**Te Papa’s Māori collection room – a bicultural ‘contact zone’?**

**Introduction**

The creation of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in 1998 was an attempt to put the abstract concept of biculturalism into practice on all levels of the museum. It was a bicultural experiment whereby the indigenous culture, Māori, and all the other cultures of New Zealand should be acknowledged equally, and different world views should be reflected without one dominating the other.

However, biculturalism is a complex, muddled and often misunderstood term that is not easy to define. I have developed this table to order the various understandings scholars and museum professionals have about biculturalism:

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Source: Schubert-McArthur 2014: 25
My working definition is that biculturalism is the acceptance of two cultures (indigenous Māori and Western non-Māori) as different but equal, as well as a commitment to share power and resources; it is not an end in itself, but an on-going negotiation process and a stepping-stone towards Māori self-determination.

What Te Papa does quite successfully, is that it provides the framework for a contact zone; ‘a safe place for unsafe ideas’ (Gurian 2006: 99).

James Clifford (1997) coined the term ‘museums as contact zones’. Clifford borrows the concept from Mary Louise Pratt (1992: 6f.) who defines the ‘contact zone’ in relation to the ‘frontier’ as

the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict.

For me the contact zone is not a border but rather a starting point. Here fixed notions of imperialism and colonialism give way to diverse voices (Golding 2009: 49) and the museum becomes a ‘third space’ (Bhabha 1994: 56) where encounters take place and people are transformed through interaction (Taylor 1994: 70-71).

During 2009 and 2010 I undertook twelve months fieldwork at Te Papa, where I observed 18 different teams and interviewed 68 former and current Te Papa staff. My findings suggest that Te Papa (the institution as a whole) acts as a ‘contact zone’, but entails multiple contact zones not only within the public space but more so behind-the-scenes where decisions are made, culture is produced and diverse concepts are negotiated.

These contact zones within Te Papa are the exhibition spaces, the exhibition making process, the staff training opportunities (Māori language classes and Māori singing), the marae or Māori meeting place, the exhibition blessings and closings with Māori rituals, staff celebrations that showcase Māori culture, and the Māori collection rooms.

In this article I use the protocol or tikanga of the Māori collection room as an example to illustrate the cultural clashes that sometimes occur in a bicultural environment.
The Māori Collection Rooms

Te Papa houses the Māori collection in three store rooms that are kept separate from the rest of the collection. Kaitiaki Māori or collection managers look after the Māori artifacts or taonga. They define their role as caretakers who look after the taonga like they would care for elder relatives. According to Mead (1986: 77f) taonga have a ‘religious quality’ as they present a ‘mythical link to the past’. For Māori they are not just inert artifacts representing the ancestors, they are the ancestors and therefore are treated with love and respect, talked to, sung to, embraced and wept over. Taonga embody mana (authority, status) intrinsically through spiritual power and age, as well as contributing mana to the group who owns it. With this animistic belief comes a duty to perform certain protocols and rituals which must be carried out properly to control the spiritual powers that can endanger visitors and museum staff (see Tapsell 1998). Failure to do so might have serious consequences: “people become sick, they have accidents or they may die” (Mead 1986: 78).

Te Papa’s Conservation and Tikanga policy outlines the best practice in the Māori collection room to ensure the object’s safety but also that the conservator’s behaviour is culturally appropriate. The first three are standard procedures and universal, while the last five are recommendations and seen as personal choice.

- To say prayers/karakia
- Not to work on carvings
- Not to work on koiwi (human remains)
- Not to use certain treatments, e.g. saliva for surface cleaning a Māori portrait
- Not to work on taonga while menstruating

The last point is the most controversial, because Western and Māori world views collide over what women should or should not be doing while menstruating.

I analyse the conflicting discourses around this issue in the Māori collection store, using participant observation, an interview with a kaitiaki Māori, media reports and autoethnography.

Case Study: Experiencing Tikanga Taonga in the Māori Collection

Having anticipated doing fieldwork in the Māori collection for some time, I was very excited at the prospect of working in the store rooms. I followed a kaitiaki or guardian, a Māori woman throughout the day, spending most of the time in the carving store Ahuru Mōwai, where I assisted with putting registration numbers on taonga and observed tikanga in.
practice. The kaitiaki explained that it is a very different realm inside the collection room compared to the rest of the museum and that just being in this special space with the wairua can be very draining and tiring. She advised me to leave the collection room and sprinkle myself with water to disconnect any spirits hanging on to me, should I feel tired.

Curiously, I did get tired quickly and found it difficult to concentrate. Whether this was due to the wairua (spirits) or the quiet atmosphere, I am not sure. Frequently, I left the room for a ‘breather’ on my own. I always had to remind myself of the practice of cleansing with water and often forgot, only to realise my mistake half-way down the corridor, which had me running back to the sink in a hurry. I clearly had not yet internalised the tikanga.

For my colleague who had grown up immersed in Māori culture, adhering to tikanga is not a conscious decision or obeying rules, but second nature: “Well, I live it, eat it and breathe it.” So it was a ‘no-brainer’ for her that “we [kaitiaki Māori] don’t work in the realm during that time. We stay out of those rooms until we are ready to come back in.” They simply do desk-based work during that time that does not require physical contact with taonga.

However it is more difficult, according to the kaitiaki, to ensure that the tikanga is complied with when back-of-house tour groups come in. Although visitors are alerted to the protocol beforehand, whether or not people comply cannot be monitored: “Because you cannot in reality go out and say ‘well, have you got your period?’”. In Māori culture women are considered the source of life and the ‘house’ for future generations (Higgins/ Meredith 2012:1); during menstruation women in traditional Māori society were in a tapu (sacred) state (Douglas 1966; Brook 2013) and had to adhere to restrictions in order to protect themselves and others from ‘dire consequences’ (Higgins/ Meredith 2012:2).

One non-Māori staff member told me of her inner conflict with respecting Māori protocol and at the same time being true to her own values:

*I’m not particularly comfortable with the protocols, because I don’t believe in them personally. [...] There are certain things – menstruating women can’t go places – that I find quite confronting. So my approach is to acknowledge that [...] there is a difference in belief there, but I will respect it.*

I have not encountered any non-Māori women on Te Papa’s staff, who openly criticised the tikanga practiced in the Māori collection – perhaps because their jobs did not require their presence in this realm – but I heard about two scenarios where Māori women challenged
the protocol. In both cases Māori women who were pregnant, requested to be allowed to work in the Māori collection, claiming that their elders had given them permission. Although tikanga in fact varies from iwi to iwi (Māori tribes), and is a guideline rather than the law, some kaitiaki Māori were very concerned for the women’s well-being and tried to dissuade them. The late Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, then Director Art and Collection Services and himself Māori, was appalled that one of his employees was told “that a demon might jump onto her and affect her baby in the womb”. He believed that incompatible world views “caused things to be said that I just don’t think belong in a professional situation.”

Three main issues are at stake: (1) the personal safety of staff versus employee rights, (2) the risk for the spiritual safety of taonga, and (3) the challenge for Te Papa to care for national treasures from diverse iwi with different tikanga. Applying tikanga taonga is further complicated at Te Papa by frequently-changing iwi kaumātua or elders, that make it necessary to decide on a case-by-case basis, as it is not clear who should be the authority: should Te Papa construct a pan-tribal tikanga, apply the tikanga of the iwi kaumātua, the local iwi or the iwi a particular staff member identifies with? The kaitiaki Māori insisted that breaking tikanga restrictions has tangible consequences for the spiritual realm of the collection room and the people working in it:

_We have had someone in here menstruating, this whole place went crazy. Just things, our kōrero [communication], nothing, just nothing, nothing sort of tallied up. Things just weren’t happening. So yeah [...] you get signs alright, you get signs, y’know they [the taonga and their wairua or spiritis] either like it or they don’t basically. And they’ll tell you if you’re welcome or not._

After the interview I went to the bathroom and was shocked to notice that my period had set in. For a moment I considered pretending nothing had happened and going back in to continue my fieldwork. All sorts of thoughts went through my mind: “Does the tikanga even apply to me as a non-Māori? If the tikanga was for my own safety, surely I wouldn’t put anyone else at risk if I went back in? But after everything the Māori woman had told me how can I not respect the tikanga?” I decided to accept the tikanga and told the kaitiaki that I could not continue. I was relieved that she understood and simply said, “these things happen”. Yet, having anticipated my fieldwork in the Māori collection room so much, I felt utterly disappointed and also a bit embarrassed that my period had come so inconveniently
and cut my fieldwork short.\(^1\) Nevertheless, I told myself that it was much better to be honest and respectful rather than being found out or worse, falling victim to ‘bad spirits’.\(^2\) This experience made me realise, that while it is easy to agree to tikanga restrictions in principle, it feels quite uncomfortable to be actually in a situation where it has tangible consequences for oneself.

Given the importance that is placed on tikanga Māori in the collection room by insisting that everyone, regardless of ethnicity, cultural and spiritual beliefs obeys the ‘rules’, I argue that Māori staff demonstrate and maintain their power by setting these boundaries. According to Linda T. Smith (2006 [1999]: 74) “[c]oncepts of spirituality [...] are critical sites of resistance for indigenous peoples. [...] It is one of the few parts of ourselves which the West cannot decipher, cannot understand and cannot control... yet.” This perhaps explains why Māori are so anxious that their tikanga is adhered to in the collection room; for them it is a sacred space and a site where Māori culture prevails. At the same time, the restricted access and narrative of a spiritual connection of Māori to their taonga can be read with Erving Goffman (1959: 59) as a strategy to ‘mystify’ Māori culture and maintain a social distance to non-Māori by establishing Māori as authority in this realm. However it seems to me that the power of Māori staff is symbolic, as in practice it is impossible to control and enforce the tikanga, as visitors to the Māori collection determine whether or not they subscribe to the rules. The media uproar about this issue that follows, demonstrates this.

**Public Outcry over Te Papa’s Ban For Pregnant and Menstruating Women**

Not long after my fieldwork in the Māori collection, Te Papa made newspaper headlines for ‘warning off’ pregnant and menstruating women on a back-of-house tour. In October 2010, a group of museum professionals from regional museums requested to visit Te Papa’s Māori collection. Te Papa sent out a confirmation letter including the clause that “wahine [women] who are either hapu [pregnant] or mate wahine [menstruating] are welcome to visit at another time that is convenient for them” (Ash 2010: 5). Reading this clause the women in the group felt discriminated against and informed the media. In the subsequent media

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\(^1\) I did continue my fieldwork in the Māori collection a couple of days later, yet missed several planned fieldwork days in the Māori collection.

\(^2\) Serious consequences of not adhering to Māori protocol or breaching tapu have been reported, including sickness and death (Mead 1986:78). Remarkable events occurred in the making of the meeting house Rauru, when tapu was breached by Te Waru (Garbutt 2007:112; see also Tischner 1971; Neich 2001), who subsequently lost three wives and one (or two) sons (Pomare/ Cowan 1930:260). Parts of Rauru are today exhibited at the Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg, Germany.
there was an outrage by some members of the public, who called Te Papa’s policy ‘stupid’, ‘bloody ridiculous’, ‘sexist’ and ‘too PC’. Māori were also divided about the issue, with some commending Te Papa for upholding Māori values (DigitalMaori 2010), while others criticised the custom as outdated or suggested that Te Papa should find a middle-ground. Feminist blogger ‘Boganette’ was quoted in several articles: “It’s disgusting that in this day and age women can be told they’re ‘forbidden’ for menstruating or being pregnant. It’s a completely archaic belief that is oppressive to all women.”

This comment links to the feminist tradition of revealing restrictions placed on women as patriarchal oppression, arguing that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 1973: 301). Mary Douglas in her book Purity and Danger (1966) asserts that everything that cannot be classified is abnormal and considered dirt; being out of place it threatens the natural order. Menstruation blood is a prime “symbol of power and of danger” (Douglas 1966: 124) to mankind, which therefore needs to be controlled and encapsulated from ‘normal’ people. In this context, the body becomes political (Jenkins 2011: 116). The feminist outcry against Te Papa’s policy is unsurprising, as it curtails women’s hard-earned equality. Non-Māori women felt excluded and discriminated against, which stems from a patriarchal angst of the natural powers of women (Butler 1990).

What is the Māori rationale for this restriction? In a Māori world view taonga embody the ancestors, being mediators between the past and the present (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 52); they are tapu and can pass on the good or evil ‘spirits’ of the people who used them to the living, especially when the person handling them is in a vulnerable state, such as menstruating or being pregnant (Higgins/Meredith 2012: 2; Kaeppeler 1994: 28). Most Māori women would therefore not go into the collection store, let alone touch taonga under these conditions.

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circumstances, not – as some non-Māori assume – because the women would contaminate the taonga, but to ensure their own personal safety.

In the public debate the issue was not just one of women’s rights versus indigenous rights, or superstitious beliefs versus enlightenment, but one of cultural dominance and ideology within a public institution. Blogger Deborah Russell deemed it inappropriate for Te Papa as a public entity to force tikanga Māori on visitors, saying: "I don't understand why a secular institution, funded by public money in a secular state, is imposing religious and cultural values on people." Te Papa stood by its policy, yet Kaihautū Michelle Hippolite added "[i]t's your choice, it's not a ban", and Te Papa spokesperson Jane Keig explained the underlying reasons:

There are items within that collection that have been used in sacred rituals. That rule is in place with consideration for both the safety of the taonga and the women. [...] Pregnant women are sacred and the policy is in place to protect women from these objects.

The Arts, Culture and Heritage Minister Chris Finlayson downplayed concerns in his response to a complaint to the Human Rights Commission: “It's an advisory requested by the iwi, but it's for people to make up their own minds". Thus, the policy is not legally binding as Finlayson emphasised, and can therefore be ignored.

I suggest that the public outrage can be read with Elizabeth Povinelli as a ‘hegemonic project’, where “state and public figures trumpet the national shame of allowing such practices of [...] ignorance and superstition, to take place within its borders” (Povinelli 2002:27). Povinelli continues, that nation states often focus their attention on ‘inhuman practices’ of a minority culture which they deem unacceptable, yet the motivation is rather their anxiety of ‘the other’ who they would rather exclude altogether. Perhaps then, the media attention was an attempt to construct a NZ identity in contrast to ‘backward Māori customs’?

Conclusion

My findings suggest that having a Māori enclave with its own rules functions within Te Papa, and moreover asserts Māori authority. However, the public uproar suggests otherwise: at the public interface of the museum as contact zone, Māori dictating the rules within a Crown entity is unacceptable. The different reactions to tikanga by Te Papa staff, who mostly embrace it, and the public, who contest it, suggests to me that engaging in genuine biculturalism is limited to the physical boundaries of Te Papa where staff are instructed to tolerate cultural differences, whereas wider New Zealand society rejects biculturalism if it conflicts with a Western world view.

This case study and my own experience have demonstrated that working in a bicultural environment can ignite a transformation in terms of thinking, attitude and professional practice in staff that has a ripple effect for their professional and personal life. Non-Māori certainly benefit from the exposure to the Māori-world view that widens their horizons. Therefore, these cultural clashes are valuable contact zones in themselves that provoke deep learning. However, to have an impact on race relationships in New Zealand, the museum needs to explain Māori concepts, such as tikanga, better to the public.

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Mead, (Sidney) Hirini Moko  

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa  

Neich, Roger  

Pomare, Maui, and James Cowan  

Povinelli, Elizabeth A.  

Pratt, Mary Louise  

Schubert-McArthur, Tanja  

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai  

Tapsell, Paul

Taylor, Charles

Tischner, Herbert

**Biography**

Tanja Schubert-McArthur is a cultural anthropologist working in the museum sector. In 2014 she completed her PhD titled "Walking the Talk? - An Ethnography of Biculturalism at Te Papa" at Victoria University of Wellington. Her research took her behind the scenes at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, revealing the complex politics and relationships between Maori and non-Maori employees. Tanja studied social anthropology, rhetoric and German literature at Eberhard-Karls-Universitaet Tuebingen in Germany; her Master's Thesis "Mit Sack und Pack nach Neuseeland. Zum Gepäck deutscher Auswanderer heute" about German immigrants to New Zealand was published in 2007 (Mana Verlag). Hailing from the South of Germany originally, Tanja has made Aotearoa New Zealand her home since 2006.