

I Ka 'Olelo No Ke Ola: Understanding Indigenous Hawaiian History and Politics Through Hawaiian Language Sources

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Ua lehulehu a manomano ka 'ikena a ka Hawai'i.
The knowledge of the Hawaiians is myriad and great.
(traditional saying)

United States colonialism in Hawai'i resulted in several generations of Native Hawaiians being schooled in English, unable to speak the mother tongue of their ancestors. It has also meant that the study of the history, politics, and anthropology (among others) of Hawai'i has been conducted almost exclusively in English, ignoring the wealth of source material available in Hawaiian. More than seventy-five newspapers in the Hawaiian language are preserved on microfilm, ranging in date from 1834 to 1948. In these papers, Hawaiians wrote their own histories, literature, political opinions and analyses, as well as poetry and religious thought. The language revitalization movement of the past twenty-five years has created a new generation of scholars now able to read the writing of their ancestors. In this paper, we will present examples of how Hawaiian history looks from indigenous Hawaiian points of view. These include how the myth of Hawaiian non-resistance to colonialism was exploded by the recovery of the history of the organized political resistance of the 1890s and a new understanding of the role of political songs in the same resistance movement. Many more examples abound, and in our individual and collaborative work we continue to research and publish these.¹ The importance of such indigenous views of the past to students of every age and level would be difficult to overestimate, as they finally are able to see their ancestors (and, thus, themselves) in history. This paper should be of interest and value to other indigenous scholars engaged in recovering their own histories.

An old Hawaiian saying goes, "I ka 'olelo no ke ola; i ka 'olelo no ka make," or "In the language is life; in the language is death." The saying reflects our traditional beliefs in the power of language, as well as the value that our ancestors put on their poetic and prose artistry, and on genealogies as the keepers of culture and history. When Kanaka 'Oiwi (Native Hawaiians) first encountered the opportunity to learn reading and writing, they immediately grasped the value of doing so, and became literate in far greater proportions than Europeans or Americans of the early nineteenth century. In 1868 Samuel Kamakau described early Kanaka enthusiasm for reading and writing:



Noenoe Silva (left) and Leilani Basham perform Hawai'ian chant.

A ike iho la na Lii he ike maikai ka ike palapala, a he mea maikai ka heluhelu ana i ka palapala, alaila, lawe ae la kela a me keia alii i mau kumu ao pi-a-pa no kela a me keia alo alii.... Aole i hala ka makahiki hookahi...aia hoi, ua ike na elemakule a me na luahine i aneane aku i ke kanawalu a kanaiwa o na makahiki ua hiki ke heluhelu i ka paipala...a pela i holo ai ka ike heluhelu i na kanaka a pau. O ka noho ana o na misionari ma na apana kuaaina, aole lakou i ao aku i ka poe oo, ua ike kahiko no lakou i ke ao ia.²

[And the chiefs recognized that the knowledge of documents was a good knowledge, and the reading of documents was a good thing, and then, each chief took teachers into his or her home to teach the members of each chiefly household...before the passing of one year, and behold, the old people of nearly eighty and ninety years could read the Bible.... It was in this manner that education spread so rapidly to all of the people. When the missionaries began to settle in the outer districts, they did not educate the mature, older people, for they already knew the teachings.]

The early missionaries to Hawai'i, mainly Calvinists from New England, learned themselves to speak, read, and write in Hawaiian. By the second generation of their settlement in Hawai'i, however, their original intent to save heathen souls had become inextricably entwined with a desire to colonize the Islands. Their children and grandchildren, born in Hawai'i, were subjects of the Hawaiian kingdom but were not content to be ruled by Native people, whom they considered to be backwards and inferior. In one step after another, they ascended to high positions in the kingdom's government, established sugar plantations and became wealthy, and began working towards taking over the government for themselves.³

Ngugi wa Thiong'o explains that colonialism usually 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, oratory and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer."⁴ The aim and result of this is a cultural bomb and

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of nonachievement and makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland.⁵

It is fortunate, that, in the case of Hawai'i, our ancestors wrote a great deal before the cultural bomb had its complete effect. By 1861 Kānaka Maoli had their own newspaper—written, edited, managed, typeset, and printed by Kānaka—where they were determined to set down their own stories, histories, poetry, and political opinions. By the 1890s, there were four or five Hawaiian language newspapers written, edited, and published by Kānaka at any given time.

He aha ka hala i kapuhia ai ka leo? [What was the wrong that forbade the voice?]⁶

In 1893 the kingdom's government was overthrown by a wealthy circle of Europeans and American-identified elites, in conjunction with the U.S. minister in the islands, John Stevens. They first established a provisional government and then, in 1894, the so-called Republic of Hawai'i, which was actually an undemocratic oligarchy. In 1896 the Republic

passed a law making English the language of all schools, public and private, in Hawai'i. This began the era of the cultural bomb, as the next generation began to be schooled in a language foreign to their parents, and were thus cut off from the stories and other wisdom of their grandparents. Knowledge of Hawaiian slowly dwindled, and the last Hawaiian-language newspaper went out of business in 1948. The majority of Kanaka Maoli of the generations of the mid-twentieth century suffered from learning almost nothing about the history and culture of their own people, and still suffer incorrectly and unnecessarily from seeing their past as a "wasteland of nonachievement."

Now, however, as a result of the efforts of many people to re-learn and to teach the language, we can read the newspapers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and through them begin to disarm the cultural bombs by recapturing the events as well as the opinions of our ancestors.

Opposition to the Overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom

When one reads the so-called "Hawaiian" history books and other accounts written in English on this event that were published between 1893 and the 1990s, very little is related about Kanaka reaction or opinion to the overthrow; the perspective of the historians is decidedly one-sided, and obviously biased. According to these sources, the Kanaka "peeked from behind doors and around corners,"⁷ and the greatest reaction they are allowed to have experienced is "intense frustration."⁸ The speed with which the government yielded was described as "evidence of the rottenness of the monarchy which fell as soon as any resistance was made,"⁹ and the public meetings held by the Kanaka, which were actually very well attended by thousands of Kanaka, were described as "subdued"¹⁰ by one historian and "tame and dispirited"¹¹ by another.

In truth, Kanaka reaction was immediate, clear, direct, organized, and readily apparent to anyone who takes a moment to look for it. It was also calm and peaceful, not because of a lack of spirit, but because of the request made by Queen Lili'uokalani to her people that they all "malama i ka maluhia" ["maintain the peace"].¹² The interpretation by historians of this peace as "dispirited" is reflective of their own biases as well as the bias found in the pro-annexation, pro-American English-language newspapers and other sources printed at the time. All any of these well-respected and supposedly knowledgeable historians needed to do was look at *all* of the sources to be found on the subject, including the Hawaiian language sources.

In 1893 the numerous Hawaiian language newspapers being published recorded the activities of the people, businesses, and the government of the Hawaiian kingdom, including the events leading up to, culminating in, and following the overthrow of the government. In addition to news articles recounting the events of the overthrow, many people expressed their thoughts, opinions, analyses, and emotion through the composing of *mele lāhui*—nationalist poetic texts.

The appearance of *mele* (poetic texts, poems, songs, chants) was common in Hawaiian language newspapers since their inception and *mele* were used to express a variety of ideas and emotions. They were a common feature in epic stories that were published on a serialized basis in many papers. *Mele* were used to express admiration and *aloha* (love, affection, respect) for places, family members, and chiefs; they also were used to provide commentary and historical information on political activity.

The overthrow occurred on January 17, 1893, at the instigation of a small group of missionary descendants and businessmen who called themselves the Committee of Safety, with the assistance and support of the U.S. military as instructed by the U.S. Minister John Stevens. The first *mele lāhui* protesting the overthrow was published a mere three days later on January 20 and *mele* of this type were continuously published on a regular basis in several newspapers between 1893 and annexation in 1898, creating a body of *mele* numbering more than three hundred.

These *mele lāhui* are full of detailed historical information on the events of the overthrow, as well as language of admiration for the heroes of the Kanaka. In addition, there is a great deal of language of insult and disparagement for the members of the Committee of Safety and U.S. Minister Stevens. Most importantly, and far outweighing these, are *mele* that contain expressions of admiration for the *lāhui* (nation, people), the Queen, her government, and even her symbols of leadership and independence, her throne and her palace.

One *mele lāhui* that embodies each of these characteristics is entitled “Hooheno No Liliu,” composed by Mrs. Kawohikapulani and published first on March 9 and again on March 11, 1893. The Hawaiian text of this *mele* appears below without an English translation. I have consciously made the decision not to translate the entire *mele* because it would be a great disservice to the composer and the *mele* itself and presumptuous of me to assume I understand and could correctly and completely translate her words into another language and still do justice to all of the strength, beauty, and poetry found within the original.¹³ I will instead highlight and interpret specific sections of the *mele* that are pertinent to this discussion and will provide a translation of the sections that I specifically quote. In truth, these *mele lāhui* contain language that is full of metaphor and poetic references that take years of study to fully understand and that would take many pages to fully explain.

*Hooheno No Liliu*¹⁴

*Kaulana Liliu Ahaolelo
Ma ka Poaono hookuu ia
Aia o Kalani i Iolani
Me na komite o ka lehulehu
He hana ua holo like ka manao
I aupuni Kumukanawai hou
Punihei o Kalani i ka mali leo
Hookohu i na Kuhina o ke aupuni
Kau nui ka manao o na kupa
I pono kaulike no ka lahui
Hea aku no au o mai oe
Lanakila kamahao ko Hawaii
Haina ia mai ana ka puana
A kau o Liliu i ke Kalaunu*

*Kaulana o Liliu i ka maluhia
Ma na welelau o ka honua
He honua ia a he lani keia*

*Noho ia iho Ko noho Kalaunu
E Uli eia ko pulapula
O ka Wohi kukahi ku i ka moku
E Hawaii e hohoi mai oe
A pipili me Liliuokalani
Kulia i paa kou kuokoa
I mau ke ea o ka aina
Kohia i paa Ko heiau
Welo haaheo Ko hae Hawaii
Hea aku no au o mai Oe
Lanakila kamahao ko Hawaii
Haina ia mai ana ka puana
A kau o Liliu i ke Kalaunu*

*Kaulana mai nei oe Kakina
Huakai paoa aohe hope
He hana kumu ole aohe koo
He ulu lau wale aohe mole
Hokai ua manu a'e hewa
Kolea kahu ole no ke kai mai
E lilo i mea ole na enemi
Lehelehe eueu hana lapuwale
E Kane, Kanaloa kii ia aku
E hoihoi mai oe ia Hawaii
E ola o Kalani a mau loa
A kau i ke ao malamalama
Hea ia aku no au o mai oe
Lanakila kamahao ko Hawaii
Haina ia mai ana ka puana
A kau o Liliu i ke Kalaunu*

(Haku ia e Mrs. Kawohikapulani)

The first verse of this *mele* is filled with detailed historical information and a relating of the events that occurred immediately prior to, during, and following the overthrow. The composer begins this history three days prior to the overthrow, on January 14, 1893, by describing Queen Lili'uokalani's official closing of the kingdom's legislature for 1892. The verse goes on to relate the events following this closing of the legislature, in which the Queen returned to the Palace, her seat of government, and requested the new ministers of her cabinet to sign a new constitution which would return the full monarchical authority to the Queen. The monarchical power of the sovereign had been reduced in the 1887 Bayonet Constitution that her brother, King Kalakaua, was forced to sign, and since Lili'uokalani's ascension to the throne, she had received thousands of requests from the Kanaka to re-establish the old constitution, thereby restoring her powers. The historical record seems to indicate that Lili'uokalani had been working on the new constitution for some time and believed that she

had the support of her new cabinet. The composer relates this aspect of the story as well, describing how the Queen was “punihei i ka mali leo” [“fooled by the soothing voices”], because, when she placed the constitution before them, the cabinet refused to sign. At that time, the Queen stepped outside the Palace, where many Kanaka were awaiting the announcement of the new constitution. Lili’uokalani explained the cabinet’s refusal to sign the new constitution and it was at this point that she asked them to maintain the peace.

Lili’uokalani’s request for and maintenance of peace during this time is honored in the first lines of the second verse. All of the historical accounts seem to agree that there was no civil unrest in Honolulu at the time, although the words chosen to describe this peace differ greatly between the English and Hawaiian accounts. As discussed above, most historians have chosen words like “dispirited,” “tame,” or, at the most, “intense frustration” on the part of the Kanaka. Kanaka, however, remained calm and peaceful not because of a lack of spirit, but rather as a sign of their great respect and absolute obedience to the voice of their Queen. This peace is also of great historical and political significance because one of the reasons that U.S. Minister John Stevens ordered the landing of U.S. troops on January 16 was for the protection and safety of American property and lives. The troops, however, set up their base across the street from the Palace and the Government building, rather than near the U.S. embassy and/or property owned by U.S. citizens. With guns pointed at the palace, Lili’uokalani had little choice but to cede peacefully in order to avoid the loss of life, and at her direction, the Kanaka also maintained the peace.

The rest of the second verse goes on to request assistance for Lili’uokalani, her people, and her government from a variety of religious and cultural symbols. The assistance of Uli, a Hawaiian goddess of sorcery and also an ancestor of Lili’uokalani, is invoked. The rest of the lines in this verse request assistance from specific objects themselves, which is very reflective of the Hawaiian belief in the *mana* (spiritual strength, power) possessed by all objects. Specifically, it is requested that Hawai’i itself return to “pipili me Liliuokalani” (“closeness/connection with Lili’uokalani”), and that Hawai’i continue to strive to have its independence secured so that the life of the land may continue in righteousness (“I mau ke ea o ka aina i ka pono”). This assistance is also requested so that the *heiau* (“temples”) of Hawai’i may be secured and that the Hawaiian flag would continue to *welo haaheo* (“proudly wave”).

The third verse takes us in a completely different direction, as it is filled with language of insult and disparagement for those who were instrumental in the overthrow. The first line specifically mentions “Kakina,” the Hawaiianized version of Lorrin Thurston’s last name. Thurston was a descendant of Asa Thurston, one of the first missionaries sent to Hawai’i in the early 1800s. He became a prominent businessman and was a pro-annexationist. He was one of the founding members of the Committee of Safety and, upon the completion of the overthrow, he immediately left for Washington, DC, in order to lobby for the ultimate goal of U.S. annexation of Hawai’i.

In the last verse of this *mele*, the composer recognizes that Thurston’s leadership role was instrumental in the overthrow. She describes the journey that Thurston has gone on, seeking annexation, as *paoa* (“strongly odiferous”) and *aohe hope* (“without backing”). The composer goes on to describe Thurston’s actions as *He hana kumu ole aohe koo* (“an action without reason, which has no support”), and as *He ulu lau wale aohe mole* (“a tree with only leaves and no root”). The following lines use other words of insult, calling Thurston a *Kolea* (“a plover bird”) and an enemy who has *Lehelehe eueu hana lapuwale* (“energetic lips which

create only worthlessness”). The *kolea* bird is used here as a reference to *haole* (foreigners of European descent), who come to Hawai’i to only eat off the wealth of the land, increasing their own coffers, without reciprocating back to the source of that wealth, as the *kolea* bird does each winter when it flies to Hawai’i, lives here, eats off the land, and fattens itself up on our resources before returning to its birthplace, where it expends those resources.

The last four lines of each verse of the *mele* are nearly identical, and describe the composer’s ultimate goals and desires for the conclusion of this problem and the act of aggression taken against the Hawaiian kingdom, the Hawaiian Queen, and the Hawaiian people themselves. The composer sends out a call (*hea*) and is awaiting a response of victory for Hawai’i. The composer sings the refrain, the main idea of the *mele*, requesting that Lili’uokalani be returned to her rightful position on the throne as the sovereign of the Hawaiian kingdom.

Throughout this *mele*, as well as in the hundreds of other *mele lāhui* written during this era, there are abundant examples of Hawaiian historical thought and analysis, expressions of great *aloha* for the Queen, and great opposition and resistance to the overthrow of the government and the subsequent annexation of Hawai’i. It is readily apparent that the idea that Kanaka did not even react strongly to, much less actually make expressions of and take action to oppose the overthrow is just one of the cultural bombs deployed by U.S. colonialism against the Kanaka. In truth, Kanaka did engage in acts of resistance and opposition to the overthrow continuously from the time of the overthrow in 1893 through the illegal annexation of Hawai’i in 1898.

Opposition to Annexation by the United States

In 1897 William McKinley took office as president of the United States. He was a Republican who was in favor of expansion of the territory of the United States. When representatives of the Republic of Hawai’i offered him a chance to take Hawai’i, he readily agreed. McKinley and the representatives of the oligarchy signed a treaty of annexation, which McKinley then forwarded to the U.S. Senate for ratification. Treaties require a two-thirds vote in favor in order to pass.

Queen Lili’uokalani was in Washington at this time, meeting people and telling the story of the loss of her kingdom. She engaged in many acts of resistance to the takeover, including writing *Hawai’i’s Story by Hawai’i’s Queen*.¹⁵ She was an astute political observer, and when the treaty was signed, she immediately began to work with the various political organizations in Hawai’i to defeat the treaty in the Senate. She corresponded with the leaders of the three big organizations, the Hui Aloha ‘Aina o Na Kane [Hawaiian Patriotic League for Men], the Hui Aloha ‘Aina o na Wahine [Hawaiian Patriotic League for Women], and the Hui Kalai’aina [Political League]. Together, through letters, they organized a massive petition drive to protest annexation. The idea was to demonstrate powerfully that the oligarchy did not represent the majority of the people in Hawai’i, particularly the Kanaka ‘Oiwi.

In a matter of a month or two, the three *hui* managed to collect about 38,000 signatures from five islands, out of a total native population of about 40,000. Hui Aloha ‘Aina had more than 21,000 signatures on their petition protesting annexation, about equally half men’s and women’s, and Hui Kalai’aina had about 17,000. The *hui* also raised funds to send four men to Washington to present the petitions to the Senate and to tell their side of the story to the

senators. When they arrived, they met with the queen, and then with friendly members of the Senate. They decided to present just one of the petitions to the Senate, because the headings on the two were slightly different (the Hui Kalai'aina demanded restoration of the queen, while Hui Aloha 'Aina merely protested annexation). Their work was initially successful; the treaty never garnered enough votes to pass.

Unfortunately, during this same time, the United States declared war on Spain after a ship exploded in Havana harbor. Spain was losing control of its colonies in the Pacific and the Caribbean, and some politicians in the United States saw an opportunity for expansion by taking over those colonies.¹⁶ After the United States quickly defeated Spain in both the Caribbean and the Philippines, it declared war on the newly independent Philippines. In the midst of the war fever, many congressmen were persuaded that the U.S. "needed" Hawai'i as a coaling station for the war to take the Philippines. A joint resolution of Congress called the Newlands Resolution purported to annex Hawai'i in July and August 1898, although a joint resolution of Congress is an insufficient instrument to annex territory, under both international law and the U.S. constitution.¹⁷ Hawai'i was quickly occupied by U.S. warships and the military bases that have proliferated ever since.

Most Kanaka 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. When the story of this organized resistance became known in 1998, Kanaka Maoli responded emotionally and politically. Three different plays have been produced 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 of the pages of the petitions were produced; several works of art were inspired; and the petitions have been used as evidence of 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 only knew the names of the oligarchy and the U.S. presidents.

'A'ohe mea e kapuhia maoli ai ka leo! [There is nothing by which our voices will be forbidden!]

These examples of cultural bombs that have been disarmed are only the beginning; there are still many more cultural bombs being deployed to prevent our true understanding of our own histories, bombs that also must be disarmed, in the areas of political science and history, as well as religion, education, anthropology, science, and social and cultural practices. There are still many metaphors and figures of speech that appear in the writings of our ancestors that we do not understand, because the cultural referents are gone or difficult to find and follow, given the distance of time and the degrees to which our understanding and perspectives on our world have changed. Even given these limitations of understanding, however, the time is over when people can continue to write Hawaiian history without attending to what was written in Hawaiian by Hawaiians. Hawaiian history and the interpretation of it must include the Hawaiian voice. As such, we are confident that the revitalization of Hawaiian language has reached such a level that there will never come a time in which the voices of our ancestors and our own voices as well will ever be forbidden or silenced again.

Endnotes

1. See Noenoe K. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) and other works; J. Leilani Basham, *He Puke Mele Lahui: Na Mele Kupa'a, Na Mele Ku'e A Me Na Mele Aloha O Na Kanaka Maoli* (M.A. thesis, University of Hawai'i, 2002); and Amy Ku'uleialoha Stillman, "Of the People Who Love the Land: Vernacular History in the Poetry of Modern Hawaiian Hula," *Amerasia Journal* 28, no. 3 (2002):85–108, and other works.
2. Samuel M. Kamakau, *Ka Nupepa Kuokoa*, January 18, 1868. Translation by J. Leilani Basham.
3. For excellent treatments of this history, see Jonathan Kay Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio, *Dismembering Lahui: A History of the Hawaiian Nation to 1887* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002) and Sally Engle Merry, *Colonizing Hawai'i: The Cultural Power of Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
4. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986), p. 16.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
6. An 'olelo no'eau [traditional saying].
7. Lawrence H. Fuchs, *Hawaii Pono: A Social History* (New York: Harcourt Brack Jovanovich Publishers, 1893), p. 3.
8. Edward Joesting, *Hawaii: An Uncommon History* (New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 1971), p. 238.
9. William A. Russ, *The Hawaiian Revolution (1893–1894)* (Selingsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1922), p. 96.
10. Gavan Daws, *Shoal of Time* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1974), p. 271.
11. William Alexander, *History of Later Years of the Hawaiian Monarchy and the Revolution of 1893* (Honolulu: Hawaiian Gazette Company, 1896), pp. 50–51.
12. *Ka Leo o ka Lahui* (January 18, 1893).
13. This section was written by and based on the master's thesis of J. Leilani Basham.
14. *Hawaii Holomua* 9 (February 11, 1893).
15. Lili'uokalani, *Hawaii's Story by Hawaii's Queen* (Honolulu: Mutual Publishing, 1990 [1897]).
16. See Tom Coffman, *Nation Within* (Kane'ohe, HI: EpiCenter Press, 1998) for more on this story.
17. For the legal arguments and documentation, see www.hawaiiankingdom.org

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