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978-1-107-62582-2 - The Social and Political Systems of Central Polynesia: In Three Volumes: Volume I  
Robert W. Williamson  
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THE SOCIAL AND  
POLITICAL SYSTEMS  
OF  
CENTRAL POLYNESIA

*IN THREE VOLUMES*  
VOLUME I

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THE SOCIAL AND  
POLITICAL SYSTEMS  
OF  
CENTRAL POLYNESIA

BY  
ROBERT W. WILLIAMSON, M.Sc.

*AUTHOR OF THE MAFULU MOUNTAIN  
PEOPLE OF BRITISH NEW GUINEA*

*IN THREE VOLUMES*  
VOLUME I

CAMBRIDGE  
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1924

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## ERRATA

### VOLUME I

- p. 129, ll. 3–4. *For* drawing *read* driving
- p. 254, l. 23. *For te arika karakia read te ariki karakia*
- p. 254, l. 27. *For te arika pa tai read te ariki pa tai*
- p. 273, l. 19. *For* Tangaia *read* Tangiia
- p. 284, l. 6. *For* Kariki *read* Karika
- p. 344, l. 7. *For* Lakamba *read* Lakemba
- p. 381, l. 6. *For* Tapaïro *read* Tapairu
- p. 389, l. 42. *For* Hoto-matua *read* Hotu-matua

## PREFACE

THE ethnology of Polynesia is the subject of an extensive and varied literature. For long past travellers, explorers, missionaries, government officials and others, and academic writers at home, have been accumulating ethnological material, and a large quantity of this is now at our disposal. It is, however, scattered in many books and articles in journals and other periodicals, and, though some of these are written in a more or less scientific method, many are mere collections of isolated and disconnected data; also the information is confined in most cases to specific islands or groups. The material has therefore been greatly in need of collection, arrangement and co-ordination. I must confess that, when Professor Seligman suggested that I should undertake the task, I hesitated to do so; and as the work proceeded, and the voluminous and complicated character of the evidence became more apparent, my fear that I had undertaken a duty which should have been discharged by a better qualified investigator became intensified.

I decided when, in the latter part of the year 1913, I commenced the work of collecting the material, not to attempt to include, in what I then anticipated would be one book, the whole of Polynesia, and I was supported in this proposal by the opinions of friends well qualified to advise. I therefore excluded Hawai'i to the north and New Zealand to the south, and confined my attention to the islands nearer the equator, though I included Easter Island. It is to designate this limited area that I use the term "Central Polynesia" in the title of the book; and when I refer from time to time to "Polynesia" and the "Polynesians," it must be understood that I do so only in this restricted sense.

Subsequent developments have impelled me to modify even this restricted scheme. The amount of available material proved to be much greater than I had anticipated; and an attempt to deal with it adequately requires more volumes than I had expected. I therefore decided to confine myself in this book

to certain portions of the whole subject, leaving other portions to be dealt with later. I shall refer to this matter again.

The Fijian islands are commonly regarded as forming part of Melanesia, and so do not, strictly speaking, come within the scope of my subject. Nevertheless, in view of the extensive intermixture of Polynesian elements among the people of parts of Fiji, this group can hardly be disregarded. Some of those elements may have had their origin in the distant past, when some of the Polynesian ancestors first reached the Pacific; others are doubtless of more recent origin, and that of some is comparatively modern, dating back only to historic or partly historic times. Dr B. Glanvill Corney kindly supplied me with useful information concerning the modern geographical distribution in the Fijian islands of the Melanesian and Polynesian ethnic elements; but unfortunately writers on Fiji do not always tell us in which portions of the group the information supplied by them was obtained, and even localized material loses some of its value through the absence of evidence by which we can connect Polynesian features with possible old associations, as distinguished from what may have been comparatively recent developments. In these circumstances I have not included Fiji as part of Polynesia, in the sense of introducing the systematically tabulated particulars which I have tried to include in the accounts of admittedly Polynesian islands. I have confined myself, as regards Fiji, to the introduction here and there of certain matters which seem to have been definitely Polynesian in character, or partly so, and which tend to illustrate or explain Polynesian systems and customs.

I have included in my material some data collected in islands outside the geographical limits of Polynesia proper, but in which more or less definite Polynesian elements have been found. The Ellice group, for example, was partly, but not entirely, Polynesian; Tikopian culture was largely so; but in the other Polynesian settlements, as they are sometimes called, in the neighbourhood of the Melanesian islands the interaction of Polynesian and Melanesian cultures was of a character that renders exact discrimination between the two difficult. This mixture has perhaps led me sometimes to introduce matters which should be regarded as Melanesian. I decided not to include the Gilbert Islands; but it has been suggested to me recently that I ought to have done so. It is now, however, too

P R E F A C E vii

late to correct the error, if such it be, as I should have to set to work to collect the necessary material, and probably every section of the book would have to be partly rewritten.

The recording of the numerous traditions and the histories of the several islands and island groups does not come within my purpose. I have therefore only introduced such legendary and historical material as seemed to be useful for the purpose of explaining, or illustrating, or at least adding interest to, the matters that form the subject of the book. I would point out, as regards legends, that the interest of a tradition does not necessarily depend solely upon its probable truth; true or untrue, it is of value if it discloses beliefs held by the people, and we may well think that any customs or practices to which a legend points were prevalent, or were believed to have been prevalent in days gone by.

My subject is Polynesia as it was, and not as it is; and I have tried to avoid the introduction of data that are probably modern and not truly indigenous—many of them perhaps due to white men’s influence. I have therefore written throughout in the past tense, though many of the old systems and customs described, and even some of the beliefs, have survived to the present day; indeed some of the material of which I have availed myself has been of quite recent collection.

There are a few matters concerning which words of caution are desirable. The evidence to which I refer has been collected from the works of writers of different periods, some being quite recent and others written many years ago. During this stretch of time many changes must have occurred, and indeed we know that they have done so. Consequently the stringing together of material relating to any one subject may easily be misleading and produce an erroneous impression. I have in some cases tried to discriminate in this matter, and to avoid confusion in connecting and comparing matters that have been observed at dates more or less distant from one another; I fear, however, that I have often failed to do this, sometimes because I had no means of doing it, and that some of the apparent differences between the ideas and customs reported from the several islands may have been chronological, rather than geographical.

Then, again, it must be remembered that many of the observers, from whose works my materials have been collected,

have doubtless only recorded matters which they had actually seen, or of which they had been informed, and which it has occurred to them to mention. No doubt many specific ideas and practices, though only recorded as having been found in one or more of the several islands, have not been confined to them; they may have prevailed in others also; but in the absence of evidence of this I have had to confine my references to these customs to the islands from which they have been actually reported. Consequently comparisons of apparently differing customs may in some cases have been based upon inaccurate or incomplete data.

Another possible source of confusion and inaccuracy is geographical. The Polynesian islands have been arranged by travellers and students of geography in certain named groups; but, though there is in some cases a general probability, based on the proximity of the islands of these groups, that the ideas and customs found in one island of a group prevailed to a greater or less extent in the group generally, we can never be confident that they did so, especially in the case of the larger or more scattered groups. The ethnological grouping of the Polynesians may in places have differed substantially from the geographical grouping now adopted of the islands; in certain cases we know that this was so, and in particular that some, at all events, of the ancestors of the inhabitants of some of the eastern islands and island groups were migrants from more than one island or group of islands further west. Hence general comparative statements as to adjacent named groups, in which each is treated as a defined group, differing from the others, must often be inaccurate and misleading. Probably in some cases the ethnological differentiation between what I may call frontier islands of adjacent groups was small, and there was no hard and fast line of ethnological demarcation between the two groups. Perhaps some of the apparent inconsistencies and contradictions in the evidence are due to this cause.

A difficulty, somewhat similar to the above, arises from doubts as to the correct localization of information supplied by writers. Both Ellis and Moerenhout, for instance, collected the bulk of their material in Tahiti; and when, in referring to a custom, they speak of the Society Islands, it is often difficult to be sure of the extent to which they wish us to understand that this custom prevailed throughout that group. Similarly,



## P R E F A C E

ix

Gill sometimes talks of the Hervey Islands, leaving us in doubt as to whether he is supplying information collected only in Mangaia, which was the island specially studied by him, or whether we are to regard it as applying to Rarotonga and other islands also. Other examples of this difficulty might be given; for instance, the bulk of the information on the Tongan group, supplied by Mariner, was obtained elsewhere than in Tongatabu; the greater part of that relating to the Marquesas was collected in Nukuhiva; and Mangareva is our chief source of information in the Paumotu. For these reasons it has often been impossible for me to differentiate with any approach to accuracy, even between main islands of a group, and a regrettable looseness in writing has resulted.

It is difficult, and indeed impossible, for terminology to be exact and consistent in a book, the material for which has been collected from a large number of works, the authors of which use the same term for what were perhaps different things, and different terms for what may have been the same thing. It is impossible, for instance, to be clear in trying to distinguish by defined terminology between what would, perhaps, properly be called a village, a sub-district or a district; and sometimes I have used the term division for a large area, including several districts; though I can offer no scientific definition, applicable to all the islands, of this term. I have had, as regards each island, to use the terminology which seemed convenient for the purpose of explaining, so far as possible, the geographical division of that island. The same difficulty arose as to terms indicating the chiefs of these various areas, great and small, and I have had to content myself with meeting it in the same indefinite way. There were in some places great chiefs whose jurisdictions spread over comparatively large areas—whole islands, and even perhaps groups of islands—though I suspect that some very widespread rules have been of relatively recent origin; these head chiefs are frequently spoken of by writers as “kings”; and, though I dislike the term, mainly because I cannot define it, I had to use that or some other term to express the extended controlling jurisdiction which these people enjoyed; and the substitution of some more suitable term—such, perhaps, as “paramount chief”—would not have removed the difficulty of definition. I have therefore often used the term “king,” which has at least

the advantage of being short. The words “family,” “clan,” and “tribe,” also are used by writers, sometimes as though they were interchangeable terms, and often with but little, if any, appreciation of any differences in meaning between them, or between a mere family of parents and children and a larger consanguine family; in this again I have been unable in quoting these writers to adopt a scientific system of terminology; and I fear a similar lack of exactitude has sometimes, almost necessarily, extended to my own comments. It must not be assumed that when I quote these terms, as used by writers, I adopt them as being correct.

It has been necessary for me to refer from time to time to family relationships, such as father, mother, son, daughter, brother and sister; and, in doing so, I have not as a rule stated whether I used these terms in the sense in which we understand them, or in the wider and different sense involved by a classificatory system of relationship. As it is generally recognized that this system prevailed widely in one form or another in Polynesia, this gross lack of exactitude is to be deplored; but it has been unavoidable, for most of the writers from whose works my materials have been collected do not deal with the question, and I could only quote their terminology as I found it. Some of the writers knew nothing of the classificatory system, and have no doubt been misled in their interpretation of what was told them by the natives. Others, and especially those who remained for lengthened periods in one place, and learnt the language of that place, and became intimate with the people, could hardly fail to be aware of the system, if it prevailed there, although in their time it had not become the subject of detailed scientific investigation. It is inconceivable that such a one should fail to note at least that the words used to denote father, brother, etc., included other relations; and yet as a rule they tell us nothing about it. I think we may believe that these authors, whatever they knew or did not know, have generally intended us, unless they tell us otherwise, to understand the terms used by them in the ordinary sense involved by our own system; in which case the difficulty is reduced to that of error on their part. The doubt as to this subject must, however, be borne constantly in mind in all places where these relationship terms are used; and it must, I fear, be assumed that their use is often wrong. Any attempt by me to investigate

P R E F A C E xi

and compare the classificatory systems of the different islands would obviously, in the circumstances, have been futile.

I have, as regards a few words, adopted throughout the book uniform methods of spelling, though these differed, in accordance with rules of dialectic interchanges of consonants and other local variations, in the several islands and island groups. For example, I have generally used the term *marae* for what is often translated into “temple,” instead of altering it in places to *malae*; and I have always called the god Tangaroa by that name, though for some islands it should be spelt Tangaloa, Taaroa, etc. These are merely two illustrations of a method that I have adopted with reference to a few other words and names which appear frequently. I have done this because an attempt to discriminate and vary the spelling for each island or group would tend to be confusing, without offering any adequate compensating advantage. Moreover, some writers have at times adopted for certain islands modes of spelling that are wrong for those islands, having probably retained methods which they had learnt elsewhere. I have, in consequence of advice given to me, adopted for all islands the nasalized *ng* instead of the simple *g*; but very likely the latter has sometimes been introduced inadvertently, especially in quoting other writers who use it.

Then, again, there are, independently of dialectic variations, great differences in the spellings adopted by the numerous writers, and appearing in maps (including among the latter those of modern cartographers), for the names of islands, districts, mountains, villages, etc., and for those of gods, mythical and traditional personages, and even people of historical times, and indeed for the Polynesian words for all things. Under these circumstances it is difficult to preserve in a work of this character a correct, or even a uniform, Polynesian orthography, and this difficulty is specially great as regards the innumerable names, many of them of great length, of places, persons and gods throughout Polynesia. I fear that discrepancies will be found, and that some of these have been purely slips of my own.

There is an obvious lack of proportion in the book, some subjects of importance having been treated somewhat scantily, whilst other less important matters are discussed to a disproportionate extent. This has been inevitable, at all events as regards the former defect, which has arisen simply from lack of the requisite material.

It may be thought that I have lengthened some of my chapters needlessly by quoting separately a number of writers who refer to a specific matter, instead of quoting only one of them and giving foot-note references to the others; but I have had definite reasons for doing this. Although I have often made suggestions and offered probable or possible explanations of the meaning of the evidence, and sometimes have even indulged in hypotheses, my main object has been the collection of the facts. It often happens that different writers say practically the same thing, but do not state it in exactly the same way, and in these cases it is desirable that readers should have all the evidence before them, and so be able to form their own conclusions as to the deductions to be drawn from it. In some cases, which I regard as important, I have quoted a number of writers separately in order that the full cumulative value of their evidence may be secured.

I regret greatly that I have not given more maps. It had been my intention to have these of as many as possible of the different islands and groups; but the excessive cost of printing and publication at the present time has compelled me reluctantly to confine myself to such as seemed absolutely necessary for an understanding of the matter contained in the text. The general reference map of the islands has been prepared by Messrs Edward Stanford & Co., being a partial reproduction of their well known map of the Pacific Islands. The names of the persons of whose maps some of my other maps are reproductions, and who have kindly allowed me to use them, and the sources from which one or two maps have been prepared by me are stated in the chapters on "Political Areas and Systems" relating to the particular islands.

This book is confined, after a preliminary chapter on origin and migrations, to the subject of social and political systems. I hope to be able in the near future to produce a second instalment, which will probably deal with a number of myths of creation and concerning other subjects, the religions of the people, including their beliefs as to the soul and the after-life of the dead and their great army of gods and spirits, and beliefs and ideas relating to certain sacred places and objects, and other matters. We shall then have a fairly comprehensive basic material, in the light of which I hope, at a still later date, to be able to consider the religious and other rites and ceremonies

## P R E F A C E

xiii

of the people, and their customs and practices. I also look forward to the further possibility of considering afterwards the subject of inter-island movements, for which purpose I should introduce a number of traditions, and more or less historical material and views of writers, relating to original migrations into some of the islands—in some cases movements from island to island—excluded for the present, as they throw no light on social and political organization; from a comparison of these, and of the differing religious, social, political and other cultural features of the people of the several islands, we might acquire some insight into past inter-island migrations. I fear I can hardly hope to be able, as I intended originally, to turn, after completing my investigation of Central Polynesia, to that of the Polynesians of Hawai‘i and New Zealand.

The Bibliography includes all books from which I have collected material dealing with any part of the whole subject; and it is possible that they have not all been referred to in this book. My search for material in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *Man*, the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, and English books, has been continued up to the middle of 1923. I have examined foreign and Colonial books, and all other journals and periodicals, only up to the time of the commencement of the war; as, owing to the large quantity of matter which I had collected already, the amount of work to be done with it, and my advanced age, I thought it wiser to push on with this, rather than occupy time in collecting further information, which can be done hereafter by someone else.

The limitation of the matters considered in this book to one branch only of the entire subject has made it necessary for me to refer sometimes to other matters with which I do not deal now, and to my views as to the effect of the evidence concerning those other matters, although that evidence itself is not quoted. This is an undesirable method; but I do not see how, under the circumstances, it can be avoided. It may be also that some of the references in passages, written before my change of plan had been made, to later chapters, though now inaccurate, have escaped my notice, and not been corrected.

In the chapter on “Origin and Migrations,” adopting the late Mr S. Percy Smith’s terminology, I have used the word “Rarotongans” to designate a group of people whose movements have been disclosed by the Rarotongan “logs” and other

legends, and their descendants, or a section of them, and who, as I contend, were the people who were specially the worshippers of the god Tangaroa. Originally I had continued to use this term “Rarotongans” throughout the book; but, in view of the possible misleading character of the term, and acting on advice, I altered it to “Tangaroans” in all chapters other than that on “Origin and Migrations.” It is possible, however, that there are, here and there, places in which I have omitted to make the alteration.

I have not hesitated to ask friends for advice on points concerning which they could help me, and there are several of these to whom I am indebted for kind occasional assistance of this character. I wish, however, to express my specially grateful thanks to Professor C. G. Seligman, and the late Dr W. H. R. Rivers, whose never failing interest in my efforts was a constant source of encouragement and inspiration, and whose kind help and advice have always been at my disposal, and have been invaluable.

I am also much indebted to Mr Sidney H. Ray for help given from time to time in translating Polynesian words and passages; to Mrs Scoresby Routledge for information about Easter Island; to Sir Everard im Thurn for the very long continued loan of his Samoan and Tongan dictionaries; and to the Council of the London Missionary Society for having allowed my Secretary, Miss Campbell, to visit their rooms from time to time, and study and take notes from books in their possession—including that rare volume, Davies’s *Dictionary*—and for the help which was given to her in doing so.

Finally, I desire to record the debt of gratitude which I owe to Miss Muriel Campbell, who has helped me in the collection and arrangement and tabulation of the materials, and in many other ways. Miss Campbell threw herself whole-heartedly into the work; and her enthusiasm, along with her unflinching industry, her great ability, her excellent memory, and the faculty of insight which she possesses, have been of the utmost value to me ever since I commenced my investigations.

ROBERT W. WILLIAMSON

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CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ABBREVIATIONS (PART I) . . . . .	xvii
” ” ” (PART II) . . . . .	xxix
<i>Chap.</i>	
I. ORIGIN AND MIGRATIONS . . . . .	I
II. POLITICAL AREAS AND SYSTEMS (SAMOA) . . . . .	40
III. SOME HYPOTHESES AS TO THE EARLIEST HISTORY OF SAMOA . . . . .	88
IV. POLITICAL AREAS AND SYSTEMS (TONGA) . . . . .	131
V. ” ” ” (SOCIETY ISLANDS). . . . .	170
VI. SOME POSSIBLE EARLY HISTORY OF THE SOCIETY ISLANDS . . . . .	218
VII. POLITICAL AREAS AND SYSTEMS (HERVEY ISLANDS) . . . . .	250
VIII. ” ” ” (MARQUESAS) . . . . .	300
IX. ” ” ” (PAUMOTU) . . . . .	325
X. ” ” ” (OTHER WESTERN ISLANDS) . . . . .	343
XI. ” ” ” (OTHER EASTERN ISLANDS) . . . . .	381
XII. ” ” ” (MELANESIAN ISLANDS) . . . . .	410
XIII. ” ” ” (OBSERVATIONS) . . . . .	418

LIST OF MAPS

	<i>Facing page</i>
GENERAL REFERENCE MAP . . . . .	*
UPOLU (SAMOA) . . . . .	*
SAVAI’I (SAMOA) . . . . .	40
TONGATABU . . . . .	*
TAHITI . . . . .	170
NUKUHIVA (MARQUESAS) . . . . .	300
EASTER ISLAND . . . . .	*

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BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ABBREVIATIONS  
(PART I)

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xviii BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ABBREVIATIONS

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xxvi BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ABBREVIATIONS

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xxviii BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ABBREVIATIONS

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(PART II)

(Articles from Journals, etc., from which quotations are seldom given are included in the Bibliography under the names of the Authors.)

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<b>L'Anthropologie.</b> Paris	<i>L'Anthro.</i>
<b>Anthropos.</b> Wien, Salzburg	<i>Anthrop.</i>
<b>Association de la Propagation de la Foi, Annales de l'.</b> Lyon	<i>A.P.F.</i>
<b>Das Ausland.</b> Augsburg	<i>Ausland</i>
<b>Australian Association for the Advancement of Science.</b> Melbourne, Sydney, etc.	<i>A.A.A.S.</i>
<b>Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte.</b> Zeitschrift für Ethnologie. Berlin	<i>Z.f.E.</i>
<b>Ethnological Society of London,</b> Journal of the. London	<i>J.E.S.</i>
<b>Folk-lore Society.</b> Folk-lore. London	<i>Folk-lore</i>
<b>Die geographische Gesellschaft in Hamburg.</b> Mittheilungen. Hamburg	<i>M.G.G. Hamburg</i>
<b>Die Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin.</b> Verhandlungen. Berlin	<i>V.G.E.</i>
	<i>Z.G.E.</i>
<b>Globus.</b> Braunschweig	<i>Globus</i>
<b>Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie.</b> Leiden	<i>I.A.E.</i>
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