

Voices of Fire: Reweaving the Literary Lei of Pele and Hi'iaka

By ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui

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Voices of Fire: Reweaving the Literary Lei of Pele and Hi'iaka by ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui provides an authentic interpretation of an important literary history in Hawaiian culture: the narrative of the volcano goddess Pele and her youngest sister Hi'iaka, patron of hula. It allows for both Native Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian individuals to be included in a multi-dimensional heritage that has not been genuinely explored. This particular myth has been repackaged on different occasions, favouring western ideals or portraying the Hawaiian people and their stories differently from how they imagined themselves. By reweaving the Literary Lei or reasserting the true native roots and significance, *Voices of Fire* unfetters the goddess sisters of their colonial entanglements.

ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui notes that the creation of a *mo'olelo*, a history or story, is akin to that of a lei. When constructing each, the crafter chooses the material and then carefully places it in a desired order for a particular effect and both operate within a context of multiple possibilities with infinite choices. *Voices of Fire* is thoughtfully constructed and does not take its reader for granted. The book provides a solid foundation of historical, cultural and political context, affording its reader a full appreciation of the material. Overall, the book offers a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted Hawaiian *mo'olelo* of Pele and Hi'iaka, which elucidates its significance to Hawaiian nationalism, particularly in the face of colonialism. There is an intense use of the local Hawaiian language but mercifully, words are translated as they appear and a glossary has been included. Additionally, we have varying narratives which intertwine: that of the personal experiences of the author exploring her native land; the more academic discussions of the significance of the myth and the historical context (in its own right as an empowering tale, coupled with the significance of it being told by a Hawaiian native); and the actual *mo'olelo* (histories, stories, narratives), *mele* (poetry, songs) and *oli* (chants) themselves. These litter the pages, embracing the reader in a way that facilitates a dual experience that is simultaneously educational and cultural. The reader is able to engage first-hand with this Literary Lei, rewoven here within the pages. Given this multi-layered aspect, multiple readings of this text are

recommended, and it may prove enjoyable to focus on a particular narrative and possibly refine one's perception of the text in its entirety.

The *mo'olelo* of Pele and Hi'iaka is an integral part of the literary nationalism that burgeoned in the Hawaiian kingdom between 1860 and 1893. While using this story, the author emphasizes themes intrinsic to Hawaiian heritage during this time. She considers the weaving of oral and written traditions, as well as the interlocking of oral and literary devices. Moreover, she looks at Hawaiian literature accommodating elements of Western writing and the importance of the publication of Hawaiian stories as well. Publication of Hawaiian literature was a necessary political manoeuvre as it was meant to contradict the Western sentiment that Hawaiian culture and ideologies were inferior. It served to reassert their identity when colonial settlers would have denied them an intellectual history. She also considers broader themes which speak to the essence of Hawaiian identity which course through many of the indigenous myths. For example, the notions of healing, ritual and abundance, among others, which exemplify important skills, practices and cultural values that resonate throughout the culture. Spun into the fabric of the *mo'olelo*, these themes, which serve to embody the spirit of the Hawaiian individual, formed the foundation of literary nationalism in nineteenth century Hawaii and assisted in establishing a sense of community.

Apart from the political discussions within the text, the author also highlights the *mana wahine* – female based strength, power, resilience and the essence of womanhood. Although one may lean towards describing the tales as “feminist”, it would be unjust to describe the literature so, as the centuries-old myth of Pele and Hi'iaka transcends the relatively recent – not to mention Western – construct of “feminism”. Unlike other stories in which Pele's power is balanced against masculine entities, often when Pele and Hi'iaka feature, the women are the central characters and their power is balanced off of each other. This insistence on the integrity of Pele and Hi'iaka's feminine power is important, because in other versions of the myth there have been insertions of masculine power to temper the actions of the female characters. Christianity has also played a part in recreating the (westernized) identities of Pele and Hi'iaka, with scenarios coloured plainly in black and white, good versus evil, or whitewashing the complexity of female interaction, all of which detracts from the physical, intellectual and spiritual power of the godly women.

ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui, our dedicated author, roots herself in the text and throughout it we experience Hawaii with her, seeing it through her eyes via photography and we embrace the quirks of the native experience through her anecdotes – and we undoubtedly feel her passion when she contemplates the true power of women. ho'omanawanui suggests that if women were to embrace the fullness of their potential, their *mana wahine*, their capabilities would be limitless. Greater than this, she contemplates the power of her people. She has lifted her fiery voice to honour the story of Pele and Hi'iaka – to honour her people. By reweaving the voices of fire of her people she illustrates that the core of the Hawaiian individual can be traced to its literary lineage. *Voices of Fire* is an engaging text, recommended for lovers of myths, culture and

those committed to contradicting literary colonialism. The *mo'olelo* of a nation can encourage, uplift and inspire – but they must be authentic. They must be woven by the minds that birthed them so that regardless of whatever power they hold in the present or future, whether political, empowering or aesthetic, they are true.