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978-1-107-62569-3 - Religion and Social Organization in Central Polynesia

By Robert W. Williamson and Edited by Ralph Pippington

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# RELIGION AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION IN CENTRAL POLYNESIA

BY

ROBERT W. WILLIAMSON, M.Sc.

*Author of The Mafulu Mountain People of British New Guinea,  
The Social and Political Systems of Central Polynesia,  
Religious and Cosmic Beliefs of Central Polynesia*

Edited by

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With a Preface by

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*Reader in Anthropology in the  
University of London*

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## FOREWORD

THE work of the late ROBERT W. WILLIAMSON in social anthropology began in 1908, when he set out to do field-work in Oceania, the outcome of which was his book *The Mafulu Mountain People of British New Guinea*. How great were the difficulties with which he had to contend in obtaining the material for this work emerges very clearly from the following extract from the Introduction contributed to it by Dr A. C. Haddon:

Mr Williamson was formerly a solicitor, and always had a great longing to see something of savage life, but it was not until about four years ago [written in 1912] that he saw his way to attempting the realization of his desire by an expedition to Melanesia. He made my acquaintance in the summer of 1908, and seeing that he was so keenly interested, I lent him my MS. notes on Melanesia; by the help of these and by the study of other books he gained a good knowledge of the ethnology of that area. In November, 1908, he started for Oceania for the first time and reached Fiji, from which place he had intended to start on his expedition. Circumstances over which he had no control, however, prevented the carrying out of his original programme; so he went to Sydney, and there arranged modified plans. He was on the point of executing these, when he was again frustrated by a telegram from England which necessitated his immediate return. It was a sad blow to him to have his long-cherished schemes thus thwarted and rendered abortive, but, undaunted, he set about to plan another expedition. Accordingly, in January, 1910, he once more set sail for Australia as a starting-place for the Solomon Islands and British New Guinea, and this time achieved success; the book which he now offers to the public is the result of this plucky enterprise. In justice to the author it should be known that, owing to climatic and other conditions, he was unwell during the whole of his time in New Guinea, and had an injured foot and leg that hurt him every step he took. The only wonder is that he was able to accomplish so large and so thorough a piece of work as he has done.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the difficulties and discomforts under which he laboured, it is noteworthy that nowhere in the whole book does he refer to these, except in so far as they interfered with his scientific work.<sup>2</sup> The work itself was carried out at a time when anthropological field research was in the pioneering stage, and Mr Williamson's legal training in the collection and sifting of evidence contributed very materially to the value of his

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to *The Mafulu Mountain People of British New Guinea*, pp. xvii–xviii.

<sup>2</sup> We learn, however, something of his personal experiences in his less strictly scientific and more autobiographical book, *The Ways of the South Sea Savage* (1914). Dangers, difficulties and physical discomforts alike were faced with fortitude and recorded with cheerful good humour, while throughout runs the continuous thread of scientific interest in native peoples.

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researches. In particular, the description of “the big feast . . . the greatest and most important social function of a Mafulu community of villages” (Chapter VIII) gives a vivid picture of a series of significant ceremonies, and indicates their importance as factors of social integration.

After this, Williamson turned his attention from Melanesia to Polynesia, or more correctly to Central Polynesia, for time did not allow him to include Hawaii and New Zealand in his studies. He collected from literary sources an enormous amount of material, which is well known to students of Polynesian ethnology from his published works. The three volumes of *The Social and Political Systems of Central Polynesia* provide the only comprehensive account of social organization throughout this area, while his *Religious and Cosmic Beliefs of Central Polynesia*, in two volumes, gives a survey of a number of beliefs relating to the cosmogony, to the sky and celestial phenomena, and to the fate of the soul after death. Both of these works are remarkable for the thoroughness with which the ethnographic observations are collated and documented. The material embodied in the present volume concludes the study of religious beliefs and practices inaugurated in the second of the two works mentioned.

In January 1935 it was arranged with Mr Williamson’s executors that I should undertake the task of editing, under the general supervision of Dr Raymond Firth, a body of Williamson’s posthumous manuscripts. When these were first reviewed with a view to publication, certain problems presented themselves. In the first place, the subject was treated in a very detailed manner, and to a large extent duplicated material already published; for this reason it did not seem desirable to publish the manuscript *in extenso*, and it has accordingly been very greatly abridged. In doing this, however, I have retained, with a very few exceptions, the detailed references to the original authorities, in the hope that this work may serve not only to give a general description of Polynesian religion, but also to provide the specialist with references to the earlier and less well-known authorities. It was originally intended to incorporate in this work a body of manuscript dealing with the ceremonial surrounding the life of the individual—birth and pregnancy rites, marriage customs, and mortuary ritual, as well as a number of shorter sections dealing with specific phases of Polynesian ethnology. As the date of publication approached,



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however, it became clear that this material could not be incorporated, though I have drawn upon it in Part II, particularly in Chapter x where I have developed Mr Williamson's unpublished discussion of the religious functions of the *ariori* society of the Society Islands.

A further difficulty arose from the fact that the original manuscript was based almost exclusively upon the statements of earlier observers, and with a few exceptions did not go beyond material published up to the beginning of the war. It is common knowledge that since that time our appreciation of the ethnology of Central Polynesia has been very greatly augmented by the research of modern field-workers, in particular, of those working under the auspices of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in Honolulu and of the Australian National Research Council. In dealing with the work of the earlier observers, Mr Williamson, with the assistance of Miss Muriel Campbell, collected, classified and collated a vast number of individual statements which were arranged in an elaborate filing system, involving some six hundred headings. This work occupied several years, and it would have been impossible, in the time at my disposal, to accord a similar treatment to the more recent material. I have, however, provided some general references to this in Part I, and have drawn upon it to a very large extent in Part II.

In addition to the amount of ethnographic material which has accumulated since the completion of Williamson's collection of references, the more recent researches have brought to light certain new principles of method and of presentation by drawing attention to the contextual relationships existing between groups of ethnographic facts. In Samoa, Dr Margaret Mead has studied kinship in relation to other forms of social grouping, while Dr P. H. Buck has drawn attention to a number of important factors in the social context of technological processes. Dr H. Ian Hogbin has made a functional study of law in Ontong Java, while Dr Raymond Firth has applied this method to the study of Maori economics, as well as to various phases of social organization in Tikopia.

Certain generalizations of this type are to be found in Mr Williamson's published works. To mention only two examples, in dealing with land tenure, he draws attention to the number of factors—legal, economic, and political—which must be taken into account in discussing this aspect of native life; and again, in considering chieftainship, he points out the importance of the

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element of sanctity associated with this institution throughout Central Polynesia. But the task of treating Polynesian religion in this way, of analysing it into its elements and of indicating its relationship to other aspects of culture, had not been attempted by him. In order, then, to bring this work into line with modern tendencies in social anthropology, I have tried, in Part II, to treat the material on Polynesian religion—some of it collected by Williamson and some contributed by recent field research—in this way. Though such a treatment goes beyond the original scheme projected by the author, it is, I believe, justified by the importance of a contextual study of Polynesian religion, both for theoretical anthropology and for actual observation in the field.

In presenting this work, I should like to express my indebtedness to those who have contributed towards its production. To Miss Muriel Campbell, whose patient collection of references and careful preparation of the original manuscript have considerably eased the work; to the President, Council and staff of the Royal Anthropological Institute, in particular Miss K. M. Martindell, for the many courtesies extended to me; to Professor C. G. Seligman, friend of the late R. W. Williamson, who has taken a keen interest in the publication of his posthumous manuscripts, and upon whose advice the present work was undertaken; to the Executors of the estate, who have provided the financial assistance necessary for the preparation of the manuscript and its publication; and finally to Dr Raymond Firth, whose scholarship and field research have contributed so much to our understanding of Polynesian culture. It is impossible to assess the debt which this work owes to his wide knowledge of anthropological theory in general and of Polynesian ethnology in particular.

RALPH PIDDINGTON

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## P R E F A C E

THE study of religion is always an attractive subject for the scholar and the layman. Whatever be our convictions as to the nature of the universe, whether or not we believe in the soul and a life after death, whether we regard God as the Creator or a social creation, we still cannot help but be moved by the struggles of humanity to solve these fundamental problems and to give a meaning and a stability to existence. Even to survey the life of a savage people has its interest—their battle with the forces of nature and their persistent attempts in the face of annihilation to forge and use the weapons of the supernatural to supplement their puny and in a sense fruitless efforts have a drama, a courage and a pathos which touch us closely. Here Polynesia offers a rich field for observation. Its people have a fascinating and intricate mythology personifying natural forces with a high degree of imagination and a beauty of narrative which stands comparison with the myths of Greece and Rome. (And like those of classical Europe the mythic tales of Polynesia have now been bowdlerized, emasculated, injected with foreign moral values to be used as reading material for school-children of the Antipodes.) The Polynesians have much else too: baffling concepts like *mana* and taboo; intriguing statuary and pseudo-pyramids of stone; atypical forms of totemism; curious fraternities like the *arioi*; seasonal cycles of worship; deification of ancestors; separation of spiritual from temporal rulers—all of which have been long subjected to scientific analysis and made the basis for anthropological theories.

In this field the position of R. W. Williamson was well established before his death; his three volumes of *The Social and Political Systems of Central Polynesia*, followed by his posthumous two volumes of *Religious and Cosmic Beliefs of Central Polynesia*, are standard works of their type. In them Williamson's indefatigable industry, care and accuracy, his wide range of scholarship and his sober speculations are already too well known to need further comment. This present volume is a continuation of the *Religious and Cosmic Beliefs*, taking up the unfinished study of "their great army of gods and spirits, beliefs and ideas relating to certain sacred places and objects, and other

matters”, as Professor C. G. Seligman said in his Preface to that work, quoting Williamson’s own words.

The Editor of this volume, Dr Piddington, has done a difficult task well. To take up the threads of another man’s work, interweave them with new strands spun since that work was laid down, and yet present a fabric that preserves the rich pattern of the original is an achievement. It has demanded not only enthusiasm, industry and sound anthropological knowledge, but also a flair for seeing the relevance of new material and new points of view and setting them in judicious perspective. He has thus been able to continue Williamson’s plan and to round off suitably the analysis of the esoteric aspects of Polynesian culture.

There emerge from this book, as from Williamson’s former works, two important and related conclusions. The first is the essential interpenetration of Polynesian religion into other aspects of the native life and its supremely practical value. Stories of the gods are not simple narratives, analogous to literature, or merely primitive philosophy couched in allegoric form; they appear as part of the dogmatic ideological background for the human affairs of daily life—the actions and privileges of chiefs, titles to land, the maintenance of law and order, the practice of carpentry and other crafts, fishing, dart-throwing or dancing. Where variations of a tale are found they are often to be explained not just as ignorant garblings of an original “true” version, but as equally valid formulations, from different angles, of present social status and privilege in terms of the traditional past. The worship of the gods, again, is directed to such practical and immediate ends as securing a catch of bonito or other fish; a good taro harvest; or the recovery of a patient from illness—not merely the vague amorphous concept of “Life”, as some writers would have it. In this respect, as the present book shows, the vast and most valuable collections of Fornander, Teuira Henry and Te Whatahoro are most deficient. Consisting mainly of a body of traditional lore, dogma verbally transmitted from one generation to another, they contain but scanty records of how this dogma actually worked in the life of the people, how individual fishermen or gardeners made their appeals to the gods, what they thought about them, and what they did when their appeals were not successful. In particular, the social affiliations of the gods have been neglected in the documentary accounts available to us.

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Frequently the statement is given that a certain god was worshipped by the people of an island, but it is not said whether he was worshipped by all to the same degree. We know that in some cases this was not so. It has been ascertained, for instance, that in Tikopia each god was linked primarily with one only of the major kinship groups, but that the more important gods of each group were invoked in a secondary position by other kinship groups to perform specific duties. Hence in this island each group has its own "table of precedence" for worship of the gods which are in the main common to them all. This is not always the case in other Polynesian communities, but for many we have no adequate information. If we had, many conflicting statements as to the importance and functions of various deities might perhaps be resolved. But on this essential relation between dogma, rite and the practical affairs of specific social groups the Editor of this book rightly insists, and has done a great deal to collate what material there is and to present it in a unified account of religious worship. Arising out of this he shows too how the classical definitions of the relation between religion and magic, valuable as they are, do not cover the Polynesian situation exactly. He is moved to a re-formulation of the problem, treating religion as that which validates the supernatural and maintains it, and magic as that which uses the supernatural for practical ends, whether by appeal to the power of the gods or by formulae and acts believed to be self-sufficient. If this definitely novel idea in anthropology will not command general agreement, it should at least challenge attention and point to the need for a re-examination of the problem in the light of Polynesian data. Here as elsewhere the book is a meritorious contribution to the modern study of religion as well as a welcome addition to the literature of Polynesian anthropology.

The second conclusion which can be drawn is the importance of having anthropological field-work inspired by a systematic body of theory. Over and over again the Editor of this volume is impelled to point out, as Williamson did in his former works, that there are gaps in the data on even some of the fundamentals of Polynesian religion. Williamson noted the paucity of information about the soul, the distinction between human and non-human spirits, the fate and destination of the souls of the dead. Since he wrote some of these gaps have been filled, in part by the extensive and enterprising workers sponsored by

the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, such as Dr Peter Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa), Dr E. W. Gifford, Dr E. S. C. Handy, Mr J. F. Stimson; in part by other investigators such as Mr D. G. Kennedy, Dr H. I. Hogbin and the present writer. It is true that in many islands there has been little opportunity for many years for research into ancient beliefs and especially into ancient practices. The conversion of the people to Christianity for nearly a century has meant a loss of knowledge of the traditional forms, and only in a few isolated islands, like Rennell and Tikopia, do the old cults still hold sway. It is almost with a shock that one realizes that only two present-day Polynesian anthropologists have ever seen a religious ceremony actually performed by people who hold and practise their ancient faith. But in spite of the passing of the old faiths there is still much that can be done. Culture-contact has produced specifically Polynesian reactions to Christianity; adherence to the Church is mingled with many active beliefs in *mana*, taboo and witchcraft; and there are problems such as the relation of the new religion to the social and economic order, or the inculcation of religious ideology into children, which can be studied equally well under modern conditions. This is quite apart from the investigation of the special cults, such as the Ringa tu of the Urewera Maori, originating in maladjustment to European contact and desire for a brand of Christianity which will be in conformity with native institutions. This book does not deal with the modern situation at all, which lies outside its sphere, but in its emphasis on the pragmatic aspect of the ancient religion it forms a most useful background to such studies, and poses a number of important problems which directly bear upon them. Even in regard to the ancient Polynesian faith it may still be possible to secure more data upon such questions as the validation of land tenure and other property rights by religion, the attitude of individuals towards taboo places and things, or the operation of ritual in fishing. Here the book gives a direct stimulus to new research.

A great deal of the study of Polynesian anthropology heretofore has been bound up with the hope of settling the problem of origins, of tracing the migrations of the people, of setting the history of one island group in perspective against that of others. Attention to this problem is clearly dictated by the obvious affinities in physical type, language and culture to be found throughout the vast range of islands from Rennell and Ontong



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Java in the west to Easter Island in the east, from Hawaii in the north to the Chatham Islands in the south. The problem has too a kind of detective interest, with tantalizing clues pointing in various directions—to Indonesia, to Indo-China, to China proper, to Japan, and even to the North-west coast of America. And the solution, if discovered, would be of the utmost importance for the understanding of that peculiar genius of the Polynesian people which is expressed in a combination of realism and practicality with a deep feeling for etiquette and ritual and a high artistic capacity. It would help us also to separate out in specific cultures the common heritage from local developments, to estimate more adequately the influence of particular environmental factors or the institutional effects of the clash of contending groups. The difficulty is that in dealing with the history of a non-literate people the investigator must rely so largely upon material culture and oral tradition. The evidence afforded by the first is fairly solid, but very limited, especially since the ephemeral nature of so many Polynesian artefacts leaves the archaeologist with only stone (and a few bone) objects for his reconstruction of the past, and tells him practically nothing of former social institutions. The evidence of tradition is much more far-reaching, but much less reliable. Only in a few instances, notably in that of the Maori, can we establish with any certainty the immediate antecedents of some elements in the present population. In other cases the reconstructions made have involved a great number of assumptions the validity of which is rarely considered, and too frequently inferences incorporating these assumptions are treated as generalizations of fact. The result has been the building of elaborate houses of traditional cards which are imposing for their height rather than for their substance.

But the most cogent criticism which can be made against such historical reconstructions is that, preoccupied with them, their authors have failed to realize the interest of the material for comparative generalizations on the one time-level—for studying the distribution of customs, different types and the variations from them, and the possible correlation of type and variation with specific social and geographical conditions. Some work of this kind has been done, notably by Dr Buck in technology. But in the field of religion there has been a tendency to concentrate attention on the common elements in the mythological material and set them in a time series, especially for the larger islands;

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to seek to reconcile apparent discrepancies in the names and functions of the “major” gods; to look upon the less close resemblances in other, especially smaller, islands as attenuations, degeneration-products of an original cult; and to ignore the importance of the worship of gods with a limited distribution. A close study of the role of “local” gods in the various island groups would probably give more insight into the real character of Polynesian religion than does pursuit of the cult of Io or of Tangaroa, useful as that may be. Such thorough comparative study, in all branches of anthropology, must precede the building up of any scheme of Polynesian history, and will lay the foundations for it.

Some of this work has already been done by Mr Williamson, who in his scholarly fashion set himself to examine and compare all the records, including the earliest, and laid down clearly the fundamental premises upon which he based his conclusions. Though like all reconstructions of Polynesian history these conclusions are open to certain objections, they are stated as tentative hypotheses in a cautious form which might well have been imitated by others in this field. This present book carries on and deepens the analysis of part of his field, in particular demonstrating the vitality of Polynesian religion and its specific cultural role in a number of island groups. As part of his plan Williamson envisaged a further comparative study of an integrative type which would take in traditional material and social institutions and consider their relevance to the problems of Polynesian history. A volume on this subject is now in preparation. When it is completed Polynesian scholars of the future will have still further reason to be grateful for the monumental research which Williamson carried out himself and caused to be sponsored when he had laid down his own pen.

RAYMOND FIRTH

1937



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