

GROWING ALOHA 'AINA: Taro as the Symbol of Hawaiian Identity

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Abstract: In the period following its annexation by the United States a cultural movement emerged across Hawaii referred to as the Hawaii Renaissance. Overtime the culturally specific Hawaiian notion of aloha 'aina, or “love of the land”, became a central message driving this movement. By using aloha 'aina as a fundamental principle, supporters and activists increasingly relied upon indigenous traditions pertaining to spirituality, ancestral heritage and linkages to the environment, as interconnected forms of cultural resistance to western influence. This research examines how taro farming, both as an agricultural product and a cultural idea, functions as tangible symbol of aloha 'aina, and by doing so serves as a critical symbol of Hawaiian cultural identity. The plants traditional uses, cultivation methods, and its cultural meanings, as well as its intersectional cultural linkages to the concept of aloha 'aina, are explored. By examining taro cultivation through this lens and focusing on its linkages to various elements of traditional culture, this research provides insight to the cultural and political narratives of resistance within marginalized indigenous groups such as the Native Hawaiians.

Keywords: Hawaii, indigenous identity, social movements, environmental sustainability, ethnicity

INTRODUCTION

“Food is everything we are. It's an extension of nationalist feeling, ethnic feeling, your personal history, your province, your region, your tribe, your grandma. It's inseparable from those from the get-go.”
-Anthony Bourdain.

Following the 1959 annexation by the United States, the Hawaiian Islands witnessed the evolution of a resurgent cultural identity movement. This cultural movement, which increasingly expressed an anti-colonial stance by drawing on traditional kanaka maoli, or Native Hawaiian, culture, eventually became known the Hawaiian Renaissance (Low 2019; Chang, Winter, and Lincoln 2019). Hawaiian fervour for using their own indigenous culture to resist outside influence was not new, yet this movement varied from earlier indigenous resistance efforts in two ways. First, it was more politically aligned with other activist movements evolving across the continental U.S. and elsewhere around the world, such as the Black Power and Red Power movements, the anti-nuclear independence struggles throughout the South Pacific, and international networks in Asia and at the United Nations, (Trask 1987; Anderson 1996; Goodyear-Kaapua, Hussey, and Wright 2014; Low 2016; Massri, Bergin, and Burke 2022). Second, while the organizing principles underlying the Hawaiian Renaissance were tethered to a broad expression of Hawaiian identity, this new phase of Hawaiian cultural resistance incorporated more of an explicit

environmental message than ever before (Gon and Winter 2019).

The environmental emphasis within the Hawaiian Renaissance partially stems from an event in 1971 that provided a major spark to the movement, when a group of indigenous farmers were displaced from their homes by the Bishop Estate to make way for a modern residential development (Trask 1987; Milner 2006). As movement supporters were drawn to action in support of these farmers, the unifying message of their protest became enveloped within the uniquely Hawaiian cultural notion of *aloha 'āina*, or love of the land. This cultural concept incorporates multiple interlocking dimensions, and by doing so intimately connects Hawaiians to the spiritual and agricultural dimensions of their indigenous heritage in several ways. Haunani-Kay Trask (1987) traced the evolution of the Hawaiian Renaissance and observed that “by 1980, the larger struggle for native Hawaiian autonomy had changed from English to Hawaiian.” This shift in language and tone, encouraged by an emphasis on the notion of *aloha 'āina*, ultimately confirmed that the Hawaiian people, their spirituality, their collective ancestral identity, their physical environment, and their pursuit for national sovereignty, were and are inextricably linked.

This research endeavor represents a single component of a larger project that focuses on sociocultural and geographical linkages between the concept *aloha 'āina*, the Hawaiian Renaissance, and

other globalized social movements. In this paper, we explore the various ways in which taro production, both as an agricultural process and a cultural idea, serves as the most vivid expression of the intersectional nature of *aloha 'āina*. It is our contention that due to its symbolic and ecocultural links to *aloha 'āina*, taro has emerged as the critical symbol of indigenous Hawaiian identity in the postcolonial era.

The following section of this paper briefly summarizes the meanings behind *aloha 'aina* and connects taro to this concept by describing the significant role it has played in Hawaii, both as a food source and a cultural mainstay. This is followed by a separate section that is presented via four sub-sections, each focusing a specific facet of taro, ranging from the methods from which it is produced and managed, to the cultural meanings ascribed to the crop. These different facets of taro, much like the various dimensions of *aloha 'aina* to which they symbolize, do not really function independently of one another. In the Hawaiian context, fully understanding one facet necessitates understanding the others. However, here they are introduced here as discrete sub-sections to assist with the clarity of presentation. The final section of the paper offers concluding remarks.

1 THE MEANING OF ALOHA 'AINA AND THE CULTURAL RELEVANCE OF KALO

Aloha 'aina is perhaps the most the central idea informing and binding the critical aspects of Native Hawaiian cultural identity, including their cosmology, spirituality, ancestral heritage, as well as the traditional indigenous approach to day-to-day life. This cultural notion, by encompassing both ecological and social connections, and by confirming the mutuality of the Hawaiian people and the land they call home, evokes a strong sense of place for Hawaiians (Osorio 2001; Silva 2006; Clark 2005). *Aloha 'aina* connects Hawaiians to their home.

To understand taro as a symbol of *aloha 'aina*, and therefore to understand its role as a symbol of cultural resistance, it is requisite to understand why taro means anything at all to the Hawaiian community. Taro as a food source is not exclusive to Hawaii, yet nowhere else in the world is it as revered and fundamental to a culture. The Hawaiian Islands offered little natural sustenance prior to the initial arrival of Polynesians between the 3rd and 10th centuries, so almost every useful human food source has been imported (Kirch 1985; Laudan 1996). Taro

was one of the more important of the early imports, as there were simply not many alternative food sources on the islands that could feed so many and provide more life sustaining resources, while simultaneously being sustainable (Cho, Yamakawa, & Hollyer, 2007; Muller, Ogneva-Himmelberger, Lloyd and Reed 2010).

Mirroring other societies that developed close cultural bonds to vitally important resources, the management of taro among Hawaiians transcended its role as economic or environmental mainstay; resulting in a situation whereby many facets of local custom and culture became traversed with the special knowledge of how to employ, sustain, consume and value this single omnipotent resource. Semali (1999) has described such special knowledge as “indigenous literacy” – “a competency that individuals in a community have acquired and developed over time ... part experience, part custom, religion, customary law, and the attitudes of people towards their own lives and the social and physical environment.” Through time and circumstance this indigenous literacy, centered on taro production, grew to encompass nearly every aspect of Hawaiian culture, to the point to be largely indicative of that culture and their priorities. Offering a holistic perspective, the following section of this paper demonstrates how the intersectional nature of *aloha 'aina* – specifically the dimensions of Hawaiian spirituality, connections with the environment, sense of community, and family, respectively – is evoked via various cultural meanings ascribed to taro.

2 KALO AND THE INTERSECTIONAL NATURE OF ALOHA 'AINA

2.1 Kalo, Spirituality & the Hawaiian Creation Myth

According to the traditional Hawaiian creation story, taro precedes all humankind. This creation story, and taro's place in it, is as follows: Sky father, known as Wakea, and Earth Mother, known as Papahānaumoku, were “great grandparents of the human race” (Hartwell 1996). They gave birth to a daughter named Ho'ohōkūkālani, the Earth, which was renowned for her beauty. Wakea and Ho'ohōkūkālani later gave birth to a stillborn child that was buried, and it was from this infant's grave that the first taro plant budded (Beckwith 1970). This deceased child, which is the plant, was named Hāloa-naka, meaning long trembling stalk. The most valuable and nutritionally beneficial part of the taro plant, the corm, is believed to represent the body of

this stillborn child. Later, Wākea and Ho'ohōkūkalani had a third child, a surviving son that was to ultimately grow into the first man, the progenitor of all Hawaiians. This child was given the name Hāloa, in honor of his older brother who would feed him as he grew into that man.

In short, according to this cosmological myth, taro is not just a plant, it was born of the Hawaiian gods of creation and was intended to feed everybody. It is also noteworthy that within the context of the Polynesian genealogical principle, whereby elder siblings carry a high level of prestige and responsibility, taro is spiritually conceptualized as an older brother. As seen in this religious story, the brothers share far more than just a name. Their very survival is dependent upon one another. Thus, at the very basis of Hawaiian religion is the idea that older brother, taro, is tasked with feeding his younger brother, humanity. In return, the younger brother is obligated to honor the older brother by carefully tending to him, as a caretaker would for an older family member – or as a farmer would for the crops. This is evocative of a reverse transubstantiation that is a part of Christian doctrines. Here, the older sibling achieves immortality by sustaining the mortal younger sibling, an act of benevolence that ensures humankind's survivability and forges a bond of necessity. The story of Hāloa also evokes the *Kanaka* [humans, specifically ethnic Hawaiians] belief in a familial relationship to the land and opposition to private ownership over it, an idea that is also a fundamental notion of aloha 'aina. A Maui taro farmer describes the spirituality central to the *mahi'ai kalo* (native taro farmer) experience, as well as the deep spiritual sentiments Hawaiians attach to taro farming and their environment, thusly:

“It is a way of living day to day and processing the ability to recognize the spirit of God alive in your life. You bow down to it constantly as Muslims do in prayer. You utter invocations of hope and petitions for abundant growth as a Hindu prays his prayer beads. When disease and famine come, you seek the fault within yourself as the caretaker or recognize the dire condition of our society reflected through this condition in the *kalo* as a *kanaka kuu kahi o Hawaii*, and you beat your chest to *mea culpa, mea culpa e domino mea culpa* [just as a true catholic [does]. (Taro Security and Purity Task Force, 2009).”

2.2 Human-Environment Connections and the

Centrality of Kalo to Kapu

For Hawaiians, taro exists at a juxtaposition of the physical and spiritual worlds, a logical situation given the fact that it was their island environment that provided the fundamental elements required for a successful crop of this deified plant – specifically arable land, massive amounts of water, and an endless stream of sunlight. Hawaiian society, much like taro, was completely dependent upon the ecosystem; if the ecosystem was degraded, the society would follow (Gon and Winter 2019). However, traditional Hawaiian culture also incorporated the notion that the interests of a productive environment, specifically one expected to give birth to taro, were aligned with, and dependent upon, that of its human stewards. Borrowing from the taro creation myth examined earlier, taro culture operates on the principal that big brother *kalo* takes care of little brother *kānaka*; however, little brother must fulfil his reciprocal obligation, which includes an obvious need to provide a nurturing environment suitable for the growth of taro. One farmer said to us, “It [taro] needs people. And we need it. We domesticated each other.” Maui farmer Kyle Nakanelua stated:

“The lifestyle of taro is one of discipline, care, and affection. In one word I would sum it up as religious. Not the dogmatic blind faith robotic unconscious drudgery. But a pragmatic, dedicated, committed and continuous act on a daily basis that is serene, solemn, and thus sacred. A taro lifestyle dictates that one must organize and plan his/her daily life around the caring of taro forever. Your thoughts of taro will greet you in the morning and the accomplishments of your day will put you to sleep at night. (Taro Security and Purity Task Force, 2009, p. 17).”

Beyond the religious connotation referenced in this quote, there are practical justifications for the intimate relationship that Hawaiians shared with this environmental resource. Taro is almost completely propagated by the human hand, as seeds are rare in nature (Pollack 1992). When a plant is harvested, to guarantee future plants, a bit of the stalk is cut and used as the basic material for future planting.

Given the precarious ecological setting they inhabited, and the spiritual system they adhered to, it was logical for Hawaiians to develop formalized norms that codified their relationships to the environment. The set of cosmologically principled rules and regulations that served to safeguard their environmental resources, and which were strictly

enforced, was known as the *kapu* system (Kelly 2004). Structured on spiritual tenets, and bolstered by social and environmental demands, *kapu* was a worldly way to link the Hawaiians' spiritual and environmental obligations. This strict set of religious laws, which dictated the behaviour based upon gender, status, and age, was also, not coincidentally, centrally oriented towards responsible management of land and water to best sustain taro cultivation. The centrality of taro to Hawaiian life, and to the religious laws that governed it, is best exemplified by the fact that the abolishment of the *kapu* system in 1819 by the Hawaiian monarchy, an attempt to accommodate the colonial powers in Hawaii, led to reduced constraints on who could plant and eat certain varieties of taro (Hollyer, de la Pena, Rohrbach, & LeBeck, 1990).

2.3 The Relationship between Kalo and Wai as a Community Unifier

The *kapu* system was also responsible for the management of the Hawaiians' other important resource, one that is absolutely critical to the growing of taro; wai, or water. Water is obviously important for all societies, but water does not just feed the bodies of Hawaiians, it feeds their taro (Penn, 1980). Accordingly, ensuring that water was available to the entire community in a sustainable manner was a collective responsibility. Because water was apportioned throughout the entire population via a complex system of irrigation canals, it also became a central element in Hawaiian communal law (Greenwell, 1947), the legal precepts of which stem directly from the cultivation necessities of taro.

Hawaii is one of the few places on earth that utilizes such extensive irrigation for taro crops (Penn, 1980). Hawaiians did practice dryland taro production in highlands areas, but were far more inclined towards irrigated pond fields, as seen in Figure 1. These pond fields, *lo'i*, require an immense amount of flowing water. Continuously flowing water is necessary to bring oxygen to the densely planted *lo'i* as well as prevent plant diseases. The *lo'i* cannot be filled with water once and expected to sustain. Because natural waterways could not be expected to flow through every place that Hawaiians lived, they instead routed the water to themselves via irrigation canals called *'auwai*. These canals are the products of a brilliant engineering tradition devised independently by the ancient Hawaiians. These artifacts of the indigenous literacy common to Hawaii were the most advanced agricultural system in the Pacific (Abbott 1992; Hartwell 1996). Many farms, such as those we ourselves have worked on, utilize irrigation canals and

locks that were originally built centuries ago. Flowing water through *'auwai* and maintaining centuries old infrastructure that facilitates this irrigation method, connects Hawaiians communities across generations, and encourages the current generation to adhere to the ecological responsibilities expected of their ancestors.



Figure 1. Lo'i kalo on the Island of Hawaii. This irrigated pond field is typical of the swamp method of taro production practiced in Hawaii. The mature plants had been harvested that morning, the retaining walls repaired, and the new huli seen in the lo'i had just been replanted.

A major reason that taro farming is so central to the Hawaiian sense of community is the fact that taro cultivation, particularly the irrigated swamp method preferred in Hawaii, is extremely labour intensive. One of taro's few deficiencies is its tendency to rot quickly after being harvested. It needs to be processed and prepared within days of being pulled directly from the ground. No form or stage of taro cultivation is easily mechanized, and mechanization is useless, if not detrimental, to irrigated swamp taro (Kaybo 1976). Thus, by necessity, taro cultivation involves a lot of people doing a lot of different things (Figure 2). Moreover, while it can be consumed as a food item in various ways, the most popular and uniquely Hawaiian method of preparation is the dish known as poi, often referred to as "table taro." Poi is noted for its widespread health benefits, yet making it is yet another labour and time intensive process, as it requires one to intensely mash and pound the taro after it is cooked. In short, taro is indicative of strong community connections because utilizing this resource does indeed require a community. Neither taro farming nor taro preparation are individual efforts. One farmer explained the requisite communal

effort associated with taro this way; “A bowl of poi is the aggregate of many hands turning along the way, this is why we always say keep your hands turning!”



Figure 2. A demonstration of the low-tech, lowly-mechanized and heavily labor-dependant nature of irrigated swamp taro farming in Hawaii. This highly-versatile tool, referred to as an 'ō'ō, can be used to dig a hole for planting new plants, or for prying the corms up from the mud during harvesting.

Constructing, maintaining, and managing the infrastructure necessary for taro cultivation, the *lo'i* and *'auwai* described in the previous section, are as much a part of a Hawaiian taro farmer's responsibilities as managing the plant and soil, and require obvious communal efforts. Yet it is how this infrastructure is uniquely used to share running water that best exemplifies the culture of collective responsibility and communal mindset required for the success of a traditional Hawaiian taro farm. With wetland taro single streams often serve as the source of water for dozens, even hundreds, of taro farms. After water flows through one farm, nourishing the kalo growing in a few *lo'i*, it will continue down through the *'auwai* to the next to do the same (Figure 3). In short, one farm downstream relies on the competence, cooperation, and attention to detail of one upstream, just as that farm is relying on the same from yet another further upstream. In this system, which essentially functions like an agricultural, and by extension engineering, cooperative, helping one's neighbours entails helping oneself. And the entire community benefits if the entire community is respectful of, and familiar with, taro cultivation, even those less directly connected to it. One taro farmer stated, “If we in Hawaii want to grow food, it as be community driven. It's like a Midwest barn raising....

the community is better for having the barn, even if it doesn't belong to everyone.”



Figure 3. Pond fields, or *lo'i*, require an immense amount of continuously flowing water so that oxygen is continuously brought to the densely planted taro and to prevent disease. Irrigation canals, such as the *'auwai* above, are routed so that water flows from one *lo'i* to all adjoining farms.

2.4 *Kalo and the Hawaiian Sense of Ohana*

The most compelling evidence confirming taro's significance to the Hawaiian sense of community is the relationship the plant has with the family unit. The individual family farm, which functioned like a microcosm of the larger community, was traditionally the foundation upon which communal connections, and through which aloha 'aina was expressed and experienced. The connection between family and taro is vividly illustrated via the Hawaiian nomenclature for various parts of the plant (Figure 4). The Hawaiians named the bud that sprouts from the corm, which will grow into a shoot that can be replanted, *'oha*. When the suffix *-na* is added, the word means offshoots (Handy et al, 1972). The word *'ohana* is also the word for, and concept of, family for Hawaiians. The family is seen as continually growing and sustainable. The core of the family gives new life, which will one day give life of its own, just as the transplantable shoots of the taro corm will do. Further, the distinctive spot where the petiole meets the leaf is called the *piko*, or navel, and carries connotations of the beginnings of new life contained in the umbilical cord between mother and newborn. Taro was not just important to a Hawaiian family; it was figuratively and literally part of it.

Beyond nomenclature, many of the critical

intra-familial and community wide connections common to Hawaiian society, such as gender roles and child rearing, were guided by the demands of taro and the *kapu* system. Before the 19th century, women were prohibited from many aspects of taro cultivation and processing. All children, however, were expected to participate in a support capacity by helping to carry materials, assist with small tasks, and provide food (Handy et al, 1972). This was a sort of apprenticeship for all children, particularly older boys who would be learning how manage the family farm, while at the same learning how and why to engage in communal agricultural responsibilities. In this manner, farming also served as a medium by which older generations passed on indigenous knowledge to children. An unnamed farmer stated, “When I am tending the *kalo*, I am also tending to my ancestors, the *kupuna* who came before me and those still living who I now feed. I love my *poi* – it tells me everything because I was raised on it.” (Taro Security and Purity Task Force, 2009, p. 17).

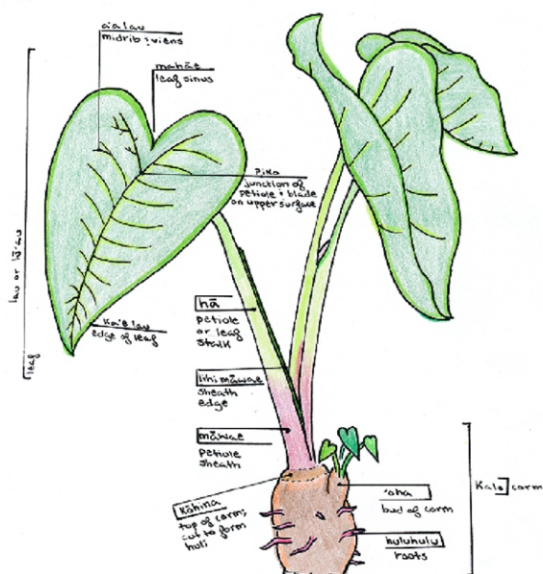


Figure 4. Taro nomenclature in English and Hawaiian. Illustration by Tracie Miller, based on a design by scientific illustrator Eliza K. Jewett and modified for the purposes of this paper (Jewett 2004).

3. CONCLUSION

Jon Osorio, a musician, historian, and director of the University of Hawai'i's Center for Hawaiian Studies, has poignantly described how the concept of aloha 'aina relates to the sustenance of Hawaiian life (Osorio 2001):

“‘Ai is the word that means to eat and when

we say 'āina we're talking basically about what it is that feeds not just humans but basically everything, and everything is directly dependent and interdependent with the 'āina.”

In this paper we demonstrate that taro production, perhaps the most traditional mode of sustenance in Hawaii, functions as an agricultural and culinary metonym for this locally specific cultural idea. For Hawaiians, the practice of caring for and eating taro is to connect with their religion, their ancestors, their family, and their environment, which are all believed to be one and the same (Miller, 2017). *Kalo*, both as a food commodity and a way of life, perfectly encapsulates this interconnectedness. In Hawaii, *kalo* functions as far more than simply food for the body. Rather, the modest act of growing it represents celebrating one's ancestral heritage and one's home. It also symbolizes the priorities and values Hawaiians hold for community, family, cultural freedom and self-determination, cultural values that lie at the very heart of Hawaiian identity and that are best exemplified by the celebration of aloha 'aina (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Sign in Waipi'o Valley, on the Island of Hawaii - “Slow down, this ain't da mainland”. Waipi'o Valley was the capital and permanent residence of many early Hawaiian *Ali'i* (chiefs/kings), and the home for much of the indigenous Hawaiian elite. Coincidentally, it was also the one-time breadbasket of the island. Taro is still grown here, as a means to grown food for the local population, but also as a means to promote and educate students, eco-tourists and others about traditional Hawaiian cultural heritage. Note the illustrated taro leaf, underscoring the valley's sense of place as an Hawaiian community. The sign serves as a reminder to visitors that they are in a sacred place, where “aloaha 'aina” - respect of the land and the local population - is expected. “Slow down” in this sense is not necessarily just referring to your vehicle speed, it also refers to the mindset one

should bring down into the valley.

Given the significance of taro as a food source for the indigenous Hawaiian community, and the reliance on the land as a means to produce this important crop, it was only logical that this dependency would foster a deep relationship between the Hawaiian people and their natural environment. In Hawaii, both land and water belonged to the gods and therefore belonged to everybody and nobody, with the control of both being governed by strict religious traditions that administered their use (Abbott 1992). Moreover, growing taro in Hawaii requires the formation of communal bonds, environmental values, and spiritual priorities that were forged from within the family unit. Therefore, we profess that the family taro farm is at the same time the cultural cradle of “Hawaiianess,” and the most immediate expression of aloha 'aina. In Hawaii, to consume taro is to assert a deep cultural connection to place. Accordingly, we maintain that taro functions as the vital symbol of the continued Hawaiian cultural resistance to Western hegemony.

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