

CHAPTER XVI

THE SOUL AFTER DEATH

HERVEY ISLANDS (MANGAIA)

I PROPOSE, before dealing with the general evidence as to the souls of the dead in the island of Mangaia, to say a few words as to the ultimate destinations of the souls, as by doing this I shall, I think, avoid—in part at all events—a certain amount of confusion which the evidence might otherwise produce. According to Gill, by whom most of our information as to this island is supplied, *Avaiki* was [in Mangaia or (?) the Hervey Island group] the proper name for “hades,” and though many other expressions occur in the ancient songs and myths, they must be regarded as designations for places or territories in *Avaiki*, the vast hollow over which the island was supposed to be placed; and this situation is shown by him in a plan illustrating the people’s conception of the universe¹. In his book he refers from time to time to *Avaiki* or hades, evidently using either word to indicate the same place. Then again he says that the names *Avaiki* and *Po* were interchangeable².

Gill says, as to the origin of the people of the Hervey Islands [by which he probably means or includes Mangaia], that the universal tradition pointed to *Avaiki* (and the equivalent names) as the original home of their ancestors; this region being sometimes called the *Po*, and sometimes “the west.” The ancestors were said to have “come up”—that is, to have sailed eastward. When a man died, his spirit returned to *Avaiki*, i.e. the original home of their ancestors in the region of sunset³. He also refers to the names of some islands—Manu‘a, Tutuila, Upolu, Vavau, Tonga, Rotuma, etc.—as regions, bearing separate names, in *Avaiki*, but which were all regarded as part of the spirit-land to which the spirits were sent to travel⁴.

The souls of the dead of Mangaia had two alternative destinations, and a soul’s fate depended, not upon the man’s rank or station in life on earth, or upon his observance of his duties to

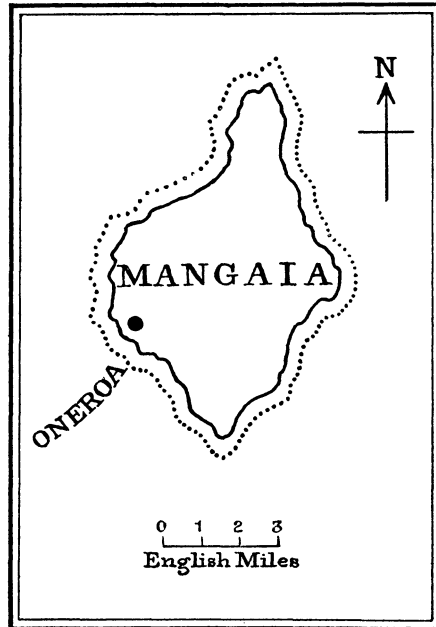
¹ Gill, *Myths*, pp. 152 sq. ² *Ibid.* p. 168.
³ Gill, *A.A.A.S.* vol. II, p. 636. ⁴ *Ibid.* p. 637.

THE SOUL AFTER DEATH

the gods, or general behaviour to his fellow men. The rule was a simple one. The souls of warriors slain on the field of battle went to day or light [in a place situate, as we shall see, in the sky]. Those of cowards [an expression used by Gill for those who were not slain in battle but died a natural death] and of women and children, went to the lower regions of *Avaiki* (*Po*), where they were eaten by the goddess Miru and her children and people, and so annihilated; though “some wise men” said that the souls, after passing through the bodies of these beings, lived again¹. The result of these beliefs was an utter contempt for violent death; and many stories were told of aged warriors, scarcely able to hold a spear, insisting on being led to the battle, in the hope of gaining the soldier’s paradise².

I will deal first with the subject of the souls destined to go to *Avaiki*; but before giving Gill’s account of the cross-country journey of these souls, in which I shall include evidence of the conduct of lingering souls, I must refer to the deplorable fact that he does not provide us with a map by which we can trace their course or the positions of certain things of which I shall speak, and that I have not been able to find elsewhere an adequate map of Mangaia.

I may say, however, that the late Mr Percy Smith sent me from New Zealand a page of printed maps of some islands, of which maps I do not know the origin, but which, he said, were based on actual surveys; and that, among these was a tiny map of Mangaia, of which I give a tracing. The interest of this map for my purpose is that it shows that the island was diamond-shaped, with its coasts facing north-west, north-east, south-east, and south-west, and that it shows the position of Oneroa, on the coast,



¹ Gill, *Myths*, pp. 162, 165.

² *Ibid.* p. 164.

HERVEY ISLANDS (MANGAIA)

3

to which I shall have to refer; though it does not, unfortunately, supply the names or positions of any other places.

Gill says that these souls were supposed to linger for a while about the cave where their dead bodies had been thrown, until the period of their final departure had come¹. Gill is referring to the souls bound for *Avaiki* when he says they were often spoken of as wandering disconsolately on the sea shore, much inconvenienced by the sharpness of the rocks and the entanglement of bindweed and vines. They were arrayed in ghostly network and a fantastic mourning of weeds picked upon the way, relieved by heliotrope gathered on the rocks, and had, wound round the head like a turban, a red creeper resembling dyed twine; and a smooth shelving piece of coral rock on the western coast was known as being the place where they blanched their newly-made garments. The great delight of these weeping, melancholy spirits was to follow the sun. At the summer solstice in January the sun rose out of the ocean opposite to Ana-kura (the “red cave,” so called as receiving the red rays of the morning); and at the winter solstice in June it rose at [? opposite to] Karanga-iti (the “little welcome,” winter being half welcome). These points became, therefore, grand *rendez-vous* of disembodied spirits; those belonging to the northern half of the island assembling at Karanga-iti, and those—by far the greater number—belonging to the southern half meeting at Ana-kura. Many months might elapse ere the projected departure of the ghosts took place; and this weary interval was spent in dances and in revisiting their former homes, where the living dwelt affectionately remembered by the dead. At night-fall they would wander among the trees and plantations nearest to these dwellings, sometimes venturing to peep inside. As a rule these ghosts were well-disposed to their own living relatives; but they often became vindictive if a pet child was ill-treated by a step-mother or other relative. Sometimes, wearied with these wanderings, the ghosts huddled together in the Red Cave [would not the souls from the north of the island huddle in the other cave?], the stony base of which was washed by the waves of the sea. Or, if they liked, they clambered up the open lawn-like place above the cave, out of reach of the waves and foam of the sea, and renowned in the people’s songs and myths concerning the dead².

The precise period for final departure [for *Avaiki*] was fixed

¹ Gill, *Myths*, p. 203 note 1.

² *Ibid.* pp. 155 sqq.

4

THE SOUL AFTER DEATH

by the leader of the band; but if no distinguished person was among them, they had to continue their waiting until such a leader was obtained. When the chief of the disconsolate throng decided to depart, messages were sent to collect those stray ghosts who might yet be lingering near their ancient haunts; and with many tears and last lingering looks they assembled at the Red Cave, or on the grassy lawn above it [would not the souls from the north of the island assemble at the other cave?], watching intently the rising of the sun. At the first streak of dawn the entire band went to meet the rising sun [evidently travelling eastward over the sea]; and this being done, they followed in his train as nearly as possible, he in the heavens above, and they at first on the ocean beneath, but afterwards over rocks and stones, always avoiding the interior of the island, until, late in the afternoon of the appointed day, they were all assembled at Vairorongo [evidently on or near the western coast], facing the setting sun. The name of this place meant "Rongo's sacred stream," and it was a little rivulet rushing out of the stones at the *marae* of the god Rongo, where, in the olden times, only the priests and kings might bathe. At last the time came when the souls, whose eyes were fixed on the setting sun, had to depart from the cherished scenes of earth, despite the tears and solicitations of relatives, who were often represented as chasing their loved ones over rocks, and across fearful precipices, round half the island¹.

Sometimes a solitary laggard soul arrived at the *rendezvous* too late to join the party in the annual journey of the souls. It had therefore to wait till another troop was formed in the following winter, its only amusement in the meantime being to dance the dance of the *tii-tii*, or starved, or to toss pebbles in the air².

These conceptions of the overland journeys of the souls are illustrated by some poems or chants which Gill reproduces and translates, adding information as to the traditions to which the chants referred, or upon which they were founded; and we may believe that the supposed experiences of these souls, as indicated by the chants, were in accord with Mangaian beliefs and conceptions. One of these is a dirge for Veetini, supposed to have been the first man who died a natural death. After Veetini was buried, his parents and his sister Tiki, hoping to see him again, sought him on the northern, western, and southern

¹ Gill, *Myths*, pp. 157 sq.

² *Ibid.* pp. 158 sq.

HERVEY ISLANDS (MANGAIA) 5

shores. At last they reached the eastern coast, and slept at night at Ana-kura. At sunrise they saw a dark speck advancing with the sun across the sea. As the dark object drew nearer, they realized that it was no other than their lost Veetini. They rushed forward joyfully to embrace him; he was indeed Veetini, though not altogether like his former self. He told his parents that he had been permitted to revisit them because of their passionate lamentations, to comfort them, and to show to mortals how to make offerings of food to please the dead. For himself, he had come and must depart in the track of the sun, being now a denizen of spirit-land. But to gratify his parents he had persuaded the great god Tangaroa to detain the sun for a while. He stayed with them for a short time in a house or shed at Karanga-iti, facing the rising sun, which had been built by them for the purpose. The allotted time being over, Veetini led his relations along the beach westward, resting only a few minutes at Vairorongo as day was fast fading. When the time came for his departure from the western end of the island his parents tried to detain him by force, but found that they were grasping at a shadow; they then watched his soul speeding swiftly westward across the ocean in the track of the sun, until it disappeared from sight. Gill gives two other poems relating to the same tradition, and says that the principal reason why Veetini's spirit was allowed to visit the world was to institute the practice of propitiating the goodwill of the dead by offerings of food¹.

Another of these poems refers to Vera, the nephew of the paramount chief of Mangaia, who died in the latter part of the eighteenth century, his death being attributed to his having caused the anger of the god [apparently he was not killed in battle], and who was the leader of one of these bands of departing souls. This poem tells of the journey of the souls, of the hopes of Vera's parents that his soul would be permitted, during that journey, to rejoin them for a short time in response to their laments, of their following him along the island in order to meet him again, and of their disappointment at not doing so. It also contains a reference to the tradition about Veetini; and it concludes with a reference to the canoe which was to carry Vera [and his party?] on the long voyage to the regions of the sunsetting². Another dirge, relating to Vera, introduces some

¹ Gill, *Myths*, pp. 181-7.² *Ibid.* pp. 188-93.

6

THE SOUL AFTER DEATH

details of the supposed journey of the souls and the effort of his father to follow, his wish for Vera's return, and his attempts to clutch the boy's visible but airy form. Certain passages of the dirge, to which I have referred earlier in this book, I draw attention to for a second time. Vera is addressed as a wretched wanderer, almost arrived at *Iva*—"yes at *Iva*: once from Tahiti, then from Tonga: *now* bound to the land of ghosts." ... "In some other region may my spirit rest! On this trembling stone, at the edge of the chasm (I stand)—At the entrance of this dark chasm." "We are awaiting the long-hoped-for south-eastern breeze to waft us over the far-reaching ocean." "Art thou [Vera] bound for Vavau, the home of ghosts?" "The cricket-god is chirping to direct thy path." There is also Vera's prayer, "Grant me a new life, oh Light of the morning! 'Tis time, friends, to depart." Gill, in commenting on this poem, says that the poet evidently places Vavau, Tonga and Tahiti in the invisible world¹.

Gill gives some other chants relating to the departing souls of the dead, and comments on them; and I will refer to a few special matters mentioned in them. One of these, dating from the end of the eighteenth century, refers to the soul of a man, Puvai, who was the leader of the band of ghosts. The soul of Puvai was clothed in ghostly network, which, we are told, was said to be part of the clothing of departed spirits. There is a reference to a fair wind which was to bear the soul to *Iva* (which Gill in his translation calls the "spirit-land"), and to the ghost-cave Ana-kura where there was the hum of the ghosts passing over the rocks and crowding along the beach by the "Double Cave." In alluding to the passage of the souls over the waves, it speaks of Puvai's canoe, in which he took the front seat, and over which he bent sorrowfully. And it refers to Tiki, the sister of Veetini, as leading the way². Another chant refers to a child Kourapapa, who died in the same period. In this is mentioned the food of the ghosts, which was "all dry" like Tiki's, thus referring, Gill says, to the way in which people prepared food for the ghosts. "Bright" evil spirits are mentioned, and Gill explains this by referring to a belief that these inferior gods became luminous at night, but that the unfortunate human spirits that went down to their abode did not become so. It speaks of the dead man's soul as having to feed on red worms, earth-worms, black beetles and other vile creatures³.

¹ Gill, *Myths*, pp. 194–9.² *Ibid.* pp. 199–202.³ *Ibid.* pp. 202–6.

HERVEY ISLANDS (MANGAIA)

7

There is another chant about Kourapapa in which his mother is represented as begging him to go to the other land, and then return to fetch her; and here again there is a reference to a canoe in which his spirit was supposed to be carried away, and which is spoken of as being full of spirits, which, I imagine, means that it was conveying all his party. It also refers to the possibility of his having been too late to accompany the other ghosts¹. A chant of the first quarter of the nineteenth century relates to a dead girl, Varenga. It commences with a statement that she came from the sunrising, and it is explained in a note that this refers to the ancient home in Tahiti of the tribe of Tane. It refers to her future treatment by Miru, and to the possibility that her soul is revisiting the spot where was her ancestral *marae*. It speaks of a house in the west; and it is explained in a note that there was, near the sea, on the western part of the island a cave, called Kauava, where some families of ghosts loved to congregate, and that near it had been built a house for Varenga's soul to live in. It is stated that she was about to descend to the nether-world. Also that ghosts from this cave took their departure, when the coral tree blossomed [in the second month of winter], by leaping from a rock on the mainland to a smaller one on the inner part of the reef and thence to the outer edge of the reef; and then passing over the sea, and disappearing with the sun into the nether-world. These spirits avoided the fatal *bua* tree, but could not escape Miru, the mistress of the shades². Another chant refers to the death of Mourua (a friend of Captain Cook); but the only matter which I need mention is that, according to the explanation given, after he had been buried, his soul appeared to one of his sons in a dream, and complained of bad treatment in connection with the interment of his body³. Gill gives elsewhere a funeral song for a dead girl, and says that her spirit was believed to follow the sun, tripping lightly over the crests of the waves, and sinking with the sun into the under-world (*Avaiiki*), the home of disembodied spirits⁴. He also gives a funeral lament for a dead woman in which there was an entreaty that she would stay awhile and rest herself, and in which it was said that she had descended with the sun to spirit-land, had disappeared to the edge of the horizon where the sun dropped through and sped

¹ Gill, *Myths*, pp. 206 sq.² *Ibid.* pp. 208 sqq., 316.³ *Ibid.* p. 212.⁴ Gill, *A.A.A.S.* vol. III, pp. 165 sq.

8 THE SOUL AFTER DEATH

to *Avaiki*; and here again there is a reference to her overland journey by the beach¹.

I commenced the consideration of these funeral dirges or chants for the purpose only of noting matters that bore upon the soul's journey across country, the subject that I was considering; but I have included references to a number of other matters, which I shall mention again later.

This brings us to the continued journey and experiences of the souls bound for *Avaiki*, after they had reached the western border of the island of Mangaia; but there are two matters to which I must refer before passing on to the accounts of the journey.

One of these relates to certain beliefs as to the origins of the groups of people by which the island of Mangaia was inhabited and as to the gods they worshipped. I have introduced among the "Myths of Creation" the Mangaian tradition which commences with "the root of all existence," and passes on to the great mother Vari-ma-te-takere, living in the lowest depths of *Avaiki*, and her children, of whom the eldest was her son Vatea, one of whose sons was the god Rongo. Then, in *Systems*, vol. I, chap. VII, I have referred to the births of Rongo's three grandsons, Rangi, Mokoiro, and Akatauirā, who succeeded in dragging the island from *Avaiki* below, where it then was, up to the light of day, and to the belief that these three brothers took up their abode in this world above, acting as joint kings or *nga ariki*, by which name, contracted to Ngariki, their descendants were all called. I have also referred to the separate groups into which the people of Mangaia were, or had been, divided. The Ngariki group, descendants of the three grandsons of Rongo, were regarded as having been the original inhabitants, and their tutelar god was Motoro. The Mautara section of this group, claiming descent from a member of the train of followers who passed with Rangi from *Avaiki* to the world above, were the priests of Motoro: they held two districts of the island, the only districts that had never changed hands, but we are not told where these districts were. These Mautara people had ruled the island from the time of Rangi, first as priests of Motoro, and latterly by right of conquest, having almost exterminated all the other descendants of Rangi and his brothers. The interest of this is that the worship of Motoro would probably be associated more especially

¹ Gill, *J.P.S.* vol. xx, p. 132.

HERVEY ISLANDS (MANGAIA)

9

with the two districts referred to above. Another group was that of the Tongans, who had first arrived in the time of Rangi, were fought and defeated by the Ngariki, but were allowed to occupy the place in the south of the island where they had first landed, though we do not know to what extent we must regard them as continuing to occupy this southern home in more recent times. They were divided into two sections, called Teaaki and Teipe, and their gods were Turanga and Tonga-iti, worshipped at Aumoana; while the special god of the Teipe section, whose name was Teipe, was worshipped at Vaiau, in the east of the island. There were also two later immigrant groups from Tahiti, called the Tane or Aitu people, who were worshippers of Tane; they settled in a north-easterly district, but were ultimately nearly exterminated.

The other matter is the Mangaian practice of depositing the bodies of their dead in caves, of which there were a very large number in the rocky bank or ring that surrounded the island¹, and which were owned by different families for the purpose². Two of these caves seem to have been specially important, and are mentioned by name. One of these was the Auraka chasm, which was near the sea on the west side of the island. It was the inland opening to the subterranean territory, and the grand depository of the dead of the ruling families who claimed to have been descended from Rongo [that was the Ngariki group], and whose ancestors came from the region of the setting sun. It had two special openings, a sacred opening being reserved for the superior class, and another used for the commoner people, and the easiest of these entrances was called Kauava³. The other cave or chasm was called Raupa, and was at Tamarua, but unfortunately we are not told where this was. It was the ancient burial-place of the Tongan group, and it had two openings, as to which Gill gives two inconsistent explanations. According to one of these, the smaller entrance was only for chiefs and priests; but according to the other the large opening was for those slain in battle, and the small one was for those who died a natural death⁴. I should think that the former of these explanations is more likely to be correct, as it tallies with that given as to the entrances to the Auraka chasm; but this is all I can say about them.

¹ Baessler, *N.S.B.* pp. 272–5. Cf. Gill, *Myths*, p. 152.

² Gill, *L.S.I.* pp. 71, 75; *S.P.N.G.* p. 23.

³ Gill, *L.S.I.* pp. 71 *sq.*; *Myths*, pp. 152 *sqq.*

⁴ Gill, *L.S.I.* p. 71; *S.L.P.* p. 119.

Returning now to the general subject of the continued journey, from the western border of the island to *Avaiki*, of Mangaian souls, Gill says that the point of departure for the spirit-land was called a *reinga vaerua*, or “leaping-place of souls.” There were three of these in Mangaia, all facing the setting sun. The boundary of the mission premises at Oneroa was marked on one side by a bluff rock, standing out by itself like a giant facing the west. It was believed that the spirits of those buried in that grand repository of the dead, Auraka, at the proper season left its gloomy, winding, subterranean passages and divided themselves into two bands. The majority started from Araia and lodged on the fatal *bua* tree. Those issuing from Kauava [one of the openings of the Auraka chasm, referred to in the Varenga dirge] went in mournful procession to the projecting rock alluded to; thence leapt one by one to a second and much smaller block of stone resting on the inner edge of the reef; and thence again leapt to the outer and extreme edge of the reef, upon which the surf broke; and from this point they took their final departure to the shades in the track of the sun. At Atua-koro, on the north-west coast of the island, there were two great stones very similarly placed by the hand of nature; and this was believed to be an arrangement for the convenience of ghosts on that part of the island. These stones were also called a *reinga vaerua*. All these places of departure were associated with the souls of those who had not been slain, and were impelled to follow in the train of the setting sun to spirit-land¹.

On the northern part of the island there was a deep indentation in the reef, and the rush of waters from the reef meeting those of the sea caused a miniature whirlpool. There was a tradition attributing this whirlpool to the throwing into the water there of a piece of sacred sandstone, which was the cause of the never-ceasing turmoil of waters. It was an ill-omened place; and there was a story of some fishermen who dreamt that they were swept away there, and were afterwards attacked by enemies who killed them, and threw their bodies into the eddy. This was regarded as one of the entrances into the shades, chiefly for the worshippers of Motoro. The destined traveller saw in his sleep a house built on long poles rising above the waters of the whirlpool with a ladder reaching up to it; and outside the house were hung alluring new calabashes and other

¹ Gill, *Myths*, p. 159.