

VARIATIONS OF MYTHS CONCERNING THE ORIGIN OF FIRE IN EASTERN POLYNESIA*

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I have analysed in this study the most completely recorded variants of the Maui myths concerning the origin of fire in eastern Polynesia. Those myths show the diversity of form assumed in each island. No two islands have an identical myth about the origin of fire. This diversity is most probably caused by narrative traditions and by individual interpretations made by each tribe. But the figure of Maui which appears in the great majority of noted myths of eastern Polynesia confirms their common origin.

Key words: Polynesian mythology, Maui, cultural hero, origin of fire

Fire is usually regarded as an important factor in the advance of human civilisation. It is the palaeologists who have supplied us with plenty of evidence which confirms that humans used fire for warmth, for protection against wild animals, for cooking, and other purposes, but there is no evidence that proves conclusively that ancient people could make fire. Archaeologists have found pieces of chipped pyrites which might have served that purpose in Stone Age dwellings. The invention of creating fire by rotating or rubbing a fire stick on a base indicates the beginning of a cultural and technical revolution.

It is an almost unbelievable fact that the inhabitants of the Andaman Islands are unable to make fire even today. They acquire it only from lightning.

Ancient people knew of the effects of lightning, the sun and volcanoes; it was especially fire's connection with the sky which led them to assume that fire had its origins there. There are numerous myths about the abduction of fire from the sky which are evidence of this widespread belief. In various myths people also tried to steal fire from each other. Those who managed to make fire were

not willing to betray the mystery of creating it. This fact indicates that the fate of fire, once it was in an individual or group's possession, was linked with the oldest kinds of property ownership. On the one hand, some individuals or groups of people in these myths acquired and managed fire, egoistically appropriating it for themselves, while on the other hand there were people who needed fire and who were willing to acquire it by any means: subterfuge, tricks or theft.¹

The cultural hero is as a rule regarded to be the originator, donor and abductor of fire in various mythologies. This archetypal phenomenon appears in the mythologies and folklore of quite a few peoples of the world. The cultural hero is considered to be the ancestor and civiliser. This figure often possesses a complicated personality which usually integrates the contrasting features of a benefactor with those of a sly and clever being whose supernatural aspects are linked with purely earthly properties.²

Cultural heroes are notable for several shared features. They have brought a variety of cultural advantages to mankind, for example, food plants that were useful as food or for medicinal purposes. They taught the people how to produce tools, to prepare their food, to hunt the animals, various crafts and art, and introduced a social organisation, laws, rules of matrimony, magic, ceremonies and holidays and, most importantly, the acquisition of fire. The myths about acquiring fire rank among the oldest of them.

Acquiring fire is credited to almost all cultural heroes; this is the case with the Greek Prometheus, the Crow Indians of North America, the Polynesians' Maui and the Australian totemic ancestors who are themselves regarded as heroes.

In ancient mythologies the concept of ancestor, demiurge and cultural hero are fused together. The ancestors, cultural heroes in the cultures of Australia,³ and with several ethnic groups of Africa⁴ and America,⁵ are zoomorphic. In the

* This study is published within the grant project VEGA 2/0153/09

¹ KOMOROVSKÝ, J. *Prometeus. Mytologické paralely*, pp. 64-65.

² KOMOROVSKÝ, J. *Prometeus. Mytologické paralely*, p. 76.

³ Several figures exist in the mythologies of Australian tribes, for example the wild cat and lizard which with the aid of a stone knife completed the creation of the first people who reminded case-worm and helplessly were lying upon rocks emerging from water. This ancestors-demiurge has taught them to make fire and prepare their food.

⁴ With African peoples they may have the shape of a chameleon, antelope, echidna and other animals.

⁵ With North American Indians they may have the shape of a crow, rabbit, coyote and other animals.

more developed mythologies of Africa, America and Oceania they have an anthropomorphic shape.

According to the views of some mythologies, it is believed that he is of divine origin or is considered to be a demigod. He can merely be a spirit who acts at the order of a superior deity.⁶ A typical feature is that they fight against the gods. This feature is illustrated not only by the Greek Prometheus but is also found in the Polynesian Maui.⁷

The Polynesian civiliser, the trickster Maui, is the best known figure in the whole Pacific region.

W. D. Westervelt, who has collected numerous Mauian myths, maintains that the myths are proof that the inhabitants of these islands are of the same ethnicity.⁸

The story of Maui may be found also in Melanesia and Micronesia as well as in the group of Polynesian outliers. Even in Luzon (Philippines), there are mythological stories of Lumauig whose behaviour slightly remembers Maui.⁹

All of this might indicate that Maui belongs to the most archaic part of Polynesian mythology. He is known throughout Polynesia under the name of Maui, but he has acquired various epithets.¹⁰

⁶ For example, Prometheus is of a purely divine origin. The Polynesian Maui is an example of a cultural hero who has several versions. The Maoris believe he is of semi-divine origin descended from the god Tu-mata-uenga. In Hawaiian mythology his mother is the goddess Hina-a-he-ahi. In several versions his parents are common human beings.

⁷ Both of them are against the gods and resist them. Both are punished for it. Prometheus was attached to a rock as a punishment for his theft of fire from heaven. According to the Maori version of Maui, his fate was worse. When he desired to acquire immortality for people, he was killed by Hine-nui-te-po, the goddess of death.

⁸ WESTERVELT, W. D. *Legends of Maui, a demi-god of Polynesia and his mother Hina*, p. 7.

⁹ LUOMALA, K. *'Maui-of-a-thousand-tricks: his Oceanic and European Biographers'*, p. 10.

¹⁰ The name Maui-tiki-tiki, found in various forms in a number of dialects, is quite common throughout Oceania. Its wide distribution gives the impression that it is an extremely old part of the cycle. Maui, according to certain storytellers in New Zealand and in the Society Islands, received the name of Tikitiki because his mother wrapped him as an abortion, or blood clot, in a length of her hair. Maui's mother cast tikitiki-wrapped bundle into the sea. Another Maori version is that a drop of her blood fell on her tiki, an ornament shaped in a compact human form. From this drop of blood Maui developed. His name recalls the incident. A Polynesian mythological character named Tiki is often said to have been the first human being, a kind of Polynesian Adam (POATA, Tamati R. *The Maaori as a fisherman and his methods*, p. 209).

In studying the Maui myths of the Pacific, it is necessary to remember that Polynesians use 't' and 'k' without distinction, and also as in the Hawaiian Islands an apostrophe (') is often used in place of 't' or 'k'. Therefore, the Maui Ki-i-k-i'i of Hawaii becomes the demigod Tiki-tiki of the Gilbert Islands or the Ti'i-ti'i of Samoa or the Tiki of New Zealand and other islands of the Pacific region.¹¹

The myths of Maui were gradually modified either purposely, or under the influence of oral tradition. Sometimes the myths have undergone changes not only due to non-professional ethnologists and others who have collected the myths, but Ra'iatean priests modified the myths during the pre-contact time and tried to systematise them.

Those who do not know Polynesian mythology maintain that the title 'heroic cycle' sounds too highbrow to be used in the Maui mythological cycle. To anyone who has a well-grounded knowledge of Maui's myths, it seems to be adequate. This Maui cycle is just one of the fundamental genres of New Zealand traditional literature.¹²

The most developed mythological cycles concerning Maui have been found in New Zealand and in Central Polynesia.

Of all the myths from the Polynesian area, probably none have been more frequently quoted than those which recount the deeds and adventures of the demigod Maui. Among the Polynesians themselves almost every group had its own versions of the tales, and 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.

Maui, the hero of these tales, is as a rule described as one of a series of brothers, the number varying from three in Rarotonga to six in some of the New Zealand versions, although in Mangaia he is spoken of as having no brother.¹³

As in hero tales generally, he is usually the youngest child, and in New Zealand especially the older brothers of Maui are described as stupid or forgetful, while Maui, the hero, is clever or mischievous.¹⁴

Most Polynesians are familiar with the famous story of how humans first gained the knowledge of making fire from the goddess Mahuika (Mafui'e, Mahuika,...). It was a result of the young demigod Maui, who visited his grandmother in the underworld.

¹¹ <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pac/maui/maui08.htm>, p. 3.

¹² LUOMALA, K. *'Maui-of-a-thousand-tricks: his Oceanic and European Biographers'*, p. 21.

¹³ GILL, W. W. *Myths and Songs from the South Pacific*, p. 51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 64 and WESTERVELT, W. D. *Legends of Maui, a demi-god of Polynesia and his mother Hina*, p. 17.

Maui's Cycle in New Zealand

The richest and most complex story of Māui comes from New Zealand. According to Maori tradition, he is linked to a divine line of Tu-mata-uenga and his feats have overshadowed all of his elder brothers. He has five brothers in New Zealand and Maui-tikitiki is the youngest one.

In New Zealand, Māui was the son of Ataranga and her husband Makeatutara, but when he was prematurely born; his mother threw the fetus into the sea. He has been brought up by his great forefather, Tama-nui-ki-te-rangi,¹⁵ and as soon he grew up, he decided to search for both his mother and for his brothers. When he finally found them, his parents received him.

A number of remarkable feats in New Zealand mythology have been ascribed to Maui; for example, he has managed to slow down the movement of the sun. After this exploit, the people had enough daytime to complete all of their work. Maui also exhibits some features of a creator in the myths describing an episode of fishing which results in New Zealand being brought up from the deep sea. Another remarkable mythological theme has it that Maui tries to acquire immortality for people, but dies in the attempt. In contrast to this last example, he successfully manages to gain fire for people in the mythological cycles.

Another cycle of Maui brings up his successful attempt to fish dry earth from the ocean, believing he would extinguish and destroy the fires of his ancestress Mahuika.

In the story, he got up during the night, and put out the fires in the village. When the servants discovered in the morning that all the fires had been put out, they tried to find someone who would be able to bring fire from Mahuika.

At last, Maui said to his mother: *'Well; then I will fetch down fire for the world.'*

His parents, who knew the country well, said to him:

If you will go, follow that broad path that lies just before you there; and you will at last reach the dwelling of an ancestress of yours; and if she asks you who you are, you had better call out your name to her, then she will know you are a descendant of hers; but be cautious, and do not play any tricks with her.

Then he went, and reached the abode of the goddess of fire; and he was so filled with wonder at what he saw, that for a long time he could say nothing. At last he said:

Oh, lady, would you rise up? Where is your fire kept? I have come to beg some from you.

Then the aged lady rose right up, and said: *'Au-e! Who can this mortal be?'*

And he answered: *'It is I.'*

'Where do you come from?' said she.

And he answered: *'I belong to this country.'*

'You are not from this country,' said she.

She continued: *'Your appearance is not like that of the inhabitants of this country.'*

¹⁵ He is the sun in the Maori mythology.

Do you come from the north-east?

He replied: 'No.'

'Do you come from the south-east?'

He replied: 'No.'

'Are you from the south?'

He answered: 'No.'

'Come you, the, from the direction of the wind which blows right upon me?'

And he said: 'I do.'

'Oh then', cried she, *'you are my grand-child; what do you want here?'*

He answered: *'I have come to beg fire from you.'*

She replied: *'Welcome, welcome; here then is fire for you.'*

Then the aged woman pulled out her nail; and as she pulled it out fire flowed from it, and she gave it to him. And when Maui saw she had drawn out her nail to produce fire for him, he thought it a most wonderful thing! Then he went a short distance off, and when not very far from her, he put the fire out, completely out; and returning to her again, said: *'The light you gave me has gone out, give me another.'* Then she caught hold of another nail, and pulled it out as a light for him; and he left her, and went a little way, and that light went out also; then he went back to her again, and said: *'Oh, lady, give me, I pray you, another light for the last one has also gone out.'* And thus he went on and on, until she had pulled out all the nails of the fingers of one of her hands; and then she began with the other hand, until she had pulled all the fingernails out of that hand, too; and then she commenced upon the nails of her feet, and pulled them also out in the same manner, except the nail of one of her big toes. Then the aged woman said to herself at last: *'This fellow is surely playing tricks with me.'*

Then out she pulled the one toenail that she had left, and it, too, became fire, and as she dashed it down on the ground the whole place caught fire. And she cried out to Maui: *'There, you have it all now!'* And Maui ran off, and made a rush to escape, but the fire followed hard after him, close behind him; so he changed himself into a fleet-winged eagle, and flew with rapid flight, but the fire pursued him, and almost caught him as he flew. Then he flew down and immersed himself in a pool of water; but when he got into the water he found that almost boiling too. The forests just then also caught fire, so that he could not alight anywhere, and the earth and the sea both caught fire too, and Maui was very near to perishing in the flames.

Then he called on his ancestors, Tawhiri-ma-tea and Whatitiri-matakataka, to send down an abundant supply of water, and he cried aloud: *'Oh, let water be given to me to quench this fire which pursues after me';* and then appeared squalls and gales, and Tawhiri-ma-tea sent a heavy lasting rain, and the fire was quenched; and before Mahuika could reach her place of shelter, she almost perished in the rain, and her shrieks and screams became as loud as those of Maui's had been when he was scorched by the pursuing fire. Thus ended Maui's memorable escapade. In this manner was extinguished the fire of Mahuika, the goddess of fire; but before it was all lost, she saved a few sparks which she threw, to protect them, into the Kaiko-mako, and a few other trees, where they are still cherished: hence, men yet use portions of the wood of these trees for fire when they require a light.

Then he returned to the village, and his mother and father said to him: *'You heard when we warned you before you went, nevertheless you played tricks with your ancestress; it served you right that you got into such trouble';* and the young fellow answered his parents: *'Oh, what do*

*I care about that; do you think that my perverse proceedings will be stopped by this? Certainly not; I intend to go on in the same way for ever, ever, ever.*¹⁶

The fundamental features of this story occur in all mythological Maui cycles. It is a visit to the underworld and includes obtaining fire either from a god or from a goddess – or even an opportunity of learning how to make fire. Another frequent motif is the struggle between the guardian of fire with a being wishing to acquire it.

According to the introduced Maori version Maui is obviously the being who brought fire from his grandmother, Mahuika. Interestingly enough, the myth mentions that people had fire before and that Maui had extinguished it. However the origin of fire is not mentioned. The fire was obviously from nature, probably from a burning tree. But people were not able to make fire. The fire goddess, Mahuika, appears as a woman, just like his grandmother which underlines his divine origin.

Similar tales have been recorded from several of the other Polynesian groups: from the Chatham Islands, the Cook Islands, Marquesas, Samoa, Tonga and Niue. The practical absence of this myth from Tahiti (the Society Islands) is probably due to the very small amount of myth material so far published from there; on the other hand, the whole of the Maui cycle is apparently less important in this Group than elsewhere.¹⁷

Maui's Cycle in the Society Islands - Tahiti

In Tahitian mythology, Maui was considered as the discoverer of fire, too. In that mythology, e contra Maori mythology, Maui was a wise man, or prophet. He was named Ao-ao-ma-ra'i-a because he taught the art of obtaining fire with the friction of wood.¹⁸

According to the Westervelt version, Maui borrowed a sacred red pigeon belonging to one of the gods and, changing himself into a dragon fly, rode this pigeon through a black rock into Avaiki (Hawaiki), the fire-land of the underworld.

He found Mau-ika, the god of fire, living in a house built from a banyan tree.¹⁹ Mau-ika taught Maui the kinds of wood into which, when fire had gone out on the earth, a fire goddess had

¹⁶ GREY, G. *Polynesian mythology. Ancient Traditional History of the New Zealanders. As Furnished by Their Priests and Chiefs*, pp. 31-35.

¹⁷ DIXON, R. B. *Oceanic Mythology. The Mythology of all Races*, p. 48.

¹⁸ TREGEAR, E. R. *Maori-Polynesian Comparative Dictionary*, pp. 194, 235.

¹⁹ In Tahiti the fire god lived in the 'Hale-a-o-a' or the House of the Banyan. Sometimes human sacrifices were placed upon the sacred branches of this tree of the fire god.

thrown sparks into in order to preserve fire. Among these were the 'au' (Hawaiian hau), or 'the lemon hibiscus' the 'argenta', the 'fig' and the 'banyan'. She also taught him how to make fire by rubbing the sticks together of these trees in a fast motion. Furthermore, she gave him some coals for his present needs.

But Maui was viciously mischievous and set the banyan house on fire and then mounted his pigeon and fled toward the upper world. But the flames hastened after him and burst out through the rock doors into the sunlit land above as if it were a volcanic eruption.²⁰

However, while this Tahitian version recorded by Westervelt is very short, it contains the fundamental and typical feature of Maui's myth: a bad reward for something good (fire). It is almost identical with the New Zealand version if we do not take into account the different name for the goddess of the underworld. The difference consists in the fact that Mau-ika teaches Maui how to make fire while according to the New Zealand version she is pulling out her nails and in this way gives Maui fire. Maui burns down the house of Mau-ike and the netherworld too. But unlike the New Zealand version, there is no mention of what happened to the goddess and the underworld.

Maui's Cycle in the Marquesas

The Marquesas were the first archipelago discovered by Europeans in 1595, but there is little clear information of the cultural and religious aspects of its indigenous inhabitants.

When the Europeans attempted to record the inhabitants' customs, myths and religious ideas, the original religion that the natives had practised was almost dead and so heavily influenced by Christianity that, as a result, only traces of the original religion have been preserved. The myths of Maui preserved in this archipelago represent a purer form than that found in other parts of Polynesia.

There are seven Maui legendary brothers in the Marquesas' Maui cycle. The eldest was Maui-mua and the youngest Maui-tikitiki. Between them were Maui-mu'i, Maui-pae, and Maui-taha. If we substitute Maui-roto for Maui-mu'i, we have exactly the same names as in the New Zealand family of five. The two other brothers are Maui-vaveka and Maui-hakatata-mai; these were probably alternative names for two of an original family of five but, in the course of time, they came to be regarded as distinct individuals, thus raising the number of the family to seven.²¹

²⁰ WESTERVELT, W. D. *Legends of Maui, a demi-god of Polynesia and his mother Hina*, pp. 40-56.

²¹ BUCK, P. Te Rangi Hiroa. *Vikings of the Sunrise*, p. 159.

F. W. Christian in his article, 'Notes on the Marquesans. Marquesan Cosmogony',²² mentions a legend which has been retold by Titi-Ouoho, the old chieftain of Taipi Valley:

Maui went down beneath the ocean to the under-world to recover his father Ihi-Auau. Whilst engaged in this dutiful occupation he met one of Mahuike's daughters, a maiden, Hina-te-Onihi, and forgetful of his mission dwelt with her as his wife. Now one day she longed very much for the scented oils and perfumed garlands of which her mortal lover told her, and gave him a calabash to take to the upper world and fill with these coveted treasures. But guile was in Maui's heart, and when he returned with the ornaments and perfumes he lowered the calabash through the ocean depths with a mighty hook attached. By and by, feeling secure of a great prey, he pulled violently at the rope, and lo! a portion of Mahuike's kingdom came up to the light of day. The same is the Ao-maama, and the land of Toko-Eva, north-east of Eiau, which the children of the strangers called 'Clarke's Reef'—solid land no longer, for Mahuike has taken his own again. Not content with robbing Mahuike of part of his kingdom and his daughter, he went down to ask for the gift of the fire.

After various incantations he sang this song:

Mahuike maho tai,
E hano au i te ahi.
Te ahi hea?
Te ahi mei to vae.

'Mahuike, Lord of the Seas,
I have come to take thy fire.
Whence shall I gather it?
From thy foot? So be it.'

The fire-god, highly incensed, grudgingly yielded fire from his foot, into the dexterous hands of the wizard. But Maui was not yet content, and continuing his incantations sang on:

Mahuike maho tai,
A tuku mai te ahi.
Te ahi hea?
Te ahi mei to muo.

'Mahuike, Lord of the Seas,
Give of thy fires.
Whence shall I gather them?
From thy knee? So be it.'

The cunning sorcerer by a third incantation drew forth fire from the old fire-king's navel, leaving him paralysed and helpless. Not content with this, by a fourth mocking command he

²² CHRISTIAN, F. W. 'Notes on the Marquesans. Marquesan Cosmogony'. In *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, p. 189.

caused a mighty flame of fire to gush from Mahuike's mouth, whose temples burst asunder, and the ogre's days of mischief were over. Thus mightily wrought Maui the wily wizard meeting force with guile in the gloomy regions below. Thus ends the tale.

This version ascribes to Maui the acquisition of fire as do the other east Polynesian mythologies. But unlike them this myth also contains the motif of his close relationship with Mahuike's daughter, Hine-te-Onihi, which is quite unique in Polynesia. Another extraordinary occurrence is that Mahuike is a male, and unlike the other versions Maui acquires fire by the use of incantations. He has thus acquired fire four times. At the end of the myth, fire flares from Mahuike's mouth and it kills him.

On the Marquesas Island, Maui-tikitiki fished up the island from the sea, he has managed to slow down the fast movement of the sun and he gains fire for the people. Fire, there, has not been acquired by Maui from his old grandmother, Mahuike, but from his grandfather living in the underworld who is the caretaker of fire.

Maui's Cycle in the Hawaii Islands

The deeds of Maui, the well-known trickster hero of Polynesia, are reported sporadically in Hawaii. Always minutely localised for each island, they concentrate in the following places: about a point above Kahakuloa for West Maui, Kauiki for East Maui, a cave on the Wailuku River above Hilo for Hawaii, Waianae on Oahu, Wailua on Kauai. Most of the principal episodes of the Maui cycle found in other groups occur, but sometimes with considerable or complete variation from forms familiar in the south. Only in the Kumulipo chant is there any indication of a complete legendary cycle. That such a cycle existed in connection with the Kane-Kanaloa legend is evident from such fragments as we have. Maui is made a direct ancestor from Wakea on the Ulu line. A series of his adventures or 'escapades' (ka ua) occurs in the fifteenth era of the Kumulipo.²³ In the Ulu line, he is the son of Akalana and his wife Hinakawea. This couple has four sons: Māui-mua, Māui-hope, Māui-ki'iki'i and Māui-a-kalana. Māui-a-kalana's wife is named Hinakealohaila and his son is called Nanamaoa. Māui is one of the Kupua.²⁴ His name should not be confused with the island Maui, even though some authors neglect to add this when writing his name.

Except for a series of encounters with Kane and Kanaloa for possession of the awa drink, these correspond closely with the well-known series from the

²³ BECKWITH, M. *Hawaiian mythology*, p. 226.

²⁴ The Kupua are a group of demigods: heroic tricksters.

south. It is unfortunate that early collectors neglected these stories, which today have probably been much toned down from forms more nearly approaching the primitive versions obtained by Stimson from the Tuamotus, and whose connection with the mythology has been lost.²⁵

The Hawaiian story of acquiring fire is different from the other Polynesian myths. It is one of the least fantastic of all the legends.

Hina, Maui's mother, wanted fish. One early morning Maui saw that the great storm waves of the sea had died down and that the fishing grounds could be easily reached. He awakened his brothers and with them hastened to the beach. This was at Kaupo on the island of Maui. Out into the grey shadows of the dawn they paddled. When they were far from shore they began to fish. But Maui, looking landward, saw a fire on the mountain side.

'Behold,' he cried. 'There is a fire burning. Whose can this fire be?'

'Whose, indeed?' his brothers replied. *"Let us hasten to the shore and cook our food,"* said one. They decided that they had better catch some fish to cook before they returned. Thus, in the morning, before the hot sun drove the fish deep down to the dark recesses of the sea, they fished until a bountiful supply lay in the bottom of the canoe. When they came to land, Maui leaped out and ran up the mountain side to get the fire. For a long, long time they had been without fire. The great volcano Haleakala above then, had become extinct-and they had lost the coals they had tried to keep alive. They had eaten fruits and uncooked roots and the shellfish broken from the reef-and sometimes the great raw fish from the distant ocean. But now they hoped to gain a living fire and cooked food. But when Maui rushed up toward the cloudy pillar of smoke he saw a family of birds scratching the fire out. Their work was finished and they flew away just as he reached the place. Maui and his brothers watched for fire day after day-but the birds, the curly-tailed Alae (or the mudhens) made no fire. Finally, the brothers went fishing once more - but when they looked toward the mountain, again they saw flames and smoke. Thus it happened to them again and again. Maui proposed to his brothers that they go fishing leaving him to watch the birds.

But the Alae counted the fishermen and refused to build a fire for the hidden one who was watching them. They said among themselves, *'Three are in the boat and we know not where the other one is, we will make no fire today.'*

So the experiment failed again and again. If one or two remained or if all waited on land there would be no fire - but the dawn which saw the four brothers in the boat, saw also the fire on land. Finally Maui rolled some kapa cloth together and stuck it up in one end of the canoe so that it would look like a man. He then concealed himself near the haunt of the mud-hens, while his brothers went out fishing. The birds counted the figures in the boat and then started to build a heap of wood for the fire. Maui was impatient - and just as the old Alae began to select sticks with which to make the flames he leaped swiftly out and caught her and held her prisoner. He forgot for a moment that he wanted the secret of fire making. In his anger against the wise bird his first impulse was to taunt her and then kill her for hiding the secret of fire. But the Alae cried out: *'If you are the death of me, my secret will perish also, and you cannot have fire.'* Maui then promised to spare her life if she would tell him what to do. Then came the contest of wits. The bird told the demi-god to rub the stalks of water plants together. He guarded the bird and tried the plants. Water instead of fire ran out of the twisted stems. Then she told him to rub reeds together-but they bent and broke and could make no fire. He twisted her neck until she was half dead-then she cried out: *'I have hidden the fire in a green stick.'* Maui worked hard, but not a spark of fire appeared.

²⁵ BECKWITH, M. *Hawaiian mythology*, p. 227.

Again he caught his prisoner by the head and wrung her neck, and she named a kind of dry wood. Maui rubbed the sticks together, but they only became warm. The neck twisting process was resumed and repeated again and again, until the mud-hen was almost dead-and Maui had tried tree after tree. At last Maui found fire. Then as the flames rose he said: '*There is one more thing to rub.*' He took a fire stick and rubbed the top of the head of his prisoner until the feathers fell off and the raw flesh appeared. Thus the Hawaiian mud-hen and her descendants have ever since had bald heads, and the Hawaiians have had the secret of fire making.²⁶

We have to note that in many myths not only was fire stolen, but birds marked by red or black spots among their feathers were associated with the theft. It would naturally be supposed that the Hawaiians living in a volcanic country with ever-flowing fountains of lava would connect their fire myths with some volcano when relating the story of the origin of fire. But like the rest of the Polynesians, they found fire in trees.²⁷

It is interesting that in Hawaiian mythology, with the exception of Maui's name, there is mentioned none of the usual traditional remarks associated with the acquisition of fire. It lacks, too, the visit to the underworld that is a universal motif, and the method for obtaining fire is also completely different from the other cycles.

Maui's cycle in the Cook Islands

In the Cook Islands there is a widespread myth about how Maui (in this version Maau) recognised his parents and how he visited them in the underworld.

His parents were Ru and Puataranga. Ru supported the heaven and his wife has been guardian of the path to the invisible world. Maui as a boy has become a guardian of that world. He used to eat raw food just like the rest of the other inhabitants of the earth. However, his mother who sometimes visited him, carried her own food in a basket. Maui peeped into it once and saw that the food was not raw but cooked. His mother's food was from the underworld and Maui concluded that it was there where the mystery of fire was being kept hidden. When Puataranga decided to go to the underworld the next day, Maui secretly followed her. When she cried out an incantation, the black rock opened and she entered. Maui approached the god Tane and asked him for a red pigeon. It was very tame and he knew how to return to his master. Maui carried him to the black rock where he called out the incantation that he had heard and the rock opened. After that Maui became the red pigeon and flew inside. He reached as far as his mother's house. He then transformed himself into a boy and explained to her why he had come to the underworld. His mother betrayed to him the secret of fire guarded by Ma'uike. Maau visited the god and immediately asked for fire for himself. Ma'uike gave him the fire, but Maau extinguished it. He repeated this three times. But Maau did not want coals. He was curious how to make fire. He decided to force Ma'uike to betray the mystery of making fire. When Maau

²⁶ <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pac/maui/maui08.htm>, pp. 3-5.

²⁷ <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pac/maui/maui08.htm>, p. 2.

came for the fourth time, Ma'uike was very furious and they started fighting each other. Maui promised not to kill him if Ma'uike was ready to betray to him the secret of making fire. Ma'uike was frightened and showed him what to do. Maui's reward was to burn the whole of Ma'uike's house. Indeed, the whole underworld started burning. Ma'uike almost burnt. Since that day the inhabitants of this world make fire with wooden sticks and eat baked meat.²⁸

The stories of Maui from Manihiki Island in the Cook archipelago were collected by Kauraka Kauraka. They do not include all of the known motifs, but they do include the familiar story of the birth of Maui, whose father was Tongaifare, the motif of the subjugation of the sun, the bringing up of Manihiki from the depths of the sea, and the mystery of making fire.²⁹

According to W. W. Gill, in the version from Mangaia, Māui's mother was Buataranga and his father was Ru. Buataranga is essentially the same name as Puataranga. This myth is almost identical with the preceding one. In addition, Gill includes the incantation which helped Buataranga to enter the underworld.

'Buataranga i tona rua, e rarangatu
koe.
E anuenue i akarongoia atu ei.
Opipiri,³⁰ Oeretue-i-te-ata e !
Vāia, vāi akera i te rua i Avaiki, nga
taae!' ³¹

Buataranga, descend thou bodily
through this chasm.
The rainbow-like must be obeyed.
As two dark clouds parting at dawn,
Open, open up my road to nether-
world, ye fierce ones.

Gill wrote down a version about the acquisition of fire from Manihiki, too. It is different from other Cook Islands versions. The myth says that:

On the island of Rarotonga there once lived Manuahifare and his wife Tongoifare, the offspring of the god Tangaroa. Their eldest son was named Maui the First, and the next was Maui the Second. Then followed their sister, Inaika.³² The youngest was a boy, Maui the Third. This wonderful lad had noticed that his father, Manuahifare, mysteriously disappeared at the dawn of every day. One day Maui the Third followed his father who was approaching to the main pillar of his dwelling, and said:

'O pillar I open, open up, that Manuahifare may enter and descend to nether-world (Avaiki).'

The pillar immediately opened, and Manuahifare descended. That same day Maui the Third went up to the post through which his father had disappeared, and pronounced the magic words he had overheard. To his great joy the obedient post opened up, and Maui boldly descended to the nether regions. Manuahifare was greatly surprised to see his son down there. Maui the Third went

²⁸ KRUPA, V. *Polynézské mýty*, pp. 126-130.

²⁹ KAURAKA, Kauraka *E au tuatua Ta'ito no Manihiki*, p. 72 .

³⁰ Names for the clouds which are parted by the rising sun.

³¹ GILL, W. W. *Myths and Songs from the South Pacific*, p. 52.

³² Ina-the-Fish.

on an exploring tour through these unknown subterranean regions, the entrance to which he had luckily discovered. Amongst other wonderful things, he fell in with a blind old woman bending over a fire where her food was being cooked. Maui inquired her name, and, to his surprise, found it was Inaporari, or Ina-the-Blind, his own grandmother. Maui helped her by anointing her eyes with a piece of an apple, so she could see again. Ina-the-Blind was delighted to see again, and, in gratitude, said to her grandson, *'All above, and all below (all on earth and all in the spirit-land) are subject to thee, and to thee only.'*

Maui asked Ina, *'Who is lord of fire?'*

She replied, *'Thy grandfather Tangaroa-tui-mata,'* (or Tangaroa-of-the-tattooed-face)

'Where is he?' inquired Maui.

'Yonder,' rejoined his grand-mother; *'but do not go to him. He is a terribly irritable fellow: you will surely perish.'* But as Maui persisted, the grateful goddess Ina said, *'There are two roads to his dwelling. One of these is the path of death; whoever unwittingly approaches the Great Tangaroa by this path, dies. The other is the 'common,' or 'safe' (noa) road.'*

Maui disdained to choose the path of safety. Knowing his own prowess, he boldly trod the path of death. Tangaroa-of-the-tattooed-face, seeing Maui advancing, raised his right hand to kill him - that hand which as yet had never failed to destroy its victim. But Maui, not to be daunted, lifted his right hand. At this Tangaroa, not liking the aspect of Maui, raised his right foot, for the purpose of kicking to death the luckless intruder. But Maui was prepared to do the same to the lord of fire with his right foot. Astounded at this piece of audacity, Tangaroa demanded his name. The visitor replied, *'I am Maui the Younger.'* The god now knew it to be his own grandson.

'What did you come for?'

'To get fire,' was the response of Maui.

Tangaroa-of-the-tattooed-face gave him a lighted stick, and sent him away. Maui walked to a short distance, and finding some water, like that dividing the two islets collectively called Manihiki, extinguished the lighted stick. Three times this process was repeated. The fourth time all the firebrands were gone, and Tangaroa had to fetch two dry sticks to rub together, in order to produce fire, Maui held one stick under the other for his grandfather; but just as the fine dust in the groove was igniting, the impudent Maui blew it all away. Tangaroa, justly irritated at this, drove Maui away, and summoned a "kakaia," or tern, to come to his assistance to hold down the lower piece of wood, whilst Tangaroa diligently worked again with the other stick. At last, to the infinite joy of Maui, fire was obtained. It was no longer a mystery. Maui suddenly snatched the upper stick, one end of which was burning, out of the hand of Tangaroa. The patient bird of white plumage still firmly clutched with her talons the other fire-stick, when Maui purposely burnt either side of the eye of the bird. The indignant tern, smarting at this ill-requital, fled away for ever. Hence the black marks, resembling a pair of eyebrows, on either side of the eye of this beautiful bird to this day. Tangaroa reproached his grandson with having thus wantonly deprived him of the valuable services of his favourite bird. Maui deceitfully said, "Your bird will come back." Maui next proposed to Tangaroa that they should both fly up to day-light through the hole by which the bird had escaped. The god inquired how this could be accomplished. Maui at once volunteered to show the way, and actually flew to a considerable height like a bird. Tangaroa-of-the-tattooed-face was greatly delighted. Maui came down to the ground, and urged his grandfather to imitate his example. *'Nothing,'* said Maui *'is easier than to fly.'* At his grandson's suggestion, Tangaroa put on his glorious girdle (called by mortals the rainbow), and, to his immense delight, succeeded in rising above the loftiest cocoanut tree. The crafty Maui took care to fly lower than Tangaroa, and getting hold of one end of the old man's girdle, he gave it a smart pull, which brought down poor Tangaroa from his giddy elevation. The fall killed Great Tangaroa. Pleased with his achievement in getting the secret of fire from his grandfather and then killing him, he returned to his parents, who had both descended to the underworld. Maui told them he had got the secret of fire, but withheld the important circumstance that he had killed

Tangaroa. His parents expressed their joy at his success, and intimated their wish to go and pay their respects to the Supreme Tangaroa. Maui objected to their going at once. 'Go,' said he, 'on the third day. I wish to go myself tomorrow.' The parents of Maui acquiesced in this arrangement and accordingly, on the next day, Maui went to the abode of Tangaroa, and found the body entirely decomposed. He carefully collected the bones, put them inside a coconut shell, carefully closed the tiny aperture, and finally gave them a thorough shaking. Upon opening the coconut shell, he found his grandfather to be alive again.³³

This Manihiki version is very interesting because it is one of the longest from the whole of Polynesia and is documented in detail thanks to Gill; unfortunately, this is not the case for the archipelagos like Tahiti or the Marquesas. Despite it having all the signs of an East Polynesian myth of acquiring fire, which means that Maui the youngest of all his siblings operates here, his father leaves for the underworld, but the difference is hidden within the names of his parents: the father is Manuhifare and the mother Tongoifare. But a marked difference consists in the person of the fire guardian. In spite of the fact that in eastern Polynesia, as well as in many regions of western Polynesia, it is either a god or goddess Mahuika, Mahuike, Mafuike or other variants of that name. In the Manihiki version this figure appears as an old woman just like in preceding versions, but under a different name. The difference consists in the fact that she alone shows to Maui the road to the god of fire, who is in this case Tangaroa-tui-mata, Maui's grandfather. The incident of the battle appears as well, which results in Tangaroa being killed. However, Maui revitalises him soon after.

The version from Mangaia displays many shared features with the New Zealand variants in the sense that Maui leaves for the underworld. Maui is visiting Ma'uike, the god of fire in order to learn the mystery of making fire. Ma'uike being afraid for his life finally betrays it to him. Maui burns both his house and underground and Ma'uike's life is almost lost as a result.

Maui's Cycle in the Tuamotu Islands

Myths of Maui from the Tuamotu archipelago were written down by J. F. Stimson. His book, *Legends of Maui and Tahaki*, are the sole source of Maui myths from this archipelago.

Well-known motifs in the cycle of Maui do occur in Tuamotu. Maui's mother has the name Hua-henga and his father's name is Ataraga. However Hua-henga is not Ataraga's wife. His true wife is Hava. But when Maui-tikitiki-a-Taranga was born he decided to live with his father.

This story of making fire is very similar to a version from the Cook Islands.

³³ GILL, W. W. *Myths and Songs from the South Pacific*, pp. 63-70.

Ataraga and his wife Hava went searching for food to Havaiki-the spouting-breaking-upon-the-back-of-Atea. Maui-tikitiki-a-Taraga wanted to take part in searching for food together with his parents; they were not willing to take him along but Maui decided to race after them. He transmogrified himself and took on the appearance of a pigeon and caught up with them. Then he asked them for two land crabs to be given to him. He told his father that he would bake them and afterwards returns home. But it was a lie. Maui wanted to acquire fire from the guardian Mahu-ike. He found Mahu-ike and he asked for a burning log three times. But he always extinguished it in the water. As soon as he came again, Mahu-ike asked him for the last time what he wants. Maui replied that he wanted the very heart of the fire. Having obtained the heart, he extinguished it. Mahu-ike was left only with a few sparks. Maui ceased to be afraid of him because his strength in the heart of fire was destroyed; he returned and started struggling with Mahu-ike and he finally killed him with a magic formula. He cut off his head and he brought it to his grandfather Tane-te-vai-ora. This made his grandfather very sad and he decided to bury Mahu-ike's head in the corner of his own house.³⁴

This myth from Tuamotu seems to be a synthesis of myths about Maui from the Cook Islands. For example, it is highly similar to the Mangaia myth. In that case, Maui likewise enters into the underworld and changes into a pigeon and the guardian of fire is a male being by the name of Ma'uike. Maui extinguished the fire, but the end of the myth is different and is remindful of the Manihiki myth (also the Cook Islands), despite the obvious difference.

However, both myths end with a battle of Maui and a being that possesses fire. In Tuamotu, it is Mahu-ike whom Maui finally kills and his grandfather Tane buries him in his house. In the other Manihiki version, Maui is fighting with the fire guardian, who is, unusually, Tangaroa-tui-mata. Maui kills him but later revives him again. The death motif of the being that possesses fire is extremely rare. We meet with it only in eastern Polynesia in Tuamotu and in the Marquesas, where Mahu-ike, the god of fire, dies because fire requested by Maui flashes from his mouth.

Of all the mythological heroes of the south Pacific islands, Maui is the most widely known. He is clearly present in almost every Polynesian island and in the Melanesian and Micronesian islands, the inhabitants of which are somehow related to Polynesians or have come into contact with neighbours who are.

Though evidence is lacking that Maui was originally a chief whose followers deified him, many islanders regard him as their ancestor or that of their chiefs because he brought up their lands from the depths of the ocean. His other adventures, like that of raising the sky may also be reversed to reveal him as the founder of an important family line. Any of his adventures may be utilised in

³⁴ Short version of legends recorded in Stimson's '*Legends of Maui and Tahaki*', pp.17-21.

connection with agriculture, fishing, bird-catching, and other vital economic activities. His name is often associated with bringing new food plants to the earth and stealing fire from an old god who hoards it. Rarely is Maui rated as a primal god. More often he is described as a demi-god who lived in the era following the creation or evolution of the world which he modified to raise the low-hanging sky to its present heights, slow down the speeding sun, bring up islands from under the sea (by fishing), and acquire fire for mankind to cook food.³⁵

I have analysed in this study the most completely recorded variants of the Maui myths concerning the origin of fire in eastern Polynesia. Those myths show the diversity of form assumed in each island. No two islands have an identical myth about the origin of fire. This diversity is most probably caused by narrative traditions and by individual interpretations made by each tribe. But the figure of Maui which appears in the great majority of noted myths of eastern Polynesia confirms their common origin.

The various versions of this legend which have been recorded in the Polynesian area present minor differences which would seem to be significant, and a consideration of some of the separate incidents of this myth may, therefore, be instructive. In the first place, the idea that fire was originally obtained from the underworld (a feature found in all of these Polynesian versions except those from Hawaii and Easter Island³⁶) is one which also occurs in Melanesia; although, on the other hand, a more usual explanation in this area is that fire was either brought from another land by some animal after several unsuccessful attempts or was accidentally discovered.

In the Polynesian versions of Maui's exploit the method by which his parent and he reached the underworld varies considerably. Thus, in the form outlined above, the opening to the underworld is concealed under a tuft of reeds or grass, and this same idea appears in both the Samoan version and in that from Niue. Forms of the tale from New Zealand, Samoa, and Mangaia (the Cook Islands), however, state that the parent went to a rock or cliff, and by repeating a charm caused it to open, thus revealing the entrance to the lower world. This 'Open Sesame' incident by itself is found in numerous other myths from New Zealand, as well as from the Chatham Islands and Tahiti, and is reported also from British New Guinea and from Halmahera. Still another way of descent to the

³⁵ LUOMALA, K. *'Maui-of-a-thousand-tricks: his Oceanic and European Biographers'*, p. 273.

³⁶ I underline that the religious ideas and mythology of Eastern Island have been preserved only in fragments and are markedly different from those found in the other parts of the Polynesian regions. The myths of acquiring fire and of Maui seem to be completely lacking there.

underworld, namely, by pulling up one of the house posts, occurs in one of the Maori versions, as it does in that from Manihiki.³⁷

In the myth from the Cook Islands, he gained entry into the underworld thanks to the magic formula which Maui had heard from his mother Buataranga while he was following her. In the Tahitian version, Maui, who has transmogrified into a pigeon, managed to penetrate through the black rock to the underworld known in this version as Avaiki, in other words, Hawaiki. In the Tuamotu version, Maui enters into the underworld and its name is Avaiki, too. The idea of a god guarding a fire in the underground is almost identical. On this point the myth barely deviates: modifications of the name of the fire guardian indicate that sometimes it is the name of a male and in other instances it is a female being.

In the New Zealand myths, the underworld deity from whom Maui secures fire is described as an old woman, Mahuika, whereas in practically all the other portions of Polynesia where the myth is found this divinity is male. In the Maori version, she is the younger sister of Hine-nui-te-pō, the goddess of death. It was from her that Maui obtained the secret of making fire. She married Auahi-Turoa and together they had five children named for the five fingers on the human hand, called collectively Ngā Mānawa. The symbolism of this connection between fingers and fire is revealed in the stories where Maui obtains fire from Mahuika by tricking her into giving him her fingernails, one by one. In some parts of New Zealand, Mahuika is a male deity. This is also the case in some parts of tropical Polynesia; for instance, in the Tuamotu Archipelago it is Mahu-ike, in the Cook Islands it is Ma'uike and in the Marquesas, Mahuike is the fire god who lives in the underworld in addition to being the grandfather of Maui. The only exception in eastern Polynesia is the island Manihiki where Tangaroa-tui-mata is Maui's grandfather and the guardian of fire. In other parts of Polynesia, similar deities are known as Mafui'e, Mafuika or Mahui'e. In Hawaiian versions Maui has not gotten fire from the goddess Mahuika. This motif in Hawaii, alone of all the Polynesian groups, is completely lacking, although it possesses one of a wholly different character. In speaking of the more usual version of Maui's exploit, it was pointed out that the widespread myth of the origin of fire in Melanesia and Indonesia claims that animals or birds brought it from a distant land. While this is by no means an exact parallel to the Hawaiian tale, it presents the nearest approach to it of any of the myths of the origin of fire that are known from the whole Pacific area.

In the New Zealand version Maui asks the fire-goddess for fire; she takes off and gives to him one of her fingers or toes, the element for ignition thus being

³⁷ DIXON, R. B. *Oceanic Mythology. The Mythology of all Races*, p. 48.

obtained from the body of its owner. This incident is also found in the Chatham Island versions, and in a slightly modified form in the Marquesas, though it is lacking in other portions of Polynesia. However, it is interesting to note, on the other hand, that this same conception of the acquisition of fire from the body of its owner occurs both in Melanesia and in Micronesia.

On the other islands of eastern Polynesia, Maui acquires fire in the shape of burning logs. Despite certain diversity, these versions coincide in the fact that Maui as a rule asks for fire three times and always extinguishes it. He is chiefly trying to learn how to make fire. Within the same motif, Maui is always prepared to commit evil acts directed at the god of fire. According to the Maori version, he burns the underworld of the goddess. In the Mangaia (the Cook Islands) version he fights with Ma'uike, he almost kills him, and finally burns his underworld. In Manihiki (the Cook Islands), Maui harms the god of fire Tangaroa-tui-mata and kills him but revives him in the end. Mahuike, the god of fire dies in the Marquesas because Maui, by means of a magic formula, provokes a flame from Mahuike's mouth that tears his head apart. Maui kills him in Tuamotu.

A very frequent motif is that Maui's mother is a guardian of the road to the underworld. As far as the names of Maui's parents, there are great differences in the myths of Eastern Polynesia. In New Zealand the mother is called Ataranga and father is Makeatutara. On the island of Manihiki (the Cook Islands) the mother is Tongoifare and the father is Manuhifare. In Mangaia (the Cook Islands) the mother has a very different name, Buataranga, and likewise the father, whose name is Ru. His function consists in supporting heaven. The persons in the Marquesas are very different: the father is called Ihi-Auau, while the mother is Hina-te-Onihi. This woman has a strange feature. She regards herself as Mahuike's daughter. A certain similarity of names is obviously present only on Tuamotu. Maui's father is Ataraga, which is actually quite analogous to Maui's mother's name, Ataranga, in the New Zealand myth. The name of Maui's mother in Tuamotu is also very different from the remaining versions: it is Hua-henga. Maui's mother appears also in the Hawaiian Islands and her name is Hina like in the Marquesas, where she has an epithet, Hina-te-Onihi, meaning 'Hina the fiery'. We must also remember that in the Hawaiian legends Kalana is Maui's father. Kanaloa, the great god of most of the different Polynesians, is also sometimes called the Father of Maui.³⁸

In spite of the fact that in most of the quoted myths the names of Maui's parents are quite different they do share one property: they know how to

³⁸ <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pac/maui/maui08.htm>, p. 3.

penetrate into the underworld whether by means of a magic formula or simply because they know the locality and know where the entrance to it is.

Some legends make Maui the fire-teacher as well as the fire-finder. He teaches men how to use hardwood sticks on the fine dry dust on the bark of certain trees, or how to use the fine fibre of the palm tree to catch sparks.

The story of fire-finding in Polynesia is almost always woven, with very few exceptions, between Maui (or one of his widely-accepted names), his father, and his ancestress. This fact is important in showing, in a very marked manner, the race relationship of a vast number of the islanders of the Pacific world. From the Marshall Islands in the west, to the Society Islands of the east; from the Hawaiian Islands in the north to the New Zealand group in the south, the footsteps of the fire-finder can be traced.

As mentioned before, versions of the myth of acquiring fire clearly prove not only the common origin of the inhabitants of eastern Polynesia but of the inhabitants of the whole of Oceania as well.

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