Three Principles of Māhū Leadership: Leʻa, Aloha ʻĀina, ʻOhana

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In this ʻŌiwi op-ed, two Native Hawaiian māhū (healer/trans/queer/third gender between male and female) situate within the lived experiences of their community three core Hawaiian principles of leadership: leʻa (pleasure), aloha ʻāina (love of land and all that nourishes), and ʻohana (family). Although these guiding concepts apply to kāne (men), wāhine (women), and māhū alike, the authors intentionally center māhū experiences for two reasons. First, māhū are generally absent from the ways in which people talk and think about Native Hawaiian resilience. Second, dominant religious, sexual, and gender norms distort Native Hawaiian life. By grounding māhū epistemology in everyday realities, the authors return to ʻike Hawaiʻi (Hawaiian knowledge) and ancestral wisdom for mana (power) to guide māhū leadership.

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Authentically Māhū

The contradictions inherent to māhū life are telling. In Hawai'i, settler ideologies have the effect of dehumanizing and vilifying māhū. Māhū, who are mostly Native Hawaiian and local, are fetishized as exotic entertainers while being condemned for defying western gender expectations. Historically, māhū of wā kāhiko (traditional Hawai'i) served their lāhui (Hawaiian nation or Hawaiian national consciousness) as kumu (teachers), kāhuna (priests/healers), and kahu (caretakers). These roles were transformed, however, by colonial policies—the suppression of 'ōlelo Hawai'i and cultural practices, harmful impositions of foreign gender ideologies, and the theft of land and natural resources. Yet despite sustained efforts of erasure, 'ohana māhū (māhū families) continue to adapt, persist, evolve, serve, and sustain the lāhui. Their endurance offers vital lessons for Indigenous queer resistance and resurgence that embodies ea—life, breath, and political sovereignty.

Just as there is no single way to embody ea, there is no single way to be māhū. Māhū folks are not monolithic; the varied ways māhū contribute to daily life and uplift the larger lāhui reflect a rich, dynamic, and evolving presence. Yet, the core of being authentically māhū is grounded in Hawaiian principles, practices, and priorities. Today, one well-known māhū who helps to ground and renormalize such Hawaiian perspectives is Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu—a teacher, filmmaker, activist, and Hawaiian sovereignty leader. Hina has dedicated her life to uplifting the lāhui through oli (chant), protocol, mentorship, and political leadership. Both authors of this essay, Kalaniopua and Cocoa, have benefited greatly from the guidance of Hinaleimoana and teachings passed down by kūpuna and kumu. Blending 'ike Hawai'i (ancestral teachings) with our own lived experiences as queer māhū advocates, we, building upon the work of our predecessors, are co-creating spaces to germinate the seeds of māhū leadership at the center of our ea.

On Being Māhū and Queer

By centering pilina māhū (māhū relations) in our breath, life, and sovereignty, the authors embrace an intersectional indigeneity—recognizing that Indigenous peoples inherit complex histories where ethnicity, gender, religion, and social economics intersect, cultivating possibilities for solidarity and power across cultural differences. Here, we borrow from Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) foundational work on intersectional feminism whereby varying forms of discrimination overlap and compound one's lived experience (p. 140). While Crenshaw focused primarily on the relationship between Black women and feminism, her work is helpful for unpacking the complex forms of inherited privilege and oppression across and within differences, revealing how power structures collide and compound. Solidarity between marginalized groups stem from truth-telling and articulating the roots of shared struggle. For māhū, ea, like solidarity, grows from an ethic of collective care and personal accountability. Accepting people as they are—and not as others demand they be—is a solid first step toward building this kind of māhū relationality. We recognize that our humanity embodies a duality: darkness and light, Native and foreigner, rich and poor. This applies to ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, etc.

While solidarity is imperative, and while māhū and queer (LGBTQ+) identities do intersect, they are not synonymous. Māhū identity emerges from our homeland, Hawai'i, and our relationships to 'ohana and 'āina; queer identities arise from Euro-American cultural contexts shaped by gender policing and racialized sexual oppression. Nonetheless, cultural emphasis on wholeness, mutual respect, and shared harmony belong to us all. Thus, even though Hawaiian culture integrates māhū as functioning members of our 'ohana and lāhui—rather than as a passive sexual identity—we as Kānaka (Native Hawaiians), using our cultural privileges, must account for our personal embodiment of ea, as it affects the ea of others. This responsibility calls us to learn from and advocate alongside other queer(ed) Indigenous and LGBTQ+ people, so that they, too, may breathe in sovereignty and in unison with us. By tapping into this 'ike Hawai'i, this Hawaiian way of knowing and doing, māhū have and continue to uplift LGBTQ+ by intimately and caringly showing up for our underserved and underrepresented brothers, sisters, and those in between and beyond. For Hawaiians, wealth and success is measured not by accumulation of material goods, but by our capacity to procure and manage resources for the care of our most vulnerable. Thus, to be māhū is to be in servitude of those in need of care.

A Māhū Way of Knowing

Mary Kawena Pukui reminds, "Hawaiians always knew we had in us something feminine and masculine." In Hawai'i, we understand this phenomenon in terms of the kū/hina dyad that reflects both masculine and feminine energies, respectively. As Pukui notes, the ancestral realm of māhū folk is Hono-ka-wailana "to join the heavenly waters" (Pukui et al., 1972, vol. 2), which we articulate as māhū functionality being a bridge between the feminine-masculine continuum; a bridge that joins rather than divides. Acknowledging māhū people—as individuals who open rather than foreclose possibilities for solidarity and mutual understanding—recognizes the spiritual power of māhū epistemologies and Hawaiian ways of knowing.

In essentializing māhū functionality within lāhui, Hinaleimoana often reminds us about the importance of kūlana (role) and kuleana (responsibility) in Hawaiian life, where a Kanaka's societal identity and function lies in (1) their kūlana: who/what contributed into shaping this individual, and (2) their kuleana: how this individual contributes to and sustains the world around them. Details of this individual's genitalia and intimacies, then, are irrelevant (Wong-Kalu, 2025). In this way, māhū, as functioning members of Hawaiian society, embody a distinctly Hawaiian sense of belonging in the world. As Kānaka, māhū are extensions of 'āina, sharing the same matter that shapes bodies of land, water, air and human alike. Whether cisgender (not trans), intersex (beyond XY or XX chromosomes), or transgender (not cisgender), every Kanaka (Hawaiian) has a place under creation, for we are all descendants of the land that defines us as a people—the land that nourishes each generation, and the land we, in turn, nourish into the next generation.

Yet, while māhū experiences may overlap with cisgender and transgender frameworks, they are unique. Collective liberation, through an inclusive love ethic, must also foster pilina that addresses unique challenges māhū face with equally unique solutions. While we seek liberation for all, approaches to liberation for each community is not one size fits all. In Hawai'i, wāhine, māhū, and kāne exist not in opposition to one another but in a dynamic, fluid, and shared harmony. Thus, for today's māhū, the often most oppressed among our kin, we are tasked with restoring ancestral harmony in contemporary life. To heal our people as our ancestral māhū did, today's māhū must use ancestral medicine and methods; we

must (1) rediscover our medicine: our voices in narrating stories of māhū past, present, and future, and (2) disseminate this medicine via māhū leadership, a method that embodies three ancestral values: leʻa (joy), aloha ʻāina (love of land and all that nourishes), and ʻohana (family).

Leʻa: Embodying Joy

In May of 2019, *Mana Magazine* published Jade Snow's feature article on māhū—underscoring leʻa as a fundament to Hawaiian value systems:

> Traditional Hawaiian culture celebrated a highly expressive community in all aspects of life. Leʻa was the pleasure principle from which a person not only determined fulfillment individually, but also as a member of the community. (2019)

For many māhū, especially those who encounter and survive everyday forms of violence, leʻa is the collective joy that comes by way of releasing pain through celebration and humor. Camp, a western form of comedy centered on intentional exaggeration, resonates deeply in māhū communities as a form of leʻa and is enjoyed in other Indigenous and underserved queer communities. We can see this reflected in documentaries like *Ke Kulana He Māhū: Remembering a Sense of Place, Paradise Bent: Boys will be Girls in Samoa,* and *Paris Is Burning* (Xian & Anbe, 2001; Croall, 1999; Livingston, 1990). In various ways, these films depict the joy that Indigenous trans and queer people of color find in each other's company, demonstrating how ʻike or experiential knowledge can transform violence into obstacles that we are willing to overcome.

Other ways māhū express joy is through pāʻina (community gatherings). We recall such an event on October 23, 2023, where fifty māhū (thirty elders, twenty youths) gathered at Zablan Beach Park in Nānākuli, Oʻahu, to celebrate the historic victory of drag superstar Sasha Colby, the first Native Hawaiian māhū winner of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Organized by māhū elders Sina Sison, Maddie Sesepasara,

and others, the beachside potluck honored Sasha's achievements and the visibility she brought to our māhū at home and our lāhui at large. Many in attendance expressed the fondness of sharing joy with their māhū kin.

As Sasha shared with the group, "It is this joy among sisters that I miss most when I am away from home." Although now based in Los Angeles, Sasha has publicly reflected—on *Drag Race* and in her YouTube series *Home Stretch*—on finding a sense of grounding with her chosen family. Māhū gatherings, like the one mentioned above, honor and celebrate our existence. Gatherings are intentional spaces aimed at spiritual reconnection, camaraderie, and collective power. Leʻa anchors these moments and empowers māhū to move from the shadows to the light and to celebrate life publicly and unapologetically.

At one point during this pāʻina, Cocoa joked loudly, "You are all sinners and are going to hell," gesturing at the food line, then adding, "I think you all come for the food but stay to pooch these kāne," pointing toward local men walking by. "Pooching"—attracting someone for sexual business, pleasure, or both—is a term tied to māhū stories, particularly those connected to sex work. It is also a term that recognizes the history of māhū oppression and consignment to the dark underbelly of a Hawaiian nightlife. For some time, māhū who wore clothing considered discordant with their assigned birth sex were persecuted by law, overlooked for gainful employment, and ostracized by their biological families (Teves, 2025).

Much of these issues derived from interpreted impositions that viewed māhū people as anachronistic (relics of the past), threatening to the status quo (compromising the nuclear family), and/or disposable (unnecessary or redundant). However, māhū leaders have long rejected—and continue to reject—these notions, making way for all genders to embrace truth and freedom. In doing so, māhū leaders follow the inclusive actions of our matriarch, our ʻāina, who nourishes all into existence through leʻa, and who invites every descendant to return leʻa to her through how we live, relate, and care for one another.

Cocoa, embodying leʻa through camp, often critiques settler-imposed morality through satirical performances of a colonial character who denounces Native sexuality, an archetype readily recognizable to māhū and other critics of colonialism for its exaggerated prudishness. Camp thrives on artifice and irony, using dramatization to illuminate political truths at its core. In Hawaiʻi, many of us māhū grow up embracing camp as a tool for creative expression and resistance—a

way to share and process hardships through humor. Ironically, camp, a product of a colonially dominant societies, offers Kānaka a means of escape from the ideological impasse of colonial domination.

The humor of a brown-skinned māhū embodying a white moralist who condemns Native sexuality is unmistakably dissonant, especially to māhū and queer folks of color. We know that white folk and western impositions do not necessitate the evasion of capture for oppressed people. The presumption of white supremacy is audacious and false. Māhū thus embody leʻa to practice a kind of liberatory performance in naming white supremacist ideologies, using camp as a critical analysis to defy racism and cisheteropatriarchy. In *Paris Is Burning*, the iconic queer documentary film about Black and Latino gay and trans people in the ballroom scene of New York City, Dorian Corey reminds us:

> In real life you can't get a job as an executive unless you have the educational background and the opportunity. Now, the fact that you are not an executive is merely because of the social standing of life. Black people have a hard time getting anywhere and those that do are usually straight. In a ballroom you can be anything you want. You're not really an executive but you're looking like an executive. You're showing the world that I can be an executive if I had the opportunity because I can look like one. (Livingston, 1990)

For māhū, an exaggerated performance of a white racist, cissexist homophobe through camp acknowledges colonial history in Hawaiʻi and fiercely refuses it. Māhū can critique such history, transform it into something that benefits us and, in a sense, reposition the missionary altogether. However, to move beyond white supremacist logics on Native sexuality, māhū leaders do not stop there. Māhū leadership calls into question the colonial imposition writ-large by embodying ancestral values of leʻa, aloha ʻāina, and ʻohana, thus restoring ancestral Hawaiian wisdom, our ways of knowing and being.

Schools of knowledge, including those developed by LGBTQ+ people of color in cities like New York, also speak against white cultural domination. However, it is again important to distinguish nuanced differences in experiences between ballroom culture and māhū. As Pukui reminds, "ʻAʻohe pau ka ʻike i ka hālau

ho'okahi" (All knowledge is not taught in one school) (Pukui, 2008, p. 24, #203). Yes, māhū in Hawai'i, people of color in New York, and queer(ed) folk elsewhere all face criminalization under an imposed white supremacist, cisheteronormative law, and we continue to fight back. However, in Hawai'i, māhū have cultural privileges not afforded to our queer kin in other places. Some māhū, for example, inherit ancestral language skills, inclusive family cultures, lands and homes that embrace them, businesses that allow them to thrive, and more importantly, 'ike Hawai'i that honors 'ike māhū (māhū ways of knowing and being) in ways that many of the folks depicted in *Paris Is Burning* did not. This is in part because 'ike Hawai'i, embodied in māhū leadership and aloha 'āina, has safeguarded our people against some of the worst forms of colonial violence. Aloha 'āina is the second value that will continue to protect and perpetuate our ea.

Aloha 'Āina: Embodying Love for All That Nourishes

Aloha 'āina is a love ethic rooted in 'ike Hawai'i. It is loosely translated as love for the land and people of Hawai'i. However, more than that, aloha 'āina describes a reciprocal, interconnected relationship between people and the natural world. The concept recognizes land and natural elements as elders in symbiosis with humans. Further, it evokes a commitment to caring for the life of land and all nourishing elements. In *The Mana of Translation*, Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada draws on Hawaiian revolutionary Joseph Nāwahī and his description of aloha 'āina, likening it to the pull of a magnet. On its own, a magnet is simply a stone, Nāwahī writes, and its *'ume mageneti*—its magnetic mana (power)—emerges only in *pilina* (relationship) with someone or something else (Kuwada, 2025, p. 3). Kuwada emphasizes how the magnet's invisible pull, and the act of rubbing it against objects to transfer its mana, reflects the unseen yet powerful super nature of aloha 'āina's relational force.

For māhū, as Kānaka Maoli, the reciprocal pilina embedded in aloha 'āina is essential. Hawai'i is our home, and by nurturing māhū life—as our 'āina nurtures without discriminating—we move beyond destructive colonial violence by embodying a less predatory episteme. Through intergenerational work, we honor māhū both kūpuna (ancestor) and mo'opuna (descendant), strengthening our more-than-human bonds with the land and each other across time and space. An aloha 'āina ethic embraces living with and learning from plants, elements, and the

more-than-human world. It is an ethic committed to serving ʻāina and reflecting upon the kaona (hidden meaning) of this service to make beneficially impactful change for the next generation. For example, some māhū folks (the māhūi) have built pilina with Hui Kū Like Kākou in Waiʻanae, a group that fosters the ʻume maganeti of aloha ʻāina through traditional farming, cultural knowledge, and frontline actions to reclaim Hawaiian lands and natural resources. Kalaniopua, having established pilina with this group since 2014, helped to foster and deepen these relationships with the māhūi who have since made Hui Kū Like Kākou a part of their ʻohana and chosen family.

Hui Kū Like Kākou (Let Us Gather) is a Native Hawaiian-led group of makaʻāinana (people of the land) cultivating traditional food sovereignty and healthy nutrition. The core purpose of the group is to make ʻike Hawaiʻi and traditional food-growing knowledge more accessible to underrepresented Native Hawaiians and our allies. Such work emphasizes the importance of synergizing aloha ʻāina—building pilina with Hawaiian foodways beyond a capitalist mode of production that prioritizes profit over people. Instead, aloha ʻāina prioritizes the longstanding reciprocal pilina between ʻāina and Kānaka through practice, where each feeds the other in symbiosis, with the origins of this relationship starting with our first human ancestor, Hāloa.

The first-born Hawaiian was Hāloanakalaukapalili, a stillborn of the sky and stars whose body turned into the kalo plant, becoming Hawaiʻi's staple starch. Hāloanakalaukapalili's younger brother, Hāloa, watered and cared for the plant body of his stillborn sibling and in return, kalo was provided to sustain human life. As a result, we humans of Hawaiʻi have and must continue to care for Hāloanakalaukapalili for the future of our progeny (Armitage, 2016). Hui Kū Like Kākou strives to maintain this symbiotic pilina between Hawaiians and kalo through aloha ʻāina, perpetuating the breath and life of both ʻāina and kānaka (humans) through food sovereignty. In addition to farming on Sundays, Hui Kū Like Kākou participates in various actions—contested case hearings, marches, petition drives, and land reclamations that prioritize the health and well-being of Hawaiʻi's people and place.

Hui Kū Like Kākou has always served as a puʻuhonua (refuge) for makaʻāinana and māhū. Since its inception in 2014 under the tender guidance of Kaukaohu Wahilani as the alakaʻi (leader), a Native Hawaiian kiaʻi (ʻāina protector) who has dedicated his life to aloha ʻāina, the group has always embraced its māhū kin. Through aloha ʻāina, the practice of caring for land and *all* that nourishes—which

includes *all* Kānaka as nourishers of land—folks naturally find pilina or connection with māhū kin, the more-than-human, and the strangely human. This is because the main priority of the organization is providing sustenance to land and lāhui, not distinguishing individual identity, let alone that of sex or gender. The organization importantly reaffirms that māhū have always been part of the ʻohana, as we hold kuleana to nourishing our land and lāhui like any other Kanaka does. We know this because, as previously stated, we as Kānaka are ʻāina itself, its descendant with the duty to care for our ancestor that feeds us into being. To further define aloha ʻāina in contemporary times and point out our existence as ʻāina, Kahoʻokahi Kanuha, a kiaʻi of the Mauna Kea Movement, reminds high school graduates receiving the Aloha ʻĀina Leader Award in 2018:

> ʻĀina is the most important natural resource. And let's not separate ʻāina and say that it is only land…and in the air, and the wind, and in the ua (rain). No…I am also ʻāina. We as kānaka are ʻāina. (Kanaeokana, 2018)

The power of aloha ʻāina is in the rigorous practice of fiercely loving one another as ʻāina and becoming ʻāina together as a lāhui. We are at once ʻāina and yet stewards of ʻāina. As Pukui reminds us, "He aliʻi ka ʻāina, he kauwā ke kanaka" (The land is a chief, man is her servant) (Pukui, 2008, p. 62, #531). If we—māhū, kāne, and wāhine—do not care for one another and ourselves, how can we adequately care for the land and waters that sustain us? If aloha ʻāina means to love the land, it must also mean that we must also love all descendants of our matriarch—māhū, kāne, and wāhine—as our matriarch feeds without bigotry. If she gives life to all of us (kākou), then it's a kākou thing to give life to her—and all her descendants. This kuleana binds us as a lāhui, but even more so as an ʻohana, a group who shares familial ties and kuleana to one another, which is the third value to embody in māhū leadership.

ʻOhana: Embodying Family

The word ʻohana means family and it comes from the word ʻohā, which is the new corm growing from an older kalo root, demonstrating a Hawaiian concept of family as a new growth emerging from its original unit. As Pukui reminds us, "Members of the ʻohana, like taro shoots, are all from the same root" (Pukui et al., 1972, vol. 2, p. 166). Clearly, kalo is important to Hawaiians as it's the foundation of our origin story and the word for family. It connects us to our cultural foodways, our past, and decolonial future. Also, like us, the plant embodies both male and female characteristics: It is monoecious, meaning it possesses both male and female flowers on the same plant and can self-reproduce with the help of makaʻāinana and mahiʻai (farmers). As with the kalo, the ʻohana is also dualistic in that it is birthed from male and female elements, is shaped into being by the nutrients the ʻāina provides, and it requires a symbiotic relationship between its members to thrive as a singular entity.

ʻOhana extends far beyond immediate relatives; it includes chosen kin, community mentors, and those who share responsibility for collective care. In many families, māhū relatives have traditionally helped raise younger siblings or cousins, offering guidance, emotional support, and cultural grounding. In rural communities on all the major islands, māhū often continue to play central roles in community gatherings—organizing pāʻina (a.k.a. lūʻau), teaching traditional crafts, and supporting keiki in school and extracurricular activities. These contributions demonstrate that māhū are not simply welcomed into the ʻohana; they help shape and strengthen it.

In contemporary times, reaffirming the value of māhū within the ʻohana is both a cultural responsibility and a statement of resilience. Colonization introduced rigid gender binaries and stigmatized those who did not conform to them, leading to the marginalization of māhū in public life. Yet even through these challenges, māhū have remained visible and influential. Modern cultural practitioners continue to teach traditional art forms, lead ceremonies, and mentor younger generations. Community leaders like Hinaleimoana exemplify how māhū continue to serve the lāhui, volunteering countless hours to sharing ʻike with not only other māhū but everyone who is willing to learn. In addition to all the volunteer hours, Hinaleimoana is a caregiver for her mom and continues to serve as a surrogate mother figure to many in the lāhui within chosen ʻohana structures.

For māhū, chosen ʻohana are often formed in harsh conditions where growth is not expected. Talk story (friendly chat) among māhū will often lead to conversations about pooching, a common experience across generations of māhū. Pooching, which may involve exchanging money for sexual favors (though not always), has been a notorious source of income for māhū who are often excluded from the formal economy due to queerphobia and colonization. Being alienated and marginalized by our biological families, governments, and social systems, many māhū turn to pooching to survive. For some, it becomes the only way to access physical protection through (1) housing that sustains their relationship with our ʻāina and (2) gender-affirming care that affords "safer" passage by appearing cisgender (non-trans) in a cisheteronormative society. Pooching, which often takes place under the cover of night in backstreets, cars, clubs, lifeguard stands, hotel rooms, and online virtual realities, is a last resort for many.

Though considered lowly and undesirable as "survival sex," pooching unites many māhū through shared memories, even allowing some māhū to flourish, pay for gender-affirming care, create businesses, and raise families. As one of the māhū elders at Sasha's gathering explained:

> I loved pooching back in the days. There was a sisterhood and we decided how much was paid, who got to spend time with us, and where and how we did things…Pooching was an important steppingstone for a lot of us girls. It gave us the power to see value in ourselves and our futures. Now-a-days, you girls can get your surgeries with health insurance plans. You don't need to go on the streets to pay for the necessary surgeries like we had to, you can get it through your employer's health insurance.

She clarified that in her school, at church, and at her first job as a server, she endured much bullying as a māhū AMAB (assigned male at birth). After being kicked out of the house, she turned to pooching as a last resort for sustaining her ea, yet her journey to transition physically also became her journey to transition culturally. By learning kūlana and kuleana as a Kanaka and how that is embodied in being māhū, her generation's struggle for breath blazed a trail for the next generation to breathe more easily, allowing them to address issues beyond survival.

Kalaniopua remembers pooching one night in 2002 in downtown Honolulu with her queen mother, Venus, a large Hawaiian-Samoan māhū from Waiʻanae. She remembers walking around Chinatown on Hotel Street—hearing another māhū yelling, "I can lick you fakahs, I pooch fo fun!" At first, Kalaniopua didn't recognize the voice, but as she moved closer, she realized it was Stasha, a thin Hawaiian-Filipino māhū sister also from Waiʻanae, who went by the street name "Boom Boom Tunani." The street had been "nailz" (unpleasant), Tunani told them. On top of police harassment, she had only managed two dates (johns/clients) after more than four hours on the stroll. Having nothing else to do, she joined Venus, Kalaniopua, and a dozen other queens for a "pau hana" (after-work) feasting session at Zippy's, a local restaurant in Honolulu.

It was an unspoken rule that those who had made kālā (money) that night would split the bill. Girls like Tunani, who had a slow night, would return the favor another time. That night, as māhū shared their stories—just as they did during Sasha Colby's beach gathering and will do at many others—they created and continue to create a chosen form of ʻohana, bound by experience, resilience, and above all, life-giving pilina to each other as shoots of a single corm. Simply put, by being Kanaka, māhū birth, nourish, and maintain traditional Hawaiian family structures that center the life of the collective, serving others as both kin and collaborators in shaping our progeny's future. For māhū especially, there's a comforting sense of being ʻohana—a place to give and receive life, a place to house and be housed, a place to see and be seen, to help and be helped, to nourish and be nourished.[1]

Ultimately, the relationship between māhū and ʻohana reveals a profound truth: Community strength reflects the maternal strength of our ʻāina, one built on inclusion, reciprocity, and acceptance of identity in all its forms. When māhū are embraced and uplifted by ʻāina and kānaka, the entire collective becomes more resilient, compassionate, and connected to the values that define Hawaiʻi. Recognizing māhū's place in society is not only an acknowledgment of past traditions but is also a commitment to a future of abundance, both collective and individual. Through this lens, honoring māhū is inseparable from honoring ʻāina—as its descendant—and Hawaiian culture—as genes of its history, its present, and its ongoing evolution.

Māhū Leadership Is Hawaiian Resilience

Le'a, aloha 'āina, and 'ohana are not simply cultural principles—they are the living currents through which māhū continue to nurture, protect, and regenerate the lāhui. Across generations, māhū have carried knowledge, embodied care, and sustained relationships that anchor Hawaiian life. Despite colonial disruptions, māhū persist as healers, teachers, organizers, innovators, and cultural bearers whose work strengthens communities.

By embracing le'a, māhū transform pain into possibility through humor, artistry, and joy. Through aloha 'āina, they reaffirm reciprocal relationships with land, water, and community—relationships essential to ea and to the sovereignty of both people and place. Through 'ohana, they expand kinship beyond biological ties, cultivating inclusive, intergenerational networks of care that reflect Hawaiian values of reciprocity, respect, and abundance. All these values are present in how celebration, love, and nourishment are exchanged between 'āina and Kānaka.

Together, these principles illuminate a powerful truth: Māhū leadership is Hawaiian resilience. The survival and flourishing of māhū are inseparable from the survival and flourishing of the lāhui. To uplift māhū is to advance a more just, liberated, and interdependent future—one in which all people can live with dignity, purpose, connection, and joy.

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About the Authors



Kalaniopua Young has been actively involved in social justice movements in Hawaiʻi, Washington, Texas, and elsewhere. As the first Native Hawaiian māhūwahine (transgender woman) to earn a PhD, she continues to support a range of causes rooted in aloha ʻāina. Her academic work in anthropology at the University of Washington describes care and service work for the common people of the land or the makaʻāinana (attendants of the land). As a substance-use survivor who has overcome isolation, homelessness,

and discrimination, Kalaniopua's recovery prioritized principles and practices of le'a, aloha 'āina, and 'ohana. From the streets to the classroom and to restorative justice work grounded in ea, Kalaniopua believes that liberating māhū will create conditions of freedom for wāhine, kāne, Natives, and settlers.



Sami L. A. Akuna, a.k.a. Cocoa Chandelier, a community leader, lecturer, and performance artist, brings a distinct perspective on the diversity within the māhū world. Winner of the 2008 Universal Show Queen pageant—Hawai'i's most prestigious drag title—Cocoa's journey reflects resilience shaped by chosen family, creativity, and community care. Living with HIV and navigating the club scene of the 1990s and early 2000s, she built pathways to health and flourishing through mutual support. Today, Cocoa embodies well-being through dance, travel, nutrition, creative work, and active service—fundraising, supporting kūpuna and keiki, and carrying Hawaiian values across the Pacific and beyond.

Kalaniopua and Cocoa first met briefly in 2009 at an Imperial Court event in Portland, Oregon, then reconnected in 2022 on the board for the Hawai'i LGBT Legacy Foundation. Through "The Māhūi," the foundation's cultural and educational branch, they have co-created spaces that honor māhū leadership—integrating ceremony and protocol at various LGBTQ+ events centering on 'ike Hawai'i. Supported by board members Ian Tapu, Randy Soriano, Ha'aheo Zablan, and many others, the group of māhū and māhū-adjacent folk seeks to foster pilina (relations/relationship) with other Indigenous and queer folk through ea—life, breath, and political sovereignty.

Notes

1 This references the 'ōlelo no'eau as follows, "'Ike aku, 'ike mai, kōkua aku, kōkua mai; pēlā iho la ka nohona 'ohana (Recognize and be recognized, help and be helped; such is family life)" (Pukui, 2008, p. 130, #1200).