

# The Whakapapa of the ‘Patch’: He Korowai Tēnei

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## **Abstract**

This commentary explores the significance of the gang ‘patch’, particularly within the context of the Mongrel Mob Kingdom in Aotearoa New Zealand, amidst contemporary legislative debates aimed at prohibiting the display of gang insignia. The proposed law has sparked widespread discussion, with critics highlighting potential violations of fundamental rights and unintended consequences. This commentary offers insights into the historical and social underpinnings of the gang patch, tracing its roots back to the systemic marginalisation of Māori and the socio-economic disenfranchisement resulting from urbanisation and colonisation. The article articulates how gangs – offering a sense of belonging, identity, and kinship – emerged as a response to these adversities. In focusing on the Mongrel Mob Kingdom, this commentary outlines a transition from violence and defiance towards rehabilitation and positive community engagement. The evolution from the traditional ‘patch’ to the [‘korowai’](#) — a symbol of honour and cultural significance — illustrates this shift. The korowai embodies a commitment to personal growth, social betterment, and the collective identity of the gang as a brotherhood rather than a criminal entity. This transformation illuminates the potential for redefining gang identity, fostering greater societal understanding, and informing more nuanced policy debates. Through this comprehensive examination, the article advocates for a deeper recognition of the complexities involved in gang affiliation and the significant role of the patch in the lives of gang members and their communities.

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**Introduction**

At the time of writing this commentary, the New Zealand government is advancing legislation aimed at prohibiting the display of gang insignia in public areas. The proposed law would also empower police to distribute dispersal notices to gang members congregating in groups and restrict their ability to communicate with one another. Moreover, it would enable judges to consider gang affiliation as an aggravating factor during sentencing.

The proposed legislation has drawn a considerable amount of commentary, attracting widespread attention from the news media, and generating concern among gang communities and their whānau (family). The discourse surrounding the Amendment Bill has been intense. Critics argue that it targets specific groups and could have unintended consequences, while supporters believe it is a necessary step towards improving public safety. The debate reflects the broader societal concerns about crime, community safety, and the balance between individual freedoms and collective security. The Attorney-General, Hon. Judith Collins KC, wrote in her report to Parliament the following:

*I have considered the Gangs Legislation Amendment Bill (PCO 25941/8.0) (the Bill) for consistency with the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 (the Bill of Rights Act). I conclude the proposed prohibition on the display of gang insignia in public places is inconsistent with the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly in the Bill of Rights Act. Further, I conclude that the proposed power to issue dispersal notices is inconsistent with the right to peaceful assembly in the Bill of Rights Act. (NZ Parliament, 2024, n.p.)*

Although the above quote from the Attorney-General points out the obvious, the purpose of this article is not to take a specific position on the proposed legislation, instead, the aim is to educate the reader about the significance of the gang 'patch'. For the most part, ordinary citizens do not have any involvement with the gang world, and thus, may not fully grasp the intricate meanings and implications the 'patch' carries for those within these communities. By bringing a broader awareness about the significance of the 'patch', we intend that such an awareness can contribute to a more nuanced debate on the issue, encouraging policies that are informed by a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in gang affiliation and identity. Understanding the deep-rooted significance of the gang patch is crucial for



a holistic grasp of the implications of this legislation, not just for the public and policymakers, but also for the gang members and their families who stand directly in the line of fire.

From the outset, it is crucial to note that this article does not draw from the body of gang-related academic literature as one might anticipate from a scholarly paper. Instead, the authors have direct connections to the realities of gang communities, in various capacities, making this article evidence-based and empirical through their dual roles as both researchers and subjects. Who better is there to co-write an academic paper about the significance of the 'patch' than the leader of one of the largest gang chapters in Aotearoa New Zealand?

The 'patch' has its own [whakapapa](#), and its origins are rooted deep within the injustices committed against Māori by way of colonisation (and all the other terms ending in 'ion' that Indigenous peoples have experienced e.g. land confiscation, economic deprivation, marginalisation, exclusion, alienation etc.). Māori were stripped of their asset base, resulting in the urban drift of Māori from rural areas into townships and cities seeking lowly paid jobs, resulting in physical and cultural disconnections. The rapid urbanisation processes in the twentieth century, without adequate support systems in place, led to the exacerbation of socioeconomic disparities. Many Māori stumbled into the wilderness – with state housing, lowly paid work and the social welfare system becoming normalised. Further, the issues that often go hand-in-hand with being at the bottom of the social structure emerged and became dominant: alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, child neglect and abuse, and incarceration. This multifaceted social crisis reflects systemic failures and historical injustices that have disproportionately affected Māori communities.

For many in these communities, particularly boys who turned into young men, bonds were formed with others who were also lost in this wilderness. Those young men were living in impoverished communities, away from their [tūrangawaewae](#) and had no place to stand. Together they formed groups which became gangs, or they started chapters of existing gangs. They found shelter in the gang – it was a brotherhood, a whānau. Gangs had their own tikanga but most importantly gangs provided a much-needed sense of unity, identity, and belonging for many young men who were on the periphery of society.

With the migration of Pacific Islands peoples in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the children of the first wave of immigrants were raised in the same

urban communities as Māori, and many of their young men gravitated to the brotherhood of the gangs alongside their Māori cousins, while others started their own gangs. The gangs become the *whāngai whānau* (alternative family). Not only were members provided with the physiological needs of shelter, food and warmth, but they were also given security and most importantly a family. The gangs embraced the young men and provided them with much-needed love, kinship, discipline, a sense of self-worth and a sense of belonging. That is what those young men were yearning for.

Violence – yes, gang members have been responsible for horrific crimes, including murders, rapes, and kidnappings. Drugs – yes, gang members have been responsible for manufacturing and distributing illicit drugs (including methamphetamine) to our communities (as well as being consumers). None of those crimes are excusable. There is, however, a need to recognise the circumstances under which people are born and under which they live. Understanding the circumstances in which individuals are born and live can explain criminal behaviour among gang members.

A puppy subjected to mistreatment from birth is at a high risk of developing into an aggressive dog, potentially exhibiting violent behaviours. This outcome is a direct consequence of its early life experiences, where fear, mistrust, and self-defence mechanisms are ingrained into its psyche. It is crucial to understand that such behaviour is not a reflection of the dog's inherent nature but rather a tragic manifestation of its upbringing. When we relate the dog example to young men, plus add in fetal alcohol syndrome, illiteracy, unemployability etc., the result is not Bob and his mates from the suburbs who hold down 9 to 5 jobs. Instead, it is an army of gang members, many who are angry and have rebelled against society.

During the formation period, not only did gangs fight against the norms of society, but they also fought against other gangs. The 1980s through to the early 1990s was a time of war. These were ultimately about territory and respect. If someone within a gang *whānau* was hurt by an opposition gang then often the retaliation began. Sometimes, this meant cousins or even brothers were at war with each other because they belonged to rival gangs. It is difficult for those who do not understand the brotherhood code to grasp gang loyalty.

Brotherhood is a precious possession, and a gang 'patch' reflects that. The patch is a symbol of honour and pride, and it signifies full membership and acceptance into the gang family. Wearing the patch is a public declaration of one's loyalty and dedication to the gang's cause and



community. This is particularly poignant in the context of societal exclusion; gangs have provided a sense of belonging and identity that they may not find in the wider community. The patch encapsulates this connection and is a central element of a member's personal, social, and collective identity. It is common in the gang world to see gang members' backs, limbs and faces bearing tattoos of their patches.

Similarly, one of us (Rev Dr Steve Elers), an ordained Anglican priest, wears a clerical collar that carries analogous socially constructed meanings to the gang patch. Just as the gang patch signifies honour, pride, and full membership within the gang, his clerical collar signifies his role and responsibilities within the Church and a life devoted to spiritual leadership and pastoral care. In a way akin to the gang patch, the clerical attire of a priest fosters a sense of belonging and identity, not just for the priest but for the congregation that recognises and respects these symbols. Both the gang patch and clerical collar carry visual representations of loyalty, dedication, and the values upheld by each group. It is particularly noteworthy that [Reverend Greg Koroheke](#), a longtime member of the Mongrel Mob Kingdom and also an ordained Anglican priest, wears his Mongrel Mob 'patch' and clerical collar simultaneously, embodying his unique dual identity and the intersection of these two worlds. While those outside the gang world may struggle to understand a gang member wearing a clerical collar, for gang members, this dual representation is acceptable, reflecting their more nuanced and less rigidly black-and-white view of the world.

As time passed, changes started to happen within some gangs. For the chapter of the Mongrel Mob known as the Mongrel Mob Kingdom ("The Kingdom"), there has been a shift in paradigm and a change of thinking by the leadership. Having grown tired of being institutionalised and incarcerated and realising the *mamae* (hurt) and *pōuri* (sadness) caused to others, the Kingdom has begun to redirect its focus towards rehabilitation and addressing intergenerational trauma. The Kingdom is now encouraging members to pursue education, vocational training, and employment opportunities as vital components of membership. Initiatives such as [drug and alcohol rehabilitation programmes](#) have been introduced to support members in overcoming addiction, which is a prevalent issue within gang communities. Additionally, efforts to collaborate with [local businesses](#) and [community groups](#) have been initiated, promoting a more constructive role for the Kingdom in society.

This transformation is indicative of a broader potential within gang dynamics, where the very symbols of gang affiliation, like the patch, could evolve to represent new values for a positive future. For the Kingdom, the old fighting-dog patch was put to rest but never forgotten. The new korowai for the Kingdom was born (the Kingdom has adopted the traditional term 'korowai' instead of patch). It was given life out of the ashes of the old era. Its legacy was doused in violence with a path that left no room for repetition. Paito (one of the co-authors and the [Ariki](#) of the Mongrel Mob Kingdom) paved a path with the hope that peace could prevail. He gifted the *front-on* bulldog to his sons as a turning of the tides.



*Image 1: The korowai of the Mongrel Mob Kingdom has the front-on bulldog. Most other chapters of the Mongrel Mob have a side-on bulldog. Affiliated branches of the Mongrel Mob Kingdom have the same top rocker ('Mongrel Mob'), the front-on bulldog, and their branch name below (e.g. 'Waikato', 'West Coast' etc.). All are members of the nationwide Mongrel Mob.*

Paito's vision of the *front-on* nation is about transparency. It is about facing things directly – head-on – and living a life that does not hide behind closed doors. It is about standing tall and being proud of who you are. Far too many of our men have been incarcerated; we are in a time of healing and a time of change. Being a part of the Kingdom is no longer about dying for the cause – now it is about living for it, living for your whānau, and living for your community.



Rather than seeing the patch as a mark of defiance or aggression, it can also come to symbolise a commitment to personal growth and social betterment. This shift not only aids in reducing stigma but also fosters a more inclusive approach to community safety and cohesion. As gangs redefine their identity and purpose, the patch becomes a sign not just of belonging but of transformation, reflecting a journey from marginalisation to active, positive community participation.

The Mongrel Mob was defined as a 'gang' by the government. The definition of a gang is an organised group of criminals. The Kingdom is reforming this imposed view and will no longer let others dictate who they are. As the Kingdom is reforming, so too is the ascribed definition. The Kingdom no longer wishes to be known as a gang; instead, it is a brotherhood. It is a confederation of groups who are united in alliance or league. That is precisely what the Kingdom is, with each chapter representing its own identity.

The korowai is worn with pride – it is a taonga. There is still a large degree of institutional discrimination that reaches even as far as [marae](#). This is evident when the Kingdom's korowai is asked to be removed before entering the marae ātea (the courtyard, open area in front of the wharenuī [meeting house]). The new ideology of the Kingdom's korowai is still misunderstood and the real mamae comes not from being discriminated against by the other but by your own. So, there has been a slow shift in public perception of the korowai and its symbolic meaning. A number of marae from around the motu (region) have come to understand the significance of the korowai. Not only do they embrace the wearer, but they also recognise the place that the korowai has in modern-day society.

All members of the Kingdom are [kaitiaki](#) of the korowai; they do not belong to individuals but are guarded and protected by the wearer vigilantly. They are objects of significance that can only be earned by dedication and hard work. The different adornments of side patches reflect a part of the member's journey, they are tohu, or merits. It signifies life's journey, viewed as a living thing. It grows with the wearer such as a whatu pōkeka (a baby blanket lined with feathers to provide warmth, comfort, and security) does with a young child. The korowai are worn with honour, and not only do they signify the past, present, and future, but they emulate their Ariki. The korowai are culturally bound, and each one has been blessed by the Kingdom's church minister, Reverend Greg Koroheke, signifying their spiritual element.



The Kingdom has a code in place and that code is a set of values, which exists to help align the whānau towards positive growth. Without a code an organisation is a loose conglomerate, and, given the traumatic backgrounds of members, the whānau would certainly run wild without a code in place. The code does not have an allegiance to material wealth because that is a recipe for disaster. When money is king, it leads to betrayal.

In essence, the Kingdom is about whanaungatanga (kinship). The top rocker is the name of the iwi, and the bottom rocker is the hapū. The whānau of course are the brothers, sisters, and tamariki (children), with everyone significantly connected. Those members who proudly wear the Kingdom's coat of arms – the korowai (a.k.a. the patch) – are not wearing just an emblem. The korowai embodies a unique identity; its tangible presence offers not just symbolic and physical protection but also spiritual safeguarding, binding the membership in a shared journey of respect and honour. When the creator takes a member home, his korowai will adorn his burial vessel. If he has a successor, this will be passed to him in time, keeping his line alive. If not, it remains in the confederation as a treasured heirloom, for generations to come.

To conclude, the Mongrel Mob Kingdom's transformation from a traditional gang into a community-oriented brotherhood reflects a significant evolution in identity and purpose. The adoption of the korowai rather than a patch symbolises a profound shift from defiance to dignity, illustrating a commitment to growth, rehabilitation, and societal contribution. This narrative challenges conventional perceptions of gang affiliation, urging a reconsideration of societal and institutional approaches towards such groups. Recognising the role the korowai plays not just as a cultural artefact but also as a catalyst for positive change could foster greater understanding and integration, contributing to more effective community engagement and social cohesion.

## References

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**Author Bios**

Sonny Fatupaito is the Ariki of the Mongrel Mob Kingdom, a global chapter of the Mongrel Mob. The Mongrel Mob Kingdom chapter comprises many affiliated branches across Aotearoa e.g. Mongrel Mob Waikato, Mongrel Mob West Coast etc. and the world e.g. Mongrel Mob Australia, Mongrel Mob Canada etc. Sonny's mission is to reform his members, encouraging them to strive for personal improvement, to support and strengthen their families, and to make positive contributions to their communities.

Paula Ormsby is an Educationalist (E.C.E., Primary and Tertiary). She has worked with Men in Prison delivering Mauri Tū Pae Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and is the Community Programme Manager for Mahi Tahī Akoranga Trust. She has been a part of the Mongrel Mob Kingdom for over a decade and in 2019 became the leader of Wāhine Toa, a Women's Movement within the organisation.

Rev Dr Steve Elers is the Vicar General (2IC to the Bishop) at Te Hui Amorangi ki te Upoko o te Ika (the Māori Anglican Church from Wellington to Taranaki) and a priest at St Michael's Māori Anglican Church in Highbury, Palmerston North. He is a former police officer (Western Australia Police) and was Senior Māori Research Insights Advisor at the Evidence-Based Policing Centre, Police National Headquarters, Wellington. He was the Co-Chair of Te Tai Hauāuru Electorate for the National Party for then-MP Harete Hipango's 2023 campaign.

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