Wet Taro Farming
in Hawaiian Literature: Two Examples
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Hawaiian culture was largely based on agriculture, an important part of which was taro farming. Discussions of farming in Hawaiian literature are therefore particularly important for understanding Hawaiian culture as a whole.

The following is just a brief outline of an interpretation of the fifth wā or section of the Kumulipo, the great Hawaiian chant of the origin of the universe, composed around 1700 A.D. as a birth or name chant for the Hawai‘i Island Chief Lonoikamakahiki. (M.W. Beckwith: The Kumulipo, A Hawaiian Creation Chant, The University of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1972; all references are to her text).

The Kumulipo uses all the devices of Hawaiian poetry—especially ambiguity and symbolism—to establish three basic levels of meaning: the beginning and development of the universe; the birth and growth of a human being into young adulthood; and the history of the human community. On the first level, the universe begins with the mating of the female earth and the male sky, and proceeds to develop genealogically through the elements, the plants and the animals, to the first gods and humans and on to the birth of the chief being honored by the chant. On the second level, the child is conceived and born and passes through the various stages of infancy, childhood and early adulthood. The third level is harder to reconstruct, but seems to mark stages in the rise of the great families and the establishment of various aspects of culture.

The introduction to the fifth wā of the Kumulipo, lines 481-501, is a particularly good example of the composer's coordination of the three levels. For the development of the universe, this period marks the birth of the pig. For the growth of the child, it is the moment of male puberty. For history and culture, it is the beginning of wet taro agriculture.

These three subjects are closely connected in Hawaiian thinking. The pig is a traditional symbol of male sexuality, its snout an explicit penis symbol. The snout was ritually fed to a male infant to ensure his later sexual vigor. In Keaulumoku's Hau‘i Ka Lani, Kamehameha is praised as:

He ke'a makaio lelepā, he pu'a 'eku ikaika

The pig was also closely connected to agriculture. The prayers of the sweet potato farmers invited with great humor Kāne’ula, Pig Kane, or more rarely Kamapua’a, Pig Boy, to come root (‘eku) in their fields to soften the soil for planting. The author of the Kumulipo clearly bases his fifth section on such works, in the same way that he uses and elevates relevant literary traditions in other sections of his chant.

The connection between the three subjects of the fifth wā is personified in Kamapua’a, fiercely sexual god of both human and hog bodies and connected through his wide system of other bodies and gods to various aspects of agriculture.

Against this background, the fifth wā can be understood more fully. Each of the first seven sections of the Kumulipo contains a pair of parents, who give birth to its particular subject. The parents are given names that are relevant to their section. The name of the male parent in the fifth wā is Pōkanokano. Pō means night—the first seven sections happen during the pō. Kano or kanokano can mean “Large, hard stem... tool handle... male erection; stiffening, hardening...,” etc. (M.K. Pukui and S.H. Elbert. Hawaiian Dictionary, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1971). The ambiguity enables the parent to be connected to agriculture and sexuality, as is done explicitly in line 486:

‘O ke kanokano o ka ihu nuku ‘eli honua
The great erection of the nose snout that digs the earth.
The line describes the mating of the parent pair. The male is the rooting snout. The female is the earth. The description continues, lines 488 ff.:
Rooting in the island to raise and hill up
Making palis of the back
Making palis of the front.
The lines are describing the construction of a lo‘i, a wet taro patch, a traditional symbol for the female sex organ.
From this act is born the *kama a pua'a*, the male child of the pig, in all likelihood an allusion, but not a direct reference, to the god Kamapua'a and his cult. This pig boy makes his home in the upland forests and, line 492:

*Hio'omaha i ka lo'i lo'o'i o Lo'i'loa*
Takes his rest in the *lo'i* of Lo'i'loa.

The humorously repetitive onomatopoeia expresses the wallowing of the pig in the taro patch, which belongs to the relevant god, Great Lo'i. This wallowing is also symbolic of the sexual act. Many Hawaiian prayers follow a pattern in which male and female gods are brought together, so that out of their mating the benefits of life, fertility and prosperity may flow. From the pig's lying in the wet taro patch comes the fertility spreading over the land, in which can be seen the ancientness, beauty and religious power of the pig.

The passage has great density and depth. No interpretation can exhaust the meaning of its symbols, allusions and interconnections with the whole of the Hawaiian thought world. Hawaiian literature can produce such works because Hawaiian culture educated its members in continuing consciousness of the interrelatedness of all things in the universe.

Such a consciousness can be felt even in less formal works. I was privileged once to hear the Hawaiian religious leader Kalahikiola Nali'elua tell a Kamapua'a story in Hawaiian to a group of native speakers. He was able to tell the story in his best, most allusive Hawaiian, without worrying about whether his audience could understand him. Those listening to the story reacted strongly and traditionally to it.

Papa Kalā had been saying that the taro corm is Kamapua'a's penis and the leaves are his pubic hair. The story demonstrated his point. When he announced that he would tell a story about Kamapua'a, his listeners sat up a little straighter in their chairs and showed the two reactions associated with that god: fearful respect and ribald mirth. As the story was building to its climax, the laughter got stronger and stronger. Tears were rolling down people's cheeks. Some were holding on to the table. As the story ended, there were real and continuing shrieks of laughter, similar to those heard at the performance of a *ma'i* or genital hula. The audience reaction was powerful in every sense of the word.

Papa Kalā told how Kamapua'a was wandering around in the upland forests when he happened on a dry *lo'i*. He climbed into it and began to *'eku*, to root up a furrow. He *'eku 'eku 'eku 'eku'*d up one furrow— as Kalā said this he made a rooting motion with his fist, raising the lowering the butt of his palm, which was facing down and moving forward—and he *'eku 'eku 'eku 'eku'*d down another. As Kalā continued to repeat the word *'eku*, the laughter grew. Finally Kamapua'a came to the end of the last furrow, and, as he looked up from his rooting, he saw a beautiful woman standing on the earthen bank in front of him. He got so excited that he ejaculated (laughter) and his sperm overflowed the whole *lo'i* (great laughter).

Kamapua'a mates with the *lo'i*, with the earth. So he is a god for taro farmers as well as for sweet potato farmers.
Papa Kala's story is very near the fifth wa of the Kumulipo: the wandering of the pig in the upland forest, his rutting in the lo'i, the spreading fertility. One wonders whether the story is the remnant of an ancient tale known to the great poet. In any case, both the story and the chant express the traditional connection between wet taro farming, the pig and sexuality.

Bibliography


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