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Excerpt

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Part I
GODS & WORSHIP

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CHAPTER I

THE CREATION AND THE GODS

THE COSMOGONY

THE study of Polynesian cosmogonies¹ is complicated by several factors. In the first place the beliefs connected with the origin of the world varied from one island group to another; and even within the one group² several variants of the same myth were sometimes found, giving an impression of that inconsistency which is a feature of Polynesian legendary history, and, indeed, of primitive mythology generally. Secondly, there is the specific difficulty arising from the danger of translating concrete native terms into the abstract concepts embodied in a European language. Thirdly, in regard to the more esoteric parts of the cosmogony, there was a reluctance on the part of informants to reveal to white investigators the more intimate secrets of their religion. Finally, there is evidence that original legends have been altered by the jealousies of rival cults and similar factors.

There are, however, certain general features of Polynesian cosmogonies to which we may draw attention. They generally start with a condition of void or nothingness, and from this there emerge by a series of acts or processes of genesis various natural phenomena, human and animal species, and social institutions. These legends, because of their heterogeneous and disparate character, should not be thought of as a philosophy, if by this term it is intended to imply an attempt to construct a unified body of knowledge designed to explain the phenomena of nature. The real significance of cosmogonies will emerge from a treatment of their social functions, and of the role which they play in institutional activities. For the moment we shall content ourselves with mentioning the more important processes of genesis employed in Polynesian cosmogonies.

The first emergence of things from the initial state of nothingness is sometimes conceived as due to the *fiat* of some

¹ Myths of the cosmogony have been dealt with elsewhere (*Beliefs*, vol. I, chaps. I and II) and for this reason we shall merely attempt briefly to indicate the general configuration of this body of belief.

² For example, Mead (*Manua*, p. 156 *n.*) cites five different legends concerning Manono and Apolima, two small islands in western Samoa.

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supreme being, such as Io in New Zealand¹ or Ta'aroa in the Society Islands,² and sometimes simply as a process of evolution. In Samoa the two types co-existed—thus Turner gives an evolutionary legend³ in which a series of qualities and natural objects emerged from Nothing; first came Fragrance, then Dust, then Perceivable, and so on. From a series of inter-marriages between the objects so produced came ultimately Tangaroa-the-originator-of-men. But in another myth, cited by Dr Margaret Mead,⁴ Tangaloa existed first in the illimitable void, and from him sprang all things. Handy⁵ considers that the conception of a “World Soul” or supreme creator was universal in Polynesia, and that where the cosmogony is described without reference to such a being, the omission is due either to ignorance or reticence on the part of informants. This view, however, appears to be an inference from his theory of nature as a “psychic dynamism” to the Polynesian, in which everything was conscious and animate, rather than an induction from the ethnographic material. Polynesian creation chants contain so much poetic imagery and so many allusive references, that, when translated into abstract and metaphysical terms in the English language, they readily lead to misunderstanding. Probably many of the terms, if their meaning were sought in their social contexts rather than in facile dictionary equivalents, would be found to be far more concrete and intelligible than many of the translations would lead us to believe. For example, it would seem to be unnecessary to assume, as does Handy, that such figures of speech as the use of the word *tumu* (the base of a tree) for the foundation of the world make it “logical to conclude that these people, who described the universe and nature as evolving through propagation or growth, should regard all elements therein as conscious and animate”,⁶ any more than we would regard our own use of the word “root” in linguistic science as implying⁷ an analogous conception of language.

The evolutionary processes described in Polynesian cosmogonies are of various kinds, examples of which have been given in another work.⁷ In addition to these there are the acts of creation and procreation by gods, the raising of the sky, the fishing up or disposition of islands, or the ordering of the daily

¹ See Handy, *P.R.* pp. 9–11.

³ Summarized in *Beliefs*, vol. 1, p. 3.

⁴ *Manua*, pp. 149–51.

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 19, 25.

² See below, p. 226.

⁵ Handy, *P.R.* p. 9.

⁷ *Beliefs*, vol. 1, chap. 1.

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course of the sun. As examples of these have already been given elsewhere,¹ as well as in other parts of the present work, we may pass on to a consideration of the general question of Polynesian deities.

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The difficulties which we have mentioned in connection with the legends of the cosmogony (local variations, the difficulty of translating Polynesian concepts into European terms, the reticence or ignorance of informants, and the distortion of original legends) are also found in the more general myths concerning the gods. Here, however, more specific sources of confusion occur. In the first place evidence concerning the relationships of the gods is often contradictory, for example god *A* may appear in one story as the son or descendant of god *B*, whereas in another legend, perhaps found in the same island, it is *B* who is the son or descendant of *A*. Secondly, confusion exists as to the relative importance of certain individual gods. Finally, the duplication of names of gods or demigods in the mythologies is apt to lead to misunderstanding.

From the functional point of view, however, these sources of confusion are not as serious as would at first sight appear. The impression of insurmountable difficulty arises from the tendency, all too common in writings on Polynesia, to assume that there must be "true versions" of all Polynesian myths, and that the synthesis of these would give us a consistent system of religious ideology, of which the various conflicting versions are unfortunate distortions. If, on the other hand, the local variations are conceived as existing in their own right, each playing a definite part in the culture of an autonomous social group, a strictly empirical approach is made possible, and from being sources of confusion, the local variants become valuable scientific data, which shed light on the role played by dogma in the dynamics of religion.

The number of Polynesian gods was enormous. There were the great gods whose worship was spread widely over the Pacific; minor gods, also more or less widely known; gods whose worship was confined to one island or group of islands, but who were of high importance within the spheres of their own dominions; minor and local gods within those dominions, such as district or village gods, who, again, were often worshipped

¹ *Beliefs*, vol. 1, chaps. 1 and II.

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in more than one district or village, and some of whom were of importance; and tutelar gods of domestic or other small families. There were also gods of individuals.

Thus the Samoans had gods who were revered throughout the entire group and others whose worshippers were only the people of large districts.¹ The former of these are probably what Stair calls national gods.² There were also gods of villages and gods of households or families,³ and the latter included gods who became tutelar deities of individual members of the family.⁴ Krämer says that every district had its own special god, and gives the names, Su, 'Aufua and Saolevao as the gods of Aana, Atua, and Tuamasanga respectively, saying that the last-mentioned god had been brought over from Savai'i. He also says Fe'e (the cuttle-fish) lived inland from Apia, and was revered by the village of Vaimaunga.⁵ Again in the Society Islands, we shall see that gods of various degrees of importance were associated with the various orders of *marae*.

The gods may be divided into classes in several other ways also. Some of them were supposed to live in the distant heavens above, or in places at all events on or above the earth; the homes of others were believed to be in the regions below, these being in some cases conceived as being below the islands in which they were worshipped; again other gods were believed to reside in the region of *Po*; or in *Havaiki*, sometimes conceived as being a distant place, perhaps an island, situated away to the west (or in some islands in some other direction), or a place in the skies, or a region also below the earth, in some cases reached by plunging into the ocean.⁶ *Po*, either in the heavens above, or down below, was a home of the gods, and especially the great original gods, born of night; but in some of the islands the people believed that there was a beautiful spot, distinguished from *Po*, also a residence of the gods, which was also the home of such departed souls as had the good fortune to get there instead of being destined for the miseries or discomforts of *Po*. A special feature of the Polynesian ideas as to these places was the belief, prevailing in

¹ Brown, pp. 227, 245. See also Wilkes, vol. II, p. 131.

² Stair, p. 216.

³ Turner, p. 18. Stair, p. 216 (see *Systems*, vol. I, pp. 40-1 for the grounds for identifying Stair's "settlement" with Turner's "village", and Stair's "village" with Turner's "family"). Krämer, *S.I.* vol. I, p. 23.

⁴ Turner, p. 17.

⁵ Krämer, *S.I.* vol. I, p. 23.

⁶ On the relation between *Po* and *Havaiki*, and the tendency to identify them, see *Beliefs*, vol. I, pp. 316-18; vol. II, pp. 260-1.

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many of the islands, that the journey thither involved travelling in a westward direction.¹

Such a belief was found in the Pulotu (or Bulotu) of Samoa and Tonga, an island or region under the sea situated in the west, which was the destination of the souls of the dead.²

In Tonga the journey to this region seems to have been either by sea or underground³ and we shall see that a similar belief existed in the Society Islands.⁴ In both Samoa and Tonga writers also speak of gods living in the heavens, of which there were believed to be several,⁵ while certain gods were also said to reside on earth,⁶ or in the sea.⁷

We shall see, in dealing with the Society Islands, that various deities were believed to live in different regions. Thus in Henry's account of the *pa'i-atua* ceremony occurs the chant⁸ whereby the gods were summoned from their abodes to attend the ceremony, various messengers being sent off to fetch them. The following table gives the names of the gods summoned, the messengers which were sent for them, and the destination to which the latter were directed to go:

God	Messenger	Place from which god was to be summoned
Tane	Ti'a-o-atea	'Uporu (Taha'a)
Tu and Te-mehara	Rei-tu	Tai-nuna
Ro'o-te-ro'oro'o	Rei-tu	"To the east"
Rua-hatu and Hau	Nevaneva	Fare-papa-hauriuri (in the ocean)
Hiva	Nevaneva	Papa-uri and Papa-tea (Ma'atea)
Ra'a	Irinau	Papa-roa
To'a-hiti	Irinau	"Great cliff of the inland recess"
Punua-moe-vai	Irinau	"The river bank"
Ta'aroa and Rua-tupua-nui	Ti'a-o-uri	Po
Ta'ere-maopo'opo	Ti'a-o-uri	Rua-papa-nui
Roma-tane	Ti'a-o-uri	Rohutu-no'ano'a
Kind ghosts and malignant ghosts	Ti'a-o-uri	"The wall of skulls"

The general conclusion in regard to the homes of Polynesian deities is that these varied with the specific gods under con-

¹ This belief is associated by some writers with the idea that their ancestors had come from the west, which was therefore the original home of their race.

² Stair, p. 211; Wilkes, vol. II, p. 132; Hale, p. 27; Turner, p. 16; Gill, *Myths*, p. 168; Pritchard, p. 401; Krämer, *S.I.* vol. I, p. 23; Wilkes, vol. III, p. 22; Mariner, vol. II, pp. 102 sq.; cf. Veeson, p. 151; Wilson, p. 273; Cook, vol. V, p. 423.

³ S. Farmer, p. 132; Gifford, *Tonga*, p. 287.

⁴ See below, p. 275.

⁵ Powell, *J.P.S.* vol. I, p. 177; Krämer, *S.I.* vol. I, pp. 22, 25, 392; Cook, vol. V, pp. 422 sq.; Wilkes, vol. III, p. 23; Wilson, p. 272; S. Farmer, p. 126; cf. Mariner, vol. I, pp. 206 sq.

⁶ Wilkes, vol. II, p. 98; Mariner, pp. 206 sq.

⁷ Cook, vol. V, pp. 422 sq.

⁸ Henry, *A.T.* pp. 162-4; for a description of the ceremony see below, p. 222.

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sideration, and were determined by the social context in which the particular legends occurred. The context might relate to local associations, for example the summoning of Tane from 'Uporu (Taha'a) depended on the existence there of a national *marae* dedicated to him;¹ again the reference to Ta'aroa coming from *Po* and Roma-tane from *Rohutu-no'ano'a* can be understood in the light of the Tahitian theory of the fate of the soul after death, while the oceanic residence of Rua-hatu is explained by the role which he played as the "Tahitian Neptune".² The common characteristic of the various regions in which the gods were supposed to reside—in the sky, under the earth, beneath the sea, or on a distant island—is their inaccessibility, the function of which will be referred to later. In conclusion we may draw attention to the association of certain deities with the destination of the souls of the dead. This should be considered from the point of view of the deification of certain souls and also as a validation of the belief in immortality by its mythological charter.

Some of the deities were what may be called departmental gods, these including gods of the sea, of the various forces and phenomena of nature and of the various trades, occupations and practices—including even amusements—of the people; and beliefs as to the attributes and functions of a god were not always the same with different groups of people.

Some of the great gods were not believed to concern themselves with the affairs of men, except perhaps on special and important occasions; but they were commonly believed to have wide and varied ranges of power, and sometimes they also were conceived as being departmental gods, or as performing departmental work.

There was also a vast array of supernatural beings who may, broadly speaking, be described as being of an inferior order, as compared with those whom writers call "gods", and who are often spoken of as "spirits"; but it would be difficult—indeed often impossible—to draw a line of distinction between them and the so-called "gods", especially as the terminology of different writers in this respect is sometimes conflicting or inconsistent, and we do not know what was the Polynesian term which was translated either as "god" or "spirit".

There are references by writers to beliefs that the gods were in many respects similar to human beings, except in so far as

¹ Henry, *A.T.* p. 99.

² See below, p. 247.

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they were differentiated by their superior knowledge and supernatural power; and that the lives of the gods were also similar, in that they ate and drank, married and indulged in sexual gratifications, and quarrelled and fought among themselves.

In regard to the general attitude—beneficent or malignant—of the gods towards mankind, we shall see that there were in some islands certain classes of supernatural beings who were regarded as being, generally at all events, either one or the other of these; and when we consider the individual gods separately we shall perhaps sometimes find references to their personal characters in this respect. Most of the gods and supernatural beings, however, were believed, on the one hand, to look after the well-being of their worshippers or to regulate the affairs of nature and mankind, whilst, on the other hand, their anger was recognized and they were feared accordingly. It should be noted that it was mainly neglect of worship and of giving of offerings to themselves that more especially excited their wrath. Too much reliance must not therefore be placed upon the sweeping statements of some writers in regard to the punitive functions of Polynesian deities.

SAMOA

Turner does not provide any systematized scheme of classification of the gods of Samoa, but he gives two lists of them, calling the gods mentioned in the first list “Gods superior—War and General Village Gods”,¹ and those in the second “Gods inferior, or Household Gods”.² He applies to them the Polynesian name *aitu*.³ He includes in the first list Tangaloa and Tu, some well-known and important Samoan gods, and a number of other deities many of whom are not mentioned by other writers; his gods inferior are probably quite local gods, perhaps of domestic families.

Stair refers to the following classes or orders of spiritual beings recognized in Samoa:

1. *Atua*, the original gods, who dwelt in *Pulotu* and in the *langi* or heavens. These were believed to have been the progenitors of the other deities, and to have formed the earth and its inhabitants. They were not invoked like their descendants, and were not represented by any priests or temples. The chief

¹ Turner, pp. 23–66.

² *Ibid.* pp. 67–77.

³ *Ibid.* p. 17.

place among these was assigned to Tangaloa. But Turner¹ says that Tangaloa was worshipped and had temples.

2. *Tupua*, the deified spirits of chiefs, who were also supposed to dwell in *Pulotu*, and certain objects "into which they were supposed to have been changed" were also called *tupua* and believed to personate them. The more exalted of them were supposed to become posts in the house or temple of the gods in *Pulotu*.

3. *Aitu*, a class which included the descendants of the original gods, whose aid was invoked by the different orders of priests. They comprised war gods, family gods, those invoked by prophets and sorcerers, as well as the tutelar deities of the various trades and employments. As every settlement had its local god of war in addition to the national war gods, so every family had its own particular *aitu* or tutelar deity, who was usually believed to inhabit some familiar object, animate or inanimate, which was regarded with superstitious reverence; but it often happened that if the gods were not propitious to their supplicants torrents of abuse were heaped upon them, though as a rule they were much dreaded.

4. *O Sauali'i*, which term Stair thought might be said to include ghosts or apparitions. These seem to have been regarded as an inferior class of spirits, ever ready for mischief or frolic, but who do not appear to have been represented by any class of priesthood, or to have had any dwellings sacred to them. The term was also used respectfully for an *aitu* or god.²

Brown says that the word *tupua* was "supposed by some" to mean the deified spirits of chiefs, indicating that they constituted a separate order from the *atua*, who were the original gods.³ Wilkes, on the other hand, says that the *atua* were the gods of human origin;⁴ but he says elsewhere that many inferior gods watched over particular districts, and refers to the custom of worshipping as *aitu*, or inferior gods, dead chiefs to whose memories they erected monuments of wood or stone.⁵ According to Hale, some people thought that the souls of chiefs went to *Pulotu*, and became inferior deities.⁶ Pritchard says there were national gods, in which term he includes original gods, who were the great gods that created the islands and man and ruled the

¹ Turner, pp. 52 *sqq.*

² Stair, pp. 211 *sq.*, 215 *sqq.*, 228–32; cf. Stair, *J.P.S.* vol. v, p. 34.

³ Brown, p. 223.

⁴ Wilkes, vol. III, p. 22.

⁵ *Ibid.* vol. II, pp. 131 *sq.*

⁶ Hale, p. 27.