

Te Matatini – many faces of Māori

Te Matatini means ‘many faces’ and is **the** kapa haka festival of Aotearoa. Te Matatini acknowledges everyone who contributes to the vitality and energy of kapa haka both on and off stage. This includes the performers, composers, tutors, kuia and kōrua, whānau, co-ordinators, cooks and everyone who works day and night to make the festival what it is.

Te Matatini began in 1972 as part of the Poly Fest. It is now a biennial event. Every two years, Mana (Authority) is given to a different region of New Zealand to host Te Matatini for three or four days. To begin the festival, and welcome everyone to the host region, a powhiri by the tangata whenua (home people) is carried out. A powhiri is a customary welcome and a protocol of the host people. All performers, supporters and dignitaries are welcomed during the powhiri. During the festival, up to 30,000 people watch as the top kapa haka groups from New Zealand compete for the honour of winning national finals. As well as winning nationals there are honours, recognition and trophies for each category, such as Kaitataki Wahine and Tane, Choral, Costume. Te Matatini taonga is donated by organisations, individuals, whānau, hapu, iwi and rohe throughout New Zealand as prizes – taonga include beautifully carved wooden and glass trophies. [1]

“Māori Performing Arts brings together people of all ages, all backgrounds, all beliefs. Māori and non-Māori alike, participants and observers – when I look, I see many faces, young and old”. Professor Wharehuia Milroy¹

Te Matatini’s Purpose

Te Matatini is primarily the showcase of Māori identity. The festival’s main purpose is to run the national kapa haka festival but since 2009/2010 it now includes other important objectives:

- Develop and support kapa haka around Aotearoa
- Foster Excellence from all involved in kapa haka
- Promote Māori Performing Arts at a national and international level
- Establish a governance and management structure to support the future direction of Te Matatini

What is kapa haka?

Kapa haka (literally, “to stand in line”) has come to mean a Māori cultural performance group. It involves singing, dance and movements that were associated with Māori hand-to-hand combat practised in pre-colonial times. Much of what is seen on stage has derived and evolved from the warfare of ancestors, from weaponry to stance and expression. For example, the patu (club) and taiaha (fighting staff) were used as weapons against the enemy tribe; poi was used to train wrist and hand dexterity. As a Māori Chief led his warriors to combat, Kaitātaki Tāne and Wahine lead their group onstage at Te Matatini to give their all in ‘battle’ and hopefully leave with a national title.

The evolution of Māori music has taken inspiration from both European and Māori musical principles. Te Puea Herangi and Sir Apirana Ngata are attributed with creating waiata ā-ringa (action song). Popular contemporary Pākehā tunes were used with Māori words accompanied by actions. This led to attracting a wider audience of both Māori and Pākehā. Contemporary kapa haka maintains this merging of action, timing, posture, footwork and sound.

The Competition Format

Each group performs a total of 6-8 highly structured pieces of song and dance including: waiata tira (optional), whakaeke, mōteatea, waiata-a-ringa, poi, haka, whakawātea. Waiata tira is a choral piece (harmonised); whakaeke is the entrance onto the stage. Mōteatea are sung in unison and are the closest link to traditional performance (more on these later). Waiata-ā-ringa involves arm movements, while poi involves women displaying their graceful actions together with percussive effects as the poi are slapped on their hands. The men then take centre stage to lead the haka and lay down their challenge. Whakawātea is the choreographed exit from the stage which includes a thank you to the tangata whenua (hosts). Other divisions in which national titles can be awarded include: Manukura Wahine/Manukura Tāne (female/male leaders), kākahu (dress), te reo (Māori language). [2]

What are mōteatea?

Before Europeans settled, much of Māori singing was microtonal and did not move far from the central note. Group singing was done in unison and was described by the settlers as “monotonous” and “doleful”². The Western musical term

¹ <http://www.tematini.co.nz/>

² McLintock, Alexander, ed. (April 2009) [originally published in 1966]. "[Māori Music](#)". *from An Encyclopedia of New Zealand*. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand. Retrieved 15 February 2011

for this is chant. Mōteatea is the general term for traditional songs/poetry. One musical feature of mōteatea is that they are sung with a lot of vibrato and 'strain' on the voice (like vocal belting). [4]

As Mōteatea are the closest link with Māori traditional song they have an important role in transmitting history³ from generation to generation. Māori passed down their culture orally, therefore Mōteatea were the 'recordings' of a people's history. One kuia interviewed while researching this article described the subject matter of mōteatea as "diverse as emotional experience, from the pain of the loss of a loved one (waiata tangi), to the illustrious whakapapa of a new child (oriori)". She felt that "the study of mōteatea is not easy for today's rangatahi. The search for a clear meaning and intent of the kaitito (composer) and the context of how it was performed can be difficult to understand without guidance. The language can be classical with unfamiliar vocabulary; there are references to places and tūpuna that are unfamiliar to rangatahi today especially without the help of kaumātua to 'de-code' the intricate detail and metaphor". [5]

Mōteatea are a window to an ancient world and considered to be tapu and approached with respect. A kaumātua interviewed further said, "Traditional mōteatea create a link between bygone and contemporary Māori through the lyrics and tone. Composed without the accompaniment of modern-day musical instruments, their beauty and authenticity is captured in its delivery. Unique to Māori, mōteatea are often presented as supporting evidence by different hapū before the Waitangi Tribunal, evidence that is often unchallenged". Timoti Karetu⁴ feels that clear pronunciation and attention to the words together with using facial expressions/body to convey emotion is very important when reciting mōteatea. Today we are used to listening to pop songs which have varied melodies in major and minor keys. Mōteatea might sound dirge-like to our modern ears but are poetic and soulful records of Te Ao Māori which deserve deeper investigation.

Two mōteatea

While kaitito still compose contemporary mōteatea today, the mōteatea that will be evaluated in this section are traditional. Performers on the Matatini stage may perform either contemporary or traditional. "E pā tō hau" composed by Te Rangiamoa is a famous waiata tangi and while it is a lament for the death of Te Wano, a Ngāti Apakura chief it is also a lament for the unjust confiscation of the tribe's land.

"Ka eke ki Wairaka"⁵ is a famous waiata aroha composed by Rihi Puhīwahine of Ngā Tūwharetoa. Puhīwahine's brothers separated her from Te Toko, her lover. Te Toko was already married and so Puhīwahine would have been a second wife and of less status. As she was high born her brothers would not allow for the union and she expressed her sorrow through the words of the waiata which make an imaginary trip back to her lover expressing that it was not her wish to be separated, "kotahi koa koe i mihia iho ai" he is who she desires.

Both of these mōteatea are about real events – one which affected a rohe and the other a woman's broken heart. Both contain issues which, when their meanings are explained, help open up Te Ao Māori.

Evaluation and significance of Te Matatini

Te Matatini is important because it contributes to keeping Māori culture and Te Reo Māori alive and exciting for current and future generations. When interviewing a matua about the importance of this festival he said, "Te Matatini provides a platform for Māori to express their language, culture, heritage, and identity ... [it] fosters self-motivation and confidence within Te Ao Māori, attributes that have led to a growth of Māori participation and presence in everyday Aotearoa livelihood". He went on to say that, "Kapa haka is important as it is often used as a tool to vent dissatisfaction and/or disapproval of issues or politics that affect Māori". Te Matatini will continue to inspire and evolve as it is "an event by and for Māori". It is unique to Aotearoa. [3]

³ Royal, Te Ahukaramu Charles. 4 February 1997. Mōteatea and the Transmission of History. Paper delivered to the Otaki Historical Society.

⁴ Interviewed on Te Karere TVNZ, February 26 2013

⁵ Ngata, A. 1959. *Nga Moteatea*. A.H. & A. W. Reed Ltd. Wellington, New Zealand.