

EARTHQUAKE DEITIES FROM AROUND THE PACIFIC RIM WITH A FOCUS ON THE RECOLLECTIONS OF HONE TAARE TIKAO REGARDING RUAIMOKO, GOD OF EARTHQUAKES

Much of what I learnt as a boy has been erased from my mind through later contact with the white man and his unsettling ways, but I have retained as much as I could, so that the young people of my race will not entirely forget the ways and thoughts of their fathers. As a means of keeping my mind refreshed on the learning of my forefathers I go over old songs at nights when sleep does not visit me. I know many scores of ancient songs, and repeating these has brought back much of my old knowledge to me.—Hone Taare Tikao

Earthquakes and earthquake deities appear in the oral traditions of many indigenous groups around the Pacific Rim. Deities appear in the forms of animals or humans, male and female, or are embodied in the thing itself. Often an earthquake deity is also the caretaker of fire, as is Mafui'e from Samoa and Ruaimoko from the Māori. The proliferation of Japanese Namazu catfish images after the 1855 earthquake solidified the thrashing subterranean catfish as a legendary earthquake representative in the popular imagination.

In 1939, the historian Herries Beattie recorded the recollections of Hone Taare Tikao, a leader and scholar among the Ngāi Tahu, a Māori tribe from southern New Zealand. Tikao speaks about his people's cosmology passed down through the oral tradition, including details about Ruaimoko, the god of earthquakes. A summary and quotes follow.



Hone Taare Tikao 1896

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Ngāi Tahu iwi (principal Māori tribe)
of New Zealand pictured in red.
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Tikao said, near the beginning of the world, "the ocean received *Te Whanau-aPunga* (the family of *Punga*). This was a family of fish, and they jumped right down from the heavens into the sea when the god *Ruaimoko* first banged his *whaitiri* (thunder). *Ruaimoko* is a very active and noisy god, but I will tell you more about him later on. The family of *Punga* were very frightened at the loud noise, and, although the thunder made the sea rough they took refuge in it, and are still to be found in the deep."

Ruaimoko holds the power of thunder and lightning. Tikao said, "These two manifestations of nature come together, and there is an ancient *puha* (war-song) referring to the banging of thunder and the flashing of lightning. One line runs, '*O Ruaimoko puritia tawhia kia ita i ta e'* (Oh, *Ruaimoko*, hold fast amid the banging, banging, banging), and is an appeal to that god to restrain the fury of the storm... The song says that both *uira* (lightning) and *ru* (earthquake) are fires. The former shows up, the but latter is hidden; yet if the *ru* burst the hills asunder fire would show up or come flaming out."

He goes on to say, "*Tipukekere's mana*, or power, was given to *Ruaimoko*, and if he liked to be a 'bad brute' he could do a lot of mischief. ...[A]s a rule these gods held the great forces of nature in a retarding manner, otherwise the world would be destroyed. I was taught that the wind-goddesses hold the strong winds in check and distribute them for the welfare of mankind, but I never heard any good good of the powers of *Tawhirimatea** and *Ruaimoko* except this restraint, for unrestrained they would be our destruction."

Tikao said, "The gods were given work to do at the beginning of the world and they cannot stop now or the world would stop also."

Tikao remembered many details as he spoke with Herries Beattie, recounting the story of creation, the duties and functions of the gods, the sun, the moon, rainbows, wind and weather, seasons, and sky portents, some of which relate to *Ruaimoko*. Tikao explained, "I never heard the old *tohukas* explain the origin of lightning, but last night I remembered part of a song about it, and this said that the god *Ruaimoko* controlled it, and that there were three kinds of flashes. One of these, known as *kapo*, was a sign of wind, and if these gleams were flicking all round the horizon, the side on which they were strongest would send the wind."

**Tawhirimatea*, one of two gods with power over the air after the creation; his other name *Tawhiriwhiri*, is the fan that the wind-goddesses use to dispense the winds over the world. ■

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