

ʻIlelo Hawaiʻi Hawaiian Language as Cultural Resource

Historic preservation most often deals with tangible, physical aspects of culture, such as sites, architecture, and artifacts. In many cases it would be easier to recreate sites, duplicate architecture or recraft artifacts rather than go through the processes of restoring and preserving them. However, the value of preservation is in the maintenance of form as well as in the continuity of cultural and historical significance. The same value of historic preservation applies to a less tangible cultural aspect: language.

Preservation and perpetuation, in preference to linguistic reconstruction, has been a guiding principle in the efforts made in restoring the viability of Hawaiian as a living language in Hawaiʻi today. A major language in the constellation of Polynesian languages, Hawaiian was diminishing toward extinction in this century, but public interest coupled with personal and academic commitment have changed the status of the language in the course of the last two decades. Today Hawaiian is the language of scholarship, of instruction of media, and of daily communication in a growing population of Hawaiian language speakers. The process of revitalizing Hawaiian language to this point is really an account of a successful effort at historic preservation; a work in progress.

The decline of the Hawaiian-speaking population paralleled the disastrous decline of the Hawaiian population as a whole, and exceeded it by the end of the last century. By the 1880s, English was elevated as a language of business and government, a change in status that made it seem desirable or inevitable, even for many Hawaiians, for the education of their children to be carried out in English. The number of students in Hawaiian language schools began a precipitous fall, a direction which was encouraged and supported as Hawaiian language came to be viewed as a hindrance to progress and westernization. In 1896, three years after the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy, English was formally established by policy as the only language of instruction in government schools, a policy which closed off most avenues for learning or using Hawaiian outside of the home.

Early calls to restore Hawaiian language to its former prominence, or at least to maintain its viability as a daily language, began in the latter decades of the last century, mostly by Hawaiians who regretted the rapid change in the language and its status from generation to generation. Letters occasionally appeared in the Hawaiian language newspapers criticizing the shallow grasp of the language by the younger generation, and this lament was echoed in letters well into this century. The tenor of the exhortations became more serious as the use of Hawaiian by young people became increasingly rare. Historic preservation, however, designated an organized effort at reclaiming an “artifact” and restoring its condition and its links to the context in which it existed in an earlier period, and while these early, individual appeals surely reflected a broader public sentiment, they did not result in an organized movement to change the status of the language.

Official response was scattered and addressed the diminishing of the Hawaiian-speaking population with varying levels of success. Hawaiian civic clubs honored the language, but a changing membership eroded the number and scope of such endeavors. The University established Hawaiian language class in 1921 but the interest generated there declined after World War II, and by 1961 attracted only 27 students for the academic year (Schutz, *Voices of Eden*, U.H. Press, 1994:360–361). On the advent of statehood in 1959, the University of Hawaiʻi Committee for the Preservation and Study of Hawaiian Language, Art and Culture was created, but seriously underfunded and saddled with a very broad mission, the group has been limited to documenting Hawaiian more than perpetuating it.

In the 1970s, there began a renaissance of interest in the Hawaiian culture as whole which created new a groundswell of interest in Hawaiian language. Hawaiian classes at the University were growing again and the public high schools were starting to introduce the language as elective courses. Hawaiian clubs, such as *Hui Aloha ʻĀina Tuahine* were formed at the University and in high schools. The *Kūpuna* Program was initiated, introducing all public school students to Hawaiian language and culture by bringing Hawaiian elders into the classroom on a regular basis. The *ʻAhahui ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi*, a Hawaiian language association created in 1977, was formed to support teachers of the language and to create links among the students and the native-speaking community. The growing number of students and teachers of the language and their interaction with the native-speaking community crystallized awareness and concern about the small and ever-diminishing number of native speakers, most of whom were

elderly and scattered throughout the island chain or members of the small Ni'ihau community, people who were raised speaking Hawaiian as their first language.

Native speakers of Hawaiian increasingly came to be acknowledged as unique resources for the link that they represented to the indigenous language of the islands. Individually and collectively, native speakers were approached by teachers, students, and agencies asking for their help in teaching the students and their teachers, to provide insight into the language from the native speaker's point of view rather than rely on the expanding body of linguistic analysis and research. This nebulous, but growing, group of learners and native speakers were the first strong links in a chain of organized efforts to address Hawaiian language as a shared project of preservation.

The *mānaleo*, a term coined to express the concept of the native speaker, responded to the new surge of interest and many joined, in one way or another, the effort to keep the language alive. They took on projects, set up schools, acted as resources for Hawaiian language teachers, visited or taught classes and workshops, helped in coining terms to update the language, allowed themselves to be extensively recorded on tape and film, and generally became working partners in the move to keep Hawaiian viable for another generation, at least. This alliance of the academic community has been a major force in shaping the regrowth of the Hawaiian language and has had an impact on the form and context in which the language may be observed today.

Other elements of the increasingly organized effort to build the language community began to emerge and be put into motion. By 1978, lobbying at the Constitutional Convention resulted in Hawaiian being named as one of the two official languages of the state, a resolution that provided more status than support, but one that set a precedent in how Hawaiian language came to be viewed. Experimental language schools were attempted by Hawaiian agencies such as *Alu Like* and the newly created Office of Hawaiian Affairs, providing experience in the field but not resulting in a stable educational format.

In 1984, the *Pūnana Leo* Hawaiian language preschools were formed after a New Zealand Māori model, and three years later, the *Kula Kaiapuni*, Hawaiian language elementary schools, were initiated as a project under the Department of Education. The preschools, as private facilities, needed no sanction to teach in Hawaiian, whereas the elementary classes, part of the state of Hawai'i public school system, required government approval of the use of Hawaiian as a language of instruction. Approval involved changing the

English-only policy that had been in effect since 1896, and the earlier acknowledgement of Hawaiian as an official language of the state helped to facilitate this approval in that these new schools were not viewed as foreign-language schools under the auspices of the state, but as indigenous language institutions.

The advent of the Hawaiian language immersion schools created a watershed of change in the direction and speed of growth for the emerging Hawaiian language community. Enrollment in the immersion schools increased the number of students actively learning the language, and it fostered the interest and participation of students' family members, many of whom enrolled in language classes or took up independent study. Enrollment at every level began a rapid climb—at the University, in the intermediate and high schools, both public and private, in the community education schools of the Department of Education, and in private classes. This growth in enrollment at every level continues to expand.

New organizations, such as the *Hale Kāko'o Pūnana Leo* and *Hale Kuamo'o*, were formed to further facilitate Hawaiian language instruction through teacher training and production of materials and the *'Ahahui 'Ōlelo Hawai'i* expanded its services. For the first time in decades, books and classroom materials were being produced in Hawaiian on a scale that made Hawaiian language skill an economic asset outside of classroom instruction. A new demand was created for teachers, curriculum developers, authors, and editors with proficiency in the language. The number and types of positions and specialties continue to grow, servicing the immersion school and the broader population.

The increased demand for skilled speakers of the language boosted the number of students enrolling in Hawaiian classes and the level of language that these students desired to learn. While enrollment figures have soared since the advent of the immersion schools—500% at the University and 700% at Kamehameha Schools—the numbers reflect only part of the development. Students are requesting and gaining a much higher level of fluency today than was offered a decade ago, mirroring the move from academic study mostly for comprehension to the mastery of Hawaiian as a language for everyday use at work, home, and play.

Three thousand or more students of all ages are currently in Hawaiian language classes or schools, and a large population has already gained some level of fluency. Native speakers are more frequently heard by the general public than previously, in spite of their diminished numbers, simply because there are more places for them to use their

language and more requests for them to do so. Hawaiian language books are available at bookstores and libraries and the language is heard on television, on radio, and at public events. Hawaiian language has come again to be a visible, desirable, and permanent aspect of Hawaiian culture. With increased presence of the language and a growing number of ways to learn it, Hawaiian has gained a new status as a recognizable sign of cultural participation.

The quality of the language being perpetuated and the level of acceptance and support for the language could not have been possible without a broad range of participants, including the *mānaleo*, teachers, students, families, government entities, and the general public in Hawai'i. Just as the multi-faceted efforts to save a building or site work against the continual forces of erosion and decay, each of these parties has provided direct participation, funding, or encouragement in a way that has helped Hawaiian to flourish in light of the powerful forces that eroded both the status and vitality of Hawaiian as a language of its people.

Many individuals have helped to lead this restoration, but the *mānaleo* have played the most pivotal role in the process and must be credited for the product that can be seen today. Without their approval and support, the efforts of the teachers and students would not have been so widely

embraced as a public effort, a family effort, and an individual effort. Without their insight into the intricacies and nuances of the language, Hawaiian taught today would be mere mechanical analysis. And without their hours of labor, such as the young Ni ihau teachers who founded the first *Pūnana Leo* schools and the elders who often worked for free at the schools, much of the institutional framework existing today would never have been established.

The restoration of Hawaiian language is an ongoing historic preservation project of immense proportions. Unlike other projects, there was no decaying theater in place, no snapshots or clear descriptions of ideal form, and no narrative describing accurate use or interpretation. But like many other large projects of historic preservation, it required a many-tiered approach to the work, it entailed crucial support from all segments of the community of context, it has always had less funding than would allow it to be possible, and there is never a point at which one can say the work is completed.

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The revival of Hawaiian canoe voyaging and open-ocean non-instrument navigation had its origins three decades ago as an anthropological experiment to disprove eurocentric theories of settlement of the islands claiming South American origins, or that ancient Hawaiians arrived as a result of an accident—drifting to the islands by chance. It would eventually turn into the symbol of Hawaiian cultural revival and ethnic pride in the 1970s and which continues today to inspire and motivate both Native Hawaiians and other island communities throughout Polynesia to “rediscover” their origins and connections in the Pacific.

The most well-known of the traditional voyaging vessels is the double-hulled canoe *Hökūle`a*, or “Star of Joy.” Famous for its 1,900-mile journey to Tahiti in 1976 without the aid of navigational devices, *Hökūle`a* came into existence after a long and studied attempt to create a prototype of a traditional Hawaiian canoe based on common Polynesian design features and references to details in petroglyph carvings.

Hökūle`a not only spawned a renaissance in traditional voyaging in Hawai'i, but throughout

the Pacific islands as well. In 1995, *Hökūle`a* and two new Hawaiian canoes, *Hawai`iloa* and *Makali`i*, made a trip to Tapuatapuatea, Ra`iatea in the Society Islands to meet up with voyaging canoes from around the Pacific. Interest in the *Hökūle`a*'s 1976 voyage had sparked interest in Tahiti and many other islands to reclaim their sailing and navigational legacies. The Cook Islands, Tahiti, New Zealand, Rapa Nui, Tonga, Fiji, and Samoa all participated in the gathering, the first of its kind in over five centuries. After re-dedicating the temple at Tapuatapuatea where Polynesian voyagers traditionally met to discuss inter-island matters and honor their deities, all of the canoes traveled together to Hawai'i.

As with Hawaiian language and dance, the rejuvenation of the traditions of navigating and canoe building have provided a chance for the Hawaiian community to, literally and figuratively, retrace its roots. “Preservation” of native culture has been an incredible learning tool for old and young Hawaiians, both native and non-native, allowing them to become stewards of their history and understand the larger Polynesian connections that Hawai'i has in the Pacific.

—Jennifer Malin