

**MHST507 – Essay**

18 May 2022

**Digitising taonga tuku iho:**  
Interrelational knowledge sharing

In accordance with the International Council of Museums working definition, cultural and memory institutions strive to ‘facilitate critical reflections on memory and identity,’ and can ‘take on a wide range of formats, fostering equal access, sustainability and diversity.’<sup>1</sup> Whilst this proposal is aspirational, digital interpretations of taonga, tangible and intangible heritage in Aotearoa, are and have been for some time, matching this definition. Taonga tuku iho contains the lives, stories, mana, mauri and wairua of te Ao Māori and pertains to the longevity and sustained practice of Māori culture and wellbeing,

The knowledge and practice of (taonga), as well as their artefacts, are often spoken of as ancestral valuables forming knots in the network of whakapapa or kinship, the fabric uniting (and dividing) Māori existence.<sup>2</sup>

Taonga tuku iho transcends space and time, they are unable to remain fixed or placed in a linear or uniform state. East Coast iwi Te Aitanga a Hauiti in particular, have repurposed and embraced engagement in the digital age and successfully returned taonga to their uri. This essay will focus primarily on the projects of Toi Hauiti whilst considering the varied aspects of the repatriation process and engagement as a ‘whakapapa oriented’ means of negotiation.<sup>3</sup> Toi Hauiti have successfully comprehensively integrated Kaupapa Māori into their digitised repositories and are a leading example of this.

Te Aitanga a Hauiti iwi initially formed Toi Hauiti following the repatriation of a patu pounamu from Tairāwhiti Museum in 1999, an event that ‘rekindled awareness among the

---

<sup>1</sup> International Council of Museums, 2022, <https://icom.museum/en/news/on-the-way-to-a-new-museum-definition-we-are-doing-it-together/>

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Ngata, Hera Ngata-Gibson, and Amiria Salmond. "Te Ataakura: Digital taonga and cultural innovation." *Journal of Material Culture* 17, no. 3 (2012): 230.

<sup>3</sup> Billie Lythberg, Wayne Ngata, and Amiria Salmond, "Curating the uncommons: Taking care of difference in museums." In *Curatopia*, edited by Philipp Schorch and Conal McCarthy, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 231.

tribe to Te Rāwhero's legacy.<sup>4</sup> The canonical *Te Pou o Te Kani* project summoned artwork from across the lower North Island into an exhibition that stood as both a whare taonga and tourist attraction, inviting discourse, education, and local and global connections to take place. Toi Hauiti's plans to build a cultural centre were stalled due to a limitation of resources regarding repatriation. The digitisation of the iwi collection saw Toi Hauiti's first success in 2005 with the website Te Whatakōrero. This proved that it was possible to disseminate knowledge and heritage on a digital platform and repatriate digitally; the extensive online database allowed Toi Hauiti to establish Te Ataakura. Dr Wayne Ngata has spearheaded this movement and continues to advocate for Toi Hauiti. The economic and accessible feasibility of a building paled in comparison to the idea of a digital whare taonga, thus the digital system of Te Rauata was created. Te Rauata incorporates digital taonga with mātauranga and, in doing so 'harnesses the latest thinking and practice in the field of digitization to explore virtual repatriation and the cultural and intellectual property rights Māori assert in their taonga.'<sup>5</sup> The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) formed a partnership with Toi Hauiti which would become Te Ataakura, the purpose of which answered the needs of the people of Hauiti, who were disconnected from their rohe, marae and taonga.

Taonga tuku iho describes vast and wide-ranging forms of cultural heritage, though can be loosely translated as, 'treasures passed down from the ancestors.'<sup>6</sup> Paul Tapsell disseminates and distinguishes the aspects of taonga into that of relationships, whakapapa, exploration, boundaries, protection and collecting. Each of these hold the capacity to inform a modern Māori museum, from tuahu to atea – as spaces of separation. Tikanga is able to inform and be informed by tupuna and rising generations for if kin association is strong, taonga is 'intact'.<sup>7</sup> Further, the meaning of taonga tuku iho is imbued with three principal characteristics; mana, tapu and korero, thus reiterating taonga as *becoming* ancestors rather than standing as a representation of them. Taonga tuku iho is the primary way in which ancestral and evolving Indigenous knowledge permeates and surrounds contemporary identities, stories and spaces. Ngarino Ellis lists a number of useful questions when exploring the origin (and life cycle) of taonga, being; when they were made, by whom and for which

---

<sup>4</sup> Ngata, Ngata-Gibson, and Salmond. "Te Ataakura," 234.

<sup>5</sup> Ngata, Ngata-Gibson, and Salmond. "Te Ataakura," 241.

<sup>6</sup> Ngarino Ellis, "Te ao hurihuri o ngā taonga tuku iho: the evolving worlds of our ancestral treasures." *biography* (2016): 3.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Tapsell, *The Art of Taonga*. (Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington Press, 2011).

reasons, what makes them distinctively belong to a certain artist or art school. To apply these ideas to a larger picture of the art traditions in which taonga circulate, we can question when they began, how they are distinctive and how they may have changed over time.<sup>8</sup> Tapsell notes that museum-held taonga have become, for many urban born Māori, a prominent point of cultural reference. New Zealand's locally funded museums (kawanatanga) reflect a nation built on stolen land in that they form the basis of Māori tribal identity. This could be addressed by thorough and continued education of museum staff surrounding Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the relationship between tangata whenua and tangata Tiriti as well an understanding of kaupapa Māori. Without such, any attempt to practice tikanga and honour Te Tiriti is restricted,

Kaupapa Māori relates to the laying down of a plan, philosophies, and strategies based on Māori values, beliefs, and worldviews. It has distinctly different epistemological and metaphysical foundations than Western philosophies.<sup>9</sup>

The concepts and narratives surrounding taonga tuku iho are that of 'lived experience'.<sup>10</sup> The Waitangi Tribunal claim WAI262, from 1991, was canonical in shifting the trajectory of taonga tuku iho and recognising it as intellectual and cultural property.<sup>11</sup> Whilst museums and heritage institutions are yet to meet the requirements and objectives of this claim, resulting discussions have allowed taonga to be considered in a holistic capacity. Through applying WAI262 in museum work, the approach to taonga tuku iho and its direction 'becomes clear, Māori approaches, values and practices should be promoted within the repository design and reflected in the guidelines that support them.'<sup>12</sup> This extends and expands the access to taonga, and opens up the dialogue for each element of taonga, mana, tapu and kōrero to be explored further in innovative ways, including a digital approach.

Cultural and memory institutions hold a responsibility to protect and share knowledge, to engage their communities in conversations and ultimately, to be accessible.

---

<sup>8</sup> Ellis, "Te ao hurihuri o ngā taonga tuku iho," 4.

<sup>9</sup> Anna K. Rolleston, Judy Bowen, Annika Hinze, Erina Korohina, and Rangi Matamua. "Collaboration in research: weaving Kaupapa Māori and computer science." *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 17, no. 4 (2021): 469-479.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Tapsell, "The flight of Pareraututu: An investigation of taonga from a tribal perspective." *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 106, no. 4 (1997): 325.

<sup>11</sup> Victor Grbic, "Virtualising the stories of Ngākau Māhaki mā te whare e arahi: let the whare be the guide." Master's thesis. (Unitec Institute of Technology, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Grbic, "Virtualising the stories of Ngākau Māhaki." 13.

The range of communication formats within museums has, in the last decade, grown exponentially, digital components in museums include but not are limited to mobile devices, smartphones, virtual reality, touch screens, audio-visual scenography, 3D screens and digitally recorded archives. While this has in part been due to the Coronavirus pandemic, conversations and aspiration on online platforms have been current for some time, as, ‘digitization allows access to museum holdings to those for whom collections have typically been out of reach.’<sup>13</sup> The object integrity and reception of taonga is subject to its management and the comprehension of taonga *tuku iho*. Photography, and digitisation of taonga adds another dimension to its meaning-making process and introduces a liminal space in between objects and the consumption of their meaning. The understanding and reception of virtual repatriation of taonga - in photographed or 3-D rendered form, is varied. Toi Hauiti have collaborated on projects that would canonise the taonga *tuku iho* of Te Aitanga a Hauiti into a broad-based knowledge system and re-establish existing networks through a ‘digital legacy’. The key factors that contributed to the success of this collaboration were a series of extensive and wide-ranging workshops between heritage and tech development professionals in the UK, Brazil and Aotearoa, with a shared focus on cultural competency and understanding of the kaupapa. This developed an understanding from all parties about the meanings of taonga and their role within mātauranga Hauiti and opened up the two-hub ‘digital contact network’ that allowed for communication and shared resources. One is KIWA, a research programme and database for Artefacts of Encounter (based in Cambridge, England). The other is Te Rauata, a ‘digital repository’ for Te Ataakura (based in Uawa).<sup>14</sup> The two-hub model has been described as a framework that incorporates and distributes knowledge across a vast network. Each hub carries out work within their space, and then transfers that knowledge to other hubs, allowing for everyone involved to have equal authority over access to information. This digital network has remained strong due to the prioritisation of communication throughout and could be a useful strategy when approaching collaborative projects.<sup>15</sup> Potential direction can be indicated the ways that wānanga can facilitate iwi development in this particular area, given that it is a burgeoning and new space, the sharing of knowledge and experience between iwi, hapū and whanau is vital and beneficial. The

---

<sup>13</sup> Joshua A. Drew, Corrie S. Moreau, and Melanie L. J Stiassny. “Digitization of Museum Collections Holds the Potential to Enhance Researcher Diversity.” *Nature ecology & evolution* 1, no. 12 (2017): 1789.

<sup>14</sup> Ngata, Ngata-Gibson, and Salmond, "Te Ataakura," 236.

<sup>15</sup> Billie Lythberg, Carl Hogsden and Wayne Ngata, “Relational Systems and Ancient Futures: Co-creating a Digital Contact Network in Theory and Practice” in *Engaging Heritage, Engaging Communities*, edited by Bryony Onciul, Michelle L. Stefano, and Stephanie Kate Hawke (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2017), 205-225.

mauri and wairua of taonga can be exercised through their ongoing use, and through a relevant, locally specific approach to conversation and knowledge sharing, digital networks minimise claiming ownership of knowledge. Each of these ways of understanding taonga open this gap. Digitisation of archives, collections and taonga increases access and engagement, ‘as a form of ‘continued connectedness,’ objects, ‘can be mediated through online platforms, which both extend live connections between people who are not physically co-located and also extend this experience beyond the initial moment of performance.’<sup>16</sup> Toi Hauiti and Te Rauata are living embodiments of this kaupapa.

Another benefit of digitisation of archives and taonga tuku iho, is that it allows for a questioning of colonial-based gatekeeping of archives through disassemblage and reconsideration of collections and access. The ethics of digital reproduction however, bring to light a new set of obstacles and questions in terms of who can access online archives and what tikanga is practiced to ensure taonga are protected in the digital world. Contemporary Māori artist Louise Kewene-Doig has applied digital medium into their work. *Tutuku*, a recent project from Kewene-Doig seeks to share the information of Māori showbands through a user-based and interactive app.<sup>17</sup> Kewene-Doig alludes to the challenges around the copyright of indigenous knowledge; part of the intention of *Tutuku* was to allow audiences to engage with knowledge otherwise held within restricted access at GLAM institutions.<sup>18</sup> This proved challenging once traditional barriers began to be dismantled. Another example of co-curation between Kaupapa Māori and digitisation, is the project Te Tini o te Hakituri (Guardians of the Forest), which involved two Tauwi computer scientists and three Māori researchers. The purpose of the project was to explore the conditions and wellbeing of forestry workers, most of whom were Māori. A substantial consideration and aspect of this project was ensuring that Tauwi participants fully understood their responsibilities as partners of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The ongoing harm and intergenerational trauma from Pākehā research on Māori communities is a major consideration to be not only acknowledged, but also intentionally acted upon, to resist power imbalance and research bias. The ICOMOS and Burra Charter policies in place are useful to guide collection management and specifically the

---

<sup>16</sup> Nick Couldry, ‘Liveness, “Reality”, and the Mediated Habitus from Television to the Mobile Phone’, *The Communication Review*, 7 (4), 2004, pp 353–61 in Haidy Geismar. "Curating the Crowd: Social Media and the Choreography of Affective Experience." *Architectural Design* 91, no. 6 (2021): 66.

<sup>17</sup> Louise Kewene-Doig, "Tutuku: Telling the stories of the Māori Showband world through digital innovation." *Te Kaharoa* 17, no. 1 (2021).

<sup>18</sup> Kewene-Doig, "Tutuku". 12.

handling and dissemination of taonga, though can also be used as a framework upon which to build. These documents move away from a position of stasis and towards change, through a form of facilitation rather than designation. Toi Hauiti, given their input from the beginning, feel no differently about the return of taonga whether it be physical or virtual, for it is ‘woven into the fabric of Hauiti whakapapa and knowledge.’<sup>19</sup> In order for the digitisation of taonga to be successful, the intellectual property of cultural commons and ethics must be addressed. Art historian Temi Odumosu has written on the nature of international museum ethics and colonial archives, which she describes as ‘protecting cultural assets as a legacy and enabling public access in the most efficient and nonharmful way (for objects and documents),’ though still reminiscent of tokenism, appropriation and cataloguing conventions.<sup>20</sup> The collaboration between Te Aitanga a Hauiti and the University of Cambridge ‘Te Rauata’ covers a broad spectrum of projects. The cohesion and harmonising of otherwise displaced information and taonga in this form promotes iwi governance, their ownership of this entire kaupapa ‘allows Hauiti to maintain mana (authority) over their knowledge, and to manaaki (look after) that knowledge and share it with others on Hauiti’s terms.’<sup>21</sup> It is this example of collaboration and the utilisation and empowerment of mātauranga Māori that confirms the innovative potential of digital networks of taonga tuku iho.

While the implementation of digital components into the collecting, storage, sharing and care of taonga can be positive and diffuse obstacles such as social division and communication discrepancies, there are some audiences who can be left out of this innovation; the elderly and disabled, or those financially compromised if access requires a fee. Challenges such as these must be addressed and worked through for such a shift to work for all. The cost of digitisation is significant, and is a resource hungry pursuit. Digitisation may never be the entire solution but its role in knowledge sharing will continue to grow, ‘digital engagement with Māori is important because this is the way in which most Māori wish to learn information, now and going forward.’<sup>22</sup> With time, digital platforms and digitised taonga will become increasingly a part of ‘the norm’, Wayne Ngata describes as

---

<sup>19</sup> Ngata, Ngata-Gibson, and Salmond. "Te Ataakura," 242.

<sup>20</sup> Temi Odumosu, "The Crying Child: On Colonial Archives, Digitization, and Ethics of Care in the Cultural Commons," *Current Anthropology* 61, no. S22 (2020): S.295.

<sup>21</sup> Ngata, Ngata-Gibson, and Salmond. "Te Ataakura," 241.

<sup>22</sup> Careers New Zealand, 2016.

kanohi te kanohi, (face to face) in a digital space.<sup>23</sup> A continuous exchange between stored memory and digital memory. A key shift in the reclamation process was Te Aitanga a Hauiti's presence within museums, rather than adjacent, or supplementary operation. The 'activation' of Paikea, an ancestor of Te Aitanga-o-Hauiti and his journey of repatriation after being stored for over a century in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, by his descendants, was a curatorial act.'<sup>24</sup> Following a visit from Paikea's descendants in 2013 and increased dialogue between Te Āporo Nui and Uawa, it has become an example of a contemporary, indigenous approach to curation and treatment of taonga on offshore locations.<sup>25</sup> Te Rauata implemented the structure of Te Ao Mārama and Te Pō into the project and informed the process of this project, in utilising mātauranga Māori, every facet of Te Rauata is a form of taonga, and 'contains the world within a digital system'.<sup>26</sup> One major obstacle in connecting with Paikea via a digital repository was the structure of software, Wayne Ngata suggested the use of broad categorisation encompassed under *mea*, this kupu (word) denotes concepts, actions and aspects of te ao Māori. Utilising *mea* navigates an otherwise rigid system of classification, and allows this system to be founded on Māori terms.<sup>27</sup> Digital history and knowledge can illicit historical practice and cultural practice through presentation and representation, and carries a nature that is able to be agile and multifaceted.

Toi Hauiti has navigated the complex nature of taonga in museum spaces abroad. Since 1999, Toi Hauiti have made enormous contributions to the revitalisation of their ancestral narratives and histories through a 'mobilisation of whakapapa.' Their proceeding projects illustrate how museum-held taonga can break free of exhausted archive facilities and be reunited with their tangata, with their uri. Te Rauata has formed a relational stream between mana whenua and kaitiaki of taonga abroad, each informing the other of relevant updates and dialogue. Because 'everything in Te Rauata is already related to Te Aitanga a Hauiti people and their taonga via whakapapa on a formal basis, prior to entering the system', Toi Hauiti will sustain, and survive future changes to digitisation as the systems are rooted within the stories and lives of Te Aitanga a Hauiti.<sup>28</sup> The success of this international project

---

<sup>23</sup> Wayne Ngata, "Kanohe ki te kanohe: Face-to-face in digital space." *He Whare Hangarau Māori: Language, Culture & Technology* (2017): 178.

<sup>24</sup> Lythberg, Ngata and Salmond, "Curating the uncommons." 235.

<sup>25</sup> Lythberg, Ngata and Salmond, "Curating the uncommons." 228.

<sup>26</sup> Lythberg, Hogsden and Ngata. "Relational Systems and Ancient Futures," 211.

<sup>27</sup> Lythberg, Hogsden and Ngata. "Relational Systems and Ancient Futures," 214.

<sup>28</sup> Lythberg, Ngata and Salmond, "Curating the uncommons." 233.

is subject to sufficient wānanga and training by Tauīwi involved and is one of the major lessons, in promoting reciprocal relationships that are primarily of benefit to Māori. Digital projects hold the capacity to bring together a diverse group of people in ways museum projects have never before and the advancements made by Te Aitanga a Hauiti are, in many ways, imperative to motivating the establishment of indigenous collective memory archives and centres, and ensuring that museums abroad meet their moral responsibility when holding, handling and sharing taonga tuku iho.



## Bibliography

Careers New Zealand. 2016. "Project Kāmeameha." <http://www.careers.govt.nz/about-careers-nz/our-publications/project-kameameha/> [accessed 13 May 2022].

Drew, Joshua A., Corrie S. Moreau, and Melanie L. J. Stiassny. "Digitization of Museum Collections Holds the Potential to Enhance Researcher Diversity." *Nature ecology & evolution* 1, no. 12 (2017): 1789–1790.

Ellis, Ngarino. "Te ao hurihuri o ngā taonga tuku iho: the evolving worlds of our ancestral treasures." *biography* (2016): 438-460.

Geismar, Haidy. "Curating the Crowd: Social Media and the Choreography of Affective Experience." *Architectural Design* 91, no. 6 (2021): 64-73.

Grbic, Victor. "Virtualising the stories of Ngākau Māhaki mā te whare e arahi: let the whare be the guide." Master's thesis. Unitec Institute of Technology, 2016.

International Council of Museums, 2022. <https://icom.museum/en/news/on-the-way-to-a-new-museum-definition-we-are-doing-it-together/> [accessed 10 May 2022]

Kewene-Doig, Louise. "Tutuku: Telling the stories of the Māori Showband world through digital innovation." *Te Kaharoa* 17, no. 1 (2021).

Lythberg, Billie, Carl Hogsden and Wayne Ngata, "Relational Systems and Ancient Futures: Co-creating a Digital Contact Network in Theory and Practice" *Engaging Heritage, Engaging Communities*, edited by Bryony Onciul, Michelle L. Stefano, and Stephanie Kate Hawke (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2017), 205-225.

-----, Wayne Ngata, and Amiria Salmond. "Curating the uncommons: Taking care of difference in museums" *Curatopia*, edited by Philipp Schorch and Conal McCarthy, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 227-243.

Ngata, Wayna, Hera Ngata-Gibson, and Amiria Salmond. "Te Ataakura: Digital taonga and cultural innovation." *Journal of Material Culture* 17, no. 3 (2012): 229-244.

----- "Kano hi ki te kano hi: Face-to-face in digital space." *He Whare Hangarau Māori: Language, Culture & Technology* (2017): 178-183.

Odumosu, Temi. "The Crying Child: On Colonial Archives, Digitization, and Ethics of Care in the Cultural Commons." *Current Anthropology* 61, no. S22 (2020): S.289–S302.

Rolleston, Anna K., Judy Bowen, Annika Hinze, Erina Korohina, and Rangi Matamua.  
"Collaboration in research: weaving Kaupapa Māori and computer science."  
*AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 17, no. 4 (2021): 469-479.

Tapsell, Paul. "The flight of Pareraututu: An investigation of taonga from a tribal perspective." *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 106, no. 4 (1997): 323-374.

-----, *The Art of Taonga*. Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington Press, 2021.