

HE MELE NO KEKUNI

Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua

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I first met Kauka Blaisdell when he was treating my uncle, who suffered from a rare blood disease. Kauka greeted us and spoke in Hawaiian, something I had never witnessed a physician do in a hospital before (or since). As a high school student learning our ‘ōlelo makuahine, I was awestruck and intimidated.

A few years later, the morning after I gave the valedictory address at my high school graduation, he called my house and left a message on our answering machine. His voice was purposeful and deep, lilting upward when he spoke my name and drawing out its syllables:

“No e la ni...This is Kekuni. I heard your speech yesterday. You said a very important word: sovereignty. Please call me...”

Over the next several years, I would drop in to the Thursday night hālāwai Uncle Kekuni held at his Nu‘uanu home every week. It was there, around a table full of pūpū, that various strands of the early 1990s Hawaiian independence movement began to coalesce. It was a pu‘uhonua for me, then an undergraduate student at UH–Mānoa. At the time, independence talk was way out on the fringe, even in my Hawaiian Studies classes. Uncle Kekuni’s home was a gathering place and an archive for Kanaka Maoli sovereignty. In the living room a huge, mustard-yellow banner hung from floor to ceiling: ALL PEOPLES HAVE THE RIGHT TO **SELF-DETERMINATION**; BY VIRTUE OF THAT RIGHT **THEY** FREELY DETERMINE THEIR POLITICAL STATUS AND FREELY PURSUE THEIR ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT.

A painting of the Hawaiian flag hung in another room. When I asked Uncle Kekuni about this “Ku‘u Hae Aloha” piece, he told us that one of his grandmothers was a hānai of Queen Lili‘uokalani and that this painting had been gifted to her. After the 1893 overthrow, his tūtū kept the painting on the back of a door, so it could be seen only from the inside the room when the door was shut. He said that, when



Kekuni in front of banner at home, 2005
ILLUSTRATION BY KAHEALANI MAHONE-BROOKS

asked, his tūtū never spoke about the queen or what had happened to her. This painting was her small way of keeping the flame of her love for country from dying out completely. Uncle Kekuni's repositioning of the painting two generations later brought Hawaiian nationhood back into the center of the house, and he set out a pākaukau upon which all could share and feast.

In 2004, Kauka talked about his experience attending Kamehameha Schools, as he spoke on a panel against federal recognition under the "Akaka Bill." The sponsor of the bill, US Senator Daniel Akaka, was his high school classmate. "Yes, indeed," he said,

I was a student at the Kamehameha Schools when all the faculty were haole, fresh off the boat from America. It was their job to bleach us. Make us white! It was a military school; three times a week: drill; once a month: parade on the grounds. It was an industrial arts school to make blue collar workers out of us to work for the plantations, pineapple companies, and utilities, which were controlled by the haole Big Five. Official policy of the Kamehameha Schools. I was an electrician. I can change bulbs, wires, anything. In my graduation annual, it says: "Blaisdell, electrician." Colonized! Colonized...we're still talking colonial language, still permitting them to outline the playing field and what the rules are. No! We are a separate people, a separate country, a separate nation, a nation *equal* to the United States, not subservient, not subordinate.... The Akaka bill will make us subservient, make us subordinate. On that issue alone, we cannot accept it. Therefore, I not merely oppose, I not merely protest, I and all of must *reject* the Akaka Bill. Who is the United States...to recognize us? Did we ask them to recognize us? We recognize ourselves! We know who we are. We know who we are...

He closed that speech by leading the crowd in a rousing round from the song “All Hawai'i Stands Together”: “‘Onipa‘a kākou! ‘Onipa‘a kākou a lanakila nā kini ē! E ola, e ola, e ola nā kini ē!”

‘Anakala Kekuni credited three Kānaka with bringing him to Hawaiian independence in the mid-1980s: Kihei Soli Niheu, Imaikalani Kalahela, and Puhipau. They, along with women like Ho‘oipo DeCambra, Moanike‘ala Akaka, Peggy Ha‘o Ross, and Haunani-Kay Trask, spoke at one of the first conferences on Hawaiian sovereignty, held at the Kamehameha Schools auditorium. Together these Kānaka aloha ‘āina, among others, birthed a new age of Hawaiian education that acknowledges political sovereignty as a critical part of restoring the health and well-being of our people.

To this movement, ‘Anakala Kekuni always brought fire in his words, accompanied by the biggest smile and the deepest aloha. He is the one who first invited me to embrace Hawaiian independence. He treated youth with tremendous warmth and genuine respect, even when we had not yet done anything significant for our people. He made us believe we could make a difference in the life of the lāhui. He was always mentoring, always helping to make connections and build relationships, always encouraging and uplifting. And of course, he was as meticulous in his photographing and note-taking of movement events and meetings as I am sure he was in his medical practice and scholarship. He was a consummate researcher, movement-builder, and teacher. To know him, to sit in his presence and to exchange hā with him, has been one of the greatest blessings in my life.

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