

Maori World View

Before outlining the main features of pre-European Maori religion a brief outline of the Maori view of history is necessary in order to give some understanding of Maori thinking.

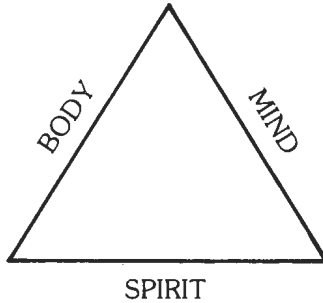
Briefly, Western man's view of history is that it is an ongoing linear process, a continuum; with a beginning and an end. The Maori view however, seems at first glance to be a cyclical one in which everything repeats itself as does the cycle of life — birth, growth, marriage, death — and the cycle of the seasons. This is generally regarded as the normal view held by primal people. Yet, as will be shown, this is a superficial judgement.

A people's view of history is, of course, bound up in and emerges from their world view. It is only as we see this, that we are able to enter sensitively into the other person's world. As Streng (p. 102) has said, "Our image of 'our world' reflects not only spatial extension but time". A diagram developed some years ago³ will be used to show that the Maori world view is a three-tiered structure made up of the Realm of Ultimate Reality, the Realm of the Human, and the Realm of the Dead. (Diagram 1) Ultimate Reality is the realm of the gods. It is not some archaic realm shrouded in the mists of time but is an ever present reality that has continuity with present reality (Realm of the Human). These two realms are not closed, for in the Maori view the realm of the gods penetrates the realm of the Human. Various analogies have been used to form a cosmological picture of "the way things are". The cosmology of a people presents an orientation to life and a way of interpreting existence. A people's image of the world is a power, an organising force, which provides the pattern for defining the kind of meaning available in future experience. Two fundamental religious issues are dealt with in a people's world view. First, it answers the questions "Where do we come from?" and "Where are we going?". Second, it answers the questions "What is 'cause'?" and "What is responsibility?". Thus it seeks to relate personal action and the universal order of things, and confers upon a people some symbols of self-identity.

The Maori people do not accept the concept of a closed universe. Instead, their world view binds Maori society together as a functional whole and illustrates the complexity of humankind's relationship to the sacred and the secular worlds. Maori people do not see the sacred and secular as separated but as parts of the

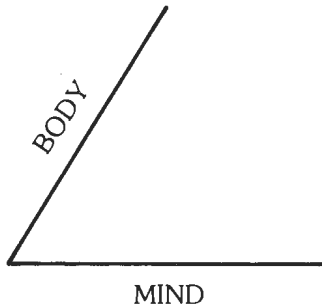
whole. There is a holistic view of life. We Europeans may still tend to see human beings as made up of body, mind and spirit as though these are separate entities which could be dealt with separately. It is better, however, to see these three related as are the sides of a triangle. The moment we take one away we cease to have a triangle, we lose the concept of wholeness.

Thus:



= wholeness

whereas:



= loss of wholeness

This is important in understanding Maori Religion at the time of the coming of Western people with all the disruption an invasive culture brings. The Maori holistic view of human beings and their universe relates directly to the concept of healing, to religious rituals, and to the ordinary as well as extraordinary activities of life.

In the Maori understanding of history we are looking at a view developed in isolation from Western man. This does not thereby make it invalid or inferior. It remains true for Maoris today that there is a 'Maori world' that is real, though usually inaccessible to Europeans because of their presuppositions. Adaption and change have always been features of Maori life yet this does not destroy the fabric of the society.

This is well summed up in the ancient saying:

Te ao hurihuri
te ao huri ai ki tona turanga
te ao rapu;
ko te huripoki e huri nei
i runga i te taumata o te kaha.

Te ao hurihuri
is a world revolving
a world that moves forward
to the place it comes from;
a wheel that turns on an axle
of strength (King: Frontispiece)

The 'axle of strength' is found in the Maori use of *whakapapa* (genealogy). This is a means of affirming identity, linking the speaker with his hearers and with the past, so that it also becomes a statement of the meaning of history. It has become a truism to say that Western man since Descartes draws his identity from within himself, "I think, therefore I am", whereas the Maori speaker says "I belong, therefore I am". The *whakapapa* tells the story of the speaker by saying whom he comes from, and at the same time enables his listeners to identify common ancestors and common tribal affiliations. Identity is found in belonging.

When making an historical allusion a Maori speaker will refer to "*nga wa o mua*", which is usually translated as "the old times" or "in days gone by". Yet this translation is inaccurate, for the word '*mua*' means "in front" and this gives an essential clue to the Maori understanding of history. The past is not something which lies behind, but something which is spread out *in front of* the speaker — beginning as it were at his feet. He sees his parents, grandparents and forebears spread out in front of him and, seeing, he participates in what is an on-going participation by his sharing. There is a strongly cyclical rhythm here, but only in terms of *Te Ao Hurihuri* for it does not leave the past behind. It gathers it up and moves forward. This is plainly not a static view of history as each person is added to the story (*whakapapa*) and moves forward in the growing community of past and present and that which is to come.

How, then, do Maori people see the future? Here we pick up the ideas in the phrase "*i nga wa o mua*" where the preposition "i" (in) has been added. Metaphorically, to the Maori speaker the future is behind him; it cannot be seen for it has not yet happened. This concept helps to an understanding of the reluctance Maori people have towards long-term planning, because there is no way to estimate the unknown contingencies. Nevertheless, the old people were interested in the future as is shown in the function of the *tohunga matakite* (seer, the expert in divination) who helped to prepare for the future. Then, too, the prophetic factor must be reckoned with for prophecies were part of the religious experience of the people.

The Maori remain a people of an oral tradition (Dewes in King) although they have been literate since shortly after the arrival

of the early missionaries. To understand their world view and to comprehend their view of history we must see how they recorded historical events. As with most primal people there were four chief ways.

i. *Myths*

Myths are of primary importance as these give a people's religious interpretation of the cosmos and humankind's relation to it. It is worth quoting Berdyaev in this connection:

Myth is a reality immeasurably greater than concept. It is high time that we stopped identifying myth with invention, with the illusions of primitive mentality, and with anything, in fact, which is essentially opposed to reality... The creation of myths among people denotes a real spiritual life, more real indeed than that of abstract concepts and of rational thought. Myth is always concrete and expresses life better than abstract thought can do; its nature is bound up with that of symbol. Myth is the concrete recital of events and original phenomena of the spiritual life symbolised in the natural world which has engraved itself on the language, memory, and creative energy of the people...; it brings two worlds together symbolically (quoted in Taylor: 30).

ii. *Legends*

Legends relate how the people came to terms with the natural world.

iii. *Names*

Names of persons, places, hills and valleys are born in events and continue what was there begun. This is not always apparent to the outsider. For example, a small settlement is known as *Te Whaiti* which means literally 'the narrow', yet the full name is *Te Whaiti nui a Toi*, i.e., the great clearing of *Toi*. Here is a trace of the journey of the great pre-European explorer when he emerged from the dense forest to a valley of open ground. It is obvious the lexical meaning will not indicate the historical reason for the name. An old informant 40 years ago told me that it was so named as an expression of relief after long trekking through dense forestry.

Individuals also become the carriers of history by the names they bear. These can range from the trivial to the profound. A woman named *Waiparani* was so named because her mother was revived, after a difficult birth, with a drink of brandy and water. Yet an old man named *Patu* (slay, kill) told me that that name was given to him when he was a lad. The great leader *Te Kooti* had narrowly escaped from an ambush and gave this name to the boy to commemorate the event, and also to lay upon the lad the task of *whakautu* (revenge).

iv. *The Arts*

The arts of the Maori are important carriers of history. The songs and dances, the carvings and paintings in the meeting houses, the

laments and *haka* (posture dances), all have their historical components. When you sit in the meeting house you are surrounded with the living past and the rich historical inheritance of the people (Dewes in King: 74).

Because Maori people are deeply immersed in tradition — as can be seen in the rituals of meeting on public occasions when *whakapapa* will be recited, in whole or in part — there is the tendency to conclude that they are immersed in a static view of history (“as it was in the beginning, etc.”). This is to ‘misread’ their understanding of history which, as shown in the quotation of *Te Ao Hurihuri*, moves forward on “an axle of strength”. Certainly Maori people do not leave the past behind, for then they would lose their identity, but the strength of the past enables them to change and adapt as they move into *Te Ao Hou* (the new world). The Rev. Maori Marsden has examined carefully the Maori traditions and declares:

Two conclusions emerge from this: the idea of continuous creation and the idea of a dynamic universe. These ideas are inclusive. The universe is not static but is a stream of processes and events. This concept also includes the idea that history is not cyclical but lineal — it is an on-going process. But the Maori did not develop the idea of a goal of history. The only hint that he aspired towards a final goal is the story of Maui’s final attempt to gain eternal life for man... (M. Marsden in King: 216f).

Before the coming of Europeans to New Zealand, Maori philosophers had given much thought to origins. They saw a basic structure to the universe which they described through the device of oppositions — for every positive there is a negative — and these provided a logical structure for the cosmos. Eric Schwimmer (*J.P.S.* 72(4):408) draws attention to this in a brief note, but Dr. Anne Salmond (*J.P.S.* 87(1):5-40) in a more recent article has developed it in fuller detail which is vastly intriguing. The basic opposition is shown in the two realms of *Te Rangi* and *Te Po*. Each of these has many aspects. *Te Rangi* is sky or heaven and is associated with day and light. *Te Po* is associated with darkness and death (literally, ‘night’) and is also the place to which the spirits of the departed go. (*Te Po*, like the biblical Sheol, lacks the elements of judgement and punishment.) A further dimension to *Te Po* is that it is not only the realm of endings but also of beginnings. *Te Rangi* is the abode of the gods, and it was believed in pre-Christian times that the spirits of the dead chiefs were drawn up to *Te Rangi* to become stars. A graphic and clear description of this is to be found in Dr. Joan Metge’s *The Maoris of New Zealand* (pp. 55-57) where she goes on to show that between *Te Rangi* and *Te Po* is *Te Ao Tu Roa* (The Long Standing World), sometimes called *Te Ao Marama* (The World of Light), the realm of the human. In this realm most things have a physical and a spiritual aspect. As Metge points out, the opposition between *Te Po*

and *Te Rangi* is not one of conflict and negation, but rather one of complementarity. A further series may help to make this clear.

<i>rangi</i>	(sky)	— <i>whenua</i>	(earth)
<i>ra</i>	(day)	— <i>po</i>	(night)
<i>ora</i>	(life)	— <i>aitua</i>	(fate)
<i>ora</i>	(health)	— <i>mate</i>	(sickness, death)
<i>tapu</i>	(sacred)	— <i>noa</i>	(ordinary, common)
<i>matau</i>	(right)	— <i>mauii</i>	(left)
<i>tika</i>	(right, correct)	— <i>he</i>	(wrong)
<i>runga</i>	(above)	— <i>raro</i>	(below)

The latter pair (*runga* and *raro*) give the opposition of ‘up, above’ to ‘down, below’ and the series is seen to link words such as *ora* (life) to *runga* (above), and *aitua* (misfortune) to *raro* (below). So in seeking to understand the cosmos the Maori philosophers used this structure as a basis. This is very clearly shown in the myths and supported by the ancient chants. In the third diagram the chants show that before the sky and earth existed there was *Te Korekore* (nothingness), yet this was not conceived as negative but as potentiality i.e. as the world of potential being. The oppositions are seen in the examples given. The chant on the left is the negative and that on the right the positive. (See Diagram 3).

On the left of Diagram 3 is given the chant of *Te Po*. *Po* can mean night, dark, the underworld or, as here, the unknown.

The first line, *Toko kai mo te po*, is somewhat ambiguous and has been variously translated. Johansen (p. 26), for example, has given it as “A pointed pole for the night” but I would prefer “The recital of the *Po*” which is closer to the meaning than Johansen’s version.⁴ Johansen’s translation of “*Toko kai mo te po*” and “*Toko kai mo te ao*” can be understood in the light of the detailed account of the separation of Rangi and Papa given in the next section, i.e., when Tane forced his parents apart 2 poles were used to prevent them reuniting. Thus Johnson is correct but my translation is closer to usage as the phrases introduce the recital of the chant describing what was, and what is. Thus the chant runs:

The recital of the great dark
 The great unknown
 The deep unknown
 The unknown that is to be used
 The scattered unknown
 The unknown that is being revealed
 The unknown that is searched for.

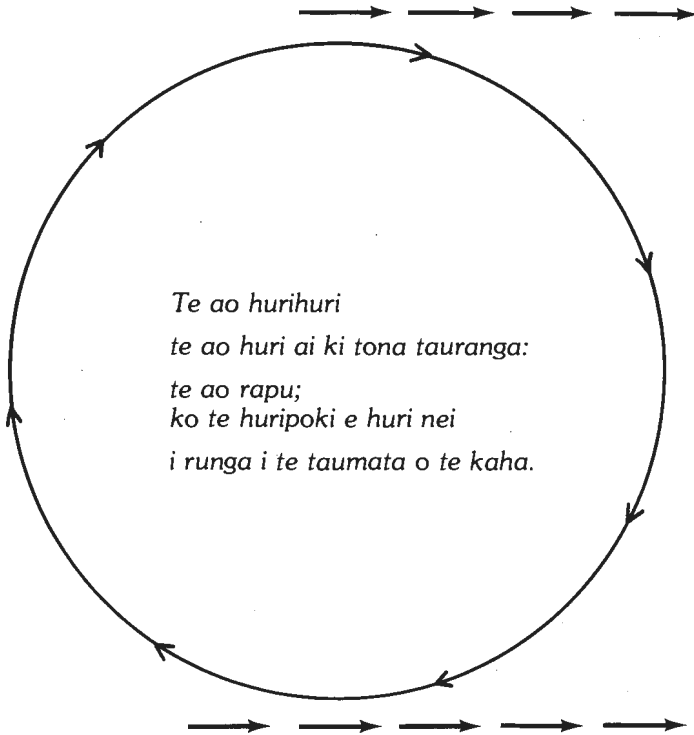
From this we see how the Maori thinkers saw the cosmos as emerging, hence *Te Korekore* is potentiality.

The opposition to this is the description of that potential world as:

- The recital for the world
- The great world
- The long world
- The dark world
- The very dark world
- The obscure world

While variant accounts of the cosmos are given by different tribes, all are in fairly general agreement, namely, that the cosmos is involved in an evolutionary process; that is, there is movement and development. At this point begins the exploration of the idea that the universe is not a closed system but that the spiritual interpenetrates the mundane world. This is set out in the Maori account of creation.

Te Ao Hurihuri



The cycle and rhythm of life

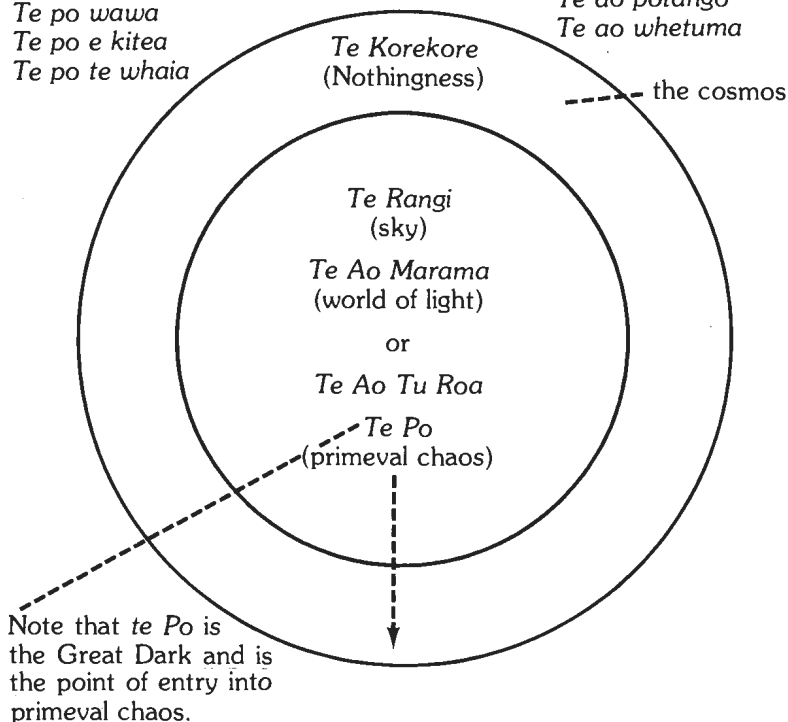
Diagram 2

Ancient Maori World View

This concept is derived from the myths of the Maori, and is attested in the ancient chants and *karakias*. Two relevant chants are given in part as illustrations.

Toko kai mo te po
Te po nui
Te po roa
Te po uriuri
Te po tangotango
Te po wawa
Te po e kitea
Te po te whaia

Toko kai mo te Ao
Te ao nui
Te ao roa
Te ao pouri
Te ao potango
Te ao whetuma



To the old Maori, the spiritual inter-penetrates the world of light — i.e., the universe is not closed.

- According to some, this three-tier universe is
- (1) *Te korekore* — i.e. Potential world.
 - (2) *Te Po* — i.e. world of Becoming.
 - (3) *To Ao Marama* — i.e. world of Being.

Diagram 3