

Fated feathers, unfurling futures¹

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ABSTRACT: While scholars have documented the travels of the 'ahu 'ula (feathered cloak) and mahiole (feathered helmet) of Kalani'ōpu'u over the course of more than two centuries, what is of principal importance to many Native Hawaiians is simply this – they left by an act of Pacific generosity and they returned by an act of Pacific generosity. This brief article seeks to explore the circumstances of the original gifting of these chiefly riches by ali'i nui (high chief) Kalani'ōpu'u to Captain James Cook in 1779, as well as the implications of their most recent return by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Both acts were of lasting cultural and political import, and were magnificent gestures of faith, of trust and, one might argue, of commitments intended to bind future generations. Might these acts be viewed not independently, but as an intergenerational continuum of relations? And how might Kalani'ōpu'u's own agency be understood in both a historical and a contemporary context?

KEYWORDS: Kalani'ōpu'u, James Cook, 'ahu 'ula, mahiole, mea waiwai ali'i, Hawaiian featherwork, Hawai'i, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Office of Hawaiian Affairs, indigenous agency, Pacific generosity.

Journeys

We in Hawai'i are known for doing things beautifully – a legacy of excellence that is most evident in the exquisitely adorned 'ahu 'ula (feathered cloak) and mahiole (feathered helmet) of high chief Kalani'ōpu (c. 1729–82). Yet it was also evident in the events surrounding the recent return of his mea waiwai ali'i (chiefly riches), including a privately held three-hour ceremony led by the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA) on 17 March 2016. Rising to the level long set by our Māori brethren, the Hawaiian community rose to this occasion and conducted the entire event exclusively in 'ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language), leading OHA Cultural Specialist Kalani Akana, who helped plan the historic event, to remark that such a cultural practice had not occurred in well over a hundred years (pers. comm., 2016). Elders, heads of cultural organisations and young leaders offered oratory, oli (chants) and mele (songs) – all in Hawaiian, one after another, hour after hour. Chief Kalani'ōpu'u's persona filled the three-storey Hawaiian Hall at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum (Bishop Museum) as chants extolling his deeds resounded.

Two days later, a public opening – 'The Return of the

'Ahu 'Ula and Mahiole of Kalani'ōpu'u' – was held for the *He Nae Ākea: Bound Together* exhibition, to which thousands came in the span of a few hours. Having just flown in from Auckland that morning, I went straight to the Bishop Museum to join in the day's festivities. People stood for hours, waiting patiently in a line so long it wound through Hawaiian Hall, out of the doors and onto the Great Lawn beyond. And they did this so that they might finally stand before a large case within which was placed the 'ahu 'ula and mahiole of Kalani'ōpu'u. Visitors lingered for as long as possible, given the line behind them, taking photographs or offering chants, grateful for the opportunity to stand in the presence of treasured artefacts that had not jointly been home since their departure in 1779.

Indeed, perhaps no other cultural artefacts symbolise the meeting between Hawai'i and the western world more than the 'ahu 'ula and mahiole presented to English explorer James Cook (1728–79) by Kalani'ōpu'u on 26 January 1779. They are the tangible representations of this extraordinary encounter, of the significance of ceremonial gifting and individual intentionality; yet, this exchange is also fraught with cultural dissonance and



Fig. 1 A private ceremony led by the Office of Hawaiian Affairs marked the return of Kalani'ōpu'u's 'ahu 'ula and mahiole to Hawai'i, Hawaiian Hall, Bishop Museum, 17 March 2016. The Te Papa delegation can be seen on the right. Photograph by Kai Markell®, courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 2 Hundreds awaited entry into the *He Nae Ākea: Bound Together* exhibition at its public unveiling at Bishop Museum, 19 March 2016. Photograph by Travis Okimoto, courtesy of Bishop Museum.

framed by contemporary lenses more than two centuries later. While scholars have documented the travels of these *mea waiwai ali'i* (Kaeppler 1978), what is significant to many of us in Hawai'i is simply this: they left by an act of Pacific generosity, and they returned by an act of Pacific generosity. Both acts were of lasting cultural and political import and were magnificent gestures of faith, of trust and of commitments intended to bind future generations.²

A profound gift

Today, Kalani'ōpu'u is best known as the paramount chief of Hawai'i Island. Son of long-time ruler Keawe, he consolidated and maintained rulership over the largest island in the Hawaiian archipelago from 1760 to 1782. A feat in and of itself, this was not enough for Kalani'ōpu'u, and he began a lifelong campaign of conquest of the nearby island of Maui. He was mounting an invasion in late November 1778 when he encountered Captain Cook off Maui's northeast end. At their first meeting on 1 December 1779, Kalani'ōpu'u boarded HMS *Resolution* with a few small pigs as gifts.³

Two months later, the pair were reunited in Kealahou Bay on the *Resolution*, where the chief and his family remained until well into the evening. The next day, 26 January 1779, an extraordinary presentation took place, recorded by Lieutenant James King: 'At Noon, Terreeoboo [Kalani'ōpu'u], in a large Canoe attended by two others set out from the Village, & paddled towards the Ships in great state ... their appearance was very grand, the Chiefs standing up drest in their Cloaks & Caps' (Beaglehole 1967: 512). The second canoe carried the priests and their idols, while the third bore gifts. The dramatic scene was also captured by artist John Webber, in an engraving whose corresponding caption notes that the King of Hawai'i was 'bringing presents to Captain Cook' (Cook and King 1784: pl. 61). However, what many do not know is that Kalani'ōpu'u did not immediately board the *Resolution*; rather he and his entourage circled the ships and headed back, effectively summoning Cook to shore. According to King, under a nearby tent, Kalani'ōpu'u 'got up & threw in a graceful manner over the Captns Shoulders the Cloak he himself wore, & put a feathered Cap upon his head, & a very handsome fly flap in his hand' (Beaglehole 1967: 512). Five or six other cloaks were then lain at Cook's feet. Following an exchange of



Fig. 3 Members of Hālau Pua Ali'i Ilima present a hula pahu (drum dance), Hawaiian Hall, Bishop Museum, 17 March 2016. Photograph by Kai Markell®, courtesy of the artist.

names between Kalani'ōpu'u and Cook, and additional presentations, Cook responded by hosting the chief once again on the *Resolution*, where he gifted him a number of items, including a linen shirt.

What is clear in this exchange is that Kalani'ōpu'u *dictated the time, place and manner* of his ceremonial presentation. These multiple encounters, the nature of this particular event and the exchanging of names all indicate that Kalani'ōpu'u saw Cook as an equal of significant stature. Moreover, when he gifted his 'ahu 'ula and mahiole, it was with the full knowledge that Cook would carry them off upon his departure, a fact that is confirmed since Kalani'ōpu'u did not seek their return despite Cook's subsequent death. Just as Kalani'ōpu'u was attempting to expand his kingdom through the conquest of Maui, did he likewise see his 'ahu 'ula and mahiole as a means of projecting his mana (authority) out into the world? Why might he have done such a thing? By some accounts, Kalani'ōpu'u was not well at the time



Fig. 4 *Tereoboo, King of Owyhee, Bringing Presents to Captain Cook, 1779*, engraving by S.C. Sparrow after J. Webber, published in James Cook, *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean in the years 1776–1780*. Atlas Folio. London: W&A Straham, 1784, Plate 61. Image courtesy of Bishop Museum.

of Cook's arrival (Beaglehole 1967: 499); indeed, his death would come only three years later. Says Hawaiian scholar Keone Nunes:

In the reality of that time, that original time, you didn't give people your article of clothes because that contains your mana. What he did was very significant. That was his way of extending the mana of himself to places that he would never visit. When the time came for him to return to his ancestors, he had an awareness of where that part of himself had gone. (Pers. comm., 2016)

Can we imagine for a moment Kalani'ōpu'u's own sense of agency and urgency? Might he have envisioned how his chiefly treasures would travel across oceans, binding people – even countries – and creating relationships that would span generations? Despite Kalani'ōpu'u's death more than two centuries ago, do we not feel that a part of him and his mana survived in his mea waiwai ali'i? And like travellers upon distant journeys, have they not grown from their encounters, gathering mana along the way?

A prolonged absence; a celebrated return

After well over a century in Europe, the 'ahu 'ula and mahiole finally returned to Oceania, gifted to New Zealand's Dominion Museum in 1912. Periodically on display in New Zealand, it was at the grand opening of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) in 1998 that the 'ahu 'ula and mahiole received special prominence. At that event, Kamana'opono Crabbe presented a chant he had composed for Kalani'ōpu'u. Six years later, he led a delegation of kāne (men), conducted an 'awa (kava) ceremony and made a kāhea (call) for the return of the mea waiwai ali'i. Crabbe's reverence can be seen as one in a long line of pilgrimages Hawaiians have made over the last several decades to visit Kalani'ōpu'u. Others, like Keone Nunes, Maile Andrade, Mehana Hind and Vicky Holt Takamine, were involved in numerous visitations, and viewed going to see Kalani'ōpu'u's chiefly treasures as a critical aspect of a sojourn to Aotearoa New Zealand. Recalls Nunes:

I saw the cloak back in 1987. I offered a ho'okupu [gift] in the form of a mele and oli ... Since that time, I felt it belonged home. This was an ali'i that was respected, as well as the time period. It was for me a time of



Fig. 5 Honoring Kalani'ōpu'u's 'ahu 'ula and mahiole at the entrance of Hawaiian Hall, Bishop Museum, 17 March 2016. Photograph by Kai Markell®, courtesy of the artist.

first contact, if you will. That it comes from that very important point in our history that forever changed Hawai'i. (Pers. comm., 2016)

Mehana Hind, now with the OHA, was also someone who had been travelling for years to Aotearoa New Zealand. Says Hind:

When we travel around the world, when we as Hawai'i go abroad, we make our journey to go and see our kupuna [ancestral treasures] that are all over the world. But when I was a young college student and went to Aotearoa the first time, I didn't know how to voice it – I didn't know if my voice mattered or even if I said anything – but the more and more I went and the more I was around people who weren't shy to say that these things should come home, not only that they should come home but that there was a reverence paid, and just going through those actions actually can result in something amazing in the end. (Pers. comm., 2016)

And throughout all these pilgrimages were those people at Te Papa, like Arapata Hakiwai and Sean Mallon, who facilitated the access; who bore witness to the aloha (love) and the joy, the pain and the anguish; who shared laughs and tears over tea, beer and kai (food); who formed deep and abiding relationships with Hawaiian practitioners, artists, scholars and curators. And they were present when

a Hawaiian delegation of practitioners (including Nunes and Hind), facilitated by the Bishop Museum, visited Te Papa in 2014, only this time Hakiwai happened to be acting chief executive officer. Both parties were keenly aware of the Bishop Museum's *E Kū Ana Ka Paia* exhibition of 2010, which brought together the last of the three great Kū temple images in the world. According to Mallon, he saw the Kū exhibition as laying the foundation for future collaborations (pers. comm., 2016). One can kāhea for a lifetime, indeed multiple lifetimes, but someone has to be there to hear your call. And hear it they did.

It is important to note how difficult and how rare this is in a museum context, that one could go from initial dialogue to a return home in less than three years. Such complex negotiations between Te Papa, the Bishop Museum and the OHA might easily have taken two or three times as long, navigating loan agreements, relevant international laws and delicate insurance matters, and securing funding. It was truly through an act of Pacific generosity that Kalani'ōpu'u's chiefly adornments returned home, yet we know that such actions were also built upon the foundation of decades of earlier pilgrimages. Each visitation, each kahea before his 'ahu 'ula and mahiole, was in effect a direct kahea to Kalani'ōpu'u himself, calling upon his memory, his mana, his presence. And he in



Fig. 6 A group pays their respects before Kalani'ōpu'u's 'ahu 'ula and mahiole at the public unveiling, 19 March 2016. Photograph by Travis Okimoto, courtesy of Bishop Museum.

kind responded, his own agency, his own desire to return helping to pave his way home.

I am reminded of Māori scholar Paul Tapsell's belief that some taonga (treasures) have a comet-like trajectory that enables their return for key events in a community's life; that at the moment of their departure, their return is inevitable, when they are needed the most (Tapsell 1997). Might Kalani'ōpu'u have envisioned his own return, having accumulated centuries of mana along his many pathways? Is it a coincidence that the paramount chief of Hawai'i Island returns just as Hawaiians gather in contemplation of nationhood?⁴ Is he here to remind us that he and his chiefly descendants sought relations on a global scale with countries centuries old? And that the United States was but a fledgling infant when Kalani'ōpu'u sought to create lasting bonds with Captain Cook and his kind? And what does it mean when three mana moana (oceanic) institutions come together to make such a return possible? That we can move forward not in isolation or opposition, but together in solidarity towards greater purposes? That we are bound together, he nae ākea, through our deep and abiding relationship and aloha, love for one another? Indeed, how

best can we comprehend the words, works and wisdom of our chiefly ancestors? These questions I posed to Keone Nunes, and his response was somewhat unexpected:

Definitely, there are connections between the issues we are facing and his return. These are not coincidences. I do think that there are significant reasons for the return of the cloak. How it manifests I'm not sure at this point ... It will be determined by how we take care of the kuleana [responsibility] that is necessary for the upkeep – not just the physical but the spiritual upkeep. That's ultimately going to determine what kind of influence he will have upon the current issues of sovereignty, of being indigenous. To me, the easy part was getting him here. The difficult part is maintaining what is needed to keep him here. (Pers. comm., 2016)

How long Kalani'ōpu'u is here in Hawai'i remains to be seen, but many believe that his 'ahu 'ula and mahiole are home for good. As with Bishop Museum's *E Kū Ana Ka Paia* exhibition, multitudes were involved, a complex interweaving of people, communities, institutions and nations. Most importantly, a supreme act of Pacific generosity was reciprocated generations later. Relationships

were built, tended, tested and renewed, and in the end Kū and Kalani'ōpu'u came home for us. We willed them back from their journeys because they responded to our kāhea, our call, our prayers, our protestations, our emerging collective consciousness, indeed, our aloha.

Notes

1. The title of this article is taken from a 'talk story' session that took place at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum on Sunday, 20 March 2017, one day after the public opening of *He Nai Ākea: Bound Together*. Organised by the author and sponsored by the University of Hawai'i Museum Studies Graduate Certificate Program, the two-hour session invited interested individuals and key participants, including those from the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, to contemplate the historical and contemporary significance of the return of Kalani'ōpu'u's chiefly adornments.
2. The concept of Pacific generosity within the context of the gifting and return of Kalani'ōpu'u's 'ahu 'ula and mahiole is also briefly considered in 'He alo ā he alo: kanohi ki te kanohi/Face-to-face: curatorial bodies, encounters and relations', a chapter written by the author, Moana Nepia and Philipp Schorch for *Curatopia: museums and the future of curatorship* (forthcoming).
3. According to Lieutenant King, Kalani'ōpu'u 'had on a very beautiful Cap of yellow & black feathers, & a featherd Cloak which he present'd to the Capt'n' (Beaglehole 1967: 499). Exploring the significance of this presentation is beyond the scope of this article, but one might easily argue that this theoretically 'spur of the moment' gifting does not equate to the more elaborate ceremony that was to take place nearly two months later. Moreover, it is ambiguous as to whether the mahiole was part of the presentation noted above; no predominantly yellow and black feathered helmet has been associated with the Cook voyages thus far (Kaeppler 1978).
4. The years and months preceding Kalani'ōpu'u's return were marked by controversy over Native Hawaiian efforts towards self-determination. These included a series of contentious public hearings by the United States Department of the Interior (DOI) in 2014, the establishment of an OHA-funded Native Hawaiian organisation whose purpose was to 'facilitate Hawaiian nation building' in March 2015, various enrolment efforts, the issuance of a draft DOI procedure for the re-establishment of a 'formal government-to-government relationship between the United States and the Native Hawaiian community' in September 2015, and a Native Hawaiian convention that in February 2016 adopted a constitution which would require subsequent ratification.

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