Kākahu and gown: The incorporation of kākahu into academical dress in Aotearoa New Zealand with an example of a kākahu worn at a City University of New York graduation ceremony in 2006 - an interview with Sarah Smith

“At graduation ceremonies Māori students often wear the korowai over the academic gown. These korowai may be ancestral heirlooms or made especially for graduation, incorporating traditional and contemporary features. While gowns signify students’ production of ‘legitimate texts’ (theses), korowai symbolise their genealogical, spiritual and other cultural connections” (Middleton & McKinley, 2010, p. 229)

**Introduction**

Evolved from ancient clothing, kākahu or traditional/contemporary Māori garments made from natural or synthetic fibres, or a combination of both, are to Māori, a symbol of honour and prestige. Within the context of academical dress, kākahu may represent to the wearer, ancestry, achievement, and educational success. While the history of academical dress in Aotearoa New Zealand clearly begins, as Noel Cox’s book *Academical dress in New Zealand* identifies, with the establishment of universities in the nineteenth century, the point at which kākahu were incorporated into academical dress is less clear. The author’s suspicion, based on increased Māori political activism from the 1970s, the explosive growth of Māori-driven educational
initiatives in the 1980s, and some newspaper articles commenting on Māori and graduation/academical dress in the 1990s, is that kākahu were incorporated into academical dress in the late 1980s and 1990s. This article will discuss the incorporation of kākahu into academical dress in Aotearoa New Zealand. This article will also include an example of a kākahu worn at a City University of New York graduation ceremony in 2006.

**Academical dress in Europe**

“The evolution of academical costume is complicated by the secular and ecclesiastical contacts which characterized the universities at the time of their earliest development” (Hargreaves-Mawdsley, 1963, p. 4)

The history of academical dress comes out of the history of European education where “[s]eparated from the education of the classical world by a profound religious and ethical divide, education in early mediaeval Europe was intimately associated with the Church” (Cox, 2001, p. 15). Following the misery of the Dark Ages, places of higher learning emerged in some major European cities, many of which developed from monastic and cathedral schools; these places eventually became the proto-universities within which the sombrely-clad scholar-clerics would exist for centuries (Cox, 2001; Franklyn, 1970; Hargreaves-Mawdsley, 1963; Shaw, 1966).

**Image 1: From the 14th Century - Right: Citizen; Middle: Doctor of Medicine; Abbot**

(Franklyn, 1970, p. 132)
Their dress, as with other clerical garb, had its origins in lay fashion; in time, however, the robe and hood came to distinguish scholars, both layman and cleric - modern academic dress was to evolve out of this context (Cox, 2001; Franklyn, 1970; Hargreaves-Mawdsley, 1963; Shaw, 1966). Despite the political and religious turmoil in continental Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries resulting in the rejection of academic dress, the United Kingdom maintained academic attire in their universities as “…emblems of political orthodoxy” (Cox, 2001, p. 15).

**Image 2: Evolution of academical dress**

(Kerr, 2008, p. 110)

According to Dutton (1983):

Academic dress has a very long history, almost as long as that of the universities themselves. Yet it is interesting to observe that, however much universities may evolve and develop, the wearing of a distinctive form of dress on ceremonial occasions shows few signs of becoming obsolete. No matter how self-consciously modern a university may be in the design and content of its courses, one of the first things it does when it receives its charter is to adopt a set of robes of its own, which are distinctive and peculiar to it. Indeed, the colleges of advanced education established in the last twenty years or so, however fiercely they have sought to maintain
their distinctly non-university nature and role, have frequently made a point of establishing a tradition of scholars’ and graduates’ gowns modelled on those used in universities (Dutton, p. 4).

Image 3: Gowns, hoods, and caps from some English universities
(Shaw, 1966, pp. 18-32)
Academical dress in Aotearoa New Zealand

With the colonial expansion of the British Empire, academical dress was exported to Aotearoa New Zealand in the nineteenth century, modelled on that of the University of Cambridge; indeed, Cambridge-style academical dress remains the standard in Aotearoa New Zealand (Cox, 2001). However, there are a number of differences that distinguish Aotearoa New Zealand’s academical dress from Cambridge: doctoral gowns are patterned after that of the Cambridge MA - instead of true doctoral gowns - with the addition of coloured facings; while Māori graduates may wear a korowai [or kākahu] over the gown (Cox, 2001).

The oldest university in Aotearoa New Zealand is the University of Otago, founded in 1869 by the Otago Provincial Council (Cox, 2001; University of Otago, n.d.). Parliament passed legislation (New Zealand University Act 1870) to establish the University of New Zealand and incorporated Otago as one of a number of degree-granting colleges until the further legislation (Universities Act 1961) dissolved the federal institution and individual universities were established.

Image 4: L-R: Hood shape for University of Auckland, Massey University, University of Otago, and the Victoria University of Wellington; and hood shape for degrees at University of Canterbury

(Smith & Sheard, 1970, p. 463)
Kākahu

The word kākahu refers to garment, clothes, cloak, apparel, clothing, and costume (Moorfield, 2011). Te Kanawa (2006) states: “Kakahu is the generic name for cloaks or clothing. For me, a korowai is a cloak that has a border along the bottom and the kaupapa (body of the cloak) is decorated with feathers and/or hukahuka (tassels)” (p. 12). Kākahu, sometimes also referred to as korowai (the arguments around the various regional, traditional and contemporary semantics surrounding this/these terms is beyond the scope of this article), are also known as cloaks.
Image 6: L-R: “A native of New Zealand. 1850” by Philip Doyne Vigors; Tūhoe women wearing kākahu outside Te Whai-a-te-Motu wharenuai, Mātaatua, Ruatāhuna; and Tūhoe men wearing kākahu in Rūātoki during the visit of Lord Ranfurly, March 1904

(Vigors, 1850, Alexander Turnbull Library, A-357-027; Alexander Turnbull Library, c. 1910s, PA1-o-042-14-2; Ross, 1904, Alexander Turnbull Library, PA1-q-634-41)

Indeed, “[h]istorically, both men and women of considerable status, traditionally wore these cloaks on ceremonial occasions” (Te Kanawa, 2006, p. 12). As in ancient times, kākahu are worn at auspicious events.
Te Kanawa (2006) contends: “...korowai [or kākahu] are often worn for special occasions such as graduation ceremonies, weddings, or birthday celebrations and for visiting dignitaries at powhiri (welcoming ceremonies) (Te Kanawa, 2006, p. 12).

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2 This korowai was commissioned from Dame Rangimarie Hetet, honorary Doctor of the University of Waikato, and her daughter, Mrs Diggeress Rangituatahi Te Kanawa to mark the 25th year of the foundation of the University of Waikato in 1989. The cloak is decorated with feathers from the weka, kereru and pheasant, and with karure (tassels) of twined three-ply fibre. There are two rows of mawhitiwhiti (cross-stitch) above and below the taniko border. Traditional dyes were used for the taniko. Black was created from the hinau bark and mud, yellow from the raureka bark and tan from tanekaha bark and hot ashes. The fibre used is from flax known as kohunga and taeore (University of Waikato, n.d., n.p.).
Image 8: The Duchess of Cornwall, the Prince of Wales, and Te Ariki Tamaroa, wearing kākahu, in this case, kahukiwi

(Radio New Zealand, 2015, n.p.)

E tipu, e rea, mō ngā rā tōu ao: Sir Āpirana Ngata
Sir Āpirana Ngata was “…one of the most illustrious New Zealanders of the twentieth century” (Walker, 2001, p. 11). Ngata spent his life pursuing Māori development as a politician and as a prominent leader in the Māori world. Walker (2001) states that Ngata was “…a man of such extraordinary gifts of intelligence, energy and foresight that among his own Ngāti Porou people he was esteemed as a god among men” (p. 11).
Ngata attended Canterbury College where he studied law and the arts, fulfilling the requirements for a BA in political science in 1893 (an MA was added later) and he completed his LLB in 1896; he was the first Māori person to complete a degree at a New Zealand university (Sorrenson, 1996). Ngata set a path for Māori to follow concerning tertiary education and leadership.

**Image 10: Ngata and his son Henare, 1948**

(Boyer, 1948, n.d., Alexander Turnbull Library, PAColl-6388-14)
In May 1948 Sir Apirana Ngata BA, MA, LLB, received an honorary Doctorate of Literature from Victoria College at the same ceremony at which his son Henare graduated with a Bachelor of Arts.

Originating in an autograph book in 1949, Sir Āpirana Ngata’s celebrated ōhāki or parting speech encourages Māori to understand introduced Pākehā knowledge and technologies, while maintaining the knowledge and traditions of their ancestors as a two-pronged approach for Māori progression (Rangiwai, 2018). He states:

E tipu, e rea, mō ngā rā tōu ao;
Ko tō ringa ki ngā rākau a te Pākehā hei ara mō te tinana;
Ko tō ngākau ki ngā taonga a ō tīpuna Māori hei tikitiki mō tō māhuna,
ā ko tō wairua ki tō Atua nāna nei ngā mea katoa (Panapa, n.d., p. 33, emphasis added).

Anglican Bishop, W. N. Panapa, gave the following translation:

Grow up oh tender plant
To fulfil the needs of your generation;
Your hand clasping the weapons of the pakeha
As a means for your physical progress,
Your heart centred on the treasures
Of your Maori ancestors
As a plume upon your head,
Your soul given to God
The author of all things (Panapa, n.d., p. 33, emphasis added).

With these words, Ngata offers positive change for Māori going forward through the advantageous amalgamation of two different knowledge systems: ngā rākau a te Pākehā - Western knowledge; and ngā taonga a ō tīpuna Māori - Māori knowledge (Rangiwai, 2018). Ngata’s words suggest that there are significant benefits, for Māori, of both systems of knowledge. Applying Ngata’s words to the subject of the incorporation of kākahu into academical dress reveals that mixing symbolic clothing – kākahu and academical dress –
appears to be a natural progression as well as an expression of cultural pride.

**The incorporation of kākahu into academical dress**
Finding substantial evidence of when kākahu were first incorporated by Māori into academical dress has been nearly impossible. University administrators seemed to have little if any knowledge around this topic. However, Sue Hirst had the following to say: “Victoria University of Wellington first started incorporating Māori ceremony into graduation in 1987 and the marae-based graduation ceremony dates back to 1992” (personal communication, December 14, 2018). Similarly, Professor Mason Durie states that Massey University had celebrated Māori achievement in special ceremonies since 1988 (Massey University, 2008) which would suggest that kākahu were being worn at these events and were probably incorporated into academical dress. The evidence above supports my assumption that the incorporation of kākahu into academical dress began in the late 1980s and 1990s.

**Image 11: Students wearing kākahu with academical dress at Massey University which has, according to Professor Mason Durie, celebrated Māori academic achievement in special ceremonies since 1988 (Massey University, 2008)**

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3 Sue Hirst is Special Collections Librarian in the J. C. Beaglehole Room, Victoria University of Wellington Library.
Image 12: Massey University Māori graduands at the pōwhiri for the ceremony to honour Māori graduands at Te Kuratini Marae, Wellington campus

(Massey University, 2009, n.p.)

Image 13: University of Otago graduation ceremony with graduand wearing kākahu in 1998

(MS-4225/290, Hocken Library, University of Otago)
Maori cloak for graduation

By Fleur Howe

A historic cloak once owned by a Maori family in Dunedin made a brief reappearance on Saturday on the back of an Otago Polytechnic graduate.

Dean Fraser’s Scottish name belies his heritage as a member of the South Island tribe, Kai Tahu. The 21-year-old Dunedin man had his family cloak sent from an uncle in Wellington so he could wear it when he received his certificate in Te Ao Maori at the polytechnic yesterday.

The woven cloak had belonged to his great-grandmother, an Elliot, and had been in the family for some time before she got it, Mr Fraser said.

“It’s like a taonga [treasure]. I’m the oldest grandson and the first one in the family to graduate.

“It [the cloak] symbolises me being Maori and being different from everybody else. It signifies being Maori and that we can also strive for achievement in pakeha institutions of academia.”

There was a time when Mr Fraser had thought he would never graduate, having left school at the age of 14.

But after several years working as a labourer, he decided it was time to get an education, he said.

(Otago Daily Times, 1996, p. 5)
Kākahu are now a normal and celebrated part of graduation ceremonies around Aotearoa New Zealand. Indeed as one University of Canterbury spokesperson said, the wearing of kākahu/korowai and other traditional wear along with academical dress has become the accepted norm in more recent years (cited in Walters, 2016). Most university websites contained instructions around how to incorporate kākahu (or korowai), and other types of cultural dress, into academical dress. The University of Waikato, however, did not seem to have any reference to the incorporation of kākahu into academical dress on their website.

**Auckland University of Technology:**
“you can wear culturally appropriate adornment, like korowai or garlands, over your gown” (Auckland University of Technology, n.d., n.p.)

**The University of Auckland:**
“You may choose to wear clothing or garments of honour from your culture or home country such as a sari, korowai or ta’ovala as well. This is a welcome enrichment to the colour of the graduation ceremonies” (University of Auckland, n.d., n.p.).

**The University of Canterbury:**
“Māori graduands are encouraged to wear their family korowai over their gown at their graduation. The hood must be worn on top of the korowai” (University of Canterbury, n.d., n.p.).

**Lincoln University:**
“Embellishing with garments of honour from your cultural tradition, such as a tribal or family korowai, ta’ovala or corsage is perfectly acceptable. The korowai is worn over the gown and beneath the academic hood” (Lincoln University, n.d., n.p.).

**Massey University:**
“Maori korowai or other national dress may be worn with academic regalia” (Massey University, 2019, n. p.)
The image below shows the preferred way of wearing kākahu Māori with academical dress. Massey University (n.d.) states: “If you are wearing a korowai, it should be worn over the gown and under the hood…” (n.p.).
University of Otago:
“Korowai and equivalent ceremonial garments of other cultures may be worn with academic regalia” (University of Otago, n.d., n.p.).

Image 16: Māori medical graduands, University of Otago

Note: The incorrect position of the hoods, off the shoulder, is probably a result of being encouraged to display the hoods for the photograph. (University of Otago, 2016, n.p.)
Maori, Pacific students’ right to cloaks at graduation recognised

By Matthew Harcourt

GRADUATES of Maori and Pacific student enrolments at the University of Otago are being offered the opportunity to wear an academic cloak at graduation ceremonies for the first time. The decision comes as part of a formal review of the University’s graduation ceremonies. The university has been working with staff and students to ensure that the new cloak is reflective of the culture and heritage of Maori and Pacific Islanders. The new cloak will be available for students to wear at the graduation ceremony in June 2019.

(Otago Daily Times, 2011, p. 5)

An example of a kākahu worn at a City University of New York graduation ceremony in 2006: An interview with Sarah Smith

Feather in Her Cap

A determined Sarah Smith had to ruffle a few feathers to wear the graduation gown she wanted at Hunter College’s June commencement ceremony.

Sarah, 32 - who is a Maori, a member of a tribe in New Zealand - was one of more than 2,000 Hunter students who received their degrees at Radio City Music Hall. She earned honors in her double major of political science and women’s studies.

But the tough part was getting an honorary ceremonial cloak made with exotic bird feathers - handcrafted by members of her Ngati Kuri tribe and sent nearly 9,000 miles from her homeland - into Radio City for the big day. Less than a week before commencement, the gray, orange, and blue cloak was seized from her parents at Kennedy Airport by U.S. Customs officials, who claimed the feathers came from endangered bird species. They refused to allow it into the country.

“I was devastated,” said Sarah, who had been eagerly looking forward to wearing the cloak, along with her traditional purple cap and gown, to commemorate becoming the first Maori to ever graduate from a college in the CUNY system.

The cloak - described as a “cultural treasure” - was lovingly handcrafted by members of Sarah’s tribe out of wool, silk, shells and paua shell.

(Hunter College of the City University of New York, 2006, p. 1).

When was the kākahu made and how long did it take?

It took about six months to make; my aunty started making it in 2005, so that it would be ready for my graduation in June, 2006 (S. Smith, personal communication, 2019, January 8).

Besides the kiwi, kuaka, and kererū feathers mentioned in the NY Times article, what other materials is the kākahu made from?
The kākahu has been woven from 100% wool fibre. It contains some ostrich feathers to depict the white kokota sands up north; pāua shell; three woven kete made from pingao and spray painted gold, along with gold-coloured metal charms to represent the “bling” of NYC. The internal side of the cloak is a red satin; red used because it is a vibrant and strong colour (S. Smith, personal communication, 2019, January 8).

**Who granted permission for you to wear the kākahu; what was the process like and how long did it take?**

It was initiated by my mum, Nettie Smith (nee Norman) who asked my Pākeha father to help; so he took it upon himself to speak to our Ngāti Kuri elders, Ministers, Department of Conservation, and various other authorities to acquire the feathers, have it made, and brought to the US. He had to do a mihi in front of a panel of elders and Department of Conservation representatives in Whangārei. Dad was terrified and trembling when he had to make the case to the panel for the feathers. He felt inadequate, as a Pākeha, and he was emotional, but managed to hold it together. He made the case that it was incumbent that Ngāti Kuri, our whanau, in recognition of my journey, bestow the korowai upon me for the occasion. He was in regular email contact with the person who was trying to locate the kuaka feathers which were extremely hard to come by - Phil Battley - and for several months they were both unsure if acquiring a kuaka would be possible given they had to die of natural causes. Then unexpectedly my dad received a message from Phil that there was one kuaka that had died overnight and was being saved for my korowai - it had flown into a power line which was ironic as dad worked for years for AEPB/Mercury Energy. The kuaka has strong significance to us as Ngati Kuri as it does to my journey given they are migratory and return home every December - his wish for me one day (S. Smith, personal communication, 2019, January 8).

**How did it feel to be on stage with the kākahu and be asked to display it to the crowd?**

It felt only right to wear it on stage, especially after the korowai was taken from my parents when they arrived at JFK and stored in a plane hangar warehouse for four painstaking nights. We couldn't sleep and fretted the entire time, constantly on the phone speaking to elders, government officials, family, friends, lawyers, politically connected...
influencers, and anyone we could think of. It took all of that and a miracle to get it back and to get it the day before my graduation; so to wear it on stage felt like we all - whanau/whanaunga/elders up north - had conquered and overcome the bureaucracy and colonisation that has always tried to trample on our tikanga. And it was achieved quite simply by insisting that it was our tikanga that must prevail - we repeatedly explained that it was a cultural treasure, impossible to assign it a monetary value. We were incensed at the question that we might want to sell it on the black market. We had the backing and support of more than 50 elders from Te Hiku o te Ika requesting its release for me. It was a moment I will never forget to wear it that day. I felt like I was floating (S. Smith, personal communication, 2019, January 8).

When I was asked to stand up and turn around while on stage when they were talking about my degree, I did feel a little uncomfortable showcasing it. To me, I was wearing gifts from my ancestors as if they were an invisible cloak around me, so I didn’t want to parade them around! On my entrance to the stage we had to walk single file up the aisle while thousands of other graduates were standing at their seats; one young man reached his hand out to touch the korowai which completely unnerved me. I remember asking him not to touch it. From that point on I was on alert and no-one else touched it, although some asked if they could (S. Smith, personal communication, 2019, January 8).

How did you fellow graduates/staff/academics react to the kākahu?
Everyone was very gracious and it made me a little sad that out of the thousands of graduates that there were probably First Nations students or other Pacific Island students graduating that weren’t getting the same “love”. I was introduced to some of the VIPs on stage and I remember seeing a professor there whom I had had a run in with a year prior over our views on indigenous peoples’ rights in Peru - she was courteous but there was no love lost (S. Smith, personal communication, 2019, January 8).

What thoughts went through your head as you “rocked” the kākahu on and off the stage for graduation?
I was so happy for my parents, my aunty Janey who wove it, and grateful for all of our whanaunga back home who had been praying for days, sharing their knowledge and time to get
it back in our own hands. I really was on a high thinking about our tūpuna and our beloved kuaka (S. Smith, personal communication, 2019, January 8).

**What is the tikanga (that you are able to share) surrounding the kākahu?**

One is that we have to be tūturu and unwavering to our tikanga and traditions. While this korowai is not traditional in all of its materials, it is truly traditional in our whakapapa. The symbolic representations surrounding the kuaka which flies in “v” formation toward the sun; with the woven neckline with the colors of yellow and orange/red to represent the sun at the top; the kuaka feathers on the back of the cloak in a “v” formation pointing upwards; the kiwi feathers on the shoulders to represent all of my ancestors from Aotearoa; the kererū on the left and right side panels woven so they are standing upright to represent the choppy seas that the kuaka and I have flown over; and the glistening pāua shells scattered to represent the blue reflection of the water; and white representing the sand dunes of Te Kokota and home - Te Hapua (S. Smith, personal communication, 2019, January 8).

**Who blessed the korowai and how? (were you present when it was blessed?)**

My Uncle George Moon (married to my mum’s sister Elsie) blessed it under the Rātana faith. I was not there but received photos and a video of my whanau there with him at Aunty Janey’s house in Henderson (S. Smith, personal communication, 2019, January 8).
Conclusion

This article has discussed the incorporation of kākahu into academical dress in Aotearoa New Zealand. Although it is difficult to determine, at this point, the precise date that kākahu were first incorporated into academical dress in Aotearoa New Zealand, it seems highly plausible that this occurred in the late 1980s and 1990s, following periods of increased Māori political participation and resistance. While
Sir Āpirana Ngata, as the very first Māori person to earn a degree in a New Zealand university, set a path for Māori to follow with regard to higher education, the many thousands of Māori who have gone on to achieve academically each lay down a stone on the pathway of Māori educational achievement. Sarah Smith’s story highlights the international side of Māori education and success, and the kākahu that was made specifically for her graduation is a symbol of her whakapapa from Aotearoa New Zealand, and her life in New York City where she continues to reside. The incorporation of kākahu into academical dress is a symbol of Māori academic achievement that is now an accepted part of academical dress in Aotearoa New Zealand.

“While the korowai is symbolic of the lived, the gown represents the practical mastery of the conceived. For some, the layering of gown and cloak signified a fused identification as ‘Māori academic’. For others, the layering of the cloaks expressed dual identifications – as Māori and as academic. ...Students who succeed in weaving it all together draw power from the critical edge, shouting loudly back to the academy from its interstices, critiquing and challenging, creating dynamic and revolutionary works” (Middleton & McKinley, 2010, p. 242)
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