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# Chronology, Mythology, Invention: John Bevan Ford's Maori Cloak Images

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NEW

DIRECTIONS: Examining the Past,  
Creating the Future.

## Chronology, Mythology, Invention: John Bevan Ford's Maori Cloak Images

Suzanne P. MacAulay, Ph.D.

This year's symposium theme linking past actions to future creations implies a linear, sequential correspondence between the past and the future. One precedes the other yet offers possibilities to be realized at some future point in time. A different model for time sequencing where past, present and future are conceptually more integrated is the New Zealand Maori view of ancestral presence manifest in the past, but also present in the future. To paraphrase a Maori proverb, '*I nga ra o mua*' - the ancestors stand behind a person, but also stand ahead. Maori weaver, Erenora Puketapu Hetet, once explained the concept this way, "the word *mua* also means '*in front of you*'. The Maori have a different time concept, which means we cannot separate ourselves from our ancestors or the generations in front of us. *Our past is our future and is also our present, like the eternal circle*" (MacAulay and Rewiri 1996, 1). Thus, within this non-European concept of time, the ancestors are simultaneously regarded as both progenitors and future descendants within a timeframe conceived as a spiral, which endlessly loops back on itself.

Using the backdrop of time as a spiraling continuum, this paper explores the cross-fertilization between the Maori weaving heritage and contemporary art making in the two-dimensional pigmented ink drawings or paintings of Maori artist, John Bevan Ford, in terms of symbolic, metaphoric and visually mythical language. The inspiration for his choice of Maori cloaks, *kākahu*, as the vehicle to graphically represent ancestral lineage as well as sacred, collective and personal history melds ancient mythological themes and cultural attitudes with current innovative, exploratory and creative impulses. Ford's depiction of sacred cloaks as metaphors for earth and sky aligns with Maori beliefs that cloaks made from plant fiber and feathers embody the gifts of the gods of forest, land and sky. In keeping with the scope of his symbolic repertoire, John Bevan Ford was always extremely articulate about the meanings of his work, believing that each of his paintings should elicit from the viewer, a desire or "need to understand the figurative or metaphorical nature of Maori thought" in order for a dialogue to occur by interrogating the work (Panny 2004,7).

Technically, each object whether it is a weaving or a painting is labor-intensive. Ford's paintings are composed of meticulous all-over markings of very small lines replicating the texture of fiber, which corresponds to the painstaking process of weaving the body of a cloak through accretion line by line. Both genres share the sacred and genealogical environment of Maori spiritual and aesthetic practices extended to the realm of lived experience with all the variables and contradictions.



Figure 1: John Bevan Ford *Te Hono*, mid-1980s. Reproduced with permission from Te Manawa Museum, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Maori refer to New Zealand as *Aotearoa*, the land of the long white cloud. Ford's image of the cloak in *Te Hono* hovering over mountains and sea evokes the image of a translucent mist radiantly backlit by subtle washes of rainbow colored pigments. The cloak is symbolized as a gathering place for the concentration of power in the sense of intensification of thousands of inanimate and animate entities (plant fibers, gestures, knots, people, memories, expectations, events, and landscapes). Cloak substituted for place as a metonym aligns with Maori perceptions (ancient and modern), and reinforces Ford's vision of the cloak image as contiguous with and protective of *Aotearoa*. In this instance the cloak provides the main focus for the composition where the sacred and genealogical environment intersect and flow together.

The *tāniko* border along the lower edge is patterned with reference to the weaver's identity, *whakapapa* (lineage), locale, and tribe. Geometric *tāniko* patterns visually abstract the ideas and values representing the Maori *ethos* or worldview. Rangi Te Kanawa, curator at Te Papa, New Zealand's national museum, describing the Maori belief that weavers transmit sacred knowledge through weaving, writes "in this respect whakairo or symbolic patterning, expresses and passes on ancestral knowledge" (Te Kanawa et al. 2011, 26). John Bevan Ford does this as well through his choice of motifs and in the symbolic compositions of his paintings. In his words,

"A cloak is made out of materials of the land. The artist takes the strands and weaves them. You place the cloak over the land and you are talking of the *mana* (power, authority and nobility) of the people, the *mana* of the land. You look at the land and you think of all the people who used to be there – not any people but your people" (Panny 2004, 24).

A Maori weaver transmutes the tough, fibrous leaves of flax, *harakeke*, into a soft, pliable textile through a series of ritually prescribed actions. Stripping the *muka* from the coarse flax leaf, the weaver works these fibers between her fingers moving horizontally from left to right manipulating and intertwining strands of *aho* and *whenu*, weft and warp. The materiality of the weaving process is offset by ritual practice acknowledging the sacred, *tapu*, with its potency as well as its prohibitions. Acknowledging the synergy between art making and ritual practice plus

amplifying Ford's metaphorical images of *kākahu*, weaver, Toi Te Rito Maihi writes, "For Maori *kākahu* are connected to both physical and metaphysical worlds. *Kaupapa*, the foundation, are made of *muka*, which represented a 'channel between the physical and spiritual realms.' *Muka* was seen not only as a concrete way to represent *wairua*, life force, but also as powerfully symbolic of the unseen – the spiritual element, that to Maori, permeates all aspects of life." (Maihi 2011, 34).

Regarding Maori cloak typologies, most of John Bevan Ford's cloak inventions derive from variations on the *kaitaka*. This is one of the older forms of cloaks associated with Maori aristocracy, *rangatira* (chief), *ariki* (lords) and *tohunga* (the priests). *Kaitaka* is basically a finely woven *kaupapa* sparsely adorned except for the contrast provided by the decorative geometric bands of *tāniko* (see Figure 1). These cloaks display much technical virtuosity and great skill. Single designs of raveled wool from trade blankets are sometimes stitched along the outer margins of the design field. In this example, enlarged zigzag motifs echo the *tāniko* border below. Their presence and the frugal but elegant use of material, is not only an aesthetic measure of the preciousness of the *kaitaka* but an inspired response to the sacredness of the garment as well. 18<sup>th</sup> c. explorers such as William Monkhouse, traveling with Captain Cook on the *Endeavour* in 1769 recorded seeing fine cloaks of flax "shiny with borders woven in geometric patterns of black, cinnamon red, and cream." Some were also enhanced by red breast feathers of the Kaka and tufts of dog hair.



Figure 2: *He Pihi 5*, 1989. Reproduced with permission from Te Manawa Museum, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Formally, this dynamic version of *He Pihi* (piece of land) suggests a cloak imploding to reveal both its inner and outer layers like a gigantic curtain billowing in the wind above land and sea. The outer layers of the cloak are heavily textured in an overall pattern, an amalgamation of the decorative texture of weaving and etched carving designs, while the inner garment provides a focal still point registered by calm lines amidst turbulence. The white space in the center represents *te whaitua*, the original creative energy source or active space from which the earth and sky emerge. The two spirals composing the whale's body on the lower left – centripetal (force directed toward the center) and centrifugal (moving outward from the center) – reinforce the notion of the dynamic genesis from which all things arise. The double spiral indicates the past and the future and catalyzes genealogical forces and the generative processes of Maori heritage. Locked in uneasy tension, the cloak's edges kinetically interact with the active contours of the landmass representing the meteorological interchange between land and atmosphere as manifest in wind, rain, storms and tidal waves.

On the one hand, Ford is alluding to a primordial era when everything was one and indivisible before earth and sky separated. On the other hand, he is simultaneously exploring the main tenets of the Maori origin myth of Ranginui, the Sky Father, and Papatuanuku, the Earth Mother. According to writer Witi Ihimaera,

The Sky Father began to create the heavens, but, during his labours, he thought to make love to Papatuanuku because she was so beautiful. They pressed together in a close embrace, so close that they shut out the light. So it was when they had children, who were gods themselves, the children were born into darkness... Then Tane [the forest god] conceived the idea of standing on his hands on Papa and thrusting against Rangi with his feet. His manoeuvre was successful and with great grieving Rangi and Papa were separated (Panny 2004, 32).

Similar to the divine liberated children of Papa and Rangi, the geometrical designs, *niho*, (triangular “dragon's teeth”) and *patikitiki*, (stars or diamonds) have broken away from the *tāniko* borders to float upward on the cloak's edges like constellations hanging in the night sky. Ford states, “for a cloak to be suspended above the land shows the *mana* of the land and the *mana* of the people ... it also makes a connection between the Sky Father and the Earth Mother” (Panny 2004, 36).



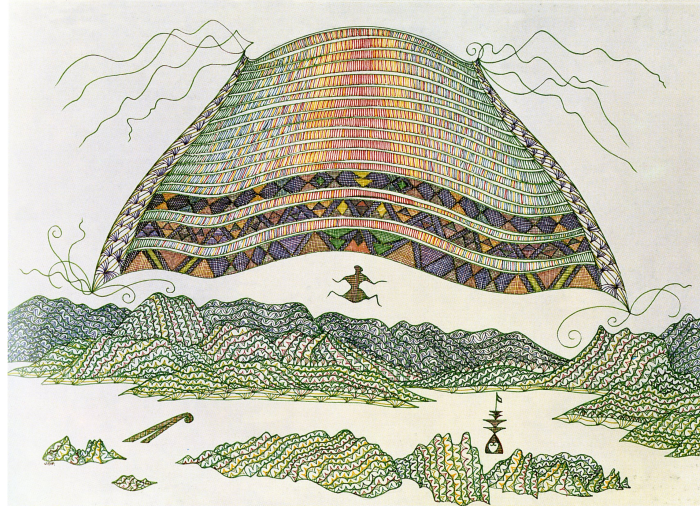


Figure 3: John Bevan Ford, *Te Hono Ki Zeelandia Nova 17*, 1992. With permission of Te Manawa Museum, Palmerston North, NZ.

This image depicts one of the most prestigious cloaks, *kaitaka paepaeroa* with three rows of *tāniko* across the bottom. It is distinguished by vertical *aho* rows (the wefts) instead of the horizontal norm as in most cloaks. This requires great virtuosity and skill. According to John Bevan Ford's symbolic program, as the cloak hovers between earth and sky it becomes "a sail filled with the breath or spirit of the people" (Panny, p. 26). The idea of a cloak suspended in space can also refer to protection. Noting the evolution of the cloak image in his drawings, Ford says, "[they] are like a mist enveloping the island and eventually as if the cloak of some invisible elder was drifting above the land and sea, [becomes] a symbol of *mana* lifted up, making room for us all. A cloak to warm us, to bind us, to spiritually enfold us" (Panny 2004, 22).

The power of a cloak to extend one's own power over another or to spiritually protect a person is evident in the following stories. In the 1820s *Rangi Topeora*, a great chief of the *Ngati Toa* tribe led her people from the North Island to Kapiti Island. She claimed her husband, *Te Rā-tū-tonu*, "by throwing her finest *kaitaka* over him" (Te Kanawa et al. 2011, 25). In another instance a young immigrant teenager just landed in Wellington harbor, found shelter in a house under construction for a Maori chief. The house was in the process of being built and was considered by Maori to be *tapu* (sacred space, i.e. off limits). The teenager was discovered by the chief, who was about to kill him with his *mere* (weapon) when his daughter-in-law, Ruhia Pōrutu, intervened by throwing her prized *kaitaka paepaeroa* over the boy (Maihi 2011, 41).

In the 1990s John Bevan Ford created a few outstanding rug designs for Dilana Rugs in Christchurch (Fusco 2001, 81). The theme of *Kupe* on a rug in Government House, Wellington, New Zealand, acknowledges one of the legendary Maori chiefs and culture heroes, who travelled between Hawaiki, the launching place for the last Maori migrations, and Aotearoa, the final destination. The symbolic script visualized here relates to the tracery of genealogy upon the contours of the land as it extends to Kupe, a primary ancestral figure. In this scene on the rug Kupe is depicted as a navigator while the cloak is a stylized version of a *kaitaka paepaeroa* with

its vertical bands of *aho* and colorful *tāniko* borders. Luminous in the sky like the Southern Lights, the *aurora australis*, the cloak symbolizes “dignity and leadership” as revealed in its static quality and distinct outlines. Counterpoint to the impression of contained yet forceful authority is the agitated motion of the cloak’s ties made of strands of *muka* with their stylized calligraphic and ever-changing lines waving in space. The juxtaposition of containment and energetic release suggests an analogous interpretation to the animation of feathers customarily tied to *muka* cords affixed to the finials of sacred Maori meetinghouses as described by Toi Maihi. She writes about the “custom of attaching feathers to the head of the ancestor figure, *tekoteko*, [placed] at the apex of the roof of the *wharenuī* with ropes or strands of *muka*. When the wind blew the feathers rustled thus animating the ancestral *tekoteko* figure’s head imbuing it with the illusion of life. The comparatively fragile *muka* cord ... brought the past into the present and the spiritual world into the physical” (Maihi 2011, 34). Similarly, we can also regard the lively flow of the cloak’s ties in Ford’s rug design as spanning the past, present and future.

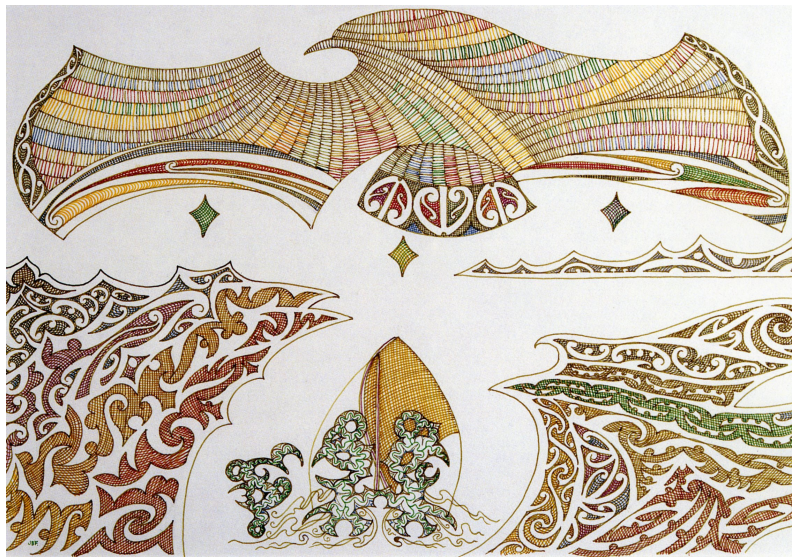


Figure 1: John Bevan Ford *Ko Kupe 4*, 1992. With permission of the Te Manawa Museum, Palmerston North, NZ.

In this image the cloak shape is transformed into a bird poised over land and sea accompanied by stars. Birds and stars were key navigational guides to early migrants and explorers as they moved across endless oceans. The detailed surface pattern indicating bird feathers replicates in two dimensions the weaving lines and characteristic folds of the *kaitaka* cloak suggesting the pliable nature of finely worked flax. It also symbolizes the topography of the landscape. The vertical *tāniko* borders and the bird’s tail feathers are decorated with curvilinear *kowhaiwhai* tribal motifs signifying abundant food sources. In contrast with ideas of settlement and prosperity, the lower *tāniko* designs at the bottom of the wings are inspired by scroll-like carving patterns, *puhoro*, from 19<sup>th</sup> century war canoes whose presence evokes the realities of migration and defense.



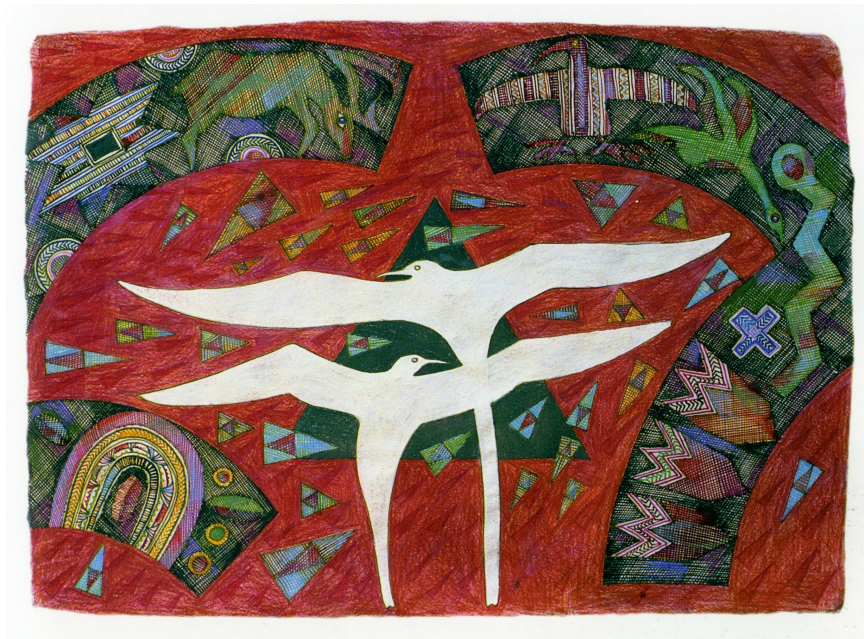


Figure 5: John Bevan Ford, *Two Amokura Go Fishing*, 1996. Reproduced with permission of collector.

In this piece John Bevan Ford has abandoned the visible *kaupapa* or body of the cloak. Yet its presence is implied as the unseen protective cover anchoring *tāniko* fragments across the void to link the edges of the Pacific Rim or the coastlines of Australia, Asia and the Americas in the same manner as *tāniko* function to define and adorn the borders of *kaitaka* cloaks. This composition pays homage to Ford's indigenous artist friends around the Pacific. For example, Australian Aboriginal painter, Judy Watson is represented by a ceremonial box for ancestral bones bounded by a rainbow marked with Maori carving patterns. Watson's symbol becomes a portal through which spirits pass. Its geographical location within the painting is in the southwest quadrant and is prominently placed in the left-hand corner in *Two Amokura Go Fishing*. Across the Pacific in the upper right of *Two Amokura* is the thunderbird motif, a totemic image of Native American artist, Rick Bartow, who often worked together with Ford on sculpture commissions. Other potent and some ancient symbols encircle these compositions acknowledging friendship and collegiality, creativity and poetic alliances.

The amokura is also known as the tropic bird. Although it has not been sighted for centuries around New Zealand, it is a powerful symbol of migration and movement across the Pacific, which alludes to its role as guide to the prehistoric migrating tribes in search of land and food travelling through Polynesian waterways. Migrant chiefs wore the amokura's red tail feathers as they moved over the Pacific searching for a new homeland. Thus, the image of the amokura conflates *mana*, status, prestige and genealogy into a powerful symbol of transience, unity, and guardianship. The sacred red color permeates *Two Amokuras*. It can be seen as the backdrop to the central bird figures and as color accents in groups of *niho* (triangles), which have broken free from *tāniko* design fields and are now dispersed throughout the picture plane like migratory birds or the ancient flotillas of canoes skimming the surface of the sea on their quest for land. Shadowing the multi-colored triangles, beneath the surface red *niho* dart and flash like shoals of



fish or merge in streams like oceanic currents. Groups of *niho* also symbolize cultural diasporas. Their trajectories trace aquatic ley lines conveying ideas and experiences as they are diffused throughout the Pacific. Ford's vision also sees these submerged monochromatic triangles as ancient geological forces emanating from the submerged mountains affected by the era when "the great Australasian plates rumbled together and pushed their knees up and twisted around" convulsing into earthquakes and tsunamis.

The content of *Two Amokura* may be suggestively turbulent, but in the case of the Pacific Rim series, John Bevan Ford appears to be re-drawing and re-creating the connections around the Rim that were severed by early migrations over time and distance. They are now joined again through Ford's inventive efforts to enrich and strengthen this fellowship of comrade artists scattered around the Pacific. Ford's series of cloak paintings encapsulates Maori symbols much like a visual lexicon revelatory of mythological narratives and cosmic signs. Initially, his metaphoric and pictorial cloaks signify an ancestral presence saturated with all the potent elements of the environment and atmosphere – plants, land, storms and light. Towards the end of the series, however, the fragmentary and dispersed motifs such as the broken up *tāniko* designs, paradoxically reassert the profound unity of Pacific people after centuries of physical and metaphysical separation.

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