J. Smith, *Tapu Removal in Maori Religion*
Eric Schwimmer

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Document généré le 29/03/2016

While this short work, presented as a B. Litt. thesis at the University of Oxford, restricts itself to one very specific problem of Maori ethnography, namely the explanation of ritual practices of *tapu* removal among the New Zealand Maori, it does in fact open fascinating perspectives for the interpretation of Maori culture in general. Briefly, the author’s general argument is that *tapu* was not only regularly violated, but it was a premise of Maori philosophy that survival was impossible without the violation of *tapu*. Thus, cooked food, excrement, sexuality are all, in principle, pollutions of *tapu*. Many rituals involving acts of pollution are performed to give man the degree of access to resources he needs for survival.

The great interest of Jean Smith’s work lies in her analysis of the roles of elder and younger brother with regard to *tapu* violations. It is the role of the elder brother, endowed as he is with ancestral mana, to violate *tapu* in the natural order by performing the ritual acts of *tapu* removal needed for community survival, whereas the younger brother, lacking the power for such high exploits, may in principle (if he is strong enough) violate the *tapu* in the social order whereby his elder brother maintains his own position of political supremacy. On a purely practical level, one may say that the Maori does recognize, next to the “ascribed” position of the elder brother, the possibility of an “achieved” position of the younger brother and even a reversal of roles.

In her analysis of myth and ritual, the author demonstrates a striking spatial distribution: while the elder brother’s actions tend to be represented on a vertical axis, those of the younger brother tend to take place along the horizontal axis. The opposition here is not between sacred and profane, but purely spatial. Several of the best-known Maori myths are analysed. Not only does the author find explicit textual evidence for her hypothesis, but in many texts the vertical/horizontal opposition turns out to be a dominant theme. Furthermore this opposition is regularly stated in the code of elder/younger siblings. Especially commendable in this connection is the analysis of the different versions of the Taawhaki myth. These versions can be classified, on the most explicit evidence, into a “vertical” and a “horizontal” type. Now it turns out that in the vertical versions Taawhaki is presented as an elder brother whereas in the horizontal versions he is presented as junior.

Meritorious though all this analysis is, the author does not fully exploit its possibilities. We have never been so close to understanding the basic structure of Maori thought. Jean Smith, however, denies that such is her intention, and insists that any connection between her work and the structuralist method is pure coincidence. Her two explicit sources of theoretical insight are Evans-Pritchard and Mary Douglas. She is quite aware, nonetheless, that her handling of the concept of pollution is very different indeed from Mary Douglas’s. She claims to have chosen the topic of *tapu* removal merely because it is “a matter of practical concern to the Maori”; on the other hand, the topic of *tapu* as such supposedly interested her much less because it is not “in itself the object of much speculation”.

It seems simpler, on the whole, to argue that the relationship between elder and younger brother contains a fundamental contradiction in Maori social structure and that Smith’s analysis of data on *tapu* removal has given us a particularly clear (and even, one might say, “practical”) insight into this contradiction.

Eric Schwimmer