
Thinking About Cook Islands Native Religion

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Introduction

Kia Orana. Cook Islands traditional religion, as in other Polynesian societies, is complex. Handy (1927:330), in his book *Polynesian Religion*, stated that evidence has been found to prove the presence in it of ancient Indic, Southern Asiatic, historic Hindu, Chinese, Melanesian and American Indian traits. The fusion of these traits took place in Southeast Asia or Indonesia before they were carried by the Polynesian ancestors to the Pacific Islands. In my opinion, Hawaiian religion is more complex than Tahitian religion, which, in turn, is more complex than Cook Islands religion. However, one can say that Cook Islands native religion is complex in its own way and that there are features unique to it. I will now attempt to describe briefly some aspects of this religion as well as comment on it.

God

It is commonly said that Cook Islands' native religion, like other Polynesian religions, is polytheistic, that is, believing in many gods. The four deities Tu, Tane, Tangaroa and Rongo dominate much of Polynesia. Tu and Rongo predominate in Hawai'i, Tane in Aotearoa, but for the Cook Islands it is Tangaroa and Rongo. Tangaroa is usually god of the sea and Rongo god of the land. Sometimes, on particular islands, Tangaroa is elevated to be Creator of all things, a position held by Tane in other places. Craighill Handy suggested that Polynesian religion can also be monotheistic, that is, believing in one god. This can be so due to the existence of the Polynesian god Io, who is invisible and creator of all things. Reference to Io may be found in Cook Islands native chants. The attributes of Io are similar to those of the Jewish god Jehovah: The All Knowing, All Powerful, Without Beginning or End, the Cause

of all existence. Indeed God is One. God is Spirit. The ancestors simply had different names for various aspects of God: the Core, the Essence, the Just, the Truth, the Most Glorious. Hell is the state of being separated from God. Consciousness of God dissolves all fears and divine love is manifested. God is love.

Priest

Most of the time, it is a man trained for the role of a priest who performs the rituals associated with the god. The role of priest can be fused together with that of an ariki or chief, as in the case of Te Faingaitu Ariki of Manihiki. He is priest to their tribe's god, Te Puarenga, as well as their chief, that is, to about 1,000 people. But in Hawai'i, where the size of the population is far greater, the role of priest is carried out by one person and the chiefly role by another. The priest seeks the favor of the god on behalf of the ariki and the people. He often wears distinctive clothing and is expected to know incantations, prayers and religious knowledge and rituals to be done upon the appropriate occasion. Everyone can be a priest in the sense of becoming a vehicle for God's message and power. Everyone should be responsible for his own salvation. Each one must find his or her own way back to God. Only the sincere seeker will find God.

Offering

In Cook Islands native religion it is necessary to give offerings to one's deity. The offering is made to seek the god's blessing or to give thanks for a past blessing. It can be the first bunch of coconuts of one's special tree, the first catch of one's new net or the first born of one's children, who is set aside to be trained to be a priest. When a fisherman returns after a successful catch he would

leave some fish in front of the fishing god located at his landing place. Human sacrifice in the past has been practiced in the Southern Cook Islands, especially in association with success in warfare. A victim would be secured to be offered to the god to grant victory in battle. Sometimes at the beginning of a war, a warrior might allow himself to be killed as sacrifice to his god to induce victory for his tribe. Self-sacrifice is the ultimate offering. Absolute dedication to doing God's will proves one's love for God which is to be done joyfully. God's mana can then be released through the devotee. I accept that human sacrifice is wrong, but the sacrificial attitude of the believer is still relevant.

Havaiki

This term has several meanings. It usually means the place where the Polynesian ancestors have come from. It also means the abode of the dead. When a Polynesian dies his soul flies to the westward part of that country and departs to Havaiki. For Rarotonga, such a place is Tuoro (Black Rock). For Aotearoa, in the North, it is Cape Te Reinga. This Havaiki is not a hell in the Christian sense. It is merely another world much like this one. It is usually invisible to us. In the Cook Islands, it is a common belief that dead relatives are still hanging around the house. They instruct the living by revealing themselves through visions or dreams thus protecting the relatives from harm. Java was once believed to be Havaiki. For me, Havaiki is that original home of the human spirit: Heaven. One can be in Havaiki by attaining the highest spiritual level possible while living on earth. Havaiki is where the soul meets and converses with God.

Omens

These are signs to foretell the happening of a particular event. When there is something unusual in nature, like a ring around the sun or moon, people would say this or that will happen. The same sign may be given different meanings in various Polynesian societies. In the Cook Islands, certain insects play an important role in being good or bad omens. One family could refer to the dragon fly, as with my family, as the omen for an unusual

event or news, while another family might view the cricket to be its news bearer. It is said that when one sees a spider carrying its egg sack one is likely to collect some money soon.

Certain signs herald the death of a chief. For Makea Ariki of Rarotonga I have been told that it is usually a hill land slide or *ika tauira*. For someone belonging to the chiefly family of Atiu the bright shooting star named Te Rongo would be seen first. For Te Faingaitu Ariki of Manihiki the *ngoio* bird would herald his death by flying low around the palace giving a disturbed cry. True omens herald the divine truth.

Spirits

There are good ghosts and there are bad ghosts. Particular ghosts, at a certain time at night, come out to walk about. They walk a fixed path, and should one be fortunate to come across that path one should have an interesting encounter. Such ghosts have, for some reason, decided to return to this world. At Muri Ngatangia, there is a story about a woman named Taakura, who, when the moon is in the right phase, will walk along a particular path. She would be dressed in white and appear very beautiful. It is said that she would lure young men to follow her into the sea to drown them. The Black Rock area is reported to be ridden by ghosts, usually animals, at certain times of the night. Some drivers have attributed the cause of their accidents to a ghost animal in that area. An example of a good ghost would be one called Mokara, who would enter the body of the *tahunga* named Nuinui. With the ghost Mokara in her, Nuinui could then be able to walk to where she wants. Nuinui was a healer in olden times in Manihiki. Tamatonarahi, also of Manihiki, relies upon the assistance of his ghost friends to make medicine for his patients. Above all, however, there is but one Great Spirit or God from whom the secrets of life can be known.

Spiritual Protocol

According to a local taunga of Ngatangia village, it is important to ask permission from the relevant god when crossing boundaries, for example, from the land to the sea. There are three basic realms:

the sea, the land and the sky. The god or guardian spirit, who lives in those particular areas, must be paid respect by seeking permission for entry. Without proper protocol the god would be angered and the visitor into that territory would likely meet obstruction.

Curse

To curse is the doing of the *taunga purepure* or specialist in causing success or harm by magical means. One Manihiki legend tells of two great sorcerers who tried to kill each other. One secretly placed one of his hairs inside the other's food bowl but the other blew it away, destroying its power. He caught the man's spirit in his basket then drowned it, thus causing the man's death. Today, some elderly folk curse. A father might curse his son for making his sister pregnant. A good curse corrects what went wrong. A bad curse promotes what is wrong. A wrongdoer is cursed. A righteous soul is blessed.

Religious Objects

I do not believe that our Polynesian ancestors worshipped the carved wooden images or other objects that they made. I believe that they worshipped God the creator of the object they made. These objects were probably meant to inspire them to focus upon God or as a means to enhance communication with God. The ancestors had their own name or names for God in various manifestations. The main thing is that the ancestors probably understood that there is a God, who is Spirit and who is responsible for the existence of all things. Being human, we need the use of objects to remind us of something unseen like God. So even Christians use wooden or metal crucifixes to remind them of the death of their god Jesus Christ. Images to represent the Cross of Jesus may be part of a church building or the altar apparatus.

Religious objects are usually sacred to the people of that particular religion only. What is sacred to one people may not be sacred to another. But all of life is sacred because everything was created by God the Sacred One. But man finds it convenient to declare some things profane when he has no use or desire for

them. It is not the material object that matters but the idea which that object represents. A more accurate label for idols would be religious figures and not "gods." God's spirit cannot be limited to certain objects. God is everywhere.

Harmony

The world is not static and without motion. Man calls the state of compatibility, harmony. Man's ears pick out particular sounds and call them harmonious because he finds them pleasurable to listen to. This is man-defined harmony. Natural harmony is that which enables everything to function according to natural laws. In the Cook Islands, our ancestors probably worked with nature and not against it. Traditional knowledge, such as using the phase of the moon to guide the time for planting, fishing and so on, is evidence of this working in harmony with the season and with nature. When nature is disturbed by man it has its own way of restoring the natural order. True harmony is only possible after knowing God.

Absolute harmony is that state beyond good and evil; beyond human time and space. It is being one with God. The past, present and future becomes one. Nothingness is realized. Eternal consciousness is the result.

A person can experience internal harmony with the aid of meditation. Aspects of native religions that promote respect for all of nature can help to bring about inner peace and harmony within the seeker. It is unfortunate that some people pride themselves in being the highest form with the intelligence to commune with God. To accept the equal rights and value of all peoples and all things in nature having come from the same source should be a step towards attaining internal harmony and cosmic understanding.

Cook Islands native religion, I believe, was based upon respecting all of nature and living in harmony with nature. To achieve eternal life, one has to understand the eternal cycle of nature and its creator. Life harmonizes with death and the human spirit is liberated from the prison of ignorance which is the purpose of religion. It seems that unless we have a better understanding and appreciation of our native religion, we will always feel inferior to the foreigner after allowing his god to dominate our minds. God

is Io to the Maori and Jehovah to the Jews. If God is love then God cannot have a favorite people. Those who choose God become the chosen. God loves all people everywhere. Let us love God and love everything created for our sustenance. God is like the sun. It does not discriminate on whom it shines. It has the power to give or take life. It is mysterious. It is self-sufficient. *Kaura, Kaura, Kaura tapu vananga e, io!*

Reference

HANDY, E. S. CRAIGHILL 1927. *Polynesian Religion*. Bishop Museum Bulletin 34, Honolulu, Hawai'i.