# Aloha Pedagogy: Weaving Aho as Ways of Knowing

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## Abstract

This article braids Native Hawaiian ontology, Indigenous approaches to the critical study of education, and the author's own reflections to advance a decolonizing approach to communication. This entails divesting from the Western assumption of mind-body dualism in favor of privileging a form of embodied knowledge that includes feelings, the senses, and intuition through artistic forms such as hula, oli (chanting), and storytelling.

***Keywords:*** Indigenous pedagogy, Kānaka Maoli, braiding methodology, communication

## Introduction

My grandmother would always tell me, "ma ka hana ka ‘ike," "In working one learns." I expand this definition to also mean that knowledge comes from doing—that the body is a part of the learning process. Eurocentric/Western notions on communication and scholarship are predominantly informed by a mind/body dichotomy. This idea runs counter to an Indigenous perspective on communication and knowledge production. Indigenous communities have something to offer to the non-indigenous world such as their explanations of the environment and the centering of the self in connection to everyday occurrences. This showcases what Sonya Atalay (2019) calls a braided knowledges approach to research. Here, everyone in the community is interconnected and interdependent. This decolonizing approach to communication entails privileging a form of embodied knowledge that includes feelings, the senses, and intuition through artistic forms such as hula, oli (chanting), and storytelling.[1] From a Kānaka (Native Hawaiian) point-of-view, while the brain is considered to be the seat of power, intelligence is located in the area of the stomach, liver, and guts—it is in a sixth sense we call naʻau (Meyer, 1998; Oliveria, 2014).

The head merges with the heart creating a dual system of knowing information and feelings. Using Native Hawaiian ontology, this paper explores the connection of lived, embodied experiences, and communication scholarship by laying out an Indigenous Aloha approach to communication, knowledge production, and community in the Kaʻao Framework. In (re)connecting our mind with our bodies we weave together the multiple strands that create who we are. We no longer compartmentalize what we think to how we feel, but all these things inform

[1] Philosophic approaches such as mind-body dualism, or Cartesian dualism, staunchly supported by René Descartes, argues that a person's mental capacity, or intellectual thought, exists outside of the physical body, in which when we are to be "objective" we are to separate how the body feels, with what the mind thinks. This idea is further used in the scientific revolution, in which the scientific method and total objectivity becomes the standard for knowledge production. By encouraging these examples of colonial thought, it silences other views of knowledge production and communication outside of "objective" thought.

who we are and how we communicate, we perform our Indigeneity. As Madison (2005) describes Turner's notion of the "homo performans," the act of connecting all our lived experiences, senses, and feelings helps us become a performing species who communicate for our survival.

I was born into a Hawai'i colonized and occupied by the United States. Stories of American imperialism, conquest, and settler colonialism from George Washington to Pearl Harbor, from American Calvinist missionary letters and journals to the storylines of television series like *Hawaii Five-O,* and even to recent films like *Aloha* and *The Descendants*, are inescapable. Yet, born into a Hawai'i-based Maoli (Native) family, the stories of our Akua (deities), kupuna (elders), and our 'āina (land) have been woven through my life in deep and profound ways. I think the key term here being, *woven*—or braided, weaved, and corded. These mo'olelo (stories) are more than something spoken to the next generation, they connect the next generation to preceding generations (lāhui). They also connect the individual to 'āina. In all of this, genealogy matters, it emphasizes the connection that Kānaka Maoli have to all things.

My lineage connects me to not just people, but to the 'aumakua (spiritual ties). Let me take this moment to introduce my genealogy. I am a descendant of the Pi'ilani line of Maui. I was raised on the Hilo side of the island of Hawai'i, also known as the Big Island, in the Hawaiian archipelago. I am a scholar, a writer, an educator, and practitioner who negotiates between two traditions, one colonial, the other resistance. I was born into captivity, a Native person in a non-native world, a Kānaka in an American colony. Because of the long dominance of American imperialism in our Native homeland, including the military overthrow of our Native government in 1893, the banning of our language in 1896, a forced change in citizenship from Hawaiian to American with U.S. annexation in 1898, and a near total imposition of foreign ways and thoughts, our traditions, our Native voices, literatures, and oratures, have been silenced, though not completely gone. Alongside this historical rotting of na mea Hawai'i (things Hawaiian) has come a redefinition of our national culture from Hawaiian to American, albeit with an island, multiethnic flavor. When the Hawaiian language was banned at the turn of the century, the clear American intent was to prohibit our speech, including resistance speech. They wanted to diminish our literary voice, especially any critical voice. The objective was to obliterate from our minds a unique Native understanding of who and where and how we are. Given this bitter history, my writing, as that of other Hawaiians, whether we write mele (songs), or oli (chants), essays or speeches or poetry or scholarship, is a continuing refusal to be silent—it is a (re)centering and (re)connecting of the self in all of this.

## Aloha Appropriated, Aloha Reclaimed

One crucial influence in reflexivity in communication is the aloha I have. The term aloha itself has deeply conflicting definitions depending on who you ask. For many, aloha signifies a deep, abiding kinship within Hawaiian culture based on practices of reciprocal care and the work it takes to be in community, but we also know that aloha has been turned into a concept for tourism, emptied of its cultural context when displayed in advertisements or postcards. One thing is clear: aloha is a performance, negotiated at the intersection of ancestral knowledge and outsider expectations, manifest in the daily contradictions and complexities of Kānaka Maoli indigeneity (Teves, 2018). Usually conferred through the sharing of a lei, a kiss on the cheek, or perhaps a shaka, aloha is supposed to communicate an overall feeling of welcome and warmth. This imagined performance affirms in the global imagination the existence of something that is real, that represents Hawai'i, that comes from Hawaiians, but that is now a gift given to the world by

Hawaiians. Living with Indigenous values and culture like aloha is a contradiction that many Indigenous people are challenged with. Culture is what makes Indigenous people special, so it should be a source of pride and shared, however, it is cultural difference that made Indigenous peoples subject to colonization and continues to keep Natives locked in Western discourse.

The Hawaiian dictionary defines "aloha" as love, affection, compassion, mercy; to love, to venerate, to show kindness; and as a salutation, to greet, and to hail (Ulukau, 2019). As Hawai'i became more influenced by Western ideology and economics, the use of Hawaiian language and the teaching of Hawaiian culture was banned. By the early twentieth century, aloha became one of the few cultural practices that Kānaka Maoli had left, and they were encouraged to perform it for money (by dancing hula and expressing aloha) (Kanahele, 1992). This is precisely how aloha got attached to the definition of Hawaiianness and Hawaiian culture, because under capitalism Kānaka Maoli are required to perform it as their worth (Teves, 2018). The tourism industry works to ensure that American tourists to Hawai'i would feel at ease in their choice of vacation destination, without any exposure to Hawai'i's troubled racial history or American conquest over Native Hawaiians (Joesting, 1979).

Such non-Hawaiian and Western claims to aloha clearly pose problems for Hawaiian sovereignty. As a Hawaiian word rooted in Polynesian ways of life, aloha belongs first and foremost to Hawaiians, who are uniquely situated to determine its applications. Yet, the "aloha state" and the "aloha spirit" were constructed works against Hawaiian interests in multiple ways, as Keiko Ohnuma (2008) states that it does so:

1. by subsuming the asymmetrical political claims of immigrant-settlers and indigenous people under the umbrella of Christian equality;
2. by containing any political resistance that would foreground such claims;
3. by continuing to invite the exploitation of land and other resources;
4. by the tourism industry; and
5. by substituting feel-good intentions for any material remediation of colonial exploitation. (p. 378)

By appropriating and defining aloha using Western standards, the idea of aloha became a barometer of Hawaiianness that was used to quiet dissent and encourage the maintenance of the settler-colonial state. Our performances of culture can thus function as a tool or weapon of the dominant culture, which forces Indigenous people to perform within the limited and often negating frames it sets to be seen or recognized as subjects at all (Teves, 2018). These are the catch-22s of Indigeneity. Settlers employ definitions of Indigenous cultures that limit Indigenous claims to our resources, lands, and sovereignty. Indigenous people must prove themselves as "real" or "authentic" to secure political recognition and, unfortunately, cultural belonging. Hawaiians have in turn utilized these definitions of Western aloha to access the social, economic, and political resources that are necessary for their survival (Raibmon, 2005).

While the historical appropriation and commodification of aloha have been justifiably criticized, this paper looks instead at the conditions that require Kānaka Maoli to perform aloha and how aloha can be reclaimed as a practice of their own world-making that exceeds the limits set by colonialism. This practice is what Stephanie Nohelani Teves (2018) terms "defiant indigeneity." The uncritical celebration of aloha impacts Kānaka Maoli, for aloha's deployment

in a number of discourses undergirds the ongoing military occupation of the Pacific, the cultural exploitation of our Hawaiian culture, and the attendant environmental degradation across our islands from the ocean to the shores, and to the mountains/volcanos. Still, I am compelled to defend aloha despite its internal conflicts and the contradictions that reform and reproduce its power—I would be lying if I said I didn't believe in aloha too. Aloha is promoted as what is "Hawaiian" and the thing that binds us, and it does. It is imperative, then, to mark how Kānaka Maoli articulate and perform aloha with other Hawaiian philosophies as a strategy to disarticulate aloha from its most commodified forms.

When aloha is connected to our genealogy, land, and culture, a more nuanced aloha is observed. Kānaka-centered and produced texts and performances are much more than the "aloha spirit," they in many cases refute it and reclaim their own sense of aloha grounded in Native Hawaiian ontology and epistemology. We must recall the definition of aloha put forth by Pukuʻi (1983), that aloha is embodied in spaces where people gather to provide mutual helpfulness for collective benefit. Further, aloha functions alongside other Hawaiian values, such as ohana (family) and kōkua (help), which challenge articulations of aloha purely in the name of capitalism. In our commitment to perform our indigeneity, we recenter aloha among ourselves, which in turn allows us to make decolonial claims to life, love, and living as Kānaka Maoli. When we recognize the aloha in one another, we refuse state-based or tourist-infused fantasies of aloha, and we reaffirm aloha as a social relationship between Kānaka Maoli and our land, and non-Natives whom we welcome because they are also committed to this relation. As Trask (1999) describes:

> Social connections between our people are through aloha… carrying with it a profoundly Hawaiian sense that is, again, familial and genealogical. Hawaiians feel aloha for Hawaiʻi from whence they come and for their Hawaiian kin upon whom they depend… But aloha is freely given and freely returned; it is not and cannot be demanded or commanded. Above all, aloha is a cultural feeling and practice that works among the people and between the people and their land. (p. 141)

Trask's words remind us all that we need aloha and we need each other. We must remember this social relation and cultivate it because the yardsticks of indigeneity and aloha apply to all of us.

At the heart of these woven strands of genealogy, land, and people, of who and how we are is aloha, but what now? I surely hope people will read this essay and discover a deeper definition and connection to aloha, but how can we perform aloha in the classroom? I teach and research at a university that serves a majority of Hawaiʻi locals and Hawaiians, and that prides themselves in being one of the most ethnically diverse universities in the nation. It is also designated as an Indigenous-serving institution. So how can an Indigenous scholar, born and raised in a colonized land, taught to embrace both Western and Indigenous perspectives, use aloha in teaching? Well, just like the approach taken in this article, I would like to propose weaving and connecting these perspectives together. The key being a (re)centering of the self in learning, research, and teaching. Here, the Kaʻao Framework provides us with questions to ponder as we perform aloha through our embodied experiences.

## Indigenous (Aloha) Pedagogy: The Kaʻao Framework

In 2012, the University of Hawaiʻi system started their commitment to transforming its campuses into an exemplar of what an Indigenous serving institution of higher education might look like. The main goal being to address the higher education needs of Hawaiʻi's Indigenous

population. From this endeavor, Dr. Taupōuri Tangarō developed the Kaʻao Framework (Our Journey, 2021). Kaʻao can be described as a tale, myth, legend that weave together genealogies to place and people, as Kanakaole from the Kohala Center (2020) asserts, "These stories were born from intimate and intense observations of the natural environment and the changes it goes through. The function that Kaʻao serve is to preserve scientific observational data through compelling stories that can transcend time and generation" (p. 1). From a weaving aho approach, it is centering Western methods with Indigenous lenses with the goal of creating reflexive practitioners and researchers. As Brown would add to this approach, the Kaʻao Framework meshes what we traditionally would think of as dialectical tensions or opposites:

> From a Kanaka Maoli perspective, all of these supposed binaries [legend and history; history and culture; fact and literature] are inextricably intertwined in a holistic approach to the creation and transmission of knowledge that mirrors our relationship with and understanding of our environment. Because the universe, from a Kanaka Maoli viewpoint, is a web of interconnected and genealogically related elements—gods, humans, land, sea, sky, and everything therein—this awareness underpins our poetical approaches to creating and relaying knowledge. (Brown 2016, p. 8)

The Kaʻao Framework as an aloha pedagogical tool helps students to examine themselves and their connections to each other and place. It also encourages us to think about our positionality in terms of the past, present, and future. Kaʻao is a process of transforming oneself and how one thinks of oneself. In using this method, our focus as researchers then becomes more journey focused, rather than result focus. When we approach research and learning, it is not then for the degree or the publication, but it is about how that degree or publication can be a stepping stone to a larger context. The Kaʻao Framework asks the individual personal questions to get them to think about their connection to learning and community—it asks, "who am I?" and "what's my value?" When we bring these questions forward, they act as guides through the academic process. Kaʻao becomes an agent of individual and collective transformation.

The Kaʻao Framework derived from the folklore that was passed down from generation to generation, from hero myths to rites of passage myths, to creation myths in Kānaka Maoli tradition (Brown, 2016). Although this perspective is rooted in Hawaiiana (Hawaiian culture), Kaʻao is a worldwide phenomenon. Every Indigenous community around the world has Kaʻao. They have stories of leadership, of nature, and of value for that community. These are important features for all people, and the Kaʻao Framework brings that into the academic process for students and educators. The purpose, again, is (re)centering the self and weaving the self in education. We no longer approach academia by how many students graduate, but really, as a result of graduating what are students now able to contribute to the community they live in?

The Kaʻao Framework has five components: Hua, Haʻalele, Huakaʻi, Hoʻina, and Haʻina. As we think about myths and legends having literary elements, these five components are what help to create and understand folklore. These components are also what help to understand ourselves in the larger community of the academic institution and local community. Hua, or dream, in terms of a myth is how things began, or the inception of the story. In most cases it is the conception of a conflict or problem that needs to be resolved. For the Kaʻao Framework, it is the catalyst for transformation and asks the reflexive questions of "why?"—"why am I here?", "who am I?" It starts from a place of positioning the self in education. In the classroom, this could be done by creating a safe space where students can share their story with each other. It is

not about defining a person solely by their name on the roster or their student identification number, but from a Kānaka way, we start by understanding their genealogy and connection to place and community. We being to know who they are, where they are from, and what their aspirations are in life. The Hua is the beginning point of centering the student in their education, and weaving connections with each other.

In Hawaiian tales, Haʻalele, or preparation, is the process in which the characters train and get ready to find a solution to the Hua. In the Kaʻao Framework, we think of this as the embodied and collective practices that need to be done to be prepared to achieve one's Hua. It is likened to the ancient Polynesians who left their respective island to venture off to find new islands. Their voyage did not occur overnight, but training needed to be done to acquire the navigational skills and the survival skills. It took years for them to prepare for the journey. In academia, how can we better equip students to achieve their Hua? For one, there is the educational component, but equally important is empowering students to be able to think for themselves, see themselves and their role in their education, and by supporting students as if they were like ohana (family) instead of distant individuals. By valuing students for more than just academic prowess, and treating them like family, we encourage the idea of woven identities, showing that we are all connected to each other.

The third element in the Kaʻao Framework, the Huakaʻi or journey, is the fulfilment of the Hua. In mythical tales, it would be the actual journey that is taking place. Relating it to research and self, it is the sequence of events that take place to reach or attain one's aspiration. For the student it may be a short-term passing grade in a course, or the completion of the requirements for the degree that they are pursuing. For the researcher, it could be the process of collecting information and conducting interviews, or surveys, or (auto)ethnographies. Again, at the center of this all is placing the self in the journey, along with connecting the self to others. The Huakaʻi is the day to day growing of your narrative through the multiple perspectives that you learn. As with any journey, we encounter uplifting moments, but also challenges. It is these difficult scenarios, however, that will help you build fortitude and deepen the relationships we have with others. The Huakaʻi can be an arduous process because it will reflect your strengths, as well as reflect areas that need strengthening. In thinking of the Polynesians who voyaged across the Pacific, it was through trial and error that they learned how to masterfully craft a resilient canoe that can handle calm waters, but also raging seas and turbulent weather. As aforementioned, the Huakaʻi is not just to attain a degree or a publication but is more about the reflexivity in taking the journey itself. How did each class, each component of the academic experience contribute to your world vision and your identity as a person and a scholar?

When the Huakaʻi is complete, we reach the pinnacle of Kaʻao, the Hoʻina or service. In Kānaka folklore, after the journey has taken place and we reach the moment of conflict resolution or ending, the Hoʻina becomes the product of such voyage. It could be the creation of land or environment, or the explanation for cultural phenomenon. In terms of the students and scholar, the Hoʻina is the return to the community. After seeing yourself in this process and how you belong in this process, what will you do to continue this legacy? How will you return what has been learned to the lāhui or community? It is the hope that seeing the deep connection that you have to the community will inspire you to give back to the community to ensure its future and survival. The Hoʻina is a moment in which we find our voice and now use it in the world. It is education in action.

The fifth element of the Kaʻao Framework occurs both at the ending of the Kaʻao process, but also throughout the other four elements of the process. This element is known as Haʻina, or reflection or solution. In most mele hula (Hawaiian hula songs/dances), at the ending of each major verse or at the ending of the song altogether is the phrase, "Haʻina ʻia mai ana ka puana," though not easily translatable into English, it can be loosely translated to, "and so the story goes," or "thus ending my story," or "this is my story." For one thing, Haʻina acts as the ending of the journey, but more importantly Haʻina is also self-reflection throughout the Kaʻao. At every point it asks questions like, "where do I belong in all of this?" "Am I doing what is pono (right)?" "How will this affect others and the environment?" The key idea in Haʻina, is reflexivity—where are you in your story? Thus, at every point of the Kaʻao Framework, you are (re)centering and (re)evaluating the self, because your story matters. In communicating aloha, outside of the "aloha" expected from the tourists' gaze, you need to know yourself. Kaʻao as a framework guides students and individuals in the discovery of the self. It questions our motives at each step of the framework, and keeps us accountable in communicating to others with aloha. In a way, by totally adopting an exoticized notion of aloha assigned to us by colonizers, we are also abiding by Western notions of communication and knowledge production. We separate our own emotions, experiences, and culture to perform a White, "objective," iteration of "aloha." As a counter to this, in adopting a defiant aloha, guided by the Kaʻao framework, we practice self-reflection and reflexivity—we perform aloha as a notion of (re)centering self, and self-determination of the individual, Kānka Maoli, and knowledge production.

**The Future of Indigenous Pedagogy: Who I Am Matters**

Engaging in academic research and writing can mean spending a lot of time alone in archives, in labs, in libraries, in "the field," and often in front of computers. But, referred to as braided knowledges by Indigenous studies scholar Atalay (2019), everything has a connection, thus our scholarly methods should intertwine the best of all perspectives, to create a synergetic approach. This attitude towards scholarship is also seen in Hawaiian studies, as Trask (1999) poetically reassures us that, before we were born, those "Kānaka who came before us have been twinning stores of intellectual ropes for us to use…thus, we who consider ourselves to be Hawaiian studies practitioners are never really alone. Our kūpuna (elders/mentors) join us in our work, whether we recognize them or not" (p. 23).

In her work on research and Indigenous communities, Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) points out that academic research is a site of contestation, struggle, and negotiation between the West and Indigenous people, and lays the groundwork for Indigenous researchers to write from a cultural perspective that serves their home community. Hawaiian cultural protocols serve as guidelines for my research, particularly the value of kuleana (right, responsibility). In academic inquiry, kuleana is applicable to the concept of one's right to information or to share information, as well as one's responsibilities in this knowledge and sharing. Indigenous scholars must be cognizant of what and how we have a right to know and share. As kahu (caretakers) of knowledge, we are responsible in differing degrees to our disciplines, colleagues, and the institutions we work in, but we have equal responsibility to our kupuna (elders), ʻaina, and lāhui (Hawaiian community). When I am asked how I came to choose to research and write about Hawaiian culture and media representations, my answer is always the same: I did not choose it, it chose me. There are many coincidental events that have occurred far too often throughout my life, and especially in the years I have spent in my undergraduate and graduate tenure of studying these texts to be considered mere accidents. Rather, I strongly believe I am guided by my kupuna

on this path of discovery and scholarship. What this kuleana means to me, my ʻohana (family), and the greater lāhui is deeply embedded within me, and guides not just my scholarship, but who I am. Thus, who I am is woven into my scholarship. This is my Kaʻao, and it is my hope that you find yours as well.

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