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Embracing Identity and Culture: Hawaiian Rhetoric in Kumu Hina’s “He Inoa Mana (A powerful name)”

Abstract

The 1960’s marked the Hawaiian Renaissance as kanaka maoli (native Hawaiian people) experienced a growing interest in Hawaiian language, music, traditional navigation, and hula. Today, kanaka continue to resist colonial oppression and work together to establish their identity as a people through staying connected to their traditions. There are many community leaders that kanaka maoli look up to, one of them being Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu. She is affectionately known as Kumu Hina who is an educator and community activist. The first section recalls her life story including her life growing up and achievements. Then, the essay delves into a TEDtalk by Wong-Kalu entitled “He Inoa Mana (A powerful name).” The first portion describes the rhetorical situation of the speech. Following the rhetorical situation, the essay explores Hawaiian rhetoric unique to kanaka maoli communication in Kumu Hina’s talk; concepts such as genealogical rhetoric and indigeneity, vivacity, resignification, and identification. Hawaiian influencers like Kumu Hina encourage young kanaka to embrace who they are and their culture to foster a strong lāhui (community, nation).

Embracing Identity and Culture: Hawaiian Rhetoric in Kumu Hina's "He Inoa Mana (A powerful name)"

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The 1960's marked the Hawaiian Renaissance as kanaka maoli (native Hawaiian people) experienced a growing interest in Hawaiian language, music, traditional navigation, and hula. Today, kanaka continue to resist colonial oppression and work together to establish their identity as a people through staying connected to their traditions. There are many community leaders that kanaka maoli look up to, one of them being Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu. She is affectionately known as Kumu Hina, and she is an educator and community activist. The first section of this paper recalls her life story including her life growing up and achievements. Then, the essay delves into a TEDtalk by Kumu Hina entitled "He Inoa Mana (A powerful name)." The first portion describes the rhetorical situation of the speech. Following the rhetorical situation, the essay explores Hawaiian rhetoric unique to kanaka maoli communication in Kumu Hina's talk; concepts such as genealogical rhetoric and indigeneity, vivacity, resignification, and identification. Hawaiian influencers like Kumu Hina encourage young kanaka to embrace who they are and their culture in order to foster a strong lāhui (community, nation).

Keywords: Communication, ethnicity, gender, Hawaiian identity

During a time like now, Hawai'i is experiencing a deep and strengthened connection among the native Hawaiian people. To this day, the Hawaiian people stand together in solidarity in their aloha 'āina¹ (love for the land) movements to stand up for their birth rights to the land. The Mauna Kea movement, Protect Na Wai 'Ehā (The four waters), Protect Pa'akai (Salt) Ponds, and Protect Kahuku are all examples of significant Hawaiian social and cultural movements geared to preserving the land for future generations to come. In 2007, Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu wrote the song "Kū Ha'aheo E Ku'u Hawai'i" in hopes to strengthen, connect, and inspire the aloha 'āina warriors and all people of Hawai'i. The song calls out to all people from every island of the chain to come together and perpetuate the legacy their ancestors have established for the future generations. This song sparked a renewed awakening among the Hawaiian people, becoming an anthem for Hawaiian people and their cultural responsibility to the land and their community. It is people like Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu who can help the Hawaiian community move forward, together as one, for the bright future of the next generations to come. There are three central sections of this paper: the life and achievements of

Hinaleimoana, a discussion of the rhetorical situation, and analysis of her TEDtalk.

THE LIFE OF A MĀHŪ

Born in Nu'uaniu of O'ahu, Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu [also referred to in this paper by her preferred name, Kumu Hina] embarked on her journey as a kanaka maoli (a native Hawaiian). Prior to the newfound name Hinaleimoana, Collin Kwai Kong Wong was the birth name given to her on May 15, 1972, when she was born to a Hawaiian-Portuguese-English mother and a Chinese father (TEDxTalks, 2014). Additionally, Kumu Hina is the youngest of two brothers and a sister. As Collin, she graduated from Kamehameha Schools Kapalama in 1990 and continued her education at the University of Hawai'i Mānoa. She acquired a bachelor's degree in Hawaiian language from the university, and later obtained a degree in Education to teach others (Kamehameha Schools, 2018). Later, Kumu Hina decided to transition from male to female in her twenties and now she's known as a native Hawaiian transgender woman. She is admired among the Hawaiian community and recognized for her numerous contributions and achievements throughout her life as a teacher, filmmaker, community

¹ In protest to normalize non-Western language, throughout this paper the hua 'ōlelo (Hawaiian words) are

purposefully not italicized.

leader, activist, and cultural practitioner. Her committed work lies in many different organizations to serve the community.

After finishing her degree, Kumu Hina dedicated her time to Ke Ola Mamo Native Hawaiian Health Care System with a mission to improve the health of Hawaiian people. She served as the board president and helped educate people, especially those who were at risk for sexually transmitted diseases (Kamehameha Schools, 2018). Kumu Hina also served as a community advocate for the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA), and later announced her bid for a position on the board in 2014. She was the first transgender candidate to run for statewide political office in the United States (“Kumu Hina”). In addition, as a community advocate she chairs the O’ahu Island Burial Council where she oversees the management of Native Hawaiian burial sites and remains. According to Kumu Hina, she acknowledges her service to the community is indebted to her high school education: “My career to date has included advocacy and service towards empowering the Native Hawaiian and larger island community” (Internet Archive Wayback Machine, 2014). In 2018, Kumu Hina was awarded the Kamehameha Schools Native Hawaiian Community Educator of the Year for creating an engaging environment for young Hawaiian students. She has taught at many places including Leeward Community College, Kamehameha Schools, Hālau Lokahi Public Charter School, the Hālawā Correctional Facility, and the O’ahu Community Correctional Center (Kamehameha Schools, 2018). Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu is a cultural icon in the Hawaiian islands, and she continues to give back to the community in various ways through being her authentic self and standing up for what she believes in.

One of her most significant contributions is the Kumu Hina film, the story of Kumu Hina as a transgender native Hawaiian teacher and cultural icon bringing meaning to māhū — embodying both the male and female spirit. Cave summarizes, “It is equally about Hina’s personal struggles as a māhū, her professional life as an educator of Hawaiian tradition, and her domestic life with her husband, Haemacelo, or Hema” (Cave, 2014). For two years, a crew followed Kumu Hina to capture all the intimate moments of her personal life and interactions as an educator. In Hana Hou! The Magazine of Hawaiian Airlines, Kumu Hina transports the audience back in time to the life of Collin Wong and the difficulties he faced before transitioning (Blair, 2015). Kumu Hina recalls how troubling

it was to break the news to her family, learning their son would now be their daughter. Joe Wilson, one of the directors of Kumu Hina, recalls in an interview for the Honolulu Magazine, “Stepping out of the normal bounds of social etiquette. She was being careful, saying I know this is not normally how Hawaiians tell stories. She thought it was really important” (Cave 2014). Although Collin was transitioning, his identity as a Hawaiian remained a constant, which is how the name Hinaleimoana was chosen: “Hina is the Hawaiian goddess of the moon, among the most desired figures in Polynesian mo’olelo (stories), a name she says honors her mother’s cultural heritage and one that Hina hopes to ‘live up to’” (Blair, 2015). The documentary film achieved success; it premiered at the Hawai’i Theatre, the Pacific International Film Festival in Tahiti, was aired on PBS, and various places in the United States and Asia. Furthermore, an educational and age-appropriate version of Kumu Hina has been produced by Kumu Hina and her editors, Joe Wilson and Dean Hamer, called “A Place in the Middle,” following the narrative of one of her students from the documentary film — one of her students who identifies with Kumu Hina as a māhū as well.

Being a native Hawaiian transgender woman is a big part of Kumu Hina’s identity, and she takes pride in who she is emphasizing her identity as a Hawaiian which is expressed in her film Kumu Hina. In the Hawaiian culture, being māhū has great power to these individuals and they were known as healers in society. In the Kumu Hina film, she narrates, “We passed on sacred knowledge from one generation to the next through hula, chant and other forms of wisdom” (Blair, 2015). Occupying this place in the middle was viewed as a good thing in the Hawaiian culture, yet this changed with Western occupation and their imposition of Western ideologies. Over the years, integration of the American way of life dominated the Hawaiian islands and, seeping into the ideologies of the Hawaiian people, came the term transgender. Kumu Hina expresses, “The only reason I wear the label māhū is because I’m surrounded by Americans. And I can never get away from it” (Van Gelder, 2018). Despite the colonial struggles in Hawai’i, Hawaiian traditions continue to flourish today such as oli, hula, and ‘aikane (same-sex marriage). In 2013, the bill-signing ceremony for same-sex marriage in Hawai’i was celebrated with former Governor Neil Abercrombie. He invited Kumu Hina to deliver the oli which she gladly accepted, “to be a catalyst for this change” and not, she says, to become a standard-bearer for LGBT issues (Blair, 2015).

Time and time again, people hear Kumu Hina mention her strong identification with being native Hawaiian always comes first and her gender comes second. The statement shines through in the Kumu Hina documentary film and unfolds the experience of someone who shares a unique perspective of LGBT people. Hence, the narrative about taking risks and breaking out of the societal norms was captured on film, “Because, for the 20 years that she had lived as a māhū wahine — transgender woman — she knew it was challenging for others who didn’t have opportunities that she had” (Cave, 2014). Kumu Hina believed her story was worth sharing with the world to open a door for other people who are experiencing difficulties in their life because of this label.

RHETORICAL SITUATION

In 2014, Kumu Hina shared her story as a transgendered woman exploring her Hawaiian and Chinese ancestry. Throughout her “He Inoa Mana (A powerful name)” TEDtalk, she anecdotally shares her trip to China and unexpectedly connects with her family there. Her speech is produced at a time when our society is normalizing intersectional identities with the legalization of same-sex marriage. The exigence, “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be,” is marked through her identity struggle (Palczewski et. al, 2016, p. 227). By traveling to China, Hinaleimoana makes realizations about her identity and its origins. Being connected to our ancestors and understanding where we come from is a big part of the Hawaiian culture, with an emphasis on familial values as well. As previously mentioned, Kumu Hina is an educator and cultural practitioner which is reflected in the way she carries herself and in her rhetorical agency.

In her talk, she uses narrative to share her life experiences and the trip she takes to China. Her particular style reaches her rhetorical audience, or the “audience that ‘consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change’” (Palczewski et. al, 2016, p. 229). Kumu Hina’s intended audience are those who showed up to the Ted talk that was held on Maui, Hawaii. Furthermore, she begins to speak to LGBTQ people and polyethnic people. When a person hears Kumu Hina, her rhetoric is conversational in the sense that one feels like she is a friend and they are catching up through her tone and word

choice that is specific to the rhetoric of people who live in Hawaii. The exigence and the audience Kumu Hina addresses emerges from the constraints of identity she has experienced. First off, gender identification plays a major role in regards to how Kumu Hina defines herself and how other people perceive her gender as well. There are two ideologies of gender clashing, what it means to be mahu and transgender, making it difficult for society to understand what to call her. Secondly, understanding the role of one’s ancestry in our identity can constrain people from accepting who they are.

EXPLORING HAWAIIAN RHETORIC IN “HE INOA MANA (A POWERFUL NAME)”

In the analysis section of this paper, I identify four crucial concepts that pose Kumu Hina as an effective rhetor. First, I will relate the value of genealogical rhetoric and indigeneity to the Hawaiian culture, along with other indigenous groups, and to the TEDtalk Kumu Hina gives. Second, vivacity draws in her audience members as a part of her proficiency as a storyteller. Third, Kumu Hina resignifies perceptions of identity; more specifically, how people discern transgender and nonbinary people. Lastly, identification plays a crucial role in fostering unification amongst all people, through shared life experiences and what Kumu Hina has gone through.

Genealogy is a key component of navigating indigenous ancestry to understand our true identity, as Kumu Hina’s speech demonstrates. In the Hawaiian culture, storytelling is a traditional element that is expressed in various forms to instill cultural values and behaviors. The beauty of storytelling is the tradition of passing down these stories for future generations to come. Genealogy or the, “Mo’okū’auhau are a primary meiwī because they are an expression of ‘Ōiwi heritage, ancestry, identity, and ethos” (Ho’omanawanui, 2015, p. 249). In the opening of her speech, Kumu Hina delivers her genealogical chant exhibiting her identity as a Hawaiian and Chinese woman. Throughout her oli, she mentions the Hawaiian creators of the world, the father sky and mother earth, leading up to her powerful name “Hina” altogether conveying her identity and ethos as a speaker. Ho’omanawanui (2015) explicates that, “oli [is] a primary vehicle of expression in oral culture; its structure allowed for delivery and memory” (p. 249). Oli and genealogy alike hold potent history and narratives that are shared across indigenous

rhetoric. Tiara Na'puti provides insight about the importance of creating conversations about indigeneity and settler colonialism through reviewing genealogies. She offers, "Indigeneity as analytic offers an ancestry/kinship lens that understands racialization and indigenization as interwoven colonial processes, and commands us to take responsibility for deepening these connections in our intellectual genealogies" (2019, p. 497). It is critical to draw upon indigeneity for understanding the ancestral roles in narratives. Coupled with Kumu Hina's oli, she expounds her purpose for using the genealogy chant to tell her story: "In the language of my mother's ancestors, I not only bring you greetings but I invoke the essence of my kupuna" (TedxTalks, 2014). Once again, we trust Kumu Hina because of her credibility and identity as a Hawaiian woman who knows the importance of being connected with our ancestral origins utilizing language and oli to send her message. In all, Kumu Hina is immersed in the Hawaiian culture as she is a proud Hawaiian woman and she presents competency by giving an oli that honors her heritage, identity, and name.

Kumu Hina is a vivacious speaker, rooted in her culture as a Hawaiian, compelling her audience to become invested in her story. Vivacity engages "a sense of immediacy or presence created through the use of descriptions, imagery, and colorful language that make an idea come alive" (Palczewski et. al, 2016, p. 139). Hawaiian people have been story tellers since ancient Hawaii, passing on stories through oral tradition. As she gets further into her speech, Kumu Hina pronounces, "For it is the light of our ancestors, the ancestors of this land, that will help pave the way" (TedxTalks, 2014). She poetically weaves together her story, especially in this instance where Kumu Hina recognizes her ancestors are the "light" that is guiding her every step of the way on her journey. As audience members, the image is clearly illuminated as Kumu Hina is talking and draws us into her speech through the guiding light imagery. Additionally, Kumu Hina discloses the origin of her name Hinaleimoana named after the goddess of the moon, Hina: "She presides over the moon and it is that light that is cast upon us in some of the darkest of times" (TedxTalks, 2014). In this brief snippet of the speech, there is the contrast of light and dark that Kumu Hina has lived through manifesting in the name she created for herself. Just as she describes the light of her ancestors establishing a pathway for her, the light now shines through from the moon and Hina. She then reveals her elation for finally connecting with her

Chinese ancestry after years of denying who she is, and now understanding the lit path her ancestors laid down for her:

"Ladies and gentlemen, this family that I connected with after three generations of not being connected to our heritage in the great land of China — the middle kingdom, the middle earth — it took Hinaleimoana 42 years before I got the chance to connect with this side of my heritage" (TedxTalks, 2014).

Here, Kumu Hina creates a persona for China through describing the country as a "great land," "the middle kingdom," and the "middle earth." In this instance, she gives life to her ancestral land of China by acknowledging the location of the country being in the center of the world and a superior civilization. Through presenting vivid imagery for her audience to take in, Kumu Hina is an effective storyteller as she communicates her life experiences in a relatable way.

Kumu Hina's TEDtalk shares her trip to China and the realizations she makes about the origins of her identity. In her talk, Kumu Hina uses resignification to challenge the way audience members understand a person's identity. According to Rhetoric in Civic Life, resignification is "a process in which people reject the connotation of a symbol, expose how the meaning of the symbol is constructed, and attempt to change its connotation" (Palczewski et. al, 2016, p. 56). The use of resignification in the talk more specifically focuses on interchangeably using the word transgender and māhū in regards to understanding one's identity. Kumu Hina contends, "For you see in the world of the West we have the word transgender, but in Hawaiian we have the word māhū. And if anyone knows Hawaiian language the true definition of māhū is not a source of contention. It is not a source of disdain, it is not a source of negativity. It is simply an adjective to describe the attributes of someone who doesn't necessarily look like this, but to describe someone somewhere in the middle between kāne and wahine, between male and female" (TEDxTalks, 2014).

Here, there is a clear distinction between what it means to be transgender and māhū. Instead of being labeled as transgender in Western terms, Kumu Hina defines the Hawaiian way of being transgender as māhū yet challenges the outward expression of the Western notion of transgender. Multiple genders are found across different regions such as the Native American berdaches, or two-spirit, and Greco-Roman galli.

Will Roscoe explores the third gender paradigm of two-spirit leading him to analyzing various texts consistent with not following the gender-crossing model. He found the concept of sex and gender have many nuances and are conceptualized differently across cultures: “I also believe that cross-cultural typologies are feasible and useful; that some historically-defined culture regions are characterized by the presence of multiple genders and some by their lack, and that these patterns have correlates in the social formations and histories of the societies in those regions” (Roscoe, 1995). Through recognizing third genders and the cultural implications, we can begin to recognize what it means to have two spirits or be in the middle. By resignifying transgender as māhū, audience members can begin to shift their understanding of transgender as an adjective as Kumu Hina states that helps us understand the Hawaiian history and culture. Being transgender is embodying both the male and female, not the negative connotations of the social construction. There are more intersecting characteristics of our identity that make up the self, which is the underlying message Kumu Hina is conveying. In all, it is critical for people to understand how a person chooses to identify their self especially those who identify as nonbinary.

By using identification, Kumu Hina creates a bridge between other people and herself through illustrating how as humans we all experience common life lessons. Identification is a “process through which people are unified into a whole on the basis of common interests or characteristics” (Palczewski et. al, 2016, p. 8). On the surface level, a common interest arises in her speech when she broadly connects to the audience after sharing how elated she was to be united with her family from China derived from her desire to know where she comes from. Kumu Hina asks, “Can you imagine the tremendous feeling that this was?” (TedxTalks, 2014). As humans, we all experience revelation at some point in our lives that can essentially bring us joy and satisfies our curiosity. Towards the end of her talk, Kumu Hina begins to unite her audience members by illustrating our that origins or identity will always remain a constant for each of us:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I ask each and every one of you to take away from the story that I have shared with you regardless of whether you are multiethnic, multicultural or you’re of one ethnicity. Regardless of your age, regardless of your sex, regardless of any of all of these

things and these variables do change. Regardless of all that, our ancestry never changes” (TedxTalks, 2014).

She brings up the various characteristics that make up our identity which serves to divide us at times, then breaks them down to convey these are “variables,” they aren’t the true essence of our identity. Kumu Hina strengthens our connection with one another as humans through encouraging the audience to embrace one’s ancestral origins through consummatory rhetoric. Danielle Endres illustrates this gathering of like-minded through, “show[ing] how Leonard Peltier’s response to the denial of clemency in 2001 ‘uses three interrelated rhetorical appeals: 1) identification, 2) an appeal to justice, and 3) a call to action’” (2011, p. 3). Each of the variables that Kumu Hina mentions creates the identification for her rhetorical audience to acknowledge. Furthermore, Kumu Hina calls for action and leaves the message of valuing our ancestry because it helps us understand who we really are. She proposes, “I challenge you to go out and find out, to search the path that we have all come down so that we will. It is not only a Hawaiian belief but it is also a Chinese belief” (TedxTalks, 2014). Once again, Kumu Hina identifies with her Hawaiian and Chinese ancestry but attempts to reach out to her audience by alluding to this path we are all on. This path is understood by all people as life, and Kumu Hina reinforces the importance of reconnecting with our purpose. Altogether, the audience is able to identify with Kumu Hina as she shares her life experiences that sound very similar to our unique paths in turn unifying all people.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Through analyzing the life story of Kumu Hina and her talk, she has exhibited how valuable it is to embrace our identity and purpose in life. She found her purpose through serving the community as an educator and advocate for native Hawaiian rights, and accomplished many great achievements in these positions. Moreover, Kumu Hina has learned to accept and embrace her gender identity by understanding her ancestral origins and putting that identity first. To be able to recite one’s genealogy displays a strong connection to one’s identity just like Kumu Hina. Although it was difficult for her to accept who she was in her childhood, by staying rooted to her ancestry and knowing her genealogy she prevailed through the hardships. Having this knowledge enabled her to be a better storyteller as she is a vivacious speaker. Her simple

and poetic yet expressive language draws in audience members, impelling them to pay attention. Resignification focuses on changing the connotation of a word to better understand what a particular symbol means. In Kumu Hina's talk, she identifies the difference between transgender and māhū through her experience as being different from other people when she was growing up. Kumu Hina then uses identification to reach her audience by sharing her experience and life lessons she has learned on this journey. Throughout her talk, Kumu Hina mentions life lessons surrounding how we describe ourselves. She demonstrates how each path we are on can be traced back to our identity rooted in our ancestry, and this is important because it will never change. Kumu Hina is a well accomplished transgender native Hawaiian woman who inspires people to follow their path and trust in their purpose. Kumu Hina continues to serve her community in any way that she can. Amidst the Mauna Kea movement, Hawaiian influencers including Kumu Hina have stood up and voiced their rights as a people. Notably, various artists were featured in a music video for Kumu Hina's "Kū Ha'aheo E Ku'u Hawai'i" that came out three months after the protesting on Mauna Kea began. The legacy of Kumu Hina will live on through the perpetuation of this song, that has become an anthem, and all the hard work she has put in to revitalizing the Hawaiian culture.

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