PART III
RECENT RETURNS

Occasionally, reports emerge of objects, archives or ancestral remains being returned or of serious negotiations for their return. Are they testament to a substantially changed relationship between ex-colonisers and ex-colonies? Do they foster mutual trust? Do they mean that the two parties deal with each other on a more equal footing? This Part presents four examples that, together, give an impression of the current practice of restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium. They concern ancestral remains, archives, surplus collections and, currently the most discussed category, spoils of war.

A pioneering example dates from 2005. The Māori people of New Zealand wanted to repatriate tattooed heads of ancestors from Europe and North America. To this end, the Māori, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and the New Zealand government launched a campaign. At the beginning, in 2003, there were still five heads in museums in the Netherlands and Belgium. What is the situation with them now?

The Netherlands, Indonesia and Suriname had already agreed on the return of colonial archives. In many negotiations about archives, the question was: Who should have the originals? This chapter focuses on current negotiations between Rwanda and Belgium. Why is the question of whether the originals are in Brussels or in Kigali of little concern?

The third example is about the extensive transfer to Indonesia of a collection of items from Museum Nusantara in Delft, which closed in 2013. The municipality wanted to get rid of them quickly and allowed them to be returned to Indonesia. But behind the scenes, quite a few ob-

stacles emerged. Fifty years earlier, the Koloniale Hogeschool (Colonial College) in Antwerp had to dispose of its superfluous Congo collection. How had that worked?

Finally: Nigeria and Europe. At the beginning of 2021, there was a breakthrough in the talks between several museums in Europe and cultural authorities in Nigeria, which had been ongoing since 2010, on the future of the thousands of bronze, copper and ivory objects from the Benin Kingdom. The German government announced it would return Benin objects currently in public collections. Some museums in Great Britain with small Benin collections came out with similar statements. How did these talks proceed, and can they be a model for a Europe-wide approach to dealing with colonial looted art?

8.
THE CAMPAIGN FOR MĀORI HEADS

On 22 August 2002, Steven Engelsman, director of Museum Volkenkunde, gave a lecture about the museum of the twenty-first century in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in the capital Wellington. Present were Pat Stuart, director of the museum, and Arapata Hakiwai, her repatriation manager. After finishing, they asked Engelsman to come with them to a side room. There, in a tone as friendly as it was business-like, they told him that there was a Toi Moko, a tattooed Māori head, in the Leiden museum and that New Zealand did not think a Western public collection was the right place to keep it. They knew the inventory number, RMV 350-5763, and also that Museum Volkenkunde had acquired it in 1883 and retained possession of it ever since. Would it be possible to return it? The inventory number and year are in a letter of 16 September 2002 to the Leiden institution. For the New Zealanders, these heads were not museum objects but 'the remains of ancestral figures who were entitled to maximum respect and discretion'.

When asked, Engelsman remembers his reaction to Stuart's request well: 'I immediately said that she knew more about it than I did and that we would work on it together.' It turned out that the museum in New Zealand had known it in the early 1990s, when a curator from Leiden had told them about the head at a conference about Māori heritage overseas in Wellington. Stuart and Engelsman each agreed to start their own research and to compare the results afterwards.

Back in Leiden, this proved more difficult than expected. Engelsman recalls: 'It was an entirely new kind of request, we had no precedent. How should our museum deal with this? Moreover, among the museum staff there was quite some resistance to the return of the art.' In retrospect, in the whole process that followed, he found this 'the most difficult'.

Some staff members thought that the New Zealand director had put their boss's back up against a wall. Engelsman did not feel that way: 'The request was indeed unexpected, but no, I did not feel insulted.' The staff members also felt that if the head was returned, they would no longer be able to do proper research, not even on comparable heads. They therefore wanted to keep it in the collection.

Another problem was that no documents about the Toi Moko could be found in the museum archives. At least, that was what the employee whom Engelsman had put on the research asserted. 'Unfortunately', he began his report, 'he could not find any information regarding the Toi Moko'. Museum Volkenkunde had received it from the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities in 1883. 'Given its numbering, it would have entered the cabinet around 1850. It cannot be determined whether it was a purchase or a gift […]. The archive of the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities is so incomplete that an exact reconstruction is impossible.' Shortly afterwards, an independent researcher did find an archive document that answered the question as to whether it was a donation (no) or a purchase (yes). Had the museum worker not been meticulous? Can 'not being able to find' something be seen as an obstruction of an impending return? In this regard, Museum Volkenkunde was not the only institution where this kind of friction played a role.

FAMILY MEMBERS IN THE SHOP WINDOW

As already shown, the history of the trade in ancestral remains is full of unpleasant stories. This certainly applies to the intercontinental trade in Māori heads. According to researchers in both Wellington and London, its history began with three British men: Captain James Cook, naval doctor William Monkhouse and botanist Joseph Banks. In 1768, their ship, the *Endeavour*, docked at New Zealand. There are no sources available to show exactly how he managed it, but Monkhouse was the first person to obtain a mummified Māori head. How Banks managed it is known thanks to the diary of this famous scholar and collector. He had already collected many plants and animals, but such a painted human head was new to him. When the *Endeavour* moored further on and an old man in a canoe came by, Banks seized his chance. From under a piece of cloth, the man pulled out the tattooed head of a young Māori. Banks picked up his musket and gestured that he wanted it. What did the canoeist want for it? The two finally agreed on the price: a few pairs

of pants flapping on a line on the deck, because the canoeist had never seen anything like them. That's how the exchange was settled.

Both Māori and Europeans played a leading role in the trade. Māori communities regularly went to war with each other, and the winners took the heads of slain enemies. How did they then mummify them? First, they removed the brains and eyes; then they put clay and fibres in the resulting cavities. Often, they cut back the lips, which made the teeth very visible. These are now proving to be useful, as traces of DAN can be used to identify a community of origin. Then they boiled and smoked the head and let it dry in the sun. A layer of oil preserved the skin and the tattooed patterns.

The British soon became eager buyers. For two heads they gave one musket. The Māori needed the weapons in their mutual wars. Some Māori did not take it too seriously. To meet the demand, they prepared heads of opponents they had enslaved. While still alive, they were tattooed, and once the wounds had healed they were killed and their heads cut from their bodies. Frederick Edward Maning (*Old New Zealand*, London, 1887, quoted in Gerritsen, *Historische verkenningen*, 2005, p. 213) experienced this practice around 1885: 'A while ago they even had to tattoo a slave, but the bastard ran off with tattoo and all […]. What a bad trick. […] Once a living Māori head with a nice tattoo was ordered and paid for in advance, it was always delivered honestly afterwards.'

While the colonial administrators promised to respect the rights of Māori communities to their lands, forests and fishing grounds, British newcomers – among them ex-convicts with a single ticket to New Zealand or Australia – showed less respect. They extorted land and other resources from the Māori. They were not interested in the backgrounds of the Māori and just wanted tattooed heads. The Māori, who were quickly becoming impoverished, had more and more difficulty with the behaviour of the newcomers. When two of them saw heads for sale in the window of a British settler's shop, wrote Reverend Richard Taylor in 1868 (as described in Aranui, 'Toi Moko in Toi Art', 2018), and recognised two members of their own Taupo clan, they went in and begged the dealer to give them back. But the man laughed at them. When the two men found out that the shopkeeper himself was involved in robbing the heads, they waited for him and killed him. And offered his head for sale.

The import of tattooed heads also aroused criticism in nineteenth-century Europe. Some physicians and collectors, who felt awkward about their possessions, handed over their heads and other body parts to mu-

seums or to the medical institution for which they worked. But in many more instances, Māori heads became a must-have item. Natural history and ethnographic museums everywhere wanted them. It was the same in Belgium and the Netherlands. At the start of the twentieth century, there were at least five in our countries, amongst others in the Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels, Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden and Museum Vrolik of the Amsterdam Medical Centre.

STUMBLING BLOCKS

When that Leiden curator attended the conference in Wellington in the early 1990s, the Māori communities had long since distanced themselves from the former practices of their forefathers. Together with the Museum of New Zealand, they forged plans to bring skulls and grave finds home. They knew there were hundreds at institutions and individuals in New Zealand, Europe and North America. An additional aim was to help rehabilitate the image of the Māori, seen as poverty-stricken, illiterate, unemployed and often with criminal records. The campaign officially started in 2003; Director Stuart already announced it in her letter to Leiden of September 2002.

For Director Engelsman there was, besides the opposition among his employees, another stumbling block. The Māori head was the property of the Dutch state and for it to be returned he needed the permission of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCenW). Engelsman felt that he had to be well prepared if he was to fulfil Wellington's wish.

The way he proceeded led to unexpected consequences, both in the Netherlands and in New Zealand. What happened? During his consultation with officials of the Ministry of OCenW, Engelsman was asked to draw up an advisory document for the Minister. In order to substantiate the advice, he consulted his colleagues of the Tropenmuseum Amsterdam and the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam and the outcome of their consultation led to the proposal to submit the New Zealand request to the Ethics Committee, which ethnographic museums in the Netherlands had just set up and which was to check whether they had acquired their acquisitions correctly. Now the committee also had to rule on returns.

His letter of 29 January 2003 to the Ethics Committee echoed the internal opposition. Engelsman wrote that he preferred a 'long-term loan' of the Toi Moko, even though a 'transfer of ownership […] is also possible', adding two non-negotiable conditions. Because the head was

part of the Dutch heritage, it should never be destroyed. And it had to remain accessible for scientific research. An employee of his museum could therefore 'never be denied access'. Engelsman now says: 'It came down to the fact that we were not yet ready to part with the head definitively'.

He had another question for the committee, a complicated one. He wanted to know whether a party with a direct interest in the head had the greatest right to it and, if so, whether the museum in Wellington was the appropriate address to which it should be transferred. Would it not make more sense to hand it over to the Māori community from which it originated? That question had been put by the Dutch ambassador in New Zealand, An de Bijll Nachenius, in a letter to him of 18 February 2003. She had spoken to a prominent Māori chief who felt that the museum in Wellington could not claim to be the 'guardian' of Māori remains: 'We Māori are our own guardians'.

TO WHOM DO YOU GIVE IT BACK?

The Ethics Committee of the ethnographic museums responded to Engelsman that a long-term loan was not appropriate. Ownership of the head should be transferred to its rightful owner in New Zealand. The museum should find out who that was. That question – to whom in a former colony should objects or human remains be returned? – is complex and will be raised in this book more often. The Ethics Committee advised him not to negotiate further until a clear answer from New Zealand had come.

Since the search by museum staff in the Leiden archives had yielded nothing, Ethics Committee member Susan Legêne dived into another part of the museum archive, which she found in the Provincial Archives in Haarlem: 'Without too much effort', she told me while showing copies of the relevant documents, 'I found two lists of acquisitions on which the Māori head did indeed appear'. This raised the question of whether the museum researcher had searched properly, a question that also arose during the search for the kris of Diponegoro. On one list, the Māori head was at the top and on another, it was mentioned between a Chinese junk with a god in it and an Arab sundial. In both instances the same amount was mentioned: 75 guilders. It was collected around 1840 and had been bought by the museum in 1882.

While the three partners in the New Zealand campaign – Māori communities, Museum of New Zealand and government – were looking

for an answer, a high ranking official of the Ministry of OCENW sent an email favouring repatriation: 'These human remains [are], more than books, documents and objects, probably the most pronounced witnesses […] to the whole complex of settler colonialism: to discover, to know, to have, to love, to be intrigued by, to convert and change/develop or suppress.' Each head of an ancestor has its own story and it is not only about the person it belonged to, but also about the road it took 'to Europe (the Netherlands) and now back […]. The return is a next step in this interaction.' Both the Ethics Committee and the Ministerial Department went further in their thinking about repatriation than the Leiden Museum.

In the course of 2005, an answer came from New Zealand. The partners had agreed on a division of roles. Māori communities are the rightful claimants and receive heads and other remains. They help with finding out about the ancestor's presumed family and designate the place where and with which rituals repatriated heads, bones and grave finds are given a resting place. The role of the museum in Wellington is to trace human remains and grave finds at home and abroad, do further provenance research – do the remains really come from New Zealand? – and to retrieve them. It maintains contact with seventy institutions outside New Zealand. The government in Wellington facilitates the process and pays the costs of transport. The repatriation itself is not paid for. From this answer, it was clear that a Māori delegation would come and collect the head.

TRANSFER SEALED WITH A NOSE KISS

On 9 November 2005, James Te Puni, the new repatriation manager in Wellington and himself of Māori origin, and Director Engelsman from Leiden signed the handover agreement. Entirely in Māori style, the two gave each other a nose kiss: the forehead being the place of memory of the ancestors, with the breath of life coming through the nose. Museum Volkenkunde decided that from now on, the rights of communities of origin would weigh more heavily than the right to their own research on ancestral remains. It also decided to stop exhibiting such remains when an ancestral community considers it unethical to do so. The Māori do see it this way. That a return can strengthen the relationship became clear in 2010. In that year, some Māori came to the museum to assemble a *waka* (a traditional canoe). That the boat was not a gift but a long-term loan to the museum expresses the wish of the Māori to establish a long-term relationship. Every year, the Māori and the museum renew their contact.

Does this approach work for New Zealand? It seems to. Since 2003, many Toi Moko and other ancestral remains have been repatriated. By the end of 2020, the number stood at 180 repatriations from within the country and 420 from abroad. Many of these have been distributed among seventeen communities of origin. Where it is no longer possible to trace the exact origin of a head, the Māori have set up a sacred space for it in the national museum, a *wahi tapu*. There they lie in acid-free boxes covered with plastic packaging. Few people are allowed to see them. The Museum of New Zealand estimates that another 600 Toi Moko are in European and North American museums, medical and private collections.

In 2020, the museum in Wellington informed the Leiden museum that it had done everything to find out from which community the Toi Moko came, but had not succeeded. That could mean that the head had belonged to an enslaved person. The head now has a resting place in the *wahi tapu*, together with other heads that have remained anonymous.

ANOTHER TOI MOKO REPATRIATED

Fourteen years later, the second transfer of a tattooed Māori head took place. This time, it was arranged much faster, within one year. Museum Vrolik in Amsterdam owned one head and three Māori skeletons and

On the occasion of the handover of the Māori head, Māori rowed the canoe specially made for Museum Volkenkunde. © National Museum of World Cultures Collection

five skulls of ancestors from the Moriori community. The Moriori are related to the Māori and live on the Chatham Islands, more than 500 miles from Wellington. In 2018, curator Laurens de Rooy informed the museum in Wellington about these remains and the option of their repatriation. Unlike earlier in Leiden, there was no opposition to it within the museum. De Rooy told me: 'We were a small team, nobody objected.' Repatriation would indeed cause a break in the collection, 'because we

Serious faces and restrained emotion at the handover of a head and remains of Māori and Moriori ancestors by Museum Vrolik to a New Zealand delegation. © Hans van den Bogaard/Museum Vrolik, Amsterdam UMC

would be taking something out of its historical context, but we also knew that in time they would go back anyway'.

What also made the transfer easier was that the remains were not the property of the Dutch state, but of the hospital. Its Board of Directors quickly consented to the transfer and there was an almost immediate positive response from Wellington. The fact that the remains were not repatriated right away gave the Amsterdam museum time for archival research. The museum had acquired the Toi Moko somewhere between 1850 and 1863, the skeletons and skulls in 1908. A New Zealand biologist had brought the latter from a burial site.

At the handover ceremony, it was clearly visible that the Māori and Moriori used it to show outsiders how they honour their ancestors. They had chosen a special day for it: 25 April 2019. Since 1916, New Zealand and Australia have commemorated all civilians who died in conflicts, wars and peacekeeping operations on this day. On 25 April 1915, thousands of soldiers from both countries set foot on the Gallipoli Peninsula to fight with other Allied troops against the Ottoman Turks. Nearly 3,000 New Zealanders lost their lives. By choosing this date, the New Zealand delegation in Amsterdam placed their sacrificed ancestors and the dead of Gallipoli in the same tradition of remembrance.

In his speech, New Zealand Museum delegation leader and repatriation manager Te Herekiekie Herewini assured the listeners that the Moriori and Māori have never forgotten their ancestors: 'We are still spiritually and culturally linked to them. When they arrive back on their own soil, they will be welcomed and embraced with tears.'

The remains were packed into nine boxes. Preceded by Te Herekiekie Herewini and other delegation members, museum staff carried the boxes to the room for the ceremonial transfer. The New Zealanders placed a black cloth over the boxes and on top a colourful fabric they had brought with them. For many museum staff members, the ceremony was new. You can see from the photos how touched they were.

As with the Toi Moko from Leiden, the museum in Wellington has not been able to identify the community from which the head came. It now lies in the same sacred space as the head from Leiden. The skeletons and skulls have been returned to the Chatham Islands and buried there.

After Amsterdam, the Māori and Moriori delegation travelled on, continuing the repatriation campaign. From the Charité University Hospital in Berlin they collected 109 ancestral skulls. In Berlin, the

same seriousness and emotions prevailed as in Amsterdam and Leiden. In 2020, a Māori delegation visited Germany again, this time to bring home ancestors held by the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz and the Georg-August University in Göttingen.

THREE MĀORI HEADS IN THE PROCESS OF REPATRIATION

There are still three Toi Moko in Belgium. The holder of one of them wants to remain anonymous and I have no information whatsoever about it. The Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels has the other two. One of these was donated in 1833 by 'an unknown inhabitant of Ter Loo' in West Flanders, curator Nicolas Cauwe writes to me. Coming so soon after the Belgian Revolution, this donation may have been intended as a contribution to a Belgian national collection. The second one was bought by the museum in 1938 from Gustave Gilson, a professor in Leuven. During research in Fiji, he had acquired a large number of pieces, including this head. It is not known how it had ended up in Fiji. The Brussels museum does not know either from which Māori communities the two heads originate.

In September 2018, the museum of New Zealand submitted a formal request for the repatriation of the two heads. Asked what he thought about a repatriation, Cauwe answers that he has no objection to it, also 'because the facilities in New Zealand are in good order'. But just as in the case of the Toi Moko in Leiden, the decision lies with the federal minister for science policy, and that is where the problem lies. In recent years, this post has been held by quite a few people. The minister who received the formal request in 2018 left it at that. But when I enquired in August 2020, something had changed. Minister David Clarinval felt that 'the issue of Māori heads' should be part of 'a larger process of reflection'. He ideally wanted 'a global response' to the issue of colonial ancestral remains. The government had set up the HOME Working Group on Human Remains for this purpose in December 2019. It is due to issue its recommendations in 2022. Since October 2020, State Secretary Thomas Dermine has been in charge of the federal science policy. He endorsed the approach of his predecessor. In January 2022, the museum informed me that the repatriation process is underway. The date depends on the introduction of a generic restitution law and travel restrictions due to the Covid pandemic. The anonymous holder of the third Toi Moko has accepted that this

head will be repatriated together with the two heads in possession of the Brussels museum.

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What can we learn from these returns? Certainly, a concerted approach by representatives of communities of origin, a museum and a government gives added strength to an international repatriation campaign. It encourages institutions in the Global North to become more forthcoming. Leiden museum director Steven Engelsman presented the return of the Toi Moko as a sign of recognition of the suffering inflicted and a sincere attempt to 'erase as much as possible a blot of the past'. In this development, it is crucial that the Māori and Moriori communities have confidence that the repatriation campaign is really about them. In the physical transfer of human remains, recognition of blots can be equally important and have a healing effect.

Neighbouring Australia is also moving towards such an approach, with representatives of Aboriginal groups working with museums in the various federal states and their governments. The parties in New Zealand and Australia do not opt for a confrontational strategy with institutions in Europe and North America, but for dialogue. New Zealand and Australia insist on repatriation, but do not force it. No harsh words are spoken, although the sluggish handling of repatriation requests in the West could sometimes justify it.