For R. Gordon Wasson

Mushroom Myth and Imagery in Hawai'i: Evidence for an Indigenous Cult

by Mark Hoffman

Ke ho'i a 'e ka 'opua i Awalau
(The rain clouds are returning to Awalau)
Hawaiian proverb, said of a return to the source.

He kukahi au, he wauke no Kuloi!
I stand alone, for I am a wauke plant of kuloli!

A boast:
"Like the lone wauke plant of Kuloli, I stand alone in my battles!"

When it comes to the question of the indigenous[1] ethnomycological traditions of Hawai'i, the consensus of those mycologists and ethnobotanists who have considered the problem is clear—prior to the introduction of cattle, horses, and sheep in the 1790s, there simply *was no tradition* to be considered (Pollock 1974; Allen & Merlin 1999; Desjardin 2002). To this day in Hawai'i, there is no ethnomycological record whatsoever for the period prior to contact. Despite some additional consideration of the problem,[2] evidence for an indigenous sacred mushroom tradition has not surfaced in the literature. It is due to this lack of evidence that experts have come to believe that no such practice, much less a mushroom cult, existed.[3]

1.

Consider this drawing of a "mushroom helmet" rendered by Arago in 1819, as well as the other evidence that accompanies this article. As we search for traces of indigenous use by various means, the essential question under consideration here is simple. Do these motifs, myths, and other bits of evidence, represent sacred mushrooms?

"How Strange it is.˙˙"

wrote R. Gordon Wasson, "...that the most spectacular, the most potent, mushroom lacks a name in the English language" (Wasson 1968). In order to account for the puzzling lack of a common name for *Amanita muscaria* among the Indo-Germanic languages, Wasson went to great depths to uncover and document cultural and linguistic evidence illustrative of the spiritual origins of specific fly agaric traditions, and the process by which sacredness and tabu become interrelated (Wasson & Wasson 1957; Wasson 1968). By pursuing those candidates that possess an unusual *absence* of information, one may very well be on path of the most sacred—and therefore tabu—of cultural phenomena. The stranger or more unlikely the absence, given the availability of similar or related data, the more likely we are to find deep veneration and a subsequent "protected" (tabu) status within the cultural context.[4]

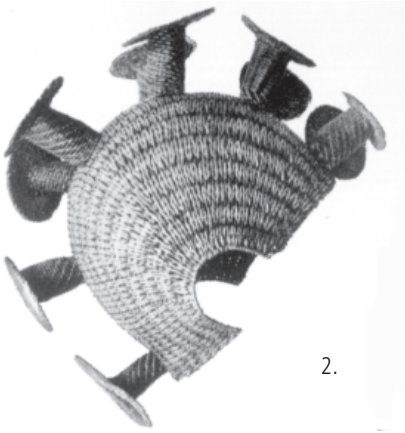
Author's Note: This article is dedicated to R. Gordon Wasson, the father of ethnomycology, who inspired this research. A cited photocopy of Figure 1 was found during a visit to the Wasson Archive, Harvard Botanical Museum Libraries. The author would also like to thank John Allen and Dr. Dennis Dejaridin for their assistance with this research.

If one accepts the idea that indigenous Hawaiians lacked any knowledge, names, or interest in the exotic world of fungi, then one must also accept that they do so while venerating and sacramentally consuming other, more common and accessible flora—as if the mystery and novelty of fungi would hold no interest for a shamanic people! Such an assumption seems unlikely.

Thus, we must look for a more satisfying explanation for the situation in Hawai'i—and we need not look far. In fact *huna* (secret)[5] is literally the name of a Hawaiian religion whose practitioners and functionaries are called *kahunas*. The concept of *tapu*, as the source and translation of our word "tabu," is close in meaning to *mana*, an important concept in Polynesian religion that describes a contagious spiritual power that lasts only short period of time. The word *tapu* is similarly used in describing transitory states such as shamanic ecstasy—or "being under the influence of the Gods"—and the sacredness of the ceremonies whose main function it was to channel this divine "energy" where it was desired (ELIADE 1987). Because this energy is characterized by its motion, *tapu*-infused or "sacred" foods, objects, *etc.*, must be carefully managed to avoid accidental exposure to potentially dangerous spiritual influences. The proscriptions are assigned "forbidden" status, and special preparations and precautions are established for entering states of "divine possession."

During the pre-contact period,[6] the rank and file of Hawaiian society must have been privy to *tapu* matters. Thus the existence of sacred traditions concerning mushrooms were probably not overly "secret," nor would there have been a desire to have them be so by the chiefs and *kahunas.* (Such a futile effort being doomed from the start, what with wearing helmets like that!) Given the fact that native Hawaiian's seem to have avoided wild mushrooms even

MUSHROOM HEADS AND HELMETS



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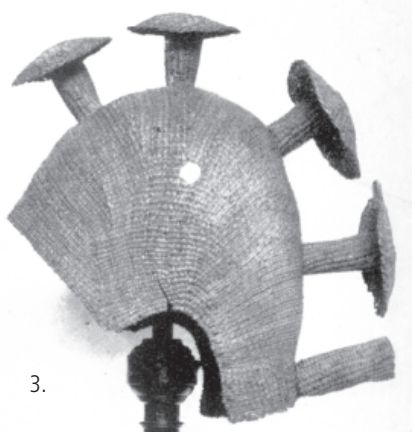
"Mushroom heads" like those that accompany this article appear in many locations worldwide as petroglyphs and in other forms, including the altar-sized mushroom-stones of the Americas and China, and the "owl head" megaliths across Eurasia. These and similar designs represent a consubstantiality with the "divine spirits" of the entheogenic mushrooms. The "mushroom head" motif lived on in various parts of Eurasia, and is found upon the heads of Gods (such as KRISHNA) or kings, being popular among the Sassannian and other Persian royalty. One especially interesting Egyptian statute, which had been owned by KAHIL GIBRAN and loaned to R. GORDON WASSON, sprouts a somewhat traditional-looking Egyptian multi-crown, but being slightly wider and rounder, looks remarkably like a flush of psilocybian mushrooms. Such mushroom helmets might be placed in a "category" along with the opium poppy headgear of ATTIS and various Old World Goddesses, as well as the lily-headed designs of Gods and shamans in both the Old and New Worlds.

While such images are revealing of entheogenic states, they also warn the observer of the tabu condition surrounding them. Considering this, I propose it likely that such ritual headgear (including the crowns of divinely-appointed and power-conferred monarchs), evolved from the need to protect against accidental exposure to a contagious, *tapu*-like power. Such protection would be especially appropriate to the Hawaiian/Polynesian need to "manage" the divine allocation of royal *mana*/*tapu*.

Other examples of sacred plant-headed motifs abound, even in Hawaii where we see (fig WHICH NUMBER IS THIS?), that well-known streaming headdress almost certainly derived from the decoration of masks and helmets with the long, thin leaves of the sacred *Ti* plant during rituals. The presiding shaman would also integrate themselves with the sacred flora by creating ritual paraphernalia and even disposable garments from the leaves of holy plants as a protective measure, presumably serving to mediate the *tapu* created by the rituals for the safe management and release of this temporary-but very delicate and contagious-spiritual condition. Similarly such concerns for ritual purity is the likely impetus of the *lei*-giving tradition.



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for food, it's likely that the *tapu* restrictions over time extended to all of the higher fungi, resulting in an "all out" ban on mushroom consumption. Such strong *tapu* could explain why the natives didn't even have a word for mushrooms. India's Santal language gives the unique attribute (within the vegetable kingdom) of "soul possessing" to their *pukita* mushroom (Wasson *et al.* 1986); it would be surprising if Hawaiians didn't also preserve a unique status for mushrooms in the natural order—considering them very powerful incarnations of *tapu* due to their unparalleled growth and special relationship to the sacred rain.

FUNGAL FECALPHILISM

It is an interesting fact that there is no known native Hawaiian word for "mushroom," nor any specific varieties thereof. This puzzling situation has led to the acceptance of a very unlikely conclusion (what with the comparative wealth of other specific plant names): that pre-contact Hawaiians either "didn't like" or "had no interest" in mushrooms. Given what we know of historical food shortages and famine (Chock 1968), and keeping in mind the advanced herbal-pharmacological skill of specialist *kahunas* who study plant medicine starting as young as five years of age, this is a conclusion I can not accept.[7]

I recently learned that it would be a serious mistake to apply my wholesome American fecalphobia to native Hawaiians, and by so doing perpetuate the assumption that "horse dung" is viewed with any disdain. Exploring their *kava* customs I read in a traditional prayer: "...and produce for us excrement for your land which has stood orphaned. This is your *kava*, Male Ancestor..."(Lebot *et al*. 1992).

Although I had realized that it would be prudent to check into the assumption that there was nothing "behind" the post-contact term for "mushroom" that is in widespread use, *kukaelio* ("horse dung"),[8] I hadn't yet considered the idea of the potential sacredness of excrement. I came away from this reading with a new hope that the persistent problem of the Hawaiian mushroom "horse shit" would soon be resolved to my satisfaction.

Checking Hawaiian dictionaries for this and related terms, I notice a very promising entry: "kukae'ua'u. A medicinal plant (no data)" (Pukui & Elbert 1971). First it is a matter of combining the root *kukae* (excrement) with *ua* (rain). The final "u," however, is not a standard connective (like "o" or "a") allowing for the simple "excrement of rain." Rather, and very appropriately, the word ends the characteristic "au" of the words "drug" and "heal" ('au). The inclusion of the medical characteristic in the dictionary reinforces my interpretation that the *'au* of "drug" is intended.

Another similar fungal word is also present: "kukaela: Eggs deposited by flies, as in meat. *Lit.*, sun excrement." The presence of maggots and flies certainly conjures to mind the image of rotting fungi. In addition, the word for mite in Hawaiian is *'ona*, which also means "intoxication." Given that flying insects were also thought to cause possession, insanity, and intoxication in medieval European lore (Wasson & Wasson 1957), the sun's role here is consistent with that of sacred illuminator, with dung being a breeding ground for those small insects associated with intoxication (perhaps due to the psychoactive mushrooms that also frequent such habitats).

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The word "dung," *kukae* is often used to designate a fungus-like "excretion" and in fact, is the root of several types of lower fungi. Of the later, a certain *kukae-akual*—"ghost excrement" or "god excrement" (Pukui & Elbert 1971)[9]—is considered an excreta of spiritual origin. The same fungus also goes by the name *hua-mai-lani*, or "fruit of (the) sky." This particularly appropriate description of fungi indicates that the same "dung of God," was probably applied to various entheogenic species of edible "fruit" fungi, and intended in the same manner as the "*kava* excrement" is applied above.

In fact there is evidence that such "excrement" was indeed eaten in a magico-religious context. There is a proverb involving an *'ai pilau* (eater of filth) who is said to practice malicious sorcery by this means. His God is called *akua'ai pilau* (Pukui 1983). Notice that in this malicious context *kukae* is not used however, the "filth" instead going by *pilau*.

DIVINE IDENTITY

If I am right in my speculation that there *was* a native sacred mushroom tradition, then it is certainly possible that one may find indications of the "missing" mushroom names among the many Gods of the Hawaiian pantheon. Suggesting themselves immediately as candidates of a botanical avatar were the mysterious and magical "little people" of the Hawaiian forests, the *menehune*. Kane, bringer and source of the "water of life" is their God, and he is also God of the forest. Like the little people of enchanted European forests, these phallic "little men" are said to achieve amazing feats of "construction,"[10] usually during the night (Knipe 1989). In one example these little people, night after night, replant a felled tree that is to be made into a canoe. One might speculate that the *menehune* "live" and "hide," appearing and disappearing as inhabitants resurrected periodically, as they fruit from the rotting trunk.

The name *menehune*—often described as "magical" and "mysterious"—is certainly cognate with *mea huna*, which means "secret" (Pukui & Elbert 1971). Considering the curious fact that the important designations *menehune*, *huna*, and Kane all carry as a primary definition "minute particle, tiny" (as a means of indicating their "hidden" identity), it is again significant that *'ona*, the word for "mite" (or tiny flying insect) means "intoxicated."

The wind God Makai-ke-oe, also endowed with the power of plant growth, took form as an intoxicating tree whose branch (*mana* in Hawaiian) was a potent but dangerous love potion, inducing visions and voices (Beckworth 1940). Entheogens and other psychoactives are often also considered aphrodisiacs (Rätsch 1997). Even more interesting for our mycological purposes is another version of this God, Kapua'i'aia called the "wicked footprint" (Pukui & Elbert 1971).[11] This intoxicating God is found where we would expect to locate a mushroom—on the ground.

ARAGO PAINTS US A PICTURE

Given what is known about the cultures that produced similar "mushroom head" renderings (and in the absence of other explanations for the motif), that the unusual headgear of the Hawaiians was rendered naturalistically becomes obvious when considering this headgear alongside "mushroom" glyphs (McBride 1969). Jaques Etienne Victor Arago, who provided a narrative of his 1817–1820 "voyage 'round the world" for the French government, drew the depiction of a mushroom helmet (fig. 1) shown at the start of this ar-

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ticle (Arago 1823). Mushroom heads also appear in petroglyph form on several other occasions. One such glyph even shows tapu lines coming from the (mushroom) head (fig. 5). The glyphs strengthen the argument because they are so different from the helmets, but also clearly fungal. The distinctive helmets are also rendered in glyph form—these appear in print along with other helmeted figures, but their source is not cited (Feher 1969). The idea that the petroglyphs were often involved in initiation rites has been proposed (McBride 1969), and that they are generally linked to sacred phenomena is widely accepted by researchers (Lee & Stasack 1999).

If we allow that these motifs do in fact refer to mushrooms, it comes as no surprise to us that—of the ubiquitous anthropomorphic figures, which represent the majority of the glyphs—there are but a few styles that deviate from the simple round head form. Of these variations the vast majority can be identified as animal heads and/or known headdresses or helmets. Acknowledging and allowing for the importance of shamanic and visionary themes, it is safe to conclude that anthropomorphic glyphs represent naturalistic phenomena. Such naturalistic depictions developed, over time, to include the characteristic triangular torso and muscular forms of Hawaiian glyphs. This conclusion is also consistent with the documented and widely-accepted idea that these glyphs were important objects of sympathetic magic (Cox & Stasack 1970; Farley 1889). This being the case, we would expect a bemushroomed individual to be represented as we find our examples. In fact naturalism is the central guiding principle in Hawaiian glyph art, which is obvious from the wide range of identifiable flora, fauna, and material culture (Lee & Stasack 1999).[12]

HAWAIIAN SACRED PLANT TRADITIONS

La'a, meaning "sacred, holy, devoted, consecrated, set apart for sacred purposes, dedicated" is the root most often found in words that refer to medicinal herbs, and related treatments, and is also the root of "intoxicating drug" (*la'au 'ona*, "intoxicating plant or medicine") and "narcotic" (*la'au ho'omalule kino*, "plant or medicine to bring peace to the body"). Also sharing the root *la'a*, are the words that designate psychoactive plants such as *Datura stramonium* and *Papaver somniferum* (Pukui & Elbert 1971). We know that a mythological and ritual complex, involving sacred and sometimes psychoactive plants, was an important part of Hawaiian religion. For instance one finds many mythological references to *lohiahu* or "the water of life," the great prize of the underworld that can revive the dead (Beckworth 1940). And there is a consecrated drink, for the princess Hi'iaka who—as sister of Pele and equal in power to him—is also able to revive the dead by means of "medicinal herbs" and drinking the "water of life." Another sacred plant is an evergreen tree called *noni* (*Morinda citrifolia*), which was brought by the earliest Polynesian settlers and is an important part of the native pharmacopeia. According to a Tongan myth, it was the leaves of this tree that revived the lifeless Maui. And there are, of course, the famous *'awa* (*kava* or *Piper methysticum*) drinking ceremonies, so central to and symbolic of the exercise of secular as well as sacred power. There is also a "potent liquor much like a clear brandy" called *okolehau* (or *oke*), which is distilled from the baked root of the *Ti* plant (*Cordyline terminalis*), a member of the lily family. This plant, sacred to the God and Goddess of the *hula*, is also an emblem of "high rank and divine power." As mentioned the leaves of this plant were used as decorations on sacred masks and helmets, and it is thought that the feather *hahili* evolved from *Ti*-laden headgear (see www.hawaii-nation.org/canoe/k1.html).

CONCLUSION

Were the mushroom motifs extant among the native Hawaiians prior to European contact and the introduction of cattle and horses, which started in the 1790s? Arago's depiction—obviously representing mushrooms—was done in 1819. Due to the series of events that would have had to have taken place prior to this time in order for these helmets to appear, the improbability of their representing a post-contact motif speaks for itself.[28] I hope that additional research will be done into the eventual Western influence, particularly with regard to the assignment of the *kukae* cluster to fungi (in the case of *kukaelio*). Several promising and suggestive terms have been preserved among the fungal group. Considering these, along with paying careful attention to the spiritual ontology of lower fungi (in the case of the *kukae akua* "ghost dung/god dung," and its related traditions), I propose that it is highly improbable that early Hawaiians didn't have some entheomycological traditions. Eventually, additional linguistic and mythological analyses may make moot the need to establish the visual motif prior to contact.

Perhaps the evidence presented here will stimulate additional discussion and research, contributing to a more satisfactory understanding of the early ethnomycology of native Hawai'i. Your comments and suggestions are encouraged. Aloha.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

1) Arago's 1819 rendering. "Mushroom Ornamented Helmets... Such helmets apparently were not covered with feathers." Image scanned from Feher 1969.

2) Mushroom helmet with two rows of "ornaments." Image scanned from Feher 1969.

3) Mushroom helmet a single row of "ornaments." Image scanned from Feher 1969.

4) Mushroom head petroglyph from the Kaeo 1 site, Puako, Hawai'i Island. Scanned from Lee & Stasak 1999.

5) Petroglyph with *tapu* or *mana* lines from the Kaeo 10 site, Puako, Hawai'i Island. 76 x 43 cm. Scanned from Lee & Stasak 1999.

6) Petroglyph with ritual botanical headgear from the Ka'upulehu site, Hawai'i Island. 130 x 83 cm. "A finely pecked chiefly figure with muscles, elaborate headdress, and an unusual mushroom-shaped head." Scanned from Lee & Stasak 1999.

7) Petroglyph from the Ka'upulehu site, Hawai'i Island. "Two finely pecked muscle figures with oddly shaped heads...have been vandalized by gross pecking." Scanned from Lee & Stasak 1999.

8) Mushroom head from Ahupu Iki site 121G, Kaho'olawe Island. Scanned from Lee & Stasak 1999.

9) Mushroom head from Lana'i Island. Scanned from Lee & Stasak 1999.

10) An interesting comparison, this image is *not* from Hawai'i, but rather it depicts a "Mexican goddess representing the spirit of *teonanácatl* mushrooms incarnate, from Mixtex *Codex Vindobonensis*, circa 1500 A.D. The mushrooms issuing from her head mirror a motif found in the Mexican *Lienzo de Zapatepec*, in first millennium B.C. petroglyphs from Siberia and in more ancient petroglyphs from Tassili, Algeria...Drawn by Martín Vinaver, México, April 1993." Scanned from Ott 1993.

NOTES

1) Here "indigenous" is defined as that culture living on the archipelago before contact with European cultures. Though the most geographically remote of all cultures, many of the sources of this unique civilization (as encountered by British explorer Captian James Cook and those that followed) remain of unknown origin and probably reflect an eclectic mix of influences from several continents. Another unsettled matter has to do with the historical likelihood that Hawai'i was visited much earlier than previously believed (McBride 1969; Lee & Stasak 1999). The Spanish recorded an encounter with uncharted islands in this area. Hawai'i's native legends often mention early visitors, and such "folk tales" are generally accepted as having a factual basis among the Polynesian "natives." Such contact may have occurred as early as the 1550s, explaining the introduction of non-Polynesian objects such as the "helmet" headgear, long cloaks, and daggers (Lee & Stasak 1999).

2) Evidence for pre-contact use of entheogenic mushrooms has been sought in the past—without any published result—by Andirja Puharich the controversial parapsychologist and author of *The Sacred Mushroom*, together with David Bray, a well-known Hawaiian *kahuna*.

3) This conclusion is also based upon the fact that no native species of psychoactive mushroom is yet known, nor is one expected to be discovered (Pollock 1974; Allen & Merlin 1999; Desjardin 2002). It is true, however, that several species designated "native" have not been bioassayed or otherwise analyzed, and these may yet prove psychoactive (Desjardin 2002).

4) As a general rule, the applicability of this principle increases proportionally to the sacredness of the plant. Thus entheobotany, focusing on what are traditionally the most sacred plants and fungi, must not be discouraged by situations like we find in Hawai'i. Rather, such a rare and remarkable case is bound to *reveal* the desired and forbidden fruits.

5) *Huna*, compared to the terms *mana* and *tapu/kapu* has a much more limited range of meaning. Still, it should be noted that the first definition "minute particle, grain" indicates an inherent mystery or "difficulty of seeing" rather than the religious convention of "hiding" or "disguising" (*i.e.* "keeping secret") spiritual information, which is only the secondary meaning (Pukui & Elbert 1971).

6) Such secrecy usually results when the religion of an invading nation establishes oppressive and putative measures or otherwise co-ops and decimates the competition. Certainly in Hawai'i—where conversion to Christianity was especially

swift, destructive, and complete—this must have played an important role in pushing the "sorcerers" underground, where such traditions may yet be preserved.

7) In addition to possessing a sophisticated spiritual world view, *kahunas* were also "highly specialized experts with considerable skill in physical diagnosis and pharmacology," according to Drs. F.L. Tabrah and B.M. Eveleth, from a report to the *Hawaii Medical Journal* on "The Effectiveness of Ancient Hawaiian Medicine." (See www.naturestruth.com/history_of_noni.htm.)

8) Clearly *kukaelio* ("horse dung") was coined by native Hawaiian speakers *after* the introduction of horses. Mushrooms also sometimes went by *mamalu*, meaning umbrella (Desjardin 2002).

9) Though for some reason not mentioned in this definition, *akua* carries the primary meaning "God."

10) Though extended to canoes, in typical "fairy tale" fashion, such "construction" has a primary meaning of "growth"—miraculous/non-ordinary/mushroomic growth, as in the present mythological example.

11) Literally "wind of the trailing whistling," an apparent reference to the pursuing "voice" of the God's alter ego.

12) Abstract (or 'geometric') designs are not uncommon, but they are not necessarily related to naturalistic glyphs. For this reason it would be a mistake to assume that a mushroom-headed glyph combines the human figure with an "abstract" symbol of unknown meaning. The abstract category is of course the most difficult to interpret (Lee & Stasack 1999), and it is probable that many of the "abstract" designs were intended as pictograms of everyday phenomena, which due to their simplicity, have yet to be identified.

13) Included among these preconditions are; the sufficient spread of cattle and horses, the incorporation of a the new mushroom entheogen into the spiritual life of Hawaiians, the incorporation of the motif into their sacred arts, the gradual replacement of previous (and venerable) helmets with the fungal design, the wide dispersion of this motif that Arago found, and the development of the motif to the high degree of skill his renderings attest. All of this would have had to taken place in about 25 years.