

## THE ADOPTION OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER IN NATIVE HAWAIIAN *PULE*

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Many outward, physical manifestations of Hawaiian language and culture have changed radically among Hawaiians since the first arrival of foreigners to Hawai'i in 1778. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that the inner, psychological and emotional, character of Hawaiians has changed more slowly. Certain traditional cultural and linguistic elements have been retained in acculturated forms. An example of such retention is the adoption of Christian prayer in spontaneously composed *pule*, a form of prayer and the sole genre of formal Hawaiian oratory retained in uninterrupted continuity from the early nineteenth century to the present. This article describes the importance Hawaiians traditionally placed upon language, comments on several major historical events that led to the decline of Hawaiian language and culture, and shows that in spite of this marked decline many elders who speak Hawaiian as their first language retain a distinctly Hawaiian form of Christian prayer, which originated soon after Hawaiian conversion to Christianity. The several traditional elements of prayer language, poetic devices, and vocal styles of presentation retained in this form reflect the creative adaptation of Christian prayer to suit Hawaiian values and sensibilities.

GIVEN A KNOWLEDGE of the major cultural, political, and sociological changes that have taken place in Hawai'i since foreigners (British explorer Captain James Cook and crew) first arrived in 1778, one might assume that little of traditional Hawaiian language and culture survives today--that Hawaiians have all but completely embraced the English language and Western culture. Certainly, and in spite of the growing strength of Hawaiian language and culture since the late 1960s evidence of the pervasiveness of

Western influences seems compelling: most Hawaiians speak English and not Hawaiian as their first language, receive an English-medium education, live in Western-style homes, and wear Western clothing, to name but a few influences.

Without question, many outward, physical manifestations of culture have changed radically among Hawaiians, especially in the past hundred years since the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchical government by American businessmen. Despite these outward manifestations, however, evidence suggests that the inner, psychological and emotional, character of Hawaiians has changed more slowly. Although some traditional cultural and linguistic elements have been irretrievably lost, other traditional elements have been retained in acculturated forms. With regard to the process of sociocultural change, Robert L. Bee writes, "The stimuli for sociocultural change are constantly operating to alter the preexisting elements in the system; but insofar as the system, the general pattern of life, is considered worthy by its members, they will (consciously or unconsciously) take action aimed at insuring that change does not suddenly obliterate all or even most of the stabilizing links with the past" (1974:13). An example of the retention of traditional elements in an acculturated form and the focus of this article is the adoption of Christian prayer in spontaneously composed *pule*, a Hawaiian form of prayer and the sole genre of formal Hawaiian oratory retained in uninterrupted continuity from the nineteenth century to the present. I make a distinction here between spontaneously composed and pre-composed Christian *pule*. The latter are usually translations from English and contain fewer traditional Hawaiian elements than the former.<sup>1</sup> Spontaneously composed Christian *pule* (hereafter referred to as Christian *pule*) may still be heard in Hawaiian Christian churches and in the opening and closing prayers of meetings and parties, among other contexts.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I describe the importance Hawaiians traditionally placed upon language and comment on several major historical events that led to the decline of Hawaiian language and culture. Further, I show that, despite a marked linguistic and cultural decline, many elders who speak Hawaiian as their first language retain a distinctly Hawaiian form of Christian prayer that originated soon after Hawaiian conversion to Christianity early in the nineteenth century.

Since the late 1960s a widespread renewed interest in Hawaiian language and culture has occurred in Hawai'i, but more among younger than older Hawaiians. Older Hawaiians tend to retain a negative view of Hawaiian language and culture shaped during their youth, mainly by a strongly Euro-American-based school system that greatly suppressed the language and

culture. Although a few young people involved in Hawaiian language revitalization have shown an interest in learning about Christian *pule*, most Hawaiians show little interest, apparently assuming that it contains little that is traditionally Hawaiian. In some cases, the lack of interest also results from the perceived association between *haole* (Anglo-American) colonialist oppression of Hawaiians and Christianity. Thus, the elders' retention and use of this acculturated prayer form are not in response to the current renewed interest in Hawaiian language and culture; rather, the form reflects an unselfconscious expression of the elders' worldview.<sup>3</sup> Although some elders express surprise and puzzlement upon learning that several elements of their Christian *pule* originate in pre-Christian Hawaiian sources, none with whom I have spoken would deny that these very elements contribute to the unique power and beauty of this prayer form.

In traditional Hawaiian society, the proper use of language was of great importance. The elevated language of poetry was considered to be the most appropriate for use in prayers, which were an important means to address the deities. Indeed, traditional prayers were frequently referred to as *mele pule*--chanted prayer-poems. Proverbial sayings about the power of language reflect the great value placed upon proper language use. Sayings like "*I ka 'olelo no ke ola; i ka 'olelo no ka make*" (In language rests life; in language rests death) and "*'O 'oe ka luaahi o kau mele*" (You bear both the good and the bad consequences of the language used in your poetry) underscore the traditional Hawaiian belief that language--especially as used in chanted prayers and poetry--is imbued with *mana*, power originating from a spiritual source. According to this belief, the desired outcome of activities in various phases of life is, to a great extent, predicated upon the skillful manipulation of the *mana* inherent in language. Indeed, at one time or another, every Hawaiian expressed, affirmed, and influenced the course of his or her life through the *mana* of language, which was given focus and direction by chanting (Silva 1989:86).

Although changes due to foreign influences began with the arrival of the first foreigners in 1778, Hawaiian language and culture have suffered a great and continuous decline since 1820, when New England Calvinist missionaries began actively converting Hawaiians to Christianity. The Hawaiian language continued to be spoken by most Hawai'i residents--both Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian alike--until the end of the nineteenth century, when political developments led to the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893. Three years later a law was passed by the Republic of Hawai'i that made illegal the use of Hawaiian as a language of instruction in the schools (Territory of Hawaii 1905:156). As English then became the sole legal language of instruction and the only language permitted on school grounds, children on all

islands, with the exception of Ni‘ihau, were forced to abandon Hawaiian.<sup>4</sup> Two years later, in 1898, the annexation of Hawai‘i by the United States effectively took away all opportunities for Hawaiian political self-determination and re-affirmed the prevailing status of English. In 1900, Hawai‘i became a U.S. territory; in 1959, the fiftieth state in the Union. These dramatic political, social, and linguistic changes, combined with the influence of immigrant sugar and pineapple plantation laborers from countries such as China, Japan, and the Philippines, resulted in the decline of Hawaiian language use and gave rise to Hawai‘i Creole English, commonly known as “pidgin English” in Hawai‘i today.<sup>5</sup>

After the turn of the century, the decline in the number of Hawaiians who were knowledgeable in traditional language and culture was matched by a concomitant rise in those who embraced the English language and Euro-American culture. Although all of the estimated 40,000 Hawaiians at the turn of the century spoke Hawaiian, of the 220,000 Hawaiians today, only some 800 are native speakers.<sup>6</sup> Chanted prayers and poetry, because of their inextricable association with the Hawaiian language and cultural contexts, were severely and adversely affected. Increased Westernization brought about the adaptation of many new and different values, which resulted in the decrease of traditional chant contexts and the loss of many chanted texts from the active repertoire. For example, as Hawaiians became Christianized, many traditional *pule* to the numerous Hawaiian deities came to be looked upon as pagan (and thus unacceptable) and were deliberately put aside and forgotten (Silva 1989:87).

Christian *pule* to Jehovah largely replaced traditional *pule* to the Hawaiian deities and, in less than a generation after missionaries first arrived in Hawai‘i, some Hawaiians had learned so quickly about Christianity that they became missionaries themselves and began proselytizing other Hawaiians (Thurston 1833). By this time, the language and vocal presentation style of Christian *pule* probably had already begun to reflect Hawaiian adaptations, which undoubtedly enhanced the relevance, meaning, and power of what was once a foreign prayer form.

A comparison of the language used in a traditional and in a Christian *pule* follows (see the Hawaiian texts with English translation below--the first translation by Mary Kawena Pūku‘i as adapted by this writer, the second by this writer). The *Pule Ho‘ola‘a Hale* was given to me by my chant teacher, Ka‘upena Wong, who received it from his teacher, Puku‘i (for Puku‘i’s Hawaiian version of this *pule*, see Handy and Pukui 1972:113-114). The Christian *Pule Ho‘oku‘u* was tape recorded and transcribed as spontaneously composed and presented by Martha Mānoanoa Lum Ho at the close of a community meeting held at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo in 1985.<sup>7</sup>

***Pule Ho'ola'a Hale***  
**Traditional House Dedication Prayer**

*Ua ku ka hale, ua pa'a ka hale,*

The house now stands, it is completed,

*He hale ku i ka 'eleua, i ka 'eleao,*

A house that resists the rains and the stormy elements,

*He hale noho ho'i no ke kanaka.*

A house for man to dwell in.

*E Lono e, eia ka hale lā,*

O Lono, behold the house,

5 *Ua ku i Mauiola.*

A house in the presence of the Giver-of-Life [the deity Mauiola].

*E ola i ka noho hale,*

Let it have life through those who dwell therein,

*E ola i ke kanaka kipa mai,*

Let it have life through the visitors that come,

*E ola i ka haku 'aina,*

Let it have life through the landlord,

*E ola i na ali'i.*

Let it have life through the chiefs.

10 *'O ia ke ola o kauhale, e Mauiola.*

That is how this dwelling shall have life, o Giver-of-Life.

*Ola a kolo pupu a haumaka'iole,*

Life until one creeps and is weak-eyed with age,

*A pala lau hala,*

Until one sprawls like a withered *hala* leaf,

*A ka'i koko,*

Until one must be carried about in a hammock,

*A kau i ka puaaneane.*

Until one reaches the extremity of life.

15 *'O ia ke ola āu, e ke akua.*

That is the life that you provide, o god.

*E Ku, e Kane, e Lono,*

O **Kū**, o Kane, o Lono [three major Hawaiian deities],

*Ku'ua mai i ke ola,*

Let down the gift of life,

*I na pomaika'i*

And all of the blessings with it

*A ea ka lani, ka honua,*

Till the heavens and earth be heaped.

20 *Ea ia Kaneikawaiola.*

Let them be raised up by Kane-of-the-Living-Waters [the deity Kaneikawaiola].

*E ola mai kahi pae a kahi pae,*

May there be life from one boundary to the other,

*E ola mai luna a lalo,*

From above to below,

*Mai kaupoku a ke kahua.*

From roof to foundation.

*E ola a ola loa no!*

Let there be life--everlasting life!

25 *'Amama, ua noa.*

The prayer is complete, all sacred prohibitions have been lifted.

Several poetic devices typical of traditional *pule* are used in the *Pule Ho'ola'a Hale*. These devices provide the means through which the Hawaiian value placed upon wholeness and thoroughness is expressed, thereby increasing the *mana* of the language used and, ultimately, ensuring the efficacy of the prayer.

In traditional *pule*, important themes and ideas are typically restated several times. In the *Pule Ho'ola'a Hale*, the word *ola* (life) occurs fifteen times. In traditional *pule*, deities, people, places, positive attributes, and desirable outcomes are typically listed, one after another, with each deity, person, place, attribute, or outcome placed within an identical syntactical structure. In the *Pule Ho'ola'a Hale*, such listing occurs frequently and is found in lines 6-9: "Let it have life through those who dwell therein / Let it have life through the visitors that come / Let it have life through the landlord / Let it have life through the chiefs"; in lines 11-14: "Life until one creeps and is weak-eyed with age / Until one sprawls like a *hala* leaf / Until one must be carried about on a hammock / Until one reaches the extremity of life"; and in line 16: "O Ku, o Kane, o Lono." Further, in traditional *pule*, words of opposite meaning and that delineate space or time are typically paired. In the *Pule Ho'ola'a Hale*, such pairing occurs in line 19: "Till the heavens and earth be heaped." In lines 21-23, two poetic devices are combined--paired words of opposite meaning are listed within an identical syntactical structure: "May there be life from one boundary to the other / From above to below / From roof to foundation." In addition to providing a means through which the potency of the prayer may be intensified, each of the foregoing devices--separately and in combination--renders the language used aesthetically pleasing to the Hawaiian ear.

Related to the use of poetic devices, the overall tone of the language used in this *pule* also deserves comment. Aware of the interdependent nature of

his relationship with the deities and having successfully fulfilled all requirements of ritual and worship, the composer believed he was entitled to call respectfully yet forcefully upon the deities now to do their part by providing the outcomes sought through prayer. Describing this traditional relationship between Hawaiians and the deities, George Kanahale writes, “Simply put, gods and people are interdependent: for better or worse, they need each other. It is not a relationship in which one functions as the slave of the other, or takes from the other without returning benefit or hurt. Rather, it is the perfect symbiotic relationship, in which both parties mutually benefit from living and working together” (1986:80).

The Christian supplicant praying in English typically places himself in a vastly inferior position beneath God, using, for example, language like, “We, Thy humble servants, beseech Thee, Almighty God, . . .” In contrast, the tone of the language used in the *Pule Ho‘ola‘a Hale*--typical in traditional *pule*--reflects the composer’s confidence in his right to benefit from the *mana* his prayer will generate to create the life (*ola*) and blessings (*pomai-ka’i*) he seeks.

***Pule Ho‘oku‘u***  
**Closing Christian Prayer**  
**by Martha Manoanoa Lum Ho**

1 *Pule kākou.*

Let us pray.

*E ke akua, ka mukua lani,*

O God, Heavenly Father,

*Ke ho‘omaika‘i aku nei makou ia ‘oe.*

We praise and thank you.

*‘Oiai ua pau nā hana i keia ahiahi,*

As our work this evening has been completed,

5 *‘O ‘oe ka mea nāna e kokua kia‘i i na makua, na keiki*

You will assist and watch over the parents and the children

*I ko lakou alahahele e ho‘i ana i ko lakou home.*

On their way back to their homes.

*‘O ‘oe pu kekahi me lakou:*

You will be with them:

*‘O ‘oe ma mua, ‘o ‘oe ma hope, ‘o ‘oe ma loko, ‘o ‘oe ma waho.*

You will be in front, you will be in back, you will be inside, you will be outside.

*Nau e kia‘i kokua ia lakou a hiki i ko lakou home,*

You will watch over and assist them until they reach their homes,

10 A 'o na mea pono 'ole, nau no 'oki ho'oka'awale aku.

And you will sever and separate from them all misfortune.

A ua a'ō mai 'oe ia makou i ka pule 'ana: "E ko makou makua i loko o ka lani . . ."

And you taught us to pray: "Our Father, who art in heaven . . ."

'Amene.

Amen.

Although Lum Ho's Christian *pule* is comparatively short, it contains several of the same poetic devices through which the value placed upon wholeness and thoroughness in traditional Hawaiian *pule* (and noted in the *Pule Ho'ola'a Hale* above) is expressed. For example, she states not just once, but twice, in line 5 and again in line 9, that God will assist and watch over the parents and children who are about to leave the meeting. In line 8, she combines the use of two poetic devices in the delineation of where God will be found by pairing opposite locations listed within an identical syntactical structure: "You will be in front, you will be in back, you will be inside, you will be outside" (in other words, God will be everywhere providing protection).

Further expressing her Hawaiian worldview, Lum Ho inserts traditional prayer language in line 10: "And you will sever and separate from them all misfortune." Her inclusion of the term *'oki* (sever) reflects the traditional Hawaiian religious practice explained by Pukui, Haertig, and Lee:

In the human-with-human, human-with-gods relationship of old Hawaii, nearly every destructive or negative psychological-emotional force had its more positive, hopeful offsetting force. . . . In this psychic balancing act, *'oki* played a star's role. Traditionally, *'oki* could remove a name (*inoa*) that harmed its bearer, or merely separate harmful influences from the name so it could be kept. *'Oki* could release the living from the clinging spirit of the dead. It could remove curse or *kapu* (taboo), or prevent or lessen misfortune forecast in a dream or vision. In these important remedial functions, *'oki* was accomplished by prayer, often coupled with a statement that severance was now being done. (1972: 172-178)

Lum Ho strengthens her use of *'oki* by adding the term *ho'oka'awale* (separate) after it so that misfortune will not only be severed, but will also be isolated and set apart from everyone involved. Finally, and related to the use of this kind of emphatic traditional prayer language, the overall tone of Lum Ho's prayer, like that of the *Pule Ho'ola'a Hale*, is respectful yet forceful and fully confident that God will, indeed, provide what is being sought--protection over those leaving the meeting to return home.



In addition to retaining the use of several elements of traditional prayer language, some Hawaiian-speaking elders--Lum Ho among them--also retain in the vocal presentation of their *pule* either of two traditional chanting styles called *kepakepa* and *kawele*.<sup>8</sup> Despite showing a definite preference for one style over the other, most elders do not associate their manner of praying with pre-Christian chanting styles nor do they appear to know much about them. This is not surprising since, as mentioned above, most elders also do not associate the language of their Christian *pule* with pre-Christian Hawaiian sources. While growing up, Hawaiians like Lum Ho learned to pray by imitating their elders, but they did not also learn the terms for the associated vocal styles because chant contexts and use were breaking down and in a general state of decline at the time.

In former times, *kepakepa* was the most ubiquitous of the several different chanting styles, perhaps because it is speechlike and requires little formal vocal training. *Kepakepa* could be used when chanting nearly every kind of poetry--both formal and informal, pre-composed and spontaneous. For example, it was used when chanting *mele mo'oku'auhau* (genealogical poems), *mele inoa* (name poems), *mele hula* (dance poems), and *mele pa'ani* (game poems). Notably, in the context of this discussion, *kepakepa* was also used when chanting *mele pule* (Tatar 1982:111).

Initially, the use of *kepakepa* in Christian *pule* may seem quite perplexing, given the style's traditional use in prayers addressed to native Hawaiian deities--the pagan deities the Christian missionaries vehemently condemned at every opportunity. However, as the cadences of everyday speech were unsuitable in the presentation of the formal poetic language used to generate the *mana* desired in prayer, to newly converted Hawaiian Christians the familiar *kepakepa* undoubtedly appeared to be the vocal style of choice--precisely, perhaps, because of its association with traditional *pule*. Adrienne Kaepler writes that, during the first years of their conversion to Christianity, Hawaiians did not immediately cast aside the old religion and in fact continued to worship some Hawaiian deities (1993:2). Thus, it appears likely that as Hawaiians began worshipping Jehovah among several other deities, the use of *kepakepa* in Christian *pule* provided the continuity of vocal presentation that seemed logical and appropriate.

Although several substyles of *kepakepa* exist, the most common in former times and the one that continues to be heard today in the praying of some Hawaiian elders is a rapid, rhythmic, spoken form in which phrases of descending contour and decreasing loudness are punctuated with quick and deliberate pauses for breath. In the 1985 tape recording of her Christian *pule*, Lum Ho prays using the *kepakepa* style.

*Kawele* is another, less frequently heard chant style also used by some elderly Hawaiians while praying. Although rhythmic like *kepakepa*, *kāwele* is

slower and features longer, sustained phrases that follow a level rather than a descending contour. As a result, *kawele* sounds more chantlike than does *kepa* and lies on a vocal continuum between speech and chant.

Despite strong Euro-American influences in Hawai'i since the early nineteenth century, the development and the retention of the spontaneously composed Christian *pule* indicate that, even while embracing Christianity, Hawaiians have, in this acculturated prayer form, clung to several elements of traditional language and culture. Far from slavishly adhering to Western models, Hawaiians have creatively adapted Christian *pule* to suit Hawaiian values and sensibilities, infusing its language and vocal style with traditional elements that give the form relevance, meaning, and power.

### NOTES

1. The pre-composed Christian *pule* most widely known today is probably *Ka Pule a ka Haku* (The Lords Prayer).

2. The growing vitality of Hawaiian language and culture since the late 1960s is reflected today in the increased public use of Christian *pule* in various contexts.

3. With exceptions, the expression of this worldview is generally lacking in the language used in Christian *pule* by young people who are not native speakers of Hawaiian.

4. Unlike most Hawaiians elsewhere, Ni'ihau residents continue to speak Hawaiian as their first language, partly because of the long-standing efforts of the islands owners, the Robinson family, to support the residents' comparatively traditional lifestyle and partly because of the independence of the people themselves, described in the traditional saying, "*Ni'ihau i ke kiku*" (literally, Ni'ihau leans back firmly; that is, Ni'ihau people are independent [Pukui 1983:252]).

5. For detailed discussions of Hawai'i Creole English, see Bickerton and Odo 1976 and Carr 1972.

6. This is my current estimate based on Emily Hawkins's 1979 estimate of 2,000 native speakers and considering that most were elderly at the time of her estimate.

7. Lum Ho was born in Wala'ohi'a, Puna, Hawai'i, in 1904 and died in Hilo, Hawai'i, in 1987.

8. For a detailed discussion of *kepa* and *kawele*, see Tatar 1982.

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