

Kamakawi Glyphs

by David Peterson

These are some of my favorite Kamakawi glyphs, accompanied by an explanation of how they work, and how I came up with them.

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 *i'o "goat"*

This was a favorite glyph of mine I recently rediscovered. If you look at it, it basically looks like a goat's head—and, in fact, that's what I thought it was when I went to catalog it a few weeks ago; I'd forgotten how I'd created it. As it turns out, it's actually built off of another glyph:

 *i "for"*

This glyph is used in the syllabary for the sound [i]. Here, it's being used as the base for the glyph for "goat", and is doing double-duty: it's serving as the goat's head, *and* it reminds the reader of the sound of the word by using the glyph for the first syllable of the word *in* the glyph itself.

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 *uomo* "moon"

Admittedly, there's nothing very special-looking about this glyph, but it illustrates something funny about the history of Kamakawi, and the history of its script. When the script was first being developed, glyphs were used for specific, concrete words. At that time, the glyph for "moon" looked like this:

 *uomo* "moon"

As it came into general use, the glyph was simplified, and came to be used for the syllable *uo*. As it was so small, a stick (perhaps an elongated variant of the identity determiner) was added below to give it weight:

 *uo* (the syllable)

Gradually, the association with the meaning "moon" was lost, so a new glyph (the first picture) was created for "moon". It, too, was deemed too small, and so the "land" determiner was added beneath it to give it weight, giving us the glyph we have today.

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 *alama* "sand crab"

I'm rather fond of this glyph, though I'm not quite sure why. It's derivation is interesting. Visually, it is a combination of two glyphs: the glyph for "sand" and the glyph for "crab", both shown below:

 *ta* "sand"

 *maka* "crab"

The combination is fairly straightforward (the top of the "z"-like shape in "sand" forms the top of the crossbar in "crab", and then the rest is overlaid), and semantically, you have "sand" and "crab". The actual words in Kamakawai, though, bear no relationship to each other whatsoever; *maka* and *alama* are totally separate and unrelated words. Further, *ta* doesn't provide any phonetic cues as to the pronunciation of *alama*. Essentially, then, the glyphs are combined idiomatically to give one an idea what the word *is*, and, assuming one speaks Kamakawi, once one knows what the glyph represents, the word will suggest itself. That's the theory, anyway.

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 *eine* "woman"

The derivation of *eine* is complicated. It's kind of a fanciful combination of elements of three glyphs: *ei* "I", *ne* "seagull" and *nea* "she":

 *ei* "I"  *ne* "seagull"  *nea* "she"

This is basically what I did. I built the glyph off of *ei*, which I liked, because the glyph for "woman" isn't based on the glyph for "human" or "man", or anything like that, but "I". To indicate the *ne* part, I needed something that looked vaguely like "seagull", and I drew inspiration from the glyph for *nea* "she", which is kind of like three upside-down v's (two lines and a circle away from being a radioactive sign). The result is something that looks like "The female I", with no male counterpart—consider the glyphs for "man", "human" and "he":

 *hopoko* "man"  *emi* "human"  *lea* "he"

I rather like the result: highly individualistic and feminist at the same time.

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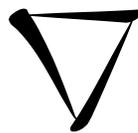
nopa "waist"

In designing the various glyphs for Kamakawi, there arose quite a number of happy accidents. *Nopa* was one of them.

Like many a conlanger, I'm sure, I found myself needing vocabulary of a certain type, and *nopa* arose when I was coining body words (I think it happened when I realized I needed a word for "belt", and, of course, a belt goes around your waist, and I realized I didn't have a word for "waist" [or "knee", or "elbow", or a lot of other things...]), so, pretty much at random, I came up with *nopa*. I didn't think anything of it, until I went to design the glyph. Usually the first thing I look at is the syllabic glyphs that comprise the word, and these are the glyphs for *no* and *pa*, shown below:



no "three"



pa "bowl"

When one is laid over the other, you get none other than the infamous "hourglass" torso (though perhaps a bit more realistic). How's that for luck!