

# Beyond Repatriation: The Need for Sensitive Museum Display of Indigenous Objects

Piper Whitehead

---

*Piper Whitehead is a third-year undergraduate in History of Art at Pembroke College, Cambridge. She is a winner of the Warren Trust Award for Architectural Writing and has been an Arts Columnist for Varsity. She is also a published poet and enjoys theatre and competitive debating.*

---

Many significant cultural objects have found uncomfortable homes in museums across the world.<sup>1</sup> They have been trapped behind glass, victims of looting, 'scientific' collection, and other damaging colonial acts. After many years, museums have come to recognise how important it is that they engage with repatriation and culturally sensitive forms of display. Repatriation has been the subject of intense debate. I focus in this article specifically on the issue of display. I will do so through the lens of one object, a Māori *pouhaki*. This *taonga* was made by the master carver Tene Waitere. Waitere was born in Mangamuka in Northern New Zealand in 1854 and is of Te Arawa and Ngāpuhi ancestry. His links to Te Arawa also connect him to a strong carving tradition. I argue that sensitive display has contributed to the restoration of the *pouhaki's mana*.<sup>2</sup>

In its current home within the main gallery of the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), the *pouhaki* is one of the most striking objects on display. An eight-meter carved flagpole, it is, according to Nicholas Thomas, the only one of its kind outside New Zealand, as well as the oldest extant.<sup>3</sup> It is carved on three sides with *manaia*, supernatural figures that guard against evil.<sup>4</sup> The fourth side is incomplete, potentially indicating the rush to prepare it for its original purpose, as a gift to the Prince of Wales on his 1920 visit to New Zealand. Splits in the timber also suggest the *totara* wood was not

fully seasoned when it was carved, another indication of being made in haste.<sup>5</sup> The *pouhaki* has suffered damage in its lifetime, and although some of this may have been due to transport between Aotearoa New Zealand and the United Kingdom, much of it was undoubtedly the result of inappropriate display over 85 years in a garden at the *HMS Excellent* Navy Training Centre.<sup>6</sup> Earlier in its life, the currently eight-meter post would have had an additional pole on top and a crossbar, but these have been lost. In its initial presentation, ceremonial flags would have been connected to guyline-like ropes from the crossbar or the top of the pole, mimicking the effect of a ship's mast.<sup>7</sup>

As this history suggests, the progress of the *pouhaki* from Rotorua to Cambridge is an unusual one. It was first presented as a gift to Edward, Prince of Wales, on the tour he made of the Dominions to thank them for their support in the First World War. On 19 April 1920, it made its first official appearance during a *powhiri* in Rotorua at Arawa Park, where it displayed around 14 tribal flags.<sup>8</sup> When Edward returned to the United Kingdom two years later, he brought the flagpole with him, and gave it to the captain of the *HMS Excellent*, a training facility on Whale Island, Portsmouth. It was then placed in a rose garden, which at the time was something of a menagerie for the exotic animals acquired by naval captains.<sup>9</sup>

Leaving the *pouhaki* stranded in a garden in Portsmouth undercuts its cultural significance. The very fact that it is a *flagpole* is significant. As Nicholas Thomas (Director of the MAA) notes, 'It is a striking feature

---

1 Māori terms are defined in the glossary.

2 Deirdre Brown, 'Colonial Styles: Architecture and Indigenous Modernity' in Peter Brunt and Nicholas Thomas (eds), *Art in Oceania: A New History* (Thames and Hudson 2012) 318.

3 Nicholas Thomas, 'A Māori Flagpole Arrives in Cambridge' (2011) 24 *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 187, 193.

4 Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 'Accession No. 2010.672' <<https://collections.maa.cam.ac.uk/objects/552750>> accessed 29 January 2021.

5 Nicholas Thomas, *Rauru: Tene Waitere, Māori Carving, Colonial History* (Otago University Press 2009) 25.

6 Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (n 4).

7 Thomas (n 5) 25.

8 *ibid* 190.

9 *ibid* 25.



**Figs 1 and 2.** Kauri-wood pouhaki (flagpole) carved by Tene Waitere and restored in 2008 by James Schuster, Tene's great-grandson. Rotorua, New Zealand. Donated by the Ministry of Defence Art Collection. This image is copyright. Reproduced by permission of the University of Cambridge, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (2010.672).

of Aotearoa New Zealand's history that Māori have consistently and effectively embraced signs of European power and sovereignty, and made them serve their own ends.<sup>10</sup> Indeed it is almost impossible to interpret the *pouhaki* outside the context of colonisation and disputed sovereignty. The very idea of a flag, and the pole that supports it, is tied to concepts of ruling powers. As easily as Māori had taken up metal carving tools, during the nineteenth century they adopted symbols of European dominance and used them for their own purposes. Flags and flagpoles were part of this process, and in some cases Māori resistance movements harnessed their symbolic power. In its original state this *pouhaki* would have strongly resembled the mast of a sailing ship, a crucial tool of economic dominance and colonisation.<sup>11</sup>

Though a gift to the British royalty, the *pouhaki* did not connote servility. It has significance beyond symbolising the distinguished service of Māori during World War I. Arawa oral tradition maintains that *taonga* were most commonly gifted in order to settle differences between hostile groups.<sup>12</sup> Thomas interprets the *pouhaki* as an affirmation of friendship on equal footing, and a subtle way of highlighting the Crown's neglect of the reciprocal obligations set out in the Treaty of Waitangi, which was signed in 1840.<sup>13</sup> Te Arawa had supported the Crown during the New Zealand Wars which followed in

10 *ibid.*

11 Thomas (n 3) 189.

12 Paul Tapsell, 'The Flight of Pareraututu: an investigation of *taonga* from a tribal perspective' (1997) 106(4) *The Journal of Polynesian Society* 323, 338.

13 Thomas (n 3) 190.

the 1860s. By the 1920s the settler government had a poor track record of upholding its obligations to the Māori community. The Treaty had promised Māori they would retain *rangatiratanga* (chieftainship), while the Crown received *kawanatanga* (governorship). However, in the course of its colonial rule the Crown often did not respect Māori sovereignty, even for groups like Te Arawa which had previously supported its aims. Māori would often remind the government of its broken promises in symbolic ways. For example, just a few years later, in 1940, Nga Puhi wore red blankets to a Treaty of Waitangi commemorative celebration as a protest against land loss.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, whilst the *pouhaki* remained a gesture of friendship, it was also an ornate reminder of government failure to respect Māori sovereignty.

The *pouhaki*'s initial placement in an environment close to a zoo speaks to a conception of it as an exotic souvenir, a far cry from a *taonga* created by a highly skilled and respected artist. Few would have been aware of the *pouhaki*'s origin or meaning, or indeed, with the exception of those working at the base, of its very existence. During this time the accompanying plaque also inaccurately identified the flagpole as a sort of totem pole used to mark tribal boundaries. Thomas describes this as 'a piece of information that somehow typifies the vaguely plausible but commonly erroneous captioning of historic native objects.'<sup>15</sup> It certainly demonstrates the

14 Jock Philips, 'Anniversaries – New Zealand's Centennial, 1940', *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand* <<https://teara.govt.nz/en/photograph/43020/apirana-ngata-at-waitangi-1940>> accessed 21 March 2021.

15 Thomas (n 5) 25.

lack of attention that had been paid to the *pouhaki* since it arrived in Portsmouth. It was not until the 1990s that the curator of the HMS Excellent's museum contacted Auckland Museum about the *pouhaki*, which led Jim Schuster, Tene Waitere's great-great-grandson and a heritage advisor to Heritage New Zealand, and Dean Sully, a conservationist, to come and view it in 2006. Nicholas Thomas made a follow-up visit in 2007. Finding the *pouhaki* to be in good but imperfect condition after its years outdoors, Thomas proposed, with Schuster's support, to have it moved to the MAA.<sup>16</sup> It was at this point unclear who legally owned the *pouhaki*, so it was accessioned to the Ministry of Defence's art collection. The Ministry, however, came to support the proposal for the pole's removal in October 2007.

The removal of the *pouhaki* from Portsmouth was a first step, but more was needed to display the object in accordance with Māori gifting practices. Paul Tapsell describes three essential elements of *taonga*. The first is *mana*, instilled in the object by the ancestors as it passes through their hands over generations.<sup>17</sup> The second is *tapu*, which marks an object as sacred and protects it from transgression, preserving its *mana* for the future. This would usually entail care by senior elders of a tribe. The third element is *kōrero*, the orally transmitted knowledge and ritual surrounding an object. This would usually take the form of a *karakia*.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, Schuster performed a *karakia* when the *pouhaki* was removed, which both recognised and restored its *mana* and resituated it within its *kōrero*. Significantly, the *pouhaki* was reconnected with its carving *whakapapa* as he carried another Waitere object, a *tokotoko*, with him during the ceremony. Respecting such practices is key to appropriate display.

Tapsell also compares the journey of Arawa *taonga*, gifted outside its tribe, to that of a comet.<sup>19</sup> He first notes that the gifting of a *taonga* raises the *mana* of both parties—the receiver's as a result of gaining a powerful object, and the giver's as a result of their generosity. This obligates the receiver to reciprocate in some form, so the *pouhaki* was intended not only to remind Europeans of their duties but also to reaffirm them.<sup>20</sup> *Utu*, the idea of repayment or reciprocity, is key in Māori culture.<sup>21</sup> When a *taonga* is given it is most often expected that it will be returned, that 'one day [*taonga*] suddenly reappear, charged with the spiritual energy of past ancestors, returning home to their descendants in a blaze of rediscovery', creating even greater *mana* for all parties involved.<sup>22</sup> Such gifts were typically given between different Māori tribal groups, which understood their obligations to the object and the power surrounding it.<sup>23</sup>

When an object is passed into foreign hands, however, as in the case of the *pouhaki*, there is no longer a guarantee of reciprocity or maintenance. Customs surrounding the object are often ignored or forgotten. For these objects, display is more than visual. It incorporates a more extensive and temporal process—its *kōrero* must be understood. While the tribe most likely did not expect the *pouhaki* itself to be returned, it would be viewed as part of a cycle of obligations—beginning with the tribe's service in the war, reciprocated by the visit of the Prince of Wales, and ending with the *pouhaki* itself. The most probable expectation of reciprocity would have been the general fulfilment of European obligations towards Māori, an issue that remains contentious to this day.

16 *ibid.*

17 Tapsell (n 12) 327.

18 *ibid.* 328.

19 *ibid.*

20 *ibid.* 337.

21 *ibid.* 338.

22 *ibid.* 339.

23 *ibid.* 338.

I would argue that ignorance, rather than malice, is the cause of the neglect around the *pouhaki*. A *pouhaki* displayed in a rose garden under an inaccurate plaque is not being intentionally violated. But it is fundamentally separated from the layers of knowledge which give an object its *mana*. It is divorced from the genealogy of its maker, its tribe, the practice of carving itself, and even from the reasons why it was gifted in the first place. Some from outside of Māori culture may not understand why this manner of display was disrespectful. In a culture which prioritises preservation of treasured objects, the declining physical state of the *pouhaki* might have seemed the only real problem at hand. However, the removal from context was a greater loss than physical neglect. *Mana* and *tapu* are essentially threatened by the loss of *kōrero*. As Tapsell describes, 'such *taonga*, which can be found in their thousands in archives, upon the countryside, or in museums, remain recognisably Māori because of the patterns embedded in them ... but because they have lost all associate knowledge, they are consigned to museum-like roles of representing an obscure and irretrievable past.'<sup>24</sup> The object clearly does not fit into the narrative of theft, violence, or coercion that entangles many objects held by British museums. But in any case, objects should be displayed appropriately to their cultural context.<sup>25</sup>

The restoration process is a good example of how an acceptable compromise can be found between European curatorial practice and Māori custom. Present-day Western curatorial practice tends to preserve an object in the condition in which it arrives, whereas Te Arawa customs would be much more hands-on, to the point of painting the object red.<sup>26</sup> The restoration of the *pouhaki*, which was carried out by James and Cathy Schuster, Dean Sully, and a group of Sully's students, ended up being much more responsive to the unique position of the *pouhaki* within the MAA.<sup>27</sup> While replicating a traditional mud-based stain was considered, technical analysis showed the existing stain on the *pouhaki* was shellac, probably from the 1920s, as by then Māori had adopted commercial paints and varnishes.<sup>28</sup> With that context in mind, it was clearly unnecessary to pursue the most traditional route possible, and indeed more suitable to take one that was adaptive to the environment, just as Waitere had adapted to the use of modern materials. James Schuster felt that the *pouhaki* should be visually consistent with the rest of the gallery, particularly the Haida Totem Pole.<sup>29</sup> He decided instead to use linseed oil, which was very visually effective despite being unusual both for Māori and European custom.<sup>30</sup>

The restoration process also went further than re-staining the wood to restore the *pouhaki* to its former glory. In sections near the top of the pole, where carvings had been damaged by a woodpecker, Schuster used Waitere's own tools to repair the damage.<sup>31</sup> This not only returned the *pouhaki* to its original liveliness but also restored some of the object's *mana*, by reconnecting it with the *tapu* tools and its own living history. The *pāua*-shell eyes were also replaced during the restoration as the originals had been lost over time.<sup>32</sup> The glittering shells now ensure the *pouhaki* is as communicative and lively as originally it would have been. These alterations are compatible with Te Arawa customs because, as mentioned above, when a *taonga* becomes too delicate for use its power is often

24 *ibid.* 332.

25 Nicholas Thomas, 'Introduction' in Brunt and Thomas (eds, n 2) 19.

26 Thomas (n 3) 191.

27 Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (n 4).

28 Thomas (n 3) 192.

29 *ibid.* 191.

30 *ibid.* 192.

31 Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (n 4).

32 *ibid.*

transferred to a replica. The significance lies not so much in the particular object as in the power surrounding it.<sup>33</sup>

Museum display contexts are tricky territory when it comes to Māori objects. Not only are there the history of stolen objects and inaccurate display to contend with, but the very idea of a 'museum' is also at odds with Māori treatment of *taonga*. Tapsell speaks about this in relation to his own research into *taonga*:

I could easily understand why many Māori people feel alienated from their *taonga* held in large city institutions. Apart from the physical barriers of distance and glass cases, the visiting tribes also have to cope with foreign labels and bureaucratic hierarchies. These not only separate *taonga* from their descendants and ancestral lands, but also recontextualise them in Western culture as objects assigned monetary valuations and institutionally defined in terms of legal possession.<sup>34</sup>

This passage shows how displaying *taonga* can prevent them from fulfilling their cultural function, especially as Māori consider them living objects. Even if an object is displayed in a local museum that Māori could easily access, it can create a sense of alienation.

I would argue that the *pouhaki* is an exception to this rule. There were a number of factors which led the Schusters to decide that the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge was an appropriate home for the *pouhaki*. It was decided that the *pouhaki* should remain in the UK as it was a legitimate gift with no expectation of return, as detailed above.<sup>35</sup> They also felt the museum allowed the *pouhaki* to be placed within the context of other Pacific objects and Indigenous carvings like the Haida Totem pole, as well as other gifts that were presented to British royalty. Importantly, the museum already held a *tokotoko* that Waitere carved.<sup>36</sup> It also helped that the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology retained a royal connection, as the Prince of Wales had graduated from it, and that Cambridge University had a history of visits from prominent Māori figures such as Hongi Hika.<sup>37</sup> Finally, the Schusters' consent and involvement with the placement is itself a vital legitimising factor, reinvigorating the relationship between the descendants of Waitere and their ancestral *taonga*.<sup>38</sup> The *pouhaki* is still legally owned by the Ministry of Defence, but the physical connection with the object, and acknowledgement of Waitere's descendants, is more significant to appropriate display than legal technicalities of ownership.<sup>39</sup> Though the *pouhaki* is not expected to be returned, it is nonetheless reconnected with its *whakapapa*.

In December 2008 a formal ceremony of dedication took place.<sup>40</sup> The event was reported in the *New Zealand Herald*, and the very title of the article, 'Historic flagpole recovers its mana', indicates how the object's new placement was the very opposite of what is usually entailed by museum display. In this article Schuster talked about the great sense of emotion that rediscovering the *pouhaki* had brought him.

Just to see it, knowing it was made by his hands, it brings great pride. There's lots of our things over there [and]

33 Tapsell (n 12) 331.

34 *ibid* 341.

35 Thomas (n 5) 26.

36 *ibid*.

37 Thomas (n 3) 190.

38 *ibid* 193.

39 Thomas (n 5) 26.

40 Thomas (n 3) 193.

you always feel a lot of aroha for them—being away from home. But there's also a sense of pride knowing that your great-great-grandfather's work is being appreciated on the other side of the world.<sup>41</sup>

The improvements also showed off the prestige of the tribe and Māoridom at large to any visiting the museum. Similarly powerful reactions have been recorded by those encountering other *taonga*. This demonstrates the immense emotional value these objects have for Māori people. In the face of such connections, it is clear that European museums must do better to bring together objects in their care with those who made them, when such objects are put on display. In many cases, the appropriate action will be to repatriate the object, but the story of the *pouhaki* shows that new *kōrero* can be developed. An open dialogue between institutions and families can result in arrangements where specific objects can remain in museums while retaining their *mana*.

## Glossary

- Hapū:** A kinship group. Section or subtribe of a larger kinship group.
- Iwi:** An extended kinship group, such as a tribe.
- Karakia:** Highly ritualised form of prayer.
- Kōrero:** Orally transmitted knowledge and ritual surrounding an object. Often in the form of a **karakia**.
- Mana:** A kind of spiritual power, instilled in an object by the ancestors as it passes through their hands over generations.
- Ngāpuhi:** **Iwi** based in the Northland region.
- Paua:** Abalone. The shell has an iridescent interior often used for decorative purposes.
- Pouhaki:** Flagpole.
- Tapu:** The sacredness of a **taonga**. **Tapu** protects a **taonga** from transgression so that its **mana** is preserved for the future.
- Taonga:** Broad and complex term often roughly translated into English as 'treasure'. Can refer to anything from man-made objects like carvings to natural treasures such as waterways. The three essential elements are **mana**, **tapu**, and **kōrero**. See Tapsell (n 12) for further explanation.
- Te Arawa:** A collective of Māori tribes (**iwi** and **hapū**) that trace ancestry to the Arawa canoe. Based in the Rotorua and Bay of Plenty area.
- Te Reo:** The Māori language.
- Tohunga** Master carver. There is no **Te Reo** word which translates to 'artist' directly.
- whakairo:** Walking stick.
- Tokotoko:** Walking stick.
- Utu:** Loosely, repayment, reciprocity, or balancing of obligations. Closely related to **mana**.
- Whakapapa:** Genealogy or ancestry. A highly significant concept in Māori institutions.

Definitions are sourced from <<https://maoridictionary.co.nz/>>.

41 Vaimoana Tapaleao, 'Historic flagpole recovers its mana' *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland, 27 November 2008) <<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/historic-flagpole-recovers-its-mana/4UOKET3HXOWV4RUX4AEPNESENE/>> accessed 29 January 2021.