

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa: The Case of the Intangible Heritage

By

Kolokesa Mahina
Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa
KolokesaM@tepapa.govt.nz

Paper presented at the Concurrent Session *Museums and Living Heritage*, organized by ICME, The National Folk Museum of Korea, ICOM Korea and ICTOP.
ICOM general conference, Seoul, Korea. October 2-8, 2004

The Pacific region encompasses living and transforming cultures that are both tangible and intangible. Museum institutions worldwide, have long been associated with the tangible aspect of Pacific cultures in terms of the amassed Pacific material wealth that they have collected / acquired and currently have in their care. In the early phases of museums, in private collections and "cabinets of curiosities", Pacific items were regarded as "curiosities" of the unknown exotic "other" and, often served to represent the status of collectors and other individuals as being well-travelled and knowledgeable. The development of the "cabinets of curiosity" into public museum institutions, in some cases took on a scientific approach where Pacific collections came to be regarded as specimens of different peoples, races and interpreted in such manner. This scientifically driven collecting required an objective approach where Pacific items were classified and displayed in a systematic fashion. The objective approach would further de-contextualise Pacific collections by disregarding any intangible or anecdotal meanings items may have possessed.

For a long time, the displays of Pacific collections in museums have represented Pacific cultures as static. As a result, museums have been criticised for their contribution to the estrangement of the collections they hold from their original functions. The walls of museum institutions literally confine Pacific collections in passive contexts, marginalising their original functions and interpreting them according to established and conventional Western museological practices and worldviews. The representation of Pacific cultures as static is an issue that is being addressed and continually revised by many museums. The focus on representing Pacific cultures as dynamic and changing comes at a time when Pacific Peoples, whose cultures are represented have also been included in the decision-making processes taking place in museums. This is through the consultation process that is established between museum institutions and communities. In this respect the approach of the museum regarding the Pacific collection has gone from the elitist, scientific and authoritative voice of the institution and academics to a more plural, inclusive and culturally sensitive approach. This historical background is comparable to the history of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) and the representation and

interpretation of its Pacific collection.¹ Before discussing the Pacific collection a brief overview of Te Papa is required to set the context. Te Papa's significance as a museum institution in the Pacific is in part its commitment to being a bicultural organisation.² This is through acknowledging the importance of the Treaty of Waitangi and the equal recognition and representation of its two signatories - Tangata Whenua, those who belong to the land by right of first discovery or Maori and Tangata Tiriti, those who belong to the country by right of the Treaty, or European. The bicultural ethos provide the foundation that shaped Te Papa in its incipient stages of development and infiltrates into the conceptual and operating framework of the organisation, right through to the governance level. Although Te Papa is committed to being a bicultural organisation, it has an obligation under the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act 1992 to represent other ethnic groups that make up New Zealand society. This is outlined in Section 8 of the Act, which requires that the Board shall:

- Have regards to the ethnic and cultural diversity of the people of New Zealand, and the contributions they have made and continue to make to New Zealand's cultural life and the fabric of New Zealand society;
- Endeavour to ensure both that the Museum expresses and recognises the mana and significance of Maori, European, and other major traditions and cultural heritages, and that the Museum provides the means to contribute effectively to the Museum as a statement of New Zealand's identity.³

This clause in the Act acknowledges the multicultural make up of New Zealand society today where it is now home to many ethnic groups such as Pacific peoples.

Te Papa originated from the merging of the National Museum and the National Art Gallery, both dominated by the Western institutionalisation of heritage. The incorporation of an indigenous approach - through knowledge and understanding

founded on Maori custom, culture and protocol - provides a framework that allows for the acknowledgement of intangible manifestations of heritage. This indigenous approach is particularly evident in the current Collection Development Policy through the recognition that Maori are the spiritual owners of their *taonga* (treasures) and that Te Papa is only guardian of these treasures.⁴ The guiding principles set out for the care and management of *taonga* Maori are aligned with Maori knowledge, custom and protocol. This is put into practice through, partnerships developed between the museum and various Maori tribes.

Intangible Heritage is defined by UNESCO as:

*"The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity"*⁵

Implicit in this part of the definition is the interconnection between the intangible – "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills" and the tangible – "instruments, objects and artefacts and cultural spaces". Te Papa has acknowledged this interconnection not only through the documentation of the associated stories and history of its collections but through telling of these stories within exhibition spaces. The definition also includes other manifestations of intangible heritage such as:

*"oral traditions and expressions, language, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship."*⁶

As a bicultural organisation Te Papa has since its inception, put into practice the concept of "museums and intangible heritage" within and outside the museum context through the recognition and acknowledgement of Maori knowledge systems. However, this has primarily been in connection with knowledge related to items in the collection or the exhibitions with a strong narrative base, but is not emphasised in the Museums actual collection itself.

This is evident with regards to the Pacific collection, which at present does not emphasise the intangible elements of Pacific cultures. Te Papa's Acquisition Strategy sets out the desired outcomes, strategy, directions and priorities for collection development in all collection areas. The focus is only on collecting the tangible. This is indicative in the acquisition priorities for the Pacific which are:

- Items for exhibitions, particularly those created and /or used in New Zealand by New Zealanders of Pacific Island descent, including items which show innovative use of materials or designs.
- Items that help to underpin research into the expressions of identity by Pacific people in New Zealand; and
- Selected heritage items from Pacific cultures for exhibitions and education programmes or which provide context for contemporary items.⁷

This strong emphasis on the tangible is not compatible to the guiding principles set out in the Collection Development Policy which states that:

Te Papa will collect significant cultural property and information related to its mission, in order to document, illustrate and explore the natural and cultural heritage of New Zealand, and those parts of the world that have contributed to its natural and cultural identity.⁸

It continues to state that it does this:

- To capture the imagination of New Zealand by exploring our national identity;
- To give physical and visual presence to the concepts, values, ideas and information that Te Papa disseminates to users by all media; and
- To form part of the record of scholarship and matauranga Maori.⁹

The acquisition strategy therefore needs to be better aligned with this policy statement.

In terms of the Pacific Collections we are currently re-developing the acquisition strategy that will involve a more structured and active role in collecting the intangible. Because Te Papa has already established the conceptual foundation for including intangible heritage, it is simply a matter of emphasis by incorporating a statement into the acquisition strategy to follow through with its implementation. It will be this implementation process that will be the challenging task. This is where the unique approach developed by the Vanuatu Culture Centre (VCC) is of particular interest.

Vanuatu is unique in the Pacific region for its cultural fieldworkers network program, which is widely seen as a model for community participation in cultural heritage management.¹⁰ The fieldworkers program was set up in the mid-1970s at the VCC which now comprises of the National Museum, the National Library, the National Film and Sound Unit, the National Cultural and Historic Sites Survey and later additions of the Women's Culture Project, established in 1993, and the Vanuatu Young Peoples Project, established in 1997.¹¹ The work carried out by fieldworkers is focused primarily on collecting in the area of intangible heritage, through the documentation of oral histories, genealogies, rituals and performances. The fieldworkers are people from within the local community who are selected to represent the culturally diverse areas in Vanuatu. Fieldworkers are trained in the use of resources for recording and documentation. This training takes place at an annual two weeks workshop, where fieldworkers gather and share their experiences and to decide on the theme of research for the following year. The National Film and Sound Unit is responsible for compiling and database storage of work from fieldworkers. This Unit has a state-of-the-art film and sound recording, production and archiving facilities that have enabled it to build up a substantial film and audio collection.

The successful approach taken by the VCC through its network of fieldworkers is attributed to many factors. Most of these factors are distinct and particular to Vanuatu in terms of the cultural context that the fieldworkers programme has developed and grown since its inception in the 1970's.¹² The fieldworkers network operates on a voluntary basis. It is this voluntary aspect that contributes significantly to its success because it draws on people with a genuine interest and passion in preserving, maintaining and reviving Vanuatu culture. Another contributing factor is that the fieldworkers program involves a continuous long-term relationship with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. These are two factors that can offer some guidance for implementing our approach. Instead of looking at duplicating the fieldworkers approach, certain elements will be drawn on to develop a strategy that is appropriate for Te Papa and its current relationships with Pacific communities.

Te Papa's consultation with the Pacific communities prior to, and since its opening in 1998, has been on a project-by-project basis.¹³ One project was in relation to the development of Te Papa's Pacific exhibition, *Mana Pasifika*, which involved two Pacific advisory committees. Other means where consultation with Pacific communities takes place are with regards to collections development for referrals or acquisitions, and as contributors to publications and public programmes.

Te Papa's Pacific collection is comprised of both historical and contemporary items and consists of about 13,000 items that represent most, if not all, of the Pacific region. The current Pacific Acquisition Strategy mentioned earlier not only has a strong emphasis on collecting tangible, but specifically items created and used by New Zealander's of Pacific descent and items that underpin research into expressions of Pacific identity in New Zealand. Pacific communities have responded in creative and innovative ways to their environment here in New Zealand through expressions of local identity that merge with their own respective traditions, knowledge and practices. The material elements of these expressions are represented in the collection through Te Papa's active approach of collecting contemporary items produced by Pacific peoples in New Zealand. This has resulted in a significant contemporary collection of Pacific material culture that is possibly unique to Te Papa.¹⁴ What is lacking is an equal representation of the intangible forms of expressions such as oratory, theatre, dance and music. The collection may contain associated material forms such as costumes or related archival material but this does not sufficiently capture the essence of these oral expressions.

The fieldworkers network approach would provide the framework that would accommodate and encourage representatives from the diverse Pacific communities in New Zealand. Te Papa has many Pacific networks that fieldworkers can be recruited from. What will be difficult to implement is the voluntary element. This is the most important of all, as only time will reveal people's genuine interest and passion in the programme and in the possibilities they see the museum offering.

Staffing levels have increased with two full time Pacific curatorial positions established in 2004, an improvement on the position of the two previous years. These new developments provide an opportunity for Te Papa to change the emphasis of its acquisitions strategy to reflect a different engagement with Pacific peoples. The proximity of Pacific peoples in relation to New Zealand demands that Museums with Pacific collections reconsider how they are developed and managed. These processes should view the tangible and intangible aspects of Pacific cultures as mutually interdependent.

But this does not mean that museums more distant from Pacific communities should not also act to re-evaluate how and what they document and collect. Telecommunications technology, the Internet, online museum collections and publications are making the world smaller. Pacific collections and curatorial practices are more open to international scrutiny than ever before. Peoples in the South Pacific can view and interact with collections and curators in Europe, the United States and Asia. The "curiosity cabinets" are bursting open and with this comes a new responsibility, a reconsideration of how we do things.

Pacific cultures are "living" cultures and this can only be reflected in a Pacific collection and curatorial practice that conceptually and practically encompasses both the tangible and intangible in mutual and holistic ways. Pacific collections have gone through many phases of representation and interpretation, which run parallel to the development of museological theory and practice. The concept and practice of museums and intangible heritage is therefore better understood when the

historical context of museums and its collections is taken into consideration and, used as a basis for decisions that we make in the present. This is best expressed in the following quote by Okusitino Mahina:

In the Pacific, it is generally thought that people walk forward into the *past* and they walk backward into the *future*, where the *past* and the *future* are constantly fused and diffused in the *present*. In this way, the actual past is put in front of people as a guiding principle in the ever-changing present, and because the elusive future is yet to take place, it must always be brought to bear on their past experiences, situating it behind them in the conflicting present. This means that the onus of preserving the past and mapping of the future – whether they be for culture's sake, humanity or future generations - rests squarely on our shoulders in the present.¹⁵

Notes

¹ For a comprehensive overview of the history of Te Papa see Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, *Icons nga taonga: from the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa* Wellington, N.Z.: Te Papa Press, 2004

² For more information see Te Papa's website <http://www.tepapa.govt.nz/TePapa/English/AboutTePapa/AboutUs/>

³ On <http://www.tepapa.govt.nz/TePapa/English/AboutTePapa/AboutUs/WhatWeDo/The+Act.htm#>

⁴ Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa *Collection Development Policy*, August 2001 [Updated November 2002, July 2003].

⁵ UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Article 2 – Definition, Pg 2. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001325/132540e.pdf>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, *Acquisitions Strategy 2004/2005* pg. 3.

⁸ Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa *Collection Development Policy* August 2001 [Updated November 2002, July 2003], pg 5.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ K. Huffmann, *Communities and Fieldworkers: The Vanuatu Experience*, a paper presented at the Pacific Islands Museums Association (PIMA) 2nd Museum Directors Workshop, National Museum, Port Vila, August 17 – 21, 1999. For published material see University of Sydney, *OCEANIA*, Volume 70 Number 1, September 1999.

¹¹ R. Regenvanu, *The situation of cultural heritage preservation, promotion and participation: Country Report: Vanuatu*, Pacific Culture Ministers Meeting, Noumea, September 2002.

¹² See L. Bolton, "Introduction" and D. Tyron "Ni-Vanuatu Research and Researchers", University of Sydney, *OCEANIA*, Volume 70 Number 1, September 1999, pp. 1-15

¹³ Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, *Pacific Peoples and Te Papa: Activities and Consultation since opening 1998*, September 2004.

¹⁴ Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, *Pacific Peoples and Te Papa: Activities and Consultation since opening 1998*, September 2004, pg 2.

¹⁵ O. Mahina, pers. comm., 2003