HAWAI'I IN NEW AGE IMAGINATIONS:
A CASE OF RELIGIOUS INVENTIONS*

Mikael Rothstein

The religious use of indigenous peoples’ religions is becoming increasingly more popular on the New Age scene. Particularly perhaps the religions of the North American Indians, but other cultures provide inspiration as well, among those the pre-European Hawaiians. Rather than integrating actual Hawaiian religion, however, New Agers seem to carry out a radical reinterpretation of this tradition, or simply invent traditions that were never Hawaiian.

Based on data obtained in the field, as well as through literature and the Internet, this chapter presents the phenomena and suggests several ways of approaching and interpreting it. It seeks to describe and analyse the use of native Hawaiian religion in the viable fabric of New Age beliefs. As it will appear, this issue is by no means simple—partly because New Age religion, as well as the traditional religion of Hawaii, are difficult to overlook, partly because the ongoing development of any belief system is a delicate and complex cultural process. Furthermore, what appears to be ‘Hawaiian’ in this connection, very often turns out not to be Hawaiian at all. In fact, what is presented in the following, is not simply a discussion of recent articulations among participants on the so-called New Age scene. It is just as much one example of how human beings think and act during the formation of new religious thoughts and ways in general. All religions are negotiated cultural phenomena which only have come into existence because human beings have created them in a variety of cognitive and social transactions. Very often this process means relating to the religious systems of other people, and to the general New Age ideologist and practitioner this certainly is a driving force in the ongoing production of religion (even if the religions of the ‘others’ are very often, as in this case, transformed into something radically new or straightforwardly invented).

* This chapter is a revised version of Rothstein (2005b). I would like to thank the editors of FINYAR’s journal for allowing this reprint.
Indeed, what is commonly designated syncretism—the blend or mix of various religious systems—is so normal that it hardly needs to be specified as a phenomenon. As a rule, every religious system (beliefs as well as practices) constitutes a conglomerate of traditions that are balanced into a new system, and the concept of syncretism therefore is rather empty. It simply points to obvious things. The real theoretical issue at stake is of course the question of ‘tradition’. What has been, what exists, and what will prevail? And how is the dynamics of this relationship best understood? What is its texture, so to say. The issue has been discussed at some length by historian of religions Armin W. Geertz with reference to a host of significant contributions, and I agree when he refers to sociologist Wilbert E. Moore and says that, “any enduring system must have some degree of flexibility which in turn at least provides, if not encourages, innovation” (Geertz 1992: 164). Perhaps it is too early to call New Age cosmologies “enduring systems.” They may, after all, be too young for that designation, but it is very true that the structure of these systems provide possibilities for and encourages innovation. Above all, New Age ideologies entertain the notion of constant evolution: things have to move on, knowledge and perception are supposed to expand, new standards and perspectives are meant to be reached perpetually. The ‘tradition’ of the New Age community (historically rooted in Theosophy), consequently, defines itself as very viable and dynamic. It follows that New Age beliefs and practices are extremely adaptive, a fact that may explain why this kind of modern folk religion seems to survive—sometimes, as in this case, by ‘sponging’ heavily on other peoples’ cultural systems.

Not every perspective pertaining to the relation between New Age religion and the religion of ‘old Hawaii’ can be covered in a few pages. The intention, therefore, is to present the basics of the theme before us, a kind of framework that will allow further academic expansion on the matter. The present discussion may also be seen as a brief interrogation into the construction and development of certain mythological structures (rather than myths in the narrow sense of the word) including: firstly, the sacredness of the ethnic Hawaiians; secondly, the sacredness of the Hawaii islands; and thirdly, the ‘spiritual evolution’ of the human race. Furthermore, as indicated already, the discussion touches upon the problem of cultural and political dominance facilitated by ideologies shaped within mythological frameworks.