

## E MAU KE EA

*Imai Winchester*

Dr. Richard Kekuni Akana Blaisdell was a healer. His love for his family, and his prestigious medical career in hematology and pathology, were balanced and focused by his aloha 'āina, his patriotic devotion to Hawai'i. He explained that his name, Kekuni, passed down from his Maui lineage, suggested the position and responsibility bestowed upon him. Kuni, as it was explained, is a special fire ceremony associated with an ancient form of healing whereby a medical specialist, a kahuna kuni, would divine the circumstances of a particular illness, or even death, to properly treat the sickness or to determine the responsible parties. In this respect, Kekuni Blaisdell's legacy is one of diagnosing and problematizing the sickly condition of the Hawaiian people against a century of land displacement and American trauma, while at the same time restoring health and life, ea, to his beloved nation through his dedication to restoring independence to Hawai'i.

CORRESPONDENCE MAY BE SENT TO:

Imai Winchester

Email: [imai@halaukumana.org](mailto:imai@halaukumana.org)



Founding chair, UH Department of Medicine, Honolulu, 1966

**K**ekuni firmly believed that the return of ea, sovereignty, is the only lasting cure to reverse the downward spiral of his people and nation. Today, years after Kekuni's passing, the impact of his life's work for ea is forever branded and seared into our na'au, our mind, hope, and affection. I hope this token of remembrance breathes life into his legacy.

## UNCLE KEKUNI

Kekuni Blaisdell greeted every person he met the same way, with a glowing smile and a warm embrace. Uncle Kekuni always took the time to acknowledge everyone in the room. It was important to him. He embraced you with two hands and pressed his nose and forehead to yours to exchange a deep and long honi, the symbolic exchange of hā, or breath, which connects the lines of our shared past and binds us to a collective future. Uncle Kekuni always took a moment to inspect you, top to bottom, at which point he would give you his typical diagnosis: "Ikaika!"

Uncle Kekuni, as we affectionately called him, was known more widely as Dr. Richard Blaisdell, a pioneering hematologist since the 1940s. His work advanced the field of medicine in Hawai'i, where he became a professor emeritus and first chair for the newly founded John A. Burns School of Medicine at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. His work with survivors of the atomic attack on Japan, and his subsequent study on the health of Native Hawaiians in the 1980s, were central to his illustrious medical career.

Framed behind retro spectacles and a matching pocket protector for pens he always kept handy for note-taking, Kekuni was born of a different era. Although his daily attire may have hinted at his profession as a medical doctor and distinguished professor, I feel it was more a reflection of his refined character: always put together, always prepared, always well dressed. He wore pressed slacks, business shoes, and a neatly ironed aloha shirt, which he often covered with his famous black Ka Ho'okolokolonui Kānaka Maoli—The Peoples' International Tribunal, Hawai'i shirt he printed en masse as a means to promote and fund this international event in 1993. Uncle Kekuni wore those black shirts proudly everywhere he went. His attire became symbolic of his life, as his medical career began to be eclipsed by his growing sense of cultural and national identity. The

shirts reflected his reclamation of who he was, but beneath the exterior still beat the heart of a healer. Wearing those shirts was his way of protesting American colonization while at the same time promoting self-determination and independence for Kānaka Maoli. It was his armor.

His education in America at the University of Chicago exposed Uncle Kekuni to the realities of racism and segregation. While he was in Japan, working with atomic blast survivors, his views on power and militarization underwent a major shift.

His commitment to health, people, and service became even more politicized when he returned to Hawai'i with his family during the period known as the Hawaiian Renaissance. In 1966, after twenty-two years away from Hawai'i, Kekuni became drawn more and more to the resurgence of his culture, language, and history. He began to identify himself as Kanaka Maoli, the name for the true indigenous people who first settled Ka Pae 'Āina, the Hawaiian Archipelago.

By the 1980s, Kekuni had fully embedded himself into Hawaiian culture and soon began to run with the independence crowd. He credited legendary icons of the Hawaiian movement, such as Kihei "Soli" Niheu of the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement, Hawaiian filmmaker Puhipau Ahmad of Nā Maka o ka 'Āina, and Imaikalani Kalahahele, revolutionary artist and poet, as opening his eyes to the marginalization of Kānaka in Hawai'i. Kekuni gave recognition to these men over and over again for his colonial emancipation and for introducing him to the Hawaiian independence movement, which he quickly became a crucial part of.

I came to learn that the awakening of Kekuni's Hawaiian consciousness, coupled with his prestigious medical career, helped to give the young and developing sovereignty movement serious traction and legitimacy in advancing the cause. Yet I pause to contemplate whether Kekuni himself would say otherwise—that it was his commitment to Hawaiian consciousness and activism that validated his medical work. Either way, the rebirth of Kekuni Blaisdell, the Kanaka Maoli patriot, and the resuscitation of ka Lā Ho'ihō'i Ea (Hawaiian Sovereignty Restoration Day) in 1985, occurred during an era when Hawaiian independence was converging with a swelling interest in the revival of Hawaiian history, language, and culture. Standing at the center was Dr. Kekuni Blaisdell.

## HOW I MET KEKUNI

I first met Kekuni Blaisdell while I was a student at the University of Hawai'i in the early 2000s. As a graduate of Kamehameha Schools, I struggled to reconcile my cultural identity within a colonial system designed to carve Americans out of Hawaiians. Kekuni came from the same institution and was empathetic to our shared decolonial struggle. At the university I studied Hawaiian history, politics, and culture under influential professors, and KS alumni, such as Dr. Jon Osorio, Dr. Lilikalā Kame'eiehiwa, Dr. Kanalu Young, and the fiery Dr. Haunani-Kay Trask. My course of study intersected with Kekuni's work and contribution to the Hawaiian movement. For example, in 1983 Kekuni authored a section of the *Native Hawaiians Study Commission* report. This sobering research concluded that Kānaka Maoli were in critical condition and revealed that Hawaiians had the worst social, economic, health, and educational indicators of all the major ethnicities in Hawai'i. The findings of this groundbreaking study had major ramifications for the legislation of new Native Hawaiian health care programs that integrated traditional practices with Western medicine.

We also learned about the work Kekuni did in 1993 to convene an international tribunal of distinguished human rights experts and advocates, who put the United States of America on trial for violations against Kānaka Maoli and the Hawaiian Kingdom. The tribunal was called Ka Ho'okolokolonui Kānaka Maoli—The Peoples' International Tribunal, Hawai'i. It was bold and brash, the first of its kind. After ten days of accepting testimonies on five different islands, the judges called for the United States to return all stolen lands illegally seized and controlled to the Hawaiian Kingdom and de-occupy Hawai'i without delay.

Influenced by my professors and inspired by leaders like Kekuni Blaisdell, I was experiencing my own awakening. I had begun to participate in political protests and rallies, where I eventually crossed paths with Uncle Kekuni, and we became loosely acquainted. During this time I had become a teacher at Hālau Kū Māna New Century Public Charter School, which excited Uncle Kekuni. As a professor emeritus, he had a special affinity for teachers and often spoke about his influential teacher at Kamehameha, Don Kilolani Mitchell. I was fortunate at this time to get to know Uncle Kekuni on a personal level, and the stories and affectionate

anecdotes he shared showed me the kind of man he was beneath the prestigious physician and the activist leader. It was not difficult to understand why he was treated with such reverence and respect everywhere he went. He was truly a remarkable man.

He once told me that his experience in Japan, studying victims of the atomic bomb, was a crucial turning point when he began to question American hegemony. He shared how complicated it was for him to work for years with the trauma of the American war machine. He dealt with those affected by this devastation every day, and to be directly identified with the country responsible for causing their suffering was difficult for him to reconcile. He said that it was this experience in Japan, working with survivors of radioactive exposure, that turned him against war, the military, and nuclear weapons proliferation. There were no winners in war, only survivors. What he shared next blew me away. Uncle Kekuni was so impacted by his work with survivors that he adopted a young boy, orphaned in the war, named Mitsunori. He raised the young child as a single and inexperienced parent before eventually returning to America, where he met his future wife, Irene Saito, and had Nālani, his daughter. He gave his son the name Mitsunori Kamakanikailialoha Blaisdell and returned home to raise his family in 1966.

I also learned that Kekuni was deeply impacted by the findings of the 1983 *Native Hawaiians Study Commission* report, which he had helped to author. This research revealed some hard truths to Uncle Kekuni about the extent of socioeconomic and health barriers faced by Native Hawaiians. The influence of the Hawaiian movement began to express itself in Kekuni's work, and he soon concluded that the collapsing health of his people was a direct result of generations of colonial land dispossession and systemic disenfranchisement of the Kānaka Maoli, beginning with the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom. The reality of more than one hundred years of Americanization was killing Kānaka Maoli, who suffer mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The land and the people were dying from colonial asphyxiation. Uncle Kekuni determined that the only solution to reverse this condition and heal his people was *ea*, independence from America, and the restoration of the Hawaiian Kingdom. He dedicated the rest of his life toward that end and opened his life and home every week to those who shared this kuleana.

## HALE KĀ'OHINANI: THURSDAY NIGHT HĀLĀWAI

The Thursday night hālāwai at Uncle Kekuni's house in Nu'uānu was an impressive assembly of the Hawaiian resistance. This was rebel headquarters, and Kekuni was the host. Every week, aloha 'āina, patriots, heroes of the modern Hawaiian movement, revolutionaries, rebels, and instigators would convene at Kekuni's house, affectionately called Hale Kā'ohinani. Legends who shaped the modern Hawaiian movement, like Soli Niheu, Puhipau Ahmad, Imaikalani Kalahēle, Marion Kelly, Kawaipuna Prejean, Stephen Boggs, Ulla Hasager, Dr. Baron Ching, Atwood Makanani, Steve Tayama, Terri Kekoolani, Maivan Lam, and Lynette Cruz, among others, were regulars. For a young Hawaiian student, it was like pulling up a chair at Arthur's Round Table. We sat with icons of the Hawaiian independence movement and developed relationships and bonds that propelled each of us on a path toward community leadership.

Guests at Hale Kā'ohinani would introduce themselves and their affiliations and discuss pressing political issues in their community. Some guests came simply to share news and information, some came to listen and learn, and others came to counsel and strategize for direct action. Much of our discussions and planning included initiatives like challenging militarization, specifically the Stryker brigade, Pōhakuloa Training Area, Mākua Valley live-fire training, telescopes on Mauna Kea, federal recognition, and the Akaka Bill. We also discussed creating networks of resistance like Hui Pū and MANA (Movement for Aloha No ka 'Āina). These weekly meetings in Nu'uānu often included prestigious visitors from all over the world, who would stay with Kekuni at Hale Kā'ohinani. The weekly Thursday hālāwai was a central hub, allowing accessibility to outsiders and eager young students like us, who were drawn to social justice and political activism but lacked guidance and mentorship. For years, the Thursday night hālāwai at Hale Kā'ohinani was a critical intersection of movement-building and cultivating young leadership.

Kekuni's home was a living library of Hawaiian history and medicine. Every time a new topic was raised to the group, Kekuni, having ascertained the course heading for the discussion, would discreetly stand up and walk toward a set of file cabinets in the next room. A little while later he would return to the group discussion with readings, handouts, and annotated copies of newspaper articles, journals, magazines, and especially his photos. Kekuni was truly a keeper of the flame. As a researcher he treasured information, and he was certainly a reflection of his

profession as he kept extensive records of everything Hawaiian. His famously extensive archival collection, gathered over decades, was spilling out from his shelves, cabinets, and drawers onto the floor in neatly stacked piles, organized coherently for easy and frequent access.

Cozy couches and a guest pūne'e partitioned Uncle Kekuni's retro-style, tongue-and-groove paneled living room. His home was warm and welcoming, a refuge from the cold Nu'uaniu wind outside. Family pictures decorated the walls and fireplace. Neatly laid out on the coffee table was the customary spread of small dishes like fried aku, poi, 'uala, cone sushi, fruits, chow fun, and other miscellaneous items, including Uncle Kekuni's favorite nightcap, mochi ice cream!

Hung from a ceiling crossbeam was his famous twenty-foot yellow banner that reads, 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 nod to the United Nations Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, this banner declared Uncle Kekuni's strident belief in self-determination for Hawai'i and his commitment, not just for the rights of indigenous peoples, but for all people. Uncle Kekuni was a true humanitarian. He fought for social progress and human rights for marginalized and disenfranchised communities. All who came to Hale Kā'ohinani sat under this banner, which was a constant reminder of the collective nature of our work.

One cold night in 2004, a small group of graduate students, including myself, attended Kekuni's hālāwai and shared our plans to challenge the Department of Defense and the proposed transformation of the army's Stryker brigade, a mobile assault transport vehicle used for urban combat, in federal court. Kekuni's eyes lit up with excitement, and he smiled from ear to ear. He was filled with joy and hope, I think, to see young, eager faces taking action and seeking political guidance, so he opened his home to us. We spent months strategizing and planning how we could throw a monkey wrench into the army's plans by using federal laws, while at the same raising social consciousness about the issue. Our young group, named Kīpuka, began organizing marches, rallies, and vigils to draw attention and increase awareness of the gross militarization in Hawai'i. Under Kekuni's guidance and support, we were able to accomplish our goal of stalling the transformation for two years. And in the process, Kekuni helped cultivate us into young



activists. He was our source of light during that time, and his warmth and protection left a permanent impression that is still felt today.

After the Stryker case, we started to work side by side with Kekuni and earn his trust. He included us on several other projects during that time, including ka Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea—which I had no real knowledge of before meeting Uncle Kekuni.

## KA LĀ HO‘IHO‘I EA

Ka Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea is the first national Hawaiian holiday. It was established on July 31, 1843, when the Hawaiian Kingdom was restored to power following Britain’s unauthorized seizure of control over the islands. It was on this day that King Kamehameha III, as the re-enthroned monarch of Hawai‘i, proclaimed the kingdom’s enduring sovereignty: “Ua mau ke ea o ka ‘āina i ka pono.” The site of this seminal event, then called Kulaokahu‘a, was given a new name, Thomas Square, in an act of appreciation for the honorable Admiral Richard Thomas of Her Majesty’s Navy, who restored independence to Hawai‘i and Kamehameha III in 1843. This site is significant, as it was the first park of the kingdom and a testament to Hawaiian sovereignty and justice.

Despite the national importance of this event in the early decades of the kingdom, ka Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea went underground for nearly a century. The overthrow of the Hawaiian government, and the subsequent occupation and Americanization of Hawai‘i, attempted to sweep away any remnants of Hawai‘i’s sovereignty. National holidays celebrating Hawaiian independence were expunged. And when the Hawaiian language was successively outlawed, a new, patriotic, American curriculum for all schools further contributed to the fragmentation and dismemberment of Hawaiian independence.

Kekuni understood that the extermination of his people began with the strangulation of ea, life and sovereignty, so in 1985, on the last Sunday of July, Kekuni resuscitated this Hawaiian holiday. He began organizing, sponsoring, and hosting a small gathering of Hawaiian patriots under the shade tree at Thomas Square Park in Honolulu. Under his organization, Ka Pākaukau, Kekuni began to rekindle independence consciousness and dialogue at Thomas Square. The event was situated at the same place where the Hawaiian flag had been ceremoniously raised

in 1843, following the restoration of Hawaiian sovereignty. In addition to leading an ‘awa ceremony and discussions about Hawaiian independence, Kekuni also reenacted the lowering of the Union Jack and the raising of the Hae Hawai‘i, as originally done by Admiral Thomas. This act directly challenged the state system and reclaimed the park and its national significance. Thomas Square, like our people, had become a victim of Americanization—its identity and prestige had been stripped away, and the area had come to be known as a recreational playground for settler privilege, while homelessness and drug addiction had decayed the integrity of the park and our people.

Over the years, Kekuni often spoke of commitment to action during these small ceremonies. He called on all present to accept both the privilege and the burden of Hawaiian independence. Every tanoa was a gathering and stirring of the people and their ancestral genealogies, and every cup of ‘awa was a commitment to action for the betterment of the lāhui. The ceremonial drinking of ‘awa, established by Imaikalani Kalahela, was important to Kekuni because it was a connection to akua and a means to commune with the ancestors for guidance, protection, and healing. Calling on ancient traditions, which set the tone for the event, only empowered Kekuni, and he would transform into a kahuna. It was during these ceremonies that I began participating as a lawelawe, a server of the ‘awa. That duty would foreshadow a larger role in my future.

“Ho‘okū‘oko‘a! Ho‘okū‘oko‘a! Ho‘okū‘oko‘a!” Kekuni would begin this chant for independence, and soon all were following in cadence. Cups of ‘awa were solemnly served to each member of the audience, and each was given a moment to share their thoughts and commitments to the lāhui. One by one, each member would address the crowd with messages of independence and then drink their cup, symbolically recommitting themselves to the return of ea. This time to speak was also a time to heal. To close the ceremony, Kekuni and Dr. Baron Ching would solemnly lower the Union Jack and US flag and raise the Hae Hawai‘i as a symbolic gesture for the United States to bring a peaceful end to its illegal occupation and, like the British did, to properly restore Hawaiian sovereignty and de-occupy Hawai‘i.

Kekuni’s reclaiming of Thomas Square and ka Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea, on behalf of the Hawaiian Kingdom, established a renewed sense of place, purpose, and ownership for Kānaka Maoli while providing an open platform for the proliferation of

independence discourse. Kekuni saw beyond the dilapidated exterior of Thomas Square, just as he saw beyond the health maladies afflicting Kānaka Maoli. These conditions were symptomatic of the colonial suppression of Kanaka space and identity, and Kekuni's antidote to the suffering was ho'iho'i ea. Not just the return of sovereignty and life, but also the return of history, the revitalization of culture and language, the expansion of our arts and trades, as well as the reconvergence of our lāhui to Thomas Square. This is what Kekuni believed would heal our people and uplift the nation. Kekuni's commitment to ka Lā Ho'iho'i Ea and Thomas Square re-exposed the historical value of the park in relation to independence and the Hawaiian Kingdom. He committed to the work of healing his people through the revitalization and restoration of ea.

## HULI

By the summer of 2005—after twenty years of organizing and leading ka Lā Ho'iho'i Ea—Kekuni was ready to pass the torch. He was well into his seventies, and his health was beginning to impact his work and level of participation. His mind, however, was still razor sharp. Uncle Kekuni knew that Lā Ho'iho'i Ea needed a succession plan, so he called for a meeting to discuss future measures to ensure that kuleana for ka Lā Ho'iho'i Ea would be secured and carry on.

So during a Thursday night meeting at Hale Kā'ohinani, Kekuni began to explain his intentions to our small working group. The news took us by surprise, probably because we never wanted to entertain the eventuality that Kekuni would someday be gone. We sat there silently as he explained the importance of ka Lā Ho'iho'i Ea for our people and its power to restore our independence—of mind, body, and spirit. There was a different urgency in Kekuni's voice that night as he described what was needed to assume these responsibilities going forward. Kekuni offered all of his support, guidance, and contacts to anyone who could commit to this kuleana of carrying ka Lā Ho'iho'i Ea into a new era.

I recall at that time staring deep into Kekuni's eyes. I sensed that he was taking personal inventory of his life's work and legacy. He was now handing over a piece of himself, and someone needed to be there to receive it. I heard in his voice, for the first time ever, vulnerability. He was making a plea. I could sense that he wanted assurance that his life's commitments and sacrifices for his lāhui would not fall back into the shadows of our history. Ka Lā Ho'iho'i Ea needed to persevere beyond Kekuni, as one of his lasting contributions to the nation he loves.

In that moment of vulnerability, I looked around the circle of those gathered and felt a boiling in my na'au. A huli. Unconsciously perhaps, weighing the significance of what all of us owe to Kekuni, I raised my hand to accept kuleana for ka Lā Ho'īho'ī Ea. To fall back seemed out of the question. It was time to step forward.

In the hands of a new generation, the celebration of ka Lā Ho'īho'ī Ea has grown in scope and reach. For years, the early celebrations of Lā Ho'īho'ī Ea were intimate and personal, located under the shade of a single tree. Today, still firmly rooted in independence, our generation has reframed the focus of Lā Ho'īho'ī Ea on three fundamental principles: (1) celebration, (2) education, and (3) inclusion.

For a time, Lā Ho'īho'ī Ea was negatively stigmatized as a sovereignty event, perhaps more synonymous with frustration and anger than peace and justice. Likewise, Thomas Square suffered from its own negative stigma as an urban park with a rising indigent and homeless population. Many did not consider Thomas Square to be a welcoming space.

The new leaders of Lā Ho'īho'ī Ea wanted to reposition these negative perceptions and redesign a program focused on celebration and family, while at the same time remaining true to independence-building and community engagement. It took years of building trust to demystify independence and contextualize the continued significance of Lā Ho'īho'ī Ea and Thomas Square park so that more of our communities would feel comfortable enough to attend as individuals or participate as organizations. We made new investments and partnerships to broaden our reach, and we focused our message around the celebration of Lā Ho'īho'ī Ea as a cultural fair with music, games, entertainment, community discussions, food vendors, small businesses, and artisans. The focus on family began to pay dividends and subsequently, the event became larger and more popular, attracting hundreds throughout the day.

Education about Lā Ho'īho'ī Ea was paramount to building community support and forging new alliances and partnerships. We frequently accepted offers to share and discuss Lā Ho'īho'ī Ea to new, uninformed groups thirsty for independence information and dialogue. It also gave us an opportunity to create a public discussion space for experts to present and engage with pressing topics that impact Hawaiian communities—such as health, militarization, federal recognition, and the protection of sacred lands—in a safe venue that is accessible to and inclusive of our lāhui and audience.

In 2015, Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea started to set a new precedent for Thomas Square when we dug, built, and lit the first imu at a public park as an exercise of genuine sovereignty and food security. It harkened to the most essential of political strategies of the chiefs of old, as the true sign of power was measured by the ability to feed the multitudes. Now, each year we fill these imu with thousands of pounds of organic, healthy pigs grown by our local farmers, along with kalo, ‘ulu, and ‘uala donated from across Ka Pae ‘Āina. The public imu at Thomas Square for Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea was an important accomplishment because it led to the creation of a new permit designated for an imu in a public park, which we seek to push and expand to all parks throughout Hawai‘i as an exercisable right. Our imu crew grows every year, and so does our proficiency to feed our people—ultimately increasing our capacity to live independently.

In 2018, we celebrated the 175th anniversary of the establishment of Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea at Thomas Square and initiated the erection of the first ahu, or altar near the Victoria and King Street quadrant. It was blessed with an ‘awa ceremony and given the name Ho‘iho‘ikea, which was the name of Kauikeaouli’s first residence in Honolulu, whose name was inspired by the events of July 31, 1843. Rocks from around O‘ahu and the outer islands were collected and sent to contribute to the new ahu, which was built as a bridge to unite our pae ‘āina, to bring akua and sacredness to the park, and to call our people to return to Thomas Square for the restoration of Hawaiian independence. The creation and dedication of this ahu also served as a reminder to state authority that we have not forgotten or abandoned the fight for the restoration of our kingdom.

Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea has grown beyond the park limits, seeding and cultivating a month-long series of independence events in July. Today, Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea not only reclaims the physical space of Thomas Square, it also repossesses all of July as Hawaiian independence month, while at the same decentering its focus on American independence.

In partnership with various community organizations, the celebration of Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea has successfully branched out and now includes a Hawaiian independence film festival, educational conferences and teacher trainings, historic

reenactments at 'Iolani Palace, tours of historic sites associated with Lā Ho'ihō'i Ea, art and screen printing, reggae and hip hop concerts in Honolulu, 'āina workdays across the island, demilitarization tours of the island, spoken word and slam poetry nights, community wood carving workshops, and Hawaiian independence music workshops.

Our philosophy was not to be an isolated event on a single day in Honolulu. Instead, we fixed our sights on bringing Lā Ho'ihō'i Ea out of Thomas Square and taking its message and meaning to the people in a way that directly benefits our communities. We strategically began developing relationships with groups and individuals whose mission and vision align with the spirit of restoration and the perseverance of ea.

These events allowed us to expand the reach of Lā Ho'ihō'i Ea into our communities, utilizing independence education. We sought to broaden our influence in a meaningful and personal way that directly empowers and benefits our diverse and multigenerational lāhui. By reaching out to our communities where they are concentrated, we project even more additions to the July calendar of celebrations, such as hula competitions, canoe regattas, and working with incarcerated Hawaiians here and abroad.

## **THE FUTURE**

Ka Lā Ho'ihō'i Ea will forever be a platform for independence and a vessel driving toward sovereignty and the healing of our people. Lā Ho'ihō'i Ea will always seek new partners, new ideas, and new networks to collaborate with and will engage our communities by providing spaces where sovereignty can grow and be normalized.

It must also stay true to its roots and continue to challenge oppressive systems and amplify the call for the complete de-occupation of Hawai'i. Lā Ho'ihō'i Ea must be a sounding board for communities around the world who face similar oppression and marginalization and yet continue to defy the stranglehold of global imperialism.

We cannot live in the past. Instead we learn from it, we adjust, and we turn to the future, more informed. Ua mau ke ea o ka ‘āina i ka pono, the sovereignty of the nation continues. This famous proclamation, which reaffirmed Hawaiian independence in 1843, is a reminder from our past that directs our future. When Kekuni breathed life back in to ka Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea, he not only resuscitated this national symbol of independence and justice, he also revived the Hawaiian consciousness and awoke a sleeping generation toward independence. Dr. Blaisdell was resuscitating our people, and ka Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea was a way of breathing life back into the nation.

In the same spirit of drawing action and movement from our past, it became clear that our generation needed to advance beyond our predecessors. The passing of kuleana forward to us allowed Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea to give birth to new ideas, unencumbered by political baggage or jaded relationships. A new generation of Hawaiian independence needed a new generation of leaders, thinkers, and doers. To meet that pursuit, we started by reframing the famous proclamation—Ua mau ke ea o ka ‘āina i ka pono—removing it from the past and activating it as a directive for our people.

Today we empower the message, “E mau ke ea o ka ‘āina i ka pono,” which implies that we must act toward our consciences and endeavor to make wrongs right. Despite seemingly overwhelming odds, we must forever endure. The phrase “E mau ke ea” means that sovereignty lives and breathes within our action and inaction. So we must never fail to act. Kekuni reminded us that we are a people of action—that has always been who we are. When we pule and commune with the akua to guide our actions, our lāhui heals. When we answer the call to mount a defense for sacred lands, our nation rises. When we flood the streets with red and march for our rights to exist in our own home, the nation is invigorated. With the opening of every Hawaiian school, with the completion of every successful voyage connecting us to the world, and with every advancement of cultural expertise that turns into an innovative business model, our ea grows stronger. With every child who doesn’t suffer from historic amnesia and identifies days like ka Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea and ka Lā Kū‘oko‘a as their all-time favorite holiday, the lāhui lives. This shift compels us to activate our activism and commands us to advance the principles of justice and pono in a way that heals our communities. The independence and life

of our nation are carried through the work of our people. This gives this old adage new purpose and new direction. Just as children must adapt to new circumstances for their new reality, we as a people and movement must also be ready to meet that change. The phrase “E mau” turns a completed action (ua mau) into a living one.

### **THE TORCH IS STILL BRIGHT: TIHEI MAOLI OLA**

Kekuni identified as a proud Kanaka Maoli and loved the Hawaiian Kingdom. He believed in the future that awaits us at the end of a long, righteous struggle. He believed that Hawai‘i’s independence will be returned from American occupation as it was in 1843 by the British. He believed that ka Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea is a catalyst toward restitution, awakening our people from this American coma and directing us into a new era beyond survival and struggle.

But Kekuni saw an even bigger picture. He believed that the power of ka Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea would transcend a century of colonial violence and Americanization, which he believed was responsible for the collapsing condition of his people. He believed that Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea has the power to treat the maladies inflicted upon Kānaka Maoli and the Hawaiian Kingdom by first confronting the truth of our suppression. He passionately felt that Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea is the remedy for Kānaka Maoli and can unite all people to rally around universal values and principles: justice and honor, peace and civility, friendship and brotherhood, promises made and promises kept.

Ultimately, it is through the promises we make and the promises we keep—our commitments—that we begin to pay tribute to Uncle Kekuni. Our continued work and our perseverance will keep Kekuni alive forever. The hā we continue to exchange, with every greeting and farewell, carries Kekuni within us. With every tanoa mixed and every apu served, we honor and reaffirm our collective commitment as Kekuni taught us. We are the living breath of the nation, and we must continue to work for the restoration of our ea, life and sovereignty. E mau ke ea o ka ‘āina i ka pono.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Imai Winchester serves on the board of directors for Hālau Kū Māna Public Charter School.