

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 110: Terrifying Terrific Taniwha. 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. Today is going to be a discussion on a topic that is related to episode 109 but didn't exactly fit with the tone. When I did a short Te Reo course a couple years ago, the teacher explained the concept of tapu and noa as not just a sacred or supernatural thing but also the idea of dealing with heavy topics or being in a formal setting and then needing to transfer to the lighthearted and informal. The best way I can describe it is like a funeral, you have the actual funeral itself where everyone mourns over the casket, there might be singing, speeches and at least for Christian funerals, it's all very rigid and prepared. Whereas the wake afterwards, you shed the heavy weight of the funeral and mourning and share funny stories, get drunk, eat some food, maybe make a fool of yourself and generally just have a good time as the deceased would have wanted. The reason I'm telling you this is because since an episode all about death and the soul is a difficult one I think it should be followed by something a bit more fun to help us shed the tapu and allow us to return into the world feeling a bit more energised rather than depressed. So as you might guess from the title this is going to be a fun, kinda spooky talk all about taniwha, fairies and other creatures of Māori folklore.

In the previous episode we talked about the wairua and its journey into the underworld after it has shed its mortal coil. Generally speaking most wairua would remain in Rarohenga or in the heavens but that wasn't true for everyone, there was opportunity to return to the realm of the living. Sometimes this was instigated by someone on the material plane, such as if a tohunga called up their ancestor for help or advice, other times it may have been the wairua returning of their own accord either to warn their descendant of danger or to become an animal, tree or even taniwha. However, if the wairua returned in its true form, the form of the human it once was rather than an animal or plant, then they would be a kehua. A kehua is a physical manifestation of someone's wairua that hangs around the Material Plane most often where they tended to hang out in life. In other words, a ghost. These were apparently able to be made visible via whistling which is also part of why Māori didn't like whistling. Kehua were seen as the wairua returning from the spirit world and were almost like a corrupted evolution of the wairua, given it isn't meant to physically come back to the mortal realm. As with western ghosts, kehua tended to be more active at night, with some night travellers carrying cooked food to ward them off since kehua, being a type of wairua, were tapu. People who had died violent deaths were more likely to become kehua unless the proper karakia were spoken over their body to help their wairua on their way to the spirit realm. Why kehua were so feared, Best doesn't say, but ghosts are just inherently pretty scary so perhaps there doesn't need to be a bigger reason than that!

Entities returning from the spirit world weren't the only things lurking in the wilderness though, there were strange, supernatural beings that stole people away into the bush, never to be seen again. These were the Patupaiarehe. Living in the deepest bush and at the tops of mountains, they had pā made of vines that they almost always stayed within, only leaving on rainy or misty days so that they weren't seen. As such, seeing them was generally thought to be pretty bad. Often described as fairy people, they were said to have fair skin, long red hair, wore white clothes and were not tattooed anywhere on their body, all of which of course was unusual in Māori society. Patupaiarehe mothers would hold their babies in their arms rather than on their hips, which again Māori thought was very weird. They ate any foraged plants or fish raw and sometimes Māori would leave fish out for them near awa so that they didn't scare the fish in the river away. Patupaiarehe actually had a few different names or perhaps subgroups depending on how you look at it. Tūrehu is one we have heard before as well as ponaturi, sea fairies, Tāwhaki burnt their house down in

episode 98. There is also porotai (stone people) and maero (ferocious forest people), they weren't exactly like patupaiarehe but they were very similar. Patupaiarehe are probably most well known for the fact that they play the kōauau and pūtōrino when they are out and about, as such the kinda ghostly sounds of the flutes can be heard during misty days. Very spooky! This music was said to be like a siren song for some young women, who would follow it to the patupaiarehe's pā, despite warnings not to. People with light hair were said to be born of a patupaiarehe father so it seems that perhaps some of these women did return. However, it did depend slightly on where you lived. In Te Urewera, the patupaiarehe were said to be fairly peaceful but in most other places they were more malevolent. The men would snatch and steal human women, with the ladies seducing and luring human men away. Usually, people abducted by them didn't return and were said to live in a "dazed condition among their supernatural captors". Patupaiarehe along the Whanganui River were said to gather in the kūmara fields to have a kōrero. Though they didn't destroy the crops, they would sometimes enter houses of humans and use magic to put the people into a coma. To revive them, they would need to be taken outside and have water thrown on them. Just to really drive home the fact that these are a mysterious people that are difficult to find, patupaiarehe also sometimes went invisible, in which case only matakite could see them.

There does seem to be a bit of blurriness or perhaps Europeans getting things mixed up as you will sometimes see Shortland or Best use these names to refer to visible, malevolent wairua. For example, they said patupaiarehe were "those foredoomed to death... vague forms seen on hills and sea coast, ere long news of the fight will arrive." Whereas turehu were said to be permanently tied to certain areas, rather than heading to the spirit world. They would often be seen dancing, singing and generally making merry, however they were also a portent of "dire misfortune." So it's unclear if these names could refer to multiple different types of entities or whether there was a bit of a mix up in European understanding, possibly both.

Despite these fairies being hard to find and extremely dangerous there were some defences against them so that you didn't find yourself dazed and confused in a tree top pā for the rest of your life. The first was cooked food and the other was kōkōwai, the red ochre that was used as paint and considered tapu. I'm unsure why the kōkōwai was used, tapu combating tapu doesn't make much sense from everything else we know but the cooked food is something we have seen lots before since it is noa and cancels out the patupaiarehe being tapu. Additionally, kai was used because tapu beings like fairies or wairua didn't eat cooked food, they only ate it raw due to its noa properties so that made it a good deterrent. If those were too hard to get a hold of then patupaiarehe normally avoided sunlight so as long as you survived until morning, you would generally be safe. This really evokes some survival horror stuff where you are tucked under a tree in the bush trying to avoid being caught in the darkness of the night, hearing their kōauau hauntingly off in the distance as the pale skinned people seek you out. Patupaiarehe weren't always trying to snatch people though, they did do some building. There are a few natural features that were said to be of their make. Te Tokaroa, Meola Reef is a lava flow near Point Chevalier in modern Auckland that extends for about 2km into Waitemata Harbour. Ngāti Whātua says it was created by patupaiarehe who wanted to get to the other side, so they worked to make a crossing during the night. However, when dawn came they still weren't finished so they had to abandon it.

A similar group were Te Tini o Te Kakuturi, who were kinda like the classical elves or fairies of Europe. They were guardians of the forests and worked under Tānemahuta to punish those who violated his tapu. They appear in a few stories related to felling trees and carving.

Maero were another fairy/elf like woodland creature. A. W. Reed says that although it's said they lived in both the North and South Islands, belief in them was more prevalent in Te Wai Pounamou,

“where the dense rainforests, the great mountains and river gorges encouraged belief in the wild people of the forest, while the softer contours of the mountains of Waikato, Rotorua and Coromandel were the home of the somewhat more civilised, though equally dangerous patupaiarehe.” So it’s possible that maero were the South Island equivalent of their northern brethren and the more craggy landscape of the south inspired different ideas in what they were like. Another theory is that it relates to the South Island iwi Kāti Māmoe, who were mostly absorbed by Kai Tahu or driven into the more remote regions of the island. So the concept is possibly derived from fringe communities of Kāti Māmoe living in the dense bush and high in the Southern Alps, perhaps making small raids into the lands of Kai Tahu. Maero were said to be quite a hairy group of people with long fingernails that they used to spear birds and fish. They were also possibly quite clumsy in their movements, according to a story where some were captured by Māori. A subspecies of these, Māeroero-repuwai were said to be tall and very good flute players. There are even some geographical features named after them, such as the mountains south of Lake Wakatipu which are called Ngā Puke-māeroero in Te Reo, meaning the hills of the māeroero.

We of course can’t have a spooky episode without mentioning the top spookster himself, Whiro, who commanded the demon armies of Rarohenga. These demons were often sent to the mortal realm to inflict disease on humans, sometimes cause Whiro wants to get revenge on his brothers and sometimes cause a human called upon it through mākutu. Although tīpua is usually translated as demon or sometimes goblin it can also be used to refer to the Māori version of ogres and witches. Tīpua can also mean enchanted when used as an adjective, such as a rākau tīpua, an enchanted weapon. These were usually said to be enchanted by way of a wairua of a dead person entering the object. Some of these items were deliberately enchanted by humans but sometimes it was something else entirely that caused it to happen. Reed gives the example of if some people were carrying an important person’s body and laid it under a tree while they rested, the wairua or perhaps a part of it may attach itself to the tree. A body that was washed in a stream would have a similar effect. Although Māori didn’t worship objects like this, they were placated and given offerings in the same way they did for the Big Six or family atua. These gifts would usually be ‘green’ offerings so branches of a living tree or fresh leaves, usually being made by travellers for protection. It was very important to make an offering the first time the object was passed but often it was done every time and as such it wasn’t uncommon to see the trees or plants around the object be stripped of their foliage.

Going back to tīpua, it isn’t exactly fair to translate that word into ogre and witch. Those aren’t really the right terms to use as what you probably have in your mind isn’t the same as what Māori back then would think but they’re the closest thing we have in English. It is also good to remember that Māori may have regarded them as atua, kaitiaki and tūpuna as well. Most of the stories about ogres and witches are about women, usually who were wicked and did foul deeds. Their male counterparts don’t seem to have featured as much. Reed suggests that this is because “there is something deeply disturbing in the idea of mothers and grandmothers, usually the nurturers within society, biting off children’s heads and running people through with their fingernails”. So an ogre isn’t exactly an ogre like Shrek, their true nature might not even be known to their closest family until they need to reveal themselves. A lot of the stories about these characters were told in the house at night, so they were kinda meant to be like spooky ghost stories you tell at a camp.

Giants were also in Māori folklore and were more or less the same as Western giants. They could range from being just really tall people at over 9ft, to the size where they could move mountains. Some of these are possibly just over exaggerations of the height of real people, such as Kiharoa of Ngāti Raukawa and Ngāti Whakaterere “who was said to be twice the height of an ordinary man.”

When he was killed and a hangi made to cook him, it was so large it was nicknamed the giant's grave. There were said to be giants in Marlborough called Rapuwai, prior to the arrival of Kupe. They were apparently slow and clumsy but skilled in the arts of war, "crushing their enemies in their strong arms." As such, there are many stories of giants doing great or terrible deeds.

The supernatural creature that you are likely most familiar with though is the taniwha. These are generally fishy or reptilian creatures (though sometimes they could be whale-like) who live in rivers, deep lakes or the sea, though there are some stories of taniwha living on land, under rocks or mountains or even ones that could fly. The ones that live in water are often described as looking like crocodiles, eels, lizards or some combo of all of them. Generally described as being quite large, monstrously large even, their temperaments range anywhere from being harmless unless disturbed or tapu is broken all the way to being openly hostile. Some were kaitiaki of their habitat or of a hapū and as such should be shown the proper respect. Taniwha that lived in the sea were known to be quite helpful, rescuing people who had their waka capsize, escorting waka through dangerous waters or even carrying people on their backs, though that was usually whales. Many were quite malicious towards humans though and they were known to eat people but they could be placated with offerings if needed, since they were seen as atua in their own right, despite the travel advisory to avoid them. In this vein, all taniwha were descended from Tānemahuta, the first being his grandson/nephew, due to good old fashioned incest. However, there are a few taniwha that don't belong to this lineage cause some humans did turn into taniwha so they are regarded as kaitiaki and tīpuna to various iwi. In one instance in Kāwhia, on the bank of a river, a man turned himself into a taniwha made of stone and women would pray to him to help them conceive. In some cases the death of a guardian taniwha was the cause for war or rather, there was a war and the death of a guardian taniwha is later how the story was recounted. Naturally, taniwha play a big role in legends and how Māori viewed the world around them, a lot of stories of how natural features in the landscape were formed involve taniwha carving them out, such as the Wellington Harbour.

Next time, we move on from our discussions about religion slightly to something we mentioned a couple episodes back. Aotearoa is full of wonderful plants that have a plethora of medicinal properties, what are they? Did Māori make use of them? Find out soon!

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!