IO – THE SUPREME GOD OF POLYNESIANS?

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This contribution is dealing with the question of faith in a supreme being of Polynesia. Believes in this God, called Io, Ihoiho or Kiho, appear in the written records from the end of the 19th century. The problem consists of the fact they appeared after the first contacts with Christianity and no doubt the informants were already influenced by the new faith. Nowadays the specialists incline more to the concept that the existence of a supreme deity cult is the result of the impact of Christian teaching.

Keywords: monotheism, Io, supreme being, Polynesian religion

The Polynesian religion has its roots in the cult of ancestors and its nature is polytheistic. This is generally valid for the whole of Polynesia despite the differentiation that has obviously taken place throughout the centuries between its Western and Eastern parts. The pantheon of the Eastern Polynesia is dominated by a tetrad of first class deities including Tane, Tu, Rongo and Tangaroa. In the Western Polynesia, however, we meet only with Tangaloa (or rather with a family of Tangaloas) whose etymology remains questionable and there are attempts to derive it from Melanesia.

The origin of Polynesian gods still requires explanation. According to one theory the Polynesian gods may be characterized as deified ancestors while other authors suggest that we are concerned with personified forces of nature. And we cannot exclude that both views are partly true. Perhaps the local minor deities are derived from remarkable and important ancestors – or these deities are present in the relevant natural phenomena. Neither can multiple representations of the phenomena be excluded.
The most widespread supernatural beings obviously existed in the consciousness of the Polynesians prior to their dispersion throughout the Eastern Pacific; this may be confirmed not only by the wide distribution of Tangaloa (Tangaloas) but also by the presence of the cultural hero or demi-god Maui in both parts of Polynesia and also in the neighbouring Melanesian archipelagos. Further gods may have appeared upon the stage after the fresh Polynesian settlers had created stabilized and organized communities. However, the inherited religions have developed under different social, economic and sometimes even natural conditions.

There can be no doubt that information concerning individual religious and mythological systems may differ in their quality and reliability. Quite a few of them may be at least partly questionable sometimes because observers were not competent to correctly interpret information and their knowledge of both local language and local culture was fragmentary. Sometimes they may have been tempted to modify the acquired texts to their preconceived moral ideas, to the Biblical mores or even to important European customs. And, finally, many non-professional collectors were not aware of the existence of alternative versions of myths.

Religion exerted a far-reaching influence upon all aspects of the community and upon the behaviour of individuals. The Polynesians approached their gods at every opportunity, for example, when appealing to their help or protection when fishing, during war or even when building their houses, but also at the fieldwork and, of course, at various social occasions. People were afraid of death, just as of disruption and chaos without the protection of their gods. Without obeying deities the world order was believed to be unthinkable and no one dared to provoke the anger of the gods. The peace of the soul was likewise guaranteed by the gods and everybody tried to avoid the threatening fury of deities.

And yet, strangely enough, the reverence to the Polynesian gods was not without limits. Occasionally they could have lost the favour of the people quite easily. Maoris pragmatically maintained that gods may die when people stop revering them. Sometimes people could get rid of gods who were not able helping them (e.g. in Tahiti). For example, the Christianization of the Maoris indicates that the traditional gods were not always abandoned right away and maybe the natives were to some extent sorry to part with them; or decided to approach their original gods with lesser pleas while on the other hand more important prayers were addressed to the powerful Christian God. Another serious reason for rejection of a traditional deity must have been the defeat in a tribal war sometimes ascribed to the loss of mana. And obviously the same must have happened when too many members of the tribe
died suddenly. Such a helpless and useless god could have been buried, burnt or put into a boat and subsequently confided to sea currents.

In addition to traditional gods, possibly deified ancestors or personified natural phenomena, the ideas of a supreme being appeared. These supreme divine beings were recorded in New Zealand, the Hawaiian Islands, in Tahiti and in the Cook Islands.

Elsdon Best has categorized various Maori gods ("atua") into 4 groups:

1/ a supreme being  
2/ gods of various spheres – personified natural phenomena  
3/ regional, widely known gods  
4/ local beings, dead ancestors and familiar demons of local importance

I believe that this categorization is acceptable in general features but the problem of authenticity of the supreme god deserves attention. That is why we should apply several contradictory views to this problem in order to explain it.

An idea of the existence of a supreme deity has been known in many religions as well as in mythologies of the world. Such a being might or might not operate as the only god in the sense of monotheism but it was often perceived as the supreme god among other gods. The ideas of such a supreme deity occurred in New Zealand where he was called Io as well as in Tahiti where his name was Iho or Ihoiho, and was worshipped in Hawaii and in Tuamotu as Kiho.

Probably the first European to learn of Io was C. O. Davis, who featured a few details in his publication "The Life and Times of Patuone", published in 1876. On p. 12 Davis wrote "the ancient Maoris, as far as can be gathered from their traditions, apprehended a supreme being known under various designations, as Ranginui, i.e., the Heavenly Great, etc."²

Davis writes "...a distinguished Maori Chieftain some years ago, he inadvertently revealed the fact that the Maoris, in the olden times, worshipped a supreme being whose name was held to be so sacred that none but the Priest might utter it at certain times and places. The name was Io, perhaps an abbreviation of Iouru".³ And then he continues: "Witnessing my anxiety to obtain further information on the subject, he refused to disclose any more Maori secrets as he called them, and politely referred me to an old Priest who resided about one hundred miles off. Patuone acted in precisely the same

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¹ BEST, E. The Maori as He Was, p. 68.  
³ Ibid., p. 13.
manner when an attempt was made by me to procure from him some particulars regarding certain ancient Maori rites."\(^4\)

At the end of the above-mentioned book (pp. 132, 133) Davis published an old recitation to Io. Unfortunately he did not include the date and the name of the interpreter.

"Nekea e Whakatau
Ki runga o Hawaiki,
Whakaturia to whare,

Me ko te maru a Io;
Nga tokorua a Taingahue,
I maka ki runga,
Hei tohu mo te rangi era."

"Move on, O Whakatau,
Move to Hawaiki,
Establish there thy house, (temple)
As though it were (beneath)
The maru (shelter, or sacred headship, or protecting care)
Of Io
The two of Taingahue (said to be an ancestor,)
Were placed above
As signals in the heavens."\(^5\)

A lot of information about Supreme Being named Io mentioned John White in his monumental a few volumes book, "Ancient History of Maori, his Mythology and Traditions: Horo-Uta or Taki-Tumu Migrations". The first volume was published in 1887.

The first chapter he started with an incantation chanted whilst planting the kumara, where Io occurred too.

"....Kapakapa, kapakapa tu taku wairua, ki te Ao
Taku manawa ka irihia nei
E tupe tane, tupe Tane.
Io.
Tenei au e tupe Tane

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 14.
\(^5\) Ibid., pp. 132-133.
Ko Whiti-te-ramarama au e tupe Tane.
Ko Tama-te-ahu-aho,
Ko Tama-te-ahu-ake,
Ko Tama-i-ahu-retireti,
Ko Tama-i-ahu-oro-wai,
Taku paenga ruwai, E Apo e:
E Apo e,
Io.
Kapua hekeheke iho i runga o Rehia,
Tuhi te uira, rapa te uira
Ko ana hau, ka tahu ai,
Tena koa te makopu wananga
Te tu mai nei, koia kia toia,

Kiatakona ki te kauwhau ariki

Taku rei, tuku rei,
Tuku rei ka whati,
He Toroa, he Toroa, he ta
Io."

"...My spirit yearns, and now,
O god of man! deprive
My enemies of power.
O Io!
O god of man! I now
Am at my work—
My crops am planting,
Moisten my plantation
And cause my crops to grow.
O Io!
O cloud! descend from Rehia [a mountain],
And lightnings flash, and winds descend,
And yield an increase;
Whilst I my offering make,
And chant my sacred song
To him, the One supreme.

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Oh, that that which to me is precious
May not now be blighted
By the salt sea-wind or gale!
O Io!"7

White said, that members of the Ngāti Hau tribe believed that Io is really the god. He made the heaven and the earth. The following is the opening of one incantation repeated to him at the time that the bones of a corpse were being exhumed. At the conclusion of this incantation another one was repeated to Tio-rea (great reverberating sound), who was the pet of the noted Ue-nuku. Ue-nuku was a man, but after death he was deified. Io made Tiki.

"E Io e, rangi tapapa mai e koe
A taua tama, ko te whakarongorongo
I raro i to tawhito
Tapa rongo nui a Rangi
Ka totoko Rangi ki te ahu Rang."8

"O Io! O! Put our children
All in a line, and name them,
That they may hear
Words from your seat (throne)—
From the great seat
Of fame in the heaven.
Heaven moves to meet
The coming of its hosts."9

According to members of the Ngāti Ruanui tribe Io was a sign of good or evil. The involuntary twitching of any part of the human body was recognized as Io.

In addition to C. O. Davis’ remarks concerning the god Io, the only detailed account of Io is in a manuscript with English translations, published in 1913 as "The Lore of Whare-wananga or Teachings of the Maori College on Religion, Cosmogony and History".10

The sources for this material were the writings by Christian H. T. Whatahoro. Whatahoro acquired this information in Whare wananga where

8 Ibid., Vol. 1 (Text in Maori language), p. 5.
9 Ibid., Vol. 1 (Text in English language), p. 3.
10 LANGDON, R. The Lost Caravel, p. 250.
two tohungas Te Matorohanga and Nepia Pohuhu lectured in 1865. Whatahoro's manuscript was approved by Tane-nui-a-rangi Committee in 1907 as a tradition of the Ngaati Kahungunu tribe in New Zealand. It has been spread from there. In accordance with their cult all gods are just one god who has several names. Smith (translator of that material), believed that god Io was never known to many people, only to a narrow circle of chosen people. It is questionable whether the common people ever heard his name.

Smith was told that the manuscript had been dictated to Whatahoro in 1863 by an old tohunga of the Wairarapa, Moihi Te Matorohanga. Subsequent textual analysis by Bruce Biggs and David Simmons has shown that the manuscript was a composite, including pages of English text recorded by Whatahoro's Pakeha father, J. M. Jury, around 1840, traditions recorded by Whatahoro from recitations of oral traditions in a specially constructed whare wananga by Te Matorohanga, Nepia Pohuhi and other tohunga, and additional material copied more recently by Whatahoro from other sources. Smith was told that the manuscript had been dictated to Whatahoro in 1863 by an old tohunga of the Wairarapa, Moihi Te Matorohanga. Subsequent textual analysis by Bruce Biggs and David Simmons has shown that the manuscript was a composite, including pages of English text recorded by Whatahoro's Pakeha father, J. M. Jury, around 1840, traditions recorded by Whatahoro from recitations of oral traditions in a specially constructed whare wananga by Te Matorohanga, Nepia Pohuhi and other tohunga, and additional material copied more recently by Whatahoro from other sources. Smith was told that the manuscript had been dictated to Whatahoro in 1863 by an old tohunga of the Wairarapa, Moihi Te Matorohanga. Subsequent textual analysis by Bruce Biggs and David Simmons has shown that the manuscript was a composite, including pages of English text recorded by Whatahoro's Pakeha father, J. M. Jury, around 1840, traditions recorded by Whatahoro from recitations of oral traditions in a specially constructed whare wananga by Te Matorohanga, Nepia Pohuhi and other tohunga, and additional material copied more recently by Whatahoro from other sources.

Smith's volume on Io and the other lore of the whare-wananga was enthusiastically received and accepted by Best and other Maori scholars of the time.

In Elsdon Best's writings, especially in his book "Maori Religion and Mythology" printed in 1924 there is a lot of information on Io taken over from "The Lore of Whare-wananga or Teachings of the Maori College on Religion, Cosmogony and History".

According to Best, the cult of Io was the acme of the esoteric beliefs of the higher minds of the people. It was unknown to the majority of the people, being confined to the first order of priestly adepts and the superior families. We may characterize it as an aristocratic cult to which only high chiefs were initiated.

Best in his book "Maori Religion and Mythology" claimed "I was told by the last of the wise men of the Tuhoe tribe that Io was the first of all gods, and the principal one. The old man said — "The cult of Io was very ancient. He was a god of very ancient times. It was he who was the origin of all gods. He was the beginning (or first) of the gods".

Best's second informant, likewise unnamed but a member of the Ngai Tahu tribe, once told him that "Io was born of Rangi and Papa, the Heavens and Earth". Instead of postulating secrecy as the reason for the lack of Europeans’

12 See BEST, E. Maori Religion and Mythology.
13 BEST, E. Maori as He Was, p. 69.
14 BEST, E. Maori Religion and Mythology, pp. 458-460.
knowledge of Io, Best claimed that the laws of tapu kept Maori people silent on their religious mysteries.

In the same book Best mentions that Io is said to have existed for ever, he was never born, hence his name of Io-matua-kore (Io the Parentless). He was not created – on the contrary, he was the origin of the universe and of the lower gods – he caused them to exist. There is no proof that Io was raised to primacy from a polytheistic system, or because he was a primal ancestor, or a great force, such as the sun. The concept bears the aspect of a metaphysical abstraction, the result of a speculative philosophy seeking a First Cause.15

E. Best in his book “The Maori as He Was” says that “In regard to the superior cult of Io, the supreme being, its ritual was resorted to, or practised, only in connection with what were considered highly important matters. It never became known to the many, but was jealously conserved and retained by a few, hence it was not affected by degeneration as were similar concepts in other lands. The Maori preserved the purity of his conception of a supreme being by means of withholding it from the bulk of the people, hence Io was never degraded to the level of a tribal war-god, as was the case with Yahweh. To force monotheism on a barbaric people must necessarily result in a form of degeneration of a superior concept.16

Nowadays, however, many scholars consider Best’s publication rather unreliable.

Pei Te Huri Nui Jones quotes “proofs” of the faith of the Waikato tribe in god Io. In his biography of King Potatau Te Wherowhero,17 he describes the raising-up ritual for the first Maori king in 1850 and he gives the Io karakia used by Te Tapihana whom he describes as “a High Priest of the ancient Io (supreme being) cult of the Tainui tribes”.

Pei Te Huri Nui Jones version:

\[
\begin{align*}
E\ Io!\ E\ Rangi! \\
Tapa\ mai\ ra\ ia \\
Ta\ tata\ tama \\
I\ whaka-tama\ ai\ taua \\
o\ taua\ nonoketanga \\
I\ nonoke\ ai\ taua;
\end{align*}
\]

E Io! Thou Heavenly One!
Name him,
This son of ours,
A son, indeed, he was to us;
When You and I strove manfully
In our striving.

15 BEST, E. Maori Religion and Mythology, p. 148.
16 BEST, E.: Maori as He Was, p. 70.
17 See JONES, Pei Te Huri Nui. King Potatau an Account of the Life of Potatau Te Wherowhero, the First Maori King.
I o taua momoetanga
I momoe au taua
I te po:
E Io! E Rangi!
Tapa mai ra ia,
Ko wai?
Hei Kingi!

He guarded our peaceful slumbers,
And we slept soundly
through the night
O Io! Thou Heavenly One!
Name him,
Name him what?
Name him King!

Since the last verse contains the word Kingi (derived from English), it follows that karakia had been introduced, or at least modified after the arrival of the Europeans in New Zealand.

According to Pei Te Huri Nui Jones, a priest from the Tainui tribe maintained that Io created the world. Huri Nui Jones maintains just like E. Best and others that Io was not known to the common people because he was too sacred and his name was not to be pronounced at any common occasions.

In the tradition of Ngati Kahungu tribe concerning Io (as mentioned before, the Tane-nui-a-rangi Committee in 1907 approved Whatahoro's remarks from 1865, acquired in whare whananga as a tradition of the tribe). However, Io is not explicitly mentioned as a supreme being, but is referred to as an atua whose special work is the building of fortified pa. This identifies Io with the establishment of peace without excluding the notion of Io as a supreme being:

Ko ta Tumatauenga mahi, he whawahi tonu,
he riri tonu, ko ta Io mahi he hanga patu atawata.
Tuumatauenga occupied himself in warfare and fighting.
The work of Io is to build palisade forts.

Mauria mai nei ko te rongo a whare,
Ko te rongo taketake ki mua ki te atua
Ka whakaoti te riri.
So was brought here the house of peace,
Lasting peace in the presence of the atua,
And the fighting was ended.18

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References to Io occur in M. Marsden and in Cleve Barlow as well. M. Marsden talks of Io as “both Being-itself and absolute Nothingness. That is, he is truly infinite, encompassing within himself both the absolutely positive and absolutely negative”.

Io is both Passive and Active. In his passive state he is referred to as Io-Mate-Moe (Io of the Slumbering Countenance), Io-Mata-Ane (Io of the Calm and Tranquil Countenance), Io-Kore-Te-Whiwhia (Io the Unchanging and Unadulterated in whom there is no confusion and inconsistency). But he is also Io-Mata Aho, (Io of the Glorious Blinding Countenance), Io-Mata-Kaakaa (Io of the Flashing Countenance).

“Io is Io-Roa (Eternal), Matua-kore (Parentless), atua First Parent, Io-Mua (The Precursor). Io is Creator of all things, both Origin and Originator. Io-Taketake (Foundation), Io-Te-Pukenga (Io the Prime Source), Io Waiora (the Fountain head of Life), Maataa-wai (The Head Waters). Io is Omnipotent, Io Nui Almighty, Tikitiki o Rangi Supreme One of Heaven, Te Toi o nga Rangi Pinnacle of Heaven. Io is Omnypresent. Io Uru (The Diffuse and Ubiquitous), Mata-Kana (The all-seeing, Omnypresent). Io is Sacred and Mysterious. Io Tapu Holy, Matangaro Hidden.”

As Wilhelm Schmidt describes, in many cases periphrases are substituted for the name of a supreme being. Some of these names in Hawaii were Hika po-loo, Hika of the Long Night; Io signifying Most Excellent Supreme; Ili-o-mea-lani meaning The Reflection of That Chiefly Someone; Kue-manuai-lehua, literally The Beak That Feeds on Lehuas but meaning The Power of Death; Uli meaning Eternity and Ku-kauhai, meaning The Established One. These names were titles of the One True God, his true name being too sacred to mention his name was ‘Io.20

James Irwin in his book “An Introduction to Maori Religion” uncritically wrote down texts concerning god Io by the above-mentioned authors like E. Best, C. O. Davis and others. Although the book was published in 1984, he did not accept the opinions of the revisionist school represented by ethnologists such as Te Rangi Hiroa alias Peter Buck and without any polemics maintains that the cult of Io was pre-European in origin.

According to some views the Maori embraced Christianity quite easily because they were aware of the faith in one supreme being. And the king

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Potatau Te Wherowhero justifed the faith in one supreme deity. And yet this is more than questionable because many sources accentuated that Io was known to a very narrow circle of the population. I believe that fast Christianization should not be assumed to have been a consequence of the acquaintance with the only deity, namely Io.

Written documents and karakias devoted to the supreme being have been found in various regions of New Zealand – for example in oral legends of the tribes Ngaapuhi, Waikato, Ngaati Kahungunu and Kai Tahu. Some scholars maintain that the idea of this god appeared as a reaction to the Christian ideas and teaching of missionaries during the nineteenth century.

This situation is reminiscent of certain millenarian movements trying to adjust to new ideas in a somewhat modified form. Other scholars such as Marsden, Hall and Kendall believe that a relatively long time after the first missionaries arrived in New Zealand in 1814, the Maori were not at all interested in the new belief.

Conclusion
The available written sources viewed the god Io as the creator of everything. One of his titles is Io-matua-kore (Io without parents). His residence is situated in the highest of the twelve heavens in the house named Rangi-atea (clear sky).

Andersen introduced further attributes from the Maori environment namely Io-nui (Great Io), Io-take (Eternal Io), Io-matua (Parent), Io-mataaho (Invisible Io), Io-te-waio (Io the source of life) and so on.21

In accordance with Andersen the name Io-mataaho (Io invisible) was not to be looked at directly but only at rays of light. This implies that Io might be the sun.22 However, the attribute “invisible” may also mean that, as the supreme god of an esoteric type, he has no concrete face – just like Yahweh who may take various shapes.

The Tahitian analogy of Io is Ihoiho, which may be translated as “core of everything” thus corresponding to Hawaiian Iho. Tregar explains its meaning as a “centre of everything” of the “truth”.23

T. Jaussen thinks that Tahitian Ihoiho may be identical with ihoiho “soul” or with iho “essence”.24 This would correspond to the Maori word “heart, inside, essence”.25

21 ANDERSEN, J. C. Mýty a legendy Polynésanů, p. 273.
22 Ibid., p. 273.
24 JAUSSEN, T. Grammaire et Dictionnaire de la langue tahitienne, p. 96.
In Hawaii *Iao* means Jupiter, a morning star. It appeared here early in the 1930s and was brought to the archipelago by Maori sailors employed in European ships and familiar with the Panpolynesian ideology.\(^{26}\)

In Mangaia, the word *io* is used in the meaning of “god” and the god *Motoro* is called *Te Io Ora*, “the living god”. Other gods were called *Io Mate* “gods of death” because their followers might have been sacrificed to the god *Rongo*.\(^{27}\)

In accordance with traditions *Io* lived in the highest of the twelve heavens; he keeps his guardians and messengers who bring news of what is going on in the world. The name of *Io* was strictly taboo and whoever dared to pronounce it, might be killed. Verbal tabooing, or a word taboo, was widespread in Polynesia and elsewhere, as in Australia and Israel; however, it was more common in Polynesia. And thus we may not use it as an argument for or against the origin of the cult of *Io*.

W. Schmidt, A. Lang and other scholars as well, were of the opinion that monotheism had been the early form of religion; however, it slowly degraded and turned into polytheism. Frankly speaking, this theory has been overcome, and the probability is preferred that similarities between the Christian God and *Io* may have appeared just by chance.

E. S. C. Handy uncritically and without any retrospection maintains that most of the ancient Maori prayers were devoted to *Io*. Such a view is absent from both S. P. Smith and E. Best, the first propagators and discoverers of the cult of *Io*. There can be no doubt that the number of prayers devoted to *Io* is really modest when compared with other deities. The cult of a supreme being was not an ancient feature of Polynesian religion but rather a speculation of Polynesian priests.

According to Handy, the name *Io* was applied to the Hawaiian hawk because its cry is reminiscent of the sound *ioio*. He concluded it was a specific bird cult of the hawk and secondarily for the owl. Handy warned against trying to establish *Io* as a supreme being in Hawaii. So to claim *Io* is God, we would have a bird speaking God’s name that is holy. It is not strange that some men want to “sanitize” the myths of the indigenous people to make them compatible with Christianity so they can reach these same people.\(^{28}\)

Richard Tylor’s notebooks include information about *Io* and the faith of the Kahungunu tribe in this god. However, Reverend Richard Tylor, who travelled

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\(^{26}\) KRUPA, V. Legendy a mýty Polynésie. Polynéská kosmologie, p. 149.

\(^{27}\) ANDERSEN, J. C. Mýty a legendy Polynésanů, pp. 271-272.

across the island and in 1855 published his book “Te Ika a Maui”, maintains that the natives had no knowledge of a Supreme Being. They had a multitude of gods, and these were said to have been the fathers, each one of some department in nature; and these gods are so mixed up with the spirits of ancestors, whose worship entered large, into their religion, that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other.29

Other missionaries expressed similar ideas. For example, William Colenso30 claimed that the Maori do not know any being that could properly be called God.31

Sir Peter Buck alias Te Rangi Hiroa was one of the first scholars who doubted the information and records of Io as the supreme being. The discovery of the New Zealand supreme god was perceived as a surprise by both Maori and Pakeha alike. Buck firmly defends the idea that Io as the supreme being arose as a reaction to Christianity, and so was a post-European creation.

In his book “Anthropology and Religion” he expressed his opinion that Io is a newly created god. He thought, that probably in Waiararapa district of the North Island of New Zealand an esoteric school, like the seminary at Taputapu-atea32 arose and this New Zealand school invented a creator named Io. Like Ta’aroa, Io had no parents but simply came into being. He was then made responsible for the creation of the already existing pattern of religion, but certain additions were made. Two more skies were added to the older count of ten, and Io went into residence in the twelfth, that is the topmost sky. A house was provided for him, named Rangiatea, and the assembly place before it was named Te Rauroha. A staff of Celestial Maids (Mareikura) was provided, and Guardians (Poutiriao) were appointed to the series of sky levels which were given individual names. Messengers were engaged to carry on communication between Io and the major gods who were not interfered with in the new reorganization. As Io was regarded as the source of all knowledge, a new incident was added in Tane’s ascent to the topmost heaven to obtain the three baskets of knowledge from Io. It will be seen that the New Zealand revision was much more smoothly accomplished than that at Taputapu-atea. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the Maori school attempted to proselytize other tribes. The cult of Io seems to have been an intellectual effort confined to the higher priesthood and to have had a limited distribution.

30 William Colenso 1811-1899 was a missionary, printer, explorer and botanist who worked on New Zealand.
31 See SIMPSON, J. Io as Supreme Being: Intellectual colonization of the Maori?
32 It was religious school on Raiatea in the Society Islands. The priests from this school elevated the god Ta’aroa to the position of Creator, and the old pattern of mythology was changed.
A third centre of religious activity resulting in drastic changes appears in the Tuamotu atolls. From native informants and from his translations of various chants, J. F. Stimson has come to the belief that the Tuamotuans also had a creator named Kiho or Kio. It is tempting to see a similarity between Kio and Io, but, as the Maoris do not drop the consonant k, they seem to be distinct words.

There has been a tendency to regard these sporadic occurrences of a creator as evidence that the Polynesians originally had a monotheistic religion which was later changed to polytheism. Te Rangi Hiroa at the end of this subject said that he believes that Polynesian religion has always been polytheistic, but that intellectuals among the priesthood in some localities have elevated a particular god to supremacy among his fellows by making him a creator. I regard these versions of a creator as late sporadic efforts that took place after the general dispersal and not as the remnants of an ancient general monotheism.33

Bishop Muru Walters at a Pacific region Religious Liberty Congress in June 1993 also rejected the tradition of Io and argued that it developed about the late nineteenth century.

Scholars like Dorothy Barrere do not doubt that the rise of this cult is linked to the early influence of Christianity. Likewise an American anthropologist Allan Hanson declares in his article “The Making of the Maori: Culture Invention and Its Logic” that the cult of Io is not derived from the Polynesian society.34

Robert Langdon in his book “Lost Caravel” states that the only detailed account of Io is mentioned in a manuscript by S. P. Smith and titled “The Lore of the Whare wananga or Teachings of the Maori College on Religion, Cosmogony and History”. This text was dictated by Te Matorohanga to Te Whatahoro. In Buck’s opinion, Langdon and other scholars were suspicious of the fact that both Te Matorohanga and his scribe Te Whatahoro had become Christians before details of the Io cult were written down.35

Matorohanga freely admits that he did not transmit traditions in their pure form, but that much of the knowledge is lost and that he made changes and innovations.36

Matorohanga’s statement clearly maintains that he has modified the origin tradition. Since he may have been Christian at that time it may be more than probable that his experience of new religion has been expressed in his story. All collected facts seem to prove that the idea of the supreme god in Polynesia

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33 HIROA, Te Rangi, Anthropology and Religion, pp. 60-61.
34 See HANSON, A. The Making of the Maori: Culture Invention and Its Logic.
35 LANGDON, R. The Lost Caravel, p. 252.
36 SCHWIMMER, E. World of the Maori, p. 114.
appeared in fact as late as the end of the 19th century when the Christian teaching spread by the missionaries had settled in the new environment. Max Muller assumes that the early forms of religion were polytheistic and supreme beings appeared later. This process has taken place in Polynesia as well. There was a hierarchy of deities; however it is questionable whether the Polynesians really believed in a single supreme god. The idea of the supreme deity may have been an invention of amateurs or missionaries including C. O. Davis and S. P. Smith or a romantically inclined Polynesian scholar, such as, E. Best. The reason may have varied from an effort to elevate the wild natives to a civilized community or from the desire of the natives themselves to be respected by foreigners. And yet the idea obviously appeared under the pervasive influence of foreigners whose number inevitably prevailed over the Maori population.

REFERENCES


NOTES

More information on the “IO cult” available at:

http://www.letusreason.org/Current68.htm
http://deceptioninthechurch.com/babel.htm