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## CHIEFTAINSHIP AND THE SISTER'S SON IN THE PACIFIC<sup>1</sup>

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THE purpose of the present paper is to set forth the native theory of chieftainship in Fiji and Polynesia, together with one of its logical consequences. It naturally falls into three parts. In the first, I shall sum up the gods or divine ancestors so far as may be convenient to the better understanding of this paper. In the second, I shall bring forward evidence that the Polynesian chiefs<sup>2</sup> are representatives, probably embodiments, of these gods. In the third, I shall suggest that the sister's son's right was originally limited to the stealing of offerings, and that its extension to things secular, or seemingly secular, is the natural outcome of the equation: chiefs = gods.

### GODS AND DIVINE ANCESTORS

Dr Rivers, following Dr Codrington, uses the word spirit of "a being which has never, according to native belief, been incor-

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<sup>1</sup> *g* = "Melanesian" *g*

*ŋ* = palatal *n* (as in sing).

*ʃ* = English *sh*.

*ʈ* = voiced English *th*.

<sup>2</sup> Authors use the term, chief, very loosely both of the sovereigns of a tribe or island, and of their family which is more properly called the nobility. It is not therefore always possible to distinguish between the two; but in my own material I shall always use chief of the head of a tribe or clan.



porated in a human body." <sup>1</sup> I propose to use it as a generic term including ghosts. First of all, we want a term to include ghosts as well as beings of uncertain origin. Secondly, we are not always sure what the native beliefs on the subject are, so we require a non-committal word for such cases. Thirdly, the most positive assurance that a spirit never was a man is no proof that it has never been a ghost, for chiefs are not men and so their ghosts were never embodied in men. This will become clearer as we proceed.

The need for such a generic term is strongly felt in the Pacific. Most South Sea islanders, if not all, distinguish between ghosts, the souls of their kinsmen and of ordinary people, and certain ancient spirits who are sometimes said never to have been men, and yet in some cases have plainly been men in our sense of the word. Nevertheless many use the same word both for ghosts and for these spirits and one has to be acquainted with their beliefs to know to which they are referring. Very often they would be at a loss to decide that point themselves. Others, like Fijians, can, by a qualifying word, make clear which they are referring to, if necessary; but as a rule they do not; either the context makes it plain, or the matter is undetermined. Others still always appear to make a distinction: such are the New Hebrideans and Western Solomon islanders. These ancient spirits correspond to the culture-heroes of some authors. They are often definitely regarded as the ancestors of the tribe and their first chief.

In Fiji they are commonly lumped together with ghosts as *kalou* <sup>2</sup> but they can be distinguished from these as *kalou vu* or simply *vu*. The word *vu* means trunk of a tree, basis, origin, cause, ancestor. Some are called *vuwanua* or *vunivanua*, that is "origin of the land" or "people". They are usually said never to have been men, but to have existed "from the beginning". They are often connected with sacred stones or with birds or fishes, which are spoken of as their "ships". The stone and the animal seem to exclude one another. Some of these *vu* are concerned with crops, others with war.

<sup>1</sup> *The History of Melanesian Society*, I, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> See "On the meaning of *kalou*," *Journ. Roy. Anthr. Inst.*, Vol. XLII, 1912, p. 437.



In the Eastern or Lau group of Fiji they are known as *tupua*<sup>1</sup> from the Polynesian verb *tupu*, to "grow", "originate"; in Mangarevan *tupu* means "root", "trunk"; it is therefore the Polynesian equivalent of *vu*. One informant gave the obvious definition of *tupua* as "the stock whence men grow" (*a i tumbutumbu ni tamata*). Natural features of the islands are often ascribed to these *tupua*.

The word *tupua* is not used so widely in other parts of Polynesia. In New Zealand it is said to mean "a goblin, fairy, the spirit of one who when living was known for the powerful effect of his incantations".<sup>2</sup> In Hawaii he is a person "of extraordinary powers of mind and body";<sup>3</sup> concrete cases would perhaps show that they are really the same in every respect as the Lauan *tupua*. In Samoa and Rotuma a *tupua* is a "culture hero" who has turned into a stone. Futunans apply the word to constellations, which, throughout Polynesia are supposed to be mythical beings or animals.<sup>4</sup> The beings that in Polynesia correspond to the Fijian *vu* are more commonly described as *atua* or *aitu*, words which also mean ghost.<sup>5</sup> In Tonga it is 'otua; 'eitu survives only in names. In Samoa it is *aitu* or *atua*, in Rotuma *aitu*, in Hawaii *akua*. Examples of such *atua* are Tanaloa, Tane, Sikuleo (Hikuleo). In Wallis island ghosts may be described as '*atua tanutanu* or "buried *atua*", while these spirits may be distinguished as '*atua tupua* which include Tanaloa. In Futuna they are described as *atua muli*<sup>6</sup> and include Finelasi, Fakavelikele, Tonamuli, and others.

Turning to Melanesia we find them in the New Hebrides under

<sup>1</sup> The word does not come from Tonga, because Tongans do not know what a *tupu'a* is; they only know the word in the expression *tala tupu'a*, which means "an ancient tale."

<sup>2</sup> Tregear, *Comparative Maori Dictionary*, s. v. *tupua*. Other comparative instances are taken from the same work.

<sup>3</sup> Andrews, *Hawaiian dictionary*.

<sup>4</sup> Grézel: *Dictionnaire Futunien-Français*.

<sup>5</sup> See "On the meaning of the Rotuman word *atua*," *Man*, April, 1915; also a paper on Spirit Animals," *Man*, October, 1915.

<sup>6</sup> Grézel translates *atua muli* as "divinités inférieures," but as he gives no names of any and no details it is impossible to decide whether he is simply making an inference from the word *muli*, which means "behind," "after," or whether my own informant was misusing the term.



the name of *vui*, which is the exact philological equivalent of the Fijian *vu*. For it is the rule in the Banks that the words which take their possessive suffixed end in *i* when used without a possessive.<sup>1</sup> *Vu* is one of these words; therefore it must appear in the Banks language as *vui*. *Taŋaroa* in the Banks is the "name given to certain stones, carried or hung up in a bag, possessed of magic powers as the abode of a *vui*; or a shark, or other creature in or with which a *vui* is present."<sup>2</sup> The name of an Aurora *vui* is *Tagaro*.<sup>3</sup> Dr Codrington and Dr Rivers both identify him with *Taŋaloa* of Polynesian mythology<sup>4</sup> and the whole character of his legends bears this out. The attributes assigned to the *vui* agree with those of the Fijian *vu*.<sup>5</sup>

Dr Rivers and I found a similar class of beings in the New Georgian group of the Solomons. They were called *tamasa*. There were two classes of which one was responsible for the crops. They were usually called *tamasa*, but sometimes, in Roviana at least, *tomate tamasa*, as opposed to *tomate* proper, that is, ordinary ghosts. This is the exact parallel to the *kalou vu* of Fiji in '*atua tupua* of Wallis island. In times of scarcity a procession visited the sacred places of the *tamasa* of crops to entreat them to make the

<sup>1</sup> Codrington and Palmer: *A Dictionary of the Language of Mota*, p. XIV.

Cp. Mota: <i>tamai</i>	Fiji: <i>tama-</i>
<i>tupui</i>	<i>tumbu-</i>
<i>matai</i>	<i>mata-</i>

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, s. v. *Taŋaroa*.

<sup>3</sup> Codrington, *The Melanesians*, p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> *Tagaro* cannot be derived from *Taŋaloa* because Polynesian *ŋ*=Aurora *ŋ*, and not *g*. The identification would therefore be impossible on phonetic grounds had we not Maori evidence. Maori has two forms, *Taŋaroa* and *Takaroa*, showing that there was originally a duplicate form *Taŋaroa* and *Tagaro(a)*; this latter one is preserved in Aurora.

<sup>5</sup> Dr Rivers (*op. cit.* II, p. 429) suggests that the *vui* represent the indigenous inhabitants who were considered hardly human, because they were so rude and savage. A glance at Tregear's article on *Taŋatoa* is sufficient to dispose of this suggestion. The *vui* belong to an earlier culture, but it does not follow that that culture is lower. It appears to be quite the reverse. It is easier to explain things if we suppose the *vui* to be the "gods" of a race which has also found its way to Polynesia but has disappeared from Melanesia. This explains why so many *vui* like Fijian *vu* and *tupua* are nameless: their original possessors are gone. The forgetting of names is all the easier as in some parts, like Fiji and the Western Solomons the names of these beings are usually avoided; they are alluded to as "the god of such and such a place."



food grow. In Vella-lavella they were called *mbanara*, which in other parts means, chief.

In Yap in the Carolines<sup>1</sup> we find spirits called *kan* as distinguished from ordinary ghosts called *zagiz*. "Formerly there existed, according to the Yap men's conceptions, a race that were at once men and *kan*. . . . Only a few large stones lying here and there prove to the Yap people their former existence." They answer therefore to the petrified heroes of other parts. Their other attributes are the same.

I propose to call these beings "gods" for convenience' sake without implying more in that word than I have stated here. It may prove advisable later to reserve "god" for another class of beings; but in the meantime there is no harm done so long as we remember what we have defined the word to be.

It must be borne in mind that I have very much simplified matters in this summary. There are certainly at least two classes of gods, which may be as many strata. But this in no wise affects the following argument in which they will be treated as if they formed one homogeneous whole.

#### GODS AND THE POLYNESIAN CHIEFS

Our next task is to show that the sacred chiefs of Polynesia and Fiji are the representatives of these gods. As the evidence from Futuna is the most direct I shall take it first. I owe my clues to Rev. Father de Lorme, S.M., who lived a long time in that island, but who has now removed to Wallis where I met him. Thanks to his information I was able to make the best of the few hours I spent in Futuna. He told me that if the *Sau*, or High Chief, of Futuna was not present at kava the first cup, which should be his, is poured at the foot of the post for the "god" who is supposed to be in the absent *Sau*. This statement served as the basis of my researches. The material collected was necessarily very defective: it was taken down in a hurry without interpreter in a mixture of Futunan, of which I had little experience, and Wallisian, which I

<sup>1</sup> P. Sixtus Walleser: Die religiöse Anschauungen der Bewohner von Jap, *Anthropos*, VIII, 1913, p. 1056.



knew better. Owing to the kindness of Father Fox, S.M., I was able to go over part of it with a Futunan in Suva. The upshot was this:

There are now two *Sau*, or High Chiefs, in Futuna: one in Alo, and one in Siṇave. Originally, there was but one, and the old title was Fakavelikele. Now Fakavelikele is also the name of a god. "In the olden days the god abode with the *Sau* and revealed to him the things that will happen."<sup>1</sup> Then came a quarrel in which some people went off to Alo "with the god Fakavelikele who entered Pili, a man of Asoa, and that was the beginning of the *Sau* in Alo."

*Sau* are continually being deposed for various reasons: one is that under his reign food does not grow,<sup>2</sup> and the land is hungry. Father de Lorme told me that one was deposed in recent times because of a hurricane. The connection between the *Sau* and the food supply was not absolutely clear, but it appeared that if the *Sau* offended against the god<sup>3</sup> there would be a famine so they would "give the *Sau* and the god" to another. A similar belief seems to have prevailed in Wallis: during my stay there, some young people nearly broke out into rebellion against the *Hau* or "King" because there was a famine.

A similar state of things once existed in Savage island according to Turner. In 1845 they had no king there: "Of old they had kings but as they were high priests as well and were supposed to cause the food to grow the people got angry with them in times of scarcity and killed them; and as one after another was killed the end of it was that no one wished to be king."<sup>4</sup> Behind this loose way of speaking we can recognize the identical idea.

In Rotuma the *Mua*, one of the two ceremonial chiefs, yearly headed a procession to the burial place of his predecessors, his followers waving branches of every food-bearing tree to make the year fruitful. A similar procession in Eddystone island, Solomons, visited the shrines of the gods to entreat them to remove a famine.

<sup>1</sup> *I taimi mua e nofo le atua muli mo le Sau; e faka'ilo ki ai te me'a ke fai.*

<sup>2</sup> *e leai se tupu le mangitši.*

<sup>3</sup> *hala mo te atua muli.*

<sup>4</sup> *Samoa*, p. 304.



The same idea appears again in Fiji. The people of Western Vanua Levu believe that they have less food now than formerly because the government head of the province is not their proper chief; when the last one who was their proper chief died "the food was buried with him". Among the Wainunu-Ndreketi tribes they put down a bad year to some mistake of the chief's or to his being in the male, instead of the female, line. It is significant that the term for plenty and peace in Fiji is *sautū* which appears to be compounded of *sau*, the title of many sacred chiefs in Eastern Fiji and elsewhere and *tū*, to stand, to be. "*Sa sautu na vanua*" means "the land is *sauing*", that is, "prosperous" or "at peace".

The word *sau* or *hau* occurs in most Polynesian languages. In Rotuma *Sau* is the title of a sacred chief. In Tonga the *hau* was the second chief, next to *Tu 'i Toŋa*. In Hawaii the obsolete title of *Hau i kalani* or "*Hau in Heaven*" belonged to the highest chief.<sup>1</sup> In Tahiti *hau* means "peace", "government", "reign"; in Paumotu "to reign", "peace". In Rarotonga *au* means the same. The connection of chiefs and prosperity must therefore have been very widespread.

The most direct evidence I got in Fiji of the close connection between the chief and the gods was in Tokatoka on the Rewa river. Ratu Manoa, the chief, an exceptionally good informant, claimed that he bore the names of Koiranamalo, Ratu, Vunivanua, Tora, Koiranatora, Koiranasau. All these are also the names of gods and to each there is a priest (*mbete*) or medium. Before a war people would go and make offerings at the small shrines or temples (*mbure*) and tell the gods, "Be gracious, your namesake says . . .", meaning by their namesake, the chief. This may explain why Fijian chiefs are spoken of in the plural. Note that Tora is the title of the chief of Tokatoka, and that the last god mentioned bears the familiar name of *sau*. The name Vunivanua is significant.

Dr Codrington<sup>2</sup> quotes a Fijian chief as saying, "I am a *kalou*," that is "spirit". His explanation is strained and impossible. He

<sup>1</sup> Dictionaries give the word as *Hau*, but Fornander points out that it is a wrong division of words.

<sup>2</sup> *The Melanesians*, p. 122.



says the actual Fijian sentence containing no verb would not define the time and may therefore refer to a future time, that is to a time after death. But as a matter of fact the Fijian sentence is definitely present and cannot be understood in any other sense.<sup>1</sup> The chief in question was a *kalou*, *i. e.*, god, at the time he spoke; and we can now see that this was no conceited boast but current belief.

Samoa makes an interesting contribution to our problem. The great dignities of Samoa, *Tui Atua* and *Tui A'ana*, are called *tupu*, which is usually translated "king". This word, as we have seen, is the root of *tupua*, and the equivalent of the Fijian *vu*. Of the two families that have a right to these dignities the more ancient is called *Sa Tupua*, or "the family of *tupua*". In Mangareva *tupua* is a "principal", "chief", "wise man".

One of the great titles (*papā*) of Samoa is *Taʔaloa*. It is said to be derived from the original *Taʔaloa laʔi*, or *Taʔaloa Heaven*, the great Polynesian deity.<sup>2</sup>

Turner's evidence about Fakaofu in the Union group is important. "The King, Tui Tokelau," he says, "was high priest as well. There were three families from which the King was selected and they always selected an aged man. . . . Their great god was called Tui Tokelau, or King of Tokelau. He was supposed to be embodied in a stone which is carefully wrapped up with fine mats, and never seen by any one but the King. . . ." <sup>3</sup>

The father of the first *Tu 'i Toʔa*, according to an account I got, was *'Eitumatupua*, which means Spirit-and-god. The Tongan word *taula 'eiki* is rather significant. *Taula* is anchor, and *'eiki* chief; *taula 'eiki* is therefore "the anchor of chiefs". The Marist Fathers' dictionary<sup>4</sup> gives it as the synonym of *taula 'otua*, "the anchor of spirits", that is the medium in which a spirit enters. Thus *'eiki* in this word seems to be interchangeable with *'otua*, a spirit, ghost, or god.

The ordinary Polynesian word for chief is *ariki*. In Maori this

<sup>1</sup> *Ko yau na kalou.*

<sup>2</sup> *Taʔaloa Heaven* may simply mean "Taʔaloa the chief," for in Polynesia chiefs are often called *laʔi*, or sky.—MS. legend from Safune.

<sup>3</sup> *Samoa*, p. 268.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionnaire Tonga-Français*, Paris 1890, s.v. *taula*.



means "first born", "chief", "priest". Taylor says that among the Maori "a descendant of the elder branch of a family is a *papa* (father) to all other branches, and the eldest child of the main branch is an *ariki*, lord to all that family, and is supposed to have the spirits of all his or her ancestors embodied in himself or herself, and to be able to converse with them at pleasure."<sup>1</sup>

To sum up, the chiefs are representatives of the gods, we may say with certainty, their incarnations. If they are the equivalent of gods all the divine attributes must be theirs also. And in fact this is so.

The fundamental meaning of *tapu* appears to be "sacred"; anything consecrated to a sacred being is also sacred and may not be used. The chiefs are gods, therefore things can be consecrated to them and so become sacred, and hence forbidden to common people. The *tapu* belongs both to gods and chiefs.

Miraculous power (*mana*) belongs to the gods. It is also associated with chiefs.<sup>2</sup> Hawaiian idols are covered with red and yellow feathers. Hawaiian chiefs wear cloaks of red and yellow feathers. Idols have crests on the top of the head, so have the helmets of chiefs.<sup>3</sup>

In Fiji, the same morning salutation (*tama*) is given to gods and chiefs. Offerings of food and stuff are made to chiefs with the same ceremonial and formulae as to gods. Both gods and chiefs are entitled to first fruits. Chiefs in Fiji are formally installed; some of the ceremonies suggest a rebirth, and their probable meaning is that the nobleman elected becomes the incarnation of the god. In the interior of Viti Levu these ceremonies were held but once, some eight generations ago. It is perfectly logical therefore that in those parts the original chief is spoken of as a spirit (*kalou*), while his successors "were born as men" (*suðu vakatamata*). This is not the case where every new chief is installed. Through-

<sup>1</sup> cp. Morgan, *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity*, p. 458, note.

<sup>2</sup> See "Mana," *Man*, XIV, 1914, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Nobles appear to wear them also, as far as one can infer. Nobles seem sacred in a way and to share some of the sanctity of a chief, but only as descendants of gods, not as incarnations. Our authorities are too vague to enable to define exactly their position.



out Polynesia, in Fiji, and in the New Georgian group of the Solomons, "man" is the antithesis to both "chief" and "spirit". Instances might be multiplied showing with what logical rigor the equation chief = god is carried out. One corollary in Tonga is worth following out both because it illustrates this rigorous logic and because it is necessary to an understanding of the third part of our argument.

In Tonga at a formal kava ceremony only the chiefs and their heralds (*matapule*)<sup>1</sup> are allowed to sit in the ring. All others whether of gentle birth or commoners, sit huddled together behind the kava bowl which is at the bottom of the ring facing the king. Food is laid out before the king; this is afterwards removed to be divided among the people. In the meantime while the kava is being strained a small part of that food is divided into small portions and laid before the chiefs and their heralds. This food is called *fono*. The recipients do not eat it, but kinsfolk come forth from the crowd and carry off the *fono* and eat it up. Not anyone can do so: he must be the chief's grandchild or his sister's child in the classificatory sense; if none of these are present, it must be a stranger, not another class of kinsman.

This custom is the logical consequence of the theory of chieftainship. Not in the Pacific only, but almost universally, food is offered to spirits; a small part is then set aside for them while the worshippers eat the rest. The spirit's share may either be left to rot, or burn, or be carried off by some one. Now the chiefs in the Tongan kava ring are, while the ceremony lasts, gods; the crowd are the worshippers. A portion of the feast is set apart for them but it is carried off and eaten by some human. But why, it may be objected, is not the same done with kava? Because kava is never merely presented to the spirits, then drunk by men: it is poured out at the foot of the post or on the stone where the spirit abides.

It still remains to explain why only the grandchild or sister's child is allowed to carry off the *fono*. This detail must flow from the premises as inevitable as any other fact, or there is something

<sup>1</sup> There is good reason to look upon the heralds as the priests of the chiefs.



wrong with the theory, or we must be able to point to some disturbing factor.

The sister's child is among the persons privileged to carry off the *fono*. This gives us our clue. We will concentrate on him for a time and ignore the others.

#### THE RIGHT OF THE SISTER'S SON

The theory of the sister's son's right of taking his uncle's property as a relic of mother-right has long been accepted as final. Dr Rivers is the first to have realized its inadequacy.<sup>1</sup> But his amendment is open to the same objections as the original; it might explain why the sister's son should treat his uncle's property as if it were his own father's, but there is a good deal more than that in the sister's son's right. There is a formalism, and a ceremonial impudence about it which has to be explained. I will just point out some of the features of the Fijian right which the theory fails to explain:—

(1) The violence and excess with which it is carried out. The *vasu* or sister's son seizes his uncle's property wholesale and recklessly. He kills pigs and roots up plantations vastly in excess of his needs, for the fun of it.

(2) He does not confine himself to his uncle's property. If his uncle is a chief he may seize anything within his uncle's dominions with a recklessness which the chief himself dare not practise, or he would soon provoke a revolt. Yet, the people endure this from the *vasu*, not with patience only, but almost with pride.

(3) In fact, this is one of the proudest customs of Fiji. It is looked upon as essentially "chiefly" (*vakaturana*). It is not indeed limited to the nobility, but only by them is it practised on a large scale.

(4) The right, in some parts at least, can only be exercised if the nephew's kinsmen have made a feast for his uncle's kinsmen. If the right of *vasu* is a survival of matrilineal descent why has it to be paid for? I have elsewhere described the custom of *tauvu* which is one of reciprocal tribal *vasu* (*veivasuti*).<sup>2</sup> There also the right

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* II, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> *Journ. Roy. Anthr. Inst.*, XLIII, 1913, p. 101.



may only be exercised after the would-be plunderers have made an offering to the god of their kinsfolk whom they wish to plunder. They may then proceed with impunity.<sup>1</sup>

(5) In many parts the *vasu*, when he seizes stuff at an exchange between his uncle's and another tribe, gets a beating from his uncle's sons. They may not take back the stuff, but they may beat him. I have a case of this even in Mbau. If he is merely doing what he used to do under matrilineal descent why does he get beaten for it?

Books on Fiji have confined themselves almost entirely to the powerful tribes with divine chiefs that occupy the shores all round the Koro sea. They it is who practise the custom of *vasu* as known to anthropologists. When we turn to the inland tribes of Vanua Levu and to the tribes of southwestern Viti Levu which have no divine chiefs we find that the right of *vasu* is strictly limited to those ceremonies called *solevu*. A *solevu* is a meeting of two tribes or clans for the exchange of stuff. The exchange takes the form of an offering from each tribe to the chiefs or to the gods (*vu*) of the other.<sup>2</sup> It is then, and then only, that the sister's son interferes:<sup>3</sup> he comes up and carries off some fine mat or the biggest pig which has been offered up to his uncle's tribe. His cousins in some places, if not all, abuse and beat him, but cannot recover the stuff.

Thus over a not inconsiderable part of Fiji the sister's son's right consists merely in carrying off what has been offered up to the gods of his mother's people. We find a curious parallel among the Thonga tribes of southeast Africa. Mr Junod<sup>4</sup> tells us that when a sacrifice is made after a death the wives of the *bantukulu*, or uterine nephews, steal the meat of the sacrifice and run away with it while the people pursue and pelt them. He adds "Uterine

<sup>1</sup> *Man*, XIV, 1914, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> It is impossible here to bring forward the evidence without obscuring the main argument with a long digression. I will just mention here that at these exchanges (a) the stuff is offered up with the same formalities as when making an offering to spirits; (b) inland the givers always wind up their formula of offering with some such words as "let it be offered up to . . ." naming the land of the god (*vanua vu*) of the other party.

<sup>3</sup> In the words of one informant from Wainunu: "It (the *vasu*) is not an every day thing, but only for *solevu*."

<sup>4</sup> *Life of an African Tribe*, I, p. 162.



nephews are representatives of the gods (*i. e.*, ghosts) . . . and assert their right by stealing the offering and eating it." In Tonga we found the sister's son doing exactly the same, only the gods in that case are chiefs.

These three cases put together suggest the following origin of the right of the sister's son to take anything belonging to his uncle.

The sister's son's right was originally limited to offerings. He *stole* the god's share of the feast, the sacrificial meat among the Thonga, the *fono* in Tonga, the biggest pig in Fiji. He alone could steal it because he alone could do so without any harm coming to him; the reason of this immunity may be the subject for future research. If he was not present some stranger took his place either because the stranger enjoyed a similar immunity, having other gods,<sup>1</sup> or because nobody cared if he did fall ill. The sister's son could only secure immunity by first making an offering to the god. In Fiji the *vasu* makes a feast once for all, but in the custom of *tauvu* or reciprocal tribal *vasu* it is done every time one tribe comes to visit the other; if the visitors proceed to plunder without having made an offering they fall ill.

Where the chiefs are gods anything offered up to them is liable to seizure. It is but what we should expect that the right of *vasu* is only exercised constantly in those parts of Fiji that have divine chiefs.

We have still to explain the great scale upon which it is carried out in those parts. The clue to it is this: in Fiji the land is offered up to the chief in the shape of a lump or basket of soil (*ta ngele*, *mbuli ngele*). This is done whenever a tribe acknowledges itself subject to a chief. Though the land is offered up to the chief it does not become his property, but remains the property of the former owners; the land is spoken of as "his", but the possessive used is not that of property (*nona*), but that of destination (*kena*) signifying that it is for his use. He can command the produce for feasts but not the estate.<sup>2</sup> Both chiefs and gods receive a share of

<sup>1</sup> In Fiji a chief or nobleman only has miraculous power (*mana*) over his own people or dependants.

<sup>2</sup> As one informant put it, "The people own (*taukena*) the land; the chief decides about it (*lewa*)."



all the produce as first fruits (*i sevu*). Whenever a chief visits a subject tribe or returns to his own tribe after a journey he is presented with an earnest (*i sevu sevu*) of the land in the shape of a kava root,<sup>1</sup> it is presented after the usual style of offerings. The produce having been offered up to the chief it becomes liable to seizure by his sister's son who may appropriate a whole taro field by merely blowing the conch over it; but he cannot touch the land; he can only acquire land from his mother's people if they chose to give it.<sup>2</sup>

We can now understand why the custom of *vasu* is looked upon as essentially noble or "chiefly". It is a direct consequence of the theory of chieftainship.

There remains the fact however that it is practised by the commoners both in Fiji and elsewhere. It does not matter in how mild a form, it has to be explained. Here we must tread cautiously, for we are leaving the safe ground of evidence for the quagmires of supposition. We can only hint at a possible solution.

It is highly probable that the gods are merely a variety of ghosts, the ghosts of the original chiefs reincarnated in their successors. Anyhow in Polynesia and sometimes in Melanesia the two are classed together as two species of one genus, and they are not always discriminated. Ghosts proper are the souls of anyone's parent, grandparent, and great-grandparent. They may possess any man of their own kin and cause him to quake and prophesy. Intensive ghost cult with possession appears to belong to a different and later stratum than divine chieftainship, at least in the Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

We can thus suggest the following line of development as a working hypothesis:—

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<sup>1</sup> In the Eastern Group a cocoanut is also offered up under the name of *vono*, which is probably the same as Tongan *fono*. The original meaning of *fono* would then be "offering."

<sup>2</sup> In one village near Suva, Vutia by name, the *vasu* can seize a house. Unfortunately, I had not the present view of *vasu* in my head at the time and so never thought of finding out whether houses there were the subjects of offerings.

<sup>3</sup> In Tonga commoners had no souls so that ghost cults such as exist in Melanesia cannot have existed there. Their only ghosts were those of chiefs and their heralds, and presumably also of the families of both.



(a) The sister's son carries off the offering made to the deceased kinsmen of his mother.

(b) Chief = gods, a particular kind of ghost. Therefore the chief's nephew takes what is offered to his uncle.

(c) Possession by ghosts comes in so that any man may become the embodiment of a ghost. Therefore a plebeian nephew may take from a plebeian uncle.

It may be that *b* and *c* should be reversed or it may be that they are independent developments from the same original, not derived one from the other. There is yet another way and that is through heads of clans, but this would lead us into a treatise on chieftainship which we cannot undertake here. In fact, the obscurities of the whole subject of chieftainship in the Pacific is one great obstacle in the way of a satisfactory theory of the sister's son. If I have advanced such a theory at all it is in order to draw the attention of field-workers to new points of view; either they will find new facts confirming it, or in finding facts that definitely refute it they will be led on to a more fruitful theory. It is something if I have been able to break through the magic circle of mother-right.

There is one detail in the Tongan custom of *fono* which still awaits explanation: why the grandchildren share the right with the sister's child. The reason is that the right of *vasu*, though primarily a relation of nephew to maternal uncle is in practice much wider. In Fiji the sister's son's son is also *vasu*, and he is a grandson in the classificatory system. In Tonga both the sister's son and the daughter's son are called *fahu*, the Tongan form of *vasu*. In the kinship system of Vanua Levu, Fiji, and in many others the sister's child and the grandchild are confused. The reasons for this coalescence do not concern us here, it is sufficient that it should be a common phenomenon. If grandchild = sister's child the privileges of both will be the same.

It may be objected that the theory has not explained the custom of *vasu* but merely removed it further back in the past. Such an objection will only trouble those who conceive the history of mankind as the sudden growth of customs out of nothingness.



However far back we may go, there was something already in existence which gave rise to that which we are studying. Ethnology therefore can do no more than trace each custom to earlier customs that will have to be explained in their turn by still earlier customs. The present theory is content with suggesting an earlier form of the sister's son's right; if it should prove to be true our next task will be to reconstruct the customs and beliefs that came before.

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