

THE FATE OF THE CAESAREAN OPERATION – AN EPISODE IN MARQUESAN ORAL LITERATURE

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Polynesian mythology is notable for several brief allusions to what is usually termed Caesarean birth. The sense of this operation does not consist in saving both mother and child but seems to be provoked by unsatisfactory knowledge of the operation that preferred the life of a newborn child at the expense of that of its mother. According to the legend, the innovation seems to have been brought from outside by Kae to the Marquesas and received favourably there.

Key words: Kae, whales, his role in Samoa versus the Marquesas, island of women, Caesarean operation in Polynesia, Kae as a cultural hero?

Kae ranks among the widespread legendary figures of Polynesian mythology and is usually described as a negative character. He represents a clear contradiction and without hesitation deceives the positive hero Tinirau (Sinilau) who was ready to help him. The story of Kae was recorded in Tonga by Edward Winslow Gifford who, in addition to this version, acquired two other versions in Ha'apai, one from Sakalaiia Vao and another one from Josiah Paluto.¹ In the end angry and disappointed Sinilau handed perfidious Kae over to his relatives who killed and ate him. In Paluto's version the conflict arose between Kae and Longopoa. According to John Tupou (another Tongan of Nukualofa), King Loau of Ha'amea in Tongatapu decided to undertake a voyage to the very horizon. He commanded Kae and Longopoa to drag their double canoe into the sea, they reached Ha'apai, but continued to Niuatopotapu until they approached Samoa. There Kae again visited Sinilau who decided that

¹ GIFFORD, E. W. *Tongan Myths and Tales*, p. 139.

Kae should return to Tonga. The daughter of Sinilau's father gave birth to twin whales named Tonga and Tunanga-tofua.² Kae wished to go to Samoa and wanted to take the twins along. Sinilau agreed and ordered his whales to take Kae to Tongatapu and then return for him too.³ However, when Kae reached Ha'amea, he deliberately took the twin whales to dangerously shallow waters and assembled the inhabitants. Tunanga died, but Tonga managed to escape home with the bad news. Thus Sinilau learnt of Kae's treachery and of the death of one of the twins. Sinilau assembled all the Samoan gods and asked them to bring back Kae. They obeyed Sinilau, surprised Kae sleeping and managed to bring him to Sinilau's canoe shed. When a cock awakened Kae, he thought that he was again at home and was surprised to see Sinilau at the entrance of the shed. Kae was without delay brought to the graveyard where the local inhabitants cursed him and finally buried him there.

This is not the only version of the story. The events are, with some variations, well known in other parts of Polynesia, but on the whole his character is generally painted in a similarly unflattering light, as expected. G. Brown describes Kae and his fate in the same circumstances and in the same Tonga – Samoa region.⁴

In the Maori version of the story, Tinirau's relationship with Kae essentially agrees with Gifford's version from Tonga. Maui's sister Hinauri married Tinirau and Kae performed the ritual birth ceremony when her new-born child Tu-huruhuru was born.⁵ Tinirau called his tame whale Tutunui to the shore, he cut a piece of Tutunui's flesh and gave it to Kae who found it delicious. He borrowed Tinirau's whale under the pretence that he must return home to Te Tihi-o-Manono (and refused to use the canoe). Tinirau warned Kae not to send the whale back as soon as they reach shallow waters near the shore. Kae, however, broke his promise given to Tinirau and let Tutunui to die. His people cut up the body of the whale and cooked it. Tinirau vainly expected Tutunui's return and finally decided to revenge the loss of his pet. His women managed to take Kae back to Tinirau's village where Kae was killed as revenge (this was the start of a subsequent vendetta).

Kae's troubles with the two whales are described in Marquesan mythology in a somewhat milder manner than either in Samoa or in New Zealand stories (cf. Karl von den Steinen). Threat of his death has been averted and he could settle down upon an islet within the archipelago. Instead we shall now

² Ibid., p. 1460.

³ Ibid., p. 1470.

⁴ BROWN, G. Some Nature Myths from Samoa. *Folklore* 280, pp. 94-99.

⁵ see <http://www.teara.govt.nz/1966/M/MaoriMythsAndTraditions/en?print66=true>, and GREY, G. *Nga Mahi a nga Tupuna*, pp. 29-31.

concentrate upon Kae's introduction of a useful new gynaecological technique in a small islet within the Marquesan archipelago.

The abandonment of Caesarean operation may be interpreted as one among the cultural innovations remembered in the distant prehistory of the mythical Marquesan prehistory. The end of this custom and its replacement by classical childbirth may be included within the list of the deeds of cultural heroes who are usually perceived in mythology as benefactors of mankind who have introduced useful novelties into everyday life and thus gaining deserved respect within the community. One of the prototypical and obviously universal examples of early cultural innovations throughout Polynesia is the origin of fire ascribed to Maui, a rebellious spirit comparable with Prometheus. Maui represents the type of cultural hero who overcomes the inherited inertia of living beings and modifies the far from perfect reality of creation so as to improve the fate of human beings in this world. However, the will to improve the quality of life was present even before, at the dawn of creation, – when the created world was too narrow and oppressive for the living beings. In the Polynesian myths some of the failures were removed by the second generation of gods (cf. activity of the sons of Rangi and Papa in Maori myth) or even by the demigod Maui who took part in lifting the heavenly father upward and thus expanding the living space for all mortals. According to a widespread mythical motif, Maui acquired the knowledge of fire from his ancestor (typically from Mahuīke) – but there are more remarkable deeds due to his inventive and enterprising activity. Is Maui perhaps a manifold impersonation of the inventive and rebellious human mind?

However, Maui is not the only cultural hero of Polynesia. Another obviously ancient cultural innovation of a more specific kind is hidden behind the widespread and virtually universal Orphean myth that may be characterized in cognitive terms – the time came when the living inhabitants of this world grasped that a return from the netherworld to this world is impossible; after several vain individual attempts the gate of the underworld was closed for ever. This warning is explicitly pronounced by the guardian Kuwatawata "This is the last time someone will be released from the underworld" quoted by Adele Schafer.⁶ However, Elsdon Best gives a more sophisticated explanation of the borderline between the world of the living and the world of the dead: "As to the underworld, no evil is there known, nor darkness; it is a realm of light and rectitude. And this is the reason why, of all spirits of the dead, from the time of Hine-ahu-one even unto ourselves, no single one has ever returned hither to dwell in this world... none save spirits of the dead can enter Rarohenga".⁷

⁶ SCHAFFER, A. *Visits to the Underworld in Maori Mythology*, pp. 43-46.

⁷ BEST, E. *The Maori As He Was. A brief account of Maori life as it was in pre-European days*, p. 51.

A less common but nevertheless highly peculiar instance of cultural innovation, even of a fragmentary nature, childbirth is only briefly mentioned in the oral literature of several Polynesian peoples, but more explicitly described in the Marquesan mythology than anywhere else,⁸ in Tonga,⁹ in Tuamotu and Mangareva,¹⁰ in New Zealand,¹¹ in the Cook Islands,¹² and in Kapingamarangi.¹³

Here we have to do with an irreversible and according to mythology abrupt transition from the so-called "Caesarean childbirth" (euphemistically speaking) inevitably resulting in the mother's death to a normal birth which is survived both by the child and its mother as introduced in the Marquesan archipelago. This transition is linked to Kae from Ta'a'oa in the island of Hivaoa where it happened. It was Vainoki, the tiny island of women dominated by the local *ha'atepei'u* Hina. The basic change was introduced in Vainoki by Kae from Atuona, who managed to escape from the bowels of a shark.¹⁴ His brother-in-law tried to get rid of Kae while fishing; and yet Kae saved himself by swimming when he escaped to the island of Vainoki¹⁵ where Nuku-Mau-Toe live. There were no men and local women cohabited with pandanus trees.¹⁶ When Kae came to Vainoki, the local women had no masculine partners at all; it was pandanus roots that replaced husbands of local women and when their day of delivery approached, the tuhuna came and cut open the stomach of the pregnant woman; naturally, the child was born but its mother inevitably died.

However, one day the local chiefess Hina-i-Vainoki met Kae and they became husband and wife. Hina-i-Vainoki did not reveal the presence of the first true man as a partner to the women and refused to go bathing with them.

Kae had no idea of the drastic birth delivery of local women until a messenger came and announced that a woman was to be cut open in three days. Kae asked his wife: "Why do you cut open the woman's stomach?" ("*Umaha i vavahi ai te kopu o te kui?*") He had no idea what would happen to

⁸ VON DEN STEINEN, K. Marquesanische Mythen. In: Zeitschrift für Ethnologie. 1934-1935, pp. 353-364, HANDY, E. S. C. Marquesan Legends, pp. 56 - 63, LAVONDES, H. Récits Marquisiens.

⁹ BROWN, G. Some Nature Myths from Samoa. Folklore 28., pp. 94-99, GIFFORD, E. W. Tongan Myths and Tales, p. 124.

¹⁰ CAILLOT, A. CH. E. Mythes, légendes et traditions des Polynésiens, p. 58.

¹¹ WHITE, J. The Ancient History of the Maori, pp. 10-11. BEST, E. The Maori As He Was. A brief account of Maori life.

¹² GILL, W. W. Myths and Songs from the South Pacific, pp. 265 - 266.

¹³ ELBERT, S. H. Uta-matua and Other Tales of Kapingamarangi, pp. 242 - 246.

¹⁴ VON DEN STEINEN, K. Marquesanische Mythen. In: Zeitschrift für Ethnologie. 1933-34.

¹⁵ Vaino'i in HANDY, E. S. C. Marquesan Legends.

¹⁶ see also HANDY, E. S. C. Marquesan Legends, pp. 56-63.

the woman. Hina-i-vainoki explained that the woman will die after the child is born, saying it had always been like that (“*‘Ati’i ana ‘tu, te vehine fanau tama ‘io matou nei, mei kakiu mai tihe ‘i te ‘a nei*”). At this very moment Kae acts as a true cultural hero: “My woman, you must get rid of that. With us the mother’s stomach is not cut open but she is caused to give birth” (“*E to ‘u vehine, titi ‘i pu. ‘Io matou ‘a ‘o ‘e e vavahia te kopu o te kui, e ha ‘afanau*”).

In the meantime the two *tuhunas*, *Pohihi’i* and *Pohaha’a* (mentioned as *atua*, that is goddesses *atua*) came. But Hina-i-Vainoki had forbidden them to cut open the woman’s stomach (“*‘umo ‘i e vavahi te kopu o tenei vehine*”). And the two *tuhunas* (*atua*) left ashamed.

The chiefess was astonished and admired her husband’s knowledge; if not for you, the old lady would be dead (“*‘Umo ‘i ‘oe, e tu ‘u ahana, ‘ua mate te pa ‘afio i te vavahi ia Pohihi’a a me Pohaha’a*”). Another remarkable detail is the negative attitude of the chiefess to what seems to be polyandry. Several women approached the chiefess with the request to let all of them sleep ‘with our husband’, meaning Kae. However, But Hina-i-Vainoki strictly refused them (“*‘A ‘o ‘e ane iho au e ma ‘ima ‘i*”).

One day the couple, Hina-i-Vainoki and Kae, became aware of their age. Taking the lice out of Hina-i-vainoki’s hair, Kae noticed grey hairs on Hina-i-Vainoki’s head and warned her. However (due to her links with the Moon), she had no doubts that her youth would return (“*Eaha a ‘ia pa ‘afio au, e koana ia ‘u i te ha ‘apoko ‘ehu haka ‘ua*”). And then Hina-i-Vainoki noticed plenty of grey hair on Kae’s head, and remarked that he is getting old (“*‘U ko ‘oua ‘oe, e tu ‘u ahana*”). Thereupon she decided that both of them would go surfing. It helped the wife, but Kae remained as aged as before and felt ashamed (“*‘U hakaina te ahana*”). Hina-i-Vainoki became pregnant and Kae asked her to name their child Te-Hina-Tu-o-Kae intending to leave Vainoki. Hina-i-Vainoki told him to leave on the third day and promised to call her brother, a whale called Tunua-Nui who would carry him. And she asked Kae to kick three times the islands Motutapu, Motutotomoto, Mataukaaea, Papaotoniho, Motuofio and Kakenatetupuna. Kae has forgotten to fulfil her wish and therefore the whale has been destined to die. Tunua-Nui got stranded on the beach of Ta’a’oa and the islanders cut up his body. His sister Hina-i-Vainoki felt it and wept for her brother (“*‘Ua pa te toto i te umauma o to ia tuehine*”). She reproached Kae saying he is a very bad man (“*He ‘enata pe ‘oko ‘oe, e tu ‘u ahana*”).

Hina-i-Vainoki gave birth to a boy and named him Hina-Tu-o-Kae, as expected by Kae himself. Children mocked the boy as a son of the foreigner and he felt offended. The boy approached his mother who used to persuade him that he had no father at all. Finally she had to admit he had a father and his name was Kae who was living at Tohuti. Hina-i-Vainoki invited her younger brother Tunua-Iti who was willing to take his nephew to Tohuti. Te Hina-Tu-o-Kae did

not obey his mother's instructions and as a consequence Tunua-Iti went astray. The local inhabitants noticed the whale and obviously mistook it for dead. They took hold of the whale's tail, but the whale dragged them into the sea to die. The death of Tunua-Nui was revenged.

A conflict arose when the boy decided to take a bath in a sacred pool prepared for him. The local inhabitants did not know him and were scandalized by his bath, by his behaviour and by his tearing bananas and sugar cane. They took him to the two tuhunas to hang him. They put him into a hole with the intention to strangle him. This was to happen in three days. However, the boy decided to recite an incantation obviously believing it would support his defence:

*Oe oe oe oe oe oe
'O te ui mai o tu'u kui
Hina-i-Vaino'i
Ena to 'oe motua
'o Kae i Tohuti.
I mau ai 'oe
'o Te-Hina-tu-o Kae?*

Having heard these words, the tuhuna sent a messenger to Kae and invited him to Tohuti. Kae was ready to go – the messenger repeated the boy's spell. Kae decided to immediately leave and took his club. He came to Ta'a'oa and his eyes were wet with tears. He commanded the tuhuna to free his son and made him tapu so that he put the boy upon his head (*"'A tahi 'a to'o to ia motua i hua tama, me te tu'u 'i 'una o to ia upoko, me te ha'a 'i fifi 'i 'una o te upoko"*). Then the tuhuna consecrated the child and after the festivity the boy remained with his father.

The story of Kae recorded and published by Karl von den Steinen¹⁷ is notable for its numerous details and links with other Polynesian mythologies. The story included in E. S. C. Handy's *Marquesan Legends*¹⁸ was narrated by Isaac Puhetete (Ha'apuani) from Atuona in Hivaoa. The story of Pota-a-te Mau is its continuation narrated by the same person.

The notion of a Caesarean "operation" is documented in Mangarevan myths. Peter Buck discovered it in a manuscript at the B. P. Bishop Museum in Honolulu. The god Tangaroa decided to marry Toa-Tane, Tane's daughter as his second wife. However, she hesitated: "The people of my father Tane have

¹⁷ VON DEN STEINEN, K. Marquesanische Mythen. In: Zeitschrift für Ethnologie. 1933-34, pp. 347-364.

¹⁸ HANDY, E. S. C. *Marquesan Legends*, pp. 56-63.

objected, as my abdomen will be cut open at the time that the child is to be here, one will die, one will live; the mother will die, the child will live. All the beloved eldest daughters have so died.”

Tangaroa assured Toa-Tane that she would not die because he had a different teaching and promised to deliver her child (*Ki atu Tagaroa kia Toa-Tane*: “*E kore koe e mate. E atoga ke tei aku nei. A mea ta koe teiti ka ‘uki’uki ai, ka ki mai koe ki aku. Maku to koe teiti e ‘aka’anau’*”).

The mythical Caesarean operation occurs elsewhere in Polynesia as well. It is mentioned by William Wyatt Gill in his *Myths and Songs from the South Pacific*.¹⁹ Ati, the husband of Tapairu from the nether world refused to accede to such a cruel birth and preferred departing to the underworld together with his wife Tapairu (their son was born in the normal way).

Caillot²⁰ briefly mentions the Caesarean operation for the childbirth in Tuamotu, namely on the island of Hao (“*Te peu ki rave hia ki reira ia hapu te vahine e fata ta ki te fanau e gatore ki te makuahine kia tae mai te tamariki ki vaho*”). The woman named Kairarua says, it need not be done like this, I shall show you my own way, I shall make the birth myself (“*Ka kite ra taua vahine ra Kairarua ki te reira huru, reko atu ra: keiaha e na reira teie tona ravea, naku e hakafanau*”).

A similar event has been written down by John White and we can find it in the first volume of his *Ancient History of the Maori*²¹ ... *haere mai nga tangata he wahine tonu nga whanaunga hoki, tana mataa, tana mataa, tana huka huka, tana huka huka, haere mai tena wahine tana mataa tana huka huka, a kanoho nga tangata, i whakapeti (poto) ai ki te takaiti ki te hapu ka ki atu te waha o Tura ki tana wahine, “He aha tenei, i haere mai ki te aha ra?” Ka ki atu te waha o te wahine, “Haere mai ki taku tamaiti kia haea taku kopu, ko taku tamaiti te tango atu, ko au kia mate.” Ka ki atu a Tura, “Ne, kei te penei te tikanga.” Ka ki atu te wahine. “Ae.” Ka haere a Tura ki te whaihanga whare, a ka whaihanga i te whare ka hoki ano a Tura ki tana wahine ka ki atu a Tura, “Kei te aha koe,” ka ki mai te wahine, “Kua makere te ara o taku tamaiti.”* (in English: ... and all her female relatives came to his wife, each bringing a piece of obsidian, some clothing, and some flax. On seeing these females coming, Wairangi said to his wife, “What are these females coming for?” His wife answered, “They are coming to give birth to my child, and I shall die. The child will come into life by my death, and these women are coming to cut me open.” Wai-rangi, in surprise, said, “Is it so? I that their practice?” She said, “Yes”. Wairangi then built another house, and took his wife there.

¹⁹ GILL, W. W. *Myths and Songs from the South Pacific*, pp. 265-267.

²⁰ CAILLOT, A. CH. E. *Mythes, légendes et traditions des Polynésiens*, p. 58.

²¹ WHITE, J. *Ancient History of the Maori*, pp. 10-11.

E. Best in his description of pre-European times in New Zealand situates the occurrence of Caesarean birth in a 'strange land occupied by a strange folk'. "These people knew not fire; they ate their food raw, and possessed singular customs... Then came the surprising discovery by the castaways of the fact that children were not born in the normal way, but the Caesarian operation was always performed on the hapless mother, thereby causing her death." The local people did not know normal birth and always performed the Caesarian operation on mothers causing thus their death.²²

The motif of regular birth is linked with Kae who is an important figure not only in the Marquesas but also in Tongan mythology and in other archipelagoes. His story, however, is best documented in the mythological cycle written down by Karl von den Steinen.²³

The Caesarean operation is mentioned in legends from Niue in West Polynesia²⁴ Niue-Fekai. The Niueans believed that a living man was born from a tree which is named Ti-mata-alea (a species of *Dracoena*) which grows in the open. This detail slightly recalls the custom mentioned above in the Vainoki Island (in the Marquesas), see the following quotation: "Then came down some of the people of the land, who surprised and caught the woman, whom they took away with them and cared for her. She was a handsome woman, was Gini-fale, and was taken to wife by the chief of the Island. When the time approached that her child should be born, the husband was constantly in tears. So Gini-fale asked him, "Why do you cry?" Said her husband, "I am crying on your account, because of your child." Now the custom of that island was to cut open the mother that the child might be born, but the mother died. This was the reason why Lei-pua was so sorry. Then Gini-fale said, "O thou! I will disclose the way by which the child may be borne."²⁵

²² BEST, E. *The Maori As He Was*. A brief account of Maori life as it was in pre-European days, p. 55.

²³ VON DEN STEINEN, K. *Marquesanische Mythen*. In: *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*. 1934.

²⁴ SMITH, S. P. *Niue-fekai (or Savage) Island and its People*. Part of: *Tidal Pools*, pp. 74-75.

²⁵ quoted from SMITH, S. P. *Niue-fekai (or Savage) Island and its People*. Part of: *Tidal Pools*, pp. 74-75.

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