

**The Reclamation of Hawaiian Featherwork:
Exploring History and Tradition in Relation to the Present**

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Abstract: Hawaiian cultural traditions began hundreds of years ago, before European contact and have been sustained to the present. Hawaiian featherwork, which was reserved for the ali'i (chiefly class), is one of the oldest traditions and continues to be an important marker of Native Hawaiian identity today. It was practiced before and during the beginning of the monarchy period (ca. 1810-1893). After Kamahameha I's (the first king of the unified Hawaiian archipelago) death in 1819, the production of featherwork started to wane though featherwork continued to be prominently displayed by the ali'i throughout the nineteenth century. Since the 1960s, it has been reclaimed as a practice and a symbol of Hawaiian culture due to its link to Native Hawaiian identity and history as it has been passed down through generations. Not only has it been reclaimed among Native Hawaiians as a living tradition, the reclamation of featherwork has also taken the form of Indigenous conservation practices and public exhibitions in Hawaiian institutions, in collaboration with Western institutions.

In *Sacred Claims*, Religions Studies scholar Greg Johnson beautifully writes, “We can speak of tradition, then, not as a collection of objects on museum shelves but as the spirit of the people who seek to animate these objects in the present.”¹¹ Although *Sacred Claims* pertains to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and the returning of ancestral remains and objects, this particular quote alone speaks to the involvement of the people and their cultural objects in keeping their cultural traditions alive. In this paper, I will be discussing Hawaiian featherwork and its practice as an important symbol of Native Hawaiian identity. Its connection to ancestors—those that have made past Hawaiian featherwork—is also emphasized and discussed through its historical context, which relates to the case of its reclamation being practiced today.

Reclamation, which is the focus of this paper, is reclaiming or bringing back a lost cultural tradition or object from the past through the values and perspectives of the culture(s). In the case of Hawaiian featherwork, reclamation can be expressed through the revival of past feathered objects and the transferring of the practice generationally. During the monarchy period in Hawai’i (c. 1810-1893), featherwork became a tradition and symbol of the continuity of Hawaiian culture and identity that ali’i (the chiefly class) frequently displayed despite European invasion. Even though its production had started to wane after Kamehameha I (the first king of the unified Hawaiian islands) died in 1819, featherwork was sustained throughout the nineteenth century as a symbol of Hawaiian history and identity due to its connection to mana. More recently, since the 1960s, reclamation is achieved through the conservation and display of past feathered objects in museums and the transmission of the practice from one generation to another.

Featherwork had not initially started in Hawai’i, but was brought by Polynesian settlers

¹ Greg Johnson, *Sacred Claims* (University of Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 24.

in 1000 CE. However, Hawaiian featherwork during the monarchy period was not accessible to everyone in Hawai'i and was only reserved for the ali'i (chiefly class). The chiefly class was seen as separate from the maka'āinana (commoners). In fact, Native Hawaiian scholar Leilani Holmes writes that, "Genealogically, ali'i are viewed as descending from gods."² Prior to European colonization this relation to the gods and separation from maka'āinana was supported by the kapu system. The kapu (sacred) system, which is a complex set of laws, ultimately protects the mana (spiritual power) of the ali'i. Furthermore, "bird feathers or hulu o nā manu were reserved exclusively for the chiefs, and the most important featherwork were 'ahu 'ula (feathered cloaks), symbols of Hawaiian royalty."³ Displaying their chiefly rule and serving as protection, the ali'i were adorned with feathered objects such as the 'ahu 'ula and mahiole (feathered helmet), and were initially used in battle.

By the time Captain James Cook had arrived in Hawai'i in 1778, they were primarily being used in ceremonial events.⁴ One prominent example of an 'ahu 'ula owned by an ali'i was the one made for Kamehameha I as he rose to power in the mid-eighteenth century. In a ceremony, he was given a long golden yellow 'ahu 'ula (**Figure 1**) that contains only a bit of red feathers on the left opening edge of the cloak. Made out of yellow mamo and red 'i'iwi feathers, it is currently in the possession of the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum. The ahu 'ula doesn't appear to have any patterns or intricate design but instead relies on the brilliant color for symbology. A mainly yellow cloak would have most likely linked the wearer to the major

² Leilani Holmes, *Ancestry of Experience* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), 4.

³ Noelle M.K.Y. Kahanu, "Ahu 'ula: The Most Treasured of Chiefly Possessions," in *Royal Hawaiian Featherwork: Nā Hulu Al'i*, ed. Leah Caldeira, Christina Hellmich, Adrienne L. Kaeppler, Betty Lou Kam, and Roger G. Rose (San Francisco, CA: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2015), 24.

⁴ John Charlot, "The Feather Skirt of Nāhi'ena'ena: An Innovation in Postcontact Hawaiian Art," *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 100, no. 2 (1991): 120, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20706388>.

Hawaiian god Kāne, “god of life and creation”⁵ and the bits of red feathers (being the most highly valued) could have linked him to Kū, the god of governance and war.⁶

Besides physically wearing feathers, kähili (feather standards) and akua hulu (feathered god images) were common items that the ali’i usually possessed. The feather standards **(Figure 2)** were traditionally handled by kähili bearers at ceremonial events, where they would follow the ali’i with these objects. These feather standards became a symbol of the strong sacred status of chiefs. In addition, feathered god objects were normally gifted to ali’i chiefs. “These objects retained residual mana and power, which might be passed on from generation to generation.”⁷ They were passed down through the ali’i lineage, representing the physical form of important gods such as Kū, Lono, or Kāne. In battle, they ensured victory.

Hawaiian featherwork became synonymous with Hawaiian royalty because bird feathers were highly treasured. Thus, they were harvested from many regions of Hawai’i including upland forests and grassy coastlines. Native birds were caught by kia manu or “skilled bird catchers, [who] understood the behaviors and environments of these birds, [as] they used a variety of techniques to attract and capture them.”⁸ Many of these birds, being of the forest, the sea, or in the mountains, included terns, honeycreepers, a genus of honeyeater,

⁵ Marques Hanalei Marzan and Samuel M. ‘Ohukani’ōhi’a Gon III, “The Aesthetics, Materials, and Construction of Hawaiian Featherwork,” in *Royal Hawaiian Featherwork: Nā Hulu Al’i*, ed. Leah Caldeira, Christina Hellmich, Adrienne L. Kaeppler, Betty Lou Kam, and Roger G. Rose (San Francisco, CA: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2015), 26.

⁶ Te Rangi Hiroa and Peter H. Buck, “The Local Evolution of Hawaiian Feather Capes and Cloaks,” *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 53, no. 1 (1944): 9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20702959>.

⁷ Adrienne L. Kaeppler, “Genealogy and Disrespect: A Study of Symbolism in Hawaiian Images,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 3 (1982): 83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41625301>.

⁸ Marzan and Gon III, “The Aesthetics, Materials, and Construction of Hawaiian Featherwork,” in *Royal Hawaiian Featherwork: Nā Hulu Al’i*, ed. Leah Caldeira, Christina Hellmich, Adrienne L. Kaeppler, Betty Lou Kam, and Roger G. Rose (San Francisco, CA: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2015), 26.

and moa (domestic fowl) to name a few. Among these birds, the feathers of forest birds were highly valued as the birds were “said to fly closest to the heavens”⁹ and represented the mana and chiefly status of the ali’i.

By the early 1800s, however, there was a decline of Hawaiian bird species due to new foreign bird diseases and predators along with the loss of habitat as a result of human intrusion. Thus, “accounts in Hawaiian-language newspapers at the time acknowledged the loss of native birds in the uplands, most of which became extinct by the end of the twentieth century.”¹⁰ Most accounts by scholars of the nineteenth century do not mention much about the important information pertaining to the birds and their relation with the environment, let alone their preservation. This devastation of the loss of widely used bird species for Hawaiian featherwork led to the use of different materials such as goose feathers, pheasant feathers, and chicken feathers.

Though featherwork has changed throughout Hawaiian history due to the different materials being used in the practice, conservation of past featherwork at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Honolulu has highlighted the importance of these objects as a sign of Hawaiian identity and has continued to help keep the objects relevant in contemporary times. Through their “Ethnology Database” one is able to find many different feather objects, including leis, cloaks, and capes. This is not surprising as after the co-founder and benefactor, Bernice Pauahi Bishop’s (a Hawaiian chief of high rank) passing, she had donated many of her

⁹ Bille Lythberg, *The Journal of Pacific History* 51, no. 3 (2016): 345, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26157863>.

¹⁰ Marzan and Gon III, “The Aesthetics, Materials, and Construction of Hawaiian Featherwork,” 26.

valuable Hawaiian royal items that she had inherited.¹¹ Emma Kaleleonāhana Rooke (the wife of Kamehameha IV and Dowager Queen of the Hawaiian Islands)¹² also donated her royal items not long after Bernice Bishop's passing.

In 1889, Charles Reed Bishop, the husband of Bernice Bishop, opened the museum in honor of his wife with the intent of caring “for the tangible and intangible heirlooms of the Kamehameha lineage and other royal lineages”¹³ and educating Native Hawaiian youth on Native Hawaiian culture. These objects and other Hawaiian material culture have been carefully taken care of (by the Ethnology Division) by using the “best practices” (universally used conservation practices). Recently, however, there has been an integration of Indigenous care methods that the ethnology staff use, which “depend on the skills that they learned from their parents, grandparents, and community mentors.”¹⁴ This type of care emphasizes the importance of these objects in relation to Hawaiian identity and preserves them with the intent to respect Native Hawaiian's cultural objects and traditions. Furthermore, in doing so Hawaiian featherwork (and other past Hawaiian objects) continue to exist as an important symbol of the Kingdom of Hawai'i and Hawaiian identity. It is also important to note that these objects still contain mana, a crucial component of Hawaiian culture.

Past Hawaiian featherwork has a direct connection to the ancestral realm through mana.

Mana is a sacred belief in many Oceanic cultures that all things—people, animals, places,

¹¹ Sarah Elizabeth Carr-Locke, “Indigenous Heritage and Public Museums: Exploring Collaboration and Exhibition in Canada and the United States” (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 2015), 71.

¹² Halena Kapuni-Reynlds, “Mo'okū'auhau (Genealogies) of Care: Curating Ali'i Collections at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum,” *Studies in Art and Humanities* 3, no.2 (February 2017): 90.

¹³ Kapuni-Reynlds, “Mo'okū'auhau (Genealogies) of Care: Curating Ali'i Collections at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum,” 91.

¹⁴ Kapuni-Reynlds, “Mo'okū'auhau (Genealogies) of Care: Curating Ali'i Collections at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum,” 98.

and objects—contain a spiritual energy or life force. In Hawaiian culture, it especially links mana to the power and authority of the ali'i that is given to them by their gods. Past featherwork that had once belonged to ali'i can still contain mana (if properly stored using Indigenous care methods) which has a direct connection to it. Honoring and caring for past featherwork made by ancestors (kūpuna) is reciprocated with mana, an intangible aspect that surpasses the human realm.¹⁵ Furthermore, the honoring of ancestors continues the practice and is a form of the reclamation of Hawaiian featherwork.

Past featherwork also has a direct connection to familial ties through the passing down of featherwork practice among family members through generations. In the 1960s and 1970s, the practice of Hawaiian featherwork had resumed after a long pause. This resurgence in Native Hawaiian culture, in not only art practices, but in language and other traditional cultural practices was called the Hawaiian Renaissance.¹⁶ A Hawaiian featherwork artist, named Mary Louise Kaleonahenahe (Mary Lou) learned the practice in the mid-1950s from her kumu (teacher) Leilani Fernandez and became a feather lei master herself. “By 1970, she was teaching, imparting the knowledge she had developed.”¹⁷ Before teaching the wider community the practice of Hawaiian featherwork, Mary Lou started teaching her daughter, Paulette Nohealani Kekuwa Kahalepuna in 1962.¹⁸ This curiosity and interest in Hawaiian featherwork soon turned into a passion for both women.

This mother-daughter duo (**Figure 3**) began teaching the making of lei hulu (feather lei) (**Figure 4**), contributing to the reclamation of the practice and display of Hawaiian

¹⁵ Johnson, *Sacred Claims: Repatriation and Living Tradition*, 33.

¹⁶ Betty Lou Kam, “The Aloha of Sharing a Hawaiian Art,” in *Royal Hawaiian Featherwork: Nā Hulu Ali'i* (San Francisco, CA: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2015), 125.

¹⁷ Kam, “The Aloha of Sharing a Hawaiian Art,” 125.

¹⁸ Kam, “The Aloha of Sharing a Hawaiian Art,” 127.

featherwork. They were also involved in many activities centered around Hawaiian art and culture such as the exhibition called *Artificial Curiosities: Being an Exposition of Native Manufactures Collected on Three Pacific Voyages of Captain James Cook, R. N.* held at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in 1978 and were a part of Hawaiian societies and civic clubs.¹⁹ In 1991, they opened a store that served as a learning center, providing a variety of featherwork tools and materials for beginning and intermediate featherwork enthusiasts, called Na Lima Mili Hulu No’eau (“skilled hands touch feathers”) (**Figure 5**) in Honolulu. Although Mary Lou had passed away in 2008 along with her daughter Paulette in 2014, respectively, their store has been passed down to Mele Kahalepuna-Chun, Mary Lou’s granddaughter and Paulette’s daughter. Na Lima Mili Hulu No’eau continues to be a space where the community and tourists can learn featherwork, as well as providing a meeting place for connoisseurs.²⁰ Today, Kahalepuna-Chun perpetuates Hawaiian featherwork through family tradition by making lei hulu, educating others of the ancient art practice, and allowing space for Native Hawaiians to connect with their Hawaiian history and identity.

Hawaiian featherwork was also reclaimed through the exhibition, *Royal Hawaiian Featherwork: Nā Hulu Ali’i* at the De Young Museum in San Francisco, California, in collaboration with the Bishop Museum in Honolulu. Taking place in 2015, this exhibition had offered “a rare opportunity to view these iconic Hawaiian symbols of authority and prestige from around the globe.”²¹ It also provided Native Hawaiians who live in the Bay Area with the

¹⁹ Kam, “The Aloha of Sharing a Hawaiian Art,” 127. See also, Adrienne L. Kaeppler, “*Artificial Curiosities*”: *Being an Exposition of Native Manufactures Collected on the Three Pacific Voyages of Captain James Cook, R. N., at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, January 18, 1978–August 31, 1978, on the Occasion of the Bicentennial of the European Discovery of the Hawaiian Islands by Captain Cook, January 18, 1778* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1978).

²⁰ PBS Hawaii, “Traditional Hawaiian Featherwork,” filmed September 2022 in Hawaii, video.

²¹ Blair D. Collis, *Royal Hawaiian Featherwork: Nā Hulu Ali’i*, 11.

opportunity to connect with these feathered objects and, ultimately, to their Hawaiian identity and history. The waiwai ali'i (chiefly treasures) and other cultural objects used in the exhibition were loaned from a number of museums, including the Bishop Museum, the British Museum in London, the Honolulu Museum of Art, The California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, and more.²² The waiwai ali'i were proudly displayed, as this was the first exhibition to show Hawaiian cultural objects such as these in North America. This exhibition was successful in reaching a global audience and had achieved success in reminding the world of this beautiful, strong Oceanian culture that continues to thrive despite Hawai'i's colonial history. Even though *Royal Hawaiian Featherwork: Nā Hulu Ali'i* is like a good example of reclamation, there are other exhibitions in well-known institutions that also showed precontact Hawaiian objects but may have interfered with fully achieving reclamation for Native Hawaiians.

At the Honolulu Academy of Arts, *Life in the Pacific of 1700s: The Cook/Forster Collection of the Georg-August University of Göttingen* in 2006 focused on the issue of Native Hawaiians being able to fully honor their ancestral objects and reclaim them. Pacific anthropologist Margaret Jolly offers a variety of opinions about the exhibition, from the general audience, Honolulu daily press reviewers, and an artist-scholar in her article. In response to the minimal labels and absent additional text for the Hawaiian objects, Hali'imaile Andrade commented that, "The lack of interpretive materials in the galleries relegated the works to mere historic "objects."²³ On the other hand, others were relieved to not see as much text as it did not try to force a certain perspective or narrative on the objects. Regardless, many

²² Richard Benefield, *Royal Hawaiian Featherwork: Nā Hulu Ali'i*, 10.

²³ Margaret Jolly, "Moving Objects: Reflections on Oceanic Collections," in *Tides of Innovation in Oceania: Value, Materiality and Place*, ed. Elisabetta Gneccchi-Ruscione and Anna Paini (Anu Press, 2017), 86.

Native Hawaiian visitors were touched by the appearance of Kū, an akua hulu (**Figure 6**), and had even left offerings in front of his pedestal.

Hawai'i in the monarchy period (c. 1810-1893) was filled with an array of feathered objects, in which featherwork had become a tradition and symbol of precontact Hawaii. Despite European interference, Hawaiian featherwork (restricted to only the ali'i) continued to be displayed even though production had waned after the death of Kamehameha I (1819). Brought by Polynesian settlers in 1000 AD, it had become a symbol of Hawaiian culture, identity, and history—especially being synonymous with Hawaiian royalty. Furthermore, the honoring of past featherwork—whether through practice, revival, or care through Indigenous conservation methods—is also a form of reclamation. In addition, Hawaiian feathered objects are connected to the mana of past ali'i that can also be reciprocated through the current practice of honoring the kūpuna who made and used these objects. Honoring these objects include integrating Indigenous care methods in archiving, storing past featherwork, and exhibiting. The passing down of the cultural practice within Native Hawaiian families, like in the case of Mary Lou, her daughter, Paulette, and granddaughter, Mele Kahalepuna-Chun, has brought back the ancient art, and it continues to live in the legacy of the Kahalepuna family. Today, the continuation of the practice and display of Hawaiian featherwork in Hawaiian institutions (and in collaboration with Western institutions) is a form of reclamation for Native Hawaiians as well.



Figure 1. The 'ahu 'ula of Kamehameha I (c. mid-18th–early 19th century), representing his rise to power. *Royal Hawaiian Featherwork: Nā Hulu Ali'i* (San Francisco, CA: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2015), 142.



Figure 2. A kähili (19th century) once belonging to Queen Lili'uokalani. *Royal Hawaiian Featherwork: Nā Hulu Ali'i* (San Francisco, CA: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2015), 214.



Figure 3. Mary Louise Kaleonahenahe (on the left) with her daughter, Paulette Nohealani Kekuewa Kahalepuna (on the right). *Royal Hawaiian Featherwork: Nā Hulu Ali'i* (San Francisco, CA: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2015), 126.



Figure 4. A lei hulu made out of mostly yellow mamo feathers. Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, from the Ethnology Database, <http://data.bishopmuseum.org/ethnologydb/detailed.php?ARTNO=02807>.



Figure 5. Inside the store of Na Lima Mili Hulu No'eau ("skilled hands touch feathers"). "Ki'i Hō'ike'ike," Feather Legacy, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://featherlegacy.com/ki%CA%BBih%C5%8D%CA%BBike%CA%BBike>.



Figure 6. Akua Hulu at the exhibition, *Life in the Pacific of 1700s: The Cook/Forster Collection of the Georg-August University of Göttingen*, 23 February–14 May 2006 at the Honolulu Academy of Arts. Margaret Jolly, “Moving Objects: Reflections on Oceanic Collections,” in *Tides of Innovation in Oceania: Value, Materiality and Place*, 86

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PBS Hawai’i. “Traditional Hawaiian Featherwork.” Filmed September 2022 in Hawai’i. Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13HoFWr49kw>