visit relatives and friends. The family of the deceased prays for the soul's successful journey to the land of the dead. The dead can linger, however, around the living to whom they were especially attached. Elderly couples continue to converse long after one of them has died. The surviving lover can be pulled toward the new home of the beloved. According to the Polynesian belief system, the world of the living is in continual communion with that of the dead.

Family and friends must, therefore, establish methods for both detachment and attachment. The clothes and belongings of the deceased can be destroyed. At the wake of the deceased, the New Zealand māori “trample” through the house to reclaim it for the living. In formal oratory, they call upon the ancestors for their blessing but dismiss them before the body of their speech. Throughout Polynesia, the troublesome presence of a dead person reveals the existence of unfinished business that must be resolved before the soul can depart in peace.

The positive relation to the ancestors and the recently dead is, however, one of the strengths of Polynesian culture. Genealogy provides identity as well as individuals upon whom one can call for help. An elder who has been revered as a leader in life does not lose his or her love of family after death. If the family feels the need for his or her continuing care, they can strengthen the soul’s presence with offerings and prayer. Hawaiian families conduct ceremonies to transform the deceased into the body of the animal to whom the family is related. A fisherman of the shark family is guarded by his embodied relative. Children of the owl family can be led out of danger by the bird who appears to help them. Similarly, family and even friends can use body parts of the dead to create servant spirits, which lack the full personality of a family god but are obedient servants for limited tasks.

Polynesian spiritual practices are possible because souls are physical. At death, a soul exits the body from a tear duct and begins a tentative, instinctive journey into the uplands for a time and then proceeds along the path of the spirits to the place on each island where the souls jump off into the land of the dead. If a soul expert feels the person should not have died, he or she can find the soul, “snatch” it between cupped hands, reinsert it

POLYNESIAN RELIGIONS

In treating all subjects, including death, Polynesian religions are based on experience rather than faith. Prominent among those experiences are encounters with many different types of gods and spirits. These include human beings who have died and assumed one of several possible forms. For instance, miscarried or aborted fetuses can be transmuted into vicious demons. Neglected souls can become wandering, homeless, pathetic ghosts. Revered relatives can be transformed into family gods. The diversity of such experience stimulates a wide variety of beliefs and practices.

Polynesians believe in life after death. Indeed, the wall between the living and the dead is more permeable than in modern Western culture. When a person is about to die, one of his or her souls can—unbeknownst to him or her—warn the immediate family. Shortly after dying, a person can
under the big toe, and massage it up the body until the person revives. On the other hand, an enemy can capture the soul and destroy it, annihilating the deceased. Polynesians believe in life after death, but not necessarily immortality.

As in all aspects of Polynesian religion, human beings are seen as powerful and capable. They are not terrified and overpowered by phenomena of the dead. Inborn talent, trained sensitivity, and education enable them to handle gods and spirits as naturally as they do the winds and the waves. Indeed, Polynesian Christians, living in the same world as their ancestors, often supplement their new religion with such traditional beliefs and practices. The combinations they create are compelling and broadening. The Polynesian's understanding of family as a spiritual power, of deceased family members as continuing sources of love and care, of the closeness and communion of the living and the dead, and of the human being's capacity to manage death as well as life are a genuine contribution to the world.

See also: African Religions; Afterlife in Cross-Cultural Perspective; How Death Came into the World

Bibliography


