A Note on the Hawaiian Prophecy of Kapihe

In 1812, at a period called Kani‘aukani by Hawaiians, Kamehameha returned to Hawai‘i after his year on O‘ahu. There he met a prophet named Kapihe, who recited for the king his already famous prophecy. That prophecy has conventionally been repeated and interpreted in the following way:

Before the arrival of the missionaries in Hawai‘i a ka‘ula named Kapihe is reported to have uttered a prophecy in the presence of Kamehameha. The popular English rendering makes it appear that Christianity and democracy were destined to triumph: ‘The ancient kapu will be overthrown, the heiau and lele altars will be overthrown, and the images will fall down. God will be in the heavens; the islands will unite, the chiefs will fall, and those of the earth (the lesser people) will rise.’

This interpretation of the prophecy as foretelling the overthrow of the traditional Hawaiian polity is based primarily on its reversal of the two major Polynesian directions luna and lalo, ‘above’ and ‘below’, a reversal used negatively in the earlier prophecy by Ke‘au‘uulumoku in his Haui ka Lani:

O ke kini hoi i kahi kiakie,  
Aia hoi i kahi haahaa  
‘The many also in a high place,  
Their are now in a low place…’

The tradition of Kapihe’s prophecy has been supplemented in conformity with this baleful interpretation.

A positive interpretation can, however, be made of the earliest recorded version of that prophecy. Gideon La‘anui introduces his account with the words: ‘A ike no makou i kekahi kanaka wakahae ia wa o Kapihe kona inoa, ‘And we saw a slippery-mouthed person at that time, named Kapihe’. La‘anui was accompanying Kamehameha I on a fishing trip in Kohala, when the chief Ka‘ikio‘ewa approached them to propose:

E hoi kakou i Kona, aia ke kanaka mana la i Kona o Kapihe ka inoa o  
Kamohiokala ka [sic] aaka, he hauwi [sic:] hii na moku he ola na kaupuna, he ihohio  
‘Let us return to Kona. There is a powerful man there in Kona, named Kapihe. His god is Kamohiokalā. The islands will be joined. The ancestors will live. The things that belong


2 The prophet Kapihe has been identified uncertainly with a man of the same name working later at court; but La‘anui is writing at a time when he would have known the second Kapihe, and he is completely negative about this first one.

3 As described by Niel Gunson, pers. comm.


6 Gideona La‘anui, ‘He manao hoakaka wale no keia no ko‘u hanau ana, a me ko‘u kamalii ana, a me ko‘u hoakaka ana, a me ka ike ana i kekahi mau me oloko o ke aupuni o Kamehameha’, Ke Kumu Hawaii, 3:21 (1838), 83.
La'au'u comments negatively: 'Aole hui na maka, aole ola na kapuna, pau ia mea', 'The islands were not joined. The ancestors did not live. That was the end of it.'

La'au'u's hostility is explained by the fact that he is a supporter of Kamehameha's government, which claims to have solved the problems raised by the contact situation. For instance, Kamehameha had united the islands (Kaua'i nominally) so that foreigners could not conquer the Hawaiians by dividing them against each other. Consequently, if Kapihe prophecies the future joining of the islands, he implies that somehow they have not yet been adequately united by Kamehameha's conquests and reorganisation of the government. The prophecy is positive but will be fulfilled in the future: Kapihe is dissatisfied with the present and hoping for a change for the better. To deflect this point, La'au'u chooses to give a crude physical interpretation of that section of the prophecy. Rightly understood, however, Kapihe's prophecy is one of the few surviving expressions of Hawaiian dissatisfaction with Kamehameha's reign.

A major worry — and thus dissatisfaction — expressed in the prophecy is that Hawaiian medicine is still proving ineffective against the foreign diseases ravaging the native population. The water and the fan in Kapihe's prophecy refer to the religio-medical treatments of Hawaiian practitioners: they will work again to heal the sick. Ineffective medicine, however, reveals the general infirmity of the current situation. Hawaiian medicine depended on a right relationship with the relevant gods as well as on correct ritual and physical treatment. Ineffectiveness reveals a rift in that relationship, which endangers all areas of society. The predicted solution is that the ancestors will live again, not just as normal ancestral gods, but in the physicality implied by the word ola 'vitality, vigour'.

The famous luna-lalo reversal is thus framed by positive prophecies: on the one side, the joining of the islands and the revival of the ancestors, and, on the other, the restored effectiveness of Hawaiian medicine. Therefore, the luna-lalo reversal must itself have a positive sense: the ancestors will return from their abode in the sky and raise their descendants to an even higher level than traditionally anticipated. Disturbed by the tragic problems of his time, dissatisfied with the government's innovations, Kapihe foresees a resurrection of old Hawai'i, not just as it was, but with a wondrous intensification of its powers for living successfully and communicating with forebears and gods. The marvelous element in the prophecy is novel in Hawaiian religion, but — a symptom of anxiety — will increase until today.

This positive interpretation of Kapihe's prophecy is reflected in a later version, which has been influenced by Christianity.7 The author (identified only by his initial S.) writes that Kapihe — who was called a crazy man, 'he pupule' — came to see Kamehameha on Hawai'i in order to communicate the following prophecy:

E hui ana na aina,
E tho mai ana ko ha lani,
E pii aku ana ko lalo nei,

The lands will be joined.
The things that belong to the sky will come down here.
The things that belong down here will rise up.

7 S., 'He wana'a', Ka Hou Hawaii, 5:8 (1860). Transcription in Johnson, Kukini 'Ahu'tolome, 212f. This version has been discussed by Ambrose Don Kameakauna Velasco, 'Chiasmus in ancient Hawaiian prophecies, prayers, and chants', Lāie, Joint Mormon Historical Association/Mormon Pacific Historical Society Conference, 1990, who takes it as the original and dates it to 1782 (pp. 86, 91, 101), following an article in Johnson, Kukini 'Ahu'tolome, 210ff. Velasco's interpretation, pp. 87-90, 103-8, compares this version to Mormon writings. On Velasco, see Mette Ramstad, Conversion in the Pacific: Eastern Polynesian Latter-day Saints' conversion accounts and their development of a LDS identity (Kristiansand 2003), 239ff.
E iho mai ana ke Akua ilalo nei, The God will come down here.
E kamaitio pu ana me kanaka; He will talk with the human beings.
E pii mai ana o Wākea ihana, Wākea will rise up to the above.
E iho aku ana o Milo ilalo, Milo will descend to the below.
E noho pu ana ke Akua me kanaka The God will live with the human beings.

This version is clearly later than the one discussed above. The language is more modern: e ... ana construction rather than he .... The use of 'āina 'land' rather than moku 'island, section' lessens the ambiguity of the joining: 'āina is more patient of a political, social sense.

Most important, this version maintains the positive message of the earlier one. The luna-lalo reversal is used to express the re-establishment of a cosmic order that has been disturbed earlier. The sky God Wākea, ancestor of gods and human beings, now returns to his proper position above; Milo, the god of the underworld and the dead, now returns to his realm below. The world will no longer be ruled exceptionally by the sickness and death that the Hawaiians have been experiencing, but by the rightful god of cosmic fertility.

The earlier prophecy of the revival of the ancestors — ‘he ola na kupuna’ — is now applied to a single god who descends to converse and cohabit with human beings. I see Christian influence in the singleness of the god as opposed to the multiplicity of the ancestors. Moreover, the ancestors — even as family gods — are similar to human beings. In contrast, the second version emphasises difference by twice using the traditional, contrasting pair akua-kanaka ‘god-human’. Although the god is not identified with Jesus, I believe this version has been influenced by Christian teachings about the distance between God and human beings, about the Incarnation and life of Jesus, and perhaps about the Second Coming of Christ. The use of male Hawaiian gods only may also be a result of Christian influence. Christian colouring is thus being used for a nativist formulation in which the gods are still active in their traditional roles.

All versions of Kapihe’s prophecy reveal the worries and hopes of the Hawaiians of their times, as do both the positive and negative interpretations. Historians should be conscious of the anxiety with which Hawaiians pondered such texts, trusting, as S. did, that ‘he wahi io paha koloko’ ‘there is perhaps some truth inside’.

JOHN CHARLOT

Acknowledgements

I thank the members of my classes in Hawaiian religion, especially my graduate seminar of Fall 2003, for discussions of these texts. Texts are given as they appear in their publications.

8 Wākea can be found as an underworld god in sorcery chant, and this version of the prophecy may be alluding to sorcery as one source of the current misery.