Biculturalism at New Zealand's National Museum. An Ethnography of Te Papa
by Tanja Schubert-McArthur
[London and New York: Routledge, 2019]

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Right now, ICOM members worldwide are in heated discussion about whether to extend the definition of a museum to include new roles: becoming democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue; acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present; guaranteeing equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people; working in active partnership with diverse communities; aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice... It will take a while before a majority of ICOM members will accept – if ever – such drastic steps, and list these aspirations as fundamental and defining characteristics of a museum.

But New Zealand already did so decades ago! On the 14 February 1998, to be precise, when the National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa was opened on the Wellington waterfront. In its very conception, in its vision and mission, in its daily practice, Te Papa was to address the social and cultural challenges of New Zealand with its majority Pakeha and minority Maori populations. Its brief was to be a bicultural institution, democratising, inclusive, polyphonic, guaranteeing access to all and contributing to human dignity. So, all these aspirations that were proposed for the new ICOM definition have long been part and parcel of Te Papa's museum paradigm.

How is it that New Zealand has been such a forerunner? The reason is simple. Maori revival was the big issue. It had gained traction with the establishment of the so-called Waitangi Tribunal in 1975. This permanent institution was to ensure that New Zealand respected the terms of the original 1840 Treaty of Waitangi in which Maori chiefs had accepted Queen Victoria as their sovereign, and the Queen in return had accepted the Maori as full-fledged citizens of the Empire. Then in 1984, the exhibition *Te Maori* was an eyeopener on Maori culture. Maori from all over the country were involved in curating this exhibition and telling their stories. It travelled to four venues in the United States, starting at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. After its tour through the US, the exhibition toured New Zealand as well, and resulted in nationwide awe and appreciation



Plate 1
CEO Seddon Bennington and Kaihautū Michelle Hippolite *hongi*.
Photograph by Te Papa, undated

of Maori culture as a living thing. Thus the idea was formed to build a new national museum that would include Maori culture on an equal footing with Pakeha (white, predominantly anglophone, immigrant) culture. In 1992, parliament adopted the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act. Building Te Papa could begin.

Biculturalism at Te Papa

The first corporate principle of Te Papa states: *Te Papa is bicultural*. This is explained as: *Biculturalism at Te Papa is the partnership between Tangata Whenua [=people of the land, Maori. SE.] and Tangata Tiriti [=people of the Treaty, Pakeha. SE] recognising the legislative, conceptual and Treaty framework within which the Museum operates as well as reflecting international developments. This framework provides the mandate for the Museum to express and celebrate the natural and cultural diversity of New Zealand. It acknowledges the unique position of Maori in Aotearoa New Zealand and the need to secure their participation in the governance, management, and operation of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.*

This was truly a very innovative endeavour. The project team for the new museum was to embark on a journey into uncharted lands, invent novel forms of co-operation and partnership and bring together two very different cultures in one institution (Plate 1). There was the Pakeha western, professional organisational culture, which is quite independent of the personal cultural background and beliefs of the staff involved. And there was Maori culture, very expressive in all its artistic forms of song, dance, prayers, talking, carving, weaving, tattooing, storytelling, *waka* and *haka* (Plates 2 and 3) and so on; and this was deeply personal, it was Maori identity itself that was at stake. How to bring about fruitful co-operation between these two cultures? How to build Te Papa? And then, how properly to manage it, go about daily operations, make exhibitions and have public programmes in a truly bicultural way?



Plate 2
Amber Aranui, Richard Wright and Khali Philip-Barbara blowing (conch shell) at a Repatriation *pōwhiri*.
Photograph by Te Papa, October, 2012.



Plate 3
Te Papa staff doing the *haka* to welcome *manuhiri* (guests).
Photograph by Te Papa, undated.



Plate 4
Te Papa's bold façade.
Photograph by Te Papa, February, 2008.

Tanja Schubert-McArthur provides answers to these questions in the book under review here: *Biculturalism at New Zealand's National Museum. An Ethnography of Te Papa*. It is based on her PhD thesis submitted to Victoria University in Wellington in 2014. The author studied anthropology and ethnology in Germany, at the University of Tübingen. Fascinated by Te Papa, she embarked on a research project to deal with Te Papa as a tribe that merits an ethnography – hence the subtitle of the book. In her fieldwork she employed all the methods that ethnologists have in their toolkit: participant observation, interviews and auto-ethnography. Over the years, Schubert-McArthur has been employed by the museum as an events supervisor, a research assistant and a tour guide, and this enabled her to participate, observe and interview over 60 colleagues and staff.

The book contains a wealth of material from all those observations and interviews. It is well organised in seven chapters plus introduction and conclusion: 'Establishing biculturalism' is about the basic setting and briefing; 'Interpreting biculturalism' is about theory versus day-to-day practice; 'Performing biculturalism' tells the fascinating story of the Te Papa *marae* – which I will address in more depth shortly; 'Learning biculturalism' explains how staff are trained in Maori language and how living Maori culture is presented to the visitor; 'Enacting biculturalism' is about organisational practice and the differences between front-of-house (TP is good at training the public) and back-of-house (TP is weak in training staff); 'Tackling biculturalism' describes culture clashes in dealing with human remains and Maori *taonga* (treasured objects); while 'Grasping biculturalism' gives some very intriguing examples of transformations in staff attitudes towards Maori culture (Plate 4).

The author illustrates in fascinating detail the complexity of the Te Papa project with the story of Te Papa's *marae* Rongomaraeroa with its meeting house Te Hono ki Hawaiki (Plate 5). A *marae* is a traditional Maori meeting house, often with beautiful carvings and weavings. It is at the very heart of the land of an *iwi*, the people of a certain piece of land. Here all events take place, meetings, decision taking, ceremonies. Every *marae* has its own strict protocol, the *marae kawa*. Maori master carver and artist, Cliff Whiting, was the first *Kaihautu* (Maori co-director) and member of the first project team for the construction of Te Papa, and it fell upon him to build a dedicated *marae* for Te Papa. It was to be a *marae* for all, for Maori of all *iwi*, for Pakeha New Zealanders, for the visitors to Te Papa. The architects had positioned the *marae* on the roof of the building, it was going to be the *marae of the sky*. This architectural solution had been made possible through an agreement with the local *iwi* at Wellington waterfront. Since the *marae* was not on their lands but in the sky, and since the Te Papa building was constructed on isolators that protected it against earthquakes, the argument was accepted by the local *iwi* that this *marae* could not have a say about



Plate 5
Te Papa's *marae* Rongomaraeroa with the contemporary meeting house Te Hono ki Hawaiki, on level four is part of the museum.
Photograph by Te Papa, undated.

the waterfront lands on which Te Papa was built. The next question then was to define which *iwi* would set the rules, the *kawa* for the Te Papa *marae*. In the documentary film about the making of Te Papa, there is a fascinating clash between Whiting and the Pakeha chairman about whether English would be an accepted language at the *marae* and whether women would be allowed to speak as well as men. This was just not done in any *marae*. And yet it was unacceptable to the chairman to have a *marae* where a female CEO of Te Papa would not be allowed to speak in her native tongue. This was just one of the many dilemmas that had to be overcome. Cynical remarks from outsiders may have made things even more difficult, such as this comment by a Maori woman on Te Papa's staff: *When a museum says to a tribe what you should be doing on the marae… hello? That's not bicultural!* Heated discussions may have made it difficult at times to retain confidence in the process. It was the generosity of Cliff Whiting and his fellow Maori leaders and their dedication to the project that provided the stamina to find ways out of these dilemmas. And even now, negotiations have not ended. Each time there is a novel event at the *marae*, the resident *iwi* (changing every two years) and the *marae* coordinator have to again define what is the proper Te Papa way of going about things [Plate 6].

Another basic choice, made at the very outset of the project, was the decision that Te Papa would also be bilingual. I remember well from my first visit to Te Papa back in 2002 that there was a long welcome speech in Maori by the *Kaihautu*. Of which I did not understand a word, and neither did many of the Pakeha guests in the audience. The speech was then repeated in English. The implications of this basic choice are phenomenal. With Maori language come Maori concepts and customs, and they have become the backbone of Te Papa's museology. Tanja Schubert-McArthur provides a six page glossary of Maori technical terms that one needs to understand how Te Papa operates. And in some areas, this is quite different from standard western museum practice.



Plate 6
Te Papa staff singing a *waiata Māori* song during a farewell.
Photographer: Tanja Schubert-McArthur, undated.

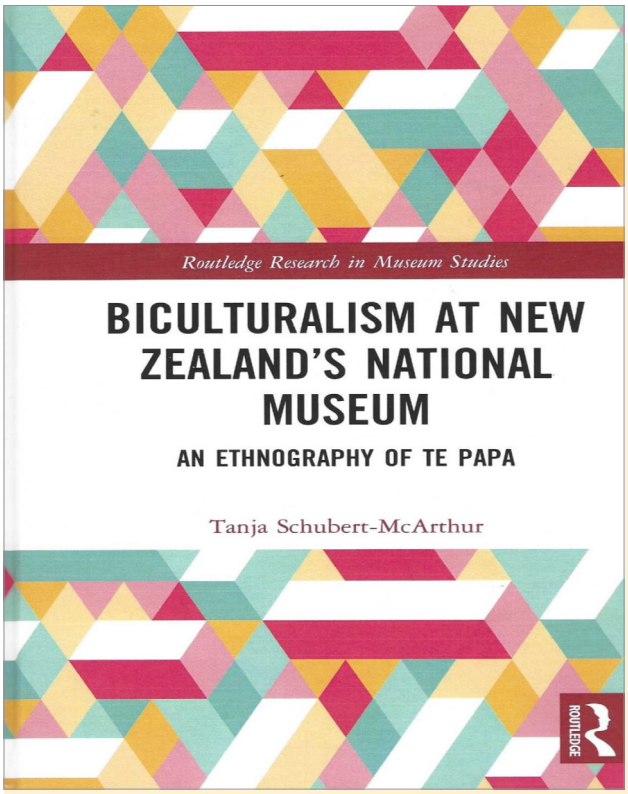
As Schubert-McArthur explains the most striking difference is in the way Te Papa deals with collections. This is laid down in Corporate Principle number two: *Te Papa acknowledges Mana Taonga. Te Papa recognises the role of communities in enhancing the care and understanding of collections and taonga.* Museum objects are not viewed as lifeless material objects, but as spirited, animated treasures, that connect people of today with their ancestors; they are called *taonga*. *Taonga* can be embraced, talked to, sung to, wept with, touched, sprinkled with water, used in ceremonies etc.. They have to be kept in special storage, depending on the type of object and the type of spirits that are housed in them. Access to storage is limited; in particular, menstruating or pregnant women are not allowed to enter. The author documents how this situation has given rise to enormous clashes and public rows, in the media, in parliament. It is the effect of adopting a different set of rules, another paradigm in collections management. Those in charge have to be well trained and skilled in intercultural communication, and public relations.

Conclusions

Tanja Schubert-McArthur concludes her study by characterising Te Papa as a 'contact zone' in the sense described by James Clifford. A contact zone between Maori and Pakeha, between colonised and colonisers, where they can work together and have meaningful relationships they might otherwise not have had. And on closer examination, there are a great range of different contact zones in Te Papa, between front-of-house and back-of-house. And in these different contact zones, biculturalism has different faces, which range from simply singing and dancing together to the

transfer of rights and power. *Biculturalism* – she states – *is a necessary phase on the journey of moving away from monocultural institutions towards indigenous empowerment, a journey ultimately bound for Maori self-determination*. And here Te Papa is one of the nation's main contact zones, where Maori and non-Maori interact in a safe environment and create moments of great empowerment.

This is a very fine book with important lessons for museums that try to become truly inclusive institutions. In doing so, they should keep in mind the main lesson and conclusion of this book: *Biculturalism is not a state but a process that needs constant debate and negotiation, because the moment we proclaim 'we are bicultural' is probably the moment when the concept collapses.*



Post Scriptum

This book has one very serious flaw. For reasons beyond my understanding, the publisher, Routledge, has decided to eliminate the bibliography. This omission makes the hard-cover book virtually useless. It has 640 footnotes, which reflect the meticulous research that the author has done. They refer to over 600 sources. But because of the lack of a bibliography, these cannot be identified. For those who have the book in hand and want to find the references, I can only advise that they contact the author directly at: tanja.schubert-mcarthur@dia.govt.nz She promises to send the bibliography by email straight away. Thankfully, I have been informed that the e-book version has not suffered the same fate.