

Testimony for
"Reconciliation Hearings"
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Assistant Interior Secretary, John Berry
and Tribal Justice Director, Mark Van Norman

Uē ka lani, ola ka honua. When the heavens weep the earth lives. Thus said our elders when it rained as it rains ,now, during these hearings. It is as if our kūpuna long gone weep with us as we reflect upon the injustice wrought over a century ago upon us Hawaiians but also cry with tears of joy as we come closer to reconciliation.

Aloha. Welcome. It is with this single Hawaiian concept and word that I predicate the testimony of our organization. Aloha.

If not for the aloha of committed families and educators, the Hawaiian language would not have survived the decimation of our native tongue purposed by legislation in 1896 banning the use of our language over a hundred years ago. Imagine us Americans having been raised and nurtured in English going to school one day to be told that English is banned and cannot be used. Furthermore, if anyone heard us speaking English we would be punished and humiliated. Picture children being encouraged to report and spy upon one another if English was being used in the playground and to report these incidences to the teachers. Fortunately, this basic right is protected in the United States. It was not so in those dark years.

How did our fledgling nation with a reported literacy rates surpassing even those states in the United States at that time drop to become a "nation" with one of the lowest literacy rates? We maintain that it was the direct and purposeful will of those who deposed Lili'uokalani and our legitimate government to Americanize us Hawaiians with a very powerful colonizing technique. Such a technique was used by Nebuchanezzar when he subjugated the Israelites -ban the native language and impose sanctions and punishment for using it.

Can we even perceive the brutality of linguistic genocide? When we consider the demarcation of class and race in Hawai'i for Hawaiians based on race and language through the establishment of English Standard Schools, we understand the educational predicament we Hawaiians still face today. Moreover, political power was secured in the new regime with a law stating that in order to vote, one needed to read and write English. How successful would we Americans be if all of a sudden in order to vote we needed to read and write Chinese? Not very successful at all. Repeat and sustain those experiences over a century and one must applaud and give thanks to the tenacity of the few who refused to give up the Hawaiian language for dead. Death for our Hawaiian language was the goal of these individuals.

For over two decades, the 'Ahahui 'Ōlelo Hawai'i has been involved in Hawaiian language revitalization efforts. It has been exciting seeing the number of Hawaiian language speakers growing while at the same time sad to see many of our last remaining native speakers leave us. There are perhaps less than a hundred native speakers alive today who were born before the Queen's death and who were educated just at the beginnings of this language suppression effort.

The 'Ahahui 'Ōlelo Hawai'i, however, despite all its efforts and committed volunteers as well as other Hawaiian Language Revitalization Vanguards such as the universities or 'Aha Pūnana Leo, cannot fully make our language viable again until one thing occurs. Our land must be returned.

Our language is tied to our land, our 'āina. When we are born we are covered with the placenta of our mothers, our honua, our earth. When we dance the hula, the songs tell of the beauty of the sky, land, and sea. When we think scientifically, we must use the terms of our ancestors to name the stars, the varieties of taro, and the species of fish. When we die, we must return to the earth, the honua.

The 'Ahahui just held its fourth conference for native speakers at a Kona hotel. How much more lively and meaningful it would have been if it could have been held at a Hawaiian center for Culture, Language and History on Hawaiian owned land. In a way, our own association is a microcosm of what we Hawaiians face. We are constantly asking for money and borrowing and renting this space and that to meet. This should not be so. With our land returned, each island and community could have a center where the arts flourish, the language is spoken, and the spiritual and emotional welfare of elders, parents, and youth thrive in an environment of *Mauli Hawai'i*.

I was asked once, "Aren't you glad that you are a United States citizen?" I paused to reflect on the many benefits that I enjoy as a citizen. However, I'm also very positive that had our own government and society been left intact that we would be more prosperous because our spirit as a people and nation would be stronger and the word *aloha* would be more intensely felt because our language would be dynamically used in everyday life by people of all walks of life, creed, and color.

Aloha kākou.



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