

Thick as Blood

by Kasie Apo Takayama

Wiry, cord-like, and stout, it hangs from her scalp like a symbol of pride. Blowing in the wind and standing out amongst the thousands of others, a single hair catches my eye like the rare “Blood Moon” on a cloudless night. This hair is kinky and coarse. It is as thick as fishing line and is an iconic feature on the goddess, Pele. Seeing my grandparents, aunties, and uncles as I grew up, I remember admiring this beautiful hair. Whether they were dancing hula or just having a jam session in a family member’s garage, I watched as their hair swayed along with their hips and dancing to the melody of their ‘ukulele playing. It is this unique hair that exemplifies that serves as a message and symbol of my Native Hawaiian heritage.

The idea that Hawaiians always have long hair could possibly have come from the fact that during the times of old, there was a specific “kapu”, or law, set for hula dancers. This “kapu” stated that hula dancers were not allowed to cut their hair. Despite the reason, however, Hawaiians are still identified by their lusciously beautiful, long hair to this day.

Used in only the most sacred of traditions, hair was believed to have held an extensive amount of “mana” or divine power in the times of old. Feeding from this belief of power from a person’s hair, one could not just dust aside or disregard a hair that had been taken from their head. It was to be guarded and not made publically available. Furthermore, if one had taken hair from their head, the hair was to be properly disposed of in private. Otherwise, my ancestors believed that the hair could be used by an enemy to harm that person through prayer and negative desire. As this hair held so much power, however, the hair of my ancestors was used historically as a part of a “lei niho palaoa”. This was a formal piece of chiefly regalia that consisted of a sperm whale tooth

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pendant hanging from a great amount of braided human hair as its necklace. A “lei niho palaoa” was worn only by Hawaiian ali‘i (chiefs) and those of noble birth. Hanging from a chief’s neck, aside from their feather cloak and “mahiole” (feather helmet), displayed a sign of their rank. It expressed the message that the person who wore it possessed a large amount of power and authority.

Aside from these long lived traditions, another example of the importance of the hair unique to my lineage is the story of Māui. He was a strong, and determined young man who always did things with the intentions of helping others. His story was one, told by our people, which explained why the sun is out for so much of the day. Seeing that the sun was moving around the earth too quickly, Māui set to slow down the sun. He did this in order to allow more time for farmers to harvest their crops, fishers to collect and dry fish, and kapa (cloth) makers to dry their kapa in the sun. Making a rope to snare the sun, Māui knew that his rope needed to be strong enough to win a battle against the sun without breaking. For this reason, he used hair. This wiry and thick rope, along with its coarse and durable nature and the mana that it carried, allowed him triumph in slowing the sun down. This triumph is a story carried on throughout generations as Māui, because of his powerful rope made of hair, is a legend and a hero to our ancestors.

Sometimes, a specific hair, rare like the blood of my ancestors, is white. Thicker and stronger than even the dark colored others, to me, it embodies the wisdom and experience of the person to whom it belongs. I see this uncommon hair and it reminds me that my family and I are a piece of uncommon beauty. Its thickness reminds me of the strength and power that runs through our bloodline. It is this strength that gives us the fight to unite as a people in times where we are in despair. This thickness runs through my veins as a constant source of life for, if not for this reminder of my heritage and the blood that it represents; without my ancestors, I am never truly

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alive. I am without an identity, without a history, and without a future. After all, the people of old strongly believed that, “We are our ancestors.”

Today, in times of economic hardship, disease, and war, our mind looks for a place to escape from the dangers and ugliness of the world around us. We seek a beauty and a refuge that is uncommon to our eyes in a city of pain. Today, many people of my culture find this refuge with their families. They find it watching our relatives dance hula and throw nets at the beach. As we admire these traditional beauties, one thing that always catches our eyes is that beautiful Hawaiian hair. Its body and the way it caresses the wind shines through as a symbol of the comfort, embrace, and safety that I feel when I think of my family and the culture that we come from. Its bulkiness and persistent rhythm of flow and kink is like the beating and pulsing of our warrior built hearts. Its thick roots serve as a reminder of the honed roots that we have to our past, our present, and our future. Today, as a symbol of beauty, strength, wisdom, lineage, experience, and culture, as I walk amongst our kupuna (elders), the hair of my people is the icon that ties me to who I am as a Native Hawaiian.

This rare gem is simple, unique, and may not seem of great importance but I always try to follow in the ways of my ancestors. They believed that even the littlest details of a person, place, or thing were significant in its overall meaning and purpose. They were perfectionists and never let anything as simple as single strands of hair miss their attention. For this reason, when looking at who I am and what represents my culture, I decided that a canoe, flag, or whole person was too broad and too cliché of an icon for me. In addition to this, and continuing to follow in my ancestors’ footsteps, I realized that it is my duty to keep and pass down the knowledge of my people and our identity. I realized that I need to re-instill a sense of pride and remembrance of who we are and what

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we stand for. Simple, yet strong, bold, and flooding with history, the hair of my people is the perfect representation of who I am.

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