



Kaitiakitanga: Utilising Māori Holistic Conservation in Heritage Institutions

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ABSTRACT

It is imperative that heritage institutions deal with the legacies of colonialism within their collections, the way this material is retained, preserved, displayed and interpreted, and the impact that this will have on local and global audiences. Failing to do so risks such organisations being perceived as the beneficiaries of colonial violence, and acts as a barrier to the recruitment, empowerment and retention of minority ethnic and indigenous staff. Kaitiakitanga, drawn from the Māori view of the natural world and its stewardship, provides a sustainable and holistic means by which such issues can be understood and addressed. This paper explores the way in which the author has used his own heritage and experience to apply this philosophy to practical problems encountered in the heritage sector, both those arising from colonial legacies in institutions and collections, and those of a more general nature. By doing so, it is demonstrated that such an approach can be positively applied to practice across a range of activities, alongside existing procedures, to break down historic barriers and entrenched views, facilitating genuine and far-reaching change within the heritage sector.

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Kaitiakitanga can be broken down into three main concepts. Mana, tapu/rahui, and mauri:

Mana relates to the status or presence of a person, place or item, although as a concept it has no direct English equivalent. A *person* holds mana through their actions in the community. A doctor, teacher or a social worker can hold mana, as can a decorated soldier, such as a recipient of the Victoria Cross, an esteemed leader, like Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. Negative or evil actions can conversely, lead to a decrease in mana (Mead 2016). A *place* can hold Mana through its significance in the history of Māori who live or lived there, and this is why every Iwi, or tribe, in New Zealand has its own sacred mountain and river. *Objects*, including books, also hold mana through their own history and significance in relation to the history of the *people*. They are taonga, or treasures, not simply 'items'.

Closely associated with Mana is **tapu**, in which a person, place or taonga is considered sacred, and requiring restriction. A breach of tapu would be considered a serious violation. Tapu is also prevalent in Polynesia as 'tabu' and is the root origin of the word we know today – albeit highly oversimplified – as taboo (Gilmore, Schafer, Halcrow 2013). A person of high status, such as a great leader with great Mana may be declared as tapu, so their Mana is protected. A place, such as a battle ground, could be declared as tapu, forbidden to access, for a certain number of years, if not permanently. This can be due to the destructive loss of life that has been scattered or seeped into the ground; it also prevents disturbing the bones of the fallen and, also in an oral culture, ultimately ensures memory tied to the land, not too dissimilar to the way Flanders Fields are seen today. In a more modern context, a **rahui** or temporary prohibition, has a shorter period of time, usually measured in weeks. Rāhui may be applied where someone has died, or an area such as a beach that has declining shellfish or wildlife, which would be lifted when numbers return. A rāhui ensures the sustainable and reciprocal relationship with the natural environment that is at the heart of kaitiakitanga (NZ Environment Guide 2018).

The third aspect of kaitiakitanga is **mauri**, which translates as life force or essence. Again, this can be applied to people, places and objects. All living things contain mauri. Places and objects possess mauri through their connection with the natural world. A forest for example, will have mauri, expressing its health as a living landscape. By managing the forest Māori can ensure the health or vitality of that area is maintained. Destructive acts, such as overuse or pollution, can damage or destroy the mauri of an area or natural resource. Placing a rāhui on an area is a method by which mauri can be restored so that in time its resources can be used again for future generations. Mauri can also be applied to objects, and this is particularly pertinent to a heritage context. Objects held in collections are imbued with the mana and the mauri of their people. These can be diminished in a variety of ways, including accidental or deliberate damage, or a failure to appropriately preserve or safeguard the item. A loss of mauri within an item can reflect badly on its kaitiaki, diminishing the Mana of both.

Kaitiakitanga can, therefore, be understood in a very basic sense as a combination of the three concepts of mana, tapu/rahui and mauri, which together create a holistic and mindful approach to custodianship that reflects Māori relationship with the natural world (Figure 1). These ties enable Māori to honour and retain their past, while working in the present to preserve and provide for future generations.

INCORPORATING KAITIAKITANGA INTO HERITAGE INSTITUTIONS

As tangata whenua, we believe imbalances in the natural world will also impact negatively upon the people. Consequently, such imbalances in the way that a heritage organisation holds and displays its collection will also affect its staff, and the wider audiences who interact with it. Thus, while kaitiakitanga originates within an understanding of the natural world, it can readily be applied to heritage institutions, both on an individual and collective basis. In many cases, aspects of what would be recognised as kaitiakitanga may already be incorporated into work processes in areas such as preventive conservation, environmental sustainability or 'green' initiatives, and the provision of handling guidelines for staff, readers and the public. However, Kaitiakitanga also serves as a model for a more thoroughly grounded cultural and holistic approach, which, if undertaken properly, can create a positive shift in thinking that has

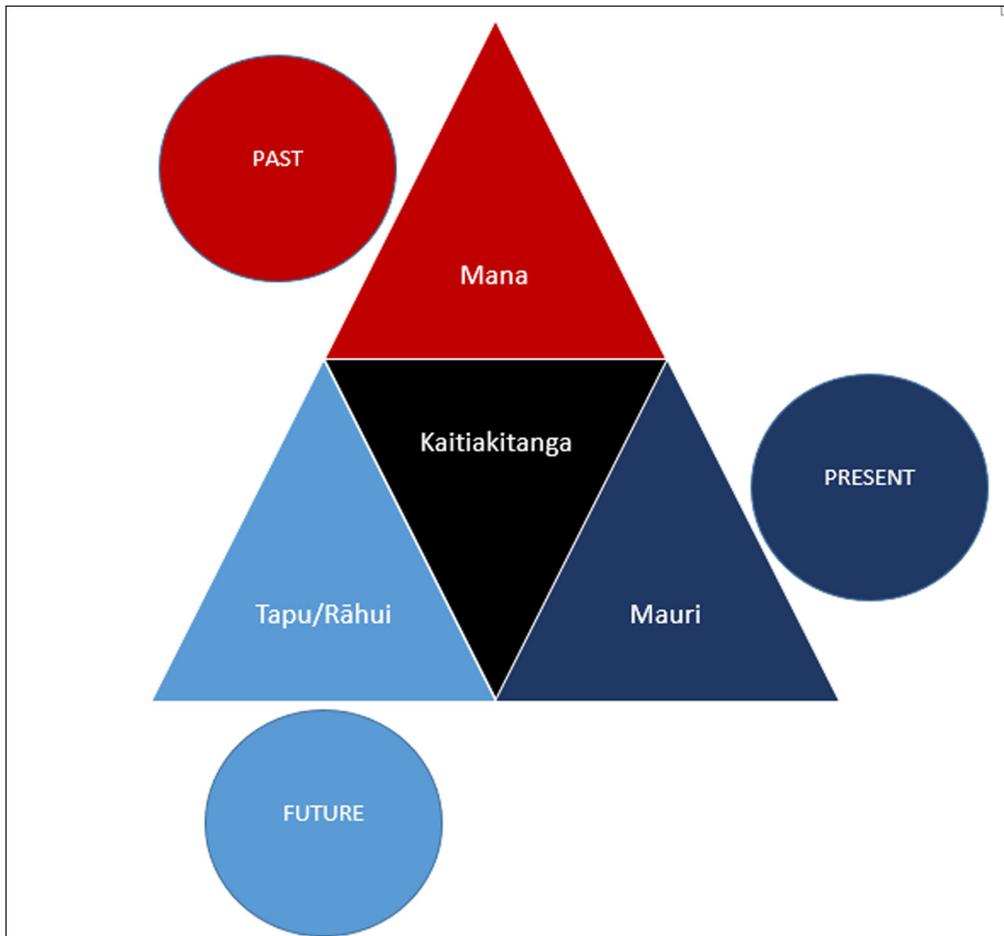


Figure 1 Understanding Kaitiakitanga as a process, tied to the past, present and future.

wide-reaching benefits. It provides opportunities for minority staff, irrespective of their rank and role, to develop their potential more fully within heritage organisations, and to have the opportunity to honour their people and their past, in a way that is positive, empowering and where both the individual and the institution gain mana. It provides a platform on which local and global audiences can engage with these institutions in a positive way. And it acts as a guide to approaching and combatting perceived entrenched colonial viewpoints and addressing problematic inherited collections.

HOW CAN KAITIAKITANGA BE APPLIED? KAITIAKITANGA IN CONSERVATION

All actions of the conservation professional must be governed by an informed respect for the cultural property, its unique character and significance, and the people or person who created it. (AIC 1994)

Kaitiakitanga can be applied to many of the activities that heritage organisations carry out, but it can be seen that it has a particularly natural fit with conservation and collection care. At a basic level, a conservator or conservation professional would fulfil the role of a kaitiaki by ensuring items, many of great historical significance (mana) are conserved or managed (mauri) and where necessary, placed under restriction (tapu) or a temporary ban on loan or use (rāhui). Preventive conservation provides a particularly good example of an aspect of kaitiakitanga by ensuring the safety and security of collections, by monitoring and maintaining appropriate environments, actively carrying out integrated pest management or dust programmes, and offering training on the sympathetic and safe handling of items. Understanding threats to collections through concepts such as the Ten Agents of Deterioration (AIC 2020) and, thus, being able to mitigate their effects, is an excellent example of the proactive process of conservation that could blend harmoniously with kaitiakitanga: ensuring the mauri, the lifespan, and, therefore, the mana, of those collection materials, by actively preserving our past in the present, for future generations.

In terms of actual treatment, the link to the whenua, the land or natural landscape, is an important one. Conservation has a good record in using natural and sustainable materials, such as the use of wheat starch paste and Japanese mulberry tissue paper in book and paper repair. The use of such materials, with strong ties to the natural world, will increase the mauri of that item. Where culturally appropriate, the use of more 'natural' tools, such as bone folders instead of teflon variants, for Indigenous materials can fulfil the same role; but this is not a blanket rule, and care must be taken to ensure the appropriate tools and treatments are used for each individual situation. This emphasises the role of the conservator as a mindful custodian of the collection, the kaitiaki of that taonga. Treating and restoring an item as appropriate, is also treating and restoring the mauri and mana of that item, so should be carried out in a way that is respectful – drawing on the past, while in the present, to preserve for the future, through an item that is a conduit to its people.

In addition to being integrated into existing procedures, kaitiakitanga can also be seen as a mechanism for change, not only in mindfully caring for diverse collections in a more culturally inclusive manner, but also in addressing ways in which conservation can break down the barriers between community custodians, providing an opportunity for inherited knowledge to blend with institutional practice to enhance the mana and mauri of a taonga. An example of how this can be achieved is the interventive treatment of a pukoro kete, (woven flax bag) discovered at Puketoi Station in 1895. The conservation of this taonga was a collaboration between representatives from the Otago Museum, The University of Otago, and Kahutoi Te Kanawa, a highly regarded Māori contemporary weaver. The conservation process revealed new information to better our understanding of its usage, while also stabilising the taonga to enable handling. Te Kanawa's expertise not only provided deeper understanding of the function of the kete, its creation, style and make-up of the highly skilled weaving, but also identification of the plant materials that revealed significant new information on South Island Māori society.

Without collaboration combining the knowledge and skills of traditional owners and contemporary techniques of analysis and conservation, information contained within this assemblage of artefacts would not have been accessible.... Through examination and replication of the pukoro, links have therefore been made between taonga and the living culture of the people who made it. (Smith, Te Kanawa & White 2011)

Kaitiakitanga can positively deconstruct practices that are harmful to the mana and mauri of the collections, practices that spark concern within minority communities about the appropriateness of the museum or the library as a place for the custodianship of their history. To this end, one of the ways conservation can embrace kaitiakitanga, decolonisation through community partnerships and combating entrenched attitudes, is through language.

In Māori culture, the language itself is considered sacred; books by definition carry that language, which ties to the land and, therefore, to our history. The makeup of the book itself, paper, leather, linen sewing thread, is tied to the whenua, the land. If they are items of great mana, maybe due to their age or significance, the eating of food or drink near them would be forbidden, as this breaks the mana of that item. In the same vein, carefully washing hands before handling taonga removes personal tapu. This act can also diminish the danger of imparting strong or negative emotion that can negatively affect the mauri of the taonga.

But language is reflective not only of how material is treated, but also how it is viewed by those carrying out treatments; and through blogs and publications, studio tours and outreach events, this language will reach an international audience. Reducing material to the status of an 'object' which is 'worked on' can unintentionally carry overtones of superiority that can not only impact on this wider audience, but also risk diminishing the mana and mauri of that item by imprinting the views of its custodians upon it.

Western knowledge systems have sought to privilege a European perspective and displace alternative ways of understanding the world around us. Historically, the negation of alternative views was a critical part of asserting colonial ideology, in which such views were said were labelled 'primitive' and 'incorrect' Said (Sully 2007, 28).

In a broader sense, the reduction of cultural taonga to the status of an object described and classified in scientifically detached language, reinforces a colonial viewpoint of that taonga as another trinket or curiosity from the loot of its Imperial 'owners'.

The imposition of Western ideals and views upon the taonga without consultation, damages its mauri, and mirrors and repeats the trauma Indigenous cultures experienced from colonialism.

The problems arising from this style of language can be broken down, by addressing the ways in which cultural material is approached, treated and described. Where possible, it is better to avoid referring to an individual taonga as an 'object' or by its catalogue number or accession record. Discuss an item in terms of what it is or by its specific title (in the case of items such as books), which identifies the material as having mana, through having a name. Before starting treatment, research and actively associate the items with the culture from which they originate to emphasise the ties between that culture and their material legacy, and to ensure the tools and style of treatment is appropriate. This is the best opportunity to build genuine relationships with BIPOC staff, as well as wider communities, and in turn provides the community with the opportunity to engage as genuine, not token, stakeholders. Honouring the link between an item and its people, by not only asking for advice on the best way to ensure their taonga is honoured and treated appropriately, but bringing them onsite, involving the community in the decisions around potential treatment.

'When a descendant holds one of these pieces, all the power, awe and authority of the ancestors flows into the living person. Tears flow, and a bridge is built between the living and the dead, the past and the present.' (Simmons et al. 1990)

This process enables conservation professionals to understand the views and concerns of the community, and reciprocally helps demystify the scientific conservation approach to treatment. This can form the foundations of a bridge spanning the great divide rent by colonialism and years, if not centuries, of trauma brought about by Eurocentric thinking and practice, and places conservation at the forefront of positive cultural and community engagement and partnership, as a model for other heritage departments.

Continuity between the past and present is an important phenomenon in many cultural traditions and should be a key concept in heritage conservation. A bottom-up interactive community conservation process is advocated in preference to a top-down, linear, expert driven process of decision making. (Sully 2007, 22)

Although conservation as a discipline has historically lacked diversity, by becoming more culturally inclusive and attractive as an employment option, conservation can be at the forefront of assisting minority ethnic or Indigenous peoples to reclaim their mana, through genuine involvement with the custodianship of their taonga.

KAITIAKITANGA IN EXHIBITIONS

Our mission was literally to break down the walls of the museum, reconnecting the umbilical cord between taonga and people, building two-way highways so that life could be given back to taonga that had been sleeping for years. Empowering the Māori people in the whole process, from the initial ideas and exhibition concept phase through the selection and presentation of taonga, gave authority and mana to what we were doing. (Hakiwai 1999)

Staff working in the departments directly or indirectly connected to loans and exhibitions can equally apply kaitiakitanga to their activities and processes.

While museums and large libraries frequently lend and borrow to enhance their exhibitions, it is important to consider whether, in a more culturally aware context, it is always appropriate to do so. This should be part of the process of considering an application for a loan from its very first stages onwards. What is the exhibition, what is its context, how will materials be presented within it and what stories will it tell? Will the taonga gain mana by being there, will they be safe, and most importantly, is it right that they are there?

As with conservation, the policies and procedures already in place help to fulfil in some part the role of a kaitiaki by ensuring that a borrowing institution is able to display the item safely, within strict environmental parameters, and that appropriate security, safeguarding and salvage measures are in place. But kaitiakitanga applied here adds a moral imperative to these policies.

As a kaitiaki, as a *guardian*, steps need also to be taken to ensure the preservation of the mana and mauri of the potential loan item. In understanding the Māori viewpoint of taonga as a conduit to their people, it is the responsibility of any custodian to take no action that would harm or diminish the life-force of the items in their care; such harm would be caused by lending a taonga to an inappropriate institution or exhibition, and this harm would consequently extend to its people.

To fulfil this responsibility, it is important to apply critical scrutiny not only to the request itself but also to the borrowing institution, including their reputation, mana, and past treatment of cultural material. This is best achieved by taking a proactive, rather than reactive, approach, and aiming to understand why problems might arise and, thus, being in a position to prevent them, rather than dealing with them once they occur. Presenting taonga out of context, as trinkets or curiosities, or displaying them as exhibits in a setting that glorifies colonial or Imperial exploits, can be harmful to the mana and mauri of the items themselves and the people from whom they originate. In a globalised world, with widespread audiences adept in the use of social media, such blunders will not go unnoticed by BIPOC communities, and can lead to significant reputational damage to the institution concerned (Simpson 2001). Māori, for example, would not hesitate to call out an institution that was displaying taonga in a negative or inaccurate way.

Another thing to consider is organisational change or transformation. While the growth of the organisation is good for the institution in the longer term, the short-term impact and trauma on staff and organisational culture can affect the environment in which the taonga is displayed that would impact on the Mauri, the life force of those items. The practical aspect of this would be staff who are affected by redundancy or role change may not be as efficient in their roles. But from a kaitiaki perspective, the taonga would be at great risk of absorbing the negative wairua, or spiritual energy, while on exhibition there.

In the creation and implementation of internal exhibitions, the risks are the same: inappropriate and out of context displays of cultural material can lead to reputational damage from both local and global audiences, and again, can be damaging not only to the mauri and mana of the taonga, but to Māori by connection (Nolan 2022). An exhibition is a window through which the public can see how an institution treats its collections and how it views other cultures. Something as simple as a few spelling mistakes on an exhibition label can undo months or years of hard work to build bridges, as it suggests an underlying lack of concern. Kaitiakitanga can be employed effectively here as an agent for change, by advocating for active involvement of Indigenous staff and/or wider communities from the genesis of the exhibition; to do so midway through the planning process, or as an afterthought, effectively asking such communities to rubber stamp decisions that have already been made, is ineffective at best and is much more likely to be viewed as evidence of tokenism. Many staff from minority backgrounds are employed in low-grade or entry level positions, so often find themselves in the situation of observing, but being unable to participate, while well-meaning, mostly white, curators explain their heritage in a way that can not only be incredibly disempowering, but can also lead to exhibitions that are controversial or contain offensive, but easily avoidable, errors. Seeking the involvement of staff who have a connection to the culture on which the exhibition is focused, and ensuring that this involvement occurs from the start of the process, not only limits that danger and helps to create a better, more informed exhibition, but also sends a strong message that the organisation is an inclusive one. Furthermore, it acknowledges and affirms the understanding that just because a museum has that item as part of their collection, does not mean that culture and community have ever relinquished custodial rights.

Kaitiakitanga can also be employed in an exhibition to ensure items are displayed with correct materials, in a way that is not only appropriate in a collection care perspective, but is also holistically and culturally appropriate. For example, ancestral Māori pounamu, or greenstone items such as hei-tiki, are of immense significance and connectors to tupuna, or ancestors (Austin 2019). They should never be placed or held with metal; this diminishes the mauri of that taonga immensely (Nolan 2022). To do so, thus, undermines the strong reciprocal link between Māori and the natural environment, and would be seen to reflect and endorse colonial or foreign domination of Māori culture and values. Care should also be taken on the placement of hei-tiki, as the head is considered tapu in Māori culture (Austin 2022). Fastenings employed in this area would, therefore, be very inappropriate. The makeup of the mountings themselves can also be adapted. A kaitiaki could look to utilise environmentally sustainable or natural materials that

would reflect a positive relationship with the natural landscape, and so safeguard the mauri or mana of these taonga, which in turn sends a strong message that the mana of the people themselves is taken very seriously. Again, this is an opportunity to build bridges and create genuine inclusion with BIPOC staff and local and global communities, showcasing the museum or library not only as relevant, but as a real driver of social change.

Many museums continue to view the processes of collection, preservation and display, not as functions through which the organization creates social value, but as outcomes in their own right. Whilst there is a growing consensus of the importance of broadening access to museums and diversifying their appeal and visitor profiles, relatively few museums have purposefully explored their wider social role to engage with and impact on social issues facing their communities. (Sandell 2002)

KAITIAKITANGA IN PUBLIC-FACING AND SUPPORTING ROLES

Kaitiakitanga can also play an important role in public-facing roles. At its simplest this can be expressed through the safeguarding of items in galleries or exhibition spaces, whether through monitoring their condition or protecting them from deliberate or accidental damage. However, a more fundamental and perhaps more meaningful application of kaitiakitanga is in the context of public interaction with the items as displayed, but this also presents more challenges. It can be difficult balancing the innumerable opinions that can be thrown at a Visitor Experience or Library Assistant during a tour or gallery/library invigilation. It can be very stressful – occasionally traumatic – if you are challenged, and your defences can be raised. But such interactions are on the whole, particularly in relation to cultural material from BIPOC communities, attempts to engage with the institution; stepping away or shutting down dialogue can reinforce the view of the museum as separate to, not part of, the community. People can, and do, journey a long way to view taonga from their own culture, and this can be an emotional experience, grounded in the bond between their treasure and their community; therefore, it is vital to ensure that public-facing staff are seen as appropriate and sympathetic custodians.

Taonga can serve as a gateway to home or ancestry. For visitors this connection with their material culture can be either immensely uplifting or triggering in reliving a collective memory connected to an imagined community (Anderson 2016). With such powerful emotions already involved, misrepresentation of, or disrespect for, taonga can be both upsetting and de-powering for the individual, their mana and the mana of that item. This can easily lead to anger, and public-facing staff, as representatives of the wider institution, may have to deal with this anger. Kaitiakitanga here helps both to understand the situation and to defuse it. A public-facing staff member, in their role as kaitiaki, should be aware that the individual is not simply irate, but specifically upset because their culture and they themselves have been diminished and this will enable a more mindful and empathetic response.

Engaging with a museum can fill some communities with suspicion. They are sites where historically not many good things have happened for Māori. But Māorified museology can help build pathways into the museum and portals in to influence its practice. (Cairns 2020)

Staff with public-facing roles or who support public activities in institutions with working collections, such as libraries, face additional challenges, which can also be considered and addressed in the light of kaitiakitanga. The role of Library Assistant at the British Library can serve as a good example of this. The demands on a Library Assistant's time are many and varied, juggling enquiries and customer service while also retrieving collection items and invigilating their use, and faced with such pressures it may be difficult to fully accomplish other less immediate aspects of the role, such as identifying if a book is damaged, shows signs of mould or pencil marks, or needs pages to be cut; thus, it can be tempting to overlook a damaged book, or return it to the shelves or stores. But from the perspective of a kaitiaki, responsibility and custodianship fall to all. By viewing core tasks in a conscious kaitiaki role, it is possible to take on responsibility positively and adopt a more active stewardship, rather than simply carrying out such tasks by rote. The greater mindfulness of tasks that kaitiakitanga encourages, helps to reduce human error, promote good handling and provide

a wider and more supportive context in which to identify damage, highlight storage concerns, and decide that an item may need conservation or advocate restrictions on its use. This then carries out the three main concepts of kaitiakitanga, by affirming the mana of an item by protecting its mauri, through implementing tapu or rāhui. Even if decisions about the use of an item do not fall within the remit of a member of staff, the positive advocacy for the item's treatment is a recognition that the material has mana and mauri, leading to greater inclusivity, empowering staff and demonstrating respect towards the communities that the institution serves.

KAITIAKITANGA IN CURATORIAL AND RESEARCH ROLES

In general, museums, in accepting perpetual responsibility for the objects they possess, also accepted the assumption that any newly assigned value given to an object is correct and immutable. The curation and conservation of objects within collections create a new set of rules, meaning, and value around objects. The old values and meanings, however, are not erased and become evident when other social interests recognise other social meanings in museum objects that are in conflict with those of the museum Hooper-Greenhill (Sully 2007, 34).

The ongoing debate over Māori human remains held by the British Museum, and the refusal to repatriate them to New Zealand, is an excellent example of Māori concerns regarding the treatment and retention of taonga by Western heritage institutions. The British Museum holds a collection of Toi moko, Māori tattooed heads collected in the 1860s to 80s. Te Papa Tongarewa, the National Museum of New Zealand, supported by the New Zealand Government, requested the repatriation of these taonga in 2007 on behalf of Māori, a request that was refused by the British Museum (O'Hara 2012).

The museum policy starts from a presumption of retention which can be outweighed in certain circumstances....and that it was not clear that the importance of the remains to an original community outweighed the significance and importance of the remains as sources of information about human history. (BM 2008)

This is indicative of a colonial mindset regarding Indigenous items collected and housed in museum collections, and a failure to understand the importance of their return to their original communities. From this institutional viewpoint, Toi moko are simply 'objects', museum property to be labelled, catalogued and accessioned for study, for genetic research (Endicott 2007), or to display, to play on Western stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as savage and grotesque (Yates 2013).

To Māori, they are our people. Each item is an individual who has been taken away from their home against tikanga, or custom, and against the wishes of Māori, and are, in a sense, still alive. Knowing that their tipuna or ancestors are not able to be laid to rest creates a powerful sense of shame, loss and tragedy amongst Māori communities, and a negative impact on the wellbeing of those individual Iwi or tribal groups.

This leaves the impression that such museums or institutions are commoditising or profiteering from Indigenous communities. Demand by museums and collectors for Toi moko helped spur on the devastating Musket Wars, where Iwi were compelled to give up Toi moko, whether they be kin or foe, in exchange for muskets to defend themselves from annihilation from those who already had them (Palmer and Tano 2004); those Toi moko were then sold for great profit in Europe. Thus, the Museum not only becomes party to historic intra-tribal devastation, but in a present-day context, the refusal to return continuously extends that trauma. In view of the current questions being asked around historical legacies and relationships with BIPOC communities, this can have the potential to ignite a strongly negative and very public reaction. The veneer of retention for public good, or genetic research purposes is very thin, and raises ethical considerations, but also implies a Eurocentric mindset, as Māori are strong and vital people, able, if they choose, to participate in such studies as collaborative partners rather than being exploited as a resource. An institution in this context could be seen as a prison, rather than a centre of knowledge and understanding. Kaitiakitanga would help to create a more conscious mentality, which removes the temptation to treat material, with such an important link to a living community, simply as an item. In this context, the retention of Māori

human remains leads to a strong diminution of mana not only of that museum and the Toi moko themselves, but also Māori as a people. Curatorial staff should investigate and examine the circumstances in which items were, and are, procured. Collaboration and the creation of genuine partnerships with relevant communities allows the ethical and cultural significance of those items to be understood as more than 'objects' in a collection. Ultimately, this will enable the following question to be asked and answered: Is this institution the right place for these collections to be?

A culturally relevant guardianship or kaitiakitanga in an institutional setting involves collection divestment as much as investment. Smaller institutions, particularly private museums, are increasingly looking like dioramas of the custodial past as they become filled with imperialist items and display devices that civic institutions are only too keen to de-accession. (Brown 2006)

In print literature, Kaitiakitanga can also encourage more insight around what we hold in our collections, and how that can impact on ourselves and our readers. There are many items which are purported as academic tomes that hold thoroughly racist and outmoded views around minority and Indigenous cultures, which can be incredibly distressing not only for the reader, but also the staff. Be mindful of the negative impact a racist book or archival document might provoke. Consider identifying material that holds racist or 'outdated' ideas and label them accordingly, or catalogue new accessions or digitised content with a warning, maybe linking to the holding institutions stance on diversity and anti-racism. This could go a long way to assist in a libraries role in promoting inclusivity.

Museums and libraries also increasingly digitising parts of their collections and making this content freely available, but this can be extremely problematic with materials taken from marginalised cultural communities. Institutions may be sidestepping concerns about the inappropriate display of cultural material by simply moving platforms. Furthermore, there seems to be an unwillingness to comprehend the distress and trauma that can be caused when global audiences are able to view images depicting their own cultures in negative or demeaning ways from a simple online search. It may mean little to a Western culture that depicts martial endeavours as commonplace, but when heritage institutions host images that give a sense of glorifying a violent colonial past, they appear out of touch at best, if not wilfully ignorant. Content shared and then reshared innumerable times under creative commons licences by a number of heritage institutions can dramatically highlight this issue.

As an example, an image from The Wellcome Collection ([Wellcome 1895](#)) shows the soldier and collector Horatio Gordon Robley surrounded by the severed heads of Māori in an image that is both deeply upsetting and continuously traumatising. This image was originally hosted on Robley's Wikipedia page but was removed in 2021 after contact with the Wellcome Collection. While the prompt removal after querying its inappropriate display is positive, and suggests a burgeoning awareness of the negative impact of museum-supplied traumatic media, the image still remains freely available to view and share without restriction on Wikipedia Commons ([Wikipedia Commons 2013](#)).

There must be harder questions asked why, as a society, we recoil at the images of terrorist beheadings, yet freely share, and have re-shared, such immensely painful images of a white man posing with the severed heads of ancestral tangata whenua. This image stands not only as a strong example of the mentality of the museum reducing both taonga and human remains to the status of curios, but also an overt statement of white martial and intellectual 'superiority'.

it is easier to think of the enemy as just a savage who kills, then holds up the head of his prey for all to see....The more exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying. (Sontag 2003)

Heritage institutions need to be far more discerning in the content they provide, with the understanding that there is a global audience, and that by hosting and promoting offensive and traumatising images they risk significant reputational damage ([Gagen 2021](#)). Kaitiakitanga would be used here to incorporate cultural values into the digital curation process. In some cases, this may mean removal of distressing images from display and acknowledging the damage caused to that culture in a way that can enable them to heal; in others, it may be

achieved by applying warnings that acknowledge the content as potentially upsetting, and link to a broader context inclusive of input from culturally relevant communities. This can go a long way to showcasing the institution as empathetic and mindful to the concerns of BIPOC communities. It is also an excellent opportunity not only to avoid reputational damage but work to repair that trauma by building on that sense of custodianship through meaningful, empowering and enduring consultation and interaction with BIPOC staff, and both global and local communities.

IN A WIDER CONTEXT: KAITIAKITANGA AS AN AGENCY FOR CHANGE

Restrictive entry routes into the sector drive inequality. A culture of unpaid work experience as a rite of passage into the sector favours those who can self-subsidise internships, and further narrows entry routes for people from working class or BAME backgrounds. I believe there is a connection between questions of what to do about colonial provenance, imperialist narratives of history and civilisation, the lack of diversity of the workforce and the lack of interest from BAME and working-class audiences in what museums are offering. (Francis 2018)

We have seen how kaitiakitanga can be incorporated within a heritage institution on an individual basis, through appropriate handling, treatment and display, and on a department level, through exhibitions and curatorial areas. At its heart, kaitiakitanga is an active mindset, an agent of inclusivity that naturally complements many existing processes. But kaitiakitanga can also be utilised as an agent for social change, and can help to provide a positive and active way to address concerns levelled at the heritage sector, around not only the legacies of colonialism, but also racial inequalities and the lack of career progression for BIPOC staff (Sandell 1998). That feeling of being ‘trapped’ in an entry level role for years, if not decades can be disillusioning and perhaps unwittingly portrays the institution as a colonial ‘master’ employing staff from minority ethnic backgrounds on mainly front-facing and entry-level roles, carrying out a large amount of work with little say and little recognition in the form of meaningful representation, development and promotion (Kendall Adams 2019). This perception, with the resulting low stats in motivation and ultimately, retention, does feedback to communities through those affected staff, and deepens suspicion of the heritage institution as exploitative, and mirroring the structure of colonialism itself. There needs to be more effort within organisations to identify and encourage these staff to connect with culturally relevant treasures within their workplaces; and this in turn needs to be supported by greater opportunities for recognition in the form of promotion and genuine development (Baldwin 2019).

The willingness of BIPOC staff to work with an institution to positively effect change is illustrated by the reinterpretation of the busts in the front hall of the British Library. Members of the BAME network (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) there collaborated with curatorial and interpretation staff to approach the issue of the busts of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century donors who had contributed to collections that are now a part of the Library (Roy 2020). Two of the donors were involved in the profiteering from slavery and in colonial violence and had been the subject of complaints from BIPOC staff who felt traumatised by a public tribute in their place of work to these two individuals who had perpetrated such cruelty to their ancestors, a trauma which is still felt today. Reinterpretation was achieved by placing a plinth beneath these busts, on which not only were their careers and achievements described, but their roles in slavery and colonial violence and oppression were also highlighted, with powerful statements from BIPOC staff to support this. This process was very successful. The plinth presented a more accurate picture of the donors, but in a way that was informative, not alienating. The busts were not removed but were instead ‘depowered’ by the addition of the staff statements, neutralising the negative wairua, the energy with which they had been imbued by being enshrined in places of honour. The Library, thus, showcased, both externally and internally, a real and genuine willingness to address some of its acquired collections in a way that was positive and proactive. This provides a valuable lesson in the way in which an institution can act as an agent of social change, embracing its role in education by simply offering a fuller and better informed picture, and demonstrating the benefits of the valuable and meaningful contribution BIPOC staff can make when given an opportunity to contribute as kaitiaki for their people and as a moral compass for the institution.

In the same way, the proactive inclusion of BIPOC staff could also be embraced by departments, which have historically been lacking in diversity. This would allow staff to reconnect with their culture and also to further bolster the sense of custodianship without direct ownership that kaitiakitanga offers. However, for this to work, it is essential that these staff are allowed to engage with work as genuine partners, not as secondary participants, which would simply be another example of tokenism. Just as asking a local cultural group to an exhibition launch without having offered any genuine involvement beforehand is an empty gesture – a box ticking exercise – which can easily be perceived as a front for another colonial perspective, so too can nominally consulting with BIPOC staff when all significant decisions about an exhibition, loan, interpretation or treatment have already been made. Such misguided attempts at inclusivity instead become de-powering and demeaning experiences for the staff concerned. However, by asking for active involvement by BIPOC staff in decisions that are made about collections, organisations can break down the walls that allow and support institutional racism, hinder participation and legitimise the commodification of cultural heritage. Furthermore, empowered staff are able to provide a richer, deeper understanding of collections and the impact they create, in a way that goes beyond the simple history of these items, and, which offers opportunities for outreach and communication, allows the interpretation of items in a fully informed cultural context, creates renewed kinship bonds and avoids tokenism. By laying the foundations for a more meaningful community connection with these objects and the way in which they are managed, heritage institutions can create a platform with which to address the stigma that attaches to such organisations when they are seen as bulwarks of colonialism.

At a more tangible level, institutions gain by having more invested staff who will be careful to ensure the care and wellbeing of collections. Invested staff also impact positively with reduction in sickness rates, reduced presenteeism and increased retention. Staff gain by having an opportunity to actively connect with collection material or collection areas, and by having opportunities for meaningful involvement in departments, which may historically have had little diversity. All of this enhances options for recruitment, especially internally, increased pay, secondment and promotion. An increased engagement with collections, in which staff are given the opportunity to explore and explain collections in their own terms, will help promote the library or museum as a driver of real inclusivity. Acknowledging the damage done by colonialism and encouraging staff to tell their own stories, enabling them to re-forge the links to their own culture, thus, renewing or revitalising that culture or community through participation and mutual benefit, not only demonstrates respect for different cultural views, but celebrates them (Smith 2009). Rather than being cast as bastions of colonialism that will become ever more irrelevant in an increasingly globalised world, heritage institutions can be at the heart of real social change, as drivers of genuine and positive inclusivity that benefit all of society. Kaitiakitanga is a way of enhancing the talent that is already present within those departments, showcasing a proactivity and willingness to engage with, and care for, the collections. But heritage institutions need to do much more to recognise and create career pathways for these individuals to ensure skills retention and enhance social mobility. In this way, both the staff and the institution gain mana.

Ultimately we are searching for a future where lived experiences of being Maori, where our relationship to our material culture, is respected and honoured in museums on our own terms. We are searching for mana motuhake – for our own cultural autonomy – within the museum realm. But it is the mere fact that conversations like these today help to enable ideas that have been waiting in the wings, within indigenous communities who have been searching for ways in to the institution. (Cairns 2020)

CONCLUSION

Kaitiakitanga offers a framework in which heritage institutions can incorporate a more culturally sensitive mindset that can be applied to all aspects of its organisation, staff and collections. It can provide empowerment without detriment, break down barriers without force, enable custodianship without direct ownership and work to bridge the gap between BIPOC staff and employers. It can achieve this not only by providing a culturally-minded viewpoint, but also by creating opportunities to proactively change perceptions and attitudes. These benefits are summarised in Figure 2.

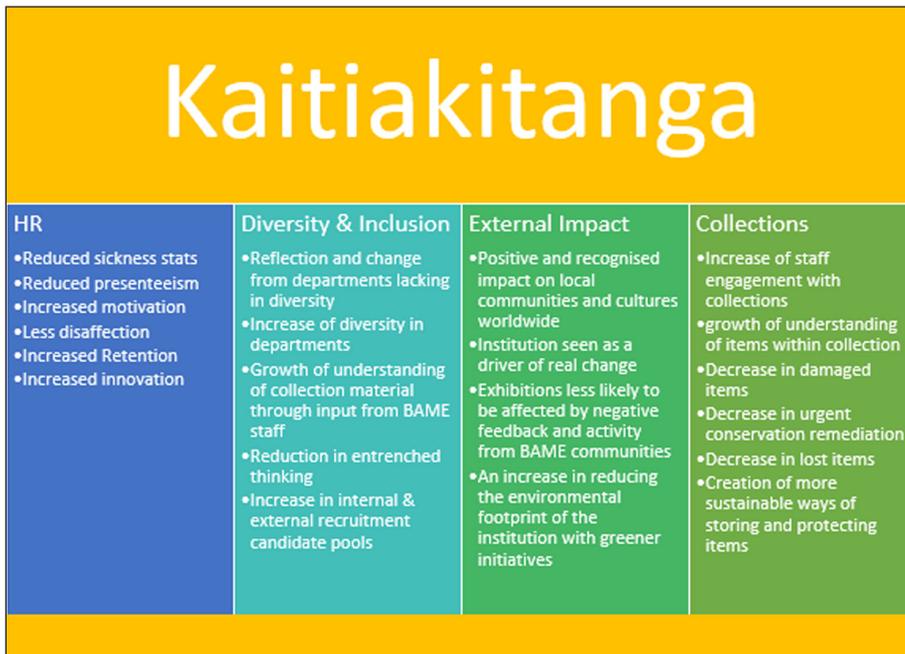


Figure 2 The benefits that Kaitiakitanga can offer heritage institutions.

This is especially relevant and important given current societal changes and movements. Museums and libraries have an obligation to address the widening gaps in our society, to combat the residual imperialism which itself draws strength from the tangible remnants of empire found within heritage institutions, as well as from ‘fake news’ and misinformation. The statues, the displays, the lack of diversity in senior staff, even the buildings themselves, promote a view of other cultures from a position of white superiority. Museums often perceive themselves as above such concerns, without recognising that such attitudes inevitably position them firmly within an outdated colonial past, ensuring that they themselves become increasingly irrelevant. To survive and be truly relevant, heritage institutions need to be more educational, to be far more reflective of current society, both local and global, to actively address their contentious pasts and collections, and to provide a much more balanced understanding of Britain’s colonial history. Kaitiakitanga as a cultural concept can inspire that change in thinking and help make headway towards addressing the concerns culturally diverse communities and cultures have about heritage institutions. The key concepts of mana, tapu and mauri can easily be incorporated into existing policies and procedures and strengthen them by doing so. These ideas should serve as a pou whenua, or marker post, for discussions with BIPOC staff to allow them to incorporate their own voice and their own stance in collections or culturally relevant taonga. Let it stand alongside other voices, often suppressed or ignored, to create a far more inclusive environment, which should be found not only in the museum or library of the future, but of now.

He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata.

What is the most important thing in the world? It is people, it is people, it is the people.

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