

CHAPTER 1

Mythology

The mythological origins of Maori society are laid out in three major myth cycles, beginning with the creation myth of Ranginui, the sky father, and Papatuanuku, the earth mother. The second sequence of myths deals with the adventures of the demi-god Maui, who fished up the land and brought many benefits into the world for humankind. The third series of myths deals with the life of Tawhaki, the model of an aristocratic and heroic figure. The stories of mythology are set in the remote past of the fabled Hawaiki homeland somewhere in the trackless wastes of the vast Pacific Ocean. The central characters in the myths are gods, their progeny and their human descendants. The stories are narrated in prose form, with the notion of an evolutionary sequence conveyed by the storyteller linking the main characters through the traditional method of genealogical recital. Inherent in the genealogy of earth and sky, the gods and their human descendants is the notion of evolution and progression.

The Maori divided the phenomenological world into three states of existence which were designated Te Kore (the void), Te Po (the dark), and Te Aomarama (the world of light). Although Te Kore signified space, it contained in its vastness the seeds of the universe and was therefore a state of potential.¹ Te Po was the celestial realm and the domain of gods. This was the source of all mana and tapu. Te Aomarama is the world of light and reality, the dwelling place of humans.

Ranginui and Papatuanuku

The creation myth starts with the sequential recital of the various names for the first state of existence. In the beginning, there was only Te Kore, the great void and emptiness of space. The different qualities of Te Kore were described by a series of adjectives. Thus, Te Kore became Te Kore te whiwhia (the void in which nothing could be obtained), Te Kore te rawaea (the void in which nothing could be felt),

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Te Kore i ai (the void with nothing in union) and Te Kore te wiwia (the space without boundaries). The number of descriptive names for Te Kore varied from tribe to tribe. Whatever the number and gradations of Kore, they signified the aeons of time during which the primeval matter of the universe came together and generated earth and sky.

Te Po, the second state of existence, also had qualifying adjectives and gradations. Beginning with Te Po, the recital proceeded to Te Pounui (the great night), Te Po roa (the long night), Te Po te kaita (the night in which nothing could be seen), to Te Po uriuiri (the dark night), Te Po kerekere (the intense night) and Te Po tangotango (the intensely dark night), to the tenth, the hundredth and the thousandth night.² As in Te Kore, these periods of Te Po correspond to aeons of time when the earth came into being. Te Kore and Te Po also signify the emptiness and darkness of the mind. Because there was no light, there was no knowledge. The reason for this state of affairs was the self-generation during Te Kore of the primeval pair Ranginui and Papatuanuku. They were the first cause preventing light from entering the world because of their close marital embrace. The procreative powers of Ranginui and Papa brought into being their sons, Tanemahuta, Tangaroa, Tawhirimatea, Tumataurangi, Haumia-tiketike and Rongomatane. The sons, living in a world of darkness between the bodies of Ranginui and Papatuanuku, plotted against their parents to let light into the world. They concluded that their plight of living in a world of darkness and ignorance could be alleviated only by separating their parents, so that Ranginui would become the sky father above them and Papatuanuku would remain with them as their earth mother.³

The task of separating earth and sky was accomplished by Tane-mahuta, who prised them apart with his shoulders to the ground and his legs thrusting upwards. Thereafter, one of his names became Tane-te-toko-o-te-rangi, Tane the prop of the heavens. The verity of this name is evident in the great forests of Tane, where the mighty trunks of the totara and kauri trees can be seen soaring upwards to the green canopy overhead and the sky above it.

The separation of earth and sky brought into being Te Aomarama, the world of light. This is the third state of existence, the abode of human beings. The separation was thought to be the first hara, or misdeed, in the story of creation. Letting light into the world brought with it knowledge of good and evil and was the analogue to the biblical tree of knowledge and its forbidden fruit. The binary opposition of good and evil is one of the central themes underlying Maori

mythology. The gods played out this theme in their disagreement over the separation of their parents.

In the war of gods which followed the separation, Tawhirimatea, the god of winds, who opposed it, devastated the forests of Tane with winds of hurricane force. Having vanquished Tane, he lashed up mountainous seas over the domain of Tangaroa, driving the descendants of that deity to seek shelter from his wrath. The scattering of the children of Tangaroa brought about a separation of the species, with Ikatere fleeing to the depths of the ocean to become progenitor of fishes, and Tu-te-wehiwhi going inland to establish the reptilian family. Tawhirimatea was unable to vent his wrath on Rongomatane and Hau-miatiketike because their mother Papatuanuku hid them from him by thrusting them deep into her bosom. Being untested in the crucible of war, these descendants were cast in passive roles. Hau-miatiketike became the deity associated with edible fern roots and other wild and uncultivated plants. Rongomatane became the custodian of the kumara and the god of cultivation and peaceful arts.

Tawhirimatea's assertion of mana over his brothers was incomplete. When he turned his wrath on Tumatauenga, he was unable to vanquish him. Tumatauenga, who was left to stand alone against Tawhirimatea, was angry with his brothers for not supporting him. For this reason he is known by the names Tu-ka-riri (Tu of violent temper), Tu-ka-nguha (Tu of raging fury) and Tu-whakakeke-tangata-ki-te-po (Tu who consigns men to Hades). Tu, as the god of war and ancestor of fierce man encompassed in his names the aggressive characteristics of the warlike nature of human beings.⁴

Tumatauenga sought utu from his brothers for leaving him to face Tawhirimatea alone. First, he attacked the children of Tane and asserted his mana by debasing them and converting them to common use. From trees and vines he fashioned spears and snares to kill and trap Tane's birds. He also made nets and canoes to catch the children of Tangaroa. By his actions of using the children of his brothers as food and common objects, Tumatauenga negated their tapu, thereby making them noa. In this way the basic dichotomy in Maori life between the sacred and profane came into being. Tu's assertion of mana over his brothers was the rationale for the superior position of human beings in the natural order.

The personification of natural phenomena in the Maori pantheon is fundamental to the holistic world-view of the Maori. Papatuanuku was loved as a mother is loved, because the bounty that sprang from her breast nurtured and sustained her children. Humans were conceived

of us, belonging to the land, as tangata whenua, people of the land. This meant that they were not above nature but were an integral part of it. They were expected to relate to nature in a meaningful way. For instance, trees were not to be cut down wantonly. If a tree was needed for timber, then rituals seeking permission from Tane had to be performed first. Similarly, a fisherman had to return to the sea the first fish he caught as an offering to Tangaroa. The first fruits of the harvest season had to be offered to Rongo, the god of cultivation. It was believed that these practices ensured the bounty of nature would always be abundant.

Maori mythology also preserved a widespread ancient folk memory of a great flood. The genesis of the submergence of the world is found in the personification of other natural phenomena and the recital of their names in a genealogical tabulation similar to Te Kore and Te Po. First came Ua-nui (great rain), Ua-roa (long rain), Ua-whatu (fierce hailstorms), Ua Nganga (light rain) and their many progeny, including mist, heavy dew and light dew.⁵ These forms of precipitation were the manifestation of Ranginui's sorrow at being parted from Papatuanuku, whose face far below was a constant reminder of the painful separation. In order to alleviate the discomfort to those on earth, the gods decided to turn Papatuanuku over so that her face would be hidden from her husband. This event is known as Te Hurihanga a Mataraho, the overturning of Mataraho. The youngest of the brothers, Ruamoko, was still a child at breast at the time, and as the god of volcanoes he was left there to warm and comfort his mother.

The First Human Being

Tane and his brothers, who were the epitome of ira atua, the divine principle, searched the natural world for ira tangata, the human principle. In his restless search, Tane the creator tried his procreative powers on various elements in nature, bringing forth trees, birds and insects. The gods concluded from these results, that ira tangata could not be derived from ira atua. A separate act of creation was needed for human beings. To this end, Tane fashioned Hineahuone, the earth-formed maid, and breathed the life force of his mauri into her mouth and nostrils. Tane cohabited with Hineahuone and brought forth Hineititama, the dawn maid. He then cohabited with Hineititama, to produce other children.

In due course, Hineititama asked Tane about her father. His evasive answer telling her to ask the posts of his house drove her to the

inevitable conclusion that her own husband was her father. This discovery appalled Hinetītama, who fled from Tane in the direction of the underworld of Rarohenga. As she entered the portal to the underworld, she turned to Tane, who had followed her, and bade him farewell, saying, 'Tane, return to our family. I have severed connection with the world of light and now desire to dwell in the world of night.' Thereupon she descended into Rarohenga, where she became Hinenuitepo, the goddess of death. In a creation myth that begins with a single pair, incest in the next generation is inevitable for the establishment of the human line. But that necessity did not absolve the act from moral judgment. Tane's evasive answer to Hinetītama, and her reaction to the discovery that their relationship was incestuous, suggests there was an innate antipathy to it. The story served to establish and promulgate the incest taboo among the adherents of the myth. Alpers, however, goes too far by suggesting in his book *Maori Myths* that Tane's relationship with Hinetītama was the first sin.⁷ The Arawa scribe Te Rangikaheke, who recorded the story 'Nga Tama a Rangī', as published by Grey in *Nga Mahi a Nga Tupuna*, is quite specific. He states categorically that the first sin was the separation of Rangī and Papa.⁸