

The social implications of medical practice among Maoris

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Native knowledge of medicine may be described as non-existent in former times. No attempt was made to study it because it was believed that sickness and disease were caused by *atua* (evil spirits). This formed part of the belief that offenses against the gods are punished in this world not in the spirit world. As all complaints were so caused, inflicted by the gods then it would be highly absurd to administer human remedies. And so we see that the superstition-laden religion of the Maori blocked advancement in the science of medicine. The Maori when ill was in the truly unhappy position of being in the care of a priest instead of a doctor. He was dosed with charms and incantations and mummery until he died or recovered in spite of his friends.

(Best 1974 : 136)

Best's dismissal of Maori medical practice as superstitious mummery failed to make the distinction which the Maori's themselves made between illness with an observable physical cause and "**mate Maori**" illness with a spiritual or psychological cause. Buck (1949: 406) describes the treatment of minor ailments "obvious to the sight". These included warts, boils, toothache, the use of heat to relieve pains after birth or difficult menstruation. Even the widespread remedy of bloodletting was practised to relieve pain. Captain Cook and Dr Deffenbach of the New Zealand Company both recorded the use of steam rising from heated leaves for medicinal purposes. John Rutherford an English sailor who lived among the Maoris from 1816 to 1826 attested to first hand experience of Maori ability to operate on and heal battle wounds by the application of herbal remedies (Brooker and Cooper 1961:7).

However, there is no early recorded observation of the use of internal herbal remedies. It would appear that the development of oral medication was introduced to New Zealand by Europeans. The new science caught on with the Maori and they began to use medicines more freely and to try out native plants. This experimentation must have proceeded at a precipitous pace since Brooker and Cooper record over two hundred plants used by the Maori for medicinal purposes. Certain plants were believed to induce abortion, stave off pregnancy or cure the introduced venereal diseases.

Tapu

The social world of the Maori was governed by the laws of *tapu*. It was believed that man consisted of three parts, **tinana** (body), **wairua** (spirit) and **mauri** (life essence). Bodily well-being was dependent on support and protection of the **mauri** by the gods. Any transgression of the laws of *tapu* led to withdrawal of divine protection. The **mauri** was then exposed to the influ-

ence of malevolent spirits. Illness with no observable or known physical cause was attributed to an attack on the *mauri* by malevolent spirits. The remedy was to call in the **tohunga** (priestly expert) who would identify the offense and recite the necessary incantation to ward off its effect.

Early childhood socialisation practices implanted unquestioning belief in the power of *tapu*. *Tapu* was of three kinds, sacred, prohibited and unclean. *Tapu* in the unclean sense was associated with illness or death. However, transgressions against *tapu* prohibitions or sacred places could bring on a state of ill health which if not attended to by a *tohunga* could lead to death.

The belief that man could control natural processes by the power of incantation pervaded much of Maori medical practice and social usage. For instance, the Maori knew the mechanics of reproduction: "The seed of life is with man and that woman represents the sheltering or nurturing bed or receptacle for that seed" (Best 1975:11). This knowledge was supplemented by fertility rites known as **whakato tamariki** (planting children) to cause conception.

The Maori was also aware of the need for psychological or spiritual purging to absolve a woman "from the hampering effects of wrong acts, indiscretions (**hara**) that she may have committed". So the *tohunga* practised a **whakahoro** (purification) rite (Best 1975:10). Tradition related that when Tutanekei's mother went into prolonged labour at his birth the *tohunga* was called in to facilitate the delivery with appropriate incantations. When these failed to work the *tohunga* taxed the woman with having committed some **hara** (sin). She then confessed that her husband was not the child's father. The incantations were then repeated with the insertion of the real father's name in the genealogy. The child was then delivered with ease. Clearly, the Maoris believed in the idea

of confession being good for the soul, that physical disturbances may have psychological causes.

Cultural change

With the coming of the European the spiritual world of the Maori was largely replaced by Christian beliefs. But some elements of the old social order remained. Some Maoris still have a deeply ingrained antipathy when things *tapu* are brought into proximity with things **noa** (common). For instance hats, combs, scarves articles of toilet are all *tapu* by contagion. They must be kept separate from places where food is prepared or served. To place these items on a table where food is eaten is to give offense. Similarly to place one's posterior on a table or pillows is an offense against the laws of *tapu*. Many Maoris still observe the custom of removing their shoes before entering a house.

A few traditionalists who still adhere to the customs of *tapu* even separate out their washing. Undergarments for instance should not be mixed with tea towels or table linen in the wash. Clearly, these taboos are more than mere superstition, they obviously have a sound basis in hygiene. Sick people and corpses were **tapu**. It was once customary to purify oneself at a stream after visiting the sick or attending a funeral. While many of these practices are still followed in rural areas they are gradually falling into disuse among urban dwellers.

Faith healing

The *tohunga* of old was more faith-healer than physician. With the introduction of European diseases which carried off large numbers of Maori population his role was called into question. By 1900 Maori numbers as a consequence of musket wars and introduced diseases fell from over 100,000 to 40,000.

In 1907 the "Tohunga Suppression Act" instigated by Maui Pomare was passed. He and Buck then visited Maori communities and through the Maori Councils promoted health reforms in village life such as uncontaminated water supplies, through ventilation in meeting houses and so on. Gradually the Maori population recovered. But despite the suppression of faith healing belief in the *tohunga* flourished. In 1918 when the influenza epidemic swept away 226 in 10,000 Maoris compared with 49 in 10,000 Europeans, the stage was set for the emergence of Ratana the modern prophet and faith-healer of the Maori people (Ratana 1972:17). But unlike the *tohunga* of old, Ratana taught that cures would be wrought by belief in the One God. At the first Christmas gathering Ratana was reputed to have cured a hundred people