

Kalo  
A'ali'ikumakani Dukelow

Whenever I reminisce of my grandparent's home in Kahakuloa Valley, I immediately envision myself gazing from the kitchen window to the terraces of green heart-shaped leaves undulating in unison amongst the gentle breeze that traverses the enveloping cliffs. Glistening beneath the leaves is the water that assiduously percolates through each taro patch, while nourishing the soil

This agricultural system for the kalo or taro established by my kūpuna or ancestors centuries before, not only served as the pivotal source of their survival, but also the method as to which their knowledge and customs were perpetuated through generations. When my grandfather first taught my cousins and I how to cultivate taro on his farm in Kahakuloa, he shared an ancient Hawaiian proverb with us that goes "Make no ke kalo a ola i ka palili." This ancient Hawaiian proverb translates as, the life of a taro plant is preserved through the lives of its offspring. He also told us that our kūpuna maintained the land for us to thrive on and that it is our kuleana or responsibility to do the same for the next generations to come. Each taro plant carries the voices of our kūpuna. Through this plant their knowledge is able to resonate with us, and they inspire us to commemorate them by carrying on their values and customs.

As a student of the Hawaiian Language Immersion program my entire life, I was able to learn the language and customs of my culture. One of the stories we learned in elementary school was the story of Hāloa, the first human being in Hawaiian mythology. In the story of Hāloa, Wākea, the deity of the heavens, has a child with the demigod Ho'ohōkūkālani. Ho'ohōkūkālani delivers the child as a stillborn that they name Hāloanakalaukapalili, which means the long stem of the trembling leaf. While in mourning, Wakea and Ho'ohōkūkālani bury their son behind their

home and shortly after, a taro plant grows from the soil on his grave. When Ho'ohōkūkalani births a second son, who is the first kanaka, or human in Hawaiian mythology, he is named Hāloa in honor of his older brother. Hāloa tends to the land by cultivating the taro plants that arose from his brother's resting place and in return he receives crops from them. This relationship between Hāloa and the taro plant conceived the traditional concept that land is the superior of humans because of our dependence on the crops that the land produces.

In ancient times, taro was the essential source of my ancestor's survival because of its ability to produce abundant crops in their tropical climate. Not only did they appreciate the land that they inhabited for supplying them with these crops, they revered the land for always rewarding them after they worked hard to maintain it.

Their ideology of aloha 'āina, or to be devoted to the land, motivated them to lead an ecologically sustainable lifestyle. Harvesting and cultivating land was not considered perfunctory to them, but rather viewed as a responsibility that was regarded with respect. According to George Helm, a native Hawaiian activist and musician, "The truth is, there is man and there is environment. One does not supersede the other....Man is merely the caretaker of the land that maintains his life and nourishes his soul. Therefore, 'āina is sacred. The church of life is not in a building; it is the open sky, the surrounding ocean, and the beautiful soil" (Morales). Taro will never be considered solely as a crop to my culture, as it embodies the knowledge of our ancestors that sustains us and that will sustain our subsequent generations.

At the young age that I began to tend to my grandparent's taro patches with my cousins, I never appreciated the strenuous work that it required, but I knew that I inherited this responsibility as a gift from my ancestors. Eventually I realized that not many children my age

who are of Hawaiian descent are offered the opportunity to exercise this ancient practice. The taro plant remains as a prominent symbol within my family as my aunts, uncles, and my father have uhi, or tattoos, of patterns of symmetrical triangles that represent the taro leaf. The structure of the taro plant itself symbolizes family unity because of its multiple stems that grow outward from the corm that rests in the soil. It is also said that the growth pattern of the stems on the taro signifies each member of our family and our culture thriving from one shared foundation. I firmly believe that the significance of the taro is that it personifies one of our most valued principals; to gain solidarity in order to achieve salvation and success as a collective people.

Each time the soles of my feet return to the devouring mud of the taro patches, I know that I am connected to my ancestors. This experience always reassures me that my connection to them can never be severed. The desecration of our land began with the oppression of my ancestors, who suffered from pillage and were forced to abandon their beliefs and traditions. Never again will we as a people be constrained by outer forces that intend to debilitate the essence of our heritage. In my hometown of Wailuku on the island of Maui, my people and I are currently fighting for accessible water. Large quantities of water are being diverted from our central streams to commercial agriculture corporations such as the Hawai'i Commercial & Sugar company to expand the sugar cane industry. The water that once fed the taro patches of our ancestors is now being unrightfully appropriated towards increasing Hawai'i's economic prosperity.

Even in a time where western conformity and mass industrialization emanates the intentions of modern society, the voices of our kūpuna prevail. We as a people have emerged from western despotism and are in the process of restoring our culture. Our taro plant will

invariably serve as a reminder to us all of the struggles our kūpuna endured to conserve the belief of aloha 'āina. Aloha 'āina appeals to us all, not only as an indigenous group but as a human race. My kūpuna honored the relationship between man and the earth and I promise to them that I will with my best efforts to try to implement this belief every day of my life. We must persist to grow our roots upon the foundation that our ancestors have set for us.

## Works Cited

- Armitage, Kimo, and Solomon Enos. *Akua Hawai'i: Hawai'ian Gods and Their Stories*. Honolulu, HI: Bishop Museum, 2005. Print.
- Pukui, Mary Kawena. *‘Ōlelo No‘eau: Hawaiian Proverbs & Poetical Sayings*. Honolulu, Hawai'i: Bishop Museum, 1983. Print.
- Morales, Rodney. *Ho 'iHo 'i Hou, a Tribute to George Helm & Kimo Mitchell*. Honolulu, HI: Bamboo Ridge, 1984. Print.
- Handy, E. S. C., and M. K. Pukui. *The Polynesian Family System in Ka-'U, Hawai'i*. Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1977. Print.