

Song of the Old Tohunga

A Celebration of Rongoa Maori
Traditional Medicine of New Zealand

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Dedication

to Nadine Williams

for her positivity, creativity and future collaborations.

Introduction

As with SLEEP WELL, MR TODO, my introduction to *Kampo*, the traditional medicine of Japan, so Song of the Old Tohunga, offers a basic introduction, an insight, into the healing traditions of the Maori, the original people of New Zealand.

Song of the Old Tohunga

Tohunga

Good to see you here little Kakariki, like a rendezvous for healing. What a blessing! You, here on the mainland, usually a resident of the islands: we heard talk that you were on the endangered list.

Narrator

Known as a *tohunga*, the old healer gives thanks once again, for what his eyes can see. And it seems as if the forest comes alive, with other voices of gratitude and celebration.

Voices

Come little Kakariki,
So good to see you here.
Jacket emerald green,
Hat of a scarlet sheen,
So good to see you here.

Come little Kakariki,
So good to see you here.
Red-Crowned Parakeet,
We thought you were beat,
So good to see you here.

Tohunga

I saw you Kakariki, but didn't want to disturb you. It was a pleasure to watch you bathing in the pool; the shades of green, red on the head, flecks of blue on the wing, happily splashing in the water. I'm just an old tohunga, happy at the sight of a young Kakariki. My prayers have been answered. Across the generations, we meet at an ancient source of medicine: the bird, the man and a manuka tree.

Voices

When the old tohunga,
Called on *Tane Mahuta*,
He heard,
Yes I think he heard.
Tane Mahuta,
Child of the Creators,
God of forest and birds.

Narrator

All his life, the ageing healer has asked for support and given thanks for Creation and all the medicine chests, it has presented him with. Every morning on rising and every night before laying his head, he chants words of gratitude to the Creators: to *Ranginui* and *Papatuanuku*. Since childhood days, when he was chosen and the training began, he has carried the potential to heal, with pride and dignity. Not the pride of vanity: the pride of one, entrusted to carry something sacrosanct. He was chosen to learn what is *tapu*, what is sacred. Chosen, then trained by a *tohunga pu*.

Tohunga

I have listened,
So I have learnt.
Of which to boil,
Of what should be burnt.

The goodness of Rata,
Of Pohutukawa.
As well as Kawakawa,
And Tikouka.

Qualities of Tanekaha,
And of Rewarewa.
Of Horoeka,
And Putaputaweta.

Voices

He has received invocations from the Manuka.

Tohunga

The potential of Kanuka,
And of Totara.
Of Kapuka,
The one called Karaka.

The properties of Tawa,
And of Rangiora.
Of the one called Tarata,
And Kahikatea.

Voices

He has received invocations from the Manuka.

Narrator

Long ago, he took all the learning he could from the *whare wananga* (house of learning); now, he is a *tohunga ahuwera*. He learnt the soothing potential of massage and incantation, as well as of plants. He often speaks of the blessings of the manuka; as food, insecticide, soap ingredient, water container, tool manufacturing, construction material, crayfish trap and so on. But most of all, he speaks of its medicinal blessings.

First Voice

So much to give,
Infusion of bark as sedative.

Second Voice

Used for dysentery
And complaints urinary.

Third Voice

Used boiled leaf vapour,
Release from cold and fever.

Voices

For aching joints,
Burns,
And inflammation.
For eye
And mouth problems,
For forest re-generation.

Tohunga

Everyone comes to this tree, little Kakariki, as Captain Cook did, who used it to make tea. Ahhh little Kakariki, I have come to this tree so many times, so its good to see you here. Have used this tree for a range of ailments, as you use it to rid yourself of parasites. I feel for you, as we, past and present, have had to counteract parasitic and predatory behaviour: but we go on, as you do. Tonight, when the human world is quiet, I shall make a little fire and chant *karakia*, in gratitude for the eternal gifts of Creation: for you little Kakariki - and for the tree called manuka.

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