Repatriation of Māori ancestors: a partnership approach.

Abstract

Māori and Moriori ancestral remains were traded throughout Europe, the Americas and Australia from 1770s onwards. Repatriation requests have successfully secured the return of many ancestral remains over the last 15 years, but the act of repatriation does not always secure a lasting legacy of friendship and continued collaboration. The University of Birmingham, UK, and the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) have worked together to build a bridge which fostered collaborative work beyond the formal handover ceremony of the Māori ancestors. The bridge was built by mutual respect, increased levels of understanding and willingness to cooperate for the good of both parties. From the university perspective, the act of repatriation was seen as a moral duty, providing an opportunity to address colonial attitudes which had led to the collection and retention of the ancestors in the first place. In resolving the competing rights of Māori to repatriate and the university to retain its collection intact, the focus was on respecting indigenous claims as a gateway for greater opportunity and benefits through collaboration. Upholding Māori spiritual and cultural practices in respecting the ancestors provided an opportunity for the university to reflect on its moral duty and its wider remit as a civic university. From Te Papa's perspective, the formal handover ceremony provided an opportunity to show respect to the ancestors in an appropriate cultural and spiritually sensitive way. Placed within the context of indigenous rights, agreements to repatriate provide critical access to communities of origin, allowing them the human right to offer dignity to their ancestors, and the opportunity for a new type of museology to be created that is reflective and embraces indigenous cultural perspectives.
**Case Study**

The theme of this section of the programme is the power of sharing collections through inclusion and connection. In our case study, we will describe the power which comes through negotiating and working through one of the most difficult arenas, that is the collection and retention of human remains.

For the two of us, ‘sharing’ the collection of Māori ancestors would continue the practice of morally objectionable acts. We will argue that the ancestors cannot be ‘shared’, they must be repatriated. We will focus on shared decision making, shared common goals, and ultimately, the sharing of hearts and minds.

We will give our perspective on a number of questions through this presentation:

- Should repatriation happen?
- What is an appropriate process for repatriation?
  - Should there be a handover ceremony?
  - Should it be done discreetly or openly?
- What legacy can repatriation create?

**Background: Trade of Māori and Moriori ancestral remains**

Let us provide some background about the trade of Māori and Moriori ancestral remains, both kōiwi tangata (skeletal remains) and Toi moko (tattooed, preserved heads).

From the arrival of Captain Cook in 1769, there were exchanges in human remains. Pākehā (Foreigner/European) wanted to acquire local cultural items such as the unique Toi moko, sometimes forcing Māori to release ancestral remains to them (Te Awekotuku 2007:48).

From the early 1800s to the 1830s some Māori rangatira (chiefs) such as Hongi Hika actively traded in the mummified heads of fallen enemy chiefs and warriors (Te Awekotuku 2007:48; McLintock A.H. 2009). The most prolific occurrence, however, of the trade was between the 1860s to the 1930s, which was often at the hands of Pākehā (Foreigner/European) traders associated with newly established museums or other agencies of the crown (Smith and Aranui 2010:190; Prebble Ray G. 2012). It is estimated up to 80% of the Māori and Moriori ancestors in overseas institutions were collected and traded after the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840.
Despite the loss of the ancestors and the passing of over 100 years in many cases, the connection between Māori and Moriori communities and the tūpuna (Māori word for ancestors) and karapuna (Moriori word for ancestors) endures. In the 1970s Māori leaders actively sought the return of their tūpuna including:

- representatives of Te Arikinui Dame Te Atairangikaahu sought the remains of the ancestors Tūpāhau and the mokopuna (grandchild) taken by Andreas Reischek in the 1880s (Prebble Ray G. 2012);

- Maui Pomare as the chair of the National Museum now Te Papa returned many tūpuna from the United Kingdom (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2012: 3); and

- Dalvanius Prime well known entertainer became a vocal person seeking the return of ancestors as well (Higgins, 2013: 5).

**Karanga Aotearoa Repatriation Programme**

All this energy created momentum, supported by Māori communities to seek the New Zealand government to establish and mandate a national repatriation programme. In 2003, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) was resourced to undertake this project and established the Karanga Aotearoa Repatriation Programme with the specific leadership responsibility to repatriate Māori and Moriori remains (Ministry for Culture and Heritage 2004).

In saying that, however, there is the well-known African saying “It takes a whole village to raise a child”. In reference to repatriation in Aotearoa New Zealand it takes the whole support of Māori, Moriori and the following government agencies to bring the ancestors home, namely the Ministry for Cultural and Heritage, Ministry for Māori Development, Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and New Zealand Customs.

The programme is nestled within Te Papa as our national museum is seen as the natural conduit to opening doors with overseas museums and institutions to discuss and negotiate these most delicate and sensitive matters, and I am pleased to confirm that since 2003 the programme has repatriated over 350 kōiwi tangata and Toi moko back to Aotearoa New Zealand. We also have an active programme in returning these ancestral remains to their whānau (extended families), hapū (sub-tribe) and iwi (tribal groups) around the motu (country)
Importance of Ceremonies
As with many cultures, ceremonies of welcome, exchange, farewell and mourning are special and important traditions. This extends to Māori traditions and rituals which are framed and supported by tikanga – Māori cultural practices imbued with Māori spiritual beliefs.

These traditions still remain cherish elements of Māori life today. The same cultural practices are maintained by Te Papa through its bi-cultural practice, some would say indigenous museology in action.

This is the same tikanga that the repatriation programme extends through an invitation to overseas institutions to include within the formal handover ceremonies of the ancestors, extending Te Papa's bi-cultural reach beyond the shores of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Birmingham Medical School
The Birmingham Medical School holds a collection of ancient human remains from around the world. We have no record of how this collection came to be held. It is most likely comprised of private collectors donating human remains to the medical school in their legacy. The medical school is 150 years old and during the colonial period many prominent physicians and collectors lived near the University. The only provenance for the Māori ancestors was the uniqueness of the Moko. There were no further written records. We know that they have never been on display or used in any way

The Human Tissue Act 2004 only covers tissue gathered in the last 100 years.
http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/30/section/14

-As the ancestors died longer than 100 years ago, they fall outside of the legal requirement to have a licence to hold them. An inventory of the ancient anatomy collection was performed in 2011. It was at this point that we identified the Maori ancestors and immediately set up meetings to discuss repatriation. Our repatriation decision-making process involves the Dean of Medicine, Director of Human Biomaterials Resource Centre and myself as College Lead on Religious and Cultural Diversity. Our decisions must be verified by University Legal Office. Our process is not overly bureaucratic because we already have a presumption in favour of repatriation where possible.
Ownership of Remains

At the University of Birmingham we believe that collecting and holding objects does not confer ownership. We preferred to see our institution as custodians of the collection. As custodians, we can move easily to facilitate repatriation where possible. Our moral decisions are based on respect for equal principles of justice. It is wrong to withhold ancestors when their descendant communities want their return home. We cannot change past actions but we have the privilege of not repeating past wrongs. We are able to ensure that contemporary decisions reflect contemporary moral principles of mutual respect, self-determination for Māori people, and inclusive human rights.

We needed to be proactive because no one knew about the collection. Had we not have contacted Te Papa, the collection would have remained unclaimed because there was no way for its presence to be known about outside of the institution. Te Papa repatriation website provided all the information I needed to make the initial contact. From the outset, we wanted to enable the Māori Repatriation team to conduct the repatriation in the way that was most authentic for them.

Protocols and Ceremonies

Te Papa led on protocol and content for the ceremony. It was important to follow Māori protocol so that our intention of respect was actualised. We needed to relinquish
institutional power to control the handover process and give power to the Māori delegation to structure the ceremony according to their needs. Public acknowledgement was important for us to bring the truth into the light, to educate, to apologise, to create opportunity for deeper respectful relationships. Whilst Te Papa led on the ceremony, there were still collaborative decisions we needed to make together. These included selecting an appropriate venue which was quiet, private and had flexible space. We selected the Senate Chamber, the most prestigious room in the University where the most important decisions are taken. We wanted to honour the ancestors in the best way we could by ensuring the venue was in keeping with the importance of the occasion.

We also agreed to have media present, with very clear guidelines and boundaries to ensure Maori Protocol was maintained throughout. We were interviewed for BBC and TVNZ news programmes.

We also decided together to film the ceremony and place it on YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UobfYENpS8 Our intention was to create a public record which could be used to inform and guide other institutions considering repatriation. Connecting with the ceremony on an emotional level, which the YouTube film facilitates, may help institutions to see the human side of repatriation claims.

Repatriation handover in the Senate Chambers, Birmingham University. October 2013. Te Papa representatives acknowledge the tūpuna (ancestors) Copyright Birmingham University
Positive Experience

“It doesn’t have to be all angst” - the positive experience of working with Te Papa has helped the institution move towards broader repatriation efforts for the rest of its collection where possible. Leading by example, Te Papa has made it possible for other indigenous groups to have repatriation offered. It has also helped the University extend its remit of inclusive cultural engagement with local communities. The work has been incorporated into cross-course modules on Making Culture, where we discuss the ethics of repatriation as one example of how to deal with contentious collections.

It has been featured in UK Arts and Science Festival in 2014, bringing the issue of repatriation into public consciousness. It is important to humanise indigenous issues for a public who are not used to dealing with them.

The Legacy of Collaboration

The most important legacy from our collaboration is that the ancestors have been brought home, however, we are also working to create a broader legacy such as:

- Other medical schools may hold ancient human remains collections, which is not publically available information. We work to overcome reticence to disclose and support the process of repatriation; and
- We are also working on joint publications. Interdisciplinary publications widen the scope of international access and interest in indigenous approaches to heritage-reaching indigenous, museum, scientific and philosophical communities.

Te Papa as a bi-cultural museum has the opportunity to provide bi-cultural experiences through its work, both local and overseas. The sharing of Māori traditions through the repatriation handover ceremonies at international institutions, allows those attending to experience the wairua (the spirit) of the sacred.

We are reminded we belong to the past, the present and the future. The inhumanity of the past, through the collection and trade of human remains. The present, through the same ancestors still being housed in institutions, and the future, through repatriation and the handover ceremonies. Through this process humanity is offered to reconcile the past, through the inclusion of indigenous communities, their ceremonies and practices.

Part of this legacy also has implications for Aotearoa New Zealand, its regional museums and universities who house many hundreds of Māori and Moriori human remains. We would openly invite the leaders of those museums to consider the
process of actively returning those ancestral remains to their hau-kāinga, to their communities and places of origin.

Kaumātua (Elder) Shane Te Ruki (standing) welcomes to Te Papa the tūpuna (ancestors) repatriated from the United Kingdom and Guernsey in October 2013 Copyright Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa( Te Papa)

In summary, through this presentation, we have indicated

- The Story of trade of Māori and Moriori remains began in 1769;
- Māori, Pākehā, and agents of the Crown were involved;
- From the 1970s Māori and Moriori seek the return of tūpuna (ancestors)
- From 2003 Te Papa invites institutions to repatriate;
- Birmingham University actively contacted Te Papa;
- Opportunity to build an active relationship through the repatriation process and the good will of both groups;
- Handover ceremony was imbued with tikanga Māori (Māori philosophy and customary practice); and
- The story continues in a more positive light.

We are hopeful that through this presentation, we have provided an appreciation of indigenous cultural practice meeting positively with an institution's good will, and that the door to these types of experiences has been opened for you, your institution or museum.

Ngā mihi / Kind regards,
Dr June Jones and Te Herekiekie Herewini
References


Unpublished sources


Internet references


**Biography**

**Dr June Jones** is Senior Lecturer in Biomedical Ethics and Lead on Religious and Cultural Diversity at the University of Birmingham. She leads the repatriation programme of ancient human remains for the University. She has collaborated on two repatriations, with the Salinan Tribe of Native Americans and Te Papa. Her work centres on the moral obligation of holding institutions to work collaboratively with indigenous groups to ensure that their rights are upheld.

**Te Herekiekie Herewini** is the Manager of the Karanga Aotearoa Repatriation Programme (KARP) based at Te Papa. His role includes working alongside the Repatriation Advisory Panel, a group of Māori elders and cultural experts, as well as strategic planning, initiating the formal request to repatriate, and negotiating the return of the Māori and Moriori remains. Te Herekiekie is also a PhD candidate (part-time) at the University of Victoria in Wellington. Since KARP was established in 2003, it has repatriated over 350 Māori and Moriori ancestral remains from international institutions.

**Website:**

[http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/index.aspx](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/index.aspx)