

## ON BEING HAWAIIAN

*Jonathan Osorio*

Were Hawaiians better off in 1893 than today? In 1893, our people were not confused about who they were and understood themselves to be Hawaiian, not American. It is *huikau*, confusion, over what our choices are and what they mean that is threatening our nation. How far are we willing to commit ourselves to be Hawaiian? It all comes back to our choice: to live as Hawaiians or not. I believe we are warriors still, and we are more than up to the task of building our nation again. We need to bring our leaders together, to strategize what to do with the expertise we have built, and to be willing to take the fight to the next level.

CORRESPONDENCE MAY BE SENT TO:

Jonathan Osorio, Center for Hawaiian Studies, University of Hawai'i–Mānoa  
Hawaiian Studies Building Room 209A, Honolulu, HI 96822  
Email: [osorio@hawaii.edu](mailto:osorio@hawaii.edu)

*Hūlili: Multidisciplinary Research on Hawaiian Well-Being* Vol.3 No.1 (2006)  
Copyright © 2006 by Kamehameha Schools.

I almost always begin a talk\* with this prayer. Dr. Kanalu Young and I wrote this song together. We composed it in November 1992, during the time when those of us who were at Kamakakūokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies had been preparing for the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the loss of our kingdom. We wanted to write something hopeful and spiritual, something that would refer to leaders but that would also give us a sense of direction. So this prayer is what we came up with:

E ho'okāko'o

*Let us support*

E ala launa pū

*Gathering together*

'O Mauna'ala i ke ea

*Mauna'ala is the source of our spirit*

Pū mai nei Lanakila ē

*The wind of victory comes this way*

E mau mana'o mai

*Let the thought prevail*

Noi aku iā 'oe

*We ask you o Lord*

Ke alaka'i nō

*Lead us*

He wiwo nalowale lā

*Fear is gone*

A pau ka 'eha o ka lā

*And finished is the pain of that day*

E mau mana'o mai

*Let the thought prevail*

What happens when you write—and any writer will tell you this—is that you can come up with some really strange ideas. That's why you write over and over and over again. That's why you rewrite. I didn't have time to rewrite this presentation, so these may be strange ideas, but I think they're important ones.

The University of Hawai'i–Mānoa has a brand new graduate seminar called Hawaiian Studies 601: Indigenous Research Methodologies. I teach the seminar, and I have 14 brilliant graduate students. During our seminar, we have grappled with the issues and choices facing Lili'uokalani in 1893. This is a particularly rich class as the readings included all the recently authored histories of the kingdom and Lili'u's own *Hawai'i's Story by Hawai'i's Queen* (1898). During a particularly interesting exchange, we noted how certain things have not really changed since the end of the 19th century: We were a landless and impoverished people, our

\*This article is based on a speech delivered at the 2005 Research Conference on Hawaiian Well-Being in Honolulu, Hawai'i.

own government had been usurped and greatly distorted to the point where it ruled us without actually representing us, and we were a people unable to defend ourselves militarily from invasion or intimidation. However, in several important areas, there have been substantial changes. In 1893 we were practically 100% literate and very much involved in and informed about the political issues of the day. In 1893, our people also understood themselves to be Hawaiian, not American.

Certain things  
have not really  
changed since  
the end of the  
19th century.

I want us to consider the very interesting notion that we Hawaiians were better off in 1893 than in 1993, despite the fact that our population was at its very lowest point, despite having just lost what was left of our government, and despite the much smaller income and access to modern goods. We read, we wrote, and we had opinions that we were not at all afraid to share about the provisional government, about annexation, and about our own native political leadership. Our people were not confused about who they were. And while the entire annexation process was deeply humiliating, annexation was not itself the thing that separated Hawaiians from their identities. It was what came as a consequence of the takeover—the military occupation, the American school system, and the brutal evictions of our people from the public lands and the large estates over the next century—that disfigured us as a people. We were fewer in 1893, yet somehow we were more substantial.

## HUIKAU (CONFUSION)

I heard 'Īmaikalani Kalāhele read a poem of his about houseless Hawaiians a few weeks ago and was struck by what a simple and elegant theory of dispossession it was. It goes like this: On some beach, a houseless Hawaiian is confronted by another Hawaiian who wants to know what he is doing there. He asks, “What are you doing here?” “Watchu doin’ hea brah?” That’s actually how he said it. The houseless Hawaiian replies that he was always there, from the first settlement to the coming of the great southern chiefs to the invasion by Kamehameha. He, like his ancestors, has always been a part of the land. It was only huikau, confusion, that caused people to believe they had no right to live and work on the land. Kalāhele’s poem tells us that the houseless Hawaiian is completely at home, while the one who confronts him is the one who is homeless because he doesn’t know who or where he is.

It was only  
huikau,  
confusion,  
that caused  
people to  
believe they  
had no right to  
live and work  
on the land.

For the longest time, I've been aware that with every new generation, a larger and larger number of our young people need to work harder to identify with their ancestors—or even just with other Hawaiians. Brought up in urban environments, far from *lo'i* (wetland taro patches), and often unfamiliar even with the ocean, reared in the loud emptiness of American popular culture, our young increasingly exist in an isolation that even the children of my generation never knew. Despite the very real successes of Hawaiian language education, the revival of *oli* (chant), *mele* (song), and hula, and the ongoing political and social activism, *Kānaka Maoli* (Native Hawaiians) face a most dangerous time in our history, when being Hawaiian may be rendered impotent by a federal court decision by the American culture of equality, and most importantly, by our own choices.

It is huikau, confusion, over what our choices are and what they mean that is threatening our *lāhui* (nation) and not the choices themselves. One example is federal recognition. The kingdom folks tell us that supporting the Akaka Bill will end our essential sovereignty and replace it with a puppet government, end our legitimate claims to the crown government lands, and ultimately lead to the end of the *lāhui*. The Akaka folks tell us that without federal recognition, the courts will eventually destroy all of our entitlements and leave Hawaiians with nothing.

I wonder what Lili'u would make of this kind of choice? I think her choices were clear and simple: Commit her people to fight and die for her government, or not. The choice she faced did not, in her wildest imagination, lead to a people who would become indistinguishable from Americans. It was simply about whether her government and her rule continued.

The essential choices for Hawaiians today are no more complex than hers. Do we wish to live as Hawaiians, or don't we? And if that is the choice we must make, then federal recognition is irrelevant. What matters is not what the U.S. Senate decides but how we will face the future together, whom we will entrust with leadership, and how far we are willing to commit ourselves to be Hawaiian.

We've been hearing these conversations all around us, for the better part of a half century. Hawaiians must know their language, Hawaiians must know their history, Hawaiians must remain on the land, Hawaiians gotta stick together. The common thread to all of these imperatives is Hawaiian. Being Hawaiian. When I consider all the things American society possesses and promises, it almost surprises me that there are so many of us who insist on living our lives as Hawaiians. Especially since so few of us come well equipped for the task. My *'ōlelo* (language) is halting enough to make me almost mute in any gathering of Hawaiian language faculty. And my family would starve if they needed to depend on me to care for the *lo'i* or the *loko i'a* (fishpond). So, I might be a technically deficient Kanaka Maoli, but this I know: I am not an American. And if that statement makes any Kanaka in here uncomfortable, it is *huikau*, confusion, about what being Hawaiian means. It isn't just ancestry and it isn't just cultural proficiency; being Hawaiian is ultimately about not wishing to be anything else.

There are certain things that cannot be taken, that can only be surrendered. As a people, we are knowledgeable about the things taken but not always conscious of the things we have not surrendered. I am speaking of our unwillingness to forfeit our kinship with each other and the many different ways we attempt to express that kinship. All of the culturally significant things we do, from *'ōlelo* to cleaning the *'auwai* (ditch, canal) to marching through Waikīkī, are not as important as the fact that we do them to be closer together. I laugh when I think about how hard it is to keep this faith. While we insist on maintaining this kinship, it doesn't mean that we necessarily agree with one another or even that we like each other.

That brings me to some observations about Hawaiian leadership. I notice that we modern-day Kānaka Maoli are particularly hard on our leaders. And as I have become acquainted with our 18th- and 19th-century *ali'i nui* (great chiefs), I have realized that we've always been that way. We kill the weak ones, the foolish, the inept, the disloyal, and sometimes just the unfortunate. I think of a chief like Ka'iana, who came back from voyaging to China wanting to support Kamehameha, wanting to get involved, bringing his guns and knowledge of the world, and he was ready to go. The other chiefs didn't like him, so they started spreading rumors, they created suspicion, and pretty soon that poor guy was outta there—one of the people killed on O'ahu in the invasion.

Do we wish  
to live as  
Hawaiians, or  
don't we?

We're like that to our leaders. We killed them literally before; we harm our leaders only figuratively today. I'm not sure which one is more merciful—the literal or figurative killing—but this I know: We are warriors still—men and women—and we are more than up to the task of building our nation again. It comes back to our choice: to live as Hawaiians or not.

As I've been involved in different parts of our movement, and mostly in education in these last 10 years, I've noticed that one of the things we tend to do—we do it almost naturally now—is to avoid taking over the whole thing. We want to do our own *kuleana* (responsibility), and it's a very Hawaiian thing to do. We stake our claim to a particular kind of task: health, education, higher education, whatever it is. We want to be sure we're doing something we are competent to do, and we don't want other people butting in. And we're really good about caring for our kuleana, and now we have kuleana everywhere: *kumu hula* (hula instructors), educators, people in law, people in government. But it's not enough. We need people now to bring the leaders together and say, "Yes, those are your kuleana, but we need to be together now. We need to strategize what to do with the expertise

you have built and the people around you are building together. We need to come up with a strategy for building our nation again, and you have to take a step forward and be willing to take the fight to the next level. You have to be willing to talk to people you couldn't stand before, you have to be willing to make mistakes and maybe lose." And until we do this, we are a nation in theory only.

Being  
Hawaiian is  
ultimately  
about not  
wishing to be  
anything else.

I've been saying some of these things for the last few months, recognizing that we have suffered the attacks on our ali'i trusts and on the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA). I am very much aware of the fact that those attacks are going to probably continue because the people who are doing this believe that they can win, and that we're running from them. We shouldn't run from them anymore. The

Kamehameha Schools, with its money and its lands, has the capacity to transform the economy of this state. It has the capacity to effect tremendous political change just by threatening to transform the economy of this state. OHA can pitch in with the corpus of money it has collected over these years and the experience it has had within its own leadership.

But people have to listen to one another. Because the fact is, it isn't going to be Kamehameha Schools' money and land or OHA's money that can make change. It's the leadership, the leadership that's grown out of the community that has done enormous things in the past quarter century, such as saving Kaho'olawe Island from the navy and reviving the Hawaiian language. All this was done without Kamehameha Schools' money, and without OHA. So, what are we doing? Why are we running from the courts? Why are we running from the U.S. government?

We have  
to remind  
ourselves that  
leadership is  
sacrifice.

Leadership is about recognizing that we choose to be Hawaiian. We choose to be nothing else. We don't want to be fragmented. We don't want to be part-Hawaiian. We don't want to be part of a country that is aiming for something very different and has very different values and very different understandings of its role in history. If we are to be true to the legacy of our ancestors—and I mean not just our distant ancestors but our immediate ancestors like Lili'u and Nāwahī, and even Kūhiō—we need to resurrect the nation. We need to be a country again. It is only *huikau* that prevents us from taking this step.

I think the longer we are in this movement, the surer we are of who we are. We had children to understand that we know who we are so that they follow in our footsteps, and we need to bring the leaders to task to understand what they have to do. I look at Kekuni Blaisdell and see someone who has led us for so long in a gentle and yet forceful way toward making those choices. We're ready. We should stop fooling around. The Twigg-Smiths in this world, they're not fooling around. They're not going to wait on us. They're not going to give us an inch. We need to take this place back, and we need you to do this with us.

Just so nobody thinks we're romanticizing leadership, we have to remind ourselves that leadership is sacrifice. So I close with a tribute to George Helm and Kimo Mitchell, who were lost on Kaho'olawe Island in March 1977.

I can recall the way your voice would fill the room  
And we would all be stilled by your melody  
And now your voice is gone and to the sea belongs  
All of the gentle songs that you had harbored

Hawaiian Soul how could you leave us  
You've not been lost at sea, you're only wandering  
Hawaiian Soul we sing your melody  
And send them out to sea, you know the harmony

They say before you left to seek your destiny  
That older voices called and drowned your laughter  
But I believe you knew what you would always be  
A beacon in the storm to guide us after

---

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Osorio, PhD, is director of the Kamakakūokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies, University of Hawai'i–Mānoa. His research and teaching interests include 19th- and 20th-century law and politics in Hawai'i, music and identity, and indigenous rights.