

## The Concept of Genealogy in Indigenous Hawaiian Culture The Image of Piko (umbilical cord) in a Contemporary English-Hawaiian Poem

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### Abstract

This study aims to consider the idea of “genealogy,” which would be a key word to describe characteristics of indigenous Hawaiian culture. Appealing strongly to Hawaiian sensibilities, this concept appears repeatedly in literature, history, and political discourses, revealing their views on life and death. It puts a person in a chain of life, a continuance of life, and collective memory. We will consider how this idea has been expressed differently in different ages by referring to three examples: First, we will focus on a creation myth “Kumulipo” and see its central motif of an increase in life. Second, we will review a historical anecdote from the latter half of the 19th century to understand the politics of genealogy in the Hawaiian kingdom. Third, we will look at the contemporary Native Hawaiian movement, where indigenous nationalists often use the term “genealogy” as a watchword. To consider their identity politics, we need to understand the cultural concept. At the end we will conclude that the idea of genealogy offers the key to an understanding of Hawaiian views of life, death, and the world.

Genealogy is the production of human activities in which people try to establish a connection between the dead and the living, and the living and the unborn. This presentation is an attempt to introduce the rhetorics of genealogy in the contemporary indigenous Hawaiian movement and find continuity between them and the traditional Hawaiian symbolism through reading a political poem written in the 1980s.

Native Hawaiian movement is an activism from approximately 1970 to the present, which has flourished largely, though not exclusively, on college and university campuses. Under the influence of other ethnic minorities’ movements in the United States, Hawaiian activists began to assert cultural autonomy and accuse the psychic violence that racism, colonization, and discrimination had wrecked on Hawaiians with the aim of decolonizing the mind and the body.

A popular form taken by many Hawaiians to express their inner emotional lives was poetry written mainly in English but containing some Hawaiian words. Puanani Burgess’s “Choosing My Name” is one of those English-Hawaiian bilingual poems:

When I was born my mother gave me three names:  
 Christanbelle, Yoshie, and Puanani

Christanbelle was my “English” name,  
 My social security card name,  
 My school name,  
 The name I gave when teachers asked me for my “real” name  
 A safe name

Yoshie was my home name  
 My everyday name,  
 The name that reminded my father’s family  
 That I was Japanese, even though  
 My nose, hips, and feet were wide,  
 The name that made me acceptable to them  
 Who called my Hawaiian mother *kuroi* (black),  
 A saving name

Puanani is my chosen name  
 My *piko* name connecting me back to the *`āina*  
 And the *kai* and the *po`e kahiko*  
 My blessing, my burden,  
 My amulet, my spear

The poem is plain in its wording apart from the four Hawaiian words used in the last stanza: *piko*, or an umbilical cord, *āina*, or the land, *kai*, or the sea, and *po`e kahiko*, or people of the old times. The theme seems very clear, too. The poem describes the poet’s fractured identity—an identity fractured by the three names she was given by her mother. The poem suggests that she abandoned her English and Japanese names as it says in the past tense, “Christanbelle was my ‘English’ name” and “Yoshie was my home name.” On the other hand, in the last stanza, the poet uses the present tense for her Hawaiian name: “Puanani is my chosen name.” One possible interpretation of this stanza is that it is a manifestation of self autonomy over her own identity and that she is the one who chose her own name.

But should this stanza really be read as a manifestation of autonomy? Does the poet celebrate herself as the agent of the deed of choosing her own name? The key to this question is one of the Hawaiian words she uses here: *piko*.

In classical usage, *piko* basically means an umbilical cord. As is usual with Hawaiian words, however, it conveys various meanings depending on the context it is used. In some context, it means genital organs, and in a different context, it means the crown of a head. It can also connote relationships between ancestors and descendants, boundary line of adjacent lands, and junction of plant leaf to stem.

Despite the diversity among them, these definitions share a basic idea in common, i.e. “to connect.” The umbilical cord connects the mother and her baby. The genital organs connect male and female as well as linking them to the genealogical line by enabling them to bear children and become parents. The crown of a head is another *piko* because in the classical symbolism it is where

one's ancestral guardians are supposed to stay. *'Aumākua*, or the spirits of ancestors in forms of animals such as lizards, sharks, and owls, hover over the head of their descendants. Each body part called *piko* is an organ that symbolically (and physically) connects a person to the genealogical line.

For a better understanding of the concept of *piko*, we should know some grammatical rule, too, which is commonly seen in Polynesian languages: two different types of possessives. In his book on Hawaiian grammar, Samuel Elbert explains the difference between the “a-form possessive” and the “o-form possessive” in Hawaiian language: “Use of *a* and *o* is one of the most discussed, and most intriguing, of Polynesian problems. The following dichotomies have been proposed for distinguishing their usages,” he says. “The possessive indicates the *nature of the relationship of the possessed and the possessor*. The a-forms ... show that the possessor ... *caused* the ownership. The o-forms show that the possessor ... had nothing to do with the cause.” (138; Emphasis is in original.) Thus, “Ego’s affinal generation and all later generations are acquired and take *a*.” (137) For example, “my child” is “*ka’u keiki*” in Hawaiian. (*Keiki* means child.) The noun *keiki* takes the a-form possessive, *ka’u*, not *ko’u*, an o-form possessive. On the other hand, “Ego’s consanguineous generation and all earlier generations are inherited and take *o*.” (137) For example, a noun *makua* or “parent” takes the o-form possessive.

This rule applies not only to kinship terminology. “Most material object takes *a* because the possessor caused the ownership of them.” (138–139) For example, “my fish” is expressed as *ka’u i’a*. But there are some exceptional nouns: House, canoe, land, and sometimes adzes take *o*. This is because “[t]hese were highly important in the old culture and were inherited; the owner did not, in theory, initiate the ownership nor might he ultimately dispose of them.” What is relevant to our concern here is that *piko* is one of those exceptional nouns that take the o-form possessive. Body parts take *o* because “one does not originate his own body parts.” (138–139) To borrow Hawaiian idioms, these nouns refer to objects whose nature are *pili koko* (adhering blood) and *wehena 'ole* (cannot be untied). They are in the nature of *he iwi*, *he i'o*, *he koko* (“bone, flesh, blood) and remain to be so until one violates a serious taboo and *ua mo ka piko* (“the *piko* is cut”), i.e. being ostracized from the family. *Piko*, closely connecting individuals to the kinship and genealogy, implies determinism, which seems incompatible with self autonomy of the individuals over their own identity.

Let us now return to Burgess’s poem again. In the last stanza she emphasizes how crucial her Hawaiian name Puanani is for her existence, calling it “My *piko* name connecting me back to the 'aina,/ And the kai and the po'e kahiko.” She parallels the name with the *piko*. Name, or *inoa* in Hawaiian, is another noun that takes the o-possessive. The possessor did not cause its ownership any more than they did for the ownership of their *piko*. They received their names by inheritance. Incidentally, or not, both *'āina* (the land) and *kai* (the sea) are nouns taking the o-possessive. (The last word of the poem, “my spear” could also take the o-form possessive as adzes could. Warriors prized the spears they inherited just as canoe makers cherished their adzes.)

Of course I do not intend to claim that Burgess was aware of such grammatical nature these Hawaiian words happen to share in common. Still, we should notice heteronomous tone in these lines, even though on the surface the poet appears to appeal the autonomy she has acquired. Note the phrase “my chosen name.” Instead of using the active voice and a phrase like “the name I chose,” she uses the passive voice, “chosen.” She does not make it clear who chose her “*piko* name.” The

agent of the action could be herself, and could be some “Other.”

Early in the 1980s, when Burgess published this poem, the classical concept of *piko* had been faded at least from the popular vocabulary. According to a report in 1971, the old concept of *piko* had been lost and traditional customs related to *piko*, such as a tradition of hiding the *piko* of an infant under a special rock, had been obsolete. (Pukui et al. 187) Burgess’s English-Hawaiian poem was an attempt in such situation to rebuild the genealogical community and reconnect herself to it. She used the image of *piko* as a key to the reunion. According to the poet, it is her “piko name” that connects her to the *‘āina* and the *kai*, and to the moral community of po’e kahiko, or people of the old. It is an umbilical cord that connects her to the collective genealogy of the Hawaiian nation from the past through the future.

### Works Cited

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