The marking of the human body varies among cultures throughout history in terms of use, application and meaning. The application of inscriptions along the body range from temporarily painting the skin, like the *henna* technique that originated in India, to permanent scarification, the scarring of the body that is widely used in West Africa today (Schildkrout 323), all having distinct significance to each particular culture. In several cultures, the skin is used as “a visible way of defining individual identity and cultural difference” (Schildkrout 319) from the rest of the world. Each culture has their own version or meaning behind the markings, as well as how they mark their bodies that distinguish their history and people from the rest of the world. Some bodily markings like “tattooing, branding, and piercing” have been adopted by various cultures for different reasons and meanings throughout history. For example, the use of ink in tattoos originated in various indigenous tribes around the globe, ranging from eastern Polynesia to China to South America, with no distinct creator. Many cultures who had not even come in contact with each other before the last few centuries were using similar tattoos or tattoo-like markings, but with very different meanings behind them.

One of the most distinctive versions of tattoos in the world is the “Tā Moko” or Māori tattooing technique that is used by the indigenous people of New Zealand. The Tā Moko design originated in eastern Polynesia and was adopted into the Māori culture. What makes it stand out among the rest is the use of its bold, black lines to create a variety of symbol all over the skin. The bold statement and meaning that it makes as well as the techniques used to implement the ink into the skin make it a rather unique cultural tradition the Māori still hold to this day. This
specific meaning, design, and technique combined help tell the history of the Māori people. Its
cultural implications, as well as its resurgence in the past two decades in popularity make it stand
out against the common practices that modern western culture holds for tattoos.

The origins of the Māori Moko come from “similar designs in eastern Polynesia” (Kernot
478). What makes these markings different from the designs of eastern Polynesian markings is
the meaning that is put behind the carvings. The Moko is one of “the most important pieces of
Māori carvings in the form of human bodies” for the Māori people’s bodies were seen as “the
bodies of their ancestors” (Thornton 147). The Moko is considered to be on the most important
aspects of showing one’s identity as a Māori member. Traditionally, those high in the social
structure would receive the Moko and anyone who did not have any markings was considered to
be of low status and rank.

The placement of the Moko on the body differed between genders. Both males and
females received the Moko as “an important milestone between childhood and adulthood”. The
process of receiving the Moko was “accompanied by many rites and rituals” performed in the
community (Robley). Men traditionally received the Moko on their faces, raperape or buttocks,
and puhoro or thighs. The buttocks are a peculiar place to receive a Moko to some cultures, like
western culture, but the Māori people believed that “the bottom is a very sensual area to look at”.
Traditionally, the bottom was imprinted upon in order to link the back designs to the designs on
the thighs, but the Māori people also believed that “the spirals accentuate the roundness of the
buttocks, enhancing the body” and providing a more attractive look to the marked in the
community. When the Moko is applied on the face, it is considered “the ultimate statement of
one’s identity as a Māori” for the head was believed to be the most sacred part of the body. It
was an undeniable declaration of Māori identity, which both women and men had the
opportunity to bear. Women traditionally received the Moko on their “lips and chins”, but both genders had the option of wearing the Moko on their “forehead, neck, back, stomach, and calves” (Kernot 481).

Both in the past and modern day, Mokos are applied to various place of the body with *uhi* or chisels. As Pita Graham demonstrates in her illustrated account of traditional Māori art, the chisels “leave the skin with grooves rather than a smooth surface.” As demonstrated in the documentary *Te Hono Ki Aotearoa*, the Moko designs are first drawn on top of the skin with temporary ink. Historically, the Māori people would create natural pigments from the earth around them in order to draw the designs, sometimes using charcoal other times using various plants and herbs. Once that was done, the *uhi* would be dipped in a permanent pigment or ink and then chiseled into the skin “as if the skin were a piece of wood”, marking various grooves into it. As technology developed, the traditional *uhi* changed from wood to steel, but it was a gradual process over the course of many years. The final evolution of the *uhi* to modern day happened “in the late 19th century when needles came to replace [them]” (Robley) for they were a quicker, less risky method. However, the drawback was that they changed the feel of the Moko from the traditional raises markings and grooves to one of a smooth line along the skin, like a regular tattoo.

This evolution of the *uhi* led to a decrease in the use of the traditional Moko in Māori culture, along with several other customs. The needle quickly became popular to use, and the *uhi* fell out of fashion as several Māori men and women started to embrace western culture. The use of the facial Moko, one of the most revered Mokos, declined until the 1990s. It was then that resurgence occurred, not only for the acceptance of Mokos in general, but also the use of the *uhi* reemerged. The main cause for this resurgence lay with the women and youth of the community
who wanted to express their identity once more through the traditional application of the Moko. As the documentary showed, the Moko is a major part of the Māori identity that had been lost, but now was being embraced in the community once more.

The decline in the use of the Moko over time resulted in a significant loss in the Māori community. The rite of passage and use of the Moko played “a significant role in the culture…their participation in the rituals and rite of passage demonstrated the meaning behind the Moko” (Pritchard 40), which is the story of their history. As Pita Graham mentions in her illustrated account of the traditional Māori art, the Moko’s carvings and design is a very deliberate process that goes to the core of the Māori people’s history and culture. Through her pictures, she shows how several different Mokos tell a story of the holder’s ancestry that is meant to be shared with the community and the world in memory of their past. The Māori people have a strong connection with the spiritual realm, as demonstrated in several sources and the documentary. Their way of respecting the spiritual connection they have is through the application of the Moko onto the body. This connection “was temporarily severed and the loss of some generations [has] impact[ed] the Māori culture” (Sanborn, 33) the Māori culture in various ways.

The resurgence of the Moko has been very beneficial for the Māori people, not only because of the cultural Identity that has been revived through it, but also because of the popularity it has suddenly attracted among people outside of the Māori culture. Although the Moko is a “Māori tradition that is performed by the Māori people, markings that are not moko but inspired by Māori design are accepted” (Nikora) within the culture. The kirituhi or “writing on skin” designs are not true Mokos and are not accepted as such, but the imitation is
appreciated. The *kirituhi* is traditionally applied with the needle instead of the *uhi*, while the opposite is the case in the community of the Māori people.

The imagery of the Moko design stands out in today’s culture because of the purposeful placements of the Moko. It is a rather uncommon and disconcerting marking for people outside of the culture to see, especially when it is applied on the face, for not many cultures have a wide acceptance of visible markings in the western world. What they do not understand is that “every Moko contains ancestral/tribal messages specific to the wearer and these messages tell the store of the wearer’s family, tribal affiliations, and social structures” (Robley) in the Māori culture.

Tā Moko is a cultural practice that is very unique and very meaningful to the Māori culture of New Zealand. The Moko itself as well as its use has a deep historical meaning among the Māori people, one that markings in western culture tend to lack. Tattoos in western civilization may have meaning, but that meaning tends to be restricted to a very personal reason. If a tattoo is applied with a group meaning, the meaning does not extend as deep as the Moko does for the Māori people. This cultural practice is a distinct part of a culture that is difficult to imitate or find anywhere else in the world.

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The Moko vs. The Tattoo

In American culture, the art of tattooing has various meanings depending on the subculture it derives from. The tattoo can be seen as a sign of rebellion in a conservative culture, a sign of associations within a group, like a gang, club, or membership, or a personal rite of passage in an adolescent. All these meanings are very loose in American culture and even fewer have a long historic history behind the tattoo. In relation to the Māori tattoo or the Moko as it is called, the American culture tattoo has even less meaning behind it when compared to the rich history that the Moko has. Yet, it is the closest equivalent to the Māori tattoo that the American culture has, because of the vast number of physical similarities that exist today.

The American tattoo is one that can be obtained once an adolescent turn the age of eighteen, as is legal by the United States law. Despite this law, several teenagers have been known to obtain tattoos by the age of sixteen, or even a few years earlier. What is the cause for obtaining such a permanent marking on one’s body so early in life? What is the meaning behind it all? It varies from sub-culture to sub-culture. Even at a young age, something very meaningful and/or traumatizing could have occurred to a person, therefore they desire to get a tattoo to permanently remember or memorialize that tattoo. In other cases, the tattoo can be a sign of rebellion against a more contemporary culture. Sometimes, the tattoo is obtained when under the influence of alcohol or drugs. In American culture, tattoo parlors are found in a numerous amount of locations, and is quite easy to be obtained regardless of ones mental state at the time. There are various reasons for obtaining the tattoo in American culture, and not all of them are very wise or thought out decisions. The tattoo can still represent deep meaning to the person, but
unlike the Moko, it is usually a very personal meaning that has very little historical or ancestral context.

The Moko is a very different tattoo from the American tattoo; in fact, it is not really a ‘tattoo’ at all but rather a carving into the skin. In the United States, needles are commonly used to apply a variety of ink colours to a person’s body. There is also very little limitation put on the placement of the tattoo. The Moko is almost the exact opposite. Black is the colour of ink that is used when the Moko is carved into the skin. In modern times, the needle is an option in the ritual of the Moko, but mostly men and women choose to have the tattoo chiseled into their bodies. The placement of the tattoo has deep meaning, and is restricted depending on ones gender. Women tend to get it on their chin, or lower face while men tend to obtain it on their upper or whole face, back, buttocks, and upper thighs. Both genders also have the option of obtaining the Moko on their necks, arms, and calves. The placement of the Moko has deep significance to the meaning behind the Moko. Unlike the American equivalent, the Moko represents a person’s history, be it ancestral or cultural. Obtaining a Moko is seen as a sign of a rite of passage in the Māori culture, and the particular designs or placement of the carving is taken very seriously. There is no ‘drunk Mokos’ like there are ‘drunk tattoos’, nor are there rashly or hastily made Mokos like there can be with tattoos. The Moko carver is a well-trained member of the Māori culture. Each carving of the Moko design is deliberate and an essential part of the rite of passage ritual.

The tattoo compared to the Moko is similar on a physical level, with the application of the two being the only difference, but on a mental or spiritual level, they are vastly different. It makes it seem like the tattoo is a crude form of marking the body, but that is not the case here. Rather, it is a more individual as opposed to communal act done in American culture. There are
even Moko imitations in American culture that have similar meanings behind them that the
Māori people hold. This does not diminish the meaning behind either mark, but it is a definite
difference that cannot be overlooked.