TRADITIONAL SONGS OF THE MAORI

IN a series of six illustrated talks on Maori song forms, to start from 1YC on Tuesday, October 30, at 7.30 p.m., Phyllis Williams reveals much of the richness and beauty of this ancient form of expression. To European ears an old Maori chant often sounds meaningless, but underneath this apparent monotony is a world of subtle meaning.

Phyllis Williams has had unique opportunities to study and learn Maori songs and dances. For many years she has lived among the East Coast people and was a great friend of the late Sir Apirana Ngata. She followed his work closely, as well as that of the late Materoa Reedy, and became very friendly with the Maori people, especially with the younger generation. Her interest in singing led her to become an expert in singing Maori songs, and she has lived for so long in a Maori atmosphere that her interest and knowledge of these is considerable.

Most of her songs are drawn from the traditions of the Ngati-Porou. This tribe had two outstanding leaders, who were expert performers and teachers—the late Materoa Reedy and Sir Apirana Ngata. Phyllis Williams was present at many of their classes, and describes Materoa Reedy as a handsome woman with a strong personality. This, combined with her leadership and expert execution of the actions of the haka, had an electric effect on the performers. In 1943 she attended classes held by Ngata in Ruatoria, and she describes the interesting proceedings which took place. "To begin with," she says, "the pupils formed a big circle in the centre of which he stood. We learned new words, and in many instances used songs that were well known to us, so that not having to worry about the words, complete attention could be given to every detail of the action, footwork, and head movements." She was also working with Hera Haereroa, an expert in chants. "She was small, alert and humorous, and had a moko (tattooing) on her lips which suited her to perfection. Her eyes sparkled with amusement at our efforts to imitate her pronunciation and old time chanting. Later I went to her for some private practice, and then sometimes she laughed until the tears ran."

N.Z.S. photograph

PHYLLIS WILLIAMS

Many of the songs Phyllis Williams sings are old chants. "These chants," she says, "perpetuate in an agreeable form for the Maori the legends and history of their race, which were kept alive by singing the songs on every occasion it was possible to use them. They were then accurately taught to the next generation, so that nothing would be lost in transmission."

One of the East Coast classics she sings is the lullaby "Popo." This tells of the introduction of the kumara into the Gisborne district, and refers also to other traditions of the East Coast tribes. The child who will not sleep hears the stories and legends of his ancestors which supposedly are so exciting that he forgets to cry and listens. When the end of the song comes the child is lulled to sleep. He may dream of an abundant kumara crop safely stored away for the winter, ready to be eaten with fat pigeons.

There are many differences between European and Maori methods of singing. While singing the older chants and songs the Maori closes his throat and this gives him a quality of tone which is quite different from a pakeha. Often it carries a more wailing, mournful sound, similar in ways to the keening of the Irish.

The Maori child was taught how to sing and chant from an early age. As soon as he could walk and talk he was taught rhyming songs with simple actions which would train his tongue and lips. He also learned how to make rhythmical movements and how to combine actions and words. He learnt, too, how to breathe, so that by the time he was an adult he could sustain the tremendous breathing required in the old chants and hakas.

Among the musical illustrations are "He Putiputi pai" ("You are just a flower from an old bouquet"), a star action song at the big hui in Tikitiki in 1926; Alfred Hill's setting of "Waiata Aroha"; and several hakas, including "Ka panapana."