

THE REPRESENTATION OF ANIMALS IN INDIGENOUS HAWAI'IAN TALES

Lucía Aranda
University of Hawai'i

Long ago there were no islands here. The great sea rolled over this place. And a sacred bird flew over it—the great red fowl of the god Kane. In his beak he bore a calabash, and dropped it on the sea. It broke, and the pieces became islands.
– Hawai'ian legend

The presence of nature in Hawai'i is so prevalent that it is not surprising that animals, along with other elements of nature such as the ocean (*kai*) or land (*'āina*), imagine the tales on the islands. Tales of animals, gods, heroic deeds, rituals or everyday events are told in cultures the world over, and Hawai'i is no different. However, while Hawai'i is politically part of the United States and therefore now partakes of the Euro-American tradition, its history grows from traditions rooted in the Pacific, namely Polynesia. The themes children have encountered in the tales of Hawai'i have been transmitted orally and revolve around the origin and formation of the islands, genealogy and the gods. Told and re-told through time, the rich collection of tales has reinforced the values, religion and history that have informed their culture for generations.

The Polynesian triangle, whose vertices are considered to be Hawai'i, New Zealand and Rapa Nui, is a vast region comprising of some 1,000 islands in the Pacific. Hawai'ian tales can be traced back directly to the Polynesians. In fact, many of the Hawai'ian tales, legends and myths share storylines, deities and even names with other Pacific islands, though they have become politically and culturally distinct. According to historians, the first settlers to make the 3,000-mile canoe voyage came from the Marquesas in the fourth or fifth centuries, and then in the mid-thirteenth century another group arrived from Tahiti. The tales of their ancestors were adapted to their surroundings and enriched with local variations (Craig 1989: viii).

As in other places, in Hawai'i, legends, myths and tales are frequently interchangeable terms. Myths are fictional stories that narrate how the world

began, explain the world around us and validate social values; they include a religious explanation and each culture presents their gods in their myths. Legends are told as if they were historical accounts concerned with particular people, places, events and times in history and the main characters are superheroes who can perform heroic deeds. Insofar as folktales and fairy tales are concerned, scholars and critics have tried unsuccessfully to distinguish between them as though they could be traced to their origins (Zipes 2001: 845). These two forms—folktales and fairy tales—are not set in a particular time or place more often than not involve some element of magic. In Hawai'i, the Western distinctions between one and the other do not fully explain the nature of the indigenous stories: stories of gods (*akua*) are *moo'lelo*, and *kaao* are fictional stories (Beckwith 1977: 5). Nevertheless, neither of these is exclusive.

The gods of Hawai'ian legends—mainly of nature—involve heroes and heroines (chiefs who visited) with extraordinary or supernatural powers, and who, as gods, are capable of changing their shape and form. Mysterious events frequently spur these transformations. Hawai'ian legends unite human and animal forms in ways similar to the centaurs of Roman mythology (Westervelt 2005: 56): there are dog men, bird men, rat men and hog men. As Zipes explains, hundreds of years ago, people all over the world believed in magic, although they were always able to distinguish between what was probable and improbable (2001: 849-50). Hawai'ian mythology itself recognizes a pre-human period (Beckwith 1977: 9).

Myths recount the origins of the world and so are considered sacred. In Hawai'i they are spiritual accounts that emanate from its land and people and that form the basis for the islands' animistic philosophy. There are a great number of gods and demigods in Hawai'ian mythology. *Ku* (male) and *Hina* (female) are the most ancestral and rule over the earth and mankind. *Kane* is the god of life, *Lono* the god of agriculture, and *Kanaloa* the god of the ocean. *Pele* rules the volcanoes. "The Hawai'ians worshipped nature gods and these gods entered to a greater or less extent into all the affairs of daily life, played a dominant part in legendary history, and furnished a rich imaginative background for the development of fictional narrative" (*idem*, 6).

Notwithstanding a rich oral heritage, what is considered Hawai'ian literature is fraught with confusion. According to Hawai'ians, for whom ancestry and genealogy are vital, Hawai'ians are only descendants of the Polynesians, the original inhabitants of the Hawai'i, and Hawai'ian literature is only literature by and about Hawai'ians. As in the case of the Native Americans, whose literature is also oral, Hawai'ian orature includes chants, songs and speech. These told stories, mythologies, genealogies and biographies were often accompanied by dance, such as the hula, which originated as a sacred

ceremonial dance. Literacy in Hawai'ian literature made its way to the islands with the arrival of the first missionaries and immigrants from Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and China around 1820, a significant event which coincided with King Kamehameha's death in 1819 and the elimination of the *kapu* (taboo) system. As the strict traditional religious and social laws of the *kapu* went out of order, a new order was ushered in. Orality was transformed forever.

The influence of foreigners, especially missionaries, on old Hawai'i was far-reaching. Hawai'i was colonized through language: missionaries learned Hawai'ian, systematized the alphabet and set up printing presses, accelerating the substitution of old values with new ones. Ben Adams explains, "There was perhaps never a more unlikely meeting of people than between the stern and fervent Yankee missionaries and the carefree Hawai'ians. Yet their impact on Hawaii was lasting and profound" (Adams 1959: 37). In the introduction to a re-edition of King Kalakaua's 1888 *The Legends and Myths of Hawaii*, Terence Barrow contends that Hawai'ian confidence was damaged irretrievably by four events: Captain Cook's arrival in 1778, the renunciation of the *kapu* system, the arrival of non-Hawai'ians in mid-nineteenth century and the overthrow of the monarchy by US economic interests in 1893 (Barrow 1976: 3-4). As Hawaii transitioned into its annexation in 1898, elements of the West and the East weaved their way onto the islands, and simultaneously, as the tales were put in writing, the nature of the tales began to be displaced—their reception, influence and significance forever altered. Christian and patriarchal elements, which entered European fairy tales as they were first being recorded between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries (Zipes 2001: 847), made their way into the first written Hawai'ian narratives. This meant the substitution of Polynesian gods and beliefs with Christian ones, especially in stories with Biblical counterparts (the strong erotic sense in Hawai'ian culture, for example, was erased by Victorian overtones). Nevertheless, as "ongoing suppression of the Hawai'ian language and culture . . . became more overt" and acculturation became more widespread, the literature shows that there was resistance as well (Bacchilega, and Arista 2007: 161).

In the foreword to the anthology *Island Fire*, Houston comments on James Michener's preface to the 1961 *A Hawai'ian Reader* in which Michener applauds the editors for placing the Hawai'ian texts dealing with the folklore of the islands at the end because of their "alienating style" and beginning the anthology with literature from "the modern world, like that written by Captain Cook" (2002: ix). In Houston's opinion, what has significantly changed since the 1960s is the perception that indigenous Hawai'i was unimportant. The representation of Hawai'i has been adapted in contemporary narratives to "produce a legendary Hawaii primarily for non-Hawai'ian readers and audiences" in part because of the dilemma between orality and literacy

(Bacchilega 2006: 1). As a handful of schools tackle language revitalization, it is apparent that there are not enough commercially available native materials from the perspective of Hawai'ians, as those from the perspective of non-indigenous people reflect points of view which can misuse or mistranslate cultural values (Wilson and Kamana 2001: 152).

Until the second half of the twentieth century, most written Hawai'ian literature was in Hawai'ian and tended to incorporate the oral elements at the core of its culture: *oli* (chants), *mo'okuauhau* (genealogies), *olelo no'ea* (proverbs and sayings) and *koana* (hidden or underlying meanings). The themes remained Hawai'ian, not yet of the colonizer. However, the impact of the colonizer brought forth a linguistic and literary disruption: English and Pidgin, or more correctly Hawai'i Creole English—a mixture of English and the languages of the immigrants that developed on the plantations—created a shift in the literature and replaced Hawai'ian as the main language of discourse. Today, although some literature is still written in Pidgin, most is in English, the literature's oral nature having been displaced. Views of what is or is not Hawai'ian literature include questions of genre (oral versus written literature), language (Hawai'ian, English and/or Pidgin) and blood (Hawai'ian or "local"). For Haunani-Kay Trask, "a celebration of Pidgin English becomes a gloss for the absence of authentic sounds and authentic voices" (Trask 1999: 170). James Clifford expresses similar concerns; he contends it is necessary to "transcend colonial disruptions," given that "old myths and genealogies change, connect, and reach out, but always in relation to an enduring spatial nexus. This is the indigenous *longue durée*, the pre-colonial space and time that tends to be lost in postcolonial projections" (Clifford 2001: 482).

The isolation of Hawai'i and its dependence on its own resources explain the centrality of animals in Hawai'ian lore. It is assumed that the first Polynesians to the islands would have found some sixty-seven varieties of endemic birds, of which approximately one third are believed to have become extinct. On this first journey, the Polynesians brought with them dogs, pigs and stowaway rats; these joined the only two mammals to have arrived before: the hoary bat and the monk seal. Not surprisingly, sea animals figure most prominently in the tales.

The legends are "complex, oral narratives that consisted of priestly chants, lengthy legends of gods and heroes, and love lyrics known to chiefs and commoners alike" (Craig 1989: xvii). According to Robert D. Craig, when read as texts, these oral compositions seem quite tedious; some are extremely long, and can take several sittings to recite. Since Captain Cook's arrival to the Hawai'ian Islands in 1778, a number of other men and women have been collecting the myths of the islands' people. One of the first was Samuel

Kamakau, whose stories appeared in Hawaiʻian newspapers between 1866 and 1871. In 1920 the Bishop Museum published what is considered one of the most extensive collections of Hawaiʻian legends: the *Fornander Collection of Hawaiʻian Antiquities and Folklore* collected by the Swede Abraham Fornander; Thomas G. Thrum published *Hawaiʻian Folk Tales* in 1907 and *More Hawaiʻian Folk Tales* in 1923. Also worth mentioning are William Westervelt, whose four volumes of legends have recently been collected into the volume *Myths and Legends of Hawaii*, and Martha Warren Beckwith's superb *Hawaiʻian Mythology* (*idem*, xxvi).

Hawaiʻians had many gods and a significant number took on the forms of animals. As in most traditional tales around the world, for the most part the gods triumphed and punished their enemies (Kawaharada 2000: 218). Essential to Hawaiʻian language and its lore is the use of a metaphorical and symbolic language, full of symbolism and allusion, as well as a prevalent "pairing of opposites" (Beckwith 1977: 7), such as night and day or male and female.

Following is an account of the main animals in the indigenous tales of Hawaiʻi and a brief narrative describing some of the forms they take and the names by which they are known. Gods and demigods realized a great many forms so there are many versions (good and evil) of each animal depending on place and story.

Sharks: Sharks, of which there are some forty species living in and about the Hawaiʻian waters, are a powerful presence in the island legends, as they are in Greek mythology. There are a significant number of legends told of sharks in Hawaiʻi. Two recurring themes are man-shark transformations and shark attacks occurring immediately after a warning by a shark. There are ancestral sharks (Kuhaimoana—the largest and most celebrated—Kanehunamoku, Kauhuhu, Kamohoaliʻi and Kaneikokala) and specific localized sharks (Kawelomahamahaia of Kauaʻi; Pauwalu of Wailua, Maui; Nenewe of Waipio on Hawaiʻi; Kaaipoʻo of Kapaahu in Puna, Hawaiʻi; Manonihokahi at Laʻie, Oʻahu; and Kamaikaahui of Maui (*idem*, 53).

Some of the sharks are good: Kamaikaʻahui, husband of Pele, the volcano goddess, part shark, warns people going into the ocean, while others, such as ʻAikanaka, a man-eating shark, are evil. Kamohoalii was the King-shark and Nanaue the son he had with the human Kalei. It is told that Nanaue, who was capable of taking the shape of man or animal, had an unhealthy affection for mankind. Only when the young demigod Unauna had the help of the people of Molokai would they be rid of him.

Lizards: The *mo'o* already appears in the creation legends. It is considered a sacred animal and a guardian spirit ranking just behind the shark. The *mo'o* is a large reptile, a dragon-like monster found in ponds and damp woodlands, with variations found all over Polynesia. The *mo'o* goddesses bring fish and prosperity, although not all are female or friendly. For example, Kalaimanu'u is the goddess to whom bodies were dedicated to become *aumakua*, deified ancestors or ancestral guardians. A number of versions of Kalamainu'u either have her attempting to eat her surf-loving husband Puna or luring away other women's husbands.

Today's gecko, a much smaller version of the large *mo'o*, believed to bring good luck to households across the islands, seems to have arrived only around World War II (Scott 1991: 120).

Owls: The *pueo*, as he is known in Hawai'ian, is believed to be able to bring souls back to life and also protect the remaining family. Like sharks and turtles, owls are manifestations of the *aumakua*.

Hogs/Pigs: A prominent deity in Hawai'ian mythology is Kamapua'a, the hog god who, as half-hog and half-man, garners great favor from the gods. Best known for his warlike nature and his romantic exploits, Kamapua'a's adventures include conflicts with his stepfather, chiefs and the god Lono on almost every island. Once *kapu* (forbidden) as food for women, women enjoyed them as pets and used the boar tusks for jewelry.

Whales: In spite of its size, there is notoriously little presence of this enormous animal in Hawai'ian tales. Some theorize that Hawai'i had enough food sources without the whale that, although the sperm whale did live in the surrounding Pacific, the huge humpback was only pushed there as it fled from hunters. However, the fact that the *ali'i* (royalty) wore carved whale teeth as pendants seems to contradict the former theories. Perhaps the whale was such a sacred creature that its stories were reserved exclusively for the *ali'i* and, having disappeared, the tales too have disappeared. The *kohola* (whale) is said to be a manifestation of Kanaloa, the god of the ocean.

Dogs: Dogs feature prominently in Hawai'ian legends, tales and even chants. Among the god-dogs are Puapualenalena, Ku'ilioloa, a man-dog with supernatural powers and a tail like that of a dog, and Pa'e, who could transform from a woman into a dragon-like lizard as well as a dog. Kaupe, the leader of a hairless class of people who specialized in wrestling and bone-breaking, also known as a cannibal, frequently turns into a giant dog to rob and kill travelers. The importance of this animal in Hawai'ian culture is attested to by the fact that

the most frequent image to appear in the stone-carved petroglyphs are those of the dog.

Fish: There are around 680 species in the waters surrounding the Hawai'ian Islands. While Polynesians brought animals with them, the ones in the ocean were the ones to provide them with the most food (Kirch 1998: 3). Kuula, who had a human body and supernatural powers, is the deity ruling over the fish. Another fish-god is Kamapuaa, who having lost a fight against Pele, took on the thick skin of the hog into which he sometimes transformed in an attempt to withstand the boiling waters Pele had warmed. And because it is said that this fish grunts like a hog, it received the name of *humuhumunukunukuapuaa* (*nuku* meaning small snout). This is today's state fish.

Turtles: The recurrence of turtles in the tales and legends of Hawai'i should come as no surprise. According to one version, as Aiai overturns a rock on the sand it becomes a turtle. There are friendly turtles and monster ones as well. In one legend the hill Haupu is really the turtle Kahonunuimaeleka, the ancestor of all the turtles in Hawai'i.

Birds: Hawai'ian proverbs suggest that birds were useful in predicting the weather. In the legends of Hawai'i birds were sacred; not only were they messengers or attendants to the gods, but they also could speak. Cloaks and helmets adorned with feathers were the most prized possessions a chief could have, and because of their expense, only the *ali'i* could afford the beautiful pieces of clothing.

A number of other animals appear in the legends and tales of Hawai'i (for example, Kanaloa, the god of the sea, occasionally takes the form of the octopus and the squid). As English became the dominant language of discourse, new narratives geared themselves to a touristified Hawai'i and avoided the indigenous local. A look at the myths and legends of old Hawai'i, on the one hand, reminds us of the great repository of learning and entertainment to be found in the oral tales, and on the other hand, reminds us of the need to support Hawai'ian literature, both oral and written. The animals of these stories inform Hawai'i's history and its heritage and are a valuable source for understanding the intimate and respectful relationship Hawai'ians had and have with nature. Especially at a time in which the world is reevaluating its own relationship with nature, there is much to learn from the representation of animals in the indigenous tales of Hawai'i.

Works Cited

- ADAMS, Ben (1959). *Hawaii: the Aloha State*. Hill and Wang, Inc.
- BACCHILEGA, Cristina (2006). *Legendary Hawaii and the Politics of Place*, U of Pennsylvania P.
- BACCHILEGA, Cristina and Arista, Noelani (2007). "The Arabian Nights in the Kuokoa, a Ninteenth-Century Hawaiian Newspaper: Reflections on the Politics of Translation", in
- BARROW, Terence (1976). "Introduction", in King Kalakaua (1976). *The Legends and Myths of Hawaii. The Fables and Folk-Lore of a Strange People*, Vermont and Japan, Charles E. Tuttle Company, pp. 3-6.
- BECKWITH, Martha Warren (1977). *Hawaiian Mythology*, U of Hawaii P.
- CLIFFORD, James (2001). "Indigenous Articulations", *The Contemporary Pacific* 13.2, pp. 468-490.
- CRAIG, Robert D. (1989). *Dictionary of Polynesian Mythology*, Connecticut, Greenwood Press.
- KAWAHARADA, Dennis (2000). "A Search for Ku-ula-kai", in Cynthia G. Franklin, Ruth Hsu and Suzanne Kosanke (eds.) (2000). *Navigating Islands and Continents: Conversations and Contestations in and around the Pacific*, U of Hawaii P, pp. 216-231.
- KIRCH, Patrick Vinton (1998). *Feathered Gods and Fishhooks: An Introduction to Hawaiian Archaeology and Prehistory*. U of Hawaii P.
- HOUSTON, James D. (2002). "Foreword", in Cheryl A. Harstad and James R. Harstad (eds.) (2002). *Fire Island. An Anthology of Literature from Hawai'i*, U of Hawaii P, pp. ix-xi.
- MARZOLPH, Ulrich (ed.) (2007). *The Arabian Nights in Transnational Perspective*, Detroit, Michigan, Wayne State University, pp. 157-182.
- SCOTT, Susan (1991). *Plants and Animals of Hawaii*, Honolulu, Bess Press.

Trask, Haunani-Kay (1999), "Writing in Captivity: Poetry in a Time of Decolonization",

VILSONI, Hereniko and Rob Wilson (eds.) (1999). *Inside Out*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, pp. 17-26.

WESTERVELT, William (2005). *Myths and Legends of Hawaii*, Honolulu, Mutual Publishing.

WILSON, William H. and Kamana, Kauanoë (2001). "'Mai Loko Mai O Ka 'Iini: Proceeding from a Dream": The 'Aha Punana Leo Connection in Hawaiian Language Revitalization," in Leanne Hinton and Ken Hale (eds.) (2001), *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice*, Emerald Group Publishing, pp. 147-179.

ZIPES, Jack (2001). "Cross-Cultural Connections and the Contamination of the Classical Fairy Tale," in Jack Zipes (ed.) (2001). *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition: From Straparola and Basile to the Brothers Grimm*, New York, WW Norton & Co., pp. 845-868.