

DISCUSSION AND CORRESPONDENCE

POLYNESIAN TOMBS

DR. RIVERS could not write about "Sun Cults and Megaliths in Oceania"¹ without stimulating new ideas. A suggestive paper however invites criticism as all the suggestions it contains* cannot be of equal value; the inquiries to which they give rise confirm some and reject others.

The part of his article I would modify before accepting is that where he draws a comparison between the *marae* of Polynesia and the *nananga* of Fiji.

The *marae* were sacred enclosures containing pyramidal structures; they were places of sacrifice and worship. Among the religious emblems they contained there have been noted images of the sun. The *nananga* were also sacred enclosures with a pyramidal structure. They lay outside the village, and were the scene of the cult called *Mbaki*, that is Year or Crop. This cult was so secret that little is known about it, and that little is scarcely certain. The secret ceremonies of the *nananga* were followed by a public performance on the village green. This cult was not common to the whole of Fiji but confined mainly to the valley of the Singatoka river and to the south and west coast of Viti Levu; the tribes that practised it were all members of that group which I have called "Low Fijians."

Dr. Rivers argues thus:

The *nananga* resemble the *marae*;

The *marae* were devoted to the worship of the sun;

Therefore the *nananga* were also the scenes of sun cult.

In ethnology as in any other science we must argue from the known to the unknown. The known is modern European society, the society in which we live and which we know as a whole and in its past; the unknown is that extinct Polynesian society which we are trying to reconstruct from the meager fragments that remain. Before we can apply any argument to those fragments we must test it on European culture; if it leads to conclusions at variance with known facts, it is a faulty argument and must be cast on the rubbish heap. Before we can accept Dr. Rivers's reasoning let us see what it makes of our own temples.

¹ *American Anthropologist*, (n. s.), vol. 17 (1915), p. 443.

Notre-Dame in Paris is a Gothic structure; Westminster Abbey is in the same style. Notre-Dame is dedicated to Roman Catholic worship; therefore Westminster Abbey is also Roman Catholic. This we know to be contrary to facts.

Certainly Westminster Abbey was once Roman Catholic; but it is no longer so, and that is quite enough to deprive Dr. Rivers's argument of all force. Besides there are plenty of Gothic churches and chapels which were originally built by Protestant sects, Methodists, Congregationalists, and even Unitarians. The Gothic is spurious, if you like, and easy to distinguish from the real mediaeval Gothic; still it is Gothic, whereas the cults which it harbors are far removed from Roman Catholicism and in some cases have almost ceased to be Christian. The cults all belong to the same family and have the same origin, even as the architectural styles, but they have diverged so much more widely that one is no very good guide to the other.

What is true in Europe is true at the Antipodes. The *marae* and the *nananga* may be ever so much alike, it does not follow that they are associated with the same doctrines. The most we can say is that probably those doctrines, like the architecture, have everywhere the same origin, but while the style of building may have changed but little (as far as our evidence goes it may have changed considerably) the doctrines may have traveled so far apart that they scarcely retain a point in common. If Unitarians can build Gothic chapels in which the Virgin and the Saints and even the Trinity have no part, the Fijians may well have set up pyramids to other gods than the sun, or to no god at all. There is no such proportion in Ethnology as:

Style A : style B = religion M : religion N.

So much for critique. Let us see what the facts have to say.

Tregear in his *Comparative Dictionary of Maori* gives the following meanings of the word:

Maori: An enclosed place in front of a house.

Samoa: An open space in a village.

Tahitian: The sacred place formerly used for worship, where stones were piled up, altars erected, sacrifices offered, prayer made, and *sometimes the dead deposited*.

Hawaiian: A calm place in the sea.

Tongan: A green.

Mangaian: The sacred enclosure.

Mangarevan: Sacrifice, first fruits.

Paumotuan: A temple.

I would like to add that in Wallis island and in Rotuma the meaning is the same as in Samoa and Tonga. It is difficult at first sight to find consistency in all these various definitions or to guess at the original fundamental meaning of the word. The key is supplied by Tonga, where I found a use of the word not recorded in any works I have seen. I was there told that the king's tomb was called a *langi* or heaven; a chief or nobleman's was known as a *mala'e*; for the common people the term was *faitoka*.

I will here refer the reader to my paper on *Chieftainship and the Sister's Son in the Pacific*,¹ in which it was shown that Polynesian and Fijian chiefs and kings are divine. Now if,

Chiefs = gods,

then

Chiefs' tombs = temples.

All the various definitions given by Tregear derive naturally from this equation. The Tahitians often buried their dead in the *marae* because a chief's grave, a temple, and a sacred enclosure, were all one. The village green is called *malae* or *marae* because it was the open space before a chief's house or a temple. The Mangarevans used *marae* in the sense of sacrifice or first fruits because sacrifices and first fruits were made on the village green. The presence of pyramids on the green is only natural since kings' and chiefs' tombs were often pyramidal, so it was at least in Tonga, and it is possible that the circular guest house in Samoa is derived from a pyramid.

The presence of solar emblems in Tahiti suggest that the *marae* was there dedicated to sun worship. How can we reconcile this with our equation? It is quite a simple matter. The Polynesian chiefs were certainly conceived as being of heavenly origin, or at least connected with the heavens. In Hawaii and elsewhere chiefs' names often contain the word "sky." In Tonga the king's head and his tomb were called a "sky." In Samoa if a chief died they said "The sky has fallen." In Tahiti "sky" was the title of the highest chief or king. In Hawaii it was also the title of a high chief. It is needless to multiply evidence. One fact from Tahiti suggests that the kings were more particularly connected with the sun, for on the transference of the king's temporal power it was said, "The *Ra* (sun) has set."

Everything fits in with implacable logic. The *marae* are merely one detail in the institution of divine kingship; and we may have the more confidence in our conclusions as they outline a system of beliefs which

¹ *American Anthropologist*, (n. s.), vol. 17, 1915, p. 631-646.

curiously resembles what we know to have existed in Egypt: solar kings who are buried in pyramids and who are sometimes conceived as descended from the embrace of Heaven and Earth.¹

On the other hand the *nananga* were certainly not connected with divine kingship. Scanty as is the evidence, I think we may affirm this with confidence. Divine chiefs do not appear in any of the accounts, such as they are, of the *Mbaki* festival. It is significant that the area covered by the *nananga* is precisely that where the divine kingship is weakest; its former presence can be inferred from legends and customs, but the divine chiefs themselves have practically disappeared from all but a few tribes, and I should be inclined to say that the *Mbaki* worshippers are precisely the people who broke down the institution.

The true equivalent of the *marae* in Fiji is the *rārā*. The *rārā* is the village green. Round it stood the temples and the houses of the nobility with their foundations in tiers like unfinished pyramids. In the case of temples a square hut with an extremely high roof completed the pyramid. In this green all feasts were held, and the food was offered up with prayers; the first fruits were piled up there for presentation to the gods or the chief. In many tribes these offerings were superintended by a hereditary herald known as the *Tu Rara* or Lord of the Green. In Rotuma this herald is known as the *Fu Mara'e*. Now if,

Tu Rara = *Fu Mara'e*;

and *Tu* = *Fu* (for *t* becomes *f* in Rotuman),²

then *Rara* = *Mara'e*.

This *rara* also exists where the *Mbaki* cult prevails, and is one of the proofs that they once had divine chiefs. Clearly if the *rara* represents the *marae*, the *nananga* cannot. The *nananga* can scarcely be connected with the sun. For no trace of solar worship can be found in that part of Fiji where the divine chieftainship still exists; the chiefs, though divine, are in no way connected with the sun, not even with the sky. It is hardly likely therefore that sun worship existed where the chieftainship had decayed still further.

All we know about the *mbaki* suggests a ghost cult or some form of spiritualism. This cult may have been originally derived from a solar cult or be modelled upon it, but the sun probably had no part in it. The *mbaki's* nearest affinity is perhaps the cult of "water sprites," "stone

¹ Tregear under *Rangi*, and Erman's *Handbook of Egyptian Religion*, p. 29.

² *F. mata* : R. mafa;

F. mati : R. mafi;

F. oti : R. ofi; etc.

gods," or "stoneheads," which has in fairly recent times overspread Fiji; indeed it is quite possible that these spiritualistic cults are merely the exoteric and public ceremonies of the *mbaki*; for the devotees of the *mbaki* after concluding their rites in the *nananga* came to give a public exhibition in the village green. The water sprites likewise came on to the village green after completing their initiation in the bush. This connection between the *Rara* and spiritualistic ceremonies is however quite accidental; there is no historical relationship between the *Rara* and the sprites; the green is an ancient institution, whereas spiritualism has but recently spread over eastern Fiji from the hills. The *Mbaki* worshippers and the spiritualists merely came to perform on the green because it was the scene of all ceremonies, dances, and feasts.

In Tahiti the secret society of the *Areoi* performed on the green; Dr. Rivers rashly concludes that the *marae* belongs to the *Areoi* and that consequently their cult was addressed to the sun. The example of Fiji shows us how unfounded is such a view, and rather suggests that the *Areoi* were intruders.

In our present state of knowledge it is safest to believe that as,

rara = *marae*,

so

water sprites (and *mbaki*?) = *Areoi*,

that in Tahiti as in Fiji secret societies holding spiritualistic cults have made use of the village green which belonged to the old established religion.

Here if you like we have a clear case of culture fusion: two different cycles of beliefs have come into contact, and interfered with one another. The village green belongs to the cycle of divine kingship, such as prevailed over a considerable part of the world. As that institution decayed in Polynesia the sacred green lost its intimate connection with the gods and their earthly representatives; it became the scene of all ceremonials, and offered its convenient space to the public performances of a newly imported cycle of beliefs, that of secret societies.

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POSTSCRIPT

A friend of mine was kind enough to criticize my analogy of the Christian Churches. "Different as all these sects may appear to an outsider," he objects, "on closer examination they are all found to have a common origin and possess certain beliefs in common." I quite agree but would point out that the style gives no clue to which particular beliefs happen to be common to all. Wherever we find a Gothic church