

The Importance of Hawaiian Language Sources for Understanding the Hawaiian Past

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I'D LIKE TO INTRODUCE MY WORK BY INTRODUCING MYSELF and my relationship to it.¹ I was born on O'ahu half a century ago into a Hawaiian family who, like most other Hawaiian families, no longer spoke Hawaiian. My mother grew up knowing some words and some songs in Hawaiian, along with a little hula and a lot of fishing practices. Her mother grew up mostly understanding but not speaking *her* mother's native tongue. And her mother's (my great-grandmother's) native tongue was 'ōlelo Hawai'i, which she supplemented with Chinese and English. Between my great-grandmother's time and my mother's time, the knowledge of our language along with its stories, poetry, children's word games, and beautiful figures of speech was almost entirely lost. I was raised in California and when I returned to Hawai'i as an adult, I began to study the language. After receiving a degree in 'ōlelo Hawai'i, I pursued graduate degrees in order to study the wisdom of our ancestors further. As I began to contest the historiography of Hawai'i by reading nineteenth-century material in Hawaiian, I was often frustrated by my inability to understand what I was reading.

1 This essay is adapted from excerpts from my book, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism*, Duke University Press, 2004.

Not only was our language gone, but so many of the commonly shared cultural references were gone—not even recorded in contemporary reference books. One day, while walking along puzzling over some mysterious passage, I finally became enraged. Why couldn't I understand what was written in a newspaper by someone of my great-grandmother's generation? Why didn't I grow up speaking and understanding this? It is my heritage; it should be my birthright. The violence of the loss of the language became real to me that day, and added to my resolve to keep learning, to teach, and to tell the stories of the people who wrote them down, knowing the language was waning, but having a glimmer of hope that one day, a new generation would be reading their words again.

One result of the language loss has been the perpetuation of certain myths about Hawai'i and its native people. One of the most persistent and pernicious myths of Hawaiian history is that the Kanaka 'Ōiwi (the Native people of Hawai'i) passively accepted the erosion of their culture and the loss of their nation. In 1984, in an article in the *Journal of Pacific History*, for example, Caroline Ralston claimed that the maka'āinana (ordinary people) made "no outspoken protest or resistance against the series of events which appear to have been highly detrimental to [their] well-being" (Ralston 21). Haunani-Kay Trask relates a story of sharing a panel with a historian from the U.S. who, like Ralston, claimed that "there was no real evidence for [resistance by Kanaka Maoli]" (Trask 154–55). Popular historian of Hawai'i, Gavan Daws, dismissed Kanaka resistance in a single paragraph, even though, in the same book, he continued to document it (291). Ralph Kuykendall interpreted King Kalākaua's and Queen Emma's resistance to takeover by the U.S. as anti-haole racism (187). But as Amy Ku'uleialoha Stillman has observed, "Hawaiian-language sources suggest a remarkable history of cultural resilience and resistance to assimilation" (85).

My work seeks to refute the myth of passivity through documentation and study of the many forms of resistance by the Kanaka Maoli to political, economic, linguistic, and cultural oppression. The main basis for this study is the large archive of Kanaka writing contained in the microfilmed copies of over 75 newspapers in the Hawaiian language produced between 1834 and 1948. As Nancy Morris carefully detailed, historians have studiously avoided the wealth of material written in Hawaiian and, as a result, it has appeared that Kanaka Maoli hardly appeared in history at all (Morris). For this reason, Trask has characterized Hawaiian historiography as "the West's view of itself through the degradation of my own past" (153). It is easier not to see a struggle if one reads accounts written by only one side,

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and, since the arrival of Captain James Cook in 1778, there have always been (at least) two sides of a struggle going on. The Europeans and Euro-Americans sought to exploit the land and subjugate the people, and the people fought back in a variety of ways. The archives in English, however, present a preponderance of material on one side—the colonizers’ side—of the struggle. As soon as one reads the Hawaiian language archives, however, it is immediately apparent there was resistance to every aspect of colonialism. Recent work by Kanaka historian Jonathan Kamakawiʻōle Osorio demonstrates how different Hawaiian history can look when Kanaka Maoli as subjects are privileged in the narrative (see *Dismembering Lāhui*). Kānaka are central in his work as both aliʻi and makaʻāinana, accommodating foreigners and their demands for western ways, creating their own constitutional government, and fighting against every attempt to extinguish their independent nationhood.

How is it that the history of struggle has been omitted to such a great extent from Hawaiian historiography? Part of the answer lies in the nature of the colonial takeover itself. As Ngugi wa Thiong’o has explained, colonialism entails establishing mental control over the colonized. The effort for mental control requires “the destruction or deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser” (16). The aim and result of this is to “annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle” (3).

This process began in the early nineteenth century when the Hawaiian language was disparaged as inadequate to the task of “progress.” After the political coup of 1893, the U.S.-identified oligarchy outlawed public and private schools that taught in the Hawaiian language and English became the only acceptable language for business and government. By the mid-twentieth century, the idea that English was the language of Hawaiʻi seemed natural, especially because, except by some persistent Kānaka, Hawaiʻi was no longer regarded as a separate nation with its own people having their own history and language. When historians and others composed their narratives, they “naturally” conducted their research using only the English-language sources. It is important to denaturalize these notions and practices, because it is still possible to obtain a doctorate specializing in Hawaiian history and not be required to learn the Hawaiian language or use Hawaiian-language sources. It is crucial that Hawaiian history no longer be written without considering what Hawaiians wrote in their own language. Contemporary Kanaka Maoli need to know their ancestors’ side

of every chapter that is written. In this essay, because of the nature of this forum, I will provide just two examples of how different history can look when the writing of our ancestors in their native tongue is respected as research material.

Cook in Hawaiian (Con)text

Anne Salmond has recently written, “[Captain James] Cook’s Pacific voyages ... provoke reflection about the nature of history, and the impartiality of its explanations.” In Hawai‘i, Kanaka ‘Ōiwi have been writing accounts of the encounter with and death of Cook since the early nineteenth century. At the same time, Kanaka historians such as Samuel Mānaiakalani Kamakau and Davida Malo contested the historiography of Hawai‘i by foreigners. Both of those historians were founding members of the first Hawaiian Historical Society in 1841 whose explicit mission was to correct what Kanaka thought were misrepresentations of their history being produced by foreigners. Kamakau’s description of the society reads, in translation:

This Association ... was formed because the teachers of [Lahainaluna] Seminary desired to obtain and preserve all historical data possible which bore on the origin of this race, and to obliterate the common belief among some foreigners who claim that this is a wandering race which was lost in a storm and driven by the winds to these shores.... A great many things being circulated by these foreigners are not so. Because ... these foreigners are partaking of the same food with us, what they would say now would be given much credence by our descendants.

Mainstream historians and anthropologists have relied on translations of Kamakau’s mo‘olelo (along with some others’) for Hawaiian accounts of the encounters with Cook. These were originally published serially in Hawaiian language newspapers, between 1866 and 1871. The most commonly cited translation of Kamakau’s mo‘olelo is the book titled *Ruling Chiefs of Hawai‘i*, published by Kamehameha Schools in 1961 and revised in 1992. It is based on the work at Bishop Museum by both Kanaka and foreign scholars, including Mary Kawena Pukui, Thomas Thrum, Lahilahi Webb, Martha Beckwith and Dorothy Barrere. Martha Beckwith divided Kamakau’s writing of mo‘olelo kahiko (ancient history/literature/legend) into two manuscripts based on European ideas of what constitutes “history,” as opposed to “culture.” “History” became *Ruling Chiefs of Hawai‘i*,

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while “culture” was funneled into other books, *Ka Po‘e Kahiko: The People of Old* and *Tales and Traditions of the People of Old*, especially.²

Intriguingly, Kamakau’s translated account of the first arrival of Captain Cook starts with an ellipsis. Kamakau’s original work is now available in a book called *Ke Kumu Aupuni*, which allows us to see his narrative as it was before it was divided up. When the two versions are compared, it is apparent that seventeen pages of text were deleted and replaced with the ellipsis (Kamakau 27–45). What happens when we view the account of Cook’s arrival within the context that Kamakau, historian in struggle, provided for his readers?

First, it is striking that in contrast to English-language histories, Kamakau’s work does not represent Cook’s arrival as the most important event in the narrative. Instead, he embeds the story of Cook within the larger mo‘olelo about Kamehameha I. He likewise contextualizes Kamehameha’s story by recounting the mo‘olelo of wars between the various ali‘i of Hawai‘i Island, Maui, and O‘ahu. At the time of Cook’s visits, Kamehameha was a seasoned warrior but not yet a ruling ali‘i. Kamakau’s December 22, 1866 installment covering the wars ends with the statement: “Eia ka manawa kūpono no ka hiki ‘ana mai o nā haole makamua ma Hawai‘i nei,” or “This was just the time of the arrival of the first white foreigners in Hawai‘i” (27). This statement appears in quotation marks, indicating that Kamakau was quoting someone else, and, more important, that he disagreed with this common assertion of haole historical accounts. He goes on to tell a different history, whose sources are the ancient mele (song; poetry) and mo‘o kū‘auhau (genealogies). According to those recordings of the past, epistemologically valid to Kamakau and other Kānaka, Cook was not the first white foreigner to arrive in Hawai‘i nei. Kamakau contests at length the story that Cook and company were the first haole in Hawai‘i. He first recounts many stories concerning people who traveled to Hawai‘i from foreign lands, and the voyagers who sailed between Hawai‘i and distant lands in Oceania. He follows those with stories of the arrival of new ali‘i from Kahiki (foreign lands), and then with accounts of haole travelers that were preserved in memory through name songs and genealogies.³

It is to this substantial genealogy of travelers that Kamakau adds the story of Captain Cook, purposefully disrupting the story told by haole

2 For an explanation of the translation and division process see Kamakau *Ka Po‘e Kahiko*, vii.

3 For more detail on this story, see Silva, *Aloha Betrayed*, 16–23.

that Cook appeared magically and suddenly as a unique phenomenon, to the shock and amazement of the Kanaka 'Ōiwi. After seventeen pages of voyaging stories, one is not surprised when another kind of foreigner arrives. When Kamakau's text was cut up and reordered to fit the Western category of "history," the context of Cook's arrival he carefully set up for the reader disappears. The fact that Kamakau deliberately contested haole historiography and its methods (by relying on the oral tradition) is literally lost in the translation.

Mass Native Opposition to Annexation

Thirty years after Kamakau's historiographical acts of resistance, Hawai'i was under siege by U.S.-identified elites, many of whom were Hawaiian subjects. Between 1887 and 1898, Kānaka Maoli mounted vigorous and organized resistance to the takeover of their country, first by these elites, many of them missionary descendants, and later by the United States itself. Some of the organized political action of 1887 to 1893 has been mentioned in mainstream histories, but mainly the story of how Kānaka Maoli tried to preserve their national sovereignty between 1893 and 1898 was ignored by historians until my work became public in 1998.

Briefly, after Lili'uokalani was deposed by a U.S.-identified oligarchy in conspiracy with the U.S. Minister John Stevens in 1893, many of her loyal subjects formed political associations to support her and to preserve the country's "independent autonomy" (their words). These were the Hui Aloha 'Āina o nā Kāne (Hawaiian Patriotic League Men's Branch) and Hui Aloha 'Āina o nā Wāhine (Hawaiian Patriotic League Women's Branch). These joined the older Hui Kālai'āina (Political League) to actively oppose annexation to the United States. Hui Aloha 'Āina started out with 7,500 men and 11,000 women and grew between 1893 and 1898. Hui Kālai'āina had about 17,000 members.

Immediately following the coup that deposed Lili'uokalani, all three organizations wrote testimony detailing their protests of the coup, and testifying as to the illegal and improper activities of the U.S. Minister. Their testimonies were included in the report of the investigator, James Blount, and were instrumental in defeating the first proposed treaty of annexation.

The three organizations thereafter protested in mainly nonviolent ways against the oligarchy's consolidation of their power, their institution of a racist and undemocratic constitution, and finally of a second drive for annexation in 1897. Working closely with Queen Lili'uokalani, these three organizations, representing nearly the entire native population, mounted

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a massive petition drive to oppose annexation. Hui Aloha 'Āina collected over 21,000 signatures and Hui Kālai'āina collected around 17,000. They then raised funds to send delegates to join Queen Lili'uokalani in Washington to submit the petitions and to lobby against annexation. They were originally successful, and a second treaty of annexation was defeated in the U.S. Senate.

Unfortunately, Hawai'i was still taken by the United States in a military occupation in August 1898, as a casualty of the U.S.'s drive to expand into Asia. The U.S. went to war against Spain early in 1898 in order to obtain Spain's colonies in the Caribbean and the Pacific. After defeating Spain in the Philippines, the U.S. declared war on the Philippines in order to take that country, and since Hawai'i was en route, the expansionists determined that the U.S. "needed" Hawai'i as a coaling station for their warships. The Newlands Resolution that purportedly annexed Hawai'i was passed by simple majorities in each house of Congress, but this is clearly not a legal way for the U.S. to acquire territory.⁴

Most Kānaka Maoli did not know of this history of organized opposition to the loss of their nation's sovereignty. Knowing of it validates their suspicions that their ancestors did not passively allow themselves and their descendants to be harmed. It is also just the beginning of recovery from a time when the history of the struggles of our recent ancestors was hidden from us. When the story of this organized resistance to the loss of sovereignty became known in 1998, Kānaka Maoli responded emotionally and politically. Three different plays have been written and performed based on the story; the petitions were reproduced on a banner for a march commemorating and protesting the 1898 illegal annexation; two different exhibits of all the pages of the petitions were produced; they inspired several works of art; and the petitions have been used to demonstrate the undemocratic nature of the takeover in various court cases and political arenas. Many people in our community now know the names of their ancestors who fought against annexation as well as they previously knew only the names of the members of the oligarchy and the U.S. presidents.

This kind of work clearly demonstrates that we (human beings) need to know our own peoples' histories, as well as our native languages and literatures. Being absent in history and having our languages and literatures taken away from us is a crime of colonialism that unnecessarily promotes feelings of inferiority. All of our languages have beauty and worth, and all

4 For documentation and legal opinion on this question, see <<http://www.hawaiiankingdom.org>>.

of our ancestors have proud (and mixed) histories. We need to know and we need to tell our own stories.

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