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Sylvie LARGEAUD-ORTEGA

**Who is who in ‘The Isle of Voices’? :
how Victorian Robert Louis Stevenson viewed Pacific islanders’ perceptions of
Victorians and of themselves**

This article was first presented as a shorter paper in the panel on Robert Louis Stevenson at the ‘Oceania and the East in the Victorian imagination’ conference, which purported to examine ‘How the Victorians perceived the East and how the Victorians were perceived in the East’. In this stimulating context, I chose to focus on Stevenson’s short tale ‘The Isle of Voices’ (1893) because the tale’s protagonists are Hawaiian, which means that, allegedly, the Scottish author’s narrative and axiological points of view are Hawaiian. This paradoxical perspective unfailingly summons up the question: ‘How did Stevenson perceive the Pacific islanders’ view of Victorians as well as of themselves?’

Hybrid Hawaiians

Hawaiians in ‘The Isle of Voices’ are presented as a hybrid people. Let us consider the male protagonists, for instance. The young hero, Keola, is a native Hawaiian, but his lifestyle in urbanised late nineteenth-century Molokai is definitely Western. True to Pacific tradition, his ‘uxorilocal’¹ home is his father-in-law’s, but contrary to tradition, he is no breadwinner there, only a sponger. Also, although he preens himself on his aristocratic origins, being ‘come of a good family and accustomed to respect’, he is only too happy to live in a modern opulent Western-style house among ‘all manner of rare luxuries’². According to ancient Pacific tradition, noblemen were idle men:

laziness for a high-ranking ali’i [aristocrat] is a duty, not a vice; it is a manifestation of his absolute plenitude, of the absence of any lack, and, moreover, of perfect self-control. The prescription of immobility helps explain why divine ali’i do not walk but are carried; moreover this custom reveals that the ali’i belong to the realm of above (heaven) as opposed to the realm of below, represented by the ground.³

Keola is indeed idle, even to the extent of being judged ‘lazy’ and ‘useless’⁴ by others; but far from feeling ‘absolute plenitude’, he ‘pine[s] for’ the panoply of a Victorian dandy in the tropics, ‘fine clothes’ and ‘a concertina’⁵: ‘an intense competition for status developed among the Hawaiian aristocracy. [...] Fine clothing was the main thing’⁶. All in all, Keola is a decadent Pacific island aristocrat, a caricature of native consumers of Western goods. He has turned ancient sacred customs into modern profane uses and, in that respect, illustrates what happened to the Pacific *tabu*, which originally meant ‘things set apart for the gods’ and which, under Western influence, ‘became the sign of material and proprietary right’⁷.

Keola’s first trip to the Isle of Voices only makes his acculturation worse, as he is suddenly propelled onto a beach strewn with shining dollars that only want picking up. The eponymous island is an epitome of the West, and it tantalizes Keola just as Western lifestyle

¹ Serge Dunis, *Ethnologie d’Hawaï’i*, « *Homme de la Petite Eau, Femme de la Grande Eau* » (Paris, 1990), p. 183

² Robert Louis Stevenson, “The Isle of Voices”, *South Sea Tales*, (Oxford, 1999), pp. 112, 104.

³ Valerio Valeri, *Kingship and Sacrifice, Ritual and Society in Ancient Hawaii*, (Chicago and London, 1985), p. 147.

⁴ Stevenson, “The Isle of Voices”, pp. 108, 109.

⁵ Stevenson, “The Isle of Voices”, p. 108.

⁶ Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985), p. 141.

⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 142-3.

tantalised a large number of late nineteenth-century Pacific islanders. To conclude with Keola's cultural hybridism: at the start of the tale, the hero belongs nowhere. He is neither fully familiar with imported Western ways – which he has an unbridled longing for – nor respectful of his own Pacific island traditions – which he has forgotten.

The same applies to the other male protagonist, Keola's father-in-law, Kalamake. His very name evinces his cultural hybridism, since the first half of the name, *kala*, is the word dollar, symbol of American power, pronounced the Hawaiian way, and the second half, *make*, is Hawaiian for death. To Hawaiian speakers, Kalamake is understood to be the man-who-kills-for-dollars. Kalamake is a Hawaiian *kahuna* 'anā'anā, i.e. a sorcerer of the harmful kind who has 'repressed, unsatisfied and socially unsatisfiable, desires'⁸ and performs his art for monetary profit. As a culturally hybrid character, however, Kalamake proves to be a deviant *kahuna* 'anā'anā. Quote Kalamake:

'The men of old were wise ; they wrought marvels [...] ; but that was at night, in the dark, under the fit stars and in the desert. The same will I do here in my own house and under the plain eye of day.'⁹

A potent example of Kalamake's transgressions can be seen in his rash pick of a sorcerer's apprentice, Keola, a complete novice. **ICI** His craving for cash leads him to break the most basic rules of sorcery.

Yet another demonstration of how deeply Kalamake perverts his sacred art is provided by his doings on the Isle of Voices. The agenda on the beach is threefold: 1/ gather leaves, 2/ pick up seashells, and 3/ make a fire.

The **first task**, gather leaves, breaks one first *tapu*. Picking leaves from trees was nothing less than stripping the sons of the primal couple, Mother-earth and Father-sky. Gathering had to be performed with respect to religious restrictions. The sorcerer takes all and gives nothing – a fundamental breach, since life was structured by reciprocity. Gift-exchange applied everywhere, including in relations with the non-human world.

Kalamake's **second activity** on the atoll is to pick up seashells. It equally consists in raiding Mother earth without offering anything in return. Like leaves, seashells were related to primal creation. Indeed, when Mother earth and Father sky were separated, slivers from Mother earth clung to the flesh of Father sky. They were the seashells, and they became stars. These splinters from the divine maternal body, encrusted into the divine paternal body by the intervention of their divine son, Tane, were the first twinkles of light. This explains why the "men of old" who were "wise" *kahuna* 'anā'anā used to perform their sorcery "at night" (105): when picking up shells from the earth in darkness, they re-enacted Tane's task, giving the world its first glimmers. In contrast, sorcerers gathering shells in broad daylight, only grab for themselves the artificial glitter of dollars.

The **third task** is to make a fire. This is lit up with a match, not in the old Pacific way, with two fire-sticks. Starting a fire in the traditional way symbolized the sexual union of Mother earth and Father sky, so only priests were allowed to master fires, or give light in the wake of Tane.

To conclude with Keola and Kalamake, they both symbolise a highly Westernised Hawaiian society, oblivious of its own culture and greedy for Western consumption.

⁸ Valeri, *Kingship*, p. 138.

⁹ Stevenson, "The Isle of Voices", p. 105.

Keola's three rites of passage:

In this context, Stevenson puts his young hero to the test. True to the genre of fairy tales, Keola is sent out into the world to carve out an identity for himself. He makes three initiatory journeys, which are three rites of passage. These three initiatory journeys are not to be mistaken with the first trip to the Isle of Voices, which, as I said before, is a voyage of discovery; not a rite of passage.

As is argued by Bettelheim's psychoanalysis of fairy tales, Keola's three rites of passage may be read as **three father-son confrontations**, which are necessary for the son to equal and eventually surpass the father. Quote Keola: "I am no child, I am as cunning as he" (108).

So Keola is pitted against three successive father figures.

I suggest that the **first one**, the Hawaiian father-in-law, represents hybrid Pacific islanders who have given over to Western powers in order to secure their own political clout.

The **second** father figure, the white mate, impersonates the West, and his merchant ship, accordingly, is a microcosm of the Western world.

The **third** father figure is the Paumotu father-in-law. He represents genuine native Pacific islanders. The atoll may be construed as a microcosm of Pacific islands supposedly remote and free from Western influence.

I now suggest focusing on these three rites of passage.

Rite of passage # 1

It pits hybrid son versus hybrid father figure. Keola wishes to equal Kalamake and become a full-fledged member of the society of consumption. In this he is cruelly arrested by Kalamake. Indeed, native politicians who had given over to the West, on the one hand, allowed their fellow islanders access to the benefits of the West; on the other hand, they kept them under tight control. In the middle of the Sea of the Dead, Kalamake rises into a giant, an impersonation of the Western military powers that were deployed at the slightest threat of a native uprising, such as

in Samoa

1/ in 1888, when the German warships gunned Apia (denounced in *A Footnote to History*)

2/ in 1893 when the **British** warships threatened to follow suit.

Kalamake may also embody Western-backed royals like

Tahitian Pomare II and V,

Hawaiian Kamehameha.

To conclude on this first trial, it ends in failure. Kalamake denies the hero all personal development. It hints at Stevenson disapproval of the Pacific islanders who had given in to foreign powers. This might impart that, if Pacific islanders thought their only means of self-fulfilment was the consumption of dollars, they would remain subjugated, and like Keola, would drown into immaturity.

Rite of passage # 2

Keola's next rite of passage takes him on board an all-white merchant ship. To Keola's eyes, the white crew is "no worse than other whites", "fools" and "children" (112), which provides an ironical inversion of the traditional cliché presenting native islanders as children. Points of view are stimulatingly embedded here: Victorians viewed by Pacific islanders viewed by Victorian Stevenson.

Keola is taught a few lessons about the West. The white father figure proves to be harsher than Kalamake. A former commander of a slave-ship, he represents the most oppressive sides of Western powers. On board the ship, Keola is no longer allowed to lie idle. He now has to toil to earn his food. He is beaten and abused. He painfully experiences the exploitative power of a world that used to fascinate him.

At the end of his second rite of passage, the hero has understood that his own development cannot be achieved under foreign domination.

He outlives the mate, which hints at the fact that, on their own ground, the natives manage better than foreigners. Indeed, because the mate scorns the natives' advice, he dies of swelling – which is not a disease ever heard of in the Tuamotu: this swelling is a symbol of imperialism's deaf and blind greed and self-centredness.

It might be concluded from this second rite of passage that Stevenson urges Pacific islanders to get a serious knowledge of the West, which might induce them to shake off the hegemony of Western colonial powers, and follow their own ways.

Rite of passage # 3

The third rite of passage takes place in the Tuamotu archipelago, which was the Pacific's most isolated by late 19th-century standards. The atoll also symbolises the land of origins because, historically, Hawaiians came from this and the Tahitian southern island groups

Keola's last rite of passage needs to be divided into two parts: the time when he is alone, and the time when he is with the Paumotu tribe.

In both stages, his ordeals get tougher and tougher.

In the **first stage**, there is no more talk of good food or idleness: he has to struggle just to survive. He learns how to be self-sufficient, and a moderate consumer of exclusively native goods: he goes fishing, drinks from coconuts, builds a hut, and makes fires in the old way.

In this context, Keola learns how to redefine *tabu*: on this island of origins, he gradually becomes a self-taught worshipper of Mother earth. He retraces original myths, as when he carves fishhooks, as did the Polynesian semi-god Maui. He reproduces cosmogonic creation, as when, in awe, he revisits taboo primal darkness, the *Pō*, "trembl[ing] till morning" (114). Like a native Crusoe, or Friday turned Crusoe, he reconnects with his own sacred.

His is not the blissful state of a Noble Savage, however, but a life of dread and loneliness.

Things get to a pitch when he confronts the Paumotu cannibals, who are the most destructive of all father figures.

One conclusion to be drawn from this third rite of passage is that, first, in their search for identity, Pacific islanders need to get back to their own roots. But this is only a preliminary step to self-assertion: because, second, utter isolationism will lead them nowhere. To be cut off from the rest of the world is too precarious a state, which eventually leads to regression and inner destruction, as is symbolised by cannibalism.

But there may be more to this.

The Paumotu tribe actually turn out to be deeply Westernised. Their home island, near Fakarava (which used to be named *Hawaiki*, in Paumotu) is replete with "rum and tobacco", "wine and biscuits", just like *Hawai*'i.

Their cannibalism is no longer the sacred practice it used to be. Sahlins explains that cannibalism originated with one of Mother earth and Father sky's sons, Kū, defeating his brothers, the parents of birds, trees, fish, etc. To defeat was to render *noa* (without *tapu*) and consumable. Kū was thus able to consume his brothers' offspring, a power he passed on to mankind." Consuming human flesh was a *tabu* ritual, which could only become *noa* if crowned by war heroism.

The only *tapu* **these** Paumotu are concerned about is the one imposed by the French Vice-resident – not a sacred *tapu*, but a secular one, which in their cowardice they are not even brave enough to challenge; they only dodge it.

To conclude on this third trial, it appears that Stevenson viewed all Pacific male islanders, as an acculturated people. The atoll is a marketplace of unbridled consumption, of cash, or flesh. It is, a stronghold of consumerism.

Hawaiians and Paumotu alike depend upon Western ships that are the new bearers of fertility. The god of fertility, Lono's mythical canoe, has sunk into oblivion.

In this context, disaster is what awaits the denizens of the Isle of Voices, with "the wizzards and the man-eaters hard at fight" (121) on a land turned into chaos. Pacific island

societies used to be founded on the sacred. When the sacred no longer holds, societies fall apart.

Female Pacific islanders

Salvation comes through Pacific women, Paumotu as well as Hawaiian. They are the depositories of Pacific traditions and the standard-bearers of a well-balanced approach to the modern world.

Lehua, onomastics

Lehua's name is that of a native Hawaiian tree's. She represents truly indigenous Pacific islanders.

The tree is a symbol of genealogy, which was of utmost importance in the Pacific, since genealogy was linked to man's sacred origins. So it can be inferred that Lehua symbolises the woman of origins.

The *lehua* wood and red flowers were used for sacred purposes, to carve statues of divinities, and to attract the *apapane* birds, whose red feathers adorned chiefs and gods.

Lehua is an impersonation of the *mana*, the creative power of divine origin. She is the archetypal life-giver.

Keola's Hawaiian and Paumotu wives are strikingly similar: the Paumotu wife is first seen standing by a **tree**, with nothing on her body, like a primal woman, too. They both save their husband's life.

What is these women's structural function?

True to the genre of fairy tales, women save their husband so that he may fulfill his role as a procreator, indicated by the hero's name, Keola, meaning "life" in Hawaiian: he is the genitor of children-to-come. Contrary to the trees stripped or felled by the folly of men, Lehua is a tree that can bear fruit. She is the one who enables the young hero to take the place of the father figure, to become the father of a family of the next generation.

Her first care is to feed Keola some *poi*, or pounded taro. This is highly ceremonial food, since taro is the older brother of mankind. Indeed, the primal couple's first son, Hāloa, died, was buried, and gave birth through a taro stem to a daughter, Ho'okukalani, who delivered the very first human. So, through taro, Lehua connects Keola back to his sacred primal ancestors.

Eating taro is also a metaphor of Keola's sexual union with Lehua's life-giving powers.

Lehua is not all tradition. She is also a sensible consumer of Western goods. Bridging the past, the present and the future, she knows how to keep traditions alive in urbanised Molokai.

This may remind Pacific islanders of the prime role women played in Pacific history – like Lili'uokalani in Hawai'i, whose government had just been toppled at the time of the writing. It recalls the need for Pacific islands to adapt to Western ways without giving up their own idiosyncrasies.

The conclusion of the tale

Irresolution

Contrary to fairy tales, there is no happy-ever-after ending. At the end of the tale, there are still three father-figures allied against the young couple: the Hawaiian sorcerer, the white missionary, and the police, all three representatives of the three C's of imperialism: Commerce, Christianity and Civilisation. Thus, the father-son conflict is not solved. The tale ends on an unanswered question, "Who shall say?"

Who shall say what is the future of Pacific islands? As long as foreign powers loom large over the islands, and as long as male Pacific islanders are enthralled by Western values and forgetful of their own, who can tell how the islands will fare? Whatever progress may be made by a few wise ones, Pacific foundations remain fragile.

“Who shall say?”

To conclude – or rather, not to conclude – a tale entitled “The Isle of Voices” on the question: “who shall say?” is highly ironic. The narrator of “The Isle of Voices” is suddenly made voiceless. This may signal Stevenson’s reluctance to speak to the last for the natives. Just as Keola is a sorcerer’s apprentice and only incompletely carves an identity for himself, in the same way, Stevenson is an apprentice teller of tales in the Pacific and only incompletely tells a tale from the Others’ axiological and narrative points of views. As a Scotsman, it is not his to answer the Hawaiians’ quest of identity.

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