



aboriginal policy studies

## Commentary

---

### *Slice of Heaven: 20th Century Aotearoa: Biculturalism and Social History at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa*

Kirstie Ross

*Curator History, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa*

*aboriginal policy studies* Vol. 2, no. 2, 2013, pp. 115-127

This article can be found at:

<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/aps/article/view/19009>

ISSN: 1923-3299

Article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5663/aps.v2i2.19009>

---

*aboriginal policy studies* is an online, peer-reviewed and multidisciplinary journal that publishes original, scholarly, and policy-relevant research on issues relevant to Métis, non-status Indians and urban Aboriginal people in Canada. For more information, please contact us at [apsjournal@ualberta.ca](mailto:apsjournal@ualberta.ca) or visit our website at [www.ualberta.ca/nativestudies/aps/](http://www.ualberta.ca/nativestudies/aps/).



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA  
FACULTY OF NATIVE STUDIES



Aboriginal Affairs and  
Northern Development Canada

Affaires autochtones et  
Développement du Nord Canada

# ***Slice of Heaven: 20th Century Aotearoa: Biculturalism and Social History at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa***<sup>1</sup>

Kirstie Ross

*Curator History, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa*

---

## **Introduction**

The permanent exhibition *Slice of Heaven: 20th Century Aotearoa* opened at the Museum of New Zealand in October 2010. Described as “a kaleidoscopic view of New Zealand life from the century that was,”<sup>2</sup> the exhibition has, at its heart, four chronological “slices” of social history specific to New Zealand’s twentieth century, and that have indelibly shaped it. These four “slices” of social history cover international relations (titled “Mother Country”); social welfare and the state (“Altered States”); Māori cultural, social and political tenacity (“Okea Ururoatia”); and social diversity and civil rights (“Us and Them”). A fifth segment (“Home Grown”), which features everyday objects that were used in New Zealand homes during the twentieth century, provides a counterpoint to these narratives.

*Slice of Heaven* was the first bicultural social history gallery to be developed at Te Papa since its opening in February 1998. At that time, thematic history displays in the museum were arranged in galleries according to two categories: *tangata whenua* (“people of the land, here by right of first discovery”) and *tangata te tiriti* (“people of the Treaty, here by right of the Treaty of Waitangi”).<sup>3</sup> Although they were living in the same land, New Zealand’s two peoples—Māori and Pākehā (European New Zealanders)—were not presented as occupants of the same temporal world. Nowhere in the museum was New Zealand’s history addressed as an experience shared by both Māori and Pākehā. This oversight was somewhat ironic for an institution that was so clearly wrought from New Zealand’s colonial past and the unravelling of “race relations.”

A partial solution to this split, proposed by the museum’s exhibition programming team, was to develop an exhibition about the twentieth century. I was the lead curator on this exhibition, which ultimately resulted in *Slice of Heaven*. My essay considers the exhibition as a general response to the museum’s original omission of experiences shared

---

1 I’d like to thank to the following people for their helpful comments on drafts of this essay: Te Herekikie Herewini, Athol McCredie, Sean Mallon, Debbie Martin, and Paora Tibble. Thanks also to Kristen Pederson Chew for her editorial comments. The views expressed here are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of Te Papa.

2 See link (document)

3 On the development of the major Māori exhibition *Mana Whenua* developed for the opening of Te Papa, see Conal McCarthy (2007, 177–97). McCarthy also notes that a section about modern Māori society had to be left out of the exhibition (197).

by Māori and Pākehā, with a focus on how *Slice of Heaven* presented the challenges and changes that Māori faced over the twentieth century. Overall, this is a commentary on how Māori social history in the museum was shaped by institutional and historical contexts and describes, in particular, some of the practical solutions made by the curators and designers of *Slice of Heaven* to issues that stemmed from the museum's commitment to biculturalism.

### **History, Te Papa, and Biculturalism**

Before I describe the Māori elements of the exhibition in more detail, I'd like to comment on the history of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. This is because the development of *Slice of Heaven* may be seen as just one episode in an ongoing series of responses by the museum to the past.

Te Papa (the national museum's brand name) was the result of a merger of the National Museum and the National Art Gallery, along with their respective collections. As one might expect with a continuous reign of scientist-directors from 1865–1989, the National Museum's activities had been geared towards collecting, describing, and revealing New Zealand's natural environment. Dedicated to colonial economic and Enlightenment intellectual enquiry, the collection and display of Māori material culture was an integral part of the museum's activities. Initially, this was considered a salvage operation that would preserve the material remains of an inevitably "dying race." Collectors extracted Māori *taonga* (cultural treasures) from the "tribal affiliations and genealogical histories that animates them" (McCarthy 2011, 177). The provenance and the circumstances of their production were seldom recorded by collectors and museum staff. Within the context of the museum, these *taonga* became "tribal relics" and "curios" that were arranged and displayed according to essentializing ethnological principles.

This museological status quo, and the social and political assumptions that validated it, were not overtly challenged until the late 1960s. It was then that activists, largely urban-based, began to point out the negative impacts of colonization. One critical object of this activism was redress for the breaches of rights that had originally been promised to Māori in 1840 in the Treaty of Waitangi. Through high-profile court cases, the Treaty gained legal and political clout and, from 1985 on, Māori claims against the Crown for its breaches of the Treaty back to 1840 could be lodged with the Waitangi Tribunal. Māori self-determination—*tino rangatiratanga*—was the movement's motto.

Museums, as sites of cultural colonization, became a focus of demands for decolonization (McCarthy 2011, 38–44; 78–81). The international travelling exhibition *Tē Māori* (1984–1987), which was created and maintained with tribal consultation and input, coincided with this demand for decolonization and changes to museum practices. The Museum of New Zealand (i.e. Te Papa), established by statute in 1992, was a place where this reform was played out explicitly. This was a watershed moment that reflected and prompted new practices that acknowledged and integrated Māori cultural practices and concepts. As such, the museum became both a product of decolonization and a place where Māori cultural sovereignty was to be asserted.

Te Papa was also imagined as a place where new democratizing and post-modern approaches to museology—"the new museology"—would be implemented. As Conal

McCarthy later noted, at the time of Te Papa's conceptual development, "Māori and Pākehā aspirations became entwined. The new museology's emphasis on democratizing the audience coincided with a Māori concern to address the historical alienation of their people from museums" (2007, 175).

Te Papa was empowered to enlarge and broaden its audience and to prioritise the visitor experience. Māori engagement with the museum was considered to be a critical indication that this goal had been achieved. For Māori, museum display "so long a tool of colonization. ... now became the means of decolonization" (McCarthy 2007, 166). The reconfigured institution was charged with modelling biculturalism—"a stage in the longer process of decolonization"—in its exhibitions, research, administration, and collection management practices (McCarthy 2011, 9). McCarthy observes that "New Zealand's national museum embraced the policy of biculturalism in an attempt to reconcile its Māori collection with the nation's colonial legacy through a reform of museological practice" (111).

A central concept in Te Papa's bicultural policy and practice is *mana taonga*, (power, authority, and responsibility, all associated with the possession of taonga) This principle recognizes the spiritual and cultural connections of cultural treasures to people through ancestry. It bestows to *iwi* (tribes) and communities "the right to care for their taonga, to speak for them, and to determine their use or uses by the museum."<sup>4</sup> This right to co-management applies to exhibition development and delivery. As Te Papa Mātauranga Māori curator Awhina Tamarapa (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Ruanui, Ngāti Pikiao iwi) has put it, "All cultural treasures in museums should be displayed in partnership between the people who created them, the people who held them, and the people who will see them on display."<sup>5</sup>

But can these aspirations and practices mesh with those associated with exhibiting social history? If so, then how? Unlike bicultural exhibitions developed with *iwi* that are for and about *iwi*, a social history exhibition like *Slice of Heaven* explains history rather than answers to it. *Slice of Heaven* is not an explicit expression or product of biculturalism as self-determination (McCarthy 2007, 177), which shaped the development of *tangata whenua* exhibits for the opening of Te Papa and continues to underpin an ongoing series of *iwi*-led exhibitions. Instead, by using objects and other media, *Slice of Heaven* provides historical and social context to this imperative, and some of the historical forces and processes behind the bicultural "turn." The team working on the exhibition therefore faced museological and practical tensions created by these two parallel approaches to the past and its purpose.

### Developing *Slice of Heaven*

The issue of how or whether to reconcile the two ways had to be put to one side due to the practical demands of the project. Museum exhibition development is often a long and complex collaborative exercise. This was true for *Slice of Heaven*, which took over eight years, from its initial idea to the exhibition's opening. The exhibition team eventually

4 Te Papa's Mana Taonga Policy, 2005, 'Kete' Intranet Resources for Understanding Biculturalism at Te Papa' cited in McCarthy (2011, 114).

5 Cited in McCarthy (2011, 177). *Mātauranga Māori* is a Māori system of knowledge.

included five curators, with two of us working full-time on the project—myself and Māori curator Debbie Martin (Te Aupōuri, Te Rāwara iwi). We were all responsible for identifying storylines and objects, checking the accuracy of content in other types of interpretation (e.g., audio-visuals and graphics), and briefing label writers. We also took care of relationships with people and groups who either lent objects for display or whose stories were featured in the exhibition.

The task of condensing the century so that it would fit into a 650m<sup>2</sup> gallery was our first job. The exhibition team knew from the outset that the exhibition could not be comprehensive, and that the century had to be filtered in a meaningful way. Eventually we settled on an approach that would maximize dramatic and affective storytelling, considered essential for a satisfying visitor experience. This resulted in the four narrative “slices,” complemented by a display of material culture, described in the introduction. As far as possible, curators selected stories that characterized, and were specific to, the twentieth century, rather than processes that transcended centuries. I was vigilant in ensuring that we avoided progressive narratives, especially an orthodox one of cultural nationalism that sees a homogenous sense of national identity as the ultimate outcome of the century.<sup>6</sup> Māori perspectives and experiences, in particular, were not to be overwritten by a narrative charting the historical development of this identity.

*Slice of Heaven's* narrative approach was the exhibition's most overt expression of biculturalism, rather than the process by which its content and displays were developed. Approaching the material this way, with Māori and Pakeha having a shared history, was an institutional requirement; but it was also underpinned by historical reality. One of the century's defining features was the increasing degree to which the personal lives and social, cultural, and political worlds of the Māori and Pākehā—largely separate at the beginning of the century—crossed over and sometimes clashed. The growing frequency of these encounters was due, in part, to urbanization and internal migration, the rapid recovery of Māori population numbers, and the raised political profile of the Treaty of Waitangi, along with concomitant re-assertions of *tino rangatiratanga*. I'll return to this history of Māori urbanization in more detail below.

There are several ways in which the exhibition and its development might be described as “bicultural.” The first was through the adherence to *tikanga Māori* (customary rules or protocols) in the gallery. For example, the exhibition was blessed by Māori elders before it was opened to the public, a ritual that acknowledged the work of the exhibition team and their ancestors, while one controversial object (a box of equipment used to hang murderers in the 1950s) received a ritual cleansing to nullify its history and negative associations before it came into the museum.

A second way in which *Slice of Heaven* may be read, literally, as bicultural is through its bilingual exhibition texts. Labels dedicated to the exhibition's four overarching “slices” and the main sections within them, are written in English and *te reo Māori* (the Māori

---

<sup>6</sup> This meta-narrative had resulted in a historiography that explains the past in terms of “national maturity”; this quest for nationhood filters out historical continuities such as colonisation. This historiography has been intelligently critiqued by New Zealand historian Peter Gibbons (2002). For the first and most distilled expression of this idea see also Gibbons (1986).

language). Bilingual text policy was extended to other labels about a specific Māori story or artefact. Audiovisuals are subtitled in te reo, while interactive computer games have both English and te reo options.

The third bicultural component is the integration of personal stories of individual Māori within the broader story arcs of the exhibition's "slices". The use of personal stories is one of the defining principles of exhibition practice at Te Papa, and is a strategy that both makes abstract concepts accessible and enables visitors to connect emotionally to content. In keeping with this strategy, three personal Māori stories highlight the historical experience and agency of Māori from an individual or biographical angle.<sup>7</sup> Each of these stories is accompanied by an object that was directly implicated in the life of the owner and their connection to a particular historical event or process. While these are not *taonga* (cultural treasures) in a conventional or customary sense, they would be considered so by their current owners because of their genealogical links to ancestors. Curators, by consulting the lenders of these objects about display and interpretation, followed a principle of *mana taonga* (power, authority, and responsibility, all associated with the possession of taonga) in their interpretation and display.

### Three Personal Stories

The first of the exhibition's three personal Māori stories is about Kurupo Tareha (1871–1938, Ngāti Kahungunu iwi). Kurupo Tareha appears in an area that discusses New Zealanders as imperial subjects and participants in Empire. The exhibition team agreed that it was important to show a specifically Māori inflection to imperial relations at the start of the twentieth century, which is why we tell Kurupo Tareha's story here.

Around 1900, many Māori were loyal to the Queen—though certainly not all. Some had been in conflict with the Crown for much of the nineteenth century, while others considered Queen Victoria to be their legitimate and personal partner in the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand's founding document. Kurupo Tareha no doubt held the latter view, and freely represented Māori as loyal subjects of the British Crown. He was the Company Sergeant Major of the Māori volunteer soldiers who marched in London at Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. Kurupo Tareha's story is told using the ceremonial sword presented to him after this successful trip, which today is held by members of his family.

The second personal story is that of Maudie Reweti and her cross-cultural experiences during World War II. This was one of several stories in the exhibition about how New Zealand's war-time commitment to Britain affected the home front. Maudie, like most Māori at this time, lived in a rural area. But, when the war broke out, she elected to move from her small home town to the city to carry out war work. Maudie Reweti's stepfather carved a photograph frame as a farewell gift for her when she left to work in a munitions factory near Wellington, where she filled hand grenades and mortar bombs. Te Papa borrowed the frame, which is decorated with motifs usually associated with customary taonga, from Maudie's family for the exhibition. Maudie's story appears next to a description of tribal efforts to coordinate Māori support for the war that was overseen by tribal leaders.

<sup>7</sup> Individual Māori also feature in the interactive computer game "Who Am I?" See <http://sites.tepapa.govt.nz/whoami/default.aspx>.



The third personal story discusses the contributions made by Maui Pomare (1875/1876–1930, Ngāti Mutunga, Ngāti Toa iwi) to the health and welfare of Māori at the beginning of the twentieth century. His story was one of a number about efforts undertaken by the government and individuals to improve infant health and welfare at the start of the twentieth century. Pomare, New Zealand’s first Māori doctor, ventured on horseback to remote Māori villages and wrote infant-care manuals for Māori. The tireless doctor was dubbed “a one-man nationwide health service for Māori on a shoestring budget.” Telling this story with an object required some imagination. In the end we were able to borrow Pomare’s immunization kit from his descendents. Armed with this kit, Pomare had embarked on his mission when Māori infant mortality was at least three times that of Pākehā.

Sometimes when a personal story and object could not be identified or the lack of space conspired against us, we made sure that Māori were visible in graphics or more general stories. This strategy, while not ideal, was to help us avoid the trap of perpetuating the myth that Māori had no twentieth-century history until their so-called “renaissance” in the last decades of the century.



### **Okea Ururoatia / Fight Like a Shark**

*Slice of Heaven* also physically separated out a specific Māori historical narrative—the story of Māori political and cultural tenacity. Curators saw the successful efforts by Māori to defy their colonial classification as a “dying race” as a key historical phenomenon that distinguished the twentieth century from the nineteenth in general, and from the colonial juggernaut of the preceding century in particular. The twentieth century in New Zealand, and the history of Māori, is unimaginable without acknowledging this struggle and the consequent gains for Māori.



The importance of this historical process justified a separate narrative “slice” in *Slice of Heaven* that sits alongside the other three in the exhibition (as described in the introduction). The “slice” or section that is about Māori tenacity is called “Okea Ururoatia.” It comes from a Māori *whakataukī* (proverb): *Kia mate ururoa, kei mate wheke!* / Better to die like a shark than an octopus! Paora Tibble (Ngāti Porou, Te Whānau a Apanui, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Tūwharetoa iwi), the exhibition’s Māori writer who proposed the title, writes that “this statement comes from a perspective of Māori being proactive in their battle for survival as opposed to that of a dying race.” He also explains that:

The “ururoa” in this statement is a shark. The shark is known for putting up a good fight. The shark doesn’t just give up, it fights, writhes, and struggles right to its last breath. As a metaphor, the shark speaks of vitality, of tenacity. Okea means to struggle, writhe, fight. . . . It would be easy to assume that focussing on how someone dies is a negative statement. But here’s the deal, in Māori culture there are certain truths. One of these is that we all die. The question is, what happens between the moment you’re born and that which you die? This *whakataukī* focuses on dying in a way that reflects your life. Dying with valour reflects the life of a brave person.<sup>8</sup>

The construction of a separate “slice” or area dedicated to Māori stories within the exhibition echoes, in some respects, the *tangata whenua*/*tangata te tiriti* split in the rest of the museum, mentioned at the beginning of this essay. However, it was also a conscious response to the needs of a segment of our potential audience. Market research, conducted with Māori focus groups during the early stages of *Slice of Heaven*, had revealed that some

<sup>8</sup> Paora Tibble, email to author, 29 June 2012.



Māori visitors wanted their stories to be presented as a whole, and not be sprinkled through the “mainstream” story. Creating a separate Māori “zone” was at odds with the social history objective of showing Māori and Pākehā histories together but, because a designated area would enable Māori to engage with their history and culture on their own terms, it fulfilled bicultural and therefore institutional objectives.

Tenacity, articulated in many forms and by many individuals and groups, is the big idea underpinning “Okea Ururoatia”, which is housed in a stylized *wharenuī* (meeting house). The essence of its narrative arc is the triumvirate of rights, resilience, and resurgence. Three paragraphs on the exterior of the wharenuī inform visitors that:

Early in the twentieth century, Māori live in rural communities, separate from Pākehā. European diseases, war, land confiscations, and discrimination have wreaked havoc—many Māori live in poverty, and the overall population has plummeted.

But like the shark, who will not give up without a struggle, Māori resist the net of colonisation. They tenaciously fight for the rights guaranteed them under the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand’s founding document.

The 1950s mark a large-scale move by Māori to the cities, where they negotiate the modern world—and continue their struggle. By the century’s end, the Māori population has recovered, and their cultural revival is well under way.

This text sums up a century of social change. It introduces visitors to the concepts behind “Okea Ururoatia” and signals it as an area in the exhibition specifically dedicated to Māori social history over and above explanations of pre-colonial tribal Māori culture and society. The contemporary style of the wharenuī also indicates to visitors that the area explores Māori-related topics but ones that are different from those covered in other galleries that showcase customary Māori material culture.

### **“Okea Ururoatia / Fight Like a Shark”—Selecting Main Themes and Stories**

The Māori curator for *Slice of Heaven*, Debbie Martin, was specifically responsible for the narratives, artefacts, and other media, plus the overall tone of “Okea Ururoatia.” She was determined that, in this section, Māori agency in the face of the relentless impact of colonization would be explained, highlighted, and reinforced. Martin selected three significant case studies of tenacity for “Okea Ururoatia”: influential Māori ancestors who fought for racial equality; ongoing Māori claims for the return of tribal land; and Māori urbanization and cultural identity.

Visitors entering “Okea Ururoatia” first encounter “He Iwi Kotahi Tātou? / One People?” This section is dedicated to the efforts of influential tribal leaders in the first half of the century (more or less) to gain equality for their people, including the success of the pan-tribal spiritual and political movement founded by Tahupotiki Wiremu Ratana (1873–1939, Ngāti Apa, Nga Rauru iwi). Instead of biographical text, stories were told through the words of the living descendents of these leaders. The section also interrogates the myth that New Zealanders were “one people” after a century of colonization by using mass-produced mementoes from the 1940, the centennial of British government in New Zealand. Pākehā boasted “the best race relations in the world” at the time, and the New Zealand Centennial

Exhibition (1939–40) portrayed a picture of unity. This view was challenged by Apirana Turupa Ngata (1874–1950, Ngāti Porou iwi). Ngata knew that, in reality, Māori suffered official and unofficial discrimination, and that the centennial exhibition largely trivialized their culture. The decorations on the mementoes displayed here illustrate this trivialization.

The Treaty of Waitangi had little to do with the 1940 centennial but, by the 1970s, it had moved to the centre of national politics, especially in disputes over land between Māori and the Crown. These disputes are explored in the second section of “Okea Ururoatia”—“Whenua” (land). Māori are tangata whenua—the original people of Aotearoa New Zealand. Before Europeans arrived, individual iwi were the land’s *kaitiaki* (guardians). Yet, by 1939, Māori retained just 1 percent of the South Island and 9 percent of the North Island—a result of the Crown’s land dealings, including confiscation. This dispossession occurred despite the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi promising to protect Māori *tinio rangatiratanga* over their lands and possessions. Martin stressed the importance of showing Māori success in their persistent quest for official redress over the course of the twentieth century, showing protest culminating in negotiations, settlements—and partnerships—between the Crown and iwi.

The dramatic process covered in the third section of “Okea Ururoatia” is the rapid internal migration of Māori into urban areas that occurred after World War II. This section, called “Ngāti Tāone,” addresses Māori urbanization, a defining historical and demographic process that affected many aspects of *te ao Māori* (the Māori world). The phrase “Ngāti Tāone” is a neologism most likely coined during the migration period. In *te reo Māori*, *ngāti* is a prefix denoting “tribal” and *tāone* is the Māori transliteration of “town.” The phrase “Ngāti Tāone” is, therefore, a play on tribal affiliations and their urban reconfigurations.

It is difficult to overstate the social, cultural, economic, and political impact of migration by Māori from rural areas to towns and cities after World War II—it changed the course of Māori and national history. The demographic change is startling: about 75 percent of Māori lived in the countryside before the war. Over the course of a generation, this urban/rural split had almost reversed itself, with approximately 60 percent of Māori residing in urban areas (Dalley 2005, 325).

What motivated this move? Of the land still held by iwi, much of it was marginal and uneconomic; it would not support a population that almost doubled between 1951 and 1960 (Dalley 2005, 326). Post-war prosperity and industrial development in cities supplied jobs. There were also official schemes that helped a limited number of families to make the move from iwi bases.<sup>9</sup>

Some Māori flourished in the city, establishing successful careers and enjoying the benefits of the modern world. Many urban Māori artists, musicians, and writers, for example, combined customary practices with modern art forms and technologies. The Māori showbands of the 1950s and 60s were a particularly successful example, both at home and abroad.<sup>10</sup> While urbanization created opportunities for the new migrants, it

9 The inability of post-World War II state housing to meet the requirements of Māori is addressed in a section of the exhibition that explores the rise of New Zealand’s welfare state. In particular, it explores the ideological assumptions of these housing schemes.

10 Māori show bands were the subject of a Te Papa online exhibition from December 2004–December 2006.

“also created the need to redefine aspects of Māoriness,” writes historian Michael King (2003, 475–76). “Māoriness” now had to cover a raft of new issues, including how to sustain extended family connections in an urban setting, how to run a *hui* (meeting) or follow bereavement rituals away from *marae* (meeting places), and how to organize city Māori socially, politically, and pan-tribally. Adapting existing tikanga or developing new ones to take these new conditions into account became vital as more Māori came together in cities.

Some Māori had a tough time. They faced discrimination and separation from their *whanau* (families) and *whakapapa* (genealogy), language, and culture. The emerging urban generation had less knowledge of these aspects of their heritage and identity. The feelings of dislocation that they experienced contributed to Māori struggling to achieve in the education system and being over-represented in unemployment figures, hospitals, and prisons. Māori confronted these inequalities tenaciously, setting up cultural organizations, urban marae, and social and sports groups. Some groups were iwi-based, while others were pan-tribal. In the 1970s, Māori themselves initiated various programmes to revive te reo Māori. In 1987, Māori was finally acknowledged as an official language of New Zealand.

### Explaining and Exhibiting Urban Migration in “Ngāti Tāone”

The massive and far-reaching story of demographic change and cultural vitality presented in “Ngāti Tāone” created interpretative challenges for the exhibition’s curators and designers. But, however we told the story, Debbie Martin maintained that it was critical that “Ngati Taone” showed dynamic cultural responses to living in the city, rather than dwell on the negative consequences and concomitant, demoralizing social statistics in which Māori are disproportionately represented.<sup>11</sup>

Generally, the task of telling social history stories with objects is challenging enough. As a discipline, social history neither has a tradition of museum display nor a reliance upon it to reach its audiences—unlike art or decorative arts.<sup>12</sup> The recurring issue for social history curators always seems to be: how can material culture convey processes or abstract ideas and give form to social history concerns?<sup>13</sup> Past and present collecting priorities in the museum amplified the already tricky task of displaying the process of Māori moving to and living in the city. In particular, relatively few items connected to later twentieth-century experiences of Māori have come into Te Papa’s collections. Of those that have, very few, if any, relate directly to urbanization. This is due, in part, to the priorities of Mātauranga Māori curators who have focused, to a large extent, on the enormous task of reconnecting taonga to iwi and their whakapapa. Mass-produced, everyday objects from the last century do not seem to have the same tribal associations or genealogical and spiritual connections as older taonga. As a result, many twentieth-century objects can be trickier to accommodate within a commitment to mana taonga and cultural sovereignty.

11 Statistics that depict Māori as “failing the system” tend to be sensationalized in mainstream media, and preoccupy conservative New Zealanders without generating much analysis or informed social commentary.

12 It is worth noting, however, that through the 1970s and 1980s, it became acceptable to display ethnographic objects as art. See McCarthy (2007, 141).

13 For a discussion on this point see Ross (2007).

However, Te Papa does have a growing collection of contemporary art and craft by Māori artists, and Martin deployed her art curatorial knowledge and expertise to select art works to tell the story of “Ngāti Tāone.” Such works may be viewed as responses to urbanization and expressions of being urban Māori. For example, *The immigrants*, a painting by Robyn Kahukiwa (b. 1941, Ngāti Porou, Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti, Te Whānau-a-Ruataupare iwi) depicts a Māori family that has moved to the city. The work explores the alienation of urban Māori from each other and their iwi base and is displayed in the exhibition.

Like most Māori of his generation, leading contemporary artist Michael Parekowhai (b. 1968, Nga Ariki, Nga Whakarongo iwi) was born in the city. His piece in the exhibition, *Atarangi*, can be seen as an abstract sculpture or a Māori carving with upraised arms. Vertically, the giant, smooth, brightly coloured plastic rods form the word “HE,” which means “a” or “some” in Māori, and is a masculine pronoun in English. The sculpture’s name, *Atarangi*, is also the name of a method of teaching the Māori language. As such, the connections between Māori identity and language, reconfigured in towns and cities, are explored. This concern carries over to an audio-visual that features archival footage and contemporary interviews about the double-edged impact of city life on personal and collective Māori cultural identity.

The fact that the Māori, by the end of the twentieth century, had emerged as major players in the urban cultural and political landscape is inescapable. While *Slice of Heaven* highlights how Māori social and cultural tenacity contributed to this achievement, it can not claim to be the definitive museum exhibition on this topic. There is still scope for future exhibitions at Te Papa and elsewhere to engage with this ongoing and historically significant process.

## Conclusion

In her 1999 review of the newly opened Museum of New Zealand, historian Charlotte Macdonald noted:

That a national institution can simultaneously so thoroughly marginalise empire and embrace “race” when the two are intrinsically bound together in New Zealand’s history since the late eighteenth century signifies the complex, often contradictory, unravelling of interwoven threads of colonialism in a former settler colony at the end of the twentieth century (Macdonald 1999, 81).

This essay has touched on some of the complexities that confronted members of the *Slice of Heaven* team as they developed a social history exhibition about Māori and Pākehā in the twentieth century in a museum known for its commitment to biculturalism and, as Macdonald puts it, “unravelling the interwoven threads of colonialism.”

Because Te Papa is committed to decolonizing the museum, the exhibition team had to combine the disciplinary concerns of social history (exhibition as explanation) with the political aspirations of biculturalism (exhibition as emancipation). We also had to juggle two ways of thinking about social relations and objects.<sup>14</sup> The exhibition’s development and

---

<sup>14</sup> Social history interrogates social relations, and the distribution and exercise of power according to social categories such class, gender, and race. But as a rule, it tends to be ambivalent about material culture. The reverse is true for those who are guided by the principle of mana taonga. Taonga can not be separated from their social and genealogical relationships; they also connect the past to the present, and the tangible to the intangible.



delivery incorporated aspects of biculturalism, in that Māori protocols were followed in the gallery, the exhibition's story telling was bilingual and narrated both Māori and Pākehā historical experiences, and that most of the Māori content was developed by a Māori curator and was presented in a specially designated area. But I'm not sure that the sum of these parts was a bicultural exhibition. And, as I suggested above, the dedication of a specific area to Māori topics within *Slice of Heaven* could be considered the persistence of a particular conception of biculturalism that the exhibition was meant to address.

But, while the exhibition may have been a missed opportunity, in terms of advancing bicultural social history museological practice, *Slice Heaven* continues to make an emotional impact on visitors. One has even commented, "I never thought I would actually be moved by a museum exhibit, turns out I was wrong. Thank you for reminding me why I am so fiercely proud to be a New Zealander."<sup>15</sup>

At the beginning of this essay, I noted Te Papa's initial failure to bring Māori and Pākehā together in the same temporal world. *Slice of Heaven* attempted to rectify this using the twentieth century as an organizing principle. Perhaps more that just historical contingency is required to realize an entwined social history of Māori and Pākehā? I know that if I went back in time to curate *Slice of Heaven* again with the benefit of hindsight, I would make sure the exhibition concept combined the past with place. I would concentrate on the city, the place where the lives of Māori and Pākehā, in the second half of the twentieth century, became inextricably connected, and by doing so, perhaps push conceptions of biculturalism into new directions and uncharted territory.

---

<sup>15</sup> Visitor comment (unsigned), 13 March 2011. In the possession of the author.

## Bibliography

- Dalley, B. 2005. "The Golden Weather." In *Frontier of Dreams: The Story of New Zealand*, ed. Bronwyn Dalley and Gavin McLean, 307–35. Auckland: Hodder Moa.
- Gibbons, P. J. 1986. "A Note on Writing, Identity, and Colonisation in Aotearoa." *Sites* 13: 32–35.
- . 2002. "Cultural Colonization and National Identity." *New Zealand Journal of History* 36 (1): 5–17.
- King, M. 2003. "Return of Mana Maori," In *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, 469–87. Auckland, NZ: Penguin.
- Macdonald, C. 1999. "Race and Empire at Our Place: New Zealand's New National Museum." *Radical History Review* 75: 80–91. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/01636545-1999-75-80>
- McCarthy, C. 2007. *Exhibiting Māori: A History of Colonial Culture of Display*. Wellington, NZ: Te Papa Press.
- . 2011. *Museums and Māori: Heritage Professionals, Indigenous Collections, Current Practice*. Wellington, NZ: Te Papa Press.
- Mein Smith, P. 2005. "Treaty Revival 1974-2003," In *A Concise History of New Zealand*, 226–48. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ross, K. 2007. "Materialising Social History in Museums." *Te Ara: Journal of Museums Aotearoa* 32 (1–2): 2–5.
- Walker, R. 1992. "Māori People since 1950." In *Oxford History of New Zealand*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Geoffrey W Rice, 498–519. Auckland: Oxford University Press.