

# Lord Byron Views the Rites

From *Voyage of H.M.S. "Blonde" to the Sandwich Islands, 1824-25*

By George Anson, Lord Byron

February 28 [1825]

Returning from a walk this morning, I witnessed, for the first time, a rite of sorcery. My attention was attracted by a group of people near the path I was crossing. On approaching it, though ignorant of the particular ceremony performing, I at once judged it to be idolatrous.

A small mat was spread on the ground, on which was spread several pieces of tapa, a native cloth, and on those again two of the large leaves of the *ape* (one of the largest of the vegetable productions of the islands—I do not know its scientific name). These last seemed to have been prepared with special care; they were both of the same size; were placed the one directly above the other, both of the stems being split entirely up to the point of the leaves. They were carefully held together by a man kneeling at one end, while the priest-or sorcerer, kneeling at the other, repeated prayers over them. These, with two or three others who appeared engaged in the ceremonies, were as solemn as the grave; the rest of the company were light and trifling, and some of them turned to me, and laughing at what they seemed to think the folly of their friends, said, *ino, ino*—bad, bad—*pupuka*—foolish—*debelo*—devilish! On inquiring what it meant, they told me a pipe had been stolen from one of the men, and the incantation was making to discover the thief, and to pray him to death. On reproving them for their superstition and wickedness, they became disconcerted, and the man holding the leaves made some unfortunate movement, which the man praying said had destroyed the effect, and immediately ceased to pray.

Perhaps there is no superstition more general and deep-rooted in the minds of this people than the belief that some have the power of destroying the lives of others by their incantations and prayers. There is not a doubt that many yearly become victims to their credence in this device of darkness, which holds thousands in the bondage of cruel fears. A person gains the displeasure of one of these praying men. He is told that the *kanaka anaana* is exercising his power over him, and that he will die. He cannot shake off the dread of that which he believes to be possible; his imagination becomes filled with pictures of death—his spirits become affected—his appetite fails—these, the natural consequence of his fears are believed to be the effect of the sorcery of his enemy. Under this conviction he takes no nourishment, pines, languishes, and dies, the victim of his own ignorance and superstition. This is no fiction, but a reality that is constantly occurring.

The less enlightened of the people think no one dies a natural death. Every instance of mortality is assigned to the effect of poison administered by some foe, or to the more insidious, but, in their opinion, equally fatal influence of the *pule anaana*.

Before a sorcerer can gain power over the life of a chief, he must possess himself of something that has belonged to the person of the chief, as spittle, or *any excrement*, an article of clothing, etc. In this superstition we find the origin of the care taken of the spittle, etc. of a chief, which is always in charge of a confidential attendant. When a chief became unwell, or had any fear that one of the praying-men had obtained an article which had been worn by him, or had touched his person, he had immediate recourse to sacrifices to counteract the prayer against his life.

The last instance of the kind occurred in October, 1824. According to the custom of disposing of the old clothes of the chiefs, the princess had several boxes of garments she had thrown by

carried out from Lahaina and secretly buried in the sea. It was reported that one dress had been stolen with a design of praying her to death, from the power it would give the sorcerer over her life. The consequence was that her ignorant attendants prevailed on her to sacrifice to her old gods to escape the evil. For this purpose she went to a village eight miles from Lahaina (which was said to be too much under the influence of Jehovah to secure success in the rite) under pretext of visiting her plantations in that neighborhood, and sacrificed to the gods of her fathers. This is the last, and probably will remain the last, sacrifice ever made in the islands by order of a high chief.