



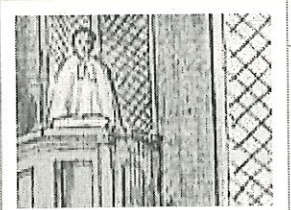
Rongoā – medicinal use of plants

1907

The impact of colonisation

Colonisation by Europeans had a significant effect on traditional Māori healing. Tohunga had limited ability to combat the diseases brought by Europeans. Though Western medicine was also relatively ineffectual at the time, this failure still strongly affected Māori confidence in tohunga.

Some Pākehā missionaries attributed the spread of disease to a lack of Christian faith. As their own healers appeared impotent, many Māori accepted this explanation and turned to Christianity. Over time, the whare wānanga (schools of higher learning) which had trained tohunga started to close. The tradition of the tohunga declined.



Rangiatea Church,
Ōtaki

Catholic rongoā

Mary Joseph Aubert was a French Catholic nun who became interested in medicinal uses of native plants. She spent much time among Māori, particularly on the Whanganui River, and created a number of herbal remedies. She had knowledge of botany, chemistry, nursing and medicine, but also learnt about rongoā through her work with Māori. Her products, a blend of Western medicine and rongoā, were sold throughout New Zealand.



Mary Joseph
Aubert's medicine

Second-class tohunga

Many Māori continued to seek rongoā. While some traditional tohunga continued their work, another type appeared – lacking education and authority. These 'second-class tohunga' played on the superstitions of a people caught between two cultures, often travelling from pā to pā claiming to cure all kinds of illness. By the early 20th century there were so many that they were seen as a threat by both Pākehā and Māori authorities.

The Tohunga Suppression Act

The Tohunga Suppression Act grew out of concern over the practices of some self-appointed tohunga. The influential Te Aute College Students' Association was particularly critical, believing that tohunga might harm patients, and could hinder Māori progress. Tohunga also came under attack from the prominent Māori doctors Māui Pōmare and Te Rangi Hīroa (Sir Peter Buck).

The Tohunga Suppression Act was presented by Māori MP James Carroll and supported by the four Māori members of parliament. It was passed in 1907. The preamble read:

Every person who gathers Maoris around him by practising on their superstition or credulity, or who misleads or attempts to mislead any Maori by professing or pretending to possess supernatural powers in the treatment or cure of any disease, or in the foretelling of future events, or otherwise, is liable on summary conviction before a Magistrate to a fine not exceeding twenty-five pounds or to imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months.

There were few prosecutions under the Act, and very few convictions – its main effect was to drive tohunga underground. In 1962, it was repealed.

The Act has been seen by some as an attempt to control the Ngāi Tūhoe prophet Rua Kēnana, who built an independent settlement at Maungapōhatu in the Urewera from 1907.

The Act has also been viewed as a breach of the Treaty of Waitangi, as it challenged traditional Māori wisdom – considered to be one of the taonga (treasures) that Māori were promised under the second article of the Treaty.

Biographies



Mary Joseph Aubert, 1835–1926



James Carroll, 1857–1926

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