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History 460

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Kalaupapa, Hawaii: What's in a Name?

Moloka'i, Hawaii: "The Friendly Isle." Situated between the Hawaiian islands of Oahu and Maui, its unassuming nickname hides an amazing history. Throughout the years, Moloka'i has been known by many names. Before the arrival of Europeans, Moloka'i was called *Pule-oo,* meaning "powerful prayer," because, rather than warriors, its chiefs used *kahuna,* ancient chants given to them directly from the goddess Pahulu, to protect the islanders. Moloka'i's population's *mana*, power from the spiritual world, was considered the strongest and most respected throughout Hawaii (Bisignani 305). In 1779, with the arrival of the first recorded white, Captain James Cook, (Hymer 14) as well as the simultaneous arrival of introduced diseases, Moloka'i, drastically reduced in population, became known as "The Lonely Island." Among these diseases, leprosy, microscopic bacteria affecting the skin and peripheral nerves, characterized by skin lesions, nodules, plaques, and thickened dermis, was extremely contagious to the Pacific Islanders (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Between the mid-1800s and 1940, Moloka'i came to be known as "The Leper Island" because islanders afflicted with leprosy were relocated to the island's northern, geographically isolated peninsula, Kalaupapa (Morse 3). Only since 1946, (50) with the discovery of sulfate drugs, has leprosy, now known as Hansen's disease, been able to be controlled (Stewart 403) and Moloka'i has come to be known as "The Friendly Isle," "a human time capsule where the pendulum swings inexorably forward, but more slowly than the rest of Hawaii" (Bisignani 305). By examining Moloka'i's environmental

history through the geography of the Kalaupapa peninsula, the spread of the infectious disease *Mycobacterium leprae* (from here on, Hansen's disease), and the interactions among the isolated lepers and their unique environment, the evolution of Moloka'i from *Pule-oo* to "The Friendly Isle" may be witnessed as stark contrast against the "tropical, untouched paradise" many people from the mainland United States today view Hawaii.

The Hawaiian Islands were formed some 70 million years ago by volcanic activity along the Pacific Plate hot spot (U.S. Geological Survey). Moloka'i, a thin strip of land 38 miles wide and ten miles from north to south (Bisignani 308) formed distinctive cliffs along its northern side, ranging from a height of 1500 to 3000 feet high, the tallest seas cliffs in the Pacific Ocean. Approximately half a million years ago, during the latter part of the Pleistocene era, a small volcano, Kauhako, rose out of the ocean abruptly against Moloka'i's northern coastal cliffs (Cahill 2). The lava that flowed from Kauhako formed a small peninsula some 4.5 square miles in area (Hawaiiweb.com) that came to be known as Kalaupapa, literally, the flat plain (Cahill 2), but intrusion by white settlers would soon change the concept of Kalaupapa as an "isolated" peninsula on an "isolated" island.

On January 16, 1779 Captain James Cook sailed into a bay of Hawaii for the third time. Unbeknown to Cook, the harbor he had sailed into was sacred to a Hawaiian god Lono, who had left Hawaii long ago, vowing to return (Hymer 14). It was also *makahiki* time, a celebration dedicated to Lono, god of Earth (Bisignani 22). The Hawaiians celebrated Cook as the returned Lono, spending much time with the crew members (Hymer 14). The sailors traded metal items for hogs and sex, and, as their constant demands for food and sex grew, the natives began to question Cook's godliness. During Cook's stay, a crew member named William Watman died, cementing the fact that these *haole's*, foreigners to Hawaii, were mortal (Bisignani 22-23).

Realizing that their welcome had been overstayed, the expedition sailed away almost one month after its arrival, only to return in nine days with a ship damaged from a storm. A few Hawaiians, upset to see the returned ship, stole a cutter for its nails and other metal tools and devices. Cook's sailors fired on a Hawaiian canoe attempting to escape the blockaded harbor, and the natives became enraged, counterattacking. In all, five members of Cook's crew, including Cook himself, were killed (Hymer 15). Hawaii had witnessed its first taste of white imperialism, and its connection with the *haole* world, combined with its geographic characteristics, would forever change the islands.

It would be ten years before another exploration party landed on Hawaii. However, white explorers from Cook's party were to be a constant reminder to the Hawaiians, although not for their last deadly journey to Hawaii and their skilled metalwork. A journal from Cook's third voyage describes the microscopic co-invaders that had also accompanied Cook's crew and had spread among many Hawaiians from his first voyages:

> Three of the natives have applied to us for help in their great distress: they had a clap, their penis was much swelled and inflamed. The manner in which these innocent people complained to us seemed to me to show that they considered us the original authors. (Miles 60)

Yaws, gonorrhea, syphilis, and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) became widespread, and it was documented that by the early-1840s "[venereal disease] was rife in Hawaii" (60). Cook, also a physician, had proved unsuccessful in keeping the 66 men who had STDs (out of a crew of 112) away from the Hawaiian women. His fatal third arrival during *makahiki*, when "willing partners enjoyed each other sexually" (Bisignani 23) combined with the fact that many female Hawaiians "tested" the sailors with the temptation of sex to see if they were indeed god or mortal (21), proved fatal for the Hawaiians, too. Less than 100 years after Captain James Cook had arrived in Hawaii, the Hawaiian population had plummeted by more

than 80 percent from infectious diseases (46). Not the sailors themselves, but, instead, their biological co-invaders had decimated the Hawaiian population and left much of the rest with diseases before unknown to these geographically isolated Pacific Islanders.

Certainly one of the most gruesome ailments to haunt the Hawaiians was Hansen's disease. A description of a case on Maui by a doctor follows:

> The beauty of the climate and fertility of the soil might render the inhabitants extremely happy, if the leprosy and venereal disease prevailed among them less generally. These scourges, the most humiliating and most destructive with which the human race are afflicted, display themselves by the following symptoms: buboes, and scars which result from their suppurating, warts, spreading ulcers with caries of the bones, nodes, exostoeses, fistula, tumours of the lachrymal and salivary ducts, scrofulous swellings, …, atrophy of the eyes, blindness, inflamed prurient herpetic eruptions, indolent swelling of the extremities…. (Miles 37)

The first case of this unsightly and highly contagious disease was introduced to Hawaii sometime between the early- and mid-1800s (38-39). By 1865, Hansen's disease had spread to so many Hawaiians that the king, Kamehameha V, introduced "An Act to Prevent the Spread of Leprosy." The Hawaiian Board of Health was to designate a suitable, isolated location for the quarantine of those diagnosed with the disease. The king soon named Kalaupapa, Molokai that place, and, one year later, the first boat load of inflicted individuals was taken there (Cahill 4), beginning the cycle of isolating leprosy on the Hawaiian islands that would last for over 100 years.

Geographically, Kalaupapa's land was found to be diverse enough to provide a suitable habitat for humans. On its southern edge, at the base of the cliffs, are three vallies that protrude deep into the mountain, providing water to the relatively dry peninsula and allowing dense forestland to abrupt the cliffs. This forestland proves crucial by providing wood for lumber and firewood for those living on Kalaupapa (Hawaii Legislature 5). The leftover remnant of the

Kauhako volcano, a large crater, is centered in the middle of the flat plain and contains some of the only remaining dry deciduous forest in Hawaii. Kalaupapa's western shore is relatively calm, while its eastern shore is rocky and dangerous, providing an excellent habitat for many fish and a well-known productive fishing ground. While much of the soil on the peninsula was relatively unproductive and the land spotted with rocks, it provided ample nutrients for a staple crop of Hawaiians, sweet potatoes, before contact with whites. The rocks that littered the ground were used in the construction of fences and windbreaks (Cahill 3-4) for the wild pigs that were caught and raised on the vines and leaves of the sweet potatoes. The first settlers of Kalaupapa most likely canoed from the other Hawaiian Islands, settling on the peninsula's western side, also known as Kalaupapa, presumably not only because of its drier and less windy climate but also for its calmer waters, more suitable for boat anchorage. Its eastern side, Kalawao, and its central plain, Makaualua, remained relatively uninhabited because of the strong trade winds that blow across the eastern shore and northern plain, unprotected by lack of vegetation and the strong rains these trades are known to bring. Early setters used these limited resources to build a community that at one time may have supported 3000 individuals (4).

According to John O'Connor, Jr., "when the edict went forth that Moloka'i was to be the lazaretto, a cry of anguish and despair was heard throughout the islands" (15). Despite protest, in 1866, a cattle ship dumped the first lepers to settle on the peninsula into the ocean along its inhospitable, eastern Kalawao shore. The Hawaiian Board of Health had "erected a crude hospital" for the lepers and provided them with meager food and clothing. Other than this, the lepers were left to fend for themselves (15). As the Kalawao patients struggled to survive, changes in population density across the island began to occur. The native Kalaupapa population slowly left as the highly contagious patients found their way to the more favorable climate of the

western coast, leaving the eastern coast once again uninhabited by humans (Cahill 4). These first lepers made makeshift huts out of the few branches and leaves there (O'Connor 5), presumably hunting, fishing and planting sweet potatoes for subsistence. These early, infected settlers were expected to survive on their own, denied many simple human rights and freedoms.

On May 11th, 1873, the first long-term missionary arrived on Kalaupapa (Stewart 93). Father Damien, often credited as the "savior" of the lepers, helped provide better houses for the patients (Stewart 351) as well as building Kalaupapa's first church and helping to build a road between Kalawao and Kalaupapa (Cahill 5). By 1888, the year Damien died from Hansen's disease, leprosy was considered an epidemic in Hawaii (Cahill 20). At this time 1,011 lepers had been brought to Kalaupapa and over 500 were residing there (Stewart 350). Despite improvements by people such as Father Damien, conditions were still very hard for the lepers on Kalaupapa due to its isolated geography, limited natural resources and highly contagious, disease-ridden population.

In 1892, a committee report was written to the Hawaiian legislature uncovering large problems at Kalaupapa (Hawaii Legislature 2). Victims who claimed they had been sent to Kalaupapa by mistake or were cured from Hansen's disease demanded to be returned to their families (2). While lepers were able to cultivate some produce, raise cattle, and build better houses and hospitals on the peninsula, their lifestyles were still meager (3-4). The little produce that was cultivated on the land had to be divided with the Board of Health, and requests were made to increase the rations of food that could not be grown due to Kalaupapa's dry conditions (3). Firewood had to be obtained from the foot of the cliffs by lepers who were often too sick to do hard labor (5). The committee requested that a butcher shop and a store be established in Kalaupapa (10), also proposing that, "if the parties think it does not pay them to cultivate [land]

under those conditions, they can discontinue and the Board [of Health] can use the land for [live]stock" (11). The committee requested the construction of a reservoir for water, noting that the production of produce on the dry Kalaupapa was only possible "where water is had for irrigation" (18). Yet, while the committee recommended careful examinations of all decreed lepers before entering the isolation of the peninsula (6), "the imperative duty to maintain strict segregation must not be forgotten" (13).

By 1907 the leper settlement in Kalaupapa had grown to ten square miles and, with the arrival of five Franciscan Sisters, the Bishop House, a women's hospital, was established, not to mention "six churches and a Young Men's Christian Association building… several assembly halls, band stand, race track, baseball grounds and shooting ranges" (Territory of Hawaii 8). Agriculture and the raising of livestock as well as dairy were carried out by the Board of Health (9), and by the early 1940s, before the discovery of sulfate drugs as a cure for Hansen's disease, Kalaupapa resembled a modern, albeit poor and isolated town, somehow forgotten by the rest of the world.

In 1946, sulfate drugs were found to control the spread of the bacteria that causes Hansen's disease, both within a patient and between one infected person and another non-infected person. By the late 1960s, with the widespread use of sulfate drugs and a more certain diagnosis of Hansen's disease, any case of infectious leprosy could be made non-infectious within a few weeks. 1969, a monumental year for Kalaupapa, saw the recindication of the law requiring all Hawaiian lepers to be confined. Many of Kalaupapa's residents, however, remained by their own will (Cahill 106). These lepers, once isolated from the entire world, were finally free to become "real people," by proving the human identity they had been denied for over 100 years.

Ironically, an island once shunned because of the humans and their bacterial co-invaders who lived there became famous overnight. Hansen's disease, a biological disease that was once feared, keeping visitors away from Moloka'i, had become a tourist attraction. With the ability to control Hansen's disease came the push for visitors and environmental conservation on Kalaupapa, an isolated and, therefore, ecologically and historically fascinating area, partially due to the disease that was feared only years before. In March of 1959, the United States Congress made Hawaii its 50th state. On December 22nd, 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed into existence the 10,770 plus acre Kalaupapa National Historical Park, and today a small number of residents, former Hansen's disease patients, still live in Kalaupapa (National Park Service). Not only was the land open to tourists, but by naming the park Kalaupapa National *Historical* Park, so too were the residents of the leper colony put on display for visitors.

Moloka'i has become one of the most sought-after Hawaiian Islands for the preservation of flora and fauna, especially on the extremely isolated Kalaupapa peninsula. The Nature Conservancy (Arizona Memorial Museum Association) and the National Park and State Park Services all tout preserves and wildlife conservation parks on the island. According to the Arizona Memorial Museum Association's website, many places in the Kalaupapa National Historical Park provide habitats for threatened and endangered Hawaiian plants and animals because they "[have] never been occupied by humans." The website calls the threats to the peninsula's endangered species "all alien to the natural ecosystem" including goats, pigs and deer, brought in by the early residents of Kalaupapa, simultaneously denying the existence the Kalaupapa lepers who lived on the island for over a century.

With the growth of ecotourism, Kalaupapa has been marketed as a destination for the adventurous traveler. According to the National Park Service website, approximately 10,000

people visit the settlement each year, arriving by air, private boat or taking the 2.9 mile switchback trail by mule down the cliffs. There is no overnight camping in the park except by guests of residents, although "interaction with residents, physical isolation [and] scenic beauty… contribute to memorable visitor experiences at the Kalaupapa National Historical Park" (National Park Service).

This ironic push for tourism on the island of Moloka'i has accompanied mixed emotions. Almost half of the island's inhabitants have more than 50 percent Hawaiian blood, making it the only Hawaiian Island except for Niihau where Hawaiians are the majority. Today *kuleana* owners, Moloka'i residents that were given 40 acres of land if they could prove over 50 percent Hawaiian blood, form a type of grass roots organization fighting for Molaka'ian rights against developers threatening to buy up the land (Bisignani 305, 353), standing stark contrast to the other highly developed, tourist-based Hawaiian islands. Unfortunately, this Hawaiian pride may get in the way of Moloka'i's economy, where between 80 to 90 percent of the population is on welfare (312).

The victims' of Hansen's disease were treated poorly in the early years of the settlement of the Kalaupapa, Molokai leper colony, and denied many basic individual rights and freedoms. Today Kalaupapa's former residents have been denied a cultural history by calling the peninsula untouched by humans because of their once low population size and subsistence-based lifestyle. Undoubtedly, the history of Moloka'i's Kalaupapa peninsula has been full of ironic contradictions such as these, documented most clearly by the island's changes in nickname. Just as Kalaupapa's scenery starkly contrasts sublime ocean cliffs and a pastoral plain, so has Moloka'i's representation of "The Lonely Island" come to contrast its nickname today as "The Friendly Isle." Although Hansen's disease is today controlled in Hawaii, the peninsula continues

to be part of an environmental story of geographical isolation, microbial disease and human interaction with the land, only now incorporating new issues of environmental conservation and cultural identity.

> Some people say, 'Oh, it must be a blessing not to have feeling. You can't feel the sting of a burn or a cut.' I don't think it is a blessing. I can't feel the silkiness of a baby's hair nor the velvety petals of a rose nor the feel of a scorpion crawling over my foot, or even a centipede. I will confuse you a little bit more. In a dull sort of way, I can feel when I am being touched and not all parts of my body are in the same condition… I think it's kind of this disease to allow that, don't you?
>
> Even if my skin is insensitive, my heart and my soul are not. (96-97)
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> - Olivia Robello Breitha, leper who lived on Kalaupapa from 1937-1983, from her *book Olivia: My Life of Exile in Kalaupapa*

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