



Chances are you've heard of poi, seen someone spinning poi, or even had a go at spinning poi yourself, but what are poi, and why are poi so important in New Zealand?

Poi are one of the most well known flow props across the globe, and are often the prop that gets people into flow arts. Did you know that poi originated here in Aotearoa and have an extremely fascinating history?

Read on to learn more about poi, and the importance of poi in Māoridom, performance, play, and wellbeing.

What is Poi?

Poi are a precious Māori taonga (treasure) and originate from here in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

More recently, poi have become a staple within the circus arts and flow arts worlds. This style of poi encompasses that same 'ball on string' design as traditional poi but is manipulated very differently.

The word poi is both the name of the object (noun) in the singular and plural, and what you do with that object (verb).

Poi (noun): a light ball on a string of varying length which is swung or twirled rhythmically to sung accompaniment.

Poi (verb): to toss up, swing the poi, toss up and down, toss about.



Photo by [Pōiki Poi](#)

What Are Poi Used For?

Poi were used by indigenous Māori to sharpen their reflexes, improve coordination, and to increase flexibility and strength in their hands and arms. You can have a look [here](#) at a rare 'poi awe' that is being kept safe at Te Papa.

Wāhine (women) used poi to keep their hands flexible for weaving, and tāne (men) used poi as a training aid for the strength and coordination required during battle.

Traditional Māori poi are still used in kapa haka (Māori performing arts), and variations of these - what we commonly see in the flow arts world today - are used for exercise, entertainment and fun, performance, improving coordination, and so much more.

The History of Poi

There is little information about the history of poi in New Zealand prior to the arrival of the European settlers. It's believed that traditional poi originate from 'Poi Toa' (more on that below) and were originally a light ball crafted from raupō (bulrush/swamp plant) and attached to a rope made from harakeke (flax).

During the New Zealand land wars, in the 1860's, poi were utilised as a non-violent, religious and spiritual messenger. In 1868, [Te Whiti-o-Rongomai](#), a peacemaker, prophet, priest, and chief of the Taranaki tribes made Parihaka his home.

Te Whiti's father was Hōne Kākahi (sometimes known as Tohu Kākahi), a minor chief of the Patukai hapū of the Te Ati Awa tribe. His mother was Rangikawau, daughter of Te Whetū of the Taranaki hapū Patukai.

Te Whiti adopted the raukura (feather plume/treasure) of the albatross, and the poi as his emblems of peace and hospitality. He preached peace and non-resistance, and soon gained influence over many tribes, never once swaying from his teachings of peace, even during the invasion of [Parihaka](#).



Photo by [Ravi Gogna](#)

After the wars, poi became a key element in kapa haka (Māori performing arts) and also took on the role of attracting tourists. It's still very common today to see poi being used in kapa haka, and many international (and local!) tourists are delighted and impressed by these performances.

At just 7 years of age, distinguished kapa haka performer [Dame Aroha Reriti-Crofts](#) performed with the Tuahiwi School group to welcome the Māori Battalion back from the war in 1946. Thirty years later, she set a world record for the longest non-stop poi performance at 30h 19m, and she still practises poi today to exercise her neck and shoulders.

We often see wāhine spinning poi, but can males spin poi? While it was historically common for tāne to use poi to strengthen their wrists, it's not as common to see them using poi in kapa haka these days. Check out this interesting [video](#) showcasing "Boys Who Poi Challenging Stereotypes..." that also gives a visual example of how traditional Māori poi differs from the poi spinning we see in flow arts.

Te Whakapapa o te Poi (The Genealogy of Poi)

A long time ago, the world was surrounded by darkness. In the silence and the dark, Ranginui (atua (god) of the sky) lay holding Papatūānuku (the earth mother) tightly in his arms. Ranginui and Papatūānuku had [six children](#), all who were crushed between them in the darkness, desperate for light and freedom.

One of the children was Tāne Mahuta (atua of the forests and all things living in it). Tāne was big and strong, and he could no longer endure being crushed between his parents. He rose up, using his great strength to separate them, and thrust Ranginui high above Papatūānuku, making earth and sky.

Light and air filled the space, and Tāne soon became the father of a great family. Tāne mated with Hine-i-te-repo (the swamp maiden), and they produced raupō (bulrush/swamp plant). He also mated with Pakoti (Pakoki), and they produced harakeke (flax). Raupō and harakeke are the primary traditional materials used to make poi.

Tāne Mahuta is in the Waipoua Forest in Northland, between Dargaville and Opononi. A short 1-2 minute walk from the road will have you laying eyes on this majestic and treasured forest giant.

Tane Mahuta



Image credit: [Yathursan Gunaratnam](#)

Poi Toa and Ki

[Poi toa](#) are similar to traditional poi but are bigger and date back to pre-European Aotearoa. Poi toa is also the umbrella term used to describe any tākaro (game) where poi toa were used. The skills developed from practising poi toa were useful in battle, just like poi.

So, where did poi toa originate?

Poi toa originate from the ancient ki, which were small woven flax baskets, typically made from harakeke. These baskets were used to carry a single moa egg. Now, if you know anything about moa, you know they could grow to be huge. Some could be smaller than a turkey, but the [largest moa](#) stood about 2m tall and weighed over 250kg. A [giant moa egg](#) was found in Kaikōura, 240x178mm in size, and weighed (fresh) a whopping 4kg!

Like our national icon and namesake (the kiwi), the moa, now extinct, was a flightless bird and is part of the ratite group of birds. Māori hunted moa for their flesh (food), for their feathers and skin (clothing), and their bones (fish hooks and pendants).

To make it easier to carry more moa eggs, two or more ki were joined by a braided length of flax rope and slung across the shoulders or around the neck. Nowadays, 'ki' refers to the head of the poi toa.

Just like both traditional and modern poi, poi toa varied in ki (head) weight, in rope length, and in design and decoration.

Records also tell us that long before what we know now as 'fire poi' were ever a thing, poi toa were adapted into fire-bombs and used to bomb pā (fortified villages), and they were also utilised as moa hunting weapons.

Poi and Hauora (Māori Philosophy of Health)

[Hauora](#) is the Māori philosophy of health and wellbeing, unique to Aotearoa and recognised by the World Health Organisation. Hauora encompasses four dimensions of health:

- Taha tinana (physical) – the physical body and ways to care for it; its growth, development, and the ability to move.
- Taha hinengaro (mental/emotional) – a coherent thinking process; acknowledging, expressing, and responding constructively to thoughts and feelings.
- Taha whanau (social) – family, friends, and other interpersonal relationships; social support; and feelings of belonging, compassion, and caring.
- Taha wairua (spiritual) – personal identity and self-awareness; the values and beliefs that influence the way people live; and the search for meaning and purpose in life. For some, spiritual well-being is linked to a particular religion, and for others, it's not.

These four dimensions of hauora have been compared to the four walls of a strong whare (house). Each element influences and supports the other, and needs to be strong, steadfast, and stable in order to stand. Poi equally embodies all four dimensions of hauora and, as such, can be used as the perfect tool to holistically improve wellbeing.

Poi in Flow Arts

While it's clear to see the styles of poi we see in flow arts today have been heavily influenced by traditional Māori poi, there are similarities between flow poi and elements from other cultures too. Take the [bolas/boleadoras](#), for example. These are an indigenous South American weapon, used by the gauchos of Argentina, consisting of stone balls

attached to long ropes. These balls and ropes are whirled like a sling, then thrown near the target's legs in order to entangle them. In fact, until the early 2000's, parts of the world were calling flow poi 'bolas/boleadoras'.



Traditional Māori poi and the poi we see in flow today differ somewhat in both appearance and technique, but they are both a ball on a long or short rope, and they are both an important part of performance, play, and fitness.

Māori poi spinning is deeply entwined with story, song, and dance, and involves more contact with the head of the poi, usually hitting it against one's hand or other body parts for a percussive effect. Some circus and flow style spinning/performances also incorporate story, song, and dance, but also include aspects like poi tech (technical and precise moves, focus on complex geometric patterns), 3+ poi, and tosses/juggling. Circus and flow involves less contact with the head of the poi (unless its contact style, which is generally rolling the head over other parts of the body), and a more 'flowy' style of spinning, taking inspiration from other areas of circus arts.

The style of poi spinning we see today has been influenced by club (juggling clubs) swinging - a technique where the juggler twirls and swings the clubs around their head and body instead of tossing them like traditional juggling. When swung quickly, the clubs resemble spinning poi, as seen in this [video](#). This technique emerged from Persia and Egypt and was a popular form of exercise in the 19th century – it was even included in the first modern Olympic games but shrank in popularity when team sports gained traction.

Stringed glow sticks, a.k.a. glow stringing, was popularised in the 1980's at raves, and involved spinning glow sticks on strings in a similar way to how fire and flow poi are spun. Glow stringing is likely the heaviest influence for LED poi.

Poi in flow arts have evolved over the years and have taken on many different shapes and styles. These days, you can find [ribbon poi](#), [sock poi](#), [scarf poi](#), [contact poi](#) (conceived by Ronan McLoughlin from Ireland in 2007), [day flow poi](#), [LED poi](#) and of course, the ever favourite, [fire poi](#).

Where do Fire Poi Come From?

In 1946, a Samoan knife dancer, [Freddie Letuli](#) birthed modern day fire spinning using techniques borrowed from fire eating. Letuli watched a Hindu fire eater and was intrigued, so asked to borrow some of his white gas. Letuli wrapped a towel around the blade of his knife and created the 'Flaming Sword of Samoa' which became a massive hit, and he went on to perform across the globe.

It's believed that fire poi originated in Hawaii in the 1950's as a tourist attraction, perhaps after seeing a performance by Letuli, but [evidence](#) (a Van Wyck juggling prop catalogue shows an item that resembles fire poi for sale at \$4 per pair) suggests it dates back to early 1900's, although it's not clear whether the 'rope' on this poi was in fact a rope, or a solid metal rod.



Poi in The Modern Age

During the latter part of the 20th century, the circus industry was going through a huge series of changes. Attendance was dropping, mostly due to animal welfare concerns and changing tastes of audiences. By the 1970's, a new era of circus was born – cirque nouveau (contemporary circus). This type of circus focused more on showcasing performers who were trained in acrobatics, dancing, and juggling using theatre style themes and narratives. One of the most well-known examples of cirque nouveau is Cirque du Soleil.

During this same time, a variety of props were being used for a wide range of performance traditions, but these props and performances hadn't yet come into contact with each other. It wasn't until the emergence of music festivals and counter-culture events that this started to change and the lines between professional performer and amateur began to blur. People who had learned something at one of these events would take it home and practice, all while sharing what they learned with those in their community, growing the passion and knowledge for what we know today as flow arts.

In 1998, Malcolm Crawshay of Christchurch founded Home of Poi, a central hub for spinning supplies, tutorials, and international forums dedicated to various aspects of spinning and flow arts. It was perhaps this that led to the name poi, a Māori word unique to Aotearoa,

being used to describe this prop around the world. Prior to Home of Poi, many people outside of New Zealand had never heard the word poi before. Flow and fire poi were known by other names, such as 'chains' due to their martial arts influences of nunchaku and 9 section whip, and also as 'glowstringing'.

Tikanga o te Poi (The Respectful Practice of Poi)

There have been a couple of [discussions](#) in the flow arts community of late surrounding the topic of cultural appropriation, specifically in relation to poi. In order to understand whether the use of poi in flow arts is cultural appropriation, we first need to understand what cultural appropriation is.

Cultural appropriation can be defined as people (usually of a more dominant societal group) inappropriately taking customs, practices, traditions etc. of another (usually minority) group and using them in a disrespectful, exploitative, and stereotypical way.

Cultural appreciation can be defined as honestly seeking to learn about, and understand a different culture, while honouring its customs, beliefs, traditions etc. One of the great things about being alive in a globalised world is being able to experience, to learn, to understand, and to appreciate different cultures.

As discussed above, poi in flow arts have taken inspiration from many places, not just traditional Māori poi. Poi in fire and flow arts have become an art form of their own, mirroring techniques from other disciplines and art forms.

While poi in flow arts is a distant relative to traditional Māori poi, it's still important to remember their roots and to show appreciation by ensuring the history and the tikanga (the correct procedure, and customary system of values and practices) of traditional poi are shared and respected as the taonga (treasure) that they are.

An important part of this respect and appreciation is sharing the knowledge and history of poi - perhaps one of the most interesting histories for one of the most well-known props around. We encourage you to share this article within your own community (flow or otherwise) and help us spread the story of this incredible art form.

If you want to get yourself a set of traditional poi and support Māori artists, head on over to the [Buy Māori Made](#) Facebook page and check it out.