

Approaching the Sacred

Reference has already been made to the extensive use of a form of prayer termed *karakia*. This word was translated by the early missionaries as 'prayer' and 'worship' and so used in all the churches. What the old-time Maori meant by the term was often misunderstood by Europeans and it is inadequate to use such simplistic translation, although long usage will doubtless ensure its continuance.

Karakia is a general term for verbal approaches to the sacred, and for gatherings for the recital of *karakia*. The actual verbal recitals are not based on European Christian understandings of prayer and worship but on symbolism, analogy and sympathetic magic (Best 1976b: 306). The word can denote a spell, a charm, an incantation or an invocation and is composed of a formula of words that have *mana* (power) and are therefore effective. Such a *karakia* does not have ethical dimensions as such, although it was essential to fulfil all the necessary ceremonial requirements. A feature of a *karakia* utterance was that its power and efficacy depended upon accurate repetition of set phrases, sometimes seeming to have little bearing on the particular concern. This however, must be understood in the light of the reference to symbolism and analogy. Symbolical language is always difficult to translate accurately and when, as in the Maori situation, there are included historical references which, for a particular listener, are obscure, the *karakia* could well seem incomprehensible. It was essential that nothing should be omitted and nothing added. To make a mistake was considered a serious ill-omen and disaster was expected to follow. Thus in the *Maui* myth we are told that *Maui's* father omitted certain words from the birth rites and so *Maui* was marked from birth for disaster.

There was a large number of *karakia* known to the people in general — especially those to cause rain to stop, those that protected from the danger of *makutu* (ill wishes, curses), and those appropriate to their work. The important *karakia* were known only to the *tohunga* who was the medium of the particular *atua*. What little is known of those *karakia* which pertain to the cult of *Io* shows them to be of a different character and closer to the European ideas of prayer and worship.

Apart from the *karakia* associated with public ceremonies such as *tangihanga*, the dedication of a Meeting House, and so on, most of the *karakia* were recited in the presence of those immediately concerned. The potency of the particular *karakia* was in no small measure dependent upon the *mana* of the *tohunga* conducting the ritual.

Karakia can be classified under the following headings for convenience:

Placatory: as in setting out on a fishing expedition or sea journey. The main intention seems to be to persuade the *atua* (in this case *Tangaroa*) to remain quiescent.

Invocatory: according to Best, *karakia* were not invocations in the sense that Christians use the word; but in as much as they were addressed to an *atua* they do have this element, although the idea of submission is lacking.

Intercession: this was an element of many recorded *karakia* although these mainly concerned the sub-tribe or the extended family seeking to gain benefits or avert some disaster. Thus they were aimed at dominating the *atua* and manipulating him to secure the desired ends. Although this is contrary to the Christian conception of intercessory prayer yet it reflects a universal tendency.

Incantation: this more adequately describes the more significant *karakia* as they sought to cause the inherent *mana* to accomplish the desired ends. It is most likely that the recital of the incantation itself brought about the desired result through sympathetic magic.

Exorcism: the final type of *karakia* is that associated with nullifying a *makutu*, and turning the effects of such utterances back on the one who had caused it to be said. In the same category are the *karakia* for healing, for one of the signs of a *makutu* was a sickness that did not yield to such medicines as were available.

A great deal of criticism has been levelled at the content of many *karakia* because they do not have the structure familiar to Christians. An early deviation from Christianity among the Maori people known as *Pai Marire* was led by *Te Ua Haumene*. Certain of the prayers seemed to be nonsense sentences, sometimes being the names of notable Europeans, or the transliteration into Maori of the commands of English officers to their troops. What is not recognised is that the structure was in Maori thought-forms, the names and commands were those of people with great *mana*, and the words were filled with *mana* (as when a troop is called to attention). Thus the *karakia* were not "gibberish" or "nonsense" as European observers frequently described them, but entirely congruous in the Maori situation.

Karakia were, of course, only part of what could be simple ritual ceremonies or complex and elaborated ones. The former is illustrated by the casual tossing of a portion of food over the shoulder accompanied by the words "*To kai, e Maru*" (your portion, O *Maru*) to placate the fierce war god *Maru*. The other extreme, in a serious situation, could require the *tohunga* to stand naked in running water for his own protection from the malign influences he was attempting to nullify.

Healing and Exorcism

From the earlier discussion on sickness we have seen that any illness not responding to the usual treatment was regarded as a *mate Maori*. Such illnesses required the services of a *tohunga* skilled in such matters who had to decide what had caused the illness before he could treat it. If it had been caused by an infraction of *tapu*, or because a *makutu* (curse or ill-wish) had been placed on the person, then different forms of ritual were required. While both would be termed *whakanoa* rituals, the content of the *karakia* would be different.

The failure of traditional medicine and healing procedures after the coming of the European had seriously undermined the position of the *tohunga* and the old sanctions. However, the advent of new epidemic diseases, and the failure of European medicines to cure what may be termed psychosomatic illnesses, led to a renewed concern with the old *tapu* restrictions and the *whakanoa* rites. It seemed to the Maori that there was a class of illness which was impervious to European medical procedures. Such illnesses were termed *mate Maori*, indicating a malady caused by some spiritual disturbance. A number of *tohunga* had accepted Christianity and the Christian *atua*, and sought to synthesize the old and the new. It was unfortunate that few missionaries appeared to have understood what the Maori participants were saying in these attempts to combine the two systems into a whole (see Hamlin: 163).

An early example of this was seen in the emergence in 1851 of a cult named *Wahi Tapu* (Sacred Place). This cult was an attempt to cope with the people's belief that by accepting Christianity death and sickness were inflicted upon them by the spirits of their ancestors. To deal with this they held what was clearly a *whakanoa* ceremony within the ancestral burial place. By this means they attempted to destroy the *mana* of those ancestors by a combination of traditional practices and Christian prayers. Food was cooked over the burial place and then eaten by the participants, followed by a reading of Scripture from the Temptation of Christ ("It is written that thou shalt worship the Lord thy God"). Then prayer was

offered that the place be cleansed of its *tapu* (i.e. that it be rendered *noa*). Insufficient attention has been given to this radical innovation as an attempt to Christianise the ancient ritual (see *J.P.S.*, 76(1) 1967: 42f). The missionary Taylor, who described the ceremony, obviously saw this as syncretistic and therefore to be rejected.

While the *Wahi Tapu* movement did not persist for very long yet the ideas behind the cult continued to exert influence, as Hohepa shows in an account of two *tohunga* in Northland during the 1880's. Hammond, a Methodist missionary, describes them as follows:

There resides at Mangakahia a wonderful healer, who seems just now at the zenith of his prosperity ... proceeding at once to cure by cold water and prayer all sicknesses ... During the whole course of treatment, strict rule of *tapu* is observed, any violation of which would nullify the good effect ...

We have had, too, a visit from a young man from Kaipara, who assumes wonderful sanctity and scriptural knowledge, while at the same time he pretends to have all the old power of the *tohungas*. He professed to tell of certain bewitchments that had caused the death of a number of persons, thus reviving in the minds of the young men ideas that we do our best to dispel (Hohepa: 45f).

From these quotations it will be seen that, despite the changes taking place, the acceptance of Christianity did not mean that the ideas of *mana* and *tapu* had been abandoned but that the ideas were now attached to the *atua* of the European. Moreover, the basic understanding of life, as shown in the outline of the Maori world view, cannot be understood without the concept of *mana* and *tapu*, and without seeing the need for rites of cleansing and purification to continue.

Some years ago I discussed with an old man his recent healing from the nearly fatal results of gangrene in the leg. The leg had been black and swollen from toes to thigh (I had seen him at that time) and the district nurse had said that death was very close. Yet after the ministrations of a *tohunga* (who was from another district and was said to have great *mana*), he had fully recovered. He related that the *tohunga* had enquired of him as to possible causes, then given him a drink of an infusion made from boiling flax leaves (*harakeke* — phormium tenax), laid hands on him and prayed. After the procedure had been repeated for three days, healing commenced. The *tohunga* cautioned the elderly patient that his life must be blameless and his heart given to God. The procedures used by the *tohunga* were plainly those of the *whakanoa* rituals, yet it is impossible to judge from the information whether the ritual was for exorcism of a *makutu* or of a *tapu* infringement. It is also impossible to judge whether the illness had a psychosomatic basis. All we can

say is that the ritual had action and words that were effective. The participants believed that the power (*mana*) of God did the healing. What is important is that the procedures were meaningful for the patient.

Shortland gives an illustration of *whakanoa* procedures in an occurrence in the 1870's. In a village where the residents were mainly Christian, an increase in population had created a need for more land and had resulted in new houses being built too close to a *wahi tapu* (probably a cemetery). Early in the morning the villagers gathered at the chosen place where a large *umu* (earth oven) had been fired. It was being opened by the women, and each participant was handed a cooked *kumara* taken from the *umu*. This was held in the hand while the usual morning service was read, concluding with a short prayer that God's blessing might rest on the place. Then each person ate the *kumara* they were holding and the place was declared *noa*. Shortland (1856) comments:

I could not but think that the native teacher had done wisely in thus adapting so much of old ceremonial as to satisfy the scruples of those of little faith ... every one present, by eating food cooked on the *tapu* ground, equally incurred the risk of offending the *atua* of the family, which risk was believed to be removed by the Christian *karakia*.

We should note that it was the women who opened the oven — a significant role in the *whakanoa* ritual, for normally this is a task only for men. Shortland's explanation is not entirely correct for, as we have shown, cooked food is an effective agent in nullifying (or lifting) a *tapu*. The use of the *kumara* was also significant, for this has special importance to Maori people. Each part of the service was equally important for the efficacy of the ceremony.