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Frazier/The True Story of Kaluaikoolau

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INTRODUCTION

IN 1906 IN HONOLULU a little book written in the Hawaiian language was published by Kahikina Kelekona (John Sheldon)¹ which was “Offered and Dedicated to Native Hawaiians.” It was the story of Kaluaikoolau (referred to herein as Koolau), as told by his wife Piilani. These events, as described by Piilani, took place on the island of Kauai in the Hawaiian Islands, in Kalalau Valley.

Koolau and his young son Kaleimanu contracted leprosy at a time when there was no known cure for it and it was believed to be very contagious by the foreigners in Hawaii because of its spread amongst the Hawaiian race. It was only by strict segregation of leprosy patients from the rest of the world, at Kalawao on the island of Molokai, that the Hawaiian government was able to cope with the problem. Kalawao was the most easterly *ahupuaa*, a major land division, on a peninsula which projected from the Northern side of Molokai. The peninsula was effectively cut off on the landward side by forbidding cliffs and surrounded on the other sides by rough and dangerous ocean. In later years the patients were resettled on the dryer Western side of the peninsula in the *ahupuaa* of Kalau-papa and the settlement now bears that name. In these times patients are said to have Hansen’s Disease and they prefer not to be stigmatized as lepers, but in 1893 the means of arresting the disease later discovered by Hansen was unknown, and so the ancient name for the disease is used in this translation.

The Hawaiians called the disease *mai Pake*, the Chinese sickness, or *mai alii*, the royal sickness, because a chief was said to have been the first to be afflicted, or *mai hookaawale*, the separating sickness, because of the strict segregation of the patients. Kalawao was called *ka luakupapau kanu ola*, the grave where one is buried alive.

In the beginning those who contracted leprosy were allowed to be accompanied by helpers, called *kokua*, usually a family member. However, problems had arisen and about the time that Koolau became sick *kokua* were no longer allowed to accompany patients to Kalawao.

Koolau refused to be parted from his wife and the three of them, husband, wife and young son, took refuge in Kalalau Valley, descending into the isolated valley by an ancient and most difficult and dangerous trail which no longer exists.²

The story, after a brief introduction by Sheldon, is told by Piilani. It is the true and tragic record of the last years of their son and her husband, revealing a steadfastness and devotion that can rival any classical legend.

At a period when foreigners in the community were terrified of this dread, incurable disease, she accompanied her family and cared for them with no thought of harm to herself.

Attempts have been made by Jack London and other writers to exploit this story but none of the stories can compare with that told by Piilani herself.³

In 1916 C. B. Hofgaard, of Waimea, Kauai, read a paper to the Kauai Historical Society, mentioning the recent death of Piilani whom he admired and knew personally. He gave the story much as it appears here but without using the poetic and figurative imagery which used to ornament the language as spoken by Hawaiians of that era.

In 1973, Aubrey P. Janion asked me to do a translation of the story as he wanted to incorporate part of it in his book of Hawaiian historical vignettes entitled "The Olowalu Massacre".⁴

"The Olowalu Massacre" was published by the Island Heritage Press, Limited. When I decided to send the full story for publication in the Journal of the Hawaiian Historical Society in 1987, Island Heritage Press, Limited graciously granted permission for the publication of the full story in the Journal.

Neither Aubrey Janion nor myself were aware of the existence of Mr. Hofgaard's paper until I had completed my translation. It was very interesting to find that our stories, with one important difference, were practically identical. The difference is my attempt to follow as literally as possible the language of the original with all its richness of poetry and its pathos.

Hundreds of volumes about Hawaii exist, but they are all, with few exceptions, from the viewpoint of the *haole*. Here is one from the Hawaiian side of the story.

Readers will note that the translator has not used the glottal stop and macron for Hawaiian words and names, since at the time the story was written, such marks as aids to pronunciation and meaning were not used. Only in recent years have students begun to use these marks as aids in learning and understanding the language.

Frances N. Frazier
Translator

