

Ku'u Ēwe, Ku'u Piko na Melehina Groves

Ku'u ēwe, ku'u piko, ku'u iwi, ku'u koko. My umbilical cord, my navel, my bones, my blood. While it is a very simple statement, this 'ōlelo no'eau powerfully and eloquently illustrates the connection between the physical and the spiritual in the Native Hawaiian worldview. This saying refers to a very close relative, but it also shows us that our ēwe, our piko, our iwi, and our koko bind us to our kūpuna -- they are physical reminders of our relationships and the responsibility we have been given to honor them.

Tūtū Pūku'i defines the ēwe, or 'iewe, as more than just the umbilical cord -- it is the "afterbirth, placenta, infant, and relative of a common ancestry." 'Iewe can even be used to refer to one's birthplace -- ēwe hānau o ka 'āina are "natives of the land" -- or to a common family trait. It houses the mana of both mother and child -- a physical representation of this most sacred and powerful connection. In this wider context, one can see how a baby's 'iewe ties him not only to his mother, but also to the countless generations that came before him, nurtured him, and claim him.

Today, a growing number of Native and non-Hawaiians, their families, and supporters are working to change a policy which they feel threatens the physical and mental health and well-being of kānaka maoli children. This policy, which took effect on June 9, 2005, made it unlawful for families to take their baby's 'iewe home and called for the "summary destruction" of all 'iewe on hospital grounds, classifying it as "infectious waste." The Department of Health asserted that this was an important governmental policy aimed at protecting the public from the transmission of diseases such as HIV and Hepatitis B and C through "improper disposal of infectious human tissue." However, many cultures, including Native Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino, share the belief that the proper way to honor the 'iewe and protect the newborn child is to bury the 'iewe deep in the ground.

Public health and welfare are certainly important concerns for all of us. However, in testimony before Senate and House Health Committee hearings, opponents to this measure pointed out that there are ways to ensure the 'iewe does not carry an infectious disease before releasing it to a family, and that burial is actually a technique recommended by the Center for Disease Control. Many feel that there is not sufficient reason to justify the seizure and disposal of all 'iewe, a practice which ignores the sanctity and mana of the 'iewe, as well as the relationship between mother, child, and ancestors it represents.

Opponents of this policy to "summarily dispose" of all 'iewe have found hope in HB 2057, a bill which provides that the 'iewe may be released to the woman from whom it originates. If this bill continues to move forward in the legislature, it will be a means of protection for the spiritual and religious practices of Native Hawaiians and other cultures. Some point out that there are international laws to consider as well -- laws which protect our rights as an indigenous people to practice our customs and preserve traditional knowledge.

There are numerous references by Native Hawaiian scholars as to the paramount significance of properly honoring the 'iewe upon a child's birth. According to Tūtū Pūku'i in Nānā i ke Kumu, the 'iewe was most often washed, as "the unwashed placenta could cause the baby's eyes to be weak or sore. The placenta carelessly disposed of could bring harm to the child. The placenta that was burned or that was dried out could diminish the child's vitality." Today, Native Hawaiians still practice this private ceremony of honoring the 'iewe, thereby protecting the newborn child's mana and health, at the same time reinforcing his spiritual connection to his ancestors.

Tūtū Pūku'i tells us that a child's 'iewe would often be buried beneath a certain tree that would then become the "property" of that child and would keep him from wandering, ensuring that the child's spirit would never be homeless. "Puna maka kōkala -- Puna of the eyelashes that curve upward like the thorns of the pandanus leaves," refers to the practice of burying the 'iewe beneath a hala (pandanus) tree so that the child's eyelashes would grow long like the thorns of the hala. Tūtū Pūku'i explained that during ceremonies like these, families oftentimes prayed to both ke Akua and the child's 'aumākua, thanking them for blessing the mother with a successful birth and invoking their mana during the ceremony.

Although these practices undoubtedly trace back to antiquity, Samuel Kamakau cites in Ka Po'e Kahiko that these practices were first recorded during the time of Heleipawa, a Maui chief and the son of Kapawa. According to Kamakau, the places where an ali'i's piko and 'iewe were deposited were as important as his birthplace, his famous deeds, and the land where each was buried. In ancient times, "when a male child was born he was taken immediately to the mua (the men's eating house and family chapel) [to be consecrated to the gods.] If he was a royal child... the placenta was washed well in water and taken care of by the kahunas, and the child was washed."

I believe that many Native Hawaiian families, perhaps more than we realize, have continued this tradition of honoring the 'iewe for countless generations. Sometimes these things are not spoken of until it is necessary. One such family, upon asking the hospital for their firstborn's 'iewe, was told simply, "it isn't done." That was back in 1977. They had intended to plant a baby hala tree over the 'iewe, and although they were denied their request, planted the little tree anyway. That hala tree, the father shared with me, died within a couple of years. Although their yard is full of healthy hala trees, this one "needed its 'iewe and could not survive without it."

Not all families will come forward to share their stories, as for some it is much too personal, but we must not ignore this issue. Even if this practice no longer exists in our own individual families, we all have a kuleana to stand with those who believe the health of our children will be threatened by the loss of the 'iewe, a vital connection between mother, child, and k_puna. E 'onipa'a k_kou.

See also, "Cultural Birthright or Infectious Waste?" Ka Wai Ola o Oha Newsletter March 2006, vol. 23 no. 3

"Customary Release of Placentas Demanded" Star Bulletin 2/11/06