To Translate or Not to Translate: Revising the Translating of Hawaiian Language Texts

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Hawaiians have long looked to the stories of their ancestors’ lives for direction in their own lives. A well-known example is the story of ʻUmi and his brother Hākau. They were the sons (by different mothers) of the high chief Līloa, who ruled the whole of Hawai‘i Island. When it was time to pass on his rule, Līloa gave control of the land to his eldest son and heir Hākau, but gave the care of the war god to his lower-ranking son ʻUmi. Līloa’s expectation was that Hākau would rule justly, but that if he didn’t, ʻUmi would use the war god to usurp Hākau’s power. When Hākau turned out to be a tyrant, ʻUmi went to war and deposed him, becoming a leader famed for his wisdom and justice.

Many generations later, Kalaniʻōpuʻu, the paramount chief of Hawai‘i Island, followed the example of Līloa and bequeathed the land to his son, Kiwalaʻō, and the war god to his nephew, Kamehameha, with the same expectations. Kamehameha overthrew Kiwalaʻō and became king over all Hawai‘i. Then, Kamehameha himself followed this example, when he gave the control of the land to his son, Liholiho, and the war-god to his nephew, Kekuaokalani.1

Once literacy became widespread, Hawaiians chronicled countless moʻolelo,2 such as the ones above, in the Hawaiian-language newspapers, oftentimes printing biographies of famous ancestors in order to provide examples from the past for those living their lives in the present. Early examples appeared in Ke Kumu Hawaii and Ka Nonanona, Hawai‘i’s second and third newspapers, written by two noted Hawaiians. In 1839, Gideona Laanui wrote a brief account of his life with Kamehameha (Silva and Badis 13), and the multitalented John Papa ʻĪʻi, best known now for his collected works that became Fragments of Hawaiian History, wrote a relatively brief biography of the dowager queen Kīnaʻu (“He Moolelo”). In 1845, David
Malo penned an account of the life of Kuakini, who had been governor of Hawai‘i.

A spate of biographies came out near the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. These highly political accounts detailed the lives of Robert Wilcox, Kaluaiko‘olau, Joseph Näwahī, David Kalākaua, and Kamehameha. These were all written in the vein of the mo‘olelo of ‘Umi and Hākau, in that they were meant to inspire Hawaiians and call them to action during a time of great social, political, and cultural unrest. Though these mo‘olelo were written a relatively long time ago, they stand as examples for Hawaiians of today to look to and gain direction from.

However, most Hawaiians and people studying Hawaiian culture cannot read them. The decline in the number of Hawaiian-language speakers that began in the nineteenth century and continued up until only the last few decades has ensured the obscurity of these writings. At least 100,000 pages of Hawaiian-language newspapers of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries have survived—the equivalent of more than a million 8 ½ x 11 inch pages. But even if the value of these newspapers is becoming widely known from community presentations and recent scholarly works, the knowledge itself remains locked away from the 95 percent of Hawaiians who cannot speak Hawaiian, because only a tiny fraction has been translated into English. One would think therefore that the Hawaiian community would be making a big push for these materials to be translated, so that the knowledge would be available to everyone. And many Hawaiians do in fact feel that translation is a valuable enterprise, and that many more translations should be produced and published. But a small yet vocal group made up primarily of Hawaiian-language speakers is very much opposed to translation.

**HISTORICAL PROBLEMS OF HAWAIIAN TRANSLATION**

To understand this opposition, you must first know a little bit about the long and troubled history of translation from Hawaiian to English, a history which has really only come to light in the last two decades. Ever since the translation of what would become the so-called “canonical” texts began at the close of the nineteenth century, English versions of Hawaiian writings have created and perpetuated gross misrepresentations of the lives and culture of the Hawaiian people. A range of problematic and even unethical practices—many not even involving the translating itself—took the translations further and further away from the source texts.

In an 1865 article for the Hawaiian-language newspaper *Ke Au Okoa*, Samuel Mānaiaikalani Kamakau, perhaps the most studied and referenced historian and genealogist of his time, wrote:
He makemake ko’u e pololei ka moolelo o ko’u one hanau, aole na ka malihini e ao ia’u i ka mooolelo o ko’u lahui, na’u e ao aku i ka mooolelo i ka malihini.

I want the mo’olelo of the sands of my birth to be correct; it is not the foreigner who shall teach me the mo’olelo of my people, I shall be the one to teach it to the foreigner.4

Kamakau wrote this in reference to those who might rely on foreign scholars and historians over Hawaiian, and as a call of sorts for Hawaiians to present their own perspectives on Hawaiian history. Little did he know that within a hundred years, even though his writings would indeed be the ones to teach “foreigners” the history of his people, he would likely no longer view his mo’olelo as “pololei,” or “correct.”

Kamakau had written his “history” as a continuous narrative that was ordered and arranged in a manner consistent with Hawaiian understandings. Though it was ostensibly a mo’olelo of the Kamehameha dynasty, Kamakau included descriptions of material culture and cultural practice next to or within historical vignettes as appropriate. Through the process of translation, however, his narrative was extensively edited and reordered in a manner consistent with Western understandings into four separate volumes—one each for history, material culture, and cultural practice, and one for everything that did not fit those categories—that bore little resemblance to his original text. There were certain relationships—sometimes genealogical, sometimes topical or geographical—among the things that he was describing that were clear to his readers of the time, but were lost through the reordering. In much the same way that Western “orientalist” scholars constructed their own images of the “Orient” and then projected them upon Eastern cultures, Kamakau’s writings were viewed through an unapologetically Western lens and translated to fit what Western scholars saw as Hawaiian history and culture.

Because of this, even when “foreign” scholars deigned to include “the native voice” in their work by seeking out these translations, they did not get what they thought they did—namely Samuel Kamakau’s mo’olelo. Nevertheless, works such as theirs, based on these highly transformed translations, influenced and informed a huge proportion of the scholarship that was to follow. With the near-catastrophic decline in the use of Hawaiian language, even Hawaiians themselves began to rely on these deracinated translations of Kamakau to tell them about their history and culture.

The treatment Kamakau’s work received is by no means an isolated example, just one of the most damaging. The majority of problems in regard to translation from the Hawaiian language are tied to the fact that, as Lawrence Venuti points out:
Translation never communicates in an untroubled fashion because the translator negotiates the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text by reducing them and supplying another set of differences, basically domestic, drawn from the receiving language and culture to enable the foreign to be received there. The foreign text, then, is not so much communicated as inscribed with domestic intelligibilities and interests. (482)

It is not so much the inscription of “domestic intelligibilities and interests” itself that is so troublesome in the Hawaiian context; it is that this inscription went so long unnoticed and unmentioned.

With the canon texts readily accessible and few people able to read the originals from which they were drawn, more and more authority began to accrete to these sources in both academic circles and the Hawaiian community, until eventually, if a Hawaiian practice was not described in the canon, it was often considered to be a modern invention. The accumulated authority of these sources therefore paradoxically excised rather than emphasized the multitude of lives written in such Hawaiian-language materials as handwritten manuscripts, songbooks, and newspaper writings lying outside of the canon. This effect is staggering when we realize that the Hawaiian translation canon is made up of only seven books, totaling some 1,542 pages, in contrast to the Hawaiian-language newspaper archive alone with its million pages, which includes many of the 1,542 canonical ones! But with such an attractive English snapshot of Hawaiian culture already in hand, scholars are not often motivated to look beyond the canon.

**CONTEMPORARY HAWAIIAN TRANSLATION: PROBLEMS AND CONCERNS**

Problems for contemporary translation have also grown out of the catastrophic decline in the number of Hawaiian language speakers and the devaluation of Hawaiian culture that went hand-in-hand with it. The small speaking population, together with the numerous cultural and academic demands placed upon that population, yields an extremely small pool of translators. To complicate matters further, the same factors responsible for the low number of translators are also responsible for the lack of people qualified to edit and critique these translations. And finally, compared to the larger Asian and European languages, the Hawaiian language has very few books or reference materials, such as dictionaries, place name books, and encyclopedias.

Recognizing the problematic history of translation and some of these contemporary issues, a number of Hawaiian-language speakers, students and teachers alike, have come out against translation. A fundamental opposition of theirs points to the link between language and culture. As with perhaps all
cultures, Hawaiian worldview and epistemology is wrapped up in the Hawaiian language, summed up in the oft-quoted ‘o-lelo no‘eau: “I ka ‘o-lelo nō ke ola, i ka ‘o-lelo nō ka make” [In language there is life, in language there is death]. Since so much is embodied in the language, some Hawaiians are understandably dubious about the possibility of “life” and “death” being transferred into English through translation. Noenoe Silva, a contemporary scholar of Hawaiian history and language, states that “it is impossible to convey all of the cultural coding that English strips away, and equally impossible to avoid the Western cultural coding that English adds” (12).

The impossibility of absolute transmittal of the cultural connotations in the Hawaiian language is further complicated by the Hawaiian penchant for polysemy, which George Steiner describes as “the capacity of the same word to mean different things, such difference ranging from nuance to antithesis” (35). The deployment of polysemy, and the ability to bring those multiple meanings into play, were marks of skill in the Hawaiian language, and were greatly appreciated in forms such as poetry, writing, or oration. But when translation comes into the picture, the “restrictive” interaction between polysemy and translation impoverishes the result. This is further exacerbated by the fact that many translators still seem to think they can produce “literal” translations. For example, in her translation of Kaluaiko‘olau’s biography, Ka Moolelo Oiaio o Kaluaikoolau, Frances Frazier claims that she has attempted to “follow as literally as possible the language of the original with all its richness of poetry and pathos” (x). Kenneth Emory called Mary Kawena Pukui’s translation of John Papa ʻĪʻī’s work “literal” (xii), and Dorothy Barrère declared the translation of Kamakau’s text by committee to be “completely literal” (vii).

This belief obscures the interpretive nature of any translation, regardless of polysemy, and in any case, the very idea of a “literal” translation is so vague as to be almost meaningless. Translators who use the term often have completely different models in mind. For some, it means keeping the syntactic order of a sentence. For others, it is using short words to translate short words and long to translate long. Readers, however, tend to have a single if equally deluded idea in mind when they see the word “literal”: the translation is a “good” one that does not interpret, but gives only the “actual” meanings of the words. Recognition of this occlusion of meaning has led some Hawaiian-language speakers to take the position that if people want access to Hawaiian source texts, they must learn to speak Hawaiian.

A related fear is that the wholesale translation of Hawaiian materials will damage the Hawaiian-language recovery and revitalization movement. Many opposed to translation feel that the texts we are translating, such as Ka
Moʻolelo o Hiʻiakaikapiolepe, are the “momi,” or “pearls” of the language that draw people to learn Hawaiian. If we keep turning the pearls into English, those who do not speak Hawaiian will not feel the need to learn it, and the pearls’ luster will fade.

The last opposition involves issues of control over the dissemination and use of knowledge. Hawaiian language, history, and culture have very often been appropriated by outsiders, or interpreted through non-Hawaiian criteria, often leading to very damaging understandings and portrayals of Hawaiians. Mainstream appropriation and misuse of Hawaiian, with words such as “kahuna” being attached to everything from hamburgers to the upcoming version of Hotmail, and “aloha” being used to sell cars and plumbing supplies, have led many Hawaiians to be justifiably leery of anything that enables further misuse. Though some strides have been made in public and scholarly approaches to Hawaiian culture, many still fear that translation will allow Hawaiian materials to “get into the wrong hands.” And it is undeniable that if these materials are exclusively available in Hawaiian, they will be accessible only to those who have “put in their time” and “shown their allegiances” by learning Hawaiian well enough to understand the texts.

Translation can certainly be a very damaging process, and each new translation threatens to duplicate the negative effects. But despite, or even perhaps because of these problems, I feel that we must translate Hawaiian texts, for one simple, overriding reason: not everyone speaks Hawaiian. On the surface, this justification is exactly what those opposing translation are afraid of: an apparent call for the wholesale translation of materials into English, with no regard for the effect it might have on the recovery of the Hawaiian language. But I believe, and many other Hawaiians will agree, that even if everything ever written in Hawaiian were translated into English (something I am not advocating) people would continue to learn Hawaiian, because the revitalization of the Hawaiian language has more to do with our identity as a people than with reading texts. Many Hawaiian speakers do not read the texts we publish, whether the original or the translation. They learned Hawaiian so they could speak it when they work in the loʻi, or when they are out surfing, or even when they go to the store.

Even if it was somehow true that everyone involved in the language revitalization movement was learning Hawaiian so they could read these nineteenth century texts we are translating, learning a language is a slow process, and while we are teaching and training students to reach the level necessary to read these sources in Hawaiian, people will continue to make judgments about Hawaiians, their culture, and their ethos by consulting only the limited number of sources in English. Translating just a fraction of the materials in
the newspapers alone would completely change the way people understand Hawaiian history and culture, because the thousands of articles and writings there supplement, revise, and sometimes even contradict outright what we now “know” about traditional culture, or events during the Kingdom era.

There are also social and economic reasons that necessitate translating Hawaiian materials. In both 1989 and 1999, Hawaiians in Hawai‘i had the highest family poverty rates among the major ethnic groups (Kana‘iaupuni et al. 8), with the mean family income being nearly 16 percent lower than the statewide average (3). Hawaiian families also tend to be larger than average, which means that this comparatively low income supports more individuals (4). And despite the fact that at least 2,000 children are currently enrolled in Pūnana Leo (ʻAha Pūnana Leo) with hundreds of others learning Hawaiian in immersion charter schools and in Kamehameha’s six-year language program, for the majority of adults, the only choice available for the in-depth instruction necessary to read Hawaiian-language sources is the University of Hawai‘i, whether at Mānoa or Hilo, and these schools require thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours to attend, something many Hawaiians simply do not have.⁸

Hawaiian students also rank among the lowest of all major ethnic groups in the public school system in nearly every category relating to educational engagement and success. They attend low-quality schools, have less experienced teachers, score lower on standardized tests, are overrepresented in Special Education, have high rates of absenteeism, low graduation rates and high rates of being held back, and are most likely to be classified as “missing” from the educational system (Kana‘iaupuni and Ishibashi 3). As a group then, Hawaiians are less likely even to qualify to attend the University—the only place to learn their language to a point that would allow them to read these texts. Enrollment statistics bear this out. In 2005, around 16 percent of the students at UH-Hilo, and 8 percent at UH-Mānoa were Hawaiian (“Stocktaking” 6), even though according to the 2000 US census, Hawaiians make up nearly 20 percent of the state’s population.

Compounding these economic and educational problems were the generations which came after the decline of Hawaiian language and before its subsequent revitalization. These Hawaiians have almost been culturally “left behind.” Though the parents and grandparents of these generations probably spoke Hawaiian around the house, it was mostly to each other, and not to them. Their children could learn Hawaiian in high school and college, and their grandchildren could attend immersion, but some members of these generations feel that they never really had the opportunity to learn. ‘Emalani Case, one of the translators at Awaiāulu, shared an example of this:
A few months ago, I sat down with an aunty of mine and explained to her the work that I was doing. With tears in her eyes, she thanked me (and all of those involved in translation) for making the works of our kupuna accessible to people like her who do not speak the language. She told me about her dreams to be able to speak Hawaiian but also about how she felt that it was too late in her life to begin learning. Therefore, translation would make it possible for her to read accounts written about our people and our history. As I sat and listened to her, I realized that the work I had become involved with was partly for people like her, people who have an immense desire to learn but are ultimately limited by language. (pers. comm.)

Because of the economic and educational disparities facing Hawaiians, and the example of people like ‘Emalani’s aunt, insisting that someone must spend at least four years learning Hawaiian at the University is not only unrealistic, but widens the gap between the cultural haves and have-nots, with Hawaiian-language speakers on one side, and everyone else on the other.

**NEW DIRECTIONS**

If contemporary translators can keep all of the objections to translation in mind, and more importantly, try to address them, translation can be transformed from a process often reinforcing oppressive hegemonic understandings of Hawaiians to a process that empowers and liberates—one that will allow us to bridge this gap of cultural knowledge between those who speak Hawaiian and those who do not. I would now like to discuss a translation collective that was formed in an attempt to address some of the problems I have just mentioned. In 2003, noted Hawaiian language scholar and translator Puakea Nogelmeier teamed up with the late Dwayne Nakila Steele, then head of the Grace Pacific Corporation, to form their own publishing house: Awai‘aulu. It is a Hawaiian literature pyramid scheme of sorts, with the express purposes of disseminating what we call “legacy” materials, and of training resource people who will then lead their own projects and train their own resource people.

The project that we are currently working on is a translation of Joseph Poepoe’s 1905–1906 biography of Kamehameha, which was originally published in the newspaper *Ka Na‘i Aupuni.* To carry out this translation, we follow a collaborative model that Puakea developed for the translation of our first major text, *Ka Mo‘olelo o Hi‘iakaikapōliopele.* The model is designed as an apprenticeship of sorts, training young and relatively inexperienced translators in a “safe” environment. During the four-year process of translating *Ka Mo‘olelo o Hi‘iakaikapōliopele,* Puakea, a translator with decades of experience, acted as head translator, while Saho Fukushima and I were assistant translators. For this translation of the Kamehameha biography, I have moved
into the lead translator slot, and have chosen two apprentices of my own: Beau Bassett and ‘Emalani Case. As with the Hi‘iaka text, training is carried out mainly through doing the actual translation under the tutelege of the lead translator. Each of us translates our own short sections, then we meet and go over them together. One of us reads our translation aloud while the other two follow along in the Hawaiian, chiming in when we do not agree with a word, the way an event was understood, or even the tone, although the final decision rests with the lead translator. This is a long and arduous process that sometimes leads to debates that last hours, days, or even weeks, but the challenging nature of the process leads to a very high level of attention to detail, and helps ensure that each section is translated with the necessary care.

This model directly addresses historical problems of translation; for example, the problem of unqualified translators. With massive depopulation and the decline in language came the loss of a great deal of Hawaiian political, traditional, and historical knowledge. Because of the vast amounts of knowledge to be recovered, and the focus of personal interests, there is a great diversity in what knowledge potential translators possess. Some are interested in traditional fishing or farming, while others are more well-versed in Hawaiian poetry and mele, and still others have studied wahi pana, or storied places. Working as a group in the translation process expands the knowledge of a single translator to include that of the co-translators, and this group knowledge is further extended when we call upon kūpuna, or elders, to help us with passages that have us completely stumped.

The collaborative model is also set up in such a way that it fosters dialogue among the translators, allowing them to be self-reflexive and to even question the translation process itself. One way we accomplish this is to integrate semi-formal sessions into the translation process, during which we read and discuss excerpts from translation theory texts or writings by Hawaiian authors. Though not as formal as actual translation classes, these discussions help us keep issues of politics, representation, and responsibility in mind when translating, and the constant questioning of ourselves and our motives keeps us moving towards the utopian ideal of being “responsible” and “appropriate” translators. The constant focus on applying these theoretical discussions directly to the current Hawaiian social, political, and cultural situation keeps us from repeating at least some of the mistakes that plagued translation in the past, and informs the way we critique our own translation work.

We hope this atmosphere of collaboration and dialogue will foster the development of what S. Shankar has called a “culture of translation,” in which readers and producers of translation alike have an awareness and understanding of what translation is. At the moment, not much dialogue exists in the
Hawaiian community on translation and its ramifications beyond the page. Yet, with each translation we publish, we work towards creating an understanding in the larger community of what at least our approach to translation is, and what it entails. For example, with the foreword and editorial notes in *Ka Moʻolelo o Hiʻiakaikapoliopele*, we attempted to inform our readers about the breadth and diversity of the Hawaiian-language newspapers from which the story was drawn, and its importance as a resource. In the Kamehameha biography’s supplementary materials, we are planning on emphasizing the problems of translation and its interpretive nature. We hope that our continued focus on educating the public about the problems of translations through our publications and the media coverage surrounding our publications will do important (albeit limited) work to raise public awareness about the historical and interpretive challenges involved in translation in Hawaiʻi. We also hope this heightened awareness of both the limitations and merits of translation will open up a more productive dialogue with those opposed to it. Perhaps then translation can be transformed from a process that once pushed Hawaiian lives into the background to one that brings them out of obscurity.

**NOTES**

1. This time, though, the tried and true formula did not hold true, because when Kekuaoakalani tried to depose Liholiho for abolishing the kapu system, he was defeated.
2. “Moʻolelo” gets translated as both “story” and “history.” Hawaiians often made no distinction between what Westerners would consider “history” and “legend,” so both the “legend” of Hiʻiakaikapoliopele, the youngest sister of Pele, the volcano-goddess, and the “history” of Kamehameha, the chief who united the Hawaiian Islands in the nineteenth century, are called “moʻolelo.”
3. Although the biographies of Kalākaua and Robert Wilcox actually appeared in book format, the main venue for the publication of Hawaiian writings was by far the Hawaiian-language newspapers.
4. Translations of Hawaiian words and phrases will follow this format, with the Hawaiian first, followed by the translation. Unless indicated, all translations are mine.
5. In Kamakau’s time, the term “foreign” would likely have referred to anyone who was not genealogically Hawaiian, so the later generations of Americans and Europeans who studied Hawaiʻi—including scholars such as Gavan Daws, Martha Beckwith, Ralph Kuykendall, and Kenneth Emory—would fall into this category.
7. The current number of Hawaiian-language speakers is estimated at anywhere between 6,000 and 15,000: 2 to 5 percent of the state’s Hawaiian population, 0.4 to 1.2 percent of the total population. Even though this number has grown substantially from the 1983 estimate of 1,500 (Staton A5), it is clear that most Hawaiians do not speak their native language.

8. There are of course Hawaiian-language classes offered at the community colleges and community centers. But none of these will raise someone to a level advanced enough to understand most of these materials.

**WORKS CITED**


