

How Legends Were Taught

by M. K. Pukui

Hawaiians regarded the lore of their ancestors as sacred and guarded it jealously. Such subjects were not talked about lightly nor too freely. Those who were versed in poetry (mele), story telling (ha'i kaa), genealogy (mookuauhau) and oratory (kakaolelo) found themselves in the courts of the chiefs. Before tellers of stories would relate the tales of the gods or of the chiefs who ranked next to the gods in sacredness, they first took note of whom they were relating the stories to and the significance of the occasion. A person who was likely to repeat all he heard was not trusted and so he did not learn very much.

Grandparents who were versed in the lore of their people and their homeland picked out the grandchildren with the most retentive minds to teach. Should a young person wish to learn from an old one other than his own grandparent, he asked permission to become a pupil and if accepted, became a member of that household. There had to be quiet during story telling period so that the mind would not be distracted. Strict attention had to be paid to every word of the narrative. No unnecessary movement was permitted except to change the sitting position when uncomfortable. The call of nature must be attended to before the story telling began, for it was kapu to attend to such matters in the middle of a tale. Tales learned were not repeated casually without thinking to whom and where one spoke. Ghost stories and tales of spirits or the dead were not related after nightfall as the things talked about were often attracted to the place.

My first stories were learned from my grandmother, who told them as she rolled her lauhala into big rolls to be used later for mats. Sometimes I sat on the center of the roll as it grew as large as a cart wheel. The stories were told when no others were around. After two or three nights had passed, she would have me re-tell them to her. Every now and then she would grunt to let me know that she was listening carefully as I went on. When I made a mistake she would say, gently, "Aole me ia, me neia" (Not that way, it is this way) and then she would repeat

that part so that I would learn it correctly. It didn't matter whether it was told interestingly, but it did matter that it be told correctly. Then another tale would be told with a very short chant and then I learned the chant by reciting it back to her during our story telling period. Too bad that she did not live until I reached womanhood, for she had a fund of interesting tales.

All of those I knew in her generation, grunted as they listened to stories, not like the grunting of a pig but a sound like "m-m." A grunt of disgust had an inflection of its own in an "uhuhu", with a nasal sound and somewhat drawn out at the end. These grunting sounds are not heard any more except from the very few old people that remain. It was at the old Lunalilo Home that I heard the interested grunting once more after leaving Kau.

When Dr. Handy, Mrs. Handy and I were in Hawaii in 1935, we found several informants of the old school. They were not too eager to impart information until they knew what we wanted and what we planned to do. My old relative, Keliihue Kamali, in Kau refused to say a word in the presence of old friends and neighbors. It was not their right to listen and then perhaps repeat. And so we three worked together by ourselves, Keliihue related what she knew, it was my business to listen and Dr. Handy's business to write what I interpreted for him from the Hawaiian of Keliihue. If there were others around, she would plead ignorance and talk about the weather, or the doings of her little great-grandson. Having lived with my grandmother in my early childhood I knew enough to save my questions until "All was still on the plain; not even an owl hooted" (Ua malu ke kula aohe ke'u pueo), as the old saying goes.

In Hamakua we met a fine old lady who listened very carefully to us but had nothing to say. When she talked, it was about the trees in her yard, the Filipinos and so on; nothing of any particular interest to us. Suddenly she said to me, "My brother was given a very peculiar name, Kuapuu-hele-i-ke-alo-o-na-alii (Hunchback-who-went-before-the-faces-of-chiefs). Do you know what that means?"

By the suddenness of her question, I knew that she was trying the ho'opapa to find out how much folklore I knew. The ho'opapa was a form of riddling or asking questions as a "feeler", to see whether the other person knew the answer or not. I merely pointed to my throat and smiled. "You do know the answer," she said to me quietly. The "hunch back" meant the ivory pendant of the neck ornament of the chiefs. After an hour had elapsed, she said, "Curious people have come here to ask for my genealogy. My father told me that we were of Kahiki-alealea and to say nothing more. Do you know where that is?" I knew and answered, "In the western part of this island. Your ancestors were chiefs in Kona." She then told me how Rev. Thurston sent her grandfather and granduncle to the Lahainaluna School and from then on they lived on Maui. Her father was born on Maui and was an expert with herb remedies. She was her father's constant companion and went everywhere he did. She said, "Idle curiosity did not bring you here. Tomorrow I will take you to Waipio Valley and point out na wahi pana, the places of interest." I knew some of the stories but there were many more that I did not.

Looking down into the valley, one could picture the scout at the top of the pali that divided Waipio from Waimanu, looking far out at sea for approaching canoes. Should one be seen, a signal was given to a watcher below who notified the kahuna of the heiau of Pakaalana. The kahuna would then pick up a young pig that was always kept near at hand and ran with it toward the heiau. When almost near the pig was released and the kahuna stood praying and watching the actions of the pig. Should it run to a certain stone there and start to root, it meant that the approaching canoe contained a war party. A conch shell was blown, with the signal that a war canoe was coming, and before long the shore was covered with men armed with spears. Should the pig lay its head upon the stone, the canoe belonged to people who were coming to visit and a welcome feast was made ready as soon as the people were notified by the blowing of the conch shell.

She told of the steep trail of the kahuna at the head of the valley where

boys in training for the priesthood were made to climb after completing a course. Should he show some fear, he was not ready to go on but must re-study, for a kahuna must learn to be fearless even at the cost of his life.

This Hawaiian woman and I spent several hours alone together at Waipio.

That evening she told other stories, stories of healing with herbs, of Pahua, of the pet parrot of Kamehameha V, and many others. The family had assembled then to listen. Then a member of the family spoke to another. The old lady said indignantly, "Daughter, story telling is not a game. If you want to learn, listen. I don't have to tell what I know." That was the teaching of the old school, to close the mouth and open the ears.

A young woman was once learning to be a genealogist. She was of noble blood, as genealogists should be. Commoners were not trained to memorize and recite the genealogy of the chiefs. She had a habit of memorizing aloud and was often heard to recite portions outside of the school which were picked up by some of her hearers. When the teacher (kumu) heard of it, he watched to see if it was so. He saw her busily memorizing her lesson of the day audibly and so she was never permitted to finish her course. Genealogists learned not only the names and family connections but also the genealogical chants and the stories of each chief and chiefess; where he was born, what he did and all about him.

For each family there were the stories of the 'aumakua that belonged to that family. These were learned too, as in them were revealed the reasons why certain things were kapu. Certain fish, sea creatures or birds might cause sickness or death when touched or eaten. Such stories were not discussed outside of the family unless the person to whom it was told was trusted not to repeat. To talk too freely was said to kaula'i na iwi o kupuna i ka la (dry out the bones of the ancestors in the sun). Bones were hidden things, not brought out for all to stare at.

Stories of places, na wahi pana, were freely discussed. It was a matter of pride to the people of a locality to have many places of interest to point out to

a visitor and to know the legends connected with each one. The more noted places there were, the greater the pride of the inhabitants who knew, loved and named even the rocks and trees. With the march of time and civilization, many legendary rocks were ground or blasted for modern highways - many house foundations or paepae removed for modern stone lanai posts, new names given to old places and the old tales forgotten. New tales are created which sound interesting but not authentic.

Legends were partly told and partly chanted. Dialogue in chants was called paha and was found in many of the old hero tales. The chants of the Pele and Hiiaka legend were called kau. No long legend was complete without the recitation of chants.

Chants for chiefs and favorite children could not always be understood without some knowledge of the legends and figurative sayings.

A person well versed in all three, story telling, poetry and figurative sayings found himself a favorite of his chief. Especially if the figurative sayings ('olelo ho'oka'au) were humorous (ho'omake 'aka) and amused the hearers. One versed in both history and legends was said to be pa'a mo'olelo.