

The cover features a central illustration of a Maori mask (haka) in yellow and black, set against a blue background. The mask has large, circular eyes with blue centers and intricate patterns on its face. The title is written in white and yellow text within a black, heart-shaped frame that is part of the mask's design. The entire cover is framed by a yellow border with decorative scrollwork at the corners and bottom.

An Introduction to  
**MAORI RELIGION**

James Irwin





Carole Curach  
1995

# **An Introduction to MAORI RELIGION**

Its character before European Contact and  
its survival in contemporary Maori and  
New Zealand culture

**James Irwin**  
M.Litt. (Aberdeen)



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**for Alice**



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# Preface

In compiling this monograph every endeavour has been made to keep references to a minimum consistent with supplying sufficient information to enable those with special interests to do further reading. The style, it may appear, does not follow the usual academic methodology of purely objective description and statements of facts (not that such methodology is to be decried). A problem in research into matters Maori is that early accounts of Maori religion were almost exclusively by people of European origin and education whose presuppositions frequently led them to compose highly interpretative and sometimes misleading accounts.

While it will be seen that I also am interpretative, my comments are based on more than forty years involvement in Maori life at the “grass roots” level. I had the good fortune at the very beginning of my work (c. 1941) to have as my guides a number of Maori people who were born shortly after the 1860's. One, in fact, was 104 years of age in 1950. Another had been an adopted son of the great Te Kooti. These persons had acutely accurate capacity of recall so that I had access to material not written down. They guided me in my education in the *kawa* (protocol) of their people and this gave me an entrance into the confidences of many elderly Maoris whom I have been honoured to call my ‘koroua’ and my ‘kuia’ (equivalent to grandparents). This has given me sources of information not always open to Europeans.

In the course of describing certain rituals I have recorded anecdotes and personal observations when this has seemed appropriate, although I have been careful to avoid revealing any privileged information. One result of this procedure is that the monograph does not remain simply on account of past practices but indicates how the underlying beliefs of pre-European Maori religion are still present in the very warp and woof of contemporary Maori society.

Most of those old people are now “*kei tua i te ara*” (within the veil) and I miss them greatly.

*Na reira, e nga koroua me nga kuia,  
haere koutou ki runga ki taua ara whanui  
ki Paerau. Ka nui te mamae o toku ngakau,*

*ka nui te aroha ki a koutou. Mokemoke nei  
nga morehu.*

*Tenei aku mihi ki a koutou,  
Haere e wai i te waewae o Uenuku,  
kia ora ai te tangata.*

Whakatane, 1983

*Heemi Ewene*

James Irwin

## **New Zealand Maori Religion**

“At its core ... religion is the representation by rite, myth, and symbol of the presence of that sacred power by virtue of which all regions and dimensions of human existence are knit together in a fabric of interwoven significance and value.”<sup>1</sup>

