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Aztec and Hawaiian Beliefs of Returning Gods:
How They Influenced the First Encounter with the Europeans

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Introduction

Although the ancient Aztec and Hawaiian civilization were separated in history by hundreds of years and geographically by the Pacific Ocean, the two cultures possessed some similar religious beliefs. Both societies worshiped multiple deities, praised their leaders as divine, and built massive religious centers. Modern scholars embrace these cultural characteristics as symbols of the civilizations' religious focuses. However, the two cultures also shared seemingly irrational beliefs in returning gods.

The Aztecs believed that a deity would return from the east. According to the Spanish chronicle, the Aztecs thought this prophesy fulfilled with the arrival of Cortés in 1519. Thousands of miles to the west the Hawaiians had a similar vision. They believed Lono, worshiped as one of four major gods, would return during the *Makahiki* festival. The Hawaiians thought Captain James Cook arriving with two European ships in the 1770's was their returning god. In both the case of Mexico and of Hawai'i, historians have developed differing views on the reality and the importance of these prophesies.

As the historiography sections explain, through most of the twentieth century scholars accepted the Aztec returning god myth. However, with the emergence of postmodernism, historians began to reexamine the myth and argue it was a fabrication of the post-conquest world, used to explain why the Aztecs easily fell to the Spaniards. The current, historical, scholarly doubting of the importance of this prophesy is the result of confusing the differences between the influences this myth had on the initial contact between the two cultures with its impact on the Spanish conquest. The conquest should not be considered purely a subset of the initial encounter, but a completely different episode. The confusion over differentiating between these two events results from their

close proximity in time. (This concept will be explored further after the Hawaiian historiography section.)

Historians need to restructure the way they perceive the importance of the Aztec returning god myth. By studying the Aztec and Hawaiian prophecies together, undoubtedly the importance of both myths lies in their separate influences on the initial contacts between the indigenous cultures and the Europeans, not their impacts on the conquests of the empires. This confusion has not occurred in the ancient Hawaiian scholarship. Therefore, Aztec specialists should follow the model used by Hawaiian historians.

Unfortunately, the opposite has occurred. With the growth of postmodernist ideas, historians introduced skepticism about the Hawaiian returning god myth. Constant reevaluation of historical sources is necessary, but modern historians should not completely discount the importance ancient religious beliefs had on their societies. Modern historians will never fully understand these prehistoric, mystic beliefs. Nevertheless, it is deceitful to dismiss the significance of these prophecies due to our own epistemological thoughts. By examining the returning god myths appropriately their influences on the initial contacts are obvious.

This thesis examines past historical arguments concerning the prophecies and differentiates between the influences the myths had on the initial encounters between the Europeans and the aboriginal cultures with the impact those myths had on the end of the empires. After these explanations, detailed description of Quetzalcoatl and Lono are provided and I describe why Cortés and Cook were received as these returning gods. Lastly, the influences these myths had on the initial encounters will be considered and

accounts of the events that led both cultures to realize the Europeans were not divine are explored.

Historical Views Regarding the Returning god myth of the Aztecs

Scholars have approached the study of the Aztecs' conquest from different perspectives. One of the many questions that have risen to the forefront of this scholarly debate regards the role of religious superstitions and the myth of Quetzalcoatl's return. The question of the Aztecs' belief that Quetzalcoatl, a former emperor and god in Mesoamerica, would return has both fascinated and puzzled historians. Over time historians' opinions have changed. Early in the 20th century, few historians questioned the validity of the returning god myth. Zelia Nuttall, one of the few scholars who disputed the legitimacy of the myth during the early part of the century, focused primarily on the ancestral origins of the Aztecs. However, most early twentieth century scholars including D.G. Brinton, H.H. Bancroft, and T. Esquivel Obregon entirely accepted the validity of the myth. The Aztec returning god myth was well accepted by the 1950's and 1960's. Historians, including D.M. Poole, Alfred Crosby and Sara Cohen, began to only briefly mention the myth; instead, scholars concentrated on other aspects of the Aztec collapse, such as disease. Yet, historians never completely forgot about the myth. In the 1980's, scholars such as H.B. Nicholson, David Carrasco, and Stephen Colston began to question the validity of certain aspects of the myth, while largely accepting it as true. However, even more recently, historians including Susan Gillespie and Camilla Townsend completely discount the myth, labeling it a post-conquest fabrication.

In order to trace the different views presented in these scholarly articles and monographs published between 1906 and 2003, and to explain why these differences

exist, I will ask three questions of these articles: which questions are the authors seeking to answer in their publications; which primary sources do the scholars use and what questions do they ask of those sources; and lastly, which historians and scholars do these authors cite? By studying these works, the shifts within history become clearer.

Zelia Nuttall's article, "Some Unsolved Problems in Mexican Archeology," attempts to address her primary question of the ancestral origin of the Aztec people. The main focus of her article was proving that the Aztecs had previously met the Spaniards and these earlier Spaniards became the ruling class of the ancient society. Furthermore, she argues the barbarians began to slowly corrupt these Spaniards. Nuttall claims that when Cortés and the Spaniards arrived in 1518, Moctezuma received them as his ancient relatives, who were coming to save him from his barbaric subjects. Within her article there is a secondary argument about the returning god myth of the Aztecs.

In the first section, "Moctezuma's Evidence as to His Ancestry and Origin" she considers Cortés's "Second Letter to Charles V" written on October 30, 1520 and includes literal translations of addresses made by Moctezuma to the Spaniards. Nuttall uses this second letter to prove Moctezuma felt the Spaniards were "familiar with the history of his foreign ancestry."¹ Nuttall also uses the study by Fray Bernardino de Sahagun who came to Mexico in 1529. Sahagun combined narratives told to him by the natives and later published these narratives in the *Historia de Nueva Espana*, also referred to as *The Florentine Codex*. *The Florentine Codex* is a twelve volume history of the arrival of the Spaniards and the conquest, written by the Aztec people in the Nahuatl

¹ Zelia Nuttall, "Some Unsolved Problems in Mexican Archeology," *American Anthropologist*, Vol.8, 1 (Jan. - Mar. 1906), 137.

language, and subsequently translated by Sahagun into Spanish. After the introduction of this source, Nuttall mentions the myth of Quetzalcoatl:

It will be seen that the name Quetzalcoatl does not appear in any of these, the earliest texts... Yet, notwithstanding the incongruity of certain details recorded (as, for instance, the fact that, unlike the sun, the solar god took his departure toward the east), the current belief is that Moctezuma narrated 'the Quetzalcoatl myth' to the Spaniards and that he sacrificed himself and his people to a foolish superstitious belief in an imaginary god or hero. It seems strange that, if this was actually the case, the astute Cortés did not simply inform the emperor that Moctezuma had recounted to him 'a ridiculous fable about their god,' a phrase often used by his contemporaries in speaking of native religious myths. And what is even stranger still, is that the keen-minded Friar Sahagun, who obtained a deep knowledge of the native religion and superstitions, writes naught of the connection... Nor does Bernal Diaz.²

Nuttall's article is in direct response to two monographs: D.G. Brinton's *Myth of the New World*³ and H.H. Bancroft's *History of Mexico*⁴. Instead of crediting the myth to these primary sources Nuttall uses them to answer her initial question. She states that by studying these sources she believes "Moctezuma absolutely believed in the foreign origin of his ancestors and sacrificed his power and position to what might be termed a quixotic conception of his duty toward the rightful, though remote, sovereign of his people."⁵ Nuttall's lack of attention and notice of the inclusion of the prophesy within these sources is not a result of its absence, but the consequence of the questions she asked of the sources and her misguided thesis. Focused on finding the ancestral origins of the Aztecs and Moctezuma's view of the Spanish as ancestors, Nuttall failed to recognize evidence of the myth. Later historians (see below) found evidence within the exact same sources and excerpts.

² Nuttall, "Some Unsolved Problems," 140-141.

³ Daniel Garrison Brinton, *The Myths of the New World: a Treatise on the Symbolism and the Mythology of the Red Race*, New York: Leypoldt and Holt, 1868.

⁴ Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Mexico*, San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft, 1888.

⁵ Zelia Nuttall, "Some Unsolved Problems," 141.

By 1919 when T. Esquivel Obregon wrote the article “Factors in the Historical Evolution of Mexico,”⁶ it was an unquestioned, historical “fact” that the Aztecs accepted Cortés as Quetzalcoatl, a belief that greatly contributed to the conquistador’s success.

Obregon simply wrote:

It was a general belief among the Indians that the god Quetzalcoatl would come from the east to recover his kingdom, and this superstition together with the hatred inspired tyranny of Moctezuma, enabled the Spaniards to take possession of the land without resistance, other than a few battles with the Tlaxcaltecas, who afterward became their most faithful allies.⁷

This statement clearly reveals that historians accepted the myth as a major causal factor explaining the conquest. They relied on sources such as *The Florentine Codex*, and scholars such as Nuttall, simply did not notice this evidence, due to her focus on tracing the ancestral origins of the Mexicans. However, Obregon also mentions another factor of Spanish success: the poor leadership abilities of Moctezuma. He illustrates that historians began to shift the focus from the religious beliefs of the Aztecs to other causal factors. This shift of focus continued during the World Wars and into the 1950’s and 1960’s partially due to the expansion of scientific reasoning and a scholarly backlash against mysticism.

With new technological and scientific advancements during the World Wars, the discipline of history became increasingly scientific in methodology and focus. As the discipline of history broadened, researchers focused on alternative explanations for the

⁶ T. Esquivel Obregon, “Factors in the Historical Evolution in Mexico,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 2. 1 (1919), 135-172.

⁷ T. Esquivel Obregon, “Factors in the Historical Evolution in Mexico,” 139.

conquest including the Spaniards' technological superiority, diseases, and the effects the conquest had on the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican people and the environment.⁸

Although historians between the 1940's and 1960's began to examine other causal factors, historians continued to reevaluate the returning god myth. Sara E. Cohen's article, "How the Aztecs Appraised Moctezuma," focuses on discovering the reasons for the Aztec conquest at the hands of the Spanish. Using the same sources as Zelia Nuttall, but asking different questions of them, Cohen attributes the collapse of the Aztec empire to poor leadership and religious fear due to omens and prophecies occurring before the arrival of the Spanish. Using Sahagun's work, Cohen studied the religious omens and the story of Quetzalcoatl. Cohen retells parts of the story of Quetzalcoatl who left Mexico promising to return. She also stated:

According to the Aztec legends, Quetzalcoatl had white skin and blond hair and had come from the East...One day, however he was driven out by a rival tribe and left, but not before promising that he would return to deliver his people from bondage. The year prophesied for his return was the same year Cortés began his march into Mexico... It is therefore understandable that Moctezuma...was entirely convinced that Cortés and his men were none other than the god Quetzalcoatl.⁹

Furthermore, Cohen claims that "through his interpreters (Cortés) learned that the Aztecs believed him to be a god." Cortés used this information during his first encounter with Moctezuma's envoy, firing cannons to frighten them, and attempting to perpetuate

⁸ Many historians took this approach, including Ursula Lamb's 1956 article "Religious Conflicts in the Conquest of Mexico" Her article focused on the post- conquest religious affects rather than the influence of the myth. D.M. Poole's 1951 study of geographical aspects on the conquest, discussed the Spanish steel weapons and horses, compared to the Indians stone axes and chisels. S.F. Cook's article "The Incidence and Significance of Disease amongst the Aztecs and Related Tribes" published in 1945 and most notably Alfred Crosby focused on different aspects of the conquest. Although Crosby briefly mentions the technological advancement of the Europeans over the Spaniards, he mainly focuses on the significant effect of diseases on the Indian populations in both his 1967 article, "Conquistador y Pestilencia: The First New World Pandemic and the Fall of the Great Indian Empires," and his 1972 monograph *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*.

⁹ Sara E. Cohen, "How the Aztecs Appraised Moctezuma," *The History Teacher*, Vol. 5, 3 (Mar., 1972), 25-26.

the Aztec beliefs that the Spaniards were immortal by immediately burying any horse or man that died.¹⁰

In a similar study to Sara E. Cohen's, David Carrasco's "Quetzalcoatl's Revenge: Primordium and Application in Aztec Religion," is an expanded examination of Quetzalcoatl, both as the Toltec leader Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, and as the Aztec god. In this article he emphasized how the Aztec belief of Quetzalcoatl's return affected their conquest. On the basis of Bernardino de Sahagun's *The Florentine Codex: The General History of Things of New Spain*, Carrasco writes, "the Aztec sovereign Moctezuma thought 'that this (Cortés) was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl who had arrived.'"¹¹ Similarly to Cohen, Carrasco explains elements of the myth and why Cortés was believed to be Quetzalcoatl. He included a description that the Spanish boats arrived at the "appointed time," referring to *Ce Acatl*, a term borrowed from H.B. Nicholson's unpublished 1957 Harvard PhD dissertation, "Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl of Tollan: A Problem in Mesoamerican Ethnohistory."¹²

A more expansive focus on the omens mentioned in Cohen's article was Stephen A. Colston's, "'No Longer Will There Be a Mexico': Omens, Prophecies, and the Conquest of the Aztec Empire." Colston's article distinguishes between which parts of

¹⁰ Cohen, "How the Aztecs Appraised Moctezuma," 26-27.

¹¹ David Carrasco, "Quetzalcoatl's Revenge: Primordium and Application in Aztec Religion," *History of Religions*, Vol.19, 4 (May, 1980), 296.

¹² H.B. Nicholson, "Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's Revenge: Primordium and Application in Aztec Religion," Harvard PhD dissertation, 1957. Also, Carrasco not only uses *The Florentine Codex*, and H.B. Nicholson's article, but also used terms and articles by a variety of previous historians including but not limited to: Nigel Davies study of the term Tollan in his 1977 monograph *The Toltecs: Until the Fall of Tula*, Jacques Soutelle's 1970 monograph, *Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*, Miquel Leon-Portilla's monographs *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico* published in 1969 and *The Broken Spears; the Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* published in 1962 among many other sources. Carrasco mainly used these historians to give recognition to terms they coined and in correlation with the similar ideas presented in his article that he was revising, expanding and connecting with other historians to build one more inclusive and total article.

the myth were present pre-conquest and which were added post-conquest. After examining the omens listed in *Book XII of The Florentine Codex*, Colston argues: “Most, if not all, of these omens were likely composed by post-conquest native raconteurs who, by presenting these events as though they occurred before the Spaniards arrived, sought to demonstrate the immensity of a calamity and, by extension, the inevitability of this event.”¹³ Colston, unlike later historians, does not completely discount the myth. Using the same quotes from Cortés’s “Second Letter to Charles V” as Nuttall in 1906, he argues that Cortés claimed that Moctezuma suggested “Charles V was Topiltzin’s descendant...clearly reflecting Cortés’s political astuteness.”¹⁴ Although Cortés manipulated Moctezuma’s words for political gain, this passage is important because it shows an already present belief. Colston also uses Father Duran’s account of the returning god and its religious meanings. Although this is a Christian-manipulated view of the myth, Duran’s writings are evidence that a pre-conquest prophecy existed.^{15 16}

Overall Colston argues:

Since this prophecy is known only through colonial-period chronicles, it has been suggested that the tale of Topiltzin’s return was fabricated by colonial writers and that the pre-Conquest myth only told of his symbolic return as Venus. However, on the basis of examining early colonial native writings, and the writings of chroniclers who utilized native source, there is strong evidence that a prophecy of Topiltzin’s return had been widely circulated before the

¹³ Stephen A. Colston, “‘No Longer Will There Be a Mexico’: Omens, Prophecies, and the Conquest of the Aztec Empire,” in *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol.9, 3 (summer, 1985), 240.

¹⁴ Colston, “‘No Longer Will There Be a Mexico,’” 249.

¹⁵ Colston, “‘No Longer Will There Be a Mexico,’” 249-250.

¹⁶ Evidence of a myth existing were also present in Duran’s *Historia de las Indias* finished in 1581, John Leddy Phelan’s *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans: a Study of the Writings of Geraonimo de Mendieta, 1525-1604* published in 1956. Furthermore both Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc’s monograph *Cronica Mexicana*, written in 1598 and published in English for the first time in 1944, and Cervantes de Salazar’s book *Cronica de la Nueva Espana* written in 1575 and published in Spanish for the first time in 1914, suggested that Moctezuma thought that Cortés was sent by the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli. I firmly discount these writings in that their only argument for believing that Cortés was perceived as Huitzilopochtli was that Cortés was violent. However, the god Quetzalcoatl was believed to represent both calm winds and violent winds such as tornados and hurricanes. Therefore, the Aztecs did believe Quetzalcoatl could be violent at times.

Conquest...Interestingly, a number of elements of this prophesy were diffused among other pre-Contact native cultures.¹⁷

Although convinced a myth existed, Colston points out several elements of the myth were added after the conquest.

The first important addition was Quetzalcoatl's physical appearance as white and bearded, which first surfaced in the late sixteen-century chronicle by Father Geronimo de Mendieta. Colston explains Mendieta most likely included this to suggest "that this Spaniard was the Messiah whose coming the natives long awaited."¹⁸ The second important addition to the myth started with Alva Ixtlilxochitl writing in the early seventeenth century that Quetzalcoatl would return in the year *Ce Acatl*. To argue this point Colston writes:

There is no evidence that a pre-Conquest prophecy made mention of Topiltzin's return in *Ce Acatl* or any other year. Significantly, when word reached the Mexica of Jaun de Grijalvo's landing in Mexico in 1518 (in the native calendar, the year "Thirteen Rabbit") this event was also taken by the natives to be Topiltzin's return. Still, the natives may have ascribed the calendric sign *Ce Acatl* with attributes with particularly encourage the fusion of Cortés with Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl...Even though the association of *Ce Acatl* appears with Topiltzin's return was, as suggested, devised after the Conquest, Quetzalcoatl was nonetheless allied with this calendric sign.¹⁹

In addition to consulting the primary sources explained above, Colston also consulted Nigel Davies, David Carrasco, and many of the same sources consulted by earlier scholars. With the help of other sources including Alva Ixtlilxochitl, Colston built from these arguments, both improving on their previous opinions and adding new interpretations. Colston's article shows the beginning of further critical analysis and questioning of the Quetzalcoatl myth.

¹⁷ Colston, "No Longer Will There Be a Mexico," 251

¹⁸ Colston, "No Longer Will There Be a Mexico," 251

¹⁹ Colston, "No Longer Will There Be a Mexico," 151-152

Writing between 1989 and 2001, multiple historians, including Susan Gillespie,²⁰ James Lockhart,²¹ Francis J. Brooks,²² and Ross Hassig,²³ continued analysis of the Quetzalcoatl myth and of its sources. Following these studies, Camilla Townsend wrote the article “Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico.” In this article, Townsend argues that Francisco Lopez de Gomara in 1552 “was one of the first to claim in print that the Mexicans had believed the conquistadors to be divine... (and) there is little evidence that the indigenous people ever seriously believed the newcomers were gods, and there is no meaningful evidence that any story about Quetzalcoatl’s returning from the east ever existed before the conquest.” The myth was a way to remedy the shortage of an acceptable “alternative explanation for the conquest.”²⁴

Townsend emphasized that in recent years new explanations as to why the Aztecs were conquered became apparent: technology and diseases. Reverting to the explanations explored in the 1950’s and 1960’s, she argued that “by the 1550’s, some Indians were themselves saying they (or rather, their parents) had presumed the white men to be gods. Their words became widely available to an international audience in 1962, when Miguel Leon-Portilla published *The Broken Spears: the Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*.”²⁵

Taking a similar view to Zelia Nuttall, Townsend claimed that none of the earliest articles including the “Letters to Charles V”, written by Cortés, directly mentioned

²⁰ Susan D. Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexica History* Tucson, Arizona, 1989

²¹ James Lockhart, ed. And trans., *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* Berkley, California, 1993.

²² Francis J. Brooks, “Moctezuma Xocoyotl, Hernan Cortés, and Bernal Diaz del Castillo: The Construction of an Arrest,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 75.2 (1995), 149-183.

²³ Ross Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico*, Austin, Texas. 2001.

²⁴ Camilla Townsend, “Burying the White Gods,” *American Historical Review* Vol. 108.3 (2003) 659-660.

²⁵ Townsend, “Burying the White Gods,” 662

Quetzalcoatl. Sources such as *The Florentine Codex* are not completely reliable; especially considering the statements about the omens were proven fabricated.²⁶ She also finds the nature of *The Florentine Codex*, as the natives' explanation of the conquest of their people, suspiciously biased. Moreover, since Sagahun translated these writings himself from the native language into Spanish, she felt the source may have been corrupted. Townsend writes:

There is no evidence of any ancient myths recounting the departure or return of such a god, but, in the early years after conquest, discrete elements of the story that has become so familiar to us do appear separately in various documents, with that main character being mortal rather than divine. The wandering hero is called Huemac or Topiltzin: he is not given the name 'Quetzalcoatl' until the 1550s, and then not in Nahuatl language texts.²⁷

Townsend's discussion returned to the thoughts of Zelia Nuttall, but from a different perspective. Townsend asked the correct questions of the sources but ultimately decided the sources were unreliable. Townsend felt the nature of *The Florentine Codex*, written post-conquest as a native explanation of events, contained biases. This insight along with the fact that no early sources identify myth directly, further cemented her belief that a pre-conquest myth did not exist. However, Townsend overlooks several truths: the Aztecs did not have a written language and many ancient documents and pieces of art were burnt by the Spanish. Therefore, it should not surprise Townsend that the sources she seeks are unavailable.

Just as the scholarship surrounding the Aztec returning god myth changed and the debate regarding the validity of the myth grew, historians began to reexamine a similar Hawaiian belief in a returning god. These similar critiques are the result of postmodernists reexamining previous research.

²⁶ Townsend, "Burying the White Gods," 667

²⁷ Townsend, "Burying the White Gods," 668-669

Historical Views Regarding the Returning god myth of the Hawaiians

Until recently historians have agreed on the reality of the Hawaiian returning god myth. The journals and diaries written by sailors aboard the *Resolution* and *Discovery* undisputedly corroborate claims that Hawaiians referred to Cook as Lono. According to the ships logs, the Europeans discovered and revisited the islands between November and February, the holy time of the *Makahiki*. Although there is a consensus concerning these facts, modern historians have begun to disagree over their meanings, implications, and how the native Hawaiians perceived the Europeans. These concerns are amplified by modern historians' skepticism about the Aztec returning god myth. In essence, if historians could argue one returning god myth was false, why not argue that similar myths were also post-conquest fabrications?²⁸ Therefore, although the historiographies of the Aztec and Hawaiian myths are not identical, similar historical skepticism links them.

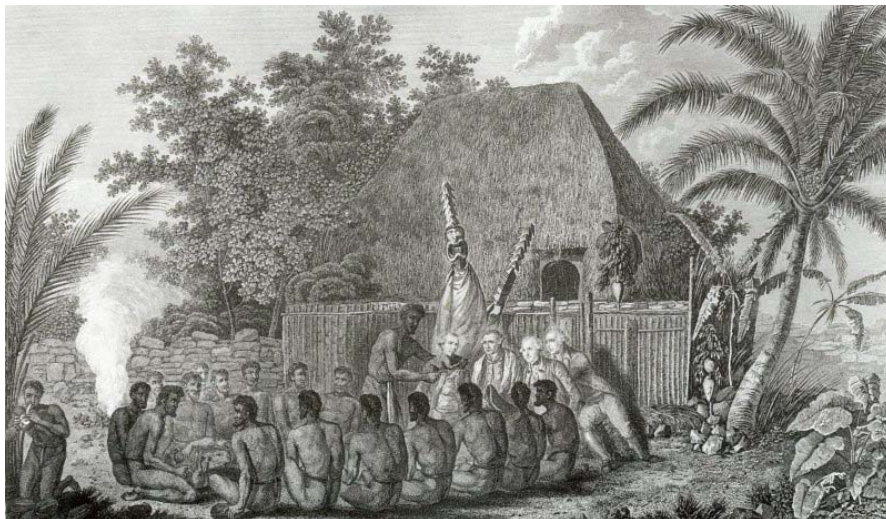
An obvious difference between the Spanish conquest and Cook's explorations are their differing periods of discovery. Whereas the former occurred in the 16th century, the latter took place during the 18th century, approximately 150 years later. The explorers processed the world around them through their contemporary ways of thought. Since Cortés arrived during the late Renaissance and Reformation periods and at the beginning of enlightenment thought, he and those who accompanied him gave little credence to non-European religious beliefs. Instead, Cortés and the conquistadors concentrated on

²⁸ Obviously I'm being sarcastic, but this seems to be the current historical procedure concerning these myths. These myths have apparently been over stereotyped and clumped, leaving them all open to the same criticism. This criticism can be viewed as beneficial, but only if done through the traditional historical process and not proclaiming all of the myths either true or false with only one set of interpretations of sources.

finding gold and other ‘valuable’ resources. Native mystic beliefs, generally ignored, were not recorded because the explorers’ were strictly controlled by the Catholic Church.

By contrast, although the Europeans on the *Discovery* and *Resolution* also arrived during the age of enlightenment, the age of romanticism was beginning. During the Romantic period, mysticism was noticed and recorded. These two vessels not only carried sailors but people who kept detailed journals and records including scientists, cartographers and artists.²⁹ Many recorded their interpretations of religious ceremonies and the native beliefs. For example, John Webber created detailed drawings, which were later made into engravings. In the ceremony depicted bellow, Captain Cook is being offered a pig, and behind Cook is the symbolic *kapa* banner. (The significance of this banner will be explained in greater detail later.)

Figure 1³⁰



Another valuable resource historians use to study the ancient Hawaiian beliefs are the documents produced by missionaries. Since the Hawaiians had no written language, these records have become essential in understanding the initial contact period.

²⁹ John Dominis Holt, “Forward,” in *Pacific Images: Views from Captain Cook*, ed. Eleanor C. Nordyke (Hawaiian Historical Society, 1999), xi.

³⁰ <http://www.captaincooksociety.com/a3-294a.jpg> viewed on May 27, 2005.

Reverend Hiram Bingham, member of the Calvinist Church of New England, arrived in Hawai'i March 30, 1820. Bingham was an extremely influential figure in Hawai'i helping to create the Hawaiian written language and publishing the first *Dictionary of the Hawaiian Language* in 1838.³¹ His writings captured his sentiments toward the Hawaiians and strong statements condemning Captain Cook for “not acting as an evangelizing missionary.”³² Bingham's most important contribution was writing a detailed explanation of the European arrival from the Hawaiian point of view. He writes:

As [Cook] appeared off Kohala, some of the people scanning the wondrous strangers, who had fire and smoke about their mouths in pipes and cigars, pronounced them gods...Seeing so unusual a mode of traveling the ocean, and supposing the squadron to be the vehicle of the gods, setting at naught their tabus (*kapu*, religious taboos) which forbid sailing on the water just at that time, they launched their canoes, and ventured out upon the bay to reconnoiter, and applied to the commander the name of a Polynesian deity, and rendered him the homage which they supposed would please him. The popular name of that navigator the missionaries found to be *Lono*.³³

This quote introduces the notion that the Hawaiians perceived the Europeans as gods, and explains several reasons why, including that the whites smoked and sailed differently. (A more detailed explanation of why the Hawaiians perceived the Europeans as gods will be given later.) Bingham continues his description of events by writing the first full explanation of the Lono myth, ceremonies the Hawaiians performed and the European actions that forced the natives to rethink their beliefs about the foreigners. (All of these will be explained in greater detail later.) Bingham's writing led to future

³¹ Terence Barrow. “Introduction,” in Hiram Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years in the Sandwich Islands 3rd ed.*, (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1981) 3.

³² Terence Barrow, “Introduction,” 5.

³³ Hiram Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years in the Sandwich Islands 3rd ed.*, (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1981) 32.

examinations of the Hawaiian myth, religious beliefs, and history by Professor Ralph S. Kuykendall³⁴ and Gavan Daws³⁵.

Until the emergence of postmodernism, historians with the missionary documents and the journals kept by sailors aboard the *Discovery* and *Resolution* argued that Cook was received as the god Lono. In 1968, the same year Gavan Daws published *Shoal of Time: A History of the Hawaiian Islands*, he also wrote “Kealakekua Bay Revisited: A Note on the Death of Captain Cook.”³⁶ In the article, Daws explained the importance of Cook’s arrival during the *Makahiki* festival, a time of peace and festivities. He also claimed that Cook’s forced return, in the middle of February, after the end of the festival, led to his death. He wrote “(Cook returned) in mid February, when the *Makahiki* season was all but over. By then chiefs and commoners alike had had time enough to see far more humanity than divinity among Cook’s men.”³⁷ With the end of the *Makahiki*, war was no longer forbidden, and an attack on the foreigners became acceptable. With the killing of a Hawaiian chief, the worshippers of Ku (the war god) readied themselves for revenge and to protect their *ali’i*. Daws explains:

It was not the Hawaiians as a people who defied Cook, but the priests of Lono. It was not the Hawaiians as a people who killed him, but the chiefs and their fighting men, devotees of Ku, the war god, acting as protectors of their ruler, Kalaniopuu, against the incursions of a god who might very well not be a god, and whose period of ascendancy was in any case drawing to an end.³⁸

Daws’s explanation of the death of Cook is extremely important. It identifies that by the time of Cook’s unexpected return the Hawaiians were no longer convinced he was

³⁴ Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1938.)

³⁵ Gavan Daws, *Shoal of Time: A History of the Hawaiian Islands*, (New York: Macmillan, 1968.)

³⁶ Gavan Daws, “Kealakekua Bay Revisited: A Note on the Death of Captain Cook,” *The Journal of Pacific History*, 3 (1968): 21-23.

³⁷ Daws, “Kealakekua Bay,” 22.

³⁸ Daws, “Kealakekua Bay,” 23.

a deity. The Europeans had out-stayed their welcome in the Hawaiian Islands, leading to the death of Captain Cook. (Other explanations for Cook's death will be explored later.)

A decade after Daws's article, in 1978, Gavin Kennedy wrote a detailed explanation of the events leading up to Cook's death.³⁹ He began his monograph, *The Death of Captain Cook*, by explaining several problems historians face when using the sources:

A viewpoint that is often ignored is that of the Hawaiians themselves. As they had no written language until the missionaries arrived, their version of the story of Captain Cook and his visits to the islands remained for some time purely oral tradition... (Also,) palace names and personal names in Hawaiian can show an alarming inconsistency. This is complicated by the changes that have taken place in the language since the eighteenth century. Cook's men wrote down the Hawaiian language as best they could. For example, the modern Kealahou Bay was written as Karakakooa Bay by Cook's men.⁴⁰

After explaining these problems, Kennedy explains the Hawaiian's reception of Cook as Lono and systematically explains the events that contributed to the realization that this belief was false. He examines arguments about the strain the Europeans caused on the native food sources, their sexual activities with the native women, and their stealing of sacred carvings.⁴¹ Lastly, Kennedy argues that the death of Cook resulted from a poorly thought out scheme to retrieve a stolen cutter from the Hawaiians.⁴² (All of these events will be discussed later in the paper.)

Another historian supporting the validity of the returning god myth of the Hawaiians is Marshall Sahlins. He argues that due to the Europeans' coincidental arrival during the *Makahiki* that the Hawaiians perceived Cook as the returning god Lono. Furthermore, Sahlins claims all of the Hawaiians' expectations and actions during Cook's

³⁹ Gavin Kennedy, *The Death of Captain Cook*, (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co, 1978.)

⁴⁰ Kennedy, *The Death of Captain Cook*, 3-4.

⁴¹ Kennedy, *The Death of Captain Cook*, 25-27.

⁴² Kennedy, *The Death of Captain Cook*, 45-80.

visits and actions, including his death, reflected the Hawaiian, annual celebration of the *Makahiki*. However, the extreme stress on the importance of the *Makahiki*, his neglect of the many other facts and contradictory statements within his different writings, has led to criticisms.

One of the leading critics, Gananath Obeyesekere, questioned Sahlin's emphasis on the importance of the *Makahiki*, as well as several inconsistencies with Sahlin's scholarship. Obeyesekere's monograph, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, introduced several new arguments, including his thesis that the Hawaiians' accepted and named Cook, Lono, because they perceived him a high chief not a god. To discredit Sahlin's interpretations of the *Makahiki*, Obeyesekere wrote, "It is doubtful whether there is a protracted four-month *Makahiki* cycle, until Kamehameha's time...It seems that the *Makahiki* was systemized, universalized, and articulated to state by Kamehameha."⁴³ However, despite Obeyesekere's down-playing of the importance of the *Makahiki* early in the monograph, he later uses its existence to argue his thesis:

There is good reason, according to the logic of Hawaiian naming procedures, for Cook to be called Lono simply because he came at the time of the *Makahiki* festival or close to it...Cook coming in at *Makahiki* time was sufficient reason for him to be called Lono, a name other Hawaiian chiefs of the time also possessed. In other words, this was a reasonable conventional naming procedure.⁴⁴

The inconsistency of Obeyesekere's argument is obvious. He can not discredit Sahlin's interpretation of the *Makahiki* by claiming it did not exist and then, twenty-two pages later, claim that Cook was named Lono because of his arrival during the festival. Furthermore, his argument about naming procedures in Hawai'i is misleading. Although the name "Lono" related to several individuals, "Lono" is also used as an adjective or in

⁴³ Gananath Obeyesekere. *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992, 74.

⁴⁴ Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis*, 96.

combination with other names: such as *Lono i ka Makahiki*- (Lono of the Makahiki), *Lono Kahuna* (priest of Lono), and *Lono Kaeho*. For Cook to be named simply Lono indicates that the Hawaiians were accepting him as the god, not as a priest of Lono or as a chief. Traditionally an Indian scholar, Obeyesekere's unfamiliarity with Hawaiian culture is obvious throughout the monograph. Despite these inconsistencies, Obeyesekere's work led historians to critically examine the myth.

After the publication of Obeyesekere's 1992 monograph, other scholars continued his arguments. For example, Olivia Harris observed, "In the case of Cook's death, his identification by the Hawaiians with their deity Lono is used to evoke their naivete and shocking error in killing him."⁴⁵ Harris, a Latin American specialist, clearly overlooked the realities behind the myth and the death of Captain Cook. As will be explained in more detail later, the Hawaiians killed Cook after recognizing he was not Lono. His death was not considered to be a shocking error in the eyes of the Hawaiians but the result of this realization. Cook and his sailors had violated several *kapu* (religious laws) during their stay on the Hawaiian Islands. The punishment for these violations was death; therefore, the death of Captain Cook, although shocking to Europeans, for the Hawaiians, resulted from his own actions of breaking *kapu*.

In response to criticism by Obeyesekere and Harris, Sahlins published *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook For Example*⁴⁶ in 1995. Sahlins attacked

⁴⁵ Olivia Harris "The Coming of White People.' Reflections on the Mythologisation of History in Latin America," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 14. 1 (1994): 12.

⁴⁶ Marshall Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook for Example*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Obeyeskere's monograph, pointing out his errors section by section, as he attempted to regain legitimacy within the field of history.⁴⁷

Differentiating Between the Influence the myths had on the Initial Contact and the Impact the myths had on the End of Native Empires

Historians have confused the difference between the importance of the returning god myth on the initial encounter between the Europeans and the Aztecs with its influence on the Spanish conquest of that empire. Recent historians have down-played the importance of the myth because of this confusion, making the differentiation between these two subjects increasingly important.

The significance of the returning Quetzalcoatl myth lies in the influence it had on the meeting between the whites and the natives, not its contribution to the conquest of Tenochtitlan. The studies by S.F. Cook and Alfred Crosby regarding diseases, Pooles' analysis of geography, studies concerning the importance of the alliances between unconquered Indian nations with the Aztec fighting style, and Moctezuma's leadership abilities, prove that many factors contributed to the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs. However, none of these studies discredit the importance this prophesy had on the initial encounter between the two cultures.

Fortunately, the scholarship on the Hawaiian myth does not face this same problem. Since the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy occurred in 1893, more than one hundred years after the initial European contact, historians do not confuse the myth's influence on the initial contact with its influence on the overthrow of Hawai'i's leadership. More than one hundred years separate the two events, forcing historians to

⁴⁷ By reading both Obeyeskere's monograph *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* and Sahlin's, *How Native's Think*, it is obvious these two men do not see eye to eye. Each book is a direct attack on the other's scholarship, knowledge and intelligence. The obvious hostility between the two scholars makes it hard to decipher if the attacks are legitimate criticism or simply due to hostility.

differentiate between the two subjects. Historians should use a similar model when studying the importance of the Aztec returning god myth, as this prophecy's importance lies in the role it played on the initial encounter not as a casual factor in the empire's demise.

Who Were These Returning Gods?

Despite the multiple differing historical views, to understand the aboriginal acceptance of the Europeans as gods, it is necessary to understand who these gods were. By understanding the beliefs of the native peoples prior to European arrival, it is easier to understand why the natives accepted Cortés and Cook as Quetzalcoatl and Lono, respectively.

The Aztec god Quetzalcoatl

Quetzalcoatl was a god worshipped in Mesoamerica, beginning perhaps as early as the Olmecs and continuing through the Aztecs. A polytheistic society, the Aztecs worshiped a pantheon of gods, each god responsible for different natural phenomena, parts of daily life, and/or mythical creations. Consequently, Quetzalcoatl had defined responsibilities as an Aztec god. Understanding Quetzalcoatl is very complicated because he has many different incarnations and is involved in multiple creation myths and religious stories. He is viewed both as a god, symbolized through the form of a feathered serpent, and remembered as a historical figure, the Toltecs' high priest. The multiple descriptions, responsibilities, and memories of Quetzalcoatl, make it hard to understand the definite attributes of this major god of the ancient Mesoamerican societies, specifically the Aztecs.

One of Quetzalcoatl's many identities was as the god of wind, or Quetzalcoatl Ehecatl. The wind, a complex natural phenomenon, can be both peaceful and calm, bringing in small rain clouds to help cultivate crops; or at other times, the wind can be extremely violent in the form of a tornado or hurricane. Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, is believed to guide both types of wind, the peaceful gusts as well as the destructive storms that are common on the Gulf coast of present day Mexico. In fact the Aztec word for a tornado is *ehcocatl*, meaning wind snake,⁴⁸ a name that further shows the relationship between the god and his responsibility for the wind. This attribute shows the belief that Quetzalcoatl could be violent, discounting the belief that Cortés could not be viewed as Quetzalcoatl simply because of the Spaniards' violence and harshness toward the natives.

The Aztecs had many religious and cultural myths involving Quetzalcoatl. The Aztecs viewed Quetzalcoatl as one of their creation gods. Along with his rival god, Tezcatlipoca, Smoking Mirror, the two gods are attributed with making the earth, the first flowers, and raising the sky. One of the more important creation myths that Quetzalcoatl is attributed with is the creation of humans, including the Aztecs, during the fifth sun. The Aztecs did not believe themselves to be the first humans to walk the face of the earth, but rather a part of the fifth creation of the earth, called the fifth sun. With each previous creation, or sun, ending catastrophically in regular increments. After the fifth creation of the earth the spirits asked, "Who will live here?" The spirits sent Quetzalcoatl into the underworld to retrieve ancient bones in order to create the new race of the world. When Quetzalcoatl reached the underworld he yelled to the dead land lord, "I've come for the bones you are keeping." The dead land lord asked him why he wanted the bones and

⁴⁸ http://www.meta-religion.com/World_Religions/Ancient_religions/Central_america/quetzalcoatl

Quetzalcoatl explained that the spirits had sent him so they could create a new people to live on the earth. The dead land lord gave his consent, but later he tried to trick Quetzalcoatl and prevent him from leaving with the bones. Quetzalcoatl outwits him and returns to the sky with the bones. Once in the sky, the bones were ground into a powder and all the gods poured their blood onto it, creating the Aztec race.⁴⁹

After the creation of the Aztec peoples, the spirits asked, “What are these human’s going to eat?” As preserved in the manuscript of the suns, the myth explains that Quetzalcoatl discovered corn. One day he noticed a red ant carrying a kernel of corn out of a mountain. So, he transformed himself into a black ant and went into the mountain to investigate. Once he found the source of the corn, Quetzalcoatl used lightning to split the mountain, allowing the Aztecs to gather, grow, and eat the food.⁵⁰ Due to the importance of corn to the peoples of ancient Mesoamerica as a dietary staple, the discovery of corn is extremely important. By attributing this discovery to Quetzalcoatl, the myth also shows his importance.

As stated earlier, Quetzalcoatl was also revered as a past high priest of the Toltecs. The relationship between the god, Quetzalcoatl, and the priest, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, is not completely clear. Among others, David Carrasco argues that the high priest was forced to flee his home. However, his fame and legacy continued and soon he became remembered and praised as a “priestly archetype.” As time passed his reputation became confused with other gods, including Ehecatl.⁵¹ In other words, Quetzalcoatl, the

⁴⁹ Biehorst, *The Mythology of Mexico*, 183-184

⁵⁰ Biehorst, *The Mythology of Mexico*, 6

⁵¹ David Carrasco *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. 61

deity, and Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, the high priest of the Toltecs, became linked in the minds of the Aztecs.

As with all deities, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, tied to the deity of Quetzalcoatl, is involved in a myth of his own; a myth that led to the eventual fall of the fifth sun. As discussed in the historiography section, there are several versions of the Quetzalcoatl myth.

Despite arguments concerning the myth's validity, it is important to understand the basics of the myth because it sparked the belief that Cortés was received as Quetzalcoatl and the recent postmodernist backlash. Following is one variation of the myth: Tezcatlipoca, mentioned earlier as Quetzalcoatl's chief enemy, collaborated with demons and gave Quetzalcoatl a wrapped gift. Being a god, he had always believed that he didn't have a face. When the deity opened the gift (a mirror), Quetzalcoatl saw himself and was astonished to find that he looked like a human. Once he saw his face, he thought he was a human and he had a human destiny. To fulfill his assumed human destiny, the god became the high priest of the Toltecs. One night, Tezcatlipoca tricked Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl into drinking wine. Once intoxicated, Quetzalcoatl called for his sister Quetzalpetlatl, and they committed sins together, including sexual activities. The next morning, when he was sober, he realized the crime he committed. Embarrassed and ashamed of his actions; Quetzalcoatl fled to the east, sailing away on a raft of serpents, and promising to return to see if the humans were taking care of the earth.⁵² Although there are several variations of the myth, it always ends with the anticipated return of Quetzalcoatl.

⁵² Carlos Fuentes, Michael Gill, and Christopher Ralling *Buried Mirror, The Conflict of the Gods: V2* Produced and directed by Carlos Fuentes. 60min, videocassette. And Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, 176-178.

Despite differing versions and evidence that portions of the myth were added post-conquest, are scholars justified in completely discounting the myth?

Was this Purely a Post- Conquest Fabrication?

Contrary to arguments by Camilla Townsend, it is nonsensical to completely discount the myth. Following arguments by Colston, a returning god myth did exist before the conquest of the Aztecs, but several adaptations have been made to the myth perhaps either to make the myth more interesting to Europeans or to clarify the seemingly irrational thinking of the natives.

Through personal examination of sources, it is reasonable to suspect both the importance of *Ce Acatl* and the physical appearance of the returning Quetzalcoatl were added post-conquest. As stated by both Colston and Townsend, Alva Ixtlilxochitl was the first to add that the Aztecs expected Quetzalcoatl to return during *Ce Acatl*. The Aztecs undoubtedly linked Quetzalcoatl to *Ce Acatl*, but since no writings included the importance of *Ce Acatl* as the “appointed time” until Ixtlilxochitl in the seventeenth century, it is difficult to validate the statement. To further prove that *Ce Acatl* was not included in the original myth, the natives believed Juan de Grijalvo’s landing in 1518, one year before *Ce Acatl*, was possibly the return of Quetzalcoatl.

The initial inclusion of the physical appearance of Quetzalcoatl as fair-skinned and bearded presents more problems. By the sixteenth century, as Colston points out, Quetzalcoatl’s anticipated appearance was included by Father Geronimo de Mendieta, possibly to show Cortés as an arriving messiah for the natives. This physical description was also included in Alva Ixtlilxochitl’s writings in the seventeenth century.

However to discount the myth entirely, due to a couple of discrepancies, is deceitful. The sources demonstrate that a pre-encounter myth did exist. The importance of its existence will be discussed after examining the Hawaiian god Lono.

The Hawaiian god Lono

Similarly to the Aztecs, the ancient Hawaiians were a polytheistic society, worshipping a multitude of gods. These gods were present within nature and within their *ali'i* (the ruling class and viewed as living lesser gods). The Hawaiians did not question the reality of their gods. They knew their deities were present not only because of their faith, but because their deities showed themselves in nature as rain, thunder, lava and the ocean. These natural phenomena exist, as did their gods that represent these natural processes. The Hawaiians believed that their gods were not only in nature, but walked among them as *ali'i* and other gods, including Pele, visited regularly. The Hawaiians, therefore, believed that their gods took both the forms of natural phenomena and humans. Lono, in his human form, was a light skinned man and had a beard.⁵³

Similarly to the scholarly skepticism that Quetzalcoatl's appearance resembled Europeans, it is likely that, Lono's appearance was altered in the mythic narrative after the European missionaries arrived at the islands. In both cases, symbolizing the native gods as white would help justify the missionaries' arrival and show a deep desire within the native societies to be saved from their polytheistic beliefs by a white, bearded messiah. However, there is no scholarly research demonstrating this to be true in Hawai'i.

Within the worship of the Hawaiian pantheon of gods, four major gods existed: Lono, Kane, Ku, and Kanaloa. Lono was the Hawaiian god of sports, fertility, and

⁵³ Cunningham. *Hawaiian Religion and Magic*, 11 and 24.

agriculture. Similarly to Quetzalcoatl, he was also the god of peace. Within nature he was seen by the Hawaiians in the clouds, wind, rain, thunder, storms, whirlwinds, water-sprouts, gushing springs, and the sounds of the wind and the rain. As the god of fertility and agriculture his most important responsibility was as the supplier of food and of fruitfulness. *Heiaus* (temples) were built in his honor. Lono's *heiaus* were centers of prayers and religious ceremonies; asking for rain and prosperous crops, with sacrifices of fruits, vegetables and pigs. Unlike the temples to other gods, the worshipers of Lono never sacrificed humans. This characteristic is similar to the worshipers of Quetzalcoatl.⁵⁴

To further celebrate Lono and his blessings, each fall after the large annual harvest, the *Makahiki* festival was held. This four-month festival lasted approximately from October or November until February or March, depending on when the star cluster Pleiades rose in opposition to the sun (at sunset).⁵⁵ This was a period of extreme celebration throughout all of the ancient Hawaiian chiefdoms: the *kapu* (religiously sanctioned laws) were raised and the people were allowed to fish, surf, and eat freely without restriction, the ancient games of Hawai'i were celebrated, and large tournaments were held. Lono began these games in honor of his wife whom he had killed during a jealous rage.⁵⁶ War was forbidden, the temples of Ku were closed to worshipers and sacrifice, and, most importantly, the *Makahiki* marked the annual celebration of Lono's return from *Kahiki* (the term used to classify the "ancestral homeland"⁵⁷ and the island of

⁵⁴ Cunningham. *Hawaiian Religion and Magic*, 24.

⁵⁵ Will Kyselka, "On the Rising of the Pleiades," *The Hawaiian Journal of History*, Vol. 27, 1993, 173-183.

⁵⁶ Rita Knipe, *The Water of Life: A Jungian Journey Through Hawaiian Myth*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989, 138.

⁵⁷ Cunningham. *Hawaiian Religion and Magic*, 25.

the gods).⁵⁸ Despite arguments by Obeyesekere, the *Makahiki* festival did not suddenly emerge as a predominant festival after the unification of the Hawaiian chiefdoms under the Kamehameha. Rather, the festival simply became more systemized, regulated, and uniform between all of the islands. However, Sahlins' interpretation of the *Makahiki* as the driving force behind all events during Cook's arrival is misleading, especially in explaining of Cook's death, which will be explained in great detail later.

During this annual, representative return of Lono, a high priest would travel to Kealakekua on the Big Island of Hawai'i carrying the image of Lono; a long wooden pole with a crosspiece at the top draped with white *kapa* cloth, *leis*, feathers and ferns.⁵⁹ Although, this was only a representational return of Lono, the Hawaiians believed the Lono would someday truly return to them from *Kahiki* and celebrate the *Makahiki* festival with them. It was this belief in a returning god that made the Hawaiians so vulnerable to the European explorers.

Similar to the Aztec myth of Quetzalcoatl's return, there are several versions of the returning Lono myth. The following version of the myth was used by Gavin Kennedy and Obeyesekere, as acquired from the missionary Hiram Bingham:

In very ancient times Lono dwelt at Kealakekua with his *wahine* [wife] Kaikilani-aliopuna. They dwelt together under the precipice. A man ascended the *pali* and called to the woman. 'O Kaikilani-aliopuna, may one dare approach your paramour- Ohea the soldier? This to join- that to flee- you and I to sleep.' Lono hearing, was angry and smote his *wahine*, and Kaikilani-aliopuna died. He took her up, bore her into the temple and there left her. He lamented over her and traveled around Hawai'i, Maui, Molokai, Oahu and Kauai boxing with those he met. The people exclaimed, Behold Lono, greatly crazed! Lono replied, 'I am crazed for her- I am frantic on account of her love.' He left the islands and went to a foreign land in a triangular canoe, called Paimalu. Kaikilani-aliopuna came to life again, and traveled all round the islands searching after her husband. The people demanded of her, 'What is your husband's name?' She replied, 'Lono.'

⁵⁸ Cunningham. *Hawaiian Religion and Magic*, 25.

⁵⁹ Cunningham. *Hawaiian Religion and Magic*, 25.

‘Was that crazy husband yours?’ ‘Aye mine.’ Kaikilani then sailed by canoe to a foreign land. On arrival of ships the people exclaimed, “Lo this is Lono! Here comes Lono.”⁶⁰

Similarly to the included Aztec myth, the Hawaiian myth above is important because it explains the beliefs of the Hawaiians prior to European contact. Although this myth is important, it is equally necessary to realize, this version of the myth was written by a missionary after the arrival of Europeans, and may not be completely accurate. Remember, the Hawaiians did not have a written language. Therefore, there are no primary documents written by the ancient Hawaiians but, only the journals kept by sailors aboard the *Discovery* and *Resolution*, ethnographies, and documents written by missionaries. This particular version of the myth, recorded by Hiram Bingham, was by a Hawaiian.⁶¹

Why were the European Explorers Perceived as these Deities?

Now that the basic native beliefs surrounding Quetzalcoatl and Lono are understood, it is important to examine why the white explorers were received as these gods. This examination is increasingly difficult, especially with the realization that portions of the myths were added after contact with Europeans.

Why did the Aztecs believe Cortés to be Quetzalcoatl?

As argued at the end of the section “But was this Purely a post-conquest fabrication?” although the natives expected Quetzalcoatl to return, they did not necessarily believe he would return during the *Ce Actal*, nor were they anticipating him to be fair skinned and bearded. Traditionally, historians arguing the existence of the myth have used both of these additions to explain the acceptance of Cortés as

⁶⁰Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years 3rd ed.*, 32.

⁶¹Kennedy, Gavin. *The Death of Captain Cook*, London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1978, 23.

Quetzalcoatl. Since both of these explanations have been proven false, why did the Aztecs accept Cortés?

The answer to this question is not apparent through the primary documents. The Mesoamericans expected the return of Quetzalcoatl from the East. With the arrival of Juan de Grijalvo in 1518, the native's hopes of the return of their god were raised, but he did not fulfill their hopes, only staying for a short period. Instead, Grijalvo simply prepared the minds of the natives and created more anticipation for Quetzalcoatl's return. A year later, in 1519, Hernan Cortés landed on the east coast of present day Mexico. He landed in a part of the Aztec Empire, with a people who were excitedly awaiting the return of a god in the form of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. The news of the landing spread quickly through the empire and soon Moctezuma learned of it. He sent five emissaries to meet the foreigners and present gifts.⁶² Although the existing myth of the Aztecs did not specify Quetzalcoatl returning in the year of *Ce Actal*, his arrival at this time made sense because of the deity's linkage to the date.

The European's technological advancement also led to natives to link the Europeans with divine beings. The Indians noticed all of the large animals such as horses, amounts of food, and equipment that the Spanish unloaded from their impressively large ships. The Spanish technology wowed the Indians and made them further believe that only gods had such unknown possessions. This awe was compounded by the initial encounter between Montezuma's envoy and the European's firing of the cannons.⁶³

⁶² Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, 195. Carrasco argued this information from Benjamin Keen's *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1972), 381.

⁶³ Cohen, "How the Aztecs Appraised Moctezuma," 26-27.

The Indian beliefs lasted longer than currently believed rational due to the Europeans' use of information. Since Cortés learned through his interpreters that the Indians believed him to be a god, he (and others) encouraged the natives to believe Europeans were immortal by immediately burying any horse or man that died. Since the Indians never saw any of the Europeans die, only seeing them sick or injured, this gave the illusion that these foreigners were immortal.⁶⁴ This seeming immortality led the Aztecs to continue believing the Spaniards were deities and that their leader, Cortés, was Quetzalcoatl.

Lastly, although usually overlooked by historians, the faith of the Indians should not be ignored. The Aztecs believed Quetzalcoatl had returned because they believed someday he would come. When the foreigners arrived, the Aztecs accepted them because they wanted their prophecy to be fulfilled.

Why did the Hawaiians believe Cook to be Lono?

Unlike the scholarship regarding Quetzalcoatl's return, the time of Lono's anticipated arrival has never convincingly been discounted. The Hawaiians believed Lono would return to Hawai'i from *Kahiki* during his celebrated four month festival of the *Makahiki*. The Hawaiians traditionally celebrated Lono's future arrival during the *Makahiki* with a planned procession throughout Hawai'i. In the eyes of the Hawaiians this return occurred in the European year of 1778.

Under the command of James Cook, the vessels *Resolution* and *Discovery* found the northwestern island of the Hawaiian chain in January 1778, anchoring off the Waimea village on January 20th. Similarly to the Aztecs, the Hawaiians were over-whelmed by

⁶⁴ Cohen, "How the Aztecs Appraised Moctezuma," 26-27.

the technology of the Europeans, especially over their enormous ships and iron.⁶⁵ Once anchored off shore, Cook traveled three times to visit the islanders. Each time, the common people threw themselves to the ground to worship him. Through his travels, Cook had become accustomed to the various island communities paying him the same homage as royalty; however, Cook had never seen entire villages bow before him as he first saw on Kauai and Ni'ihau and later on the Big Island.⁶⁶

Notice needs to be given to the fact that many historians disagree whether or not the Hawaiians on Kauai and Ni'ihau accepted Cook as Lono on this first voyage. Historians generally agree that he was accepted as a god, praising him in a similar fashion as they praised their *ali'i* (chiefs believed to be lesser living gods). However, Cook was not formally referred to as Lono until he arrived in Kealahou Bay. This discrepancy is one of the major reasons Sahlins' extreme focus on the *Makahiki* has been discredited.

After two weeks of exploration on Kauai and Ni'ihau, Cook sailed to the north to further explore the Pacific Ocean. During the eight month interval between Cook's departure and his subsequent return, the native Hawaiians discussed their encounter with the white foreigners. The news of the strangers quickly traveled throughout all of the eight Hawaiian Islands. Eight months later, Cook's massive ships appeared once again in Hawai'i, but this time further south in the Hawaiian chain, off of the coasts of Maui and the Big Island of Hawai'i. Once again, the Europeans' arrival coincided with the *Makahiki* festival, further cementing the linkage between Cook and Lono.

⁶⁵ Ralph Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom Volume I: 1778-1854 Foundation and Transformation* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1965, 13, 15.

⁶⁶ Barrow, Terence. *Captain Cook in Hawaii*, Australia: Heritage Collection, 1978, 105.

Moreover, the sails on the European ships greatly resembled the *kapa* banners the Hawaiian's carried during the representative enactments of Lono's expected return.⁶⁷

Figure 2, below, is an artist's rendition of the Hawaiians holding the *kapa* banner of the *Makahiki* festival looking out toward the European ships with similar looking sails.

These *kapa* banners were the symbol of Lono and the likeness between these banners and the sails on Cook's ships linked the *Discovery* and *Resolution* to the symbolization of Lono. Also, as discussed in the historiography section, Bingham introduced the argument, that both the European sailing techniques and smoking habits also contributed to the Hawaiians' belief that their god had returned.⁶⁸

Figure 2⁶⁹



Furthermore, the current circulating myth includes the belief that Lono would be fair skinned and bearded. Although this portion of the Hawaiian myth has not yet been discredited by historians, most likely, similarly to the case of Quetzalcoatl, it was added after European contact. By depicting the Hawaiians as anticipating a white, bearded god, the missionaries would be able to argue that the natives wanted to be saved from their

⁶⁷ Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom*, 15.

⁶⁸ Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years 3rd ed.*, 32.

⁶⁹ http://www.alohamana.homestead.com/files/Order_of_Lono.jpg

pagan lifestyles. This adds to the image of the Europeans as messiah figures and godly missionaries. Due to these coincidences and similarities between the myth and Cook's exploration, by Cook's second visit to the Hawaiian Islands, historians agree that Cook was received as the god Lono.

Upon arriving at Kealakekua Bay,⁷⁰ Cook was met by Koa, a high priest, and given sacred gifts linked to Lono, including a pig, coconuts, and a red *kapa* cloth. After being presented these gifts, Cook was taken ashore. "When they approached the water's edge, the priests began a regular chant in which the word 'Lono' was constantly repeated."⁷¹ Cook was then taken to the *heiau* at Hikiau, a massive temple devoted to the worship of Lono. Throughout Cook's stay in the islands, he often heard the name Lono. Lieutenant James King wrote, "During the rest of the time remained in the bay, whenever Captain Cook came on shore, he was attended by one of these priests, who went before him, giving notice that the Orono⁷² had landed, and ordering people to prostrate themselves."⁷³

The engraving shown on the next page, made by William Byrne was originally drawn by John Webber, an artist aboard the ships. This is Webber's depiction of Kealakekua Bay, with the Europeans ships anchored, the multiple outrigger canoes, and the Hikiau *heiau*.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ironically Kealakekua means the way or pathway of the gods.

⁷¹ Burrow, *Captain Cook in Hawaii*, 105.

⁷² Orono, is how the Europeans transcribed the name Lono throughout their journals. Since they had no written Hawaiian language to base their spellings, many words are spelled differently than they are today.

⁷³ King, "Tuesday, January 19, 1779," in *Pacific Images: Views from Captain Cook*, ed. Eleanor C. Nordyke (Hawaiian Historical Society, 1999), 115.

⁷⁴ John Webber and William Byrne in *Pacific Images: Views from Captain Cook*, ed. Eleanor C. Nordyke (Hawaiian Historical Society, 1999), 131.

Figure 3⁷⁵

The Realization that the Europeans Were Mortals

In Tenochtitlan

Cortés' journey inland to Tenochtitlan was a time of great unrest for the Spaniards. Although Cortés had met Montezuma's delegates and received gifts from the Aztec king, he and the Spaniards were unsure of the reception awaiting them. Upon their arrival at Tenochtitlan, this anxiety was relieved. Montezuma met the foreigners at the city's gates and welcomed Cortés saying, "Welcome, we have been waiting for you, this is your home."⁷⁶ This initial encounter has many implications. Not only were Cortés and his men welcomed into Tenochtitlan, but Montezuma believed Cortés to have godly powers showing respect to these foreigners in a way that previously had never witnessed. This homage paid to the conquistadors, must have caused immediate changes in the empire. Montezuma publicly showed that he was not as important as this man, Cortés.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ <http://www.captaincooksociety.com/ccsu8.htm>, viewed on May 17, 2005.

⁷⁶ Carlos Fuentes, Michael Gill, and Christopher Ralling *Buried Mirror, The: V. 2 - Conflict of the Gods* Produced and directed by Carlos Fuentes. 60min, videocassette.

⁷⁷ Some historians including, Dr. John Rector, argue that Moctezuma showed Cortés this respect purely out of fear. Hearing about the events at Cholula, Moctezuma feared these foreigners and showed them the greatest form of respect possible in order to save his people. I personally believe this interpretation to be false. Although, Moctezuma may have slightly feared Cortés and the Europeans, I believe he welcomed

After their welcome into the capital city, the conquistadors were escorted to Montezuma's residence. The Spanish became increasingly aware that they were outnumbered by their hosts. With this knowledge, they decided to take Montezuma as a hostage in his own residence. Meanwhile, the Aztecs continued to treat the Spanish men as gods.

Cortés soon heard of a convoy sent by the Spanish government to arrest him for unrelated activities. Upon receiving news of the group, Cortés left Tenochtitlan to intercept the expedition. Before leaving, Cortés put Pedro Alvarado in charge of the troops remaining in the Aztec capital. During Cortés's absence, the Aztecs held a religious ceremony with dancers. The ceremony enraged Alvarado so he killed several of the dancers, in the process shattering the belief that he and his men were gods.⁷⁸

Quetzalcoatl had always been worshipped as a god who valued human life and Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl was remembered for loving his people and never making human sacrifices.⁷⁹ Therefore, when Alvarado killed several dancers partaking in a religious festival, it was now clear to the Aztecs that these men were not god. The Aztecs became instantly enraged. When Cortés returned, he decided to abandon Tenochtitlan, on a night that is remembered by the Spanish as *noche triste*, or the sad night.

Unfortunately for the Aztecs, the realization that their guests were men came too late to save their empire. The enemy had already been allowed into Tenochtitlan carrying

them into Tenochtitlan believing they were gods. If you feared a group, why would you welcome them behind your protected walls? I feel the argument doesn't make sense.

⁷⁸ This is when I believe the Aztecs figured out the situation. It has been argued by others, including Dr. John Rector, that the Aztecs knew this after the massacre at Cholula. However, I do not feel the Moctezuma and the Aztecs would have allowed the conquistadors behind their protective walls if they believed the Europeans were enemies.

⁷⁹ Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, 176

devastating diseases that crippled the society.⁸⁰ Eventually, the Spanish, rejoined with Cortés and allied with Indian nations, attacked the capital city and conquered the Aztec Empire.

In Hawai'i

The Hawaiians, like the Aztecs, became increasingly aware that their visitors were not gods, but rather unruly sailors. On February 1, 1779 two events occurred that forced the Hawaiians to question the reality of the fair-skinned foreigners. The first of these happenings dealt with the Europeans' need for resources.

Cook and his sailors constantly needed wood for their galley fires. On February 1st, Cook noticed a broken-down fence surrounding the Hikiau *heiau* and offered to pay Koa for the use of this wood. Koa allowed Cook and his men to take the wood for free. But Cook insisted on paying for the wood, sending several sailors to collect the railings and posts. The sailors not only collected the railings and posts but they also took several wooden idols from within the *heiau*. These wooden idols were extremely sacred to the Hawaiians. By stealing and burning these items, the Europeans' divinity became suspect.

The suspicion surrounding the true identity of the foreigners deepened when William Watman of the *HMS Resolution* died from a paralytic stroke the same day.⁸¹ The Hawaiians believed their deities immortal so the death of Watman forced them to further reexamine the origins of these white men.

After the death of Watman, Cook readied his ships for departure. However, shortly after setting sail, one of the ships' masts broke, forcing the Europeans to return to Hawai'i for repairs. Upon their return, the Europeans realized that they were no longer

⁸⁰ For more information read Alfred Crosby.

⁸¹ Burrow, *Captain Cook in Hawaii*, 127-130.

welcomed. Due to their previous actions and affairs with the local women, the Hawaiians “were disposed to oppose them.”⁸² The Europeans responded to the hostility by firing at the Hawaiians and stealing Pa’alea’s canoe. (Pa’alea was a lesser *ali’i* and demanded respect from others.) When Pa’alea resisted the attack, he was hit by a paddle, and the locals began to throw stones at the foreigners in order to protect their leader. Fearing a godly intervention, Pa’alea quieted his subjects, but later returned to the European vessels and took one of their smaller boats, a cutter, in retaliation. When Captain Cook learned that one of his ships had been stolen, he went to meet with the Hawaiians. Cook learned that the return of the cutter would be impossible because the Hawaiians had already dissembled it for the metal nails. However, Cook was unsatisfied with the results and planned to bring an *ali’i* aboard the *Discovery* and convince him to repay the Europeans for their loss of property. On February 14th, the Europeans blockaded the bay and Cook led a small group of men to capture the *ali’i*. The affair ended with the death of Captain Cook.⁸³

The return of the ships and their subsequent firing at the native canoes, cemented the belief that these men were not deities. Lieutenant James King describes the death of Captain Cook as follows:

[Captain Cook] did not appear to have been in the least danger, till an accident happened, which gave fatal turn to the affair. The boats, which had been stationed across the bay, having fired at some canoes, that were attempting to get out, unfortunately killed a chief of the first rank. The news of his death arrived at the village where Captain Cook was, just as he had left the king, and was walking slowly toward the shore. The ferment it occasioned was very conspicuous...the men put on their war-mats, and armed themselves with spears and stones. One of the natives...came up to the Captain, flourishing his weapon...and threatening to throw the stone...Our poor Commander, the last time he was seen distinctly, was standing at the water’s edge, calling out to the boats to cease firing, and to pull

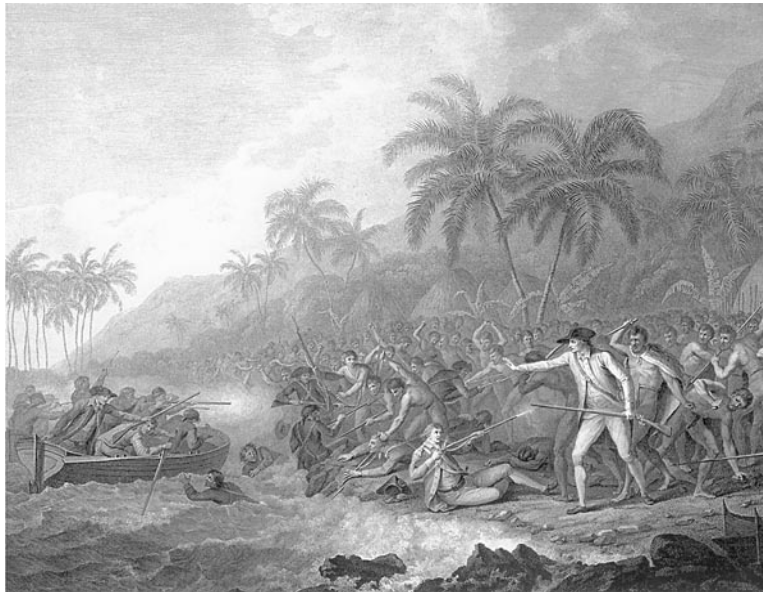
⁸² Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years* 3rd ed., 33.

⁸³ Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years* 3rd ed., 33.

in...For it was remarkable, that while he faced the natives, non of them had offered him any violence, but that having turned about, to give his orders to the boats, he was stabbed in the back, and fell with his face into the water.⁸⁴

The exact details of events are recorded differently by other sailors; with some writing he was facing the natives and others saying he ordered them to fire. This discrepancy is explained by the fact that King, although on the voyage, did not witness the death first hand, hearing about it from other sailors.⁸⁵ Regardless of the exact position of Cook, the Hawaiians lashed out at the Europeans and their Captain, punishing them for breaking *kapu* and killing several of their *ali'i* by murdering Cook among others. Below is another John Webber drawing, later engraved by Francesco Bartolozzi and William Byrne. This shows the death of Captain Cook. It is interesting that Webber, similarly to King, depicts Cook being stabbed in the back. This depiction carries the notion that the natives were cowardly, dishonorable savages.

Figure 4⁸⁶



⁸⁴ Lieutenant James King, "Sunday, February 14, 1779," in *Pacific Images: Views from Captain Cook*, ed. Eleanor C. Nordyke (Hawaiian Historical Society, 1999), 135.

⁸⁵ UCLA Library Department of Special Collections, "The Death of Captain Cook," <http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/special/scweb/cookcheck7.htm> viewed on May 17, 2005.

⁸⁶ http://www.royalbcmuseum.org/mh_papers/cooksdagger.html viewed on May 17, 2005.

Conclusion

Over time, the historical scholarship surrounding the importance and reality of the returning god myths of both the Aztecs and Hawaiians has changed. Despite Zelia Nuttall's arguments that evidence proving the Aztecs returning god myth did not exist in *The Florentine Codex* and Cortés "Letters to Charles V", earlier historians, notably Daniel Garrison Brinton and Hubert Howe Bancroft, endorsed the returning god myth and its influence on the initial encounter between the natives and the Europeans. Many early 20th century scholars, including Obregon, accepted the legitimacy of the myth. During the 1950's and 1960's, scholarship regarding the importance of the myth shifted and historians including Lamb, Poole, Cook, and Crosby began to focus on alternative factors for the conquest. Despite this scholarly modification, other historians, including Cohen, Nicholson, and Carrasco, continued to support the legitimacy of the prophecy. Then in the 1980's a notable shift occurred. Historians such as Colston began to argue that parts of the myth, including the physical description of Quetzalcoatl and his expected arrival during *Ce Actal*, had been added post- conquest. These arguments led some historians including Gillespie and Townsend to discount the myth entirely.

These recent arguments are the result of confusing the difference between the importance the Aztec myth had on the initial contact and the impact the prophecy had on the conquest. Although historians have repetitively argued multiple factors contributed to the swift conquest of the Aztecs, none of these studies discredited the impact the prophecy had on the initial encounter between the two cultures. The confusion is caused by the lack of a significant time differentiation between the two events.

Luckily, the same confusion does not occur in the Hawaiian scholarship. Through studying the Hawaiian returning god myth it is clear that a distinction between the initial contact of native empires and the Europeans with the end of the empires should be made. Differentiating these two separate events, allows historians to focus on the true importance of the prophecies: the peaceful welcoming of the Europeans into the kingdoms. Furthermore, although indigenous cultures welcomed the Europeans as deities, these receptions were short lived. Through the Europeans' actions, the aboriginal nations realized their visitors were not divine.

With the detailed journals kept by the sailors aboard the *Discovery* and *Resolution*, along with the writings of missionary, such as Hiram Bingham, scholars have a greater insight into the native Hawaiian religious beliefs. With these records, historians have not argued that the Hawaiian returning god myth was a complete fabrication. Instead, several historians have simply disputed sections of the myth.

Similarly to the Aztec scholarship, throughout most of the 20th century, historians, including Gavan Daws and Gavin Kennedy, emphasized the importance of the Hawaiian returning god myth. Then, in the 1990's, two historians, Sahlin and Obetsekere, disputed certain aspects of the belief. Sahlin argued the *Makahiki* festival dictated all of the Hawaiians' actions toward the Europeans; whereas, Obetsekere claimed that Sahlin had over-emphasized the festival's importance. He claimed Cook had not been accepted as the god Lono but as a high chief. However, both historians contradicted themselves, allowing skepticism of their conclusions.

Despite recent scholarship, the returning god myth of the Aztecs had huge influences on the first encounter between the Aztecs and Hernan Cortés. Although I

accept the arguments made by Colston against the validity of certain aspects of the myth, the scholarship completely disregarding the myth is false. When the conquistadors arrived in Mesoamerica, the Aztecs believed Quetzalcoatl had returned. This idea seemed validated by the technological superiority of the Europeans, the animals they rode, and because Cortés buried the dead immediately, giving the appearance that the Spaniards were immortal. This belief caused Moctezuma to welcome the foreigners into Tenochtitlan as guests providing them with gifts. The belief that the conquistadors were gods continued until Pedro Alvarado killed several native dancers during a native religious ceremony. This action discredited the belief that Quetzalcoatl had returned, resulting in *noche triste*. Lastly, many factors contributed to the collapse of the empire, but this does not change the importance the Quetzalcoatl myth, and the impact it had on the initial encounter between the two cultures.

Similarly, as suggested throughout this paper, the returning god myth of the Hawaiians had enormous influence on the initial encounter between Captain Cook and the Hawaiians. With the belief that Lono would return from *Kahiki*, the Hawaiians accepted Cook as Lono and the Europeans as deities. The arrival of the ships during the *Makahiki* festival, the foreign and superior technologies, especially iron, and perhaps the physical appearance of the foreigners, led the Hawaiians to believe their deported god had returned. To show Cook respect, the Hawaiians praised and worshiped him by prostrating themselves at his feet giving him gifts related to Lono and chanting to honor his return. Furthermore, the Hawaiians allowed Cook, thought to be a god, to break religious *kapu* without punishment; including excessive fishing and hunting in restrictive areas and the stealing of religious statues from the *heiau* without punishment. These

actions, along with the death of Watman, alerted the Hawaiians to the fact that these visitors were men, not deities. Even with this realization, the Europeans almost escaped without punishment by setting sail. However, their forced return to the islands and hostile acts cemented the fact that they were men and needed to be punished. This recognition resulted in the religious killing of Captain James Cook.

In conclusion, the returning god myths in both cultures had a strong influence on the initial acceptance of the Europeans by the natives. Despite recent scholarship belittling and misinterpreting the importance of these native beliefs, their importance is apparent when examined appropriately.

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