

Karakia or cultural appropriation?

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Introduction

This article is about karakia in post-colonial New Zealand and introduced religious influences that have changed Māori cultural beliefs and practices.

This is not an article about religions and what religion is the more appropriate. Every person has a right to practice their own religious beliefs without hurting others or being hurt because of their faith.

This article is written because it is increasingly becoming the new normal for government agencies, education facilities and organisations to recite what they term a karakia to open and close meetings and bless food. A number of definitions of karakia from authoritative sources is also included.

A common karakia that is recommended by [Te Puni Kōkiri](#) and practiced across of much of government is analysed and its origin discussed in section 3 to highlight possible risks and unintended offence and humiliation that may be caused to some Māori .

Included and will be updated is a list of karakia that are used by language experts who state they are neutral.

Origins of Karakia

We find karakia first mentioned in the story of Rangi and Papa. Te Rangikaheke's version of the story tells of Tū being given his karakia after he had overcome his brothers, all except Tāwhiri. He was given his karakia as the means by which he would be able to overcome his elder brothers and use them for food:

Na reira i whakanoatia ai ona tuakana, a, ka wehewehea i reira ana karakia, he karakia ano mo Tāne-mahuta, mo Tangaroa ano tona, mo Rongo-ma-Tāne ano tona, mo Haumia ano tona, mo Tūmatauenga ano tona. Ko te wahi i rapu ai ia i nga karakia nei, kia whakahokia iho ona tuakana hei kai mana, a, he karakia ano mo Tāwhiri-ma-tea, he tua mo te rangi; he karakia ano mo Papa-tua-nuku, kia noa katoa ai i a ia ratou i rapua ai e ia he tikanga karakia mona. Otira, na te atua ano ia i whakaako, i mohio ai.

And so his [Tūmatauenga's] elder brothers were made noa and his karakia were sorted out, the particular karakia for Tāne Māhuta, those for Tangaroa, those for Rongo-mā-Tāne, those for Haumia, those for Tūmatauenga. He sorted out these karakia so that his elder brothers might be turned back to him to be his food. And there is also a karakia for Tāwhirimātea, a tuā for the heavens. There is another karakia for Papatūānuku, which renders free from restriction all that is sought by him. And there is ritual for human beings.

All were taught and made known by the atua.' It is through the word, the word of the karakia, that Tū is to be able to eat his elder brothers, that is to have power over them to control them.

In another text, Te Rangikaheke says that our karakia come down to us from the time of the separation of Rangi and Papa and he names different types of karakia. It is the same power of the word given to Tū, which is given to us.

A wehea rawatia ake te Rangi me Papa, kua nui noa atu nga tangata i roto i te pouri. No reira ano te take o nga karakia mauri, pana tamariki, karakia rangi, karakia mahaki, karakia mo nga kai, karakia o nga taonga, karakia mo nga whawhai.

'Then Rangi and Papa were separated. People had become many, there in the darkness. It was from that time that life-giving chants, chants for childbirth, chants for the weather, for sickness, for food, for possessions, and for war, came down to us' (Shirres, 1986).

What is Karakia

Karakia are the chants of Māori ritual. They often call on the atua and are a means of participation, of becoming one, with the atua and the ancestors and with events of the past in the 'eternal present' of ritual. In their use of ready-made phrases or formulas, the karakia are similar to the other forms of Māori recited chants and Māori songs. But karakia are different in their musical style – a very rapid monotone chant – and in their almost exclusive use of traditional language, symbols and structures. Karakia speak the words of the ancestors and are the work of a people, rather than an individual (Shirres, 1986).

With the introduction of Christianity to New Zealand in the 19th Century, new karakia were written to acknowledge the Christian God and Jesus Christ. These karakia have been used since that time, however there is a current move towards using our more traditional karakia (which were often chanted or 'sung'), which call upon many of our Atua (Gods/guardians) for direction; these karakia are poetic and full of beautiful imagery and metaphor. It is important however to remember that there are not always appropriate English words which can fully reflect the essence of the Māori words used; often literal translations need to be considered metaphorically ([Otago University](#)).

In Māori knowledge, the natural and supernatural worlds are one – there was no Māori word for religion. The use of the term 'whakapono' for religion was introduced by missionaries. Whakapono also means faith and trust.

It is not uncommon to see Māori who have been brought up with traditional knowledge uttering a karakia by themselves.

Traditionally there were a number of prescribed karakia that everyone knew and there were those for the higher learning tohunga.

Typical of ritual everywhere, the karakia have their own distinct, very rapid mode of recitation. Professor Mervyn McLean describes them musically as 'exceedingly rapidly intoned ritual chants whose tempos may exceed 300 syllables per minute'.

Karakia were usually recited solo by males, though some of the work karakia have sections for a chorus and there are examples in the Māori manuscripts of Ngā Puhi karakia recited by women.

Also typical of ritual in general, the karakia are strongly traditional. They have their own traditional structure, traditional symbols and ritual actions and traditional images and their concern is everything, the whole of the universe, earth, sea and sky, and beyond, into the night. Such contrasting phrases as te ao, te pō, the world of daylight, the world of the night; te wai nuku, te wai rangi, the waters of the earth, the waters of the heavens, are used frequently in the karakia.

Whakataka te hau ki te uru

The following karakia is promoted by [Otago University](#) and [Te Puni Kōkiri](#). Yet, there is a clear lack of understanding about the karakia and its original meaning and translation.

The Māori words for snow, ice and frost sometimes appear using various other Māori words. This may be due to the local region. Thought I can find no explanation or justification.

Whakataka te hau ki te uru,
Whakataka te hau ki te tonga.
Kia mākinakina ki uta,
Kia mātaratara ki tai.
E hī ake ana te atākura he tio,
he huka, he hauhunga.
Haumi e! Hui e! Tāiki e!

Get ready for the westerly
and be prepared for the southerly.
It will be icy cold inland,
and icy cold on the shore.
May the dawn rise red-tipped on ice,
on snow, on frost.
Join! Gather! Intertwine!

Original Source

The karakia represents and celebrates a controversial colonial figure governor Governor George Grey. The karakia and its translation above were first composed as a karakia in 1855 by 85 practicing Anglican Māori of Ngāti Apa to farewell Governor George Grey who was travelling back to South Africa.

The original text in Māori and English can be found in [pages 31 and 32](#) of the publication: *Māori Menetos: Being a Series of Addresses, Presented by the Native people, to His Excellency Sir George Grey... With Introductory Remarks and Explanatory Notes, to which is added a Small Collection of Laments, &c.* by C. O. Davis. Published in Auckland by Williamson and Wilson, 1855.

Governor George Grey was responsible for the Waikato land confiscation where most of Waikato had their land stolen by the government and for other mass confiscations of land in New Zealand. Under George Grey's rule, Māori were severely disadvantaged through wars and other discriminatory acts.

To recite this karakia is to hold George Grey in high regard and to relive his memories and to celebrate the man. It is doubtful if Waikato, Taranaki and other Iwi would appreciate this celebration and remembrance of a man who caused so much hurt an inter-generational harm to so many Māori.

Lost in translation

Some people seem not to have understood this triple structure when they tried to put this karakia into English. They noticed that it was a “prayer” of sailors threatened by an approaching storm, and they then distorted the Māori words to make all three sections requests for what is wanted (Shirres, 1986). There are several translations being promoted by academia and the New Zealand government. The following translation is from Te Puni Kōkiri.

Get ready for the westerly
and be prepared for the southerly.
It will be icy cold inland,
and icy cold on the shore.
May the dawn rise red-tipped on ice,
on snow, on frost.
Join! Gather! Intertwine!

Analysis

1. The first section of any karakia acknowledges the great forces that are at work connecting us to the atua, the spiritual powers. In the above example this is expressed by the Westerly and Southern winds.
2. The second section expresses a loosening of these forces' harmful bonds, and a strengthening of their helpful ones. In the above example this is expressed by referring to the aftermath of the howling Southerly storm blows through, a frigid, but windless night will follow.
3. The third section is the naming of what is required for oneness with the atua. In the above example this is expressed with an awe-inspiring dawn transforming the icy snowscape.
4. Tāiki e! The signifies the end of a speech and time to carry on with the purpose of the meeting.

Recommendation.

This is not entirely a traditional karakia as it avoids recognising the deities of the ocean, winds, wood the ship was made of etc. It was referenced as a song in the original source.

The karakia is probably most relevant to members of Ngāti Apa and Māori of Anglican faith. Some caution should be considered when using this karakia as the iwi and the Anglican faith may be at odds with the people and the environment you are at.

It is certainly not appropriate to be said in an office space to open a meeting as it is a farewell karakia to someone or a group of people travelling on the ocean.

Blessing of food Karakia

At many Māori hui it is expected that the food is blessed using a blessing in Māori language. The blessings of food is an introduced religious practice, predominately a Christian practice and not a pre colonial Māori practice.

Traditionally, Māori would say a karakia of acknowledgement and thanks to the gods of the food that they were to partake of. They would also offer some food to the deities or atua. There were also strict rules about not eating various foods together as it would cause the deities and gods to clash.

If you have a meal of kūmara and bird meat, you might karakia to Rongo-mā-Tāne the god of cultivated foods and Tāne Mahuta the god of all birds. You could likely also provide a part of your meal to the spirits and or to the gods as an acknowledgement of thankfulness for the food. Depending on the situation, a karakia to the deity of the particular species would occur.

In today's modern world we have processed food that does not have a deity. So some choice of words need to be considered.

Otago University Blessing of Food karakia.

Nau mai e ngā hua
o te wao
o te ngakina
o te wai tai
o te wai Māori
Nā Tane
Nā Rongo
Nā Tangaroa
Nā Maru
Ko Ranginui e tū iho nei
Ko Papatūānuku e takoto nei
Tuturu whakamaua
Kia tina! TINA! Hui e! TĀIKI E! I

Welcome the gifts of food
from the sacred forests
from the cultivated gardens
from the sea
from the fresh waters
The food of Tane
of Rongo
of Tangaroa
of Maru

I acknowledge Ranginui who is above me, Papatuanuku who lies beneath me
Let this be my commitment to all!
Draw together! Affirm!

Analysis

Unless you have food from the forest such as birds and plants; food from the ocean such fish and shell fish; cultivated and cultivated and uncultivated food such as Kūmara and fern root, then the karakia defeats the purpose as it acknowledges food sources that you are not eating from. This karakia also refers to Maru, a war god. It is unclear why he is included. But it does raise the issue that various Iwi have their own stories and various gods that may not match the current district you are in.

The karakia also ignores the fact that there are many children of the primary gods referenced who it may be better to acknowledge than the parents.

New building karakia

Pre colonisation, Māori performed karakia for a new building. Today a similar practice is in place. Pre colonisation the karakia was to Tāne Māhuta as the house was built from his children, the trees. Today building materials are not solely timber. Therefore, karakia to Rūamoko for bricks and stones and other minerals such as metal might need to be explored. An eco-earth house would likely require a karakia to Papatūānuku.

A safe Karakia to use

This karakia was written by Scotty Morrison and appears all over the Internet and Social Media. It is labelled as safe for learners and has been taught nationwide – yet strong.

Tūtawa mai i runga
Tūtawa mai i raro
Tūtawa mai i roto
Tūtawa mai i waho
Kia tau ai
Te mauri tū
Te mauri ora
Ki te katoa
Haumi e
Hui e
Tāiki e!

Come forth from above,
below, within,
and from
the environment
Vitality
and well being, for all
Strengthened in unity.

Karakia for health and well being

The following karakia was written for the period of Covid 19. The author is Kaye Gray. The karakia is written using southern dialect K in place of Ng.

Karakia mo te Kaha me te Oranga
Incantation for Strength, Wellness & Wellbeing

E lo o te Ora
Ko koe te mauri tuturu o ka mea katoa i roto o enei Ao
Tukua ki a matou te matauraka me te mohiotaka ki te whakaora
Ka aitua me te whakatika hoki te kaore i oritetaka
O te uwahataka me te tanetaka o te ao turoa
Nou te orite o ka mea katoa
No reira tukua ki a matou te maramataka
O tenei mauri orite hei paikia mo te ira takata
Me ka aitaka maha o te Putaiao, te Ao Turoa me te Ao Wairua
Homai ki a matou i tenei wa te kaha ki te whawhai te whawhai pai
Homai ki a matou te kaha hoki ki te whawhai tenei nawe o te Mate Karauna
Tukua ki a matou whanau whanui te mauri toiora, hauora, waiora
Me te mauri ora hei paikia mo te whanau ora
E lo Waiora

Karakia or cultural appropriation?

Ka ruruia koe ki a matou te waiora o te whakaora
Inaianei tae atu mo ake tonu atu
Tuturu mai kia whakamaua
Kia tina! Tina!
Haumi e! Hui e! Taiki e!

O Living Supreme God
You are the true balance of all life in these worlds
Give unto us the knowledge and wisdom to heal the injustices
And to make right the imbalances
Of the feminine and masculine energies of this natural world
You are the balance of all things
Therefore grant unto us enlightenment
For the balance of the life force for the wellness and wellbeing of humanity and all
life forms of the Cosmic World, the Natural World and the Spiritual World
Give unto us the strength at this time to fight the good fight
Give unto us also the strength to fight this deadly Covid 19 virus
Grant to our broader family members the lifeforce of spiritual, mental, emotional and
physical wellbeing for the wellbeing of our families
O God of Healing Waters
You sprinkle us with the life giving waters of healing and wellness
Now and for ever more
Let it be firmly fastened!
Make it firm! It is firm!
Join it! Bind it! It is done!

Summary

Individuals and organisations must question the relevance of karakia and if it should be practiced. Christianity has been a primary influence that has removed Māori religious beliefs.

To respect Māori culture and Te Tiriti and for a desire to karakia, then appropriate karakia need to be created to suit the organisation and the event or the usage of the termed safe karakia above should be used.

Definitions of Karakia

Below is a list of definitions of the word karakia from authoritative Māori literature.

(Barlow, 1991, pp. 36-37)

Karakia consists of pleas, prayers and incantations addressed to the gods who reside in the spirit world. Karakia are offered so the gods may intercede in the affairs of mortal men by providing comfort, guidance, direction, and blessings for them in their various activities and pursuits. One petitions gods through prayer in accordance with one's own individual capacity to pray and the extent of one's knowledge and faith that one's requests be fulfilled.

Karakia are described as the sacred heart which is installed into the mind and thought of an individual or thing (for example, a carved meeting house) and through which the essence of life and the influence and power of the gods might be manifested. By the use of karakia or prayer a bond is established between the person praying and the and the spiritual dimension, or source of power. The object of Karakia is to find favour with the gods in all activities and pursuits.

There are many types of karakia, an in ancient times all people used some form of prayer in daily life and on special occasions. Some prayers have special ritual functions, while others are used for protection, purification, ordination and cleansing. In traditional Māori society, people of all classes, from children to adults and priestly experts, possessed a repertoire of karakia for use in all kinds of situations.

Nowadays, most of the prayers used by Māori follow a Christian format and are offered to the Christian god. Although the Māori do not appear to have a concept of the resurrection as in Christian theology, where the body and soul are united at some later stage following death, they do believe in an after-life in which the spirit body returns to the god that created it. Many of the prayers, especially for the deceased reveal a traditional belief in immortality of the soul of man.

(Benton, Frame, Meredith, & Te Mātāhauariki, 2013, p. 124)

A set form of words to state, confirm or make effective the intent of a ritual activity, and the reciting of these words, thus often translated by the terms such as 'incantation, 'charm', or 'spell'. In modern usage the term has been extended to include Christian and other religious services (for example, a church is often referred to as a whare karakia). In traditional ritual activity strict adherence to the proper form of the karakia was essential; hesitation, mispronunciation or omissions in its recitation could negate or reverse its intended effects and bring harm to those involved.

Karakia form an integral and indispensable part of many Māori customary practices.

(Best, 1924)

The following definition of karakia was written by Maning, author of *Old New Zealand*: “Karakia properly signifies a formula of words or incantation, which words are supposed to contain a power, and to have a positive effect upon the spirit to whom they are addressed, totally irrespective of the conduct or action, good or bad, of the person using them.”

We cannot quite agree with this gifted writer in the above remarks—namely, in regard to the conduct of the repeater of the karakia. In many cases such a person had to be remarkably circumspect in his behaviour, though such behaviour was usually in respect to ceremonial matters, not to his spiritual state or moral behaviour. The moral aspect did, however, enter into such functions in some cases, as we have seen in the foregoing chapter.

The infrequent occurrence of true invocations, of direct appeal to the gods, is a very remarkable feature in Māori ritual. Even in the higher class of ceremonial formulae anything like prayer, entreaty, direct invoking, is often absent, and the power of efficacy of the ritual seems, in native belief, to be in the repetition of set phrases that, in many cases, seem to have no bearing on the subject being dealt with. Much might be written on this subject. We observe that in the fine ritual pertaining to ceremonies performed at the baptism of a child much of the matter is simply descriptive of the doings of the offspring of the primal parents; the fact that such offspring were supernatural beings seems to have been sufficient to impart mana to these ritual utterances.

As an illustration of the simplicity of some of the formulae employed by the ordinary people, to which even the name of “charm” can scarcely be applied, we may cite a curious custom formerly practised by persons suffering from the ordinary “barn-door” variety of stomach-ache. The hapless sufferer keeps repeating the following phrase: “Meinga atu ki a mea he mate kopito toku” (“Tell — that I have a stomach-ache”), repeating the names of all the chiefs and priests he can think of. In this amazingly simple performance the idea is that the persons named all have relatives in the spirit-world, the spirits of their dead relatives of many generations, one of which spirits may possibly be the cause of the distressing stomach-ache. Now, on hearing the name of its living relative mentioned, the spirit that is afflicting the sufferer may relent, its anger being appeased, whereupon it will cease to afflict the person; hence the repetition of the name is supposed to conciliate the troublesome atua, or spirit. It is worthy of note that even this simple phrase is termed a karakia. It may also be noted that the names repeated are those of chiefs and priests, not those of common folk.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Māori karakia is the fact that in but a few cases do we find a true invocation, anything that can be called an appeal to higher powers. When we do meet with such productions it is noted that they mostly belong to the higher type of ritual pertaining to matters of the highest importance, and not to such as deal with everyday affairs. Again, of these invocations the writer would classify very few as prayers, though a few connected with the whare wananga may be so placed. Many of the better type of karakia consist of a repetition of matter seemingly quite foreign to the subject under treatment, and this peculiarity it is that illustrates the mental attitude of the Māori in connection with his gods. This peculiar dissociation of ritual from its object relegates the karakia Māori to the mists of antiquity, and places it in the same category with those of the ancient inhabitants of Egypt of pre-pyramid days. This singular phase of mentality has probably obtained among all races at some period of their history, for traces of it have been noted in many lands. We know that the ritualistic formulae employed by the early Egyptians bore a strong general resemblance to the average Māori charm—that is to say, they were but incantations. We know that Babylonian religion was supercharged with magic and mystery, and that even among civilized peoples of to-day are found survivals of very primitive forms of charms.

It will readily be understood that a very considerable proportion of Māori charms consisted of such as might be acquired and used by any person. Every child learned and repeated simple forms to accompany certain games, to cause rain to cease falling, &c. Every wrestler knew and employed a charm to strengthen himself, and another whereby to weaken his adversary. Every fisherman, fowler, and trapper possessed charms that he uttered over his paraphernalia. Every fighting-man learned charms used in various conditions pertaining to war, and every man knew at least one of the minor charms to avert the shafts of magic. Tree-climber and traveller, paddler and planter, bushman and bather, all possessed their private budget of charms. No man so lowly, no calling so humble, but it possessed a few necessary charms. Apart, however, from these generally known charms, there were a great number of others that were known only to professionals—that is, to persons who occupied the position of tohunga, or expert in one or more branches of knowledge. It is in this class that tapu pertains to ritual, and that a special and close study of the many forms of charms and ceremonial observances was necessary before a person would take his place as an expert and practise his profession. A large number of such charms and ceremonies pertained to all industries and arts, as agriculture, fishing, trapping, weaving, war, &c., and a tohunga might confine his studies to one or two of these subjects, or become a general practitioner.

Above this medium grade of ritual was the highest form, including that connected with the Supreme Being, and such ceremonial was known to and conducted by the higher class of tohunga only, such as were termed tohunga ahurewa and tohunga tuahu. Lower grades of experts not only did not practise the higher forms of ritual; they were not even acquainted with it. And here it must be noted that the term tohunga means simply “expert,” and not “priest” or “shaman.” It is applied to persons of the higher class of the priesthood and to the most inferior grade of necromancer, sorcerer, thaumaturgist, warlock, or shaman; also to an artisan, any person who is an adept at any particular craft. Carrying as it does this wide range of meaning, it behoves one to be careful in rendering its meaning into English when encountered in native traditions.

We see that any man may possess the knowledge of simple charms connected with his daily life or ordinary tasks, but the more important ritual charms and observances were retained by the priesthood or experts, and practised by them only, by which means they preserved their power over the people, a peculiarity of the priestly class in all lands and periods.

Some of the religious ceremonies of the Māori were performed in public and were viewed by the people as important functions; while others, the more tapu and important ones, were conducted in the presence of but few persons, those immediately concerned. The most intensely tapu functions were those in which the Supreme Being was referred or appealed to.

It is clear that it was necessary that every man should be acquainted with a number of charms for use in daily life at times and places where the services of an expert were not procurable. So numerous, for instance, were evil omens and unlucky signs in Māori life that it was highly necessary that every person should be in a position to avert such influences. Again, in war, each man must know certain formulae to be repeated under certain conditions, as when pursuing or being pursued. The fisher and fowler also needed to be acquainted with certain charms, likewise the traveller. But in the higher branches of sacerdotal observances the tohunga came into his own. In the case of some functions that were public spectacles, such as the kawa whare and whakainu waka (ceremonies performed over new houses and new canoes of superior design), the opening function for a new pa (fortified village), and others, the participants in the function alone occupied the place where such ceremony was performed, while the public were grouped some distance away.

(Best, 1972, p. 1128)

True prayer was unknown, and invocation not common. Placation the keynote of Māori religion. Temporal benefits only were sought for, no Māori would ever think of asking the gods to promote virtue or morality in himself or others. A quote from an informant “ E hara te inoi I te Māori. Nā te Pākehā, no roto I o te Pākehā karakia – “Praying was not a Māori custom. It was derived from the white men, is found in their ritual.

When chanting or intoning karakia it was absolutely necessary that no error be made in the repetition thereof. In the case of a highly tapu invocations, etc., a mistake would spell disaster, probably death, the offender. The gods would destroy him.

(Buck, 1949, pp. 489-491)

The priests established oral communications with their gods by means of karakia. A karakia may be defined as a formula of words which was chanted to obtain benefit or avert trouble. A vast number have been composed by all tribes to meet every possible contingency in human life and they cover a range which exceeds the bounds of religion. It is therefore impossible for one English word to cover adequately all the meanings of Karakia. All karakia are chants. Prayers and invocations which imply direct communication with a god, are not usually chanted in English, and when chanted in Maori they apply only to a few karakia.

The terms charm, spell, enchantment, witchery, magic, sorcery, exorcism, and incantation have all been used to describe karakia; but they cover some and not all meanings, just as karakia does not cover all meanings of the English words to translate it. Probably incantation is the nearest in general meaning though any of the English words mentioned may be applied to particular karakia but not all.

The karakia may be conveniently arranged for study into those used in connection with three groups in the community: children, laymen and priests.

(Marsden & Royal, 2003, p. 58)

A karakia is a liturgical chant

(Mead, 2016, p. 22) Sir Hirini Mead

One way of understanding [karakia] is to study the texts of karakia. The karakia usually follow a set order and there are many similarities among the different iwi. By translating the karakia some understanding can be obtained. Another way to speak to practicing Tohunga and get them to explain. However, some Tohunga are not very good at explaining what they do and do not really

want to be cross examined. The other way is to attend many of the ceremonies and talk to various people at them.

(Moorfield, 1990)

1. (verb) (-tia) to recite ritual chants, say grace, pray, recite a prayer, chant.
2. (noun) incantation, ritual chant, chant, intoned incantation, charm, spell – a set form of words to state or make effective a ritual activity. Karakia are recited rapidly using traditional language, symbols and structures. Traditionally correct delivery of the karakia was essential: mispronunciation, hesitation or omissions courted disaster. The two most important symbols referred to in karakia are of sticks and food, while the two key actions are of loosing and binding. Individual karakia tend to follow a pattern: the first section invokes and designates the atua, the second expresses a loosening of a binding, and the final section is the action, the ordering of what is required, or a short statement expressing the completion of the action. The images used in karakia are from traditional narratives. There were karakia for all aspects of life, including for the major rituals, i.e. for the child, canoe, kūmara, war party and the dead. Karakia for minor rituals and single karakia include those for the weather, sickness, daily activities and for curses and overcoming curses. These enabled people to carry out their daily activities in union with the ancestors and the spiritual powers.
3. (noun) prayer, grace, blessing, service, church service – an extension of the traditional term for introduced religions, especially Christianity.

(Rewi, 2010, p. 138)

Karakia act as intermediary between the spiritual world and the temporal world.

(Salmond, 2017, p. 112)

From early missionary times onwards, words referring to Māori cosmological ideas were translated with English words that refer to Western religious practices – atua as ‘god (rather than powerful ancestor); wairua as ‘spirit’ (rather than a person’s immaterial being); karakia as ‘prayer’, instead of chant. This interpretive approach cast Māori understandings as a direct challenge to Christianity, which had to be cast out and replaced by Christian doctrine.

Assuming that Māori thinking was fundamentally wrong-headed, however, the missionaries described Māori ideas as ‘superstition’ or ‘idolatry’, dismissing them out of hand.

(Tikao & Beattie, 1939, pp. 72-73)

Karakia of the olden Māori was not like Pākehā prayers but was an address to the gods in regular form, a kind of petition to ask a favour, or in some cases a sort of charm or spell. The one used all depended on the occasion or what was wanted at the time. If it was seed-planting season the tohuka would karakia to the gods concerned to give a successful year and a good yield. He could karakia to the sun to decrease or increase heat as desired. He could karakia to the moon (which was thought to send cold weather and storms, and to lessen the heat of the sun to a certain extent) and to ask it to restrain the storms or to decrease the rainfall, and so on.

There was a form of karakia which was really an incantation because it was said with ceremonies to bewitch people; and there was another form which might be called a charm to ward off sickness, sorcery and evil spirits, and if your karakia was 'firm' none of these things would touch you. There were some kinds of karakia said when you imposed tapu, and there were others to say when you removed it.

The karakia used on sea differed to those used on land. Although, its mana is gone now, in the old days karakia, rightly used, was all-powerful to bring rain, smooth seas, quell wind, calm storms dispel darkness at night, and protect voyagers.

The karakia imploring fair weather would bring good days and nights and also favourable breezes, but karakia that went wrong would act the reverse way and bring storms. Some of the navigators were wrecked and turned to stone.

All repetition of karakia has to be done extremely carefully as it was very easy to step over the line, and then disaster followed. The rendering had to be word-perfect on every occasion, and sometimes it was accompanied by certain observances, and the whole had to be done solemnly and reverently if it was to be successful.

(Williams, 1957)

1. Karakia. 1. n. Charm, spell, incantation; particularly the ancient rites proper to every important matter in the life of the Māori . Katahi ia ka whakahua i tana karakia (T. 21). He aitua to taua, i hiki taku karakia (T. 28).
2. v.i. Repeat a form of words as a charm or spell. E kai ana, e karakia ana (T. 173).
3. v.t. Repeat an incantation over a person or thing. Kua oti hoki tana kotiro te karakia (T. 173). Ka mea atu raua, "Ki te karakia i a maua mara" (T. 199). Sometimes with the name of the spell added. Katahi ka karakiatia e ia ki a Titikura, ka ora katoa ana tangata (T. 56).
4. Note.—The application of the word to public worship is, of course, modern.

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