

In the Hands of Te Kore

Toi Māori moving beyond gender

The patience, collective nature, and tactile act of creating with my hands connect me to something larger than myself. In te ao Māori, mahi ā-ringā/mahi toi are not simply artistic practices; they are vessels of whakapapa, preserving pūrākau and carrying the mātauranga of our tīpuna through generations. Our hands can become a portal to Te Kore, the boundless void of unlimited potential and becoming, where creation, transformation, and possibility emerge. As an urban Māori who has often felt whakamā about not yet having my reo, toi Māori has become a vital pathway back to my Māoritanga. However, being takatāpui, I have also questioned the gendered roles imposed by both te ao Māori and te ao Pākehā. This piece explores how colonial frameworks narrowed Māori understandings of gender through tikanga, toi Māori, and storytelling, and I speak to the contemporary practices of Te Ana o Hine, the first wāhine carving shed.

Before colonisation, Māori society operated through systems of balance, reciprocity, and collective responsibility rather than rigid hierarchies. While different roles existed for wāhine and tāne, these roles were often complementary and shaped by the needs of the hapū rather than fixed binaries. Te reo Māori itself reflects this fluidity through gender-neutral language such as “ia” and “tana,” revealing a worldview less concerned with strict gender categorisation than Victorian Britain.

When James Busby arrived in 1832 as

the first British Resident, he sought to establish relationships with rangatira in ways that aligned with British political structures and authority. Events such as He Whakaputanga, Declaration of the Independence of New Zealand (1835), and the choosing of Te Kara (1834) increasingly positioned chiefs as sole decision-makers, despite tikanga Māori traditionally valuing collective hapū-based governance. Colonisers largely negotiated with men, reinforcing patriarchal Christian ideals that reshaped Māori understandings of gender. As a result, contemporary assumptions that wāhine universally “could not carve” overlook the diversity of tikanga across iwi and hapū, each of whom maintained their own ways of regulating relationships, roles, and cultural practice.

Whakairo has often been framed as a highly tapu and predominantly male domain, particularly because carvings embody tūpuna and those who have passed into the realm of Hine-nui-te-pō. Within some tikanga, wāhine as life-givers were kept separate from these spaces as a form of protection. However, pre-colonial understandings of tapu and noa were far more fluid than rigid colonial binaries suggest. As explored by Manuka Henare, tapu and noa coexist as interconnected forces rather than opposites. Wāhine could embody both states simultaneously; menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth were understood as deeply tapu, while wāhine also held the power to whakanoa and restore balance.

Tikanga also differed greatly between iwi and hapū. The story of Mihi Kōtukutuku Stirling illustrates these tensions. In 1925, she challenged Te Arawa tikanga restricting whaikōrero to men, asserting her own iwi’s understanding that speaking rights were determined by mana rather than gender. Similarly, while raranga is commonly associated with wāhine, collective survival required shared knowledge. Practical necessities such as repairing fishing nets meant tāne would also have held weaving mātauranga, reflecting the adaptability and interconnectedness central to Māori life.

These ongoing conversations around tikanga, tapu, and gender continue to evolve through contemporary Māori carving spaces such as Te Ana o Hine at Te Tuhi. Led by wāhine, the collective was created to nurture and empower wāhine taketake and others who face barriers within the carving world. The name refers to “the cave of Hine,” honouring the mana of atua hine while also referencing the whare tangata, acknowledging wāhine Māori as the nurturers and life givers to our mokopuna.

The collective demonstrates that wāhine carvers are not “breaking tikanga,” but instead participating in ongoing tikanga conversations that have always shifted across iwi, hapū, and time. Hollie Tawhiao speaks about learning whakairo from her father after the tapu was lifted, with her pāpā questioning why half of Māoridom should be excluded from such an

enriching practice. Zena Elliott explores gender fluidity, Māori sovereignty, and whakairo as rongoā, while Ngaroma Riley emphasises the exchange of mauri between the artist and rākau. Despite growing understandings of the fluidity of tapu and noa, many wāhine are still warned that they or their whānau will be cursed for carving. The persistence of these narratives only reinforces the importance of the kaupapa and the resilience of these mana wāhine.

Toi Māori reveals that tikanga has never been static, but shaped through relationships, collective wellbeing, and the realities of each generation. Through whakairo, raranga, and other forms of mahi toi, knowledge is carried forward while remaining open to reinterpretation and growth. Contemporary spaces such as Te Ana o Hine show how wāhine and takatāpui are continuing these conversations, reclaiming pathways into practices once framed as inaccessible. Rather than rejecting tradition, they reaffirm the adaptability already embedded within te ao Māori. In returning to our hands, our stories, and our creative practices, we also return to whakapapa, to healing, and to the limitless potential of Te Kore.

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