

# THE PHENOMENON OF THE CULTURE HERO IN POLYNESIAN MYTHOLOGICAL SYSTEMS\*

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This article deals with the phenomenon of the culture hero Māui in Polynesian mythological systems. A culture hero is a mythical being found in the mythologies of many archaic societies. He is culture bringer, demiurg. The most famous is Greek Prometheus which has much in common with Polynesian Māui. He is characterized by several common features: he often invents new cultural goods or tools, for example, making fire or cultivating crops; he teaches people to make tools, provide food and perform arts. He introduces social structure, law, rules of marriage, magic, ceremonies and holidays. The article is divided into four blocks. The first focused with the culture hero in world mythology overall. The second with dissemination of the Māui myths in Oceania, the third is on origin of Polynesian culture hero and the last deals with the most important actions of Māui like fishing islands, snaring the sun and stealing of fire.

**Key words:** Māui, Culture Hero, Demiurg, Polynesian Mythology, Stealing of fire, Snaring of the Sun, Fishing Islands

## I. The phenomenon of the culture hero in world mythology

A great many oral traditions include myths of culture heroes. A culture hero is a mythical being found in the religious traditions and mythologies of many archaic societies. The culture hero is generally not the person responsible for the creation of the world, but is the one who completes it. He sometimes assists the supreme being in the creation of the world, yet the most important activity for the culture hero occurs after creation: making the world habitable and safe for humankind. The culture hero is considered a forefather and civilizer. He, unlike the supreme being, is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. Various scholars have

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referred to the culture hero as the “transformer”, “demiurge”, and “culture bringer” in English, “héros civilisateur” in French, and “Heilbringer” or “Kulturbringer” in German.

The German historian Kurt Breysig first introduced the term Heilbringer in 1905. Since then, the idea of the culture hero has been interpreted in various ways. Early interpretations emphasized the place of the culture hero in the evolution of the idea of a supreme being. Breysig, for example, saw the culture hero as belonging to a stage of religious development that was not only earlier than, but also inferior to, humankind’s awareness of a personal supreme being.

The culture hero is of interest for researchers not only due to his extraordinary popularity in the folklore and mythologies of various nations, but also due to the unusual complexity of his character, which often combines the traits of a benefactor of mankind with those of a fox and trickster, and supernatural, divine traits with purely earthly characteristics.<sup>1</sup>

The culture hero is a mythological hero who changes the world through invention or discovery. He is characterized by several common features: he often invents new cultural goods or tools, for example, making fire or cultivating crops; he teaches people to make tools and musical instruments, provide food, hunt for game, do handicrafts and perform arts. He introduces social structure, law, rules of marriage, magic, ceremonies and holidays.

Often, the deeds of culture heroes end up being responsible for the way the world is now. Sometimes they are depicted as creators or makers of the world. They, for example, draw the land out of the primeval ocean, create celestial bodies, regulate day and night, high tide and low tide, and create the first men and so on.<sup>2</sup> This activity could be described as an additional modification of the creation, or, in other words, as an effort to improve the position of humankind in the created world.

In ancient myths the culture hero often appropriates existing cultural conveniences: he simply finds them or steals them from their previous owner.<sup>3</sup> Classic examples are the Greek Prometheus stealing fire from the gods and Maui stealing fire from the goddess or god of the underworld in Polynesian myths.

Among the oldest of these myths are the myths of the origin of fire. Mankind received the gift of fire from culture heroes – the Greek Prometheus, Raven from Native North American traditions, the Polynesian demigod Maui, and Australian totem ancestors who also bear the traits of civilizers. Of later origin

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<sup>1</sup> KOMOROVSKÝ, J. *Prometheus. Mytologické paralely* [Prometheus. Mythological Parallels], p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> TOKAREV, S. *Mify narodov mira* [Myths of the World’s Nations], p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Celestial deities, spirits, a foremother, the mistress of the underworld, etc.

are the myths of the origin of cultural objects; these elucidate the way such objects were made with the help of a potter's tools, smith's tools and others.

Some mythologies, for example Aboriginal Australian mythologies, display a blend of the concepts of forefather, demiurge and culture hero. The culture hero has not only a human form, but often he is half human-half animal, or has a purely animal form. In Australian mythology a demiurge in animal form can change into a human and vice versa. This feature is also present in Polynesian mythology.<sup>4</sup>

At first sight, it may seem that among societies at an earlier stage of cultural evolution the prevalent notion of the cultural hero took the form of an animal.<sup>5</sup> However, I think that this is contradicted by the fact that we find the human demiurge in Australian mythologies.

In some mythologies the culture hero is attributed a divine origin; in others he is a demigod or only a spirit that acts on the command of a higher deity. For example, Prometheus is of purely divine origin. According to Hesiod's "Theogony", he is a son of Iapetus and the Oceanid Clymene. The Polynesian Maui is an example of a culture hero who was in some versions of myths of semi-divine origin: in Maori mythology he comes from the lineage of Tumatauenga, and in Hawaiian mythology he was mothered by the goddess Hina-a-ke-ahi (Hina of the fire). In other versions, Maui was born to ordinary parents. However, all available versions agree that after he was abandoned by his mother, he was raised and taught magical skills by gods.

A very typical feature of this character is profanity. A suitable example in this respect is not only the Greek Prometheus, but also the Polynesian Maui. Both of them try to defy and rise up against the gods, but both of them suffer for it. Prometheus is bound to a rock face as a punishment for stealing fire from heaven and every day he must put up with an eagle feasting on his liver. Although he is later set free, he forever has to wear a ring bearing a piece of the stone to which he was bound as a sign of disgrace. Maui has an even worse fate. According to the Maori version, while trying to gain immortality for mortals, he dies at the hand of the goddess of death, Hine-nui-te-po.

In many mythologies, there are dualistic themes in myths featuring two culture heroes arranging the world in a complementary manner. Dualistic cosmologies are present in all inhabited continents and show great diversity: they may feature culture heroes, but also demiurges. The two heroes may compete or collaborate;

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<sup>4</sup> Maui can change into a pigeon when he follows his parents into the underworld, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Some Australian tribes have myths which tell of a wild cat and a lizard which by means of a stone knife created the first humans. They looked like larvae powerlessly lying on rock cliffs rising from water. The cat and the lizard taught them to make fire by using friction and to prepare food. African peoples think of chameleons, spiders, antelopes, porcupines and other animals as their forefathers. Native North Americans believe their forefathers were ravens, minks, rabbits, coyotes and others.

they may be conceived as neutral or contrasted as good versus evil, be of the same importance or distinguished as powerful versus weak, be brothers or be not relatives at all. In many cases, a culture hero is one of several brothers, but he is always different from them thanks to peculiar and supernatural abilities. He often sees his twin as a rival: they constantly compete and their competition sometimes results in murder. This fratricidal motif is known from the oral traditions of the Iroquois<sup>6</sup> and certain peoples of Melanesia. Occasionally, his twin is his direct opposite.

On the island of New Britain in Melanesia there is a myth of two twin brothers, To Kabinana and To Karvuvu.<sup>7</sup> The former is considered to be an inventor of all good and useful things, such as fertile soil, fishing gear and customs. The latter is his antithesis: he is the creator of all evil, barren soil and all badly made things.<sup>8</sup>

Myths of culture heroes also occur in Africa; for the Zulu tribe it is Unkulunkulu and for the Hereras it is Mukuru. Both names mean “an old man” or “an ancestor”. Both figures are a blend of the traits of the demiurge and the culture hero. They taught people to work the land, make fire, use weapons, etc. The best-known example is probably the story of Prometheus and Epimetheus, who, unlike his brother, is clumsy.

In the mythology of the Australian Warramunga tribe, two brothers take on the role of culture heroes. The younger brother is the first to come up with the idea of obtaining fire, but it is the older one who succeeds in doing so. The younger one is depicted as clumsy. In Victoria the twin-brother myth speaks of wise Bungil and his wild brother Palian. The Kulin tribe attributes the appearance of a falcon to Bungil and thinks of Palian as a bat or a raven. The myth emphasizes their mutual animosity. Bungil bears the distinctive features of the culture hero because he organized people into exogamic phratries, set the rules for marriages and ceremonies and gave them fire.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the best-known and best-researched mythological figure of this type is the Greek culture hero Prometheus. Hesiod’s “Theogony” does not portray him as particularly different from the heroes of other mythological systems of archaic communities. He bears the traits of a trickster who enjoys making fun of the gods. However, Aeschylus does not mention any of his tricks in

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<sup>6</sup> The Iroquois twin culture heroes are Ioskecha and Taviskaron. In TOKAREV, S. *Mify narodov mira* [Myths of the World’s Nations], p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> According to my correspondence with Prof. Andrew Pawley, there are about 50 languages in New Britain. These look like names in the Tolai (= Kuanua) language. **to** is prefixed to names of males in Tolai.

<sup>8</sup> DIXON, R. B. *Oceanic Mythology. The Mythology of All Races*, pp. 122 – 124.

<sup>9</sup> KOMOROVSKÝ, J. *Únoscovia ohňa. Mýty a legendy o kultúrnych hrdinoch a zrode civilizácií* [Seizers of the Fire. Myths and Legends on Cultural Heroes and Civilization Birth], p. 24.

“Prometheus Bound”. It is possible that the motif of Prometheus chained to a rock in a gorge of the Caucasus Mountains stems from Caucasian folklore as there is the myth of Amirani, a hero-sufferer who was chained to Mount Elbrus as punishment for his desire to give mankind a carefree life. Also, Prometheus has his opposite in his brother Epimetheus, who is dull and clumsy. Due to his foolishness he married Pandora, who had been given to him as bride by Zeus, seeking revenge on Prometheus. Despite being warned by Zeus that she not open it, Pandora, overcome by curiosity, opened the jar that she had been given as a wedding gift in Epimetheus’ house and released the world’s ills and miseries which soon afflicted mankind.

Nearly all myths of the culture hero mention that besides good character qualities, he also possesses some bad ones. He is usually described as a trickster, joker or rascal. It is difficult to trace the origin of this peculiar character trait. The word that Paul Radin considers the most expressive of it is the English word “trickster”, which combines elements and nuances of meanings: “swindler”, “deceiver”, “fox”, “joker”, “wit”, etc. These character qualities shift the culture hero to the boundary of the sacral and profane.<sup>10</sup>

According to Robert D. Pelton, “Everywhere one looks among premodern peoples, there are tricky mythical beings alike enough to entice any human mind to create a category for them once it had met two or three. They are beings of the beginning, working in some complex relationship with the High God; transformers, helping to bring the present human world into being; performers of heroic acts on behalf of men, yet in their original form, or in some later form, foolish, obscene, laughable, yet indomitable”.<sup>11</sup>

In this archetypal form, the culture heroes called tricksters have been widely discussed and analysed: two representative and thorough studies, for example, are Paul Radin’s *The Trickster* (1956), which focuses on the trickster in the Winnebago myth cycle, and Lewis Hyde’s *Trickster Makes This World* (1998), which examines tricksters from a wide variety of cultures and discusses their effects on the modern artistic imagination. There seems to be fairly general agreement about the characteristics or properties of these tricky beings.<sup>12</sup>

According to Lewis Hyde, the trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox,<sup>13</sup> and can thus be seen as the archetypal boundary-crosser, although here Hyde notes that “there are also cases in which trickster creates a boundary, or brings to the surface a distinction previously hidden from sight”.<sup>14</sup> By this he

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<sup>10</sup> RADIN, P. *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*.

<sup>11</sup> PELTON, R. D. *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight*, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> LOCK, H. *Transformations of the Trickster*.

<sup>13</sup> HYDE, L. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischievous, Myth, and Art*, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

means that the trickster crosses both physical and social boundaries; the trickster is often a traveller, and he often breaks societal rules. Tricksters cross lines, breaking or blurring connections and distinctions between “right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead”.<sup>15</sup> The trickster often changes shape (turning into an animal, for example) to cross between worlds. In his role as boundary-crosser, the trickster sometimes becomes the messenger of the gods.

Leeming says that although he is clever, his desires sometimes land him in a lot of trouble. “He is often the butt of his own tricks, and even in his creative acts he is often crude and ‘immature’.”<sup>16</sup> In hunting cultures, the trickster is often depicted as a clever but foolish animal, led by his appetite. Paul Radin writes that “among the North American Indians, Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others, and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil, yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being.”<sup>17</sup>

Many researchers attempted to elucidate the complex problem of the origin of the figure of the culture hero by looking for the general cause of his coming into existence. Some searched for his historical roots; others concluded that the doings of culture heroes in mythical stories mirrored cosmic-meteorological and astronomical phenomena and the characters themselves should be viewed as solar, lunar and astral heroes. Many known typologies and definitions of culture heroes are inevitably imprecise as culture heroes in myths are much more diverse, depending on the local traditions in which they were born and depending on external interethnic influences. Although all characters of culture heroes stem from an original, undifferentiated, syncretic complex of ideas and religious, mythological, ethnic and aesthetic concepts and opinions, we are compelled to assume that they came into existence in different ways depending on which characteristic features prevailed locally. Also problematic are the concepts of ancestors who create individual cosmic and cultural objects and human beings, and the concepts of culture heroes who acquire objects which have been created but which are hidden or distant and need yet to be discovered. Their concepts are mutually interwoven.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> LEEMING, D. A., PAGE, J. *God: Myths of the Male Divine*, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> RADIN, P. *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, p. xxii.

<sup>18</sup> KOMOROVSKÝ, J. *Únoscovia ohňa. Mýty a legendy o kultúrnych hrdinoch a zrode civilizácií* [Seizers of the Fire. Myths and Legends on Cultural Heroes and Civilization Birth], pp. 22 – 23.

The phenomenon of the culture hero has been commented on by many scholars. Andrew Lang connected the culture hero with creators/demiurges. According to Kurt Breysig, the figure of the culture hero underwent a gradual development. At first, he was a semi-zoomorphic spirit, an ancestor, and later he turned into an anthropomorphic god who then developed into the figure of the supreme being. Paul Ehrenreich assumes that the culture hero is an emanation of a higher deity and is of astral origin. Nathan Söderblom acknowledged an inconspicuous metamorphosis of the culture hero into a god. He held the opinion that the *Heilbringer* group of mythical figures also includes the original creator, the forefather. Paul Radin claims that the culture hero and the main deity were originally independent of each other, but their features gradually got mutually mingled. Wilhelm Schmidt maintains that the concept of the culture hero overlaps with that of the forefather. In times of matriarchy he is identical with lunar heroes, and in times of patriarchy he is an arbiter between men and the higher gods. Emile Durkheim recognized an idealized ancestor in this figure. Yeleazar Meletinskii speaks of a syncretically undivided complex of the demiurge-culture hero at whose heart stands the forefather, no matter if related to clan, phratry or tribe.<sup>19</sup>

Sergei Tokarev thinks that the ancient figures of culture heroes, originally related to the totems of clan groups (phratries) gradually transformed into demiurges, the organizers of the world, and later into great gods of nature, gods living in heaven.<sup>20</sup>

Wilhelm Schmidt identified five types of culture hero:

1. The mythical hero who liberates men from enemy beings and protects them from dangers. He is to be found in fantasy tales and epic poems. He fights with bloodthirsty monsters which brought evil to the earth, caused rivers to dry up, a bad harvest, a lack of precipitation and natural disasters. This way the hero creates favourable conditions for undertaking the effort of civilization and releases civilizing energy.
2. The culture hero who bequeathed to people various arts and inventions, i.e. he gained or first made objects of culture and civilization for people. He taught them to make fire, grow cultured plants, make and use working tools, hunt for game and do handicrafts and various arts.

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<sup>19</sup> KOMOROVSKÝ, J. *Prometheus. Mytologické paralely*. [Prometheus. Mythological Parallels], p. 77.

<sup>20</sup> TOKAREV, S. *Mify narodov mira* [Myths of the World's Nations], p. 27.

3. The great lawmaker who established a social and political order, introduced a certain social organization, and gave people laws and rules of cohabitation of spouses, families, clans and tribes.
4. Sages and prophets who set or reformulate ethical and religious norms and introduce ceremonies and holidays.
5. The transformer, i.e. an organizer of the world, who recreates and organizes the existing creatures.<sup>21</sup>

In his work *Der Heilbringer* van Deursen characterized the culture hero as a mythical figure with supernatural powers, who played a role in recreating the earth after creation or after the flooding of the world or who gave people important laws, institutions and cultural conveniences. Van Deursen distinguishes four types of culture hero:

1. The organizer of the world
2. The culture hero who gave people inventions or institutions
3. The messenger descended from heaven to teach people about supernatural things
4. The arbiter between deities and human beings.<sup>22</sup>

The definitions make it clear that there is no agreement among scholars of religion or anthropologists on the characteristics of the culture hero. It is probably a result of the fact that individual types of the figure overlap and assume their characteristic features in individual cultures. However, what is important is that it is a figure that occurs in almost all mythologies.

## II. Dissemination of the Maui myths in Oceania

While in the European context the Greek Prometheus is the most famous culture hero, the mythological figure of Maui has the same status among the Polynesian peoples. Of all the myths from Polynesia, probably none have been more frequently quoted than those which recount the deeds and adventures of the

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<sup>21</sup> KOMOROVSKÝ, J. *Prometheus. Mytologické paralely*. [Prometheus. Mythological Parallels], p. 77.

<sup>22</sup> DEURSEN, A. van *Der Heilbringer. Eine ethnologische Studie über den Heilbringer bei den nordamerikanischen Indianern*.



demigod Maui. Among the Polynesians themselves, almost every group had its own versions of the tales, except for Tuvalu Island in the west of Polynesia and Easter Island in the east. The large number of variants, many of which have fortunately been recorded, make the Maui cycle one of the most important for the study of this whole area.<sup>23</sup>

W. D. Westervelt, who gathered together many stories about the hero from publications on several islands, wrote that the Maui myths are one of the strongest links in the mythological chain of evidence binding the scattered inhabitants of the Pacific into one nation.<sup>24</sup>

The Maui legends are of considerable antiquity. Of course, it is impossible to give any definite date, but there can scarcely be any question of their origin among the ancestors of the Polynesians before they scattered over the Pacific Ocean.<sup>25</sup>

There are three centres for these legends: New Zealand in the south, Hawaii in the north, and the Tahitian group including the Cook Islands in the east. In each of these groups of islands, separated by thousands of miles, there are the same legends, told in almost the same way, and with very little variation in names.<sup>26</sup> In the major islands of Western Polynesia, such as Tonga and Samoa, the same legends are present in more or less a fragmentary condition.<sup>27</sup>

Maui's stories are also known in Melanesia among the Polynesian Outliers.<sup>28</sup>

Maui's names and some of his adventures are also present in Micronesia. So far, however, accounts of his career have been recorded only from the Caroline Archipelago (Ponape, Feis, Lamotrek and Mogmog). Yap in the Carolines (Micronesia) is the westernmost island in the Pacific from which the name of Maui has been definitely reported.<sup>29</sup>

It is uncertain whether the Maui myths recorded from the Carolines are borrowed from a Polynesian source.

Perhaps it is present even farther west, for the Bontoc and Lepanto Igorot tribes of northern Luzon in the Philippines have stories about a beneficent culture hero called Lumaug.<sup>30</sup>

R. Roosman in his article *Coconut, Breadfruit and Taro in Pacific Oral Literature*, quotes that Luomala has associated Maui with Lumaug, a beneficent

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<sup>23</sup> DIXON, R. B. *Oceanic Mythology. The Mythology of All Races*, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> WESTERVELT, W. D. *Legends of Maui. A Demigod of Polynesia and his Mother Hina*, p. vii.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that these island groups are occupied by closely related peoples who speak Eastern Polynesian languages.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Fiji, the New Hebrides, Ulawa, Tikopia, Ontong Java and Santa Cruz.

<sup>29</sup> LUOMALA, K. *Maui of a Thousand Tricks*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> KEESING, F. M. *Taming Philippine Headhunters*, p. 154.

culture hero of the Bontoc and Lepanto Igorot tribes of Northern Luzon. One of Luomala's grounds for comparing Maui with Lumauig is that these culture heroes "have raised the Sky".<sup>31</sup>

### III. The Origin of Maui

Researchers into Polynesian mythology have been involved in many a debate about the origin of the Maui figure. According to collectors in the 19th century, Maui was a real person whose great feats of navigation and leadership made his name immortal. His followers and descendants elevated him to the rank of demigod and surrounded him, as the years rolled on, with more and more mythical deeds. Some of these scholars believe that the Maui myths are allegorical accounts of history and that if the fantastic elements are stripped from the myths, the nub of pure history will be exposed. Maui, according to this theory, was either an ancient ruler of the Polynesians in their pre-Polynesian homeland or a chief who led them into their present islands in the eastern Pacific. Maui may well have been a real navigator or discoverer. More accurately, someone by the name of Maui may have been in ancient times such a leader. Polynesians have the custom of deifying distinguished ancestors and of mixing fact and fantasy about them.<sup>32</sup>

Captain Cook was the European discoverer of Maui. He was the first to write about him. In his journal of June 1769 he describes a curious image which he saw Tahitians carrying. This image, about seven and a half feet high, was of basketwork with black and white feathers arranged to imitate hair and tattooed skin. The upper part of the figure had several knoblike lumps which represented the creature's many heads. Cook says that the people did not worship the image but used it as if it were the character Punch in a puppet show. Tupaia the interpreter told Cook that the figure represented Maui, who the Tahitians thought of as a many-headed giant, half-human and half-god, endowed with immense strength and many abilities. Tupaia told Cook many stories about Maui, but unfortunately Cook thought them too absurd to note down in his journal.<sup>33</sup> Fortunately, in later generations there were some European scholars who were so captivated by the stories of Maui that they recorded them in detail, for example, John White, W. D. Westervelt, George Grey and others.

Maui is regarded as an ancestor in nearly all parts of Polynesia. A complicating factor in distinguishing between history and myth is that chiefs are named after or adopt the names and deeds of gods and ancient heroes. Polynesians frequently start off a family genealogy with Maui as their earliest

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<sup>31</sup> ROOSMAN, R. Coconut, Breadfruit and Taro in Pacific Oral Literature, p. 219.

<sup>32</sup> LUOMALA, K. *Maui of a Thousand Tricks*, pp.18 – 19.

<sup>33</sup> WHARTON, W. J. L. (Ed.) *Captain Cook's Journal during His First Voyage Round the World Made in H. M. Bark "Endeavour," in 1768 – 1771*, p. 83.

ancestor because of the myth that he fished up the island where the family now resides. Residents also exhibit relics to prove that Maui once lived on their island. They point out his footprints in the reef, the marks left by his sun-snaring ropes on the rocks, and his weapons, which have become stars in the sky. These relics prove to them that Maui actually lived on their island.<sup>34</sup> No other personage in Pacific lore has as many or as great a variety of visual illustrations of their accomplishments as Maui. According to all the Maui myths, he was one of the Polynesian demigods. His parents belonged to the family of supernatural beings. He himself possessed supernatural powers.

The New Zealanders claim Maui as an ancestor of their most ancient tribes and sometimes class him among the most ancient of their gods, calling him “the creator of land” and “creator of man”. Westervelt in his book *Legends of Maui. A Demigod of Polynesia and his Mother Hina* mentions Tregear’s claim that Maui was sometimes thought to be “the sun himself”, “the solar fire” and “the sun god”, while his mother Hina was called “the moon goddess”. The noted greenstone god of the Maoris of New Zealand, Potiki, may well be considered a representation of Maui-Tiki-Tiki, who was sometimes called Maui-po-tiki (*potiki* means youngest child).<sup>35</sup>

Among the Maori, Maui is seen as one of the heroes of antiquity. He is described as performing all kinds of marvellous tricks, and rejoices in the name of “Deceitful Maui” and “Maui the Trickster”. However, he apparently personifies light, or day, and is credited in many places as having drawn up lands from the depths of the ocean.<sup>36</sup>

In Hochstetter’s work on New Zealand a statement is made that Maui was the creator of the world, but no Maori myth exists that makes any such claim. A further remark by the same writer to the effect that Maui “as god of the atmosphere and lord of the deep, as god of the creation in heaven and on earth, is identical with the cosmogonic supreme deities of other Polynesian islands” is incorrect in all aspects.<sup>37</sup>

If a god is defined as a supernatural being who receives worship, then Maui is rarely (if ever) classified as a god. Evidence in the form of hearsay, native statements or the actual observation and experiences of Europeans that Maui ever had worshippers is so rare, obscure, and uncorroborated as to be practically absent or atypical. More often they identify him as a demigod and a spirit who was once an ancestor of supernatural skill. The fundamental conflict in Maui’s personality is implied in the Polynesian dual classification of him in terms of

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> WESTERVELT, W. D. *Legends of Maui. A Demigod of Polynesia and His Mother Hina*, pp. 3 – 4.

<sup>36</sup> BEST, E. *The Maori – Volume 1*, p. 141.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

both divine and earthly rank. To Tahitians he is a *tupua*<sup>38</sup> and to Hawaiians a *kupua*, a supernatural being and wonder-working trickster who is half-human and half-god.

When Tuamotuans talk of Maui as a person who once lived but who is now dead, they call him an *atua*, which to them is any unusual being with supernatural or “supernormal” qualities. Society Islanders regard an *atua* as a god of high rank.<sup>39</sup>

Tongans usually say that the Maui family belongs to the order of created gods who are not, however, spiritual beings like the Tangaloa family. As in Tonga, Maui is closely associated with the earth in Mangaia, where he is a guardian of the earth.<sup>40</sup>

S. Percy Smith, a former governor of Niue, writes that in Niuean mythology Maui is not a god but merely a hero who has gained much glory through his actions.<sup>41</sup>

Thomson in his book *Savage Island* considers Maui to be like Loki of the Nibelung myth.<sup>42</sup>

According to Gifford, in Tonga he was a culture hero and demigod.<sup>43</sup>

Te Rangi Hiroa in the book *Ethnology of Mangareva* says that Mangarevans regard Maui as a hero with supernatural powers, but they do not worship him; he intervenes in the chronology between the gods and legendary heroes.<sup>44</sup>

Conflicting as the statements about Maui-tikitiki in Efate, Aneityum, Tanna, Aniwa and Futuna in the New Hebrides are, the impression remains that he received some worship on this southwestern boundary to which knowledge of Maui had spread. People regarded him with ambivalent feelings derived from the local interpretation of his character as a spirit with a dual nature.<sup>45</sup>

Maui has the typical qualities of a trickster who plays malicious tricks on the gods and his relatives. He is sly and always tries to do things by means of petty artifice.

Maui was loved but not worshipped; he was earth-bound yet a “heaven-burster”, comic yet tragic, petty and heroic, boy and man, a benefactor and destroyer.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The word *tupua*, *tupu'a*, etc., is also known in Western Polynesia: e.g. Niuean *tupua* ‘1. giant, legendary creature, monster, 2. ancient god’, Tongan *tupu'a* ‘ancient, venerable, historic’, Samoan *tupua* ‘idol’.

<sup>39</sup> LUOMALA, K. *Maui of a Thousand Tricks*, p. 125.

<sup>40</sup> GILL, W. W. *Myths and Songs from the South Pacific*, p. 51.

<sup>41</sup> SMITH, P. S. *Niue Island and Its People*, p. 197.

<sup>42</sup> THOMSON, B. *Savage Island, an Account of a Sojourn in Niue and Tonga*, p. 84.

<sup>43</sup> GIFFORD, E. W. *Tongan Society*, pp. 290 – 291.

<sup>44</sup> TE RANGI HIROA (BUCK, P.) *Ethnology of Mangareva*, p. 306.

<sup>45</sup> LUOMALA, K. *Maui of a Thousand Tricks*, p. 127.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

He defied an endless number of taboos in a society where taboo played a big role. J. F. H. Wohlers wrote that Maui was a strange person – not a god, and not like other men, neither good nor absolutely bad, but always dealing in mischief and wicked practical jokes. He is certainly an ancient personage, for he and his deeds are known and talked about by the whole Polynesian race.<sup>47</sup>

Maui is neither a primal god in Polynesian genealogies nor a child of the primal parents. The Maori do not include him among the children of Rangi and Papa. He was born several generations later. He is not among the first Marquesan gods of creation who emerged after the separation of “the level above” and “the level below”.<sup>48</sup>

Moui, listed among the primal Marquesas gods as the deity of circumcision, should not be confused with Maui the earth-fisher.<sup>49</sup>

Though “Te Maui” is one of the four functioning Tongarevan gods, he is not one of the eleven children of the primal parents, Atea and Hakahotu, who represent the upper and lower strata of the world, comparably to Rangi and Papa.<sup>50</sup>

Maui usually appears not earlier than three or four generations after the birth of the children of the primeval parents. For example, the genealogy of a noble family of the Maori Tuhoe tribe begins with Rangi and Papa, whose child was Tane, the father of Hine-ahu-one, the first woman. Tane married his daughter and begot two more girls, who also became his wives. Next in the genealogy is Muri-ranga-whenua, whose jawbone Maui was later to take for a weapon. Muri’s child was Taranga, the mother of Maui.<sup>51</sup> From Maui-tikitiki the line of descent is traced down to the most recent chief in this distinguished genealogy.<sup>52</sup>

In certain Rarotongan genealogies which name almost a hundred ancestors back from A.D. 1900, the Maui family appears between the seventieth and eightieth names.<sup>53</sup> In Mangaia, Maui-tikitiki is in the fifth generation (when we count from the first).<sup>54</sup>

Rarotongan history presents Maui as a son of Tangaroa, and Hina as a daughter of Vai-takere, and also the wife of Tangaroa. According to Smith’s computation, if the Vai-takere in question is identical with the person of this

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<sup>47</sup> WOHLERS, J. F. H. *The Mythology and Traditions of the Maori in New Zealand*, pp. 3 – 53.

<sup>48</sup> HANDY, C. E. S. *The Native Culture in the Marquesas*, p. 244.

<sup>49</sup> DELMAS, S. *La religion ou le paganisme des Marquisiens*, pp. 41, 48.

<sup>50</sup> BUCK, P. *Ethnology of Mangareva*, pp. 86 – 87.

<sup>51</sup> Hence the name given to him in Maori, ‘Maui-tikitiki-a-Taranga’.

<sup>52</sup> BEST, E. *Tuhoe: the Children of the Mist*, p. 761.

<sup>53</sup> SMITH, P. S. *Hawaiki: The Whence of the Maori*, pp. 137 – 177.

<sup>54</sup> BUCK, P. *Mangaian Society*, p. 25.

name who appears in the Rarotongan genealogies, this would place Maui and Hina as early as the first century A.D.<sup>55</sup>

In Tokelau in Western Polynesia, Maui and Tikitiki, who are regarded as two different persons, compete in genealogies to be named as the father of the first man. Variant genealogies put them later in time, as descendants of the first man, not as his ancestors.<sup>56</sup>

Hawaiian tradition states that Oahu was peopled by Maui and his wife. The Hawaiian Ulu genealogy includes Maui and his brothers in the twenty-second generation from the primal parents, Wakea and Papa.<sup>57</sup> According to the Hawaiian Kumulipo chant of the creation of the world, Maui appears in the fifteenth of the sixteenth eras. The sixteenth era begins with the line, “Maui was the man and Hina-ke-aloha-ila was the wife” and continues the genealogy back to the god Lono.

The table below demonstrates that in almost all Polynesian societies whose mythologies have been recorded Maui was considered a being with supernatural power. In most cases he was regarded as a demigod. Only the myths from Niue Island speak of him as being merely a hero. However, given that the mythology from this island has been preserved only in fragments, it is possible that in earlier times Niueans viewed Maui as belonging to the era of the gods. In terms of his origin, there are no apparent differences in the recorded myths of Eastern and Western Polynesia, yet it must be said that the myths of this culture hero are much scarcer in Western Polynesia, or, compared to Eastern Polynesia, much fewer recordings of the myths have been preserved. Even if a more complex recording of the myth is available, it never speaks of the origin of this culture hero.

**Table 1 Maui’s origin**

Eastern Polynesia	
New Zealand	The ancestor of their most ancient tribes, sometimes classed among the most ancient of their gods, the creator of the land, the creator of man, the sun himself, the sun god and identical with the cosmogonic supreme deities. He was not among the children of Rangi and Papa; he was born several generations later.

<sup>55</sup> SMITH, P. S. *Hawaiki the Original Home of the Maori*, p. 154.

<sup>56</sup> MACGREGOR, G. *Ethnology of Tokelau Islands*, pp. 16 – 24.

<sup>57</sup> FORNANDER, A. *An Account of the Polynesian Race*, p. 191.

<b>Tahiti</b>	A supernatural being: half man, half god
<b>Hawaii</b>	A supernatural being: half man, half god
<b>Tuamotu</b>	Known as Tupuatupua – which means “great miracle man” or an <i>atua</i> , which is any unusual being with supernatural or supernormal qualities.
<b>Mangareva</b>	A hero with supernatural power
<b>Mangaia</b>	Closely associated with the earth, where he is a guardian of the earth. He appears in the fifth generation.
<b>Western Polynesia</b>	
<b>Tonga</b>	A demigod
<b>Niue</b>	A hero
<b>Samoa</b>	His origin is not mentioned.

#### IV. Maui as a Culture Hero

Maui is considered a culture hero because he perfectly meets the criteria for such a mythological being. He is a benefactor of human beings: in fact, they lived cheerless lives until he appeared. Maui forced the gods to share their comforts with mankind. He is partly also believed to be a creator or a transformer of the existing condition of the world.

Maui never created anything from nothing; he is only a transformer. According to Hawaiians, when man was created he was able to stand upright but not move because his arms and legs were jointless and bound by a web of skin. Maui was furious with the motionless creature. He broke its legs, ankles, knees, and hips to create joints, tore the arms away from the body, and destroyed the web. As a result, man can move from place to place and does not have to stand still like an ironwood tree. Although Maui neglected to make fingers or toes, mankind developed them while struggling to gather food. According to the Maori, Maui himself, like many Polynesian supernatural beings, had only three fingers, more than enough for all kinds of good and bad deeds.<sup>58</sup>

Very similar versions of myths are known among aboriginal Australians. Their culture heroes are not creators either, but rather those who put the finishing touches to the world. As one of the myths has it, the first men were

<sup>58</sup> WESTERVELT, W. D. *Legends of Maui. A Demigod of Polynesia and His Mother Hina*, p. 132.

found lying in mud, limbless, powerless, and the culture heroes carved out their arms, legs, fingers, eyes and ears with a sharp stone knife.

It is very interesting that Maui is usually described as an adolescent or a very young man, but never as an older man.

In Polynesia he is known by the name Maui, but his name underwent gradual changes and he had many nicknames. The name Maui has different modifiers in different parts of Polynesia, e.g. Maui-tikitiki, Maui-kisikisi and Maui-ti'ti'i. The table below shows variations of Maui's name in a number of Polynesian societies:

**Table 2 Maui's Names**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Island</b>
Maui-tikitiki	New Zealand, Chathams, Tuamotus (except Vahitahi), Cook Islands, Mangareva, Aneityum, Efate, Nguna (New Hebrides)
Maui-ti'ti'i	Society Islands
Maui-tikatika	Vahitahi (Tuamotus)
Maui-kikii or - kiikii or ikiiki	Hawaiian Islands
Maui-kijikiji	Tonga and Fiji
Maui-kisikisi	Tonga and Uvea
Moea-tiktiki	Rotuma
Mo-sigsig	Santa Cruz
Mo-tiketik	Yap and Feis (Carolines)
Mo-tgitig	Yap (Carolines)
Maau-tik	Lamotrek (Carolines)
Ma-thikethik, Maitix	Mogmog (Carolines)
Maitik	Ponape (Carolines)
Me-tikitiki	Tikopia
Maui-tikitiki	Aneityum, Efate, Nguna
Ma-tikitiki	Tanna, Futuna, Aniwa, Aneityum (New



	Hebrides)
Mo-shikishi	Aniwa, Futuna (New Hebrides)
Maui-tukituki	Efate (New Hebrides)
Maui-tikitiki	Efate and Tanna
Ma-tiktiki, Ma-tiktik, Mo-tikitiki	Tanna
Amo-shishiki, Moshi, Mo-shishiki, Maui-siki	Futuna
Ma-tshiktshiki	Aniwa
Moi-tikitiki, Mo-tukketukke	Aneityum <sup>59</sup>

Researchers who were not professional ethnologists have tended to artificially modify myths and created a universal model which later spread into several regions of Polynesia. A similar role, the one of normalizers, was also attributed to priests in the pre-contact period at the sanctuary (marae) of Opo'a on Ra'iatea Island. They made an effort to systemize myths and intervened in the composition of the godly pantheon.

Although the myths about the culture hero Maui were known in many islands of Polynesia, the greatest development of the cycle has taken place in New Zealand and in central Polynesia (e.g. the Society Islands, the Tuamotus and the Cook Islands).

The legends of Hawaii, Tonga, Tahiti, New Zealand and the Cook Islands make this youngest Maui “the discoverer of fire”, “the ensnarer of the sun”, “the fisherman who pulls up islands”, “the man endowed with magic” or “Maui with spirit power”.<sup>60</sup>

His last and noblest exploit in Maori mythology, the one in which he lost his life, was his attempt to destroy death by entering the womb or open mouth of the sleeping Hine-nui-te-po (the great lady of the night), the goddess of death who dwelt in the underworld.<sup>61</sup>

The complete Maui mythological cycle is to be found in the Kumulipo, a creation chant translated by the Queen of Hawaii, Liliuokalani. The Kumulipo chant contains these motifs:

<sup>59</sup> LUOMALA, K. *Maui of a Thousand Tricks*, pp. 24 – 25.

<sup>60</sup> WESTERVELT, W. D. *Legends of Maui. A Demigod of Polynesia and His Mother Hina*, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> HANDY, C. E. S. *Polynesian Religion*, p. 118.

- 1/ birth under strange circumstances
- 2/ the lifting of heaven
- 3/ the stealing of fire
- 4/ the pulling of land out of the sea
- 5/ the slowing-down of the celestial motion of the sun
- 6/ the rescue from a water monster
- 7/ death.<sup>62</sup>

The Maui myths are remarkable. They are not only different from the myths of other nations, but they are unique in the character of the actions recorded. Maui's deeds rank in a higher class than most of the mighty efforts of the demigods of other nations and races, and are usually of more utility. Hercules accomplished nothing that compares with "lifting the sky", "snaring the sun", "fishing for islands", "finding fire in his grandmother's finger-nails", "learning from birds how to make fire by rubbing dry sticks" or "getting a magic bone" from the jaw of an ancestor who was "half-dead" (i.e. dead on one side and who therefore could well afford to let the bone on that side go for the benefit of a descendant). The Maui legends are full of helpful imaginings which are distinctly Polynesian.<sup>63</sup> Whatever Maui did was done well. His acts were always phenomenal.

His popularity among Polynesians lies in the universal appeal of his adventures and of his mischievous and disobedient personality. The inhabitants of Oceania had no writing before Europeans introduced the art. Knowledge of Maui and his adventures was circulated by word of mouth from island to island and from generation to generation for hundreds of years.<sup>64</sup>

Since Polynesians attributed extraordinary significance to an accurate interpretation of myths, karakias and spells, the Maui myths have been preserved almost in the very same form as they were passed on by oral tradition before the ancestors of Polynesians dispersed across this part of the Pacific. The versions from Melanesia and Micronesia display much more significant variations. However, when we take into consideration that the myths are spread across 5,000 km from Yap Island in the west to Mangareva in the east and across 4,500 km from the Hawaiian Islands in the north to New Zealand in the south, it is remarkable because they show great similarity across such a wide area.

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<sup>62</sup> BECKWITH, M. *Hawaiian Mythology*, p. 227.

<sup>63</sup> WESTERVELT, W. D. *Legends of Maui. A Demigod of Polynesia and his Mother Hina*, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> LUOMALA, K. *Maui of a Thousand Tricks*, p. 10.

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