

Kapa haka's rich and developing cultural fabric

By Piri Sciascia



TE MATATINI, 2007

Kapa haka has been known by many other titles and phrases in the history of Māori people. Today the term refers to the traditional performing arts and is a term recently coined. Kapa means a group, and haka means to dance. Dance groups as such have been known as rōpū, or cultural groups. The term has also come to refer to the performance activity itself. In any case we may be assured that the performing arts of the Māori people have been a part of the culture since inception, indeed since the first Māori ever stood to dance.

In pre-European times haka or dance was performed in the whare tapere, the house of entertainment, akin to the village hall, or on the battle field, and the marae, or in fact anywhere where Māori decided to dance, for all the variety of reasons that human beings find the need, the urge, the desire to get to one's feet and extol or articulate the feeling in the moment. There are many traditions and early records of exciting and memorable performances of haka, of peruperu, of tūtū ngārahu, of mōteatea, of pihe and apakura, of ngahau and harakoa, known generically also as kanikani.

As Māori became more exposed to European music and its instruments, so the dance and music culture of Māori responded by incorporating facets of non-Māori culture that Māori felt able to integrate in an innovative and new way. Some of the initial records of this are to be found in the early 1900's Māori newspapers like Te Toa Takitini, which records the appearance of haka hou, or new dance, at a hui in Pakipaki in Hawke's Bay amongst Ngāti Kahungunu. Early exponents of this new development included Paraire Tomoana of Ngāti Kahungunu, Kingi Tahiwai of Ngāti Raukawa and Te Puea Hērangi of Waikato to name a few.

Many tribal groups had their own exponents and travelled overseas with cultural groups, which today would be termed kapa haka. This movement was later followed by the incorporation of dance entertainment, and cultural competition associated with sports events and maybe surprisingly for some, church events. This development continued with innovation especially during and following the two World Wars with contribution from the Ngāti Porou exponents Āpirana Ngata and Tūini Ngāwai.

By 1970 the New Zealand Māori Theatre Trust took a group away on a tour of Russia and Europe with two opera principals – Inia TeWiata and Isobel Cowan (nee Whatarau). Of significance is that the membership of this touring group included some important players in what was to become the New Zealand Polynesian Festival, instituted two years later. The Polynesian Festival grew to become an all-Māori event and became the New Zealand Māori Performing Arts Festival. Finally in 2004 the Festival and the development of the performing arts was funded by a separate grant and rebranded as Te Matatini.

- (Elizabeth) Anne Rowse made Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit (ONZM) in the Queen's Birthday Honours

- First Tango and Salsa Ball held at the Chateau, Tongariro

- First Diwali Festivals organised by Asia NZ Foundation held in Auckland and Wellington

2002

- Bachelor of Performing Arts (Dance Degree) developed at University of Auckland

- Jolt Dance Company founded by Lyn Cotton and Fleur de Thier
- Shona McCullagh – Arts Foundation Laureate Award recipient

Significance of kapa haka in NZ

Kapa haka plays an important role in profiling Māori dance. The Māori media programming of many kapa haka events around the country, including those of high schools and primary schools, is a major component of viewing options at a nation-wide level. Tribal events are profiled as well, such as the Ahurei of Tūhoe and Tākitimu. Kura and kaupapa Māori schools, and wānanga where tapere with their kapa haka are a part of the contribution to the national rubric of the Māori performing arts, most of which embrace modern forms as well. There is a deserved place for the fruits of the cultural renaissance in the mind of the Māori part of Aotearoa. Of particular satisfaction is the uptake and development to be witnessed amongst the youth and taiohi/rangatahi in a variety of settings. The kapa haka nationals provide a major platform for political comment. Almost all of the haka performances as currently portrayed are judged on the worthiness, relevance, aptness, and veracity of the political commentary expounded in the words and the physical expression or actions. The traditional uses of marae-based groups continue as ever. There has been the stunning development of Taikura, the performances of an older repertoire, retained and promoted as a part of the Te Matatini oversight of the performing arts.



AROHAUI – THE GREATEST LOVE, 2011
DANCER: HIRIA VAKA AS MANUHIWA
PHOTO: TE MATATINI

presented and experienced: “He toi whakairo, he mana tāngata. Where there is artistic excellence there is human dignity”.

Above all, kapa haka will forever retain its place in the hearts and minds of Māori who value deeply the performing arts in its myriad forms. That it is growing so well is testimony to the work of Te Matatini and the work of Māori artists, or kaihaka - its dancers and their supporters. The festival itself is the largest performing arts festival in the country with anything up to 2000 performers at any one time. It will continue to capture the solid commitment of our cultural keepers who give unpaid and untold hours of composition, of choreography, of tuition, correction, improvement, and cultural oversight.

Innovation and Exploration in Contemporary Māori Dance.

A new energy and movement for an expression in Māori contemporary dance has also been steadily growing over the past 30 years - this energy and momentum is accelerating and heralds the dawn for an exciting future.

Works, productions and companies who are and have been committed to this new expression have included Impulse Dance Theatre (*Wānanga-i-te Rangī*), Limbs Dance Company (*Poi*), New Zealand Ballet Company (*Moko*), Te Matarae i Orehu and the Royal New Zealand Ballet Company (*Ihi Frenzy*).

We have seen the development of Māori Dance Companies and projects including NZ Māori Theatre Trust, Kahurangi Māori Dance Theatre, Taiao (formally Te Kanikani o Te Rangatahi), Atamira Dance Company, Okareka Dance Company, Maui – One Man Against the Gods (Tanemahuta Gray) and the emergence of an innovative ‘Super 12’ kapa haka competition.

The development of the *Kōwhiri Dance Festival* is quickly making its mark in this renaissance. *Haka Theatre* – a new dynamic genre emerging in Māori Performing Arts taking kapa haka to the world in a new form.

Arohanui – The Greatest Love, a project spearheaded by Te Matatini, was one of four flagship projects selected by the Ministry of Culture and Heritage as part of the *REAL New Zealand Festival*, which ran alongside Rugby World Cup 2011 (RWC 2011).

The term Haka Theatre is not a new term; Te Puea Hērangi first used it over 100 years ago. It encompasses the essence of this development, bringing excellence in kapa haka innovation into the theatre, and is available for all New Zealanders and indeed the world to see. It brings Theatre to Māori, and Māori to Theatre.

The development of the Māori Performing Arts is in good hands. Nei re tā haka a Tānerore poipoia ki runga, poipoia ki raro. Tēnā, e hika mā, Kōkiri! ■



TE MATARAE I OREHU
TE MATATINI O TE RA FESTIVAL, 2011

Purpose

Kapa haka serves to uphold mana Māori motuhake. Our favoured groups enjoy a following that over time promotes the arts as a whole, but particularly draws focus to the style of a particular group. This style may be copied or borrowed, or usually adapted to provide a rich and developing cultural fabric. Individual groups have continuously provided for their colleagues a window of music, vocal production, dynamic choreography, costuming and decoration, presence and wow. At the time of the global and transformational international display of taonga Māori, which was Te Māori in 1984, an expression was coined to express what lay at the heart of good art when it is

- First *Body Festival Dance and Physical Theatre* held in Christchurch
- Traditional Irish Dancing Association of New Zealand founded

- First *Chinese New Year Festival* held in Wellington organised by Asian Events Trust

DANZ Magazine has provided interesting and informative news on all dance horizons. Congratulations on 20 years of information and inspiration.

Wendy Johnson
NZ Amateur Ballroom and Latin Champion 1970