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THE ENDURING WISDOM OF MARY KAWENA PUKUI: EXPLORING ʻŌLELO NOʻEAU

In the vast tapestry of Hawaiian culture, few names shine as brightly as Mary Kawena Pukui. A cultural treasure, a linguist, a composer, and a historian, her life's work has preserved the very soul of Hawaii for generations. Central to her monumental contribution is the collection and translation of **Mary Kawena Pukui Olelo No Eau**—the proverbs and poetical sayings of the Hawaiian people. To encounter this work is to step into a world of profound insight, natural wisdom, and ancestral knowledge. This article delves into the life of Mary Kawena Pukui, the significance of her collection of ʻŌlelo Noʻeau, and why these ancient words continue to resonate deeply in the modern world.

Who Was Mary Kawena Pukui?

Born on April 20, 1895, in Kaʻū on the Big Island of Hawaii, Mary Abigail Kawenaʻulaokalaniahiʻiakaikapoliopelekawahineʻaihononāināleilehuaʻāpala Pukui was a child of two worlds. Her mother, Paʻahana Kanakaʻole, was a Hawaiian woman deeply rooted in traditional customs, while her father, Henry Pukui, was of Hawaiian-Caucasian descent. Raised primarily by her grandmother, she absorbed the old ways: the language, the chants, the prayers, and the nuanced philosophies of daily Hawaiian life. This immersive upbringing gave her a native fluency in both the Hawaiian language and the cultural worldview that shaped it.

Later in life, Mary Kawena Pukui moved to Honolulu, where she began her formal collaboration with the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum. For decades, she worked alongside anthropologists and scholars such as Martha Beckwith and E.S. Craighill Handy. Her role was not merely that of a translator; she was a cultural bridge. She understood that language without context was hollow. Her work ensured that the spiritual and practical meanings behind Hawaiian words were not lost in translation. It is this depth of understanding that makes her work on **Mary Kawena Pukui Olelo No Eau** so invaluable.

Understanding ʻŌlelo Noʻeau: More Than Just Proverbs

The phrase "ʻŌlelo Noʻeau" translates directly to "clever or wise sayings." However, to categorize them simply as proverbs is to underestimate their power. These are not mere witty remarks; they are encapsulated lessons,

historical records, legal precedents, and spiritual axioms. Each saying is a dense repository of cultural memory. The complete collection, famously published as *ʻŌlelo Noʻeau: Hawaiian Proverbs & Poetical Sayings*, is considered the definitive reference for understanding traditional Hawaiian thought.

The scope of **Mary Kawena Pukui Olelo No Eau** covers every facet of life. There are sayings about the family, the ocean, the art of fishing, the cultivation of taro, the nature of love, the sting of betrayal, the importance of hospitality, and the reverence for ancestors. They were used by elders to teach children, by chiefs to inspire warriors, and by commoners to navigate the complexities of community life. To know these sayings is to know how Hawaiians viewed the world.

Examples of Wisdom from the Collection

To understand the power of this collection, it is useful to examine a few specific examples. Each saying is typically accompanied by a detailed explanation provided by Mary Kawena Pukui, offering the cultural context necessary for true understanding.

- **“I ka ʻōlelo ke ola, i ka ʻōlelo ka make.”** (In language is life, in language is death.) This is perhaps one of the most famous sayings in the collection. It speaks to the immense power of words. A careless word can destroy a friendship, while a kind word can heal a wound. In a time when the Hawaiian language was suppressed, this saying took on an even deeper, political significance.
- **“He aliʻi ka ʻāina, he kauwā ke kanaka.”** (The land is a chief; man is its servant.) This proverb encapsulates the core Hawaiian value of kuleana (responsibility) toward the environment. It teaches that humans do not own the land; rather, they are stewards who must care for it. This is a profoundly modern ecological ethic that was understood hundreds of years ago.
- **“Aʻohe i ka hana nui i ke alu ʻole.”** (No task is too big when done together.) This saying celebrates the spirit of laulima (cooperation). It is a reminder of the collective strength of the community, a value that sustained Hawaiian society through hardship and celebration alike.
- **“Ua lehulehu a manomano ka ʻikena a ka Hawaiʻi.”** (Great and numerous is the knowledge of the Hawaiians.) This is a proverb of pride and affirmation. It counters the narrative that indigenous knowledge is primitive. Mary Kawena Pukui dedicated her life to proving the truth of this saying.

Each of these examples from **Mary Kawena Pukui Olelo No Eau** offers a window into a sophisticated system of ethics and philosophy. They are not abstract; they are practical guides for living a good life.

The

Methodology: How She Preserved the Wisdom

The creation of the ʻŌlelo Noʻeau collection was not a simple desk job. It was an act of love and urgent preservation. Mary Kawena Pukui traveled throughout the islands, sitting with kūpuna (elders), listening to their stories, and meticulously recording their words. She was trusted because she was one of them. She spoke the language perfectly, she respected the protocols, and she understood the sacred nature of the knowledge being shared.

Her process involved:

1. **Listening with reverence:** She never rushed the process. She allowed the elders to speak at their own pace, often sharing chants and prayers that were not directly requested but were essential to the context.
2. **Meticulous transcription:** She wrote down the sayings in the original Hawaiian, paying careful attention to dialectical variations and pronunciation.
3. **Literal translation:** She provided a direct translation of the words.
4. **Contextual explanation:** This was her unique contribution. She explained *why* the saying was used and *when* it was appropriate. A proverb about a canoe might actually be a lesson about leadership. Without her explanation, the deeper meaning would be lost.

This rigorous methodology ensures that **Mary Kawena Pukui Olelo No Eau** is not just a dictionary of sayings but a comprehensive manual of Hawaiian cultural intelligence.

The Cultural Renaissance and Revival of the Language

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the Hawaiian language faced severe suppression. After the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893, English became the dominant language in schools and government. Speaking Hawaiian was discouraged, and sometimes punished. By the mid-20th century, the number of native speakers had dwindled dangerously low. The work of Mary Kawena Pukui became a lifeline for the Hawaiian Renaissance that began in the 1970s.

When a new generation of Hawaiians sought to reclaim their language and identity, they turned to her books. The *Hawaiian Dictionary* (co-authored with Samuel H. Elbert) became the standard reference. But it was the collection of **Mary Kawena Pukui Olelo No Eau** that provided the spiritual and philosophical foundation. Schools like ʻAha Pūnana Leo, which operate Hawaiian language immersion programs, use these sayings daily to teach not just vocabulary, but values. The sayings are used in homes, in art, in music, and in political speeches. They have become the common currency of cultural

identity.

The Modern Relevance of Ancient Wisdom

One might wonder why proverbs from a pre-industrial, non-Western society matter in the age of artificial intelligence and global connectivity. The answer lies in their timelessness. The human condition—love, loss, struggle, joy, community—has not fundamentally changed. The wisdom encapsulated in **Mary Kawena Pukui Olelo No Eau** speaks directly to these constants.

Consider the environmental crisis facing the world today. The proverb “He aliʻi ka ʻāina, he kauwā ke kanaka” (The land is a chief; man is its servant) offers a radical alternative to the extractive mindset that has led to climate change. It suggests a relationship of reciprocity and respect with the natural world. In the fields of psychology and wellness, the emphasis on community (ʻohana) and collective responsibility (kuleana) offers a counterbalance to the epidemic of loneliness in modern society. These sayings provide a blueprint for a more balanced, sustainable way of living.

The Legacy of Mary Kawena Pukui

Mary Kawena Pukui passed away on May 21, 1986, but her legacy is immortal. She was honored with numerous awards, including the prestigious Bishop Museum Medal. She is remembered not just as a scholar, but as a matriarch of Hawaiian culture. Her work paved the way for Hawaiian language to become an official state language and for the revitalization of cultural practices that were on the verge of extinction.

The collection of **Mary Kawena Pukui Olelo No Eau** is her masterpiece. It is a book that belongs not on a shelf, but in the hands of anyone who wishes to understand the depth of Hawaiian thought. It is a source of comfort, instruction, and inspiration. Every time a Hawaiian child hears “I ka ʻōlelo ke ola, i ka ʻōlelo ka make,” they are connecting with generations of ancestors. Every time an environmental activist quotes “He aliʻi ka ʻāina,” they are standing on the shoulders of Mary Kawena Pukui.

How to Engage with the ʻŌlelo Noʻeau Today

For those inspired to explore this treasure trove of knowledge, the path is open. The book *ʻŌlelo Noʻeau: Hawaiian Proverbs & Poetical Sayings* is widely available. For those who prefer digital access, several online databases and apps have indexed the sayings. A respectful approach is always recommended. These are not casual trivia; they are sacred teachings. When using a saying, learn its meaning, understand its context, and pronounce the Hawaiian words correctly. This respect is the highest form of appreciation for the work of Mary Kawena Pukui.

- **Read the explanations:** Don't

just memorize the saying; read the paragraphs Mary Kawena Pukui wrote about it.

- **Use them in daily life:** Try to apply the wisdom. If you are working on a group project, recall “A‘ohe hana nui ke alu ‘ole.”
- **Share with respect:** Share the sayings with others, but always credit the source and explain the meaning.

Conclusion

The work of Mary Kawena Pukui, specifically her monumental collection of **Mary Kawena Pukui**