



On the Origin of the South Sea Islanders, and on Some Traditions of the Hervey Islands

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The DIRECTOR read the reply of Mrs. Goodenough to the letter of condolence addressed to her on November 9th, 1875.

The following resolution, moved by Captain BEDFORD PIM, R.N., M.P., and seconded by Mr. JOHN EVANS, F.R.S., was then carried unanimously :—

Resolved—That a vote of condolence be passed to the widow of Dr. Richard King, the eminent Arctic Traveller and founder of the Ethnological Society, who died on Friday last, the 4th inst., and whose services to the nation, to ethnology and anthropology, and to the medical profession, are well known to all of us.

The following papers were read by the authors :

On the ORIGIN of the SOUTH SEA ISLANDERS, and on SOME TRADITIONS of the HERVEY ISLANDS. By REV. W. WYATT GILL, B.A.

MR. ALFRED WALLACE, in his admirable book, entitled "The Malay Archipelago," has advanced the theory that the Polynesians are descended from a race which once overspread a vast submerged southern continent. As the land gradually sank, a few of the aborigines may have escaped to the tops of the loftiest mountains, around which subsequently coral reefs formed. Admitting that Polynesia is pre-eminently an area of subsidence, and its great wide-spread groups of coral reefs may mark out the position of former continents, still I apprehend that Mr. Wallace's inference is unwarranted, for—

1. Supposing that human beings inhabited this great southern continent at the period of the subsidence, and that a remnant escaped, I cannot believe that human life could, under such circumstances, be sustained for any considerable time, as usually there is nothing edible on the tops of the Pacific mountains, save berries, to say nothing of the difficulty in most cases of obtaining water.

2. The theory is utterly opposed to the native accounts of their own origin, which all point to the north-west.

3. The spread of the race can easily be accounted for on the basis of historical facts. In 1862 I saw on Manuâ, or easternmost island of the Samoan group, an open boat which had accidentally drifted from Moorea, a distance of 1,250 miles, and no life lost. A few months later in the same year, Elikana and his friends drifted in a canoe from Manihiki to Nukuraurae, in the Ellice group (lying N.W. of Samoa), a distance of some 1,360 miles. Half of the party on board perished from want of food and water. In both these instances the drifting was from east to west before the trade winds. A far more remarkable event occurred in January, 1858, during the prevalence of the violent *westerly*

winds, when a numerous family of adult natives drifted from Fakaofu, in the Union group, north of Samoa, to an uninhabited spot known as Nassau Island, thence to Palmerston's Island, and, finally, to Mangaia (where I lived), altogether a distance of upwards of 1,200 miles in a south-easterly direction.

4. The colour, hair, general physiognomy, habits, character, and especially the *language* of the Polynesians clearly indicate a Malay origin. This cannot be accidental. My impression is that long ages ago the progenitors of the present race entered the Pacific from the south-eastern fork of New Guinea, but were driven eastward by the fierce Negrito race. The greatest distance from land to land, as they pressed eastward, would be from Samoa to the Hervey group, about 700 miles, which, as we have seen, has been successfully traversed by natives in their fragile barques within my own observation.

The classical word for nether-world in the dialect of the Hervey group is Avaiki, in Tahitian Hawaii, in New Zealand Hawaiki. The universe is conceived of as the hollow of a vast cocoa-nut shell, in the interior of which are many lands, the abode of unhappy ghosts and infernal gods. Near an aperture at the top of this vast shell, on the outside, are located their island homes. Rising one above another into immensity are at least ten separate heavens, constituting the elysium of the brave. Sometimes the gloomy region beneath is called "po" or "night." Originally mankind and the natives of Avaiki interchanged visits at will through the aperture at the top, which is now closed on account of the continual depredations of fairy visitors. Now two modes of access alone exist to nether-world—

1. By following the bright track of the sun-god Rā, and entering in his train the domains of Night.

2. By treading on a branch of the sacred *bua* tree (*Fagraea berteriana*), or Mystic Tree of Death.

Native song and myth delight in recounting the adventures of those who have visited spirit-world. Especially rich are the Hervey Islanders in pathetic "laments" over those who have followed the sun-god Rā into the gloomy region of Avaiki. These exile spirits, clad with bind-weed and flowers of the heliotrope, obey the commands of a leader, who fixes the time for their departure.

The esoteric doctrine of the priests was, that souls leave the body ere breath has quite gone, and travel on to the edge of a cliff facing the setting sun (Rā). A large wave now approaches the base of the cliff, and a gigantic *bua* tree, covered with fragrant blossoms, springs up from Avaiki to receive on its far-

reaching branches human spirits, who are mysteriously impelled to cluster on its limbs. When at length the mystic tree is covered with human spirits, it goes down with its living freight to nether-world.

Akaanga, the slave of fearful Miru, mistress of the invisible world, infallibly catches all these unhappy spirits in his net and laves them to and fro in a lake. In these waters the captive ghosts exhaust themselves by wriggling about like fishes, in the vain hope of escape. The net is pulled up and the half-drowned spirits enter the presence of dread Miru, who is ugliness personified.

The secret of Miru's power over her intended victims is the "kava" root (*Piper mythisticum*). A bowl of this drink is prepared for each visitor to the shades by her four lovely daughters. Stupefied with the draught, the unresisting victims are borne off to a mighty oven and cooked. Miru, her peerless daughters, her dance-loving son, and the attendants subsist exclusively on human spirits, decoyed to nether-world, and then cooked. The drinking cups of Miru are the skulls of her victims. She is called in song "Miru-the-Ruddy," because her cheeks ever glow with the heat of the oven where her captives are cooked.

Such was believed to be the inevitable fate of cowards and of all who died a natural death. But a nobler fate awaited warrior spirits, whether male or female. Their home was the warrior's paradise in the heavens. Winter was believed to be occasioned by the chilly touch of disembodied spirits. During the rainy season they cannot rise to this felicity; but when in the month of August the coral tree is in blossom (the blood-red colour of the flowers being symbolical of their own blood spilt in war), they prepare for their departure. When all is ready, *i.e.* when all the warrior-ghosts are assembled at the edge of the cliff overlooking the marae of the war-god Rongo, still facing the setting sun, there suddenly springs up at their feet a mountain, up which they climb. The road upwards is built of the clubs, spears, and stones with which they were slain. Arrived at the summit they leap into the azure expanse, where they float as *specks*. Hence this elysium of the brave is often called *Speck-land*. These fortunate spirits look down with ineffable disgust upon the wretches in Avaiki. They are covered with garlands of sweet-scented flowers, and spend their time in dancing the war dance and in reciting, over and over again, the brave deeds performed in life.

The inevitable result of this belief was to foster an utter contempt for violent death. Many anecdotes are related of aged warriors, scarcely able to hold a spear, insisting on being led to the field of battle, in the hope of gaining the home of the

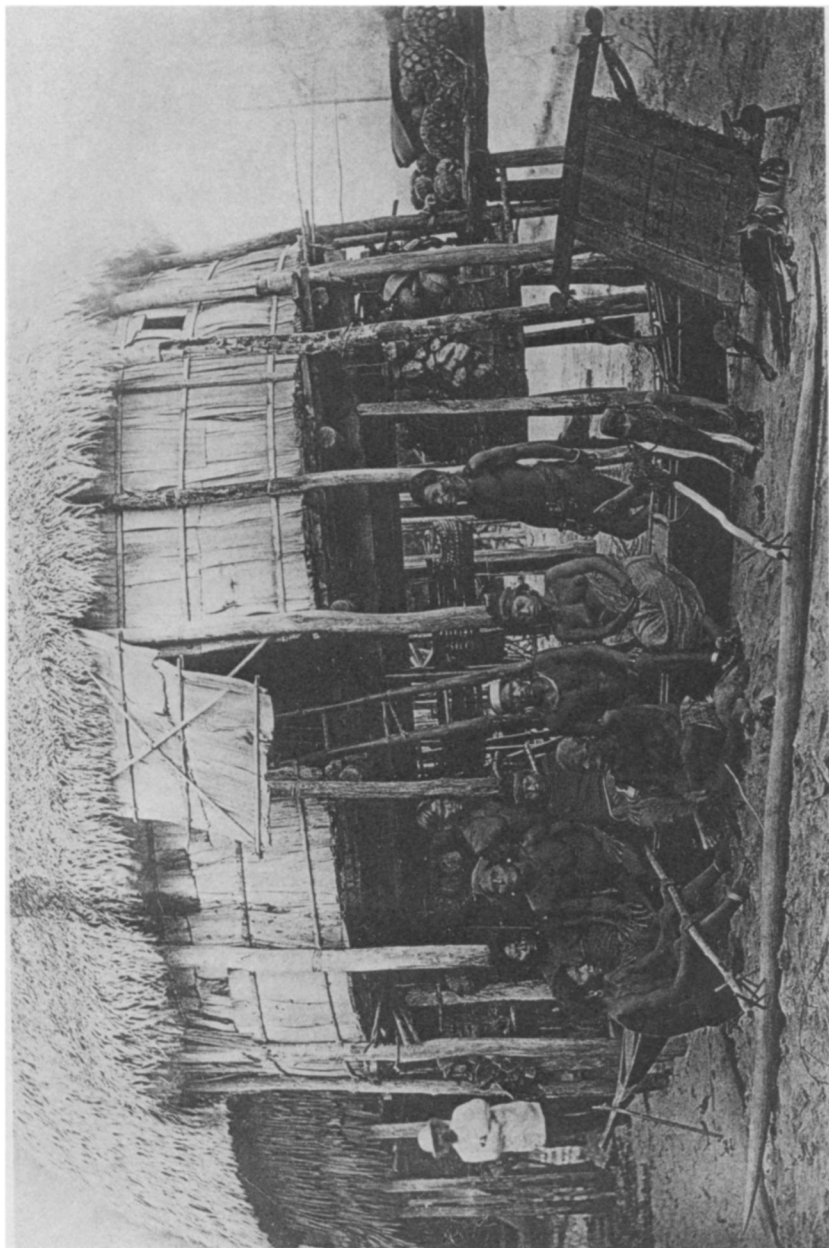
brave. Like ourselves, the natives of Mangaia despised bush fighting.

The heaven of the natives of Aitutaki consisted in a land where Tukaitaua unceasingly feeds his friends on the finest sugarcane, which they, with unalloyed appetites, chew *ad æternum*. Their hell was located in the domains of Miru, who compels all visitors to swallow a bowl of living centipedes! In the agony of pain which succeeds, the poor wretches drown themselves, and are afterwards cooked and eaten by the hag Miru and her companions.

I have just learned, with much interest, that the inhabitants of Port Moresby, in New Guinea, place their elysium in a mythical region named *Erema*, lying towards the setting sun, far beyond Cape Suckling, the last bold promontory towards the S.W. *Erema* is covered with sago-palms, and good spirits are permitted to eat sago without stint or cessation. But, unlike the South Sea Islanders, the natives of the S.E. peninsula of New Guinea believe that eventually the spirit returns to its ancient haunts to inhabit some other human body.

Mr. Brabrook read a communication by Mr. W. W. Wood, "On the Tombs in the Island of Rotumah."

On reading Lieutenant Oliver's paper on "The Megalithic Structures of the Channel Islands," I bethought me of some notes and sketches made years ago on the Island of Rotumah, in the South Pacific Ocean, where I met with some curious stone tombs, composed of masses so large that it was difficult to conceive the means by which the natives had been able to move and arrange them. The Island of Rotumah is an outlier of the Fiji group, though at a considerable distance to the north. The natives are of a different race and lighter colour than those of the Fiji's, and are distinguished (or were) for their amiable and inoffensive manners. The island is a small one, and not very high, except towards one end, where there is a precipice overlooking the sea, with a large flat terrace at its base, overflowed at high tide. At a short distance is a very remarkable object—a small island composed of an immense rock, which, by some great convulsion, has been split nearly in the middle, leaving a passage through which the sea flows and boats pass in fine weather. About half-way up the chasm is an enormous rounded rock, which is jammed in between the two nearly vertical sides of the passage and hangs thus suspended. From a certain point the sides of the rock appear quite or very nearly vertical, and the appearance of this great mass of stone, hung



*Nicobar Islanders,
Nancoury 1875.*