

Spirits of the Southern Seas

The Sacred Art and Culture of Polynesia
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Above: Mo'orea, an island in Polynesia, 17 kilometres northwest of Tahiti

Polynesia is a geographical area in the mid and southern Pacific Ocean, and it includes all of the islands, located in a rough triangle, between New Zealand, Hawaii, and Easter Island, a total of 14 groups of islands in all, but made up of several thousand individual small islands.

The Polynesian islands were settled gradually, starting around 3,000 years ago, when people left the shores of the Malay Archipelago, heading out in boats, to first come to the island groups we now called Micronesia and Melanesia, and then gradually travelling even further eastwards over time. All three of these regions are now classed as being part of Oceania, which also includes Australia.

Over time, the different groups on the wide scattering of islands developed their own forms of spirituality, but there are many overlaps of course, due to their

common ancestral roots. All of the Polynesian cultures were originally, animistic, with a cosmology including a deep understanding of the spirits. However, since European contact with the islands - beginning first in 1521, when the Spaniard Ferdinand Magellan crossed the Pacific - Christianity has now become the dominant force in the area, there having been a systematic campaign to 'convert' the people, from the C17th onwards. However, pockets of the old ways still exist, and Christianity has, to a less or greater degree, been over-shadowed by the earlier traditions, forming a Christo-Animistic fusion.

ATUA, ANCESTORS AND SPIRITS

The atua can be thought of as gods, but other spirits can be classed as atua too. Across the whole culture there are many atua, but some of the main ones found in many societies are: Rongo a god of

agriculture and peace; Tane, the creator of all living things such as animals, birds and trees; Tangaroa the god of the sea; Tu, the god of war; and Whiro the god of darkness and evil.

Along with the atua, there are many different types of spirits and supernatural beings in the traditions of Polynesia, and ancestors make up a fairly large part of them, playing a central role in the spiritualities of the islands.

At death, a person's soul is said to leave the body through the tear ducts, and then begin a journey along the 'path of the spirits' to a sacred place on each island, where the souls jump off this world, and into the Land of the Dead. These places are often ancient Polynesian temple platforms called *marae*, which even on Christian islands are still considered to be sacred places by many Polynesians.

Between rituals, very little attention might be paid to a marae;

the atua are not considered present, so there is little which can disrespect a site. When a ceremony is about to take place however, weeds are cleared, the area swept and repaired in any way needed and the atua invited.

The souls of humans who have died can become minor atua - some friendly to living humans and some unfriendly. For example, according to many traditions, fetuses which have been miscarried, or aborted, can transform into vicious demon-like atua, and souls which have been forgotten and neglected by their descendents, can become wandering, rather pathetic, homeless ghosts. Souls of those who have died can also transform into family and clan helping ancestor atua, who look after their descendents.

Animistic spiritual traditions across Polynesia were - and still are - mainly about personal experiences rather than a codified faith. Prominent among those experiences are encounters with the spirits. For example, when a person is about to die, one of the souls [like many cultures across the world, Polynesians believe a person has more than one soul] of the dying person can warn their family, by visiting them. Shortly



Left: an old marae temple platform on an island

after dying, a person can also visit relatives and friends in the form of a ghost or phantom.

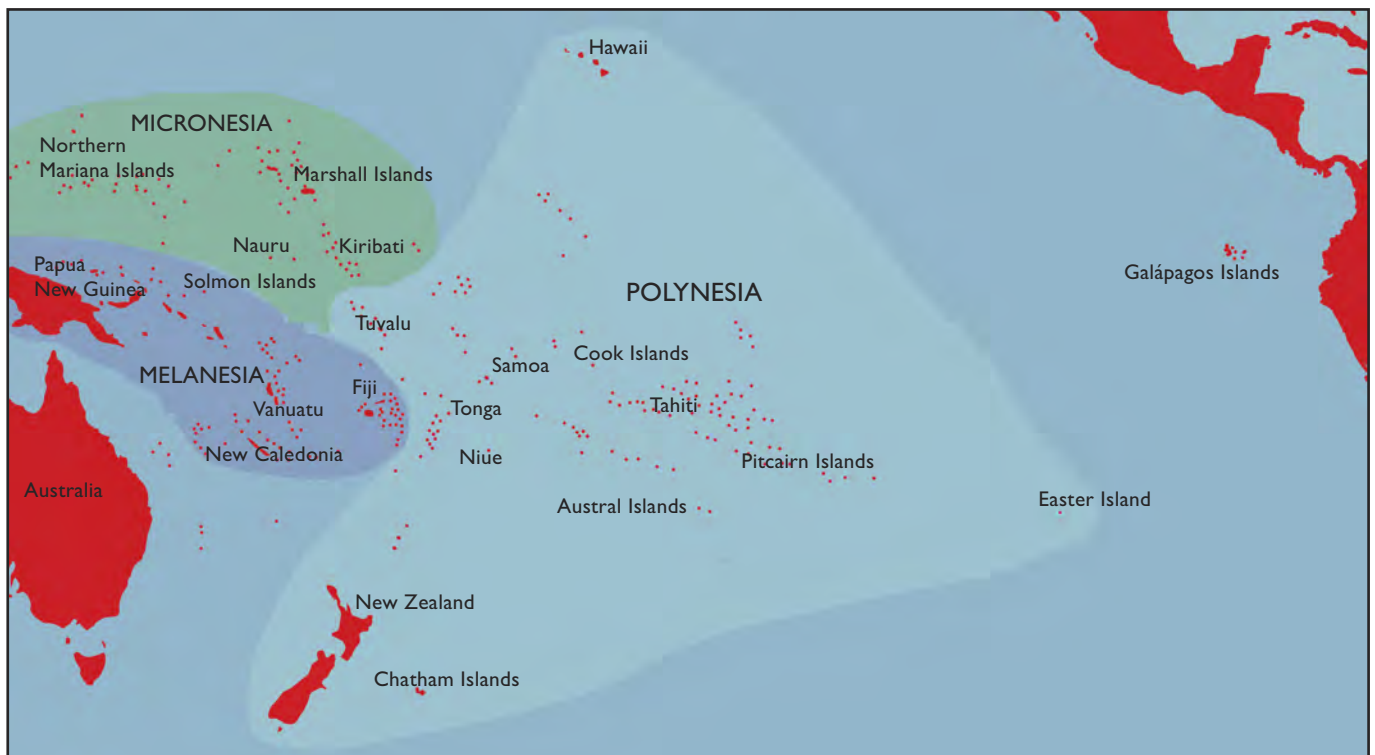
The family of the deceased perform rituals and pray for the soul's successful journey to the Land of the Dead, but the dead can linger around the living, to whom they were especially attached, and it is often noted that elderly couples continue to communicate - between the living and the dead - long after one of them has died. Because of this, the survivor can be 'pulled' toward the new home of the beloved, which is a form of soul-loss, resulting in their own imminent death. Soul loss was also often used however, in sorcery around it, as an enemy could be killed or injured by capturing or harming

their soul.

Because of this closeness between the living and the dead, and the dangers it brings to the living, there are many ways to detach from the dead, to keep them at a safe, but respectful distance to the living. The clothes and belongings of the deceased are often destroyed; and in New Zealand, the Maori loudly stamp through a house after someone has died, in order to reclaim it for the living.

Throughout Polynesia, a troublesome presence of a dead person reveals the existence of unfinished business that must be resolved before the soul can depart in peace, and so ceremonies are performed in order to help the spirit.

But, despite the dangers of the



Below: Tu the atua of war. Plant fibre, human hair, pearl, shell, seeds, dog teeth, feathers. 81cm high. Hawaii, late C18th

dead, a positive relationship with the ancestors and the recently dead is one of the great strengths of Polynesian culture. It provides identity, as well as keeping good contact with the spirits of former individuals, upon whom one can call for help. An elder, who has been revered as a leader in life, does not lose their love of the family after death, and if the family has a need for their care, they can strengthen the soul's presence with offerings and prayers.

Below right: canoe stern. carved wood and shell 148cm high. Maori, late C18th

There is also a connection with animals and the dead in many Polynesian cultures. Hawaiian families will conduct ceremonies to help transform the deceased's soul into the body of a clan animal to whom the family is related. For

example, a fisherman of a shark clan family is guarded by his embodied relatives, and children of an owl clan family can be led out of danger by the bird who appears to help them.

TABOO AND MANA

Persons, places, and things that were possessed by, or under the influence of, the atua were often referred to by the most well-known concepts of *tapu*, which has been changed to taboo in Western languages.

Tapu, comes from the Maori and Tahitian languages, and it is often seen as a restriction or prohibition, it being tapu to enter a certain place, eat a certain food, touch a certain object, etc. The word, however, does not refer to a restriction, but rather to the reason

for the restriction - namely that the place, person, or object in question is possessed by, or under the influence of the atua, and therefore had to be treated with extreme care and respect. One could translate tapu as 'sacred.'

To be under the influence of an atua is not necessarily a good thing however, because of the physical or mental illness effects of it, and tapu can spread like a contagious disease.

In New Zealand, one dog contracted an extremely dangerous tapu, because it dug in a grave and began to chew on the corpse. The situation then became worse because the dog - chased by enraged people - tried to escape by swimming across a river. The dog was caught and killed, but by



then the entire river had become tapu, because the dog had swum in it. After that the river's water could not be used for any purpose, until a Maori priest had performed a ceremony to release the river from the state of tapu.

Another word, *mana*, is used in many Polynesian languages, and this refers to being blessed or filled with power given by the atua.

A sign of mana is when someone is outstanding in what they do, or has great charisma and influence, power or wealth. But the term is also applied to objects as well as people, so, for example, a weapon or tool may possess mana.

Polynesian society was often highly stratified, with a great gulf of status between chiefs, nobles, and

commoners. Nobility was passed from generation to generation, and was often traced back to powerful atua who once lived physical lives.

This right by birth was seen as the source of intense mana, and in some cultures the nobles were considered to be like atua themselves; for example, In Tahiti high chiefs were carried on the backs of servants, because if their feet touched the ground that spot would be made so sacred that it could no longer be used for any ordinary purpose.

There is a wealth of sacred artistry within Polynesia, as atua, as well as being gods, are also ritual spirit houses - a little like Siberian ongon fetishes. So an Atua can live in an atua, and such

an object is tapu and contains the atua's mana.

New Zealand Maori invite the gods to certain places by setting out spirit houses, in which they can live in for the duration of the ceremony. These often take the form of carved stone or wooden images, and these are also sometimes placed in fields after their field has been planted, so the atua enters them to establish a state of tapu over the crop and lend the atua's growth-stimulating mana to it.

Other special objects, either natural or human-made, were and still are sometimes placed in forests, near the sea, or in villages. These establish an abundance of birds and animals in the forest, fish in the sea, and protection for the

Below:
unknown atua.
Plant fibre,
human hair,
pearl, shell,
seeds, dog
teeth, feathers
62cm high
Hawaii, late
C18th

Below left:
wall carving
of an atua.
wood with
inlaid shell.
145cm high.
Maori,
mid C19th





Above: figure of an atua
Carved wood. 116cm high
Austral Islands, late C16th

village. It is, however, always considered important to conceal these spirit houses carefully, in case they fall into the hands of an enemy, who might perform magic to make the atua leave, and so bring disaster.

In the 1700s on almost every Polynesian island, thousands of tapu atua fetishes were held sacred and maintained, but by 1830 most of these objects had been lost or destroyed under the onslaught of Christian missionaries and Western collectors. Such old objects now are in private collections and museums across the world, and are highly valuable.

OMEN POSSESSION AND RITUAL

Traditionally Polynesians pay great regard of omens. The spirit world can be seen acting within all sorts of natural events, and these can be read if one has the ability. Skilled people would read the outcome of an planned event, such as a battle, in the entrails of sacrificed animals, and the appearances of



Atua figure
Carved wood
48cm high
Tahiti, late C19th

rainbows, the shapes of clouds, and other phenomena were readable as omens.

Dreams too are considered to be a rich source of information from the spirits, and the belief that the consciousness leaves the body in sleep - sometimes travelling great distances - is widespread.



Above: wall panel
Carved wood, shell and painr. 78cm high
Maori, late C19th



Some ceremonies are very simple, just a small ritual and a prayer, but others are elaborate, demanding huge preparation, and the ceremony might last for days - or even - as in the case of the Hawaiian makahiki - for months.

Rituals normally began with an invitation to the atua to attend. In Tahiti lesser atua might be asked to act as messengers to invite the greater atua. Other Tahitian rituals were designed to awaken the atua from sleep. Once an atua had arrived at the ritual, the next phase is to make offerings to them, so they will help in the way the ritual is intended for. In many places in Polynesia the offerings are the first crops harvested, the first birds or fish caught, but in the past human sacrifices were offered. Personal blood sacrifices were also performed, for example, people in Tonga would cut off their little fingers as offerings to the atua, especially in order to restore sick relatives to health.

How effective a ritual might be depends on the perfection with which it is done. The mispronunciation of a word, a breath drawn in the wrong place, or any disturbance of the atmosphere around a ritual, can cause the whole thing to fail.

Because of this, in the past, on many islands during a ceremony, people not participating had to remain in their houses, light no fire and make no noise - cockerels must not crow, dogs must not bark; absolutely nothing was allowed to disrupt the tapu nature of the ceremony. In some places, if a woman or child wandered near where the ritual was being done, they would be immediately killed and offered to the gods as a sacrifice to make amends for the disturbance.

The final phase of a ritual was the departure of the atua and the ending of the state of tapu. A person, place, or thing that had been released from tapu entered a state of being known on many Polynesian islands as *noa*. This is often translated as 'common' or 'profane' but it is best simply understood as the opposite of tapu.

To live in such a vast watery world takes great skill and awareness, and such awareness requires a reliance on the spirits, one very evident with the peoples of the Southern Seas.

Spirit possession also plays a part in Polynesian traditions, certain people being more prone to spirit possession than others. The person falls into a trance, and an ancestor, or some other atua communicates through them. However, the spirits can also take over anyone - at any time, sometimes without warning - and often this was seen as an unwelcome event, as the intruding spirit might seek harm. Malicious spirit possession was a common explanation for disease, the intruding spirit being said to be attacking or biting the person they have possessed.

Atua can also take over animals too, sharks, herons, lizards and owls being considered particularly prone to this. Because the atua in these animals are often malicious, and have enough power to make them dangerous to ordinary people, such animals were regarded with caution and sometimes fear.

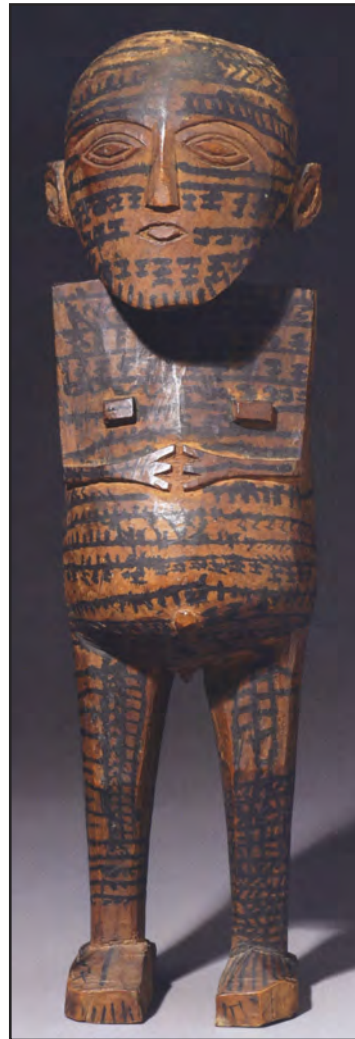
Lizards were thought in many islands to be associated with particularly malevolent atua. Richard Cruise, writing in 1823, reported that when a British ship's officer brought a lizard to a Maori woman so he could get the local name for it, the woman was filled with terror, explaining that the atua would take possession and devour her bowels.

Polynesian ritual activity focuses on many things. It can be destructive - to injure or kill someone, or it can be performed to increase the fertility of crops, for success in a sea voyage, for hunting, or fishing, and of course for healing.



Far left: atua figure Green stone (nephrite) and shell 9.5cm high Moari, C18th

Left: ritual costume of a chief mourner Pearl, feathers, coconut shell and fibre, bark turtle shell feathers 234cm high Tahiti, C18th



Left: tattooed female atua figure. Wood and pigments 58cm high Cook Islands, early C19th