

The Deeds of



ALL the way across the Polynesian Pacific men still talk of Maui the demi-god as men talked of him nearly two thousand years ago. On every island and in every tribe he occupies a high position among the supernatural beings of tradition, though it is chiefly among the Maoris of New Zealand that the details of his deeds and adventures are preserved.

Maui's place is partly in mythology and partly in folk-lore. It is probable that there were several ancestral heroes called Maui, and that they eventually merged into one personality in Polynesian-Maori mythology. At times he is represented as having possessed the powers of exalted deity; at others he is portrayed as a mischievous mortal, full of fun and frolic. But it is a remarkable fact that throughout the Pacific the story of his exploits has been preserved in vivid detail through differing dialects and under changing conditions without any serious distortion of the original theme.

Maui is first mentioned at a time when the Polynesians were still in Indonesia. He is said to have been the son of Tangaroa (not the god of the same name, though it is possible that the attributes of the two have been confused at times), and legend has it that he was of miraculous birth. After being thrown into the sea in an immature form he was nourished to adolescence by the sea-gods and later arrived at his mother's home, where

he lived for a while among his brothers. He joined in their games and proved himself expert in sports and exercises, and is credited with all manner of tricks and mischievous performances.

The earliest Maui tales deal with the snaring of the Sun and the finding of fire for the use of man. The first legend refers to the steps taken by Maui to restrain the too-rapid progress of the Sun through the Heavens. Due to the short period between the rising and setting of the sun the inhabitants of the earth did not have sufficient time for their work in the fields and the forests, and Maui, having persuaded his brothers to accompany him, armed himself with a huge snare and the jawbone of his grandmother and went to the place of the Sun's rising. The brothers lay in wait with their snare, and as the Sun (Tama-nui-te-ra) rose he became trapped in the snare. With his brothers holding the ropes of the snare taut, Maui belaboured the Sun with his jawbone club until, after many protests, the Sun agreed to give heed to Maui's demands. Then he was released from the snare and ever afterwards was more leisurely in his daily journey across the heavens.

The story of the deception of the fire goddess, Mahuika, by Maui is an example of the artful cunning with which the demi-god was credited. Learning from his parents that a certain strange glow on the distant