

# CULTURAL MEMORY INSCRIBED IN THE SKIN: SYMBOLS OF NATION AS TATTOO ART IN NEW ZEALAND

Claudia Bell

*University of Auckland, New Zealand*

*Abstract:* In New Zealand there is a strand of cultural memory popularly known as 'kiwiana'. The term embraces everyday popular cultural practices - beach activities in summer, food rituals - as well as an array of vintage artefacts. The latter are locally manufactured items originating mainly in the 1940s-50s, when import restrictions limited the availability of household goods. Local makers created products for the domestic market, for instance grocery items (and their logo-bearing containers), household crockery and toys. Those items, intrinsically representations of white (pakeha) culture, are fondly recalled by the baby boomers, and have become popular collectibles. Images of the same items have now become prevalent as decorative motifs on home wares and clothing.

Recently a further celebratory strand of kiwiana has now appeared: the inscription of its motifs as extensive permanent skin tattoos. While Maori have always practiced meaningful skin tattoo, and whilst body tattoos in general have joined the realm of fashion, this is something new. Here we see a recasting of the kiwiana images of popular cultural memory, now drawn onto the body. One wearer of such a tattoo, a 26 year old plumber, said 'I love New Zealand. I am very proud of who we are and I wouldn't change being a kiwi for the world'. His design, a map of New Zealand on his back in filled with

kiwiana items, shows his personal subscription to the populist representations that are utilised as apolitical definition of kiwi-ness. Kiwiana tattoo as a growing everyday practice is the focus of this paper.

*Keywords:* tattoo, nation, New Zealand, collective memory, nostalgia, kiwiana

*Note:* New Zealanders are often colloquially referred to as 'kiwis' after a small rare indigenous bird species.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. TATTOO TRADITIONS IN NEW ZEALAND

In New Zealand the indigenous Maori tattoo 'Ta moko' is a well-respected tradition. Early Maori brought traditional body art from Polynesia. Maori considered the head the most sacred part of the body. Hence while tattoos appeared on other parts of the body, the facial tattoo was/is particularly significant. It symbolizes power, status and belonging. Famously, Captain Cook and his crew collected preserved heads of tattooed individuals (Toi moko) to take back to

Europe as souvenirs of an exotic culture. This practice was outlawed in 1831. Since 2003 Te Papa Tongarewa, the National Museum of New Zealand, has been involved in the repatriation of 180 of these from 39 countries, as official government policy has urged that ancestral remains of Maori be returned (stuff.co.nz; 2009). Captains Cook's voyages and discoveries gave rise to sailors sporting tattoos. 'Tattoos spread through the British Royal Navy as a result of colonization of the tattooed and pierced people of the Pacific' (Carmen, Guitar and Dillon, 2012: 138).

Tattooed indigenous people, including Maori, were also 'collected' and displayed, sometimes in 'living villages' at European and American dime museums and fairs, and the 1851 World Exposition in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. These displays of 'primitive people' underscored the superiority of the 'civilized' viewers. In the 1870 - 1890s tattoos became popular amongst the British aristocracy, with many male members of the British royal family wearing tattoos. In 1862, before he became King of England, the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) got his first tattoo, a Jerusalem cross. This created a fashion. His sons the Dukes of Clarence and York had dragons inscribed on their arms. George V and his cousins Tsar Nicholas II and Kaiser Wilhelm also had tattoos (Cesare, 2011). However, the 'Golden Age' of tattooing was between the first and second World Wars, as tattoos became *de rigueur* amongst servicemen (Carmen, Guitar and Dillon, 2012: 139). In the 1960s both peaceful hippies and intimidating bikers stated their associations through tattoos.

In late twentieth century New Zealand the Maori renaissance has led to a revival of Ta moko, traditional Maori body and facial tattoos. There is a high level of

social acceptance of these as political statements about the resilience of Maori culture. Every Maori tattoo is unique, a narrative of that individual's whakapapa or family history. In 2006 when the Maori Queen Dame Te Arakinui Te Atairangikaahu died, around fifty Maori women memorialized her through traditional Maori chin tattoos (Te Awekotuku, 2012).

While indigenous Maori encompass about 12% of the New Zealand population, Pacific peoples comprise about 14% of the population. Migration for employment has meant an influx of residents from Samoa, Rarotonga, Tonga, Niue, and other islands. These are all cultures in which tattoo is a traditional and respected art form. The new generation of islanders continues this custom, with most Pacific Islanders having at least one tattoo as body adornment.

Alongside those forms of body art, other tattoos have long been familiar: the sailor tattoos; the jail 'boob tats'; various forms of home-made inscriptions: bodily decorations largely considered transgressive until the recent upsurge in tattoo as fashion.

A rapid growth of tourism to New Zealand has seen revisions of traditional tattoos. In 2012 over 2,600,000 people visited. The quest by tourists for authentic exotic artifacts through international tourism, has intensified interest in the indigenous Maori tattoo. It is now commonplace for tourists to New Zealand to seek a version of Ta moko as a souvenir of their visit. Many seek 'authentic' Maori Ta moko, carried out using traditional tools. However almost all tattoos nowadays are machine-applied. This commodification of the sacred indigenous art form has polarized attitudes amongst Maori tattoo artists, stimulating internal cultural debate. Nevertheless the demand has resulted in revised tattoo designs, derived from Maori

culture, but particular to each person receiving the tattoo. These alternatives 'tourist versions' of Ta moko appear to satisfy tourist demand.

Occasionally there are news items that refer to risks and deaths associated with getting tattoos. In 2012 there was extensive media coverage about a tourist allegedly contracting HIV after receiving a tattoo in Bali, Indonesia. This served as a warning against all tattoo studios in Indonesia. The New Zealand government's official tourism websites advise visitors about selecting appropriate tattoo facilities if they wish to be inked. There is abundant information readily available about the risks involved in getting a tattoo. Possible medical dangers include bacterial infections, perichondritis, sepsis and toxic shock syndrome (Carmen, Guitar and Dillon, 2012: 136-7).

#### *B. KIWIANA AND NEW TATTOOS*

A new genre of tattoo designs is the kiwiana tattoo. Kiwiana, symbols that represent New Zealand popular culture, have become subject and themes of permanently inked body adornment.

Kiwiana is ubiquitous as a series of well recognized images in New Zealand. The genre of material culture - actual objects, such as toys, home wares, groceries and clothing, plus their advertising logos and packaging - had its origins in post-WW2 New Zealand. The items include whimsical buzzy bee pull along toys, L and P soft drink, a common brand of tomato sauce, and a grocery chain cartoon figure called '4 Square Man'. At that time in an effort to nurture the local manufacturing sector, tariffs were imposed on imported goods, making consumer items expensive. That trade policy resulted in the development of products specifically

for the local market. In an isolated country with a small population (less than 2 million in 1950), and very limited competition in manufacturing, every household used the same products. These items are now referred to as kiwiana. They are remembered by the post-war baby boomer generation as part of their own 'good old days', prosaic objects specific to New Zealand. Since the 1970s the items and their images have turned up in various forms of iconography - postage stamps, product decoration, advertising campaigns - the appeal to nostalgia assuring recognition that indeed this is about 'us'. International products sold in New Zealand often use these symbols in their marketing operations to encourage consumers to identify with their product eg MacDonald's kiwi-burgers, Toyota vehicles. This is an effective commercial strategy that localises the appeal of global merchandise (Bell, 2012).

Today, imbued with high levels of sentiment, depictions of the same items are used as a significant expression of national identity. A recent example of its use was in the Americas Cup campaign, taking place in September- October 2013. A large digitally-produced graphic encasing the fairing under the boat featured the usual collection of kiwiana. This was denoted as 'a secret weapon to give the team a boost before heading off to battle' (Rocket, website).

In short, kiwiana recreates a fictional collective history, one that is plainly intrinsic to dominant ideology. Nostalgia is populist cultural archaeology: its pervasiveness reiterates on a daily basis who we, New Zealanders, are. Kiwiana affirms pakeha (white) primacy, underpinning local mythologies about forging a settler nation through hard work, ingenuity, innovation, adaptability and independence (Bell, 2012a). Kiwiana

harks back to that post war period, pre-feminism, pre-Maori Renaissance, pre-Asian immigration, and before a raft of liberal reforms challenged the dominance of the white male. Recognition of these signs gives us (the dominant citizenry) something in common, exclusive to this culture. Resorting to these themes excludes newcomers, and reasserts the primacy of long term citizens. New immigrant groups do not recognize or share this heritage. By continually reproducing these symbols, we remind them - and ourselves - of this. My own recent (unpublished) research shows that indeed, some immigrant families, as they become aware of kiwiana, begin their own collections as part of their conscious efforts to adapt and integrate into this new environment.

As a powerful and recurring motif in popular nostalgia and national mythology, kiwiana demonstrates the fundamental principle of capitalism that entrepreneurs may attempt to commodify almost anything - including culture, local history and manufactured 'traditions'. The constant replication of this genre is a form of construction of collective memory. Young people today did not experience these items in their original incarnations. Rather, they have received or inherited messages and experiences of the items and logos, recast on new consumer goods (Bell, 2012). Their symbolic usage is now commonplace, in many cases the original meanings irrelevant. Their persistence lies in their role as populist expressions of national identity.

Converted to tattoos, the motifs are also claimed or reassigned to another level. One New Zealander who spent \$3000NZ on a full arm (sleeve) Kiwiana tattoo, said 'some people would buy a painting. This is just another form of art' (Miller, 2012).

A 26 year old wearer of such a tattoo, a map of New Zealand on his back, won a prize for being the 'kiwi-est of kiwis' The map outline is filled in with kiwiana motifs. He said 'I love New Zealand. I am very proud of who we are and I wouldn't change being a kiwi for the world' (Fuseworks Ltd, 2012).

His design choice shows his personal subscription to the populist themes utilized as apolitical definition of kiwi-ness. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu writes that 'taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects classified by their classification, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make' (Bourdieu 1984, 6). This tattooed man is delighted to use an inked acquisition to distinguish himself. Indeed, public acknowledgement included triumph in the nation-wide contest, with a desirable prize. Through sixteen hours of physical pain, and judicious choice of images, he was able to achieve his moment of national fame, and ongoing attention both in person in public, and on various internet sites, for his highly visible statement of difference. Widespread publicity about his kiwiana tattoo seems to have furthered this as a favoured choice of body inscription. A quick web search yields thousands of pictures and advertisements for tattoo artists who custom-make kiwiana designs. There is even scope for 'fusion' tattoos. For instance, someone from South Africa may settle in New Zealand. A new tattoo is created: one with an outline of South Africa, in-filled with Maori and kiwiana images.

### C. TATTOO FASHION

After many years of being considered deviant, shady and resistant, tattoos - now called 'body art' - are well

embedded in popular culture. The revival of tattoo culture has become something of a new 'rite of passage', another space for self-expression. The social acceptance of tattoos has liberated the body as a space on which to convey individuality and pronounce identity. Through any kind of self-expression, 'each individual and group searches out his or her place in an order, all the while trying to jostle this order according to a personal trajectory' we are reminded (Baudrillard, 1981: 38).

Shock or judgment of otherwise respectable members of society procuring tattoos has faded. It is commonplace for both celebrities and non-celebrities to list their partner's or children's names into their skin. In 1999 footballer David Beckham began to inscribe the names of his children on his body, and later his wife Victoria's name in both English and Hindi on his right hand. His pop star / fashion designer wife also has their children's names as tattoos, alongside other examples of skin art. It has become the norm of celebrities to be inked. Angelina Jolie included some slogans in Sanskrit; Lady Gaga's collection includes poetry, a tribute to her Dad, flowers, a cherub and a unicorn. Celebrities who have visited New Zealand display their own customized version of the Maori Ta moko, for example singers Robbie Williams and Rhianna, and boxer Mike Tyson. Tattoos are often used as markers of significant autobiographic events such as travel. A popular design is a map of world tattoo with countries visited shaded. There are websites that recommend tattoo destinations, listing specific artists and studios where the tourist can obtain 'the ultimate souvenir, more memorable and permanent than any snow dome or tea towel' (Messer, website). Yet in some venues tattoos are still contentious. A recent high profile example was the 2013 Miss America beauty pageant,

which included a tattooed blonde army sergeant as a popular but controversial contestant. Closer to home, in 2013 a young woman aspiring to be an airhostess with Air New Zealand was refused a job because of her visible tattoo.

Schildkraut explains that focus on the contemporary inscriptions on the visible surface of the skin responds to postmodern social theory's interest in the interface between the body and society. She concludes that the body is 'not only a site where culture is inscribed, but also a place where the individual is defined and inserted into the cultural landscape' (Schildkraut, 2004: 338). The tattoo is a visible and permanent embodied performance, a 'sensuous engagement between the body and the world' (Crouch 2003: 7). In a globalized world, individual identities are socially and culturally constructed and reconstructed through consumerism. The marketplace is awash with commodities for consumers to use in the construction of their own identities (Patterson and Schroeder, 2010). A carefully chosen tattooed inscription on the body is surely an ultimate assertion of individuality, whilst simultaneously visibly subscribing to current notions of hip style.

Unlike the tourists seeking a tattoo that draws from Maori culture, the kiwiana tattoo captures received images from the wearer's own cultural memory. The kiwiana tattoo discloses a complex but extremely positive relationship between the body, the self, identity and society. Is this the ultimate statement of belonging? 'Everything, including 'culture', is a potential commodity' (Shepherd, 2002: 183). Since kiwiana has long been a purchasable product, to this we can now add, 'every cultural reference has the potential to become a mark inscribed on the skin'.

Today around 20% of New Zealanders have a tattoo. It is required by law that a person must be 18 years of age to acquire a professional tattoo. Recent research reveals that slightly more females than males have been inscribed. Psychologist Wilson notes that contrary to old stereotypes of tattooed women as promiscuous heavy drinkers, today, amongst young people, tattoos are 'just as common among high achievers as among low achievers' (Wilson, 2013: 48). Very few - just 7% - of the women he researched expressed any regret that they had made this permanent mark on their skin. For males, the level of regret was higher, 12.3 per cent. A well-known tattoo artist explained that 'the old stigmas are dissolving very quickly. It used to be gang members, strippers and social undesirables with images. Lawyers, All Blacks, young professionals all have something up their sleeve. Respected members of society are getting inked' (Booker, 2011).

Skin is a site that invites commoditization: clothing, personal hygiene, health and beauty products are central to vast commercial activity. Patterson and Schroeder explain that skin reflects the dynamic relationships between 'personal identity projects and marketplace culture... the meeting place for structure an agency' (Patterson and Schroeder, 2010: 254).

Tattoos illustrate that intriguing space where conformity and individuality intertwine. The inked representation on the body communicates individual identity, while also showing that one has joined a current, cool global fashion. That unique self is visibly affiliating to a mass phenomenon. In a manner similar to the wearing of uniforms, tattoos convey membership to a particular group in society: those who have been inked. 'Bodies encounter other bodies, objects and the physical world multi-sensuously ... bodies are not fixed and

given but involve performances especially to fold notions of movement, nature, taste and desire, into and through the body' (Urry, 2001). Unlike clothing, where the wearer may choose to change their personal style even on a daily basis, tattoos are permanent. Their physical endurance on the skin suggests a confidence in the choice of bodily decoration by the wearer. Any tattoo indicates a total commitment to the durability of this form of body decoration and the messages it conveys.

Tattoos also indicate some mystery. If some tattoos are visible on a body, perhaps other decorations are hidden beneath clothing? The wearer can choose public and private body zones to display -or not-display - their ineradicable illustrations. Lawrence writes of tattooed women and the definition of tattoos as intimate and decorative additions to the body. He suggested that judgment by others might encourage some women to choose a more discrete tattoo. Nevertheless, any prior concept of tattooed women being butch or deviant has disappeared, as pop icons display their inked arms and bodies with pride and insouciance. Tattoos appear to be no threat at all to perceived femininity. Males, Lawrence suggested, were likely to choose a more blatant identity symbol, 'a public announcement of interests, associations and a display of freedom from the constraints of everyday life' (Lawrence, c2009: 8). He provides examples of groups of men getting tattooed together, perhaps with symbols representing a favoured sports team. His research found that tattoos were not confined to a social class, age or any other demographic category. He did note however that professionals such as doctors and lawyers tended to choose tattoos that were covered by their workplace clothing; that tattoos on forearms or

hands were not generally selected by those in higher paying occupations (ibid: 37 - 39).

Current popularity is ascribed to the proliferation of genuine artists. 'Now tattoos are custom-designed and inked by someone who cares about their craft, in a studio that has the same hygiene standards as a hospital' (Booker, 2011.) Tattoo parlours have been relabelled as tattoo studios, with emphasis on tattoo as art. Internationally, designs such as snakes, skulls, hearts, roses and animals from the 1930s-1960s have given way to Celtic and tribal designs, oriental scripts, and names of one's children and lovers. Techniques are now such that any photograph can be replicated onto the skin (Lawrence, c2009: 28). The inks are now available in a wide range of colours. There is even tattoo ink that glows in the dark. Tattoo artists and wearers enter competitions and exhibitions. There are numerous dedicated tattoo magazines, and vast opportunities to show off one's work or tattoo collection on website and social media pages.

Those custom-made designs include kiwiana. These new tattoos reiterate the kiwiana images of popular cultural memory, now drawn onto the body. In a world where material objects – fashion and other commodities – quickly come and go – indelible tattoos affirm the permanence of the personal beliefs that drive the choice of illustration. The wearers of the kiwiana tattoos express self-assurance of both personal and national identity through their bodily ornamentation.

#### *D. CONCLUSION*

We live in a postmodern world where there was possible never greater concern with individual appearance and identity. Many aspects of the body can be changed through the purchase of various services:

weight loss programmes, hair colour, makeovers, plastic surgery, tattoos. One's appearance does not need to be permanently fixed, but can be altered to correspond to a revised version of oneself. This paper illustrates that practices of consumption, including services applied to the body, are profoundly cultural. Even when consumers subscribe to a global fashion, many have a powerful drive to localise it. To echo Bourdieu, even inked images on the body become meaningful and powerful as components of the wider cultural, social and economic fields in which they circulate; the world is mobilized in wider struggles for meaning (Bourdieu, 1984). These kiwiana tattoos convey a quintessential 'New Zealand'.

As cultural artefacts their inherent socio-political symbolism has significant meanings when embedded in the domestic environment.

The approach taken in this paper derives directly from cultural studies: an engaged analysis of contemporary culture, as Doring puts it (Doring, 1987). Essential to this investigation are Bourdieu's concepts about consumer culture and identification: that everyday culture is mobilized in the search for meaning. Like the procurement of material goods, the expression of the self through bodily inscription accomplishes 'a social function of legitimating social differences' (Bourdieu, 1984: 7). Hence tattoo intersects with the realm of material culture to play a commanding role in identity assertion and social positioning. This investigation of tattoos is an attempt to communicate my own understanding of a new way of expressing nationhood in New Zealand. Through the current craze in New Zealand for kiwiana tattoos, inherently and concurrently history, commerce, nostalgia and authenticity are addressed.

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