

Grimble, A.F. MS of 'The Sun and Six'.

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7th MAN. Prof to M. Zallage
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Gilbert Island: ethnography

The Sun and Six. By Arthur Grimble

Grimble

The following communication may best be read as a footnote to page 424, volume II, of the "History of Melanesian Society," by Dr. W. H. R. Rivers.

In the context referred to, Dr. Rivers sets himself to consider the place occupied by the sun-cult in the religion of Melanesia and Polynesia. Discussing the secret societies of Melanesia in this connection, he points out a feature in the ritual of the Tamate liwoa society of the Banks Group, which suggests an ~~connection~~ ^{association} with the sun. A candidate for initiation into the Tamate liwoa must, at one stage of the ceremonial, clasp in due order a series of six stakes of hibiscus wood, which are set in the ground along a line running from east to west. This orientation of the stakes suggests to Dr. Rivers that the movement of the candidate bears a rela

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to the movement of the sun, and the suggestion certainly seems the more feasible because the candidate moves westward, towards what would appear to be a representation of his own death, just as the sun approaches his setting.

Such indications as these, especially when taken in conjunction with certain other clues mentioned by Dr. Rivers, reasonably encourage the conjecture that the organisation of the Tamate societies is connected with an old sun-cult. We could pass from conjecture to something like certainty if, to the evidence of the orientation of the stakes in the Tamate liwoa ritual, we could add evidence of a fresh sort, pointing in the same direction. The number of stakes — namely, six — will be found to afford the help we need, though we must travel to

Polynesia and Micronesia for our clues. These are chiefly to be discovered in the stories of the famous Maani-cycle.

It will be remembered that one of the three capital exploits of the culture-hero Maani in Polynesian story was to snare the sun in a noose, and so to cripple him that, forever after, he travelled less swiftly across the heavens. Thus, day was lengthened.

This tale is told, with slightly varying details, in nearly every group of Polynesia, but only one of its versions need hold our attention here. It is that recorded by Wyatt Gill from Manihiki*, in which Maani (under his alternative name, Ti'iti'i) is said to have taken six nooses for the sun's snarement. This apparently

* Myths & Songs from the S. Pacific.

trifling numeric detail, being recorded in the version of but a single Polynesian community, stands in danger of being regarded as an unessential local accretion. That it is, however, far more than this, is fortunately demonstrable by reference to the mythology of the Gilbert Islands. There, the noosing of the sun is attributed to a certain Bue, the story of whose exploit belongs, without any doubt, both generically and genetically to the Maani-cycle.* The Gilbertese rendering lays a very particular emphasis on the number six. In its account of Bue's preparations for entrapping the lord of light, it tells how he made ready six weapons of offence. Some of these were missiles; the

* An extract from this story appeared in Man, vol. ~~77~~ no. 49 page 81, 1921.

sixth and last was a coconut leaf, with which the sun was eventually caught and bound.

The idea of the six weapons in Gilbertese story is obviously of common origin with that of Maani's six nooses in the Manihiki version. The presence of so curious a detail in two versions of the episode, collected from groups so widely sundered as the Gilbert and the Cook Islands, is a hall-mark upon its authenticity, and a positive proof that, although it may have been forgotten in other parts of Oceania, it was once an essential part of the Maani-Sun story. This certainly has the effect of associating the number six with the sun in our minds. As if to supply a clinching argument in favour of such an association, the Gilbertese version ~~supplies~~ ^{gives us} a very interesting

account of certain "stopping places" of the sun. These numbered six. There were three below the eastern edge of the sea, and three above. On each of them in turn the luminary was said to rest awhile as he made his progress westwards. Thus, the number six interfered with the very course he ran. Given two ideas, apparently so incompatible as that of a numeral and that of a heavenly body, it would be difficult to associate them more intimately than this story succeeds in doing.

Lastly, there is the evidence of the Nui* creation story. According to that myth, there lived in the first cleaving together of heaven and earth six creatures. The sixth was

* Nui is in the Ellice Group, but its population is Gilbertese in type, language, and social organisation.

Baka-naanku, the Great Ray, from whose eyes the sun and the moon were fashioned.

From the above summary of our material, we may therefore tabulate three distinct aspects of the relationship between the sun and six:

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- (a) In the Manihiki and Gilbertese Maunifales, the number appears as a source of power for the sun's undoing;
 - (b) In the Gilbertese version, it further appears as a guiding influence in the daily course of the light-giver;
 - (c) In the Nui creation-myths, it is intimately mixed up in the theory of solar origins.

Concatenations so curious could not have been the result of informal developement; they must have grown within a cult. On the evidence produced, we may in fact assume that the folk responsible for these

myths practiced a sun-cult; and that one of their religious beliefs was, that the sun's origin, movement and well-being depended upon the peculiar virtues resident in six.

This lends so significant a character to the number that wherever, amid the tangle of Oceanic cultures, we chance upon a ritual that is plainly influenced by six, we may reasonably suspect the presence of a sun-cult. And when we find that the number dominates a ceremony, of which several other features also seem to connect it with the sun, our suspicion may well develop into certainty.

In the ritual of initiation into the Tamate
liwoa society of the Banks Group, the orientation of certain stakes, and the action centering upon them, are features which of themselves encourage the conjecture that a sun-

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cult is here represented. Add then the fact that these suggestive stakes, which run from east to west, are six in number, and the case, as I think, is in no further need of proof. One is indeed tempted to believe that one has found the key to the whole ceremony; that the six stakes of hibiscus wood stand for the sun's six "stopping places" mentioned in Gilbertese myth; and that the candidate for initiation, who passes westward along them, is himself for the moment a personification of the sun, progressing towards his daily death.

That the number of stakes used in this ceremony is a matter not of coincidence, but design, is shown by the prominence given to six throughout the Tamate liwoa ritual. Reference to the descriptive part of Dr. Rivers' work* affords the following pertinent facts:-

The general question of the sun - six arrow-

* ~~Op. cit. vol. I, pages 98-101.~~

-ation merits research. Its singularity guarantees it to be the mark of a distinctive culture, and as such it may yet prove to be a most valuable clue to culture-migrations in Oceania. It interests us particularly in its probable relation with those people whom Dr. Rivers distinguishes by the name of "Kava people". These he reasonably supposes to have been responsible for the ritual of the secret societies of Melanesia. Therefore, if we find the sun-six concatenation to be a guiding motive of such a society as the Tamate liwoa, we may with equal reason attribute it to the Kava people. It becomes then extremely probable that to the ^{influence of the} Kava people may be assigned all those myths which show the sun and six in conjunction; and as it is clearly to be inferred, from the material ~~myths~~, ^{that} the Maani myths once had this singular feature, we may proceed to the deduction that, wherever the Maani sun-tale is told in Polynesia, it

the culture of the Kava people must have spread. It is difficult to overestimate the value of the sun-six clue in dealing with groups of islands, like the Gilberts, where through the accidents of time and environment, the other distinguishing characteristics of the Kava-culture have been lost.

Arthur Grimble