Indigenous Wāhine Talking Critically in the Museum Space

Joanna Cobley, Nālani Wilson-Hokowhitu, Maree Mills, and Rachel Yates

As greater numbers of community groups experience social disconnect, museums need to find better methods of engagement in order to remain relevant. We know that museums are no longer neutral spaces; in fact, they have a role to play in activism, which means they can shift their mission to support local communities celebrate and protect their Indigenous heritage (Drubay and Singhal 2020; Message 2018; Shelton 2013). What follows is a meditation by researchers in Aotearoa New Zealand who engage with Pacific-Indigenous concepts and museum practice in unique ways. Our big idea is to see “Oceania through Indigenous eyes” (Lagi-Maama 2019: 291) and, in particular, the eyes of Nālani Wilson-Hokowhitu with mo‘okū‘auhau to Kalapana, Hawai‘i, and Moloka‘i Nui a Hina; Maree Mills with whakapapa to Tongariro, Taupō, and Ngāti Tūwharetoa; and Rachel Yates, who hails from Vaisala, Sāmoa. As a collective, their curatorial talanoa kōrero/mo‘olelo/stories connect to current debates in the museum world where local problems need local solutions. In this instance, Wilson-Hokowhitu and Mills share the ideas that shaped their mahi at Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato in Hamilton, and Yates has just finished a COVID-19 project as Curator of Pacific Cultures at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington.

The Role of Research Leadership in Changing Museum Studies and Museums

As a method of engagement in this international movement, the Museum Worlds editorial practices evolve because we too “hope that we can better shape and be shaped by our changing world” (Cobley and McCarthy 2021). In fact, the Museum Worlds editorial team has the opportunity to take on a research leadership role. Research leaders get involved in the development of their disciplines and in activities that increase capability inside and outside academia.1 For example, a journal reviews editor contributes to knowledge by building relationships with other researchers interested in “developing new discipline methodologies or knowledge” (TEC 2018: 84–86). Based on Linda Evans’s model of researcher development,2 “intellectual development” involves increasing intellectual capacity as well as “changing viewpoints, mindsets and perceptions” (2012: 427–429) and includes Māori, Pacific, and Indigenous worldviews, epistemology, and ontology. What this equates to, in the words of Kelly Willenberg (2014: 2), is that curiosity is an important attribute of successful research leadership. Effective research leaders must also provide space for the voices of the underrepresented researchers in the community (Evans 2014: 49).
Changing museum studies and museums must involve different worldviews. From Lagi-Maama’s perspective, museum practice is “dominated by the European ways of seeing and knowing” (2019: 290). Research undertaken by Bruno Brulon Soares, from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Anna Leshchenko, from the Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow, on the history of museum theory shows similar results. As Brulon Soares and Leshchenko explain, even with evidence of diverse voices, approaches, and practices adapted to local contexts, the continued predominance of Western European thinking in today’s museological ideas, theories, and practices still needs dismantling (2018: 62–64, 73). Lagi-Maama believes there is an urgent need for more Indigenous expertise in museum spaces and in research leadership; furthermore, from the perspective of New Zealand–based museum researchers and consultants who employ Tongan and Sāmoan concepts in their praxis (Lagi-Maama Academy and Consultancy 2021: 110), museums must privilege Moana Oceania worldviews when talking about Moana Oceania (Lagi-Maama 2019: 290).

Whose Museum History, Theory, and Practice?

The 2021 *Museum Worlds* volume featured “emergent Māori and Moana Oceania contributors writing about Māori and Moana Oceania content, drawing from specific regional indigenous knowledges, terms, and ways of expressing themselves.” Rather than translate “the exotic,” the *Museum Worlds* editing process followed the advice of the contributors; as Riria Hotere-Barnes, said, “The time has come to privilege the voice of indigenous artists, writers, and readers” (Cobley and McCarthy 2021). Hotere-Barnes was part of Huia Publishing; established over 30 years ago, the small publishing house transformed the world by normalizing publishing books in te reo Māori (Eteuati 2022). Therefore, intellectual development and editorial research integrity go hand in hand. From our perspective, it requires skills in talking critically—this is a dynamic dialogic interchange between the contributor and the commissioning editor.

First, Some Notes about Women’s Contribution to Museums

History remembers women in many different ways—as glamour icons, maternal figureheads, saints, sinners, and thought leaders (Pickles 2022). Survey histories of women’s participation in Western museums reveal particular tropes. Exceptional women, often–social elites appear in the museum-building phase of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These women had good connections to vital sources of revenue. The 1920s to 1970s brought better access to education and led to greater workforce participation and new employment opportunities for women. There was also more museum building; as the scope of museums broadened and roles diversified, at the same time more women entered the museum world, as curators, collection managers, educators, and directors. The 1980s gave birth to the Gender Equity in Museums Movement (GEMM) to address perceived problems related to recruitment and pay equity practices in America (Smith 2020). GEMM also lobbied the American Association of Museums to undertake regular data collection on gender (Baldwin and Ackerson 2017). The 2015 US Bureau of Labor Statistics’ museum survey reported close to half of the workforce being female; similar findings were noted in New Zealand’s museum sector by the 1990s (Cobley 2002; Evans 1992). In terms of the role of Indigenous women in leadership, the museum community widely celebrated when Mina McKenzie, New Zealand’s first Māori woman to be appointed, became Director of Te Manawa, Palmerston North’s Museum of Art, Science and History, in the 1970s (Evans 1992). McKenzie transformed the local museum by embedding both tikanga Māori (protocols, practices, and
values from mātauranga Māori and Māori knowledge) and Western museological concepts, and she fostered a new generation of museum studies students to embrace this praxis.

**Further Institutional Commitment Required: Advancing Indigenous (Wāhine) Involvement in Museums**

This body of work features women based in New Zealand, who identify as from the Pacific or Moana Oceania region. Nicholas Thomas (2019), Director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, described Oceania as a “region, a group of indigenous cultures, a historical and artistic realm, and as an idea.” Thomas, along with Peter Brunt, Associate Professor of Art History at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington co-curated *Oceania*, a landmark exhibition held at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, and a “French version” at the Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac, Paris, in 2019. As Thomas explained, the museum came to life when the community groups “inhabited” the museum space with song, stories, and performances (2019: 269–270). People make culture come to life.

However, in Lagi-Maama’s view, museums must go further, and research leadership must represent the voices of the source communities. Thomas would agree on the question of how to engage communities and artists across the Pacific, which requires long-term institutional commitment—from universities to foster the scholarship and museums to harvest the praxis (2019: 264). Government policy that provides a framework to support and remunerate the “holders of knowledge/community elders” is a first step (Lagi-Maama Academy and Consultancy 2021: 112); another is to foster strategies and initiatives that support the professional development and academic leadership of Māori, Pacific, and Indigenous researchers. With respect to this important discussion, the invited contributors draw from their lived experiences in the museum space; they are not afraid to blend different cultures and ideas. Their brief was to use the method of “talanoa, the art of talking critically yet harmoniously . . . for the betterment and well-being of our Moana Oceania communities as a whole” (114). Maybe the idea of robust discussion feels a little too disruptive; however, like Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha’apai, the underwater volcano that erupted on 15 January 2022 and sent plumes of ash, gas, and smoke 20 kilometers skyward (Moodie 2022), once the ashes settle, the soil is enriched so that a new generation of museology can germinate.

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### NOTES

1. Research leadership and contribution to the discipline are important activities, as outlined in the *Performance-based Research Fund [PBRF] Guidelines for Tertiary Education Organisations Participating in the 2018 Quality Evaluation* (TEC 2018). The PBRF is a periodic quality evaluation exercise designed to encourage and reward breadth and diversity of research excellence in New Zealand’s tertiary education sector.
2. Evans breaks researcher development into three key components: behavioral development, attitudinal development, and intellectual development.
3. For example, *Te Kei*, a Te Kāhui Amokura Universities New Zealand (2022) initiative, supports Māori academic leadership.
REFERENCES


This is a story of relationships, human and nonhuman, akua and atua, ancestral and contemporary, islands across the vast ocean of Moananuiākea, Te Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa, connected by salt and sky, stars above and geothermal heat below. These are the connections shared between Kanaka Maoli and Tangata Māori, Hawai‘i and Aotearoa, and the co-curators of E Hina e! E Hine e! Mana Wahine Māori / Maoli of Past, Present and Future featured at the Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato from 14 September 2019 to 11 October 2021. For the purposes of this section, the exhibition is a current, living example of criticality, decoloniality, and Māori, Pacific, and Indigenous perspectives in the museum space. For Kanaka Maoli and Māori, akua and atua are ancestors embodied within the natural world, and as we retrace our genealogies, what we find are the multiple intersections of culture, language, values, and our familial ties that transcend time and space.

Informed by three decades of research and scholarship and backed by our ancestors, the first critical aspect of the exhibition is that it was entirely Māori, Kanaka Maoli, and mana wāhine–led. In this regard, as expressed in the introduction, the exhibition presented “Oceania through Indigenous eyes” (Lagi-Mama 2019: 291). As curators, artists, and scholars, we knew we could not speak on behalf of all Māori or Kanaka Maoli, so the perspectives that we shared as cocurators came from our own life experiences, whakapapa, mo’okū’auhau, genealogies, and understandings: Aroha Yates-Smith with whakapapa to the waka of Te Arawa, Tainui, Horouta, Takitimu, and Matatua; Maree Mills with whakapapa to Tongariro, Taupō, and Ngāti Tūwharetoa; and Nālani Wilson-Hokowhitu with mo’okū’auhau to Kalapana, Hawai‘i, and Moloka‘i Nui a Hina.

Kanaka Maoli scholar Lilikalā Kame‘eleihiwa articulates, “Genealogies are perceived by Hawaiians as an unbroken chain that links those alive today to the [cosmological] life forces—to the mana (spiritual power) that first emerged with the beginning of the world. Genealogies anchor Hawaiians to our place in the universe” (1992: 19–20). Drawing strength from Kame‘eleihiwa, as cocurators we boldly acknowledge that the taonga and taumata atua, Koura, called E Hina e! E Hine e! into being and envisioned the positioning of this taonga as the piko, pito, or center of the exhibition from which all other works unfurled. This is an example of how Māori and Kanaka Māoli epistemologies and ontologies can decolonize and, more importantly, indigenize the museum space. This approach is mana-enhancing for the taonga, acknowledged as ancestors, alive, and capable of initiating future potentiality.

The taonga, Koura, carved from wood and found in Pukete, Waikato, is now housed at the Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato. Historian Wiremu Puke says Mangaharakeke was a notable Ngāti Koura Pā. He believes the taumata atua to be attributed to Koura, a renowned female leader, who held the reputation of being unbeatable in the skills of taiaha. However, the most common kōrero associated with this taonga, probably due to its fetal form, is that she represents pregnancy or the unborn child. Before proposing the exhibition, Aroha Yates-Smith, while on a walk, shared with Nālani Wilson-Hokowhitu that she had been having dreams about Koura and that she felt compelled to visit the museum. This calling initiated the proposal that we created for the exhibition.
Answering this call was a part of the decolonial process for the cocurators. We acknowledge the mana of the ali'i collection and taonga. We felt supported by the taumata atua, Koura, who resembles a fetus and, when held, communicates a feeling of infinite love. In the television episode “Artefact: The Power of Women,” Dame Anne Salmond (2020) talks about artifacts as portals to the past that allow us to travel in time and space telling us as much about our present and future as our past. Within the exhibition, we take this further in acknowledging the taonga (artifacts) as having the ability to communicate and guide their descendants in the present for the future.

**E Hina e! E Hine e!** honors the taonga in the exhibition, ancestral and contemporary, to celebrate ngā atua/akua wāhine, the divine feminine, embodied in whenua/āina (land), moana (ocean), wai (water), and ngāi tipu, ngāi kīrehe (flora and fauna) to emphasize the importance of mana wāhine from time immemorial. Featuring female voices (kōrero/mo'olelo/stories) of wāhine whom anthropologists and historians omitted from mainstream texts and resources, the cocurators sought to restore gender complementarity and balance within the museum space. The reclamation of the centrality of wāhine (women) is timely, because presenting (her) stories that manifest in our natural environment illuminates a pathway toward a more sustainable future, imbued with relationship.

The importance of relationship espoused by the cocurators shaped the exhibition as our cosmological interrelationships united and empowered us to work harmoniously and collaboratively. We began with a structural color taxonomy posed by Nālani Wilson-Hokowhitu (2021). This helped apply our knowledge and think about taonga through the many intersections of Māori and Kanaka Maoli atua/akua wāhine. In Te Ao Māori there is no separation between toi (art) and life. It is understood that the motivation to visualize and enable a place of repository for our tūpuna (ancestors) using a diverse array of materials has occurred across time and generations.

The curatorial team also embraced a tuākana-tēina modality (a relationship between older and younger sibling) that enabled the intergenerational presentation of taonga in nonlinear time. As the sibling phrase implies our thinking is longitudinal. It means that in our work, we wish to be informed and guided by the generation before, speak and engage with this generation while also providing for our mokopuna (grandchildren) and the generations to come. This is perhaps not conducive to audience driven outcomes of the public institution, which prioritizes visitation numbers and requires a curator to define the target audience for exhibitions. A tuākana-tēina approach celebrates taonga within the collection alongside a new generation of creative practitioners and renowned artists and, in doing so, expands potential audiences while contributing to a contemporary critique regarding the gatekeeping of the artworld, often experienced by Indigenous artists.

The cocurators of **E Hina e! E Hine e!** initially sourced works of artists renowned for their contribution to this kaupapa and discovered that in some cases their “insurance value” necessitated the building of secure crates for travel at prohibitive cost. We felt our tūpuna were closing one door to open another, revealing new voices. We decided to redirect budget and showcase the ongoing impact of our akua/ataua by commissioning contemporary local, Māori, and Indigenous artists committed to the kaupapa. This was a controversial decision for the institution, as it required a great deal of trust in the curatorial team to manage relationships with what could be considered in a museum context as “emerging artists.”

This loaded term can also be leveled at Indigenous creative practitioners who are in fact not emerging at all but have dedicated considerable years of practice to working with and for their own communities. For example, we invited kapa artist Kawai Aona Ueoka (Kanaka Maoli) and weaver Ruth Port (Te Rarawa, Te Aupōri), who have reputations that largely remain within their own communities. A Māori worldview supports the acknowledgment of skilled expertise,
notable carvers taking the status of tohunga whakairo, for example. Both these wāhine could be considered tohunga and are highly valued by the cocurators who hold relationships with them. Their absence from art-world dealer representation and institutional collection profiles, however, sees them remaining largely in the “emerging artist” category. Karl Chitham (Ngā Puhi) discusses the complexities of who might or might not be shown in a gallery context, questioning why “in order to achieve the validation of the international contemporary artworld are curators, critics and writers privileging types of practice that more easily fit within a topical global sensibility rather than a local indigenous context? Or is there a more multifaceted set of parameters?” (2020: 187).

While we can emphatically say we did not seek validation from an international contemporary artworld, we certainly did seek it from the Indigenous communities we represented and from the context of the public museum where we were placed. We aimed to present a kaupapa Māori exhibition that provided an alternative approach to dominant thinking in museum practice, but one that was also successful in delivering better outcomes for Indigenous, Pacific, Kanaka Maoli, and Māori peoples, as well as the Waikato Museum.

Much of our local audience, both Māori and tauiwi (non-Māori), have expectations for “traditional” or customary Indigenous practice which they see as “authentic.” For example, the audience can feel challenged by seeing taonga alongside contemporary practice, but in positioning the curation in this way, we are communicating that our toi (art) is never static but rather always evolving. In the case of E Hina e! E Hine e! the work MāoriGrl by Kahrurangiariki Smith (Te Arawa, Tainui, Tākitimu, Horouta Mātaatua) is a digital video game depicting the transformation of Hine-nui-te-pō, which is intentionally placed alongside Tōku Waka Tūpāpaku, My Burial Chest by Hinewirangi Kohu Morgan (Ngāti Kahungungu, Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāti Porou), which is a massive hue (gourd), lovingly carved ready to eventually receive the ashes of the artist. This suggests that the akua/atua wāhine embodied in early taonga continue to be manifested and remain with us today.

This is by no means a new idea for museums. Waikato Museum hosted Contemporary Māori Art in 1976 and positioned customary whakairo (carving) and raranga (weaving) alongside works of painting and sculpture. The 1970s also saw the rise of Kanaka Maoli contemporary art. Before, Kanaka Maoli curator Josh Tengan reflects, “Hawaiian art was seen as folk or traditional and not Contemporary” (2020: 229). Despite this shift, cultural essentialism regarding Indigenous creative practice seems to prevail and the continued quest for authenticity remains a driver that poses continuing issues for our artists. Therefore, it was a great pleasure to push the boundaries and to overcome them with the Waikato Museum purchasing artwork from the E Hina e! E Hine e! exhibition for its permanent collection. For the curatorial team, this was a true act of reciprocity, another value inherent in a tuākana-tēina relationship.

Museum acquisition processes and policies are important practices that lay the foundation for future curators, art practitioners, and the Indigenous communities who entrust the museum with the preservation of precious taonga. For example, the purchase of the signature image for the E Hina e! E Hine e! exhibition, Toi Tuu te Whenua, Whatu Ngarongaro te Tangata: People Come and Go but the Land Remains by Regan Balzer (Te Arawa, Ngaati Ranginui, Ngaati Kirihika, Ngaati Maniapoto) (Figure 1), contributes to the museum’s commitment to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. The honoring of the treaty distinguishes Aotearoa New Zealand museums as world leaders working in relationship with the Indigenous peoples of the lands on which they reside. Therefore, Te Whare Taonga o Waikato strives to tell stories that preserve the voices of tangata whenua, the people of the land, as communicated through the arts. This acquisition enables the museum to continue to tell these stories in future exhibitions, as the painting addresses many themes including the quest for new knowledge, the importance of mātauranga Māori
regarding the sustainability of the planet, and fierce activism delivered by Māori women over
generations that communicates an inextricable relationship to land, whenua to whenua.

For the curatorial team, it was vital that the exhibition could be far-reaching beyond the shores
of Aotearoa New Zealand. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions, we needed to be
committed to creating an enduring record of the exhibition that could be accessible overseas.
We accomplished this by creating both a hardcopy catalog and an online portal of the exhibition.
Curators and participant academics provided kōrero (voice) in the form of essays that could be
amplified by the contents of the exhibition. We worked extremely hard to make the exhibition
accessible for future generations as a continued form of reciprocity that feeds forward, so that
our knowledge of mana wāhine past, present, and future will live on.

Nālani Wilson-Hokowhitu, Ngā Wai a Te Tūī, Māori & Indigenous Research Centre, Unitec
Maree Mills, Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato

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porary Art World.” In Becoming Our Future: Global Indigenous Curatorial Practice, ed. Julie Nagam,
Museum Press.
This is a story about diaspora, resettlement, and how cultural traditions and customs adapt to new contexts. It’s also a story about how museums can help foster Indigenous communities of practitioners and advance knowledge through dynamic engagement. The Tongan phrase ako mai, ako atu (teach me, teach you) is the philosophy of koloa (Tongan cultural treasures) making group Akomai Heritage, a Tongan women’s network associated with the St John’s Avalon Uniting Church in Lower Hutt, Wellington, Aotearoa (hereafter Akomai). Inspired by the invitation to talanoa, to talk “critically yet harmoniously” (Lagi-Maama Academy and Consultancy 2021), about Moana Oceanian communities in museology, I offer some insights into Akomai’s nine-day ngatu (Tongan bark cloth) exhibition held at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (hereafter Te Papa) as part of the Wana Ake Festival 2020–2021. The project brought to the forefront the importance of intergenerational knowledge, and the ways that making the textile of ngatu, became a healing, empowering, and identity-making moment for Akomai and their wider community. In this piece, I highlight how talanoa was a critical component of the project, a practice that places Moana Oceanian cultural knowledge at the forefront (see Naepi 2019; Vaioleti 2013) and is an example of critical Indigenous museology in action. As a Sāmoan woman working closely with a predominantly Tongan group of women, in a bicultural institution in Aotearoa, we deployed talanoa in a multiplicity of ways to support collective action.

Akomai was birthed from a place of ‘ofa (love) when a women’s collective became increasingly concerned with the loss of Tongan language and knowledge they were witnessing in the younger generations of their community. The group formed with the central aim of “cultivating [Tongan] cultural knowledge from generation to generation and keeping our heritage alive” (Kaufo’ou Taulata, personal communication, 2020). This cultivation manifested through workshops they organized and implemented. Drawing on local expertise and that of their membership, Akomai have collectively made kato teu (ceremonial baskets), monomono (ceremonial blankets), and kiekie (waist overskirt worn on formal occasions).

In 2017, the group formed a koka’anga (ngatu working party) to focus on the making of ngatu, highly valued Indigenous cloth often used for special occasions such as weddings, funeral ceremonies, and celebrations. As detailed at length elsewhere (see Herda 1999; Veys 2017), making ngatu is a labor-intensive process. Sourcing the required materials can be difficult, and cloth produced outside Tonga is extremely rare. Akomai have imported tutu (stripped hiapo bark)
and *ike* (ngatu beaters) from the village of Tatakamotonga in Tonga, though they have also used modern accessible materials from Aotearoa as part of their practice. These include plywood, common nails, string, flour, Vilene, and artificial ink. The group’s efforts have focused on three key elements of making: *ta tutu* (beating the hiapo bark into sheets called *feta’aki*); *koka’anga* (binding the *feta’aki* to form ngatu); and *ta kupesi* (decorating the ngatu, as demonstrated in Figure 1).

Ngatu is a constant in Tongan lives; its importance is summed up best by Akomai themselves: “Ngatu is everything. We are born with ngatu, married with ngatu, and when we die, we are wrapped and buried in ngatu” (Kaufou Taulata, personal communication, 2020). Though ngatu is frequently handled by members of Akomai, the tactility of making encouraged a renewed appreciation of an already meaningful cloth. The new experience (for most members) of beating, binding, decorating, and creating ngatu made way for new conversations (talanoa) to take place. When the koka’anga meet, elder mamas are given space to recall fond memories of helping their mothers prepare *feta’aki* from their childhood in Tonga. Members are encouraged to tell stories and sing songs from their family and village oral histories. One woman described the physical movement of binding ngatu as one of the most connective, supportive acts she had ever experienced; the koka’anga working together is an apt metaphor for the benefits of collectively working through life challenges. Youth members also shared how the process of *ta kupesi* encourages talanoa about the environment, Tongan customs, beliefs, and historical events. It is during such times that knowledge transfers through generations, and the cloth itself becomes an instigator of life-shifting talanoa that has long-lasting effects on member’s identities and how they see

![Figure 1. Akomai member Mele Tonga Grant decorating a launima, 2020. Photo by Vioula Said reproduced courtesy of Te Papa.](image-url)
themselves in the world. While there are several elder mamas in Akomai, three sisters share their skills and lead Akomai in the making of ngatu. They are Fatai Uoleva Mulikihaamea, Mele Katoa, and Tafinga Masila (Figure 2).

After two seasons of making, Akomai have produced an impressive total of 41 complete cloths, ranging in size, that families proudly display and use in community events. The group also share their knowledge of ngatu beyond their community, engaging in work for the national school journal (McNaughton 2018) and Pacific language weeks, and they continue to undertake collaborations with the wider Tongan and Moana Oceanian community. At the end of 2019, Akomai had set their sights on a community exhibition in their local town hall. It would be a chance to showcase their ngatu and celebrate the achievements of the koka’anga to date. As arrangements formalized and with the intended date of exhibition looming, Aotearoa entered its first nationwide COVID-19-induced lockdown (March 2020). This impacted not only all the members’ lives alongside the rest of the nation, but also the koka’anga’s dreams of an extensive ngatu exhibition.

However, from disaster came new opportunities. Akomai’s canceled exhibition coincided with shifts at Te Papa, where the impacts of COVID-19 forced a rethinking and replanning of work to help navigate the museum and audiences through a period of uncertainty and instability. A solution came when all staff were invited to pitch ideas for events and public facing programs under the banner of the Wana Ake Festival (Te Papa 2020, 2021). Planned for the summer of 2020–2021, in lieu of international touring shows that were no longer feasible, the festival intended to embrace local communities and audiences, and provide prospects for Māori and

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Figure 2. Akomai community from Left to Right: Fatai Uoleva Mulikihaamea, Nathan Alafoki-Toutai, Mafi Lea, and Mele Katoa. Akomai Heritage exhibition workshop, 2021. Photo by Nathaniel Cashell reproduced courtesy of Te Papa.
Pasifika initiatives. Although time, resources, and staff capacity were limited, it was a rare opportunity not to be missed.\(^3\) Representation on the floor of our national museum matters, and this was a timely opening to continue to talanoa with Akomai, a community group highly invested in sharing ngatu, and one that was in desperate need of exhibition space.

As part of a broader pitch for artists’ residences, the community-led exhibition *Akomai Heritage* was accepted. Located in Te Papa’s Level 4 Toi Art galleries, nine ngatu cloths, a range of garments including a ngatu wedding ensemble, various *kahoa* the group had previously made, photographs of the group in action, and a digital film created by the group were all put on display. The public programming schedule was substantial, including an opening night with guest of honor Her Royal Highness, Princess Mele Siu’ilikutapu (Figure 3) and three community workshops designed to teach visitors about Tongan culture and make ngatu alongside Akomai. Their short residence was noted for its impact, evidenced by high visitation numbers (more than a thousand on the first day), global media reports, and high satisfaction rates with Māori and Pasifika audiences, in particular, strongly resonating with the exhibition (De Stefani 2021). Such a residency requires a lot of effective talanoa, not only to ensure the logistics of such an event but also to build and maintain key relationships with stakeholders. Talanoa for this project was complex, layered with cultural hierarchies and competing agendas, and required deep intercultural negotiations.

The very first time I had talanoa with members of Akomai was over multiple cups of tea and a heap of *keke ‘isite* (round donuts) in the home of senior maker Mele Katoa. At the time I was there as part of the working group for the Pacific Heritage Arts Fono 2019,\(^4\) planning for a ngatu demonstration and the catering for the event. Throughout this talanoa I learned about the group and their activities; we connected over shared experiences and mutual relationships and, much to everyone’s surprise, even made close familial links. I also discovered the group had a strong history with Te Papa. Twenty years earlier the Pacific Cultures team had acquired a kato teu and *tau’olunga* (Tongan dance) costume from Mele, and over the years Akomai members had supported numerous public programs, including a historic church service held on Te Papa’s marae, Rongomaraeroa. This talanoa (which lasted a few hours) was a critical link in our relationship and established goals and aspirations the museum sector and community initiatives like Akomai share. The exchange helped build rapport and trust, and highlighted the varied ways in which institutions can, through different personnel and projects, sustain critical engagement with communities over a long period of time. Furthermore, the exchange reveals how talking critically can be done anywhere and how the simple act of exchanging food (we gifted a box of bakery goods and received keke ‘isite and tea) manifested critical Indigenous values of respect and reciprocity, key values that were also embedded in how we participated in talanoa.

From the moment our pitch was accepted for the festival, a legion of talanoa ensued. Countless visits were made between Te Papa and the community. Talanoa consisted of formal presentations to key Te Papa staff and Akomai’s wider church community, and informal smaller talanoa that occurred one-on-one or in small groups and in-person or digitally as required. A key element, present throughout most talanoa, was negotiation. This is no surprise, as Lagi-Maama Academy and Consultancy write, talanoa is the space where “issues are voiced, debated, critiqued, and mediated until a common ground is reached for the betterment and benefit of the collective and the whole” (2021: 113).

There are too many critical moments of negotiation to recall and unpack in this article, but the interactions between the exhibition team, Te Papa’s *iwi* in residence,\(^5\) and Akomai leaders stand out in my memory as talanoa that required honest consideration of perspectives and active mediation. This was especially so in the negotiations for opening night and talanoa about the most appropriate way to host HRH Princess Siu’ilikutapu. Talanoa was intense and required a
Indigenous Wāhine Talking Critically in the Museum Space

A delicate balancing act to support the implementation of appropriate tikanga (Māori customary practices or behaviors) as dictated by our iwi in residence for the pōwhiri (welcome) and blessing of the exhibition, while also adhering to Tongan protocols concerning royalty. Talanoa involved lengthy negotiations about all aspects of the evening. From menus, seating arrangements, gifting, adorning of the marae and speaking rights to thinking about how we would maneuver hundreds of people between the galleries and marae for festivities, talanoa waded through these details while simultaneously navigating between Māori, Tongan, and museum protocols (not to mention budget).

On one occasion when checking the run sheet for the evening, a lengthy talanoa ensued about the time for the Māori practices of hariru (shaking of hands) and hongi (sharing of breath), and what was appropriate in light of COVID-19, but also who could or should represent manuhiri (the visitors). After much back-and-forth with suggestions being bandied about, our iwi in residence representative raised his hand to motion a stop to talanoa and sternly asked Akomai, “Are we welcoming the princess, or are you?” After a deep pause, a member of Akomai replied with just as much vigor, “We are welcoming her together.” It was at this point that all parties burst into laughter and came to a consensus: culture was flexible, and our goal was to keep respect and the spirit of collaboration front and center in our actions. The talanoa between these three teams was deeply enriching and rewarding, yet still incredibly hard and confronting. The anecdotes shared give insight to the intercultural qualities of talanoa and how our shared values as Indigenous peoples can help guide us in these negotiations.

Figure 3. Te Papa Kaihautū Arapata Hakiwai addresses HRH Princess Mele Siu’ilikutapu at the opening of Akomai Heritage, 2021. Photo by Vioula Said reproduced courtesy of Te Papa.
For now, the talanoa continues with Akomai on a new path, as we commit to the acquisition of three ngatu for the Pacific Cultures collections. Though crises provided the pathway for Te Papa to connect with a significant, large community group, I hope this story has highlighted why we need critical Indigenous museologists in our institutions—to start, recover, and continue talanoa.

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NOTES

1. In Tonga the harvesting and process of making ngatu happens all year-round. Akomai label and organize their koka’anga in “seasons” here in Aotearoa that last six months to a year, which is a distinctive way to identify cloth they produce. The size of ngatu is determined by sections called langanga (45–60 cm; 1–2 feet). Categories can include launima (50 langanga), tokauanoa (20 langanga), and fuatanga (commonly 8–12 langanga, but sizes vary). Akomai have produced six launima, two tokauanoa, and 33 fuatanga.

2. Tongan Language Week occurs annually in September and is part of a wider initiative called Pacific Language Weeks in Aotearoa currently promoted and supported through the Ministry of Pacific Peoples.

3. While I work as a curator in the Pacific Cultures team, dedicated floor space for exhibitions is limited due to the long-term nature of social history exhibitions and resourcing challenges within a large organization.

4. This event was being hosted by Massey University Wellington in partnership with Te Papa, Creative New Zealand, and Pacifica Arts Centre. I was part of a working group led by Massey’s Herbert Bartley, Creative Director of Pasifika College of Creative Arts, and Jarcinda Stowers-Ama, Director of Pacifica Arts Centre.

5. Te Papa’s iwi-in-residence program commenced in 1998 and has featured eight iwi exhibitions and related program to date. One aspect of the initiative is the employment of staff from the iwi to assist the museum with tikanga Māori. The Pou Tikanga is the male kaumatua or tribal elder who oversees tikanga or cultural practices.
REFERENCES


Taulata, Kaufo’ou. 2020. Personal communication.


