Jørgen Prytz-Johansen (1911-1989) was a Danish historian of religion, whose pioneering research in the language and traditional religion of the Maoris was the center of an unusual career.

He grew up in an academic family of scientists. He was the only child of E. S. Johansen, professor of physics at the College of Advanced Technology. On his mother’s side, he was related to renowned professors in the Prytz and Steenstrup families. As a young boy he developed his early education in chemistry through self-study in his well-equipped home-laboratory. In 1930, he began to study physics at the University of Copenhagen, occasionally participating in Niels Bohr’s seminars at the Institute for Theoretical Physics. However, he was attracted to poetry and cultural history. He attended Vilhelm Grønbech’s lectures on religious history, which opened new perspectives and made a deep impression. Having written an essay on Novalis’ Hymns to the Night he began reading the recommended books on comparative religion. But on the verge of making a shift to the humanities, on his father’s advice he finished his scientific studies and graduated in 1937 with a M.A. in physics with mathematics, astronomy, and chemistry. After a year as assistant at the Godhavn Magnetic Observatory in Greenland he got married and taught mathematics and physics in a Copenhagen Gymnasium. In 1941, an appointment at the University Library in Copenhagen became the starting point of a career as a librarian, culminating in 1957 in a leading post as Chief of the Department of Medicine and Natural Sciences.

In 1938, Prytz-Johansen had returned to the university to recommence the study of religions. Attending professor Grønbech’s courses and seminars on “primitive religions” his first contribution was a psychological study of shamanism among the Eskimos, based on printed sources and ethnographic literature. He was introduced to the monographs on individual societies and religions from the first half of the twentieth century. Anthropologists claimed that the religion of a tribal society could be understood only through investigation of the interrelationship between basic concepts and behavior. The same approach characterized the monographs on ancient societies like Vilhelm Grønbech’s The culture of the teutons (1931) and Johannes Pedersen’s Israel—its life and culture (1926-1934). These Danish textualists’ linguistic and semantic studies of values incorporated in certain key words and institutions represented a Scandinavian philological parallel to works of the schools of Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, and Malinowski.
Grønbech pointed the way to Polynesia where the existence of a large number of texts preserving the oral traditions in the Maori language afforded a special opportunity for a close study of the mind and thoughts of the Maoris in the pre-Christian period. Retiring in 1943, he left his Polynesian books to Prytz-Johansen, who already around 1940 had started to learn the Maori language with the help of Williams’ First lessons and a meticulous study of Maori texts with translations. Now, aiming at a doctorate, he planned to present—on the basis of an independent reading of the textual sources—a consistent picture of the Maori religion and its connection with the fundamental values of Maori culture. To determine these he took his cue from the Maoris’ own concepts. Making a concordance to the comprehensive corpus of texts he subjected words such as tupu, mana, aitua, tapu, and wairua to detailed analysis and compared the results with the ethnographic reports and the general pattern of the Maori culture.

Character and structure of the action in Maori, an analysis of some syntactic and semantic aspects of the Maori language was published in English in 1948. It was a remarkable study at the time along the lines of structural linguistics.

He wrote a preliminary exposition on the sacred precincts and their mythology in Danish and from 1949 until 1955 Prytz-Johansen held a lectureship at the University of Copenhagen. A reduction of his working hours at the University Library allowed him to lecture on the results of his studies simultaneously with the progression of the forthcoming dissertation. Afterwards he lectured on Aboriginal Australian religions especially Aranda. The religion of the Zunis and ritual clowns was also treated using texts in the original languages as far as the few available aids allowed.

In 1954, he earned a doctorate (D.Phil.) with the dissertation The Maori and his religion in its non-ritualistic aspect. The sequel dealing with the ritual aspects appeared in 1958 under the title Studies in Maori rites and myths. The ritual studies he wanted to be self-contained, that is, as far as possible based on the foundations of Maori experience and presented without drawing on general theories of religion, myth, sacrifice, and rituals. The mythical topography of the sacred precincts appeared to be connected to cosmogonic ideas based on a fundamental dualism in the world-view of the Maoris. In his treatment of the cycle of agricultural rites he scrutinized the mythical associations and references in the recitations accompanying the rituals. In this way, he was able to translate and interpret these difficult texts (the karakias).

Upon the enormous amount of effort that had gone into learning Maori and other Polynesian languages it seems rather surprising that Prytz-Johansen having finished the project devoted his energies elsewhere during the following years as Chief Librarian. Satisfied with the fact that one of his former students, Torben Monberg, whom he had taught Tahitian, had taken up Polyne-
sian studies, he turned to investigations of the ritual aspects of medieval Christianity. Monberg went many times to the Solomon Islands undertaking fieldwork and “memory ethnography” on the traditional religion of Rennel and Bellona. Meeting scholars at conferences in the Pacific he could tell of a growing interest in the work of Prytz-Johansen, but Monberg never succeeded in persuading him to participate in conferences or to pay a visit to New Zealand.

Apparently content with his doctorate and leading administrative post he showed no intention of further academic advancement and did not apply for the new established chair in history of religions in Aarhus in 1960. After some hesitation, however, in 1964 he accepted an offer of the vacant chair after Grønbech’s successor Sv.Aa. Pallis’ retirement. Prytz-Johansen held the chair in history of religions at the University of Copenhagen from 1965 until his retirement at the age of 70 in 1981.

Putting the medieval studies aside he undertook the heavy task of studying and teaching all the varied disciplines of the curriculum. He gave an overview of the historical religions including selected tribal religions. Of special interest, he found the religions of India and ancient Greece. The reading of original Greek texts was regularly on the agenda. Occasionally, he held seminars on Polynesian religion informing his old materials with new investigations, e.g. on Hawaiian concepts and rituals.

Prytz-Johansen willingly declared his indebtedness to the teachings of Vilhelm Grønbech, but he always endeavored to get a direct and independent understanding of the religions and cultures he took under consideration. His wide reading and interest in other approaches and capacity of critical assessment of the scholarly literature in many fields of learning made him a man of great erudition. Among his publications of this period is to be mentioned the general survey on “primitive” cults accompanied by examples illustrating the variety of rituals in different types of societies written to a Danish handbook, afterwards published in German translation. In a minor study, he—with cautious use of parallels—interprets the Greek Thesmophoria as a festival regulating women’s life by celebrating the coming of civilizing order. The young girl’s initiation and symbolic ritual death he finds reflected in an alternative tradition of the theft of Persephone. He traces the evidence of a variant of the myth of the girl never returning as in the Eleusinan myth of eternal return.

The years of Prytz-Johansen’s retirement found him faced with the strong encouragement of a handful of students in New Zealand to retrieve earlier unpublished works. But only an older work on the Arioi of Tahiti was brushed up to an article published in 1989.

For many years, he had to tackle headaches and depression, which sometimes made him unapproachable and could leave the impression of an arrogant, rather prickly character. But people who became close knew him as
helpful, warmhearted, and humorous. In short a rich, broad-minded person, who lived a happy, married, childless life. Along with his scholarly work he cultivated his interests in music, art, literature, and history. In his open house, he generously shared his knowledge of science and technics with children and adults.

After the loss of his wife in 1984, he managed as a widower to add the daily trivialities of cooking and cleaning to his scheduled routines of reading, playing the grand piano, bookbinding, and various kinds of crafts in his workshop.

Friends, students, and colleagues used to call him Prytz. In his Maori books he refers to the works of Johansen, accordingly he was Johansen in the learned world. In Denmark, he was officially Mr. Prytz Johansen—his wife only Mrs. Johansen. To offer her his full name he had to hyphenate the two surnames. In 1982, he paid the fee for the hyphen to secure the alteration in official documents to Prytz-Johansen.

*Copenhagen, August 2012*

**Selected further works by the author**


1975. ”The thesmophoria as a women’s festival.” Temenos 11: 78-87.


