

I AM THE CARVER



Writer and Carver:
Kemal Ayata

I am a woodcarver

I wanted to play with wood. I wanted to carve wood. I wanted to get my hands involved with wood. But I didn't want to be a carpenter.

The main art form of the indigenous people of New Zealand, the Maori, is carving. Wood and jade. They carved weapons, sculptures, symbols, and their unique patterns.

There are also endemic trees in New Zealand, such as Kauri, Taraire, Kowhai, Totora, Matai Puriri, etc. Some of them have been lying in swamps for 40,000 years without decaying due to natural disasters. I experienced a separate journey with each one I began carving.

It all started when I met Israe. At the Kerikeri Saturday Market, he was carving a tiki with a chisel and mallet in his hand. "Hello, I'm Kemal, I'm Turkish." "I'm Israe, I'm Maori," he said. "I want to carve too. Can you teach me?" He asked, "Can you afford it?" "What do you mean?" I asked. As a result of our conversation, I became my master's student.

Two or sometimes three days a week, I went to his workshop, used his tools, and followed his instructions to step into the world of Maori carving.

I threw myself into **Whakairo** with great enthusiasm. My master nurtured and supported me greatly. He corrected my mistakes. He praised everything I did. He always honoured me when introducing me to others. He even declared that he believed I was Maori in a previous life. I learned everything from him.

Sometimes I searched for wood suitable for what I wanted to carve. Sometimes I set out to see what I could make from the wood I received from my friends.

I created beautiful things. But I also made mistakes. I loved my mistakes just as much. Because they were my mistakes.

I tried not to repeat myself too much, except the tikis. As I progressed, I grew to love my journey even more.

Here you go:

I began my journey with **Tiki** in 2014.

Tiki is generally accepted as the first human or the first male ancestor. In some traditions, it is believed that Tiki was the first human created by the god **Tane Mahuta**. Tiki is an important part of creation mythology and often represents the connection between humanity and the gods. Thus, it is a symbol of life and fertility. It embodies deep thought, intuition, and spiritual understanding. It provides protection from evil spirits.



One of them is with my daughter Pınar in New York.

Another one is with my passed away cousin Gülgün. The wood I used are: Rewarewa, totara, and oak.



This is a desktop-sized **Tekoteko**, which is usually a wooden sculpture carved in the shape of a full-bodied human figure. Among the Maori, it carries important symbolic meanings both as a protective figure and as a representation of ancestors. I carved it from **kauri** wood. Pinar's closest friend, Tsai, saw it in 2015 and loved it. When she expressed her admiration for it a second time, I said, "It's yours now." She took it and brought it to her family's home in Taiwan. Shortly thereafter, a relentless brain tumour took the young girl from us.



These are **Manaia**. The first one is to be hung on the wall, and the second one is a necklace. I carved the one on the left from oak and the one on the right from Kwila wood. Manaia is a hybrid, mythological creature depicted with a bird's head, a human body, and a fish's tail. This tripartite form represents life and the cosmic order, symbolising air (bird), land (human), and sea (fish).



A Maori mask designed by my master. The pattern on it is Pakati. It is carved from Puriri. It is very hard and my favourite endemic carving wood. It is part of our friend Zehra Güngör's mask collection..



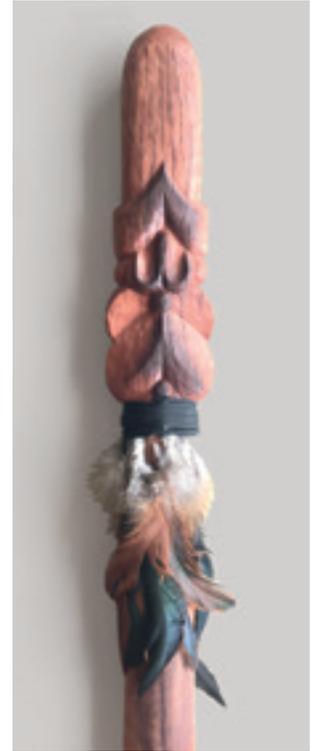
This is a figure designed by my master. It has a **wheke** (octopus) head and human, fish elements. Rewarewa tree. Lives with Ümit and Naci.

In Maori culture, **wahaika** is a traditional close-combat weapon, and the word literally means "fish mouth." It is approximately 30-45 cm long and has a sharp edge and a hollow/curve on one side that resembles a fish mouth. It was typically used by high-ranking warriors or chiefs. It was carried symbolically in ceremonies as well as in battle. The wahaika is not only a weapon, but also an object that carries mana (a symbol of personal power and prestige). It reflects the individual's lineage and social status. Lives with Bahar and Şükrü.





Taiaha is a traditional close combat weapon in Maori culture, averaging 1.5–2 meters in length. It is a sacred object (taonga) with deep symbolic and ceremonial meanings. For the Maori community, the taiaha is not merely a physical weapon; it is also a symbol of honour, authority, courage, and spiritual power (mana). It is carried by the leader during welcoming ceremonies (powhiri) and held by the speaker during whaikorero (formal speeches). It is carved from kwila wood.



Fish Hook;
Fin, Unanahi whakarei
and fish tail.
Lives with Abdul and Diana.



A piece I made
with my master,
carving various
Whakairo patterns
(Whakarei).
Puriri tree.



The first of my masterpieces. The Maori canoe, **Waka**. The front part is called **tauihu**, and the rear part is called **taurapa**. In Maori culture, waka is a multi-layered concept that carries both physical and spiritual meanings.

Basically, the word “waka” means canoe or boat, and it played a vital role for Maori in the migrations from the Pacific to **Aotearoa** (New Zealand).

I carved it from **matai** wood.





Among the Maori, **Tekoteko** is carved as a full-body figure of an ancestor. This figure is protective, represents lineage, possesses spiritual power (mana), and is a symbol of tribal identity and honour. It protects the structure it is located in and its contents. Tekoteko figures usually have exaggerated facial expressions. They have large heads. Their hands are usually directed toward the abdomen, chest, or weapon. Their bodies are decorated with spiral and geometric patterns, symbolising the cycle of life.



I carved it from a **Totara** tree that had fallen behind our house. I used the brunch split in the belly area to symbolise “Opening the Heart.”, with the help of the hands.

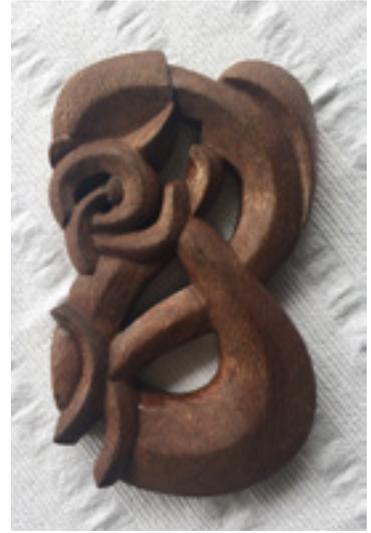


Koru represents the New Zealand fern (ponga) form that is opening up. In Maori belief, it symbolises new beginnings, the cycle of life, the connection between past, present, and future, spiritual development, and introspection. I carved it from totara wood. The **Paua** shells I placed in the eyes emphasise mana (spiritual power). The triple spiral symbolises the bonds of wairua (spirit), whanau (family), and whenua (land). The Unanahi pattern is associated with the sea god **Tangaroa**. It protects the spirit and body, symbolising good luck and abundance of food. Lives with Cüneyt and Seda.



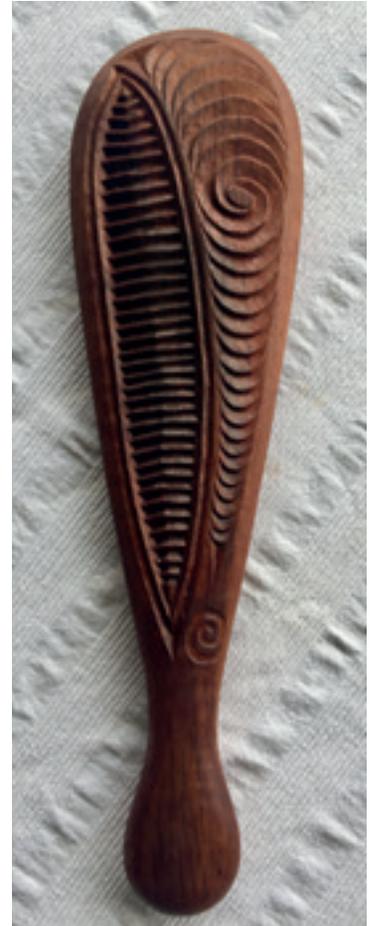
A desktop size **Tekoteko** head carved from puriri wood. I gave it to my mother as a remembrance.

I carved this **mania** from a rewarewa wood. Lives with my aunt Firuze.



Whaika. It has a Pakati pattern on it. Oak tree. Lives with Cüneyt and Seda

In Maori carving art, **Patu** is of great importance both as a weapon and as a cultural and symbolic object. It is a taonga (sacred object) that is generally used for close combat, but also carries mana (respect, authority) and tapu (sanctity). It provides physical and spiritual protection against enemies in battle. The person speaking at a meeting may take the floor while holding a patu in their hand. Patu are present in welcoming ceremonies and haka dances. Unanahi, Pakati patterns. Kwila wood. Lives with Deniz.





This is a **Poupou**. It represents an ancestral and important figure or mythological character. It is decorated with whakarei (carved patterns). Pakati, Unanahi. Human figures in Maori carvings always have three fingers. I carved it from puriri wood. For the eyes, I used sections from seashells I found on the beach.



Matau means fish hook in the Maori language Te Reo. Fish were a source of livelihood. The hook is a symbol of food and prosperity. Matau provides protection, especially on sea voyages, and emphasises the seafaring identity of the Maori people.

The name of this wonderful tree is Silver Beech. It is one of New Zealand's endemic trees. Lives at Ian's house.



A **Wahaika** trial made from a piece of Totara wood eaten by the worms. I decorated it with a small seashell and Whakarei. It is strong enough to be used as a weapon.





I named this piece Inoi, meaning a worshipped, begged supreme being. I cut the lower part of a piece of driftwood I found on the beaches of New Zealand's South Island and mounted it onto a piece of kauri wood. I carved pakati, unanahi, and whakairo patterns into it. It is possible to see a snake supplicating a dancing supreme being. Every time I look at it from different angles, I discover very diverse faces and animals.





On top of my admiration for the totems created by Native Americans, when I saw the totems of the Maori, I wanted to carve a totem myself.

I started thinking about how I would make the totem. I went to my teacher, Israe. He said, “First, the totem needs to have a story. Create the story in your head. Sketch it on paper. Come, let’s talk.”

A few days later, I had some ideas in my sketchbook.

I found a 7-meter-long Totara log. After 7-8 months of work, Tiara emerged, and we dug a 1.5-meter-deep hole in front of our house and erected it.

In November 2018, we held a ceremony to inaugurate **Tiara**, attended by Winter, Pınar, John, and their family, as well as many of our friends, with live Maori music from Makareta and Nesrin’s wonderful food. How could we forget 1.5-year-old Winter’s embrace?

Our Maori friend Paitangi, who did our tattoos, blessed Tiara with a **karakia**.

TIARA

This craftwork tells the story of **Nesrin and Kemal**. The totem pole is made from a Totara Tree that is native to New Zealand and stands at 18 feet tall. It is made of three sections. The bottom section represents our first 25 years of life, while the middle represents ages 25 to 50, and the top symbolises the rest of our lives.

The bottom section is a **Manaia**, which is a mythological motif in the Maori carving art. With the head of a bird, the body of a man, and the tail of a fish, it represents life in the air, life on land, and life in the water, or simply life. The Raperape spiral patterns on the arms represent motion. For us, this section means the “start” from the spiritual world to the mortal world to becoming a human. The time of innocence and naiveté, the years of childhood, adolescence, and education, with the protection of the Turkish evil eye. The time before starting our family and being confronted by the chaos that is called adulthood.

The middle section is the period where we strove to earn our bread and endeavour for the better. The Maori weapon Patu in our hands and the coins in our eyes describe the difficulty and the stress of the working life in the city, the struggle to have more, and the broken hearts

along the way. This second 25-year period is when we lived far from Nature and the natural state (naturalness) and when we experienced the pressure of society and competition at its worst. The feet turned inward symbolise our lack of confidence, whereas the twisted legs symbolise the weight (burden) on our shoulders. The symbols on our upper arms represent our efforts to heal ourselves by joining the Freemasons and choosing a sea life. The heart-with-in-heart symbol on our arm tells about our growing family with love and happiness. The Maori Koru spiral, which stands for birth to a new life, growth, trust, and peacefulness, represents Pinar. The Turkish Lira with Atatürk on the right eye and the New Zealand Dollar with Queen Elizabeth on the left eye accompany our journey.





The third section is the years after 50, the retirement period. These are the years when we are more mature, more experienced, more talkative, more calm and more enlightened. Our fight with Matter is winding down and our fight with Ourselves is on a peaceful stage. Those are the years spent in harmony with Nature, getting to understand the different parts of the World, living the life that we had dreamed. The crowns on the head illustrate that our ideas are becoming more universal. The long tongue means that our biggest possession now is those ideas, and our biggest merit

is to pass them on. Fibonacci numbers: We encounter this awe-inspiring series of numbers in the unique harmony of Nature again and again. We used them on the Maori patterns to represent perfection that continues to reach the Golden Ratio. The Flax Weaving that separates the three sections from each other means that the transition between the three stages of our lives was far from smooth and subtle, but rather abrupt and radical, as if we were “Cutting the Ropes” in the sailors’ terminology, when you are leaving for a journey with no intention to come back any time soon. The hawk at the top is another Maori symbol. The wings refer to whirling Dervishes in Sema ceremonies. A Messenger that extends to the Universe. Ascending into the skies. Returning to the spiritual world.

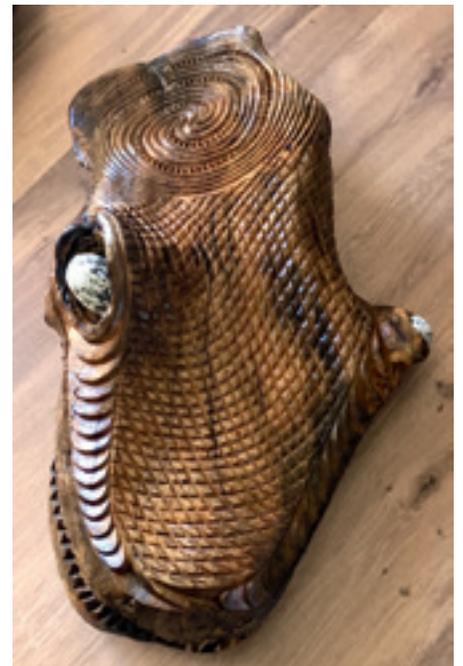
I created this piece for “My Better Half.” A heart shaped by the wings and feathers of a bird.
Love, Affection.



On the back: Calm and steady waves in the wild sea of Love.



This is an olive tree. When Ian gave me this piece of wood, I thought, “What can I make with this?” My master said, “Put it somewhere visible. It will tell you one day what it wants to be.” Months later, I noticed that it was looking at me like a crocodile. So I tried to turn it into a crocodile.





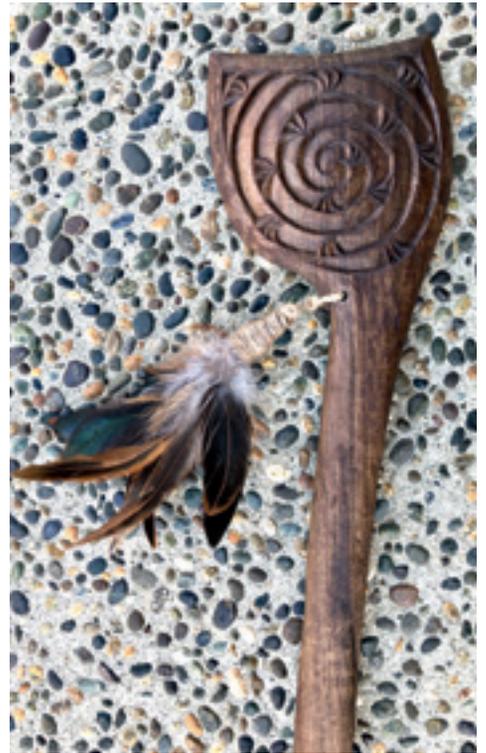
Whale Tail made from olive wood. On the back is Unanahi, a double spiral pattern. It symbolizes the harmony of opposites: Male & Female Day & Night Physical & Sipiritual Lives with Marta and Tom.





Tewhatewha, Among the Maori, it is both a weapon of war and a symbol of leadership. I carved it from puriri wood.

The **Pungawerewere** pattern on the head depicts a double spiral, with one side representing inward absorption and the other side representing outward filtration.





A desktop bowl I carved from an olive tree. The form was not designed in advance. The wood guided me. This shape came out. Below is another example living with Val and Allan.



Patu. This time, it's an olive tree. Lives with my friend Peter, who owns an olive grove and produces olive oil.





Tokotoko, in the Maori world, it is used particularly by kaumatua (elders, wise leaders) or by people who perform korero (storytelling, speaking). It has a high symbolic meaning. I carved it from puriri wood..



“**Kia Ora**” means “Hello” in Te Reo Maori.





My drum, to be played standing on the feet. Carved from Tasmanian blackwood. Double spiral **Raperape** on the upper section. Whirling Dervishes symbolism on the lower section. Rumi's famous call, "Come, whoever you are, come," and the figure of the whirling dervish in the ceremony.

The other photo shows the state after the skin was put on.





A replica of a piece I saw in a museum and took a picture of. Olive tree.



Taraire tree, handmade, in working condition.



Cutting and/or cheese board.



Two-sided desktop **Tiki**. I've never seen anything similar. Made from Silky Oak wood.



They are telling their stories.





A large **Tekoteko**. Eight and a half feet tall. Its name is **Corona**. There is a virus symbol below its feet. I carved it from Totara wood during the Covid days. It is decorated with Pakati, Takurangi, Raperape patterns. The eyes are Paua Shell. There is a Fish Hook on the left arm and a Tiki on the right.





In Maori art, **Pikorua** “Twist” is a very important symbol that usually carries the meanings of infinity and connection.

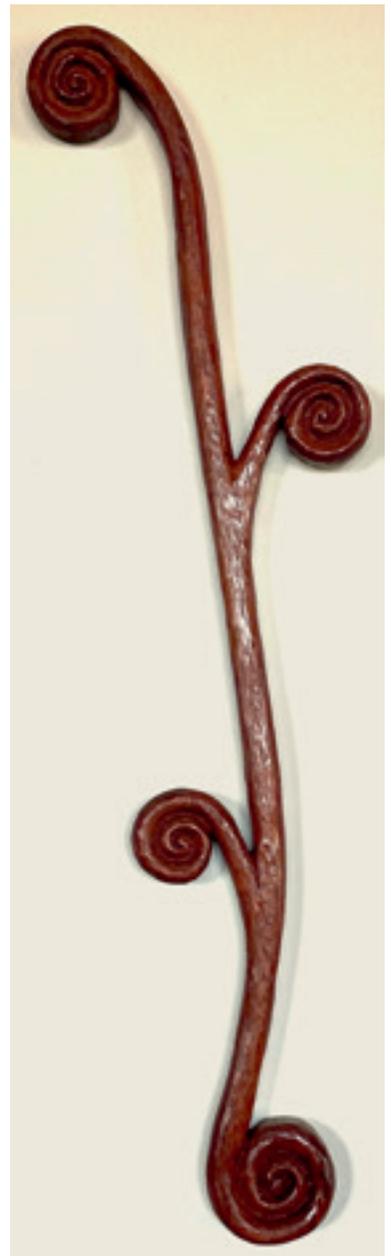
It represents the growth and connection of different life paths, different people, or cultures.

Since the twist shape is continuous, it expresses relationships that never fade over time, such as eternal friendship, love, and family bonds.

It symbolizes people going in different directions but eventually coming back together.



When William saw the drum I carved for myself, he asked me to carve his drum too. He liked the **Kiri Kiore** pattern, so I applied it all around. Tasmanian Blackwood.



Koru, which I made for Alexa and Roy, symbolises them and their two dogs at that time.

I carved this from Kauri wood that William gave me, which was taken from a swamp. The wood told me how it wanted to look. I put a **Tuatara** on it. The tuatara is a reptile, unique to New Zealand, a remnant of the dinosaurs. It is a dinosaur species that has survived for approximately 200 million years with little change. For this reason, it is often referred to as a “living fossil.” Although it resembles a lizard, it is actually a separate order of reptiles in the dinosaur family.

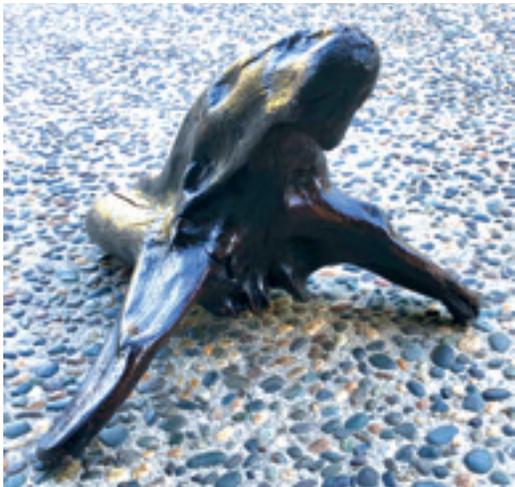


The word “tuatara” means “spiky back” in the Maori language. (Tua = back, Tara = spike). I made the spikes on its tail with teeth I pulled from the jawbone of a deceased shark. I decorated it with famous Celtic knot motifs and gave it to Val and Allan.



Examples of driftwood I
found on beaches.

Snakes, Wolves, Seals.





Uenuku is one of the oldest works of art of the Maori people. The original, made in the 1400s, is in the Te Awamutu Museum.

I carved two separate examples from old totara fence posts.

Uenuku means rainbow in the Maori language.

In Maori mythology, it is often associated with weather phenomena, prophecy, war, and communication with ancestors.

The four sticks and three gaps at the top represent the seven colours of the rainbow. The right one lives with Ian.





Taraire, is a tree endemic to Aotearoa (New Zealand), having soft wood, but with beautiful patterns.

A large **Manaia** carved from taraire wood.
Bird head, human body, and fish tail.
My master and I created and drew the design together.
On the back are Paua shell, Koru, Unanahi, and Takurangi patterns.





Hoe, means “paddle” in the Maori language and is the name of the traditional waka (canoe) paddle.

Hoe is not only a physical means of movement, but also symbolises finding direction in life.

Using a waka requires everyone to paddle in the same direction and rhythm; in this sense, the hoe is also a symbol of unity and coordination.

Carefully carved hoes are owned by chiefs (rangatira) and are a sign of prestige. Some hoes are considered tapu (sacred) and are used for ceremonial purposes.



The head is decorated with a takurangi pattern and paua shell.



The body is decorated with takurangi, pakati, raperape, and unanahi patterns. Taraire tree.





Koru, is an integrated symbol in Maori art that represents new life, growth, strength, and peace. Koru resembles the number 9, and there are 9 of them on this piece. It represents the “nine-month pregnancy period for birth.”

In numerology, the number nine represents completion because it is the last of the single-digit numbers (known as cardinal numbers) and has the highest value. However, it also symbolically emphasises the pinnacle of wisdom and experience and is filled with the energy of both endings and new beginnings.

This piece reflects the Murray family. Two big Koru’s at the bottom are Pinar and John, the one higher is Winter. That Koru is born and grown from, with, by the parents. Each member of the family has two small Koru’s. These represent mental and physical growth and strength.

This is made from the rare **Kowhai** tree of New Zealand. Kowhai is highly valued by the Maori for its hardwood durability and many medicinal properties.



This piece came from the stream on our property. We stared at each other for a few months. It looked to me like a pig. A hawk was perched on its head. I placed seashells in their eyes. A little makeup too. Kauri tree.



This piece is of a totara tree that came out of the swamp. I love its wonderful shape.

The snake coming out of it and some makeup added an extra beauty.



Poupou's are vertically carved wooden panels that decorate the interior walls of a **Marae**, traditional Maori meeting houses.

Arranged side by side, poupou's form the backbone and spiritual protection of the structure.

Each poupou is carved as a physical representation of a tribal ancestor.

The carved figure carries the mana of the ancestor it represents and acts as a protector.

Each tribe (iwi) or sub-group (hapū) displays its lineage through poupou.

Through carvings, genealogy, wars, and migrations are narrated.

Poupou are considered sacred (tapu) and are approached with respect.

Paua (sea shells) are placed in the eye areas to give them a living spirit effect.

I was inspired by the examples I photographed and also by the ones I saw on the internet.

I decorated them with Unanahi, pakati, and rape-rape patterns.

Silky Oak tree.



My various jewellery experiments.

I carved the Twin Idols of Anatolia for my brother Selçuk.





Manta Ray's are commonly referred to as **whai** in Maori art and carry significant symbolic meaning.



Manta rays are considered the gentle guardians of the seas. They are silent but powerful. Their flowing movements represent harmony with nature and the spirit. Their ability to defend themselves without being aggressive signifies strategic strength. They are believed to carry the wisdom of the deep waters and the spirits of their ancestors. They are regarded as a spiritual animal (kaitiaki) that guides the way.

This beautiful animal is carved from a block of Totara wood.



Wheke, or octopus, in Maori carving art is a link between the natural and spiritual worlds and also a symbol of versatility, knowledge, and protection.

Wheke's eight arms symbolise skills and knowledge in different directions. Does this one really have eight arms?

In some tribes, wheke is the guardian spirit of certain families or places.

The octopus's agility, ability to hide, intelligence, and adaptability symbolise wisdom.

Because it lives in the deep sea, it is associated with secret knowledge and spiritual depth.

The mighty sea creature Wheke is a mysterious being pursued by the legendary sailor **Kupe**. It guides with knowledge and shows the way.

This played an important role in the Maori people's arrival in Aotearoa (New Zealand).

The design is mine. I carved it from beech wood.



Toroa (Albatross) is a sacred bird in Maori carving art with strong connections to both the natural and spiritual worlds. As an elegant and powerful bird that travels across the oceans, it is associated with the spirits of ancestors, wisdom, and guidance due to its migratory routes and connection to the sea.

According to traditional Maori stories, **Kupe** was a great navigator who first discovered Aotearoa. He reached the

shores of Aotearoa in his large canoe (waka) from the Pacific. It is said that Kupe used toroa to navigate.

This piece of wood came from the stream on our property and whispered to me that it wanted to be a **TORO**A. I don't know how old the wood is, but we had a beautiful journey together. I also placed an evil eye charm in its eye.



Our journey continues. Let's see where we end up and how the wind blows us.

I collect wood wherever I see it. My friends immediately offer me the trees that have been cut down or fallen on their property.

In the bush on our property, I have piles of valuable wood in the drying period. I probably won't have enough time in my life to carve them all. On the one hand, my master wants to do a doctorate and wishes to include me in his team.

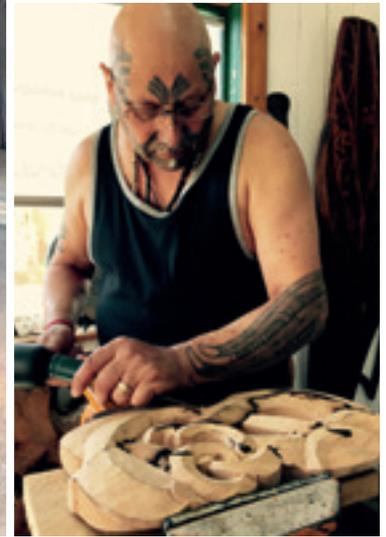
I also want to get an academic education. I applied to NorthTec University in Whangarei. I was accepted into the 5th grade of the 7-grade Whakairo program, but I didn't start because of the attendance requirement, that I cannot fulfil due to our lifestyle.

Another desire of mine is to be part of a large Maori carving project as one of the carvers. But I lack Maori genes.

Stay tuned. Who knows?

KEMAL AYATA

August 2025









In 2014, an artist was born from a spark of curiosity. The patterns and forms of Maori culture, carved in wood, gradually embraced Turkish culture through new syntheses. Over time, our own stories entered the wood — and we, too, entered with them. Each touch became both an act of patience and a way of storytelling. Even his teacher, who once said, “Perhaps you were Maori in a past life,” honored Kemal at every opportunity, while he, with humility, continues to make stories visible.

Health to your hand and heart, my “Master”.
May our journey remain joyful.

Nesrin Ayata