

**THE NEXT HORIZON OF MUSEUM PRACTICE:
VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION, RESTITUTION, AND REPARATIONS**

Twenty Years of Persistence, Two Hundred Years of Patience

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

An academic foresight paper exploring a future in which repatriation is completed and we are working collectively to tell the stories of removal, theft, accession, and subsequent restoration and redress.

ABOUT THE NEXT HORIZON PROJECT

This paper is one of a series published by the American Alliance of Museums exploring the future of voluntary repatriation, restitution, and reparations in museums. For this collection, AAM's Center for the Future of Museums invited a diverse group of authors from the museum sector, academia, and descendant communities to share their visions of preferable futures in opinion pieces, academic research, fictional stories, or hybrids between these formats. For a full overview of the project, and a selected timeline of museums' evolving ethics regarding collections and community relationships, see the AAM report [*The First Horizon: Understanding the State of Voluntary Repatriation, Restitution, and Reparations Today*](#).

How did the bones of our karāpuna (ancestors) leave this remote island? Why were they taken? Who would do this? What were their reasons?

In 2022, the National Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa, hosted an emotional forgiveness ceremony entitled “Ta Ara a Nunuku” (The Pathway to Peace). Those offering their apologies were representatives from regional museums in Aotearoa New Zealand, and those offering their forgiveness were Moriori descendants from Rēkohu (Chatham Islands). Their forgiveness was heartfelt and unwavering but peppered with questions of how, why, and who.


The ceremony was a watershed moment. It was initiated by the Head of Repatriation at Karanga Aotearoa, Dr. Herekiele Herewini, who envisioned a way for the act of repatriation to be an act of healing. To facilitate this healing, he worked with the returning institutions and with Moriori leaders to open the way for Indigenous perspectives to be expressed. The ceremony incorporated core Moriori cultural values of unity, inclusivity, and peace-making. It created a physical and temporal space for tikane Moriori (the customary system of Moriori values and practices) to be exercised. While providing for the expression of tikane in a museum context is not itself unusual (in fact, Te Papa excels at it), what made this different was the process of respectful inclusion of all viewpoints in advance of the ceremony, ensuring that everyone understood what was happening and why. The ceremony marked a new way of doing things for the museum based on the customary way of doing things for Moriori.

KARANGA AOTEAROA REPATRIATION PROGRAM

Through my work for the Karanga Aotearoa Repatriation Programme at the National Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongarewa, I was able to answer the questions posed by Moriori at the ceremony, but only in part. We know who took their ancestors (mostly) and we know how. What we don't know as clearly is why they took them, though we still must confront the question. The question won't go away if left unexplored.

My job is to give the bones their stories back, along with restoration of dignity and respect taken from them. Every bone tells a story and every body a book. I feel a duty too to tell the stories of those who took the bones—not to afford them dignity but to provide answers to the descendants of those taken. In many instances, the challenges in this task come from a culture of active disremembering, a deliberate veil covering acts that were not just immoral but illegal.


Tampering with burial grounds has been outlawed in New Zealand since the beginning of the twentieth century, with the government passing a law protecting them in



1900, and an amendment three years later making it unlawful to desecrate any burial place (Māori Councils Act 1900). Nonetheless, we find accounts like that of Surgeon-Commander Roger Buddle, who made the following entry in his diary during a visit to Rēkohu/Chatham Islands in January 1907, explicitly stating he removed human remains knowing it was illegal. He knew too that it was a cultural offense:

We went along the sandy peninsular before mentioned, and visited an old Moriori burial ground, where there were about a dozen skulls and numbers of bones, I selected the best skull, and then wrapped it up in my camera cloth, after putting in a few smaller bones and shells to conceal the suspiciously rotund shape of the parcel, and make it pass for bona-fide luggage should we meet with any maories [sic] on the way, for they would make a terrible fuss if they found out, and besides I am told that the removal of bones is prohibited by law. Anyhow, my guide enjoined strict secrecy until I got away from the island.

More than a century later, Karanga Aotearoa is charged with bringing ancestral remains home through mutual agreement, repatriating Māori and Moriori human remains from international institutions back to their descendant communities. The program started in 2003, and for twenty years the team has been persistently working to return the many hundreds of ancestral remains that were removed from resting places on Rēkohu and Aotearoa New Zealand. These patient years of pursuing mutual agreements, research, and relationships mark our program as one of the longest serving international efforts outside of NAGPRA—though our patience is nothing compared with that of descendant communities who have been waiting for up to two hundred years, in some cases, for their ancestral remains to come home.



Our program has an empowering combination of government mandate and financial support for our operations, alongside high levels of Indigenous cultural authority and backing for the way we do our work. We work by first establishing contact with international institutions that house human remains and then inviting them to repatriate. Often reaching an agreement is a quick and simple process from here, but other times years of discussion and research ensue. (We don't get discouraged in these cases—for us, a no is just a yes waiting to happen.) Increasingly, the former is becoming more common than the latter, with more museums proactively carrying out audits of collections and reviewing policies about keeping human remains. To date we have repatriated 850 Māori and Moriori ancestral remains from 118 institutions.

MORIORI: CARE FOR THEIR DEAD

Moriori are the waina pono (first Indigenous peoples) of Rēkohu. They migrated to these islands located eight hundred kilometres east of mainland New Zealand between eight hundred and one thousand years ago, settling the small archipelago and growing a thriving population of about three thousand people living in a culture without warfare and killing.

Prior to 1836, Moriori funerary customs were varied. They included cremation, tree burial, mummified cave burial, and sea burial, but sand dune internment was the most common practice. In 1868, S.P. Smith (Smith 1868) undertook a survey of Rangihaute (Pitt Island) and was there for about a year. In his notes he describes a cave burial at (Waikokopu) Canister Cove:

Noticing some caves a little way up the cliffs we climbed up there and found an old Moriori burial place with bones etc and rotting matting, the fineness of which was equal to any of the valuable mats of the Samoans and much finer than any Māori work I ever saw.

Traditionally, burials were concentrated in dune areas and around the shores of the large coastal lagoon in the center of the main island, close to occupation places and in areas where excavation for burial was easier. Commonly, people were buried in a trussed position with heads facing towards the sea, and sometimes exposed to the elements. Unfortunately, their regular exposure in the dunes also made them vulnerable to ethnographers and the like, who removed bones for study or curiosity.

The Moriori story is one of the least known or understood in New Zealand's history, but their genocide and enslavement by two invading Māori tribes in 1835 is surely one of the darkest periods in the national history of Aotearoa/New Zealand. The effects of the invasion led to a dramatic population drop over twenty-seven years, from about 2500 people to only 101. It is no wonder then that their ancestral remains were vulnerable to theft and desecration in the decades that followed.

COLLECTING THE KARPUNA (ANCESTORS)

The collecting of human remains from Rēkohu has a long history. Records from the Colonial Museum, the predecessor of the current-day Te Papa institution, show that the earliest recorded acquisition and accession of kōimi tchakat (human skeletal remains) from the island was in 1866 from Mr W. Lyon, less than one year after the museum opened. Large-scale collecting on the island accelerated after this, with many pieces

of human remains destined for museums and private collections in New Zealand and around the world. The bones were taken in such large numbers that we believe Moriori ancestral remains may represent the most “collected” people in the Pacific.

The most prolific collector of Moriori human remains, that we know of, was Henry Hammersley Travers, a young botanist and geologist who made several trips to the Chatham Islands in the 1860s, collecting at least forty-eight karāpuna that went to Canterbury Museum, the Colonial Museum, and overseas.

In 1863, acting on the request of Sir Ferdinand von Mueller on behalf of the Victorian Government, and with W.T.L. Travers defraying expenses, Henry, then aged nineteen, went to the Chatham Islands to obtain natural history and ethnological collections—bird skins and seashells were particularly sought after.

However, Travers saw the extensive Moriori burials from centuries of living on the island as “offering greater advantages as a collecting ground.” As he put it:

Although I found the remains of numerous skeletons in the woods on Pitt’s Island, I was unable to get one in good condition. I have, however, brought over several authentic skulls, which will probably be interesting for ethnological purposes.

Research to date also shows Travers was involved in the sale or trade of kōimi Moriori to the Tasmanian Museum, University of Edinburgh, the American Museum of Natural History via a purchase by J. Umlauff, and the Vrolijk Museum in Amsterdam via a purchase by L. Bolk.

REPATRIATION EFFORTS FOR MORIORI

To date, Karanga Aotearoa has repatriated more than five hundred Moriori ancestors from twenty-eight international institutions in six countries: Australia, the United Kingdom, Scotland, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States of America. In 2022, Karanga Aotearoa brought back 109 Moriori ancestral remains from the Natural History Museum, London—an amalgamated collection from Oxford University, Royal College of Surgeons, University College of London, and the Wellcome Trust. We estimate there may still be several hundred to be returned.

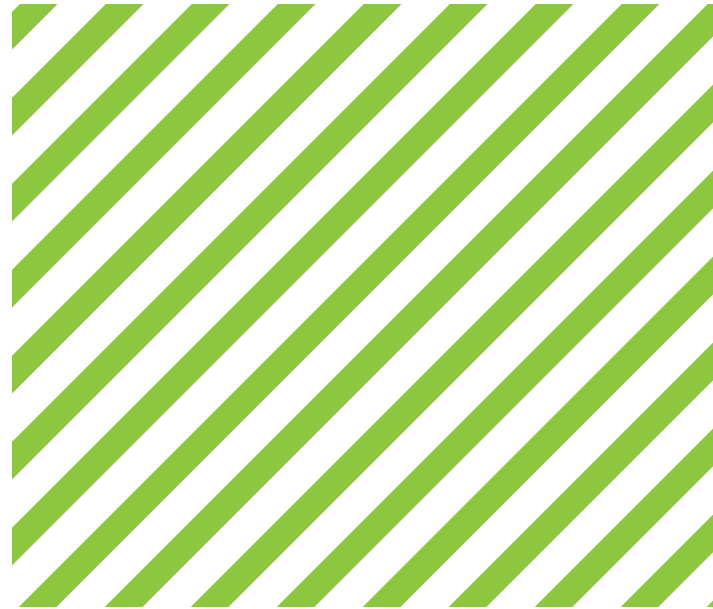
THOUGHTS ON PREFERRED PRACTICE

Simply put, my vision of an aspirational future is to be redundant. This future would see all our ancestral remains back home—not just back to Aotearoa in the Te Papa repository, but back home from where they first left these shores. Their homecoming would be a process for deeper, more evolved museum-community relationships. The role that the Colonial Museum and some of the regional museums played in the exchange of human remains would be fully acknowledged through ceremonies of healing such as the “Ta Ara a Nunuku” experience that Te Papa held with Moriori in 2022. We would curate a traveling exhibition that tells the honest stories of how and why these ancestral remains were taken in the first place, and we would be richer for that experience.

I’m confident we are already on our way to this future. Twenty years ago, there were significant challenges in many of Karanga Aotearoa’s attempts at negotiating returns. Some museums felt that ancestral remains, particularly the *Toi moko* (preserved Māori heads), would yet yield information for the scientific communities. For example, one decision-making panel from a prominent European museum declined a repatriation request in the hopes that the remains would provide, one day, information on Pacific migration and settlement. Given that no research had ever been carried out on the remains in the many decades they had been in storerooms, and that the living communities of the Pacific islands—including Aotearoa/New Zealand and Rēkohu/Chatham Islands—were available to explain migration and settlement, the response was mystifying.

At that time, museums were struggling to even assess the extent of their human remains collections. We had to travel across the planet to look at the accession records, diaries, and letters associated with these collections. Today, we are able to look at many of these records as digital copies. Today, we are working collectively on provenance research. Today, we know that repatriation is the start of the relationship, not the end.

Tomorrow we will have rethought our use of terminology. “Repatriation” will have moved aside for the more inclusive “rematriation”—a notion that is removed from blame, that introduces redress and reconnection. Beyond just the literal return to ancestral homelands, our work under this banner will embrace a reconnection with ancestral values, a restoration of balance.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Thorpe was part of the inaugural research team at Karanga Aotearoa, starting in 2004. She stepped away for a decade to live and work on Rēkohu Chatham Islands, where she is still based, but is back with the team on a permanent contract as Pou Rangahau Repatriation Researcher.

She has a master's degree in archaeology from the Institute of Archaeology, London. Her main research areas focus on landscape archaeology and Indigenous methodologies, with a particular interest in bringing oral traditions into archaeological praxis.

Susan's work is centred on provenance research to enable successful repatriation negotiations to proceed and for tūpuna Māori and karāpuna Moriori to return home to their final resting places. She is interested too in challenging the way we understand the process of returning ancestral remains.





Center for the Future of Museums

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