

Mai Ka Mole Mai: from the source towards an analysis of Hawaiian language literature

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Abstract

Following Hawaiian language revitalisation movements, students and scholars are now digging into Hawaiian language newspapers produced in the 19th and early 20th centuries, thirsting for information from the past about the past. This paper seeks to propose a way in which scholars can approach an analysis of this rich literature to not only look at the past but also to understand its present and future value. Specifically, this paper will examine an account entitled, “No ka hiki mua ana mai o na Haole ma Hawaii nei,” or “The First Arrival of Foreigners in Hawaii” by noted Hawaiian scholar, Samuel Mānaiakalani Kamakau, and will present ideas regarding culturally appropriate methodologies in Hawaiian literature. As the title indicates, it will begin “mai ka mole mai.” It will look first at oral traditions that became the root of much of what was written in the 19th century. From there, it will examine how authors of the time period built upon this literature, adding new, complex layers of meaning. Lastly, it will discuss how we can begin to interact with this literature today and use it to further understand ourselves.

Keywords

Oral tradition, Hawaiian language, language revitalisation, Samuel Mānaiakalani Kamakau

Ha‘alele Papa ho‘i i Kahiki,
Ho‘i a Kahiki Kapakapakaua.

[Papa left and returned to Kahiki,
Returned all the way to Kahiki Kapakapakaua.]¹

My early rearing in hula, the dance style created in Hawai‘i, gave me access to chants like the one above, chants that recounted the lives and adventures of my ancestors. Being just seven years old when I began my formal training, I had no way of knowing the immensity of the tradition that I was being gifted. At the time, I was simply taught to memorize words and to mimic my teacher. Therefore, without asking questions, I did as she did: I studied lines, I practiced motions, and I worked to perfect movement, to become the embodiment of a story with each dance. When I danced of travel, my arms became the wa‘a, the canoe, my feet became the moana, the ocean, and my voice became the makani, the wind, that would carry the tradition to a new audience. I danced of people like Papa who made epic journeys and lived profound lives. The beauty of hula was that I could be anything and go anywhere as long as I had a story.

Hula is a performance; it is where stories are “read” on the body and heard in the voice. It is a multi-sensory experience for both the dancer and the audience. What I was unaware of during my early years of training, however, was that hula is a space of convergence, where multiple strands of thought and tradition come together. What hula has provided me with, therefore, is the opportunity to explore these complex intersections, namely that of orality and literacy. Rather than positioning the two as binary opposites, however, it gives me the opportunity to see past what Mahuika (2012) calls an “unhelpful dichotomy, where orality and literature are polarized rather than complimentary [sic]” (p. 127). Instead, it has opened opportunities to further understand the evolution and transition of culture in shifting times.

Although hula builds on the past, maintaining some of the same traditions that were practised by my ancestors, it has also grown and changed. As contemporary dancers, we have to

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all of the translations are my own and will appear in brackets. Please note that Hawaiian words will not be italicized.

be aware that its current practice relies heavily on the existence of written texts, something that was certainly not available when hula began. Such an understanding allows us to explore pressing issues and questions regarding orality, literacy, performance, and the transitions between. Therefore, this is where my hula training and my academic training collide, where story meets analysis, where hula meets inquiry. Dancing between these complex layers is challenging. Yet, any movement towards mastery must begin with a simple step.

As the title indicates, this paper will propose a few suggestions towards a culturally appropriate analysis of Hawaiian language literature and will offer a few key considerations that should be made when working in this area. To make such proposals, I will be looking at a sort of “in-between” genre that was birthed during the rise of Hawai‘i’s printing press, specifically between 1834 and 1948, when newspapers became one of the primary vehicles for putting into print what were originally oral traditions². Similar to movements occurring in other parts of the world, authors of the time period embraced writing as a way to maintain and preserve their traditions when “repositories of oral tradition were dying out” (Mahuika, 2012, p. 81). Early authors began to record songs, chants, prayers, and proverbs that had been handed down between generations before the introduction of literacy and secured their place in history by fixing them in writing, many of them “mesmerized by the image of their voice in print”, which “opened the flood gates for a whole new way of communicating and sharing” (Meyer, 2003, p. 25).

Additionally, many of the authors also expounded on these oral traditions, offering their own interpretations and explanations. This is something that became quite characteristic of writing at the time as people were losing the ability to understand oral traditions and archaic language. The newspapers, therefore, opened up new opportunities to emerging Hawaiian scholars who were then able to present sacred traditions while also analyzing them. This was a result of literacy. As Walter Ong (1979) explains, this type of work is only possible in literate societies because “Without writing the mind cannot even generate concepts such as ‘history’ or

² Note that “oral tradition”, rather than other popular terms like “oral forms” or “oral formulations” (Finnegan, 1990) will be used to refer to proverbs, songs, and chants that were composed in a preliterate society, memorized, and then passed on. As explained by Te Rangi Hiroa (1926), a “tradition may be regarded as history derived from an unwritten source” (p. 181). According to Jack Goody (2000) “tradition” is often used in reference to the “handing over...of folktales, legends, songs, riddles, and proverbs—what I have called ‘standardized oral forms’ in order to avoid some of the possible distorting ambiguities that may arise when using the term *literature* (that is, having to do with letters)” (p. 13). “Tradition” will be used with full acknowledgment of the fact that it is a controversial term, especially given debates regarding the “invention of tradition” and the fact that “tradition” is sometimes seen in opposition to “history”, the first being “unreliable” and the latter being “authentic” (Mahuika, 2012, p. 128).

‘analysis’” (p. 2). Thus, although writing in the newspapers essentially flattened what were performed oral traditions—those that were experienced by every sense—it opened up a new space for analysis that did not exist previously. This is the space in which I now work.

In order to study this literature—literature that consists of oral traditions transferred to print, and literature that marks the beginning of scholarly analysis in the 19th century—I have chosen to focus on the work of one of the most noted Hawaiian authors of the 19th century, Samuel Mānaiakalani Kamakau. Although Kamakau is one of many Hawaiians who published regularly in the Hawaiian language newspapers, he is one of only a handful of authors who have had their works translated into English. As use of the Hawaiian language drastically declined and almost disappeared in the 20th century, the level of fluency required to access the incredible amount of information recorded in these newspapers also declined. As Puakea Nogelmeier (2010) argues, this has led to an overreliance on a “discourse of sufficiency” or a “long-standing recognition and acceptance of a small selection of Hawaiian writings from the 19th century as being sufficient to embody nearly a hundred years of extensive Hawaiian auto-representation—Hawaiians writing for and about themselves” (p. 2). Without knowledge of Hawaiian language, those who were interested in studying history in Hawai‘i turned to a handful of translated texts—Kamakau’s work included—as being representative of everything that was produced in Hawaiian in the late 19th to early 20th century. This led to serious issues in historical research. As a result, because most recent accounts about Hawai‘i have failed to utilize these 19th century Hawaiian language texts, “every form of history written, every cultural study undertaken, and every assumption made over most of the last century should be revisited in light of those neglected sources” (Nogelmeier, 2010, p. xi).

With this in mind I have chosen to focus on a number of Kamakau’s Hawaiian language texts rather than translations. These texts were originally published in the longest-running Hawaiian language newspaper, *Ka Nupepa Kuokoa*³, established in 1861 that “showed the political, economic, and racial mazes of the century’s last decades” (Chapin, 1984, p. 53). Five years after the paper was established, on October 20th, 1866, Kamakau started his serial column originally entitled “Ka Moolelo o Kamehameha I” [The History of Kamehameha I] that ran for four and a half years. Rather than focusing on this work in its entirety—as that would go far

³ Although much of what is produced in Hawaiian today includes diacritical markings (the ‘okina, or glottal stop, and the kahakō, or macron) most of what was produced in the Hawaiian language newspapers did not. Therefore, texts that come from the newspapers are reproduced here without such markings.

beyond the scope of this paper—I will be focusing on a subsection of this history entitled, “No ka hiki mua ana mai o na Haole ma Hawaii nei” [Regarding the First Arrival of Foreigners in Hawaii]. In what could appear to be a lengthy digression, Kamakau leaves the topic of Kamehameha, one of our most prominent chiefs, to discuss an era of travel between Hawai‘i and a location termed Kahiki. For five issues, he records the story of one Polynesian traveler after another, finally ending the section with an introduction to the European, Captain James Cook.

This particular section has been studied previously by Noenoe Silva (2004) and Puakea Nogelmeier (2010), both of whom have been instrumental in bringing awareness to the amount of information housed in the Hawaiian language newspapers. Therefore, it is not my goal to simply restate what they have already concluded, but rather to add on to their analysis so that we can begin to engage with new questions and considerations as we move forward in this field of study. Both Silva and Nogelmeier speak to the distortion that occurred in the translation process from Hawaiian to English and comment on how a failure to acknowledge the Hawaiian language text has and will continue to result in a missed opportunity to understand Kamakau as an author, someone who Silva (2004) argues, “deliberately contested haole [foreign] historiography and its methods (by relying on oral traditions)” (p. 9).

Kamakau’s attention to oral traditions, specifically those regarding Kahiki, a mysterious place that I have danced and sung about since I was a little girl, is what initially drew me to this text. In past decades, Kahiki has been the subject of much scholarship and debate. As the chant at the opening of this paper reveals, even Papa herself, the famed earth mother, traveled to and from Kahiki. As Ben Finney (1991) describes, Kahiki “is often portrayed as a wonderful and magical land from which came heroic voyagers as well as gods, vital food plants, and other cultural gifts” (p. 387). While many scholars in the past were preoccupied with trying to pinpoint the exact location of Kahiki, Kamakau (1866a) explains: “Ua kapa aku ka poe kahiko o Hawaii nei i na aina Bolapola, a me na aina haole, o Kahiki ka inoa” [The ancient people of Hawai‘i called the lands of Borabora and other foreign lands Kahiki] (p. 1). Therefore, Kahiki was simply any land outside of the Hawaiian archipelago. It could certainly refer to the islands of Tahiti, as many have assumed. However, it could just as easily refer to any foreign land outside of that. Therefore, trying to identify the exact location of Kahiki is not as important as identifying why writers of the 19th century maintained these stories that had been performed, danced, chanted, and celebrated for generations.

This is especially important if we consider the argument presented by Walter Ong (1982) that “in an oral economy of thought, matters from the past without any sort of present relevance commonly dropped into oblivion” (p. 98). Kamakau’s narrative deserves consideration, not simply as a written text, but as one that pulls from a series of oral traditions considered important enough to be committed to memory, maintained through hula, and then finally transferred to print, where they could continue to impact those who study them. Given the complexities of life in 19th century Hawai‘i, and the tensions existent in a shifting society, such an examination can be quite revealing. Amidst strong insistence by both Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians alike to leave behind the “old” ways, including hula, Kamakau recorded a series of stories that relied on the existence of hula and that recounted the lives of figures like Papa, who were considered by many to be indicative of an old, pagan, and uncivilized way of life. The newspapers were filled with statements like, “Ina olelo kekahi i ka olelo lapuwale, olelo lealea paha, kuamuamu paha, wahahee paha, hula paha, olioli paha, kake paha, kela mea keia mea like a pau; Mai manao ia ua pono kana olelo” [If someone speaks foolish words, perhaps uses frivolous speech, swears, maybe lies, and perhaps dances, chants, and plays with language, or all other things of that nature, do not think that what he says is right.] (Haanio, 1838, p. 84). Despite the abundance of such beliefs, Kamakau (1866a) maintained that oral traditions provided valuable information from the past about the past and that they were, therefore, relevant to Hawaiians of the time. In fact, he built his entire discussion regarding Kahiki on the fact that the names of lands outside of our archipelago can be found in chants and songs:

Ua nui no ka poe o Hawaii nei i holo i na aina o Nuuhiwa, o Bolapola, o Upolu, o Sawaii, o Holaniku, o Holanimoe, o Hakukake, o Lalokapu, o Kuukuu, o Malimali, o Muliwaiolena, o Maokuululu, a me na aina e ae i holo ia e ka poe kahiko o Hawaii i ka makaikai; aia ma na kaa, a me na mele wanana, a me na pule e loa no ka nui o na aina” (p. 1)

[There were indeed many Hawaiians who traveled to the lands of Nu‘uhiwa, Borabora, ‘Upolu, Savai‘i, Hōlanikū, Hōlanimoe, Hakukake, Lalokapu, Ku‘uku‘u, Malimali, Muliwai‘ōlena, Maokū‘ululū⁴, as well as other lands that

⁴ Although I have added diacritical markings to proper names in the translation, it should be noted that the markings represent my interpretation of the names. Therefore, variations may exist in other sources.

were traveled to by the ancient ones of Hawai‘i; most of these places can be found in stories, prophesizing chants, and prayers.]

Thus, unlike some of his counterparts, and even unlike many modern historians who are quick to doubt the validity of oral traditions, Kamakau saw their value as the mole, or the root, of his narrative.

Examining the work of authors like Kamakau eventually led to the multi-layered approach that I use when analyzing Hawaiian language literature of the 19th and 20th centuries. When I look at Kamakau’s text, I recognize at least three possible spaces for analysis and interpretation. After completing a brief survey of the context in which the text was published, the first space for analysis is the mole, or the oral tradition that was composed in the original language of the people and passed down through a sacred process like hula. It is where analysis must begin and requires that the researcher understand the language because as Jan Vansina (1965) explains, “it is impossible to carry out this work of interpretation without a thorough knowledge of the language in which the text is composed, because otherwise the literal meaning of the text will be unintelligible” (p. 75). An examination of these traditions, which is certainly enough to sustain a project on its own, can help us to understand the transition from orality to literacy: how and why oral traditions were transferred from performance to writing; how they were shortened, cut, decontextualized; and how they were offered to new audiences. It can help us to understand how the construction and maintenance of knowledge changed with the introduction of literacy and what this meant for Hawaiians living in that time period.

The second space for analysis involves looking at the oral tradition and the author’s commentary together. This is an optimal site for examining the emergence of 19th century rhetoric, or the strategic use of ancient oral traditions within larger narratives. In his study of Hawaiian literature, John Charlot (1977) utilizes form and redaction theory, commonly used in biblical studies, and talks about the power of the redactor to string traditions together to make a particular statement: “A single story unit as a whole can thus be used within a larger redactional complex for some purpose other than itself” (p. 487). Kamakau certainly took advantage of this power. He pieced together snippets from a large variety of stories concerning Hawai‘i and Kahiki and placed them within a larger narrative about Hawai‘i’s ruling chiefs to reveal his insights on 19th century Hawai‘i and its relation to the past.

In the third space for analysis the text must be examined to uncover its contemporary value. As Niel Gunson (1993) argues, “Throughout Polynesia the historical traditions offer great scope for reinterpretation if we are prepared to understand them in the context of social evolution and change and not treat them as static and unchanging forms” (p. 158). This idea is a key to an effective examination of Hawaiian literature today. Although committed to writing, we cannot and should not assign these texts one fixed meaning. As much as possible, we should treat them as entities that are just as fluid as the dances that kept them alive for generations. Just as Kamakau was able to add layers of meaning on to ancient traditions, so too are we able to utilize these same narratives to represent new ideas and expressions of identity today. We have the potential, like the redactors, recorders, and authors of the past, to reinterpret and re-present these stories, beginning at the mole, the root, and expanding from there.

It is with an understanding of these multiple, interlocking layers of meaning that I approach each analysis of Hawaiian language literature. In Kamakau’s case, I utilize his account regarding Papa to demonstrate the complexity of this literature at every level. According to Kamakau, the first traveler to make an actual journey to Kahiki—versus someone who was said to have come to Hawai‘i from the sky or some other location—is Papa. According to Kamakau (1866a): “O Papa, ua olelo ia, ua holo i Kahiki, no ka mea, o kona mau makua o Kukalaniehu a me Kahakauakoko, no Nuumehalani, he aina i ka pali ku, a ma laila o Papa e hoopahaohao ai i kona kino a lilo i mea opiopio hou” [As for Papa, she went to Kahiki because her parents, Kūkalani‘ehu and Kahakauakoko were from Nu‘umehalani, a land of tall cliffs, and it was there that Papa transformed her body into that of a young person] (p. 1). He then cites a small portion of “Mele a Pāku‘i”—the same origin chant cited at the outset of this paper—as memorized by a famed genealogist named Kala‘ikuahulu:

Ma ka Kalaikuahulu, ke kanaka akamai loa i na mea kahiko a me na moolelo a me na mookuauhau, penei kana:

‘Hoi mai Papa mai loko o Kahiki,

Ku inaina lili i ka punalua,

Hae manawa ino i ke kane o Wakea.’ (p. 1)

[Kala‘ikuahulu’s account—a man quite proficient in things of the past, and in stories and genealogies—goes like this:

‘Papa returned from Kahiki,
 Bitterly jealous of her punalua⁵
 Ravenous with anger towards her husband, Wākea.]

These three lines, a very small section of a much longer genealogical chant that tells of the birth of the islands, records Papa’s return to Hawai‘i from Kahiki. A close reading, even for someone unfamiliar with the rest of the text, can reveal a number of things: first, that a woman named Papa made a trip from a place called Kahiki; second, that she was married to a man named Wākea; and third, that Wākea had another spouse who, at one time, Papa was jealous of. This is the root. Breaking the tradition down to the simplest and most basic assumptions to be gained strips it of any fantastical nature. This, in turn, opens the text up to be read as a metaphor. Rather than engaging in discussions regarding the factuality of events contained in an oral tradition, we can begin to talk about what makes the tradition important and what its continued existence means for the people.

Deconstructing the text in this way, as Futa Helu (1999) demonstrates in his work on mythology in the Pacific, reveals the “‘historical’ kernel” of oral traditions (p. 259). Helu argues that certain elements characteristic of oral traditions must be identified and eliminated:

... in purely oral transmission the desire for novelty, i.e. distinction in presentation, becomes compulsive and takes precedence over accuracy. This opens the door for distortion and actual occurrences begin to transcend the boundaries of possibility to become fantastic and magical. The required methodology therefore would essentially consist in elimination of events or characteristics which are logically impossible.... (1999, p. 259)

It is only after eliminating these elements that one can arrive at the root of the story. Although such a deconstructive approach may appear to strip the text of any sacred or deep, cultural value, it actually accomplishes the opposite. It opens the text up to varying, metaphoric interpretations. At the same time, it allows us to reengage with the text as a fluid performance, as something with

⁵ The term punalua referred to two people, either two men or two women, who shared the same spouse. Therefore, Papa’s punalua was another women who also had a relationship with Wākea.

multiple layers of meaning that can be embodied by the dancer and scholar. In the search for validity, the tradition is often flattened. Therefore, this approach gives it movement.

Before presenting the three lines of chant, Kamakau comments on Papa and her journey to Kahiki. When Papa returned to the land of her parents, as Kamakau notes, she was able to transform her body, making it youthful again. In following Helu's (1999) approach, transforming your own body is beyond the limits of any normal human ability. Therefore, we must return to the basic assumptions discovered in the chant and must build our understanding of these fantastical elements from there. This allows us to sift through the mythological elements and search for the *kaona*, or the hidden meaning. This task can be quite revealing and liberating for, as Noelani Arista (2010) states, "*kaona* is something of a hidden package waiting to be unwrapped by the deserving, knowledgeable listener or reader" (p. 666). In an analysis of Hawaiian literature, once the mythological elements are not read as being valid statements of actual accounts, the *kaona* is more accessible. Once, for example, we get beyond trying to determine whether Papa could actually transform, we can make theories as to what that statement means metaphorically.

Perhaps the only place where Papa could find rejuvenation was in her homeland, or the land of her ancestors. Perhaps she needed to return to Kahiki to find a sense of balance, a sense of security, or a sense of connection. Or, perhaps Papa herself is a metaphor and is representative of those who first settled in Hawai'i. Maybe they maintained a memory of a land called Kahiki to remind them that they had roots elsewhere, to help them remember that they could draw on the strength of other places to survive. All of these possibilities can be linked to Papa's journey to Kahiki and back. They may not be verifiable theories. However, that is the point. What an analysis of this literature allows us to do as readers is to seek these layers of *kaona*, of deep meaning, to find relevance for ourselves. As a dancer, I can now look at the words that I have chanted many times before with new eyes. I can begin to understand for myself why Papa's story was so important, why it survived the generations, why it was recorded in print for those of the 19th century, and why it is still important for us today.

In the second space for analysis, the oral tradition can be viewed in relation to the author's larger narrative. In his text, Kamakau strategically places his account regarding the arrival of foreigners within his larger text regarding Kamehameha I. Those who translated his works into English, as Nogelmeier (2010) discusses, sometimes assumed that Kamakau jumped

from topic to topic, even digressing for long periods of time, before returning to his original story. Therefore, when translations were completed, parts of his Hawaiian text were reordered and even separated between four English books, the primary basis of separation being the belief that some parts of his text were historical while others were mythical. What resulted was a missed opportunity to understand Kamakau as an author. In his analysis of Māori literature, Te Maire Tau (2012) states, "...to Māori, the mind that composed the tradition is more important than the tradition itself" (p. 15). Thus, to reorder Kamakau's work and to take it out of context completely eliminates any chance to understand his mind or to examine why he pieced his narrative together as he did.

In reference to this particular section of the text, Nogelmeier (2010) argues that Kamakau's placement of the travel narratives was deliberate as it followed his discussion of Kalani'ōpu'u—Kamehameha's uncle—during the time of Captain Cook's arrival:

Prior to introducing Captain Cook, Kamakau spent four full weekly columns explaining the Hawaiian mind-set of the time concerning foreigners and the existence of foreign lands. His sequencing of the narrative therefore situates Cook's arrival as part of a continuum of Hawaiians' understanding about historical contact with the world beyond the horizon—not as an unprecedented, isolated event. (p. 135)

When seen in context, Papa's story and the stories of all the famous gods, priests, chiefs, and navigators that appear in Kamakau's text, take on new meaning. No longer are they just part of a simple list of figures who traveled to and from lands beyond Hawaiian shores. In context, they are those who predated Captain Cook, those who had the ability to traverse the great open ocean before a European—who has too long been known in history as the one who "discovered" Hawai'i—even reached our archipelago.

As a result, what Kamakau essentially accomplishes in the 19th century is what scholars like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1995) have been advocating for years, namely a return to our intellectual center. In his work on literature in Africa, Thiong'o proposes that African literature be placed at the center, that people work towards first understanding their regional literature and then move outward from there: "All other things are to be considered in their relevance to our

situation, and their contribution towards understanding ourselves” (p. 439). Although these types of post-colonial ideas came about generations after Kamakau, it can be argued that he started to do such monumental work in the 19th century, positioning indigenous narratives at the center and then seeing how Captain Cook related to them. Looking at a reordered translation of his text would result in missing this completely.

In the third space for analysis, we have the opportunity to look at how the text affects us today. After discussing Papa, Kamakau (1866b) introduces a long list of famous travelers. There is ‘Ulu, for whom it is said “ua pau loa o loko o Kahiki ia ia, ua ike o ia i na aupuni a pau o ka honua” [all of Kahiki was known to him, he visited all of the nations of this world] (p. 1). There is Kaha‘i, who travels to Kahiki in search of his father, Hema, and for whom it is said in chant, “O ke anuenue ke ala o Kahai...Ae Kahai i ke koiula a Kane” [Kaha‘i’s trail is a rainbow...he bypasses the rainbow-hued trail of Kāne⁶] (p. 1). There is the priest, Pa‘ao, the prophet, Makuakuamana, and the chief, Pili, who are said to have come from “Wawau a no Upolu a me na aina ma ka Hema aku, o ia paha na aina i kapa ia e na haole o Nu Zilani” [Wawa‘u, ‘Upolu, and from the lands to the far South; perhaps those places being what the whites now call New Zealand⁷] (p. 1). There is the famous traveler, Mo‘ikeha, who taught his son, Kila, “i ke ano o ka holo moana a me ke kilo hoku” [the practice of sailing and navigating] (Kamakau, 1867, p. 1). Then there are the gods, including Kāne and Kanaloa, for whom “Ua olelo pinepine ia ma ka moolelo kaa o me na pule, a me na mele a ka poe kahiko a pau, mai Kahiki mai” [it is frequently stated in legends, prayers, and songs of all of the ancient ones, that they came from Kahiki] (Kamakau, 1867, p. 1). This is but a snapshot of Kamakau’s complex record of travel narratives. He includes other figures; he draws on longer, more detailed chants; he presents dialogue between characters; and records some of the many motivations for travel to and from Kahiki. He also comments on the word “Haole,” or foreigner, and forces us to question our understanding of indigeneity. Therefore, the potential for analysis is great. When looking at the entire section about foreigners, and further, the entire series on history in Hawai‘i, the amount of information that can be pulled from it is immense.

⁶ This is a reference to death. Thus, because Kamakau calls this a wānana, or a prophesy, it could be interpreted to mean that Kaha‘i would not die in Kahiki, but would return to Hawai‘i.

⁷ There are many theories regarding Pa‘ao’s place of origin. Some place him in Samoa and Tonga, as there is ‘Upolu in Samoa and Vava‘u in Tonga, while others place him in Tahiti, as ‘Upolu and Wawa‘u are said to be ancient names in the Society Islands.

What this then means for us studying Hawaiian literature today is that there are no limits to what we can draw from these texts. Kamakau played with the positioning of stories, with the selection of oral traditions, and with the inclusion of personal insights, and as a result, was able to present his thoughts about the time. As Hawaiians of the 21st century, we are now able to see what this means for us, for our ideas about Kahiki, for our concepts of homeland, and for our understanding of identity. Perhaps what we think of identity needs reexamination. Perhaps it is not as fixed as we often believe it to be but is as fluid as the ocean that Papa traversed in a great era of exploration. Although she may have birthed our islands—perhaps metaphorically meaning that she is one of our oldest ancestors—Papa herself was connected to both Hawai‘i and a land beyond our shores. This very idea can lead to a rearticulation of identity for Hawaiians today. Like ‘Ulu, we can travel the entire world and still know how to return home, wherever that may be. Like Kaha‘i, we can follow desired paths and break through obstacles. Like Pa‘ao, we can remember and connect to the islands of our ancestors. Finally, like Mo‘ikeha, we can maintain this knowledge and hand it down so that no matter where our children go, they will know how to return to us. This type of thinking transforms an analysis of Hawaiian literature from an exploration of the past to one that explores the past in order to understand its present and future value.

Working with Hawaiian language literature requires that we look at these multiple levels of meaning and that we engage with the text as dancers would, moving back and forth, swaying between the spaces that bridge the past, the present, and the future; the performance and the text; the hula and the page. When we approach analysis in this way, we have the chance to be transformed. This, as Greg Dening (1989) writes, can make the study of literature and history quite “liberating”:

There would not be many among us who in publishing a book or article, giving a lecture, making some religious or secular witness does not discover something of self in the presentation....Making, telling, singing, performing, dancing histories is the same. Know the past, know yourself personally, culturally. Express your knowledge of the past, present yourself personally, culturally. (p. 138)

Digging into the stories of the past gives us the chance to truly know ourselves. If an examination that begins with three lines of a chant can spiral outward to a reexamination of contemporary identity that is transformative, meaningful work. It takes what could be a dry analysis of literature and makes it something with the potential to liberate our minds. But it must start at the mole, at the root, and must push us to question ourselves. It is with this idea that I will continue to chant about Papa, continue to use my body to tell her story knowing that it meant something to those who composed it, to those who memorized it, to those who recorded it in print, and to those who will carry it on to Kahiki Kapakapakaua and beyond.

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