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The Role of the *Tohunga*—Past and Present

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In traditional Maori society before the coming of the white man [pakeha]*, the spiritual leader* [tohunga] *was the person who was in communication with the gods and spirits* [atua] *and who maintained the laws of sacredness* [tapu] *and regulated the life and events of their village. Because of his great authority and power* [mana]*, the tohunga, his instruments and dwelling were tapu. However, with the coming of the white man with his guns, goods, new diseases, and his ignoring of the laws of tapu, the tohunga was seen as losing his mana. Those who continued to use the traditional methods of healing against the new diseases, often with disastrous results, were regarded as charlatans to the extent that legislation was eventually enacted against any who continued to claim to function as a tohunga.*

However, emerging out of the Maori wars was a new form of tohunga who had accepted Christianity and combined its teachings with some of the Maori culture and customs. Thus they have become the new Maori spiritual leaders and faith healers, exercising not their own power through the strictures of tapu, but the power of God and his holy angels to heal and restore the Maori to fullness of life.

Traditional Maori beliefs

Maoris, the indigenous people of Aotearoa, the "Land of the Long White Cloud," were divided up into a number of tribes. Each tribe was made up of the *rangatira* [those of chiefly rank], which included the *ariki* [the head chief], the chiefly families, and a number of tohunga [shamanistic types] with various skills both spiritual and practical. Included in a tribe were a large number of *tutua* [commoners], as well as a few slaves who were mostly prisoners of war.

The Maoris believed in the presence and activity of numerous atua,

gods and spirits. These were believed to inhabit the natural world, both animate and inanimate and had considerable powers for good and evil, but their powers and activities could be controlled to large extent by a tohunga. Of the vast number of gods, the major ones were seen as the children of Rangi and Papa, the Sky Father and the Earth Mother. These included Tane-mahuta, god of trees, birds and insects, Tu-matauenga, god of war, Rongo-ma-tane, god of cultivated food, Haumia-tiketike, god of wild berries and fern-root, Tangaroa, god of the sea, fish and reptiles, and Tawhiri-matea, god of the winds. There were also gods which belonged exclusively to a tribe, as well as local atua and ancestral spirits worshiped only by individual families. There are also many stories about semi-divine beings like Maui who tended to be rather mischievous and played tricks on people and atua. There is a belief in a supreme being, Io, held by those of superior rank, although some regard this belief as having developed through Christian influence (Sinclair 1969, 22).

The Maoris had a strong belief in the afterlife. The occasion of a person's death called for a large and usually long meeting [*tangi*], at the area for gathering in front of the meeting-house of the tribe [*marae*]. Rituals were carried out—sometimes for as long as three days—to send off the spirit of the dead to Te Reinga, the land of the spirits. It was believed that the soul of the dead journeyed up to the northern-most tip of the North Island, to Cape Reinga where it would go down into the earth through the trunk of a pohutakawa tree and into the sea of the underworld.

The ones who ordered and directed all the activities of the tribal village were the tohungas. These were usually of chiefly rank who received arduous training in a house of learning [*whare wananga*]. The highest grade of tohunga was the exponent and upholder of the cult of the Supreme Being, Io of the Hidden Face, a form of religion which was confined to men and women of superior rank, and its secrets, practices, and teachings formed the most highly venerated and most intensely tapu portion of the secret lore of the Maori. It was elitist and more philosophical. Most important for the tribe as a whole was the tohunga who could communicate with the gods, interpret their will, and

direct the life of the community accordingly. He was a scholar, who had memorized the tribal genealogies, knew all the tribal history deep into the past, was the upholder of tribal boundaries, led the chants [*waiata*] and recited the prayers, incantations, and spells [*karakia*]. He conducted all sorts of rituals in connection with tribal wars, birth, sickness, burials, removal of tapus, or making something tapu, as well as times for planting, harvesting, fishing and bird-snaring. The tohunga was seen as having great mana and could diagnose adverse happenings or sicknesses which were usually attributed to witchcraft [*makutu*] or the breaking of a tapu. Healing would usually come about through the recitation of a karakia, the use of medicinal plants, rituals, and forms of divination. Other tohungas were specialists in carving, tattooing, building canoes, and other special skills (Best 1934, 73–76).

All of society was governed and ordered by the laws of tapu. Tapu could mean that which is sacred, consecrated, prohibited, or set apart as cursed. The person of the chief was tapu to the extent that even his personal property, his dwelling, his clothes, ornaments, weapons were tapu to a lesser degree, as was his wife. In order to be fed, he would have to sit on a mat outside his dwelling, food would be offered to him by a servant on the end of a stick which he would take with his teeth without touching the stick, drink would have to be poured into his mouth. Any contact with the chief's person, his mat, his shadow, could be fatal. Those of lesser rank were tapu to lesser degrees. In this way the order of tribal authority was maintained. The tohungas were tapu according to the manifestation of their mana, as also were their dwellings and sacred instruments. To break the laws of tapu was to anger the atua and could lead to them inflicting mysterious and dreadful punishment in the form of sickness. Tapu also protected burial grounds, the kumara and taro plantings, and sacred places associated with the atua. These laws of tapu not only protected people, property and places, but penalized the tapu-breaker. Through inspiring fear, the levels of rank, authority, and the social and moral laws were maintained (Best 1934, 82–85). Besides the regular functions of maintaining the food supply through cultivation, fishing and bird-snaring, there were the gatherings at the marae for singing the chants of Maori legends, and particularly

for debates. A major occupation was tribal warfare. The first man, Tiki, after all, was created by Tu-matauenga, the god of war.

The coming of the pakeha

New Zealand was first discovered by Abel Tasman in December 1642. He had been sent by the Dutch East India Company but found the North Island offering no opportunities for trade. It was discovered again by Captain James Cook in 1769 looking for the legendary southern continent. He mapped its coasts and moved on to discover Australia. This soon led to trading and whaling ships to arrive, and eventually settlers carrying on trade and then missionaries. On Christmas Day 1814, the Rev. Samuel Marsdon preached on New Zealand soil for the first time, but it took nine years before the first Maori was baptized—a young woman about to marry a European. One of the early Anglican missionaries (who was later defrocked) was Thomas Kendall who believed that one would have to learn the Maori culture and language before one could properly communicate and thus convert. Through his efforts, he was able to develop a dictionary of Maori words which eventually led to translation of the Bible into Maori. He also took two of the Maori chiefs, Hongi and Waikato, with him to London to meet the King of England (Sinclair, 1969, 37–38).

However, the introduction of the pakeha into New Zealand soon led to the reduction of the Maori population by two-fifths. This was because they brought in new diseases such as whooping-cough, influenza, measles, smallpox, typhoid, cholera which caused epidemics amongst the Maoris to whom these diseases were unknown. Prostitution also brought venereal diseases. But perhaps the most significant cause in the reduction of the population was the trade in guns. Maoris soon recognized that the great god of the pakeha was the gun [*pu*], and the double-barrelled musket [*tupara*]. Even some of the early missionaries, in order to live, took part in the trade of muskets. The Maoris used these guns in tribal warfare and to settle old scores. When Hongi returned to New Zealand from England in 1821, he stopped at Sydney and exchanged all the presents he had received in London for 300 muskets. With these, and wearing a coat of mail given to him by King

George IV he terrorized and slaughtered thousands of his enemies. This kind of tribal warfare led to the slaughter of an estimated 40,000 people (Sinclair, 1969, 41–42).

All this led to the disorganization of the tribal structure, confusion over land titles, and the disintegration of authority and the laws of tapu. Teachings of the missionaries aided in that disintegration and confusion. Anglican missionaries were joined by Wesleyans in 1822 and French Catholic missions in 1838, leading to competition and controversy. With all these changes, the Maori were increasingly unable to cope, their confidence had been undermined along with their society. They were selling much of their land to the traders for little in return. Their tohunga could not cure these new diseases whereas sometimes the missionary doctors could. The missionary seemed impervious to the powers of the atua and to evil magic. Consequently the laws of tapu began to be ignored, defied to no ill effect. They were losing faith in their gods and their culture and began to turn to the more powerful God of the missionaries. The tohunga and the chief were no longer regarded as tapu and so their mana, their power and prestige suffered. By 1840 tribal warfare had ended because of exhaustion and the introduction of Christianity, but a growing concern now arose over the pakeha taking control of more and more tribal land (Sinclair, 1969, 44–45).

To prevent the unlawful takeover of more land by the settlers and to set up law and order that would give protection to the Maoris as well as regulate the buying and selling of land in the colony, the Treaty of Waitangi was drawn up and signed by Maori chiefs on February 6, 1840. The Treaty stated that

> The Queen of England agrees to protect the chiefs, the subtribes and all the people of New Zealand in the unqualified exercise of their chieftainship over their lands, villages and all their treasures. But on the other hand, the Chiefs of the Confederation and all the Chiefs will sell land to the Queen at a price agreed to by the person owning it and by the person buying it (the latter being) appointed by the Queen as her purchase agent.

In consideration of this, "the Queen of England will protect all or-

dinary people of New Zealand and will give them the same rights and duties of citizenship as the people of England."[1] But as time went on the pressure of more settlers wanting more and larger parcels of land led to a growing resistance on the part of Maori chiefs. Movements to prevent the sale of land to the pakeha often led to infighting with those who were willing to sell. The land issue finally led the divided tribes to unite and to elect King Potatau I, in 1858. But the strife over land continued and led to wars which lasted roughly from 1860 to 1866. It was only after this, in 1867, that all adult male Maori were given the vote, and four Maori electorates were established (Fisher 2003, 205–18).

The rise of Maori Christian churches

It was during these wars that a Maori movement began which included Christian elements. This was known as Pai marire—the Good and Peaceful Religion. As Keith Sinclair writes:

> In 1862 the Angel Gabriel had appeared in a vision to Te Ua, a Maori who had fought the Europeans in Taranaki. This angelic visitation caused him to kill his child… as a redemption for his people, 'forgetful, desolate, and in doubt.' Te Ua founded a new faith, compounded of a little Old Testament morality and Christian doctrine and some primitive Maori religion. He invoked the Holy Trinity, but revived cannibalism. The services of the new Maori evangelism were held at a *niu*, a long pole, perhaps fifty feet high, with yard-arms from which hung ropes. The congregation revolved around this mast as round a maypole while the priests conducted a service of prayer. The 'angels of the wind' were said to visit the faithful during the service. Te Ua taught his followers that this divine service and a strict adherence to his instruction would make them impervious to bullets if, when under fire, they raised their right hand and cried *'Pai marire, hau! Hau!'* The *Hau hau,* as these fanatics were called after this incantation, at first showed incredible boldness in battle; even the most practical demonstrations failed to convince the survivors that they had no magical protection against bullets. (Sinclair 1969, 140–41)

The message of Te Ua was a simple one. He promised eternal salvation to his followers with the total destruction of the pakeha, Maori dead would rise from the grave, all sick and crippled Maori people would be

cured and the best of European culture would be taught to them. He believed that Jehovah sent the angels upon the four winds to enter the bodies of believers by streamers attached to the pole of worship. Hau refers to wind. While Te Ua was regarded as a prophet, his priests who led the worship around the pole took on the role of the tohunga, imbuing the worshipers with powerful mana through their karakia, prayers or incantations. This was one example of the alienation caused by settler demands for Maori land and the pressure of competing Christian denominations. The Maori people were turning away from missionary Christianity and developing their own indigenous movements which combined many traditional elements with what they had learned from the Christian Bible. To the pakeha, the followers of this religion were known as the Hau Hau terrorists. This movement eventually paved the way for its successor, the Ringatu religion.

The Ringatu faith was developed by Te Kooti Rikirangi from a tribe of Poverty Bay. He was arrested after a battle, accused of being in league with the Hau Hau, and deported without trial to the Chatham Islands. During his captivity there Te Kooti studied the Bible, particularly the Psalms and the books of Joshua and Judges. On the basis of these he compiled numerous prayers containing scriptural verses. His personal mana and Biblical interpretations led many Hau Hau prisoners to convert to this new faith called Ringatu. Te Kooti held religious services twice a day for the prisoners. He retained the Hau Hau ritual of raising the right hand as an act of homage to God rather than as a means of averting bullets.

In 1868 Te Kooti and his followers seized a schooner and escaped to New Zealand where they landed south of Poverty Bay. There they fought against the Poverty Bay settlers but after a grim struggle he and his followers escaped into the King country in the central part of the North Island. In 1883 he was pardoned and continued to gain followers to his church which now has nothing of the fanatical Hau Hau approach to worship. Services which are held in tribal meeting houses are gentle and dignified. The church's leader, a *poutikanga*, is elected every two years with a 12-member executive. They hear all grievances, keep a record of members qualified to perform marriage services, and

report to the general assembly of church members. Each parish has a tohunga whose specialty is church law, while others called *takuta* engage in faith-healing. The tohunga follow their daily occupations since there is no stipend but spend evening hours studying and memorizing scriptures. All the chants and hymns are memorized while most prayers are extempore. In their monthly meetings they have a series of seven services, each on a different topic, culminating in a love feast to God and Holy Communion. Today the Ringatu church has well over 8,000 members and is strong in the Bay of Plenty area.

Just before his death in 1893 Te Kooti had prophesied that a child would come heralded by a star. If he arrived within six years there would be great tribulation. But if he came in 26 years he would arrive from the west and unite the people. One of those who claimed to be that child was Rua Kenana whose father had been killed in 1868 fighting for Te Kooti. Rua had worked as a farm labourer around Gisbourne and the Bay of Plenty before returning to his home at Maungapohatu where he gained a reputation as a faith healer and claimed to be the son of Jehovah and brother of Jesus. He soon gained a large following and taught them to become productive farmers. He also served them as a kind of messianic tohunga who had the power to heal and to prophesy. His claim that Edward VII would arrive at Gisbourne and give Rua money to buy back all lost Maori land was seen as a threat to settlers who were seeking more land. Malcolm Voyce claims that this issue and his reputation as a tohunga were among the main reasons for the *Tohunga Suppression Act* of 1907 (Voyce 1989, 107–10).[2] However, there was rising concern not only among the pakeha but also among young Maori who had been educated in European medicine, such as Maui Pomare and Peter Buck, over the number of charlatans who were claiming to be able to cure all manner of illnesses as tohunga and were leading many astray and away from genuine medical help.There was also concern at that time of the growing number of pakeha doctors who were using Maori herbal medicines which soon led to the passing of *The Quackery Prevention Act* in the following year (Dow 2001, 41–64). However, these Acts did not suppress the use of Maori methods of healing and they continue on to this present day. *The Tohunga*

Suppression Act was repealed in 1962.

Te Kooti's prophecy also led to a number of other messianic claims which eventually fizzled out. But one of these was a woman by the name of Mere Rikiriki who established a Holy Ghost Mission and had a large following. She was regarded as a Christian tohunga with great mana. She said that the child, the Chosen One would be her nephew, Tohupatiki Wiremu Ratana. In 1918 this farmer began having visions and hearing voices which led him to heal a person by praying over him. On November 8th at 2 p.m. as he was standing on the verandah of his home when he saw a cloud rising from the sea and enveloping him, and a voice spoke to him:

> Fear not, I am the Holy Spirit. I have traveled around the world to find the people upon whom I can stand. I have come back to Aoteoroa to choose you, the Maori people. Repent! Cleanse yourself and your family as white as snow, as sinless as the wood-pigeon.
>
> Ratana, I appoint you as the Mangai, the Mouthpiece of God for the multitude of this land. Unite the Maori people, turning them to Jehovah of the Thousands, for this is his compassion to all of you.
>
> (Henderson 1972, 14–25)

Later, he saw a shining light, an angel, who repeated the message and told him he was to destroy the power of the tohunga and was to cure the spirits and bodies of his people. Very soon, he was gaining a reputation as a faith-healer among the Maoris who began to come to his farm seeking healing. He would ask them: "Have you been to a tohunga? Give that up. God will heal all who walk in the light." Every patient who was healed signed a covenant to say that he gave up all Maori superstitions and believed in the Trinity (Henderson 1972, 26). Soon his fame spread throughout the land. The Maoris were coming from all over New Zealand seeking healing and his message in busloads. He became known in the newspapers as the "Maori Miracle Man." So many came to him that he had to give up farming and devote himself fulltime to ministry. As the Mangai, the Mouthpiece of God, as he was known he had become a Christian Maori tohunga, rejecting the old superstitious practices of the old tohunga. On Christmas Day 1920, there were 3000 people gathered for the opening of the

new undenominational church, Piki te Ora (Seek the Light), built by Ratana. This was the occasion of an enormous hangi, a feast in which all 3000 people were fed. Representatives were there from all the Christian denominations—Catholic priests and protestant ministers joined together in a combined service. Ratana held a service which lasted for four hours speaking to the people about faith in the Trinity, cleanliness of body and rejection of old superstitions. Ratana's main purpose at this stage was to convert the Maoris to Christianity and to send them back to become regular members of the recognized churches. The papers reported that there were about 100 faith-healings at that first Christmas gathering (Henderson 1972, 26–29).

His fame spread far and wide. After a tour around New Zealand he returned to the Pa (village) to find several thousand letters awaiting him. Assistants typed replies and he signed them with the result that there were many "cures by post" reported in the press. One of the most famous was that of Miss Fanny Lammas of Nelson who had suffered an enlarged heart and lung trouble and spinal weakness which had confined her to her bed most of her life. She had worn a steel frame from shoulder to ankle for 19 years in order to attend the Baptist church in a wheelchair. A Salvation Army Lieutenant who had been impressed by the Mangai suggested she write to him, which she did and received the reply:

> Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ with all your heart and soul, believe in him and his power to heal for all things are possible with the Lord. Pray to him with sincere truthful and reverent heart, appeal to the Lord with earnest and unwaning prayers, therefore repent of your sins, and whatsoever you may ask of the Lord in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost and the Holy Angels shall be granted, as I shall also pray to the Lord to grant your request. Sanctify his name and sing his praise forever and ever. Amen. Matt. 6:24; Lk 8:44–48. I am not attending or interviewing Europeans personally. T.W. Ratana, Mangai.

Three or four weeks later she walked into her church in Nelson unaided and the congregation rose and sang the Doxology in thanksgiving (Henderson 1972, 32–33).

Ratana was seen by all, Maori and pakeha alike, as having great mana. Public arrangements he left to secretaries who had a notice published in many newspapers notifying "our Pakeha friends of the Dominion of New Zealand and of the other Isles that you are absolutely barred from approaching our brother, T.W. Ratana, at present until the Maoris have been treated," signed by "The Union of the Maori Race." There were over 2000 healings recorded among the Maoris. Unfortunately, many thought that his teaching was against consulting doctors and many died because of that. But his advice was to go to a doctor remembering the presence of the Holy Trinity and the faithful angels because one is not cured by man but by the will and power of God (Henderson 1972, 33).

Earlier, some from the King Movement had come to him and the leader had said: "Mangai, I have come not for healing of my body and soul, but for healing of the sickness of the land." Ratana's reply was: "Good! First let us unite in the Father, and then we shall unite in the land." Some of the King Movement and some from the Ringatu joined his movement, but the King Movement generally remained as opponents. Later, the Ratana church was to become active in seeking justice in regard to land as it been set down in the Treaty of Waitangi. In 1923 Ratana said he would go to Britain with the Bible in one hand and the Treaty of Waitangi in the other which he did in the following year, unsuccessfully seeking an audience with the King, then sent his delegates on to Geneva to the UN to promote Maori rights. In 1928 a Royal Commission was set up in New Zealand to investigate the confiscation of Maori land and the result was that compensation was paid out to many. Soon the Ratana church had four members of Parliament and an alliance was made with the Labour party. This alliance is still continued today.

In 1925 a number of Anglican bishops became concerned about the teachings of Ratana. Initially they had been very enthusiastic because of Ratana's emphasis on the Trinity as opposed to the old Maori gods and their tohungas. But they became concerned about the teaching about the Holy Angels while Jesus Christ didn't seem to be in the foreground. It was claimed that some of Ratana's followers worshiped the

Holy Angels as the atua of the old religion. Also their prayers usually concluded with: "For the Mouthpiece is our leader, now and forever, Amen." So the bishops became opposed and threatened to excommunicate any Anglican who belonged to the movement. This led Ratana's followers to insist that he be proclaimed officially as minister and the church be registered with the Government so that official marriages could be performed. So a system of church officials evolved with apostles as leaders and officiating ministers within the meaning of the Marriage Act. Below them were the disciples, and spiritual nurses who cared for the sick and ministered to their spiritual needs (Henderson 1972, 45–50).

Today, the church numbers over 48,000 members and is the largest Maori church. The rejection of the tohunga of the past had led to a new kind of tohunga, a Christian tohunga who can bring healing and give spiritual direction and hope to the Maori, because he had gained his powerful mana through faith in the God of Christianity, the Holy Trinity and his Angels. The fears and superstitions related to tapu have largely disappeared. Tahupotiki Wiremu Ratana died in September, 1939, aged sixty-six years. The Ratana movement continues strong today and continues to have political influence in government as the representatives of the Maori people.

End Notes

1. *The Treaty of Waitangi*, English translation of the Maori version.
2. See also Foster (1966).

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