

DELUGE IN POLYNESIAN MYTHOLOGY

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Deluge is one of the most widespread mythical motifs throughout the world although it may be lacking in some parts of the world. It may take the shape of a universal punishment of sinful peoples (just as in the Bible) and thus be a part of cosmogony or may be of a rather episodic or accidental nature. This paper discusses several instances of the motif of deluge in several parts of Polynesia.

Polynesia is one of those regions where deluge is so to say endemic. Bacil B. Kirtley in his *Index* lists several kinds of flood including global cataclysms, floods as a manifestation of divine anger, floods as a result of prayers or a punishment for breaking tabu, revengeful or even selective floods (Kirtley 1971: 68-69). R. B. Dixon states that the importance of flood-myths in Polynesia was apparently not very great and is inclined to consider most of them as episodic (Dixon 1964: 38). This is obviously a misunderstanding; a variety of flood-myths have been recorded within the region delimited by Hawai'i in the northeast, Tonga (and even Fiji to the west of it and in the area of Outlier Polynesia) and New Zealand in the southeast. Some of the floods are no doubt accidental and without far reaching consequences. Thus Tawhaki (in Maori mythology) provoked a flood by simply stamping on the heavenly floor which cracked, his mother caused flood by weeping at the actions of her son, or the same Tawhaki asked the gods to execute revenge for an attempt to murder him. After his defeat he took his warriors and built a protected village upon the top of a mountain. It was here that Tawhaki called to the gods for revenge and the flood they let down was so disastrous that the whole earth was covered by water and all human beings perished (Grey 1855: 71). This episode may, however, be characterized as a cataclysmic deluge. Some of these narratives are reminiscent of etiological myths the purpose of which is probably to explain the hidden cause of heavy rains, which repeatedly occur throughout the area of Pacific islands. The gods granted Tawhaki's wish and sent down a flood, but he and his friend had to climb a mountain to save themselves. In Mangaia (Cook Islands) a deluge was the result of a conflict between two gods, and the first Mangaian

king had to beg their god Rongo to save him. In West Polynesia (both Tonga and Samoa) the primordial deluge is an ingredient part of the creation of the world.

Henceforth I shall concentrate upon instances of cataclysmic deluge in Eastern Polynesia. E. S. C. Handy points out that a cataclysmic deluge has very much in common with the primeval state of the world (Handy 1927: 15-16) as it is described by quite a few religions and mythologies not only in Polynesia, but also in the Old World, being perhaps a figurative characterization of the inertia and/or chaos at the beginning of the universe. However, a sequence consisting of the original creation followed by a later cataclysmic deluge may easily be re-interpreted as a repeated or multiple creation, as an attempt to improve the result of the first, not too successful creative attempt.

In the story of Tohe-tika recorded by Handy (Handy 1930: 107-110) the hero caused a great flood, which carried feasting and dancing people into the sea so that they were drowned. A true flood is described in the story of Tu, the god of war. Tu was insulted by his daughter Hii-hia and leaning with his back against a post of a house, wept for a long time. His tears bored a deep hole to the lower world. A torrent of rain flooded the valley, destroyed all houses and only six people survived the disaster (Handy 1930: 110).

The Tahitian version of the narrative of deluge (Henry 1968: 462-466) depicts a picture of total destruction.

One day Tahiti was totally submerged, both Grand Tahiti and Petit Tahiti. Neither pigs nor chickens, rats or dogs remained alive, except those saved by two persons. Gods took the birds and insects to the heaven to save them (I pau ihora Tahiti i te tai, o Tahiti nui e o Tahiti iti! 'A'ore pua'a, 'a'ore moa, 'a'ore 'iore, 'a'ore manu 'a'ore 'uri i toe, maori ra ta to'o rua ta'ata i fa'aora mai. Na o te atua ta manu e te manumanu i haru i te ra'i 'ore ai).

The disaster started with the big wind from the North, the cyclones lifted huge trees and they were whirling in the air... But a couple, a man and a woman were saved. The woman took her chickens, the man his piglets, the woman her young dogs and young rats usually used as food, the man took their mats and clothes, and ran away to look for a refuge (O te ho'e ra tau ta'ata to'oru, te tane e te vahine, te to'e ra ia. Ua rave a'ere te vahine i tana fanaua ri'i moa, ua rave ihora te tane i ta'na pinia ri'i pua'a, ua rave atura te vahine i tana fanaua ri'i 'uri ma'ohi e tana 'iore ri'i, o te'ai hia ei 'ina'i i muta'aiahora, e ua rave maira te tane i ta raua ota'a pe'ue e te tapa. Te haere atura e imi i te ha'apura'a).

The husband suggested that they should climb the highest mountain Orohena, but his wife preferred the cone of Pito-hiti because the sea would not reach it (Ua hi'o atura te tane i Orohena, e ua parau atura i ta'na vahine: "E horo taua i ni'a i tera ra mou'a teitei roa." Na'o maira te vahine: "Eiaha taua e haere i reira!"... "e a'e ra taua i ni'a ia Pito-hiti nei, 'eita taua e taea e te miti i reira." O raua 'tura i reira.").

Both of these human beings together with the other living creatures gathered upon the top of Pito-hiti and built a shed from tree branches.

The whole territory of Tahiti was submerged in sea water and in fresh water and Orohena disappeared below water too. Only Pito-hiti protruded from the

sea (Pau ihora te fenua i te tai e te vai. Mo'e roa a'ere Orohena i raro, o taua mou'a, ra o Pito-hiti ana'e ra tei toe atu na).

Two nights passed and the sea sank and both the man and the woman could see the peaks of the mountains (Ru'i ahuru a'era, ua pahe'e ihora te tai, hi'o ihora raua ta'ata e te vahine te viriviria ri'i o te mou'a).

They obviously perceived the god Ta'aroa's anger as the cause of the deluge (Ua parau ihora: "Ua maha te riri o Ta'aroa tahi Tumu! Ua pohe, ua ririo te tai, ua pa'apa'a te tai).

The revitalization of Tahiti took a long time and the conclusion is optimistic:

Look, Tahiti is still existing, lush and luxuriant, its valleys abound with living creatures and with nourishment (E inaha, te vai noa nei Tahiti! Te heeuri nei, te i nei peho e te mou'a i te mau mea ora e i te ma'a).

The so-called Raiatean version (Henry 1968: 466-470) is more explicit as far as the cause of the deluge is concerned. Two friends Te-aho-roa and Ro'o decided to go fishing at the islet of To'a-marama ("Moon rock") close to the coral reef Ava-rua. Unfortunately they were fishing close to a submarine cave of Rua-hatu and involuntarily disturbed him in his sleep. Instead of a fish they caught the god Rua-hatu. It was a shock to see a monster of the deep instead of a fish. Rua-hatu ordered the two friends to assemble all people and to bring them to To'a-marama; those who would not come would be killed and all trees and plants, the whole island of Ra'iatea would be destroyed. I am Rua-hatu, god of the powerful ocean, he said to them (E mou ho'i o Ra'iatea ato'a. O vau, o Rua-hatu ari'i o te tai euea!"). The majority of the people obeyed and gathered at To'a-marama. Most of them set foot upon the rock and the rest remained in their canoes. As soon as the moon rose, they could see that the mountain Te-mehani-ave-ari'i was submerged (Itea hia na te marama Te-mehani-ave-ari'i, e inaha, ua moe roa i te tai; mai te moana rahi fa'aaro ra o uta ia hi'o atu). All the people had fallen asleep and when they woke in the morning, the sea had returned to the ocean. It was calm as if nothing had happened at all, but the whole island had been destroyed. However, the island was resettled again and soon everything including the vegetation revived. Afterwards the people reconstructed the foundations of the famous marae which was given the name Tahu'ea (Magic Delivery) and Rua-hatu, the ruler of the powerful ocean, became its lord.

The following narrative of a deluge has been recorded by John White among the Ngai Tahu tribe in the South Island of New Zealand (White 2001).

White is quoting an ancient lament of Nuku-pewa-pewa for his eel-weir swept away by a flood that refers to the era when the god Tane lifted the heavenly father of the gods Rangi upward (White, p. 148 in Maori, and 165 in English).

At the beginning of the narration we learn of the flood in which Para-whenua-me¹ and Tuputupu-nui-a-uta² were involved. It is stated that the people of

¹ Débris of the flood, a son of Tupu-tupu-nui-a-uta.

² Great king of the land whose prayer obtained the power of Tane when the heavens let the rain down and filled all the land with water, and destroyed all the people – he and his children were saved (including Para-whenua-me /the scum of the flood/).

the Maori world were bad, quarrelled and fought among themselves (He kino, he kakari /whawhai/ nga tangata o te ao maori nei). Therefore Tupu-nui-a-uta prayed for the rain of the sky in order to show the mana of the god Tane to the people so that they would believe in the truth of the many sacred rites of Tane (ka inoitia nga ua o te rangi e Tupu-nui-a-uta kia kite nga tangata i te mana o Tane, kia whakaponohia ana tikanga ki te tini o nga tahu a Tane), the many rites of life, rites of good, rites of evil, rites of death (te tini o nga tahu o te ora, te tahu o te pai, te tahu o te kino, o te mate). The people disbelieved in what Tane had done to improve their life and what was preached by Para-whenua-mea and Tupu-nui-a-uta (He whakateka no nga tangata ki nga tikanga o Tane e whakapuakina ana e Para-whenua-mea raua ko Tupu-nui-a-uta). Thanks to Tiu's incantation people upon a raft made of trees were saved (Na Tiu te karakia i ora ai nga tangata i runga i te mokihi rakau). It rained for four or five days, and an incantation was able to make the skies clear.

All people within reach of the flood died and disappeared. Only Tupu-nui-a-uta and his companions stayed alive because they decided to use trees as a raft for sitting on (I mate katoa nga iwi nui o te ao i te waipuke, i whakangaromia hoki ratou. Te mea i ora ai a Tupu-nui-a-uta ma me ana hoa haere, he mahara no ratou, kia pupuria nga rakau hei mokihi hei nohoanga ma ratou).

They dragged the trees to the source of the River Tohinga³ and bound them together with vines of the pirita,⁴ built a house on the raft and took along plenty of food including dogs. They took women on the raft. After further incantations for rain the raft was lifted by water and floated down Tohinga. All the other men, women and children who denied the truth of Tane's teaching were drowned (Ka pau katoa nga tangata i te mate, o nga iwi i whakateka nei ki nga tahu o Tane, i taua waipuke).

A brief description of the route the raft followed is given and various localities are listed – localities the value of which seems to be figurative and symbolic – Au-whiwhi “entangled stream”, Au-matara “stream a short distance away”, Au-kuha “rugged stream”, Au-puha “stream blurring out”, Au-mahora “stream spread out”, Au-titi “descending stream”, Au-kokomo “stream going into”, Au-huri “turning stream”, Au-take “origin of the stream”, Au-whaowhao “stream filling in”, Au-ngawha “stream broken up, Au-mate “dead stream”. The latter indicates that the raft reached the open sea. Ceremonies and sacrifices to the gods were repeatedly continued. Despite these ritual sacrifices, the voyage was not without dangers; the people could see ill-meaning goddesses whose intention was to make the sea rough and to destroy the crew of the raft (... ka kite atu ratou i aua atua wahine e tau maeroero haere ana i runga i te moana...). The names of the goddesses are likewise meaningful: Hine-ahua “maiden of the altar”, Hine-ranga-tai “maiden arranging the sea”, Hine-apo-hia “maiden who gathers together”, Kare-nuku “rippling earth”, and Kare-rangi “rippling sea”.

³ Tohinga means baptism.

⁴ Rhipogonum scandens.

Another sequence of localities consists of figurative toponyms describing largely the dangers threatening the float, for example Te-wiwini "the tumbling", Te-wehi "the dread", Te-wana "bud forth", Te-pa "the touched", the ten Kare "ripples". In the meantime the raft spent six months upon the open sea. The crew was yearning for land and Tiu in the seventh month of their journey promised that they would not die and would land because the sea is shallow and subsiding (... ka timata te korero a Tiu ki ana hoa, ka mea a ia: "E kore tatou e mate, tena ano e u ki uta"... "Kua rahirahi te moana, kua mea kia iti haere te waipuke"). On the eighth month he said to his companions: "This is the moon on which we shall land on dry earth, as the signs of my staff indicate that the sea is becoming less deep" (Ko te marama tenei e u ai tatou ki uta, i te mea hoki e iti haere ana te hohonu o nga tohu o taku pou toko).

It is worth noting that the raft landed at Ha-wai-ki (thus spelt by White), which seems to be identical with the name of the mythical homeland of the (East) Polynesians. The travellers, however, found no living human beings there. A series of ceremonies, incantations and offerings followed but instead of slain sacrifices they presented sea-weed as their offerings to their male and female gods. The similarity with the Bible is once again confirmed by the appearance of Kahukura,⁵ the rainbow upon the sky.

In the *Récit des Ancêtres de Makemo* (Caillot 1914: 22-25) Charles Eugène Caillot published a cosmogonical Tuamotuan text, which mentions the canoe Teapopikopiko-i-hiti with a hut Papapapa-i-te-henua upon it constructed by Rata for himself, for his wife Pupuraitetai and their children Ataruru, Atamea, and Ataia. Torrential rain brought by a whirlwind started falling from the height of the house of the god Tane, from the bottom of the sky, and the earth was swallowed by a flood (Eito nei tuatau ihagahiai te vaka ra Teapopikopiko-i-hiti. I pora te i ruga i taua vaka ra, tona igoa Papapapa i henua, epuga ia no Rata e tana vahine o Pupuraitetai e ta raua fanauga ko Ataruru, ko Atamea, e ko Ataia. Ka topa mai ai ko te ua roroiragi no ruga mai i te aoragi koia te paparagi: ka hami ai te kaiga nei i te ranu). Due to the fury of Vatea the gates of heaven were broken and the rain fell in great amounts and the wind started and the earth was devastated by the shower and the sea (No te riri o Vatea i vava hiai te haga puta o te aroragi: i topa tahakarere mai ai te ua roroiragi e te rofaki ki raro nei: ka hami ai te kaiga nei i te makuru e te toau). In the moment the earth was swallowed up, Rata, his wife and their three children, together with their women, were inside the hut and after six hundred and one epochs left the hut as soon as land was to be seen. Thus they were saved with all birds and animals, and all things that crawl upon the earth and all birds that fly in the air and their young ones (I reira i tomo ai te henua e i tomo ai Rata e te vahine e tepurehuga toko geti e na vahine toko geti ki roto i te pora: e geti penu ma rari tuatau i purero ai Rata ki vaho e tana fanauga e ta ratou rire ka goe ai te ranu. I ora ai ratou, e te haga manu e te haga puaka e te haga mea e totoro i te henua nei e te haga manu e rere i te aroragi nei e ta ratou fanauga nei).

⁵ Literally red or precious garment.

The earth was afterwards peopled by human beings: Atamea was ancestor of the Tuhura, Ataia of the Tetini, and Ataruru was my ancestor (Ki ai te kaiga nei i te tagata. Ko Atamea e tupuna ia no te Tuhura, ko Ataia e tupuna ia no Tetini o Kokere, ko Ataruru ko toku ia tupuna). And in the subsequent generation the languages changed (Eiteienei tua uki i takake ai na reko).

The Ngai Tahu myth recorded by John White is of all the quoted myths obviously the most probable target of Biblical influence. It reads as a considerably individualized story in which the deluge was caused obviously by a lack of faith and the non-believers were severely punished. The raft made of trunks of several totara (*Podocarpus totara*) and kahikatea (*Podocarpus dacrydioides*) trees was solid enough and those who saved their lives upon it were capable of floating upon it some eight long months. Unlike the Biblical deluge, the travellers made no attempt to find out if there is dry land available to them; no bird was sent as a messenger; however, Tiu had at his disposal his staff which helped him to forecast that the land was no longer far away. Unlike the Bible, there is no mention of taking aboard animals (with the exception of dogs). Someone might object that birds needed not to be taken upon the raft. However, we should not forget that this does not correspond to the New Zealand reality; there are birds (as well as other animals) in New Zealand that are incapable of flying at all.

The motivation of the disastrous deluge seems to be incongruous with what is known of Maori ethics and religious ideas. Therefore it is highly probable that the influence of Christian missions cannot be excluded. If there are traces of Biblical influence, they may have been incorporated into the network of pre-existing Maori religious ideas to explain the partial opposition to the successful attempt of the powerful god Tane to lift the heaven from the Mother Earth which is certainly present in the Maori mythology both in the South and North Islands of New Zealand. There were opportunities to contact Christian missionaries in the south well before John White came to collect Maori traditional oral literature. In other myths of deluge there are few traces of a contingent interference with Christian sources. The cataclysmic deluge is obviously a motif that may – under certain circumstances – appear spontaneously and is probably a verbalization of hidden universal existential anxieties as well as of a certain logical advance from inert chaos to order.

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