



PUAWAI CAIRNS TE PAPA DETECTIVE

BY WHITI HEREAKA

Puawai Cairns loves history. That’s why she became a curator at Te Papa Tongarewa. Puawai (Ngāti Pūkenga, Ngāti Ranginui, and Ngāiterangi) is especially interested in social history, which she says is just stories about people. As a curator, it’s Puawai’s job to tell these stories. Each one always begins with a **taonga**.

Te Papa has thousands and thousands of taonga. Some have been well researched and a lot is known about them. Others are more of a mystery – and this is when being a curator becomes a bit like being a detective. “When very little is known about a taonga,” Puawai says, “you have to ask a lot of questions to get the full story.”

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MĀTAURANGA MĀORI

Puawai is part of the team that works with Te Papa’s Mātauranga Māori collection. As the contemporary curator, she looks after taonga that date from when Captain Cook first visited Aotearoa right up to the present day. “It was a time of huge change for Māori, which is one of the reasons the taonga in our collection are so varied,” Puawai says. “We have kete and **kākahu** and medals. The collection even contains T-shirts!”

All up, there are around 35,000 objects in the Mātauranga Māori collection. Puawai says that ideally, a good curator should know something about each one of them – obviously an enormous job. “I could spend my whole life learning about our taonga Māori,” she says. “Even then, it would be impossible to cover everything.”

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THE CROSS-TREE

Because of its size, the Mātauranga Māori collection can't be on display all at once. Taonga in storage are kept in a special room that has a carefully controlled temperature. Small pieces can be found in drawers or on shelves. Very large pieces are attached to metal grills. This includes one of Puawai's favourite taonga: a long carved pole, as thick as a lamp post in the middle, with carved **manaia** at each end. Traditional **kōkōwai** has been used to paint the pole red. In some places, this paint is still as red as a tomato.

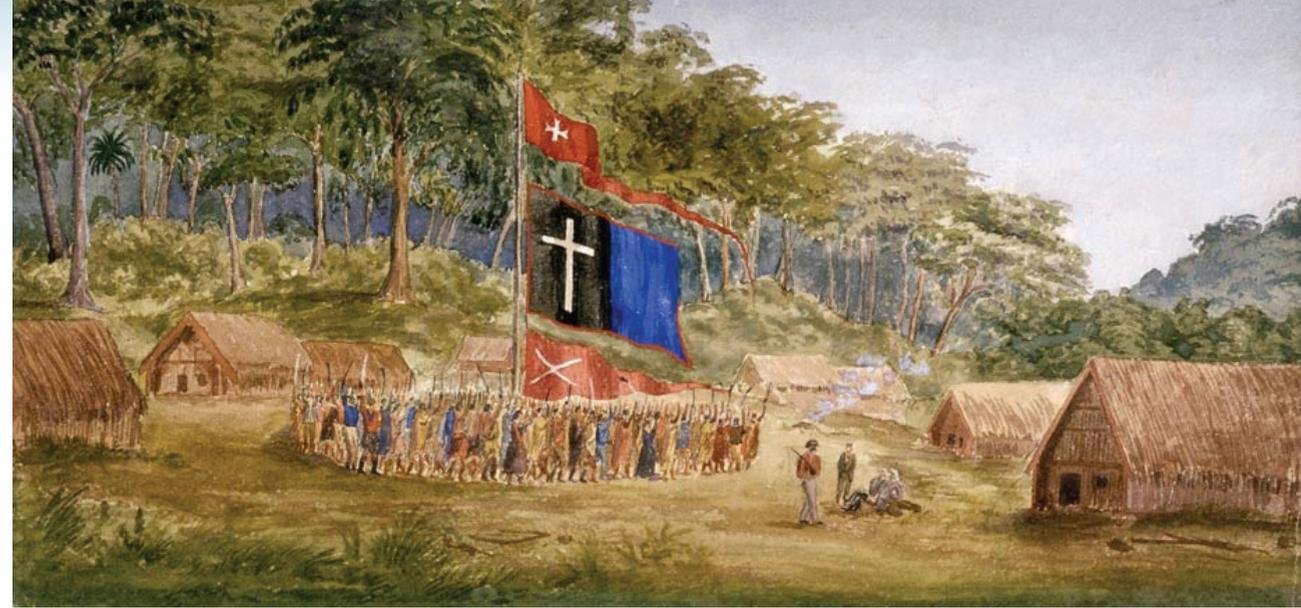
So what exactly is this pole? A ship's mast perhaps? Some kind of crane? "These are both common guesses," Puawai says, "but the pole is actually a cross-tree from a niu, which is a kind of flagpole. At one time, these niu were scattered all over the central North Island. The flags they flew made a very strong statement!"

Niu were linked to a Māori religious movement called Pai Mārire, which began in Taranaki during the New Zealand Wars. Puawai says that Taranaki Māori fought hard for their land and

independence. "Many Māori joined this new religion as a way of protesting, and so the government treated them as dangerous rebels. When soldiers stormed pā where Pai Mārire lived, their first job was to cut down the niu. Rejecting the Pākehā flag and flying your own was a big deal back then."

Puawai knows exactly how she would display the cross-tree in an exhibition. "I would make sure it was attached to a modern niu – and definitely flying a flag! That way people could see what Pai Mārire were saying and how challenging it was."

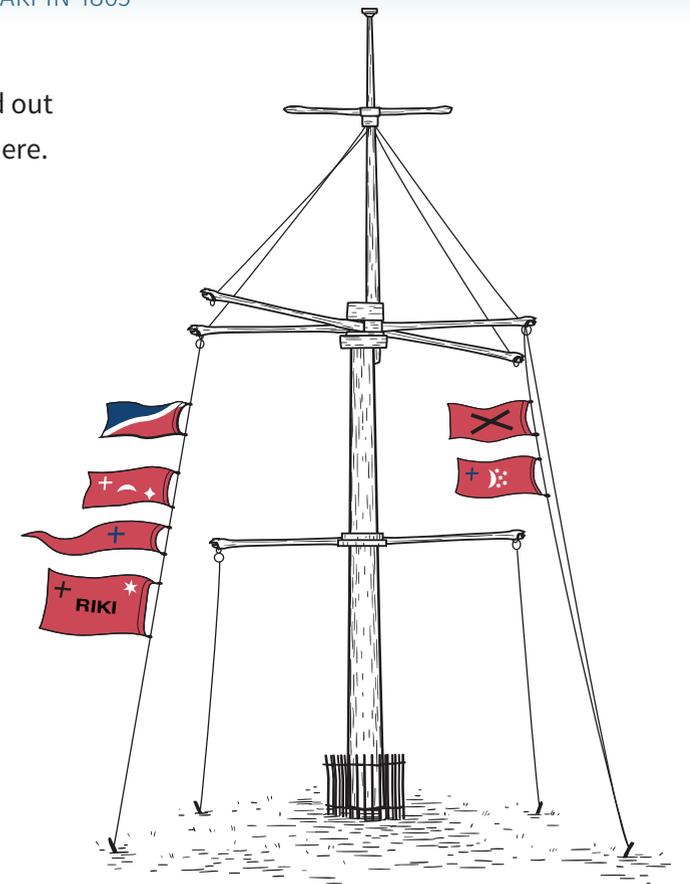
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A PAI MĀRIRE CEREMONY IN TARANAKI IN 1865

Puawai would really like to find out who carved the cross-tree and where. She knows it was bought by a collector from a place called Fort Galatea, near Murupara, in the Bay of Plenty. Soldiers in the area probably seized the cross-tree from a captured pā. To find a family connection to the carver, Puawai says she would begin her hunt in Murupara and Whakatāne.

"Imagine if the carver's whānau could see the cross-tree and know who made it," she says. "How great would that be?"



THE SKULL TIKI

In the same storage room, tucked away in a metal drawer, is a small carved object. It's about the size of Puawai's hand and very light. Puawai points out how beautifully the taonga has been carved, with **piko-o-rauru** and **rauru** patterns. There's also an old cardboard label. On one side, it reads "21. N.Z.156, Skull tiki"; on the other, there's a crown stamp and the initials "GR".

"When I first looked at this tiki," Puawai remembers, "I knew it couldn't be made from an actual human skull. Te Papa does have taonga made from human bones, but they are kept in their own special room. This tiki is also too glossy to be bone."

Puawai photographed and weighed the skull tiki. Then she examined it very carefully, noting anything that could be a clue. On the underside, she discovered cross-hatched markings. She'd seen something like these before. "When a person makes a plaster copy of a taonga, they use mesh," Puawai says. "Mesh leaves this kind of pattern."

This was proof that the skull tiki was not an original. But who had made the copy and when and why? The answer to "when" came from the label. It didn't record an actual date, but Puawai knew



that the crown stamp and initials stood for "George Rex" – or King George V, who was the king of Great Britain from 1910 to 1936. "So I knew the skull tiki was most likely made during this time," she says.

The next clue came from a book written by an anthropologist called James Edge-Partington. "He was very busy in the late 1800s, researching and drawing Pasifika and Māori taonga," Puawai explains. In this book, she discovered a sketch that matched Te Papa's skull tiki. A caption said that the original was held in the British Museum. Useful information – but this still didn't explain how the copy had come to New Zealand.



Then came more sleuthing and the final clue: a letter from the director of the Dominion Museum in Wellington to James Edge-Partington. It was written in 1909. "The museum director was very admiring of the taonga in Edge-Partington's book," says Puawai. "He wanted a copy and said he was going to request one from the British Museum."

Eventually the museum director from Wellington was rewarded with a plaster replica. "The tiki was a gift from one museum to another," Puawai says, "and I really love that. I don't think the same thing would happen these days. In fact, I'm very sure it wouldn't!"

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THE MICROPHONE

Another part of Puawai's job is to collect today's taonga for the future. This involves a bit of guesswork. "A hundred years from now, if a curator was making an exhibition about twenty-first century Māori, what would be in it?" she asks.

It's a great question, and Puawai enjoys answering it. Recently, at her suggestion, Te Papa acquired a microphone used by the reporters on Māori television. The station began broadcasting in 2004 to promote Māori language and culture and now attracts over a million viewers each month.

"Māori television has been a really important development in Aotearoa," Puawai says. "For me, the microphone is like a **tokotoko**. It shows that the reporter has authority. It's also a symbol of the freedom of the press – a promise to bring news to the people who sit watching at home."

Puawai admires the microphone collar's white-and-orange colour scheme – its mix of the old and the new. "These are not traditional Māori colours, but the koru is definitely ours."

To help future curators understand the microphone's history, Puawai will gather as much information about it as she can. "Perhaps one day it will be displayed in an exhibition about our times. Why not?"

"A **HUNDRED** YEARS FROM NOW, IF A CURATOR WAS MAKING AN EXHIBITION ABOUT **TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MĀORI**, WHAT WOULD BE IN IT?"



GLOSSARY

kākahu: a cloak

kōkōwai: paint made from ochre and animal fat

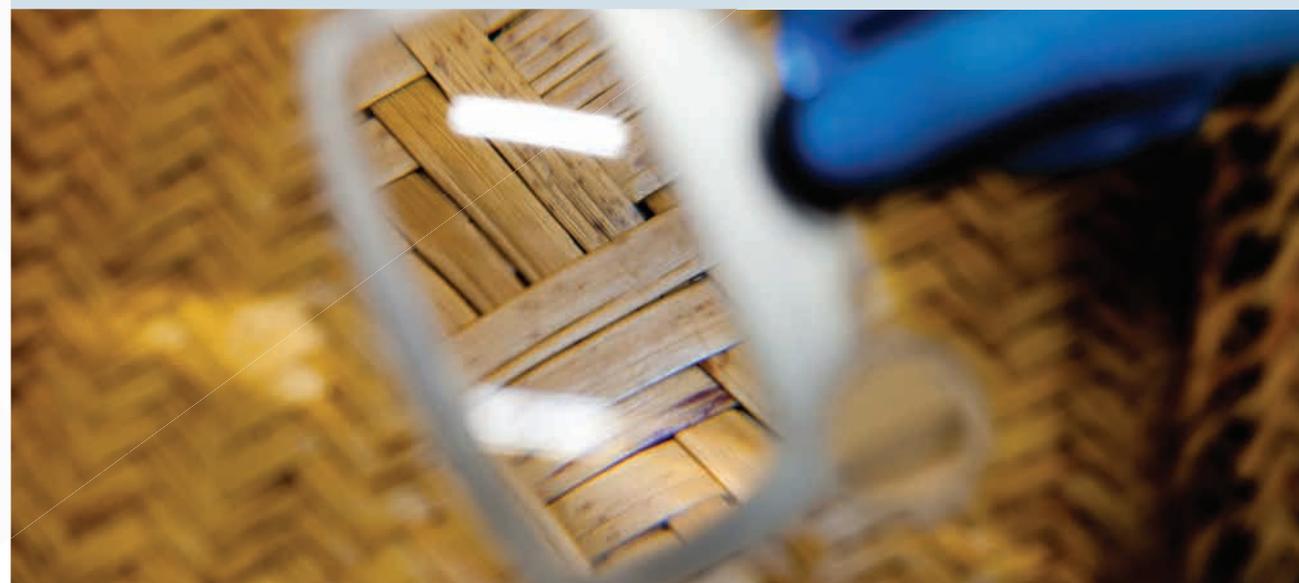
manaia: a stylised figure

piko-o-rauru: plain spirals

rauru: notched spirals

taonga: a treasured object

tokotoko: a ceremonial walking stick (and a symbol of authority on the marae)



Puawai Cairns: Te Papa Detective

by Whiti Hereaka

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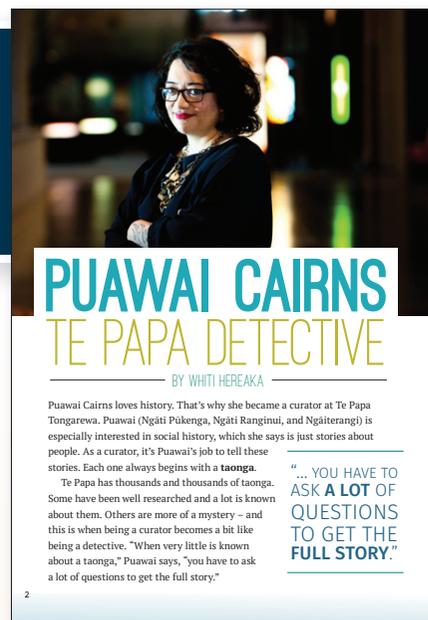
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