

THE SPIRIT OF 'OHANA AND THE POLYNESIAN VOYAGERS

by Cecilia Kapua Lindo

The 'ohana (family) of old made it possible for the Polynesian voyagers to venture forth to unknown lands. This seafaring 'ohana was able to travel thousands of miles on double-hulled canoes because it was in touch with nature and the gods. The 'ohana felt safe because there were no barriers between the spiritual and cultural world. The Hawaiian was never separated from his makers and ancestors because the gods and demi-gods showed themselves everywhere; in the sky, in the earth, and in the sea. They could move from one realm to another.

"Every cloud, rainstorm, lightning flash, ti plant, and maile vine was a body form of Kāne. Rainclouds, rain, lush ferns, āholehole fish and certain types of seaweed revealed the god Lono. The god Kanaloa was represented by the deep ocean depths by squid, octopus and certain kinds of seashells."¹ Kū was god of culture and of war. Every rock, waterfall and natural feature had a name and explanation as to its origin, just like the Hawaiian race.

The Hawaiians had their own mystical and ancestral roots. According to tradition the Hawaiian Islands and its people were born of the spirit world. The honored genealogies of the Hawaiians do not stem from Adam and Eve but from Papa and Wākea. Wākea was the first man and the ancestor of the Polynesians. Hāloa, son of Wākea was born a shapeless mass and was buried beside Wākea's home. A taro plant grew in this spot. The ancients believed that the progenitors of the Hawaiians came from this mystic man called Hāloa. The word Hāloa means long stem, which represents the long stem of the taro plant.

The word 'ohana comes from the 'oha, or corm of the taro plant. The taro plant links the Ha-

waiians to the origin of their people. Is it any wonder, since taro was, and still is, the staff of life for the Hawaiian people?

The ancient Hawaiians not only used taro corm, stems and leaves as food, but they also used various parts of the plant as medicine. The leaf stalk was rubbed on insect bites to take away the sting. The juice of the stalk, blended with sugar or coconut milk, was drunk to reduce fever, cut root stopped bleeding, and thickened poi was applied as a poultice to infected sores.

Since there were 84 types of taro, some varieties were offered to Hawaiian gods, others were kapu (sacred) to the ali'i (royalty), but there were enough varieties to make poi the mainstay of the Hawaiian diet. Varieties of taro could be identified by the color of the corm—green, red, white, gray, rose and purple.

Taro was not native to Hawai'i. The first written records of taro came from China, 200 years before Christ. It was also recorded in Egypt, 23 B.C. The first Polynesian voyagers who settled in Hawai'i probably carried taro plants on their double-hulled canoes. Records show that some taro patches in Hawai'i have been under cultivation for over 100 years.

Hawaiians believed that 'oha, or taro corm, was the "root of origin." It did not matter how many offshoots came from the 'oha. In Hawaiian terms regardless of how distantly people were related, they were still all brothers and sisters. Even if they were 14th or 16th cousins, their roots were from the 'oha so they were 'ohana. The 'ohana included parents, grandparents, children, ties of blood and non-related persons and immortals like the 'aumakua, or family god. The 'ohana in nearly every sense were those adopted in friendship. A loved, non-related child could be made a ho'okama (son or daughter adopted in friendship).

¹William Pila Kikuchi, "Heritage of Kaua'i," *The Native Hawaiian*, February 1979, Vol. III, No. 4, page 4.

Members of the 'ohana, like taro shoots, were all from the same root. Taro gave the Hawaiian poi, and poi was god given, like the 'ohana. *Pule* (prayer) was important in the 'ohana. This helped to prevent unhappiness. *Pule* was so much a part of the 'ohana that to this day, the word 'ohana is often used to mean *pule 'ohana* (family prayer).

Affection and warmth were the values of the 'ohana. Hawaiians believed it was important to keep lines of communication open. Members of the 'ohana did not strain feelings by forcing other members to conform. In the 'ohana there was a sense of shared involvement, mutual responsibility, interdependence and helpfulness. The 'ohana meant love and loyalty. All its members practiced the spirit of sharing and caring. Forgiveness was very important. There was great respect for the elders.

Members of the 'ohana knew that life was interconnected. The 'ohana who farmed depended on the 'ohana that fished. Each depended on the other for survival.

The *maka'āinana* (commoner) lived on the 'āina (land) of the *ali'i*. The *ali'i* knew they could not survive without the *maka'āinana*, upon whom they depended for food and well-being. If an *ali'i* treated his tenant unfairly, the tenant could leave and become a tenant of another *ali'i*. There was an old Hawaiian prov-

erb that said, "You are a chief because of your people." The 'āina did not belong to the chief; he was caretaker of the land that belonged to the gods.

The beliefs of the ancient 'ohana corresponded with the view of the relationship between man and nature. And it really made good sense. If you look back to *Hōkūle'a* and its origin, interdependency was the key to the canoe's success. Herb Kawainui Kane, Dr. Ben R. Finney and Charles Tommy Holmes founded the Polynesian Voyaging Society, but they had to rely on hundreds of people and resources to make *Hōkūle'a* a reality.

We can learn from the ancient 'ohana, who practiced the art of dealing with people and understanding feelings. In other words they practiced the spirit of aloha. The Hawaiians constantly gave thanks to their gods and to nature. They were grateful even for the tiny 'elepaio bird (flycatcher) which they considered a deity, because the bird helped them select good trees for their canoes. If the 'elepaio pecked at a tree trunk, they knew that the tree had worms and would not be good for a canoe. They considered the 'elepaio a canoe goddess and called her *Lea*.

We can learn meaningful and beautiful lessons from the ancient 'ohana.