

## A kāuta for today

Manaaki ki te tāngata, hosting and caring for people, is central to Māori culture and society. Traditional fireplaces on marae called kāuta, are at the heart of this tradition. Modern regulations surrounding open fires have contributed to the decline of kāuta, and many kāuta have been decommissioned

and the mātauranga or traditional knowledge associated with kāuta has begun to disappear.

Scion has partnered with Tau Iho I Te Po Trust on a two-year project entitled Kāuta: E hononga mō ngā tāngata manaaki,

Traditional hearths: Bringing people together. The project brings scientists, tāngata Māori and regulatory agencies together to develop engineering design requirements for a contemporary kāuta.



Figure 1: Group outside a cookhouse in Parihaka.



Photo: © Peter James Quinn

Figure 2: Kāuta inside the whare kai. Whareponga Marae, East Cape, Ngāti Porou in 1995.

## What is a kāuta?

A kāuta refers to part of the whare kai (dining hall and kitchen), where food is prepared and cooked. Kāuta also serve as a gathering place where whānau (family) get together to share narratives, history and memories.

In response to modern environmental, building and fire regulations, many kāuta on marae across New Zealand have been decommissioned. Over time this has resulted in the loss of associated hapū (subtribe) and whānau culture, traditions and mātauranga Māori.

## The history of kāuta

Historically, kāuta were separate earth-floor shelters with fireplaces for cooking and food. A woman named Reremoana Koopu, born in 1893, described childhood memories of kāuta at Otūwhare in the eastern Bay of Plenty in the book *A History of New Zealand Women*. She said “We had a kāuta, then. It is a big one, though, with a big chimney we cooked in. You have your fire and you would cook all your kai there, with the pieces of iron to hold your pots. We had our kitchen things buried in the chimney – oh, it was nice. We had big pots – whaling pots ...” (Brookes, 2016). The kāuta she refers to may have been similar to that in Figure 1, depicting a kāuta in use at Parihaka, Taranaki, around 1900.

As western influences began to have an effect, kāuta became incorporated into

whare kai on marae. Here they still served the same functions as before, to cook food and provide heat and a gathering place for whānau (Figure 2).

The remaining kāuta in existence today are often standalone structures (Figure 3), mainly due to the complexity of building code regulations for open-fire kāuta in whare kai. The rise of modern gas and electric cooking and heating appliances has also had an effect, removing the need for kāuta to be used in cooking.

## What is the aim of this project?

This project will develop a set of design requirements to engineer a contemporary kāuta that meets cultural and regulatory expectations. The research team will use a systems engineering approach, which focusses on the design and management of complex engineering systems over their life cycle. One of the first steps in the systems engineering approach is to



Figure 3: Kāuta in a separate building from the whare kai. Photograph taken in Northland, 2019.

develop a set of requirements for engineering design.

The design requirements describe the necessary functions and features the contemporary kāuta needs to fulfill. These include the user and cultural requirements (e.g. for how many people a kāuta needs to cook food and warm water for, the affordability of a kāuta, location on the marae, how it can enable people to gather around it). Regulatory requirements include limitations on the amount of smoke that can be released by the kāuta, for example.

The next step is to use the requirements to design a contemporary kāuta that meets user and cultural expectations and is compliant with all the necessary regulations.

## How do we collect information on kāuta?

To better understand the cultural needs for a contemporary kāuta researchers engaged with whānau, kaitiaki (traditional and cultural guardians) and rangatira (tribal authority) who have experience with traditional kāuta. The research team also ran a social-media campaign to reach hapū and iwi (tribe members) who will help determine what a contemporary kāuta may look like.

This dialogue provided the research team with a knowledge foundation on which to determine the value of kāuta in a modern world, and what people would need from a contemporary kāuta design. To ensure the research team's conclusions are appropriate, they will be reviewed by a Roopu Tikanga (working group that applies a traditional knowledge and values lens to the work within the project) comprised of tāngata Māori that work in fire management and kaumātua me kuia (respected tribal elders), will oversee the cultural integrity of the overall project.

Researchers hope that in the long term this project will help to reinstate kāuta on marae safeguarding traditions, culture and identity.

## Why do we want to reinstate kāuta?

One user of traditional kāuta shared her memories of their use and importance, saying "Many of us can remember kāuta, on marae as part of whare kai. When you arrived at the marae, the kāuta was the



Photo: © Peter James Quinn

Figure 4: *Tipapa marae, east of Ruatoria, Ngāti Porou, December, 2010.*

place you found kaimahi (workers) at the back of the dining hall, catching up with each other, sharing stories and rememberings, meeting new whānau and making lifetime links that strengthened our relationship with each other and our marae. The kāuta was one of the places on the marae you learnt tikanga (procedures) and your connection to the place and people of that marae, whānau, whenua (i) land ii) the sustenance supporting the existence of humankind) and hapū."

The kāuta is a place for intergenerational learning, the retention of mātauranga, building relationships, the making and remembrance of whenua and whānau history and tikanga. Through the 'shared kāuta experience', gatherers experienced the spiritual and natural environment. As kāuta disappear, kuia and kaumātua recognise that associated mātauranga Māori, tikanga and reo (language) with respect to kāuta is lost. Reinstating kāuta will enable the retention of mātauranga Māori and tikanga associated with kāuta while there is a generation with memory and knowledge of their use.

## Why a contemporary kāuta?

Māori culture and identity are inextricably linked with language and practice. Māori are exploring ways to reinstate their tikanga me ona reo which is founded on traditional axioms, while addressing the expectations set upon them by their Te Tiriti partner.

The development of a contemporary kāuta will ensure tikanga, the cultural expectations and tradition of kāuta are adhered to whilst considering current environmental, building and fire regulations.

## What regulations does the modern kāuta have to meet?

The kāuta needs to meet the Resource Management Act's National Environmental Standards for Air Quality (NESAQ) (2004). Some regional and local councils may have stricter environmental standards for kāuta

and part of this project is to engage with regional councils to identify and summarise these standards. The installation of solid fuel heaters, such as kāuta, is regulated by the New Zealand Building Code.

## What's next?

The contemporary kāuta requirements will be publicly available as a resource to design modern kāuta prototypes. The prototypes will be tested for suitability and the best contemporary kāuta designs will be reinstated back to their rightful places – at the heart of marae.

## References

Brookes, Barbara (2016). *A History of New Zealand Women*. (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books). 554 pp.



Photo: © Peter James Quinn

Figure 5: Ōpūtao marae, located at Ruatahuna, Ngāi Tūhoe.



Figure 6: A kāuta on a Northland marae.

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