

# MAORI MOKO: A COSTLY SIGNAL?

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## ABSTRACT

Costly Signaling Theory (CST) addresses cultural behaviors that are risky or apparently wasteful but which may serve to convey important fitness-related information. Recent studies have expanded the application of CST to such phenomena as religious ritual and body modification. The Maori, an indigenous Polynesian culture, historically practiced an elaborate form of facial tattooing called *moko*. *Moko* procedures were irreversible and potentially deadly. By examining historical sources and detailed ethnographic accounts, I evaluate four hypotheses for the explanation of traditional Maori tattoo: 1) Pathology, 2) Expression, 3) Costly signal of ally and enemy quality, and 4) Costly signal of mate quality. I argue that male *moko* may have signaled commitment and ferocity in war, in addition to mate qualities such as status, wealth, and bravery. I argue that female *moko* may have signaled potential mate qualities such as rank, wealth, and sexual maturity/availability. I conclude with possible areas for future research.