

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Lynette Cruz

Kekuni Blaisdell was a “man for all seasons,” the ultimate man of conscience. Back in the early 1990s, as a newcomer to Hawaiian history and Hawaiian activism, I fell in love with the idea of Kekuni as someone rational and balanced, a person who remained true to himself and his beliefs, despite external pressure or influence.

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Kekuni's credibility among members of the community rested less on his competence as a doctor, which was considerable, and more on his ability to bring all his influence and skills to bear in helping heal the injuries of Kānaka Maoli brought on by Western impact. I think Kekuni would have called that the "hammer" of Westernization, a power structure that viewed all native peoples as nails. He mentioned more than once that the illness that decimated Kānaka Maoli was based in capitalism, where making money (taking out of an exchange more than you put in) became more important than making friends, and more important than a healthy and caring relationship between people and the land.

Kekuni was more than a Hawaiianist. He was a Hawaiian social justice advocate to the max! This awareness of his hugeness, the extent of his personal mana, was revealed to me and others after years of attending Ka Pākaukau—the weekly Thursday night meetings where men and women gathered from every corner of the world to share their struggles and their desire to form the big family of kū'ē, of resistance to oppression by native peoples and allies across borders.

As head of Ka Pākaukau, and later as the po'o of the Pro-Kanaka Maoli Independence Working Group, Kekuni was a leader who loved the people. And he hated the suffering brought on by diabetes, heart disease, homelessness, lack of education, lack of job opportunities, incarceration of so many maoli, and harm to the land, water, and sea. For him, everybody and everything suffered the consequences of Western contact, even some of the haole people who came here early on.

At his Thursday meetings, his table featured kalo, 'uala, vegetables, and fruit juices. He believed in healthy eating and healthy dialogue. He set the tone. And the ideas and creativity within those Thursday night events flowed. He flowed. He was in his element. These meetings lasted late into the night, and those of us who had to leave earlier sat closer to the door to make a quick exit without being disruptive. The meetings initially were held in a portable at the Ethnic Studies building at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Marion Kelly, Kekuni's right-hand woman, was instrumental in providing meeting space and ground support for the fledgling group. Eventually the meetings convened at Kekuni's hale on Kā'ohinani Drive in Nu'uano. His house was the safe space, the pu'uhoonua. When Marion's time came to depart, Kekuni carried the meetings alone, unknowingly (but maybe not) training some of us to pick up where he left off.

Tony Castanha, a student and friend of Kekuni, described Ka Pākaukau as a coalition of organizations and individuals pursuing self-determination and independence, with independence defined as sovereignty. Those groups pursuing self-determination were not in pursuit of sovereignty. As Castanha noted, Ka Pākaukau supported the sovereignty movement, as long as the ultimate goal was independence. Ka Pākaukau was never promoted as a government, and Kekuni resisted moving in the direction of creating one. He served in multiple roles, as leader of the various iterations of Ka Pākaukau, while simultaneously pushing forward as convener of the 1993 Peoples' International Tribunal, Hawai'i, which brought the United States to trial for crimes against the Kanaka Maoli people.

I believe Kekuni was challenged daily. He had a medical practice and a family; he was a busy man. Yet somehow the health and wellness of the entire lāhui became his kuleana, and it became, I believe, his privilege as well as his burden. I can't say that there was time enough for the "small" family as well as for the larger one, of which I am a beneficiary. But I am a parent, and I know the pull between work and home time. When my kids were little, they whined about the amount of time I spent working in support of the lāhui, time I could have spent at home. But my kuleana was small compared with Kekuni's. I wasn't charged with the health and wellness of the entire lāhui. Was it fair? Probably not.

I think it is safe to say that Kekuni had an urgency, driven by his own sense of rightness and balance, to heal physically, mentally, and in every other way the malaise that, following Western encroachment, settled on entire generations of our ancestors. This was his lāhui, a nation of people whose very sense of connect-edness was ripped away in the hurricane of that poisonous impact. I think in his heart of hearts, Kekuni cried for us all, past, present, and future generations. And he also knew, and stated publicly multiple times, that knowing our history is important to visioning our future. We cannot move forward until we know where we came from, thus where we are headed.

In the 1800s and 1900s, the people died. Those who made it through the holocaust changed. And after a time, our ancestors, through indoctrination and with generational trauma settling into their bones, became survivors. We are all survivors today, as were our parents and grandparents, a fact not recognized by us until Kekuni called it to our attention. Victims of circumstance and foreign greed? Yes. Accepting of our national "lot" in life? Absolutely not. In that direction lay Americanization and cultural death.



Hawaiian Civic Club Honoree, 2009

ILLUSTRATION BY KAHEALANI MAHONE-BROOKS

How does a medical doctor deal with generational trauma visited upon, and residing within, the DNA of Kānaka Maoli today? By emulating our kūpuna, who maintained their aloha and wisdom throughout that whole period of disenfranchisement. Kekuni tempered his own outward expression of anger with aloha, resisted oppression with research and knowledge, and shared his concern and support for others in struggle year after year, with the same welcoming attitude that always characterized interactions at his hale. If there truly was a tutu's house, his was it.

When my youngest son was little and I was barely making ends meet with lecturer jobs at UH–Mānoa and Hawai'i Pacific University, I had no medical insurance. When my son was ill, I took him to Kekuni to get fixed. He never turned me down. He never turned any of us down. He understood that Hawaiians today, many of us, are hanging by a thread. He took on the burden of fixing the little and the big, all at the same time.

Today, we, at least the non-medically trained, try to follow in his footsteps. We try to inspire others as he inspired us. Our healing practices are limited by our lack of knowledge, but our cultural practices reflect, we hope, Kekuni's own modality of welcoming others into the fold, at whatever level of understanding they express. Because ultimately, those coming in will be charged with carrying out the work when the older and more frail move on. We have learned to make space for the next set of learners and practitioners, just as he made space for us. We have learned to practice the same kind of aloha and ho'okipa that made his home our home.

Kekuni was the leader, the father, the trusted adviser. His impact was so profound that at his passing, two services were held: one for family and trusted advisers and leaders of the Hawaiian and medical community, and a second service for those of us on the "ground level," who knew him as a comrade in arms. We will never forget. He will never be forgotten.

On Saturday, August 5, 2017, the Hui Aloha 'Āina/Hawaiian Patriotic League, the newly revived Hawaiian national organization, met in convention on the grounds of 'Iolani Palace in downtown Honolulu. The original hui, founded in 1893 following the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, was started by Hawaiian patriots Joseph Nāwahī, James Kaulia, and William Pūnohu White. Today's Hawaiian patriots are slowly finding their way to the hui and, it is hoped, toward the health and wellness Kekuni envisioned, and the restoration of the Hawaiian Kingdom and our stolen history. Hui Aloha 'Āina passed this resolution in support of and with great love and reverence for Kekuni Blaisdell, a man for all seasons.

1 KA 'AHAHUI HAWAI'I ALOHA 'ĀINA - HAWAIIAN PATRIOTIC LEAGUE

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'ŌLELO HO'OHOLE - RESOLUTION NO. 17 - 04

REMEMBERS AND HONOURS RICHARD KEKUNI AKANA BLAISDELL,
HAWAIIAN PATRIOT AND HAWAIIAN NATIONAL

Whereas, Dr. Richard Kekuni Akana Blaisdell, beloved physician, friend, activist, lover of the 'āina and of social justice for all people, was born on March 11, 1925 and passed to his ancestors on February 12, 2016;

Whereas, Kekuni was a humble graduate of the Kamehameha Schools, the University of Redlands, and the University of Chicago School of Medicine, where he later returned to join the teaching faculty;

Whereas, In 1966, Kekuni and his family returned home to Honolulu where he joined the founding faculty of the University of Hawai'i Medical School and later became the Founding Chairman of Medicine for the University of Hawai'i John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM);

Whereas, Kekuni was a passionate and devoted advocate for Native Hawaiian health and championed the need to improve the health of kānaka maoli;

Whereas, His efforts were instrumental in the founding of organizations such as E Ola Mau and Papa Ola Lōkahi;

Whereas, Over a 37-year career at JABSOM, he mentored and inspired countless physicians, many of whom joined in the effort to improve Native Hawaiian health;

Whereas, Kekuni was a staunch advocate of Native Hawaiian wellness and emphasized that the health of Native Hawaiians is connected to the land, the preservation of cultural traditions and an understanding of traditional ways of life;

Whereas, In recognition for his contributions to the people of Hawai'i, he was honoured as a Living Treasure and received the David Malo, 'O'ō and Kalani Ali'i awards;

Whereas, Kekuni served as interim director of the Center for Hawaiian Studies at U.H. Mānoa from 1987 to 1988;

Whereas, Kekuni documented how the term 'kānaka maoli' was used by natives of the land to refer to themselves when early white foreigners arrived;

Whereas, Kekuni also served as convener of the 1993 Kanaka Maoli People's Tribunal;

Whereas, Kekuni was a central mover in documenting U.S. abuses in Hawai'i before an international panel of judges as convener of the Kanaka Maoli Tribunal, and the primary organizer of Ka Pākaukau (literally, "the Table"), an ongoing forum for dialogue surrounding kānaka maoli sovereignty and Hawaiian independence;

Whereas, Kekuni whole-heartedly opposed federal recognition by the U.S. and supported Hawaiian independence;

Whereas, Kekuni was a scholar and researcher, as well as a collector of articles, manuscripts, photographs, historic writings, and journals, unearthing articles and writings that supported the continuity of the Hawaiian Kingdom; and

Whereas, Kekuni was proud to have found many of his ancestors' names in the Kū'ē Petition and spoke often about the kuleana of present-day generations to those kūpuna who came before us and their strong stand in support of Queen Lili'uokalani and the Hawaiian Kingdom; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That Ka 'Ahaui Hawai'i Aloha 'Āina (Hawaiian Patriotic League) at its Annual Convention held at 'Iolani Palace in Honolulu, O'ahu, this 5th day of August 2017, remembers and honours Richard Kekuni Akana Blaisdell, Hawaiian Patriot and Hawaiian National;

Resolved, That the name of Richard Kekuni Akana Blaisdell be added to an ongoing and yet-to-be-compiled list of Hawaiian nationals and supporters of Hawaiian independence [Fallen Warriors] who have worked diligently to raise up the Hawaiian Nation, with no thought of personal gain, and who have since passed;

'Ao'ao 1 o 2

52 *Resolved*, That a certified copy of this resolution be sent to Richard Kekuni Akana Blaisdell's
53 family with the acknowledgement that, in his work, he willingly and with great zeal "*took on the*
54 *honorable struggle*" to free Hawai'i from U.S. occupation.
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56 Adopted, Honolulu, this 5th day of August, 2017.
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58 *Pelekikena* - President:


Leilani Lindsey-Ka'apuni

59 *Kākau 'Ōlelo* - Recording Secretary:


Keokani Kipona Marcel

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynette Hiilani Cruz, a retired professor of anthropology, lives in Wai‘anae, O‘ahu. She presently teaches at Leeward Community College Wai‘anae and is a kupuna in residence at Hawai‘i Pacific University. She actively supports de-occupation of Hawai‘i.