

Repatriation Request from Karanga Aotearoa (Repatriation Unit), Te Papa Tongarewa (Museum of New Zealand).

Report on discussions held in New Zealand. Lissant Bolton 27 September 2007

In response to the request made to the Trustees of the British Museum by Te Papa Tongarewa for the return 16 human remains, I visited New Zealand from 13-25 September 2007. I held discussions on this topic with Maori representatives in Wellington, Christchurch, Hamilton, Wanganui and Auckland. These discussions included a number of formal meetings and a number of informal discussions with both individuals and groups. I met formally with five representatives of Te Papa Tongarewa on 14th September. I also attended a meeting of curators from regional museums in the North Island of New Zealand, held at the Wanganui Museum on 20th September: one session of this meeting was devoted to a discussion of the issue of human remains return, at which both I and a number of Maori and non-Maori curators, as well as other Maori representatives, all spoke. A list of all the people with whom I discussed these issues is appended to this report.

In response to a request, I agreed to keep the source of individual comments confidential. I explained this policy at all meetings, saying further that this report would be placed on the British Museum website. As a result no comments are individually sourced in this report.

This report is a summary of findings from these conversations. It does not offer any recommendations.

Background

People who identify as Maori currently represent 15% of the New Zealand population. New Zealand has a bi-cultural policy which supports the use of the Maori language, thus, for example, all government departments and institutions have both Maori and English names (hence the Museum of New Zealand is also known as Te Papa Tongarewa). New Zealand is presently processing a series of land claims by Maori tribes, known as *iwi*, through a body known as the Waitangi Tribunal. This relates to the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, made between the British Crown and Maori representatives.

Maori speak one language, with dialectical variations, but are separated into a number of *iwi*. The New Zealand government recognises 81 *iwi* for the purposes of the Waitangi Tribunal. Many *iwi* are divided into smaller sub-groups known as *hapu*. *Iwi* have a number of traditional leaders – chiefs, elders and specialists of various kinds. They are often also incorporated with political leaders and business representatives. *Iwi* are all tied to land – which they may or may not actually own – and to specific places in the landscape. Before the European incursion these tribes were sometimes at war with each other, and in the immediate post-contact period those hostilities intensified in a period now known as the Maori Wars.

Until World War II most Maori lived in rural areas, and continued to speak Maori. Partly as a result of demands for labour during and after the war, significant numbers of Maori moved into urban contexts. By the 1970s 80% of Maori were urban-based,

some retaining tribal affiliation, language fluency and cultural knowledge, and some, with rapid generational turnover, losing them. In the late 1970s and 80s there was a revival of language and practice, partly influenced through the museum sector by an exhibition called *Te Maori*, which opened in New York in 1984, and subsequently toured other US and New Zealand venues.

Despite the unity created by the shared language, there is no inherent unity between Maori: where people know their tribal affiliation, they adhere to that as their primary identity. Many *iwi* retain their own histories, and are aware of past enmities with other *iwi*. Life is centred on the *marae*, an open area with a number of buildings representing community facilities, including a meeting house, dining hall and other buildings, for example a church. Residential communities generally all have their own *marae* so that each *iwi* has many *marae*. Meetings, ceremonies and funerals are all held on the *marae*. Funerals are a particularly important Maori ceremony, and much time and resource is devoted to them.

Although much has changed for Maori, there are those who hold significant traditional knowledge, including knowledge of history, of song and poetry, of land and resources and knowledge of spiritual practice. Such people are recognised within their *iwi* and more widely within the Maori community. Young people may be selected by elders to be trained in one or more of these areas (trained as an orator, for example). Several people to whom I spoke were learning to be, or were, a *tohunga* or priest/ritual specialist. There are key principles of knowledge and practice which are common across Maoridom, called *kawa*, although their implementation (*tikanga*) may vary from tribe to tribe.

There is a wide diversity of Maori knowledge and opinion on every topic, born out of original differences which have been enhanced by the colonial process. I encountered this diversity in discussing the topic of the return of human remains.

Contemporary attitudes to the dead

In Maori society, the dead are highly valued. As one person put it to me, after death everything about a person increases, rather than decreases. That is to say that a person's power and reputation ideally increases though what happens to their body and as they are remembered. The funeral or *tangihanga*, is the pre-eminent contemporary Maori ritual and funerals are assessed and remembered for the number of people who attended. After death the person belongs not to their immediate kin, but to the *iwi*. There is a proverb which says "while you are alive you are your own chief: when you die your *iwi* becomes your chief." The body is returned to the *marae* and it is the *iwi* who make decisions about the funeral and burial, even where, in some cases, these conflict with the wishes of the immediate kin. Meeting houses are decorated with images (carved, or in photographs and paintings) of ancestors and precursors of far and just recent-generations who have died.

Traditionally most people were buried. Only high-ranking individuals were subject to a secondary burial process whereby their body was placed on a platform or in a tree, and the bones subsequently placed in a safe place in the landscape, for example in a cave, or even a shaft in a cave. There was always concern lest an enemy retrieve the bones and dishonour them in one way or another.

A sense of responsibility and ongoing care for the dead is made evident in the concern people have for the soldiers of the Maori Battalion who died overseas, especially in World War II. Kin make expensive journeys to visit the graves of those lost in the war. The New Zealand Government explicitly excludes the return of Maori fallen in war from their support for the return of human remains overseas. Responsibility for bodies is also evident in the care and ritual associated with the reburial or redeposition of bones which emerge from the landscape. These might be bones revealed by landslips, sand dune erosion or other natural causes, or by human activity such as building work. At the curators meeting at Wanganui a number of people told stories about the responsibility communities feel for these remains and the care with which they have been reburied, often with attendant funeral ceremonies on the local *marae*. In one case described, a community still maintains an ancient burial cave, visiting it annually. Should floods threaten the cave, a party will go there to protect the bones. If other ancient bones are found in this district, they will be deposited in this cave.

Regional museums in New Zealand also hold human bone collections. Where provenancing makes this possible, these museums are now returning these remains to the relevant *iwi* and they are being reburied or replaced in burial caves. This is not necessarily an easy matter for individual *iwi*, which may find accepting bones a difficult responsibility (financially, and in terms of finding appropriate protocols), although one which they would not reject.

Dealing with unprovenanced human bones

The issue of unprovenanced human bones is a far more complex issue, bringing to the fore some of the significant differences in Maori perspectives. These bones have often emerged from the landscape in past generations, partly through archaeological research. In some cases archaeological or other records can be traced to provide locations for them. The Auckland Museum, in particular, employed a researcher whose careful archival research has retrieved locations for a significant part of their collection. However, other bones remain unprovenanced.

Many *iwi* are reluctant to rebury remains which may not be their own ancestors. Some see it as a heavy responsibility, which they may nevertheless accept, to bury unknown bones on their land. Others express a specific reluctance to bury among their ancestors someone who may have been an enemy. In meetings of *iwi* about the Repatriation Unit at Te Papa Tongarewa, a group from the extreme north of the North Island has offered to build a burial vault for unprovenanced remains on their land. This is because for many *iwi* it is from that point of land that the dead traditionally make their final departure to the world of the dead. Some people to whom I spoke saw this as a generous offer and a good solution. Others came from *iwi* that recognised other departure points. Some felt concerned that some of their own dead might be buried there unwittingly. Yet others saw this as a political gesture on the part of the individuals who made the offer, and wondered if it had the support of the whole *iwi* involved.

Preserved heads

The issue of preserved heads is more complex. There are even a number of different terms currently used to describe them, including *moko mokai*, *toi moko*, and *upoko tuhi*. Most people I talked to were far more comfortable discussing bones than they were discussing the heads, and it was clear that a number of issues around the heads

are not widely considered. In particular, it is clear that the 'manufacture' of heads for sale to European traders between about 1815 and 1831 is not much discussed.

It is far more difficult to ascertain a provenance for the preserved heads than for the bones. Although there were regional tattooing styles, facial tattoos were highly individual, designed for the structure of each individual face, so much so that a number of men signed the Waitangi Treaty by drawing their own facial tattoos as their signature. As far as I know, there has not yet been significant research devoted to analysing regional styles, nor to considering the degree to which individual tattooists observed them. Equally, not much research has yet been developed to address other ways of establishing provenance, although a number of different methods were proposed to me that might provide a measure of identification. Clearly, the work of individual tattooists could be identified through a process of careful observation (as the work of other kinds of artist can be identified). Research into hairstyles (where they are preserved) may suggest regional affiliation. Similarly, recent textile research has demonstrated differing seam styles specific to the North and South Islands of New Zealand. An examination of the stitching on the heads (at the eyelids and the base of the neck, for example) may enable heads to be attributed to one or other island.

All these research techniques relate to the tattooing of and preparation of the heads. They do not necessarily identify the home place of the individual concerned, who may have come from one area, but whose head may have been prepared in another (after capture or enslavement, for example). There were recognised tattooists (at least one still known by name) whose skill was sought after, so that they could and did tattoo individuals from a number of different *iwi*. The question of DNA identification of the heads was raised. Recent research into mitochondrial DNA has identified a number of different groupings in a small sample of Maori individuals, but those groupings were not tied to location or to *iwi*. Given tribal intermarriage and the short time-depth involved, it is unlikely that DNA research will be able to provide tribal identifications.

Attitudes to return

Although there are uncertainties about the proper disposition of unprovenanced bones, the return of bones is an issue which most people are clear about. Each bone represents an individual, who should be returned, and should ultimately be buried, in New Zealand

There was a wider range of attitudes to the question of the return of the heads. It was clear that some people had not thought much about, especially about the preparation and sale of heads to traders. It may be possible by studying the heads to establish whether they were the heads of kin preserved to honour and memorialise the dead, or the heads of enemies preserved to be mocked, or the heads of slaves and enemies prepared to be sold. The care with which the head was preserved, the presence or absence of post-mortem tattooing and the condition of the tattoos may all contribute to this kind of identification. However, such distinctions are not discriminations Maori are now comfortable to make.

In traditional Maori thought, a person's humanity (encompassed at some levels in the idea of *mana* or spiritual power) could wax or wane according to the events both during and after his life. One man reflected this thinking in saying that if his

grandfather had been captured and enslaved, and his head tattooed and then sold, he would not seek the return of his grandfather's head. Deprived by these events of his *mana* or power, the head would no longer be that man any more, but rather merely something (like a pair of his shoes) which could remind his grandson of him. Most people were not comfortable with this kind of thinking, preferring to recognise all the heads as ancestors who should be returned. In one discussion, people argued that Maori practice had changed, and those changes needed to be accepted and acknowledged. One person felt it disrespectful to ancestors to ask for the heads back without offering anything in exchange, given that they were traded away. Another perspective offered was that the trade was made under pressure from the European incursion. When I pressed this question in discussion, one person suggested that the return of the heads represents a process of healing and reconciliation with the Maori past, while another argued eloquently that people today need to mitigate the actions of their ancestors. The idea of taking responsibility for the actions of one's ancestors and dealing with their consequences is one that occurs elsewhere in Maori thought.

I always explained that the British Museum policy looks for a request for return from both the relevant community and from the government. Most people welcomed this policy very warmly, and would prefer that the relevant *iwi* be identified before return. Most people to whom I spoke would prefer that the remains were at least in New Zealand. A number of people argued against hasty decisions. The Repatriation Unit at Te Papa argued that they are in the best position to research remains. However, not all the people I spoke to would hold that position.

There is no doubt that this is an important issue for Maori, and that the return of remains to the right place is of considerable importance. This holds true for the heads as well as for bones, but there is a sense in relation to the heads that there has not been extensive discussion or research by Maori on the issues, and that people are still thinking through the issues. Most Maori felt that they should be in New Zealand, but there is a considerable amount of unfinished business which Maori need to address in relation to them; some felt that this business needed to be completed before the heads were returned, others suggested that they should be returned in order that the business should be completed.

Summary

- Death is a core cultural issue for Maori and there is ongoing concern for the remains of ancestors.
- There has been significant discussion and action in New Zealand in relation to the return and reburial of human bones. Both museums and *iwi* are concerned to ensure the proper burial, or disposition of human bones in the right place in the New Zealand landscape. Not all *iwi* seek or welcome the responsibility for dealing with bones, but all recognise the responsibility.
- Cultural practice, history and contemporary concerns make the issue of the preserved heads more complex. There does not seem to have been the same level of discussion about the heads as about bones. Most Maori felt that they should be in New Zealand, but there is a considerable amount of unfinished business which Maori need to address in relation to them; some felt that this business needed to be completed before the heads were returned, others suggested that they should be returned in order that the business should be completed.

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