Embodying Mana Wāhine

Rongoā as Identity, Body Sovereignty and Knowledge Transmission

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Māori healers navigate the reclamation and revitalization of rongoā Māori as a locus of cultural identity, bodily sovereignty, and intergenerational resilience. Drawing on qualitative interviews, the study employs a hybrid methodology combining Kaupapa Māori principles with Indigenous qualitative research methods. Findings highlight that rongoā is not solely a therapeutic modality but also a living expression of mana wāhine through identity, body sovereignty, and knowledge transmission. Participants describe rongoā as an embodied experience, a reclamation of bodily autonomy, and as a form of healing knowledge succession. By applying Indigenous epistemologies, we aim to demonstrate that rongoā supports identity reclamation, self-determination in healthcare, and the ongoing creation of Indigenous knowledge. This research contributes to the growing recognition of Indigenous healing systems as central to decolonization, wellbeing, and cultural resurgence.

Keywords: Rongoā Māori, mana wāhine, Kaupapa Māori

Introduction

Across Aotearoa | New Zealand a growing movement for political change, cultural reclamation and revitalization, Indigenous sovereignty, and embodied resistance is evident. Central to this movement is the resurgence of interest in, and practice of, rongoā Māori, a holistic system of healing grounded in whakapapa (genealogy), wairua (spirit/spirituality), and deep relationality with the natural world. While rongoā has long been recognised for its therapeutic value, it is increasingly understood as a cultural and political practice affirming Māori identity, spiritual continuity, and epistemology.[1,2,3,4,5,6]

[1] Annabel Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., *The Future of Ongoā Māori: Well-Being and Sustainability* (Institute of Environmental Science and Research Ltd, 2008).

[2] Donna Kerridge, *Rongoā Rākau Māori Herbal Medicine* (Auckland: Ora New Zealand, 2018).

[3] Glenis Mark, "Rongoā Māori (Traditional Māori Healing) Through the Eyes of Māori Healer: Sharing the Healing while Keeping the Tapu" (Doctoral thesis, Massey University, 2012).

[4] Glenis Mark et al., *Cultural, Ethical, Research, Legal and Scientific* (CERLS) Issues of Rongoā Māori Research (Whanganui, New Zealand: Whakauae Research for Māori Health and Development, 2018).

[5] Bruno Marques et al., "Adapting Traditional Healing Values and Beliefs into Therapeutic Cultural Environments for Health and Well-Being," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 1 (2022): 426, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19010426.

[6] Erena Wikaire, "The Past, Present and Future of Traditional Indigenous Healing: What Was, Is, and Will Be, Rongoā Māori" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Auckland, 2020).

Within this framework, wāhine Māori (Māori women) are regarded as knowledge holders, healers, and descendants of atua wāhine (female deities), playing a pivotal role in embodying the many dimensions of rongoā.

Despite their centrality to Māori cosmology, epistemology, and society, the voices and experiences of wāhine within rongoā practice have often been overlooked or subsumed within broader narratives of Māori health. This article addresses that gap by foregrounding the lived realities of Māori women who engage in rongoā both as a healing modality and as an expression of *mana wāhine*, through which Māori women enact authority, agency, and ancestral power. Through centering wāhine narratives, the study explores how rongoā becomes a site through which Māori women enact body sovereignty, reclaim cultural identity, and transmit intergenerational knowledge.

Mana wāhine is both a theoretical and methodological framework grounded in the lived realities, genealogical knowledge, and spiritual philosophies of Māori women.[7] Emerging as an Indigenous feminist critique, it resists the imposition of colonial worldviews and reaffirms Māori women's centrality in the maintenance of cultural, spiritual, and political life.[8,9] At its core, mana wāhine honors the multiple roles and identities traversed by wāhine Māori across the life-course, recognizing their intrinsic mana as derived from atua wāhine, whenua (land), and whakapapa.[10] The etymology "wa" denoting time/space, and "hine" signifying female essence, situates wāhine cosmologically within Māori knowledge systems.[11,12] As a theoretical orientation, mana wāhine is informed by, but distinct from, Western feminist traditions. It prioritizes mātauranga Māori, asserts Indigenous female authority, and critiques the intersecting oppressions of colonialism, patriarchy, and cultural marginalisation.[13,14] Critically, mana wāhine is not only conceptual; it is embodied, with material, spiritual, and political consequences in the everyday lives of Māori women.

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[7] Aria Graham, "Tika Tonu: Young Māori Mothers? Experiences of Wellbeing Surrounding the Birth of Their First Tamaiti" (Doctoral dissertation, Victoria University of Wellington, 2018).

[8] Donna Campbell, "Ngā Kura a Hineteiwaiwa: The Embodiment of Mana Wahine in Māori Fibre Arts" (Doctoral thesis, University of Waikato, 2019).

[9] Leonie Pihama, "Tihei Mauri Ora: Honouring Our Voices: Mana Wahine as a Kaupapa Māori Theoretical Framework" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Auckland, 2001).

[10] Wikitoria Theresa August, "The Māori Female – Her Body, Spirituality, Sacredness and Mana: A Space Within Spaces" (Master's thesis, University of Waikato, 2004).

[11] Campbell, "Ngā Kura a Hineteiwaiwa."

[12] Pihama, "Tihei Mauri Ora."

[13] Pihama, "Tihei Mauri Ora."

[14] Naomi Simmonds, "Mana Wahine: Decolonising Politics," in Mana Wahine Reader: A Collection of Writings 1999–2019, Volume II, edited by Leonie Pihama, Linda T. Smith, Naomi Simmonds, Joeliee Seed-Pihama, and Kirsten Gabel (Hamilton: Te Kotahi Research Institute, 2019), 105–22.

Rongoā Māori, often narrowly associated with plant-based remedies, must be situated within a broader Indigenous framework of holistic health and wellbeing. Traditionally inclusive of ritenga and karakia (rituals and prayer), rongoā rākau (herbal medicine), mirimiri (bodywork), wai (water therapies), and spiritual interventions, rongoā is a dynamic system which interweaves body, land, wairua, and ancestral intelligence.[15,16,17,18] It transcends biomedical paradigms, operating across physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.[19,20,21]

The concept of wairua, central to the practice of rongoā, is difficult to define, being akin to one's "soul" or "spirit." Wairua is a medium for ancestral communication, and a trans-temporal energy sustaining balance.[22,23]

Within te ao Māori (the Māori world), the body is not merely a biological vessel but a sacred site of mana, cosmology, and memory. The maternal body, in particular, is honored through the concept of whare tangata, or "the house of humanity." The kōpū or womb, which physically grows and nourishes the next generation, also links wāhine directly to Papatūānuku (Earth Mother) and the atua wāhine.[24,25] These connections are embedded in tikanga (customs) that uphold the tapu (sacredness) of the female form. However, colonization, by Christianity, patriarchy, and suppression of Indigenous knowledge, has profoundly disrupted these cosmologies. Aotearoa | New Zealand was colonized by the British in the 19th century through a series of actions that included the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi) in 1840. Although the Treaty was intended to establish a partnership between Māori and the Crown, the English version was used to justify British sovereignty, leading to widespread land confiscation, war, the erosion of Māori rights, language, authority, and healing systems.[26] Colonial frameworks reinterpreted

[15] Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., *The Future of Ongoā Māori*.

[16] Mason Durie, Whaiora: *Māori Health Development* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[17] Kerridge, *Rongoā Rākau Māori Herbal Medicine*.

[18] Mark, "Rongoā Māori."

[19] Glenis Mark et al., "Acknowledging the Māori Cultural Values and Beliefs Embedded in Rongoā Māori Healing," *International Journal of Indigenous Health* 12, no. 1 (2017): 75–92, https://doi.org/10.18357/ijih121201716902.

[20] Robert McGowan, "The Contemporary Use of Rongoā Māori: Traditional Māori Medicine" (Master's thesis, University of Waikato, 2000).

[21] Hukarere Valentine, "Kia Ngāwari ki te Awatea: The Relationship between Wairua and Māori Well-Being: A Psychological Perspective" (Doctoral thesis, Massey University, 2009).

[22] Mark et al., *CERLS Issues of Rongoā Māori Research*.

[23] Marques et al., "Adapting Traditional Healing Values."

[24] August, "The Māori Female."

[25] Kirsten A. Gabel, "Raranga, Raranga Taku Takapau: Healing Intergenerational Trauma through the Assertion of Mātauranga Ūkaipō," in *He Rau Murimuri Murimuri Aroha: Wāhine Māori Insights into Historical Trauma and Healing*, ed. C. Smith and R. Tinirau (Te Atawhai o te Ao, 2019), 16–27.

[26] Margaret Mutu, "To Honour the Treaty, We Must First Settle Colonisation (Moana Jackson 2015): The Long Road from Colonial Devastation to Balance, Peace and Harmony," *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand* 49, suppl. 1 (2019): 4–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/03036758.2019.1669670.

pūrākau (ancestral narratives) to center male figures, commodify the Māori maternal body, and marginalize wāhine within health, political, and spiritual spheres.[27,28,29]

Despite these disruptions, Māori women remain at the forefront of cultural resurgence. The reclamation of moko kauae (sacred chin tattoo), traditional birthing practices, and the revitalization of rongoā represent powerful acts of healing and resistance.[30,31] Such practices restore individual wellbeing and reassert the role of Māori women as cultural leaders and custodians of Indigenous futures. Tā moko, the act of creating a sacred tattoo, has been described as both a healing ritual and an archive of whakapapa and ancestral protection.[32] Similarly, the expansion of rongoā to include toi Māori (Māori arts) highlights the sensory, sonic, and visual dimensions embedded in both.[33,34]

Central to the endurance of these practices is intergenerational knowledge transmission. Grandmothers, mothers, and aunties all serve as living repositories of mātauranga; holding, and passing forward embodied, ecological, and spiritual understanding of health.[35,36] In this context, rongoā becomes both a healing modality and a conduit for ancestral memory and cultural continuity.

Te Ao Rauropi: Mapping the Biosphere of Rongoā Māori shares findings from a three-year research project undertaken with traditional Māori healers, practitioners and experts. Drawing on our study findings, we explore how wāhine Māori (Māori women) enact mana wāhine (female sovereignty or authority) through rongoā Māori. We posit rongoā Māori as a site of cultural identity, bodily sovereignty, and intergenerational knowledge. By centering on the experiences of healers that affirm Māori female bodies as sacred and sovereign, we argue that rongoā can be regarded as a living practice of resistance, renewal, and healing.

Methods

This study was grounded in a Kaupapa Māori theoretical framework. Kaupapa Māori is an Indigenous research paradigm that serves both as a methodological approach and an

[27] Pihama, "Tihei Mauri Ora."

[28] August, "The Māori Female."

[29] Gabel, "Raranga, Raranga Taku Takapau."

[30] Mera Penehira, "Mouri Tu, Mouri Moko, Mouri Ora! Moko as a Wellbeing Strategy" (Doctoral thesis, University of Waikato, 2011).

[31] Naomi Simmonds, "Honouring Our Ancestors: Reclaiming the Power of Māori Maternities," in *Indigenous Experiences of Pregnancy and Birth*, ed. Hannah T. Neufeld and Jaime Cidro (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2017), 1–19.

[32] Penehira, "Mouri Tu, Mouri Moko, Mouri Ora!"

[33] Maihi Potaka, "Whakarongo" (Master's thesis, Massey University, 2021).

[34] Wikaire, "The Past, Present and Future of Traditional Indigenous Healing."

[35] Paulé Aroha Ruwhiu, "Ka Haere Tonu Te Mana o Ngā Wahine Māori: Māori Women as Protectors of Te Ao Māori Knowledge" (Master's thesis, Massey University, 2009).

[36] Kahutoi Mere Te Kanawa, "Taonga Tuku Iho: Intergenerational Transfer of Raranga and Whatu" (Doctoral thesis, University of Waikato, 2022).

epistemological stance. This positioning enabled a culturally aligned examination of mana wāhine within rongoā Māori. Kaupapa Māori research is defined by its orientation toward Māori self-determination. It is an approach to research that is conceptualized and undertaken by Māori, for Māori, and with Māori, and it prioritizes the aspirations, values, and ways of knowing embedded within te ao Māori.[37,38] This framework was particularly well-suited to a study focused on wāhine Māori, whose roles as cultural healers, knowledge holders, and sovereign agents are often obscured or marginalized within Western research paradigms. By privileging mana wāhine as both a lived reality and a theoretical lens, Kaupapa Māori provides the necessary foundation for honoring the spiritual, embodied dimensions of wāhine engagement in rongoā Māori.

The research design integrated mātauranga Māori with qualitative interpretive methods, enabling cultural grounding alongside methodological rigor, analysis, and synthesis. This hybrid approach allowed the research team to remain culturally grounded while also engaging in rigorous interpretive processes appropriate to Indigenous health scholarship. Rongoā research guidance is drawn from the Cultural, Ethical, Research, Legal, and Scientific (CERLS) Guidelines, a document outlining essential criteria for the conduct of rongoā Māori research, including cultural integrity, full transparency, the upholding of healer rights, and methodological appropriateness.[39] The use of CERLS ensured that the research process aligned with the spiritual, ethical, and political dimensions of rongoā Māori and that the knowledge shared by wāhine participants was treated with the respect it demands.

Fifty-five participants were recruited using purposeful sampling and selected for their experiential knowledge and engagement with rongoā Māori as either healers, patients, or both.[40] Participants were located across several regions of Aotearoa, including Northland, Waikato, Whanganui/Manawatū, Hauraki in the North Island and Te Waipounamu (the South Island). Participants ranged in age from 20 to 80 years and represented a diversity of cultural backgrounds, with 45 identifying as Māori and 10 as Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent). Thirty-nine participants were women, and most were employed in education, health, or community sectors. Their roles as healers, patients, or both reflected the fluid and often overlapping positions Māori occupy within rongoā healing networks, further affirming the positioning emphasised by mana wāhine theory.

Following recruitment, participants engaged in two, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, individually or in groups, based on preference. Interviews were audio-recorded

[37] Leonia Pihama et al., "Creating Methodological Space: A Literature Review of Kaupapa Māori Research," *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 26, no. 1 (2002): 30–43.

[38] Shayne Walker et al., "An Exploration of Kaupapa Māori Research, Its Principles, Processes and Applications," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 9, no. 4 (2006): 331–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570600916049.

[39] Mark et al., *CERLS Issues of Rongoā Māori Research*.

[40] Lawrence A. Palinkas et al., "Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health* 42, no. 5 (2015): 533–44, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y.

and later transcribed for thematic analysis.[41,42] In keeping with tikanga Māori (Maori values and protocols), participants received koha (a gift of acknowledgement) in the form of grocery vouchers. Further, as a means of upholding principles of manaakitanga (hospitality) and reciprocity, each session was followed by a shared meal. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the New Zealand Ethics Committee (Protocol NZEC20_36).

Data collection and analysis occurred in an iterative and cyclical manner, consistent with Indigenous qualitative methodologies. Analysis was conducted using the Rourou Approach (literally 'basket,' used here to denote data analysis), a Kaupapa Māori method of knowledge interpretation grounded in the whakataukī: *'Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi'* ('With your basket of food and my basket of food, the people will be fed').[43,44] This framework honors the collaborative and co-constructed nature of Māori knowledge and is particularly suited to a study centred on mana wāhine and rongoā Māori, both of which are culturally based practices.

The Rourou approach involved: (1) individual thematic analysis of each kōrero; (2) cross-case comparison; (3) collaborative synthesis of insights; and (4) a kīnaki phase, supporting the creation of a visual biosphere map of rongoā Māori. The graphic synthesis is described elsewhere and serves to visually articulate the holistic nature of rongoā.[45] By weaving together Kaupapa Māori, mana wāhine, and the Rourou method, this study affirms the validity of embodied, spiritual, and relational knowledge in Indigenous health scholarship. The study recognizes rongoā as more than a healing modality; it is a site of sovereignty, whakapapa, and collective reclamation.

Findings

Three interwoven themes emerged from the broader *Te Ao Rauropi: Mapping the Biosphere of Rongoā Māori* research project. While the overarching study explored rongoā Māori broadly, the participant views presented here focused specifically on the pivotal role of wāhine in sustaining and revitalising cultural knowledge. The themes detailed include:

1. Standing Strong: Reclaiming Wāhine Identity and Whakapapa through Moko Kauae

2. Embodied Autonomy: Wāhine Sovereignty over Reproductive, Spiritual, and Healing Journeys

3. He Wāhine, He Puna Mātauranga: Intergenerational Transmission of Rongoā and Cultural Healing Practices

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[41] Ann Bowling, *Research Methods in Health: Investigating Health and Health Services* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2009).

[42] Robert E. Stake, "Case Studies," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd, 2000), 435–54.

[43] Mark, "Rongoā Māori."

[41] Glenis Mark et al., "Rourou Māori Methodological Approach to Research," *MAI Journal* 4, no. 1 (2015): 60–70.

[45] Glenis Mark et al., *Te Ao Rauropi* (2024), https://www.teaorauropi.co.nz/te-ao-rauropi-model.

Together, these themes illustrate how Māori women enact and sustain sovereignty, wellbeing, and whakapapa continuity in contemporary contexts. The wider study findings are reported elsewhere.[46]

Standing Strong: Reclaiming Wāhine Identity and Whakapapa through Moko Kauae

The reclamation of moko kauae by Māori women is a deeply personal and collective act of cultural resurgence, affirming identity, whakapapa, and mana wāhine. The following examples illuminate various dimensions of this journey, and although these excerpts are drawn from a single key informant, these narratives offer layered insights into the cultural, spiritual, and intergenerational dimensions of moko kauae. Firstly, this participant reflects on the role of wāhine who receive kauae (literally chin tatoo, but in this context is an abbreviation of moko kauae) as cultural pathfinders within their families and communities:

> … I feel many women who actually come to get kauae … are that person like me, [they] will stand alone in our families sort of representing te ao Māori … it is us who are carving a pathway… some of our whānau members … would like to follow, would like to learn about … kauae.
> Key Informant, Te Waipounamu

This excerpt highlights the experience of cultural leadership and solitude often felt by wāhine who choose to receive moko kauae, particularly in whānau contexts where te ao Māori has been fragmented by colonization. This participant acknowledges both the burden and beauty of being the first to reclaim this taonga (treasure), but also the hope that moko kauae is increasingly embraced within extended whānau networks, signalling a broader inclusivity in identity reclamation.

This participant then reflected on the symbolic significance of traditional Māori art forms and the celebration of mana wāhine within them:

> … our tūpuna were onto it. They reinforced … who you are and where you stand and where you come from in every single art form, and … our carved houses and there is a story on every wall whether it be a tukutuku (ornamental lattice work) panel or the tāhuhu (ridge pole of a house) on the spine or the heke (rafters), everything is done in a very deliberate way, on purpose. I think everything in our art forms … our wharenui (meeting houses), the body of a woman … they celebrate that mana wāhine, and that's I think something that got lost and pretty much squashed through colonization heavily, that mareikura taonga (treasure of nobly born females), and the mana of wāhine. I think our art forms spoke about that, that woman were celebrated for their wonderful abilities and skills … likened to Papatūānuku, our earth mother. Much of that kōrero (narrative) got lost and I think carving, the art form, survived in our houses and tukutuku … just about died completely,

[46] Mark et al., *Te Ao Rauropi*.

> but if it wasn't for those kuia (female elder) that took on kauae … they preserved it so that we could sit here now and look at each other.
> Key Informant, Te Waipounamu

This passage situates moko kauae within the broader cultural system of Māori art forms, which have long celebrated the centrality and sanctity of wāhine. Although colonization suppressed the visibility of mana wāhine, practices like moko kauae were sustained by kuia who ensured their survival. This practice served to reclaim personal identity but also restored intergenerational narratives of veneration, artistry, and spiritual continuity.

Embodied Autonomy: Wāhine Sovereignty over Reproductive, Spiritual, and Healing Journeys

The concept of body sovereignty within Indigenous and Māori contexts encompasses more than physical autonomy. Body sovereignty has been seen as the active resistance of colonial and biomedical impositions, definitions and measures as well as the reaffirmation of traditional knowledges and embodied experiences as a site of mana, and intuition.[47,48] The following narratives reveal how wāhine exercise sovereignty over their bodies through culturally based responses to health crises and reproductive decisions.

The first statement from a key informant in Whanganui/Manawatū, illustrates the convergence of biomedical intervention and Indigenous spiritual practice:

> … so I ended up going in to hospital and found out that I had low hemoglobin so I ended up having to have six lots of blood … pumped back into my body because my body was running on empty so … for us I guess as wāhine as well… our bodies are just layered with a whole lot of trauma and we just justify it constantly. And even when we are … well connected to the taiao (environment) … to ourselves and work in a rongoā space, we still manage to find ourselves … at these places [of unwellness?] … so I had to have six lots of blood … and … I really felt like I needed to do a pohiri (welcome) to welcome in this blood that … belonged to six different people and so I ended up making contact with my Nan and then with my rongoā group that I have … just to put the karakia (prayers) out … this is what my tinana (body) is going through right now. Which, you know, on another world it might look like it's really strange, this person is doing this, but that's how I felt about it. I felt that it needed a wātea (settling) and a whakatau (conclusion) … and so everyone that I spoke to … was like … that's kei te pai (good), and had already done up my … wairākau (herbal remedies) to send up to me … that's all done ā wairua (by spirit), … I was in the best place to receive the support that I needed in the

[47] August, "The Māori Female."

[48] Ashlea Gillon, "Body Sovereignty and Te Matatini: Thoughts from a Kaimātakitaki," *MAI Journal* 9, no. 2 (2020): 173–79.

> hospital but within that environment I also needed a wairua kaupapa (spiritual approach) as well to support me in that healthy journey.
> Key Informant, Whanganui/Manawatū

This comment conveys both the bodily trauma experience as well as the reclamation of spiritual and cultural control over the healing process. The Māori cultural protocols and practices of pōhiri, karakia, and the preparation of wairakau were deliberate actions that ensured the safety of the patient as they undertook a Western treatment. Completing these actions reaffirmed that sovereignty over the body included the right to contextualize medical treatment within one's own cultural beliefs, values and ethics, challenging the lack of patient choice often seen in Western healthcare systems.

The second excerpt, from a focus group participant in Waikato, explores body sovereignty in the context of fertility, contraception, and intentional conception:

> … I went to a wānanga (meeting) and they were talking about hormones and contraception and what that really does to your body and … I remember being told that … it is your body, it's yours, what's the point of calling it yours if you're gonna rely on something else in order to control it or to determine what's going on in that timeline? So … she had this big kōrero around contraception and she said, you don't need contraception, you have the control of your own body to be able to tell it what you want and what you don't want. I thought, alright … let's give this a crack then. And … for the next three years I practiced it and it worked … I told my body if I didn't want to, if I didn't want to hold a baby during this time … my body, my āhua (appearance), my wairua, we would not hold a baby at this time. And [partner's name] pestered me for about a year … dropping hints for one more baby. And … we had the conversation … and I said, oh, fine, I will do one more, don't ever ask me to be pregnant for you ever again. And that was on the Saturday night and on the Wednesday morning I woke up and I looked at him and I said, we're pregnant … it's already happened, done. Went to the doctor he said, yeah, you're probably less than a week pregnant. So Saturday I called it and Wednesday she came … My body told me … I guess the mental, mentality and the wairua side of it had opened the doors and the body done whatever it needed to in order for it to happen."
> Focus group, Waikato

This narrative shows an embodied form of sovereignty where reproductive choices are guided by tuning in to her own body, wairua, and mental intention. When challenged by dominant discourses around hormonal control, this participant instead framed the body as inherently capable of self-regulation when one is in deep communication with it. These choices demonstrate a profound reclamation of reproductive autonomy. It also illustrates a model

of body sovereignty that incorporates not just physical will, but a dialogue between body, spirit, and whakapapa.

He Wāhine, He Puna Mātauranga: Intergenerational Transmission of Rongoā and Cultural Healing Practices

Within te ao Māori, women have long held central roles as repositories and transmitters of intergenerational knowledge. This includes not only language and ritual, but also embodying the preparation and application of rongoā Māori, as well as the preservation of mātauranga through lived experience. The following statements illustrate how wāhine Māori continue to pass on traditional knowledge within whānau, often through everyday acts of care, connection to the taiao, and holistic healing, particularly through the maternal and grandmother lines.

The first participant reflects on her grandmother's role as a rongoā practitioner, highlighting a spiritually grounded understanding of wellbeing:

> My Nan was a rongoā practitioner … we always had rongoā, she would always make us drink it, it was terrible, and she would always miri (short for mirimiri, meaning massage) us when there was something going on up here [in my head], more so than the tinana (body). And she kind of used to take us for bush walks and show us where to go and stuff but it was always about the mauri, is what she let us know.
> Focus group, Northland

This example positions the speaker's grandmother as both a healer and educator, whose methods extended beyond physical treatment to include the spiritual essence or mauri, of a person. The act of taking mokopuna (grandchildren) into the bush to learn about plants is a key form of intergenerational knowledge transmission, grounding healing practices in both land and lineage. Although the participant recalls the taste of rongoā as unpleasant, the memory also shows reverence for her grandmother's role as a cultural guide and kaitiaki of wellbeing.

The next participant describes witnessing the application of traditional remedies by both her mother and grandmother:

> … as a child … when we … [were injured and] bleed[ing] my Nana would go and get the cobwebs and put them on, you know? They never showed us anything, but they'd go and get it or, you know, just things for cough that they'd go and get it, Mum and my Nana … and panipani (ointment) … they'd do that … or else if … my brothers had an injury, you know, they'd go and get some tūpākihi (Coriaria arborea) … and … bathe them in it. So, there was a lot of … rongoā or karakia or … especially waiata (song) and karakia when we were sad or we were māuiui (sick), you know?
> Focus group, Northland

While the elders did not always explicitly teach these practices, their consistent use of these practices created an experiential learning

environment in which rongoā was embedded in daily life. It is also clear that wāhine hold and enact these roles through caregiving, ritual, and relational attentiveness.

Another participant from Waikato reflects on her evolving appreciation for her mother's teachings:

> … my Mum … whenever we were sick, we had to drink kūmarahou (Pomaderris kumeraho). Um, she got it from my Nan, and she made us drink it, as yuck as it was as a kid, now I appreciate it but as a kid it was like, "oh, why do I have to drink this? This is gross". …ee, hindsight is a great thing to now look back and, wow, my Mum is … teaching me my rongoā.
> Focus group, Waikato

This example highlights the intergenerational transmission of rongoā knowledge through the maternal line and the recognition of its significance in retrospect. The participant recalls her mother enforcing the use of kūmarahou, a traditional cleansing plant, despite her resistance as a child. It is only in adulthood that the participant comes to understand this as an act of cultural education. The shift from aversion to appreciation illustrates how mātauranga Māori is often internalised over time and may not be fully recognized until later reflection allows its cultural value to emerge.

Across these three themes, a common thread emerges: the pivotal role of wāhine Māori in the reclamation and transmission of Indigenous knowledge, autonomy, and identity. Participants demonstrated that the reawakening of cultural practices, whether through the wearing of moko kauae, the conscious exercise of reproductive agency, or the application of ancestral healing methods, is not merely personal but profoundly relational and collective. Wāhine serve not only as practitioners of cultural knowledge but also as living bridges between past and future generations. These healers affirm their sovereignty over body, identity, and knowledge as both a personal act and a communal responsibility rooted in tikanga Māori.

Discussion

This study advances a mana wāhine-informed interpretation of rongoā Māori as a vital site for affirming Māori female identity, embodied sovereignty and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Viewed through this lens, rongoā is not simply a collection of healing practices but a relational, spiritual, and political enactment through which wāhine Māori assert tino rangatiratanga (sovereignty) over their bodies, whakapapa, and roles as cultural stewards. The following discussion examines how the three thematic strands; identity reclamation through moko kauae, embodied sovereignty, and intergenerational transmission, extend and enrich existing literature on mana wāhine, rongoā Māori, and Indigenous resurgence.

Reclaiming Wāhine Identity and Whakapapa through Moko Kauae

The findings reveal moko kauae as a powerful act of identity reclamation and cultural continuity. This aligns with Campbell's framing of

mana wāhine as grounded in whakapapa, wairua, and self-definition, and with Pihama's assertion that Māori women possess the inherent right to express and define themselves through their own lived experiences.[49,50]

Participants' narratives frequently positioned wāhine who receive kauae as cultural pathfinders often standing alone in families impacted by colonial fragmentation yet carving a path for others to follow. These experiences reflect the relational and collective dimensions of mana wāhine, where identity is not solely individual but rooted in reconnection and revitalization within whānau and hapū. The spiritual and symbolic significance of moko kauae as embodied whakpapa resonates with Penehira's view of tā moko as both a healing modality and a cultural marker inscribed with ancestral intention, protection, and wairua.[51]

This intergenerational significance of moko kauae is echoed across historical periods. Throughout all eras, including contemporary society, Māori have associated moko kauae with mana (authority, prestige). In early periods, moko kauae reflected the mana of wāhine within their whānau, hapū, and iwi. As colonization disrupted traditional Māori social structures, moko kauae became increasingly aligned with broader movements of Māori nationalism and cultural resistance. In the contemporary period, the resurgence of moko kauae marks a powerful act of empowerment, not only for individual women but also within their familial and tribal contexts.[52]

Tā moko, particularly facial moko, has re-emerged as a potent symbol of Māori self-determination, identity, and cultural pride. Many Māori are embracing moko as part of a cultural renaissance, affirming their connection to te reo Māori, tikanga, and whakapapa.[53] In this way, moko kauae serves as both a personal and political act; restoring ancestral knowledge, affirming mana wāhine, and asserting the sovereignty of tangata whenua in a contemporary Aotearoa.

This act of reclaiming Māori female identity through moko kauae also constitutes a direct challenge to colonial erasures of Māori womanhood. August contends that colonization disrupted the cosmological positioning of wāhine as descendants of atua wāhine and Papatūānuku, reconfiguring Indigenous narratives to diminish their mana.[54] Participants' recognition of moko kauae as a return to ancestral aesthetics and spiritual authority illustrates a conscious resistance to colonial distortions and reaffirms the sacred status of wāhine within te ao Māori.

Wāhine Sovereignty over Reproductive, Spiritual, and Healing Journeys

The concept of body sovereignty emerged in this study as a powerful expression of mana wāhine in response to both biomedical and

[49] Campbell, "Ngā Kura a Hineteiwaiwa."

[50] Pihama, "Tihei Mauri Ora."

[51] Penehira, "Mouri Tu, Mouri Moko, Mouri Ora!"

[52] Rawinia Higgins, "He Tānga Ngutu, He Tūhoetanga Te Mana Motuhake o the Tā Moko Wāhine: The Identity Politics of Moko Kauae" (Doctoral thesis, University of Otago, 2004).

[53] Higgins, "He Tānga Ngutu."

[54] August, "The Māori Female."

cultural interventions. Participants described deeply embodied experiences of trauma, healing, and spiritual reclamation, illustrating how Māori women engage with colonial health systems while upholding Indigenous relational ethics. These findings extend August's assertion that Māori women's bodies are governed by tikanga due to their intrinsic tapu and the mana of the whare tangata; not solely because of biological function, but because of their genealogical and cosmological significance.[55]

Participant narratives revealed that autonomy over menstruation, reproduction, illness, and healing was enacted through spiritual practices, karakia, and wairua-based understanding of health. One participant's initiation of a pōhiri to receive donor blood in a hospital setting exemplifies a mana wāhine approach to bodily sovereignty. In this example, the participant is asserting spiritual control and contextualizing biomedical care within a Māori cosmology. These actions align with McGowan's emphasis on taha wairua (the spiritual side of wellbeing) as central to the healing potency of rongoā, and with Valentine's framing of wairua as a permeable, relational, and foundational dimension of Māori wellbeing.[56,57]

These embodied practices stand in stark contrast to colonial health interventions, which historically pathologized and regulated Māori female bodies. Gabel (2019) documents how state policies systematically targeted Māori women's reproductive autonomy, eroding traditional practices surrounding birthing, menstruation, and mothercraft through a Euro-Christian framework.[58] In the context of this study, the actions of participants reflect a deliberate reclamation of bodily sovereignty where wahine Māori reject the separation of body from its cultural and spiritual context. Such practices are congruent with Simmonds' assertion that mana wāhine must be materially enacted, not just theorized, in the lived, bodily realities of Māori women.[59]

To extend the concept of body sovereignty further, for Indigenous peoples, sovereignty encompasses both the right to self-determination and the responsibility to uphold and live in alignment with that identity (Monture, 2008).[60] Sovereignty, in this context, is relational rather than individualistic. Indigenous worldviews position the self as inseparable from land, kin, and collective ancestry; all of which are central tenets of Indigenous epistemologies. As Monture argues, First Nations identity is fundamentally a function of community and relational belonging.[61] It is both an internal sense of self as well as a lived expression of interconnectedness that breathes life into Indigenous knowledge systems. Viewed this way, the enactment of body sovereignty by wāhine Māori in this study is as personal as it is profoundly communal and cosmological. The

[55] August, "The Māori Female."

[56] McGowan, "The Contemporary Use of Rongoā Māori."

[57] Valentine, "Kia Ngāwari ki te Awatea."

[58] Gabel, "Raranga, Raranga Taku Takapau."

[59] Simmonds, "Mana Wahine: Decolonising Politics."

[60] Patricia A. Monture, "Women's Words: Power, Identity and Indigenous Sovereignty," Canadian Woman Studies 26, nos. 3–4 (2008): 153–59.

[61] Monture, "Women's Words."

enactment of body sovereignty reaffirms the critical place of women within whānau, whenua, and wairua.

Intergenerational Transmission of Rongoā and Cultural Healing Practices

Participants consistently identified maternal and grandmother lines as primary conduits for the transmission of rongoā knowledge, affirming the central role of wāhine in sustaining mātauranga Māori. These findings support Ruwhiu's conclusion that despite urbanization, colonization, and social disruption, many Māori women have continued to preserve and transmit cultural knowledge.[62] Often expressed through everyday acts such as administering kūmarahou, performing karakia, or gathering healing plants, this transmission reflects a form of epistemic sovereignty rooted in relational practice.

The continued preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge resonates with Te Kanawa's notion of weaving knowledge as an intergenerational continuum.[63] Just as raranga (weaving) requires the succession of relationships and embodied skill, so too does rongoā, which is often shared experientially rather than didactically. These findings also align with Wikaire's recognition of non-linear, sensory, and multi-modal knowledge transmission through waiata, karakia, tukutuku, and intimate engagements with the whenua.[64] This form of transmission defies Western educational models, privileging lived experience and relational immersion.

Participants also reflected on their evolving relationship to ancestral teachings often recalling a youthful resistance that matured into appreciation in adulthood. This shift underscores the temporal rhythms of Māori knowledge uptake, highlighting what Pihama describes as the fluidity of wāhine roles and identity across the life course.[65] Such dynamics affirm the endurance of rongoā as a system of knowledge that adapts, returns, and reawakens across generations.

In contrast to the findings of this study, other research has suggested that the transmission of traditional healing knowledge is often regarded as a spiritual process, passed down to the chosen through dreams and visions.[66] However, healing knowledge is also transferred through mentorship, apprenticeship, and collaborative interactions among healers. In many African communities, knowledge sharing extends beyond a transactional process; it is situated within a wider belief system that conceives of healing as sacred and relational.[67]

Some traditions also emphasise secrecy in knowledge retention, where the sharing of healing knowledge is tightly controlled and often spiritually sanctioned. For example, Haeata

[62] Ruwhiu, "Ka Haere Tonu Te Mana o Ngā Wahine Māori."

[63] Te Kanawa, "Taonga Tuku Iho."

[64] Wikaire, "The Past, Present and Future of Traditional Indigenous Healing."

[65] Pihama, "Tihei Mauri Ora."

[66] Jan Resenga Maluleka and Mpho Ngoepe, "Turning Mirrors into Windows: Knowledge Transfer among Indigenous Healers in Limpopo Province of South Africa," *South African Journal of Information Management* 20, no. 1 (2018): 1–7, https://doi.org/10.4102/sajim.v20i1.918.

[67] Maluleka and Ngoepe, "Turning Mirrors into Windows."

describes how Sámi healers believe that the responsibility for determining a successor rests solely with the knowledge-holder.[68] Decisions are based on the perceived ability of the chosen individual to carry the knowledge with integrity.[69]

As in our study, Mvula also highlights the role of demonstration and observation as practical methods for knowledge transfer.[70] Traditional healers were found to actively train family members and interested individuals, often through embodied, experiential learning. Challenges such as illness, emotional distress, and social isolation were however, common among novices and underscore the spiritual and psychological demands placed on emerging healers. Mvula also recommends that community leaders actively support the preservation of healing knowledge by incorporating cultural education into ceremonial gatherings, particularly for youth.[71]

Taken together, these cross-cultural insights into knowledge transmission underscore the deeply relational, spiritual, and ethical dimensions of Indigenous healing systems - dimensions that are similarly reflected in the experiences of wāhine Māori. The findings of this study reposition rongoā Māori not simply as a therapeutic system, but as a holistic, relational practice through which mana wāhine, whakapapa, and tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) are continuously enacted. What was once viewed through a functionalist lens has evolved into an understanding of rongoā as a holistic system encompassing spiritual, genealogical, and environmental aspects of Māori life.[72,73] The narratives shared here affirm rongoā as a site of resistance and cultural resurgence embodied through care, connection, and intergenerational guardianship.

Recognizing rongoā as a sovereign knowledge system has critical implications for health and healing research, policy, and practice. Rather than positioning rongoā as an adjunct to biomedicine, policy frameworks must engage with it as a self-determining system grounded in whakapapa, wairua, and collective wellbeing. Future research could explore the gendered dynamics of rongoā, particularly with respect to the authority of wāhine Māori as healers, teachers, and cultural protectors. Rongoā healing principles may also serve as the foundation for developing culturally grounded research methodologies rooted in Indigenous cosmologies and healing ethics. In addition, the right for Māori and all women to body sovereignty should be endorsed and rongoā knowledge transmission practices should be prioritized.

Ultimately, rongoā, as enacted by wāhine Māori, becomes more than a remedy; it becomes a vessel for cultural restoration, political resistance, and intergenerational renewal. This study affirms rongoā Māori as a vital site for the

[68] Anne Karen Haeata, "Secret Knowledge: The Management and Transformation of Traditional Healing Knowledge in the Marka Sámi Villages" (Master's thesis, University of Tromsø, 2010).

[69] Haeata, "Secret Knowledge."

[70] Dalisto Mvula, "An Investigation of the Acquisition, Transfer and Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge by Traditional Healers in Chibombo District Of Zambia" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Zambia, 2021).

[71] Mvula, "An Investigation of the Acquisition."

[72] Mark et al., "Acknowledging the Māori Cultural Values."

[73] Mark et al., *CERLS Issues of Rongoā Māori Research.*

assertion of mana wāhine, where Māori women reclaim identity, exercise body sovereignty, and transmit intergenerational knowledge through spiritual and embodied practice. Practices such as moko kauae, karakia, mirimiri, and plant medicine are more than therapeutic tools; they are acts of resistance against colonial erasure and biomedical dominance. Wāhine Māori are shown to be cultural pathfinders, healers, and knowledge holders who activate ancestral memory and embody Indigenous sovereignty in their everyday lives.

By grounding this study in mana wāhine and Kaupapa Māori frameworks, it centers epistemologies that honor the tapu, or sacred nature of the body, the sanctity of the body choice, and the continuity of whakapapa. It challenges Western paradigms that separate spirit from health, gender from cosmology, and knowledge from relationship. Future research and health and healing frameworks must reflect this reality by supporting cultural sovereignty, and lived transmission. We propose that rongoā is not just a system of healing. The powerful force of mana wāhine, enacted in rongoā through identity, sovereignty and knowledge transmission, becomes an entire epistemology in, and of, itself.

GLOSSARY

āhua: appearance

Aotearoa: New Zealand

atua wāhine: female deities

ā wairua: by spirit

hapū: sub-tribes

Hauraki: part of the Waikato region, Aotearoa | New Zealand

heke: rafters

He Wāhine, He Puna Mātauranga: Women as a spring of knowledge

hine: female essence

kauae: chin, short for moko kauae

Kaupapa Māori: Māori approach to research

kei te pai: good

kīnaki: the garnish

koha: literally gift, in this case in the form of a grocery voucher

kōrero: interview/focus group, also narrative

kuia: female elder

Kūmarahou: Pomaderris kumeraho or kūmarahou, also known as gumdigger's soap and golden Tainui. A plant endemic to the North Island of New Zealand. The name kūmarahou is a Māori word signifying a shrub

mana: power

manaakitanga: care

mana wāhine: a Māori concept that refers to the inherent power, authority, and strength of Māori women

Manawatū: region in lower half of North Island, Aotearoa | New Zealand

Māori: Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa | New Zealand

mareikura taonga: treasured nobly born females

mātauranga: knowledge

māuiui: sick

mauri: life force

miri: short for mirimiri

mirimiri: bodywork

moko kauae: chin tattoo

mokopuna: grandchildren

nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi: with your basket of food, and my basket of food, the people will be fed

Pākehā: New Zealander of European descent

panipani: ointment

Papatūānuku: Mother Earth

pohiri: welcome

pūrākau: myths

ritenga: incantations

rongoā : short for Rongoā Māori, traditional Māori healing

rongoā Māori: traditional Māori healing

rongoā rākau: herbal medicines

rourou: literally basket but used to denote data analysis

tāhuhu: ridge pole of a house

taiao: environment

tā moko: tattooing: visual representation of a person's whakapapa/genealogy and identity through cultural designs

taonga: treasure

tapu: sanctity

te ao Māori: the Māori world

te Waipounamu: South Island, Aotearoa | New Zealand

tikanga: cultural customs

tinana: body

tino rangatiratanga: sovereignty

tīpuna: ancestors

toi Māori: Māori arts

tukutuku: ornamental lattice work

tūpākihi: Coriaria arborea. Also called tutu or tree tutu. A native shrub with mostly opposite leaves with three to five parallel veins, shiny and dark on top

wāhine: women

wāhine Māori: Māori women

wai: water

waiata: song

Waikato: region in upper North Island, Aotearoa | New Zealand

wairākau: herbal remedies

wairua: spirituality

wairua kaupapa: spiritual approach

wānanga: meeting

wātea: settling

whakapapa: genealogy

whakatau: conclusion

whakataukī: proverb

whānau: families

wharenui: meeting houses

whare tangata: womb or house of humanity

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