

# *Te Ngahere A Tane* (Forest Lore and Associated Rituals)

This brief chapter is included as an example of the way Maori religion permeated every aspect of life. To attempt to describe the individual *karakia* for agriculture, hunting, fishing and war would be tedious and unnecessary.

At the coming of the European the forests covered vast regions of the land. They were an integral part of the economy of the people for they supplied food such as berries, fern frond tips, and rhizomes from the roots of certain ferns which, when pounded, gave a crude form of flour. The birds, both flighted and flightless, along with the *kiore* (extinct native bush rat) were its denizens and supplied scarce protein in their seasons. The trees supplied timber and thatching for humble dwellings as well as for the great carved meeting houses. Carefully selected trees were used for the tremendous logs that were skilfully wrought into the ceremonial war canoes. It was from the forests that logs came to be fashioned into the unadorned *waka* (canoes) used for daily commerce on inland waterways. The leaves of certain trees supplied needed medicines. And from the forest came the highly prized *kiekie* (*Freycineta Banksia*), a climbing plant that grew in the uplifted arms of the boughs of certain forest giants. *Kiekie* was used in the delicate tracery of the *tukutuku* panels that adorned the walls of the magnificently carved ancestral houses that were the council (*runanga*) houses of the tribes.

The forests were (and are) more than the sum of the trees, for to the Maori people man, birds, animals and trees all have a common source in that they have their ultimate origin in the primeval parents, *Papa* and *Rangi*. The forest and its inhabitants were the “children of *Tane*” for they were brought into being by *Tane* in his search for the *ira tangata* (see Section 2, Creation). Even today when a notable person dies the lament is heard “*Kua hinga te totara nui a Tane*” (“The great *totara* tree of *Tane* has fallen”). So it is that the forests were treated by the Maori people with great respect and care, for were they not part of the domain of *Tane* (*Te Wao nui a Tane*) and rooted in fertile mother earth? Even today Maori people are

environmentally conscious so that it does not surprise us to find that the *ngahere a Tane* (forests of *Tane*) are surrounded with myths, legends and rituals to preserve this vast source of some of the necessities of life. Great care was taken to preserve the forests from fire and the depredations of man. The forest myths make this clear. Before even a tree could be felled or even a cut made in its base *Tane's* permission must be sought through the appropriate ritual so that the harmony between man and environment was maintained. So important were the forests that one of the terms for the created world was the inclusive *Wao nui a Tane* which, while it is understood as "The great forest of *Tane*", also means "The great world of *Tane*".

As might well be expected, the forest came under the general cover of *tapu* restrictions because in it was the *mauri* of *Tane*, that is to say, it had its life principle upon which the fertility of the forest depended. Thus the breaching of a *tapu* of the forest was considered so heinous an offence that the offender might well be put to death.

Elsdon Best gives an example of a *karakia* (which he terms a "charm") that was recited over the repository of the *mauri*.

*E Papa e takoto nei! E Rangi e tu nei!*  
*Homai te totokai tangata kia rurutia, kia herea;*  
*Kia mau te mauri. Te mauri o wai? Te mauri o Tane,*  
*Tane-tuturi, Tane-pepeke, whakamutua ki a Tumatauenga.*  
*Whakamutua ki a Paia nana i toko te rangi;*  
*Na Tumatauenga i here te kai.*

O *Papa* below! O *Rangi* standing above!  
Enable the gatherer of food to gather a store;  
Establish the *mauri*. Whose *mauri*? The *mauri* of *Tane*,  
*Tane* the fleet one, *Tane* the fast one, ending the hold of *Tumatauenga*.  
Ending the hold of *Paia*, he who established the pole holding the sky;  
But *Tumatauenga* held the food.

This *karakia* is not easy to translate for it has reference to the creation story when *Tumatauenga* and *Paia* aided *Tane* in separating the primeval parents, and by implication refers to the strife between the brothers that arose later. So the *karakia* appeals to the parents of *Tane* that the forest shall be fertile.

The *mauri* of the forest was, like all *mauri*, an immaterial quality that had a material symbol. Normally this would be a stone of distinctive shape, but it could also be a tree or some other object chosen by the *tohunga*. Best gives an account of this when he quotes a *Raukawa* woodsman but, as in the case of the previous quotation, he supplies no translation. The meaning, however, is quite clear:

*Ko te mauri he karakia i karakiatia e*  
*te tohunga ki tetahi mea, ki te kohatu,*

*ki te rakau ranei, ki teteahi atu mea  
ranei i paingia e te tohunga hei piringa,  
hei maunga, hei nohoanga mo te mauri.  
Ka whakangawhatai ki tetahi o aua mea,  
ka waiho ki te wahi ngaro o te ngahere  
here takoto ai.*

The *mauri* was a *karakia* recited by the *tohunga* to a certain thing, a stone, or tree or some other thing chosen by the *tohunga* to be the dwelling place for the *mauri*. Should one of these things be accidentally discovered [split open] leave it in its hiding place in the forest where it lies.

Best's informant uses the word 'mauri' both for the particular *karakia* and for the actual *mauri*. It is clear from the account that the object chosen became the repository for the *mauri* of the particular *atua* in whose care that forest was placed. If the repository chosen was a stone or other object it was buried secretly, perhaps at the foot of a tree which bore an abundance of fruit and so would be a favourite spot for many birds. Often a *tohunga* carrying out the task would then obtain a *moko kakariki* (a small green tree-gecko) and release it on the tree to become its *kaitiaki* (guardian). It would be a foolhardy traveller or wood gatherer who would touch such a tree, and should one be inadvertently split revealing the *mauri* then it was to be left there. The task of the *mauri* in these situations would seem to be to protect the *mana* of the forest while it also represents that *mana*.

The *tapu* restrictions of the forest were very numerous, for the welfare and prosperity of the people was at stake. This is why a person accused of being a *kai parapara* (the term literally means "a disgusting person"), i.e., of deliberately breaching a forest *tapu* restriction, was liable to be put to death. It was forbidden to take cooked food into such an area, although uncooked food was allowed. Bird snarers and travellers were permitted to cook birds within the forest provided all was eaten in the forest area and none taken away. To remove any uneaten food would breach the *tapu* with disastrous consequences. This is how the old time Maori saw his relationship to the material world which is interpenetrated with the powers of the world of Ultimate Reality. The *mauri* guards the fertility of the forest and also serves as a voice to the *atua* (here understood as 'powers' or 'spirits') of the forest. The latter, in turn, when the correct *karakia* are recited, will recognise that they are being treated with respect and will then grant the request. One further example of how old Maori sages saw this is as follows:

*Ko te mauri o te ngaherehere hai taunga  
mo nga karakia kia nui a nga manu,  
hai kaupapa mo te ngaherehere, hai mana.*

*Ma taua mauri e tiaki i nga mana; mau taua  
mauri e karanga kia nui nga manu ka nui.  
Ko taua mauri hai reo ki nga atua,  
ko nga atua hai whakapumau, ara nga atua  
maori o mua.*<sup>45</sup>

The *mauri* of the forest is a chant to seek the increase of bird life, (it is) a symbol of the forest, (it is) its supernatural power. That *mauri* will guard the mana. That *mauri* will call the birds to increase greatly. For that *mauri* will be a voice to the spirits, for those *atua* are there permanently, that is that *atua* of older times.

Even today when forests are ruthlessly cut down for buildings and furniture, Maori people will observe all the old rituals when securing trees for constructing ceremonial and war canoes. A good example of this was recorded on film in the 1970's when the people of Waikato at Ngaruawahia decided to build a replica of the ancestral canoe *Te Winika*.<sup>46</sup> The bushmen, led by a notable *tohunga* particularly skilled in the lore of the forest, approached the stand of trees from which they planned to take the desired logs. As they came closer to the trees they slowed to a halt and the *tohunga* intoned the first *karakia* to inform *Tane* that they came with respect to his domain. Not until the invocation was completed was any further advance made. The *tohunga* then advanced alone and quietly recited the second *karakia*. Then the other men joined him and moved towards the desired trees. As they did so, the *tohunga* leading the way touched other trees, enquiring of *Tane* whether that one was suitable or not. At last they reached the vicinity of the huge tree required for the canoe and the men paused while the *tohunga* approached it. Here he commenced his main *karakia* and, when this was completed, he placed his hand high up the trunk of the tree enquiring whether this was a suitable place to make the scarf. He did this several times, each time a little lower till he reached the place where the scarf should be cut. Then followed a *whakataunga*, that is, a formal speech putting the proposition that the tree should be felled and become a carved canoe. When this was completed the axes and saws were then produced and the work of felling the tree began. All those taking part in the enterprise were under a *tapu* imposed when they entered the forest area and one which would not be lifted until the work was completed. Also the axes had been similarly "blessed" and this had required the owner to sit quietly and sing "*Te Waiata a te toki*" ("the song of the axe") while he carefully and gently sharpened the blade. This was not shown in the film but the National Film Library has in its archives a film showing one of the most notable carvers of the East Coast of the North Island singing the song.