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LAA FROM TAHITI

WHEN history is told by genealogies, rather than by cycles of years, the time-problem is difficult to solve. But in the story of Laa-mai-Kahiki* the stories and genealogies of two widely separated groups of Pacific islands produce a certain degree of apparent accuracy. The Society Islands have the story of Raa who became a ruler and established a line of rulers which has continued to the present day. The genealogy of this Raa family coincides very closely in extent with the number of names given in the Hawaiian genealogies from the time of the visit of Laa from Tahiti to his uncle Moi-keha the Restless and his subsequent return to Tahiti. This places the time of Laa in the thirteenth century.

Moi-keha sailed away from the Hawaiian Islands with his brother Olopana and his nephew Laa. He returned alone, and won the island Kauai as his kingdom. Olopana and Laa remained in the “wide spreading” valley under the shadow of what the Hawaiians called the mountain Kapa-ahu the Tapa Cloak in far away Tahiti.

The mountains of Tahiti have been built upward from the floors of the ocean until their rugged ravines rise several thousand feet above the surf-washed beach. The centuries have softened the harsh mountain outlines and swept vast masses of debris down into the valleys, until at last tropical luxuriance dominates mountain slope and level plain. Here Laa’s youth was spent, and his manhood gained. Here he proved his superiority over the Tahitian chiefs among whom he had found his permanent home. Laa’s record is that of a Polynesian viking. He was born on the island Oahu. He went to Hawaii with his uncles and spent a part of his boyhood in the royal valley of Waipio. With these same uncles he sailed the many hundred miles to Tahiti.

It has always been the ambition of Hawaiian chiefs to excel in all athletic sports and warlike exercises. This was a course of training well fitted to make Laa high-spirited, courageous and ever ready to take the leadership among his fellow-chiefs in the new land where he made his home.

Years passed by. Moi-keha was held back
from longed-for sea journeys by the cares of his kingdom and the restful delights of a prosperous home. Children whose names became noted in Hawaiian legends grew to manhood and womanhood around him. Kahai, the sea-rover, a grandson of Moi-kea, is said to have sailed to Upolu in the Samoan Islands and there found a new species of breadfruit which he thought might well be placed by the older Hawaiian breadfruit. This he brought back with him and planted at Pearl Harbor.

Kila, the third son of Moi-kea, was made a messenger to Tahiti by his father. A great longing had taken possession of Moi-kea to see the foster son whom he had carried away many years before. Kila was said to be very careful and courageous with a strong desire to emulate the deeds of his ancestors. The call to the sea was hereditary and with eagerness he grasped the opportunity. The largest double canoes were selected, their mat sails were made from new and strong hala leaves and they were equipped for the long voyage. Fornander says that some of Kila’s brothers went with him. The old astrologer and sailor, Kama-hua-lele, who had come from Tahiti with Moi-kea, was selected to be the guardian of the young chiefs and pilot of the expedition.

Kila sailed from island to island until at last he left the high mountains of the island Hawaii and
sailed away to the South. The Kalakaua legends say that Kila bore with him a brilliant royal mantle made from the rare feathers of the mamo, and that Moi-kehā had been many months in the manufacture of the mantle, assisted by hundreds of bird hunters and skilled workmen. This was an especial offering to Laa, a reminder of the high esteem in which his foster father still held him, and a proof of the intense desire for him to visit his native land.

The long canoe voyage appears to have been blessed with favouring winds and clear skies. The stars were easily observed and followed until Tahiti was found. It seems to those who now cross the ocean in great ships that such a voyage is almost incredible, but the Hawaiians were vikings and were as intrepid sailors as the Norsemen who were sailing across the Atlantic Ocean about the same time.

At Tahiti they found Laa and his uncle Olopana. Fornander says that one set of legends gives the story of Laa’s speedy return to Hawaii with Kila. Another set of legends rehearsed the age of Olopana and his desire for Laa to remain with him until his life should end. All the legends agree in stating that Laa returned to the Hawaiian Islands, that he had with him a large retinue when he visited the home of his childhood and that he brought the drum known through all
the later years as Ke-ke-ke-ke. It was made by cutting out the pithy heart of a section of a large cocoanut tree, and thinning the shell as far as safety would allow. Then the ends were covered with the skin of a shark. Fornander says that “every independent chief, and every temple where human sacrifices were offered, had their own drum and drummer from Laa-mai-Kahiki’s time to the introduction of Christianity.”

The great event by which Laa was indelibly impressed upon the legends of Hawaii was his triple marriage with three selected chiefesses of the island Oahu.

The highest chiefs among the Hawaiians were glad to ally themselves with Laa-mai-Kahiki. Not only did the romance of far-away lands and mighty deeds attract attention, but his personal appearance and royal bearing seemed to have conquered all who came near. There was the general feeling that this powerful chief, who would soon return to Raiatea, must leave descendants among the Hawaiians.

Offerings were sent to the temples and the priests were consulted. The most sacred tests were made of the most important auguries known by the priesthood. The decision was announced that Laa must have wives given to him from among the young women of highest rank on Oahu, the home of Laa in his boyhood and still the place where the larger portion of his nearest relatives resided.

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The daughters of the chiefs of the districts Kualoa, Kaalaea and Kaneohe, all on the island Oahu, were selected and married to him in the midst of a great round of feasts and games.

It was always known that Laa would return to Tahiti, and yet many inducements were placed before him to lead him to stay. But he only waited until each of the three chiefesses gave birth to a son, and then sailed away to establish a lasting line of rulers in Tahiti, where, according to Tahitian custom, he was called Raa.

The ancient Hawaiian chants recorded the names of the three sons of Laa thus:

"O Laa from Tahiti, the chief.  
O Ahukini, son of Laa.  
O Kukona, son of Laa.  
O Lauli, son of Laa, the father.  
The triple canoe of Laa-mai-Kahiki.  
The sacred first-born of Laa,  
Who were born on the same one day."

This gift of three sons—a “triple canoe”—to the Hawaiians is one of the most fully accepted facts of the traditions of long ago. They established families of great prominence and their descendants were proud of this distinction as “children of Laa.”

Apparently there was little intercourse later with the southern groups of the islands of the Pacific Ocean. The vikings passed away and their descendants failed to conquer the dangers of the seas. It may be that a prolonged season of volcanic ac-
tivity discouraged sea roving. It is probable that many sailed away and were never heard of again. History seldom records the long list of failures among men. It has been better to tell of victories.