

A quick correction before we start, last episode I mentioned the Te Reo Māori name for Auckland, Tāmaki Makaurau. However, I incorrectly pronounced it Tāmaki Makarau. This was due to a spelling mistake in my notes, apologies for that!

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 107: Tapu Tohunga. This podcast is supported by our amazing Patrons such as Freek. If you want to support HANZ go to patreon.com/historyaotearoa. Last time we talked about the structure of the Māori pantheon through the lens of four different ranks, based roughly on power level. We also looked at how these gods were given gifts, communicated with and generally how Māori interacted with them from the mortal realm. Today we are going to look more at the practical side of religion, starting with how tapu was navigated and some more about the people that helped with this navigation, the tohunga.

As we have discussed in the past, tapu is usually translated to mean sacred or perhaps holy but that doesn't exactly encompass entirely what it means or represents. Tapu is basically the closest thing Māori had to a code of laws which, instead of being backed by the might of the state, was backed by the might of the gods but in a lot of ways it was just a system to formalise practical precautions in a spiritual way. By that I mean, it's pretty common sense to not touch others after touching the dead until you have been made clean cause of the germs, as such when a widow is separated from the body her dead husband she is considered tapu, as are those who handle the body or the ill. Most things that were holy or sacred were tapu but its more accurate translation is probably closer to restricted or prohibited. For example, when Māori heard the word tapu they didn't immediately think they were dealing with something associated with the gods, even though tapu was by definition a supernatural state of being that if broken would be avenged by supernatural forces. To explain that a bit more, tapu for holy areas or objects was kinda derived from the mana of the gods but if a tohunga or an ariki were to make something or somewhere tapu, such as placing a fishing ground under a rahui, then that tapu would be derived from or perhaps an extension of their mana. This meant that the greater the mana, the stronger the tapu. That is to say, people were more likely to follow the tapu rules if the mana it came from was stronger, with atua having the most mana of anyone. In the same way, this was also related to rank, in that someone of higher rank would have more mana, which makes sense. If a slave tried to tell a freeman not to harvest the crops, they would ignore it, but if an ariki said the same thing that was another matter. Rahui could actually be placed upon areas for all sorts of reasons, in one case a rahui was placed on a few lakes so that a rangatira and his mates could be the only ones to catch fish in them. Another example of something being tapu in the sense of forbidden is when a woman is married, she would become tapu to other men. Tapu could also be translated as polluted or unclean in relation to food, sick people, the dead or those that handle them.

Māori had no temples or other permanent structures to commune with the gods. However there were tūāhu, which were tapu places that were often used for some form of sacrifice or communication with atua. Sometimes these were marked with stacks of rocks, sticks or a carved pou but others could be not marked at all. Depending on the type of things being done in a tūāhu, such as high forms of divination or makutu, these spaces could be within the whare wānanga or another building specially built for the purpose or a clearing near a kainga, essentially there wasn't a clear definition of what a tūāhu actually needed to be as long it was some sort of space suitable for the activities needed. Tūāhu could be moved and in such cases some of the earth from the old one would be taken and laid out on the new site. Streams or ponds, the wai tapu, were also considered quite sacred and could be a place where rituals were performed. A portion of the stream would essentially be cordoned off for this purpose and no person would be allowed to trespass on it, else

they would be punished, though it's not specified if this punishment would come from an atua or from something more corporeal.

People, especially high ranked chiefs and tohunga, were usually considered tapu, as well as any clothes they wore or items they used. In the most extreme cases, wherever they slept, sat or the fires they used to cook were all tapu and needed to be treated as such. Since the head was the most tapu part of the body, it wasn't uncommon for very tapu people to have long hair since no one was equal in tapu to be able to touch their head. Usually though, it wasn't uncommon for tasks like cutting hair to be given to the elderly or other people who weren't doing most of the work around the kainga, since being tapu would disrupt a person's daily jobs. In some cases, even referring to or pointing at someone's head was seen as an insult. Passing items over the head is a big nono even today and things that regularly touch someone's head are often considered tapu. With especially tapu people, anything that has touched their lips or mouth will need to be thrown away and not used by anyone else. For example, if a tapu person wants a drink, the gourd must not touch their lips otherwise it will need to be binned. If they light a pipe, the pipe becomes tapu but since tapu is "contagious" then the ember taken from the fire to light the pipe also becomes tapu so it needs to be binned because if the ember was put back into the fire, the fire would become tapu and could no longer be used to cook food. The way Shortland explains it is that tapu was from things having either an atua's or tohunga's power or essence inside of it, which can be transmitted or rather duplicated upon physical contact with other things, making those things tapu as well. Going back to cutting hair, this tactile passing on of tapu made it so that anyone who had cut hair had to be served food separately and treated in a tapu way until that was lifted. To lift the tapu, in this case, would be to cook a fern root in a sacred fire and rub it between their hands. Hair that was cut from the head would also be buried somewhere away from the kainga, often in a secret place so that it couldn't be found and used for makutu.

The way the tapu was marked was also important. Lower ranked people who wanted to, for example, mark a good tree as tapu so that no one else would cut it down before they did, would have to cut a mark into it with an adze. Whereas a rangatira could just take a thread from their garments and tie it to the tree to make it or even the whole area tapu since rangatira were inherently tapu. Other times carved pou could be used to mark a tapu area or human hair or red ochre, in the case burial sites. Sometimes tapu could be not be marked at all and just be known in the collective memory of the people. Even the names of the gods were tapu, Best saying Māori got a bit of a shock when Europeans would curse with god's name, since an atua's name was tapu and you should never do that.

If a tapu area needed to be traversed while travelling, this was often done naked, which was pretty common in very tapu rituals. In one case, Best references that someone needed to go into a burial cave to retrieve something for a land claim, so they took off all their clothes to head inside wearing only what may have been a piupiu around his waist. When on a road trip, it wasn't unusual for someone who was especially tapu to sit around a separate fire when they stopped to camp for the night. Additionally, they would set up their own little travelling hut which would later be marked by red ochre to indicate to others not to sleep in it lest they break tapu. Knowledge itself could also be tapu, such as the knowledge surrounding Io or basically any of the info taught in the whare wānanga. As such this information couldn't be repeated to those weren't as tapu or around food or the areas it was eaten or prepared. It could only be repeated at a tapu place with those of sufficient rank and in some cases those who were related to the speaker. Of course, Europeans weren't exempt from any tapu and in fact it caused a lot of tension and conflict in the early years of

European and Māori interaction. Such as the French explorer Marion du Fresene who was killed in 1772 due to, in part, because he fished in waters where someone had died.

Sickness was a common punishment of breaking tapu and often when someone was sick, a relative would seek out a matakite, someone learned in the ways of divination, and ask them what tapu the person broke that resulted in them getting sick. The matakite would then tell them what tapu had been broken and as such what spirit was causing the illness. It was then someone else's job to go to the tohunga and ask how to rectify the situation through karakia, ritual or other means. Generally, the tohunga will need to figure out how the spirit came from the underworld and so will need to do something to find out that bit of info. Once they know how the spirit got here, often by way of flax or toetoe shoots, they will then go and perform the ritual. In the case of the flax, they will find the particular harakeke that the spirit used, discovered via the sound it makes when it is pulled up, and hang the shoot over the sick person's head, speaking a karakia, resulting in the spirit taking the flax shoot road home. Shortland's source that he learned this from was a tohunga who converted to Christianity. He made Shortland promise not to show any of his iwi the notes he took. Later, Shortland found that the tohunga had died after a sickness and that it was believed the illness was brought on as a punishment by the gods for telling tapu things to an outsider, thus rendering them noa. It is possible he confessed this on his deathbed and is part of the reason why I was a bit apprehensive to talk about all of this with you. Not because I believe I will be struck down with illness but because there were people who believed that they would be and meaning this information wasn't for outsiders. Best claims that since the sick were tapu they would be segregated and not fed, resulting in many dying of starvation. This claim, in part, came from one of his Māori sources who was a bit thin last time he saw him and was now looking a bit healthier. When Best remarked about this, the guy explained that it was because since he had moved away from his whenua the demons/gods that had been causing him an immense amount of worry were no longer able to find him. To this end, some people who were sick would be moved to a different place with this idea in mind.

Best also claims that no medicine was administered due to the belief that sickness stemmed from breaking tapu and was more centered around the exorcism of demons. Additionally, Best claims that most of the "herbal remedies" that Māori had didn't exist prior to European arrival and that they are a result of Europeans sharing their knowledge. Illness and their cures did have a measure of superstition involved, such as when someone had a stomach ache, a tohunga would instruct them to take a branch of toetoe and tap their body over and over. Before each tap the person would say the name of some sort of geographical formation that held a lot of mana, usually a mountain, hill or a place where the dead were buried. The mana and sometimes tapu of the places they were repeating was meant to cure and protect them. Best points out that mana comes from tapu and tapu comes from the gods so ultimately the healing came from them. Best also notes that Moriori of Rēkohu, the Chatham Islands, believed that the wairua leaves the body during illness so their karakia were actually to return the soul to the body to relieve the illness. However, Best's sweeping generalisations of no herbal remedies or that Māori had no medicinal practices other than exorcism, to me seem pretty dubious. So I will be investigating them further when we look into Māori medicine more thoroughly.

We have mentioned tohunga a lot throughout the podcast and this is the first time we have probably talked about them in the capacity that most people mistakenly refer to them. Priests. Remember that tohunga is a word that encompasses any sort of expert in their field, most often a craftsperson like a carver, weaver or moko artist. However, throughout the most recent episodes when we mention tohunga we have been referring to the people who would be the closest thing

Māori had to priests, essentially those who commune with the gods. Spiritual tohunga, as they are sometimes known, were also the holders of knowledge in the iwi, those who remembered whakapapa, tribal stories and histories as well as legends of the mythic age. They kept an eye on the stars, the skies, the earth, the seas, the animals to see any sign that may indicate what the future may hold and what actions they should take. Signs in the environment could point to the acceptance or displeasure of the gods, or that someone was out to get them. Best talks about another case where a couple saw a ruru on their porch and thought it had been sent by a 'warlock' to do them harm. They were even doctors and helped give birth. As we have talked about, many tohunga, especially the higher up ones, were considered very tapu meaning there were certain restrictions on what they could do. Such as they couldn't enter a whare kai, instead taking food into their own whare where they ate alone and in the open with any leftovers to be put in a special place. Some tohunga were said to be so extremely tapu that if his shadow touched a whare, it had to be destroyed. To become a tohunga a person would need to become part of the whare wānanga and rise through the ranks by learning the knowledge that the tohunga kept. Some people could be pegged to become tohunga from birth and were considered to be tapu from the moment of their birth. The mana and tapu of a tohunga was further enhanced beyond that gained from their skills by their whakapapa, for example a tohunga who was the first born in the line of ariki was considered to have a lot of mana. Often high ranked tohunga were of noble birth but lesser ranked people could be tohunga too if they showed the aptitude. Tohunga that were of ariki status would conduct the most sacred ceremonies (like offering the first fish of a catch or the rituals surrounding war) and often had the final say on disputes due to having the mana of both an ariki and tohunga. Regardless of where they were on the social ladder, they had mana atua, mana derived from being the voice of the gods. Although it was uncommon, women could be spiritual tohunga and as such could perform divination but not the highest or most tapu forms of it due to their inherently noa status.

Best claims that tohunga, most often lower ranked ones, would do a sort of possession where a god was thought to enter the body of the person, making them writhe and convulse, and the words spoken were that of the god directly. Lower tohunga tended to be more 'shamanistic' and put on a bit more of a show of it than the tohunga ahurewa, the highest rank who were possibly part of the Cult of Io, as they rarely did this. Some tohunga were thought to be able to control various natural processes like storms or ocean currents or making a solar halo appear. They could also find the bones of a person if they died away from home by making them kinda resound, basically make the bones call out to him. Some stories detail tohunga creating natural phenomenon to use as signals, such as one person saying to look for the red dawn sky, which he would make to indicate he had made it to his destination safely.

What's interesting is that part of the reason that tohunga and other tapu persons were so strict about not breaking it was that when a tapu was broken that specifically stemmed from themselves, such as someone drinking from a gourd that had touched the tohungas lips, instead of the offender being punished by supernatural forces, it would be the tohunga himself that would receive the retribution, since it was their job to guard their own tapu.

Jumping forward in time a little, when Māori converted to Christianity a lot of Māori ceremonies and rituals that the missionaries would likely call pagan were still continued, such as the system of tapu and noa and how to change a tapu thing into noa. For example, Shortland was present when a group cooked kumara in a hangi, each person being given one as a Christian karakia is spoken. Afterwards they eat the kumara making the tapu ground noa. This isn't really a concept in Christianity as far as I am aware so it is important for our story during the colonial period that there was this mix of old and new, which would later lead to stories like Rua Kenana, the famous Māori prophet.

Next time, we are going to keep talking about the practicalities of Māori religion but move more into the magical side of things. Specifically matakite and makutu, divination and sorcery.

If you want to send me feedback, ask a question, suggest a topic or just have a chinwag you can find my email and social media on historyaotearoa.com. You can also find helpful resources there like transcripts, sources and translations for some of the Te Reo Māori we have used. You can help support HANZ through Patreon, buying merch or giving us a review, it means a lot and helps spread the story of Aotearoa New Zealand. As always, haere tū atu, hoki tū mai. See you next time!