From illicit trade to indigenous-led repatriation:

the journey of Māori and Moriori ancestors

Between the 18th and 19th centuries, travelers who arrived on the coasts of New Zealand desecrated graves and stole a large number of human remains. One hundred years later, the cooperation between Māori and Moriori communities and States opened a path for the repatriation of ancestral remains exhibited in European museums. As of today, over 700 ancestors have returned to Aotearoa-New Zealand. The Te Papa Tongarewa Museum in Wellington has played a central role in this process.

By Te Arikirangi Mamaku-Ironsde – April 1st 2023

Since the turn of the 20th century, the repatriation of human remains and the restitution of cultural heritage to Indigenous communities has increasingly become a key issue for cultural institutions and communities alike. From a human rights perspective, repatriation and restitution is of great importance because at its core the process and its successful implementation recognises the rights of indigenous people to have access to and control over their cultural heritage, especially in situations where the actions of colonisation saw the theft of tāonga (treasured objects) and ancestors from their communities without their consent and in violation of their rights.

For generations the Māori and Moriori people of the South Pacific have fought to have the remains of their ancestors returned home from museums and universities around the world. Over much of this time, pleas and appeals to a sense of justice and a restoration of dignity have been met with resistance. However, throughout this time, and in spite of the many challenges, their commitment has not waivered and relationships with institutions and governments is making great progress towards reconciliation.
The illicit theft and trafficking of ancestors

The sacred remains of Māori and Moriori people have been sought after by foreigners as far back as Captain Cook’s first expedition in 1769, which brought the Endeavour to the shores of Aotearoa – New Zealand. On 20 January 1770, the ship’s botanist Joseph Banks acquired a Toi moko or preserved tattooed Māori head for a pair of old white linen drawers. This exchange preceded a massive trade of Toi moko in the early part of the 19th century in order for Māori to acquire European goods including muskets. For many of the early European explorers, there was an insatiable desire to collect as much as possible from these exotic new places, and a particularly intense interest in acquiring curiosities such as Toi moko.

Between 1877 and 1889, Austrian taxidermist and prolific grave-robber Andreas Reischek travelled extensively throughout Aotearoa, assembling a vast collection of plants, birds, human remains and tāonga. It wasn’t until after Reischek’s death that graphic accounts of his pillaging of sacred burial sites would come to light, after his son, also named Andreas Reischek, published: Sterbende Welt -Zwolf Jahre Forscherleben auf Neuseeland (A Dying World: Twelve Years of an Explorer’s Life in New Zealand), in 1924. This book was based on his father’s journals and manuscripts that the senior Reischek failed to publish before his death in 1902.

An English translation entitled: Yesterdays in Maoriland: New Zealand in the Eighties, was published in 1930 and contains accounts of the pillaging of Māori ancestral remains against the explicit expectations of Māori. In a passage which illustrates a flagrant disregard and lack of respect, Reischek describes how he collected human remains with the knowledge that he was breaking tapu, or sacred restrictions: “The farmer’s son escorted me to another burial-ground – leaving me, however, to investigate alone, as the natives threaten every violator of the grave-tapu with death. Here in the first cave, I found four complete skulls and many broken bones, but for all my pains could not succeed in piecing a complete skeleton together. Digging, I came across an ornament carved out of a leg-bone, on one side
of which was represented a face, and on the other, the head of a lizard. In one hole I found
the half-rotten remains of a stretcher made of manuka branches bound together with mats,
with a pile of bones”.

In all instances leading to the undignified departure of ancestral human remains and *Toi
moko*, it is essential to consider the theft in the broader context of white supremacy and
colonialism. While the trade of *Toi moko* involved both native and foreign agents, a
pervasive sense of injustice underpins these exchanges. In the case of the hundreds of
Māori and Moriori remains stolen from their sacred burial places, the British crown and her
agents failed in their moral and legal duty to protect and preserve the rights of their
subjects.

**Reclaiming the ancestors and seeking justice**

The efforts of Māori and Moriori to reclaim their ancestors and seek justice has persevered
for well over a century. In 1830, in the Bay of Islands and as part of a trade of goods that
went horribly wrong, 14 *Toi moko* were presented by Captain Jacks, master of the schooner
*Prince of Denmark*, to a group of local Māori. When the *Toi moko* were presented, they
were immediately recognised by their relatives within the party. Understandably, this
angered the group who attacked Jacks and forced him to retreat and flee the area.

Shortly after this incident, Jacks arrived in Sydney, Australia where he was visited by a Māori
chief, also from the Bay of Islands, who immediately identified his relatives. The chief
informed his host, Reverend Samuel Marsden, seeking retribution. As a consequence of
this, Marsden petitioned the resident British authorities and Governor Darling, who issued
an order in April 1831 effectively banning the trafficking and trade of *Toi moko* through
Sydney.

Another example of the actions taken to reclaim the remains of Māori ancestors, which
relates directly to the previously mentioned Reischek, occurred in 1945. At the end of the
Second World War, Lieutenant Colonel Arapeta Awatere and the 28th Māori Battalion were
stationed in Trieste, Italy. By now, Reischek’s sinister exploits were well known among Māori. Awatere was planning to cross over into Austria and recover ‘bodies, skulls and other burial remains from the Reischek collection,’ located in the Imperial Natural History Museum in Vienna. In the end, Awatere was talked out of the recovery mission by his seniors.

The attempts to have these ancestors returned home persisted throughout much of the 20th century and included two petitions to the New Zealand Government. The first in 1945 and the second in 1946. These actions were met with very limited success; however, there have since been three repatriations from Austria involving human remains which Reischek had stolen.

Firstly in 1985, following a lengthy process, the sacred preserved head of Tainui chief Tūpāhau was returned and subsequently buried on Taupiri, the sacred mountain of his people. The second return occurred 30 years later, when a formal claim was made in 2013 by the Karanga Aotearoa Repatriation Programme to Weltmuseum Wien, formerly Vienna’s Museum of Ethnology. The claim was made for the museum’s Reischek collection. In 2015, following a successful claim and negotiation process with Weltmuseum Wien, the ancestral remains of four Maori individuals were formally welcomed home at a ceremony held at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa). As the Reischek collection was split between the Weltmuseum and the Natural History Museum in Vienna, following an agreement to return the remaining ancestors home by the Austrian government in 2020, the ancestral human remains of 64 Māori and Moriori individuals at the Natural History Museum were repatriated in September 2022.

**State recognition and support for Indigenous-led repatriation efforts in Aotearoa**

In recent times, state recognition and support of Indigenous-led initiatives has created the much-needed conditions for the restoration of dignity and respect for contemporary Māori and Moriori communities. Achieving a state of balance and harmony is a core cultural principle for these communities, and being provided with the mandate and resources to
reach this state of equilibrium has been pivotal in the success of Aotearoa’s repatriation movement.

A major turning point, which inadvertently seeded the foundations of the modern era of Indigenous repatriation in Aotearoa, was the success of the international exhibition Te Māori (1984-1987). This landmark exhibition not only established an international profile for Māori culture, it also created better conditions for Māori to engage with international institutions on matters of repatriation.

While there have been many individuals that have actively advocated for repatriation, a more systematic approach to this work started taking shape with the research and negotiations carried out in the 1990’s by Māui Pōmare (1941-1995), who served for some time as the Chairman of the National Museum of New Zealand’s council. The legacy of his work is evident today as he was personally responsible for establishing Te Papa’s wāhi tapu, or sanctified repository, for the ancestral remains, as well as developing the Museum’s Kōiwi Tangata (human remains) Policy.

Building on this momentum and the legacy created by Maui Pōmare and other tribal leaders, the New Zealand Government facilitated a series of tribal gatherings in the late 1990’s to consult with Māori communities and understand the relevant issues around repatriating ancestral remains held in foreign collections and to determine the actions required to achieve their return home.

As a result of these gatherings, it was determined that: Māori and Moriori were to be respectfully involved throughout the repatriation process; an organisation needed to be mandated and resourced to lead this process; the management, process and practice needed to be consistent with Māori and Moriori traditional protocols and traditions; and there should be an appropriate repository for the ancestors.
Redress the injustices of the past as a way to ensure the rights of the present

Finally, in 2003, with its mandate to serve as an agent of the Crown, Te Papa established the Karanga Aotearoa Repatriation Programme (KARP) to repatriate Māori and Moriori ancestral remains and Toi moko. Six overarching principles provide the scope within which this work must be conducted:

The government’s role is one of facilitation – it does not claim ownership of kōiwi tangata;

1. Repatriation from overseas institutions and individuals is by mutual agreement only;

2. No payment for kōiwi tangata will be made to overseas institutions;

3. Kōiwi tangata must be identified as originating from New Zealand;

4. Māori are to be involved in the repatriation of kōiwi tangata, including determining final resting places, where possible; and

5. The repatriation of kōiwi tangata will be carried out in a culturally appropriate manner.

Crucially, this Indigenous-led programme would be guided by an expert panel consisting of Māori and Moriori elders, academics and community representatives. This is an essential feature that defines Aotearoa’s repatriation programme.

Since its establishment in 2003, Karanga Aotearoa has repatriated the remains of over 700 Māori and Moriori ancestors from 14 countries in Europe, North America, the United Kingdom and the Asia-Pacific region, and over 125 ancestors have been returned to their communities and descendants.

In spite of the many political and legal challenges that Karanga Aotearoa has been confronted with over these decades it is with overwhelming commitment, patience and a
strong sense of duty that has ultimately created a pathway for the ancestors return home. In more practical terms, the pathway home for these ancestors, and the many more that are yet to return home, is fundamentally created on the principles of mutual respect, partnership and a commitment to make amends and reconciliation.

It is important to continue to support and empower these communities in their efforts to reclaim their ancestors and cultural heritage, and to address the injustices of the past. By doing so, we can help to ensure that the rights of Indigenous people are respected and upheld.

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