

Ke ‘A‘ali‘i Kū Makani: Kinolau of a Feminist Mo‘olelo

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He ‘a‘ali‘i kū makani mai au; ‘a‘ohe makani nāna e kula‘i (Pukui, 1997, ŌN 507). In Hawaiian mo‘olelo, the ‘a‘ali‘i is regarded as a lowly shrub with small scattered leaves and tiny flowers, not much to look at. Its counterpart, the pūmai‘a, is grand in stature with large green leaves and is beautiful to behold. However, in the time of great wind and rain, it is the ‘a‘ali‘i that is able to kū makani, to be steadfast. The lesson here is one of humility versus arrogance.

Upon further exploration however, Pukui offers another proverb of ‘a‘ali‘i. “He hina nō ka ‘a‘ali‘i kū makani, he ‘ula‘a pū me ka lepo, (When the wind-resisting ‘a‘ali‘i falls, it lifts the sod up with its roots) (Pukui, 1997, ŌN 579). This second description of the ‘a‘ali‘i is likened to a strong warrior, that in their strength everything goes with them. Like the contrast of the humble ‘a‘ali‘i and the haughty pūmai‘a, the second comparison gives us a glimpse into the ‘a‘ali‘i kū makani and ‘a‘ali‘i hina makani, both honoring the strength of the this kinolau.

I use ‘a‘ali‘i as a metaphor for our wāhine Hawai‘i, resilient in their times of both kū and hina. I use our mo‘olelo to connect our experiences back to our mo‘olelo ku‘una, as well as to our current mo‘olelo of lived experiences, each asserting our aloha ‘āina, kūpuna, and mo‘opuna.

In utilizing storytelling as a research method, it is important to understand the role that mo‘olelo have played for Indigenous peoples. Smith (1999) asserts, “Storytelling, oral histories, the perspectives of elders and of women have become an integral part of all indigenous research. Each individual story is powerful. But the point about the stories is not that they simply tell a story, or tell a story simply. These new stories contribute to a collective story in which every indigenous person has a place” (144).

Kaomea (2005) adds to this as she writes, “We seek to reclaim our indigenous stories and the indigenous practice of storytelling, as we begin to replace the stories of the colonizers with stories from our communities and struggle to once again find our indigenous voice” (79). Kovach (2010, 94) reiterates that our stories are relational and place

us in a genealogical time and space. I echo the idea that for Indigenous scholars every isolated struggle for self-determination, language, culture, and identity contributes to the collective struggle for self-determination, language, culture, and identity. Through our stories, we locate ourselves at the liminal space between our kūpuna and mo‘opuna and seek to honor both.

The mo‘olelo included in this article are three stories of exploring Ke Ao ‘Ōiwi, creating and maintaining a Kānaka ‘Ōiwi space as a wahine, mother, and kumu, either through its deficit or through its presence. I suggest that these stories, experienced through a feminist lens, are activities that cross “the (blurred) boundaries between academic and other activist sites” (DeVault and Gross 2011, 75). As experiences that do not fit discreetly within our classroom, home, or individual experiences but intersect with our personal and lāhui wellness, and as we interrogate their overlap, we are given clues in our mo‘olelo, in our kinolau, and in our own mo‘okū‘auhau.

❧ **KU‘U TŪTŪ** ❧ We, as Native Hawaiians, must continue to unveil the knowledge of our ancestors. Let us interpret for ourselves who our ancestors are, how they thought, and why they made certain decisions. In the process, we treat them with honor, dignity, love, and respect—whether they be akua, ali‘i, or kānaka—because they are our ‘ohana, our family (Kanahele 2011).

My relationship with my tūtū, Pearl Ku‘uleimomikai Amina Perry, has been of paramount importance in my life. As a model of a strong Hawaiian woman, she was raised in Waiākea Uka, on the island of Hawai‘i. Although by the time I came along she had already moved to Honolulu, there were qualities about her that carried an aura of serenity that were very calming in this bustling city. She had a deep love for family and she always appreciated the little that she had. I would suggest that my ‘ohana is matriarchal in general, but it is from her specifically that I formulate my ideas about my own identity as a Hawaiian woman and mother.

Orphaned at an early age, my tūtū, as the hiapo, took on the kuleana of raising her younger siblings, forcing her to drop out of school. She learned then, that in order to survive she had to fight—fight being Hawaiian, fight being a woman, and fight being poor. Her inner conflict about being Hawaiian manifested itself in several ways. Although Grams was raised speaking Hawaiian, later in her life she did not speak it at home. Like others of her generation, she believed that following in the American style would ensure success for her own children in a changing society. She was from a big family plagued with issues of domestic violence and sometimes talked about her ‘ohana with reproach. “‘Ona mau” she called them and would later go as far as discouraging her own children from marrying Hawaiians.

Cautioned by tūtū’s reluctance to speak Hawaiian, I stepped into my first Hawaiian language class as a sophomore in high school. This first Hawaiian language class had a profound effect on me as I was even shocked to learn that there were people who could speak Hawaiian as their mother tongue. I decided that day that I needed to be involved in teaching the ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i. It was not until I graduated, however, that I learned about Pūnana Leo, a pre-school where all teaching was done through the medium of Hawaiian language. I was truly amazed that children as young as three and four years old could speak entirely in this “new” language. I would go home after visiting the Pūnana Leo and talk to Grams in Hawaiian, sharing the new vocabulary that I had learned. Although she sometimes had reservations about the way I was speaking or the new words that I would use, I knew that she was happy again in having a hoā wala‘au.

I know that my dream to become an educator, a Hawaiian immersion teacher specifically, was a direct result of my tūtū’s own struggles. Although she had to drop out of school at an early age, she had a zeal for learning that she shared with us kids, and always reminded us to do our best with the opportunities we were afforded, “Mahalo i ka loa‘a.” She wanted a better life for us, but also for other Hawaiians who struggled as she did. She never lost her curiosity for learning. My tūtū inspired and taught me by her example. She worked so hard just to survive, so even in this time where people are proud to be Hawaiian, I can never take being Hawaiian for granted.

❖❖ **NO KALAE ‘OE** ❖❖ As a people, we make connections to our past, ka wā ma mua, through our lived experiences.

To perpetuate the knowledge and traditions of our ancestors, however, we embrace our future, ka wā ma hope, through our children. I boast with both regret and pride that as a child, my activist parents often sacrificed family by redirecting their time, energy and resources for the hope of a Hawaiian nation. As a mother, however, I learn from the sacrifices of our past and change the trajectory for a future course.

Pukui, as an early Hawaiian scholar, drew upon her native intelligence and bridged it with her expanding worldview as a Hawaiian woman. Her writings of traditional pregnancy and childbirth allowed me to seek a cultural path for the birth of my son. I believed that by invoking spiritual and practical approaches she described, a safe delivery could be ensured.

As Kaleikoa Ka‘eo reminds, “If I have courage, it is because I have faith in the knowledge of my ancestors” (as previously stated by Mau Piailug). Pukui, Haertig, and Lee (1979) provide an accounting of pregnancy from conception to birth, and gives insight to pre and postnatal practices. Diet, pain management, and ‘ohana engagement are detailed in the customary practices, providing a roadmap to cultural and spiritual practices unfamiliar to me. My takeaways from her words were simple. First, the cravings of a mother are actually that of the baby. Second, diet during pregnancy revealed the characteristics of the child to come and were designed to meet the needs of the mother. Lastly, although Hawaiian mothers experience “natural” childbirth, they did not cry out in pain as it was believed to scare the child.

While “western” medical doctors, hospitals, and insurance carriers do not support this practice, my son’s arrival into this world through a home-birth, in my humble, rented apartment, and subsequent planting of his ‘iwe in his ancestral home reassure me that he too will be firmly planted in the ways of his kūpuna. Through faith in our Hawaiian traditions and knowledge we will always have the strength to survive and thrive as a Hawaiian people.

❖❖ **HE HINA** ❖❖ The following is a cautionary story of injury. In spite of major gains that we make as lāhui, there is still much work to be done to combat the aggression against Hawaiians that is entrenched in our educational system. Crenshaw (2018) explains “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (58). Therefore, we must interrogate our own participation.

The following is a student’s written response to an assigned class reading, *Culture and Educational Policy in Hawai‘i: The Silencing of Native Voices* (Benham and Heck 1998) for an introductory teaching seminar course I was conducting. As an instructor I did my best to create an environment where students felt free to express themselves. The class itself was a mix of Hawaiian, local, and continental students seeking teacher licensure for the Hawai‘i Department of Education. Each of these candidates had been working in public schools, some in Hawaiian language immersion.

We’ve all heard the same rhetoric before about the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian government by US marine backed politicians yada yada yada. Personally, I think it grows tiresome. Unfortunately, things happened in the past that cannot be undone or changed. Constantly referring to something we are all aware of I think does nothing to add to a sensible discussion about the real issues and what we can do to CHANGE CURRENT problems. Sure it’s easier to blame the US government for the overthrow and how people have been marginalized. I think in any case though, you are going to find both sides of the coin. I’m sure there are many native Hawaiians who have suffered because of the effects the US has had here on the islands. On the same hand, there are also many who have benefited from it.

PS - This response was written in ENGLISH so that I could contribute to an open “class discussion” that involves ALL class members.

This student’s hostile attitude was not limited to his course papers but continued into class discussions. “Haole go home!” flashed through my mind, and while other students would provide a counterview in class, suggesting that perhaps if he wanted them to translate what they were saying into English, he should be prepared to translate everything he did into Hawaiian. I began to feel a sharp drop in overall morale of the students in my class, especially the Hawaiian-speaking students. As the instructor, I felt a great unease in my attempts to deal with his verbal tirades and attacks concerning Hawaiian history, culture, values, and ideas that I considered to be my foundational beliefs, beliefs I knew were shared by many students in the classroom. His combative stance made it clear he would resist any and all attempts to influence his thinking, as he aggressively fought to impose his worldview on others in the class. While I understand, as a member of the academy, that universities, of all places, exist foremost to promote

the democratic ideal of freedom and individual expression, I find myself, as a Hawaiian, questioning certain aspects of the instructor’s role. How can I promote the free flow of ideas while, in my view, a student is engaging in veiled and not-so-veiled racist attacks? How can I maintain civility in a classroom where such a student behaves overtly, and states explicitly, views that, if adopted, would further marginalize the Hawaiian people and other oppressed peoples perpetuating the intersectionality of oppression, power, and discrimination? To what extent should the teacher engage an outspoken intransigent? Is it a mere matter of facilitation skills or of possessing a more cunning intellect? As a university instructor, but contrary to my Hawaiian values, should I be expected to tolerate a classroom as a toxic battleground for racist sentiments? What role, as teacher, most promotes ideas of a safe classroom while giving voice to and counterbalancing the truth of colonization and oppression in an institution where the deep structures of that oppression are still extant? In practice, what is the role of non-Hawaiian participants in Hawaiian educational preparation program? Can exposure to counter-narratives be illuminating for all? Should I be trying to indoctrinate Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians alike? Or should I focus my efforts on supporting students that already share a worldview that is similar to my own? Or perhaps we, as a larger cultural group, need to spend more time and resources addressing areas of cultural conflict among the uninitiated.

I wish I could say that this was an isolated incident where a passionate student sought to assert his critique of literature that sets out the history of an oppressed people, but sadly the “get over it” mentality is not uncommon (Hassouneh 2006). Seemingly this student’s own discomfort with confronting a counter narrative regarding Hawai‘i’s educational history left him angry—perhaps not wanting to recognize his own position of white, male privilege. The dearth of indigenous faculty and students at institutions of higher learning is ironic considering that these institutions owe their very physical existence to, and are situated on, Hawaiian Kingdom lands that the U.S. has admitted were illegally stolen from the Hawaiian people in Public Act 103–150, the “Apology Resolution,” and that their founding costs were underwritten by revenues generated from these lands. The truth of this history is an important story that has worked its way into the soul of many Hawaiians. It must be neither suppressed, denied, or silenced because it may be a discomfort to those who benefit but contribute

little toward redress. The hostility of the academy has not gone undocumented—all we have to do is look at the enrollment numbers of our students and the percentage of our people who are tenured-track faculty to understand that the academy has worked extremely hard at keeping us out. Justice (2004) argues that “many of us have been educated to believe that we don’t belong in this place of meaning-making, that we don’t have anything worthwhile to contribute as Native peoples, that the intellectual traditions of our families and communities aren’t powerful understandings of the world and her ways” (102).

Prior to being hired at University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (the largest teacher preparation institution in Hawai‘i), there was only one other faculty member within the College of Education that had a Hawaiian language background and was involved in teacher preparation. There was then, and still is, a need to increase future classroom teachers’ Hawaiian language fluency so that they can impart a Hawaiian worldview into their teaching. Having the facility to teach courses in both English and Hawaiian, but through the lens of Hawaiian culture, helps teacher candidates gain the experience of articulating their educational philosophies and pedagogies, making them more effective teachers.

■ ■ ‘A’OLE I PAU ■ ■ While prolonged occupation still plays a very real role in shaping the parameters of our educational experiences, the landscape for Hawaiians is very different from the time of my tūtū. She would rejoice to learn that students are celebrated in our Kula Kaiapuni and not punished, as she was, for speaking Hawaiian. She would be shocked to learn that her mo’opuna had completed a doctoral degree at a university that had once been a gatekeeper institution for Hawaiians. She would be relieved to learn that her ‘ohana had career opportunities beyond the tourism service industry, where as a single mother with seven children she had limited career choices.

I write to remind myself of the kuleana inherent within my commitment to Hawaiian education. Through sharing my own family stories within the contexts of being a Hawaiian, a mother, and scholar, I locate myself within the continuum of a larger Hawaiian mo’olelo. As a learner and as a vulnerable participant in this process, I am mindful of how far we have come and how far we have to go as a lāhui to solidify our educational hale, our pou kihi. We continue on humbly, as ‘a’ali’i kū makani.

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