

BYRON RANGIWAI

## The impacts of COVID-19 on hongis and the advent of the ‘East Coast Wave’

“It is all right not to hongis, it is all right not to kiss, it is all right not to hug, it is all right to put a rāhui around yourself and around your whānau and friends”  
Ngahiwi Tomoana (Hyde, 2020, March 13, n.p.)

### **Introduction**

First, this article will explain the origins of the hongis. Second, this paper will describe COVID-19. Third, this article will discuss the advent of the ‘East Coast Wave’ as a means of temporarily replacing the hongis in response to the threat of COVID-19.

### **Hongis**

A Māori world view begins with the creation by Atua—usually referred to, somewhat inaccurately, as the gods—that exist in and are active in the physical world (Moorfield, 2011). Atua are more correctly described as ancestor deities with continuing influence over particular domains; for example, Tangaroa, Atua of the sea, and Tāne, Atua of the forest (Moorfield, 2011). There are many different Māori creation accounts. In some traditions, the creation process—which ultimately starts with Te Kore—was commenced by Io, the Supreme Creator.

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Originating from the cosmic incubator of Te Kore appeared Te Pō; and out of the many developmental phases of Te Pō came the primeval parents, Papatūānuku and Ranginui, who, while unremittingly attached to one another, produced a number of offspring (Marsden, 2003; Mikaere, 2011; Reilly, 2018). The children of these ancient parents grew discontented with the darkness that resulted from their parent's endless embrace, and so one of the children, Tāne, broke Ranginui and Papatūānuku apart, which moved the universe into a novel stage, Te Ao Mārama—the world of life and light (Mikaere, 2011; Moorfield, 2011; Reilly, 2018).

Within Te Ao Mārama, the human form was fashioned from clay (Mikaere, 2011; Moorfield, 2011; Reilly, 2018). Tāne moulded the first woman, Hineahuone, and breathed life into her nostrils (Derby, 2013; Higgins & Moorfield, 2004). Hineahuone sneezed and cried “Tihei mauri ora!” (the sneeze of life) (Higgins & Moorfield, 2004, p. 82). From this narrative comes the origins of the hongī (Derby, 2013)—which means to press noses in greeting (Duncan & Rewi, 2018; Higgins & Moorfield, 2004; Mead, 2016; Moorfield, 2011).

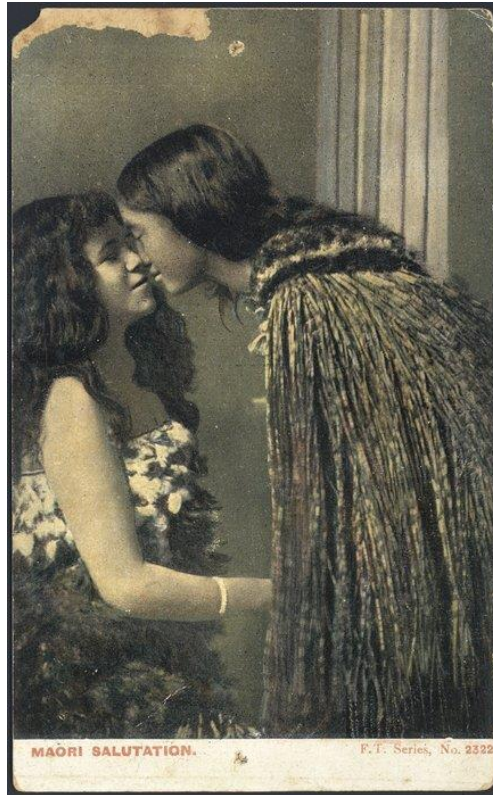


Figure 1. [Postcard]. F. T. Series No. 2322. Maori salutation (1914).

The hongi is the common Māori greeting. For some iwi, hongi consists of a single press of the nose, while for other iwi the hongi consists of a short press followed by a long press (Duncan & Rewi, 2018; Higgins & Moorfield, 2004). During the hongi, the eyes are closed (Higgins & Moorfield, 2004). Higgins and Moorfield (2004) argue that the hongi “represents the passing of breath between the two people” (p. 82) and replicates the story of Tāne’s creation of the first human being, Hineahuone. Similarly, Duncan and Rewi (2018) opine that “[t]he hongi

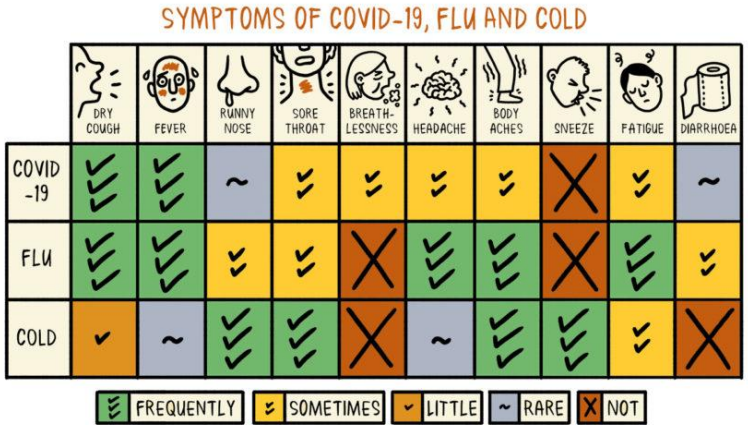
symbolises the moment in the creation stories when Tāne-mahuta pressed his nose against the red ochre-formed nose of Hine-ahu-one and delivered the breath of life” (p. 132).

## **COVID-19**

COVID-19, as it has been identified by the World Health Organization, comes from the same group of viruses that caused SARS—severe acute respiratory syndrome—and MERS—Middle East respiratory syndrome (Hageman, 2020). Coronaviruses are common around the world and are named for their crown-like “surface projections” (Hageman, 2020). It is understood that COVID-19 started in Wuhan, China, and has been linked to an animal market there, implying zoonotic<sup>1</sup> origins (Hageman, 2020; Koenig et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2020; H. Wang et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2020). Viruses like COVID-19, Hageman (2020) argues, are “host specific and can infect humans and a variety of different animals as well” (p. 99). COVID-19 presents as “fever, non-productive cough, and respiratory distress” (Hageman, 2020, p. 99). In addition to the symptoms listed by Hageman (2020), H. Wang et al. (2020) state that “[p]atients have clinical manifestations, including fever, cough, shortness of breath, muscle ache, confusion, headache, sore throat, rhinorrhoea [runny nose], chest pain, diarrhea, and nausea and vomiting” (p. 1).

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to diseases transferred from animals to humans (Shao et al., 2011). With particular reference to foodborne zoonoses in China see Shao et al. (2011).



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Figure 2. Symptoms of COVID-19, Flu & Cold (Wiles, 18 March, n.p.).

According to Negahdaripour, (2020) “implementing preventive strategies and the collaboration of countries around the globe are of the utmost importance to lower the threat of COVID-19” (p. 82). Concerning the control of COVID-19 transmission, Anderson et al. (2020) state:

Individual behaviour will be crucial to control the spread of COVID-19. Personal, rather than government action, in western democracies might be the most important issue. Early self-isolation, seeking medical advice remotely unless symptoms are severe, and social distancing are key. Government actions to ban mass gatherings are important, as are good diagnostic facilities and remotely accessed health advice, together with specialised treatment for people with severe disease (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 3).

Some governments have issued severe containment measures such as closing borders (Lautensach, 2020). Furthermore, the development of a vaccine has begun in a number of countries (Anderson, et al., 2020; McAleer,

2020). Although “[n]o vaccine or effective antiviral drug is likely to be available soon” (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 2). According to Anderson et al. (2020) the process of developing a vaccine “will take time and we are probably a least 1 year to 18 months away from substantial vaccine production” (p. 2).

As a means of reducing the spread of the virus, The World Health Organization (2020) recommends that all people should follow good hand and respiratory hygiene, maintain social distance, avoid touching mouth and nose, and self-isolation if sick.

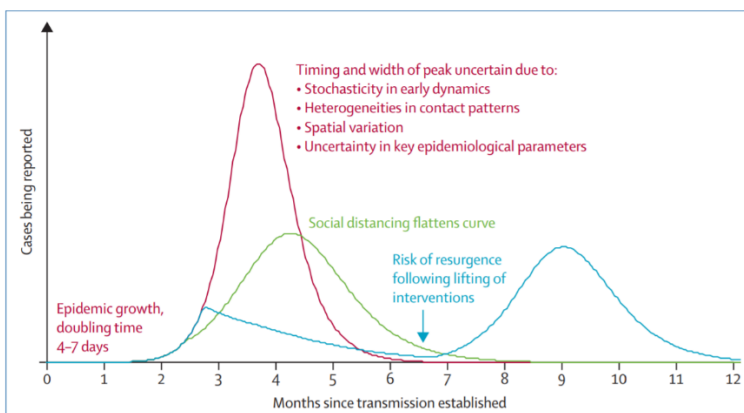


Figure 3. Illustrative simulations of a transmission model of COVID-19 (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 3).

*A baseline stimulation with case isolation only (red); a simulation with social distancing in place throughout the epidemic, flattening the curve (green), and a simulation with more effective social distancing in place for a limited period only, typically followed by a resurgent epidemic when social distancing is halted (blue) (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 3).*

### **The absence of hongī and the advent of the ‘East Coast Wave’**

A number of iwi have considered whether or not to temporarily suspend hongī—particularly during pōhiri—as a means of reducing the potential spread of COVID-19 (To hongī or not to hongī, 2020, March 6). Describing alternative ways for greeting people, Wiles (2020, 9 March) states “[i]f you are greeting people, don’t hug, shake hands, hongī, or kiss. Bump elbows or feet instead” (n.p.).

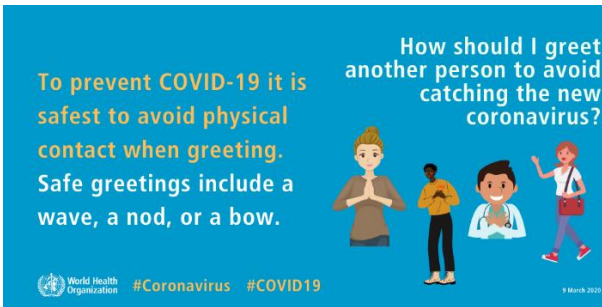


Figure 3. How should I greet another person to avoid catching the new coronavirus? (World Health Organization, 2020, 9 March).

Ngahiwi Tomoana, chairman of Ngāti Kahungunu, has asked his iwi to use what they call the ‘Kahungunu Wave’ as a replacement for hongī in response to COVID-19 (Hyde, 2020, 13 March). According to Tomoana “[t]he Kahungunu wave is the raising of the eyebrows in greeting, in affirmation, in exasperation, or in seduction” (Hyde, 2020, 13 March, n.p.). Providing an iwi context for the practice, Tomoana states that “[t]he nickname for Ngāti Kahungunu descendants over the past 200 years was Ngā Tukemata o Kahungunu, meaning the bush eyebrows of Kahungunu” (Hyde, 2020, 13 March, n.p.).



Figure 4. Ngāti Kahungunu chairman Ngahiwi Tomoana demonstrates 'Kahungunu Wave' with iwi member (Hawke's Bay iwi encourages 'Kahungunu Wave' in place of virus-spreading handshakes, 2020, March 13).

Tomoana continues, “Everywhere he [Kahungunu] went, he would help build and strengthen communities as he revealed his hardworking ethics by gathering food, building houses, constructing and designing pā” (Hyde, 2020, 13 March, n.p.). “The symbol of his multi marriages” Tomoana opines “was the raising of the eyebrows to attract or enact a romantic liaison” (Hyde, 2020, March 13, n.p.). Whenever Kahungunu raised his eyebrows, Tomoana asserts, “a new hapū was formed” (Hyde, 2020, March 13, n.p.). Throughout the iwi’s history, Tomoana claims, the ‘Kahungunu Wave’ was commonly used as a greeting—perhaps even more often than the hongī (Hyde, 2020, March 13). Indeed, “[i]n this pandemic coronavirus atmosphere” Tomoana maintains “we are urging all Ngāti Kahungunu to revert to our tikanga, the ‘Kahungunu wave’—Te Mihi ā-Tukemata a Kahungunu” (Hyde, 2020, 13 March, n.p.).





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New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has announced travel restrictions in response to [#COVID19](#). SafeTravel will provide more guidance on this soon, but in the meantime, New Zealanders are being encouraged to use the 'East Coast Wave' as a greeting.

Figure 5. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has announced travel restrictions in response to #COVID19 (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade, 2020, March 14).

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern encourages everyone not to handshake, hongi or hug, but instead to employ the 'East Coast Wave' (Coronavirus: How do I do the 'East Coast Wave'?, 2020, March 17; Deguara, 2020, March 15; Major steps taken to protect New Zealanders from COVID-19, 2020, 16 March; McKay, 2020, Mar 14). It could be assumed that the use of the term 'East Coast Wave' was to make the term more broadly accessible to the public. While television and social media personality Te Hamua Nikora refers to the gesture as the Māori salute and says "[i]t's whakapapa isn't strictly Tairāwhiti, it's PAN TRIBAL" (TeHamua Nikora, 2020, March 17, n.p.).



Figure 6. Public Service Announcement (TeHamua Nikora, 2020, March 17).

## **Conclusion**

This article explained the origins of the hongi and described COVID-19. This paper also discussed the advent of the 'East Coast Wave' as a means of temporarily replacing the hongi in response to the threat of COVID-19. In the coming weeks, months, and perhaps even years, Māori will need to adjust to a new way of interacting with each other without the close contact necessary for hongi. In due course, when the effects of COVID-19 have passed, I am sure that the practice of hongi will return.

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