

Mele A Ka'ehu Ka Haku Mele

E aha 'ia ana 'o Hawai'i
I nei ma'i 'o ka lēpela
Ma'i ho'okae a ka lehulehu
A ka 'ili 'ula'ula, 'ili ke'oke'o?

'Ano 'ē mai ana nā hoa hui
Like 'ole ka pilina ma mua
He 'āhiu ke 'ike mai
Ne'e a kahi 'ē noho mai
Kuhikuhi mai ho'i ka lima
He ma'i Pākē ko iala

Kūlou au a hō'oi'a'i'o
Komo ka hilahila i ka houpo

Lohe ana kauka aupuni
Ho'ouna ke koa māka'i
Hopuhopu 'ia mai kohu moa
Alaka'i i ke ala kohu pipi
Kū ana i mua o ka Papa Ola
Papa ola 'ole o nei ma'i
Ki'ei wale mai nā kauka
Hālō ma 'ō, ma 'ane'i
Kuhi a'e nā lima i Lē'ahi
“ Hele 'oe ma Kalawao”

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Song of the Chanter Ka'ehu

What will become of Hawai'i?
What will leprosy do to our land -
disease of the despised, dreaded alike
by white or brown or darker-skinned?

Strange when a man's neighbors
become less than acquaintances.
Seeing me they drew away.

They move to sit elsewhere, whispering,
and a friend pointed a finger:
“He is a leper.”

I bowed my head, I knew it was true.
In my heart I hugged my shame.

Word reached the medical authorities.
The doctors sent the military to fetch us.
We were caught like chickens, like cattle herded
along roadway and country lane.

Then they paraded us before the Board of Health
but there was no health in that Board for such as we.

Examining doctors eyed us, squinted this way and
that.

More fingers pointed Diamond Head way:
“You go to Kalawao!”

Ka'ehu, a Kaua'i native born in 1840 in Koloa, was an active chanter, composer and kumu hula during the reigning years of Kamehameha V, Lunalilo, and Kalākaua. He was admitted to Kalaupapa on March 22, 1875, aged 35, and probably wrote this chant around that time.¹⁷ This powerful autobiographical chant typifies his propensity to draw subject matter from everyday life whenever he composed oli.¹⁸ This chant captures in an acute and intense manner the agony and heartbreak felt by all those who were arrested and imprisoned for having suffered Hansen's Disease. Ka'ehu's refrain “What will become our Hawai'i?” was indeed the terrible question asked by the Hawaiian citizenship of the 1865 and into the 20th century. No one was exempt from the possibility of contracting leprosy. This was Ka'ehu's last known composition, and he died in Kalaupapa, his death date and gravesite unknown.

Lālau nā koa aupuni
Halihali iā kai i ka uapo
Ho'ili nā pio a pau
Ka luāhi i ka ma'i lēpela
Hiki ke aloha kaumaha nō
I ka 'ike 'ole i ka 'ohana
Ka waimaka ho'i ka 'elo'elo
Ho'opulu i ka pāpālina
Pau ka 'ikena i ka 'āina
I ka wehihehi o ke kaona

Hao wikiwiki 'ia a lilo ho'i
Kū ka huelo i ke kia mua
E nonoho lua 'o *Keoni Pulu*
Kīpū i ka hoe ma hope
Ho'ohū ka helena o ke kai
A he pipi'i wale mai nō
'Ike iā Moloka'i ma mua
Ua pōwehiwehi i ka noe

Ha'ina mai ka puana
No nei ma'i 'o ka lēpela

Again the militia took over.
Soldiers escorted us to the wharf for farewell.

Prisoners, we were marched aboard,
victims of leprosy, branded for exile.

Abandoned, cut off from family and dear ones,
we were left alone with our grief, with our love.

Rain of tears streamed from leper eyes.
Leper cheeks glistened with raindrops in the sun.

Never again would we look upon this land of ours,
this lovely harbor town.

Quickly the sails were hoisted.
Ropes dangled from the foremast,
tails of wild animals writhing,
whipping in the channel breeze.
The *John Bull* drew anchor.
In the stern the rudder turned.

So sailed we forth to dim Moloka'i Island
enshrouded in fog.

So ends my song and this refrain.
What will leprosy do to my people?
What will become of our land?



Left: Kalaupapa cemetery at dawn (Robert Mondoy, 2009)

Below: Kalawao, ca. 1890, eastward view, courtesy Kalaupapa NPS archives

