

Negotiating an Oceanic Space at the University of Hawai`i at Mānoa

Lu`ukia Archer, Malia Ka`aihue, U`i Keli`ikuli

Introduction

The people of Oceania share similar experiences, connected through common cultural traits and political experiences in this all-encompassing ocean. Having inhabited the Pacific for centuries, these amazing navigators traversed the sea with skill, maintaining successful trade routes, spreading fundamental spiritual and social practices, and fostering strong political relationships. Unfortunately, these shared experiences deteriorated through the colonization of Oceania by western powers such as England, France, Germany, and Spain. The standard tools of colonialism, including uncontrolled epidemics, the imposition of foreign religious doctrines, and the privatization of land, have been successful in acquiring territories for European countries and displacing Islanders from their lands. Laws of “discovery” legitimized the arrival, conquest, and domination of the natives inhabiting what were imagined to be “virgin” lands. Imperialism operating under the political myth of “terra nullius” also furthered the doctrines of dispossession, allowing imperialists to claim the “unoccupied lands” that belonged to those they perceived as heathen or pagan populations.

Having claimed the islands and waters of Oceania, the imperial nations of the West proceeded to impose arbitrary racial boundaries resulting in the formation of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia. The implementation of various colonial languages and systems of governance then broadened the separation and further eroded traditional inter-Oceanic relations. As we Islanders struggle to maintain our identities in the contemporary era, these aspects of colonization are regularly contested by Oceanic scholars who refuse to disassociate problems of the past from situations of the present. From an Oceanic perspective, as David Gegeo has noted, a problem is “laid to rest only after it has been truly solved in a manner that meaningfully benefits the communities. . . . So we will continue to talk about issues that in Anglo-European scholarship, are already old” (2001, 492).

Oceanic scholars and students can play a significant role in reestablishing inter-Oceanic connections at the university level. For the purposes of this paper the University

of Hawai`i at Mānoa (UHM) serves as the site of engagement. Political alliances between Oceanic peoples to counter western hegemony in the current period are as crucial as the cultural, political, and social ties that existed between Islanders during the precolonial era. Although fraught with many complications, (re)building traditional and modern connections between peoples of Oceania at UH Mānoa is an important endeavor. Universities (particularly those located in Oceania), as colonial/imperial institutions, offer milieus for Oceanic peoples to engage and challenge western discourses as well as (re)formulate indigenous connections through cultural, political, and theoretical practices and exchanges.

A perceived lack of involvement and interaction between peoples of Oceania, particularly students, at UH Mānoa is the impetus for this discussion. The ideas expressed in this paper developed out of a collaborative effort and represent our experiences as native Hawaiian graduate students in the Indigenous Politics program of the UHM Political Science Department reflecting on the gap we observed between Pacific peoples on our campus.

Traditions in Inter-Oceanic Relations

Nānā i ke kumu, or look to the source/past, is a powerful Hawaiian proverb that reminds us to look internally to our own history, our kūpuna, our theology, our knowledge, and, most importantly, our genealogies. “Genealogies are the Hawaiian concept of time, and they order the space around us” (Kame`eleihiwa 1992, 19). The peoples of Oceania are similarly grounded in genealogical discourses and share a history of rich inter-Oceanic relations, including but not limited to religious and political exchanges. By revisiting traditional methods of inter-Oceanic practices it may be possible to resurrect alliances from the past to triumph over the overwhelming problems we face as peoples dispossessed through imperial conquest.

Religious exchanges were one of the most prominent examples of inter-Oceanic relations. The Pele mo`olelo, for example, found in Hawaiian and Tahitian oral traditions, recounts her travels throughout the Pacific. In these mo`olelo, Pele travels from her homeland, Tahiti, across Oceania in search of a new home. Her voyaging party sails northwest to the Hawaiian Islands and later she makes her permanent home at Kīlauea on

the island of Hawai`i. Pele leads an expedition and successfully brings a new religion to Hawai`i (Emerson 1997).

Another relevant example is the political alliance of Taputapuatea (located on the island of Ra`iatea) with other Pacific islands. Cook Island historians confirm that the “Marae Taputapuatea was an old marae in the 1200s. Up until that time Polynesians would gather there every few years for great ceremonies” (Longstaff 1999). Through these political encounters on Ra`iatea, representatives empowered their shared Oceanic identities and reinforced the relationships of our kūpuna.

A more recent attempt exemplifying the struggle against colonial aggression and the need to emphasize traditional alliances can be found during the era of the Hawaiian Kingdom. Although often referred to in historical texts as a monarch “reviled and ridiculed” for various political blunders, Kalākaua, who reigned from 1874 to 1891, sought to form a Polynesian federation that would recreate previous inter-Oceanic connections (Silva 2004, 89). Concerned with dispelling the notion that the “Hawaiian nation was in serious decline,” and recognizing that other Pacific Islands had no “diplomatically recognized national entity and therefore were ripe for colonization,” Kalākaua struggled to create an internationally accepted coalition throughout Oceania (Osorio 2002, 230). Although unsuccessful, the formation of a Polynesian federation would have reasserted the strong cultural, political, and social ties that were once practiced in the region. Because Kalākaua secured only one signature, that of Malietoa of Sāmoa, and was facing threats of war and paternalistic rebukes from the “great” western powers, any prospect of his forming a Polynesian federation was forcibly subdued.

Deconstructing and Remodeling Inter-Oceanic Relations within a University Space

Just as Dumont d’Urville divided Oceania into Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia in the 1820s, the university is divided into multiple schools and colleges, and is further separated into individual disciplines that reflect a western perspective on teaching and learning. A space within the university must be carved out in order to deconstruct these barriers that separate scholars and students who are working toward similar goals within Oceania. The university and the scholarship that is produced within each particular school of thought are deeply implicated in this division.

The university as a colonial construct problematizes the position of Oceanic academics in various ways. Because scholarship is based on the production of research and writing—practices that have notoriously oppressed and exoticized Oceanic cultures and communities—Oceanic academics must be wary of the tendency to “reinforce and maintain a style of discourse that is never innocent” in its subjugation of native peoples (Smith 2002, 36). Recognition of intellectual aptitude is dependent on the Oceanic scholar’s ability to “appropriate the language of the colonizer,” which in turn must be used to elucidate the struggles of the colonized (Smith 2002, 36). This proves a difficult venture for Oceanic scholars attempting to liberate their communities from colonial conceptualizations and constraints. Polarizing discourses framing the relationship between indigenous cultures and the university often place Oceanic scholars on opposite shores, or—as Gloria Anzaldúa asserted in reference to a mestiza positioning—opposite riverbanks. She suggested that this oppositional arrangement is not enough for indigenous scholars, that a “counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed,” and therefore “both are reduced to a common denominator of violence” (Anzaldúa 1987, 78). Ultimately, in order to resist this violence, Oceanic scholars must “decide to act and not react” (Anzaldúa 1987, 79).

This “decision to act” has been manifested in various struggles across the UHM campus that assert the need for areas of study focusing on Hawai`i and the broader islands of Oceania. For example, Dr. Haunani-Kay Trask, former director of the Center for Hawaiian Studies, engaged in a political struggle with the State of Hawai`i to create a Hawaiian space of learning. Today we have the Kamakakūokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies, a space that encourages students in the program to speak from two cultural worlds within the confines of a western institution. This further enables Kānaka Maoli to participate in academia by way of Hawaiian epistemological “thought worlds” and has increased native Hawaiian enrollment and scholarship at UH Mānoa. A space also must be created for students and academics from across Oceania to generate scholarship through collaboration and exchange from culturally grounded vantage points.

Perspectives on the relationship between space and time are pertinent to the establishment of an Oceanic place of engagement at UH Mānoa. “Space is often viewed in Western thought worlds as being static or divorced from time . . . this is particularly

relevant to colonialism” (Smith 2002, 52). In various Oceanic epistemologies, space and time are inseparable concepts. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, for example, has noted that “the [indigenous] language makes no clear or absolute distinction between the two: the Maori word for time or space is the same” (2002, 50). Oceanic perspectives include spatial and temporal concepts. However, they are not represented as separate and individual experiences; rather, they are encountered together.

By acknowledging that western spatial and temporal constructs shape the university, Oceanic peoples can form interstices for the restoration of inter-Oceanic relationships. However, these “spaces of resistance and hope” must be re-modeled after native understandings, priorities, and needs (Smith 2002, 4). Oceanic students currently lack meaningful encounters with each other in their academic experiences that can help formulate and restore former political connections throughout the region. This includes students within the Indigenous Politics, Hawaiian studies, Pacific languages, and Pacific Islands studies programs. In addition, Oceanic students outside these disciplines may have virtually no opportunities for consequential exchanges with their counterparts from other areas of the Pacific. The compartmentalization into separate spaces promotes the colonial ideology of “divide and conquer,” effectively contributing to the disconnection between students.

Moreover, dominant conceptions of land continue to generate conflicting spatial discourses serving to further alienate Oceanic students from the university and each other. In Oceania, land has always bound familial relationships, whereas in the West, “land . . . was viewed as something to be tamed and brought under control. The landscape could be rearranged of nature, could be altered by ‘Man’: swamps could be drained, waterways diverted, inshore areas filled, not simply for physical survival, but for further exploitation of the environment or making it ‘more pleasing’ aesthetically” (Smith 2002, 51). Likewise, UH Mānoa expresses no significant genealogical relation to the land on which it is situated, disconnecting its spatiotemporal and, thus, cultural connection and purpose as a place of learning. Ku`ualoha Ho`omanawanui has expressed this relationship difference in this way: “Western science teaches that the formation of the earth and the evolution of humans were separate occurrences, while the Kumulipo, a foundational Hawaiian creation epic, recounts the birth of the universe, earth and all living creatures,

including Kānaka Maoli, who are thus genealogically related to the land” (2004, 88). This genealogical connection denotes an important relationship between Oceanic peoples and the space we occupy. The university is structured in a manner that separates time, space, land, and peoples into various categories.

Final Words

The languages of Oceania share many of the same sounds and vocabulary. In addition to embodied and material exchanges, these similarities enabled communication and understanding between the island groups and facilitated social, intellectual, spiritual, economic, and political pursuits. The strength of inter-Oceanic relationships, founded on centuries of encounters, has been eroded by the imposition of colonial languages and this is an additional barrier that Oceanic scholars must overcome. Oral and material exchanges were the principal mode of transporting knowledge and histories among Oceanic communities. In place of our native languages, inter-Oceanic encounters now utilize the languages of our respective colonizers as primary methods of communication in academia. Despite this disconnect, writer Ngugi Wa Thiong’o has asserted that “the classes fighting against imperialism . . . have to speak the united language of struggle contained in each of their languages” (1997, 3). Using the language of struggle intertwined with Oceanic epistemologies, discussions of the broad issues facing Oceanic peoples can be productive. In the university, oration as a resource has no defined space (unlike published text) and therefore it is not always considered credible. By re-inscribing the value of oral exchanges between Oceanic peoples and empowering Oceanic voices, our histories can be spoken, understood, developed, and exchanged within the university.

Our encounters at the university parallel our political struggles, projecting the separation that has molded our identities as colonized peoples. However, the university can also act as common ground providing endless possibilities for envisioning a new space for inter-Oceanic encounters to commence. Adopting a heightened consciousness throughout the disciplines and focusing on Oceanic issues will hopefully result in the recognition that Pacific peoples continue to share commonalities.

LU`UKIA ARCHER has a BA in political science and Hawaiian studies from the University of Hawai`i at Mānoa. She is completing an MA in political science (in the Indigenous Politics Program) and is applying to the doctoral program. She currently works at the Center for Hawaiian Studies with the Kia`i `Āina/Ceded Lands Inventory Project.

U`I KELI`IKULI has a BA in Hawaiian language and Hawaiian studies. She is completing an MA in political science (in the Indigenous Politics Program) and is applying to the doctoral program. She currently works at the Center for Hawaiian Studies with the Kia`i `Āina/Ceded Lands Inventory Project.

MALIA KA`AIHUE has a BA in Hawaiian language and Hawaiian studies and an MA in political science. She is a doctoral student in political science and also works at the Center for Hawaiian Studies with the Kia`i `Āina /Ceded Lands Inventory Project.

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