



Māori Oral Tradition

He Kōrero nō te Ao Tawhito

Jane McRae

Māori oral tradition is the rich, poetic record of the past handed down by voice over generations through whakapapa, whakataukī, kōrero and waiata. In genealogies and sayings, histories, stories and songs, Māori tell of ‘te ao tawhito’ or the old world: the gods, the migration of the Polynesian ancestors from Hawaiki and life here in Aotearoa.

A voice from the past, today this remarkable record underpins the speeches, songs and prayers performed on marae and the teaching of tribal genealogies and histories. Indeed, the oral tradition underpins Māori culture itself.

This book introduces readers to the distinctive oral style and language of the traditional compositions, acknowledges the skills of the composers of old and explores the meaning of their striking imagery and figurative language. And it shows how ngā kōrero tuku iho – the inherited words – can be a deep well of knowledge about the way of life, wisdom and thinking of the Māori ancestors.

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Introduction

Māori oral tradition is the richly informative, poetic record of *ngā kōrero tuku iho* or the words that were remembered and handed down by voice over generations. The genres of *whakapapa*, *whakataukī*, *kōrero* and *waiata* (genealogies, sayings, narratives and prose, songs and chants), which make up the tradition, describe and picture the ancient and historical worlds: the gods, the Polynesian ancestors, their migration from the homeland of Hawaiki and the life of their Māori descendants in Aotearoa. The oral tradition is also a repository of religious and philosophical thinking, customary practice and personal experience. It is long-standing, from *te ao tawhito*, the old world and oral society, in which there was no writing. But it is also contemporary.

Today, in the twenty-first century, when Māori gather on their tribal *marae* (ceremonial meeting-grounds), the oral legacy can be heard in speeches, songs and prayers, and in the performative, metaphorical and esoteric character of their language. If a ceremony is held in an ornamented meeting-house, its carvings and decorative panels are based on the store of knowledge preserved in the tradition. Even if a meeting-house is unadorned, its name, the name of the nearby dining-hall and ancestral names across the surrounding tribal landscape, together with the histories of what gave rise to them, have their source in *ngā kōrero tuku iho*. Māori who participate in ceremonies and meetings there, descendants of those who composed and passed on the ancient records, know the lineage of their forebears because of often quoted genealogies, which were also preserved in the oral tradition.

The words handed down from the ancestors are cherished and kept current in various ways and through new media: in cultural rituals; in teaching, either locally by elders or at Māori schools and universities; in the modern composition of songs and stories; and by way of art, print, radio, film and the internet. Māori have preserved their oral traditions since their arrival in Aotearoa and, remarkably, through the vicissitudes of colonisation and near loss of their language. One means they used during the nineteenth century to ensure the survival of these traditions was by committing them to writing, creating a manuscript store of this once oral heritage.

The literature that bears the closest relationship to the oral tradition in its original form are the texts that Māori first wrote down from memory or that were written for them as they dictated; these texts are testament to the singular style, art and beauty of the tradition and to the extraordinarily vivid portrait they give of the people and their society of old. This, largely unpublished, literature in Māori may be found in two places. One is in the private domain, in personal papers and manuscript books that Māori have inherited or continue to write; the other is in public libraries, in manuscripts written and collected by Māori and Pākehā (Europeans) from around the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century. This writing is the single most valuable material record of Māori oral tradition.

There is also a published literature of reproduction, translation and interpretation of traditions. It began with Sir George Grey's collections of songs, narratives and sayings in the 1850s. For the remainder of the nineteenth century, oral traditions became the subject of discussion and translation in works by collectors and ethnographers, such as Edward Shortland, Richard Taylor, John White, S. Percy Smith and Elsdon Best. From 1892, the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, in particular, became a substantial source of knowledge about the tradition. Māori contributed information and writing to all that literature. And the Māori-language newspapers published from the 1840s to the early twentieth century became a printed forum in which they recorded, debated and quoted from their oral heritage.

From the twentieth to the twenty-first century, the literature developed in new directions. There were English versions of mythologies and legends, such as are found in A. W. Reed's many books and Antony Alpers' *Maori Myths and Tribal Legends*; and of tribal histories that drew on and quoted from the traditional texts, such as Elsdon Best's *Tuhoe*, Leslie G. Kelly's *Tainui*

and D. M. Stafford's *Te Arawa*. This period also produced fine scholarly works from the oral repertoire with translation and commentary. Notably there are those about the songs by Āpirana Ngata and Pei Te Hurinui Jones, Margaret Orbell and Mervyn McLean; about tribal members' own oral histories and traditions such as those by Pei Te Hurinui Jones and Bruce Biggs, Anaru Reedy and Rawiri Te Maire Tau; and with interpretation and comparative example by Agathe Thornton and Christine Tremewan.

I am indebted to that and other literature of its kind, but my primary aim has been to describe the oral tradition as a whole, its genres and special character, that is, the compositional style which demonstrates that it derives from an oral society, from *te ao tawhito*, the old world before the arrival of Europeans. In this description the tradition also reveals itself as a profound source about that world; it gives a very real sense of the geographic and cultural landscape in which people lived, of what they did, and of the knowledge, wit and wisdom of the ancestors.

My other aim has been to draw attention both to the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writing of the traditions from memory and to some of the writers, as a way of acknowledging their assiduous and enterprising recording and their skills as composers. The manuscripts, one source for publications of the kind referred to above, are of enormous value: they are attractive as artefacts, wonderfully informative about the past and a fine legacy of language. They also chart, sometimes in slight and subtle ways and other times strikingly, the changes that writing brought to the structure and content of the oral compositions and to the thinking of those who created and wrote them down. They allow comparison of the old with the new, and show how Māori kept their ancestors' knowledge alive by modern means.

In writing this book, I had in mind students of Māori language and oral literature. I hoped that it would draw them to explore the manuscript trove and to discover the riches and poetry of the language and the view of the ancient world conjured up by the oral compositions. For this reason I have been liberal in citing works about the manuscript history and other literature which supports the research that is very often needed in order to understand these concise and poetic compositions. While it can be difficult to be certain about meaning, there are sufficient published and unpublished sources, as well as tribal members and elders, to reward searches in pursuit of it; that work in itself is engrossing and always repays the student in revealing more of the ancestral culture and how it is still manifested today.

As a descriptive introduction, I would like to think that the book might attract general readers with an interest in Māori culture or New Zealand literature. The oral tradition makes for a serious literature but it is also eminently readable; it can be exciting, amusing and often highly colourful, and it constantly engages the emotions. Yet while Māori are either conversant with their own traditions or aware of them as an integral part of their cultural life, a general audience in New Zealand knows little, if anything, about them. When there is talk about Māori literature, it is usually about what Māori have written in English; it is rare to hear talk of the oral literature. Unlike English or French or classical literatures, this oral and literary heritage has not as a matter of course had a place in school and university curricula, yet it is a source of fine, often eloquent and beautiful compositions, and it contains a substantial body of knowledge about Māori culture and the earliest history of Aotearoa and New Zealand. It would be an advantage to all, I think, if its great worth were more widely known and appreciated.

Content

The book comprises a general description of Māori oral tradition and, with examples, its primary genres or particular kinds of compositions. In Chapter 1, I summarise the content of the tradition and briefly trace the transition of it to a body of literature. I picture the ancient society and orality in action: the composers and the performance and uses of their compositions. And I introduce the genres and some of the distinguishing qualities and features of the oral compositional style; for this I also draw on the wider and comparative field of oral tradition.

The four chapters that follow are devoted to *whakapapa*, *whakataukī*, *kōrero* and *waiata*. In choosing this order I had two thoughts in mind.

Firstly, there is an attractive, and informative, parallel with *whaikōrero*, the formal speeches that today are heard on *marae* or at special occasions and meetings. Speakers sometimes choose to begin their orations with a reference to their genealogy (*whakapapa*), either reciting from it or by oblique reference in a saying (*whakataukī*), before going on to the body of their speech (*kōrero*) and concluding with a song (*waiata*). But it is significant to add that orators will take licence with the order and content

of the genres to fit the circumstances or to make a point. While there is remarkable conservatism in the oral tradition, its art often arises from a composer's purposeful straying from or even updating of it.

Secondly, the order reflects the form of each genre. *Whakapapa* are the most concise, being made up of strings of single names, words or very brief phrases. Placing them first also recognises their importance to all the other genres, because in very many cases, prior knowledge of a genealogy or explanatory list may be necessary to understand allusions or cryptic references in a saying, narrative or song; for example, a descent line can advise nobility or a list of boundaries confirm a tribe's right to a place. *Whakatauki* are slightly longer compositions, although characteristically terse, which encompass proverbial wisdom, sayings relating to origins and the time in Hawaiki, as well as epithets and quotations from tribal histories of Aotearoa. And in form they anticipate the numerous set phrases which, as is typical of oral traditions, make up the patterned or formulaic language that Māori oral composers used in the longer genres of *kōrero* – accounts of custom, narrative histories and stories, and of *waiata* – the songs and chants.

There is considerable overlap between the genres, in the information they convey and in the oral composer's tactic of drawing on quotations from one to enhance another. Singling them out is convenient for describing them but it should be tempered with the thought that the oral compositions are highly interconnected – just as the Māori world-view is of a highly interrelated universe.

Māori oral tradition is both ancient and modern; my description of it is retrospective. It looks back to *te ao tawhito*, the old world or the time of an oral society in Aotearoa (which had its antecedent in Polynesia) and on to the nineteenth century, when oral and literary worlds came together. The manuscript texts originated in and followed models learned in the oral society; and this gives them a certain character, which has implications for their meaning and art. However, there is an evident continuity in the tradition through to the twenty-first century; this I only refer to occasionally, although it would in itself make a very interesting study.

The examples of genres in each chapter were recorded in writing and print, and my approach to them is literary in explaining their style, form and meaning. While I stress the need to remember that they were designed to be recited and heard, I do not, other than incidentally, explore

performative aspects, such as music, actions, dance or sounds that may have accompanied them.

As the title of the book advises, I have chosen to speak generically about Māori oral tradition when in fact it is made up of tribal traditions, each of which might be studied separately. However, while to a degree personal and individual, the traditions reflect a shared world: for instance, in subject matter, such as in references to gods and cultural heroes, in themes and images, and in style, all use the genres and compositional conventions in like or very similar ways.

The oral compositions are concise, yet at the same time very often highly symbolic and dense with meaning, which is why it is said that just one composition – a song or a narrative – would be sufficient subject for a book. An evident reason for this is that in an oral society it was a habit, and useful for the memory, to be spare with words although they could nevertheless communicate a lot. In addition, a single example from any genre is embedded in a very large context – of tribe, history, belief and custom – which bears, often opaquely, on its meaning. My reading is limited to opening the way to meaning by illustrating how the oral style, the content and a knowledge of the old world all contribute to it.

The exemplar texts derive from tribal traditions and I am aware that my interpretation of them could be amplified or contested by tribal members. There are some things that one cannot know without belonging to, or having a very close knowledge of, the kin group, or without hearing descendants' voices on the *marae*. On the other hand, there is a great deal that anyone reading Māori oral literature can learn and appreciate. Like all great classical literatures, it has much to say about humanity as well as the character of tribe or culture.

Finally, the work is, of course, partial. I speak in general of the nature of the oral tradition, introducing some of the features that distinguish it and aim at giving a sense of its breadth and depth. My discussion centres on a typical few of any one genre or sub-genre and by no means represents the complete range. In addition, since Māori composers relied heavily on conventional models, as is usual in an oral tradition, but were also creative with them, ways in which the genres could be composed, recomposed or combined are remarked on but not pursued.

Exemplar Texts and Manuscripts

In choosing sample texts, I looked for those that readily epitomise the oral style and illustrate how these kinds of compositions were thought about and used in the oral society. And I sought examples with language and a context that could be described clearly and succinctly, and which came from a range of tribal areas. Some are excerpts but they are nevertheless comprehensible on their own, although much more could be said about them if they were considered in relation to the larger piece and setting from which they came.

Since my focus is on compositional form and giving an impression of the oral tradition in *te ao tawhito*, I do not explore whether one or other text might be correct or authentic in its content. The reliability or veracity of any of the many versions of the oral compositions might be said to be subjective and circumstantial. To judge from comments in manuscripts and debates in Māori-language newspapers of the nineteenth century (as well as discussion among Māori elders today), there was indeed dispute over valid or dubious renditions, and different opinions as to accuracy might be formed among individuals at any one time.

A point to note too about these texts is that it is not possible to speak with conviction about them as original or unchanged. Change was inherent to them in the time of, and after, the oral society; and the impact of the nineteenth-century meeting between orality and literacy is very often apparent. However, although comparison of traditions recorded in writing and print from the 1840s to early 1900s reveals adjustments made to them, as even the few examples in this book confirm, there is also an astonishing persistence in form, content and the oral style.

Providing a selection of interesting composers and writers and exemplifying different kinds of manuscript collections (large and small, from Māori and Pākehā, individuals and families) also guided me in my choice of examples, in order to give some measure of this literary record. Most of the exemplars are transcribed from manuscripts of the late 1840s to the early twentieth century, some of which, as I have noted, have been published in one or other version; a few texts are quoted from early, that is, nineteenth-century, publications.

The manuscripts are fascinating but they can present problems (as early publications can too). Questions may arise in the reading, for example, as to whether handwriting is that of scribe or composer, transcription of

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