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# Te Hono Ki Aotearoa: The link to New Zealand – Kaupapa Waka in the Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

In October 2010 representatives of the New Zealand Māori community entrusted two traditional canoes or *waka* to the long-term care of Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde and the Njord Royal Student Rowing Club in Leiden, the Netherlands. The project was conceived in partnership with Toi Māori Aotearoa, with the aim of making a waka available for use to Māori and non-Māori outside of New Zealand. Both waka have been in regular use since 2010. This paper explores the participatory framework on which the project was based, which involved a decision-making process that centered on Māori protocols and values. The potentials and challenges of such collaborative approaches are explored with a special emphasis on how this approach was taken up in the conservation processes involved and how working collaboratively in the care and maintenance of the waka has been essential to understanding the culture of waka.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1642 the Dutchman Abel Tasman landed at the northern tip of the South Island of Aotearoa, the indigenous name for New Zealand (NZ). The land was subsequently named “Zeelandia Nova” after the province of Zeeland in the Netherlands. Tasman describes in his diaries first encounters with the Māori and their many waka used to approach the ships. The Dutch saw little profit in NZ, unlike the French and British who began to explore the land, leading to its colonization. Significant political and economic relations between the two countries only developed after World War II, reaching their height in the late 1960s when large-scale Dutch immigration was encouraged by the NZ government which was in need of labor (Veys 2010).

In 2005 a significant moment occurred for the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde (RMV) with respect to its relations with Māori and NZ. The museum, responding to a request for repatriation, returned a *Toi Moko* (tattooed head) that had been in the collections since the 19th century, to the National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington. This act provided the grounds for future cooperation, and in 2010 RMV opened *Mana* Māori, the first major exhibition on Māori culture in the Netherlands, which resulted in the establishment of cooperative links between the museum and the Māori.

In the early planning stages of the exhibition it was decided to establish lasting links to Māori culture in the Netherlands that would go beyond the exhibition period. During a visit to NZ, Steven Engelsman (then director of RMV) contacted Toi Māori Aotearoa | Maori Arts New Zealand (Toi Māori), a charitable trust and umbrella organization supporting contemporary Māori arts nationally and internationally. Considering the history of Dutch contact with NZ, and Dutch maritime traditions, the choice was to make a waka as an enduring symbol of Māori culture in the Netherlands. Financial support for this project was granted by the BankGiro Loterij (Dutch national lottery fund).

Waka do not only represent Māori culture but are an icon of NZ. They reflect the maritime traditions of the Māori people, and the role of Māori culture in modern NZ society. They are used to welcome important visitors to the country and to mark significant events for the nation, such as the opening

ceremony of the Rugby World Cup 2011 at Auckland, where a fleet of 20 waka held center stage (Toi Māori 2013). Within Māori culture, waka play a major role in the stories of arrival of the first Māori in NZ some 800 years ago. One story tells of Maui, the demi-god who, when fishing with his brothers on a waka, lifted an enormous stingray resembling the North Island, called *te ika a Maui* (the fish of Maui). The South Island is referred to as *te waka a Maui* (the waka of Maui). Another important link refers to the seven legendary canoes on which Māori travelled to NZ from East Polynesia. Māori today refer to the voyagers in these ancestral canoes in their genealogy (Veys 2010).

As an important icon of Māori culture and indeed that of NZ, it was significant that the waka became the object and symbol around which to collaborate. As part of the collaborative agreement, the waka was to be available for general use, making it possible to actively experience aspects of Māori culture. Moreover, it would be available to Māori for their own cultural purposes. This meant that *kaupapa waka* would be introduced into the Netherlands as a participatory approach to experiencing culture. The Māori principles and ideas that inform behavior and customs relating to waka are called *kaupapa waka* (Nelson 1998). The responsibilities within the Netherlands would be divided between the RMV and the Njord Royal Student Rowing Club (Njord). The RMV would be responsible for care and maintenance of the waka, while Njord would be responsible for the crew. Legal ownership of the waka would remain with Toi Māori.

The choice of Njord as the third partner was crucial as they would provide the crew, who would be most involved in the practicalities of the use, but would be entirely new to the field of museological practices. The club, established in 1874, is named after the Nordic god of water, and is the oldest student rowing club in the Netherlands. It is the only student rowing club with a royal affiliation. Members of the club adhere to a strict set of rules and protocols, and this respect for and understanding of values and traditions made them ideal for this project (Njord 2013).

## THE PROJECT IN CONTEMPORARY MUSEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Within the past decades "ethnographic museums" have increasingly moved away from a focus on artifacts to a focus on people and community. Working together with different communities and stakeholders is changing museological approaches towards people and cultural context (Clavir 2002, Kreps 2003, Peers 2003). This project reflects this shift in approach, emphasizing the centrality of the originating culture and context to the decision-making process and to notions of (legal) ownership. The traditions and beliefs of contemporary Māori with respect to their *taonga* inform the approach of the museum with the aim of ensuring that the waka, although removed from NZ, "remain ensconced in their larger cultural contexts, and in direct relationship to people's lives as part of ongoing cultural traditions" (Kreps 2003, 148). This not only makes the waka significant as a unique object, but puts it into the context of a greater shift in museological paradigms.

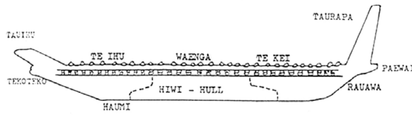


Figure 1
Sections of a waka

## SETTING THE SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

As the plans developed, the significance of the project became evident. While historic waka or sections of them exist in museums outside of NZ, this would be the first time that a fully functional waka would be built to remain and be used outside of NZ, cared for by non-Māori. Toi Māori approached Hekenukumai Puhipi (Hector Busby) to build the waka for Leiden. Hector, a key figure in the revitalization of waka traditions in NZ and an authority in all matters waka (Toi Māori 2013), suggested carving a waka *taua* since the handover would mark a significant event in the cultural relationships between Māori and Dutch.

Waka *taua* are war canoes, the largest and most elaborately carved and decorated of the waka, and are used today for ceremonial purposes. They embody the spirits of ancestors and are regarded as the personification of a specific ancestor, usually represented through a human figure at the base of the *taurapa* (Figure 1). Similary, a waka *taua* represents the *mana* (power) of the tribe it belongs to and is regarded as *tapu* (sacred); neither women nor food are allowed on board (Nelson 1998, Evans 2000, Best 2005, Veys 2010). Appropriate ceremonies and *karakia* (incantations) are integral to the building process and use of these waka. The carvings of the Leiden waka *taua* represent the life principles of gods and man, spirituality and immortality, death and the spiritual world (Toi Māori 2013).

As the project set out to enable active use of the waka as a means for the public to experience aspects of Māori culture, deciding on a waka *taua* presented some challenges. The specific protocols for use and gender restrictions meant that this waka could not be used for the public purposes proposed for the museum. The decision to build a ceremonial waka *taua* meant that the RMV and Njord had to accept caring for and using the waka as a Māori *taonga,* according to Māori protocols *(tikanga)*. For the Māori involved, it meant agreeing to entrust the care of these treasures to the hands of people and an institution with few direct links to Māori culture and customs. Training in the protocols for use and maintenance, and clear agreements on the parties' various responsibilities, were essential.

In order to address the dilemma created for the public programming of the museum, it was decided to make a second waka: a waka *tētē*. Originally a seagoing canoe used for fishing and coastal journeys (Nelson 1998), waka *tētē* are free of gender restrictions and are now mainly used for educational purposes.

In developing *kaupapa waka* for the Netherlands, the interests of the various parties involved had to be understood. A common language had to be developed for defining conditions of use, rules and roles. Through intense negotiation and discussion, the responsibilities were defined: the museum would be the home base of both waka. Njord would provide crews, train them and choose a leader *(kaihautu)* from among the members. The *kaihautu*, together with the RMV, would carry the responsibilities of a *kaitiaki* (guardian) and ensure the waka was cared for and used according to appropriate protocols. The RMV would be responsible for the financial and physical care of the waka, and for dissemination of information on the project within the Netherlands and the museum's institutional network.

The museum would cooperate with Toi Māori in seeking opportunities for using the waka. Toi Māori, retaining legal and cultural ownership of the waka, would be responsible for assisting the RMV and Njord in their function, and would participate in the decision-making process. Every five years the project would be evaluated and six-monthly reports would be sent to NZ on the condition of the waka *taua* and activities surrounding the project. The evaluations would enable all partners to assess the process and make adjustments if necessary.

The museum then would receive a ceremonial waka *taua* named "Te Hono Ki Aotearoa" (Te Hono) or "the link to New Zealand" (Figures 2–3) and a waka *tētē* named "Tāhīmana" or "Abel Tasman" (Figure 4). Since the waka were to be placed on the museum premises outside, it was decided to build a waka shelter *(wharewaka)* named "Te Rurunga" (Figure 5) modeled after the *wharewaka* at Waitangi. It is one of few of its type in existence, with only about five or six in NZ.

Figure 2
Waka Taua Te Hono Ki Aotearoa

Figure 3
Te Hono during carving in New Zealand

## *KAUPAPA WAKA* IN THE CONTEXT OF NZ

The years leading up to the 1990 bicentennial celebrations at Waitangi (Nelson 1998) saw a major revival of *kaupapa waka.* In 1992, a forum overseeing and encouraging participation in and traditional practices of ceremonial waka was established. This forum is called the Nga Waka Federation. To date the federation's committee members are key in deciding and negotiating common practices, training and setting safety guidelines. This body organizes the annual celebrations in NZ, commemorating the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi with a fleet of waka. Waitangi is the name for the place in the Bay of Islands where the treaty, New Zealand's founding document, was signed on 6 February 1840. The treaty, written in Māori and English, was made between the British Crown and approximately 540 Māori chiefs (Veys 2010, New Zealand History online 2013).

## *KAUPAPA WAKA* IN THE DUTCH CONTEXT

The principles and guidelines of the Nga Waka Federation underlie the Dutch protocols and agreements. The two waka are registered in the Nga Waka Federation "fleet" and crew and museum staff members participate annually in the Waitangi Day celebrations, renewing and strengthening the links between the two countries.

Leading up to and during the exhibition at the museum, a public program was developed and the Dutch crew was trained by Nga Waka practitioners. The handover ceremony of the waka coincided with the opening of the exhibition on 18 October 2010 (Figure 6). In the two preceding weeks, the museum grounds became a *Marae* (communal place) for the 35 waka practitioners, carvers, weavers, painters, *ta moko* (tattoo) artists and support people from NZ who came to Leiden. This period allowed all participants to experience the other's culture and to identify and address challenges due to the foreign context. For the Dutch participants, it provided the opportunity to internalize the customs and values defining the waka culture and to enable them to work according to *tikanga,* while taking account of the different context. These two weeks were an intense and emotional period

of working together and negotiating cultural differences; as a result, strong personal relations were developed, as well as a sense of responsibility for the care of the waka to be entrusted to the Dutch partners. This period was crucial in preparing Njord and the RMV to welcome a treasure into their care and for the Māori to allow a *taonga* to leave home.

## WAKA CARE AND MAINTENANCE

After the handover ceremony, the longer-term processes of care and maintenance needed to be set up. The RMV's conservation department took responsibility for the physical care of the waka and the shelter. Having waka in the care of the museum, not as part of the collection but as objects to be used actively, required some consideration of the applicable principles of conservation, especially given the involvement of Njord. Initially, the waka and the shelter were not regarded as items falling under the responsibility of the museum's collections care due to the fact that they were intended for use and not as part of the state collection. The approach to caring for these waka sets a different tone for conservation since continued use and conscious and ongoing involvement of Māori was integral to the preservation of the cultural context of these *taonga*. This kind of practice can come into conflict with conservation practices in historic collections, where conservators are trained to be concerned with preserving the physical fabric of objects (Clavir 2002), informed by the museum's definition of what should be preserved. The approach to conservation of the waka, however, would have to follow the principles laid out by the agreements between the project partners.

Figure 4
Waka Tētē Tāhīmana

Figure 5
Waka shelter Te Rurugna

Figure 6
Handover ceremony in 2010

If conservation in the museum context is "all actions aimed at safeguarding of cultural property for the future" (Clavir 2002, 3), then it can be argued that the care and maintenance of these waka is part of conservation. Working together with different communities and stakeholders is changing museological approaches and has, within the past decades, influenced conservation practices to move toward people and cultural context through consideration of existing interrelations between objects and people (Clavir 2002, Sully 2007, Fekrsanati 2010). Putting the responsibility of care for the waka, within the museum, in the hands of collections care is well in line with the changing approach within conservation away from the sole scientific approach to material preservation of historic collections toward an inclusive approach where the materiality as well as the cultural context is considered. In this case, the cultural context informs all decisions and therefore familiarity with the context is of utmost importance.

In February 2011 the first group of Njord members and RMV conservation staff travelled to NZ to participate in the Waitangi Day celebrations to be immersed into *kaupapa waka*. This provided an important opportunity to observe handling, care and use of waka in the home context. The Leiden waka have both been used regularly since their arrival and have remained outdoors, exposed to the seasonal changes. Damage, repair and maintenance are a natural consequence of their use (Figure 7). This has presented challenges, and in facing these, the cooperation with those in NZ has proven invaluable. The discussions have moved both sides towards reflection on what constitutes "good" care. For the conservation staff

involved, this project has provided opportunities for engagement with cultural meaning and identity in dialogue with non-museum partners, and in sharing responsibility and decision making in the approach to collections care. This has opened views toward allowing different sets of values and approaches to guide and inform actions taken. Working with the Māori culture in such an active and engaging manner has been a great privilege.

Figure 7
Te Hono during repairs in 2012

While the project has successfully achieved many of its goals, it is not without challenges. For example: Te Hono is 14 meters long, can seat 18 paddlers, has a 2-meter-high sternpost and has a dry weight of 900 kg. While it is rather small for a waka *taua*, the size was a major point of discussion in the process. In the Netherlands, regulations limit the overall length of a road vehicle to 17 meters and many of the bridges over Dutch waterways are lower than 2 meters in height. This led to discussions about the "essence" of a waka *taua* and whether aspects could be adapted to a European context. After much discussion, it was not regarded as acceptable to compromise on the overall length and height, but a collapsible sternpost allowing passage underneath low bridges was considered to be possible. This, however, has not yet been realized. Tāhīmana (the overall dimensions are similar to Te Hono) has a polyester hull in two sections, making road transport on a custom-made trailer possible. The sternpost here is collapsible to allow passage underneath low bridges. A second challenge is that Njord is a student club and is by definition subject to a high member turnover. Establishing continuity and preserving a sense of belonging and responsibility requires extra care and engagement. Third, finding funding and opportunities for the use of the waka are ongoing processes, requiring input from both NZ and the Netherlands. And, finally, connecting the waka to European-based Māori communities is a process in development.

## CONCLUSION

Arapata Hakiwai writes in *Decolonizing Conservation*, "For many indigenous peoples, preservation is much more than physical cleaning and conserving the 'authentic' artefact." (Sully 2007, 46). This reflects well the impact this project has had on the approach to the care and maintenance of the two waka and the shelter within the Dutch setting.

The waka and wharewaka brought contemporary Māori culture to the Netherlands, not as a static exhibition but as an active and participatory project. Strong personal and growing institutional and communal links have been created, and the use and care of the vessels is more than simply the responsibility of the museum's collections care department. Tangible and intangible aspects of the culture are integral to the approach to care and maintenance, where the physical condition is considered alongside the spiritual and cultural integrity.

Contacts with the partners and waka experts in New Zealand have been key elements in this ongoing learning process, informing and guiding discussions in the Netherlands. It has been a challenging and thought-provoking journey so far, creating a true partnership between Māori, the museum and the rowers from Njord. But, maybe most importantly, this project

has created a deeper appreciation of the importance of understanding that "objects" are expressions of identity and culture and cannot be separated from this context without losing their integrity.

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## GLOSSARY

*kaihautu:* leader
*kaitiaki:* guardian
*karakia:* incantation
*kaupapa:* underlying principle
*mana:* power, authority
*taonga:* something of value
*tapu:* sacred, spiritually potent
*tikanga:* protocol
*waka taua:* war canoe
*waka tētē:* fishing canoe
*wharewaka:* waka shelter

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