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POLYNESIAN LITERATURE
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Writing was unknown in Polynesia prior to the advent of the missionaries about 1800, but the oral literary tradition of Polynesia has been described as one of the two greatest in the world. The relatively simple phonology of Polynesian languages eased the missionaries' self-imposed task of providing adequate orthographies, and everywhere in the area the indigenous peoples of the many island groups adopted writing enthusiastically. Within the first half-century after initial contact they were themselves recording much of the traditional oral literature. In most areas, Europeans were also collecting and recording old stories and songs. With few exceptions writings in Polynesian languages have remained confined to traditional themes. On the other hand, poetry, in the form of song texts, has developed considerably under the stimulus of a new culture, and, in particular, a new musical idiom. It is not clear, however, that such development has produced material of great literary merit.

The traditional literary media of Polynesia were prose narrative, chanted poetry, and genealogical recital. In a few places a kind of dramatic song cycle was a special development in poetry. Most legendary material was in the form of prose narrative. In New Zealand, and probably elsewhere, legends may be conveniently divided into the two categories of myth and tradition. The New Zealand myths are also known in tropical Polynesia. They are set in the remote past, their characters are gods and heroes, and they include stories about the origin of the universe, and the genesis of gods, and of men. The cosmogonic myths are usually in the form of a long, cryptic genealogy. Many such genealogies have been recorded in various parts of Polynesia. In some a sequence of periods of chaos is succeeded by periods of darkness which ultimately gave way to light; in others evolution is likened to the growth of a child in the womb from conception to birth; in others the evolution of the universe is likened to the structure of a tree. New Zealand Maori genealogies of this nature have little explanatory text, but those from Hawaii and the Tuamotu Islands are accompanied by interpolated explanatory comment, much of which, however, remains cryptic today. Typically the cosmogonic genealogies culminate in the union of Heaven and Earth who produce all natural phenomena, and ultimately mankind.

Stories of the heroes, or demi-gods, are also widespread in Polynesia. Best known are the many adventures of Maui, who fished up lands, secured fire for man, beat the sun, and ultimately (in the New Zealand version of his adventures) introduced death to mankind when he failed to destroy the goddess of the underworld by passing through her body in a reversal of the birth
process. Other widely known heroes are Tawhaki, who climbed to the overworld, Tinirau, the epitome of the handsome husband, and Rata, the canal-builder who defeated the reef-heron demon.

Traditions, unlike the widespread myths, pertain only to restricted areas. Migration traditions are found in most island groups, with perhaps the greatest development, and certainly the greatest amount of tradition preserved to us, in the two areas of New Zealand and the Tuamotu Archipelago. Traditions are concerned with men, not gods; they are genealogically placed not more than thirty generations in the past, and many ethnologists and culture historians believe that they have some historical validity, at least for a few centuries into the past. The wide distribution of much of Polynesian mythology is conclusive proof that the people were able to preserve oral tradition for many centuries, so it is not unreasonable to suppose that settlement traditions, dated genealogically at a few hundred years before the present, and with obvious functional importance in the social and political organisation of the various island groups, were maintained with equal fidelity, and reflect actual events.

In the case of some groups whose social organisation was not completely shattered by the cultural conflict and disruption following European contact, continuous traditional records have been maintained from settlement times until the advent of Christianity, and the dawn of written history, in the 19th century. In a number of areas, much of this record has been preserved in the records of the courts set up by colonial powers to record land ownership.

Poetry was always chanted or sung. The metre was determined by musical rather than linguistic features, though assonance was common, and rhyme has been reported from western areas, including Fiji. Organisation into couplets was common; symbolism, much of it not readily apparent to western readers was highly developed; sexual reference was extremely common, especially in eastern Polynesia. In Hawaii, and in western Polynesia, references to features of the landscape and the sea are common and often developed extensively. In New Zealand such references are less common, and are usually associated with portents of misfortune. 'Yonder the lightning forks above Tauhara's peak; it is the sign of death' for example, is a typical first line of a lament.

The language of poetry differs somewhat from prose. Extensive use of symbolism, synonyms, contrastive opposites, and repeated key-words or short refrains, is common. Archaic words may be used, some of which have now lost any specific reference and acquired a religious mystique. The use of certain grammatical constructions, not used, or perhaps no longer used in prose, is found in the poetry of some Polynesian languages.

Minor literary forms common throughout Polynesia are proverbs, riddles and animal fables.
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