Sacrifice and Offerings

There was no fixed system of human sacrifice in Maori religion, yet ritual death was observed at appropriate times. Writers often cite the custom of offering the heart of the first victim slain in battle to *Tumatauenga* (god of war). Strictly speaking, this was not a ritual death, but there was a ritual observed when, after the offering of the heart, the *ariki* (high chief and warrior-priest) consumed it. This was to increase the *mana* of the victor and destroy the *mana* of the vanquished. Buck (p. 485), however, says that before battle it was customary for a slave to be slain, although sometimes a *kuri* (indigenous dog) was sacrificed instead of a human being. The heart was cooked on a spit and, after being offered to *Tumatauenga* who was believed to be appeased by the essence, it was consumed by the *tohunga*.

A most colourful account of human sacrifice is given by P. Heretaunga Baker in the first chapter of his novel *Behind the Tattooed Face* (pp. 1-18). The facts behind his accounts are based on his remembrance of tales told in his tribal meeting house when he was a child. He also relates an account of a battle when, to encourage his warriors at a crucial moment, the attacking chief seized his *tohunga*, cried out "Your life to appease *Tumatauenga*", and flung him on to the spears of the advancing enemy. The words uttered are a ritual incantation of an offering to the god of war, yet they are manifestly a diversionary tactic.

Sacrifices could be formal, as in the case of certain rituals associated with building and dedicating an important house. There were, however, many occasions when sacrifice was a more casual affair; as, for example, when stopping for food on a journey a small portion of food would be tossed into nearby bushes with the murmured phrase "*To kai e Maru* (Your portion, O *Maru*)". This was a placatory rite and, as indicated, a casual gesture. Some informants have suggested that human sacrifice could also be casual. For example, at the completion of the building of a new village the leading *tohunga* might instruct one of the men to go forth from the area and kill the first person he met. This, however, was not casual but a regular feature in such a situation.

Johannes Anderson (1907) has given a full account of the various occasions calling for human sacrifice (see also Best 1976b:

228-246). His book tells of these events as though senior males were relating the myths of their people and so giving authority for the institutuion of human sacrifice. Below are listed the more important of these occasions, although the first of them I have not found mentioned in any other source nor have my informants been able to confirm the practice.

Te Ika Tapu (ritual human sacrifice)

1. After the conception of a child fathered by a chief.
Anderson gives this in his account of the conception of a child by Whaitiri to Tawhaki. She is said to have entrapped two of Tawhaki's relatives and slain them. Tawhaki is given in Genealogies as a human ancestor and Whaitiri is described as an *atua* (power). Her name is the word for thunder, while Tawhaki is associated with lightning. As he did not know the *karakia* for offering a human sacrifice, Whaitiri recited the ritual chant and taught this to her husband. Best (1976b: 244), says that the *tohi karakia* (birth rituals) on the birth of a son of a high chief required a human sacrifice.

2. Death of a chief.
Following the notification of the death of a chief, two of his slaves were killed to serve him in the realm of death. His wife would then commit *moremore* (ritual suicide) and two of her slaves would also be slain. Immediately after the chief's death the women mourners would scarify their faces, arms and breasts until blood flowed.

3. Dedication of a *wharekura*.
The *wharekura* is described today as a schoolhouse, but in pre-European times it was dedicated to *Kahukura*, a supernatural being sometimes appearing as a rainbow, that is to say, the rainbow was his *aria* (symbol). The house was used for the instruction of young men of high birth in the mythology and history of the people and in the appropriate ritual for each story. When the building was completed, the final *karakia*, known as *ta i te kawa* (imparting of the protocol), was observed by sprinkling the building with water from a leafy branch dipped in a bowl of water. This action removed the *tapu* invoked for the processes of building the edifice. At this time there was a sacrifice when either a dog, a man, a woman, a child or a slave was killed in front of the building. The body was later buried in a *wahi tapu* (sacred place). Most likely this would be an *ahurewa* (a *tapu* area in a sacred place where the gods were invoked).

4. Graduation from a *wharakura*.
When the five-months-long instruction of the young men ended at a *wharekura* (or a *wharewananga*, a house of learning for the esoteric

arts), the final test for the graduating student was for him to select a victim, usually a slave. The teacher, however, might instruct an especially high-born pupil to choose a relative, excepting his mother and father. The method of slaying was by invoking a death-wish by reciting a potent *karakia*. This is generally referred to as *makutu*.

5. The building of a *whare tupuna* (an ancestral house, usually with carved decoration).

When an important tribal house was being built it was normal to place beneath the *pou toko manawa* (main supporting post) what was known as a *whatu* (stone) that held the *mauri* giving *mana* to the building. When the house was owned by a tribe or sub-tribe noted for its prowess in war then the *whatu* was a human sacrifice. The person sacrificed could be a slave, a relative of the builder or even, in an extreme case, the builder's son.

6. A war party (*taua*) setting out on a foray.

Frequently human sacrifice was offered by killing the first person to cross the pathway of the *taua* as they left the village. This was an offering to *Tumatauenga*, the fearsome god of war.

7. The dedication of a new *pa* (a fortified village).

The *pa* was a stronghold built on a hill where the people took refuge when threatened with attack. Normally there were three circles of stockades, with deep ditches in between, surrounding the *pa*. The outer stockade was made from solid and heavy logs that had roughly carved faces at their tops. It was usual for each of these logs in the front stockade to have the body of a slave buried beneath it. It will be appreciated that when it was a large *pa* this meant a large number of slaves were slain. (Not all authorities agree with this. Some say that a victim was buried only beneath the main post of the stockade.)

8. The launching of a ceremonial canoe or a war canoe.

Once more these events were the occasion of the slaying of hapless slaves. the canoes were surrounded by intricate *tapu* and *karakia* throughout the process of building. Known as *waka pitau*, they had finely carved prows with an intricate and attractive perforated spiral supported by a stylised male figure with arms stretched backwards. Accounts of the launching are contradictory in that some claim that the launching was over the bodies of slaves. However, Best is probably more reliable when he says a slave was sacrificed. The purpose of this sacrifice was most likely for *tapu* removal, for the new *waka* would derive its *mana* from the *rangatira* (chiefs) and sub-tribes who had built it.

There seem to have been four main reasons for human sacrifice in Maori religion, viz., as a direct offering to the gods; for the purpose of divination; in extreme cases for *tapu* removal; and finally

to add *mana* to a chief at a function. The widespread use of slaves as sacrifices seems to have been due to the fact that slaves would not invoke the custom of *utu* (revenge). Best (1982: 141) describes the graduation ceremonies observed in the old Tuhoe territory for *tohunga* of what was known as the *whare maire*, a school that passed on the knowledge of spells, magic and *makutu*. The graduates were known as *ruanuku* (wise men, wizards), and when selecting their victims for the graduation exercise they were not permitted to choose a slave. Yet it was by no means unusual for the choice of a sacrifice to be a matter of chance as in 6 above. In fairly recent (i.e. post-European) times a new village was built under the instruction of two notable *tohunga* who had rejected the teachings of the prophet Te Ua Haumene (founder of the Pai Marire cult in 1862). They were said to be *tohunga* of the *Io* cult and in the new village they built an unusually-shaped place of worship. On its completion, one of the males of the village was instructed to go outside the village and shoot the first living being he encountered. When the man returned he explained that he had not been able to carry out his orders, for the first person he met was one of his uncles. The prophets then declared that this was a bad omen and prophesied that the community would never prosper. Subsequent history of the village seems to have confirmed this.

An old tradition of offerings made in the original homeland of the Maori people is told by Best (1976b: 224) where he describes the offerings as 'bloodless'. He records his informant as saying:

> *Enei kai e waiho ana hei kai whakaepa ki nga atua,*
> *hei kai ma nga ariki; he kai kaore ona toto tahi,*
> *na reiro ka waiho hei kai whakaepa ki nga atua.*
>
> these foods were reserved for offerings to the gods,
> and to be food for the high chiefs. Such food was
> without blood, i.e., dry, sapless; therefore it was
> kept as a food offering for the gods.

This tradition seems to have been known to a number of tribes but not to all. There was also a number of tribes that did not use human sacrifices, e.g., when setting out on a foray against another tribe or *hapu*. Instead they might use a bird. In this case the blood of the bird was offered to the *atua* and the dismembered carcase placed by a *tohunga* at a *wahi tapu*. Some South Island tribes would offer a dog in place of a human sacrifice; the heart was removed and cooked in an *ahu tumutumu* (a ritual fire and *tapu*) where it was roasted. After the necessary *karakia* was recited, the priestly expert would offer the heart to the *atua* and then consume it. This suggests that the occasion was a war-like one, since offerings for less important matters were placed intact at the *tuahu* (sacred

place) and left to decay. However, the main offerings made on ceremonial and informal occasions were most often cooked food or birds (such as the hawk or the kiwi), rats or dogs. Often even simpler offerings were made. For example, at a *tangihanga* (funerary rites) when a *tira* (mourning party) advanced on the *marae* (grassed area in front of a meeting house) the falling tears were considered a sufficient offering as requital for the death. Behind this custom lies the philosophy that death is never natural and must always be requited. It should be noted that cooked food was an important element in *tapu* removal so that some care needs to be observed in deciding whether the cooked food is used as an offering or used for removing the effects of a breach of a *tapu* restriction. Food offerings were made generally and on the most numerous occasions by individuals in a variety of situations both formal and informal. Then there were times when offerings were made on behalf of a community. These pertained especially to seasonal occupations such as the planting of the *kumara* (sweet potato), bird snaring, fishing and other seasonal undertakings, and to occasions when a group was travelling.

The rituals relating to the *kumara* were quite elaborate and were carried out only by the males of the village. Several *tohunga* might be engaged in various parts of the ritual. Preparation of the ground called for careful planning, as did the subsequent stages of planting, cultivation and lifting of the mature crop. Once the ground was cleared ready for the new crop, the *tohunga* directed the preparation of a small plot in which a number of mounds of earth were prepared and in this *mara tautane* (a plot set apart to the *kumara* god) the carefully chosen *kumara* seed tubers were planted on each mound (*puke*) to secure the fertility of the earth and an abundance of yield. Then the men of the village made the mounds for the main garden, and the remainder of the tubers were planted. When the crop had rooted well, there was held a *pure karakia* to lift the *tapu* on the young crop that the older women could now tend. When the time came to lift the matured new tubers great care was taken to fulfil all ceremonial requirements. Only a skilled *tohunga* could carry out these *karakia*. He first lifted the *tapu* that was on the crop, then he proceeded to the *mara tautane* which was considered to hold the *mauri* of the crop. The tubers from this mound were then taken to the *tuahu* and the *karakia* intoned while the tubers were buried. This was an offering to *Rongomaraeroa* (the god of cultivated foods). All was now ready for the lifting of the main crop. Great care was taken to ensure that none of the tubers was bruised and they were taken to a specially constructed storehouse. Here the new season's *kumara* were sorted into the various types: the seed tubers, those less mature and suited to making *kao* (smoked and

sun-dried), and the mature roots suitable for long storage. When all had been safely stored, the storehouse was closed and a ritual *karakia* recited. The final act in the ceremonial was the feast in which all participated.

Bird snaring and preserving was an important undertaking in New Zealand where there was a great shortage of protein in the form of meat. The only ground animals were small brown indigenous bush rats (*kiore*), the indigenous *kuri* (dog), and the flightless birds such as the *kiwi* and the *moa*. By the time of the coming of the European, the *moa* (which was a bird ranging in height from four feet to eight or even ten feet) had been extinct for a considerable time. The *kuri* was also becoming scarce, and bush rats were harder to locate and trap. Thus the abundant bird population was of extreme importance. The *tapu* restrictions placed several limits on such matters as the times for snaring and the types of snares that could be used.

The bird-snaring season began when the agricultural crops had been harvested and the birds had feasted on the ripened tree berries. Before snaring could commence, the *tohunga* had to lift the various *tapu* and *rahui* from the areas designated for the use of the fowlers. *Rahui* were restrictions placed on particular areas for varying periods. These could be on particular trees or species of trees, but more usually on clumps of trees favoured by particular species of birds. The men specially skilled as snarers or spearsmen would then visit a special post known as a *tuapa* which, while not invested with a *tapu*, was considered able to bring good fortune. Here they would secure a piece of leafy branch and touch it to the post and then touch that to the spear or snare. They then returned to the *whare mata*, a house specially built for the making of bird snares. Here their *tohunga* would perform the ceremonies to remove the construction *tapu* from the articles, and the hunters were free to seek out their quarry. According to Best (1977: 149), this opened the bird-taking season.

The first birds taken were brought to the *tohunga* who cooked them in a special *umu* (oven). Another *umu* had already been prepared and this was opened by the women who then consumed the cooked birds. This was in the nature of a placatory offering to the particular *atua* of the birds and the forest. Some informants say that the first birds snared were offered to the *mauri* of that part of the forest. Sometimes the offering was placed where the *mauri* was secreted, but if no *tohunga* was present who knew where that secret place was, then the offering would be thrown into the undergrowth with a brief murmur to the effect that it was "*whakaepa mo te mauri*" ("reserved for the *mauri*").

When the season came to its end, the birds that had been snared were carefully preserved in *taha* (gourd calabashes) by

roasting them on spits and catching the fat in troughs. The fat was then poured over the birds which had been packed into the *taha*. The hunting party then returned to their home village chanting a number of *tau* (chants) celebrating their success. On arriving at the village, the *tohunga* would recite the final *karakia* as the villagers assembled in complete silence, and he would beckon the men to come closer. As the *tohunga* recited the last lines of the chant all the party would join in the final line, dropping their loads of *taha* to the ground. It would appear that this was a *tapu*-removal procedure so that the hunters could resume relations with their families. They were then hailed with much shouting and laughter and a feast was prepared and eaten.

In the same way, sacrifices offered to the gods by fishermen could be elaborate, or simple and casual. But in essence the aim remained the same as in the taking of birds in the forests or the growing and harvesting of crops. The necessary ceremonies were observed in order that *Tangaroa* be not offended, that the sea remain fruitful, and that the fishermen return safely.