ancestors. The associations with the fibre of the *korowai* is with the land, the spiritual ownership of land and the people of the land. These are the elements that emanate from the *korowai* and that I attempt to embrace in my paintings (Fig.1).

CONCLUSION

In Maori art all boundaries demarcating creative action, ceremonial observance, and terminology apart from poetics, are permeable - pervaded by spirit and the accumulated power of association with people or events. What is the measure of sacredness against ceremony? Whatever its magnitude, it is always in excess of material and experiential limitations.

We thank the following for their generous support which is woven into the *kaupapa* of this presentation: Michelle Horwood and Libby Sharp, Whanganui Regional Museum; Mary Donald, Taranaki Museum; Shirley Whata and Warren Warbrick, Manawatu Museum; Erenora Puketapu Hetet; and, Mina McKenzie.

REFERENCES

Awekotuku, Ngahuia, Roger Neich et al., eds. 1996. *Maori Art and Culture*. Auckland, N.Z.: David Bateman Ltd.

Pendergrast, Mick. 1994. *Te Aho Tapu: The Sacred Thread*. Auckland, N.Z.: Reed Publishing, Ltd.

Weiner, Annette B. 1985. "Inalienable Wealth." *American Ethnologist* 12:210-227.

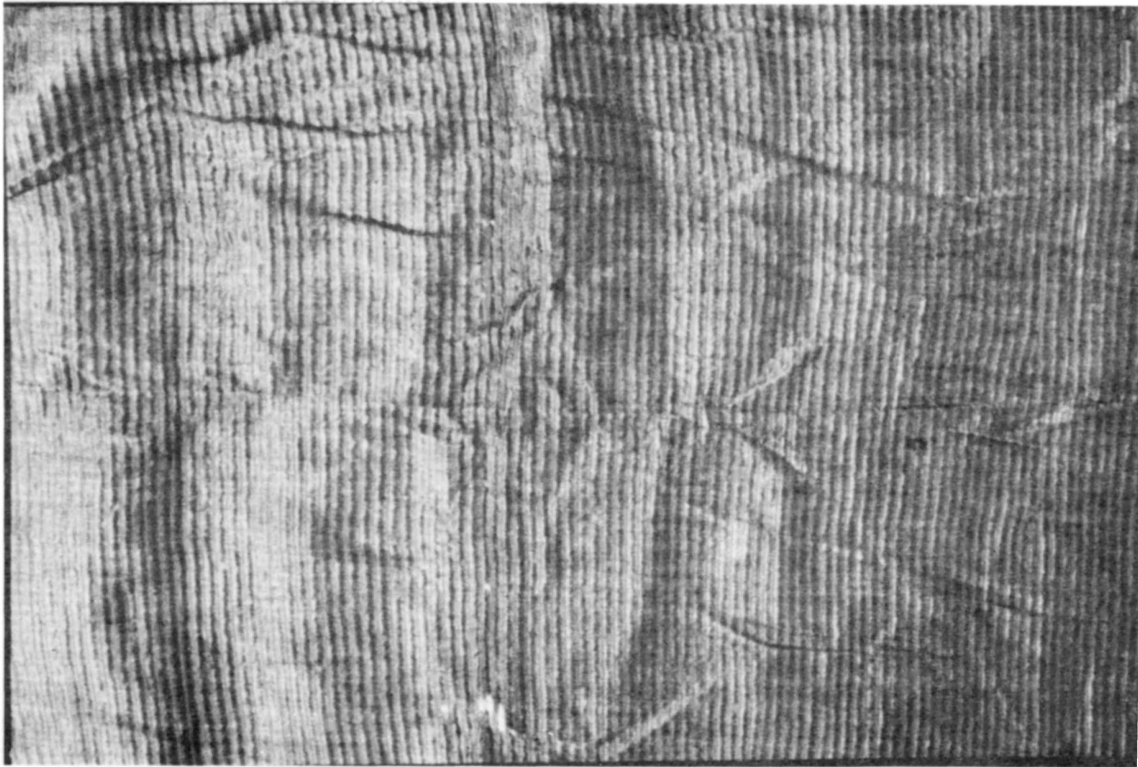


Fig. 1. *Kaitaka*, detail. Manawatu Museum, Palmerston North, New Zealand.



Fig.2. Korowai cloaks. Archives of Whanganui Regional Museum.



Fig.3.
 "Whenua/whenua."
 1996. Private
 Collection. Image
 is inspired by
 hukahuka (tags) of
 korowai.



Fig. 4. Nukutiaio Potaka, 1922. Wanganui, N.Z. Courtesy of Mina McKenzie.



Fig.5. The Potaka Sisters, 1922. Courtesy of Mina McKenzie.



Fig. 6. A. Potaka's Coffin with Cloak, 1919. McKenzie Coll.

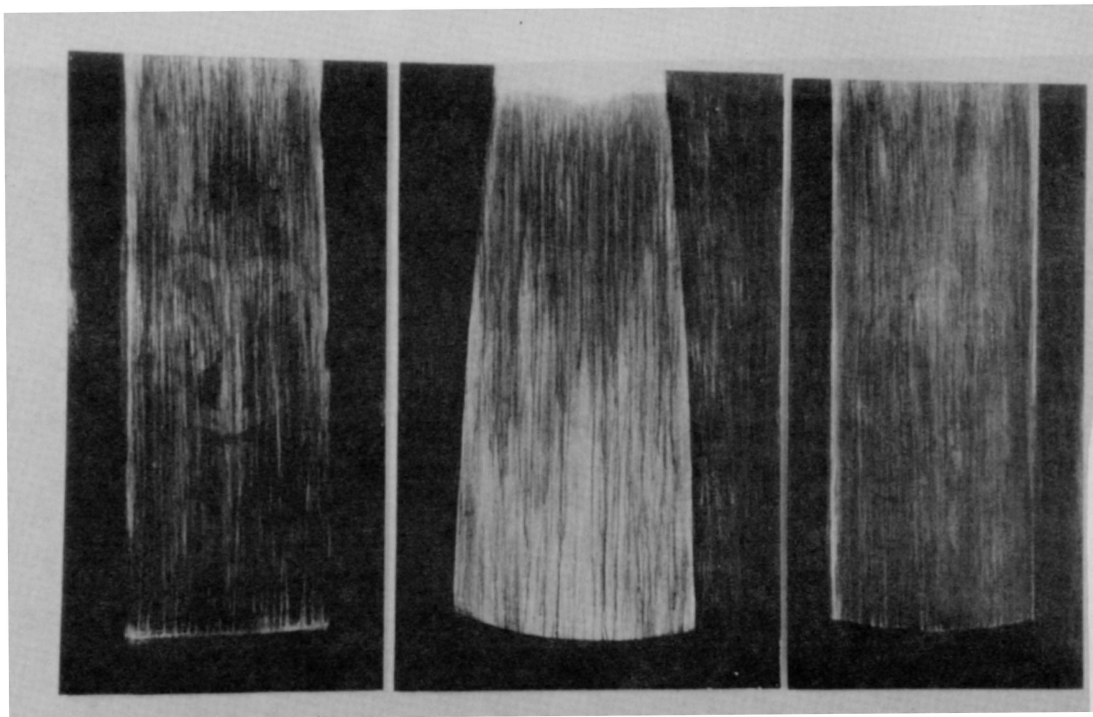


Fig.7. Kura Te Waru-Rewiri. *The Mantle*. 1994. Symbol of the colonization. Collection of University of Auckland.

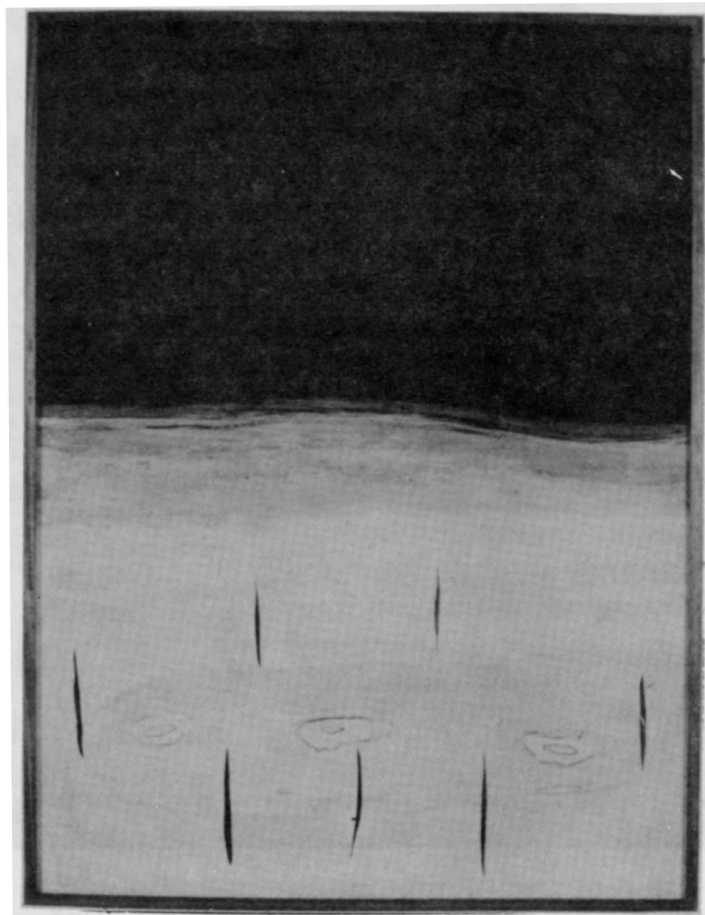


Figure 8.
K. Te Waru-Rewiri.
Deliverance. 1996.
Collection of the
artist.