

Polynesian Myth & Religion: How the Natives Interpreted Captain Cook

Kristopher Torres

The Polynesian culture is saturated with fascinating historical legends, both fictional and non-fictional. From the story of how Pele, the fire goddess, caused volcanoes to erupt, to how coconut trees originated from decapitated eels, Polynesian history is a mixture of factual knowledge and fantastical legend. The wonderment that these legends incite in all those that hear the tall tales can only be outdone by the amazement one feels when learning about the plethora of gods and goddesses that make up the Polynesian belief system. The gods of the Polynesian pantheon range in degrees of importance, from great gods, such as Tangaroa, Tu, and Lono, to local gods who were previously deified priests or chiefs of great renown. Worship of the gods involved sacrifices (including humans), chants and recitations, feastings (often with great prodigality), sexual orgies (to promote fertility), and elaborate rituals, often preceded by long fasting and abstinence. Although presently, these legends and ceremonies are simply acknowledged and respected as part of the rich cultural history, the tall tales and fantastic ritualistic practices were very real prior to European contact in the eighteenth century. It was here, in 1778, that the mystical world of Polynesian history collided with the "real" world of scientific navigation and British naval militarism, resulting in the death of one Captain James Cook.

Lono, Makahiki, and Cook's "Deification"

The death of Captain Cook is a factual historical event that has taken on a life akin to that of a mythical legend. Having been told and retold, the Legend of Captain Cook is one of the most, if not the most, fascinating stories in Polynesian history. The fascination of this story lies in the range of facets of Polynesian history that it touches on: Captain Cook's story includes ancient mythology/history (the legend of Paoa and Pili), ancient/modern ceremony (makahiki), and modern mythology/history (the actual Cook encounter, including the subsequent mythological synopses regarding the events that took place). The following encapsulates these facets and makes more explicit their meaning.

To begin with, the events that entail the celebration of makahiki have taken place for thousands of years. Four months out of the year, the Polynesian people peacefully gained power over their chiefs and participated in a ceremony reminiscent of the French "Mardi Gras". After these four months had expired, the chiefs ceremoniously regained power for the ensuing eight months of the year. As soon as the eight months had expired, the four-month ceremony of celebration ensued, and this was the Hawaiian yearly social cycle prior to the European invasion of the early eighteenth century.

The respected anthropologist Greg Dening encapsulates this relationship with the following analogy: "Native is to Stranger as Land is to Sea". Presently, this relationship only exists in theory as historical data, but prior to the European invasion of the eighteenth century, it dictated everyday living through a complex annual usurpation of power in which the power of the people supplanted that of the chiefs.

Before providing a description of the events that took place two centuries ago, a brief summary of the previous two millennium in respect to the Polynesian people is necessary:

"The Polynesians are those people who some 2 or 3 thousand years ago spread to all the islands of the Pacific through the great triangle that reached from Hawaii to New Zealand to Easter Island. . . . That was their cultural triumph. They had mastered the immense ocean. . . . In their different island worlds, the Polynesians developed separately, playing variations on their common cultural themes. They held in common, however, an understanding of themselves, expressed in the mythical opposition of 'native' and 'stranger'. They were native and stranger amongst themselves and to themselves. They saw themselves as made up of native, those born of the land of the islands, and stranger, those who had at some time come from a distant place." (Dening, 160).

The four-month period where the commoners regained power over the chiefs with usurped power, called *makahiki* (ma-tahiti), was a festive time where the ordinary was reversed. The commoners ruled the land and the god of the land, *Lono*, returned. *Lono* was greeted with great pomp and circumstance. Large memorials were constructed to honor him and people sang and danced in expectation of his arrival. Although he never showed up (Captain Cook was mistaken for him in 1778, but more on that later), the people continued to celebrate life. From November to February, peace and love reigned supreme, gender roles were reversed, and the Polynesian population immersed itself in a nonstop, four-month festival.

With astounding collective self-control, commoners would avoid the violence and civil unrest that would otherwise overpower a peaceful celebration such as this. The oral pact that was made within the Polynesian community that stated that no war was to be waged and no violence was to be displayed during these four months was amazingly respected. This astounding example of mass self-control speaks volumes concerning the Polynesian people. After four months were over, the chiefs returned, and so did "normalcy". The eight-month "normal" period in which the chiefs reacquired their power was called *Kapu* (taboo). This was a time of war and human sacrifice in order to please the gods. Fittingly, *Ku*, the ancestral deity of the strangers, took *Lono's* place as the appropriate god of worship. People reassumed their regular roles and life as usual continued... until the next November.

The annual cycle that was mentioned above speaks, as stated earlier, volumes about the Polynesian people. One could feasibly argue that this evidence shows that Polynesians are less violent than the rest of the world. Although the evidence for this hypothesis is substantial, it oversimplifies the entire traditional ceremony. The *makahiki* ceremony shows that the Polynesian people are extremely respectful and devoted to their historical traditions. As a people, they would rather die than behave in a manner that goes against their ancestors. Death is, in Polynesian religion, a transcending stage where the newly deceased are reunited with their ancestors. The stereotypical label of being "brave

soldiers" that is placed on the males of Samoa is not far from the truth. Death was not the end to life in the Polynesian belief system. Therefore to die honorably in battle would be a privilege. Rather than being an end, death was the beginning of a new life-- a reunion with prior lost loved ones and an eternal resting place where food and love was in abundance.

The Legend of Paa0: The Arrival of the Stranger

When we speak today of Polynesian culture, we are speaking of traditional cultural beliefs, ceremonies, and practices. That is, what the Polynesians were doing before European contact. Today the culture is a blend of these traditional ways with a heavy dose of European culture and a dash of Chinese. Virtually every cultural practice has been affected by colonization, but some of them are less altered than others and many remain an important part of Polynesian life despite the changes that have occurred.

Legends play an extremely immense role in Polynesian culture. They are part of the history and geography, and they are part and parcel of the connection between a family and its land. In present day Western culture, legends are stories that are deemed to be fabular; they are not considered to be either physically or historically accurate. But in traditional Polynesian culture, legends and history were intertwined until they were inseparable. Fantastic stories, with giant lizards and giant warriors, were considered to be legitimate history. Part of the explanation of this lies in the fact that Polynesians have never had a written record. All of their history has been oral. Therefore, having fantastic characters in a story makes it easier to remember and insures that it will be passed on from generation to generation.

Visitors to Polynesia will often be told various legends, but families closely guard the vast majority of the personal legends. These are the legends about particular areas or tracts of land that tie the family, via its ancestors, to the land that it owns. These legends are only told amongst the family, and even then, it is only a chosen few (usually one in each generation) that are allowed to hear and learn them. The following legend is the origin from where all other familial territory legends flow. It is the legend of Paa0 and Pili.

Paa0 and Pili were the founding fathers of the Polynesian government. *Paa0* is the founder of the high-priest family of Hawaii, and *Pili*, the ancestor of kings. In the eleventh century, *Paa0* and his elder brother *Lonopele* were engaged in an argument over stolen fruit. The argument got so heated that both *Paa0's* and *Lonopele's* sons were killed. Because *Lonopele* was the elder, and thus had more power, *Paa0* was forced to leave immediately. Paa0 traveled across the seas with his friends, his wife, and an astrologer to help them navigate the waters.

After the long journey, and when nearly out of provisions, the party of Paa0 and friends finally touched land at Hawaii. Paa0 and his company were greeted with open arms and Paa0 was pleasantly surprised that these "foreigners" spoke a language similar to his. He settled down in this environment and became high priest of Hawaii.