



**(Best, E., 1904: 223)**

---

MAORI MEDICAL LORE. NOTES ON SICKNESS AND DISEASE AMONG THE MAORI PEOPLE OF NEW ZEALAND, AND THEIR TREATMENT OF THE SICK; TOGETHER WITH SOME ACCOUNT OF VARIOUS BELIEFS, SUPERSTITIONS AND RITES PERTAINING TO SICKNESS, AND THE TREATMENT THEREOF, AS COLLECTED FROM THE TUHOE TRIBE. Part I

Author(s): Elsdon Best

Source: *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, December, 1904, Vol. 13, No. 4(52) (December, 1904), pp. 213-237

Published by: The Polynesian Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20700736>

---

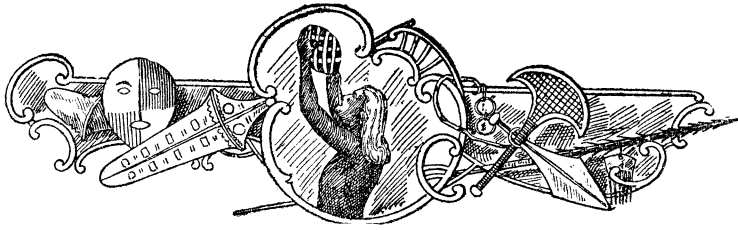
JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The Polynesian Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*

JSTOR



## MAORI MEDICAL LORE.

NOTES ON SICKNESS AND DISEASE AMONG THE MAORI  
PEOPLE OF NEW ZEALAND, AND THEIR TREATMENT OF THE  
SICK ; TOGETHER WITH SOME ACCOUNT OF VARIOUS  
BELIEFS, SUPERSTITIONS AND RITES PERTAINING  
TO SICKNESS, AND THE TREATMENT  
THEREOF, AS COLLECTED FROM  
THE TUHOE TRIBE.

---

BY ELSDON BEST, OF TUHOE LAND.

---

### PART I.

**I**N the compilation of an article on any subject connected with a primitive people, it is invariably found to be most difficult to confine oneself to the immediate subject under discussion. For instance, to draw up a monograph on the subject of Maori religion would mean the following up of so many by-ways that the complete article would practically be a full account of Maori life and thought.

Hence it is, that, in describing the native treatment of the sick, and also the Maori idea of the cause of disease, illness, &c., it becomes necessary to wander from the proper bounds of our subject, and enter the realms of magic, mythology and religion.

In this wise : The religion (or superstition, call it what you will) of the Maori entered so largely into his life, that it was scarcely possible for him to perform any act, certainly no important one, without, in some manner, impinging upon that religion. Also religion and magic, sorcery, thaumaturgy, are practically equal terms in a description of Maori beliefs.

18

One only remark, as emanating from an European, can I bear in mind, as being near the truth in locating a cause for the decadence of the Maori. That remark may be explained as "the displacement of species." That is nearer the mark—the evolution of the human race, the survival of the fittest, call it what you will. The Maori, as the Maori, is passing, although the blood will remain with us.

Q It is undoubtedly a fact that, so soon as Europeans arrived in New Zealand, the native tribes were afflicted by very serious epidemics, which swept off great numbers of the people. They perished by thousands, many villages being almost depopulated, and many settlements were deserted on account of the scourge. Natives of several parts of the North Island have told me that, when the famous *rewharewha* was ravaging the land, the dead were often so numerous that they were left in the houses unburied, while the survivors fled in terror to seek a new home elsewhere. A village known as Te Neinei, near my present camp, was so deserted, the survivors settling at Pa-puweru. Some visitors, coming to Te Neinei, found the dead lying in the huts, and partially consumed by rats. Epidemics of this nature are here termed *papa reti*, the name of a sort of toboggan formerly used here. The dying of many people was compared with the swift motion of the toboggan down the slide. Or, as an old man explained it to me, "Tuhoe flowed like water down to Hades." Pio says that it was on the second coming of Captain Cook that these epidemics commenced their ravages, and that they spread all over the island, numbers dying in every village. So many died that, for the first time, the dead were all buried near the village. As Christianity advanced, so the new diseases spread.

The natives still place great faith in their so-called *tohunga*, and the modern *tohunga* is a kind of quack doctor, a hybrid imposition, a fraud, a despicable fellow, inferior in every way to his savage ancestors, who were, at least, more honest in their professions.

A great distrust of European doctors is manifest in this district. It is probable that this is not due to any disbelief in the medical knowledge of the said profession, but that the natives have an instinctive fear that a doctor will interfere with their state of *tapu*, that the life principle will be endangered by the methods of the European being employed. A middle-aged woman of this district was taken seriously ill at Rotorua, and it was proposed that she be sent to the hospital. Her people strongly objected, urging her to adhere to native customs, saying that they would rather see her die than be operated upon by an European. However, she was taken to the hospital by Europeans, was operated upon, and recovered. When she returned here, I heard an old woman ask her, "In what