

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 109: Beyond the Veil. This podcast is recorded in Te Whanganui a Tara on the rohe of Muaūpoko, Taranaki Whānui, Te Atiawa and Ngāti Toa Rangatira. We are generously supported by our amazing Patrons. If you want to support HANZ go to patreon.com/historyaotearoa. Last time we talked about karakia, rituals and magic, specifically around matakite and mākutu, divination and witchcraft respectively. Today we will talk about the wairua, the underworlds and the spirit's journey after leaving the body. However, content warning that we will be covering a lot of stuff around death, tangihanga and all of that. It's not terribly graphic or anything but I know for some people it may be a bit of a tapu subject.

In the past we have talked about the wairua as being the spirit or the soul of a person and that is more or less correct. Best says the word wairua denotes shadow or any kinda image or thing that is amorphous or intangible, hence why it is used to refer to the soul. Though it should be noted that Māori saw the wairua as being still quite material or tangible to the point where it could be seen by certain gifted individuals, those who had matakite. They even believed it could be killed or destroyed. Some people have thought that Niwareka's people in the story of Mataora are some form of wairua and since they were tattooing each other, Best posits that there must be some material nature to the wairua otherwise they wouldn't be able to do that. Typically the wairua remained in the body but would leave temporarily during dreams and permanently upon death. Although it's tempting to think that only human's or maybe even animals possessed a wairua, the concept was slightly more complex than that. Best mentions how Māori believed that streams and rivers have life, and if they have life they must have wairua given the fact that they can be "heard to sing, an allusion to the babbling of the hill streams."

And this kinda leads me into another important concept that is similar to wairua but not quite, mauri. Mauri is the life force of a person, object, entity, group, community, ecosystem, natural process or anything that is alive or could be deemed alive in some way, either literally in the sense that biological creatures are alive but also metaphorically, in the way that a village, forest or the cycle of night and day is alive. Movement, heat, sound, it all can denote mauri of a thing or of the world around you more broadly. Mauri is distinctive from a wairua in that when someone dies their mauri ceases to exist whereas the wairua continues to live beyond the body. "The earth and the heavens, the heavenly bodies, the elements, all natural phenomena, the seasons, day and night, the ocean, streams, lakes, all possess this vital, life giving principle." Mauri is also different to wairua in the sense that it is kinda dormant and doesn't have the same almost 'intelligence' as the wairua, which is more active. The wairua tends to respond to things in the physical and spiritual worlds. Mauri could also be called the "divine spirit" as it is directly inherited from the gods as the breath of life, tihei mauri ora. As such mauri is inherently tapu.

The breath of life mauri is not to be confused with the physical, material mauri found in the mortal realm. Best describes "protective talismans" as being material mauri, as opposed to the immaterial mauri inside all living things. He says these were designed to protect the immaterial mauri in a person. He describes these as being a stone or piece of wood that is granted the powers of protection through ritual or karakia which puts the wairua of an ancestor into the piece and they would protect their living descendant from things like mākutu or being killed violently. Some of these talismans were permanent objects that someone would hold onto but other times they were used temporarily. Such as if someone was going to perform a divination ritual that would present a significant risk to their mauri, the talisman would be used for that ritual and then discarded afterwards, but not before the tohunga released the tīpuna inside the object and rendered it inert. Another example is if someone was travelling, a mauri would be created to protect them and

discarded after they returned from their trip. In the case of travelling, they would be warned not to lose the talisman or an enemy could find it and use it against them.

Places could also have a physical mauri, for lakes and rivers it was often a small stone that had the mana of the body of water placed into it by a tohunga and then hidden so that no one would find it and mess with it. This was particularly important for bodies of water that were used for food gathering, so anywhere that held lots of fish, eels and shellfish. The mauri would then ensure that the lake or river remained vibrant and bountiful as well as stopping anyone from using mākutū to kill the fish or anything like that. Eelers and other fishermen would put a mauri near their hīnaki to attract fish and the taumata atua or kumara gods that were put in gardens with the crops were also a form of mauri to help them grow.

Going back to the immaterial, personal mauri, anything that affects the tapu of a person also affects the mauri, usually negatively. This is also why strict tapu is observed in certain situations, not just for fear of punishment but also due to immediate spiritual harm. The example Best gives is that during snaring season a forest might be under strict tapu and if anyone would cook food within the forest it would be a violation of that tapu, causing the gods to no longer protect the forest and thus its mauri would be diminished as birds leave the area and plants no longer bear fruit.

As Maori culture was influenced by Europeans and Christianity more and more, many saw this as a diminishing or polluting of the mauri of the Māori people as a whole and was why the Europeans were dominating the archipelago. "The vital principle of the forests has been destroyed or much weakened by the abandonment of tapu and the godless ways of the Europeans, hence the great diminution in the number of birds." In other words, abandoning the old ways of tapu was causing the gods to abandon Māori and hence why the forests were no longer full of food. This, of course, wasn't too far from the Western scientific view, bird populations were being reduced due to primarily habitat loss from European industrialisation. Stuff like timber logging, draining of wetlands, agricultural intensification and that's to say nothing of the active hunting of birds and introduction of predators like rats and stoats.

The hau is a similar concept to mauri in that it is a kind of living essence, though Best describes it more like an aura. As such the hau is a bit stickier, it can stay in places where a person has walked or sat and then be picked up and used to do various things with, either good or bad. Hau can also mean wind or air so there is a similar connection to how mauri is connected to breath. Footprints were a common place to obtain hau as they were a visible sign of where someone had been and a bit of dirt from someone's footprint was seen as "an excellent medium in wizardry". As such, people were known to avoid muddy paths or walk through water whenever they could to avoid leaving prints.

Hau also kinda means the personality of a person or a thing, such as the hau of a speech or could mean something akin to someone's fame. All of these things sorta combining to mean the vitality of a person or thing, similar in the way that the Mexican belief is that someone dies a second death when no one remembers them. The hau, the vitality of someone or something, is always there as long as there is someone who knows it.

When someone dies their mauri ceases to exist but their wairua leaves to go on a great journey north. We will get to that journey in a minute but first let's talk about what happens to the body of the deceased and how those left behind honour their memory through tangihanga. Commonly shortened to tangi, tangihanga is today translated into funeral but is actually from the root word meaning to cry or lament. It's the way that whānau and the wider community say goodbye to their loved ones. Assuming someone died of sickness or natural causes rather than on the battlefield, it

wasn't uncommon for whānau to gather around someone who was on the cusp of passing, a state known as whakahemo. Once they had passed, naturally, cries and wails would be heard to farewell their spirit on their journey. Their body would be put in a seated position, possibly being tied up a bit to help with this and set against a pou facing the east towards the rising sun. Here they would remain for several days and during this time mourners would come in and pay their respects, which could be people coming from nearby villages depending on how important the person was. Karakia would be spoken over the body to ensure the wairua reached the afterlife and to aid it in its journey. If it was thought the person died as a result of mākutu, the tohunga would find a fern stalk and use it to hit the body saying "here is your weapon by which to avenge your death". The idea being that this would help the wairua seek out the person who killed them and avenge themselves.

Although this entire sometimes weeks long period was called tangihanga, the part that was more organised and funeral like was towards the end. Keep in mind that most of this was done if the person was a rangatira or of similar importance. People gathered around the body, the women in the front, everyone holding green leaves. There would be singing and lamenting for the deceased with their clothes laid out for them along with gifts to be buried with, pounamu, jewellery and that sort of thing. A waka huia containing feathers and a model of a carved waka may also be presented. A bent stick would be set up nearby, called a hara, so that anyone who walked passed would know that a chief had died. The clothes would be put into the waka huia and kept by the family while the body was buried, presumably as they contained a portion of the rangatira's mana. Other gifts that were buried with the deceased, what archeologists would later classify as grave goods, could be objects like shell necklaces, the handle of a toki and later, once Te Reo had been translated into a written language, manuscripts of tribal history. Throughout this it was common for family members, especially women, to cut their limbs and torso as a sign of mourning. It was seen as a "token of affection, esteem and sorrow". You might recall that this is how Red Rocks in Wellington was formed from the daughters of Kupe cutting themselves in mourning thinking he was dead. There were also often speeches that probably weren't too dissimilar to Western eulogies in that they would talk about the life of the person and farewell their spirit into the next life. Interestingly, there was almost no fanfare for the actual burial itself with only a very few people being invited. Part of this was to do with the tapu of burial sites but also so that these sites didn't become common knowledge and thus their location potentially leak to enemies, who could use them for mākutu, turn the bones into fish hooks, flutes and the like or otherwise just defile the sites. The next day some men would go hunt a small bird and gather some reeds, presenting these to the tohunga at the gravesite. The tohunga himself would pick some toetoe and place it in the ground pointing towards Hawaiki so that the spirit of the deceased knows which way to go. This also helps the rangatira return to the material plane when he wants to help his whānau as an atua.

When buried, the body would be left there in the foetal position until it had mostly decayed. The skeleton would then be exhumed and the bones cleaned before being sent to another tapu spot such as a cave which often acted like family tombs. The locations of these caves were a closely guarded secret as well. Before the bones were taken to their final resting place though, they would often be put on display for the public to see them, being decorated with feathers or dyed harakeke. This exhumation and cleaning process was obviously very tapu and as such no one would eat or do any other noa things during this time. Exhumation would be accompanied by a feast which had different hangi pits for different groups of people based on rank with some of the food being offered to the deceased. If anyone was to eat food from the wrong hangi it would be very bad and bring misfortune so everyone was very careful. It was common for a karakia to be spoken before eating this feast as that would remove the tapu from it and allow it to be eaten. When Christianity was

brought to Aotearoa, this led to an interesting observation by Māori as they thought Christians were removing the tapu from the food at each meal when they said grace.

While all of this very sombre mourning was going on the wairua had already left and was making its way into the next life. The way it did this was by physically walking up Te Ika a Māui, the North Island, to Reinga, the jumping off point. Today we know this as Cape Reinga, the very northern most part of the North Island, where the lighthouse is and the cool yellow sign that points to all the different places. However, in the past this has been a place of great spiritual importance and in some ways is where the veil of the material and spiritual worlds is at its weakest or in other interpretations, is where the literal entrance to the underworld is located. Before a wairua gets there though, they will encounter two hills, the first is where the wairua takes off its clothes and lets out laments. The second is where the soul “turns its back on the land of life”. Heading further north, they reach the cape itself which is basically a large cliff face that looks over the ocean. There they encounter a pohutakawa tree that has two large roots descending down into the sea. The wairua will look into the sea, waiting for a gap in the seaweed before jumping into its murky depths. This is the point where they pass through into the underworld, Rarohenga. When they emerge, they come to a beach and a river. Crossing the river, they are greeted with a hākari, possibly prepared by their already departed tūpuna. If the wairua eats the kai then they can't return to life. This account was given by Shortland who Best claims combined aspects from several slightly different stories, some say that one of the two hills is located in the underworld and others say that the point of no return is one of the hills, not the food. In any case, this story varies between iwi and Shortland's version likely comes from Ngāti Awa. Looking at other versions given by Best, it seems that the overall idea is basically the same but the specifics vary, such as whether the soul jumps or climbs down or whether the soul must drink from the river to not be able to return to life. Other beliefs tell that the wairua of passed ancestors will come up from Rarohenga and retrieve the deceased, rather than waiting for them in the underworld.

As mentioned, Reinga is a physical place that you can actually go to. There are lots of spooky stories from Māori travellers in the far north spotting other groups of people who disappear when they get close and reappear behind them, spirits on their way to Cape Reinga. So, when those early European explorers said they were going to go take a look, Māori were naturally quite distressed as they didn't want them to fuck around with anything and stop, what they saw, as the natural process. However, Māori guides did take them to Cape Reinga and were able to point out various physical features, like the hole in the rock that souls must go through to enter Rarohenga and mentioned that they always catch fish here that are red due to the kokowai, red ochre, that the souls put on themselves. I assume this fish is tāmure, snapper since it's quite warm up there and they are known to like the warmer water.

Entering Rarohenga wasn't the end of the journey though since there were multiple underworlds, usually the same number as there were heavens. Like the heavens, the different underworlds were kinda thought of to be stacked on top of each other, except you were going down not up. The first underworld isn't really 'under' at all. It is the world of trees and birds ruled by Tānemahuta, so that is to say, our world. The second underworld is similar in that it is the dirt of the first underworld, this was the realm of Rongomatāne and Haumiatikitiki. The third is where Hinenuitepō lives and the fourth is where Whiro lives. Hinenuitepō apparently rules over both these levels so I'm not sure if Whiro is an unwanted guest of somekind. Rohe, the wife of Māui, is apparently a “vengeful goddess... killing all spirits who come her way”. She rules over the fifth, sixth and seventh underworld. The eighth underworld interestingly has no name unlike the others but it is ruled by Meru, who also rules the other final two underworlds. She kills timid spirits that come down this far,

though it's probably unlikely they would want to go this deep and more unlikely that they made it. The ninth and tenth underworld are called Toke (worm) and Meto (extinct) so they were pretty grim places. Unlike the heavens, which historically/mythologically had very few outsiders visit, the underworlds have had quite a few, like Māui and Mataora.

When a wairua entered Rarohenga they would more or less become corporeal again to the point where they would be able to do all the normal things they did in life, grow food, make clothes, tattoo each other, play games and so on. Essentially, after someone dies they would live in the next life very similarly to what they were doing on the material plane, usually, living in the upper levels where it was safer. Not everyone would get to enjoy everlasting life though. It is also thought that souls would gradually make their way down into the deeper underworlds, each level getting worse than the last. Some of these levels would have dangerous beings that preyed upon souls or inflicted punishment until they made it to the final level which had no light or food, where the soul would be finally destroyed. However, this wasn't a universal belief; most other religious concepts in Te Ao Māori refer to all spiritual punishment occurring when you are alive and that once you made it to the afterlife, you were all good. You know what does heavily talk about spiritual punishment after you die though? Christianity.

That brings me to another interesting aspect of the Māori afterlife. There was no bad place, such as hell. Māori didn't believe in post-mortem spiritual punishment so they thought that everyone got a chance at everlasting life, more or less, there were some caveats. What they believed was that there was a good place, Rarohenga, and an even better place, you could go up into the heavens. And not just any heaven Toi o nga rangi, the top most where Io resides. This upper spirit world was less well known to Māori, most people would know of Rarohenga. Best says that this is because the upper spirit world is more "aristocratic" and its knowledge was held by the whare wānanga. Though a wairua could ultimately choose where it wished to reside after death. Since those that went to the upper heaven came under the protection of Io, no harm would come to them but for those that went to Rarohenga, they would have to contend with Whiro, he's one of the caveats I mentioned. Though, to this end, they had Hinenuitēpō to protect them, as that was her job. Hinenuitēpō is probably more commonly known today as a negative deity, the one who ensured that all humans die due to stopping Māui conquering death. She is sometimes portrayed as vengeful or wishes ill on humans and takes her vengeance by way of death. However, the more correct teaching, depending on who you ask, is that she is the spiritual protector of humans, ensuring that no harm befalls their wairua in the underworld. Although Rarohenga was a bit more dangerous, choosing to go up with Io wasn't without its downsides. If someone chose their eternal resting place to be up instead of down, they would gradually lose their memory of their mortal life until they forgot it entirely. We aren't sure why but if I had to take a guess it would be down to the highly tapu nature of the upper most heaven and that it isn't really a place for mortals so to live there, the somewhat mortal wairua needs to transcend into something different, something removed from the earth.

Another interesting little tidbit is that in most Polynesian cultures, raro, the root word for Rarohenga, can translate to under or the underworld but it can also translate to west, the direction of the setting sun. The rising sun in the east was always seen as a beginning, a symbol of new life, so west was seen as an ending a symbol of death. However, Māori have a slightly different translation. They keep the idea of the east meaning new beginnings and while raro also translates as the underworld it doesn't translate to west, instead in Te Reo Māori its north, since that is the direction a wairua heads after death. Additionally, many other Polynesian cultures have their "casting off places" on the western side of the island. Why Māori had a shift in language and concept, we don't know.

Beliefs in Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island, were slightly different again in that some believed that Rarohenga was at a lake surrounded by hills rather than at the top most point in the North Island. This makes sense since knowledge of the North Island for those iwi was a bit more limited and if you know the geography of the South Island, a lake surrounded by hills just fits a bit better. There the spirits would coalesce into their material forms and live out their days more or less as normal. After some time these spirits would die again and in so doing would pass through a narrow passage where two beings called Tuapiko and Tawhaitiri would be trying to catch them. Only wairua that were fast enough would make it through with slower ones being caught though Best doesn't know what would happen to them. After they passed through, the wairua would reenter the material plane and go through various stages of reincarnation appearing mostly as insects. Moths would sometimes be called wairua tangata for this reason as they were seen as the final stage of this reincarnation cycle. Once a moth died though, we aren't sure what happened.

To finish up, I just want to quickly add something that a few of you may have been wondering about, especially if you have been through the New Zealand school system like I have. When I was at school, I was taught that the Māori afterlife was in Hawaiki, the place that Māori came from when they sailed to Aotearoa. This was explained in that there were two Hawaiki's, the physical place Māori used to live, probably Tahiti, and the spiritual one that they return to when they die. It's a nice circular concept of returning home and you can see elements of it in what we have talked about in this episode, so why haven't I mentioned it until now? Well, quite simply it's cause none of the sources talk about it at any great length but Best does mention it briefly. So we know that at least by his time the afterlife was sometimes referred to as Hawaiki by Māori. However, Best says that this isn't a reference to Hawaiki specifically or any sort of geographical or even spiritual place. Rather it is used in a similar way to Te Pō meaning the unknowable, the abstract sense that the location of Hawaiki is unknown and thus the wairua had gone somewhere beyond, somewhere that we can't reach anymore, somewhere we all must go in the end.

Next time, we are going to remove the tapu of this episode with something a bit more light hearted. It isn't October but that doesn't matter to us because we are going to be talking about the spooky and fantastical from goblins and fairies to demons and ghosts. We will discuss the things that stalk the bush in the darkness of night and why the gods aren't the only thing you should fear...

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!