

Mo'olelo — Hawaiian Stories & Myths

by Momi Naughton

Mo'olelo is a word which encompasses history, legend, or tradition of the Hawaiian people. In terms of its use and interpretation in modern times it is a vital subject which concerns Hawaiian cultural survival. The problems and responsibilities facing those who attempt to interpret mo'olelo are complex. It is difficult to define the nature of mo'olelo in Western terms. The divisions of Western folklore have their counterparts in the Hawaiian tradition. However, as the following will indicate, mo'olelo is not clearly defined.

- Myths: Stories about supernatural characters and events
 - Legends: Stories which concern historical persons and events
 - Riddles
 - Proverbs
 - Poetical compositions
 - Word play
- Ka'ao: Fictional stories in which imagination plays an important part
 - Mo'olelo: Narrative about a historical figure, one which is supposed to follow historical events.
 - 'Olelo name
 - 'Olelo no'eau
 - Mele
 - 'Olelo ho'opillipi

The broken line between "myths" and "mo'olelo" is to indicate the difficulty in separating ka'ao from mo'olelo. As Martha Beckwith stated in her book *Hawaiian Mythology*, "the distinction between ka'ao as fiction and moolelo as fact can not be pressed too closely. It is rather in the intention than in the fact. Many of the so-called moolelo which a foreigner would reject as fantastic nevertheless correspond with the Hawaiian view of the relation between nature and man" (1970:1, note — Beckwith does not use glottal stops.)

Mo'olelo is a conjunction of the word mo'o'olelo which literally means "succession of talk." Being

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linked with the concept of succession is the key to understanding mo'olelo. For example, many of the stories deal with akua, which certain authorities on Hawaiian culture say have been improperly called "gods." Noted historian Charles Kenn claims the term 'god' is a deceptive one used to conform with Western thought and in reality the akua are ancestors, far removed in time, who have increased their mana and thus their power" (Gutmanis: 1985:17)

Another term which shows affinity with the concept of succession is kupuna. Kupuna refers to grandparents or relatives of the grandparents' generation. It also refers to forebears who have died or appear in genealogies. It is a contraction of "kupu ana", which means "process of growing." The term "makua" for parent and "aumakua" for exalted ancestor include the word "akua" in their spelling. This linguistic connection would concur with Mr. Kenn's belief that akua are ancestors far removed in time.

The link between makua, 'aumakua and akua is important when defining mo'olelo. It is as though at a point in time and because of increased mana (supernatural power) through the medium of mo'olelo, an 'aumakua passes from reality to supernatural reality and becomes an akua. When writing about akua one should remember these are real people regardless of how difficult it is from the Western perspective to accept their physical and mental supernatural abilities. Portraying them in the correct era and genealogical connections is important.

In Pam and Guy Buffet's children's book based on the mo'olelo of the dog man Puapualenalena, fairly detailed measures were taken to assure cultural accuracy. However, the authors put the story into the wrong time frame and generation, although the correct genealogical line. The varied accounts of Puapualenalena take place in a confined time period either during the reign of Kiha, Liloa, or 'Umi, who are in direct descent to each other. In the children's story the authors choose a seemingly arbitrary period in which to set the mo'olelo. They portray it during the reign of Lu'ukia, wife of Olopana. Lu'ukia is eight generations removed from 'Umi, who reigned about A.D. 1650. Charting each generation as twenty-five years, Lu'ukia would have lived two hundred years after the event took place. With relation to relative time, it would be like writing a story about Captain Cook and saying that he was the first man on the moon. Too often Hawaiian culture is portrayed as though frozen in time at the point Cook documented it.

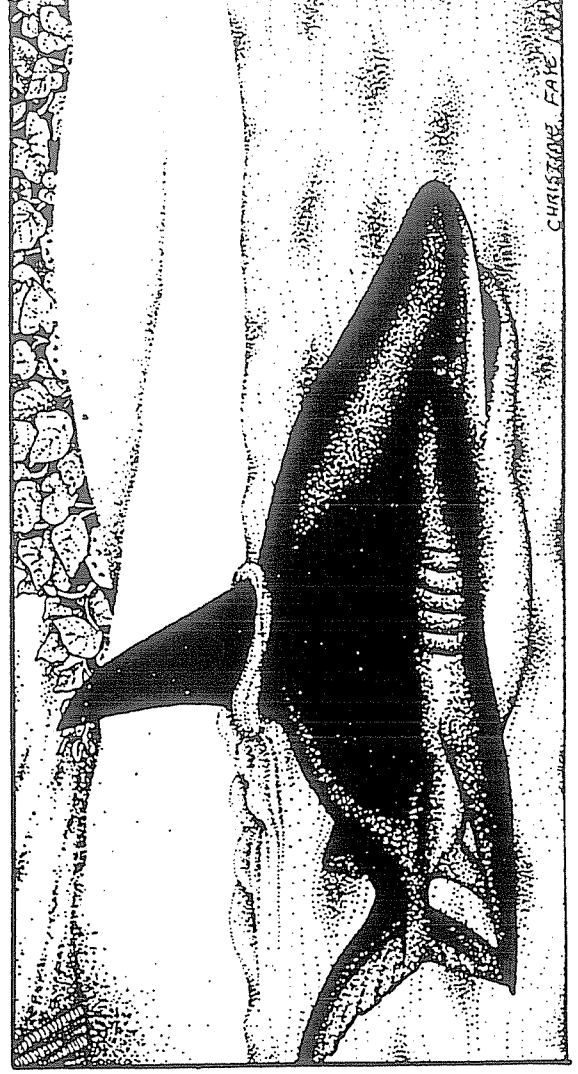
In case of Lu'ukia it is also important to put her into the correct time frame because of how much she contributed to Hawaiian culture. She is said to have introduced the five layered *kapa pa'u* (barkcloth skirt), the concept of the *hale pe'a* (menstrual house), and a particular type of cord network cover for *ipu* (water gourds) and lashing *wa'a* (canoes). She and her husband, Olopana, are also credited with having introduced a type of tattooing to Hawai'i. Many contemporary Hawaiians can trace their genealogies to the line of Liloa and Lu'ukia and this factor alone should make authors sensitive to portraying the mo'olelo concerning them accurately.

Since mo'olelo are part of the Hawaiian oral tradition, difficulties involved in transposing them into written form are found. Mo'olelo do not fit comfortably into the basic frame of Western writing. A beginning, climax, and conclusion would be difficult

"While this child was yet in the womb, and its parents realized that there was a child, on one day when the sky was clear, the mountains were green, and the sea no longer reverberated in its breaking, some men went out on canoes to fish for uhu. Arriving at the fishing grounds, they saw a handsome child diving from a precipice into the water. He was given chase; he ran and hid in the waterfall at Makamakaole; the water fell from above, but back of that was dry; he waited there and finally came out thinking to get back to the mother's womb; but he was again seen and again pursued. He ran and entered the house. Hina was making kapa. The men entered and asked: "Where is the child who came into this house?" "There is no child; I am alone." Her husband saw this so he came with the intention of killing these men (because it was against the law to have any man enter a house where a woman was and her husband not present). The husband asked: "Why are you here?" "We pursued a child. He ran and entered this house." "There is a child, but it is in that one's womb. What shall be done?" asked the husband. The men went to seek a pig, a white chicken, black coconut, red fish, red kapa and awa root, and offered them as sacrifice to the child; after which they went off. He was named Maui; but he was not yet born." (Fernander: 1919:537)

to trace in many mo'olelo. This is due not only to the oral nature of the mo'olelo but also to the Hawaiian concept of the past and future being the present. A shift can suddenly take a character from present to future action, and often a mo'olelo appears to abruptly start and end with no climax or conclusion. The following mo'olelo serves to illustrate not only this concern in molding these stories to Western form, but also how mo'olelo can contain important ethnographic information about the culture. This example speaks of the activities of Maui while he was in the womb of his mother:

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CHRISTOPHER FAYE

The way Māui weaves in and out of the present and future in his actions would make this mo'olelo particularly difficult to set to Western prose without significantly altering the story. It also ends abruptly with no apparent moral or story line. Hawaiian mo'olelo do not contain morals to the story as we think of them in the Western sense.

The other interesting point which can be illustrated using examples of this same mo'olelo is the ethnographic information which comes out of going back to primary sources. Many secondary sources condense mo'olelo by leaving off what is considered superfluous details which unfortunately also contain the meat of the cultural information. An example of this can be seen with Beckwith's retelling of Fornander's version of the Maui mo'olelo.

While Maui is still unborn, some men out fishing see a handsome child diving from a high cliff into the sea, and they pursue. The child makes for home and returns to his mother's womb. Thus they know that a magician is to be born. (Beckwith: 1970:230)

The kind of fish the men were fishing for, the contents of the offering, and the note of the kapu against men entering the woman's hale kuku (house for tapa production) when her husband was not present, are all ethnographic details which were deleted. Unfortunately many authors only go to secondary sources and do not make a serious attempt to understand the Hawaiian concepts with which they are dealing.

The purer form of mo'olelo are good sources for learning more about the Hawaiian culture. A certain honesty comes through in the stories. They are

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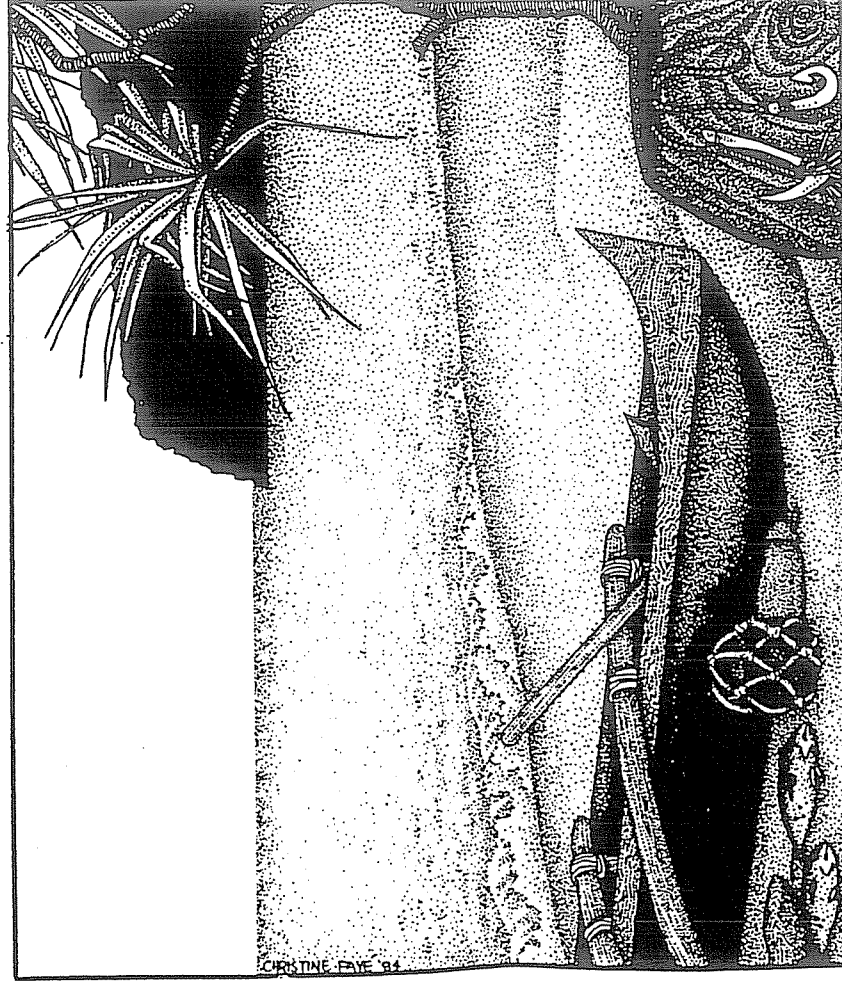
simply being told and no attempt is made to slant the information to emphasize the so-called “heathen” side of the Hawaiian culture before the coming of Christianity. Some of these early collections of mo'olelo, such as Fornander's, are told in the lyrical form of the oral tradition. The story simply is and no attempt is made to moralize.

The sexual stereotypes about women in ancient Hawai'i which we get in so many histories are often refuted by mo'olelo. We learn of women who were great athletes such as Kanewahineikloa who could surf and was “never wet by the surf” (Fornander: 1919:698), or Kelea who was “the most graceful and daring surf-swimmer in the Kingdom” (Kalakaua: 1888:231).

We also learn that some women were noted warriors. Kawahine who was Kahēkili's wife fought valiantly at his side during a battle in 1783 (Fornander: 1919:289). Manono, wife of Kekuokalani, fought and died next to her husband in 1819 (Kalakaua: 1888:299). Kanewahineikloa, men-

tioned above for her surfing skills, was also a great fighter who trained her husband in the art of warfare (Fornander: 1919:708).

Women could also be of higher rank than their husbands and would be exempt from some of the kapu which restricted most women. Kalanika'ioi'kilo was of pi'o rank (product of a high brother-sister marriage) and so sacred that even chiefs had to prostrate themselves before her. She was also allowed to climb about the heiau of greatest kapu, so high was her mana (Kamakau: 1961:260). Kamakau also writes of Keakamahana another pi'o ranked ali'i who was head of all the chiefs of Kona.



Pictures are from “Kauai Tales” by Frederick B. Wichman, illustrated by Christine Faye. Bamboo Ridge Press, 1985.

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A feature which many find hard to deal with is the concept of the akua having *kino lau* (many bodies). Hawaiians took note of the physical resemblances of plants, animals, and natural phenomena and developed a theory which encompassed these observations. An akua can have many bodies and may take the form of any of these at will. An example of *kino lau* can be seen in the mo'olelo of Kamapua'a, the pig man. His plant forms include olomea, hala, 'uhaloa, 'ama'uma'u ferns, and kukui. His other forms are a handsome man, a pua'a (pig), the humuhumu-nuku-nuku-a-pua'a fish, and the akua Lono. The concept of *kino lau* makes it difficult to accept, through the Western perspective, that Kamapua'a was a real warrior who lived on O'ahu. It is mana which takes his deeds into supernatural abilities.

There appear to have been no children's stories, as such, in Hawaiian society. When the *ha'i mo'olelo* or storyteller performed his or her art we know that they would go on for hours expounding to a group of mixed ages and sex. Because of the *kaona* (double meanings) in Hawaiian words, people would understand the mo'olelo on different levels depending on age and life experiences.

The early writers who put mo'olelo to paper succeeded to varying degrees. One of the most successful was Abraham Fornander who had come to Hawaii about twenty years after the missionaries arrived in 1820, married a Hawaiian woman, and learned to speak Hawaiian. Fornander enlisted the help of native Hawaiians such as Kepelimo, Kamakau, and Haleole to go into the community to collect from older Hawaiians who knew these mo'olelo. As Fornander was collecting in the mid-1800's, many of his informants had recollections of pre-Christian times.

Another person who compiled collections of mo'olelo in an effective way was Nathaniel Emerson. He was born in Wailua, O'ahu and though his parents were missionaries they encouraged his interest in things Hawaiian. Nathaniel was encouraged to play with Hawaiian children and to learn the Ha-

waiian language, which was not common for children in missionary families. His father, Rev. John S. Emerson, had adopted Hewanewa, the last great kahuna of Kamehameha, and brought him into the church. Though Hewanewa died shortly before Emerson was born, stories of him and the era of Kamehameha must have been often told in his youth. It is obvious in his writings that Emerson understood *kaona* (double meaning) and other subtle nuances of Hawaiian more than some of the other writers of his day.

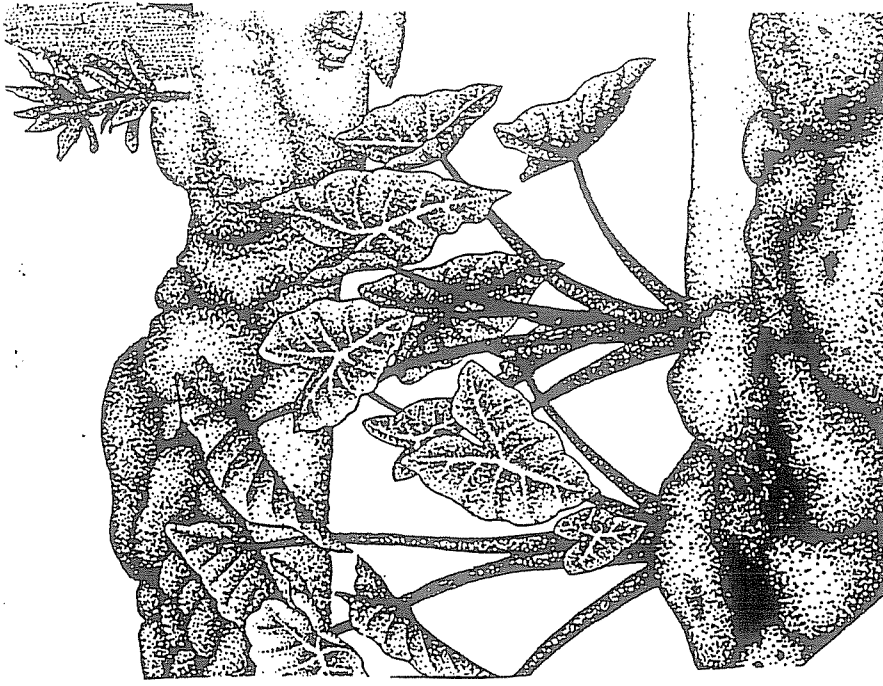
Other early writers were not as successful in capturing the true form of Hawaiian mo'olelo. It is said that Dr. William Westervelt, who first came to Hawaii in 1889 as an adult, opened his house to all scholars regardless of race. He was married to the daughter of a missionary and though he studied Hawaiian he seemed to have had a superficial understanding of the mo'olelo. His versions are heavily romanticized and written in the popular form of the day making them more palatable to Western readers.

There were two early Hawaiian newspapers, *Kū'oko'a* and *Ka Au'o ko'a*, which often published Hawaiian mo'olelo and these are rich with early Hawaiian writers. Kamakau, Nalhe, Haleole, and Kepelele are just a few who published in these papers.

Another factor which is important to consider, aside from the collector's linguistic abilities, was what island their information came from. Each island had varying versions of the same mo'olelo. There were generally differences not only between islands but sometimes in districts as well. The people of Hilo might have an entirely different name for a fish than the people of Kona, for example. Beckwith is a good resource for noting not only how stories changed from island to island, but also elsewhere in Polynesia.

Children's literature drawn from traditional mo'olelo provides an opportunity to instill pride in Hawaiian youth and understanding in all other ethnic groups of a culture which has left a rich legacy for mankind.

(Momi Naughton is a cultural anthropologist who specializes in traditional Hawaiian culture and oral history. A version of this essay was printed in the proceedings for "Literature and Hawaii's Children," a conference held in 1986 with major support from the Hawaii' Committee for the Humanities.)



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