

Te Matatini: The Many Faces of Kapa Haka

by Keriata Royal-Taeao

Kapa Haka is the term used for Māori performing arts. It literally means to form a line (kapa) and dance (haka), and involves a powerful, emotional combination of song, dance, and chanting. The Te Matatini Festival, held every two years, is essentially the Olympics of Kapa Haka, a gathering of the sharpest exponents of the art form from New Zealand and Australia, who battle over four days to be crowned Toa Whakaihūwaka, Te Matatini champions.

This title has been contested since the festival's inception in 1972. What began as the Polynesian Festival at Whakarewarewa in the famous geothermal town of Rotorua has grown and changed over nearly fifty years, pushing boundaries in every way—technically, artistically, musically, and physically. In 2004 a new name was given to the festival: Te Matatini, meaning “the many faces.” It refers to the way in which Kapa Haka touches the vast and diverse multitudes—performers, tutors, supporters, contributors, and audience members alike—attracting



Ngā Tūmanako from Tāmaki-Makaurau, reigning champions.

many faces to this display of Māori culture. The heart of Te Matatini's audience, though, lies with the whānau (families) from all over the country who attend expectantly in their thousands, eager to watch their favourite groups for days on end, in sunshine, rain, and hail. These attendees share a real sense of engagement with, and pride in, their Māori identity and language. It is also a

source of pride to be selected to host Te Matatini, as well as a serious challenge. The festival is held each time in a different region of New Zealand and hosted by the local iwi (tribe/s), whose task is to cater for upwards of forty thousand visitors!

The 2019 festival took place in the capital, Wellington, on the largest platform the festival had yet seen. Aptly themed Te Matatini ki te Ao

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(“Te Matatini to the World”), it encapsulated the festival’s aspirations for a larger scope and more international reach. Forty-six teams, each with forty onstage performers, took part in vigorous competition. They had already competed at one of thirteen regions throughout New Zealand and Australia and prevailed from among a total pool of 163 teams to move through to the four-day Te Matatini Festival itself. The first three of those days consisted of performances in three competitive pools. Only the top three groups in each pool (nine in total) qualified to compete on the finals day, Te Matan-girua.

Six compulsory disciplines make up a performance bracket and each group is given twenty-five minutes to perform. If a group chooses to perform an optional seventh discipline, the waiata tira (a group song), they are given an additional four minutes. The items comprising a bracket are:

- Waiata tira: This choral-like piece is either newly composed or uses the tune of a pre-existing song and is sung with guitar accompaniment or a cappella. Its main purpose is to warm up the group’s voices.
- Whakaeke: If no waiata tira is sung, this is where the group takes the stage for the first time. The whakaeke can consist of waiata (singing), haka, movement—which includes the use of traditional weaponry—and instruments. It is like a haka pohiri, the traditional welcome ceremony, where the visiting party introduces itself and tells the audience of its connection with the host peo-



Tē Whānau ā Apanui from Mataatua, third place in 2019.

ple through pakiwaitara (stories) and whakapapa (genealogy).

- Mōteatea: This is perhaps the most traditional item in Kapa Haka and follows a centuries-old tradition of chanted song-poetry. It is unlike other waiata in that the tune does not adopt Western approaches to melody and harmony. Mōteatea are monophonic and have a more rhythmic sense to the way in which the kupu (words) are voiced.
- Waiata-ā-ringa: This action song is embellished with use of the wiri, a quivering of the hands that is an integral part of Māori movement. Lyrics were traditionally chanted but have over the years transformed into a song incorporating melody and harmony.
- Poi: Another form of action song, typically lighthearted, employs the poi, a small ball on the end of a string. Poi are for the most part

swung by women and depict the movement of elements of the environment such as water, small birds, and insects.

- Haka: This well-known, powerful chant can be performed by both men and women and is usually accompanied by strong body movement. At Te Matatini, the men take the lead, with their legs apart and firmly grounded. Groups often use the haka to speak (chant) about current topics of importance.
- Whakawātea: This is the exit song, or finale, and comprises a number of elements intended to make a lasting impression on the audience.

The success of the 2019 winners, Ngā Tumanako, represented the epitome of hard work and commitment to Kapa Haka over many years. Hailing from West Auckland, Ngā Tumanako had never placed in the top three prior to this year. Many

members of the group had practiced Kapa Haka from school age, having attended the local kura (Māori-language immersion school), and from there carried the experience into adulthood. They are now winners on the most competitive Kapa Haka stage in the world.

Although the biennial festival is the primary event on the Kapa Haka calendar, Te Matatini also has an ambitious, longer-term plan to contribute to positive social change in New Zealand. It has already invested heavily in programs that foster youth leadership to ensure the continuation and growth of Kapa Haka, understanding that the art form has a crucial role in developing cultural identity and pride. Promoting the language is also a key aim:

all Kapa Haka is performed in te reo Māori (one of NZ's three official languages, the others being English and NZ Sign Language), while compères and broadcasters speak around 90 percent in te reo, and audience members are encouraged to use te reo wherever possible. The results of a research project commissioned to assess the social, economic, and cultural impact Kapa Haka has on society will be available in the coming year.

Te Matatini 2019 set a new bar for the exposure of Kapa Haka and for the event's own growing status as a world-class festival. International media were in attendance, and an audience of 1.1 million watched on television or via live-stream. "We all know this is New Zealand's premier

Māori event," says Te Matatini's Chief Executive, Carl Ross, pointing to a recent scoping project for NZ's Ministry for Culture and Heritage that highlighted Kapa Haka's "significant contribution to New Zealand's national identity and how we are represented and viewed internationally." Ross notes that Kapa Haka is routinely used by government departments and private enterprise when engaging with their overseas counterparts. "Kapa Haka is one of this country's points of difference. It is unique in the world." ☐

Keriata Royal-Taeao, Kaitātari Kaupapa/Business Advisor, Te Matatini Iwi (Tribes): Waikato, Ngāti Raukawa, Marutūahu, Ngāpuhi

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