

North India, whereas its descriptions of South India are purely fanciful. It is also suggested that Vālmīki was one of the *kuśīlavas* (“singers, bards”) who sang the epic. No firm evidence is available, however, in support of a historical Vālmīki. Tradition holds, however, that Vālmīki is also the author of the medieval work *Mahārāmāyaṇa*, or *Jñānavāsīṣṭa*, a philosophical text in the form of a dialogue between the sage Vaśīṣṭa and Rāma.

SEE ALSO Rāmāyaṇa.

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**VAN DER LEEUW, GERARDUS** SEE LEEUW, GERARDUS VAN DER

**VAN GENNEP, ARNOLD** SEE GENNEP, ARNOLD VAN

**VAN RUUSBROEC, JAN** SEE RUUSBROEC, JAN VAN

**VANUATU RELIGIONS.** Formerly known as the New Hebrides, Vanuatu is a Y-shaped archipelago of mostly volcanic islands located about sixteen hundred kilometers northeast of the Queensland coast of Australia. The physical, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the 100,000 or so indigenous inhabitants of the sixty-three occupied islands is extreme even for the western Pacific, a diversity that is fully reflected in religious belief and practice. While the dominant traits in all contexts may be described as Melanesian, Polynesian influences, including those pertaining to religion, are sufficiently widespread and important to set this area apart from the rest of Melanesia. This article will ignore the profound impact of Christianity on contemporary religion, but it should be stressed, however, that much of what is described here as traditional continues today to be a major part of belief and practice, even among those who have been converted to Christianity for some generations.

**SUPERNATURAL POWERS AND SPIRIT BEINGS.** The traditional religions of Vanuatu, like religions universally, have as their identifying theme the cultural and social elaboration of people’s ideas and emotions concerning the nature and locus of supernatural powers. Throughout the archipelago such powers, though mostly associated with various classes of spir-

it beings, are also commonly attributed to a wide range of “natural” phenomena, including humans, animals, birds, fish, plants, and stones. It is this diffuseness of supernatural power, together with its transferability, by means of ritual, from its various sources to human agents, that gives Vanuatu religions their distinctive character. The primary aim of Vanuatu religious practitioners is, through ritual, to gain direct control of extraordinary powers, rather than to supplicate spirit beings to act on their behalf. The ni-Vanuatu (“people of Vanuatu”), though deeply concerned with establishing and maintaining positive relations with the relevant power sources, cannot be said to worship such sources. Their religions, though replete with the powerful, the sacred, and the tabooed, are almost wholly devoid of deities, priests, and acts of worship.

As R. H. Codrington (1891, p. 123) long ago noted, the ni-Vanuatu recognize two classes of spirits, those who were once living people and those who were not. Though the former, which include both the ghosts of the dead and ancestral spirits, are everywhere the prime focus of ritual attention, it is the latter who figure most prominently in an elaborate body of mythological tales.

**MYTHOLOGY.** A widespread feature of Vanuatu mythology is the representation of the leading figures as of two distinct kinds—on the one hand, the exclusively male beings whose personal names are often local variants of such well-known Polynesian gods as Tangaroa or Māui, and on the other, the sexually variable, though frequently female, beings whose personal names are of a purely indigenous kind. The Polynesian-type beings—such as Qat and his eleven Tangaro brothers in the Banks Islands; Takaro and his brothers or supporters on Maewo, north Raga, and Ambae; Tahar in the Small Islands; Takaru and Tokotaitai in Malo; Barkulkul (or variant) in south Raga and north Ambrim; Ambat, Hambat, Kabat, and so forth on Malekula; and a variety of local variants of Māui from Efate southward—are commonly associated with the sky, mountain peaks, treetops, volcanic fires, the sun and the moon, acts of a creative or originating kind, and the attainment of a satisfactory life after death. By contrast, the non-Polynesian-type beings—such as Sukwe or Marawa in the Banks; Gaviga in Maewo; Mwerambuto or Ngegelevu in Ambae; Lehevhev (or variant) in Malekula and surrounding islands; Marrelul in south Raga; Bugliam in north Ambrim—are commonly associated with the underground, caves, mazes, snakes, spiders, rats, acts of a devouring or destructive kind, and the failure to attain a satisfactory afterlife.

**PIG SACRIFICES.** Though both classes of mythological beings are often depicted as having transformative powers that are greatly in excess of those normally possessed by humans, they are only rarely the subject of ritual attention and are generally deemed to be of small consequence in human affairs. There is, however, one major exception: Throughout the northern and central islands there existed in the past, and still exists today in modified form in some of the northern islands, an elaborate institution that centers on the ceremonial slaughter

of pigs, most especially tusked boars and hermaphrodites. Though this institution has important secular functions throughout the area, most notably in providing an elaborate social and political hierarchy, the key symbolic act, that of pig sacrifice, is nevertheless of deep religious significance. This is evident in two contexts, one of which relates the institution to the mythological beings and the other to the ancestral spirits. In mythology there is a widespread belief that there are two alternative fates that await the spirits of the recently dead: All those who have sacrificed at least one high-grade tusked boar are admitted to a pleasant abode presided over by the principal benign spirit; all others are excluded from this abode, usually through being devoured by the principal malignant spirit.

These mythic themes are, however, of relatively minor significance in accounting for the religious importance of the institution compared with the belief that the sacrificial act results in the transfer of ancestral power from the slaughtered animal to its human executioner. Through a complex cognitive and emotional process the killing of the pig has as its end result a further advancement in the spiritual progress of the sacrificer toward the attainment of full ancestral status. Men who have advanced to high rank through the slaughter of numerous tusked boars are regarded as having attained a spiritual condition not very far removed from that of the ancestors. Such men must eat and sleep alone because of the danger that their high spiritual condition poses for others, especially women and children.

**ANCESTRAL SPIRITS.** Further evidence for the importance of the ancestral spirits, especially in the context of the sacrificial rites, can be found in the Ambrim practice of setting up carved tree-fern effigies of the dead. Also on Ambrim, as on Malekula, Epi, and as far south as Efate, the slit-gongs, which are used both at pig sacrifices and at funerary rites, stand upright on the ceremonial ground and are carved and painted so as to represent human forms. On the Small Islands, and most probably elsewhere also, the sounds that issue from the gongs are said to be the voices of the ancestral spirits. In the southern districts of Malekula, life-size effigies of the dead are made in which the head is formed from the deceased's skull. These effigies are kept for some generations in the men's clubhouse and, though not the focus of specific rituals, are nevertheless treated as being in some degree sacred.

On Ambae Island, where one finds none of the above iconographic representations of ancestral spirits, they are nevertheless regularly made small offerings of food in the hope that they will not cause their descendants any problems. Such offerings are usually made in a generalized way to any potentially troublesome spirits that may be lurking in the vicinity of the living. Occasionally, ghosts, as well as other varieties of spirit beings, are believed to befriend individual humans and to assist them by imparting magical knowledge.

**SECRET-SOCIETY RITES.** In the period immediately prior to the spread of Christianity, there existed on many of the

northern and central islands, though especially in such matrilineal areas as the Banks, Maewo, north Raga, and Ambae, a variety of more secret and voluntary cults that centered around the acquisition of highly dangerous powers of a predominantly destructive kind. Whereas the kinds of powers invoked through pig sacrifices derive from the benign ancestors and impart to practitioners a positive and highly esteemed form of sanctity, those invoked in the secret society rites derive either from malignant ghosts of the dead or from what may be described as the "dark" side of human spirituality. Prominent symbolic themes include representations of ghosts and sharks, usually in the form of masks and head-dresses worn by members, and of such normally abhorrent and dangerous activities as incest, genital exposure, contact with menstrual blood, and sodomy. The powers generated in the context of these rites were primarily utilized by participants to create fear in others, and were hence closely associated both with warfare and sorcery. It is therefore no surprise that such rites mostly ceased to be practiced at about the same time that warfare was prohibited and sorcery came under increasing Christian and governmental attack.

**MALE INITIATIONS.** Though similar cultural themes figure in the ritual corpus of the more patrilineal areas of north Vanuatu (notably in Malekula, the Small Islands and Ambrim), in these communities they occur in the context of compulsory initiations into manhood rather than voluntary initiations into discreet secret societies. That the two institutions are closely related is evident in the common occurrence of shark symbolism, representations of threatening ghosts, long periods of seclusion, the importance of the phallus as a locus of power, and either real or symbolic ritual male homosexuality. But whereas the secret rites were deemed both dangerous and antisocial, the compulsory versions were, and in most communities still are, positively valued as generating a form of sanctity similar to that attained by pig sacrifices. Everywhere the key symbolic act is the removal of either part or all of the novice's foreskin and the subsequent wearing of a penis wrapper. Through such an act a boy takes his first step toward achieving spiritual maturity, a goal only fully attained when, after the slaughter of numerous additional tusked boars throughout his life, he finally succeeds, at death, in breaking his dependence on and identification with women. Needless to say, many men do not progress very far in their efforts to attain such a goal.

**WOMEN'S RITES.** The ritual life of women, though everywhere less elaborate than that of men, is nevertheless of importance in those relatively few areas about which there exists adequate knowledge. In some of the districts of Malekula there is a ritual association known as Lapas whose membership is restricted to women and which in many respects parallels the principal male ritual association, Nimangki. As in the latter, the women kill pigs, purchase sacred insignia, erect effigies of the dead, and are secluded for some days in a ceremonial house that may not be entered by nonmembers of the association, especially men. Furthermore, just as the men are believed to generate through their ritual actions a specifically

male form of sanctity or holiness, so too are the women deemed to generate a specifically female sanctity. These two forms of sanctity, though both ultimately derived from the ancestral spirits, are nevertheless so entirely antipathetic to one another that they must be rigorously kept apart. Hence the pervasive importance of the sex dichotomy in the religious life of the people of Malekula, the Small Islands, and Ambrim.

Elsewhere (though most notably in the northern matrilineal islands of Maewo, north Raga, and east Ambae, where the sex dichotomy is a great deal less pervasive and important) the women, though the principal participants in and organizers of rites that are of primary concern to themselves, such as first menstruation or body tattooing, do not exclude the men from such activities. Likewise, the men, though again the key actors in the sacrificial rites of the graded society, encourage their womenfolk to kill an occasional pig and take supplementary titles. In west Ambae the women even participate as novices in the local versions of what are elsewhere exclusively male secret-society rituals.

**SORCERY AND MAGIC.** Various kinds of sorcery and magic are practiced throughout Vanuatu, though the former was, at least until recently, of special importance in Ambrim, while magic, rather than religion, seems to be the dominant ritual theme in some of the southern islands, notably Tanna. Indeed, in Tanna there are no major communal rites of the clearly religious kind that have been described for the northern islands. Even the male initiation rites, which, as in the north, focus on circumcision, seclusion, and the donning of penis wrappers, are seemingly of a more secular and ceremonial, rather than religious and ritual, character; the emphasis is primarily on individual status transition rather than on joint initiation into a secret male cult. However, ethnographic information concerning the traditional cultures of all the southern and central islands, including Tanna, is either fragmentary and unreliable or nonexistent. Since this applies most especially to their traditional magico-religious systems, the intention here is to not be too emphatic in thus relegating the religious component to a secondary position.

**MOON WORSHIP.** Such caution seems especially relevant in the case of Aneityum, where, in addition to the widespread practice of making offerings, usually of food, though sometimes also human sacrifices, to a variety of unnamed spirit beings (*natmas*), a more elaborate ritual of worship, including prayer, song, dance, and offerings of food and kava placed on wooden altars, was periodically performed in sacred groves dedicated to the moon. As on the neighboring islands of Aniwa and Futuna, the moon, who is known by the Polynesian name *Sina*, is represented in mythology as the wife of the sun. Unfortunately, little has been recorded of this mythology and even less of what seems to have been an important religious practice.

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## VĀRĀNASĪ SEE BANARAS

## VARDHAMĀNA MAHĀVĪRA SEE MAHĀVĪRA

**VARṆA AND JĀTI.** The two separable but intertwined concepts of *varṇa* and *jāti* may be regarded as different levels of analysis of the Indian system of social structure called *caste*. While some scholars regard *varṇa* and *jāti* as reflecting quite separate dimensions of Indian social and religious thought, others insist, following the native traditions of Hinduism, that the two are inextricably linked. In any event, whereas the term *caste* is sometimes applied to social formations in places other than India, the terms *varṇa* and *jāti* are invariably applied exclusively to the Indian social (and religious) contexts.

The caste system has occasionally been regarded as so intrinsic, so enduring, and so distinctive to India and its long history that it is thought to be both the kernel of Indian culture and virtually identical to the definitional essence of Hinduism. While there are many different beliefs and practices associated with the Hindu religion, and while sectarian, regional, linguistic, and other variables make it difficult indeed to see any unifying features in that religion, it has been argued that the caste system and its attribution of hierarchical superiority to the *brahman* caste is one (and perhaps the only one) feature all (or at least the vast preponderance) Hindu traditions share. Although there are many problems in defining *Hinduism* as "the religion of caste" (not the least of which being that in India caste cuts across religious boundaries;

there are Muslim, Sikh, Parsi, and Christian—as well as Hindu—castes), the fact that the two are sometimes equated indicates the importance, ubiquity, and deep roots of caste in Indian society and history.

The word *varṇa* means "color"—not, as was previously thought, to refer to "race" but rather in the sense of "characteristic" or "attribute." The best translation is probably "class." As applied to the realm of society, it refers to four social classes that epitomized Vedic (and Aryan) India: the *brahmins* or priests, the *kṣatriyas* (warriors and rulers), the *vaiśyas* (commoners; merchants and agriculturalists), and the *śūdras* (servants). These four classes, while separate in terms of function and given hierarchically different values, are also quite obviously interdependent. Taken together, they constitute a complete and well-ordered society according to a religiously and ideologically imbued indigenous social vision.

Evidence of such a division of society into four classes (ideologically, at least, if not in actuality) first appears in a cosmogonic hymn found in the earliest text of Indian history, the *R̥gveda*. In that hymn, the entire universe is produced from the primordial sacrifice and dismemberment of a Cosmic Man, including the four classes of the social order: "When they divided the Cosmic Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms, his thighs and feet? His mouth became the *brahman*; his arms were made into the *kṣatriya*; his thighs the *vaiśya*; and from his feet the *śūdras* were born" (*R̥gveda* 10.90.11–12).

Here, then, is the much repeated and cited charter myth of an ideal Indian society. Each class is produced from the body part of the Cosmic Man that most resembles the supposed traits and assigned function of that class. From the mouth comes the *brahman* class, the priests charged with ritual functions and the oral preservation of sacred texts. From the arms, the source of physical strength and power, derive the *kṣatriya* warriors and rulers, and from the "thighs" (perhaps a euphemism for the genitals) arise the *vaiśya* commoners, who are charged with material wealth and fecundity. And from the feet, the lowest and most impure of the body parts but also the foundation upon which everything rests, come the *śūdras*, or servants.

In this system (as it was represented in the religious texts composed and preserved by the *brahmins*), the *brahmins* are invariably portrayed as hierarchically superior. They are created prior to others and therefore take precedence over others; they are created from the uppermost portion of the creator god and therefore are at the top of the social order; they are charged with (and indeed have a monopoly on) religious functions and are therefore the most pure, the most sacred, of the four classes. The *brahmins*, it is said, are also the most "complete," or the perfected instance of the human being. Indeed, some texts go much further and claim that members of this class are "human gods" (*manushya devas*): "There are two kinds of gods, for the gods are gods, and those *brahmins*