

5 Case Studies in Cultural Conflict: Nāhi'ena'ena and David Kalākaua

We have discussed Western influence on institutions—religion, education, and law. Now we will look at how Westernization affected the ways individual Hawaiians felt about themselves and about their culture.

As you may remember, some Hawaiians resented the encroachment of foreigners in the Islands and did not want them to buy property or become citizens. Unfortunately, we have few written accounts of the way average Hawaiians felt as they saw Hawai'i changing. But we do have some sense of how certain ali'i reacted. The first was a young chiefess named Nāhi'ena'ena. The second was Hawai'i's last king, David Kalākaua. As you read their stories, pay attention to how they tried to reconcile the old ways with the new.

Nāhi'ena'ena

Nāhi'ena'ena—her name means the 'raging fires', an appropriate name for someone who would feel rage at the two cultures in conflict within herself. Such a conflict need not end in death, but Nāhi'ena'ena would not survive the battle. She was the daughter of the sacred chiefess Keōpūolani and the great Kamehameha. Her name chant describes her sacred rank:

The world above where Nāhi'ena'ena
treads majestically

Nāhi'ena'ena issues forth as chief of the
rising sun,

It comes, it rises, it moves on, it broadens,
it extends forth.

(Fornander 1919)

Nāhi'ena'ena was born on the island of Hawai'i in 1815. She was just 5 years old when the first missionaries arrived. Some of the chiefs of the royal household disliked the missionaries and what they wanted to do. Many chiefs still believed in the Hawaiian gods who ruled the ocean, the winds, the volcanoes, and all of nature. But many other chiefs became Christians. Keōpūolani, Nāhi'ena'ena's mother, was an early convert. She encouraged those around her, especially her children, to give up the ancient Hawaiian beliefs, which she called the "dark heart of the past."

Every day the missionaries came to pray with and teach Keōpūolani, Nāhi'ena'ena, and her brother, Kauikeaouli.

When Nāhi'ena'ena was only 8, Keōpūolani became very ill. As she lay dying, she rejected the Hawaiian gods, speaking these words: "I have no desire for the former gods of Hawai'i. They are all false. But I love Jesus Christ" (Sinclair 1976). She was baptized a Christian an hour before she died. She had completed her break with the "dark heart."



This portrait of Nāhi'ena'ena at age 10 was painted by Robert Dampier. (Courtesy of Honolulu Academy of Arts. Gift of Mrs. C. Montague Cooke, Jr., Mr. Charles M. Cooke III, and Mrs. Heaton Wrenn, in memory of Dr. C. Montague Cooke, Jr., 1951)

At her request, Keōpūolani was given a Christian burial, and her two children were placed under the protection of the missionaries. Keōpūolani had asked the missionaries to raise Nāhi'ena'ena to be a good Christian like the humble, pious missionary wives. But as the highest-born and most sacred *ali'i*, Nāhi'ena'ena was also expected to carry on the Hawaiian customs and traditions. Because Christian and Hawaiian beliefs often conflicted, Nāhi'ena'ena faced painful dilemmas.

Hawaiians had always expected Nāhi'ena'ena and her brother Kauikeaouli to marry one day. The marriage of these high *ali'i* would keep the sacred bloodlines pure and preserve the *mana* or spiritual strength of the gods.

Nāhi'ena'ena and Kauikeaouli were devoted to each other and loved each other more as husband and wife than as brother and sister. When Nāhi'ena'ena was 9, the council of chiefs gathered in Lahaina to discuss the future marriage. The missionaries were shocked. They argued that a marriage between brother and sister was wrong. Nāhi'ena'ena was confused. The Christian ways and the ways of her ancestors pulled her in different directions.

She spoke of giving up the old ways to please her dead mother and her missionary teachers. To show Christian humility, she lost interest in the chants and genealogies that traced her ancestry back to the gods. She practiced Christianity so devoutly that she would not allow people in her home who could not read hymns. By the time she was 10, she was leading prayers at the women's church meetings.

But Nāhi'ena'ena became headstrong and moody and cried easily. Once the chiefs wanted her, as the highest born, to wear the symbols of her rank—a feather headband, a feather lei, and a beautiful yellow feather *pā'ū* (skirt) lined in scarlet satin. She refused because the *pā'ū* would cover her only below the waist. Her missionary teachers frowned on nudity. When the chiefs tried to persuade her, she ran sobbing to the mission house. She quietly returned wearing a black dress.



Robert Dampier also painted Kauikeaouli, later to become Kamehameha III, when he was 11 years old. (Courtesy of Honolulu Academy of Arts. Gift of Mrs. C. Montague Cooke, Jr., Mr. Charles M. Cooke III, and Mrs. Heaton Wrenn, in memory of Dr. C. Montague Cooke, Jr., 1951.)

At the age of 12, Nāhi'ena'ena was baptized into the church. At that time, according to missionary accounts, she made a statement of her beliefs:

Since the first time that I told you that I had given myself away to the Lord, I have had but one thought, and that is that as I have set out I cannot go back; and if all the other chiefs adhere to the old system, still I have but one thought, and that is to follow the Lord, though it be alone" (Sinclair 1976).

Still, the pull of the old ways was strong. Once she believed a *kahuna* had put a curse on her. Her attendants persuaded her to go through a Hawaiian ceremony to destroy the power of the curse. Far from the missionary influence in Lahaina, another *kahuna* conducted the ancient rites. He gave offerings of pigs, vegetables, and

fine *kapa* to the old gods. Nāhi'ena'ena and her attendants stood dressed in the native *pā'ū*.

Later she confessed to her missionary teachers this return to the "dark heart." She could not forgive her failings as a Christian. Yet by 1829, when she was just 14, her faith began to waver. Her heart did not always follow Christian ways. She prayed daily that God would "establish his kingdom" in her heart. "One day my thoughts are fixed on God; another day I am ensnared; and thus it is continually" (Sinclair 1976).

She missed Kauikeaouli. When Liholiho died in 1824, Kauikeaouli had become King Kamehameha III and moved to Honolulu. Their separation was painful to them both. Often she journeyed to O'ahu to see him. Once they traveled together to the island of Hawai'i to see the volcano, Kīlauea. Seated together on mats, they gazed at the molten lava shooting from deep within Halema'uma'u crater. But the missionaries strongly disapproved of their meetings and tried to keep them apart.

Nāhi'ena'ena's distress increased. She cried and became depressed. She could not eat or sleep. She wandered aimlessly about the streets of Lahaina. She rebelled against the strictness of the missionaries. She interrupted prayer meetings and came late to church services. She became angry and bored, and she defied her teachers. She played cards, danced the *hula*, and listened to songs and chants. One missionary observed that the 15-year-old girl was near "the brink of destruction." She fell into a pattern of enjoying old Hawaiian ways and then apologizing for these "sins." (Sinclair 1976).

In 1834, to the dismay of the missionaries, Nāhi'ena'ena and Kauikeaouli were married in an ancient Hawaiian ceremony. Missionary William Richards wrote her a long letter reminding her of her mother's dying wish—that she be brought up a devout Christian as if she were a good missionary wife. His words made her cry in shame. She knew that her soul could not enter the Christian heaven because of this terrible sin. Yet she could not deny the sacred marriage; that would deny her Hawaiian heritage.

Nāhi'ena'ena and Kauikeaouli wanted to avoid the Christian chiefs and missionaries and forget the strong disapproval. Together they traveled from place to place around O'ahu. They drank heavily.

Months later, Nāhi'ena'ena returned to Lahaina alone. Perhaps she was hoping to find peace for her troubled soul. But when she continued her old ways, the Lahaina Mission excommunicated her from the church despite her pleading.

Nāhi'ena'ena had grown from a confused little girl, saddened by the death of her mother, into a deeply troubled young woman. She was lost in a world she could not understand. She was unable to follow the strict Christian standards of conduct. She could never be like a humble missionary wife, for she was born the highest-ranking *ali'i* in the Hawaiian kingdom. Yet she could not feel completely comfortable in the Hawaiian culture because of her Christian upbringing.

In September of 1836 Nāhi'ena'ena gave birth to a son who lived only a few hours. In her struggle to settle her constant spiritual conflict, Nāhi'ena'ena lost the strength to fight physical illness. By December 1836 Nāhi'ena'ena was dead. She was 21 years old.

Questions

1. What were the conflicts Nāhi'ena'ena experienced?
2. How did these conflicts affect her?
3. Can you think of some reasons why Nāhi'ena'ena's experience with Christianity was so different from that of Ka'ahumanu and her own mother?

David Kalākaua

The story of David Kalākaua's life is quite different from that of Nāhi'ena'ena. But there are similarities too, for future *ali'i* did not escape the strains of **cultural conflict**—the struggle between the values of two differing cultures—that affected the Hawaiian nation.