



Press statement

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Ancestral panel returns to Māori after 250 years

The University of Tübingen returns the exquisitely carved ancestral panel to the Māori in New Zealand. The British seafarer James Cook brought it to Europe just over 250 years ago.

The ancestral panel is called „Pou of Hinematiaro“ and embodies the living presence of the ruler Hinematiaro. She lived over 250 years ago at the time of Captain James Cook’s first landing in New Zealand, and was regarded as a charismatic leader. The British seafarer and his crew brought the ‘Pou of Hinematiaro’ to London in 1771. From there it took a circuitous route to the ethnology collection of the University of Tübingen. The University of Tübingen returns the Pou to the Māori-Community Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti most probably in March.

The Pou facilitates a spiritual connection to the ancestors

The Pou is one meter high and 33 centimeters wide, and was carved from Canarywood using stone tools. It shows a standing figure, with ornamentation and elaborately fluted patterns adorning the tongue, face and body. A pou is traditionally kept in the religious meeting house of the Māori, the wharehau, and enables a spiritual connection to their ancestors. The good condition of the Pou of Hinematiaro and the community’s ties to the portrait sculpture over continents and centuries make it unique.

Responsibility for the past

The Baden-Württemberg science minister **Petra Olschowski** said: „There are still numerous cultural belongings from colonial contexts to be found in our museums as well as in our university collections which were appropriated in ways no longer ethically justifiable. I am glad that the committees of the University are aware of their historical responsibility and decided to return the sculpture. At the same time, this decision provides the conditions for a dialogue based on partnership with the community and partners in New Zealand.“

The president of the University of Tübingen, Prof. **Karla Pollmann**, said: „The Pou and its history has led to a long-standing relationship between the Māori community of Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti and

the University of Tübingen. We want to cultivate this relationship and make a positive contribution to the return of museum pieces to countries with a colonial past.“

Victor Walker, speaker of the Māori-Community Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti, said: „The Pou represents our paramount leader Hinematiaro and her ancestral line back to the birth of our community. The Pou transmits the life force, or mauri. When we touch it or are close to it, we can sense the breath and the presence of our ancestors and feel alive.“ The community is based in Ūawa on the east coast of the North Island, and like every Māori-Community has several pou in its meeting house.

How did the Pou come to be aboard the Endeavour?

The British seafarer Captain James Cook landed in New Zealand on October 8, 1769. In the two days after his arrival his crew shot several Māori and then sailed 60 kilometers further north to Ūawa (Tolaga Bay). There, they received a peaceful welcome from the Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti people and their then leader, Hinematiaro. How the Pou came to leave on Captain James Cook's ship, the Endeavour, is unrecorded and unknown.

Captain James Cook sailed back to London bearing the Pou in 1771. The carved wooden panel of the ancestress later passed to a private collector in Vienna and from there to the ethnology collection of the University of Tübingen in 1937, after which it was forgotten for decades. In the 1990s, the curator of the collection, Dr. Volker Harms, rediscovered the sculpture, researched its origin and made contact with New Zealand. “We could barely believe that after all these years and travel the Pou had survived,” recalled Victor Walker. In 2008 the first delegation of the Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti, including Victor Walker, traveled to Tübingen, and paid their respects to the Pou.

Debate on the provenance of cultural belongings

In the following years a worldwide debate arose concerning the origin of cultural belongings in European museums. Many items had come into the hands of European collectors and museums through violence during the colonial era, and their local communities and the governments of their countries were demanding their return. Delegations from Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti regularly visit the Pou in Tübingen – emphasizing the importance of the carved sculpture to the community. In 2019 both sides decided on a temporary loan. And so, for a couple of months from October 2019, the Pou of Hinematiaro could once again be seen in the meeting house of the Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti in Ūawa.

In 2024 the New Zealand government formally requested the repatriation of Te Pou o Hinematiaro. Once again, Victor Walker traveled to Tübingen to see the Pou with a delegation in October 2025. He was also accompanied by a school group. The Māori delegation performed a

haka, their traditional dance, in the Museum at Hohentübingen Castle, where the Pou currently forms the heart of the jointly curated exhibition “Te Pou o Hinematiaro. Celebrating Māori Heritage, Culture and Connection”. The exhibition closes on 29 March.

„We’re delighted that the Pou will soon be returning to New Zealand,” said Professor **Ernst Seidl**, director of the Museum of the University of Tübingen (MUT). “For the Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti, the Pou has a far greater significance than it does for us. This is an issue relating to many cultural belongings, and we are researching it intensively and will initiate the return of other cultural belongings as soon as their origin is clarified.”

Further information

The exhibition „Te Pou o Hinematiaro. Celebrating Māori Heritage, Culture and Connection“ at the Museum at Hohentübingen Castle continues until 29 March. See here for more information.

A video of the Māori delegation’s last visit in October 2025 can be seen here.

The photos can be downloaded via this link in high resolution and used free of charge for reporting on the pou of Hinematiaro..

Contact

Prof. Dr. Ernst Seidl, Museum der Universität Tübingen, ernst.seidl@uni-tuebingen.de

Prof. Dr. Gabriele Alex, Leiterin der Abteilung für Ethnologie am Asien-Orient-Institut der Universität Tübingen, Tel: 07071-2978538, gabriele.alex@uni-tuebingen.de

Victor Walker, Sprecher der Gemeinschaft von Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti, vic.nor@xtra.co.nz