Author: Vanessa Murray

ACROSS THE DITCH

How Māori are making a home away from home in Australia

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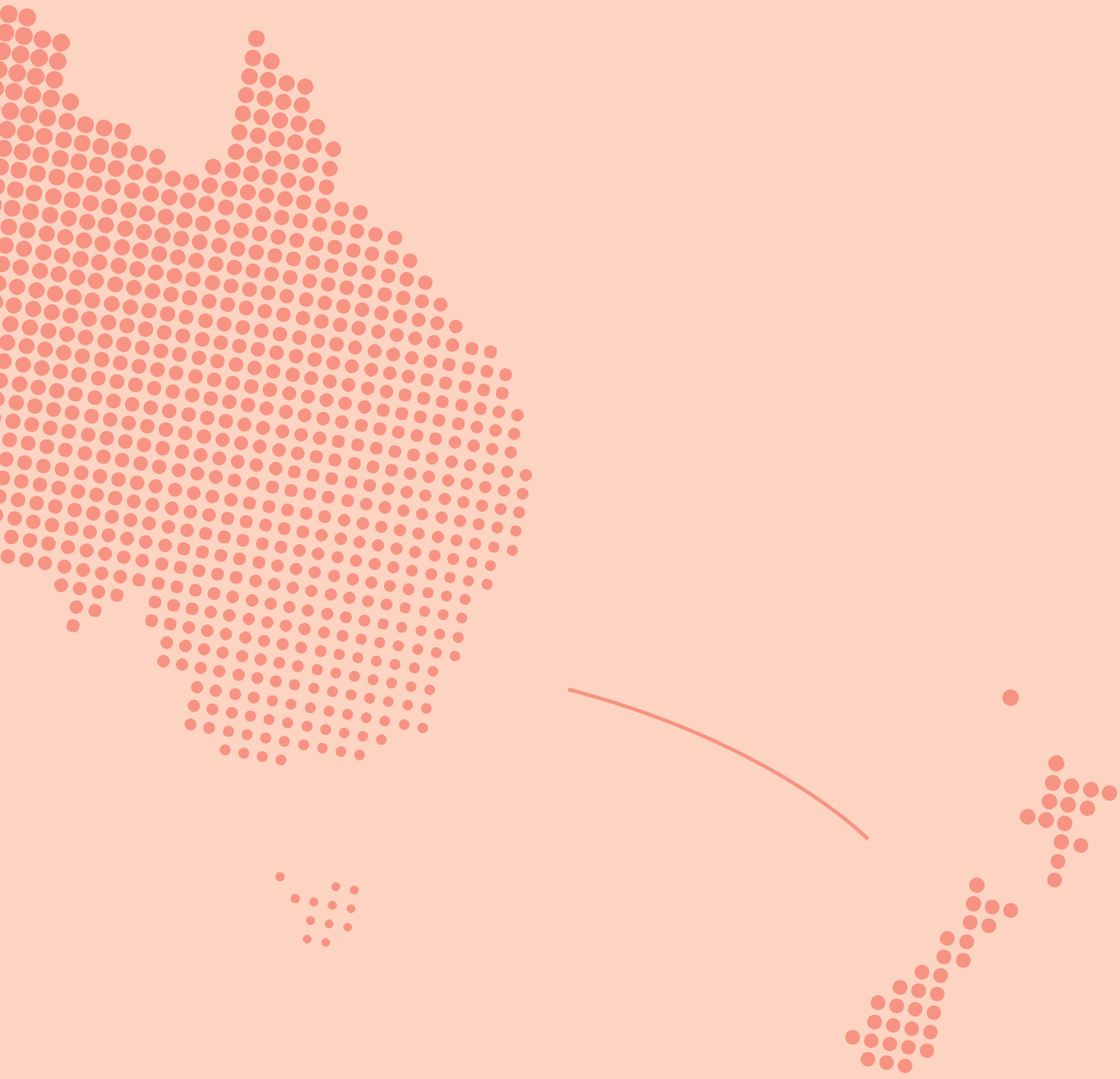

Cover image: *A group is welcomed to the Sydney Marae Alliance's Waitangi Day event in February 2026.*

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Introduction

The Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori, have been visiting Australia for at least as long as Australia has been a colonial settler state.

Today, an estimated 20 percent of Māori in the world live in Australia, making Australia home to the largest population of Māori outside New Zealand. Some were born in Aotearoa and migrated as children with their parents. Others chose to migrate as adults. Some were born here as second, third (and so on) generation Australian Māori.

Many conversations around Māori maintain that New Zealand is the only place where Māori experiences and indigeneity happen. Yet over time and across generations, it has become true that Māori aren't just *in* Australia, they *are* Australian.

This narrative explores some of the ways Māori in Australia are making a home away from home through maintaining traditional ways of knowing, being and doing. It also explores the carving out of new traditions – ways cultural practices have evolved and are continuing to evolve in response to external factors like government policy, economic opportunity and digital technology.

In Sydney, a landmark development application for a Māori Cultural Centre has been approved by local authorities, and the Sydney Marae Alliance is working towards breaking ground at the site later in 2026. The marae-like centre will be a papakāinga (base) for Māori from all iwi (tribes) – a vibrant, inclusive space where Māori can gather, celebrate and share the richness of Māori culture with the wider community.

In Queensland, Kiwi Kids is a bilingual daycare inspired by principles of Te Whāriki (New Zealand's early childhood curriculum). It integrates Te Reo Māori (Māori language) and English into daily learnings to promote cultural awareness, identity, and language development. Children from New Zealand Māori and Pākehā/non-Māori backgrounds attend the centre, along with Pasifika, African, Middle Eastern and Anglo-Australians, and everyone is treated like family.

In Melbourne, a kapa haka group, Ngā Mātai Pūrua, has evolved into a self-sustaining community organisation and cultural engagement model that celebrates identity and fosters belonging through kapa haka classes and performances, cultural workshops, youth development, and community-led initiatives. Unhappy with the divisiveness and disempowerment sown by competitive government funding models, the group's leaders set themselves a goal of operating independently for two years – 2026 marks its fifth year of independence.

The presence and achievements of Māori in Australia do not exist in a vacuum. Challenges and barriers to prosperity and belonging include shifting policy requirements around Australian citizenship, the imposition of Anglocentric notions and categories of nationality, identity and belonging on Māori and Pasifika peoples, different and conflicting policy and semantic frameworks and systemic and everyday racism, particularly in policing and corrections. Then there are the longer term, intergenerational and ongoing impacts of the colonial project in New Zealand – the plans and actions of the settler state to take and control land, resources and people and to replace Indigenous systems with their own.

For Pākehā and non-Māori New Zealanders who migrate to Australia, the psychological leap from one settler country to another is relatively straightforward. After all, through personal or ancestral design, they are already familiar with a sense of dislocation from their country of ethnic origin, and the deep knowing they can never truly lay claim to the land on which they were born. However, for Māori, as tangata whenua (Indigenous people, people of the land) in Aotearoa, the personal and cultural significance of life away from New Zealand is arguably more complex and nuanced.

In this narrative, the personal, everyday realities of these nuances are candidly shared and explored via in-depth interviews with six Māori in Australia who are active in cultural spaces. These include a marae committee, kapa haka and cultural engagement, Te Reo Māori learning and speaking, early childhood education, First Nations liaison and advocacy, documentary making and storytelling, social justice, policing and corrections and Indigenous and historical scholarship.

Themes of resilience, agency, self-determination, social justice, self-knowledge, identity, adaptation, advocacy, resistance, representation, belonging, worth, participation, inclusion and acceptance – for self, family, community and future generations – have emerged and form the backbone of the narrative.

These are some ways Māori are living in Australia.

Searching for prosperity ACROSS THE DITCH

Employment opportunities, earning potential and family connections have been attracting New Zealanders across the ditch for decades.

In 2014, keen for a better life for her kids, Robyn Finau (Ngāti Hako, Ngāti Maru, Tongan) and her husband, Sioape, relocated from South Auckland to Logan, Queensland. With them they brought their eight children and two nieces they whāngai (culturally foster).

> ***"My older boys were getting into a bit of strife. I wanted to get away from things like gang violence and alcohol. I wanted a different life for them. Me and my husband wanted something better for ourselves too. We were doing okay back home; we owned homes and we had goals, but we wanted more and unfortunately New Zealand couldn't give that to us."***

Robyn Finau (Ngāti Hako, Ngāti Maru, Tongan), Queensland

Finau's first experience of what life in Australia could be like came when she and Sioape visited a cousin who lived in Logan, Queensland in 2012.

"The price of groceries was so much lower than in New Zealand. The parks all had barbecues and there were just so many opportunities to spend time with family. I'm really family orientated, so that was a major selling point for me. Then I went out to the Gold Coast and saw the beach. I decided I was going to go home and pack up the family and come back," remembers Robyn.

It took the Finaus around 18 months to migrate after that initial visit. The family of 12 spent a month living "marae styles" (sleeping on mattresses lined up on the floor in a communal area) with another cousin and their six children in central Logan before securing a rental. Within the year, they'd managed to buy their own place. Other family members have since made the move and now live nearby.

Finau's hard working, aspirational rationale is typical for New Zealanders looking to expand.

As a small country, New Zealand's economic and employment potential is limited. The income gap between Australia and New Zealand has been growing for decades. Adjusted for purchasing power, Australia's per person gross domestic product is about a third higher than New Zealand's. Its pensions are more generous, unemployment rates are lower, and the post-pandemic cost of living crisis has hit less hard in Australia than in New Zealand. Proportionate to its population of 5.3 million, New Zealand has one of the largest diasporas in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and its citizens continue to migrate in record numbers. In 2024 alone, 129,000 permanently left the country – 40 percent above the pre-pandemic average. (The Economist, 2025)

Economic aspiration and family connection also inspired Louise Cooper OAM (Ngāti Hine) and her husband, Kiri Barber, to migrate from Auckland to Sydney with their two daughters in 2000.

"We were young and had our own construction company in Auckland, but it was hard to keep our heads above water. Kiri's parents and some of his siblings were already settled in Sydney. We moved over here with the idea of making a bit of money and then moving home, but 25 years on and we are still here. Compared to back home the lifestyle, work and income opportunities were like night and day."

MĀORI'S LONG HISTORY IN AUSTRALIA

The Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori, have a long history as manuhiri (guests) in Australia – for at least as long as Australia has been a colonial settler state.

If you look to written history, recorded in ink on paper in the language of British settlers, ferried as it was across the oceans on a tall ship of white oak, elm, pine and fir with sails of canvas and a 94-strong crew, you learn that the first Māori set foot in Australia in 1793.

Their names were Tuki Tahua and Ngā Huruhuru, and they were two young men taken by force and brought to Norfolk Island to teach female convicts how to weave flax into garments (a failure, as weaving flax was and largely remains the domain of women in 'Te Ao Māori (the Māori world).

But if you look – or rather, listen – further, to the lores of this land that have been carried by First Nations knowledge holders for generations, you'll learn that some mob, including the Dharawal, Yuin and Palawa, place Māori here before that time. Some tell of a trade relationship, others of waka (canoes) which rested temporarily in Te Whenua Moemoeā (The Land of Dreaming, Australia), en route to Aotearoa. Others say some of the warriors chose to remain in Australia (Haua, 2017).

Māori kaumatua (elders) also confirm that tīpuna (ancestors) travelled to Australia before European contact and before Pākehā first came to New Zealand. (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2007)

Today, an estimated one in five Māori live in Australia. This makes Australia home to the largest population of Māori outside New Zealand. However, the true number of Māori in Australia is unknown, and very likely higher than estimated. This is because the methodology for collecting data, the five-yearly Australian Census, has historically been and largely remains Anglocentric, limiting and under-representative. In fact, the Census doesn't include questions about ethnicity at all, leaving citizenship, place of birth, ancestry and language spoken at home as the only domains from which to infer data about ethnic identity.

We do know that since the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement came into to being in 1973, migration across the ditch towards Australia has been significant, and that today, New Zealanders (Māori and Pākehā and non-Māori alike) make up Australia's fourth largest overseas born population.

And yet, as Indigenous scholar Innez Haua (Ngāti Porou, Ngāi Tāmanuhiri) points out, most conversations around Māori in relation to indigeneity and identity tend to assume that New Zealand is the only site of Māori experiences. Reality shows otherwise.

Today, the relationship between Aotearoa and Australia is much more than a count of Indigenous people from one country residing in another, but a mass of interactions and entanglements – familial and generational interconnectedness where the history and futures of both nations and peoples are intertwined (Haua, 2017).

Māori aren't just in Australia, they *are* Australian. What does it mean to be Indigenous, but not of this land? How do Māori in Australia maintain cultural identity and pride, while becoming part of an increasingly diverse multicultural society? How is Māori culture evolving in response to a trans-Tasman existence?

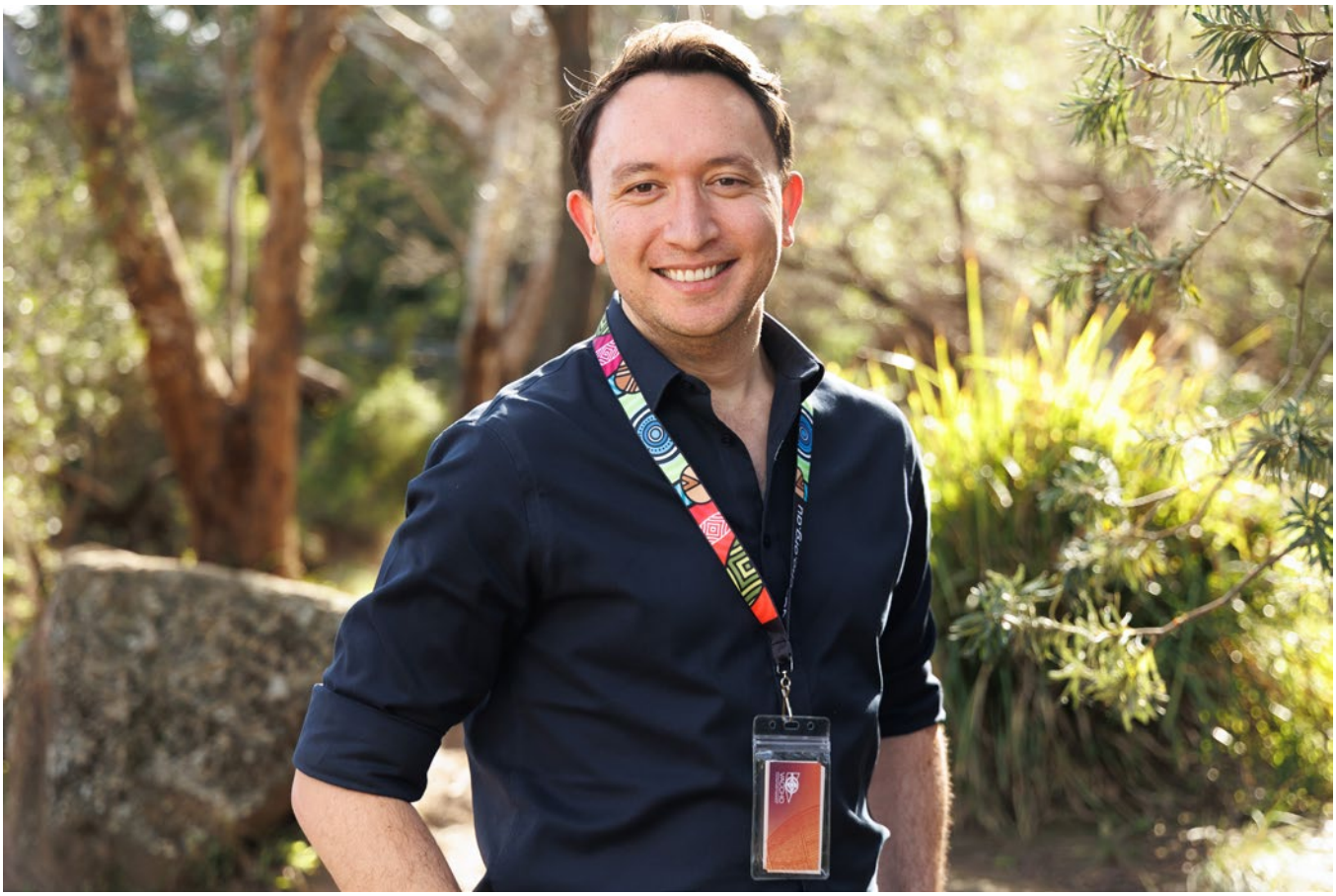
Tūrangawaewae: MAPPING IDENTITY THROUGH PLACE

Māori are an intensely place-oriented people, for whom place – land – is much more than geography. It is ancestry, spirituality, genealogy, community and identity.

For Pākehā and non-Māori who have migrated to Australia, the leap from one settler country to another is straightforward. Both countries are members of the Commonwealth, and through personal or ancestral design, Pākehā and non-Māori are already familiar with the sense of dislocation from their country of ethnic origin, and the deep knowing they can never truly lay claim to belonging on the land on which they were born.

But for Māori, as Indigenous tangata whenua (people of the land) in New Zealand, along with new opportunities to create identity, worth and belonging through migration, there are often nuanced layers of personal and cultural significance to navigate in relation to (changing) place.

Colonisation in Aotearoa has created disconnection from traditional home spaces for many Māori, whose identity and expressions of home are resilient, dynamic and ever-evolving (Wolfgramm et al., 2018 in Lindsay-Latimer, Allport, Potake-Osborne & Wilson, 2024). The word 'whenua' means both land and placenta and establishes Māori iwi, hapū (subtribes) and whānau in relation to particular land areas. Along with tūrangawaewae (place where one has the right to stand), it is an intrinsic part of how Māori identify themselves, their histories and their inks to the larger narrative of place (Lindsay-Latimer, Allport, Potake-Osborne, & Wilson, 2024).



Abe Ropitini (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Maniapoto, Trawlwoolway), Victoria

> ***The concept of whenua embodies a life source – a source of both origin and nourishment that reflects a deeper relationship than the colonialist, capitalist notion of land as individual property and commodity allows for," explains Abe Ropitini (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Maniapoto, Trawlwoolway), who is of Māori and Aboriginal Australian descent.***

"This is why we Māori are very place-oriented in our way of relating to each other. Our sense of identity is grounded in where we come from, and when we seek out wānanga (learning, knowledge exchange), we're accustomed to doing that in places where we have a sense of belonging."

Born and raised in New Zealand, Ropitini moved to Melbourne as a young adult. He is Executive Director of Population Health at the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), a Senior Fellow in Indigenous Health at the University of Melbourne and has a PhD in medical anthropology underway at La Trobe University.

"I was raised by many mothers – my mum, my aunties, and especially my great-grandmother. I have a very big family. Growing up, huge emphasis was placed on learning how you are related to everyone. Every time we went somewhere, I would ask, 'How are we connected here?', and then learn and feel a sense of connection that wasn't there before. Knowing who comes from where, who's related to whom, and how you are connected to different places: that's a big part of being Māori. We call it whakawhanaungatanga – finding connections and enriching relationships and belonging."

BEING INDIGENOUS IN ANOTHER LAND

Ropitini says for Māori in Australia, being Indigenous to another place can be complicated. At the same time, the question of how to create places for belonging in other countries is becoming increasingly urgent for the Māori diaspora.

> ***We're intent on finding ways to retain our heritage and pride while navigating this melting pot we're now in. New generations are coming through, and they want and need to know where they're from. They need to know their marae (sacred meeting places), iwi (tribe), and waiata (songs). They need to be able to say their pepeha (declaration of where one is from and how one connects to land and ancestry) and to have a sense of where their identity is in place.***

Māori don't like identifying as multicultural or being grouped into a culturally and linguistically diverse category. We are strongly of the view that we are Indigenous. And we are unapologetic about it. No matter where in the world we go, we identify as Indigenous people. But when you don't live in the place where that status belongs, it needs to be held gently and respectfully in view of the Indigenous brothers and sisters on whose land we now live."

He thinks that, with the right approaches and with respect for the fact that Māori are guests in Australia, it can be done.

Louise Cooper thinks so too. She is Chairperson at the Sydney Marae Alliance and was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for services to the Māori community of Sydney in 2023.

The Sydney Marae Alliance is the closest any Māori group or organisation has come to establishing a formal papakāinga (base) on Australian soil. An evolving endeavour that has been underway for more than three decades, Sydney Marae Alliance hopes to be breaking ground for its cultural centre in 2026.

The kaupapa (focus, guiding principles) are to facilitate the same connection and belonging as a marae does in the individual and collective experience of Māori in Australia, without claiming a tangata whenua relationship with the place where it stands.

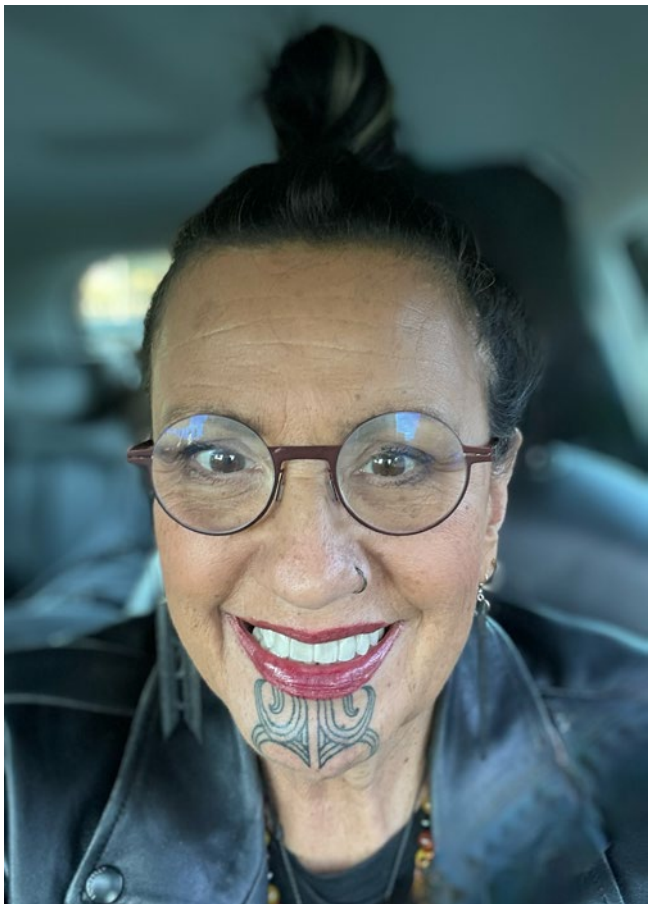
Historian Jo Maarama Kāmira (Te Rarawa, Te Aupōuri, Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Whakaue) neatly teased out the significance of a marae, and the fundamental difference between a marae and the planned Māori Cultural Centre, in a 2022 comment and analysis piece for leading Māori and Pacific journalism website, E-Tangata.

"We all whakapapa (trace ancestral connections) to our own marae in Aotearoa. Some of us have multiple marae where our whānau have links. It's where we learn our culture, our customs, traditions and protocols. Our marae are the source of our tikanga (customs) and kawa (protocols)," wrote Kāmira, whose parents, Matiu Campbell and Janice Cox, were on a predecessor of today's Sydney Marae Alliance committee in the 1970s.

"How could it be [a marae], when it's not on our whenua, when it's intended to be a place for Māori of all tribes? It will be a whare wānanga and a cultural space for us Māori Aussies [...] It doesn't matter which tribe you're from because we'll never embrace a uniform view of how to do things. [...] We're not indigenous to this whenua, nor are we trying to claim rights that properly belong to Aboriginal people." (Kāmira, A Māori "home" for our Sydney whānau, 2022)

Kāmira specialises in culturally appropriate human resources and Black Knowledge. She regularly provides commentary on Māori issues in Australia for Māori Television in New Zealand and is interested in what being an Indigenous people occupying the space of another Indigenous people looks like.

> ***"You are a settler in somebody else's country. And one of the things that comes up over and over again, especially for Māori Australians, is the tension between what's home and what's homeland and where do we fit in? These are questions that many diasporic communities and community members must contend with, but it has additional complexity for Māori, as people of colour who are Indigenous, but not of this land."***



Jo Maarama Kāmira (Te Rarawa, Te Aupōuri, Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Whakaue), Australian Capital Territory

CASE STUDY:

SYDNEY MARAE ALLIANCE

KEEPING CULTURE ALIVE BY BUILDING A PAPAKĀINGA ON AUSTRALIAN SOIL

In May 2025, Sydney Marae Alliance received a $1 million pledge from the Australian Federal Government towards a Māori Cultural Centre it is building in Greystanes, near Pemulwuy.

Sydney Marae Alliance is the closest any organisation has been to realising a long-held vision for many Māori in Australia – a vibrant, inclusive space where Māori can gather, celebrate and share the richness of Māori culture with the wider community.

Once underway, the build will be a three-year, multi-phase construction project and cost over $7 million. The Alliance has a 20-year-lease for a 1.5-hectare site in Western Sydney, and its development application was approved in June 2024. The next milestone is a construction certificate from Cumberland City Council. Sydney Marae Alliance hopes to be breaking ground at the site in 2026.

"The idea of a Cultural Centre in Sydney has been carried by our people for over four decades. It's been driven by different organisations over that time. On the books we are about seven years old, but the kaupapa has been around for much longer, more than 40 years," says Sydney Marae Alliance Chairperson Louise Cooper.

"Our job right now is to get the cultural centre from a dream into a physical reality, as we would term in Te Reo; whakatinana i te kaupapa. A lot of people have opinions about whether it should be a marae or a cultural centre, and on our right to do this. Some people think we shouldn't, but there is too much need for our community to be grounded in place to not have this."

To be a cultural centre (not a marae), it will include a large, marae-style building with kitchen and sleeping facilities, exhibition, meeting and education spaces and landscaping. It will be used for public events, education, expos and exhibitions and cultural gatherings. Close to the new Western Sydney airport, there is also potential for it to be a cultural tourism destination.

Cooper says relationships with local mob, iwi back home and the broader Pasifika community are important to get right.

> ***"We are manuhiri here. We're having ongoing kōrero (conversations) and yarns with the leaders and matriarchs of the local Bidjigal clan about how we acknowledge Pemulwuy, a local leader who led a guerilla war against the British in the late 1700s."***

> ***"It's a privilege to be part of the ongoing story here on Dharug Country. We want to honour Pemulwuy's legacy and our relationships with the tangata whenua in our architecture and art, so we are exploring co-designing with them."***

There is plenty of interest and awareness in the project for local Māori and the wider community, along with a membership-base of more than 400 supporters. But raising the funds needed to make the marae a reality is a challenge.

"The thing that's missing is the pūtea – the capital. We are working hard to build relationships and partnerships with corporate partners and with Local, State and Federal Government. We're also trying to get conversations going with New Zealand Government."

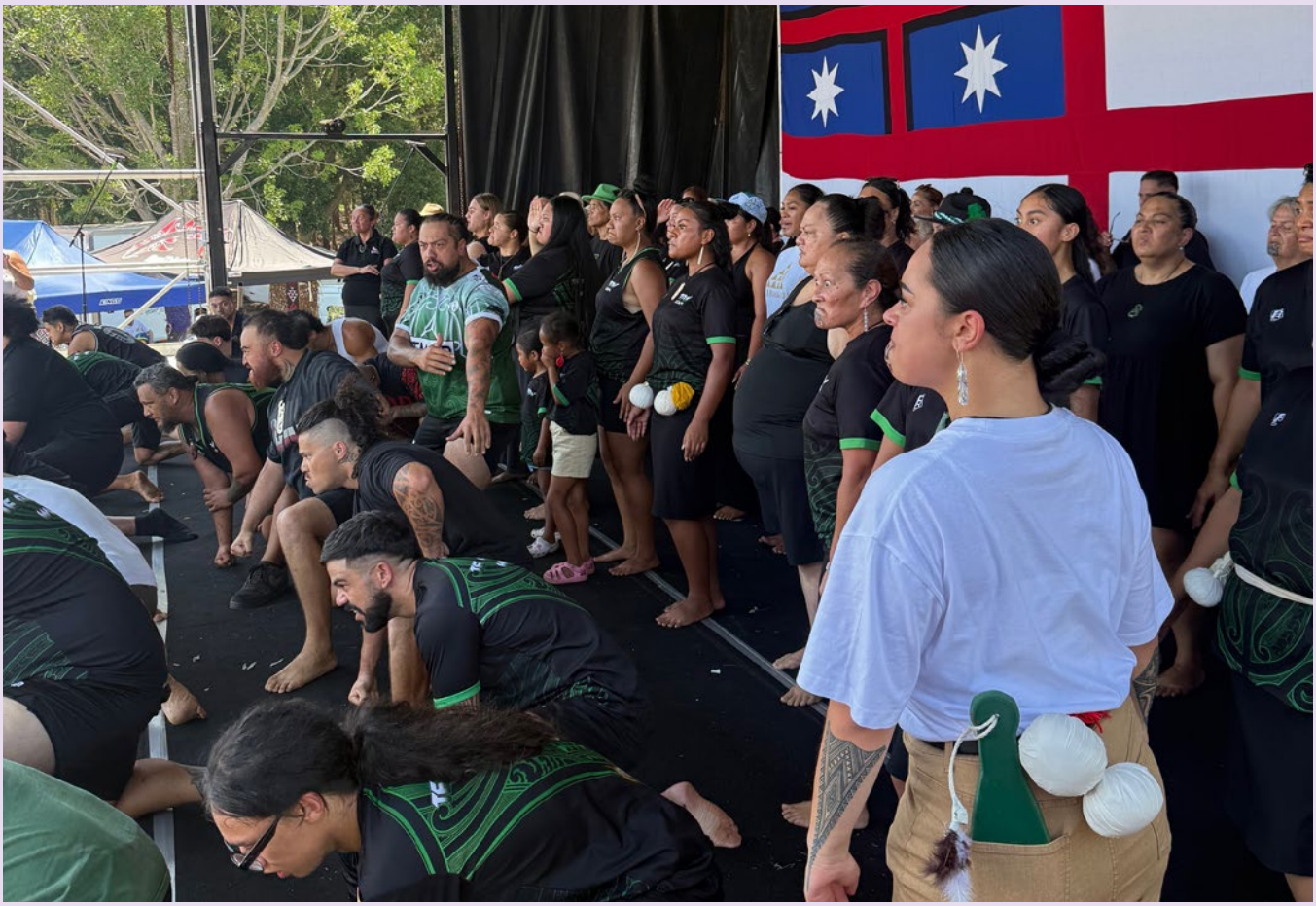
Another of Sydney Marae Alliance's major goals is creating a place of cultural prosperity for future generations of Māori in Australia.

"It's a big shift for us when we leave our country and come here, but what does it mean for tamariki (children) that are born here and don't have the connection to home? There's a lot more disconnection and lack of identity for them, and that's a big risk."

The Australian Government funding was a pre-election promise facilitated by Chris Bowen, Minister of Energy and Climate Change, in his capacity as Member of Parliament for the Division of McMahon, where Greystanes is located.

Being considered worthy of investment in by Australian politicians and decisionmakers hinges, in part, on the Alliance community's ability to offer – or at least hold potential for – a return on investment. And for that, it needs to have a critical mass of registered voters in its ranks.

> ***"If we had more New Zealanders becoming dual citizens, we'd have more voters. Our community needs to see this as an opportunity to contribute. The benefits here are bi-directional, with consequences that extend far beyond voting. For decades we have seen our people coming here and falling on hard times; citizenship is the way out of that."***



A kapa haka group in action at the Sydney Marae Alliance's Waitangi Day event in February 2026.

To be or not to be?
THE QUESTION OF AUSTRALIAN CITIZENSHIP

Actively encouraging people to pursue dual citizenship is one way Māori community groups and organisations are supporting members to get ahead in Australia.

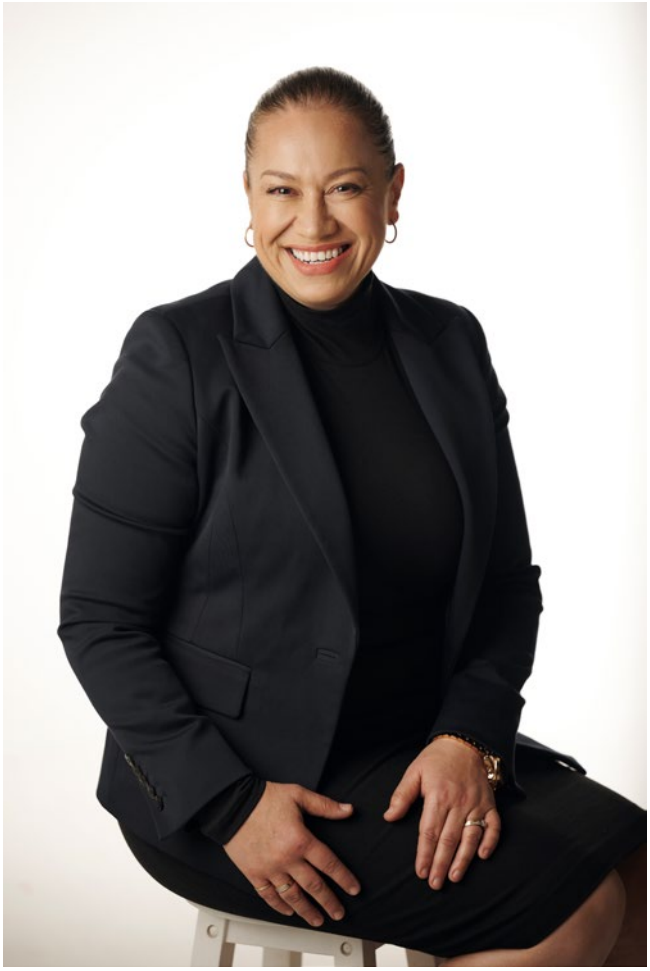
Many New Zealanders feel uncertain or ambivalent about becoming an Australian citizen. Others, despite years of participating in the Australian labour market, have wanted to access the benefits of Australian citizenship but not been able to.

Without citizenship, New Zealanders are ineligible for much of the social safety net available to Australian citizens in times of need. This includes unemployment or sickness benefits, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, student loans, public housing, student concessions and employment in the federal public service. Non-citizens are also unable to vote and cannot therefore participate in or influence Australian politics.

But as citizenship is not a requirement for living and working across the ditch, many do not see the point, or do not realise what they cannot access until it's too late.

Louise Cooper of the Sydney Marae Alliance says they see this with people in their community who have not become citizens.

> ***"If they fall on hard times, they really fall on hard times. So as part of our kapa haka (performing arts community) and as part of the Sydney Marae Alliance, we are encouraging as many people as possible to become citizens. People back home see us as being across the ditch. But I don't think we're across the ditch. Without citizenship, we're in the ditch. We are not there, and we are not here. And that is a real problem for our community."***



Louise Cooper OAM (Ngāti Hine), New South Wales

For many Māori, citizenship is a loaded legal, practical and personal space. Some worry that they will lose their sense of identity by becoming Australian. Others have found the moving feast of eligibility requirements hard to keep up with and understand, and the income threshold and visa application fees off-putting or prohibitive.

In 2001, Australia's Howard government significantly changed visa rules for New Zealanders, introducing the Special Category Visa, which allowed them to live and work in Australia but restricted access to social welfare benefits (like unemployment/disability) and created a tough pathway to citizenship. It fundamentally altered the longstanding Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement, which had previously allowed citizens of both countries nearly unrestricted rights of movement and access to social services, and introduced requirements that enabled it to serve as a kind of 'migration filter' that disadvantaged non-Pākehā New Zealanders. (Hamer, 2018)

A lobby group, Kiwis in Australia, claimed it meant New Zealanders were the only diaspora indefinitely residing in Australia that couldn't apply for citizenship after four years, and turned them into second-class citizens. (Baker, 2020)

Historian and Waitangi Tribunal Member Paul Hamer found that the change led to a collapse in the number of New Zealanders becoming Australian citizens. He observed that only 8.4 percent of the 146,000 New Zealand-born migrants who arrived in Australia between 2002 and 2011 had acquired Australian citizenship by 2016.

For New Zealand-born Māori, who were less likely to be able to meet the skills requirements or the cost of a permanent visa, the take-up rate was just under 3 percent.

New Zealanders have always had a lower citizenship take up rate than migrants from other countries, but prior to 2001 the rates were much higher (between 40-50 percent between 1985-2000). (Hamer, 2017)

FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS IN REAL TIME

Over the course of her career with the Australian Federal Police, Jo Maarama Kāmira saw Māori without access to support systems fall through the cracks in real time.

> ***"If you don't have access to work, you're not going to be able to get housing. If you don't have access to housing, what are you going to do? Where are you going to sleep? It's people in poor suburbs who are visibly out and about who get policed. Brown people are often living in small, crowded houses. They go out onto the streets to get space, and then they're in the public eye. They are visible, and they are on the radar of police. When our people do commit crimes, they're often fraud-related, because they don't have access to those systems and they're looking for a way to thrive."***

Kāmira herself became a dual citizen in the late 1980s. She wanted to work for the Australian Federal Police, and Australian citizenship was a requirement. Initially reluctant, she has come to see it as a necessity for Māori to be able to truly thrive in Australia.

> ***"We New Zealanders are in a liminal state here in this country, and the ones that suffer the most are Māori. Existing comfortably within a system gives you inherent privileges, and we don't exist comfortably within colonial and post-colonial systems."***

Academic, political scientist and commentator Dominic O'Sullivan (Te Rarawa, Ngāti Kahu) says citizenship is about who belongs and who does not, and that citizenship's primary purpose is not to tell us what services we should expect from the state, but to tell us who has a voice in deciding what the state is (O'Sullivan, 2025).

Through this lens, eligibility to apply for Australian citizenship determines who is welcome to belong and fully participate in Australian life – including Australian democracy.

Tyson Tuala (Te Rarawa, Samoan) migrated from New Zealand to Australia in 2012. He worked in construction, then landed his first 'serious' job working in corrections. Here, he observed workmates discussing and getting involved with union action but did not feel secure enough to participate.

> ***"We're not going to put a step out of line because without citizenship, if we don't have a job, what's going to happen to us? My colleagues would complain about working conditions, but I didn't feel like I could complain. There was no safety net there for me, I couldn't afford to become unemployed."***

Today Tuala is a senior engagement and communications officer in the Stolen Generations Reparation Unit at the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety. He is also President of Ngā Mātai Pūrua, an independent kapa haka (performing arts) and community organisation based in Melbourne's south-western suburbs.

He describes the use of migration policy to control the inclusion and exclusion of Māori and Pasifika populations as weaponised migration – a "shame-job".

Like the Sydney Marae Alliance and other organisations run by and for Māori in Australia, Ngā Mātai Pūrua actively encourages and supports its community members to understand the benefits of Australian citizenship, and what's involved in getting it.

A NEW DIRECT PATHWAY

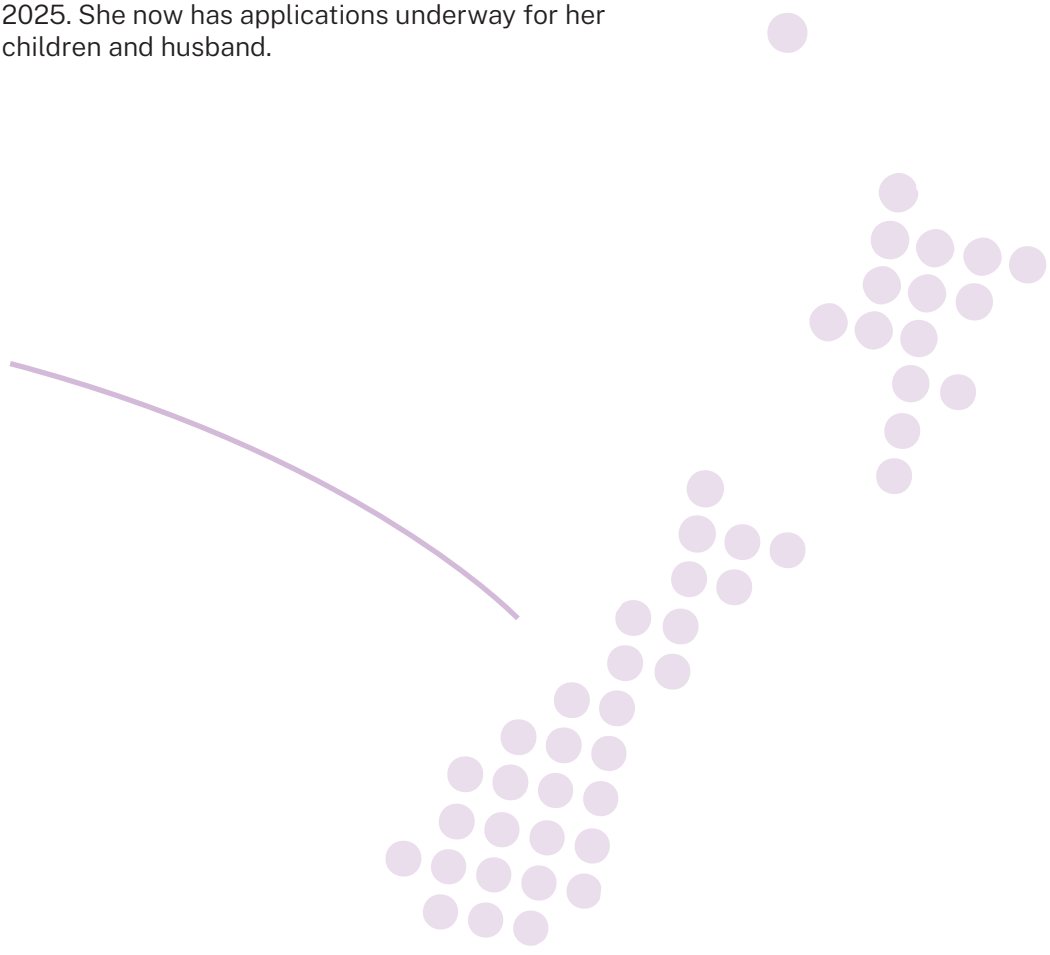
Things got easier from 1 July 2023, when New Zealanders became eligible to apply through a new direct pathway for Australian citizenship after four years in Australia, with no requirement to obtain permanent residency first.

There has been a notable uptick in conferral of Australian citizenship to people born in New Zealand since the change. In the first six weeks after the change alone, more than 15,000 New Zealanders applied for Australian citizenship. (Hurst & Karp, 2023)

In 2023-24 there were 27,825 conferrals of Australian citizenship made to New Zealand citizens; in 2024-25 there were 33,103 (Department of Home Affairs, 2025). In 2023-24 New Zealand was the second most prevalent source country for citizenship conferrals; in 2024-25 it was the first. In 2022-23 it did not even feature in the top three.

Robyn Finau moved quickly to acquire Australian citizenship under the pathway for herself in March 2025. She now has applications underway for her children and husband.

> ***"I did it not so much for me; it was more for my children, to open the doors for them, because there's just so many things that they're unable to access as New Zealand citizens, like student loans for studying. I'm grateful that we've never had to access anything like mental health or disability services, because that can be difficult. If any of my kids ever got stuck and needed some sort of benefit to help them out, they wouldn't be able to access any of that. Just like a lot of other Kiwis, we came over with the mindset that we're not here to bludge off the government, we're here to work. But I want my kids to be able to access to the same things as every other Australian citizen here."***



LANGUAGE AS AN ENVELOPE FOR CULTURE

For many Māori around the world, looking to deepen connection with Māoritanga (culturally affirming beliefs and practices), learning and speaking Te Reo Māori is a way in.

Language and culture are in relationship, with language carrying not just words and grammar, but also cultural knowledge, and ways of being, knowing and doing. Like culture, language is dynamic and evolving and – for as long as it is known and spoken – is a living system of collective history, identity and worldview and a conduit between past, present and future.

Tyson Tuala did not grow up speaking Māori. But he wanted to learn.

"On my mother's side I am Irish, English and Māori. My father is Māori and Samoan. Growing up, I spent a lot of time with my nanny (grandmother). She would say, whatever they tell you, you are Māori. I didn't grow up speaking Te Reo, so I took classes at high school and continued at university. I lived in a share house with three fluent speakers – none of them spoke English to me. That's probably how I really learned! But my teachers all spoke in different dialects, so when I'd go back to my region, I sounded like I was from somewhere else. I wanted to learn my dialect, so during Covid I arranged to speak with my nanny on Zoom every Sunday morning."

As in New Zealand, Māori in Australia/Māori Australians who are keen to deepen connection to their roots often start with language learning. There are in person classes in Te Reo all over the country, particularly in places with significant Māori diaspora, including on the Gold Coast and in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth.

People can also learn online, including for free through Ōtaki-based Te Wānanga o Raukawa, is funded by the Māori Language Commission to offer free 20-week-long courses in Māori language and protocol for New Zealand citizens living outside the country.

Several high schools in Australia offer classes in Māori language and culture to students, including Joseph Banks Secondary College and Gilmore College in Perth, and Keebra Park State High School in Gold Coast.

Louise Cooper and Robyn Finau didn't grow up speaking Māori either. Their parents and grandparents were of the generation that experienced active language suppression – when children were beaten for speaking Māori at school and it was discouraged in public spaces, and then eventually, at home.

In 1913, more than 90 percent of Māori schoolchildren could speak the language. By 1975, that figure had plunged to less than 5 percent. (Harvey, 2025)

Kōrero Pākehā (speaking English) was considered the way to go for Māori who wanted to get ahead.

> ***Dad would speak Māori at home when with his siblings and whānau. They were all native speakers. When we'd go home and back to the marae, he didn't speak English at all," remembers Cooper.***

When Cooper asked if she could do Māori language at high school, she wasn't allowed to. It wasn't until later in her life, when she was in her early twenties, that she started seeking Te Reo Māori out. Not long after, her dad had a change of heart.

"He went on a real mission. He became a reo Māori teacher, online and in person. He would say, people are born with it, and it needs to come out, and so I'm going to help people bring it out."

When their daughters were born in 1994 and 1996, Cooper and her husband decided they would be "kohanga babies" – participants in the kōhanga reo (language nest) movement. An early language learning model, kohanga reo began in 1982 and immerses pre-schoolers in a teaching environment rich in te reo and tikanga. Other programs followed, such as kura kaupapa, a system of primary schooling in a Māori-language environment. (Manatū Taonga — Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2024)

Inspired by her children's experience of kohanga reo back home in Auckland, Robyn Finau has worked hard to realise Te Reo and Te Ao Māori (the Maori worldview) in an Australian context in her Logan-based childcare business, Kiwi Kids.

She grew up with Tongan and English as her first languages. Her mother was Māori but didn't know much about her Māori culture. One of the ways she found her own way back to culture was through sending her children to kohanga reo. When she moved to Queensland, she wanted to create a similar experience for the Māori and Pasifika communities in her new hometown, Logan.

CASE STUDY:

KIWI KIDS

A BILINGUAL MĀORI AND ENGLISH CHILDCARE IN LOGAN, QUEENSLAND

In 2019 Robyn Finau and Deborah Paewai bought a childcare business and set about transforming it into a bilingual, kohanga reo-inspired daycare.

> ***"Back home, our culture is everywhere, including in early childhood education. But coming here, it was a bit of a shock that there was nothing set up for our tamariki. We felt there was something missing," says Finau.***

They set about creating the kind of experience they wanted for their own kids. More than five years on, and there are almost 90 children from roughly 75 families enrolled at Kiwi Kids, where language and tikanga are learned through a mixture of implicit and explicit teaching methods. Kaiako (teachers) introduce Māori words alongside English words, and a lot of the learning is through waiata.

Finau says people come to Kiwi Kids for different reasons. Many of the children are first or second generation Australian and have never spent time in New Zealand or learned any reo (language). Other parents are new arrivals looking for community and cultural connection. Some families are not Māori at all but hear about the centre through word of mouth and are drawn by its reputation for quality care and community building.

> ***"We have children from Pasifika, African, Middle Eastern, New Zealand Pākehā and Anglo-Australian backgrounds attending here. We open our doors to everyone. Our philosophy is, we're a family. We will treat your child – and you – as though you are part of our family."***

Finau says Kiwi Kids has been well supported by the local authorities, particularly the Queensland Department of Early Childhood Education and Care, who worked closely with Robyn to lift the centre's National Quality Standards rating from 'Working towards' to 'Meeting'.

> ***"I always felt they wanted us to succeed. They helped us understand how we were going to be able to embed what we're trying to achieve, while at the same time making sure that we are meeting requirements."***

One of the ways Finau has been able to achieve this is by connecting Australian Early Years Frameworks learning outcomes with principles from Te Whāriki, New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, and Te Ao Māori.

For example, Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity is realised in Whakapapa – Knowing who you are and where you belong. Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world is realised in Whānaungatanga – Being connected, and so on.

Recruiting and retaining qualified Māori speaking educators is an ongoing challenge, and Fianu has found herself needing to be more present, involved and hands on than she initially envisioned. She also spends time building community partnerships and supporting new families with systems navigation.

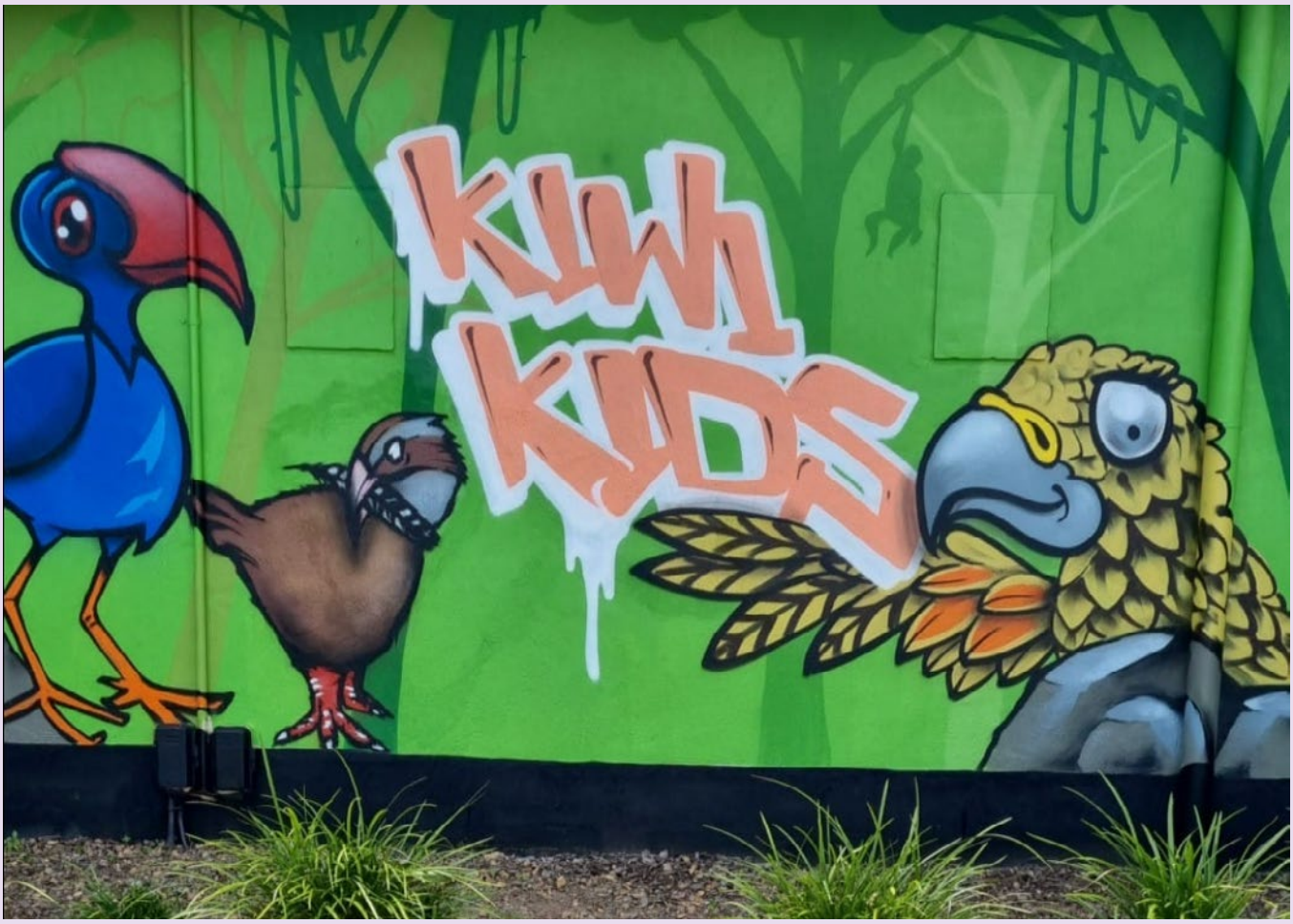
> ***"I realised I needed to get out into the community and find out what's available for our families, because some had no clue how to access supports. Some didn't even know they could access childcare subsidy benefits."***

Finau has developed partnerships with Village Connect, a Pasifika health and social services provider, and Children's Health Queensland.

Kiwi Kids hosts information evenings about local services and support for families and takes part in the Thriving and On Track initiative, which provides early developmental support to children, families and early childhood educators.

Other events are focused on culture. Recent examples include a the Matariki festival (Matariki is the brightest star in the Pleiades star cluster; its rising marks the Māori new year), a kapa haka competition, a NAIDOC festival, Māori and Pacific Island Education Network events and children's day events.

> ***"We invite the whole family and it's often our Australian and New Zealand Pākehā families who are showing up and engaging and wanting to learn more. We also have Māori who have never known their Māori side coming along. They want their children to learn that, but they also want that for themselves."***



A mural on an exterior wall at Kiwi Kids in Logan, Queensland.

Kapa haka: CONNECTION THROUGH PERFORMING ARTS

Communities form and come together around kapa haka – a dynamic, living art form where old traditions are maintained and new traditions are evolving and being formed.

A kapa haka performance can include traditional, pre-colonial haka (dance, often with chants) and waiata (chants and melodies) as well as more recent forms like waiata-a-ringa (melodies with actions and poi), and accompaniment on guitar. For many urban and diaspora Māori, the desire to learn about and be involved in culture is met by kapa haka. (Marshall, Goldsworthy, & Adams, 2003)

When Louise Cooper and her husband Kiri Barber moved to Sydney in 2000, their daughters were young, and they only knew Barber's parents and some of his siblings, who were already settled in Sydney. They were able to lean on Barber's parents to care for their daughters while they worked. Then a couple of years in, Barber started helping out with a local kapa haka group. Their social world and connection to community took off.

"When we were back home, we tutored our own kapa haka group in Auckland, it's always been part of our whānau and our ethos. We've been involved with kapa haka in Sydney ever since. Getting involved with kapa haka is one of the most enriching things we can do as Māori. It allows you to be in the community, learning our language, experiencing our culture," says Cooper.

Tyson Tuala has been involved in kapa haka since he was a teenager. He says as President of Ngā Mātai Pūrua, his job is to make it as easy as possible for people to get and stay involved and to create space for the tutors to fully concentrate on bringing new compositions or developing haka. He organises venues and times and keeps everyone in the loop. Technology is one of his main tools.

"Everything that I've learned, I bring into this space with my full heart. I am not a tutor, but I help the tutors and I'm an organiser and facilitator. I've found an app that helps the rōpū (group) stay on top of things, and I share the waiata and haka so that people can practice and learn in their own time, and at their own pace. When I was competing back home when I was younger, if you missed a session or couldn't keep up, it could get a bit stressful. But nowadays it's easier, because everyone's connected; we've got everything on our phones, and it's so much easier to do practices here and there, in ways that fit in around other life commitments like work and family. Ultimately, alongside the demands and realities of modern life, I still believe moving into performance and competition spaces is a spiritual act. I want to be and want our people to be on the stage in full, representing our ancestors, our people."

KAPA HAKA IN A CORRECTIONS SETTING

Tuala previously tutored a kapa haka program for inmates at the Port Phillip Prison – a mixed experience where his observations of systemic racism and overrepresentation of Māori and Pasifika in the prison clashed with his cultural values and personal approach to representation.

"It was maximum security facility, but a lot of the young Māori and Pasifika inmates hadn't done maximum security crimes. They were just young and brown and made mistakes. I couldn't see what they were doing in there. It was me and 60 guys. I realised I couldn't be a screw when I was running the program. To be the tutor, I'd go out of the prison, get changed and come back in. I started having ethical and moral problems with the way the activity was being run, because management wasn't honouring the values of the kapa haka space. I wanted people's issues to be left at the door, but it was used as means of punishment and reward. This didn't sit well with me at all."

In 2025, Ngā Mātai Pūrua collaborated with Essence Theatre Productions to develop and present a play, The Yellow Line, that was supported by the Scanlon Foundation. Based on Tuala's own experience as a Maori and Pasifika guard tasked with leading a kapa haka cultural program to a group of inmates during his time working at Port Phillip Prison, the play explores the complexities of the prison system and has provoked discussion on identity, justice, and redemption through a Māori and Pasifika lens.

Tuala's anecdotal observation of the overrepresentation of Māori and Pasifika in the prison system is hard to verify in data, as (as in the Census) ethnicity is tracked via country of birth data, rather than ancestry or other ethnicity data.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that at end June 2025, New Zealand-born people made up 2.24 percent of people in Australian prisons (ABS, 2025) – a figure that is approximately equivalent to the overall population rate of 2.3 percent. But as country of birth data is not ethnicity data, the figures are very likely much higher. Drilling deeper into state and territory-based corrections agencies shows that in Victoria at end June 2024, 2.5 percent of prisoners were born in New Zealand, and 1.1 percent were born in the Pacific Islands.

The figures contrast positively with incarceration rates for Maori in New Zealand, where tangata whenua are overrepresented at every stage in the criminal justice system, making up 52 percent of people in prison, despite being only 15 percent of the population. (Ministry of Justice, 2025)

Tuala's observation also aligns with insights developed by Jo Maarama Kāmira during a decade working for the Australian Federal Police, from 1988-1998. Kāmira's scope included heading intelligence training, implementing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander career strategy and running the National Equity and Diversity Unit. She links overrepresentation to the lack of safety net people experience when they cannot or do not access Australian citizenship, and to systemic racism such as racial profiling.

THE POWER OF POSITIVE REPRESENTATION

Positive representation and role modelling through community, culture and kapa haka helps to challenge negative stereotypes and gives Māori and Pasifika youth a uniquely Maori self-narrative and a new framework for belonging, worth, social justice and participation.

New kapa haka traditions have been formed by Māori diaspora all over Australia. Two contemporary examples are PCYC NSW's Haka Warriors program, and the Australian National Kapa Haka Festival.

PCYC's Haka Warriors program is a transformative and values-driven program that supports Pasifika youth to connect with their cultural heritage through haka. Developed in 2019 by PCYC in partnership with NSW Police, it is a 20-week program that aims to instil cultural pride, encourage good choices and foster holistic growth and personal development. More than 290 students from 11 high schools across Sydney performed at the 2024 Haka Warriors finale, in front of a crowd of more than 1,500 supporters (PCYC, 2025).

The Australian National Kapa Haka Festival celebrated its 10th year in 2025. The event acts as a qualifier for winning teams to travel to New Zealand and compete in events like the bi-annual Te Matatini competition.

Te Matatini Te Whenua Moemoeā delegate, Ihaka Cotter, has said the Australian festival is a showcase of the best kapa haka on offer in Australia, and an important way for Māori living across the ditch to stay connected to Aotearoa.

> ***"As Māori living away from home, it's important that we are represented at Te Matatini. We also have a longing for home and so it always gives us that grounding and connection." (RNZ, 2024)***

Trans-Tasman connections are starting to form elsewhere too. Also in 2025, a haka group from Keebra Park State High School in Gold Coast, Te Puna Mataatahi, travelled to New Zealand to perform at Polyfest, a longstanding secondary schools Māori & Pacific Islands cultural festival, for the first time. The group's members – many of whom were born in Australia to Māori or Pasifika parents but had no other connection with their culture, were given a warm welcome.

"Ko te tuatahitanga tēnei mō rātou ki te rere ki runga i te waka rererangi, ki te noho ki runga i te marae, a, ki te tū ki runga i te ātamira hei whakataetae kapa haka ki Polyfest," teacher and haka tutor Dean Harawira told a local news outlet.

("It's a first for some of them on a plane, to stay on a marae, and to stand on the kapa haka stage to compete at Polyfest.")

"It's a beautiful thing to see our kids connecting with their Māoritanga, their reo and their tikanga Māori." (Te Karere, 2025)

CASE STUDY:

NGĀ MĀTAI PŪRUA

A SELF-SUSTAINING COMMUNITY AND KAPA HAKA ORGANISATION IN MELBOURNE

Leaders wanted to stop relying on competitive grants for Ngā Mātai Pūrua's viability and become financially self-sustaining. Their initial goal was to operate independently for two years – so far, it's been four.

Ngā Mātai Pūrua is an independent, not-for-profit incorporated membership-based association founded and run by and for Māori in Melbourne's south-western suburbs.

Meaning 'the merging of two oceans', the organisation provides cultural experiences through kapa haka classes and performances, cultural workshops, youth development, and community-led initiatives that celebrate identity and belonging.

Its work is grounded in tikanga Māori and a commitment to holistic wellbeing – physical, mental, spiritual, and whānau-based. It supports rangatahi (young people) and whānau to thrive through positive role modelling and representation, cultural learning, leadership pathways, and opportunities to perform and connect.

Tyson Tuala has been President of Ngā Mātai Pūrua since 2017. Over that time the organisation's member-base has grown into the hundreds, and it has become financially self-sustaining.

Initially Ngā Mātai Pūrua survived on grants from local bodies. But Tuala and the community found the competitive and performative nature of the grant making process – in which they felt beholden to externally imposed, performative reporting requirements – divisive and disempowering.

"Competitive funding means you must fight other people, and I don't want to fight for it. If I knew there was a First Nations organisation in the funding realm, I'd pull our application," says Tuala.

> ***"When people are trying to secure funding, especially in competitive funding rounds, they cannot be themselves. They have to perform; they can't bring themselves to the table. We had to figure out a way to come back to our purpose."***

Tuala firmly protects his and Ngā Mātai Pūrua's knowledge, redirecting offers of employment (and therefore potential loss of intellectual property) to engagement and consulting. He says the organisation doesn't want jobs – it wants access. This strategy enables Tuala to retain the Ngā Mātai Pūrua's authenticity, independence and ability to be self-determining.

Financially viable solutions Ngā Mātai Pūrua has developed include a school holiday program, performance bookings for haka, waiata, poi and storytelling, creative collaborations and cultural workshops and consulting.

> ***"I see some people step in and they're so keen to connect with their language and culture, they attack it like a gym membership. This works for some people, but for others, it's overwhelming. As a project, stepping into your culture is always going to take a backseat to priorities like housing and food and family."***

He says campaign messaging from back home along the lines of just be Māori; be Māori all day, every day; be Māori everything' sums up Ngā Mātai Pūrua's overall approach. The organisation has realised it is more than a kapa haka group – it is an engagement model, and that people engage in different ways.

It is an evolving model. Future areas of exploration include scholarships and enabling members to nominate a home marae to send a portion of their annual membership fee to.

> ***"Stepping into your culture is a long game. Make it a part of your life in the ways that work for you, and you'll start to pick things up. And while I say it's not a gym membership, we do give people a trial period! So, they can come and step in and find the way that feels right for them. We are like a doorway."***

Location has also made a difference. Ngā Mātai Pūrua initially met in a local Aboriginal centre but found community members uncertain about stepping into a First Nations space. When the group physically relocated to a local youth centre, it noticed a shift.

> ***"Our people were more comfortable coming into the space. Slowly people start owning the space and now that's their community. I'm confident that if our rangatahi are at the plaza and they need a safe place, they know exactly where to go."***

Maintaining solidarity WITH MĀORI ACTIVISM BACK HOME

Following and actively engaging New Zealand politics is another way Māori in Australia maintain connection with whānau and iwi from across the ditch.

Some participants follow New Zealand politics closely; others, not so much.

"I feel for our people. And when I say our people, I mean New Zealanders. There's a huge divide, a new level of separatism going on. I don't live back home so I don't feel it on the ground, but I still have my mum and my sister and my cousins, and none of them are happy with how things are going. It's like a pattern of extreme weather in politics; we're seeing a shift towards the far corners all around the world. You get better politicking from the left and the right when there's more middle ground, but everything seems to be going to the opposite corners at the moment," says Louise Cooper of the Sydney Marae Alliance.

The new separatism Cooper is referring to are ongoing efforts by the centre-right coalition government, in power since 2023, to roll back what it terms 'race-based policies'. It is focused on reshaping The Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi), limiting Māori language use in some public functions, and eliminating many Māori institutional structures, including the Māori Health Authority, which it shut down in mid-2024. In October 2025 it emerged that guaranteed seats for Māori representatives on councils around New Zealand will be reduced by more than half, following a controversial law change that forced local governments to put the fate of Māori seats (won in 2001) to a public vote. (The Guardian, 2025) In November 2025, the government removed the legal requirement for schools to give effect to the Treaty of Waitangi by ensuring school policies, plans and local curriculums reflect local Māori customs, knowledge and world views. (The Guardian, 2025)

Abe Ropitini says the current government is openly hostile to Māori and Te Tiriti, and describes New Zealand politics as a battleground. He feels heartened to know there is still a latent power that can be awakened; that suddenly the whole of Te Ao Māori will mobilise when called forth by its leaders.

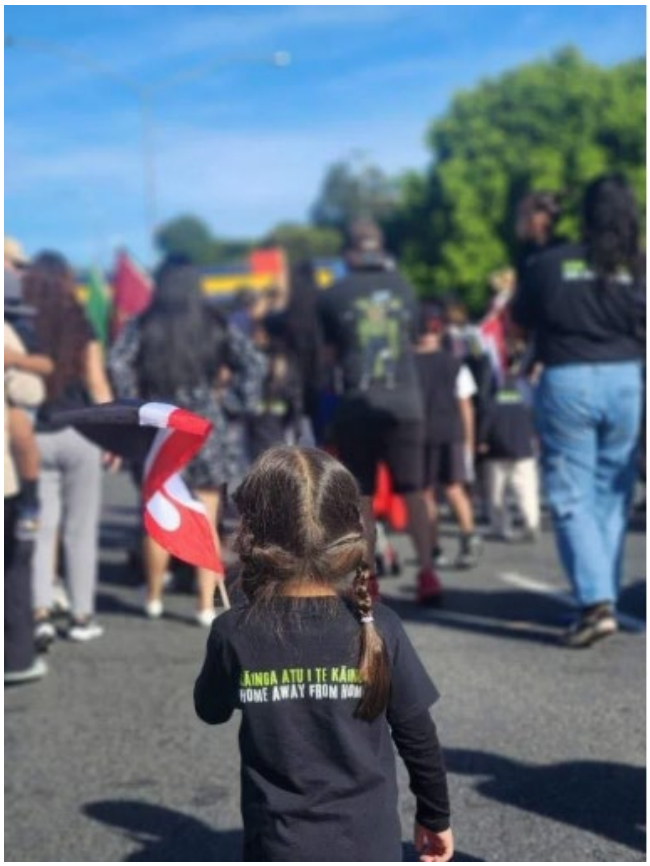
This happened most recently in November 2024, when people on both sides of the Tasman took part in the nine-day Hīkoi mō te Tiriti. A protest walk and national activation of Māori activism, each iwi travelled in convoy to Wellington to lay down a challenge in protest against the Treaty Principles Bill that sought (and failed) to redefine the Treaty of Waitangi.

Robyn Finau took part on a personal level in Logan. Others flew home to New Zealand to march with iwi and whānau.

> ***"Last year we did a couple of hīkoi about the Treaty of Waitangi principles. This was something that the parents in our community were driving, so we supported them on a personal level. We were there as brothers and sisters in arms, and we had a really good turnout. That's another thing that I really love about being here – that sense of a supportive wider community."***

Ropitini points out New Zealand is one place with two nations in it – New Zealand and Aotearoa, and they're mediated by a Treaty relationship.

> ***"People sometimes forget that, but it's something I reflect on as we're going through the process of creating a treaty relationship and asserting Indigenous nationhood here in Victoria right now. The idea of First Nations isn't just a label; it's a phenomenon we want to give life to. We want to rebuild our nations and assert our sovereign rights. It's good to be able to look back home and see that treaty relationship alive and well and getting stronger, even in the face of a hostile government."***



Hīkoi mō te Tiriti in Logan, Queensland, November 2024.

Reinforcing identity
THROUGH TĀ MOKO

For Māori living away from New Zealand, choosing to wear tā moko (traditional tattooing) can affirm and strengthen identity and cultural connection.

Emerging Australian Māori filmmaker Jaida Ngawaka (Ngai Tāmanuhiri) graduated from the Australian Film Television and Radio School in May 2025. Her directorial debut is Our Inked Identity, a documentary short about Sydney-based tā moko artist Roki Maika that explores cultural identity, connection and disconnection. It has shown on SBS, YouTube and at the Antenna Documentary Film Festival.

> ***"The process of tā moko isn't just about the tattooing itself, it's about the kōrero (talk) that comes beforehand, led with the intent to learn about someone's story – their ancestry, their family, and where they come from – and then piecing together that person's very personal sense of self by carving it onto the skin.*** *That* ***is tā moko. At one point Roki said, "You really don't have to prove it to anybody. You're Māori, you've got to know you're enough. That's enough." That hit something in me personally, and I started crying. I felt he was speaking to me just as much as he was speaking to our audience."***

Ngawaka is working on a longer documentary series called Mana People that explores similar themes of identity and belonging.

> ***"There is a certain pain that comes with being Indigenous and experiencing disconnection from community. I want our people to know that regardless of where you are born and raised, if you have love and respect for culture, you are allowed to feel and participate in it and be in those communities and spaces."***

The wearing of tā moko becomes culturally and sometimes politically significant when considered against a backdrop of suppression and resurgence.

For centuries before European settlement, Māori told stories, marked milestones and accomplishments and represented their whakapapa (genealogy) through intricate, ritualistic etching of tā moko on their faces and bodies using uhi (chisels) and natural inks.

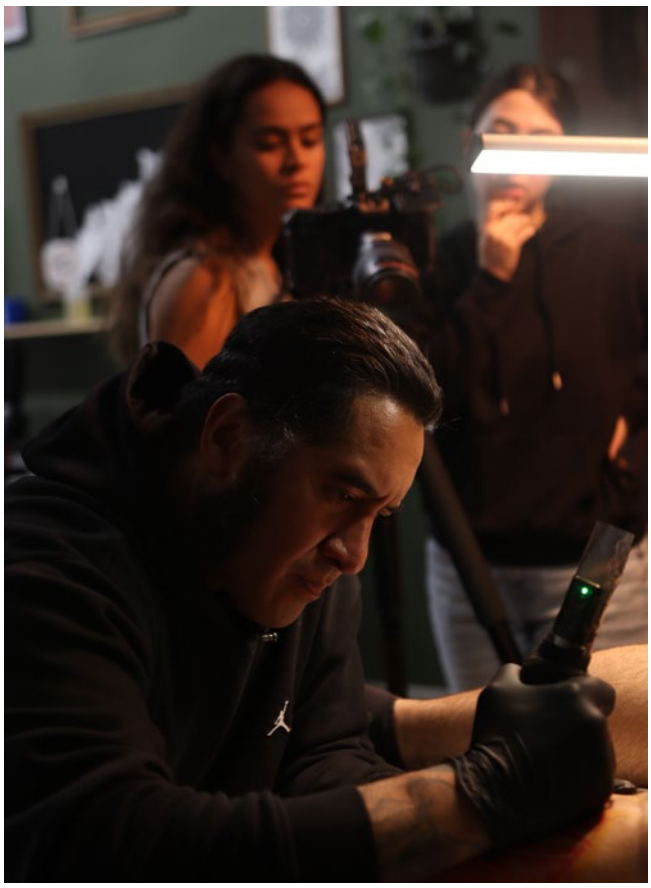
But the Tohunga Suppression Act of 1907 targeted Māori spiritual, healing and cultural experts, further marginalising traditional knowledge and practices, including tā moko.

Today, many Māori view moko as a way of embracing and expressing identity and reclaiming culture. For some, as a symbol of resistance against ongoing attempts by the settler state to erode Māori culture and rights. (Harvey, 2025)

Jo Maarama Kāmira moved to Australia with her parents in 1967, when she was four. She was the only Māori at her school and says negotiating spaces that she was not supposed to be in was difficult. She always knew that one day she was going to wear moko kauae, a chin tattoo for women that signifies learnedness, status and seniority.

"When I was young, before we came here, we lived in Whanganui. My grandmother would put on her best costume – that's what she called her two-piece suit, with a hat and white gloves – and take us to town. She would often lose me, then find me down the road with a group of Māori. I vividly remember sitting on one woman's knee and tracing her moko kauae, and I knew that was for me.

I've never had so much racism thrown at me since I've had this. Before I was ethnically ambiguous, so people didn't know 'what' I was. Whereas now, some people are openly, horrendously racist. Because when you wear moko kauae, you are signifying that you are unashamedly and unambiguously Māori, and that is deeply unsettling for some people. However, for young women of colour from all backgrounds, my presence and moko affirm their identity. I get huge smiles, nods and greetings – and that transcends any racism."



Tā moko artist Roki Maika at work.

Exploring A PAN-REGIONAL IDENTITY

For many Māori, migration away from New Zealand invites realignment with a broader, pre-colonial regional and migratory lineage: Polynesian.

A Polynesian identity sits beyond the settler colonial worldview and the separatist categories of modern nation states. It casts an ancestral line significantly farther back in time, to Māori's own origin story of exploration and migration in the Pacific region.

Between five and six thousand years ago, Māori ancestors set out on long-range voyages from Hawaiki, across Polynesia. They travelled as far as Hawaii in the north and Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in the east. Then in the second half of the 13th century CE, great migrations to a land discovered to the southwest and named Aotearoa (long white cloud) by the navigators Kupe and Kuramārōtini, started. These migrants brought plants from Polynesia to cultivate in their new home, along with cultural and linguistic traditions that remain today. (Buck, 1950)

The Pacific lineage of Te Ao Māori clearly predates the European exploration of the 'New World' that has shaped the dominant worldview in our region by several thousand years.

Yet for most of New Zealand's settler history, biculturalism has been the headline. Rooted in The Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi) as a founding document, this narrative dominated Māori-Crown relationships from its signing in 1840 right through to 1990s and is still present in New Zealand today.

Dominic O'Sullivan argues biculturalism made Māori the junior partner in a colonial relationship that ultimately obstructed Māori agency and self-determination (O'Sullivan, 2007).

The Treaty also made Māori British subjects. Together with biculturalism, it has created a false container in which Māori identity, agency and systems access is ultimately determined not by Māori, but by non-Māori.

SLOTTING INTO SETTLER POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Migration away from New Zealand invites and sometimes demands Māori to redefine themselves within Australia's multicultural and increasingly complex system.

One external challenge to be overcome is in the semantics – the meaning in the language, names and labels of a new policy and population paradigm.

In Australia, policymakers often explicitly nestle Māori under the Pasifika umbrella.

This can be confusing, particularly for newer migrants, as in New Zealand the term 'Pasifika' does not include Māori. In fact, in New Zealand today the use of 'Pasifika' is discouraged altogether (as is the once commonplace 'Pacific Islanders') – an about face of sorts, as it was in New Zealand that the term 'Pasifika' came into being in the first place (a quasi-transliteration from Pacific; from the Latin pacifus – peaceful).

The New Zealand government's current preferred naming system distinguishes Māori as tangata whenua (recognised as ethnically Polynesian) and 'Pacific Peoples' (migrants to New Zealand from other Pacific Islands and their descendants; a diaspora population). (GCDO, 2025)

For Māori moving across the ditch, there is therefore some semantic reckoning to be done along with recontextualising of self as tangata whenua to self as manuhiri – guest, and other.

Does stepping out of the false container that is biculturalism in New Zealand enable Māori in Australia to more comfortably exist and self-identify as part of a trans-border, trans-Tasman, pan-Pacific community a way that generally does not happen in New Zealand?

Is it too soon to tell? Or perhaps, not the right question?

Samoan and Māori academics Dion Enari and Innez Haua (both raised in Australia) describe the Maori and/or Pasifika dialogue as controversial, with two main perspectives.

Some believe, through shared whakapapa and migrant status, that Māori in Australia should no longer be differentiated from other Pacific Islander populations, and should be included under the term Pasifika. Conversely, others believe that if Māori were distinct from Pasifika in New Zealand, then this label should continue in Australia. They note that collective consultation to find the appropriate term(s) between our peoples and the Australian government has yet to occur, and share their own perspectives, that:

> ***"For Pasifika – including Māori – and the generations that are settled in both Australia and New Zealand, all of our beginnings start at the same place. All of our migratory journeys commenced – not with a passport and a 747 aircraft, but with the launch of va'a/waka into the vast beauty of le vasa loloa/Te Moana nui a Kiwa – the Pacific." (Enari & Haua, 2021)***

Māori in Australia are just getting on with it.

Some are comfortable identifying as Māori and Pasifika, others as Māori and Polynesian, others as New Zealanders, others as Māori.

Despite what government and its need for categorisation might like, there is no one size fits all solution. The reality of individual identity and self-determination is truly diverse.

Pasifika works for Louise Cooper of the Sydney Marae Alliance.

> ***"When you look at us across the Pacific, we're one people: we are Pasifika; the people of the Pacific. The idea that we're not – that we're separate – is a form of separatism that's being imposed on us. It's time to push that aside and say we're better together. We have lineage, shared stories, cultural markers and migration stories. How can we not be from the Pacific?"***

Tyson Tuala, who has Māori and Samoan heritage, identifies mores strongly as Māori. He has noticed most of the people in the Ngā Mātai Pūrua community, who are mostly New Zealand-born Māori, do not recognise themselves in the Pasifika label.

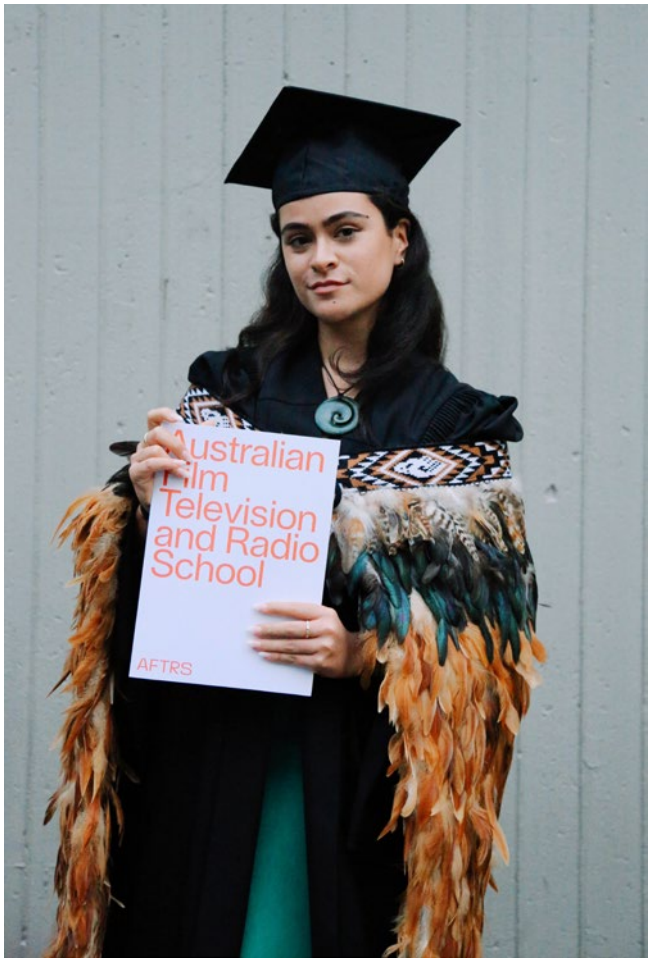
“We don't use that term for ourselves in New Zealand, and we don’t generally respond to that here. This means we might be missing out on opportunities, so we’ve started to try and educate our people about recognising themselves as members of Pacific Islander collectives in Australia, so they can access those services and have those same opportunities.”

Jaida Ngawaka identifies as Polynesian as much as Māori. Born in Sydney and raised in the Northern Beaches, Ngawaka grew up in an area with Tongans, Samoans and Māori and has always felt connected to Polynesia.

“I've always felt an affiliation with all the Pasifika nations, not just my own. We are navigators, we are one people who move to different islands – that fits with my own story, of how I came to be Australian. But I feel now that many Polynesians and Māori especially, tend to stay in a place and believe that if you move, you're not being true to home, that you’re giving up your cultural connection. But we Polynesians should remember that we have always seen new possibilities and opportunities in different lands. That is part of how we prosper. We can go anywhere and still be who we are.”

Abe Ropitini notes Māori are chameleons and have always been able to move between different worlds, evolving and renegotiating ways of belonging along the way.

> ***“We’ve been able to hold onto our oral histories throughout our migration across an enormous ocean, we’ve survived colonisation, and now we are all over the world. And in the modern world we’re creating lots of ways to be Māori. We can become scholars, linguists, artists, providers for our whānau. I am overwhelmed with pride when I see our people out there blazing a trail.”***



Jaida Ngawaka (Ngai Tāmanuhiri), New South Wales

Conclusion

The experiences and achievements of Māori who have migrated to Australia remind us that culture is dynamic and responsive, and that successful migration has long informed Māori identity and ways of being.

Australia is home to the largest population of Māori outside Aotearoa New Zealand. Some were born in Aotearoa and migrated to Australia as children with their parents. Others, keen to make the most of Australia's economic and employment potential and the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement, chose to migrate as adults. Others were born here as second, third (and so on) generation Australian Māori.

It has become true that Māori aren't just *in* Australia, they *are* Australian. It has also become true that New Zealand is not the only place where Māori experiences and indigeneity happen.

Even so for Māori, as tangata whenua (Indigenous people) in Aotearoa, the personal and cultural significance of life away from New Zealand is arguably complex and nuanced.

These nuances shape and inform the experience of Māori in Australia, and the ways Māori Australians are making a home away from home through maintaining traditional ways of knowing, being and doing, and through creating new traditions.

These include speaking and learning Te Reo Maori, participating in and creating kapa haka and other art forms such as tā moko and contemporary theatre, and working towards establishing a traditional papakāinga (base) for Māori from all iwi (tribes) – a vibrant, inclusive space where Māori can gather, celebrate and share the richness of Māori culture with the wider community.

They also involve the carving out of new traditions –ways cultural practices have evolved and are continuing to evolve in response to external factors like government policy, economic opportunity and digital technology.

New, pan-tribal and trans-Tasman communities have grown around these endeavours, and new interpretations of foundational aspects of being Indigenous and being Maori have come into being.

Place and relationality remain central to sense of self and broader familial and communal connection in Te Ao Māori (the Māori world). For Māori Australians, this is being realised and recreated through new communities and papakainga (bases) to centre and celebrate culture, and through respectful and consultative relations with tangata whenua in Australia: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Deliberate and strategic opportunities for language learning and community creation combine Maori, New Zealand and Australian models and frameworks.

Finding ways to operate independently, where possible, and to retain ownership and control of assets and intellectual property creates opportunities for autonomy, agency and future prosperity.

Choosing to wear tā moko (traditional tattoos) affirms and strengthen identity and cultural connection.

Pursuing and encouraging Australian citizenship alongside New Zealand citizenship (dual citizenship) enhances access to social security, public housing, education and healthcare, and supports full participation in Australian and New Zealand democracy.

Working within, alongside and outside of settler state systems helps to achieve positive change and representation. It role models strength and resilience, challenges negative stereotypes and gives Māori and Pasifika youth a uniquely Maori self-narrative, along with new frameworks for belonging, worth, social justice and participation.

Maintaining solidarity with Māori activism back home by following and actively engaging New Zealand politics is another way Māori Australians foster a trans-Tasman identity and existence and maintain connection with whānau and iwi in Aotearoa.

Across the Ditch also reminds us that the colonial project in both Australia and New Zealand is relatively young. We know that Indigenous Australians have inhabited this land for at least 65,000 years, and that the tīpuna (ancestors) of Māori discovered, migrated to and settled Aotearoa between 5-6,000 years ago.

Finally, pursuing individual and collective cultural identity outside of the colonial project invites realignment with a broader, pre-colonial regional and migratory lineage. A Polynesian identity sits beyond the settler colonial worldview and the separatist categories of modern nation states. It casts an ancestral line significantly farther back in time, to Māori's own origin story of exploration and migration in the Pacific region.

We've seen that being Māori in Australia (and being Australian Māori) presents opportunities and challenges that invite individual and collective responsiveness, growth and change and that Māori continue – and will continue – to seek and find ways to thrive both within and outside of the colonial project.

These are some ways Māori are living in Australia.

About THE AUTHOR

Vanessa Murray (Ngāti Pākehā) is a writer, journalist and communications specialist with interest in systems change, impact, sustainability, healthcare, sport, diversity, and literacy and accessibility. Born and raised in New Zealand, Vanessa has lived in Melbourne since 2004. She became a dual citizen of New Zealand and Australia in 2025. She has written for media at home and abroad, authored one book and contributed to several others, and works with clients seeking to benefit communities and society at large. Across the Ditch is Vanessa's second narrative for the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute.

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GLOSSARY OF MĀORI WORDS

haka	dance, often with chants
hapū	kinship group, clan, tribe, subtribe
hīkoi	walk, protest walk
iwi	tribe, kinship group, tribal nation
kaiako	teacher, teachers
kapa haka	performing arts
kaupapa	focus, guiding principles
kawa	protocols or by-laws, particularly on marae
kaumatua	elder/s
kōrero	to speak, talk together
manuhiri	guests
Māoritanga	beliefs and practices that express and affirm Māori culture and identity; encompasses concepts like tikanga, whakapapa, whanaungatanga
marae	sacred meeting places where family and cultural gatherings take place
Matariki	The brightest star in the Pleiades star cluster; its rising marks the Māori new year
moko kauae	chin tattoo for women; a symbol of learnedness, status and seniority
Pākehā	white people, New Zealand European
papakāinga	base, home base, village
pepeha	Māori identity statement; a declaration of where one is from and how one connects to land and ancestry
pūtea	capital
rangatahi	young people
reo	language

rōpū	group
tamariki	children
tangata whenua	people of the land; Indigenous people (of any land; context specific)
Te Ao Māori	The Māori World, the Māori worldview
Te Reo Māori	The Māori language
Te Tiriti o Waitangi	The Treaty of Waitangi
Te Whenua Moemoeā	Australia, The Land of Dreaming
tīpuna	ancestors
tikanga	obligations, customs and values, ways of knowing, being and doing
tūrangawaewae	home, standing, place where one has the right to stand; where one has rights of residence and belonging through kinship and whakapapa – literally: the standing place for one's feet
uhi	chisels
waiata	songs and anthems, usually holding poetic stories, aphorisms and oral histories
waiata-a-ringa	action songs, melodies with actions and poi
waka	canoes; the great migrations that came from Polynesia
wānanga	meeting, discussion, practice of learning and exchanging knowledge
whakapapa	personal and shared connections to and relationships with ancestors, places of origin, and creation stories practiced through genealogy, oral histories, legends, myth
whānau	family
whāngai	cultural adoption, fostering – literally: to embrace or nourish
whenua	life source; land, placenta, source of nourishment
whanaungatanga	kinship, sense of shared belonging, relationality

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IMAGE CREDITS

Sydney Marae Alliance (front cover, p.13, p.15)

Kiwi Kids (p.5, p.21, p.26)

Abe Ropitini (p.9)

Jo Maarama Kāmira (p.11)

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About THE SCANLON FOUNDATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute exists as a bridge between academic insight and public thought. The Institute undertakes research to help Australia advance as a welcoming, prosperous, and cohesive nation, particularly where this relates to the transition of migrants into Australian society. In doing so, the Institute links thought to action to ensure informed debate drives the agenda and empowers the critical thinking that will help drive Australia's social cohesion forward.

The Institute publishes the Mapping Social Cohesion Report, a world-leading survey, providing a comprehensive understanding of the Australian population's attitudes to multiculturalism, institutions and government, as well as to other people and neighbourhoods.

Other publications include narratives, social cohesion insights and essays, and the delivery of podcasts, webinars, and learning programs each year. Through these, the Institute seeks to provide evidence and ideas that will inform national discourses and empower communities to maintain and strengthen social cohesion.

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