

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 106: Generous Gods. This podcast is supported by our amazing Patrons, such as Jessie and Syd. If you want to support HANZ go to patreon.com/historyaotearoa. Last time, we discussed the Supreme God, Io, and his followers, who were probably the upper echelons of the whare wānanga. Today we are going to discuss the lower ranks of atua that were under the Big Six and talk a little about how Māori interacted with these gods from the Material Plane.

Something we have alluded to but not really talked about in depth is the idea of the hierarchy of the gods. I've mentioned that Io was supreme and there was also the departmental atua who had other gods under them but like most aspects of Māori culture Europeans tried to categorise this into neat little boxes when they probably shouldn't have. Most sources call them ranks or classes but all of them agree that there are four ranks of gods. The first two are pretty easy, the first rank is Io, all on his own as the Supreme God and the second rank is the departmental atua, that's Tāne, Tangaroa, Tūmatauenga and all those guys. Underneath them in the third rank is what is called the tribal gods, Uenuku, Maru and Kahukura if you are familiar with them. A lot of these were gods invoked during times of war but there were many that were all about arts or cultivation. While the third rank had atua known across multiple hapū and iwi, the fourth rank are the family gods that are restricted to a group of related people, so a whānau or possibly a hapū. This ranking system is likely not how Māori split or viewed their deities but for our purposes it does make it easier to chunk out how we talk about them. Just know that it doesn't necessarily reflect reality.

What's interesting is that these ranks don't just split the gods based on their relative power to each other but also by how active they are in the mortal realm or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, it splits them by how active Māori were in giving them veneration. Io hasn't been heard from in a very long time and the Big Six don't really involve themselves in earthly affairs but do enact punishment on those who break tapu or annoy them. These two also don't have an ariā, a sort of earthly divine aspect. No one knows what they look like, though there is some writing around Io looking like rays of light across the sky. The other two ranks can be seen or at least mostly perceived in the mortal plane. The third rank have proper ariā like the rainbow or meteors and are known to be involved in high level mortal affairs, like war. The fourth rank aren't exactly perceived on earth in the same way but they can be communicated with more readily than any of the other ranks and since they are family gods they tend to be pretty active trying to protect people related to them.

The family gods in particular tended to be tūpuna and was a way for ancestors to give advice or influence the outcome of various situations through the people that contacted them. Māori believed that the Big Six don't have a huge amount of interest in the lives of mortals. However, their ancestors, whom they sacrifice to in a similar way to the bigger gods, did have a great interest in ensuring that tapu isn't broken as well as ensuring their descendants prosper, so they keep a watchful eye on the living. The spirits of the dead tended to only concern themselves with those they were related to so every whānau had tūpuna they could call upon to aid them, as well as those who they needed to be wary of should they break tapu. More significant spirits, like those of famous ancestors or great war leaders were said to look over the whole tribe. In particular they would help them in battle, helping to direct the soldiers, to embolden them, give them strength as well as give advice or warning to the tohunga present. It wasn't uncommon for younger and less experienced soldiers to get fearful prior to a battle, which was said to be a condition of a harmful spirit in them. In such cases the family tohunga would speak a karakia and request a family spirit to enter the person and expel the evil spirit.

Sometimes the person who had done the rituals to contact the ancestor would go with the taua and help out with command on the field of battle, sometimes taking more of a leadership role than the

rangatira. The fact that these atua were tūpuna or sometimes even deceased children does somewhat stretch what you might call the traditional definition of the word god, which is what the Te Reo term atua is normally translated as. Best acknowledges that the term atua is actually used in reference to many different powerful entities, from gods to demons, ghosts and spirits. I'm not sure how accurate this is in modern parlance but it was used prior to European arrival to refer to a range of diverse entities that Westerners wouldn't necessarily refer to as gods or deities. That's what Māori called them though so that's how we are going to refer to them as well. The slight exception to this was that personifications of animals, rocks, trees, natural processes and such were generally called matua, which means parent. Further complicating matters, the departmental gods are sometimes described as tūpuna rather than atua. This depended on the context they were being invoked in though, especially since Tū the atua and Tū the tūpuna were considered different aspects of the same god. In addition to the spirits of the dead/atua only being interested in people related to them or of the tribe they are from, they generally won't extend their protection beyond the bounds of their rohe. Some families would have small carved images in their homes to allow the atua/tupuna to inhabit when called upon. These items weren't subjects of veneration themselves but were more seen as vessels for atua or as a method of communication with them.

The family atua were generally communicated with by tohunga of lower rank or sometimes called "priestly mediums". In cases where the tohunga and the atua were related the medium could be nearly anyone in the family so these were the gods that most people had experience or interactions with as the main requirement to get in touch with them was being related as well as knowing the correct ritual or karakia. Or in other words, to call them up all you had to know was their number and how to operate a phone. These gods could also watch over their "mediums" by warning them of danger, tell them prophecies and otherwise make sure the human was looked after. Obviously, this protection was somewhat contingent on offerings being made and tapu being respected. As well as people, family atua would guard tapu places, such as burial sites. Sometimes ariā they took on was a lizard, which was associated with disease, decay and Whiro in general, so it was a good deterrent to those who sought shenanigans. Other popular ariā for ancestors are a mantis, hair, gourds, kākā, owls, trees, ponds and all sorts! Objects could also be seen as being a medium of an atua if they possessed a lot of mana, mostly the Big Six, some of that mana being derived directly from the atua themselves. These items were often used for various religious purposes. To be clear, these items were not ariā and were something slightly different. This connection to tūpuna was, and still is, predicated on the spiritual relationship with the land. What made someone tangata whenua of a place was their ancestral connection to it in that their forebears had been born, lived and died there, which is a rather gross oversimplification but you get the idea. To be in touch with your turangawaewae was to be in touch with the land, which in turn was to be in touch you're your ancestors. Marae were often named after ancestors, in a sense the marae meant to signify the body of the person, indicating the importance of both the building and the ancestor. Whakapapa was extremely important not just in practical matters but it's structure was used frequently by Māori to understand the world around them or things that couldn't easily be explained, such as the formation of the universe or how certain natural processes came about. In so doing much of the way Māori understood the world was personified or anthropomorphised. Such as the many third rank atua that personified various animals, rocks or natural processes, for example, Ikaroa was likely the Milky Way, Punaweko is the father or personification of birds, Te Arawaru is origin of shellfish, Tama te uria represents lightning and so on. These gods tend to not be considered the children of Rangi and Papa, either being descended from the Big Six or being created by Io for some sort of purpose, which is most often the case for gods that fulfil some sort of role, like Te Kuwatawatata who is the guardian of the entrance to Rarohenga.

Demons or evil spirits that cause possession, disease, strife and such were considered to be of the fourth rank as well. Generally evil spirits would cause these due to mākutū, black magic, performed by one individual against another individual or a person breaking tapu and pissing off a god. One such type of evil spirit was that of a stillborn child. When a child was still born it would need to be buried by a tohunga with special rites, else the spirit would torment the parents by entering an animal and attacking or pestering them. Best describes one case where a child was buried beneath the roost of a tame kākā, who from then on caused them no end of trouble.

Atua toro, who seem to fit somewhere between the third and fourth rank, were the spiritual messengers of humans, those sent out to seek info, explore, visit people or to convey information. In one case, a member of a taua sent his "familiar spirit known as Te Weka" to do some recon. Since it came back, it was deemed that was a good sign. You see this a few times where animals are described as being a kaitiaki, guardian, of a person and the person uses them to help with various tasks. Other cases have them acting as guides to people traveling in the form of stars or comets or even meteors that burst overhead to indicate where an enemy force is. Other warnings of danger from an atua could be something in a dream, thunder, the cry of a bird, a tree falling or in one case a star that represented a guardian atua being in a particular position that indicated danger, warning his people that they were about to be attacked. Which they were the next day. Best claims that the tohunga who made these observations were mostly just "warlocks" taking advantage of natural phenomenon occurring by claiming it was them who did it. Best also makes an interesting comparison between the ancestor worship of this fourth rank to the veneration and worship of saints in Catholicism, saying that it is also a form of ancestor worship and in fact are essentially the same as the family atua. They are venerated as "inferior deities", they are active in human affairs and regularly called upon by humans, which is pretty much what the family atua are as well.

While second rank atua were known across the Pacific and the fourth rank were mostly known to their whānau or hapū, the third rank were specific to a region of Aotearoa. Other Pacific cultures likely had other gods that filled a similar niche. Some of these atua were known to multiple iwi as some of these gods related to the people from specific waka. Some early European writers thought that the third rank of gods were just elevated humans but that isn't exactly the case. Though some could be described as that, the idea is a bit more complicated. Instead, this rank is mostly filled with personifications of various species, items or processes in nature. As mentioned, the people who communicated with family gods didn't need too much experience however, calling up the tribal atua did require some specialist knowledge that perhaps one or two people in a family might have. Naturally, talking to the departmental gods required even more specialised knowledge and training and of course Io was reserved only for a select class.

One of the natural phenomenon that these tribal atua used as an ariā or perhaps personified was the rainbow. Rainbows actually have a few personifications such as Kahukura, Uenuku and Haere. Each is similar but has areas that they tend to be called upon, such as Uenuku more often being a war god than the other two. In fact, seeing a rainbow behind your taua was seen as an indication that victory would be assured, if seen in front it was generally much worse sign. If the taua absolutely must keep going even if Uenuku warns them not to, they must not go under the arch but make a detour around the rainbow. Kahukura's job was basically as Māori weatherman, particularly in relation to when it would rain. His possibly bigger claim to fame though is that he helped guide the Takitimu waka from Hawaiki to Aotearoa. Other duties Kahukura has are some influence on the cycle of life and death, he can banish demons and sickness caused by evil spirits and he acts as a guide to travelers. Haere seems to be three brothers that became rainbows but Best isn't sure how, if at all, Māori contacted them. It seems that each of these rainbow gods could be distinguished by

colours and variation in the rainbow but Best doesn't elaborate as to what those variations are, it seems he wasn't able to find out.

Tupai, another third rank atua, is associated with lightning and "He it is who occasionally slays a man during a thunderstorm". Other personifications of lightning are Tama-te-uira and Hine-te-uira, the latter being the daughter of Tāne and known as the Lightning Maid. Hine-kapua, the Cloud Maid was also a daughter of Tāne whereas Tama-te-uira is a son of Papa. Mataaho is associated with distant lightning. Tāwhaki, who we have talked about previously, is also closely linked with lightning through his footsteps and to Moroiri he has been sometimes referred to as the atua of thunder and lightning.

Tunui-a-te-ika, along with Maru and Tuhinapo, is a personification associated with the protection of pā and tapu places. These gods were popular in the Bay of Plenty but both Tunui and Tuhinapo were also said to be guardians of a pā in modern Seatoun in Wellington. When this pā was built, a rock was buried at the base of one of the posts of the wooden wall that went around the settlement. This was the mauri, basically a place where the gods could reside. Tunui was also the guardian of Wharekohu, a very tapu cave on Kapiti Island where the bones of high ranked individuals were placed. Tunui was sometimes known as a 'flying star' which possibly means comets and was known to be a messenger or to be instructed by tohunga to do various tasks, even going so far as being sent to kill rangatira. One chief even apparently saw Tunui as a comet and knew it was coming for him. Generally, comets were seen as bad tohu and often when one was seen people would assume someone had died but the specific message or intent of a comet could be inferred from a variety of things like the position in the sky or the direction of its tail.

What's interesting about how these different ranks interact is that the two lower ranks were able to cross departments. That is to say they weren't always serving one particular atua of the Big Six, they could interchange depending on what was going on. This is especially important since the Big Six don't seem to have an active role in shaping the actions and destinies of humans, that job belonged to the third rank. For example, Tūmataunga is the god of war, and his approval was needed for any taua to be successful since war was his department. If you wanted to mess around in his house, you needed to make sure you got the thumbs up from him. But Tū is essentially the manager of war, he's not the one actually on the tools so it was the job of tribal atua, like Uenuku, do the actual work of helping humans, such as telling them if their plan would succeed or sway the outcome of battles through their human tohunga.

This leads into another interesting idea that a lot of European writers struggled with when trying to understand Māori culture. The Christian God is generally seen as pretty benevolent, He has a hand in earthly affairs and is usually thought to want the best for everyone. That's not the case for the Māori pantheon. That's not to say the gods are evil, which is what many Europeans thought, but rather some of them, specifically the Big Six, are mostly ambivalent towards humans. They don't really care what we are up to and they only time we do is when we are in their departments doing stuff. So if you are cutting down trees or hunting birds, Tānemahuta expects you to give the proper respect to him, not violate tapu and give him appropriate sacrifice such as the first bird caught, but otherwise he doesn't really mind what you are doing. If tapu was broken, called hara, or you otherwise got on the wrong side of him, he would enact punishment upon usually through removing divine protection rather than any sort of active effects. This is reflected in how Māori treated their atua cause you might have noticed that throughout all of these episodes I have been very careful not to use the word worship, cause that's not exactly what Māori did. They never worshipped or venerated their gods at least not in the Western sense, Best describes it more as placation. But even that word isn't quite correct for what Māori were doing since the rituals, karakia, godsticks and other such

practices were usually to enlist the help of gods, not to try and ward them off as the word placation might imply.

The way atua were contacted/placated/employed was either by offering material goods or by offering more immaterial things like reciting a karakia or performing some sort of action or ritual. Offerings could be large, such as huge bounties or potentially human sacrifice, all the way down to small morsels of food, such as setting aside a small part of a meal each day. If it was one of the Big Six that was being offered to usually the offering would be something within their department. Offerings could be made for basically any reason, to help, hinder, protect, ensure a good harvest or fishing trip, ward off sickness, victory in battle, guiding when lost and so on. But the general idea is that Māori were offering something to their atua to get something in return, in that way it was more reflective of the concept of utu.

The gods were said to eat the essence of foods offered to them rather than the food itself, which was eaten by a tohunga after being cooked in separate fires or hangi that were considered tapu. Polack describes people travelling long distances in the northern North Island carrying a bag of food specifically for offering. They would tie it in a smaller bag on a tree just before going to sleep in an area, giving it to the local "dryads". This was also often done in the morning and in some cases if food wasn't available a lock of hair was used instead. These were offerings to the local atua, probably a third or fourth rank, that looked over the area to ensure that they were properly respected and didn't cause them any issue while traveling, like bad weather. Best describes this as being the whakau rite, which was a common practice when someone was travelling through an area that wasn't their own, and as such were unfamiliar not just with the terrain but also were unfamiliar to the gods and spirits of the area. This would ward off any bad things that may want to harm them and also placate the gods, meaning that they would be protected should they accidentally break tapu unknowingly. Once they returned from their trip they would need to lift this protection. The whakau rite worked by cooking some food, all travelers eating a portion and then the rest would be carried on their belt.

Interestingly, some gifts were offered to Whiro on occasion, which Best finds odd as to why Māori would prostrate before an evil god but not a benevolent one like Io. Though he adds that Whiro is clearly more active than Io so everyone was aware of the former's existence, especially since Io was far too tapu to even consider giving gifts to. It's also unclear whether gifts were being offered to Whiro to make him remove disease from someone or if it was more related to getting him to help with makutu.

I just mentioned it and although we have talked about similar topics before I feel we need to go over this a little bit again just so we are clear. Human sacrifice, although it did occur, was uncommon, which Best himself does admit. Though he does seem to think that cannibalism was rife, which it also wasn't. Human sacrifice could be used as part of a straight sacrifice for divination, as an offering to an atua or to add some mana to an event. Usually, human sacrifices were slaves which were in turn usually war captives from other iwi. If no slaves were available or they didn't want to use the slaves they currently had, a taua might be assembled to go get some or a dog would be used in their place. As you might expect, it was favoured to try and find a person to sacrifice that wasn't related to you, kin slaying was generally pretty frowned upon, but sacrifices of that nature were not unheard of usually only used in desperate times. Just like the first kūmara dug up or the first fish caught, the first kill in battle was dedicated to Tūmatauenga and sometimes combatants would race ahead trying to secure the glory of the first kill in a battle. In all these cases, the heart played a key role in the sacrifice.

According to a member of Ngāti Porou, human sacrifices were made mostly for five distinct reasons. 1, when a new whare was built and they wanted to ensure the prosperity of those inside as well as the stability of the house itself. The sacrificed would sometimes be buried under the main pou of the whare, acting to protect those in the house. A stone, lizard, bird or similar could also be used for this. 2, when a new waka is finished. Again this is similar to a whare in that they are sacrificing to protect the vessel and give it luck in its endeavours, along with wanting to make any taniwha they encounter help them in storms and such. For 1 and 2, human sacrifice was only used for very important houses and waka, so a rangatira or ariki's house or marae and a waka taua. Tamati the fisherman with his wife and kids didn't warrant a full blown human sacrifice when they finally got on the property ladder. 3, tattooing a high ranked young woman. This was meant to enhance the mana of the woman and give the event some gravitas. 4, a funeral feast. This was similar to 3, to enhance the mana of the deceased and give some gravitas to the funeral as well as possibly so that the deceased has some attendants in the next life. 5, avenging a death. If a relative had been killed by another iwi, they would often seek utu in the form of killing someone from the iwi of the offender. In 3 and 5 the sacrificed person was often eaten. Human sacrifice depended on the iwi though and so could be done for different reasons, such as piercing the ears of a child of high status, construction of a pā, for victory in battle, divination, during the period of mourning with the deceased, to help crops grow and many many others. Again, I should stress human sacrifice was rare and the reasons for doing so were varied and not universal. As part of that in all cases it was not taken lightly and only used as the highest form of sacrifice for only the most prestigious of occasions.

To finish up I want to talk briefly about Māori artistic depictions of gods cause what we find is that they didn't tend to make carvings or other depictions of lower atua, only human ancestors. Carvings of ancestors in marae were often mistaken by Europeans as idols to worship the gods. The exceptions to this rule were the Big Six, they were sometimes shown in carvings, though these were rare and only had small depictions made of them. Such as the figures used to represent Rongo in the gardens and godsticks, small handheld depictions of gods that were used to communicate with them.

These god sticks (Tiki or tiki wananga in Te Reo) were shaped in such a way that represented their host god best, Tūmatauenga's were perfectly straight whereas Tāwhirimātea had a corkscrew shape and Tānemahuta was straight with a bend in the middle to represent the growth of trees. These sticks had one rounded end with the other end being slightly pointed to allow it to be stuck in the ground. By Best's time there weren't any of these items left, though we do have quite a few of the other kind which represent humans and the third and fourth rank of gods. These had faces on one end and when not in use these were kept in papa whakairo, carved boxes. Depending on what the tiki wananga was being used for, it could have harakeke draped over it with red kaka feathers, human hair or bone attached to it and be painted with red ochre. These items would be used as vessels to communicate with atua, usually by way of having them inhabit the godstick but sometimes if they were traveling a tohunga's tokotoko would be used as a vessel or communication device to a god instead.

Next time, we will look at the practicalities of religion. So far we have talked about more ethereal matters but how was religion being practiced on the ground, how did this belief translate into real world actions of ritual and karakia? What was the tohunga's role in all of this? We will answer these questions and more!

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!