

The Romance of Hawaii in William Ellis's "Narrative of a Tour Through Hawaii, or, Owhyhee"

Harry Liebersohn

Abstract

The history of Hawaii offers a stark contrast between traditional Hawaiian culture and the puritanism of the American missionaries who arrived in 1820. However, the long-term relationship turned into one of interaction between these opposites and, to some degree, accommodation. This paper examines an early text documenting their complex relationship: William Ellis's *Narrative of a Tour Through Hawaii, or, Owhyhee* (1826). It focuses on Ellis's description of three hula performances. Even though other missionaries were inclined to regard the hula as a particularly pernicious Hawaiian practice, Ellis gave detailed and sympathetic descriptions of it. A pattern of performance and counter-performance emerges from his narrative, with the missionaries preaching and hymn-singing in response to Hawaiians' hula performances and praise for their gods and leaders. The paper considers the political, personal and cultural contexts for Ellis's dialogical response to Hawaiian culture, emphasizing its affinity to literary Romanticism; it also reflects on the larger significance of this kind of ambivalent missionary response to an indigenous culture.

Introduction: The Unlikely Synthesis of Native Hawaiian and American Missionary Cultures

A recent recording, *Nā Mele Hawai'i* sung by the Rose Ensemble in Saint Paul, Minnesota, is a poignantly beautiful introduction to traditional Hawaiian music: with the help of expert ethnomusicologists, this ensemble has compiled twenty songs, hymns, and chants that introduce us to some of the chief composers and styles, most of them in this album from the late nineteenth century.¹ The kinds of songs represented here have become a precious legacy, the inspiration for what is called Hawaiian music in the twenty-first century, especially as practiced by those who want to further a Hawaiian culture with a historical conscious-

ness of what makes the music distinctive. But just what is this music that we call traditional Hawaiian? The very first number, "Ku'u Pua i Paoakalani" (1895), was composed by Queen Lili'uokalani (1838-1917), the last monarch of the Hawaiian kingdom before the coup d'état that installed Sanford B. Dole in 1893. As soon as one listens to the music, the inflection comes through of a melody that is not native Hawaiian, but descends from the Protestant hymns brought by American missionaries brought with them to the islands beginning in 1820. At the same time, however, it is a love poem in the distinctive imagist style of native Hawaiian verse. It begins by invoking the flowers of Paoakalani, the Waikiki estate of the queen, and passes from the perfumed breeze across the field to the name of the beloved: a discreet synthesis of the erotic and the flowers of the field. Like the music, the text synthesizes native and settler cultures:

1. Rose Ensemble (2007).

E ka gentle breeze e waft mai nei – “O ye gentle breeze that wafts to me,” in the queen’s own translation.² Here is the mix we wish to analyze: the music that is missionary and native, the aristocrat who is descended from the Hawaiian gods but moves fluently back and forth between traditional and modern world. How did we get here in the few generations from the arrival of Captain Cook in 1778? That is what we shall explore by going back to those formidable agents of Christianity and European civilization, the missionaries. Despite their ambition to spiritually conquer and uproot the native culture, from the beginning a complicated pattern arose of allegiance to the conquerors’ culture but ongoing loyalty to Hawaiian artistic traditions. Native chant and dance enjoyed a resurgence at the end of the nineteenth century and have again been brought to life by musicians and dancers in our own time.

The Missionary War on Native Hawaiian Culture

In general, puritan missions to North America and the Pacific do not look like promising territory for evidence of *métissage* between cultures. The Massachusetts Bay Colony founders were notoriously frightened by and intolerant of Indian religious practices. Whether in sermons or in captivity narratives, they denounced native religious as the devil’s work which it was their duty to extirpate; there was no sign here of the kind of sympathy or respect that one finds in Roger Williams, whom they drove out into the wilderness of what became Rhode Island, or that brotherly love urged on his brethren by the Quaker William Penn. The early Protestant missions to Oceania, which were also in the hands of puritanical denominations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, were for the most part equally zealous and intolerant. The early London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries were lower-middle-class “godly mechanics” who, as C. W. Newbury has made clear, had disastrously little capacity to understand the alien cultures they were

thrown into.³ The same is true for the first missionaries to Hawaii. The American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions (ABCFM) was formed in New England with ambitions similar to those of the LMS in England. The founders believed that a great new territory for missionary activity had opened up in the Pacific and that they could further the end of days by working there. The Americans were better educated and could benefit from the experiences of their British contemporaries; for one thing, this time they had the sense to marry off missionaries instead of sending them out in a state of intolerable celibacy. But education and marriage did not make them any less narrowly zealous; on the contrary, they were as doctrinaire as the original Massachusetts Bay puritans.

To heighten their self-confidence, the first ABCFM missionaries had luck or, as they would have called it, divine providence on their side. Although they did not know it before their arrival in 1820, a religious revolution had taken place in the Sandwich Kingdom.⁴ Kamehameha I, the founder of the unified monarchy, had modernized the island’s army and economy, but he stuck to its religious traditions, perhaps because the Hawaiian social hierarchy was inseparable from its *heiaus* or temples, its priests, and its sacred calendar, all of which reinforced the exalted status of the *ali’i*, who were demigods descended from the gods. After Kamehameha’s death, however, his son Liholiho (Kamehameha II) began to unravel the religious system by eating in the presence of women, a violation of the *kapu* system separating sacred and profane. The missionaries arrived just in time to offer a new god for worship; and they understood from the beginning that their best chance for success was to win the *ali’i* to their side. Marshall Sahlins has written a detailed portrait of the economic crisis of the islands in the early 1820s as European and American merchants stripped them of sandalwood for trade with China and the *ali’i* catastrophically indebted themselves to the merchants in their accumulation of luxuries that could reflect their social and religious splen-

2. Ibid. (booklet accompanying record), p. 10.

3. Newbury (1980), chaps. 1-2. See also Sivasundaram (2005).

4. Kuykendall (1938) p. 102.

dour. The Hawaiians were also demoralized by a demographic catastrophe, the introduction of venereal and other epidemic diseases that had reduced the islanders to a fraction of their former number.

In his account of his twenty-one years in the Sandwich Islands, Hiram Bingham, one of the most prominent missionaries, assaulted native Hawaiian culture as a kingdom of darkness that he and his fellow missionaries were determined to bring into the light. Bingham's wrapped his description of the hula in condemnation.⁵ Beginning his account of the mission's second year (1821), he wrote: "While some of the people who sat in darkness were beginning to turn their eyes to the light, and were disposed to attend our schools and public lectures, others, with greater enthusiasm, were wasting their time in learning, practising, or witnessing the *hula*, or heathen song and dance."⁶ Bingham was especially annoyed that the dances were performed in Honolulu in honour of Liholiho at a moment when he was expected to arrive there from Kailua (today Kailua-Kona on the island of Hawai'i). The preparations for Liholiho's arrival revealed the helplessness of the missionaries: "Notwithstanding the self-indulgent and overbearing course of their monarch, the show of loyalty, feigned or real, was very general."⁷ It disturbed the peace, it distracted the students: "For many weeks in succession, the first sound that fell on the ear in the morning was the loud beating of the drum, summoning the dancers to assemble. Some of our pupils were required to attend and perform their part. Day after day, several hours in the day, the noisy hula - drumming, singing, and dancing in the open air, constituted the great attraction or annoyance."⁸ Bingham was a close observer and gave a detailed account of the dancers' swaying and the rhythm of wooden rods and calabashes, but he could not hear the music in it: "Melody and harmony are scarcely known to them,

with all their skill and art."⁹ His final judgment: "The whole arrangement and process of their old *hulas* were designed to promote lasciviousness, and of course the practice of them could not flourish in modest communities. They had been interwoven too with their superstitions, and made subservient to the honour of their gods, and their rulers, either living or departed and deified."¹⁰ Bingham was incorrect to see in the *hula* performances, which were compendia of myth and history, primarily an erotic spectacle, but was right to link them to the entire social and religious system of ancient Hawaii, which he was determined to extirpate.

William Ellis's Ambivalent Hawaiian Narrative

So far the relationship between missionary and native world-views sounds like a clash of civilizations scripted by one of today's prophets of irreconcilable differences between religious systems. But this would be an incomplete understanding of the relationship between traditional culture and Protestantism on Hawaii. At least one prominent missionary, William Ellis, points in the direction of a different vocabulary of surprise, bafflement, confusion, and even admiration.¹¹ It would not be correct to say that he gave up his puritanical convictions or hoped for something less than an end to traditional religious practices. Still, his text points to the ongoing power of traditional culture despite the impact of Western invasion on many levels, including religion. It is worth recalling that for much of the nineteenth century Westerners were convinced that indigenous peoples were doomed to biological extinction, one of the era's many forms of "progress."¹² Just as this prediction did not come true, so traditional societies could have far greater cultural resilience than it may have appeared at first sight. The text in which Ellis bears witness to

5. Bingham (1848).

6. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

11. Fig. 1.

12. Brantlinger (2003). Cf. Liebersohn (2006), pp. 287-288.

this greater complexity is his *Narrative of a Tour Through Hawaii*, first published in 1826.¹³

Clifford Geertz has written about a comparable set of observations for Bali in a short passage written by a Danish merchant named L. V. Helms, who according to Geertz lived in southern Bali between 1839 and 1856; Helms was torn between his sensuous attraction to Balinese culture and his revulsion toward the cruelty of *suttee*. Geertz speaks of the “deep equivocality” in Helms’s text.¹⁴ Ellis’s narrative, a book rather than a short passage, is different: there is not so much a tension as a juxtaposition of Hawaiian culture and missionary exhortation, sometimes with an open admiration for Hawaiian practices. Rod Edmond discovers a similar structure in Ellis’s more famous work, *Polynesian Researches*, which Edmond calls an “ideal narrative of reciprocity.” But that work as Edmond defines it is marked by a brusque alternation between neutral scientific description and cheerleading for what Edmond calls “Christian soldiers battling with the forces of Satan.”¹⁵ I myself have recounted Ellis’s polemical defence of the Tahitian mission against the contempt and complaints of upper-class captains and naturalists on the voyages of exploration that stopped from time to time at Tahiti; Ellis’s controversy with them as well as the frustrations of missionary work pushed *Polynesian Researches* into an aggressive denunciation of traditional Polynesian culture.¹⁶ In this context Ellis’s Hawaiian narrative is all the more surprising; it lacks the vehemence of the later, more systematic work. Instead the travel experience seems to swallow up Ellis’s polemical vocabulary and replace it with one altogether more irenic. While the missionary remains a missionary whose ultimate goal is conversion to Christianity and extirpation of native religion, the path to the goal runs through persuasion and an actual enjoyment of his exposure to the public

13. Ellis (1827). I have also consulted Ellis (1917). Although this is a reprint of the 1827 edition, the type has been reset and subject headings have been added.

14. Geertz (1983), pp. 40-43.

15. Edmond (1997), pp. 106-107.

16. Liebersohn (2006), pp. 262-272.



Fig. 1. William Ellis (1794-1872). Engraving used as frontispiece to the 1827 edition of *Narrative of a Tour Through Hawaii*.

performances that synthesize history, entertainment, and praise of native rulers known as the *hula*. I would suggest calling Ellis’s memoir an *ambivalent text*. By that I mean a text with explicit sympathies for each of the two cultures on open display. In contrast to the tension-filled texts described by Geertz and Edmond, with their sullen admission of native cultural allure and barnstorming condemnation of the servants of Satan, the ambivalent text offers a more evenly coloured panorama of native and missionary public performances.

Ellis belonged to the second generation of LMS missionaries in Tahiti. While the first generation was undereducated and unprepared for the alien cultures that awaited them, they nonetheless gradually recov-

ered from their initial shock and built a successful mission there. Ellis himself was of the true LMS social mould: He was trained as a gardener but at age twenty joined the LMS and became a Congregational missionary. Together with his wife, he sailed in 1816 for the Society Islands (present-day French Polynesia), where he quickly distinguished himself by installing a printing press and disseminating religious literature. A gifted linguist, he began two years later to deliver sermons in Tahitian.¹⁷ Travellers frequently bragged about their mastery of Polynesian languages, but that often meant little more than grabbing at words and phrases; building on the labours of his predecessors in the mission, Ellis seems to have attained a degree of fluency that gave him a different level of communication with islanders. In 1822 Ellis went to the Hawaiian Islands for what was supposed to be a brief visit. The embattled American missionaries were so impressed that they urged him to stay, which he did, first retrieving his family and then remaining on the islands until 1825. His position as a high-ranking LMS administrator beginning in 1830 and *Polynesian Researches*, published in 1833, made him one of the most famous missionaries of the first half of the nineteenth century.

Polynesian Researches is a far better known work today than the *Narrative of a Tour through Hawaii*, and understandably so: as a general ethnography it remains a respected source of information about Tahitian, Hawaiian, and other Polynesian cultures, which Ellis, despite his missionary bias, knew intimately well. The account of his walking tour on the island of Hawai'i would seem to be a more local work with a lasting interest only for Hawaiian specialists. Any reader familiar only with *Polynesian Researches* would be justified in thinking of Ellis as an able polemicist who was able to convey valuable knowledge despite his ambitions for the Polynesian missions. It is startling to turn from the ideologically driven ethnography to the earlier travel account. The *Narrative of a Tour through Hawaii* conveys an entirely different experience of cultural exchange that took place at the time of Ellis's tour in 1823. Ellis had been with his family on the Hawaiian

Islands for roughly four months when he left Oahu on July 2 for the island of Hawai'i. At the time there was not yet a mission there, and the tour by Ellis and his three companions from the American mission (accompanied by a "mechanic" named Mr. Harwood) was the mission's first attempt to survey the loyalty to native religion, the attitudes towards Christianity, the receptiveness of local power holders, and the best places to establish mission stations. Ellis's account of his visit, which lasted from July 11 to September 3, with additional stops on Maui during his departure and return, is a reminder of how specific works are to their moment and their genre. Ellis was captivated by the beauty of the islands and their inhabitants; he wrote up the work from his journals and did not lose the excitement of plunging into this strange world at a time when he felt welcomed by the islanders and hopeful about their prospects for peaceful conversion to Christianity. The genre of the travel narrative did not allow him to stray too far from these experiences; while the work included many ethnographic asides, he returned again and again to his narrative of his progress from place to place on a largely happy tour of the island's hospitable villages and natural wonders.

First Hula Encounter: A Royal Reception on Maui

One of the most provocative institutions for missionaries in the Society Islands or Sandwich Islands was the local dance performances. We have already seen that to Hiram Bingham, the *hula* embodied erotic enticement and flattery to a monarch, judgments that left little room for actual understanding of the performances. Hula enters Ellis's narrative soon after his departure from Oahu. Three experiences of hula performances come in rapid succession near the beginning of his story. They have the effect of leading the reader across an enchanted bridge from the business and bustle of Oahu to the remote world of Hawai'i, still immersed in native arts and religious beliefs.

The first encounter on Maui moves the narrative from the civilized world of the merchants and mis-

17. Etherington (2004).

sionaries to the world of the *ali'i*. Ellis's ship anchors "within about four miles of Lahaina, which is the principal district in Maui, on account of its being the general residence of the chiefs, and the common resort of ships that touch at the island for refreshments."¹⁸ The landing place gives every impression of a well-ordered countryside of a kind to appeal to European visitors:

The appearance of Lahaina from the anchorage is singularly romantic and beautiful. A fine sandy beach stretches along the margin of the sea, lined for a considerable distance with houses, and adorned with shady clumps of *kou* trees, or waving groves of cocoa-nuts. The former is a species of cordia; the *Cordia sebastina* in Cook's voyages. The level land of the whole district, for about three miles, is one continued garden, laid out in beds of taro, potatoes, yams, sugar-cane, or cloth plants. The lowly cottage of the farmer is seen peeping through the leaves of the luxuriant plantain and banana tree, and in every direction white columns of smoke ascend, curling up among the wide-spreading branches of the bread-fruit tree. The sloping hills immediately behind, and the lofty mountains in the interior, clothed with verdure to their very summits, intersected by deep and dark ravines, frequently enlivened by glittering waterfalls, or divided by winding valleys, terminate the delightful prospect.¹⁹

Nature is beautiful, tame, recognizable, rewarding to its cultivators; welcoming at first sight ("romantic and beautiful") and filled with signs of industry (the beds of agricultural products) and social order ("the lowly cottage of the farmer"). If the vegetation is profuse, it is also manageable. There is a hint as well of something dangerous in those "deep and dark ravines." This smooth transition in descriptions of Pacific islands goes back to the eighteenth century; a famous picture by William Hodges originating in Cook's second world voyage, *Tahiti Revisited* (1776), conveys a tropical paradise with intimations of a strange and disconcerting world. Beyond the Pacific, Coleridge's Xanadu in the poem *Kubla Khan* (published in 1816) alternates be-

tween welcoming light and sinister darkness in its description of Kubla Khan's fantastic paradise. But these special effects only enhance Lahaina's "delightful prospect." Despite the glimpse of the sinister in Ellis's account, Lahaina as he views it is above all that most welcoming of sights for a missionary - a garden.

Ellis's reception only confirms his initial impressions. A boat with chiefs on board carries him from his ship to land; on disembarking he is greeted by the governor of the island, Keoua; soon after he meets and is "welcomed by Mr. Stewart," a prominent missionary who was returning "from morning worship with Keopuolani and her husband."²⁰ A prayer meeting between Stewart and Keopuolani was a weighty event, for she was a central political power in the kingdom. Her first husband was Kamehameha I, and beyond that she was a formidable figure in her own right as a descendant of one of the highest and most sacred *ali'i* families (unlike Kamehameha himself, who came from a parvenu *ali'i* family). She was now wife of the governor of Maui; and she was the mother of Liholiho, the reigning monarch of the Sandwich Kingdom. Great *ali'i* did not necessarily have much respect for the missionaries; Ka'ahumanu frightened them with her haughty and wilful behaviour, even though she became a fierce follower of Christianity. But the humbly born Ellis's reception on Maui was all grace and light. In his account Liholiho himself is on the island and walks the visitor to the plantation house that will host him during his stay. Liholiho is, "as usual, neatly and respectably dressed, having on a suit of superfine blue, made after the European fashion."²¹ Travellers regularly gave less flattering reports of native leaders, commenting on their complexion, their clothing (often a mixture of European and native), their inattention or their insobriety, but here Liholiho appears like a modern bourgeois, all dressed up and ready for the pleasantries they exchange on their walk to the house of Mr. Butler, the plantation owner.

The next person to walk on to Ellis's stage is Keopuolani herself, with whom he spends the rest of the

18. Ellis (1827), p. 61.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

21. *Ibid.*

morning. Here again there is nothing to disturb the picture of the savage queen transformed by the dual graces of Christianity and civilization. “She, as well as the other chiefs present, appeared gratified with an account of the attention given to the means of instruction at Oahu, and desirous that the people of Lahaina might enjoy all the advantages of Christian education.” That education is already under way: the next afternoon Ellis goes with the missionaries to their schools on the beach and sees about fifty students, many of them making good progress “in reading, spelling, and writing on slates.”²²

Just as afternoon school is ending, the narrative scene shifts back to Keopuolani’s house. The hula performers appear, as do five musicians, and together they start up a *hula ka ra’au*, a “dance to the beating of a stick”: they beat small sticks (six to nine inches long) against five or six-foot staffs, their right feet “beating time” against a stone. Then comes a sensuous swirl of female dancers: “Six women, fantastically dressed in yellow tapas, crowned with garlands of flowers, having also wreaths of the sweet-scented flowers of the *gardenia* on their necks, and branches of the fragrant *mairi* [another native plant, H.L.], bound round their ankles, now made their way by couples through the crowd, and, arriving at the area, on one side of which the musicians stood, began their dance. Their movements were slow, and though not always graceful, exhibited nothing offensive to modest propriety. Both musicians and dancers alternately chanted songs in honour of former gods and chiefs of the islands, apparently much to the gratification of the numerous spectators.”²³ As abruptly as the spectacle begins, it ends. After a half hour Keopuolani asks the musicians to stop. The dancers sit down; and “after the missionaries and some of the people had sung one of the songs of Zion, I preached to the surrounding multitude with special reference to their former idolatrous dances, and the vicious customs connected therewith, from Acts xvii. 30.”²⁴ What are we to make

of this dramatic moment? Up to the appearance of the dancers, everything seems to move forward as in a kind of reformer’s dream of the progress of civilization, of a kind that North American missionaries wished for native peoples. Why, then, would the queen disrupt the illusion with the rhythm of the sticks, the perfume of the flowers, the brilliance of the tapa, the dancing girls prancing through the crowd, the chants in honour of the gods and their earthly descendants? Perhaps it was a show of her own charisma. Despite the arrival of a new god, she was still a descendant of the gods whom the hula players celebrated and the people continued to adore; the spectacle was a political-theological lesson for any visitor who thought he was dealing with an ordinary mortal. One cannot say with certainty. We only know that the *effect* of the performance within the narrative is to disrupt the flow of the preceding vignettes with their perfect garden, perfect royal hosts, and near-perfect school children.

Ellis is not dismayed. He has a counter-performance to make; he *preaches*. There is a certain opacity to his behaviour too, for he relates the performance without a hint of exaggeration or belittlement; unlike Bingham he does not play up the erotic qualities of the dance or demean the Hawaiians’ devotion to the queen mother. Perhaps his restrained response had to do with the diplomacy of the moment; if he wanted the mission to succeed on Maui and the other islands it was best to humour Keopuolani, who after all had declared that she was on his side. His behaviour belongs to a larger historical horizon as well. A minister like Ellis lived simultaneously between his nineteenth-century moment and the ever-present Acts of the Apostles. He and his fellow missionaries were spiritually conquering a new kingdom, but they were also following the commandments and re-enacting the behaviour of the early Christian community. His immediate model in the text is the Biblical verse that he cites from Acts: “The times of this ignorance God winked at, but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent.” It is the apostle Paul who speaks. He is among the Athenians, a crowd of philosophers and others who are curious to hear what the newcom-

22. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

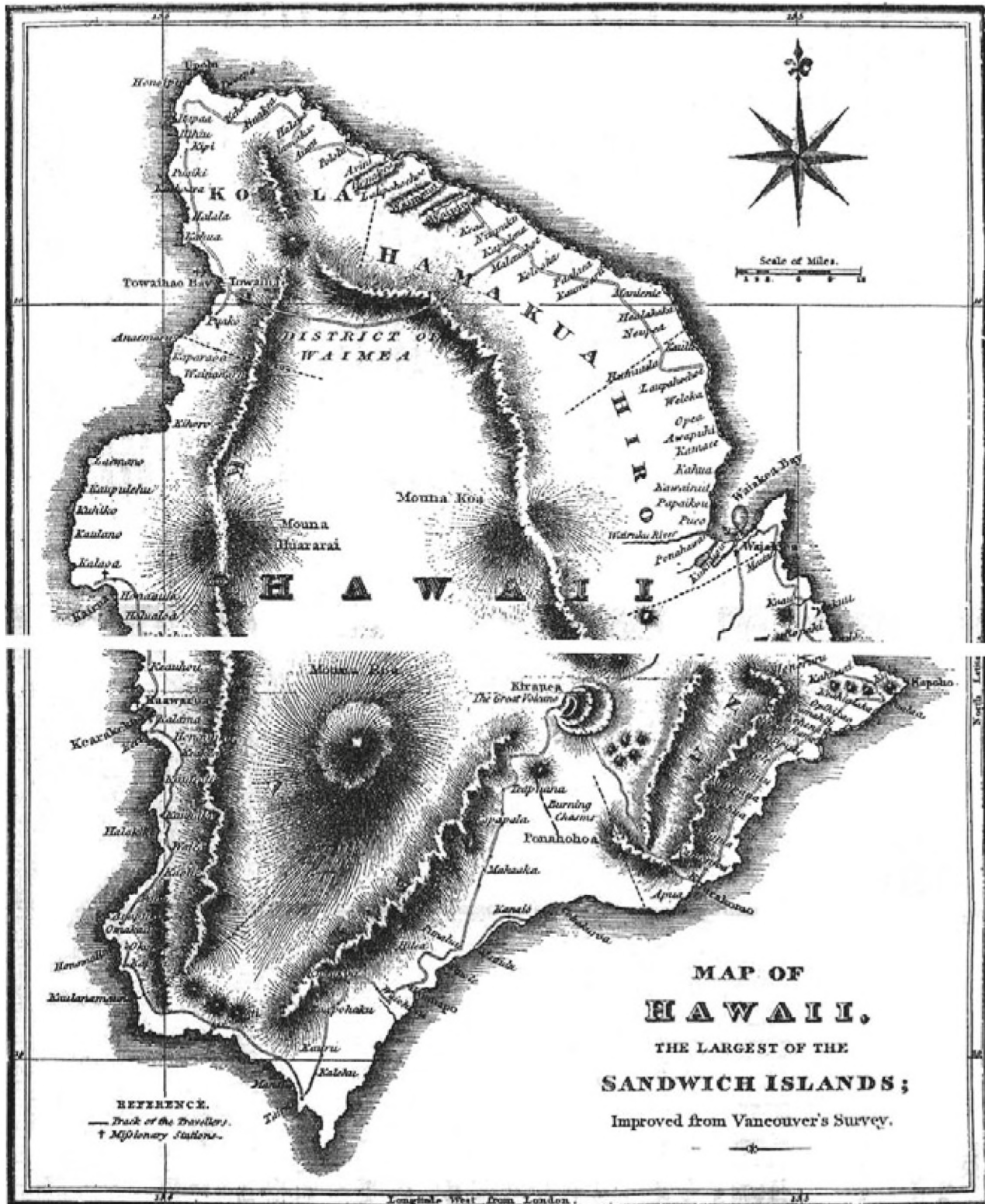


Fig. 2. Ellis' map of Hawaii in the 1827 edition of *Narrative of a Tour Through Hawaii*. Kailua ("Kairua" on the map), now Kailua-Kona, the place where Ellis met Kuakini, the governor of Hawai'i, and where a missionary station was established, is at the broad bay in the central part of the west coast.



KUAKINI.
Governor of Hawaii.

Fig. 3. Kuakini. Engraving in the 1827 edition of *Narrative of a Tour Through Hawaii*.

er has to say. Some laugh and others turn thoughtful as he tells them about the resurrection of the dead and the coming day of judgment. Ellis's dialogue with the Hawaiians on Maui and have their model in this original confrontation of pagan and Christian deities.

Second Hula Encounter: Hospitality and Indifference at Kailua

On July 14, Ellis arrived at last at Kailua, where he met the governor of Hawai'i, Kuakini, and joined up with his fellow missionaries, who had taken a separate ship a few days before Ellis's departure.²⁵ Here again Ellis is treated to hula performances in honour of the ruling *ali'i*. In the afternoon of his day of arrival "a

25. The position of Kailua on the west coast of Hawai'i is seen on Ellis' map of Hawai'i in Fig. 2. Kuakini, in traditional clothes, is portrayed by Ellis in Fig. 3.

party of strolling musicians and dancers" arrives at Kailua, "followed by crowds of people, and arranged themselves on a fine sandy beach, in front of one of the governor's houses, where they exhibited a native dance, called *hura araapapa* [*hula ala'a papa*, a sacred dance, H.L.]. This time there were again five musicians, who were keeping rhythm with calabashes by striking them on the ground and beating them with their fingers or the palms of their hands. A single male dancer worked his way through the crowd:

His jet-black hair hung in loose and flowing ringlets down his naked shoulders ... A beautiful yellow tapa was tastefully fastened round his loins, reaching to his knees. He began his dance in front of the musicians, and moved forwards and backwards, across the area, occasionally chanting the achievements of former kings of Hawaii. The governor sat at the end of the ring, opposite to the musicians, and appeared gratified with the performance, which continued until the evening.²⁶

Nothing rattles Ellis: once again he is the appreciative tourist, admiring the neatly made instruments and the yellow tapa without a hint of protest at the profuse dark locks of the dancer; this time he observes without even the counter-performance of a sermon.

The next day, at about the same time, Ellis is treated by the governor to yet another hula performance, this time with seven musicians playing wooden drums with sharkskin heads, and two children, a boy and a girl "apparently about nine years of age," performing the dance, "cantilating, alternately with the musicians, a song in honour of some ancient of Hawaii."²⁷ Ellis then gives a detailed account of the audience response:

The governor of the island was present, accompanied, as it is customary for every chieftain of distinction to be on public occasions, by a retinue of favourite chiefs and attendants. Having almost entirely laid aside the native costume, and adopted that of the foreigners who

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86. On the *hula ala'a papa* see Emerson (1909), p. 57-72. According to Emerson, this dance was reserved for high-rank *ali'i*.

27. Ellis (1827), p. 90. The scene is the only *hula* illustrated by Ellis; his illustration is reproduced here as Fig. 4.



A Hula, or Native Dance, Performed in Presence of Governor Kuakini at Kalua.

Fig. 4. Ellis' first hula at Kailua on Hawai'i, the *hula ala'a papa*. It is performed with five musicians in the presence of Kuakini, the governor of Hawai'i. Engraving in the 1827 edition of *Narrative of a Tour Through Hawaii*.

visit the islands, he appeared on this occasion in a light European dress, and sat on a Canton-made arm chair, opposite the dancers, during the whole exhibition. A servant, with a light *kihei* of painted native cloth thrown over his shoulder, stood behind his chair, holding a highly polished spittoon, made of the beautifully brown wood of the cordia in one hand, and in the other a handsome *kahiri* [kahili, H.L.], an elastic rod, three or four feet long, having the shining feathers of the tropic-bird tastefully fastened round the upper end, with which he fanned away the flies from the person of his master. The beach was crowded with spectators, and the exhibition kept up with great spirit, till the over-spreading shades of evening put an end to their mirth, and afforded a respite to the poor children, whose little limbs must have been very much fatigued by two hours of constant exercise. We were anxious to address the multitude on the subject of religion before they should disperse; but so intent were they on their amusement, that they could not have been diverted from it.²⁸

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

His host Kuakini was another formidable player in Hawaiian politics: he was the brother of Ka'ahumanu, hence from a high-ranking family; his sister linked him to the inner circle of the monarchy. Marshall Sahlins has described how his sister and her clan were in fact the real rulers of the islands after the death of Kamehameha I: Liholiho was a sacred figurehead, while the tempestuous Ka'ahumanu divided up the kingdom with her brothers. In the 1820s Kuakini was a non-nonsense leader who did not tolerate wild drinking by sailors and knew how to cut a deal with Western businessmen.²⁹ We see the evidence of his urbanity here: he dresses like a European, although he allows himself to be fly-swatted by the *kahili*, a symbol of high rank. In a hint of the global economic connec-

29. Sahlins and Kirch (1992), pp. 60-61, 79. Sahlins also discusses the sandalwood trade and its disastrous consequences. On Kuakini's political and economic role see also Kuykendall (1938), pp. 125, 130-132, 183.

tions of the kingdom, he sits on a Chinese-made chair, a reminder of the trade in sandalwood that brought huge profits to *ali'i* as foreign traders until the hills had been stripped and the market collapsed later in the 1820s. For the success of his tour Ellis was completely dependent on Kuakini. Before the hula began on the day after his arrival, he and Kuakini met to discuss his travel arrangements. The ruler provided him with a canoe for their baggage and a guide, “without any recompense whatever.”³⁰ An *ali'i* knew how to put the missionaries in his debt for his generosity. He also knew how to deflect their ambition to convert their hosts. Whatever preaching Ellis was going to do was overwhelmed by the wave of Hawaiian festivity, the “mirth” of the crowd that drowned out any attempts at preaching.

Third Hula Encounter: Ellis Confronts Pelé on the Heights of Kilauea

Why did Ellis not protest this display of power and indifference to the whole point of his visit? Clearly it was politic not to interfere with his host's idea of an evening entertainment, especially one that avoided anything like a minister's conception of indecent drinking or erotic suggestion. Moreover Ellis seems to have had a different personality from the killjoy New Englanders; one has the impression from his narrative and his successful later career of a genial man who know how to balance his missionary aims with a warm interest in the different people he met. Perhaps, too, he was optimistic at this early moment about the Hawaiian mission's future and could humour the Hawaiians as they made the transition from an ebullient, warlike, spectacle-loving people to what he hoped would be a meek and mild Christian society.³¹

30. Ellis (1827), p. 89.

31. Ellis comments extensively on the warlike character of the Hawaiians and their love of athletic competitions. See *ibid.*, pp. 132-138. And adds his hope for the future: “There is every reason to hope,” he adds, “that Christianity, when more generally received, will subdue their restless and ambitious spirits; and under its influence they may be expected, like the southern islanders, to delight in the occupations of peace, and

There is another reason for Ellis's sympathetic treatment of Hawaiian culture. His *Narrative* was a work of literary Romanticism, as he makes clear in describing the final performance of his second evening with Kuakini: at dinner the ministers and Kuakini's entourage are joined by “an interesting youthful bard, twelve or fourteen years of age” who sings “in a monotonous but pleasing strain, the deeds of former chiefs, ancestors of our host.”³² With his playful contrasts of Hawaiian and European times and places Ellis distances the performance from ancient Greece and medieval Europe, yet places it in a recognizable continuity with them. The visit to Hawaii permits him to time-travel to favourite scenes of the Romantic literary imagination.³³

The word “romantic” itself pops up frequently; we have seen a typical example in his description of the pleasant greens and dark valleys of Maui. The soaring mountains of Hawai'i give Ellis many chances to use the rhetoric of the sublime, capturing the effect of a nature that is so overwhelming that it surpasses human measure and description. So too does a natural wonder of the island: Ellis and his party are the first Europeans to visit the live volcanic lakes at Kilauea. On the way he and his companions, including Hawaiian guides as well as fellow missionaries, stay overnight at a cavern that inspires a vision of the strange and supernatural: as they clear their space for the night “a large fire was kindled near the entrance, which, throwing its glimmering light on the dark volcanic sides of our apartment, which resembled, in no small degree, scenes described in tales of romance.” They counter the preternatural scene by hymn-singing and committing themselves “to the kind keeping of Him, whose wakeful eye and watchful care no dark cavern can exclude.”³⁴ The narrative reaches its climax in the viewing of the volcanic lakes, a source of

cease to learn the art, or find satisfaction in the practice, of war.” *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

33. On the connections between literary Romanticism and Pacific encounters, see the editor's note in McCalman (1999), p. v.

34. Ellis (1827), p. 215.

native belief and terror, for this is the home of the feared goddess Pelé. They first take in the wild terror of the place: “After walking some distance over the sunken plain, which in several places sounded hollow under our feet, we at length came to the edge of the great crater, where a spectacle, sublime and even appalling, presented itself before us – ‘We stopped, and trembled.’ Astonishment and awe for some moments rendered us mute, and, like statues, we stood fixed to the spot, with our eyes riveted on the abyss below.”³⁵ Here again Ellis encounters the hula. This time it is in the abode of the gods. The “natives” spend most of the night talking about what they have seen in “the primeval abode of their volcanic deities”; they believe that “the roaring of the furnaces and the crackling of the flames were the *kani* of their *hura* [hula HL], (*music* of their *dance*, W.E.) ...”³⁶ Ellis and his companions respond to the Hawaiians’ description of the abode of the guides with a scientific explanation of volcanoes. Their debunking of native superstition is a first step toward the path to the true God. They follow it up with a counter-performance: the next morning the missionaries “sang our morning hymn of praise, in which we were joined by the natives who were with us.”³⁷ Once again performance and counter-performance mark the journey. This time there is an additional literary inflection: Ellis brings in the vocabulary and rhetoric of Romanticism to represent untamed nature and culture. He tames it with dialogue and with the counter-performance of the Christian hymn.

Conclusion: From Puritan-Polynesian Synthesis to Nationalist Revival

The story did not end as Ellis had hoped. If the early 1820s were a moment of seemingly providential success, by the 1830s the missionaries found themselves unable to control the boom town of Honolulu and the whalers, merchants and sailors passing through it.

It had turned into a riotous frontier outpost, not become the Geneva of the Pacific. Public mores went unreformed; political and economic control passed into the hands of the profiteers from the United States and other countries who refused to accept limits on their trade in the sole entrepôt of the North Pacific, the meeting-point for ships crossing north, south, east and west. At first sight it might appear that the missionaries had greater success with their Hawaiian audience: they felled the native gods, the islands were Christianized. By the end of the nineteenth-century travellers like Robert Louis Stevenson and Mark Twain commented on their disappointment with cleaned-up, westernized Hawaii.³⁸

Yet here, too, appearances deceive. If we turn back again to artistic performance, a more complicated story of competing cultures emerges. In the second half of the century, the penultimate monarch, David Kalākaua, tried to rally the forces of native society and culture against the Western invaders who were on the verge of taking political control of the islands. Kalākaua spent extravagantly on gathering and reinventing native culture, and at the time he was often viewed as a spendthrift or partier. Yet the art historian Stacy L. Kamehiro has recently shown in her book *The Arts of Kingship* how skilfully Kalākaua built Iolani Palace and other monuments to invoke the sacred traditions of the lands and people of the islands.³⁹ The Hawaiian cultural revival did not end there; it continued with his successor, Queen Liliuokalani, the last Hawaiian monarch, who continued his work of gathering up antiquities and supporting native arts. This was of a piece with European cultural movements of the same period in Europe, like the Celtic Revival in Ireland or the revitalization of Czech and other European cultures, that were acts of resistance to the cultural hegemony of empires. Despite the defeat of the monarchy, Kalākaua, Liliuokalani and others, including sympathetic Europeans, gathered the materials for

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 225-226.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 235-236.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

38. Lamb, Smith and Thomas (2000), pp. 275-291 and 299-304, especially Vanessa Smith’s editorial comments on pp. 274 and 300.

39. Kamehiro (2009).

ongoing cultural revivals. Today a new cultural and political assertiveness has led to a revival of the Hawaiian language, contestation of control over sacred sites, and separatist political aspirations.

We can see a microcosm of the long rhythm of Hawaiian culture if we go back again to the island's musical and performative traditions. Music did not exist as a separate and distinct art in pre-contact Hawai'i; it belonged to sacred and social performances such as chants to honour *ali'i* and of course the hula. The American missionaries quickly set about teaching Western music to the Hawaiians, flooding the islands with thousands of copies of hymns, translating them into Hawaiian, making them part of the school tradition. *Himani* became a native Hawaiian word for these compositions. Yet the native Hawaiians not only embraced them, but turned them into something distinctively their own. Among the most prominent composers of the second half of the nineteenth century were David Kalākaua and Queen Liliuokalani; these monarchs were gifted poets and musicians whose compositions today are considered part of the canon of native Hawaiian music.⁴⁰

Ellis and his hymn-singing companions remind us that this process started out as a competition between two cultures, pursued diplomatically by Ellis in 1822 and more aggressively by the American missionaries. Yet what happened in the end was not the eradication of native Hawaiian culture awaited by the missionaries, but a complex process of borrowing, blending, and creating new traditions for the nineteenth and twentieth century. Ellis's travel account shows us right from the beginning some of the reasons for this unexpected interaction between cultures. There was the power of the land, the social system, and the culture, all of which so visibly left their mark on Ellis's text, undermining the Christian hegemony that he hoped to establish. And there was the Romantic imagination, which shaped his text and did much to validate the culture for the modern era, just as the Romantic moment was crucial for the "invention of tra-

dition" elsewhere. Ellis opened up a world of religious, national and cultural ironies that, contrary to his own expectations and those of his fellow missionaries, belongs to the core of nineteenth and twentieth-century global history.⁴¹

References

- Bayly, Christopher Alan. 2004. *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bingham, Hiram. 1848. *A Residence of Twenty-One Years in the Sandwich Islands or, The Civil, Religious, and Political History of those Islands: Comprising a Particular View of the Missionary Operations Connected with the Introduction and Progress of Christianity and Civilization among the Hawaiian people*, 2nd ed. Hartford, Conn.: Huntington.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. 2003. *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800-1930*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Edmond, Rod. 1997. *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, William. 1827. *Narrative of a Tour Through Hawaii, Or, Owhyhee, with Observations on the Natural History of the Sandwich Islands, and Remarks on the Manners, Customs, Traditions, History, and Language of their Inhabitants*, 2nd. enlarged ed. London: Fisher and Jackson.
- Ellis, William. 1917. *Narrative of a Tour Through Hawaii, Or, Owhyhee, with Observations on the Natural History of the Sandwich Islands, and Remarks on the Manners, Customs, Traditions, History, and Language of their Inhabitants*, introd. Lorrin A. Thurston. Honolulu: Hawaiian Gazette Co.
- Emerson, Nathaniel B. 1909. *Unwritten Literature of Hawaii: The Sacred Songs of the Hula*. Smithsonian Institution, Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology, no. 38. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
- Etherington, Norman. 2004. 'Ellis, William (1794-1872)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press [<http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/view/article/8720>, accessed 14 July 2011].
- Geertz, Clifford. 1983. *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hobsbawm, Eric, and Ranger, Terence (eds.). 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

40. On Hawaiian music since the late nineteenth century, see Lewis (1984), Stillman (1999), and Tatar (1987).

41. Cf. the history of cultural mixings and religious revivals in Bayly (1983).

- Kamehiro, Stacy L. 2009. *The Arts of Kingship: Hawaiian Art and National Culture of the Kalākaua Era*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Kuykendall, Ralph S. 1938. *The Hawaiian Kingdom*, vol. 1: 1778-1854: *Foundation and Transformation*. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press.
- Lamb, Jonathan, Vanessa Smith, and Nicholas Thomas (eds.) 2000. *Exploration and Exchange: A South Seas Anthology (1680-1900)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lewis, George H. 1984. "Da Kine Sounds: The Function of Music as Social Protest in the New Hawaiian Renaissance." *American Music* 2 (1984): 38-52.
- Liebersohn, Harry. 2006. *The Travelers' World: Europe to the Pacific*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- McCalman, Iain. (ed.) 1999. *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Newbury, C. W. 1980. *Tahiti Nui: Change and Survival in French Polynesia, 1767-1945*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- The Rose Ensemble. 2007. *Nā Mele Hawai'i* (Rose Records, Rose 00008, 2007) [recording].
- Sahlins, Marshall, and Kirch, Patrick V. 1992. *Anahulu: The Anthropology of History in the Kingdom of Hawaii*, vol. 1: Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sivasundaram, Sujit. 2005. *Nature and the Godly Empire: Science and Evangelical Mission in the Pacific, 1795-1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stillman, Amy Ku'uleialoha. 1999. "Globalizing Hula." *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 31 (1999): 47-66.
- Tatar, Elizabeth. 1987. *Strains of Change: The Impact of Tourism on Hawaiian Music*. (Bishop Museum Special Publications 78.) Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1987.