Churchill Fellowship Report

Reconnecting with Māori Weaving Knowledge: Exploring Kaitaka Huaki through European Museum Collections

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Summary

My Winston Churchill Fellowship enabled me to study early Māori kākahu held in museum collections in England and Ireland, with particular attention to Kaitaka Huaki, their construction, weaving techniques and tāniko and to share this knowledge with weaving communities in Aotearoa.

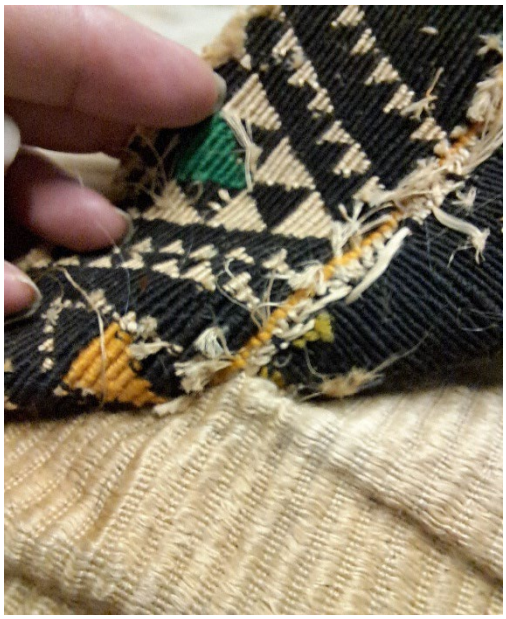
I am a Māori weaver with more than 30 years of experience in raranga and whatu, so spending time with these ancestral kākahu observing the knowledge embodied within their construction and deepened my understanding of the practices, technical knowledge and design thinking of the Māori weavers who made them.

A specific area of the Fellowship research focused on kaitaka huaki, particularly the construction and attachment of the huaki to the body of the kākahu. Phsyical examinations of ancestral kākahu showed how the huaki border had been constructed, positioned and attached, including details that are difficult to understand from photographs, catalogues or written descriptions alone.

The taonga provided tangible evidence of the technical decisions made by the original weavers and offered valuable insight into the relationship between the huaki and the wider construction of the kākahu.

Close observation revealed details of construction, fibre preparation, aho, tāniko and finishing, prompting new questions and directions for both my own weaving practice and sharing with others.

These insights into practical weaving, where techniques can be explored, tested and understood through the physical experience of working with muka and the continuation of Māori weaving practice.





Photo's showing how Huaki borders are joined to the main kaupapa.



Kaitaka Huaki: British Museum, using goat hair to replace traditional use of kurī

Key Findings

Engaging directly with the knowledge embodied in the taonga was particularly significant because my understanding moved beyond what could be learned through visual records.

- Direct examination revealed details of construction, fibre preparation, tāniko patterns and finishing techniques, rare pre-contact weaving methods, including aho pātahi, tightly woven pukupuku forms, black-on-black tāniko and reverse-face tāniko, that were not readily visible through photographs or available in existing documentation.
- Spending sustained time with these ancestral kākahu made it possible to observe how individual elements of their construction worked together. These observations also highlighted the value of examining the kākahu from different angles, including their reverse sides, where important construction details and aspects of the weaving process became more apparent.
- The physical examinations showed a sophisticated body of weaving knowledge, reflecting an understanding of fibre behaviour, structural integrity, pattern formation and the relationship between technique and function. The examination of these features also revealed both shared construction principles and distinctive variations between individual kākahu.

The insights gained on techniques can be explored, tested and understood through working with muka and the continuation of Māori weaving practice.

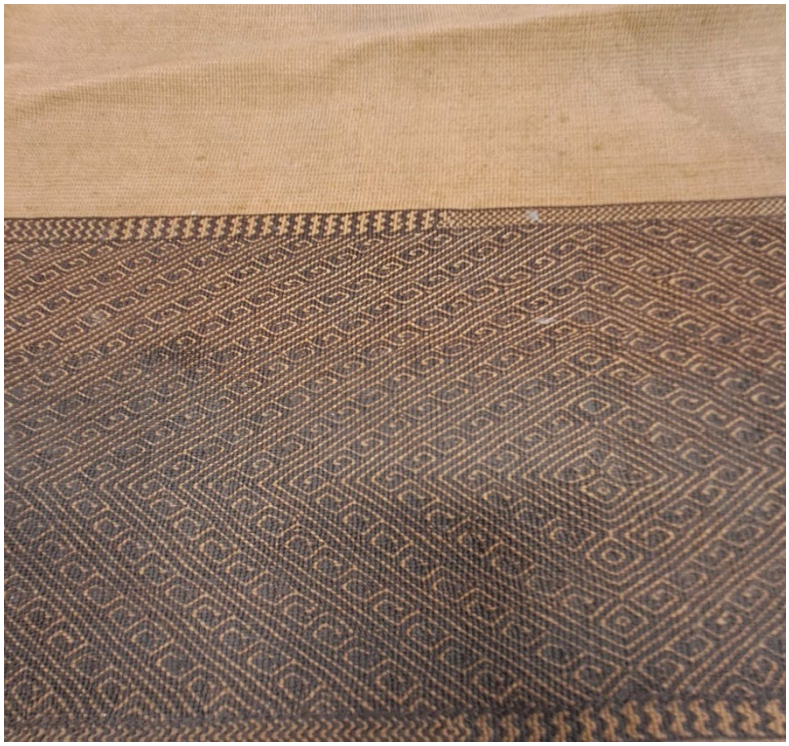
Significant Discovery

A closely related “sister” kākahu to the famous Stockholm cloak was located in the National Museum of Ireland.

I was aware of the extraordinary tāniko and construction of the Stockholm kākahu, and of the distinctive knowledge it embodies. However, visiting Sweden was not part of my itinerary, so did not anticipate having the opportunity to encounter this knowledge directly.

Visiting the National Museum of Ireland provided an unexpected and deeply significant opportunity to encounter closely related knowledge embodied in another ancestral kākahu held in their collection, a ‘sister’ kākahu (their term) with almost identical construction and tāniko to the Stockholm kākahu, revealing a remarkable continuity of technique and design between the two.

To stand before this kākahu was an extraordinary and deeply exciting experience. It provided a rare opportunity to observe this pre-contact weaving knowledge directly through another surviving kākahu and to consider the ways in which the same knowledge had been carried and embodied across these ancestral garments.









The 'sister' kākahu to the Stockholm cloak, held in the National Museum of Ireland

Cultural Insights

The Fellowship highlighted the spiritual, cultural, and emotional dimensions of engaging with ancestral taonga, reinforced the importance of kotahitanga and collective learning among weavers, and is a foundation for shared learning, collective exploration and the continued engagement with the mātauranga carried within these ancestral kākahu.

I returned to Aotearoa with excitement about what I had observed and recorded, and an eagerness to share this knowledge with other weavers by working collectively, bringing together different skills to examine, experiment with and physically practise the techniques I had documented.

I felt an immense respect and appreciation for the skill and understanding of these tūpuna, alongside a growing awareness of just how much more there was for me to learn. The experience opened up further questions, possibilities and directions for exploration.

Beyond the technical knowledge gained, the experience had a profound impact on my personal connection with these ancestral taonga. Being in their presence created a deep sense of connection through wairua to the tūpuna who had woven them and to the generations of knowledge embodied in their work.

As I encountered more ancestral kākahu, my reflections increasingly extended beyond their technical and material qualities to consider the cultural practices that may have shaped their making. I became increasingly aware of the range of emotions they evoked, deep connection, awe, sadness, joy, respect and a profound sense of connection to the taonga and the tupuna who made them.

One moment remains especially vivid as I was examining a specific technique and struggling to understand how it had been achieved. I was conscious of the limitations of my own skills and felt a strong sense of responsibility to do justice to the knowledge embodied within the kākahu. In that moment, I heard, clearly and succinctly, the words: *"Look at the back."* When I examined the reverse side of the kākahu, I could see the construction technique. In that moment, the mauri and wairua I had always understood to be present within our taonga felt undeniably real.

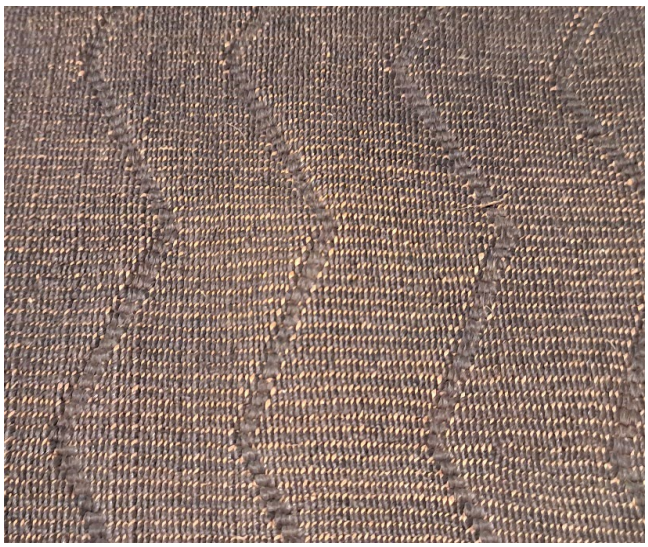
I was not simply looking at the work of my ancestors but experiencing a connection with them. Being reminded that the knowledge I was seeking was already connected to me. This experience reinforced the premise that engagement with ancestral kākahu is not only an intellectual or technical process but can also be a deeply relational experience in which knowledge is encountered through looking, feeling, listening and making.

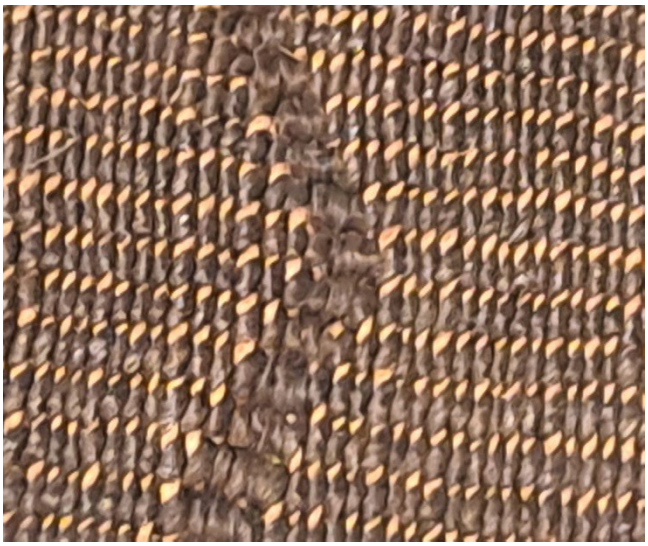
The Fellowship has strengthened the relationship between research, weaving practice and the ancestral knowledge embodied within these kākahu and affirmed the value of spending time with taonga tuku iho. Most importantly, the knowledge encountered

through the Fellowship has become part of an ongoing process of bringing traditional woven taonga tuku iho into contemporary spaces, where this mātauranga can continue









Tāniko patterns on kākahu held in the British Museum. These tāniko patterns hold examples of reverse face tāniko., black on black design.

Benefits to New Zealand

Weaving techniques and design thinking that cannot always be understood through photographs, catalogues or existing documentation. Being able to spend time with these taonga has provided a deeper understanding of the precision, consistency and variation within early Māori weaving practice.

An important benefit of this experience is the opportunity to bring this knowledge back to Aotearoa, making observations and learning from these internationally held taonga

more accessible to other weavers and practitioners who may not have the opportunity to travel to Europe.

Knowledge gained through the research has already been shared through wānanga, presentations, practical weaving sessions and experimentation within our weaving cohort. Working together to examine, test and understand techniques has strengthened our collective learning and our appreciation of kotahitanga as an important part of our weaving practice.

This sharing will continue through wānanga, presentations and practical weaving sessions, with opportunities to extend the learning through exhibitions and wider engagement with whānau, weaving communities and Māori arts practitioners. In this way, the benefit of the research extends beyond my own practice. Knowledge encountered in international museum collections is brought home, explored collectively and shared through active weaving practice in Aotearoa.

The experience has also highlighted the value of Māori weavers having direct access to ancestral kākahu held in international collections. Our weaving cohort is now planning a further research journey to engage with these taonga together, particularly kākahu associated with Cook's voyages. This will allow us to bring collective knowledge and experience to the study of these taonga and return that learning to Aotearoa for further exploration and sharing.

Recommendations for Aotearoa New Zealand

The Winston Churchill Fellowship demonstrated the value of meaningful access to ancestral Māori kākahu held in international museum collections.

I recommend that museums continue to strengthen relationships with Māori weavers, researchers, whānau, hapū and iwi, creating greater opportunities for Māori-led engagement with collections through collaborative projects. This should include providing practitioners with sustained time to spend with taonga, ask questions, undertake research and contribute their own mātauranga, perspectives and knowledge to their understanding and interpretation.

Such partnerships would support collective learning and create stronger connections between museum collections and living Māori weaving practice in Aotearoa. Museum research involving Māori weaving should recognise the value of learning through practice. Wānanga, experimentation and collective making provide opportunities for weavers to investigate techniques, test observations and deepen their understanding of ancestral kākahu. Supporting these approaches would strengthen the relationship between museum collections and living weaving practice, with knowledge shared through teaching, kōrero and ongoing practice in Aotearoa.

A longer-term aspiration is to develop dedicated weaving residencies connected to international museum collections. These residencies would enable Māori weavers to spend sustained time with ancestral kākahu, work collectively and engage with taonga through tikanga Māori. The knowledge and insights gained could then be brought back to Aotearoa and shared through weaving practice, wānanga, presentations and exhibitions. Together, these approaches would create stronger connections between ancestral kākahu held in international collections and Māori weaving practice in Aotearoa, allowing knowledge to be observed, explored, practised and shared so that internationally held taonga can continue to contribute to the living practice of Māori weaving.

Implementing Recommendations Plan

The knowledge and insights gained through the Winston Churchill Fellowship are already being put into practice through the monthly wānanga held by Te Ara Oho, a weaving collective active in Ngāti Maniapoto.

Through several wānanga held during 2026, we have built on our technical weaving skills, with a particular focus on tāniko techniques identified through the museum research. This has included exploring directional tāniko and experimenting with how these techniques can be understood and applied through our own weaving practice. The directional tāniko shown below, worked in a tāniko kete, is one example of this ongoing practical exploration.



Kete muka using directional tāniko.
Nā Sheryln Daly

Continued implementation in 2027 will build on the knowledge and technical skills developed through the Winston Churchill Fellowship and the wānanga held throughout 2026. Te Ara Oho will continue to hold monthly wānanga, providing opportunities to collectively engage in practical experimentation, discussion and making, while creating opportunities for learning and knowledge sharing with our wider arts communities, hapū and whānau.

We aim to present an exhibition at the end of 2027 that showcases the learning, experimentation and weaving developed collectively throughout 2026 and 2027. This exhibition will bring together the knowledge, techniques and work that have emerged through the Fellowship research and subsequent wānanga.

Te Ara Oho also intends to continue building relationships with international museums and galleries, with the longer-term aspiration of returning to Europe as a collective to present this body of work. This would provide an opportunity to share our contemporary weaving practice and the knowledge that has developed through our engagement with ancestral kākahu, bringing the journey that began through the Fellowship back to the international collections and audiences that informed our research.

Alongside this collective work, the Fellowship research will continue to inform my practice-led research, Te Aho Whakapapa, providing a foundation for further exploration of connection and relationship between ancestral kākahu, whakapapa, mātauranga and contemporary weaving. Together, these goals will allow the Fellowship research to continue developing through practice in Aotearoa, strengthening technical knowledge, collective learning and the sharing of mātauranga through weaving, wānanga and community engagement.