

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 105: The Lord on High. This podcast is supported by our amazing Patrons, such as Luke, Cam and Stephen. If you want to support HANZ go to [patreon.com/historyaotearoa](https://patreon.com/historyaotearoa). Last time, we talked some more about the timeline that occurred after Ranginui and Papatūānuku were forced apart by their son, Tānemahuta. We also discussed a bit about the make up of the heavens and who lives there. A few times throughout that discussion I mentioned a “Supreme God” who lives in the uppermost heaven and has many of the lesser gods report to him, such his main attendant, Rehua. If you’re anything like me, very white, you probably didn’t even know there was a god above all others in the Māori pantheon, so I’m here to tell you all about who this mysterious figure is and why he might not be as old as you might think.

The Supreme God’s name is Io and he is said to be formless. He is supposedly the one who created everything, existing before Te Pō but is not counted as being part of it. Some stories show Io as being the ultimate ancestor and was the start of two lines, the male line resulting in Rangi and the female line resulting in Papa. So, in that version, Io was part of the whakapapa and did have offspring, being the eventual ancestor of all humans. A lot of what we know about Io comes after Christianity was introduced to Aotearoa, when the tapu of talking about such things was lifted due to the changing culture, conversion and the like. Though, we don’t know all that much as many people were still secretive and those who did talk to Europeans about this were still fairly apprehensive to do so for a variety of reasons. According to Best, many of the Māori he interviewed to learn this information “regretted having spoken, though we were excellent friends”.

To give you an idea of how important Io potentially was, he had a lot of different names that he went by. This by itself wasn’t unusual, most of the major atua had a variety of names they went by depending on how they were being invoked in any given situation. What makes Io’s names interesting is that they profess his mana, tapu and status at the top of the cosmic hierarchy. Such as being the greatest of all gods (Io-nui), Io the everlasting/immortal (Io-roa), Io the parent of all things (Io-matua), Io the parentless (Io-matua-te-kore) since he is the beginning of all things and came from nothing. Io the source of all knowledge (Io-te-wānanga) since he was the one who held the kete of knowledge and wanted to pass them into the world if Tāne could just come and get them, Io the Enduring (Io-taketake) this references that everything he does, thinks and governs are for forever, they are complete, whole and unable to be reversed, Io the source of all things (Io-te-pukenga) he has thought up, reflected on and has memory of everything he has created, everything is his and only he can dictate what is and what isn’t, Io the crown of the heavens (Io-te-toi-o-nga-rangi) basically referencing that he lives in the upper most heaven and that there are none above him, Io the large/many eyed (Io-matanui) more or less saying that he is omnipotent, Io the unseen (Io-Matangaro) he is not seen by anyone or anything unless he wishes it but it could also reference that he is hard to comprehend as a formless, omnipotent being that controls all, Io the light (Io-ataaho) since the only thing that can be seen when he moves across the heavens is radiant light, Io the possessor (Io-te-whiwhia) possession of something is only done so through his will, no one can possess anything else without his approval and Io the tapu (Io-urutapu) since he is the most tapu of anything ever.

What’s interesting about Io is that he doesn’t seem to have any direct interaction with the world, he doesn’t deal out boons or punishments in the same way that the other gods do. He doesn’t communicate with anyone and in fact the last time anyone spoke with him directly was when Tāne went to get the three baskets. Though, his realm is inhabited not only by himself but by 12 each of the whatukura and mareikura. The males are the messengers and the females welcome the spirits of the dead when they enter the uppermost heaven (although most spirits go to the underworld). Io is

often seen as a moral and ethical god, that is to say he is wholly good and not malevolent but he didn't actually lay down any commandments or instructions on how to be good. Io's Cult, who we will talk about later, still encouraged everyone to be good since that's just a nice thing to do but also cause being a good person was kinda a prerequisite for participation in their order and Best comments that although Māori had no laws or anything like the 10 Commandments to guide them morally, the gods, tapu and religion in general seemed to have filled that niche. However, Io's gift of the kete of knowledge may contradict this somewhat since one of the baskets is said to have represented evil or at least contained evil. Which doesn't really make sense for a benevolent god to give evil to the world. Though it seems to be interpreted as Io giving humanity free will and the option to choose evil if they so desire.

All of what I have just told you is all well and good but some of you may be thinking that Io bears a striking similarity in his concept, reverence and general tone to the God of Abraham. If you thought that might be a bit suspect, you would be right and it does warrant a closer look. I say the Abrahamic God rather than Christian God cause Best does see parallels of Io in the Jewish deity since both the Jewish God and Io don't have images made of them and both Jews and Māori don't like saying the true name of their respective god, though I think this may be Best misinterpreting a desire to not gush about Io to an outsider as some sort of religious custom. Additionally, both of these gods are quite vague in who they are, what they are and what they are capable of. Thankfully, unlike other writers, Best doesn't make an outright connection of whakapapa between the Jewish people and Māori which is good. Well, nearly, Best does say that Māori believe they inherited a sliver of divinity from Io when humans were created and that this is similar to the belief that Jesus was divine. Best posits that Māori might have developed this belief roughly at the same time as Jews but "they never advanced to monotheism." Which I hope I don't have to explain why that is an awful thing to say.

Interestingly, despite the similarities between Io and the God of Abraham, Best says that even if everything kinda lines up to suggest that Māori had a god with heavy Christian influence, he was pretty sure that wasn't the case. By that I mean, Best thought Io was a pre-European deity. He cites that Io is known throughout the Pacific under different names and therefore that means he came about before Europeans. Additionally, all the info we have about Io and his cult show no sign of Christian influence, such as there are no similarities to Scripture or between Io and the Christian God, which I think is a stretch. There are definitely similarities, doesn't take a genius to work that out, but there is every chance that Io came about independently prior to the arrival of Europeans. The key here isn't in trying to figure out if the two atua are similar, that's obvious, the hard part is figuring out whether Io turned up in Māori culture before or after Christianity came to Aotearoa's shores. However, Best takes a slightly different stance than saying the two gods are totally separate or that the Christian God was introduced to New Zealand by Europeans. Rather that both are the same atua, just by different names, that is to say that the Christian God made himself known in Aotearoa very early on to create an independent religion that didn't revolve around Jesus. For my money, Elsdon's stance, of course, comes from a position of God definitely being real meaning he is an entity capable of appearing in multiple places and starting many different religions. As such, the hypothesis that Best puts forward doesn't take into account how religions and myths anthropologically form in a culture meaning that if Io was pre-European, then the likelihood that Māori were referring to the same entity as Christians is pretty low. Best says, "There cannot be two Supreme Beings. Do we quarrel over a mere name? Christian priesthoods have murdered, with fiendish tortures, many thousands of persons for worshipping God in a slightly different manner to that of the ruling priesthood. Has the Māori savage ever descended to such a level?" As you can see, this also leans into this not-so-subtle subtext that Best has going on in his writing of Māori religion. He mentions that some Europeans believe monotheism is a higher form of civilisation, saying that

for a group to reach a “high stage of culture” then they need to believe in a “eternal, creative and moral (or at least not immoral) being.” And that if a society does believe a singular moral God then they are a culture worthy of praise and admiration. Best rejects this idea, seeming to imply that cultures of lower status, eg. savages or barbarians, can still believe in a good, moral and ethical god like Io but still ultimately be degenerate. To me this seems like he is trying to fit his observations into a given narrative, namely that Māori are savages and that even if he sees evidence to say that they have culture and civilisation, that he just needs to weave a story about how, actually, brown people are still terrible. It should go without saying that I do not agree with these views. Best also talks about how religions influence each other, that the Christian concept of the Trinity was taken from Ancient Egypt and that Catholicism is basically polytheistic with all the saints acting as minor gods. In the same vein, Best makes a few remarks on how there seems to be this interesting cross of polytheism and monotheism in Māori culture, the former practiced by the majority of people and the latter by the high-ranking cult. Though the Cult of Io weren't exactly monotheistic, Best alleges that it was a stepping stone to monotheism, alluding to that theme of monotheism being a marker of civilisation and progress. This leads into another bit of subtext that Best has in which he basically claims the degeneracy of Western civilisation. He sees Io to be a refined idea only considered by the highest intellects of Māori. By that he means, Io is thought to be all good and would not associate with something evil, like war and as such Māori appeal to lesser gods for that. By extension, he saw a sort of pollution of the Christian god as He was invoked as a war god by both Māori and Europeans, war being a base and undesirable thing to be associated with. Additionally, he says that Io hasn't been corrupted like the Christian god because the “lower minds” of the wider public aren't able to know him and are able to be distracted by ‘inferior gods’ thus they aren't able to pollute his image with other ideas that maybe he isn't as pure as he seems.

Getting off of Elsdon's weird tangent, what is the answer to the question of; is Io a pre or post-European entity? Well, we can't answer that question for certain, a couple hundred years of colonisation does muddy the waters a lot but here is some of what we do know. Io first appeared in European written records in the 1913 book *The Lore of the Whare-wānanga*, which is where a lot of the information we have on Māori religion comes from. A. W Reed, who was writing a bit later than that, explicitly states that Io was a result of the influence of Christianity. Even renowned Māori scholar Te Rangi Hīroa said “The discovery of a supreme god named Io in New Zealand was a surprise to Māori and Pākehā alike.” Hīroa did some more digging and concluded that that the idea of Io originated from Ngāti Kahungunu specifically and from there was spread to other iwi. He suspected that there was some influence from Christianity that resulted in Io, though he wasn't sure if this was done consciously or not.

Another piece of evidence is the fact that there was a higher form of secret knowledge (sometimes called the *Kauwaerunga*, the upper jaw), the knowledge known only to those in the *whare wānanga*, complex rituals, the nature of the universe and things like that. This could indicate that Io was pre-European since not everyone would know about him, unlike the more widely known knowledge (the *Kauwaeraro*, lower jaw) which would be about *tīpuna*, various simple *karakia* and so on. According to the history website *Te Ara*, Io was “an accepted part of Ngāti Kahungunu and Ngāpuhi traditions.” Which could lend credence either way, given Hīroa's findings showing it was post-European or it could be that the pre-European concept of Io was limited to the east coast of the North Island and never made to other iwi, which I think is unlikely since it's not like those iwi were isolated from the rest of the *motu*. Additionally, the initial number of Rangi and Papa's offspring was fairly small but was allegedly later increased to 70, who then reproduced to create the denizens of the heavens, perhaps to help fit everything into the newer cosmic narrative. So overall there is a bit of debate as to when these stories appeared but the scholarly consensus does seem to lean towards that Io is a

post-European concept, which would explain why he doesn't fit as neatly into the pantheon as the others. However, I should stress that it is possible that the general public doesn't know a lot of information about Io due to tohunga wanting to keep that information to themselves and there could be a piece of evidence out there that more definitively indicates that Io is a pre-European god. It is something we will likely never know and that's ok. Some things just aren't meant for the rest of us and we need to accept that.

To follow on from that, who were these people who held this knowledge? As I've mentioned a few times, there was a group of people in the whare wānanga who held all this information about Io, the nature of the universe and all that. It's possible that this group was a high ranked subset of the people admitted to the whare wānanga but that isn't clear, it could have been everyone admitted or perhaps a group that was entirely separate. We will refer to them with the same name that Europeans did when discussing them in their writings, the Cult of Io. It's highly unlikely that that's how these people referred to or viewed themselves but just for our purposes to distinguish the people who kept this kaupapa, that's what we will call them.

Those in the Cult of Io tended to have very similar practices and beliefs across the country. This makes sense as they were an exclusive, secretive group who only passed on their knowledge to those within their circle. They had much more control over what did and did not get passed on and how it was passed which gave for a more uniform institution, a person in the cult in Te Whanganui a Tara would be able to get involved pretty easily in the practices and karakia in Tāmaki Makarau for example. Think how every Catholic mass has almost exactly the same structure and no matter where you are in the world it's going to be nearly the same. Or maybe think how Maccas has the same menu all over the globe so you always know what you're getting. Same difference. Best talks a lot about "higher forms of learning" or what he sometimes calls first, second or third class thought. Basically, he means the different levels of what people would know and how close they were to the most inner circle of the Cult of Io and the whare wānanga. People who were in the inner circle, priests, tohunga or wise people would know detailed stories about various things such as the creation of the world and the gods, whereas the second and third class wouldn't know as much about these stories or in many cases their stories would differ entirely.

The Cult is the closest thing Māori had to a unified religion, most other tohunga who contacted the Big Six had all sorts of karakia, rituals, rules and tapu that they followed and basically none of it was consistent from iwi to iwi. Again, this makes sense since it wasn't as tightly regulated and everyone has a slightly different relationship with the tangible forest or the sea as opposed to the intangible creator of all things. The main exception to this was when to perform certain rites or acknowledge certain gods in the case of planting, harvesting and things like that. These were regularly occurring at basically the same time every year, you couldn't really plant in winter, so the gap in religious practices for major, annual events was a bit smaller. Other regular religious events were births, deaths, exhumation, weddings, war, marae building and coming of age (Best calls it baptism, but it wasn't).

Tohunga of course is any skilled person, not just a priest, so that can be craftspeople, artisans and many many other professions. Each has a slightly different name, like an expert waka builder is a tohunga tarai and an expert tattooer is a tohunga tā moko. Of course, what you might call priests were also tohunga and had their own ranking system with tohunga ahurewa, that's the Cult of Io guys, at the top and tohunga makutu, which were like wizards and warlocks, closer to the bottom. There were also junior priests in training, instructors and astronomical experts. Priestly tohunga were important for many different reasons since humanity's connection to the gods was extremely important. They could act as doctors, had a key role to play in warfare and were considered central

in activities like agriculture, sea voyages and basically every occupation that Māori had since every aspect of Māori life required the approval and acceptance of the gods, if not to bring them good fortune but also to ensure they didn't actively piss them off lest the gods work against them. Especially if they were working under a particular god for a task for example fishing would be under Tangaroa.

Some women were tohunga but this was fairly rare and they weren't allowed to practice more tapu stuff, other than in the capacity of cancelling it out given that they were noa. Such as rendering a newly built whare whakairo noa by being the first to walk across the threshold. Women were also involved in re-establishing the connection between a man and the gods if the atua had revoked their protection on someone. To have the gods looking the other way was super bad cause it left them vulnerable to not just natural misfortune but also supernatural attacks. One such ceremony was to have women step over a man who was lying down.

As mentioned, the priests of the cult were called tohunga ahurewa and although there wasn't a specific temple that Māori built to Io, or in fact any gods (unless you count marae as ancestors), the whare wananga was where rituals and ceremonies to Io occurred. We aren't sure how many people outside the cult knew about Io, or even knew his name, but we do know that most people weren't privy to what the cult knew. The only people outside that had a basic knowledge of the rituals and secrets of the cult were those of high rank, who were sometimes invited to be involved in ceremonies. These ceremonies were generally fairly important things from births, tangihanga or the opening of a whare wananga. First born males of noble families were often dedicated to Io with the idea that he would protect them, their mana, their tapu and their wairua.

Next time, now that we have covered the upper echelons of the pantheon, we are going to discuss the lower ranks of gods who were weaker but far more numerous. We'll also talk a bit about how Māori interacted with these gods at a practical level.

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](http://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!