In 1819, as Liholiho (King Kamehameha II) walked to the table where the seated women were eating, he showed signs of the heavy drinking which had only delayed his decision. To openly sit and eat with the women was to violate the most profound level of the Hawaiian moral code, the 'ai kapu. Other kapu (tabu) respected royal rank or reflected chiefly whim; food proscriptions and the separation of the sexes while eating were consecrations to the gods which even the ali'i (chief) must obey. To break such a kapu was to demand either the death of the King or the destruction of the gods. Liholiho sat and ate. The next day he ordered the abolition of the kapu system and the desecration of the heiau (temples) and of the gods.

Although the action was Liholiho's, the initiative was not. Seated at that table had been the highest-ranking and most powerful women in the young Kingdom of Hawaii: Keopuolani, Liholiho's mother and most sacred of all the ali'i, and Ka'ahumanu, the self-proclaimed Kuhina Nui (Premier) of the Islands. It was the insistence and influence of both women which truly destroyed the kapu system. Later, they and the High Chiefesses Kapi'olani and Kina'u, among others, would be the major forces in the Christianization of the Kingdom.

The social transformation effected by these women has been compared to The Reformation. No aspect of native life and culture was left untouched. This profound cultural revolution was all the more remarkable when one considers the typical conclusion of Western commentary that, "Polynesia was a man's world and woman was not only inferior but dangerous to man."

The drama of the events of 1819 — Liholiho's drinking, the stresses resulting from nearly a half-century of Western contact, even the obvious personal strengths of Keopuolani and Ka'ahumanu — were recorded and are historically verified. History, however, cannot contradict culture. Events do not occur in cultural vacuums in defiance of fundamental values. Rather, they are a culmination of forces already present in the society:

"The real history of the human race is the history of tendencies which are perceived by the mind, and not of events which are discerned by the senses. It is on this account that no historical epoch will ever admit of that chronological precision familiar to antiquarians and genealogists. The death of a prince, the loss of a battle, and the change of a dynasty, are of the senses; and the moment in which they happen can be recorded by the most ordinary of observers. But those great intellectual revolutions upon which all other revolutions are based, cannot be measured by so simple a standard..."

How, then, could a generation of female Hawaiian ali'i be historically and culturally consistent if they were socially inferior and dangerous?

To trace the historical tendencies and cultural archetypes of these women and of native Hawaiian society is complicated by an oral tradition. Prior to Western re-discovery in 1778, modern notions of historical causation and a written language were unknown in the Islands. However, "... (Just as modern man proclaims himself a historical being, constituted by the whole history of humanity, so the man of archaic societies considers himself the end product of events that took place in illo tempore, at the beginning of Time."

If we suspend Poignant's judgment, then, we may examine the tendencies of what Mircea Eliade called, "sacred history." The records of sacred history are kept by mythology and stored in memory.
Mythology

Mythology is more than history alone, it is a distillation of world-view and the touchstone of a people's social and self worth. As noted by Susanne K. Langer:

"... at its best, (mythology) is the recognition of natural conflicts, of human desires frustrated by non-human powers, hostile oppression, birth, passion, and defeated by death which is man's common fate. Its ultimate end is not wishful distortion of the world, but serious envisagement of its fundamental truths; moral orientation, not escape.

A brief description of pre-Western Hawaiian society is also appropriate to gain access to this "moral orientation," particularly as it affected royal women.

Hawaiian culture was ordered and maintained by the kapu system, a complex moral code which determined rank at birth and described all of nature and man within strict relationships of respect and forbidden actions. Central to this system was a belief in the divinity of the ali'i as earthly but not separate from the gods. Royal rank among the ali'i was set by the degree of mana (sacred power) transmitted by blood-lines which merged with those of the gods. Genealogies which traced family lines back to Creation preserved the sources of mana.

This mana was inherited from both parents, and the genealogies named both mother and father. In addition, because birth-order also affected mana, a first-born daughter would have been more sacred than her younger brother. This view of mana coming from and residing in male and female ali'i without some automatic assertion of male superiority deeply affected the philosophical and physical realities of the Hawaiian.

We have only to contrast the Biblical "Genesis" with the Hawaiians' Kumulipo to gain some insight into the radically different attitude which they had toward women.

Kumulipo: A Hawaiian Creation Chant

The Kumulipo, sacred cosmology and genealogy of the Hawaii-island ali'i, detailed an erotic and sexually-complementary universe. As with the genealogy, all of Creation was named by parent-pairs as a balancing of life-forms and forces: for each land creature or plant, there was a corresponding sea-form or winged animal. This biological coordination was also maintained in the creation of human life:

"Tranquil was the time when men multiplied
Calm like the time when men came from afar
It was called Calmness (La'ila'i) then
Born was La'ila'i a woman
Born was Ki'i a man
Born was Kane a god
Born was Kanaloa the hot-striking octopus
It was day.

Not only was the woman named first, but she was synonymous with the waiting readiness which preceded the dawn of day and of birth. Thus, the Hawaiian notion of Creation was cast as a metaphor for pregnancy. Rather than the lonely act of will described by the Bible when God the Father created Adam as the first man and then transformed one of his ribs into the woman, Eve, the Kumulipo paralleled the darkness and development of gestation and biological birth.

Further, a part of the richness of the Kumulipo, and a conscious literary device common in Hawaiian literature, was the kaona, a symbolic layering of meaning maintained consistently throughout the work. In this way, the Kumulipo was also a description of the physical development and lineage of a particular royal child.

This intertwining of the divine/human nature of all creation reenforced the image and role of women as physically and theologically carrying out life and giving birth.

The sexual freedom and independence of Hawaiian ali'i women was also implicit in this Creation. For if the mother also conferred mana and rank, then children were not dependent on the power and prestige of the father alone. Hawaiians had no notion of illegitimacy.

The retelling of the first romantic triangle in the Kumulipo, therefore focused on the jealousy generated by the ranking of the children and not the sexual activities of the mother, La'ila'i:

"Kane was angry and jealous because he slept last with her
His descendants would hence belong to the younger line
The children of the elder would be lord
First through La'ila'i, first through Ki'i."

There would be no disruption in the transfer of power or rank between generations: birth-order and the rank of La'ila'i assured succession. The patriarchal genealogy of "Genesis" lists the fourteen generations between Adam and Noah only by the names of father and oldest son; by contrast, over thirty generations in the Kumulipo
also name the mother and appropriate daughters.

Incest: Sacred Power Sustained

Another consequence of the shared matrilineal/patrilineal sources of mana and rank was the desirability, if not necessity, of incest. Mana could be lost. Unless both lines contributed to this sacred power, it would be depleted and finally exhausted. On the other hand, the combined resources of mana could be stronger and more sacred in the child than in either of the parents. The children of brother-sister marriages were the most sacred.

A continuing difficulty within this system of sexual freedom and encouraged incest, however, was a match between father and daughter. Although such a union was not kapu, the ranking of children was complicated by generational lags. More immediately, the physical proximity of the three partners generated domestic problems.

Such a father-daughter union was the origin of the kapu which affected only women. As related by the Kumulipo, Wakea desired his daughter. Not wanting to anger his wife, Papa, Wakea declared new consecrations to the gods which provided him with the excuse and opportunity for meeting with his daughter:

"Papa lived with Wakea
Born was the woman Ha'alolo
Born was jealousy, anger
Papa was deceived by Wakea
He ordered the sun, the moon
The night to Kane for the younger
The night to Hilo for the first born
Taboo was the house platform, the place for sitting
Taboo was the house where Wakea lived
Taboo was intercourse with the divine parent
Taboo the taro plant, the acrid one
Taboo the poisonous akia plant
Taboo the narcotic auhuhu plant
Taboo the medicinal uhaloa
Taboo the bitter part of the taro plant..."

Curiously, the mythological rendering of these new kapu which so altered the role and behavior of women did not assume female weakness or wrongdoing. Wakea's deceit was the explicit motive for the kapu. Perhaps nowhere else in Hawaiian mythology is the richness of possible meaning so frustrating.

One authority, Johannes C. Andersen, interpreted this myth literally: "He (Wakea) changed the religious and social institutions of his people, not, apparently, because he was a reformer, but because they interfered with a love he had conceived for his daughter..." The enormity of this social change, as with its abolition, requires greater explanation than that it "simply happened."

By these kapu, women were excluded from the luakini heiau, the temples where councils about the most important political and religious decisions were conducted. They were to sleep separate from the men during menstruation and after giving birth. Certain foods were restricted and women were to eat apart.

Martha Warren Beckwith, both in her commentary on the Kumulipo and in Hawaiian Mythology, offers several possible interpretations. The most convincing is that this episode marked a power struggle between the ali'i and kahuna (priest) classes. Whether such a conflict occurred because of religious differences introduced by a new wave of Polynesian immigrants, the increase of the power of the kahuna occasioned by the development of a lunar calendar, or resistance to polygamy — we can never know. What is clear is the emotional ambiguity in response to these kapu. Consistent with this ambiguity, it was Wakea who was punished. The child born of his daughter evidently turned against Wakea:

"Born was the cock, perched on Wakea's back
The cock scratched the back of Wakea
Wakea was jealous, tried to brush it away
Wakea was jealous, vexed and annoyed
Thrust away the cock and it flew to the ridgepole
The cock was on the ridgepole
The cock was lord..."

The tremendous social disruption attributed to Wakea's actions and other myths which record what seems to be generations of strife indicates some unknown upheaval for which the culture was unprepared.

Because the kapu were consecrations to the gods there were no cultural means of undoing them. Such strictures were inviolate; their abrogation was the negation of the gods.

Although curtailed, women were not given the onus of guilt or sin which, for example, accompanied Eve's eating of the forbidden apple. Hawaiian royal women were not psychologically demeaned by mythological design.

An important variation on this theme occurred in the story of Kane and Hina. In this instance, the god Kane created Hina but did not tell her that
he was her father. As she became a woman, Kane fell in love with and slept with her.

When Hina later learned that Kane had lied when he denied knowing who her father was, she fled to the underworld as a self-exile.

The importance of accurate genealogies to every facet of Hawaiian life cannot be over-emphasized. Honesty in acknowledging intimate and familial relationships was the fundamental sense of responsibility which guaranteed the social order of the culture. Hina’s reaction, therefore, was not revulsion over the incestuous nature of the relationship; she and her children had been fundamentally betrayed by Kane's deceit.

Although Kane tried to follow Hina, he was stopped by the spirits of the nether regions. (Roughly comparable to Greek and Roman ideas of an underworld, this other world was in no way equivalent to a Christian Hell. Punishment did not continue beyond death. The worst that could happen to a Hawaiian soul was to be lost between the two worlds.)

Lonely in the underworld, Hina took some of her children to live with her. As elaborated by the Maui epic, Hina was then seen as the source of human mortality.

Justifiably famous for his audacity and fast wit, Maui determined to outwit Hina and restore his immortality:

"When the war party saw Great Hina stretched out asleep, they were terrified; but Maui told them not to be afraid, that soon they would see a sight which would make them laugh. However, he warned them, they must control their mirth, for fear of waking up Hina. He whispered to them that to kill the goddess he intended to crawl between her thighs into her body and come out at her mouth. Thus, he would be immortal and she would die. . . ."

"The hushed birds watched him crawl between Great Hina's thighs and disappear until only his legs stuck out. It was a funny sight. Water Wagtail sucked in his cheeks and danced about trying not to laugh, but one clear rippling giggle rang out. The goddess awoke with a start, squeezed her legs together, and crushed Maui." 13

The obvious humor of this story was consistent with the role of Maui in Hawaiian mythology. Although he was reminiscent of Prometheus, whatever benefits he gained for men were incidental to his own need to challenge the gods. Maui was explicitly lawless and a disrupter of the sacred cosmic order. It was death that was natural. Maui was absurd and literally wrong-headed.

To attribute human mortality to Hina was not as onerous as our culture would assume. The roles played by Kane and Maui — as with Wakea — represented the initial and crucial wrongdoing. Again, what might be interpreted as a serious condemnation of a woman's role was mitigated.

Hina, further, was a goddess of many aliases. A central figure in a variety of stories loosely unified only by her presence, Hina ultimately emerged as the Moon Goddess:

"A little contemplation shows quite clearly why the moon is so apt a feminine symbol, and why its meanings are so diverse that it may represent many women at once — Hina in many, often incompatible forms, mother and maid and crone, young and old. The eternal regularities of nature, the heavenly motions, the alternation of night and day on earth, the tides of the ocean, are the most insistent, repetitious forms outside our own behavior patterns. . . . They are the most obvious metaphors to convey the dawning concepts of life functions — birth, growth, decadence, and death. . . ." 13

For an island people, especially, the giving and taking of life as a rhythmic female/lunar cycle would have been natural. Survival depended on lunar patterns, whether sailing, fishing or human conception.

Other mythic relationships in the Hawaiian moral orientation to women, however, are not such "obvious metaphors." The body of written Hawaiian mythology may be seriously flawed by the conscious incorporation of Christian thought. The Maui-island counterpart of the Kumulipo, for example, was probably manipulated by early native sources to reflect "Genesis:"

". . . (t)he gods seeing the man without a wife, descended on earth, put him into a sleep, took out one of his ribs (lalo puhaka) and made it into a woman. . . ." 14

Fortunately, this distortion of the Kumuhonua may be explicitly contrasted to the sense and structure of the Kumulipo. The literature which was sacred to the Hawaii-island ali'i and the Kamehameha line was kept secret until late in the 19th century. The Biblicizing of Hawaiian mythology, then, was another source which often dramatically colored what we sometimes assume to be the native concept of a woman's role.
As might be expected, the most uniquely Hawaiian legend which showed women in a fundamentally different manner than that encountered in European mythologies was an epic from Hawaii-island. The women of Hi'iaka have no counterparts in Western tradition.

**Pele and Hi'iaka**

Pele personified the powerful and often capricious nature of the gods. She was the existential dilemma at the heart of all religion. Human efforts to please the gods can only hope to placate; the gods can never be controlled.

Hi'iaka was an almost singular example of the best in human qualities. She displayed the strength and courage usually regarded as masculine in Western culture, and the loyalty and depth of affection traditionally seen as a feminine virtue.

As recounted in legend, a competition between these two forces had dramatic consequences. Pele had traveled to Kauai in dream and fallen in love with Prince Lohi'au. Because of her volcanic nature, she was unable to leave the fire-pit of Kilauea — except as a spirit — thus, when she wished to bring Lohi'au to her island of Hawaii, it was impossible for her to do so.

Mistrusted by her family and all who knew her, finding someone else to fulfill her quest was not easy. Hi'iaka, the most devoted of Pele's sisters, agreed to the mission. But even Hi'iaka demanded a condition: Pele had to promise to protect Hi'iaka's beloved lehua groves and best friend.

The scope and nature of the challenges encountered by Hi'iaka on her odyssey are unparalleled in Western epic. Endowed with supernatural powers and confronted by dimensions of spiritual reality, she surpassed the heroic feats of Ulysses.

Pele's jealousy of her sister's beauty and the possibility of losing Lohi'au to Hi'iaka overcame the goddess. She erupted, destroying the lehua forest and killing Hi'iaka's friend. Pele's anger was unjustified. Hi'iaka sensed what had happened, but resolved to keep faith with her sacred sister.

It was only when Hi'iaka reached the island of Hawaii — having matched wits and strength with spirits, the mo'o (similar to dragons), and the elements — did she waver in her loyalty. Seeing the ashes of her lehua, she gave in to her anger and the love which had grown for Lohi'au. She defied Pele and embraced Lohi'au. Although Hi'iaka's action may be understandable — even justified — she had violated a sacred relationship. In response, Pele ordered the death of the Prince.

This myth and its rich expression of conflicting loves has appeal to a modern audience. The emotions described are timeless and appear in every culture. However, the quarrel between the sisters had cosmic implications. Few societies would render such a struggle between two women. So intense was the resulting battle that the other gods intervened and begged the sisters to come to a truce. Lohi'au was returned to Hi'iaka and peace was restored to the heavens and earth.

Much of the richness of this epic for its original audience, however, was the wealth of geographical detail and the intimate knowledge of each of the islands visited by Hi'iaka. Such lore, even when explained by copious footnotes, mean little to us. As noted by Emerson:

"The local allusions, the point of view, the atmosphere that were in the minds of the savage are not in our minds today, and will not again be in any mind on earth..." 16

Emerson was primarily concerned with the aesthetics of appreciation. He was acknowledging a much greater loss: the mind and culture which gave and took life from this mythology seemed, in 1915, to be dead. Certainly, Christianization, the overthrow of the Kingdom, and the decline of the native population indicated cultural death.

**Cultural Continuity: Conclusion**

But, as with the periodic declarations that "God is dead," standards of behavior continue even when their assumed source is rejected. The vitality of a culture is often its ability to rework its mythological symbols into dynamic new patterns. Continuity is the drawing together of historical and contemporary values in a common symbol with new levels of meaning.

Clearly, the role and function of these women in Hawaiian mythology and their historical counterparts showed strength, dignity, and forcefulness.

Further, when their roles are re-examined there is reason to question the glib judgment that "Polynesia was a man's world and woman was not only inferior but dangerous to man." As with other conclusions about the Hawaiian culture, that judgment may have relied too heavily on Western cultural assumptions.

The full participation which Hawaiian women of royal rank sought in 1819, would not have been a violation of their own culture. The imposition of
A comb-crested image of the goddess Pele. From Oceanic Mythology, Roslyn Poignant, p.50.

A young Hawaiian woman, drawn by J. Webber during Captain Cook's third voyage. She represented a young Polynesian woman, of the kind associated with the stories about Hina. From Oceanic Mythology, Roslyn Poignant, p. 67.
Western values on the mythology, however, is only symptomatic of their greater imposition on the entire culture. As Andersen concluded:

"... (t)he missionaries who came to Hawaii in March of 1820 found a people ready for a new teaching; but they presented Christianity as a severe, harsh religion; not one of dignity, tenderness, and beauty; a religion rather of the Old Testament than of the New; and they introduced a *tapu* system more stringent and more intolerable than the one they [sic] abolished..." 16

After their conversion to Christianity in the first-quarter of the nineteenth century, Hawaiians called their recent past "the days of dark hearts." Missionaries thought this description referred to the former paganism. The darkness was far deeper and more inclusive.

The forty years which separated Cook's re-discovery of the Islands and the coming of American missionaries were devastating. Western diseases reduced the native population from an estimated 400,000 to 100,000. A generation of ali'i died or were killed during Kamehameha the Great's war of unification. Syphilis and gonorrhea affected fertility and birthrates. The combined onslaught of physical and spiritual disruption literally robbed the Hawaiian of his will to live, the so-called "oku'u phenomenon." (From the expression: *Na kanaka oku'u wale aku no i kau 'uhane;* The people dismissed freely their souls and died.) 17

The Hawaiians of the nineteenth century did not fail to rework their mythological symbols; they simply died trying.

Perhaps out of the present convergence of renewed interest in the Hawaiian experience and in the role of women, the once-failed recasting of social values will occur. Assurances of cultural continuity are not a need unique to Hawaiians.

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Footnotes


Linda Delaney Casey received her B.A. in Liberal Studies at the University of Hawaii. Being one-eighth Hawaiian, she considers herself a "fractionated American." Her primary academic interest is the history of Hawaii.