In Māori society performing arts are an important part of life, and are not restricted to professional performers. Many visitors to New Zealand and new arrivals take the opportunity to see Māori performances, especially in Rotorua, where there is a long tradition of sharing these arts with tourists. But these traditions are living, and are expressed every day in communities big and small.

Sometimes performances include exhibitions of skills with traditional weapons. In Māori thinking the unity and force of expression of those performing has a name: ihi, “the ability to inspire awe”. The feeling that people have in response (that spine-tingling experience) is called wehi. Together, the experience of ihi and wehi is at the heart of all Māori performance.

This includes formal oratory (whaikōrero); karanga (the call of welcome); singing, including singing accompanied by poi, both as a visual stimulus and as a percussion instrument; and mau rākau – individual performance with weapons, which included the traditional wero, or challenge. Sometimes very powerful facial expressions known as pūkana are used to provide emphasis in performance. Tongues, eyes, chin and head movement are used to enhance the message and the commitment of individuals to what is being communicated. Audiences show their admiration when this is done well. It is often startling to those of other cultures, but has been maintained as an important and impressive part of tradition.

Performances for entertainment are typically applauded with clapping. Performances in more formal settings are usually not applauded in this way, but with expressions such as “kia ora!” and “ka mau te wehi”, and most traditionally, with performances in response, fuelled by the wehi experienced as a result of the earlier performance.

The haka is performed by families or small groups in cultural and private settings, and is also performed by many sports teams. There are many haka, although you will hear people say ‘the haka’ as if there were only one. New haka are composed all the time. The words can be about ancestors, historical events, criticism of policies, or celebrations of success – in fact anything the composer might feel strongly about. Specific haka are associated with particular iwi (tribes) or sub-tribes (hapū), or with institutions such as schools or government agencies.

There is a great deal of literature on Māori performing arts, and it is studied at university level because of its depth of cultural meaning and links both to Māori traditional literature and to modern expressions of New Zealand as a nation.
Official languages

New Zealand has three official languages, English, Māori and New Zealand Sign Language.

English has never been made an official language by law, but as a language of Parliament and the courts, it has official recognition. New Zealand English is very close in vocabulary and pronunciation to Australian English, and each is closely related to forms of British English.

Māori is closely related to other west Polynesian languages, such as Cook Island Maori, Tahitian, Marquesan, Hawaiian and, somewhat more distantly, Samoan, Tongan, Tokelauan and Niuean. In 1987, Māori became an official language of New Zealand by law.

The Māori and New Zealand Sign languages have special status under the law. They can be used in legal proceedings with interpreters. Māori is also taught in most schools and there are Māori immersion educational facilities.

New Zealand Sign Language became a third official language by law in April 2006. It is closely related to British Sign Language and Australian Sign Language. It is thought that the beginnings of the modern language arose among the pupils of the world’s first residential school for the deaf, which opened in 1880 at Sumner, Christchurch.

The national Māori (Tino Rangatiratanga) flag was identified through a nationwide consultation process. While it does not carry official status it is a symbol of this land that can complement the New Zealand flag. Flying the two flags together on days of national significance such as Waitangi Day symbolises and enhances the Crown–Māori relationship.

The national Māori flag was developed by members of the group Te Kawariki in 1989. On 6 February 1990, the group unveiled the flag at Waitangi.

The elements of the national Māori flag represent the three realms: Te Korekore, potential being (black, top); Te Whai Ao, coming into being (red, bottom); Te Ao Mārama, the realm of being and light (white, centre). The koru is symbolic of a curling fern frond, representing the unfolding of new life, hope for the future and the process of renewal.