
JIM WILLIAMS (NGĀI TAHU)
*University of Otago*

*Handbook of Polynesian Mythology* is part of a series entitled *Handbooks of World Mythology* and is intended to be a reference book: a well-illustrated potpourri of information and stories with some excellent background provided by way of introduction. It reads like a lifetime’s collection of data, now brought together in encyclopaedic fashion, yet unfinished—perhaps such a collection is never finished? It will be of value to all those who have an interest in Polynesia, regardless of background, but it may leave many Polynesians, and Polynesian scholars, feeling somewhat dissatisfied. The etic treatment of myth carries with it undertones of old-fashioned colonial hegemony.

The book is organised thematically with particular emphasis on creation stories, deities and concepts, and covers most, if not all, of Polynesia. However, it is not possible that even such a comprehensive offering can be expected to cover all the information that is available from everywhere in Polynesia. As example: the demigod, Māui, is covered in considerable detail, yet Katharine Luomala published an entire volume of Māui stories, *Maui-of-a-thousand-tricks:…*, that is almost the size of Craig’s book, as Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum Bulletin 198 (1949, 300 pages). There are a good number of black and white photographs, some old favourites and many new ones, recently taken.

There is a good Introduction, providing background on Pacific geography, migrations, traditional society and languages, and European exploration and colonisation. Chapter 2 deals with “Creation and the Cosmos”, providing short forms of various creation stories, though only one from each of the geopolities that are known today, however heterogeneous they might be (see the Cook Islands example below). Chapter 3, making up two-thirds of the volume, is entitled “Deities, Themes and Concepts”. It is here that the considerable detail is presented. Understandably, the major Polynesian entities: Samoa, Tonga, Hawai‘i, Tahiti, the Cook Islands and New Zealand receive primacy of place, with various other groups mentioned from time to time. Somewhat surprisingly, Tuvalu is included in each section, yet the Polynesian Outliers and the Marquesas are treated rather cursorily and Niue not at all. This is clearly seen when the Index is examined: in the Cook Islands data, Mangaia predominates with 14 entries, compared with Rarotonga’s seven, one for Aitutaki and none at all for Atiu, Mauke and Mitiaro or Manahiki and other atolls in the northern Cooks. This suggests that the research may have been done unevenly over a period of time, and the data collected has been included in the present volume, together with
a very useful series of “Annotated Print Sources”—the contents of Chapter 4 and, in Chapter 5, a number of “Internet Web Sites”, which are a combination of official government sites and a number of compilations of myth.

An egregious error was found (p. 288): it was not Anthony Hopper (sic) who wrote with Judith Huntsman! Also, Antony may possibly feel somewhat miffed that Judith, alone, is acknowledged as “the foremost contemporary authority on the islands of Tokelau” (ibid.)

In its style, the book (to this reader, at least) is somewhat dated, reminiscent of hegemonic ethnologies from the early 20th century. Some stories seem to have been collected from afar, possibly second or third hand, and suffer a little as a result. For instance, the Wanganui River story of the taniwha Tutae-poroporo is classified among the giant lizard (moko or mo’o) stories, yet in each of the several versions known to this reviewer Tutae-poroporo was actually a giant eel.

Yet I must not quibble! The plethora of detail thoroughly outweighs the infelicities present.


FRANK R. THOMAS
University of the South Pacific

Robert Langdon’s last book, before his death in 2003, focuses on plants of South American origin and their distribution in the Pacific Islands before European contact. It consists of several journal articles and books previously written by the author. Building a case for the dispersal of cultivars by American Indians, Langdon examined a range of data from historical sources, linguistics, human biology, archaeology and botanical studies. In essence, the research is intended to vindicate Thor Heyerdahl’s “Kon-Tiki” thesis of South American seafaring abilities and culture contact between that continent and several East Polynesian islands, using primarily botanical evidence.

The book is organised into 14 chapters, with the majority examining a wealth of historical references related to plant distribution. This is backed up by an impressive review of the literature on plant biology, expanding the list of cultivated species beyond the better documented sweet potato and bottle gourd. But even if their presence before European contact could be established, one needs to examine alternative modes of dispersal. Langdon believes that South American Indians (fisher-folk or travellers to the Galapagos Islands) could have drifted on balsa rafts to East Polynesia, to Easter Island specifically—the gateway for subsequent plant dispersals. The alternative, that Polynesians could have reached American shores and carried these plants back with them, is rejected by the author. A third hypothesis, natural dispersal by wind, birds or ocean currents, including soil and plants embedded in driftwood, is also quickly dismissed despite recent studies on the feasibility of such transfers and computer simulations. “Natural” dispersal could also have taken place from beached rafts or other types of vessels minus the crew who might have perished at sea or close to shore.