

# A COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS OF ESCHATOLOGICAL THEMES IN POLYNESIAN MYTHOLOGY AS A SURVIVOR OF PROTO- POLYNESIAN UNITY\*

Martina BUCKOVÁ  
Institute of Oriental Studies, Slovak Academy of Sciences,  
Klemensova 19, 813 64 Bratislava, Slovakia  
martina.buckova@gmail.com

This article deals with the comparison and analysis of eschatological themes in Polynesian myths. It points to three central themes of imagining the afterlife: the underworld, the homeland and the heavenly world. In addition to this, the article also discusses imaginings of the soul's departure to the other world. From the presented material, it becomes clear that even though there are certain differences among eschatological myths, there are also a number of common elements which provide proof of unity before the ancestors of the Polynesians spread to all parts of Polynesia. An especially interesting aspect is the understanding of the afterlife as a homeland to which spirits return after death. Upon the basis of linguistic research and mythology analysis, the conclusion can be made that the mythology of the inhabitants of western Polynesia – Tonga and Samoa – consider their homeland to be some islands in eastern Fiji. By contrast, the inhabitants of eastern Polynesia consider their homeland to be Hawaiki, which is clearly a reference to their long period of habitation in the island archipelago of western Polynesia, particularly Savai'i Island and the Samoan archipelago.

**Key words:** Eschatology, Polynesian Mythology, Underworld, Hawaiki, Pulotu, Pō

The eschatological notions of Polynesians comprise a complicated system. There are legends about where the afterlife is situated; who is its ruler, how the dead make their way to the other world, what spirits do in the underworld, whether they can return to this world, what the relation of the underworld is to the country of the ancestors and so on. Thus, just like other peoples the Polynesians knew of the next world where spirits go after death. Conceptions

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of this world differ greatly from archipelago to archipelago, but these alternatives are also positioned within the framework of the same society.

For Polynesians, everything in nature was based on dualism. According to Māori mythology, the origin of everything is in Heaven “Rangi” and Earth “Papa”. There is nothing which could be said to belong only to the Earth or to Heaven. According to this notion, even a human is made up of two mutual and complimentary aspects from a higher and lower principle. In Māori teachings, the higher human principle was made up of an individual’s vital force, “mauri”, which was made up of the godly life of “ora” and power of “mana” according to personal qualities and attributes. Mauri is a special force possessed by Io,<sup>1</sup> which makes it possible for everything to move and live in accordance with the conditions and limits of its existence. Everything has a mauri, including people, fish, animals, birds, forests, land, seas and rivers; the mauri is a power which permits living things to exist within their own realm and sphere. No one can control their own mauri or life essence. When a person dies, the mauri is no longer able to bind these parts together and thereby give life, and thus the physical and spiritual part of a person’s being are separated. This is expressed in the following saying:

“He manawa ka whītikitia, he mauri ka mau te hono. Ko te hunga mate kua wehe koutou i te hono, kōkiri wairua ki te tihi o mauri aituā. Ka tāreparepa mai te mauri ora ki te ao; ka tāreparepa atu te mauri mate ki tua o te ārai.”<sup>2</sup>

[The heart provides the breath of life, but the mauri has the power to bind or join. Those who die have been released from this bond and the spirit ascends the pinnacle of death. The mauri enters and leaves at the veil which separates the human world from the spiritual realm.]

Mauri, an individual’s life force, cannot leave the body of a person during their life and is extinguished after death. It is the centre of feelings and after death cannot exist independently.<sup>3</sup> In Tahitian “mauri” means “spirit” or “ghost”. In Samoan it is called “mauli”. In the Hawaiian Islands it is “mauli ola”, which means “the breath of life”.<sup>4</sup> While there is some deviation in these appellations, this is only the result of phonetic differences among Polynesian languages. In addition to this, they also named the essence of psychic existence, which was called “hau”. One of the ways in which to kill a person

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<sup>1</sup> The highest god, who was known only to a small circle of tohungas (priests) and whose cult had an esoteric character.

<sup>2</sup> BARLOW, C. *Tikanga Whakaaro: Key Concepts in Maori Culture*, p. 83.

<sup>3</sup> KRUPA, V. *Legendy a mýty Polynésie. Polynéská kosmogonie* [Legends and Myths of the Polynesia. Polynesian kosmogonie], p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> HANDY, E. S. C. *Polynesian Religion*, p. 57.

using magical powers was to destroy their “hau”. Externally it was material but never visible. This external materialisation appeared in such a manner so as to make people think that they had seen a part of their “hau”. Just like people, all elements in nature also had their own “hau”. The word “hau” in Māori language also means “wind”. However, in Polynesia no evidence has been found which connects the soul to wind, which is a familiar aspect of other mythologies. Therefore, “hau” can certainly not be translated as “soul” or “breath”.<sup>5</sup>

Lower human elements come from the kingdom of darkness Pō: one of these is the individual spirit, “wairua”. For a lot of peoples, the concept of the soul is connected to breath. However, in Polynesia the soul or spirit “wairua” means a shadow or reflection in the water. According to information from all Polynesian islands, the “wairua” of a person leaves the body and goes to the other world. It was possible to see it in reflections, shadows and in dreams. The “wairua” could leave the body during sleep and wander and talk with the “wairua” of other sleeping or dead people while the body was sleeping. The fact that the soul could leave the body during sleep meant that every person while asleep could be a clairvoyant and prophet. Through their dreams, which were essentially the experiences of the wandering spirits, people could foresee things which were to happen. The Polynesians believed that the soul could be seen, which explained why the shadows of priests and chiefs were strictly taboo on a number of Polynesian islands.<sup>6</sup> In the same way as “hau”, the “wairua” was also present in all creations and objects in the natural world. As has been already mentioned, the Polynesians believed that everything in the natural world had its own soul or spirit. The Rapa Nui even believed in three souls: two of these, “‘ata” and “kuhane” die with the person, but the third one, “‘ivi’atua” goes on to the other world.<sup>7</sup> It could, however, return in the reincarnated form of a bird, rat, turtle, fish or plant. These souls could thus help those relatives they left behind. However, if a soul did not leave this world after 5 or 7 days, it would become an “akuaku”, which was feared by the natives and which would settle close to villages. It could have a male or female appearance and according to legend all akuaku had sharp teeth and a nose like a dog.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> HANDY, E. S. C. *Polynesian Religion*, pp. 57 – 58.

<sup>6</sup> The tabooization of the shadow took the form of no one being able to step into the shadow of a chief or other highly positioned member of society who had a strong mana.

<sup>7</sup> The difference in these names of various types of soul on Easter Island (Rapa Nui) is not surprising as the Rapa Nui religious imagination and mythology were quite different to the religious concepts in the other parts of Polynesia.

<sup>8</sup> FIODOROVA, I. K. *Rapanui Myths and Legends as Reflections of Shamanistic Beliefs*, p. 143.

In Polynesia, there were three variations of myths which described the afterlife and which discussed the fate of the soul after a person's death. In general, the concept of existence predominated:

1. the underworld,
2. the mythical homeland, and
3. the heavenly world.

Within these areas, various modifications of these concepts can be located.

The underworld was generally considered to be the place where the souls of common people went. Its naming as Pō refers to night and darkness, which basically conforms to notions of the underworld from other mythologies, such as Greek. Anderson asserts that the Māori underworld was in addition to Pō also called Te Reinga, which literally means the place where one jumps; the entry to the underworld was known as Rerenga-wairua: that is, the place to where spirits flee.<sup>9</sup> However, according to more exact sources, the expression “Te Reinga” does not refer to the underworld, as Anderson suggests, but rather to a place on the very top northwest coast of New Zealand's North Island (Cape Reinga), which mythology ascribes as the place from where spirits leap into the underworld. The belief that spirits made their way to the underworld from this place predominated mostly in the North Island. The area is even bleakly named Muriwhenua (“the end of the world”). On a hill close to the cape, the spirits would look back for the last time, cry and farewell their relatives.<sup>10</sup> According to Māori mythology, an ancient pohutukawa (a massive patulous tree with red flowers, from whose branches spirits looked down below and waited) grows on the cliffs. When the waves receded, uncovering an entrance to an underwater cave among the seaweed, the spirits would jump. Apparently dogs also made their way to the underworld after death, albeit by a different route, as did wasted or excess food.<sup>11</sup>

According to a different Māori version, a giant pohutukawa grows at the edge of the cape and has deep roots reaching to the underworld. Souls make their way to the underworld along its trunk and roots. In the book *Polynesian Religion*, Handy presents a version by which the soul on its way to the underworld stops at two hills: at the first one it throw away its clothes from its skin and it jumps down from the second one from where long roots reach down to the sea. The soul would wait for the right moment and then climb down into the other world. On its journey it would have to cross a river with sandy banks.

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<sup>9</sup> ANDERSEN, J. C. *Myths and Legends of the Polynesians*, p. 266.

<sup>10</sup> KRUPA, V. *Legendy a mýty Polynésie. Polynéská kosmogonie* [Legends and Myths of the Polynesia. Polynesian kosmogonie], p. 106.

<sup>11</sup> ORBELL, M. *Hawaiki: A New Approach to Maori Tradition*, pp. 77 – 83.

On the other side stood the spirits of the dead, who would address the soul by name. Here they would place food in front of it: if it took some of the food, the soul would never return to this world. Along the way, a number of dangers awaited the soul. At this time, the prayers and rituals carried out by relatives left behind would protect the soul as would those of friendly ghosts of the ancestors. According to another version, the place where souls jumped into the underworld was guarded by a large caterpillar on one side and a large lizard on the other. Both would try to prevent the lamentable soul from jumping into the depths of Pō. The Māori believed that some sacrifices which were brought over along with a person's death were used by their soul as a gift to the guardians to the lower world.<sup>12</sup>

According to Māori, while the heavens were made up of various layers, the earth (Papa) similarly had ten spheres. The upper 4 were ruled by the great lady of the night, Hine-nui-te-po, who was the ruler of the realm of darkness and the goddess of death. The 5th, 6th and 7th spheres were ruled by Rohe and the final three by the god Miru. In New Zealand the underworld was described as being analogous to the world of people except for the fact that its inhabitants had fair hair and pale skin. This idea concerning the appearance of the dead, or ghosts, was widespread throughout Polynesia and this explains why the natives initially mistook white people for ghosts. The European clothes, ships and other objects they had only confirmed this opinion. James Cook's experiences with natives in the Hawaiian Islands is well-known, where he was thought to be the god Lona due to the fact that he had fair skin and a beard; this was the same as their imaginings of this god and coincidentally Cook landed near the largest temple to the god right on the day of celebrations in his honour. The afterlife was viewed almost identically in Hawaii as it was in New Zealand. According to the most widespread version, the ruler of the underworld was Milu, who Hawaiians considered to be a mythical chief. The Hawaiian underworld was even called "the pit of Milu".<sup>13</sup> The god Milu is more or less identical to the god Miru: there is only one phonetic difference, where in Hawaiian the consonant "r" is replaced by "l".

The Hawaiians viewed the underworld as a realm of dusk, shadows and a barren wasteland without water, grass, flowers or trees. The famished spirits avoid people out of fear and hopelessly try to quell their hunger with butterflies, moths and lizards.<sup>14</sup>

The entrance into the pit of Milu is at a cleft on some high bluff overlooking the sea or on the edge of a valley wall and a tree serves as the pathway by

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<sup>12</sup> HANDY, E. S. C. *Polynesian Religion*, p. 154.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

which the soul makes its departure. One such entrance is at Kahakaloa on the island of Maui, another in the Waipio valley on Hawaii and a third in Moanalua on Oahu. Other leaping places for the soul are named at different points about the island coasts. Another version says when it comes to the leaping place, the soul encounters a tree called Ulu-la'i-o-walu, which forms the pathway into the other world. Little children are gathered about it and direct the soul. One side of the tree looks green and fresh, the other dry and brittle. However, this is an illusion, for the dry branch is the one which the soul should grasp to save itself from being cast down into the world of the dead. It must climb to the top, being careful to hold on to a dry twig which will grow under its hand and then descend the main trunk to the "third level", where little children will again direct it on how to escape being cast down to Pō.<sup>15</sup>

In the Hawaiian Islands the place where souls leapt into the underworld was called Leina; in the Cook Islands and New Zealand it was called Reinga. Once again this is a correlation of the same name, the only difference being in the phonetic differences of Hawaiian.

Similarly to the Hawaiian Islands and New Zealand (albeit in a smaller amount), the island of Mangaia in the Cook Islands archipelago also had a ruler of the underworld called Miru, or more exactly Red Miru. According to local notions, the spirits of warriors left "for the light" ('aere ki te ao), presumably to heaven, whereas those who had died a natural death were cast "into the darkness" ('aere ki te po).<sup>16</sup> According to the Mangaiaans, the soul of a dying person left before their last breath and made its way to Rongo's<sup>17</sup> marae. When the soul met a good spirit which says, "Return and live on", the joyful soul returns to the body and the person lives. If not, the deceased continues on to a cape on the seashore where a huge wave rises, revealing a huge pua tree reaching down to the underworld. The deceased then climbs onto a branch specifically for members of their tribe and the tree immediately submerges back into the sea. Below the tree is a large net into which the soul falls and submerges into a freshwater lake below the tree (Vai-roto-ariki). Spirits here hopelessly flounder and look for salvation. The half-drowning souls are pulled along with the net by the indescribably ugly goddess Miru or Miru-kura (Red Miru, according to the glow of a fire in an earth oven). Miru and her daughters prepare for the souls some intoxicating and strong kawa and when they have drugged them, they thrust them into the oven and cook them. Then they eat

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<sup>15</sup> BECKWITH, M. *Hawaiian Mythology I – IV.*, p. 156.

<sup>16</sup> GILL, W. W. *Myths and Songs from the South Pacific*, p. 165.

<sup>17</sup> Rongo was the god of peace, the patron of work in the field and cultured plants and the god of rain. In the Hawaiian Islands, he was the personification of the moon.

them and the leftovers of their feast are thrown to their slaves: such is the fate of those who died a natural death.<sup>18</sup>

The prospect which the Manganians created for themselves was not attractive, and it may have been for that reason that they created an alternative; in Manganian society, warriors acquired the highest social prestige and they created a special spiritual realm for themselves which they called Tiairi. It was as far removed from the realm of Miru as possible. Instead of descending to the Pō, the souls of warriors slain in battle gathered on a mountain top and leaped up into space to ascend to Tiairi. Here they retained their vigour and garlanded with flowers told tales of battle and danced their war dances.<sup>19</sup>

The souls of the Marquesans had to cross a high mountain ridge which looked like a spine on the way to the underworld. When people by chance walked along this pathway of the dead, they could see ghosts dressed in white clothing (a burial shroud) trying to avoid the valleys so they would not get caught in the forest. It is said that the ghosts look like shadows which disappear when a person notices them. The souls refresh themselves on their journey by bathing in cold water before continuing. Below the headland was a rock; when the soul clapped, the rock would open up, the seas would retreat and the soul would enter the underworld.<sup>20</sup>

The Marquesans believed that the soul must bring the ruler of the underworld some kawa and one pig as a gift. On their journey to the underworld the soul needed food which would be placed next to the dead person at the funeral.<sup>21</sup>

According to Marquesan mythology, there were three underworlds under the earth. The lowest and most pleasurable of these was reached only by those who had brought with them the most pigs as a sacrifice. Souls lived well here: they ate excellent food and enjoyed the company of beautiful women. A little higher was a fair to middling world, where one did not live as well as in the lower world. Higher up still was a realm full of demons, where there was only wretched food which bad spirits had brought with them from earth: this was the place souls which no one had sacrificed anything for ended up. Souls would roam here and there and wait for someone to help them by sacrificing a pig.<sup>22</sup>

The other world is referred to in the Marquesas with the word “raro”, which means “downwards”, “bottom” or “base”.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, this is not only the

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<sup>18</sup> KRUPA, V. *Legends and Myths of the Polynesia. Polynéska kosmogonie* [Legends and Myths of the Polynesia. Polynesian kosmogonie], p. 101.

<sup>19</sup> TE RANGI HIROA. *The Coming of the Maori*, p. 519.

<sup>20</sup> HANDY, E. S. C. *Polynesian Religion*, p. 136.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> KOCH, G. *Südsee gestern und heute. Der Kulturwandel bei den Tonganern und der Versuch einer Deutung dieser Entwicklung in Memory of William T. Mulloy*, p. 246.

case in the Marquesas. This locative word for example forms part of the Māori language compound “Rarohenga” (where “raro” means “below”, “under” or “bottom” and “henga” means “dead”) and the equivalent Tongan appellation Lolofonua (literally “the bottom of the earth”).

In Tahiti and the Society Islands there is no concept of a tree that souls climb down into the underworld; this idea is expressed somewhat differently. They believed that souls have to begin a journey that takes them to Tata’a Point, located on the northwest coast of Tahiti. Souls there would find two stones, “life” and “death”. If the soul struck the “life” stone, it would return back to its body; if “death”, then it would continue its journey. From the sacred bluffs above Tata’a Point, the soul would then dive into the ocean and swim to the island of Mo’orea, where it would ascend Mount Rotui and then fly to Mount Temehani on the sacred island of Rā’iatea. There, it would meet the god Tū-ta-horoa and be shown two paths: the one on the right led to the upper region called Ao (light) and the other led to the Pō (darkness). Tū-ta-horoa would lead the soul to the god Roma-tāne to whom it showed the red feathers given to it by the priests, whereupon it was allowed to enter the Polynesian “paradise”. The left road led to a zone of utter darkness and to the god Ta’aroa-nui-tuhi-mate (Great Ta’aroa, Whose Course Is Death). All souls (including chiefly classes) who wound up here became menial servants to the gods. Not all souls, however, made it to Ra’iatea. Malevolent spirits and ghosts lay in wait along the path to grab any soul they could. The result, of course, was complete annihilation of the soul. It was important, therefore, that the departing spirit have the correct amulets and incantations to help protect it along its journey.<sup>24</sup>

In the cases mentioned above the ruler of the underworld was called Miru or Milu, yet on Tonga this entity had quite a different name: Hikule’o. According to mythology, all evils rose from him: murder, famine, war, bad moods, anger, revenge and cruelty. Hikule’o wants to herd all people into his kingdom and this is the reason why the inhabitants of this world die. Their souls go to the underworld. Hikule’o takes them to his domain and forms from them a living fence around his palace. He treats them in the same way as he does the wood of the tokotu’u tree. He also uses them as posts and doorsteps in his house. He harms people very much and forces them to suffer. He can do this because of their weakness and lack of knowledge. He has no empathy and for him the lives of people are not important.<sup>25</sup>

According to other well-known versions concerning notions of the underworld, after death the soul journeys to its homeland far to the west, a place variously known as Hawaiki, ’Avaiki, Hawai’i, Pulotu and so on.

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<sup>24</sup> CRAIG, R. D. *Handbook of Polynesian Mythology*, p. 96.

<sup>25</sup> KRUPA, V. *Legendy a mýty Polynésie. Polynéská kosmogonie* [Legends and Myths of the Polynesia. Polynesian kosmogonie], pp. 57 – 58.

To the Hawaiians, this island was called “Hawai”, to the Marquesans “Hawaiki” and to the Māori “Hawaiki”. The Rarotongans called it “Avaiki”, the Samoans called it “Savai”, while the islands of Rā’iatea and Fakarava in French Polynesia were both called “Hawaiki”.<sup>26</sup>

In the western groups of Samoa and Tonga, the souls went to some western abode known as Pulotu, a home which they shared with the Fijians.<sup>27</sup>

As a result, the listener to these chants frequently does not know whether the reference is to the present island or the one in their distant past. When the Polynesians were first visited by Western explorers and Christian missionaries, they were asked where they came from. The Polynesians, of course, normally gave the reply “from Hawaiki”. There is also confusion in the legends themselves: in New Zealand, for example, legends tell us that the demigod Māui lived in Hawaiki and that he “fished up” the islands of the Pacific – in this case, New Zealand. However, the legends go on to maintain that these islands were the first ones created, the ones from which the Māori left to migrate to New Zealand. More often, the word is meant to represent a mystical faraway place, a place unknown to mortals’ understanding, and a place where demigods and heroes carry out their superhuman and supernatural exploits. Frequently, Hawaiki is the name of the underworld itself, the place where human spirits go after death.<sup>28</sup>

According to Māori myths, before a person dies, spirits of death come with the aim of taking the deceased to the realm of the dead. The god Tane<sup>29</sup> waits there in the form of a red sun. The journey to the homeland leads over the sea to its end, where the sun sets on the horizon. There it submerges into Tane’s live-giving waters and is regenerated so that it can once more emerge in the morning refreshed. This area is known as the “hidden home of Tane”. According to this conception, souls return to the homeland from which they came. The situating of this mythical land in the west over the sea is very interesting. Research offering evidence of the origins of the ancestors of Polynesians and their migration to Polynesia suggests that the situating of this homeland is by no means by chance or erroneous. We will examine this theme in more detail later on.

Similarly to other parts of eastern Polynesia, in the Hawaiian Islands there was also the belief in the existence of the paradisiacal island of Hawaiki, which was both the homeland of the islands’ inhabitants as well as the place to which souls return after death.

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<sup>26</sup> CRAIG, R. D. *Handbook of Polynesian Mythology*, p. 131.

<sup>27</sup> TE RANGI HIROA. *The Coming of the Maori*, p. 518.

<sup>28</sup> CRAIG, R. D. *Handbook of Polynesian Mythology*, p. 131.

<sup>29</sup> One of four main Polynesian gods, the personification of the sun, the god of fertility, giver of light, god of the forests and the creator of the first woman.

According to a Hawaiian notion less widely spread, the ancestral homeland is situated on one of 12 sacred islands known as the “Stray Islands” or “Lost Islands”, which are often recalled in old stories and in song.<sup>30</sup> Myths assert that one can only see them on the horizon when the sun sets and rises. Sometimes they have a reddish light emanating from them. They disappear as soon as someone points to them, a moment which reveals that they are beyond human comprehension.<sup>31</sup> They were also called Kane-huna-moku (the hidden island of the god Kane).<sup>32</sup> This is the place where the god Kane lives along with the god Kanaloa and spirits. The most well-known place is Paliuli. According to Hawaiian legend, the first ancestors of the islanders lived there and so it is also considered to be their homeland.

It is interesting to note that eschatological themes were quite foreign to the myths of the Rennell and Bellona islands, the “Polynesian outliers”. Rennell Islanders were not very interested in the fate of the soul after death. The recorded mythology only states that after death the soul goes to the seashore, dances with ancestors and then makes its way to the gods in heaven in the east: that is, where the ancestors of Rennell and Bellona Islanders came from. Once more, we have here a historically accurate recollection which corresponds to the fact that the inhabitants of Rennell Island migrated from the area of Samoa and Tonga: that is, from the east and not from the west as is the case with eastern Polynesians.<sup>33</sup> While in eastern Polynesia the homeland, which was at the same time also the realm of the dead, was called Hawaiki (with some phonetic differences), in western Polynesia this place was only called Pulotu.

In a lot of places in Polynesia the afterlife as the destination of the soul corresponded with the place where the sun sets. These sorts of notions were also apparent in the Marquesas and on Samoa. According to Samoan eschatology, the souls of tribal chiefs went to an island in the west and the souls of ordinary people went to the underworld. For them, the paradisiacal island in the west was called Pulotu. It was imagined to be a beautiful and happy land: a place where the gods were based. Souls have a very good time here and bathe in the “waters of life”. Once more there is a reference to the life-giving water, which has also been mentioned in myths concerning Hawaii and New Zealand.

The souls of Samoans left for the other world on the west coast of Savai'i (Samoa). There were two circular openings among the rocks near the beach at

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<sup>30</sup> BECKWITH, M. *Hawaiian Mythology I – IV.*, p. 67.

<sup>31</sup> KRUPA, V. *Polynézske mýty* [Polynesian myths], p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Kane is simply a form of the more widely-used name Tane. This difference was brought about only because of phonetic differences in Hawaiian.

<sup>33</sup> KRUPA, V. *Legény a mýty Polynésie. Polynéská kosmogonie* [Legends and Myths of the Polynesia. Polynesian kosmogonie], p. 83.

the village of Falealupo, where the souls of the departed were supposed to find an entrance to the world of spirits under the ocean and which they called Pulotu. The chiefs went down the larger of the two, and the common people had the smaller one. They were conveyed thither by a band of spirits who hovered over the house where they died, and took a straight course in the bush westward. There is a stone at the west end of Upolu called “the leaping-stone” from which spirits in their course leaped into the sea, swam to Manono, leaped from a stone on that island again, crossed to Savai’i, and went overland to the Fafā at Falealupo, as the entrance to their Hades was called. The villagers in that area kept the cocoa-nut leaf blinds of their houses all closely shut after dark, so as to keep out the spirits supposed to be constantly passing to and fro. There was a cocoa-nut tree near the entrance to those lower regions which was called the tree of Leosia, or the Watcher. If a soul struck against it that soul went back at once to its body. In such a case of restoration from the gates of death, the family rejoiced and exclaimed, “He has come back from the tree of the Watcher!”<sup>34</sup> The ruler of Pulotu was called Saveasiuleo. The upper part of his body was human, and he reclined in a house in the company of chiefs who gathered around him; the lower part of his body was piscatorial and stretched away into the sea.

Just like the Samoans, Tongan eschatology also places the afterlife on the island of Pulotu. For sure, the reason for this is the fact that from a cultural perspective Tonga belongs to the western part of Polynesia. The eschatology of these two island archipelagos is more or less identical. Tongan mythology places the afterlife to the northwest of the archipelago. This place was considered to be the homeland of the ancestors and the home of the gods. The souls of well-known people came here and enjoyed the abundance of fruit, beautiful flowers and birds.<sup>35</sup> According to tradition, on Pulotu trees grow bearing the best fruit, the best flowers blossom there and animals are immortal in the sense that if one is captured and eaten, another one takes its place.<sup>36</sup> The ruler of this land, the same as in the Samoan Islands, had only half his body in human form. Near to his home were the “water of life” and a “talking tree”.<sup>37</sup> The term “water of life” is known also in eastern Polynesia, where it is connected to the god Tane. However, the talking tree is not a known concept there. It is important to pay attention to one interesting moment in Tongan eschatology, where in contrast to common people only those of noble descent

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<sup>34</sup> TURNER, G. *Samoa a Hundred Years Ago and Long Before*, pp. 257 – 258.

<sup>35</sup> HANDY, E. S. C. *Polynesian Religion*, p. 102.

<sup>36</sup> ANDERSEN, J. C. *Myths and Legends of the Polynesians*, p. 329.

<sup>37</sup> HANDY, E. S. C. *Polynesian Religion*, p. 145.

can hope for a life after death.<sup>38</sup> This is a unique notion, as all recorded myths in Polynesia discuss the fact that the soul continues to exist, with the only difference being which place they reach.

Furthermore, in the mythology of Easter Island, whose mythology and religion is quite different to that of other parts of Polynesia, there is the notion of a land of souls which is neither a place of reward nor punishment, but rather a realm of the afterlife to which the immortal souls of all people return. Its name is Hiva, which is also the mythical homeland of Rapa Nui. Hiva is a realm of darkness and death as well as a land where souls return to the country of light. The name Hiva clearly points to the archipelago from which the ancestors of Rapa Nui migrated to Easter Island. This place was obviously the Marquesas with the islands of Nuku-hiva, Fatu-hiva a Hiva-‘oa. Rapa Nui gave the place where souls leave for Hiva the name Motu mo Tiro Hiva, translatable as “the island which looks towards Hiva”. The ruler of this island was the bird god Makemake, the most important figure in the Rapa Nui pantheon.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to the previous two mythological elements mentioned above, the afterlife as the underworld or the mythical homeland, there are only very basic references to the heavenly world as a place to which the souls of the dead go. In general, this idea has a common element in all parts of Polynesia: namely, the notion that only the souls of important people in society and warriors left for the heavenly world.

Māori believed in 12 heavens. In the uppermost of them, Io-matua, there is Io the Parent. There is no word of any trouble or danger in this upper spirit-world; in fact, evil apparently has no place in that realm.<sup>40</sup> Each of these heavenly worlds had their own ruler. The heavenly worlds were inhabited not only deified male beings but also by female ones, who formed the third class of inhabitants of the heavenly realm. To the second class of inhabitants of the heavenly world belonged the emissaries and servants of the male and female heavenly beings and the class of protected spirits who were subservient to the gods.

The people of Rarotonga believed in the existence of 10 heavens. On Mangaia, the heavenly world was called “Vatea’s sunny land”.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> KOCH, G. *Südsee gestern und heute. Der Kulturwandel bei den Tonganern und der Versuch einer Deutung dieser Entwicklung in Memory of William T. Mulloy*, p. 246.

<sup>39</sup> FIODOROVA, I. K. *Rapanui Myths and Legends as Reflections of Shamanistic Beliefs*, p. 143.

<sup>40</sup> BEST, E. *The Maori as He Was*, p. 40.

<sup>41</sup> HANDY, E. S. C. *Polynesian Religion*, p. 63.



The Samoans describe the sky, where the gods and souls of chiefs were based, as a being separated into 8, 9 or 10 spheres.<sup>42</sup> Many theologians and ethnologists assert that the notion of the heavenly world only came about in certain places in Polynesia under the influence of the preaching of Christian missionaries. However, as a counterargument, one can put forward the fact that the heavenly worlds and their inhabitants (i.e. the gods) are referred to in old chants and incantations which evidently originated before the arrival of Christian missions to particular islands.

### Conclusions

From the above it is clear that the Polynesian underworld is a mysterious and mystical place, a place that normally eludes the view of human beings and one that generally arouses fear and terror in the listener of these ancient tales. The underworld can take many forms: it is the home of gods and goddesses, the place of origin of the physical world, a dark region where demons and monsters dwell and a place where human spirits go after death.

The afterlife could have been situated in a variety of places – below the earth, on a remote western island identical to the ancestral homeland or in heaven where the gods lived. The inhabitants of western archipelagos such as Samoa and Tonga believed that souls went to Puluotu, the legendary homeland of ancestors from long ago, where Saveasi'uleo a Hikule'o ruled. It is necessary to emphasise the fact that Puluotu as the realm of the gods is in addition to western Polynesia also known in the Melanesian archipelago of Fiji in the form of Burotu.<sup>43</sup> In eastern Polynesia there is no discussion of Puluotu (the equivalent of this word carries the meaning of “beautiful”, “pleasant” and “clean”); it is replaced by Hawaiki in various modifications. On Easter Island the homeland was referred to as Hiva and was ruled by Makemake. The New Zealand Māori also knew of Hawaiki, but a partial synonym of this term was Pō, or night, darkness or Rarohenga. The ruler of this desolate world was a goddess called Miru in New Zealand and on Mangaia in the Cooks Islands archipelago, whereas in Hawaii Miru was referred to as the god Milu and his realm was known as the “Pit of the God Milu”. Miru was considered to be the horrifying lady of death who lived off miserable souls. The full descriptive name of this ruler was Hine-nui-te-po (The Great Lady of the Night). In Mangaian society the highest prestige was enjoyed by warriors, who would after death go to the Tiairi realm of the spirits,<sup>44</sup> a beautiful land of flowers where tales of battles fought were told and war dances performed. This

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<sup>42</sup> HANDY, E. S. C. *Polynesian Religion*, p. 92.

<sup>43</sup> TREGGAR, E. *The Maori-Polynesian Comparative Dictionary*, p. 879.

<sup>44</sup> GILL, W. W. *Myths and Songs from the South Pacific*, p. 178.

heavenly refuge was reserved for the souls of important members of society and brave warriors. In general, it was the case that the significant members of society and fallen warriors went to the heavenly worlds where they lived on in affluence, while the common people went to the underworld known as Pō, Raro, Rarohenga or Milu.

Polynesians firmly believed that the spirit world physically existed and that on certain occasions, humans as well as other creatures could travel there and back if they could find the proper entrance. In the Māui legend, for example, the entrance is an opening in the ground covered by soil and grass through which Māui's mother travels when she goes back and forth each day. In the Mangaian (Cook Islands) story of Kura and Eneene, it is merely a hole in the ground through which Eneene accidentally falls. In Samoa, its entrance is a hollow pit or cave, and at its depths there flows a river that carries travellers on to the underworld. In the Tuamotuan story of Rata, the hero Vahi-vero dives into a pool of water to reach the underworld. Some legends describe the entrance as having gates or doors, usually guarded by a god or goddess of the underworld, similar to classical mythology in which Cerberus guards the gates of Hades.<sup>45</sup>

There exist a number of alternative narratives on how the souls of the dead cross over to the other world. Probably the most widespread is the idea that the souls leap or climb down a large tree to the sea and from there make their way to the underworld. These sorts of notions occur in New Zealand and the Hawaiian Islands, where the souls of the dead lowered themselves down a giant pohutukawa. However, there exist other scenarios: according to one version, entry into the underworld was gained through a gate at the place where the sky meets the earth. On a lot of islands, the soul had to travel along a glistening path leading through the sea and then enter the underworld along with the setting sun.<sup>46</sup> In the Society Islands the entry to the underworld was next to two rocks: the rock of life and the rock of death. If the soul sat on the rock of life, it could return, but if not, then the way back was closed forever. In the Marquesas souls crossed a high mountain ridge.

Asides from the ideas that souls go to the underworld in some form or other; there are also myths which talk of the transformation of souls into inanimate objects or their embodiment as animals. The souls of heroes in New Zealand would change into stars, whose brightness would depend on the number of enemies they had vanquished. In the Marquesas the souls of tohungas changed into nightmares. On Niue they believed that the soul of a dying person would enter the closest object to the person at the moment of death: this could be an insect or even a lizard.<sup>47</sup> W. W. Gill writes that on Mangaia Island in the Cook

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<sup>45</sup> CRAIG, R. D. *Handbook of Polynesian Mythology*, pp. 259 – 260.

<sup>46</sup> ANDERSEN, J. C. *Myths and Legends of the Polynesians*, p. 266.

<sup>47</sup> HANDY, E. S. C. *Polynesian Religion*, p. 125.

Islands archipelago the souls of the dead would sometimes enter birds, fish and insects as well as inanimate objects such as mussels, stone and trees. In the Society Islands they believed that the sharp tinny sound which could be often heard close to settled areas, and which was most likely that of an ordinary insect, was the voice of the dead attempting to give some news about themselves.<sup>48</sup>

Many Polynesians stories tell of gods and demigods who travelled back and forth to the underworld, but the number of mortals who travelled there and back safely are much fewer. On Mangaia, for example, Kura fell through a hole into the underworld and was captured by demons, but her husband Eneene followed and eventually saved her. In New Zealand, a tragic story is told of the beautiful Pare and chief Hutu. Pare fell in love with Hutu, but he would not return her love. In anguish, Pare hanged herself and her spirit travelled to the underworld. Meanwhile, Pare's tribe held Hutu responsible, and to save his own life he followed her spirit below. Once there, Hutu had to pass several "tests" before Pare finally agreed to return to earth with him. A similar story is told in Hawai'i, where the rejected Kāwelu strangled herself and her spirit descended to the underworld. Her object of affection, Hiku-i-ka-nahele, had a change of heart and followed her. Being reunited below, the two returned to earth where they lived happily ever after.<sup>49</sup> In Tahiti Tafa'i recovers his wife's spirit from the underworld and restores it to her body.<sup>50</sup> In Samoa, the spirit of Sina, daughter of the king of Fiji, is recovered from the ninefold heaven and the girl comes back to life.<sup>51</sup>

Paradoxically, the underworld is the origin of all mortal ills as well as of all that is good. For example, after the separation of Sky Father and Earth Mother, the Māori god Whiro fled to the underworld with his followers where they became the originators of all human ills. These forces became the goblins, ogres and demons that lie in wait to snare human beings and drag them down to their destruction. But at the same time, the underworld is a place where all that is magical and good resides. The Tongan goddess Faimalie visited the underworld and brought back the yam, while Lohi brought back the taro - both staple foods throughout Polynesia. The Māori chief Ihingā brought back charms, songs and games for New Zealand; Māui located the fire goddess and brought back the secret of making fire for humans; and the chief Mataora from New Zealand brought back the important art of body tattooing.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>49</sup> CRAIG, R. D. *Handbook of Polynesian Mythology*, pp. 260 – 261.

<sup>50</sup> HENRY, T. *Ancient Tahiti, Based on Material Recorded by J. M. Orsmond*, pp. 563 – 564.

<sup>51</sup> KRÄMER, A. *Die Samoa Inseln*, pp. 121 – 124.

<sup>52</sup> CRAIG, R. D. *Handbook of Polynesian Mythology*, p. 260.

The Polynesians were aware of the cost of committing a bad deed, but it is not possible to compare this to the Christian idea of retribution for bad deeds. For them, a bad deed was considered to be insulting the gods or breaking a taboo and the person who did such things would be punished already on earth. The anger of the gods would follow after death. According to the abovementioned information, it is clear that everyone basically awaited the same fate. However, there are also differences where fallen warriors, whose fate is more desirable, have prominence. Also mentioned has been the realm of Tiari, or the heavenly world, where fallen warriors have fun and fight, eat chosen foods and enjoy the company of beautiful women.

Souls which had crossed over into the other world were invisible to the human eye and only people with extraordinary abilities could see them. However, those souls left wandering around in the world kept their appearance and it was possible to see them mostly at night and sometimes during the day. This sort of ghost was called “kehua” in New Zealand: it always had the same appearance as during its life as well as the same clothes and mental characteristics.

The principle of the mutual dependence of the soul, spirit and physical body of a person is one of the basic and most important concepts upon which religion is based: this is why the basis of belief concentrates on the reasons of death and the innumerable forms of healing and death rituals. Ghosts usually did not create in people a feeling of fear, except for dead enemies and those members of the tribe who had a tendency to do harm. The reason why they wandered around in the world and not got to the other world was because the necessary ceremonies had not been undertaken or that demons had harmed them and taken from them their natural pathway to the next world. Over time, these ghosts would become evil demons who would wander around places of birth and death waiting for the chance to throw themselves upon a miserable soul and devour it. The Polynesians believed that the soul could not settle in the other world so long as the soft tissue had not fallen from the bone. It is possible that the soul identified itself with the muscular tissue and was an ethereal part of the body, and they therefore believed that the soul may move around in the world while muscle tissue remained on the skeleton. Later on, as the tissue disappeared, the soul could then make its way to the other world.

At the time of death, the support of relatives was very important. They helped the soul on its way to the afterlife and insured that a pleasant place of rest awaited. A basic requirement was to look after the bodily remains and undertake the necessary rituals, which involved the cleaning of the body and the ritualistic side which dealt with the soul. Immediately after death, the body was normally washed and dressed and on a number of islands it was temporarily embalmed. It was important, however, to secure the body so that

evil spirits would not harm it. The Polynesians tried to protect the bodily remains of the deceased against desecration and preserve them so as to save them as an intermediary article with the next world and as an object of respect. The bones were very important as it was through these that a close relationship with the soul was maintained. This is why they placed them in concealed places such as caves, tombs and so on. Similarly to other people in the world, they realised that the soul needed food and clothing, which is why they placed these things next to the body. Prayers and songs once again served as protection for the soul. The most important part of the skeleton was the skull: as during life, this was the most sacred part of a human being in death as well. It was the place where the mana was situated and it had a close relationship to the soul. The dissection of skulls took place all over Polynesia. In the Society Islands and the Marquesas the skulls of the deceased played an important role in the cult of the ancestors. In ancient times on Samoa, Tahiti and the Marquesas, they were kept at home in wooden containers. In addition, on Easter Island there was a testified dissection of skulls.<sup>53</sup> Warriors carried them into battle because the mana of their ancestors protected them. In the Marquesas the bones of ancestors were used in fishing rituals and they were also carried in the baskets for catching fish.<sup>54</sup> In all of Polynesia it was a habit to prepare fish hooks from the bones of enemies. The most common method of burial was the placement of bodies into graves. Only the bones of the greatest chiefs would be preserved, while the bodies of less important chiefs were twisted into a circle and burned. Common people were buried in a sitting fashion also in caves in such a way so that their heads would be resting on their knees. For Polynesians, it was most typical to have a two-staged burial. This meant that the deceased was firstly buried and then after some time the body was exhumed and the cleansed bones were buried once more.

At first glance, it may seem that the diversity in the notions of Polynesians concerning the afterlife is remarkably large. This, however, concerns the level of appearance. It is not hard to find a common denominator or denominators behind this diversity. An important characteristic of the afterlife is its fundamental inaccessibility: Hawaiki is inaccessible due to its distance from particular islands. In certain cases the underworld is not physically distant, but its inaccessibility stems from its secrecy. When Maui was looking for his mother, who had departed early in the morning for the underworld, he found the entrance to this realm only through trickery even though it was not far away. In addition, as is apparent from the mythologies of various peoples, returning from the underworld is exceptional. Secondly, the departure of the

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<sup>53</sup> HANDY, E. S. C. *Polynesian Religion*, p. 134.

<sup>54</sup> GILL, W. W. *Historical Scatches of Savage Life in Polynesia*, p. 104.

dead is connected to the ancestors. Souls of the dead return to their ancestors from long ago. The inaccessibility is further emphasised by the mention of “lost” islands. While the dead go to the islands, the living can only catch a fleeting glimpse of them and as soon as they notice them, they disappear. The afterlife is situated in the west not only because that was where their ancestors were from but also because that was the place where the Sun dies. For Polynesians, the afterlife is marked by darkness and this is why the word Pō (“darkness” or “night”) is used. This is not only because darkness symbolises a lack of knowledge but also because darkness is below the earth, where the other world has been many times situated (Raro, Rarohenga, Lolofonua and so on).

From the various mythological aspects, it is clear that Polynesian eschatology has a common base. Essentially, three themes appear regularly: the afterlife, the homeland and the heavens. Also, the names of the gods which rule the souls of the dead are identical in many places. In other places, there are differences only because of phonetic changes in individual Polynesian languages. The departure of the soul to the other world takes place in a similar fashion. As has been mentioned above, there are certain differences between western and eastern Polynesia.<sup>55</sup> It is interesting to note that as the ancestors of the Polynesians began to spread out to other Polynesian island from the centre of migration in Tonga and Samoa around AD 300, its mythology over 1500 years (up to the time that European explorers began to record it in the 18th century) experienced little change. We can attribute this fact to the importance which Polynesians gave to myths. On a number of islands there were “schools” where chosen young male students would learn the complex mythology by heart. Similarly, a number of chants and incantations stayed in their unchanged ancient form due to the fact that the tohungas had learnt them by heart, and any mistake in their delivery would have been seen as most disrespectful against the gods.

It has been mentioned that the homeland of the ancestors and the place of the afterlife are known in western Polynesia as Puluotu. P. Geraghty in his study *Puluotu. Polynesian homeland*. JPS 1993, 102, pp. 343 – 384, regards Puluotu as the original pre-Polynesian homeland, which he specifically situates in the Eastern Lau Islands (Fiji), perhaps on Matuku. P. V. Kirch and R. Green in their book *Hawaiki, Ancestral Polynesia* (p. 96) say that Puluotu is the more ancient term, reconstructable as *buroutu*, which for Proto-Polynesian speakers probably referred to the Fijian archipelago, their immediate homeland and place of their ancestors. Sawaiki, or Hawaiki was a lexical innovation at the

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<sup>55</sup> A quite different mythology and religious imagination is present on Easter Island and will require a detailed examination in a separate study.

Proto-Nuclear Polynesian interstage, corresponding to the period when the original Proto-Polynesian speech community was breaking up as a coherent unit. Its origin at this time is significant: to the immediate descendants of the Ancestral Polynesians who began expanding out of the Samoa – Tonga homeland region, Sawaiki/Hawaiki indexed that homeland as the abode of the ancestors. Thus, the origin of Hawaiki marks the end of the Ancestral Polynesian period. The name would be carried by Polynesian voyagers throughout virtually the whole of eastern Polynesia, where it was variously given to islands, e.g. Hawai'i, Sawaiki or Hawaiki, after a linguistic change; this is essentially a recollection of the island of Savai'i, which lies in the Samoan archipelago. From the above it is possible to assert that the myths which speak of the homeland as a land where the souls of the dead are do not refer to imaginary islands but rather to real ones. These myths reflect the migratory patterns of the ancestors of the Polynesians to the east, which finished with the settlement of New Zealand around AD 900 – 1000.

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