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Ke Kulana He Mahu: Remembering a Sense of Place (review)

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The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 15, Number 1, Spring 2003, pp. 231-233  
(Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2003.0031>



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visuals portray an exotic culture and society, although context is thin in scenes of the new church, which stands mute on the relationship between mission and masks. The complicated relationship between self-sufficiency, development, and global capitalism is merely hinted at, and despite their indispensable participation, women's voices are left out. I recommend this film for introductory anthropology or Melanesian ethnography courses to explore the integration of art, religion, and daily life; concepts of tradition and change; globalization and development; religious syncretism; gender relations; urban-rural connections; and issues around "doing" ethnography and making ethnographic films.

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*Ke Kūlana He Māhū: Remembering a Sense of Place*, 67 minutes, VHS (Digital Video), color, 2001. Written by Kathryn Xian; directed by Kathryn Xian and Brent Anbe; produced by Kathryn Xian, Jaymee Carvajal, Brent Anbe, and Connie M Florez; distributed by Zang Pictures, Inc., Honolulu. Individuals US\$39.95; institutions US\$195.00.

This documentary relates a tale of how colonialism profoundly transformed Kanaka Maoli (indigenous Hawaiian) society and the forms of love that are acceptable in "the land of aloha." By contrasting the diversity of gender and sexual practices in pre-colonial times with the stigmatization and marginalization of transgendered

and gay people in Hawai'i today, the film asks us to ponder a question posed by Kanaka Maoli activist Ku'u-mealoha Gomes at the beginning of the film: "Where did the change come from?" The question is a rhetorical one, and the film does not provide any explicit answers; rather, it forces us to draw our own conclusions by making sense of the montage of testimonies, interviews, dance performances, old photographs, artistic renderings, and scenes of ocean and landscapes presented to us.

The film can be divided roughly into three sections. The first part examines *kūlana* (place, station, status, rank) in Kanaka Maoli society and culture of the *māhū*, a term that was originally used for both "hermaphrodites" and for transgendered males and females. Kanaka Maoli and non-Kanaka Maoli scholars, activists, archivists, and *kumu hula* (Hawaiian dance instructors) all affirm the acceptance of *māhū* in traditional society. *Māhū* are interviewed and featured as important cultural educators and practitioners, and they perform *oli* (chants) and *hula kahiko* (traditional dance). Interviewees then relate a familiar story of colonial decay as they describe the ways that the adoption of western law, Christianity, and a cash-based economy, along with the widespread loss of life and land (caused by disease and foreign intrusion), threatened to wipe out Kanaka Maoli communities and ways of life. Although *Kānaka Maoli* did survive, many today struggle with their identities—none more than the *māhū*.

The second section, entitled "modern times," looks at the drag queen community in Honolulu. Between

scenes of drag queen performances in nightclubs, about half a dozen queens share their experiences and struggles with family, friends, and society. A series of intimate and moving interviews with two queens and their mothers reveals the spiritual and emotional trials that entire families must go through, especially when struggling with AIDS and Christianity. Academic and community leaders discuss famous *māhū* in Hawaiian history as well as the occurrence of *aikane*, a practice in which high-ranking *ali'i* (chiefs) took lovers of the same sex. The film then addresses the same-sex marriage debate/debacle of 1998 in which a proposed state constitutional amendment to grant the legislature the power to limit marriages to heterosexual couples only galvanized both conservative and liberal forces in Hawai'i and across the United States; above all else, the film shows how the event divided the local community and misrecognized gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) lives.

The final part of the film, "a story of aloha amidst Western exclusion," documents a tradition of love and caring in times when Kanaka Maoli communities were being torn apart by epidemics. Even when the Hawaiian government was forcibly quarantining individuals afflicted with leprosy (Hansen's disease), the bonds of *'ohana* (family) outweighed the law. Caroline Sinavaiana-Gabbard, a Samoan writer and professor at the University of Hawai'i, warns that this tradition of acceptance is being threatened by the "tyranny of the binary frame" (the division of the world into stratified "either-or" categories) that

is currently in place as a result of colonization. In the final fifteen minutes or so, the film brings together the multiple discussions that have been occurring throughout, with the addition of a story of a gay man who died a suspicious and tragic death. It then ends where it began, with Ku'ume-aloa Gomes asking, "Where did the change come from?"

This is an ambitious and pioneering film, which creates space for public dialogues that have heretofore revolved primarily around the moral or legal ethics and implications of recognizing GLBT lives. Focusing on the historical transformation of the status of *māhū* highlights a number of things: the imbrication of structures of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia; the importance of recognizing a Kanaka Maoli genealogy for transgendered and same-sex sexual practices in Hawai'i; and the deep spiritual interconnectedness of the people, land, ancestors, and gods/God. Hawai'i-born writer/director/producer Kathryn Xian states that the film is a critique of colonialism and globalization and is meant to foster a sense of pride in Kānaka Maoli and other *māhū* and queens (personal communication, 28 May 2002). It also aims to instill confidence in the families and friends of transgendered people and to show larger heterosexual audiences that these people are just like anyone else. Zang Pictures, a grassroots company Xian cofounded in 1999, approaches film production (primarily about Asian/Pacific experiences) "as social and community activism, as well as an integral forum for artistic expression" ([www.zangpictures.net](http://www.zangpictures.net)). As both an activist intervention, and

as a venue for mähū performance, the film is effective.

At the same time, some people may feel that the film tries to do too much and is not very successful at conveying a single coherent message. Some parts either did not seem to fit or were insufficiently explained to allow viewers to make associations. The film also does not do a good job of really explaining the term mähū and to whom it applies. At various times and by various people it is glossed as “transgendered,” “transsexual,” “two-spirited,” “both kāne and wahine, both male and female,” “cross-overs,” “physical hermaphrodites,” “practicing homosexuality,” “gay,” and “transvestites and cross-dressers.” There is no discussion of how the usage of the term has transformed historically, or even to whom it primarily applies today (for more discussion of this, see *‘O Au Nō Kēia* [2001] by Andrew Matzner, a collection of oral history interviews with fifteen mähū and transgendered males on O‘ahu, some of whom are featured in the film). Likewise, there is no discussion of the diversity of gay experiences (not to mention those of the larger GLBT community) or the contradictions of labeling all gay men (who may be quite gender normative) as being mähū (which I take to be a separate gender with its own cultural meanings).

Despite its shortcomings, *Ke Kūlana He Mähū* treats the lives and experiences of mähū and transgendered people with love, intelligence, and dignity. When I attended a free screening and panel discussion at Leeward Community College on O‘ahu, I was impressed by the responses elicited from members of the audience. A number of people who were admittedly unfamiliar with transgendered communities were able to ask the panelists questions that may have come off as a bit awkward but at least signaled a willingness to engage in a new dialogue. Some GLBT individuals present identified with the struggles portrayed and thanked the filmmakers for doing something so important. Other people shared warm and funny anecdotes about mähū in their own families. As a heterosexual Kanaka Maoli man, I realized how ignorant I really was and am, despite my claims of being open and having gay and lesbian friends. I have come to more fully appreciate the fact that true decolonization in Hawai‘i will entail a fundamental rethinking of personhood, human relations, spirituality, and aloha, and this film will move us in that direction.

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