

HAWAIIAN MYTHOLOGY

MARTHA BECKWITH



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Martha Beckwith

with a new introduction by

Katharine Luomala

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INTRODUCTION

WHY, after thirty years, should Beckwith's *Hawaiian Mythology* be reprinted? Why, for the last twenty-five years, have scholars and amateurs alike sought for either new or used copies of this book which has become a rarity?

To begin with, it was the first, and is still the only, scholarly work which charts a pathway through the hundreds of books and articles, many of them obscure and scarce, and through the little-known manuscripts that record the orally transmitted myths, legends, traditions, folktales, and romances of the Hawaiian people. Beckwith herself saw it as a "guide to the native mythology of Hawaii" (p. xxxi), and by mythology she meant "the whole range of story-telling" (p. 2).

Secondly, from the vantage point of Hawaiian oral narrative the book directs the reader into similar material from peoples elsewhere in Polynesia who are closely related to the Hawaiians, reminding him of relevant narratives from areas west of Polynesia and occasionally even east of Hawaii. The southern Pacific comparison Beckwith offers as "an important link in tracing routes of intercourse during the period of migration of related Polynesian groups" (p. 5). However, except to summarize immediately the hypothesis current in 1940 and to make her detailed comparisons throughout the book, she is unconcerned with migration theory as such. Consequently, under the silent weight of testimony, the reader envisages for himself the Pacific being criss-crossed every which way by sailing families who passed on their lore wherever they found listeners.

Beckwith, it is soon evident, in naming the book *Hawaiian Mythology* gave it an overly limited and modest title. The title does not reflect her comprehensive consideration of the oral art of the Hawaiians and other Polynesians in relation to their

total culture. It thoroughly infuses every chapter, but it is up to the reader to extract references to economic life and oral art concerning it and put together a topical chapter on economics for himself. Writing to me in May 1955, four years before her death, of her wish to have me revise her book and bring out a second edition, Miss Beckwith said, "My special interest in writing the mythology was to produce a book which covered what I conceive to be the province of a true mythology—not merely a series of tales, but, with the tales as major illustration or formal expression, to point out the ideas of the relation of man to the world he lives in, geographic, historic, social and political, which result in such expression, and to connect the particular forms of expression developed in Hawaii to those common with his throughout the known Polynesian area. This last has been done pretty sketchily as was perhaps necessary to preserve unity and be manageable in a single volume. . . ."

Four is the Polynesian ritual number, so I shall cite but one more of several additional values that might be named. What a wealth of ideas and problems she discovered in preparing her guide! Again writing to me in May, she said, "I do like to see things as wholes as far as possible. Then one gets to know where the unexplored problems come in. There are still several in Hawaiian mythology that ought to be looked into. We must talk about them when I see you. . . ." The problems she discovered, but left only partially explored, are a heritage for this generation of scholars who will appreciate the enriched implications that time and new data have given to her ideas.

A new edition, Miss Beckwith wrote me, would, she hoped, bring the work up to date "with bibliography and checked for misprints or what I fear most, notes misplaced, since the original idea was to insert the note directly in the text in parentheses and in printing the present form said references might easily have got misplaced." She was more anxious about these errors than about the incorporation of new data. In answer to my suggestion that, even with her failing strength, she might still bring out articles that would put the new research into perspective, she wrote, "I am not so keen about the new material because that can always be put into another article, as you say, although I do love a single thor-

ough text on a subject to save the scholar's search over out-of-the-way references. For example, I don't suppose anybody ever uses my maiden article on 'Dance Forms of Moki and Kwakiutl Indians' which Dr. Boas kindly had printed in the *Americanist Journal*, out of whose same theme as suggested by Dr. Boas, Ruth Benedict wrote her real masterpiece."

Her weakening eyesight and the aftereffects of a stroke prevented her at eighty-four years of age from undertaking alone a revision of her book, although she had begun a piece here and there. For myself, I could not then imagine when I would find the time. Moreover, the book as she had first written it, misprints and misplaced references notwithstanding, was uniquely hers—a monument of permanent and irreplaceable value just as she had created it. Perhaps she did come to realize that for me to make revisions in her book, even with her permission, was in my mind equivalent to tampering. Now, although the petty errors remain and the various updated additions and revisions have not been made, at least her major wish is being granted, for she said, "But I do want the book to continue in use and how can it when the new people in the field who have come along must depend on a library copy or possibly have no such copy at hand?"

For those who did not have the good fortune to know this scholarly gentlewoman I shall quote, with permission of the American Folklore Society, most of the commemorative essay I wrote about her for the *Journal of American Folklore* (volume 75, 1962, pages 341–353).

Martha Warren Beckwith, president of the American Folklore Society in 1932–1933, was a major contributor to ethnography and folklore, most notably of two regions separated by a continent, the Pacific and the Caribbean.

Miss Beckwith's formal career in ethnography and folklore did not begin until her mid-thirties. She had already spent more than ten years, after graduating from Mt. Holyoke College, as a teacher of English at Elmira, Mt. Holyoke, Vassar, and Smith Colleges when in 1906, after studying anthropology under Franz Boas at Columbia University, she received her M.A. degree. In 1918, when she was forty-seven years old, she received her Ph.D. In 1920 she returned to Vassar, which she had left in 1913 after four years in the English

Department, but now her position was that of research professor on the Folklore Foundation and associate professor of comparative literature. The latter title was dropped in 1929, but the research professorship continued until Miss Beckwith's retirement in 1938. The Vassar Memorial to her in 1959 says of the research professorship that it "was probably unique in the history of American college education—and perhaps is even to this day. It was made possible by the generosity of a Mr. and Mrs. Alexander of Hawaii, was arranged by them anonymously through a lawyer so that even President MacCracken did not know the identity of the donors until after Miss Beckwith's retirement, and was given solely for Miss Beckwith. Even in this day of giving to colleges and universities by foundations we might remark this practice for serious consideration."¹

The Folklore Foundation developed from the close ties between the Alexander and Beckwith families on the island of Maui in the Hawaiian Islands. Miss Beckwith, born in Wellesley Heights, Massachusetts, on January 19, 1871, went as a young girl to the Hawaiian Islands with her parents, George Ely and Harriet Winslowe (Goodale) Beckwith, both schoolteachers. There were kinfolk in the islands; "cousins" is the general term used to describe those who are interrelated by many and intricate lines of descent from early missionaries. Miss Beckwith was the grandniece of Mrs. Lucy Goodale Thurston, who with her husband had been among the pioneer missionaries; and Miss Beckwith, though not born in the islands, became an adopted "cousin."²

Her father, who taught at Royal School and Punahou College, also developed a plantation at Haiku, Maui, that was later taken over by Alexander and Baldwin. It was on Maui that Miss Beckwith became a friend of Miss Annie M. Alexander, who was to become well known, particularly at the University of California at Berkeley, for her sponsorship and support of research in zoology, paleontology, botany, and other fields. Miss Alexander's interest in scholarship and her devotion to her friends is reflected also in the Vassar Folklore Foundation. In 1951 Miss Beckwith dedicated the climax of her research, her study of the *Kumulipo*, a Hawaiian creation chant, "To the memory of Annie M. Alexander, Lifelong

Friend and Comrade from early days in Hawaii, whose generous sponsorship has made the author's research possible."³

To Miss Alexander, whom I met when I was a freshman at Berkeley and already set to become an ethnographer and folklorist, I owe my meeting with Miss Beckwith and much encouragement and assistance in my own study. After I had written my master's thesis on American Indian folklore at Berkeley, the two deflected me into Polynesian study with the suggestion, already well plotted by them secretly without my knowledge, that I immediately join Miss Beckwith, who was then at Bishop Museum, to help her with her manuscript on *Hawaiian Mythology*. I left four days later on the *Malolo*.

Although best known for her work on the Hawaiian Islands, Miss Beckwith had also done fieldwork, or had made short visits productive of studies, in other parts of the world. She wrote from firsthand acquaintance about the folklore and ethnography not only of the Hawaiians but of the Jamaicans (both Negroes and East Indians), the American Indians (among others the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Oglala), the Portuguese residents of Goa, and present-day Americans (folk festivals, college superstitions, and Dutchess County folklore).

She made four trips to Jamaica, usually of five or six weeks at a time during her vacations in the summer of 1919, the winters of 1921 and 1922, and the spring of 1924. She also made four trips to the Dakotas. In the summer of 1926 she worked principally at Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, mainly with the Oglala, and in the summers of 1929, 1931, and 1932 at Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota, principally with the Mandan and Hidatsa. This American Indian fieldwork was done, she noted, at the suggestion of Franz Boas. She spent the spring of 1927, while on a trip around the world, in Portuguese India, which is singled out for mention because she inspired the collecting of lore there which was later published.

But always there were the return trips to the Hawaiian Islands, and they became increasingly frequent in later years. Her first year after retirement in 1938 from Vassar College, with the title of professor emeritus of folklore, was spent in the islands. Her headquarters as usual was at Bishop Museum

where she was honorary research associate in Hawaiian folklore during the years when she was most actively and continuously engaged in translating the Hawaiian manuscripts stored there. She translated, edited, and wrote explanatory notes and prefaces to the manuscripts of Kepelino, Kamakau, and other Hawaiian writers of the period of the Hawaiian monarchy. She prepared for her later work on creation chants and mythology, and continued with her large work *Hawaiian Mythology*. "Not before 1914 did the actual shaping of the work begin," she wrote in the preface to this book which was published in 1940, a year short of her seventieth birthday, and dedicated to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of Vassar College and the twenty-fifth year of Henry Noble MacCracken's presidency.

As soon as World War II had ended and she was able to obtain transportation, she left Berkeley, her new home since retirement, to visit the islands again. Now the translation and study of the Kumulipo was her main interest. It was published in 1951 when she was eighty years old. She made only one more visit to the islands after that, and her manuscript notes on the Hawaiian medicinal herbs that she collected then are now at Bishop Museum. Although a small part of the massive Kamakau translation with which she had been more closely associated than published acknowledgments hint was printed in Honolulu in 1961, she wanted no part in it, even if she had been asked, because she did not want her name connected with it unless she could do the total revision which she felt necessary to meet her standard of quality for publication.

The deep springs of the tremendous energy on which she drew all through her life are illustrated by her last visit to the Hawaiian Islands in 1951. She had only recently suffered from what had been feared would be either a fatal or a severely disabling stroke. Proving the doctors wrong on both scores, she recovered so well that she soon set out for the islands. She tramped around Maui with her remaining childhood friends and informants as she enthusiastically collected herbs regarded by Hawaiians as of medicinal value. She participated in a busy round of social activities on Maui and Oahu, and went swimming whenever she was near the ocean.

Late one overcast wintry afternoon she pointed out to her shivering companion, half her age, the distant reef to which she had thought nothing of swimming in her youth even after a long day of picnicking and riding horseback around the island. Then she plunged into the rolling breakers and started swimming as vigorously as if she intended not only to reach the reef but break her youthful record in doing it. Ocean "bathing," as she called this activity, she heartily recommended for improving her companion's lesser energy.

In the eight years remaining to her after that, only her failing eyesight seemed to handicap her continuing to write for publication, but she was able to read what was being published in the many fields of her interest and to comment on her reading in letters to her friends, and to plan for the disposal of her remaining research papers and exceptionally fine library.

Miss Beckwith was a dedicated scholar with great powers of concentration. If she were working alone, she was quite likely to forget appointments and the passage of time. If she were working with informants, translators, or other associates, her absorption sometimes disconcerted and wearied them, for she could sit for hours almost motionless except for moving pencil or tapping finger, focusing upon the manifold possibilities of the translation of a native phrase or the rich symbolism of a character. I recall a distinguished professor of anthropology, her contemporary, telling me, still with emotion decades after the occurrence, how he had enjoyed her rapt attention to his explanation of his subject until he had suddenly felt exploited (and probably as if he were one of his own Indian informants). That more than one ethnographer has forgotten that informants want to be assured from time to time of their value as human beings and not merely as information-relaying machines was vividly dramatized a few years ago for the Anthropological Society of Hawaii by some Micronesian guest speakers who burlesqued in pantomime the dedicated ethnographer-fidgeting informant situation which they had experienced when, after World War II, the Coordinated Investigation of Micronesian Anthropology blitzed their islands.

However, the association with Miss Beckwith provided a

rigorous training and discipline in the standards of sound scholarship which successfully drew from some of her informants not only their information for the immediate project at hand, but enabled them to continue independently later with confidence and respect for themselves as original contributors to scholarship. She generously noted with appreciation the names of the numerous people who had assisted her in any way, but her point of view seems to have been predominantly that she was merely the intermediary who had helped them preserve for their people and science what might otherwise have been lost forever in the face of rapid cultural change. She expected as much of them, therefore, as of herself.

Her dedication to her work accompanied an absentmindedness with regard to many events in the outside world or a strong perturbation when she was aware of them and they violated her standards. Many a story about Miss Beckwith begins, "Do you remember the time she . . .," and has the polished smoothness and kindly humor of affectionately retold family folklore. (See footnote 11.) Miss Beckwith herself, because of her semidetachment, often described most entertainingly bits and pieces of modern American culture that had captured her amused attention. For all her love of her research she liked to entertain her friends, and despite her reserve she expressed in time of her friends' elation or heart-break a penetrating intuition and sympathetic understanding. How aptly the Vassar Memorial describes her: "She was an inspiring teacher of the comparatively few students she recognized as promising, but she was no more interested in the average student than she was interested in the political and social problems of modern life. She had many warm friends, however, who appreciated her single-minded devotion to scholarship and her courage in the many difficulties of research in her chosen field. She was a charming and beautiful woman, the best type of Victorian lady and scholar."

E. S. Craighill Handy, who is himself a lifelong specialist in Polynesian culture and who knew Miss Beckwith and her work well, wrote more than twenty years ago that she "has been equally a pioneer in unearthing literary materials and discovering living sources of authentic knowledge."⁴ This

was true not only in the Pacific but in the Caribbean, and, in fact, wherever she happened to be.

Her interest in Hawaiian literary materials is worth emphasizing because she showed it from the beginning of her career when she selected the romance of *Laiikawai* to translate and study for her doctoral dissertation. The romance was a nineteenth-century newspaper serial based upon an oral narrative which Haleole, a creative writer, reinterpreted in the hope of founding a Hawaiian literature. At the beginning of this century, when Miss Beckwith was starting out in anthropology, the emphasis was more on recovering or reconstructing the pre-European culture of natives than on what the natives had done with European culture. Alien European influences were weeded out of source materials to reveal the old. Miss Beckwith, it appears, early realized the significance of studying the post-European period in itself, of describing it as it existed, and of valuing it, first and foremost, regardless of what alien influences blended with the old, as still the culture of the natives. That she did not always fully enough sort out native from European traits and track down all the foreign strands led to some criticism of both her Caribbean and Pacific research. E. G. Burrows, for example, differed with her on how to evaluate the Christian influences on Hawaiian mythology and on the descriptions of Hawaiian culture by Kepelino, Kamakau, and other compatriots of Haleole.⁵

Miss Beckwith, it seems, read the accounts written by native Hawaiians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as if she were Hawaiian. She saturated herself in the materials and was carried along by the continuity that she recognized as present in Hawaiian tradition despite the dynamic processes of change in pre-European or post-European times. However the tradition might change, it was ever-Hawaiian, for the Hawaiian had selected, consciously or unconsciously, in terms of his own system of values from a vast arc of cultural possibilities, to use Benedict's phrase. Introduced traits, whether Tahitian or European, in Hawaiian tradition must somehow harmonize or reflect an earlier, existing matrix or they would not have been accepted.

This point of view can be discovered, I think, not only in *Hawaiian Mythology* and in the preface to the translation of

Kepelino but in the study of the Kumulipo. In the latter work, Miss Beckwith writes of trying to see the creation chant "in the light of Polynesian thought" with the aid of her Hawaiian associates.⁶ She recognized that the prayer chant was "ancient and pre-Christian" but that it may have undergone rearrangements. It was still to her the Kumulipo of the Hawaiians.

How do the Hawaiians accept her intensive scholarship? I do not attempt to say but cite what struck me as poignantly indicative. Idly looking through a manuscript deposited in Bishop Museum and written by a Hawaiian who took a compatriot to task about his translation and interpretation of a certain legend, I came to a line in which the critic informed his compatriot that as for the word Ka-aloha-lani it should be Ka-alohi-lani, and as a clincher of the truth of his assertion he added "(see Beckwith Haw. Mythology)."

Despite the training the students of Boas got in folklore and the work many of them have done in it, Martha Beckwith was one of the few to become better known as folklorist than anthropologist although she also contributed to the ethnography of Hawaii, Jamaica, and Dakota Indians. Ethnography and oral narrative art are united in her work; one illuminates the other. That this is not more widely realized stems perhaps from her unwillingness or inability to emphasize the interpretations that flash up from her assemblage of empirical data. Often they are hidden among the data where those who consult her writings only for reference material too easily overlook them or maybe discover them only after the insights have been more dramatically presented in the work of others. Her basic procedure, exemplified in the Polynesian research, was, I think, to bring to light source data that might otherwise be overlooked and lost, to draw from them their inherent organization, and to sketch the outlines of their structure. She did not seek as a rule to solve a specific problem or to test a particular hypothesis, but to make a clearer overall map of the field than existed so that later more problem-oriented followers might benefit. In a way this applies to her monograph *Folklore in America* of less than a hundred pages which are devoted mainly to "Definition of the Field" of folklore in general and to "Method of Folklore" rather than

to the title of the monograph. The work has had less notice than it deserves. Of one of its contributions, Daniel G. Hoffman wrote, on page 226, of the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1959, twenty-nine years after its publication:

I have found no theoretical discussion which supersedes Martha Beckwith's suggestions, made almost thirty years ago, about the nature of those groups in America among whom folklore is found. She proposed that isolation through time of a group with its own distinctive culture, and the resultant stability of that culture, were the prerequisites for folklore. She found the isolation to be either spatial, occupational, linguistic, religious, or racial, or any combination of two or more of these factors. We can verify these criteria by mentioning the findings of some of our principal collectors and folk historians. . . .

In presenting the Hawaiian text of the romance of Laieikawai and her literal translation, Miss Beckwith prefaces them with a fine analysis of Hawaiian narrative art as revealed through this romance and other Hawaiian narratives, discusses Hawaiian narration in relation to that of the rest of Polynesia, and dwells extensively on the interaction of narrative with the rest of the aristocratic culture, and calls attention to the sociological importance of the customs mentioned in the narratives. Similar analyses appear in her later studies. Dorothy D. Lee, in a discerning review of that important work *Hawaiian Mythology*, writes:

For me, the value of this work lies in the fact that it is the only study of mythology I know in which the writer has not intentionally or unconsciously, interfered with the ideas which are presented. . . . She draws no distinctions where the Hawaiian does not draw them. She has steeped herself so thoroughly in her material, that she accepts what most of us would have tried, at best, to justify. In this way, she can transfer directly to the reader, Hawaiian concepts unacceptable to the reasoning of the Euro-American mind. . . . Out of Miss Beckwith's presentation emerges a world of thought in which identity is not delimited and not exclusive, where identities merge and overlap and divide without confusion. Here the concept is active and real. It is treated with respect; it is not explained away either rationally or on historical grounds; neither is it squeezed into an acceptable shape through the mold of scientific thought. . . .⁷

Beckwith's pioneering in research was as varied as her regions for doing fieldwork. The importance of her work in translating Hawaiian source material, garnering information on the culture, and creating paths for later students to follow in the chaotic and complex jungle of Hawaiian mythology are familiar to all. Little known, however, is her first paper, published in 1907, which probably summarizes part of her M.A. thesis in anthropology at Columbia University under Franz Boas. In the tribes studied and the point of view expressed, it recalls the work of Ruth Benedict, a later student of Boas. Beckwith once mentioned in passing to me that Boas had indeed called Mrs. Benedict's attention to her study and suggested developing certain lines of it. In this study on Hopi and Kwakiutl dance forms Beckwith sought to show "how two groups, sufficiently isolated to exhibit distinct cultural types, have developed distinct dramatic forms along the lines of their social and economic interests." Besides singling out their distinct forms she also pointed out how differently each culture, following its own peculiar and dominant bent, had interpreted even the traits which they shared, as, for example, that of having certain dancers play the part of fools.

Climaxing Beckwith's series of papers and monographs on her Jamaica fieldwork was her book published in 1929, *Black Roadways: A Study of Jamaican Folk Life*, of which many, predominantly favorable, reviews appeared in scientific journals and literary supplements of newspapers. The long, detailed, and generally complimentary review by Melville J. Herskovits is of particular interest because of his specialization as an Africanist.⁸ The book, he wrote, is "the first ethnographic study of the life of any New World Negro which, to my knowledge, has been attempted. She tries to see the culture of the Jamaicans as a whole, and she describes it as a unit as she would describe the culture of any distinct people." Her descriptions of customs were so detailed that he felt able to identify some as not merely African in origin but specifically, say, as Yoruba or Ashanti. Whatever defects the book had in treatment, he said, were those of a first study. It did not pay enough attention to examples of individual behavior or to variations from accepted patterns. Herskovits differed with some of the interpretations which he regarded as not taking