

Interpreting indigenous art in university collections

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Abstract

Debates on the representation of indigenous cultures in museums have come to the fore in the past thirty years. This paper examines the context for the opening of Waipapa Marae at the University of Auckland in 1988. It outlines a history of Māori meeting houses used for teaching and learning in a specifically Māori context in the New Zealand tertiary sector. The challenge for the university curator with a marae as part of the collection is how to interpret it for the 21st century. Facilitating a student-led process can make present those who have been traditionally absent in ethnographic exhibitions – the culture group who produced the objects.

Introduction: The New Zealand context

Article 2 of the Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840, has implications for all New Zealanders, but especially for university curators (MURPHY 1999). Under its provisions, Māori kept possession of their taonga or treasures, including art and architecture, after colonization. Since 1990, when the sesquicentennial of the Treaty was commemorated, representational control of taonga by iwi (Māori people) has become accepted practice in museums and galleries, including those in universities. Māori people as tangata whenua (people of the land) have asserted their right to decide what, when, why and how of taonga display and interpretation. All university collections in Aotearoa contain taonga, and five of the eight universities have marae with associated whare whakairo or carved meeting houses. Working with Māori to develop conservation and interpretation strategies for taonga on campus is increasingly a priority for New Zealand university curators. These initiatives are taking place in a difficult funding environment but one in which universities themselves have made the commitment to grow Māori enrolments in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes as part of strategic planning.

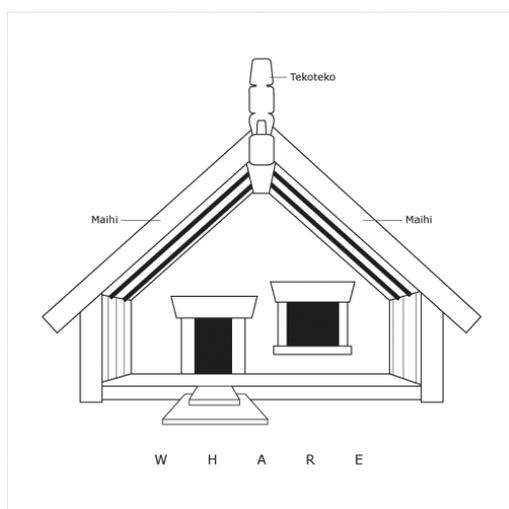


Fig. 1 - Author's adaptation of Terrence Barrow's diagram of a traditional meeting house façade. The porch is termed the roro (brain), the door is the kuwaha or mouth, and the window is the eye (matapihi). Inside the house is the womb (koopu), a sacred place, necessitating the removal of footwear before entering.

Symbolism of the whare whakairo

As momentum for indigenous rights grew in Aotearoa throughout the 1970s and 1980s, several university marae were built to enhance the campus environment and provide opportunities for teaching and learning, as well as to provide a place for welcoming visitors. Many Māori writers have argued that the marae is the one institution where other ethnic groups including Europeans can meet the Māori on Māori terms. It is therefore key to understanding what it means to be a bicultural society. The word marae refers to a meeting area in general. The full name is Te Maraenui-atea-o-Tumatauenga meaning the larger marae of Tumatauenga, God of War. Coming onto a marae involves being challenged before being welcomed into the meetinghouse or wharenuui (literally, big house). This main building represents the ancestor for whom it is named symbolically. The head is the koruru with a tekoteko (carved figure) at the apex of the roof, the arms are maihi or bargeboards reaching down to the

ground at the front. The spine is the tahuhu or taahu (the ridge pole down the centre inside and ribs areheke (rafters), often patterned with kowhaiwhai (swirling designs based on nature) reaching from the tahuhu to the poupou (carved figures around the walls). Ancestors from other tribes feature on each poupou and there are usually two uprights that support the tahuhu, representing the connection between Rangi, the sky father and Papatūānuku, the earth mother (BARROW 1976).

Teachers' College marae building in the 1970s

Teacher training colleges initiated the building of marae in the 1970s. The earliest of these is Te Kupenga o Te Matauranga (The Net of Knowledge) built for Palmerston North Teachers' College in 1979, and acquired by Massey University in a merger that took place in 1996.

Unlike most building projects which are part of the planning process at institutions of higher learning, the building of Te Kupenga o Te Matauranga resulted from more ad hoc funding. Rather than an allocation being set aside from the capital works budget, Te Kupenga o Te Mātauranga was paid for by the students' association funds and monies contributed directly from the principal's discretionary budget. This suggests that it was the result of successfully lobbying by both students and staff rather than being part of the institution's annual plan. Its decorative scheme was reliant on community expertise as well as project management by a key Māori staff. The house has extensive kowhaiwhai patterning on the interior (painted panels with Māori motifs based on the koru, a design derived from the shape of an unfurling fern frond in the forest) and also features carving and weaving, the former carried out by males, and the latter, reliant on the skills of women. This gender division of labor is customary, and the forms of decoration considered equally important and complementary.

The current use of Te Kupenga o Te Matauranga is typical for a marae on a university campus being used to welcome groups of staff and students as well as to teach aspects of tikanga (Māori protocol). Interpretation of its iconography is limited to a thirteen page booklet outlining the history of the building published in 1990 (TE KUPENGA O TE MATAURANGA 1990) and available in the Massey University Library.

The entire structure of Te Kupenga o Te Matauranga was built and decorated in one year under the direction of Cliff Whiting who was a lecturer at Palmerston North Teachers' College at that time. During his years at Palmerston North, Whiting introduced the concept of student marae visits. Born in 1936 on the East Cape at Te Kaha, Whiting is of the Te Whānau-ā-Apanui tribe. His work in Palmerston North in the 1970s was the first of several marae he would work on in the ensuing decades, culminating in the impressively colorful Te Honoki Hawaiki at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa which opened in 1998.

Tūtahi Tonu at Auckland Teachers' College followed the marae at Palmerston North Teachers' College in 1983. It was carved by Mark Klaricich in two years and the whole facility was incorporated into the University of Auckland with amalgamation on 1 September 2004. Using the expertise of photographers in the university's centre for academic development, digital photographs of this marae were taken in 2006 so that a digital tour of the building could be made available online.¹ This development foreshadows later use of digital technologies, including Web 2.0, to enable students at the University of Auckland to learn more about the Maori art on the campuses.

The third marae built as part of a tertiary institution in New Zealand was also in the North Island and part of a teacher training facility. Waikato's Te Kohinga Marama was built as part of Hamilton Teachers' College in 1987. The polytechnic sector which also wished to attract greater enrolments of Māori began to build marae in the 1980s as well. Te Kuratini which is now part of the Massey

¹ www.education.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/home/about/facilities/marae-facility (accessed December 12, 2011).

University campus in Wellington was built under the auspices of Wellington Polytechnic. After becoming part of Massey University in 1999, it has continued to be used for performing arts, community gatherings, educational conferences and accommodation for students visiting Wellington.

The intention behind these marae building initiatives as part of teacher training and polytechnic campuses was to attract more Māori students to study to become teachers and also to pursue trade qualifications. Marae were part of an initiative aimed at the recruitment and retention of Māori in higher education which is ongoing. Currently 22% of state school students are Maori, compared with 10% of teachers (MINISTRY OF EDUCATION 2008).

University marae building in the 1980s and 1990s

Only 6.8% of undergraduates at New Zealand universities are Māori despite being 15% of the population so the imperative in the last thirty years has been to change the university environment, both physically and culturally, to encourage participation in higher education where Māori are underrepresented (MINISTRY OF EDUCATION 2008). Alongside the teacher training college and polytechnic sector initiatives discussed above, two universities (the University of Auckland and Victoria University) were involved with marae building projects in the 1980s with a third, the Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand's newest university, building Ngā Wai o Horotiu marae on its inner city campus in 1997 with Te Pūrengi the name given to the carved meeting house at the marae's centre.

At Victoria University, Te Herenga Waka was moved further up Kelburn Parade from Sir Kingi Ihaka's house to become the university's marae in 1984. After refurbishment, it reopened on 6 December 1986. The reconditioning project was an all-inclusive one involving all members of staff as well as the students who were enrolled at that time. As a junior lecturer in the art history department in 1986, I was given lengths of stripped fiber from the kiekie plant (*Freycinetia banksii*) to take to the whareniui to tie in a pattern to make the tukutuku weaving panels under the supervision of a kuia (senior Māori woman) weaver Con Te Rata Jones.

All the marae discussed above are on campuses at North Island institutions. Neither Canterbury University in Christchurch nor Otago University in Dunedin have marae, nor does Lincoln University near Christchurch (originally an agricultural college). A Christchurch city facility, Rehua Marae in Springfield Road, which was built in 1960 as part of a trade training hostel for Māori workers brought down from the North Island, is used by the universities in Canterbury. Lincoln, Canterbury and Otago are all in the South Island which has a lower Māori population than the north but their lack of marae facilities is surprising given that they are ruled by the same governmental imperative to ensure better rates of recruitment and retention of Māori staff and students. Again, the polytechnic sector has been faster to respond than the universities: Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT) opened Te Mātauranga Māori in 1995. A website dedicated to Te Puna Wānaka (as it is now called) emphasizes the importance of Maori facilities for students, local iwi (tribal group) Ngai Tahu, and Pasifika (Pacific Island) communities: "it has reinforced our belief that we are the most accessible tertiary institution for Māori in Christchurch"².

The importance of the whareniui Tane-nui-a Rangi at the University of Auckland

Marae, with their carved meeting houses or whareniui, are living art works which have become a vital part of the physical and spiritual environment of many tertiary institutions in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the last thirty years. The University of Auckland is New Zealand's largest university with 40,000 students spread over five campus locations. Auckland, with its population of 1.3 million people, is the

² www.cpit.ac.nz/explore-cpit/our-schools/te-puna-wanaka/te-puna-wanaka-a-special-place (accessed December 12, 2011).

world's largest Polynesian city, and the university was the first in the country to build a Fale Pasifika (Polynesian meeting house) adjacent to its marae. The University of Auckland has almost 2000 Māori students on campus and about 50 Māori teaching staff. At the centre of Māori education at the university is the whare whakairo which is part of Waipapa marae, Tane-nui-a-Rangi. It opened on the city campus on 20 February 1988 and celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2008. The Tuakana programme at the Faculty of Arts which targets outstanding Māori students and provides internship opportunities to develop their talents, has been the means by which interpretation of the soon-to-be 25 year old Waipapa marae (as it is known) has been brought into the twenty-first century.

Built in 1988, according to traditional methods, Waipapa marae had strong institutional funding support from the outset. Maori studies lecturer Dr Pakariki Harrison (1928-2008) of the Ngāti Porou iwi was the tohunga whakairo, (chief carver) and his wife Hinemoa of Ngāpuhi designed and supervised the execution of the tukutuku weavings for the interior. John Hovell of Ngāti Whanaunga and Ngāpuhi designed and painted the rafters with kōwhaiwhai patterns (MUTU 2008). Tane-nui-a-Rangi has come to be considered the most outstanding of all the university whareniui in terms of its artistic quality. Additionally, the status of the master carver and designer involved make it one of Aotearoa/New Zealand's greatest taonga. Pakariki Harrison is the subject of a full length biography (WALKER 2008) and John Hovell's kowhaiwhai work for Tane-nui-a-rangi has been acclaimed in an award-winning study of his practice (SKINNER 2010).

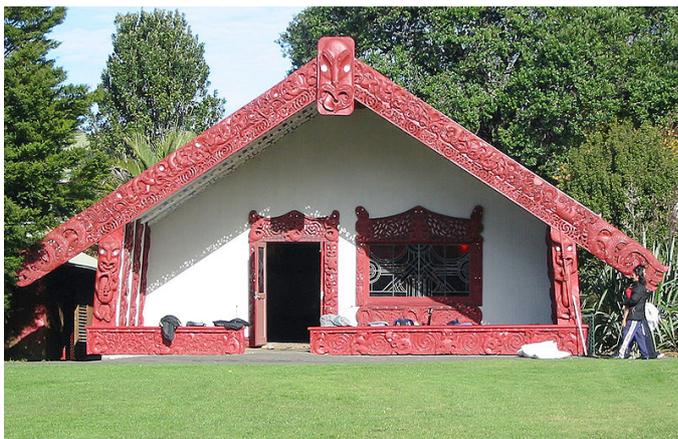


Fig. 2 - Tane-nui-a-Rangi from Waipapa Marae at the University of Auckland showing clothing, including shoes, discarded by students before entering. Photo: L. Tyler

Interpretation of the whareniui in the 21st century

The recent introduction of the Tuākana programme at the University of Auckland provided the opportunity for outstanding young Māori achievers to work with the university's art gallery staff to realize projects which utilize new technologies in order to interpret and conserve Māori art and architecture in the university's collection. A YouTube video was made in 2008 to record the exterior of the building.³ Coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the whare whakairo (carved meeting house) on

Waipapa Marae in 2008, a revised edition of the original booklet explaining the symbolism of the meeting house was published with a preface by Professor Margaret Mutu (MUTU 2008). This has been followed by the Tuākana Arts seminar series in 2011 where a seminar on the history of Waipapa Marae was given by Professor Mutu on the Marae on 27 July 2011. In development for 2013 which will be the jubilee of Waipapa Marae (its 25th anniversary) are interpretation programmes which will link the marae buildings, their carvings and history with other media through QR (Quick Response Codes) allowing links to moving images, music, dance and information. This use of new media has derived from focus groups aimed at connecting students with taonga (art treasures) by asking them how they would like to see them interpreted. Instead of the university art museum voice speaking on behalf of Māori, the intention is for students to use the art museum's resources to develop their own interpretation of the sites and objects in them.

³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1GsCf6Fzkg (accessed December 12, 2011).

Under the Treaty of Waitangi, Māori retain possession and enjoyment of their taonga, and the university's role is one of kaitiaki or guardian rather than owner of Waipapa Marae and its meeting house, Tāne-nui-a-rangi. Central to this endeavour is an acknowledgement of the mauri or living life force of the taonga. Māori do not see art which was created in the past as an historical relic but rather as something living in a present which has a future. Therefore it is appropriate to envisage a digital future for taonga since they act as a repository of connections and embody a living tradition that brings the past down into the present. Rather than being inanimate objects, their energy and significance can be conveyed using digital tools deployed by a new generation of Māori students.

By handing the power over to the culture which produced the taonga, the curator facilitates the presentation of Māori art in the best conditions and environment culturally. When artifacts become living taonga or treasures in this way, the people who made them gain mana or prestige along with the viewers who interact with them in the university environment. The imperative for university curators working with collections which include wharehau and marae is to employ Māori understandings of taonga as social agents. This has wider implications for curators working with ethnographic exhibitions and collections elsewhere in the academic and cultural collections. The time has come to make present those who are absent from ethnographic exhibitions – the living descendants of those who created the exhibited objects. Ultimately this requires changing from speaking with an authoritative voice about art objects in the collection to facilitating a process for their interpretation.

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