JADE HADFIELD | NGĀTI KAHUNGUNU, NGĀTI WHĀTUA KI KAIPARA

Honouring ancestors: A Māori approach to the Moana Wansolwara Collection at Museums Victoria

Pepeha

Maunganui ki tai,
titiro ki ua ki Tutamoe,
tapapa iho ki waenganui,
ko toku awa korero,
ko Kai hu e rere ana.
ko Jade Hadfield toku ingoa.

Maunganui stands to the tide,
looking inland to our mountain Tutamoe,
down to my speaking river that flows on, Kaihu.
My name is Jade Hadfield.

For many non-Indigenous people, it is hard to grasp what it is like for Indigenous people to walk into collection stores. There is a common misconception that these items are just objects — no different from a random piece of wood on a shelf. For Indigenous peoples, museum collection stores are not just repositories of objects; they are spaces of deep ancestral presence and responsibility. Taonga, or cultural treasures, are our ancestors, and we see them lying dormant in cold museum collection stores.[1]

Within the Moana Wansolwara Collection (previously called the Pacific Cultures Collection), currently housed at Museums Victoria, lies approximately 20,000 cultural items and over 8,000 images representing the deep whakapapa (genealogy) of peoples from the Great Ocean.[2] These taonga carry the stories and mauri (life principle) of our tīpuna (ancestors), woven into their craftsmanship, their purpose and their journey across time. However, the way these taonga came to be held in a colonial institution reflects a history of invasion, extraction and disruption.

1 'Our' and 'we' referring to myself and the collective communities from the Moana.

2 Allen, L., & Gillespie, R. (2012). *Collection plan: Pacific cultures 2013-8*.

The historical disposition of these cultural items traces back to the 1860s, initiated by Sir Redmond Barry's collection of objects from Fiji. Over the years, missionaries, colonial administrators, anthropologists and traders have amassed taonga, often devoid of the maker's name or the guardianship of their rightful keepers. Some items entered collections through trade or coercion, and many as spoils of war. Despite the colonial legacy tethered to these items, they persist as living embodiments of our ancestry, imbued with mātauranga (knowledge). These treasures serve as cultural markers associated with place, time and familial ties, bridging the generational divide while embodying the interwoven trade networks that flourished across the Great Ocean. The collection spans items ranging from finely woven feathered cloaks of Aotearoa to tapa cloths from the broader Moana (Great Ocean), intricate navigational charts from Micronesia and sacred Malangan masks from New Ireland. The collection also encompasses over 550 waka (canoes) and paddles, symbols of our enduring voyaging expertise, which continue to connect us across extensive waters. Ultimately, this collection transcends mere archival status; it embodies a living expression of our past, present and future. The museum houses these taonga physically, but their wairua (spirit) remains in need of nurture, and this can be achieved by connecting the collection to community.

The Moana has long been a place of mythmaking, with stories of Western imaginings, exotic dusky maidens and discovery, when in fact it is a place where we have navigated, traded, loved and practiced culture for thousands of years.[3] It is often misconceived in Western discourse as small and isolated; however, scholars such as Epeli Hau'ofa remind us that we hail from the Moana — a network of islands threaded together by vast oceans — asserting a kinship that encompasses a third of the world's surface.[4] Pasifika communities reflect the rich diversity and uniqueness of their ocean island homes, each with its own culture, language and traditions. Engaging with the Moana Wansolwara Collection in a Victorian context is essential for cultural continuance, community wellbeing and the ongoing development, maintenance and care of these collections.

As a wahine Māori (Māori woman) from Aotearoa New Zealand, raised on whenua (land/Country) by my grandparents, who imparted to me the teachings of tikanga (correct procedures), I use this knowledge to navigate both the physical and spiritual realms that the taonga occupies. When caring for the Moana Wansolwara collection, my approach is rooted in the principles of tikanga, mauri (life principle) and the dual concepts of tapu (sacredness) and noa (free from tapu). Tikanga serves as a vital framework, guiding my interactions and providing the necessary protocols for honouring our ancestral items. The notion of mauri is essential to fostering relationships with taonga, understanding them as living entities rather than static items.

At the heart of this approach lies the concept of kaitiakitanga, an Indigenous philosophy of guardianship that underscores the interconnectedness defining all

3 Eshrāghi, L. (2022). *Indigenous aesthetics and knowledges for Great Ocean renaissances*. Common Room;
Lopesi, L. (2018). *False divides*. Bridget Williams Books; and
Tamaira, A.M. (2010). From full dusk to full tusk: Reimagining the 'dusky maiden' through the visual arts. *The Contemporary Pacific, 22*(1), 1–35. https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.0.0087

4 Finney, B. (2002). The other one-third of the globe. In F. Spier & P. W. Blank (Eds.), *Defining the Pacific: Opportunities and constraints* (pp. 25–50). Routledge.

existence. In the museum collection context, kaitiaki (guardians) serve as carers, bridging the physical and spiritual realms while safeguarding not only the cultural objects but the communities they are connected to. This guardianship entails a profound responsibility to maintain a living connection between people and their taonga, preserving the emotional and spiritual bonds that connect us to our ancestors and their legacies.

To navigate this complex landscape, I employ wayfinding methodology, a cultural practice steeped in ancestral navigation techniques, which enables respectful engagement. This methodology is not simply about movement through physical spaces; it embodies adaptability, collaborative processes and a deep respect for whakapapa. By utilising this practice, I aspire to promote an environment grounded in cultural safety, where Pasifika needs are acknowledged and centred.

This autoethnographic paper emerges from a distinctly Māori perspective and represents my approach to the Moana Wansolwara Collection through the intertwined frameworks of tikanga, mauri, tapu and noa, kaitiakitanga, and wayfinding methodologies — all underpinned by a robust cultural safety framework. By embedding these principles in my engagement, I aim to centre Pasifika people and culture while honouring our ancestors and indigenising museum practices.

Moana Wansolwara

Indigeneity serves as the nucleus of my life and work — an effort aimed at centring our narratives while moving away from imposed colonial lexicons. Language is inherently tied to the process of indigenisation of cultural domains, shaping our identity and the way our stories are told.[5] A crucial aspect of working with our collection at Museums Victoria was selecting a name that appropriately reflected and centred indigeneity, with a deliberate shift towards prioritising language. During the Te Pasifika Redevelopment Project at Museums Victoria (2018–20), we sought a name for the collection that truly represented the people of Oceania — one that foregrounded our language and identity. This aligned with a broader regional movement to move away from imposed names and reclaim our own narratives.

For example, during a talanoa (open, inclusive dialogue) held in Aotearoa for the Creative New Zealand-funded exploration of the publication *Crafting Aotearoa: A cultural history of making in New Zealand and the wider Moana Oceania*, significant discourse emerged regarding the nomenclature attached to our oceanic realms. While the term Moana (Great Ocean) resonates across various Pacific nations, its applicability diminishes in the face of the region's linguistic diversity. The editors noted that '*Moana means ocean in Māori and connects to other islands such as the Cook Islands, Hawai'i, Sāmoa and Tonga*,'[6] though this does not capture the entirety of Oceania's linguistic richness. Here in Victoria, this same conversation emerged during the Te Pasifika Redevelopment Project. Voices, particularly from the Papua New Guinea diaspora,

5 Parajuli, B. (2021). Role of language in shaping cultural identity. *Marsyangdi Journal, 2*, (pp. 112–18) https://doi.org/10.3126/mj.v2i1.39970; Smith, L. T. (2015). Kaupapa Māori research — some Kaupapa Māori principles. In L. Pihama & K. South (Eds.), *Kaupapa Rangahau: A reader.: A collection of readings from the Kaupapa Maori research workshop series* (pp. 46–52). Te Kotahi Research Institute.

6 Chitham, K., Skinner, D., & Uafā Māhina-Tuai, K. (n.d.). *Why "Moana Oceania"?*. Lagi-Maama Academy & Consultancy.

articulated a kinship with the term 'Wansolwara' — translated as 'one saltwater'. Following extensive consultation, including discussions with key Elders from the Victoria-based Papua New Guinea community, the collective consensus designated the name Moana Wansolwara (Great Ocean One Saltwater) as a more inclusive representation for a region encompassing over 2,500 languages. This movement to prioritise Indigenous languages and worldviews reflects a growing trend across institutions. The Australian Museum adopted a similar term, Wansolmoana (one salt ocean) to honour Indigenous perspectives, indicating a broader shift towards reclaiming identity and recognition of our communities' connectedness throughout Te Moana Nui a Kiwa (the Great Ocean). In addition to recentring language, Indigenous concepts and practices are also necessary when considering the Moana Wansolwara Collection.

Figure 1: Moana Wansolwara Collection, 2025. Moana Wansolwara Collection, Museums Victoria; photographer: Gregory Doyle.

Kaitiakitanga: guardianship and responsibility within te ao Māori (Māori worldview)

Kaitiakitanga, a fundamental Māori principle of guardianship and sustainability, plays a vital role in preserving the cultural and spiritual significance of taonga. Our worldview posits that interconnectedness defines all existence, shaping our understanding of the natural world through the interplay of Papatūānuku (Earth Mother), Ranginui (Sky Father), and their descendants, including Tangaroa (guardian of the oceans). These atua (deities) oversee different aspects of nature, and as ira tangata (humans), we are entrusted with the role of kaitiaki — caretakers responsible for protecting and sustaining the land, waters and all living things.

Kaitiakitanga is an active, intergenerational responsibility. It is guided by mātauranga Māori (traditional Māori knowledge), which is passed down through observation, experience and a profound connection to place. This knowledge informs careful resource management, ensuring a balance between use and preservation so that future generations can continue to thrive.

An essential part of kaitiakitanga is the connection between people and their taonga. In a museum setting, maintaining a meaningful connection between people and their taonga requires recognising the deep interrelationship between tāngata (people) and their environment. This perspective reflects both a spiritual duty and a practical responsibility to care for cultural heritage, the land and its resources, ensuring that future generations continue to benefit from this stewardship.[7]

Museums serve a multifaceted role in this context. As custodians of taonga, museums are not only responsible for preservation but also function as spaces for cultural engagement. By facilitating access and connection to taonga, the museum can eventually provide the opportunity for Pasifika to exercise kaitiakitanga through the repatriation and care of their taonga.[8] Involving communities in the processes of curation and display enhances the narratives surrounding taonga, reinforcing the principles of kaitiakitanga — particularly the emphasis on interconnectedness between all life forms.[9]

Furthermore, addressing the colonial legacies embedded in museum practices and elevating Indigenous perspectives allows these institutions to move beyond preservation alone. By actively promoting tikanga Māori (Māori customs and values) and Indigenous self-determination, museums not only safeguard cultural heritage but also empower communities to reclaim and share their histories on their own terms.[10]

7 McAllister, T., Hikuroa, D., & Macinnis-Ng, C. (2023). Connecting science to Indigenous knowledge: Kaitiakitanga, conservation, and resource management. *New Zealand Journal of Ecology, 47*(1). https://doi.org/10.20417/nzjecol.47.3521;
Pomare, M. (2006). Kaitiakitanga: Mā te whānau tonu pea, e taurima? In E. Moore (Ed.), *Puna maumahara: Rōpu tuku iho repositories* (pp. 8–22). Te Wānanga o Raukawa;
Walker, E., Jowett, T., Whaanga, H., & Wehi, P. (2024). Cultural stewardship in urban spaces: Reviving Indigenous knowledge for the restoration of nature. *People and Nature, 6*(4), 1696–712. https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10683

8 Hutchings, J., Smith, J., Taura, Y., Harmsworth, G., & Awatere, S. (2020). Storying kaitiakitanga: Exploring kaupapa Māori land and water food stories. *MAI Journal, 9*(3), 183–94. https://doi.org/10.20507/MAIJournal.2020.9.3.1; Nolan, S. R. (2022). Kaitiakitanga: Utilising Māori holistic conservation in heritage institutions. *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies, 20*(1). https://doi.org/10.5334/jcms.215

9 Te Aika, B., Liggins, L., Rye, C., Perkins, E. O., Huh, J., Brauning, R., Godfery, T., & Black, M. A. (2023). Aotearoa genomic data repository: An āhuru mōwai for taonga species sequencing data. *Molecular Ecology Resources, 25*(2). https://doi.org/10.1111/1755-0998.13866

10 Rameka, L. K., Soutar, B., Clayton, L., & Card, A. (2022). Whakapūmau te mana: Implications for early childhood practice. *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work*, 19(1), 46–61. https://doi.org/10.24135/teacherswork.v19i1.340; Virens, A. (2023). From the mountains to the sea — Ki uta ki tai: Ecological enclosure, interconnection, and subjectivity in the commons. *Antipode, 55*(4), 1275–93. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12931

Figure 2: Kaitiaki, 2025. Moana Wansolwara Collection, Museums Victoria; photographer: Gregory Doyle.

Figure 3: Sharing mauri with a nineteenth century kaitaka (a type of highly prized Māori cloak), 2025. Moana Wansolwara Collection, Museums Victoria; photographer: Gregory Doyle.

At its core, the practice of kaitiakitanga in museums embodies the principle of relational stewardship — a recognition that every taonga is not just an artefact, but a living connection to ancestors, identity and the natural world.

Caring for our ancestors, navigating the sacred: tikanga, mauri, tapu and noa

Tikanga encapsulates the essence of doing things correctly,[11] implying a philosophy rooted in ethics and the management of relationships within collective frameworks. It illustrates how groups can interact harmoniously and outlines the ways individuals define their identities. This framework of conduct is essential for nurturing the living connections we maintain with the taonga in our care.

The interconnectedness of tikanga, mauri, tapu and noa forms a crucial framework within Māori philosophy and cultural practices. Tikanga, often defined as the customary norms and values of Māori society, serves as the guiding framework for understanding mauri, tapu — the sacred life force inherent in all beings — and the concept of noa, which represents the state of being free from restrictions or sacredness. This relationship emphasises the importance of balance and context in Māori worldviews that govern daily life and cultural practices.[12]

The concept of mauri, often viewed as the essence of life itself, is central to our role as guardians, underscoring the importance of keeping the spirit alive.[13] I envision mauri as a luminous thread interconnecting all life forms — spanning beings, flora, oceans and land — bridging existence across the cosmos. The concept of mauri is reflected throughout the Moana, as Elsdon Best demonstrated by collecting and publishing an array of languages that connect throughout Samoa, Tahiti, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.[14] Taonga, perceived as living entities, are imbued with the mauri of their creators or those who share an indelible connection to them.

Woven throughout this discourse is the delicate balance between tapu and noa. Within the Moana Wansolwara Collection, this intersection demands a deep awareness of the spiritual presence embedded within taonga. I approach this with the same reverence I would an urupā (Māori family cemetery), acknowledging ancestral spirits and recognising that museum practices must navigate both tapu and noa with care.

Tapu is intrinsic to both taonga and people, binding them to their whakapapa and the natural world. For this reason, preparation before entering such sacred spaces is essential. When guiding community members through collection store visits, I emphasise the importance of protection, both physical and spiritual, ensuring they are emotionally prepared before encountering their ancestral cultural items. This preparation may include offering an opportunity for karakia (an incantation) or a clearing ritual, creating a conduit for spiritual guidance and protection. Given the

11 Mead, S. (2003). *Tikanga Māori: Living by Māori values*. Huia Publishers.

12 Dell, K., Staniland, N., & Nicholson, A. (2018). Economy of mana: Where to next? *MAI Journal: A New Zealand Journal of Indigenous Scholarship, 7*(1). https://doi.org/10.20507/maijournal.2018.7.1.5;
Lyver, P. O'B., Richardson, S. J., Gormley, A. M., Timoti, P., Jones, C. J., & Tahi, B. L. (2018). Complementarity of Indigenous and Western scientific approaches for monitoring forest state. *Ecological Applications, 28*(7), 1909–23. https://doi.org/10.1002/eap.1787

13 Barlow, C. (1990). *Tikanga whakaaro: Key concepts in Māori culture*. Oxford University Press;
Best, E. (1954). *Spiritual and mental concepts of the Māori*. Dominion Museum;
Hēnare, M. (2015). Tapu, mana, mauri, hau, wairua: A Māori philosophy of vitalism and cosmos. In C. Spiller & R. Wolfgramm (Eds.), *Indigenous spiritualities at work: Transforming the spirit of enterprise* (pp. 77–98). Information Age Publishing;

14 Best, E. (1954).

diversity of beliefs among Pasifika peoples, this process remains flexible and inclusive, respecting different practices while fostering a collective experience.

Handling taonga also requires mindfulness. While touch can facilitate the sharing of mauri, it is equally important to acknowledge the histories and potential tapu that may accompany these objects, potentially unsettling the taonga and any unwanted energy.[15] Beyond spiritual considerations, there are also physical safety concerns, including awareness of historic pesticide treatments. Respectful interaction is always encouraged, but the unknown aspects surrounding each item warrant careful consideration. Individuals are empowered to make informed choices about their engagement — whether by wearing gloves or handling taonga directly in accordance with their own cultural protocols.

Water plays a vital role in our ceremonies, neutralising tapu and restoring balance.[16] As we exit the collection store, we perform a cleansing ritual, dipping our hands in a wairua or whakanoa bowl and flicking water over ourselves, particularly the head, to transition from the sacred back to a state of noa.

Just as tikanga guides the respectful handling of taonga within collection spaces, my engagement with these collections and people is deeply relational with spiritual responsibilities, utilising Indigenous methodologies. By centring tikanga, mauri, tapu and noa, we uphold Indigenous frameworks that honour the living presence of cultural materials and the people connected to them. These protocols guide us in fostering respectful and spiritually safe encounters within the collection space. As kaitiaki, we are not only preserving taonga but sustaining the interconnected relationships that give them life, meaning and mana across generations.

Wayfinding methodologies: Navigating cultural spaces

My engagement with collections is shaped by whakapapa, whenua and the communities connected to these taonga. It is not just about physical or spiritual dimensions but about the enduring connections between people — past, present and future. Navigating these relationships requires care and cultural awareness, particularly within a diverse landscape of over 2,500 languages. To do this, I use wayfinding methodology in a metaphorical sense to help navigate the spaces between taonga, people, the physical and the spiritual. Wayfinding methodology draws on the ancestral knowledge of the navigators that guided people of the Moana across vast oceans and continues to shape how we move through the world today.

In this context, wayfinding is more than navigation; it is a way of fostering relationships between people, communities and institutions. When engaging with Pasifika communities in collection spaces, I embrace a process of ongoing kōrero (open dialogue), where perspectives are shared and trust is built over time. These encounters are not isolated interactions but part of a broader commitment to meaningful engagement, guided by wayfinding values.

Wayfinding is about instinct and flexibility: being able to read emotions and then adapt quickly if necessary. The concept of na'au — trusting instinct, emotion

15 Pomare, M. (2006).

16 Mead, S. (2003).

and intuition — reminds us that knowledge is not purely intellectual but also felt.[17] In museum spaces, this means working across different knowledge systems, fostering inclusive spaces and ensuring that relationships are nurtured with integrity and care.

Values that guide a wayfinding approach

A set of core wayfinding values underpins my approach to this work, ensuring that engagement with collections is guided by respect, responsibility and connection.

- **Humārietanga:** humility.
- **Rangatiratanga:** inspirational leadership, weaving people together to work cohesively.[18]
- **Manaakitanga:** nurturing relationships, looking after people and being very careful about how others are treated.
- **Kaitiakitanga:** our role of stewardship. It is interconnectedness — our kinship with people and environment, and the maintenance of that kinship.[19]
- **Wairuatanga:** awareness and navigation of the spiritual and physical realms.
- **Aroha:** often interpreted as love. Tai, cited in Spiller, defines aroha as a composite of aro (the life principle, thought),[20] ro (introspection, within) and ha (life force, breath). A mindful concept connected to our life force, the breath.

These values shape how I engage with communities, institutions and taonga, ensuring that relationships are built on mutual understanding and shared responsibility. Wayfinding is not just about reaching a destination; it is about the journey itself — one that is guided by the wisdom of those who have come before us and the aspirations of those who will follow. These values not only guide my engagement with communities and taonga but also inform broader practices of cultural safety.

Cultural safety: a framework for engagement

To provide clear guidance for culturally safe engagement, *We are the Ocean: A methodology for cultural safety and care of Moana Wansolwara Cultures Collections at Museums Victoria* was co-developed with Erina McCann as a living, evolving document created for the Te Pasifika Redevelopment Project at Museums Victoria. The document serves as a cultural safety framework guiding the care and management of the Moana Wansolwara Collection. It is grounded in ocean-centric and relational worldviews, recognising the diversity of Pasifika cultures and challenging the misconception of a singular 'Pacific' identity.

At its core, the framework prioritises community collaboration and embeds Indigenous knowledge systems, ensuring cultural collections are maintained in ways that honour their spiritual, historical and relational significance. *We are the Ocean*

17 Thompson, N. (n.d.). *On Wayfinding*. https://archive.hokulea.com/ike/hookele/on_wayfinding.html, accessed 8 March 2025.
18 Spiller, C., Barclay-Kerr, H., & Panoho, J. (2015). *Wayfinding leadership: Ground-breaking wisdom for developing leaders*. Huia Publishers.
19 Spiller, C. et al. (2015).
20 Spiller, C. et al. (2015).

shifts museum practice away from rigid, Western methodologies, instead embracing orality, reciprocity and holistic engagement with Moana Wansolwara communities.

Key themes of *We are the Ocean* include:

- **Holism:** recognising the interconnectedness of people, land, sea and spirit.
- **Relationality:** valuing the sacred connections between people, ancestors and objects.
- **Reciprocity and respect:** ensuring mutual exchange, ethical stewardship and cultural sensitivity.
- **Indigenous knowledge systems:** centring Indigenous philosophies like teu le va (Samoan concept of nurturing relationships) and mauri (Māori concept of life force) to guide collection care.

The framework ensures that connection to taonga is a dynamic and inclusive practice, and that Moana Wansolwara people have agency over the preservation and representation of their cultural heritage. It is envisioned as a guiding document that will continuously evolve in response to community needs, integral to the cultural safety of individuals.

Conclusion

In honouring the taonga within the Moana Wansolwara Collection at Museums Victoria, this paper has underscored the significance of using Māori concepts, wayfinding methodologies and cultural safety to navigate the collection and reconnect community, ensuring the care and respect of taonga within museum spaces and the people they are connected to. These cultural treasures are more than objects; they are living embodiments of whakapapa, carrying the mauri of our ancestors and the histories of our interconnected oceanic communities. The importance of maintaining kaitiakitanga through culturally grounded practices has been highlighted as an essential approach to sustaining both the physical and spiritual integrity of these collections.

By embedding Indigenous values such as manaakitanga, whanaungatanga and wairuatanga into museum practices, we can move beyond colonial frameworks of collection management towards a more holistic and respectful model of care. This approach not only centres Pasifika voices and worldviews but also strengthens community ties and affirms the sovereignty of Indigenous knowledge systems.

Through the Moana Wansolwara Collection, narratives are reclaimed, reinforcing the deep spiritual connections between people and their taonga. By embracing tikanga, wayfinding values and centring indigeneity, we honour our ancestors, uphold our responsibilities as guardians and ensure that taonga remain a source of identity, knowledge and inspiration for future generations. The work of indigenising museum spaces is ongoing, but as long as our taonga are housed within museums, we need to care for their physical and spiritual aspects, reflecting their enduring cultural and spiritual significance.