

# Gods, Demons and Ghosts

As previously noted the Maori word *atua* can have wider connotation than the simple translation 'god'. It is used for any supernatural power, and in fact for anything malign or disagreeable. The common factor would seem to be a response to that which evokes feelings of awe, wonder or fear. Caution is needed in identifying these necessarily with the numinous.

Best has classified the Maori deities under four main headings: A supreme being; departmental gods; district or tribal gods; inferior beings.

## The Supreme Being

Best gives *Io* as the Supreme Being, and the cult of *Io* as representing the beliefs of the higher ranking people. His judgement must be taken with reservation for *Io* was not known to the missionaries or other European observers until the 1860's when, in a special *wananga* (house of sacred learning) convened by the chief informant *Te Matorohanga*, a number of informants revealed the lore of *Io*. A great deal of doubt has been cast on this information. Subsequent investigation by people such as *Te Rangi Hiroa* (Sir Peter Buck) dismissed *Io* as a post-European invention. Buck (pp. 454, 531-536) says: "(*Io*) was an academic invention ... he existed in theory ...".

While there are possibly some traces of an *atua* named *Io* in some of the Polynesian Islands, nowhere outside New Zealand is he considered a Supreme Deity. Buck asserts that the doctrine of the cult owes much to the biblical account of creation and to Old Testament descriptions of Yahweh. In the *Matorohanga* account of the separation of the spirits of the dead on their arrival at *Hawaikiniu* (the ultimate destination of the dead), the righteous go to the Upper world and sinners to the Underworld. This is contrary to Maori belief prior to the arrival of European religion. Schwimmer (pp. 114-116) is more cautious when he says that the truth lies somewhere in between the opposing views. It is certain that knowledge of *Io* was restricted to carefully selected initiates who were bound never to

reveal his name. The various accounts given of *Io* also indicate that he had no priests in a number of the tribes. The rituals associated with the cult were carried out in complete seclusion and extremely severe *tapu* restrictions were imposed. The impressive list of the names of *Io*, such as *Io-matangaro* (*Io* of the hidden face), suggests that *Io* was an 'absentee god' and this is reminiscent of some forms of Gnosticism. It is now too late to be able to substantiate the claims that the doctrine is pre-European although Maori informants consider it to be so.

Sir Apirana Ngata,<sup>7</sup> in an unpublished lecture, claims that the knowledge of the cult of *Io* remained to the last the privilege of the *tohunga ahurewa* (highest class of priestly adepts) and was denied to the ordinary people. Only graduates of the special *Whare wananga* (house of sacred learning) could recite the *karakia* of *Io*. These *karakia* were used only for the important matters in life, such as birth, sickness, death or exhumation of a person of importance, the opening of the *tapu* school of learning (*wananga*), and the initiation of *taura* (pupils) to such schools. The community was not permitted to learn the ritual in any way, or even perhaps to know the name of *Io*.

The concept of *Io* was developed among the higher minds of the Polynesians, though a diffusion from sources far back in the history of the people should not be dismissed. They were obviously possessed of powers of abstraction and introspective thought.

The attributes of *Io* were signified by his various names:

<i>Io</i>	the core of all gods
<i>Io-nui</i>	greatest of all gods
<i>Io-roa</i>	everlasting, not knowing death
<i>Io-matua</i>	the parent of human beings and of all things
<i>Io-matua-kore</i>	the parentless, nothing but himself
<i>Io-taketake</i>	permanent, all enduring, complete, immovable
<i>Io-te-pukenga</i>	the source of all things
<i>Io-te-wananga</i>	the source of all knowledge, whether good or evil
<i>Io-te-toi-o-nga-rangi</i>	the crown of the heavens
<i>Io-mata-nui</i>	the all-seeing
<i>Io-mata-ngaro</i>	the hidden (unseen) face
<i>Io-mata-aho</i>	seen only in a radiant light
<i>Io-uru-tapu</i>	the totally sacred

There were no gross practices associated with the cult and probably it was to maintain this that the ordinary people were not permitted to know of him and so perforce had to deal with the departmental gods.

In outline the cult of *Io* held that he was the supreme god and dwelt in the uppermost of the 12 heavens (*Te toi o nga rangi*) where

no lesser gods might enter without his permission. The *whatakura*, male spirits, dwelt in the eleven heavens below the uppermost. They acted as intermediaries between *Io* and the departmental gods, the children of *Rangi* and *Papa*. Some *whatakura* were allowed to dwell in the 12th heaven as guardians of the treasures, and were used as special messengers. The *mariekura*, said to be female spirits, were considered to be the wives of the *whatakura*. Both are sometimes termed *apa* (*apa-whatakura* and *apa-mariekura*). Some of these spirits were symbolically represented by whirlwinds. All things in heaven and earth had their guardian spirits known as *poutiriao*. They were subservient to the *whatakura* and *mariekura*.

Ngata concluded his lecture:

Whether independently evolved or borrowed, there were minds among the Stone Age people of the Polynesian archipelago which could comprehend this elevated conception and dream a philosophy of things in heaven and earth to satisfy the cravings of mind and spirit.

In 1974 the Rev. Fr. P.W. Shirres examined carefully the various early authorities (one source going back to the 1840's) and concluded (personal communication, 1974) that the cult was pre-European in origin.

It is interesting that W.W. Gill, in his researches in Mangaia (Cook Islands) published in 1879, indicates a knowledge of *Io* under the name *Matoro*, 'io' being the Mangaian name for 'god'. *Matoro* was accorded the title *te io ora* (the living God). However *Matoro* would properly be described as a 'high god' rather than as the Supreme Being as he was conjointly worshipped with *Rongo*.

## High Gods

In **popular** Maori religion the high gods are *Tane*, *Tangaroa*, *Tumatauenga*, *Tawhirimatea* and *Rongo*. These are described by Best as Departmental Gods, yet Best also refers to a variety of "powers" in the various heavens below the 12th heaven whence come *Rangi* and *Papa*. He refers to those beings known as *whatakura* (male spirits) and *mariekura* (female spirits) who serve as attendants to *Io* and who could be seen as equivalents of the cherubim and seraphim of the Old Testament or the angels of the Christian scriptures, for they seem to be messengers rather than gods (see Best, 1976b:208).

## Departmental Gods

These beings are those found in the myths of creation (as outlined earlier) and are known throughout Polynesia, although sometimes

with different functions and, as is the case with *Tangaroa*, sometimes accorded different status. In the main these are originating beings, controlling powers, and the personification of aspects of the natural world. As we have seen, these are the offspring of the Primeval Parents, each with a particular sphere of influence. The chief of these was *Tane* who separated the parents, brought the baskets of knowledge to earth, was the fertilizer of the earth causing it to produce trees and food, and fathered the first human beings: *Tane-the-life-giver*, *Tane-the-wise-one*.

Others of the children of *Papa* and *Rangi* also feature in the list of departmental gods among whom were *Kiwa* the guardian of the oceans, *Ruaumoko* who was the originator of earthquakes, and *Uru-te-ngangana* who is described as the originator of the stars. *Whiro* has already been described, and he is the one who stands in opposition to *Tane*. *Tane* stands here for light and life, while *Whiro* represents evil and death, is indicated in the name *Whiro-the-dark-one*. When defeated, *Whiro* retired to rule over the underworld. His power is still expressed in the diseases, sickness and other afflictions which assail mankind. *Tane* is sometimes described as *Tane te waiora* (*Tane the living water*) although the *waiora* refers to sunlight, according to Best, but also *waiora* denotes life and welfare (see Best 1976b:96).

For each department and departmental god there was developed a ritual with its own *karakia*, observances and *tapu* restrictions. Some of these incorporated the practical knowledge gained through the centuries of woodcraft, navigation, agriculture and star lore. *Tane*, as god of the forest, pervaded the invocations whether they related to the felling of trees, the adzing out of canoes, shaping slabs for housing or the snaring and preserving of birds. It was the *wai o Tane* (water of *Tane*) that the pigeons drank. The bilge of the canoe was *te riu o Tane*, which was also the proverbial expression for the totara tree. The bird-snarer, the canoe builder, the house-builder and the weapon-maker all walked with great care along a path beset with rituals and restrictions. *Tane*, as the personification of the life-principle and procreator, entered into the lives and relationships of men and women.

*Tangaroa* was *Tangaroa-whakamaui-tai*, the regulator of tides and the deity who presided over the dwellers of the oceans. His name therefore was on the lips of the priestly navigators whose compass was the stars by night and the sun by day. The fisherman who made his net or shaped his hook, murmured a *karakia* to propitiate the god of fishes and to invite good fortune.

*Rongomaraeroa*, the god of peace, was the one who presided over the arts of the cultivation. He was the deity of cultivated foods, and especially the *kumara* (sweet potato). The adjective *maraeroa*

(the extensive *marae*, or plaza) was applied by some Polynesians to the ocean; so *Rongo* took on some of the attributes of *Tangaroa*.

*Tumatauenga*, often given as *Tu*, was the one to whom were dedicated the fighting men of a tribe. They were *nga toa a Tu* (the warriors of *Tu*). The battlefield was the *marae* of *Tu* and those who died there were *nga ika a Tu* (the fish of *Tu*). *Tu* was the opposite of *Rongomaraeroa*, fierce and unrelenting. The grim business of fighting was accompanied at every stage by the most exacting ritual and every warrior was under the *tapu* of *Tu*. In the commencement of battle they rushed in crying "Ko *Tu!*" (It is *Tu!* It is *Tu!*).

There was no part of human activity or of nature which Maori philosophy did not place under a presiding deity. The smallest detail of life seemed to be ordered by the priests according to a ritual ascribed to the appropriate god. The prestige of the god was fortified, maintained and protected by elaborate *tapu* requirements.

## District or Tribal Gods

The title 'district' is more accurate than 'tribal' here, for often a lesser god would be acknowledged and appealed to by a number of tribes in adjacent territory. These powers were of various types. Some were local war gods and although they did not displace *Tumatauenga*, they were regarded, as in the case of *Maru* and *Uenuku*, as powerful and effective forces. The Maori is always a realist and as *Tumatauenga* was acknowledged by all it was important to have such gods who could serve the tribal interests. Yet *Tumatauenga* would be acknowledged by the offering of the heart of the first enemy slain in an encounter. The tribal deity was considered to control the actions of the war party through its human medium — in this case the *tohunga matakite* (Best, 1924: 73-77). Such a *tohunga* was termed a *waka* (literally 'canoe', but understood as receptacle) of the utterances of the *atua*, hence the medium or *mangai* (mouthpiece).

There were many other district *atua* connected with the various aspects of life, agriculture and domestic matters. In the case of such powers they were appealed to through divinatory rites. These powers were generally the lesser natural forces. For example, *Uenuku* and *Kahukura* are represented by the rainbow; *Tunui*, meteors; *Hinetuira*, lightning. Sometimes these *atua* were accorded different functions in different districts, e.g., *Maru*, already described as a war god was, in some districts, called upon when crops were threatened with failure. He was also useful in averting death from infringements of certain *tapu* restrictions. When the fighting chief of Taranaki, *Titokowaru*, abandoned Christianity during the Land Wars he chose *Maru* to be his *atua*.

Sometimes eels and lizards were apparently accorded the status of *atua* as in the case of *Rakaiora* (a lizard) or *Puhi* (an eel). Normally lizards were looked upon with much fear and the lizard was generally regarded as the *aria* (visible sign or manifestation) of *Whiro*. This writer 30 years ago was presented with an ornately carved walking stick by an elderly Maori carver. From base to handle is a closely carved series of spirals made up entirely of geckos (small harmless lizards). I suspect that this represented the carver's *kaitiaki* (family guardian spirit) and as such he was assuring me and my family of the care of his *kaitiaki*; not, I hope, a warning to those I might address in public speech, when the stick would be used in the stylised gestures of public oratory.

It is important to recognise that the pre-European Maori did not offer worship to their *atua*, as the Christians worship the Trinity or the Muslims Allah. The gods of the Maori were acknowledged, appealed to, respected and placated. *Atua* have *mana* (supernatural power) and so are dangerous to approach unless the correct forms are observed. They were feared but not invested with the qualities of compassion and so on that draws the response of adoration that features in the Christian worship. This explains in part, why, apart from the regular phases of agriculture, hunting and fishing seasons, there were not regular ceremonials of religion. Most religious functions were simply performed as the need arose. Moreover, apart from funerary rites and rites associated with the tribe or sub-tribe, such as war, building, birth etc., only those immediately involved in a particular situation would participate. The whole matter of approaching the gods involved their *mana* and the consequent *tapu* associated with them.

Both Departmental and District *atua* are mainly anthropomorphic and consequently certain of the human passions are attributed to them (anger, goodwill). How else shall human beings verbalise the concept of unseen active powers? Although among the lesser *atua* there were a number who were malicious (especially those associated with *Whiro*), many were harmless. In 1941 I heard an ancient proverb recited at a *tangihanga* (funeral) for an accident victim. It goes:

*He toa pikirakau, he kai na te pakiaka.*  
*He whare wera; he waka tahuri i te moana;*  
*Na Tupaoa enei mate.*

He who climbs trees may be killed in a fall;  
Men die in home accidents; others drown at sea;  
These deaths belong to Tupaoa.

In asking an elderly man who *Tupaoa* was I discovered that he was not the cause of the *aitua* (tragedy), as my translation led me to

suppose, but he it is who has the care of those who die in accidents. Here was no judgement as to the nature of *Tupaoa* for he is a neutral being. Behind the proverb is a philosophy of death. In the old Maori economy death was always considered an intrusion. Death came by misfortune (as above), by war (such are claimed by *Tumatauenga*), through *makutu* (casting spells) or by the breaching of a *tapu* prohibition. Failure to fulfil obligations were also considered to be a prime source of tragedy.

## Inferior Beings

This is an extremely wide class of *atua* that includes many of the minor tutelary beings, *wairua* (spirits), *kaitiaki*, *taniwha* (objects representing mythical monsters, sometimes regarded as tribal or district guardians) and *kehua* (ghosts of those not accorded correct funerary rites, aborted fetuses, and still-born children). *Kehua* are generally regarded as troublesome spirits, and in the case of an aborted fetus, malicious. There are vast numbers of other spirits, malign and benign.

The dead who were not given proper funerary rites became restless spirits because they were not installed with the ancestors. They would trouble members of their extended family or their *hapu* (sub-tribe). When the rites were fulfilled the spirit then found its rest and ceased to be troublesome.

The aborted fetus, as it was not a completed human being, was greatly feared. It would seem to be rather like the European poltergeist. A good example of this is found in the myth cycle of *Maui*. *Maui* was an aborted fetus and, although later able to join the human race, he proves to be troublesome, a trickster with malicious tendencies, who challenges both men and the gods and only finds his humanness in the failure of his last challenge (to gain immortality for man) when he dies (Irwin, 1981).

A *hapu* (sub-tribe) or a *whanau* (extended family) commonly had a *kaitiaki* whose *aria* (visible form) was a bird, fish, animal or even an insect which would warn an individual or the group of an impending danger. Post-European influence is seen in the adoption of an opossum as its *kaitiaki* by a family known to the writer. Any species that was a *kaitiaki* became *tapu* and would never be killed or eaten by a member of the group. Some years ago while the writer was attending a *tangi* (funeral) a white-breasted shag was seen flying up the course of a river and diverting over a nearby hill sheltering a home where there was a sick man. An elder of the church explained that it was *Hinenuiotepo* and it had “come” for “so and so” (the sick man). An hour later news of his death came to us. The shag (*kawau*)

was also known to another *hapu* as *Hineruarangi*. According to the people of Ngati Whare and Ngati Manawa *Hinenuitepo* (*Hineruarangi*) accompanied the *taua* (war party) of those sub-tribes who took part in the battle of Orakau (see *J.P.S.* vol. 72(4), pp. 411-414).

Another class of *atua* was the *tipua*, described in terms we would understand as goblins or demons, and these were greatly feared. Birds, fish, dogs, stones, lakes and other animate and inanimate objects could suffer enchantment and become *tipua*. Because they were enchanted they possessed strange powers and were hostile to mankind unless placated by offerings.

*Taniwha* (monsters) were denizens of rivers and lakes that lived in dark pools and caves and were monstrous in size and appearance. Frequently they appeared as large logs or masses of floating weeds. They were hostile to man and consumed unwary travellers who strayed into their domain. Even today local people will point out places where a particular *taniwha* has its lair. I once referred to a *taniwha* in a broadcast address and received a number of letters from older Maoris telling of the particular *taniwha* in their own district. From these accounts it was clear that ill-effects could be avoided by making offerings and reciting appropriate *karakia* (incantations). Some informants used '*tipua*' and '*taniwha*' interchangeably. Many of these *taniwha* seemed to perform the function of guardian to a district and to the tribe and sub-tribe of the area. A notable *taniwha* on Lake Taupo has the appearance of a mass of lake weed and sedge. It appears from time to time to warn the people of Tokaanu of impending danger.

The word *taniwha* is often used as a synonym for a chief or a notable visitor. In Tuhoe territory there is a proverbial saying:

*Ka tae te ua, te haruru me te uira,  
Ka puta he taniwha.*

When rain, thunder and lightning occur  
a notable visitor has entered the district.

In the Waikato tribal area '*taniwha*' is used as a synonym for tribal meeting houses, as in "*he piko, he taniwha*", "at each bend of the river is an important meeting house". The meeting house represents the chief of the local *hapu*, or the original ancestor.

A further class of being is termed *Patupaiarehe*, usually translated as 'fairy folk' who often appeared to men in the night but at sunrise returned to their true home. They were human in form, usually of great beauty, and could mate with human beings. The parents of the great *Maui* were a human father and a *Patupaiarehe* mother.



## Aria

As already indicated, each *atua* had its own *aria* (manifestations or visible emblems) such as the rainbow, thunder and lightning, meteors, stars, birds, and reptiles such as the lizard. They also had their own *tohunga matakite* who, as mediums of the *atua*, became the *waka* for that *atua*. Best (1976b: 208) somewhat misleads when he speaks of these *aria* as “forms of incarnation”. The *aria* is a sign or symbol of the presence or activity of the *atua* and is no more the god than an image would be. It should be noted, however, that certain types of stones were referred to as *atua*, but this was possibly because the stone (especially greenstone, i.e., New Zealand jade) had become the repository of the *mauri* (life principle) of some chief and so imbued with his *mana*, or else possessed *mana atua* (mana of the gods). Greenstone artefacts and weapons became highly prized heirlooms, with a name and a history. This was not the *aria* of an *atua*. Most likely there was some supernatural happening associated with it and it was imbued with the *mana* of the original owner.

In 1966 I was present at a moving ceremony in an isolated village when a *patu* (war club) made of whalebone that had been presented to a greatly honoured missionary was returned to the *hapu* following the death of the holder. It was presented to the people in the meeting house and was greeted with weeping and chanting as though it were a person who had returned home, and the name of the *patu* was used. One elderly man objected to this name and recited the *whakapapa* of the *patu* (i.e. of the original owners) and ended with a different name. On hearing that name the other elders were in agreement that it was the true name. A man then stepped forward and laid his own *mere* (greenstone club) alongside the whalebone *patu* saying (in Maori) “That they may copulate”. In this dramatic enactment was carried out the renewal of the *mana* of the *patu*.

There were no *aria* for the chief gods such as *Tane*, *Tu* etc., although some have suggested that this was so. I suspect that this arose over confusion between the terms ‘*aria*’ and ‘*ahua*’ (form as opposed to substance) by European observers. I doubt that any Maori speaker would confuse the terms.

Best (1976b: 220) gives a number of examples of *aria*. One of the most interesting is that named *Okiwa*, a cold wind blowing from the sacred mountain *Maungapohatu* down the valley at Ruatoki. This wind is said to be the breath of the *kuri* (extinct Maori dog) that was the *aria* of the *atua*, *Okiwa*.



### **The Tohunga under Tapu**

The Maori tohunga (priest) was tapu because of his knowledge of ancient and potent incantations. The association of food with anything tapu is very objectionable to the Maori, and it is in connection with food, and the act of eating, that the full operation of these laws are seen. This deeply tattooed Maori was painted in the Wanganui district. *Gottfried Lindauer. Auckland City Art Gallery, New Zealand.*