The Healing Power of Māori Women's Ancestral Mark

By Shonelle Wana, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interaction between feminist and Indigenous epistemologies with a particular focus on Māori women in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and the contributions of Mana Wahine theory (the authority of Māori women). Māori are the Indigenous people of Aotearoa, with connections to land, environment, cultural traditions, and a worldview shaped by whakapapa (genealogy), wairua (spirituality), and collective identity. Colonization disrupted many of these traditions; however, Māori women have continued to hold and transmit Indigenous knowledge through the generations. This paper validates the healing practice of moko kauae (traditional female chin tattoo) as a prime example of Mana Wahine. The apaper examines how Western feminist approaches can both align with and diverge from Indigenous ways of knowing. Drawing on Mana Wahine theory and the lived experiences of Māori women, it affirms the centrality of cultural identity in understanding Māori women's health and healing.

Keywords: Mana Wahine, moko kauae, Māori women, Indigenous healing, decolonization, whakapapa, Indigenous epistemologies, cultural identity

Introduction

Before colonization, Māori communities upheld a worldview that viewed gender roles as complementary. They recognized Māori women as leaders, healers, and knowledge holders, not confined to caregiving roles. Their authority was affirmed through positions such as tohunga (experts), as whare tangata (the house of life: womb), and as kaitiaki (guardians) of knowledge (Binney & Chaplin 1990). These roles reflected a deeply embedded cultural framework in which mana wāhine was valued and passed down intergenerationally (Mikaere 2011).

The arrival of European missionaries introduced patriarchal ideologies that elevated men above women and imposed a Western worldview onto Māori social structures. This colonial lens systematically devalued the status of Māori women and displaced them from leadership roles they had held for generations (Pihama 2001). Traditional practices, such as moko kauae, were condemned as symbols of primitiveness, despite their deep cultural significance as markers of strength, leadership, and service to the collective (Pihama 2010). What had once affirmed mana wāhine was reframed as shameful under colonial rule. This was not

incidental; it was a calculated effort to undermine Māori sovereignty by targeting wāhine and the vital cultural roles they embodied within Māori society..

In response to the ongoing marginalization and silencing of Māori women under colonial systems, Mana Wahine theory emerged as a framework for reclaiming voice, authority, and cultural identity (Simmonds 2009). Grounded in the lived experiences, whakapapa, and epistemologies of Māori women, Mana Wahine theory affirms the right of Māori women to define their realities and articulate their own narratives. It offers a direct challenge to the racist, sexist, and colonial ideologies that have historically sought to undermine Māori women's roles, cultural practices, and pathways to healing. Pihama (2001) describes Mana Wahine as not simply an adaptation of feminism; it is a theoretical framework grounded in te ao Māori (Māori world) and shaped by the unique experiences of Māori women.

This paper explores healing through the integration of Mana Wahine theory and moko kauae, demonstrating how these two frameworks operate together as both spiritual and political acts of reclamation for Māori women. While feminist theory has long examined the body as a site of resistance and empowerment, Indigenous women globally have called for theoretical frameworks grounded in their own cosmologies, cultural values, and histories of colonization (Phillips 2012). For Māori women, the resurgence of moko kauae represents more than a visual or aesthetic revival; it is a profound expression of identity. It serves as a conduit to ancestral connection and spiritual healing, anchoring the physical body within a continuum of memory, whakapapa, and purpose (Wana 2021).

For many Māori women, healing involves a return to these foundations and a conscious unlearning of internalized colonial ideologies. It is a process of remembering the embodied knowledge carried in our stories, practices, and spiritual lineage. By centering moko kauae, Mana Wahine theory, and the lived experiences of Māori women, this article offers a form of restoration that supports both individual well-being and collective resurgence.

Feminist and Indigenous Epistemologies

The relationship between feminist theory and Indigenous epistemologies is both nuanced and generative. These frameworks often intersect in their critiques of systemic oppression and patriarchal dominance; however, they are grounded in distinct ontological foundations (Bardwell-Jones & McLaren 2020). Western feminist thought emerged from liberal traditions that sought to challenge gender-based inequities within patriarchal societies. In contrast, Indigenous peoples embed their knowledge systems in ancestral teachings, spiritual worldviews, and the interconnectedness of all life forms (Waters 2000). Within many Indigenous paradigms, communities understand gender as spiritually complementary and balanced rather than hierarchical. Māori knowledge is

not merely intellectual or abstract; it is lived and embodied. Epistemology is inherently intertwined with ontology; how we know is inseparable from how we are. Māori knowledge systems are grounded in a worldview that emphasizes the interconnectedness of the self with the whenua (land), whakapapa, and the spiritual dimensions of existence. This holistic approach reflects a relational understanding of being that permeates every aspect of life (Nicholson 2020). While feminist theory has made significant contributions to challenging systems of inequality, it has not always adequately accounted for the depth of interconnectedness that underpins Indigenous epistemologies.

Naomi Simmonds (2011) argues that Western feminist frameworks frequently fail to account for the full impact of colonization on Māori women, particularly the spiritual dimensions of that impact. As a result, Mana Wahine theory is not a derivative of Western feminism but an independent and culturally grounded framework. Due to the fundamental differences between Western feminist frameworks and Indigenous worldviews, Māori women have often found themselves navigating spaces that failed to reflect their cultural realities or values.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some Māori women participated in the temperance movement, a campaign aimed at addressing the social harms caused by alcohol. While this movement provided an opportunity for Māori women to engage in public discourse and advocacy, it came with cultural compromises. To gain acceptance among non-Māori women who were influenced by Christian morality and Victorian ideals, colonial and missionary pressures compelled Māori women to forgo traditional practices, such as receiving moko kauae (Pihama 2010). In this context, Western feminist theorists have at times reproduced colonial patterns by assuming a universal female experience, thereby overlooking the distinct histories, lived realities, and cultural epistemologies of Indigenous women.

For Māori women, the struggle for equity extends beyond resisting patriarchy; it also involves challenging the impacts of colonization and the erosion of Māori knowledge systems (Mikaere 2011). Moko kauae, a sacred design of identity and leadership, was viewed through a colonial lens as primitive and inappropriate. This historical example illustrates how colonization often required Māori to suppress aspects of their identity in order to be acknowledged within dominant societal structures. The significance of moko kauae extends beyond its design and is more than just ink on the skin. With each line emerges an invisible line that is only revealed when the skin is marked. The visible and unseen lines represent the unification of the body and soul, as well as the connection between the world of light and the world of spirit (Winitana 2011). Moko (traditional Māori tattoo) has a history that dates to when Māori lived in two worlds—the spiritual and the physical—and could freely travel between both (Mead 2003). According to Te Awekotuku (2012), the painful process of receiving moko was a transformative experience, marking a milestone and transition into a new role.

Years of cultural reconnection, self-reflection, and healing preceded my own journey toward receiving moko kauae. Before undertaking this sacred commitment, I developed the Moko Wahine Framework as a model founded on Māori values, identity, and leadership, which emerged from both my doctoral research and an intimate process of personal transformation. Spiritual guidance inspired the framework and led me to understand that moko kauae is not simply a symbol but a sacred calling.

As the creator of this framework, I understood that its design needed to be identifiable as a Mana Wahine symbol and serve as a culturally authentic model of Māori Women's leadership (Wana 2021). Grounded in Mana Wahine theory, the Moko Wahine Framework draws inspiration from the sacred geometry of moko kauae, specifically that worn by my great-great-grandmother.

The design symbolizes the alignment of thought, action, and intention. Six interwoven principles guide the design, which is visually represented by three lines on each side of the moko kauae design, mirroring balance, duality, and harmony. These values were lived and embodied in traditional Māori women's leadership.

A leader guided by the principles of the Moko Wahine Framework upholds tika by doing what is right according to Māori values, even in the face of pressure. With pono, they lead with authenticity and self-awareness, staying true to themselves even when it is uncomfortable.

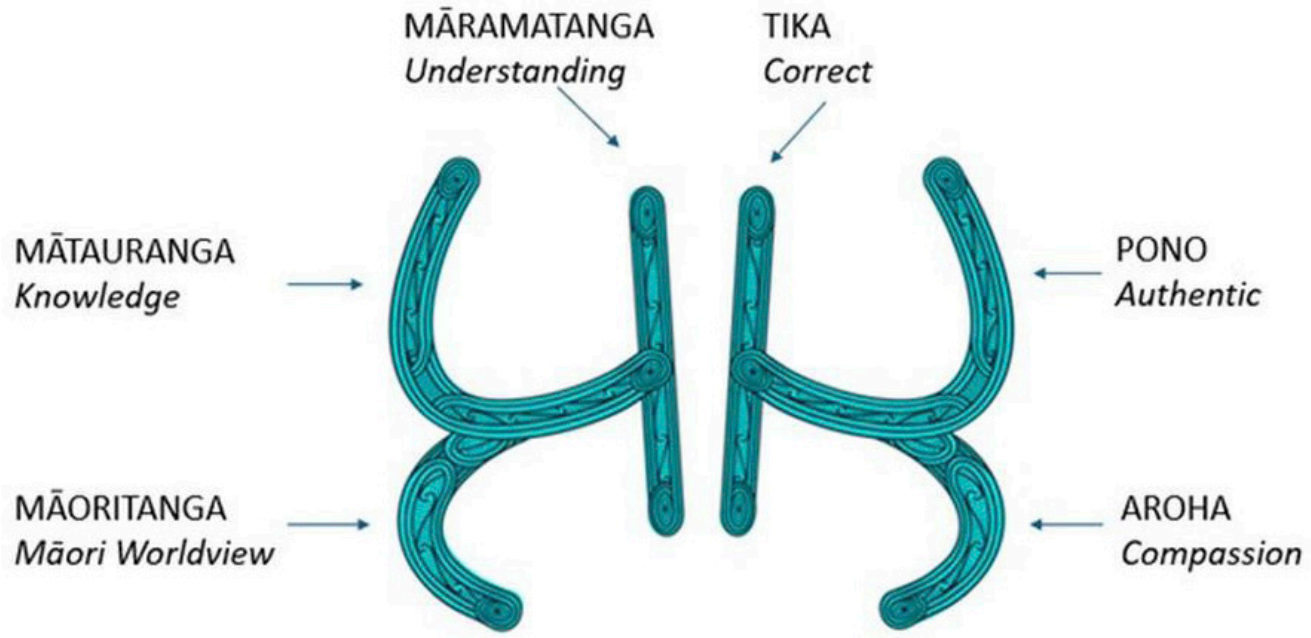

Figure 1
Moko Wahine Framework. 2021. Graphic by Shonelle Wana

Aroha grounds them in compassion, enabling deep listening, acknowledging others, and serving the collective without a personal agenda. Through māramatanga, they gain insight from lived experience, connecting the dots to guide others with clarity. Mātauranga drives their commitment to continuous learning, unlearning, and relearning in service of their people. Finally, Māoritanga positions their leadership from a Māori worldview, allowing them to navigate multiple worlds while remaining firmly grounded in identity and whakapapa.

Consistent with Smith's (1999) assertion that kaupapa Māori (Māori way of knowing and doing) research must remain accountable to the communities it serves, the framework maintains a responsibility to uphold and reflect the values, experiences, and aspirations of Māori. Inspired by the traditional Māori women leaders inherited characteristics, the Moko Wahine Framework serves as a culturally authentic guide to support current and future Māori women in leadership. It does not seek to adapt Māori women to fit within Western paradigms of leadership but rather affirms the validity and strength of leadership grounded in Māori worldviews and whakapapa.

In many respects, the Moko Wahine Framework can also be understood as a model of healing. It invites Māori women to see themselves not as fractured by trauma, but as whole beings moving through healing processes with purpose and grace. Each principle supports a return to our traditional values in the face of colonization, racism and survival.

Receiving my moko kauae was not a coincidence. It was a natural progression in the journey that unfolded through the creation of the Moko Wahine Framework. Rather than an endpoint, it marked a significant step toward embodying the values and principles I had been articulating in my research. The moko kauae became a visible, lived manifestation of the framework itself, engraved not only in theory but now revealed on my skin. The ceremony that accompanied it—the karakia (prayers) and the tears shed in that sacred moment—affirmed that the framework was not simply an intellectual exercise, but a spiritually led process of embodiment, identity, and leadership.

Collective Healing Through Sacred Lines

The decision to receive moko kauae is not influenced by aesthetic trends or superficial motivations but instead emerges from a sacred desire to reconnect with whakapapa, wairua and mana wahine, the inherent strength and authority of being a Māori woman. Moko kauae re-establishes the wearer's connection to her tīpuna (ancestors), her whenua (land) and her whānau (family). Through this action wāhine experience a renewed sense of balance and an embodied sense of wellbeing that grounds them in both cultural belonging and spiritual purpose.

Healing for Māori women cannot be confined to Western biomedical paradigms. It is holistic, relational and deeply interconnected. This form of healing involves reclaiming what colonization sought to erase through the Tohunga Suppression Act 1907, which outlawed our voices, our healing

practices, and our spiritual connection to the environment and the sacred realm (Mikaere 2011).

For many wāhine, the healing journey toward receiving moko kauae begins well before the ink meets the skin. It is often initiated by a stirring, an intuitive sense, a tohu (spiritual sign) or a quiet calling from the ancestors. The period leading up to the ceremony is frequently marked by intentional reflection, karakia and ritual cleansing. This preparatory process nurtures the heart, aligning the individual for the sacred responsibility and transformation that moko kauae represents.

When the moment arrives to receive moko kauae, it is not simply a scheduled appointment; it is a sacred ceremony. The space is often surrounded by whānau, resonant with waiata (song), karanga (ceremonial call), and the shared emotion of the occasion. It is a deeply spiritual and transformative moment, rich with ancestral presence. The tohunga tā moko (traditional tattoo expert) is not merely an artist or technician; they are a spiritual conduit, an active vessel through which the mauri (life force) and sacred intent of the process are carried and expressed. Their role is to guide the ritual with reverence, acknowledging that what unfolds is part of something much greater than the individual.

In my own journey, the call to receive moko kauae had always been present like a quiet and persistent knowing that accompanied me through many seasons of life. For years, I carried trauma, both personal and intergenerational. I had learned to bear it silently, to keep moving forward and to smile. As the time of preparation approached, I found myself wrestling with internal conflict and moments of deep self-doubt. To navigate these emotions, I sought guidance from my tribal spiritual leader, whose wisdom helped me to reconnect with my purpose.

During this period, I also began to receive dreams and subtle signs from the spiritual realm, like gentle affirmations that brought reassurance. Whenever uncertainty surfaced about my worthiness to wear moko kauae, these spiritual messages would return, calming my fears and reaffirming that I was walking the path intended for me. The moment I received my moko kauae, a profound internal shift occurred. It felt as though I had finally returned home to the deepest part of myself.

As the lines were taking form and the needle traced its path across my chin and then my lips, tears began to fall but not from physical pain, from the overwhelming presence of my ancestors. I could feel them wrapping me in their unconditional love, strength, and guidance. In that sacred moment I felt wholly supported and fully seen. My moko kauae was not merely an external marking, it was a spiritual homecoming and a powerful reconnection to those who had walked before me.

For many Māori women, the decision to receive moko kauae is not made lightly nor swiftly, but rather a gradual unfolding. In his doctoral research, Turumakina Duley (2025), a respected tohunga tā moko investigated the lived experiences of Māori women who had received their moko kauae.

One participant stated:

Getting my moko was a deeply emotional experience. It was a way of reclaiming my identity and expressing the pain and anger that colonization has caused. It's like wearing my heart on my face and it's a beautiful release of all those suppressed emotions (Duley 2025, 142).

Another woman spoke of the aftermath:

Since receiving moko kauae I do hold myself differently. The responsibility of moko kauae was huge. At the time, I was in a place where I wanted to do the work with moko kauae, at home, at the marae (tribal village) and in my workplace. I placed more expectations on myself; I'm still working on them. There was huge personal growth. I had to become immune to people staring, as I came to a point in my life that having moko kauae was already a part of me, was ingrained in me, was already in all of my being since before I was born. I am still learning (Duley 2025, 137).

Others spoke of the intergenerational impact:

I feel accountable, like being a mentor, carrying the moko kauae for our whānau and advocating for moko kauae to our hapū (subtribe), especially for our rangatahi (youth). But for our older ones in the lost generation, they're still struggling with the notion of carrying kauae moko, so I feel accountable to them. In terms of the wider community, I feel proud to carry it in the community (Duley 2025, 134).

I just think it was this huge gap caused by colonization or the loss of moko kauae and the way that we tell our stories. In the native way. You know, beneath the moko kauae there's pūrākau (stories), karakia, waiata, all those other things that are attached to it, moko is just the visual display of it, but there's a whole heap of kōrero (conversation) that sits behind it, that's lost knowledge. My family lost touch with our Māori heritage for generations. We were disconnected from our culture and traditions and it felt like a piece of our identity was missing. When I got my moko, it was a way of reclaiming what was lost, of reconnecting with my roots (Duley 2025, 145).

These experiences are reflected in my own journey also. Moko kauae is a portal for healing not just for the individual, but for generations past and future. It says: *We are not invisible. We are not ashamed. We are sacred. We are still here.*

Each Māori woman who chooses to wear moko kauae carries not only her personal narrative but also the voices of her tīpuna and the aspirations of those yet to come. This form of healing is profound, reaching far beyond the individual. When a woman steps into her role with moko kauae etched on her chin, she actively resists colonial narratives that once sought to erase her existence, silence her voice, and confine her to the domestic sphere (Te Awekotuku 2003). Every act of reclamation reaffirms identity and sends powerful ripples of inspiration, resilience, and empowerment throughout the wider whānau, hapū, and iwi (tribe).

In many communities, wānanga (gathering), which are dedicated spaces for learning and

communal engagement, have evolved into profound sites of intergenerational healing, particularly when focused on moko kauae. These gatherings bring together rangatahi and kaumātua (elders), side by side to share pūrākau, waiata, heartfelt conversations, and moments of collective emotion. While integral to these events are the transmission of tikanga (Māori cultural protocols) associated with moko kauae, they also serve as nurturing environments where participants can openly address the impacts of colonization, process communal and personal loss, and foster reconnection to self, to culture, and to one another (Duley 2025).

These forms of gathering revive the collective healing traditions of Māori society. They reflect a time when people transmitted knowledge orally through storytelling, song, ritual, and lived experience rather than capturing it in written texts. Such practices align with what Smith (1999) describes as Indigenous ways of knowing, of forms of learning that are not merely informational but experiential and relational in nature.

Moko kauae functions as a living archive, calling forth the names of our ancestors and preserving their memory for future generations. As more Māori women across Aotearoa and the wider world reclaim moko kauae, a growing network of healing and resurgence is taking shape. These once-silenced faces now speak with pride surpassing time and space.

Unapologetically Indigenous

The public visibility of moko kauae, whether in workplaces, on television, or across digital platforms, constitutes a powerful act of decolonization that directly challenges entrenched colonial ideologies. However, despite its cultural significance and resurgence, racism continues to be a lived reality in Aotearoa. Māori women who wear moko kauae frequently encounter online harassment and derogatory commentary, including being labelled as “ugly,” “disgusting” or likened to having a “barcode” on their chin. Such responses are not merely offensive; they reflect persistent efforts to undermine Māori identity, autonomy, and expressions of mana wāhine through ridicule and social control (NZ Herald 2022).

In the face of such hostility, Māori women continue to rise. Their presence, visibility, and unapologetic expression of cultural identity represent a profound assertion of resilience, leadership, and the enduring strength of Māori sovereignty. The act of wearing moko kauae, despite ongoing racialized scrutiny, demonstrates a refusal to be silenced and a commitment to reclaiming space, both physically and symbolically, as Māori women (Pihama 2001).

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) states, decolonization is not only concerned with dismantling colonial structures but also with regenerating Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices. Moko kauae encapsulates this dual function. It stands as a visible challenge to the colonial imposition of shame, silencing,

and erasure, while also serving to reaffirm and revitalise mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) systems that have persisted despite prolonged efforts to suppress them.

The wearing of moko kauae also disrupts colonial beauty standards and resists the commodification of Māori culture. In an age dominated by social media filters and homogenized ideals of attractiveness, moko kauae reclaims beauty through a distinctly Māori lens. This assertion of visual sovereignty is crucial; it challenges the colonial gaze and affirms cultural identity on Māori terms. The presence of Māori women adorned with moko kauae serves as a powerful reminder of histories of dispossession, the taking of land, the suppression of language, and the regulation of bodies, while simultaneously declaring survival, dignity, and leadership (Pihama 2018).

As moko kauae becomes increasingly visible in public life, it compels wider society to confront aspects of history that have long been ignored or suppressed. Its presence initiates critical conversations about colonization, systemic racism, and intergenerational trauma.

Conclusion

The resurgence of moko kauae honours our tīpuna kuia (ancestral women) who once wore their moko with pride and authority. This act of continuation affirms that Indigenous knowledge systems and ceremonial practices remain vital modes of healing and cultural survival (Pihama 2018). The future of moko kauae lies not only in its visible rebirth but also in its ability to nurture whānau, hapū, and iwi, inspiring strength, courage, and a collective identity. For this sacred practice to thrive, it must be actively supported through physical, cultural, and political spaces where Māori women can receive moko kauae without fear of judgment or marginalization.

As Pihama (2001) reminds us, Mana Wahine theory is the voice of our mothers, daughters, and sisters. It is a theoretical and lived framework that enables Māori women to reclaim and reimagine the world through our own lens. Within this lens, moko kauae remains a dynamic and living expression of both present identity and future potential.

Moko kauae also presents a critical challenge to health practitioners, educators, and policymakers to recognize the cultural and spiritual dimensions of Māori wellbeing in a meaningful way. Holistic health models, such as Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie 1998), align with traditional Māori healing practices; however, their application must move beyond mere acknowledgment to genuine integration.

Through my own experience, I have come to understand that receiving moko kauae is not an endpoint but a powerful beginning. It marked the opening of a deeply layered healing process, revealing wounds I had long carried but never fully acknowledged. Receiving moko kauae brought clarity, affirmation, and a renewed relationship with both me and my tīpuna. I have also witnessed this profound transformation in other wāhine who have walked this path. The tears shed in these moments are a result

of emotional release, spiritual return, and reconnecting with one's origins.

It is essential to acknowledge that for some Māori women, this path is shaped by intergenerational silence, inherited shame, or a lingering fear of rejection, whether from whānau, hapū, or the broader society. Others may experience disconnection from their iwi, from their whenua, or from te reo Māori (the Māori language), each of which can create a sense of isolation or hesitation. These lived realities are not personal failings but the ongoing effects of colonization and cultural disruption. We must approach them with empathy, understanding, and a commitment to healing that respects each woman's pace and position within her journey.

As we move forward, it is our collective responsibility to ensure that the healing practice of moko kauae is safeguarded and sustained. This requires a commitment to upholding tikanga (Māori cultural protocols), supporting the expertise and authority of tohunga tā moko, and nurturing environments in which the transmission of moko kauae can occur. Just as importantly, it involves recognizing and honoring the leadership of Māori women who have upheld and revitalized this sacred tradition across generations, ensuring its continuation for the wellbeing of people.

The moko kauae on our chin is the visible manifestation of our story, our struggle, our survival and our sovereignty. It is a reminder that healing is possible. That our resilience is intergenerational. The answers we seek do not lie outside of us because they have always resided within us, within our bloodlines, our language, and our ceremonies. Grounded in Mana Wahine theory, moko kauae is a living assertion of Māori women's authority. It affirms that our experiences, our bodies, and our ways of knowing are valid, powerful, and essential to the cultural and spiritual resurgence of our people. Quite simply, moko kauae is a living affirmation of who we are, who we have always been, and who we continue to become.

GLOSSARY

Aotearoa – New Zealand

Māori – Indigenous peoples of New Zealand

Mana Wahine – the authority of a Māori women

Whakapapa – genealogy, lineage

Wairua – spirit, spirituality

Moko kauae – tradition chin tattoo for Māori women

Mana Wahine theory – unique experiences of Māori women

Tohunga – experts, spiritual guides

Whare tangata – the house of life; womb

Kaitiaki – guardians

Te ao Māori – Māori world

Whenua – land

Moko – traditional Māori tattoo

Tika – correct

Pono – authentic

Aroha – compassion; love

Māramatanga – understanding; enlightenment

Mātauranga – knowledge

Māoritanga – Māori worldview

Kaupapa Māori – Māori way of knowing and doing

Karakia – prayer

Hapū – subtribe

Iwi – tribe

Whānau – family

Tīpuna – ancestors

Tohu – spiritual sign

Waiata – song

Karanga – ceremonial call

Tohunga tā moko - traditional tattoo expert

Mauri – life force

Marae – Tribal village

Rangatahi – youth; younger generation

Pūrākau – traditional narratives; stories

Kōrero – conversations; to speak

Wānanga – gatherings; place of higher learning

Kaumātua – elders

Tīpuna kuia - ancestral women

Te Whare Tapa Whā – Māori model for health developed by Sir Mason Durie

Wāhine – Māori women

Reo Māori – Māori language

Tikanga – Māori cultural protocols

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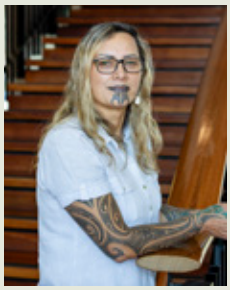

Shonelle Wana, Ph.D.

Dr. Shonelle Wana is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi in Aotearoa, New Zealand. She specializes in Māori women's leadership and Indigenous development. With a Doctorate in Indigenous Development and Advancement, her research centers on advancing Māori women and upholding the traditional values of her people. She is a published scholar, Marsden-funded Associate Investigator and recipient of an HRC Explorer Grant as Primary Investigator for a project designing a Māori model of care for the elderly. Her work is informed by lived experience, academic rigour and deep tribal ties to her homelands. She is dedicated to ensuring that her research creates meaningful outcomes for her people and future generations.