



Cultural Strength: The Foundation for Native Economies

Observations from the Native
Hawaiian Experience



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DEPARTMENT OF HAWAIIAN HOME LANDS

Native Hawaiians face some significant social and economic challenges stemming from a history of dispossession and disenfranchisement. Economic empowerment has proven particularly elusive, with Native unemployment that is twice the rate for non-Hawaiians and business ownership that lags far behind other groups. Still, Hawaii's indigenous communities are home to tremendous entrepreneurial energy, unique cultural assets and talented leaders. Native Hawaiians are using these assets to craft new and innovative answers to the question: "Can culture serve as a foundation for Native economic development?"

Business and Native Culture: A History of Conflict

Since first contact with the Western world, the relationship between Hawaii's economic development and Native Hawaiian culture¹ has been a contentious one. The emergence of a market system in the islands, dominated by Western businesses and built around principals of individualism and maximized profit, has often clashed with Native Hawaiian culture in direct and indirect ways.

The nature of this conflict has proceeded through several historical phases. From the early- to mid-1800s, missionary business leaders led a charge to actively suppress Native Hawaiian culture. They advocated for bans upon a variety of core cultural practices, including hula, surfing and speaking the Hawaiian language. They also established Christian churches and missionary schools and encouraged the parceling of land, moving away from communal ownership toward Western private property arrangements. Suppression of Hawaiian culture continued well into the 20th century with the ban on Hawaiian language remaining on the books until the 1970s.

As tourism replaced plantation agriculture as Hawaii's dominant industry, the relationship between business and culture began to change. Rather than outright hostility toward things Native Hawaiian, by the 1960s, Native culture had become a commodity – modified, packaged and sold by the visitor industry as part of its product offering. Aloha attire, flower lei and luau shows became mainstays of a tourist industry owned and operated by non-Natives. Often, commercialization degraded and mutated Hawaiian culture, for it ignored the spiritual meanings that were essential to cultural practice.

On the heels of the tourist revolution came a real estate boom, spurred by off-shore investment, that brought the conflict between Native Hawaiian culture and economic development to a new head. As residential, commercial and resort development peaked in the 1980s, an anti-development movement led by Native Hawaiians and environmentalists took shape. Native Hawaiians reasserted their gathering and water

¹ For present purposes we define culture as "the values beliefs and ideologies held by members of [an] ethnic group as fundamental and necessary for effective social functioning."

rights, opposing many real estate projects and encouraging community-based approaches to economic and physical development.

The clash between economic development and Native culture has thus continued for more than two centuries in Hawaii, taking new forms as times have changed. Native Hawaiian culture has commonly found itself on the losing end of this protracted battle, as outsiders in a system dominated by non-Native business values. One Native Hawaiian organization summed up the enduring sentiment in the 1990s, “the economy is becoming less accountable to social and cultural values, and without community-based efforts to ensure accountability, the values themselves will continue to be eroded.”²

A New Relationship: Culture as an Economic Force

Though Native Hawaiian culture and economic development have often been at odds with one another in Hawaii, there is mounting evidence that a new relationship between them is emerging. The work of leading Native Hawaiian businesses and nonprofit organizations is recasting Native culture as a powerful economic force. Three factors are converging to reposition Native culture in this way:

- (1) Non-Native leaders from business and government are beginning to recognize the importance of Native Hawaiian culture to the future of Hawaii’s economy.
- (2) Native Hawaiians are entering the ranks of entrepreneurs and business owners in increasing numbers.
- (3) Native Hawaiians are pioneering models that blend culture and business in new, synergistic ways.

These forces are contributing to a “new economy” in Hawaii – one being driven by Native people and Native culture.

Non-Natives Recognize Culture’s Economic Importance

The first factor creating a new role for Native culture in economic development is a growing appreciation among Non-Native leaders that Native Hawaiian cultural knowledge has much to offer business and industry. Non-Natives are beginning to recognize the important role Native Hawaiian culture will play in sustaining and growing the state’s economy. They also see that the relationship between business and culture must change if valuable cultural assets are to be sustained. As a result, Native Hawaiian culture is exerting a new influence in some of Hawaii’s most essential industries.

² Opelu Project ‘Ohana, From Then to Now, A Manual for Doing Things Hawaiian Style, Waianae: Kaala Farm, Inc., 1996, p.2.

Culture in the Visitor Industry

Hawaii is a mature visitor destination with a growing need to diversify its product offerings in order to remain globally competitive. Government and industry leaders are increasingly aware that Native culture will play a critical role in diversifying Hawaii's visitor product, and not in the 'window-dressing' fashion of the '60s and '70s. Cultural tourism is a particularly attractive niche because cultural tourists tend to be older individuals who travel with their families, stay longer, spend more and treat a place with greater respect than other visitors. However, cultural tourists demand authentic cultural experiences and products which must be delivered by Native organizations and businesses.

A recent State-sponsored study recommended that "to sustain Hawaii's tourism industry, the State should focus on Native Hawaiian values." The study advised investing in "sustainable tourism" based on Native Hawaiian concepts of *lokahi*, (harmony), *malama 'aina* (stewardship of the land), *ho'okipa* (hospitality), and *kuleana* (responsibility). It specifically recommended establishing more demanding tour guide certifications that required knowledge of Hawaiian history and culture.

Culture and Real Estate Development

A similar recognition is taking hold in the sphere of real estate development. Here, prominent private sector leaders are playing a pivotal role. For example, Maui Land & Pineapple Co., a Hawaii-based, publicly-traded real estate and agricultural company, has built its new strategic plan around Native Hawaiian values. Its future development plans focus on developing holistic communities for local residents based on the traditional Hawaiian concept of *ahupua'a* - an ecological and land management unit designed to be self-sustaining.

Maui Land & Pineapple's first venture will be a 300-acre residential development called *Pulelehua*. *Pulelehua*'s units will be rented or sold to Maui residents (versus visitors) and 50% of the planned units will be sold at affordable prices to low- and moderate-income residents of Maui. Consistent with the *ahupua'a* concept, *Pulelehua* will be a mixed-use development combining agricultural, conservation, residential, commercial and civic uses, all in close proximity and connected via pedestrian pathways. *Pulelehua*'s neighborhood design will "foster economic diversity and self-sufficiency, and maintain the natural resources" of the area. Maui Land & Pineapple is encouraging other major landowners to take a similar approach to mixed-use, self-contained, sustainable community development.

Culture and Other Key Industries

Culture is also playing a critical role in shaping other industries important to Hawaii's economic future. In diversified agriculture, State government and industry leaders are pursuing development of many Native Hawaiian crops including kava, noni, taro, ti and

native landscape plants. In the healthcare industry, many are looking to combine Western medicine and traditional Hawaiian healing arts to create wellness products and services that will serve residents and visitors alike. In these and other areas, Native Hawaiian culture is playing a key role in reinventing Hawaii's industries and positioning them for future growth.

Native-Owned Business: A Growing Presence

As the history of Hawaii's visitor industry has proven, incorporation of Native Hawaiian culture into key industries will not necessarily lead to Native economic empowerment. In order for true empowerment to result, Native Hawaiians must participate in the *ownership* and *control* of Hawaii's businesses. To date, Native Hawaiians have been underrepresented in business ownership, making up 20% of the population but only 7% of the state's business-men and -women.

However, Native Hawaiians are joining the ranks of business owners in increasing numbers. Data from the Census Bureau's Survey of Women and Minority Owned Business Enterprise indicates that from 1987 to 1997 the number of Native Hawaiian-owned firms grew by 159% compared to 54% growth for non-Native firms.³ Other sources of data also point to an abundance of entrepreneurial energy in the Native Hawaiian community. The Hawaii Small Business Development Center Network (an organization that provides assistance to start-up companies) reports that fully one-quarter of its clients are Native Hawaiian. Similarly, the Minority Business Development Center reports that 40% of its clients are Native Hawaiian. These figures suggest that entrepreneurial activity among Native Hawaiians is on the rise, and that Native Hawaiians will be a growing presence in the local economy.

For this encouraging trend to continue, though, Native businesses must be provided with adequate support. Among these supports, access to capital is one of the most critical. There is evidence to suggest that access to capital remains a challenge for many Native enterprises. The U.S. Dept. of Treasury's Native American Lending Study of 2001 found that Native Hawaiians face multiple barriers to accessing capital including a need for financial literacy and more flexible lending practices. A more recent study found more than half of Native Hawaiian business owners are likely to need capital for expansion within the next 3 years, yet two-thirds of business owners felt it was "very" or "somewhat difficult" to access loans or investment. The overall supply of small business capital in Hawaii remains limited with Hawaii ranking 43rd out of 50 states in

³ The comparability of 1997 and previous SWMOBE data is affected by the fact that C-Corporations were not included in past surveys. However, because C-Corporations tend to be larger businesses, and Native Hawaiian-owned firms are mostly small, young companies, the inclusion of C-Corps in 1997 probably inflates non-Hawaiian counts more than Hawaiian counts. Therefore, the assertion that the growth of Hawaiian-owned firms far outpaced the growth of non-Hawaiian firms still stands.

small business loans per worker. Alternative lenders who finance those turned down by banks also report that Native Hawaiians make up a substantial portion of their portfolios.⁴

New Business Models that Combine Culture and Economics

Along with a surge in Native business ownership and a growing appreciation of cultural knowledge among non-Natives, Native Hawaiians are pioneering new business models which bring culture and economics together in new ways. Three examples help sketch the outlines of this emerging model.

Example 1: The Waianae Community Redevelopment Corporation

The Waianae Community Redevelopment Corporation (WCRC) is a Native Hawaiian nonprofit organization⁵ serving the predominantly Native Hawaiian communities of the Waianae Coast of Oahu. WCRC runs two profit-generating enterprises: an organic farm (Mala 'Ai Opio Youth Organic Farm, or MA'O) and a natural foods café (Aloha 'Aina Café). Produce from WCRC's organic farm is sold through farmers markets, limited subscription agriculture,⁶ and through the Aloha 'Aina Café which uses the farm's produce in its healthy prepared dishes.

MA'O and Aloha 'Aina Café are both designed to generate community benefits in addition to earnings. Each year, 10 to 12 Native Hawaiian youth from the area are selected to spend 10 months working in both enterprises. Throughout, they engage in paid employment and are immersed in a curriculum focused on business, agricultural science, leadership and Native Hawaiian culture. In addition to raising a new crop of leaders in Waianae, MA'O and Aloha 'Aina Café distribute healthy food to Native Hawaiian families in an area where diet-related health problems like heart disease and diabetes run rampant, and where fast food outlets abound.

Both enterprises have also demonstrated financial success: with start-up support from local banks, foundations, and the U.S. Administration for Native Americans, both the café and farm were able to break even within 18 months, covering core operating expenses with revenue from sales. Indeed, WCRC regularly sells out its organic produce and is looking to expand its acreage and program offerings. 'Profits' do not accrue to individuals, but are instead reinvested into WCRC's programs.

4 U.S. Dept. of Treasury, CDFI Fund, Native American Lending Study, Washington DC, 2002. Small business loans per worker from CFED, Asset Building Report Card for the States, Washington DC, 2003.

5 Native Hawaiian nonprofit organization meaning that a majority of its Board of Directors and Staff are Native Hawaiian.

6 Also known as Community-Supported Agriculture – the practice whereby individuals or families 'subscribe' to the farm and pay to receive a delivery of fresh produce at regular intervals (every 2 weeks or every month).

In the WCRC model, culture and economics are brought together in the following ways:

- *Values in operation.* Cultural values drive many of WCRC's business decisions. The original decision to farm was based upon knowledge that agriculture was central to Waianae's pre-contact history. Re-establishing agriculture in Waianae was therefore viewed as an act of cultural restoration. The Native value of *aloha 'aina* (love of the land) drives the use of *organic* techniques which avoid degrading the soil with chemical fertilizers. *Aloha 'aina* also drives WCRC's overarching aim to re-connect Hawaiian youth to the land, and put land to productive use for the benefit of the Hawaiian community.
- *Communal ownership and benefit.* Consistent with Native values of reciprocity and sharing, both MA'O and Aloha 'Aina are communally owned and operated. To date, communal ownership has been achieved through the Native nonprofit WCRC. However, the organization is looking to take communal ownership one step further by turning MA'O into a cooperative owned by the youth who operate it.
- *Business strengthened by culture.* The cultural significance of MA'O and Aloha 'Aina Café is a motivating and unifying force for those who work there. It fuels a passionate work ethic and team spirit which benefit the enterprise, and which would not be created by the incentive of profit alone. Culture and values have also earned WCRC a loyal customer base: the Waianae Coast Comprehensive Health Center, Kokua Market, and others purchase from WCRC in part because they are a Native Hawaiian, values-driven business.

Example 2: Reinventing Tourism in Lahaina Town

Historically, the economy of Lahaina, Maui has depended on a tourism product similar to that of Waikiki – with a familiar mix of retail stores, art galleries, outlets, bars and restaurants. The town has been successful as a tourist attraction, drawing 1.7 million out-of-state visitors annually, yet the consensus among industry observers is that Lahaina must re-invent itself if its economy is to prosper going forward. Three initiatives organized and operated by Native Hawaiians are changing the face of tourism in Lahaina town:

- (1) *The Festival of Canoes*. The annual Festival of Canoes in Lahaina brings together Master Carvers from around the Pacific to carve traditional canoes out of solid logs, using ancient techniques and modern tools. Carvers from Fiji, Tonga, Aotearoa, the Marshall Islands, Samoa, tribes from the Pacific Northwest and others convene each year in Lahaina Town. At an opening event, the carvers are presented with a 30 foot log, and within one week, must produce a seaworthy canoe with traditional design and materials, and sail it at week's end. The Festival aims to celebrate the art of the canoe and facilitate a sharing of traditions and cultural knowledge between Native peoples.
- (2) *Friends of Moku'ula*. Friends of Moku'ula is a Native Hawaiian nonprofit organization working to restore the island of Moku'ula – one of the most sacred sites in the Hawaiian islands. Once the seat of spiritual and political power and the chosen home and resting place of many of Hawaii's royalty, the island now lies buried beneath the southern end of Lahaina's waterfront commercial district. Friends of Moku'ula is working to excavate and restore this cultural treasure, and create a Hawaiian Living Center for sharing the history, culture and spirituality embodied by the site.
- (3) *Maui Nei Tours*. Maui Nei is a cultural tourism company dedicated to presenting the traditions of Native Hawaii to Maui's visitors. Native Hawaiian *kumu* conduct a walking tour through Lahaina town, visiting over 20 historic and cultural sites, including important archeological areas and monuments dating to pre-contact times. The *kumu* explain Hawaiian religious beliefs, practices and protocols, traditional arts and crafts, and the history, myths, and cultural significance of the sites. Maui Nei is a wholly owned subsidiary of the nonprofit Friends of Moku'ula.

In the Lahaina model, culture and economics are working together in the following ways:

- *Values in operation*. Cultural practice, preservation, exchange and restoration are a direct outcome of all of three ventures in Lahaina. Each holds itself to the highest level of cultural integrity, having as its first priority authentic cultural practice and sharing, without modification for commercial benefit. Indeed, the economic benefits created by these enterprises are an ancillary outcome of cultural practice.

Each enterprise embodies the Native view: “*i ka wa mamua ka wa mahope...the future is in the past.*”

- *Communal ownership and benefit.* Each enterprise is owned and/or operated for the benefit of the Native Hawaiian community in the Lahaina area. The Festival of Canoes does not benefit any one business or organization, but rather creates economic benefits that are spread throughout businesses in the area. Profits from Maui Nei Tours flow to its parent nonprofit Friends of Moku‘ula to support restoration of the sacred site.
- *Business strengthened by culture.* Remarkably, the work of these three Native Hawaiian initiatives is changing the nature of the visitor industry in Lahaina. The cultural work of the Festival of Canoes, Friends of Moku‘ula, and Maui Nei Tours is drawing visitors and residents alike to Lahaina town. Local businesses and hotels reap the benefit of this new visitor traffic, and as a result, corporate support for all three efforts has been strong. Together, these initiatives are allowing Lahaina businesses to access the attractive cultural tourism niche, improving the town’s position within the global visitor industry.

Example 3: Hawaiian Homestead Technology

Hawaiian Homestead Technology, Inc. (HHT) is a wholly owned for-profit subsidiary of the nonprofit Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement. HHT was formed in 2003, for the purpose of providing document digitization services (converting documents from paper to electronic form). HHT aims to create living wage technology jobs for Native Hawaiians and to build the capacity of Hawaiian Homestead community associations.

HHT was incorporated in December of 2002, began operating in the Spring of 2003, and by the end of the year had completed 6-figures of project work. HHT began by securing several contracts for services from local and national companies and federal government agencies. Its first pilot site for document digitization was on Hawaiian Home Lands (similar to reservations) in the community of Anahola, Kauai. HHT partnered with the Anahola Hawaiian Homes Association (AHHA) to establish its first facility, acquiring and converting a vacant dilapidated home into a digitization processing center. Local partnerships with community associations are key to HHT’s business model. As its revenues grow, HHT plans to expand by establishing new offices in homestead communities in partnership with Homestead Associations from those areas.

In the case of Anahola, the partnership model proved highly effective: AHHA raised the resources to purchase the facility, organized its rehabilitation, oversaw employee and community outreach, and managed the property. HHT managed business development, acquired start-up funding, set up systems, provided training, managed the project, and administered quality control. Through this relationship, AHHA enhanced its ability to manage facilities and engage in economic development projects

based on the vision and needs of the Anahola community. With its new source of earned income, AHHA has also been able to hire a full-time staff member and engage in work that has already brought over a quarter of a million dollars of income to implement the community's ideas. Today, AHHA owns two modest buildings, controls over 5 acres, and is still growing.

For its part, HHT has since hired 15 Native Hawaiians from the community at its Anahola facility, most with little or no previous computer experience. It has provided almost 6 full months of intensive training on the job and at the local community college. The HHT team has since completed digitization projects for the Army, Navy and Delta Airlines. They are on track to gross over seven figures in their second year of operations and poised to open two additional processing centers in two other Homestead communities within the next 12 months.

A few of the ways that HHT combines business and culture:

- *Values in operation.* Many of HHT's business decisions and practices are grounded in Native Hawaiian values of *lokomaiika'i* (generosity) and *laulima* (cooperativeness). Consistent with an emphasis on collective (versus individual) advancement, HHT's reward and bonus system is based upon team production rather than individual performance. HHT's commitment to partnering with Hawaiian Homestead Associations stems a similar ethic of sharing: the company deliberately chooses to locate in multiple Homestead communities to spread the benefits of the enterprise around, sacrificing the economies of scale possible at a single location. The partnerships are also an expression of the cultural practice of "asking the permission" of the place in which one works. HHT will not work in a Homestead community unless a local Homestead Association allows it to do so and is willing to partner.
- *Communal ownership and benefit.* Like each of the examples discussed in this section, HHT is owned by the Native Hawaiian community through its parent nonprofit organization (CNHA). In addition, HHT plans to incorporate a revenue sharing into its compensation structure sharing profits directly with its employees and community partners based on productivity. Finally, 100% of the profits generated by HHT are returned to the Native Hawaiian community through the Hawaiian Way Fund, a philanthropic fund set up to support Native Hawaiian cultural and community development organizations.
- *Business strengthened by culture.* HHT's incorporation of culture in its business decisions and management practices strengthens its business. HHT's partnership with AHHA allowed it to recruit employees efficiently through informal, but effective, community networks. Its flat management structure and group incentives offer better systems for accountability, productivity and quality than hierarchical structures. Its values-based business decisions have earned it employee and community loyalty: volunteers spent hundreds of hours to assist

in renovation of the project site. Finally, HHT's model has attracted large corporate clients interested in supporting Native Hawaiian values-driven business.

Some Observations

The foregoing discussion highlights the ways in which Native Hawaiian culture is becoming a driving force in Native economic development. While it does not allow for definitive conclusions or recommendations, it does support some preliminary observations about this new movement.

Defining Features of the New Model

The new models combining Native culture and business defy a standard definition. However, there are a handful of common themes that identify these examples as something new and valuable:

- (1) First, cultural values are given life by, and made an essential part of, these businesses. Cultural values are incorporated into management practices, made part of the product offered, and/or used to guide business decisions. In this process, Native Hawaiian culture is perpetuated and given new expression by the operation of the business itself. Business *becomes* cultural practice.
- (2) Second, each of these enterprises exhibits aspects of collective ownership and communal benefit, both of which rank high in the Native Hawaiian value system. Contrary to the conventional objective of maximizing individual gain, these businesses utilize the available mechanisms to express principles of sharing, reciprocity and communal gain: profit-sharing, cooperatives, or ownership by community-governed nonprofits are common to these ventures. Profits are also reinvested to generate social return for the community.
- (3) Third, in these examples, business and culture work in synergy, rather than at the expense of one another. Culture is not commodified or degraded through its incorporation into business practice. In fact, it is given a home in business. Conversely, business is not weakened by culture. Rather, culture creates competitive advantages for these enterprises – in recruiting and hiring, attracting new customers, and fostering employee loyalty and motivation.
- (4) Fourth, in these examples, business is viewed as a *tool* for acting upon individual and community *kuleana* (responsibility). This requires that business be understood within a Native view of time and place. Due consideration is given to generations past and future, and the history of place, before the business' proper role – its mission, products and services – are established.

The examples also illustrate that the ways culture and business come together are diverse. They vary in the values that find expression, the industries in which they operate, and the ways in which culture is operationalized. These businesses may give expression to *aloha 'aina*, *lokahi*, or *lokomaiika'i*; they may thrive in agriculture, tourism or technology.

Conditions for Combining Culture and Economy

The foregoing discussion suggests that culture can be an asset in Native economic development, but that it requires some key conditions:

- *First, culture must be placed on equal footing with commerce.* Cultural priorities must be held in delicate balance with business interests, shaping business decisions, taking precedence over profit when necessary. In order for this to hold, a *cultural conscience* must exist to guide business practice. This conscience may be institutionalized in a board or business division, or embodied in particular individuals who are part of the enterprise.
- *Second, appropriate supports for enterprises* that attempt to blend business and culture must be in place. Programs that provide access to capital, business support services, and incentives, can help grow new businesses that blend culture and economics. These supports are particularly important in the area of access to capital, since conventional sources of financing do not appear to direct adequate resources toward these enterprises.
- *Third, the rules of business* – the laws and regulations which govern business practice – may need to change to accommodate emerging Native models. For example, Native Hawaiian businesses have struggled to adopt communal ownership structures, and have settled for using Western tools like cooperatives, land trusts, or nonprofit ownership of for-profits to accomplish this aim. Ultimately, though, these may prove imperfect structures for Native firms struggling to operationalize a cultural practice of collective benefit. Similarly, a legal regime that mandates maximization of shareholder value may conflict with Native efforts to balance economic imperatives with a cultural priority of giving back to the community.
- *Fourth, self-governance is ultimately required* if culture is to serve as a foundation of economic development. The suggestion that rules must change points to the broader need for Native self-governance. If Native business is to reach its full potential as an expression of Native culture, Native Hawaiians must be allowed to rewrite the rules of business – to create the right incentives, supports, legal and regulatory frameworks that support their unique models of doing business.

Conclusion

John Dominis Holt, respected Hawaiian writer and publisher, asked in 1964, “Do we really know ourselves as Hawaiians, enjoy being Hawaiians, and strive to find places in which we can use our talents in all areas of present-day life?” The last part of his question has proven particularly vexing, especially for Native Hawaiians operating in the realm of business. Yet, a new set of Native Hawaiian business and community leaders are creating innovative models and encouraging a new awareness that promises to make culture an essential part of Hawaii’s economic future. They have persevered in this effort, in spite of the fact that some critical supports have been absent to date, notably adequate access to capital and Native Hawaiian self-governance. Addressing these and other barriers will ensure that culture is freed to fuel the economic prosperity of Hawaii and the economic empowerment of the Native Hawaiian people.

The Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement is a national non-profit organization that works to empower Native peoples by providing training, technical assistance, research, advocacy and opportunities to convene for Native organizations and communities. Consistent with its philosophy of Native empowerment, CNHA is a membership organization governed by the Native organizations and communities it serves.

Our Philosophy

Committed to excellence, CNHA believes Native communities deserve the very best resources it can provide. CNHA strives to deliver training, technical assistance and information that is immediately useful to members and clients. CNHA believes in the strength of Native self-determination and empowerment and is committed to the notion that Native communities provided with accurate information can and do create the best solutions for community concerns.