

Sharks upon the Land

Historian Seth Archer traces the cultural impact of disease and health problems in the Hawaiian Islands from the arrival of Europeans to 1855. Colonialism in Hawai'i began with epidemiological incursions, and Archer argues that health remained the national crisis of the islands for more than a century. Introduced diseases resulted in reduced life spans, rising infertility and infant mortality, and persistent poor health for generations of Islanders, leaving a deep imprint on Hawaiian culture and national consciousness. Scholars have noted the role of epidemics in the depopulation of Hawai'i and broader Oceania, yet few have considered the interplay between colonialism, health, and culture – including Native religion, medicine, and gender. This study emphasizes Islanders' own ideas about, and responses to, health challenges on the local level. Ultimately, Hawai'i provides a case study for health and culture change among Indigenous populations across the Americas and the Pacific.

Seth Archer is Assistant Professor of History at Utah State University. From 2015 to 2017 he was the Mellon Research Fellow in American History at the University of Cambridge.

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*Colonialism, Indigenous Health, and Culture in
Hawai'i, 1778–1855*

SETH ARCHER

Utah State University



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For Amber,
up life's hill

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Note on Language and Terminology

In Hawai‘i, as in other colonized spaces, language is contested. There is good reason for this. As the Hawaiian proverb says, “In language there is life, in language there is death.”¹ Scholarship written for a broad audience must weigh culturally appropriate language against the demands of clarity and understanding. A cursory glance at recent scholarship reveals the elusiveness of a standardized Hawaiian orthography. Some consider further standardization as a colonial imposition; hence, the small island next to Maui appears variously in written form as Lāna‘i, Lana‘i, and Lanai. This presents obvious difficulties for readers. As a student of the language myself, I adhere to the best practices established by my mentors, striving always for internal consistency. This means including diacritical marks – the *‘okina* (‘) and *kahakō* (ˉ) – except where the original source does not, and correcting spellings that would otherwise cause confusion with brackets. Hawaiian words appear in italics the first time they are used and in regular script thereafter, except where italics appear in the quoted text.

Translation poses its own challenges. Consider the word *pō‘ino*, a contraction of *pō* (time of, state of) and *‘ino* (wicked, immoral, spoiled, contaminated). As applied to women in menses, *pō‘ino* in nineteenth-century texts has generated translations ranging from “unlucky” to “dangerous.”² A lot hangs on these differences. Readers

¹ “*I ka ‘ōlelo no ke ola, i ka ‘ōlelo no ka make.*” Hawaiian scholar Mary Kawena Pukui offered an alternative: “Life is in speech, death is in speech” (*‘Ōlelo No‘eau*, 129).

² Malo, *Hawaiian Antiquities*, 29 (“unlucky”); Malo, *Mo ‘olelo Hawai‘i*, trans. Langlas and Lyon, 218 (“dangerous”). See also Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*, s.v. *pō, ‘ino*,

will not always agree with my translations or with the translations I have chosen, though more often than not the translation that appears is the only one thus far attempted.

The people at the heart of this book are referred to as Hawaiians, as Islanders, or by the town, district, or island from which they hailed (for example, “Kaua‘i Islander,” “Kula resident”). Choice of identifier is typically determined by context. Despite the recommendation of some scholars, I avoid Native Hawaiian, *kānaka maoli* (“true/genuine people”), and *kānaka ʻōiwi* (“Indigenous/Native people”).³ Culturally and politically significant today, these terms are mostly anachronistic for the period under study and sometimes muddle important distinctions between people of different or mixed ancestry. When relevant to the discussion, persons of mixed descent are identified in the text as “part Hawaiian” or by the Hawaiian term *hapa haole* (“part foreign”).

Regardless of where they were born, people lacking Hawaiian ancestry are never identified in this book as Hawaiian. Before 1820 visitors arrived from the British Isles, France, Spain, New Spain (Mexico), the United States, Canada, Russia, Ukraine, the German and Baltic states, Canton, and the South Pacific. In the latter chapters of this book, foreigners in some numbers began to settle on the islands. Sometimes a shorthand for these diverse newcomers is necessary. To Hawaiians they were all – with the possible exception of Tahitians – *haole* (foreign). That term took on racial connotations later in the nineteenth century. “Western” is a wholly imperfect description for these people, their ideas, and their institutions, but it will have to suffice in certain places where “foreign(er)” fails to convey the type of introduction or intrusion.

Nineteenth-century Hawaiians spelled their names in various ways; name changes were not uncommon. In general I employ the name most commonly used by scholars and by contemporary Hawaiians to refer to their ancestors. For example, the royal governor of O‘ahu appears in the text as Boki rather than Kamā‘ule‘ule, his given name, or Poki, which may be a closer pronunciation. An exception is where sources indicate that the individual preferred an alternative to the name commonly used today; for example, *Dauida* rather than David Malo. Monarchs are most often

pō‘ino. For an alternative translation of the prefix *po-*, see Andrews, *Dictionary*, s.v. *po*, *poino*.

³ For discussion, see Blaisdell, “‘Hawaiian’ versus ‘Kanaka Maoli’ as Metaphors”; Wood, *Displacing Natives*, chap. 1, esp. 12–13; Silva, *Aloha Betrayed*, 12–13; Young, “Interdisciplinary Study of the Term ‘Hawaiian’”; Kauanui, *Hawaiian Blood*; Brown, *Facing the Spears of Change*, ix–xiii.

identified by their given name (Kauikeaouli) and sometimes by their title (Kamehameha III). When a person identified by foreigners does not appear elsewhere in the records, I employ the imposed name, however inaccurate, rather than guess at the actual one.

Hawaiian society was divided into two major classes in this period. The overwhelming majority of Islanders were commoners, or *maka'āinana* (“children of the land”), while the *ali'i* (chiefly) class comprised about 1 percent of the population. Both terms are gender-neutral. I follow the convention of using “commoner(s)” for the former and “chief(s)” for the latter, though I frequently make a point of identifying female chiefs as “chiefesses,” since chief is gendered in English. A list of important persons appears in Appendix D.

While Hawai'i in this period was known to much of the world as the Sandwich Islands – and to the Chinese as the Sandalwood Mountains⁴ – I use Hawai'i or the Hawaiian Islands when discussing the archipelago and its people, regardless of era. I refer to the largest island in the chain as either the Big Island or Hawai'i Island.

⁴ Thanks to Gregory Rosenthal for this reference.

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