

# Empire building in the Pacific

## *The fundamental folly*

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**E**MPIRES CREATE STRANGE indigenous reflexes. The national anthem of the Hawai'ian Kingdom, *Hawai'i pono'i*, as composed by David Kalakaua, its last king, was such a reflex:

Hawai'i pono'i,  
Nānā i kou mō'i,  
Ka lani ali'i,  
Ke ali'i.  
Makua lani ē,  
Kamehameha ē,  
Nā kāua e pale  
Me ka ihe.  
Hawai'i pono'i,  
Nānā i nā ali'i,  
Nā pua muli kou,  
Nā pōki'i.  
Hawai'i pono'i,  
E ka lāhui ē,  
'O kāu hana nui  
E ui ē.

*Hawai'i's own,  
Look to your king,  
The royal chief,  
The chief.*

*Royal father,  
Kamehameha,  
We shall defend,  
With spears*

*Hawai'i's own,  
Look to your chiefs,  
The children after you,  
The young.*

*Hawai'i's own,  
O nation,  
Your great duty  
Strive!*

Kalakaua used his Kingdom's motto, *Ua mau ke ea o ka aina i ka pono*, 'the life of the land is preserved in righteousness' as his theme. This motto had originated in 1843 when an arrogant British naval commander, Lord Paulet,

David Kalakaua, King of Hawai'i, 1874-1891. Composer of *Hawai'i Pono'i*. (From *The Betrayal of Liliuokalani* by Helena Allen, 1982).

took Honolulu hostage to ensure that Hawai'i paid extortionate British claims against its sovereign, Kauikeaouli. While the British humiliated Kauikeaouli in Honolulu, the French treated Queen Pomare IV the same way at Pape'ete.

Pomare's plight at the hands of French warships is illustrated by the words of her desperate appeal to Queen Victoria:

The existing protectorate government of France in my dominions I do not acknowledge ... On account of this threat, against my will I signed my name. I was afraid for the British and American subjects residing on my land would have been indiscriminately massacred ... Be quick to help me for I am nearly dead; I am like a captive pursued by a warrior and nearly taken whose spear is close to me ... send quickly a large ship of war to assist me ...<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately for Hawai'i, Paulet's superiors in London overruled him partly because the simultaneous French outrage in Tahiti, and Pomare's appeal to Victoria, incurred the displeasure of Her Britannic Majesty. Partly at her behest, the Admiralty warned the French to back off in Tahiti. It then told Paulet to restore the Hawai'ian flag,

which ironically had the Union Jack in the same position that it occupies in the New Zealand flag. This 1843 restoration of sovereignty, therefore, carried an ambiguous legacy. Although Paulet's action represented the worst sort of imperial bullying, London's gracious restoration of Hawai'ian sovereignty meant that its flag stayed within Hawai'i's, and the British monarchy became the model for the Hawai'ian monarchy to follow.



## ISLAND EMPIRE BUILDING

The irony of a Polynesian Kingdom seeking to emulate an Empire whose officers treated it with contempt applied equally to the other significant Empire which sought to control Hawai'i during the nineteenth century, the United States of America. Americans, together with a few other Europeans, designed the Hawai'ian Kingdom's political and economic institutions during the 1840s and '50s. Americans attempted to play the same role in Sāmoa during the 1870s and '80s, even though Germans played a greater role on the economic side there.

In this discussion, I will argue that empire building in Hawai'i and Sāmoa was the process by which resident Europeans subordinated indigenous authority to the needs of the expanding world capitalist system. This system required both political institutions which resident Europeans could control, and plantation production of sugar and copra, again under European control.

This thesis sets me apart from the classical theorists of imperialism such as Hobson, Lenin, and Schumpeter who locate the mainspring of imperialism within the metropolitan political economy. It also sets me apart from recent historians of imperialism such as McIntyre, Wehler, La Feber and Kennedy who pay little or no attention to the role indigenous people played in the process of colonisation. In this respect my approach owes something to Ronald Robinson in his most recent exposition of patterns of indigenous collaboration and resistance essential to understanding empire.<sup>3</sup>

### COLLABORATION AND RESISTANCE

In Robinson's model, Kalakaua appears to be a classic collaborator. He ascended to the throne in 1874 only because his European business sponsors arranged for a guard of honour of US Marines who trained a Gatling gun on the enraged supporters of Emma Kaleleonalani, the

almost unanimous choice of the *maka'ainana*, (translated literally 'the people of the land') or the commoners. Paradoxically, Hawai'ians first sang Kalakaua's national anthem, *Hawai'i Pono'i*, as Kalakaua was about to depart for Washington DC to negotiate the 1875 US Reciprocity Treaty. As the harbinger of rapid commercialisation, reciprocity virtually condemned his kingdom to the scrap

heap of history. Yet the great republic always posed as Kalakaua's great friend.

While US Marines fortunately refrained from firing upon Hawai'ians when they protested Kalakaua's election in 1874, British Marines did fire upon Sāmoans who objected to the deportation of their Yankee Premier, Albert Barnes Steinberger, two years later. This Sāmoan resistance was the forerunner of even more drastic action in 1888 when they killed about 50 German Marines in a single engagement. This may have been the first major defeat suffered by German Imperial forces, and it summoned to Apia the six vessels lost in the famous naval

disaster of 1889.<sup>4</sup> Sāmoa therefore offers an example of resistance to offset Kalakaua's apparent collaboration.

### KALAKAUA'S POLYNESIAN CONFEDERATION

What then can we make of Kalakaua's apparently quixotic attempt to form a Polynesian Confederation including Sāmoa in 1887? Although Robert Louis Stevenson befriended Kalakaua as he prepared to write his celebrated *Footnote to History*, he couldn't resist ridiculing the gin-soaked Sāmoan exploits of His Hawai'ian Majesty's Ship the *Kaimiloa*. The way Stevenson tells the story makes it appear as though Kalakaua came up with the idea of a Polynesian Confederation in one of his frequent boozing binges. In fact, the genesis of the attempt to rescue Sāmoa from predatory Europeans dates back at least as far as the nascent alliance with Tahiti under similar circumstances in 1843.



Above: A portrait of Queen Pomare IV of Tahiti, ca 1875. From *Tahiti Nui* by Colin Newbury, 1980. Photograph by Mrs S Hoare.

Opposite: A portrait of Malietoa Laupepa, paramount chief of Sāmoa, 1880s. From *Hempenstall and Rutherford, Protest and Dissent in the Colonial Pacific*, 1984.

Hawai'i Sugar Production 1870-90	Plantation numbers	Sugar output (million tons)	Capital invested (\$million)	Product value (\$million)
1870	20	.08	1	2.6
1880	63	.28	4.3	8.4
1890	73	1.50	11.6	28.0

Forty years after the gunboat diplomacy of 1843, "New Imperialism" rampaged across the globe. A partition of the Pacific followed hard on the heels of the partition of Africa. During the early 1880s, the British began turning Fiji into a sugar colony; the French dispensed with the Pomare dynasty in Tahiti; the Germans grabbed New Guinea; and the Spanish took much of Micronesia. The immediate precursor to Kalakaua's Confederation was his Pacific Protest in 1883 offering his Kingdom's diplomatic services to prevent the annexation of the remainder of Polynesia. Sāmoa, Tonga, and assorted equatorial atolls looked to Hawai'i to lead them, not just out of the jaws of imperialism, but also towards that promised land of constitutional government, diplomatic protection, commercial services and state power they believed Hawai'i represented.

**THE SUGAR KINGDOM**

Had the Polynesian leaders taken a closer look at Kalakaua's Kingdom, they may have been less impressed with what they saw. Although Hawai'i indeed operated a constitutional government, a diplomatic and consular service, and an impressive array of commercial amenities, these accoutrements of modern state power were almost all European controlled. After concluding a US Reciprocity Treaty in 1875, Hawai'i became a virtual dependency of what I've described as an expanding American empire. Reciprocity transformed Hawai'i almost overnight into a sugar kingdom with a polyglot population. The statistics in the tables below illustrate a pattern which may not have appealed to the other Polynesians.

As Hawai'i became a sugar producer for an apparently insatiable American market, Hawai'ians became a marginalised minority in their own country. Asian workers produced the sugar, and the same European capitalists who pocketed the profits also dominated the Kingdom's government and diplomacy.

**SĀMOA AND IMPERIAL RIVALRY**

Unbeknown to Kalakaua, a procession of sleazy land sharks and New Zealand con-men had preceded the *Kaimiloa's* mission to Apia. During the 1870s European land sharks laid claim to more than the total land area of Sāmoa. They usually established claims by providing rifles to Sāmoans, who would then use them to provide the

land sharks with 'vacant possession'. Since people dispossessed in this way invariably returned to dispute possession, the land sharks sought to establish a pliable Sāmoan government to protect their property. Both Steinberger in 1875-76 and his New Zealand successors a decade later, John Lundon and William L Rees, attempted to set up such a regime. They all promised Sāmoans deliverance from the grip of the German commercial company and its law enforcement agency, the gunboats of the Imperial Navy.

Neither the British nor the Germans would have any of this. The Marines of the HMS *Barracouta* deported Steinberger in 1876. From Fiji, John Bates

Thurston, described by his biographer as the Viceroy of the Pacific, correctly suspected that New Zealand's vainglorious Sir George Grey had sent Lundon and Rees to succeed Steinberger. Thurston was, above all, a realistic imperialist and therefore despised Grey's aspirations to found a Polynesian Empire based in Wellington. To Thurston, the flag followed trade. Since the Germans ran the Sāmoan copra trade, they should run Sāmoa. During 1886 he reached a gentleman's agreement with the Germans to acknowledge the 'preponderance' of their 'interests' in Sāmoa.

This was the Sāmoan situation into which the *Kaimiloa* steamed in early 1887. The Germans were in the process of setting up a puppet Premier, Eugen Brandeis, when Sāmoa's titular head Malietoa Laupepa signed up for Kalakaua's Confederation. Lundon and Rees first encouraged Laupepa to seek British, and then American protection. Rees, by his



Hawai'i Population (by ethnicity)	Kamaka (indigenous population)		hoole ('foreigners' ie European)		Asian		Others		Total
		%		%		%		%	
1872-1890									
1872	51,531	90	2,944	5	2,038	4	384		56,897
1878	47,508	82	3,748	6	6,045	10	684		57,985
1884	44,232	55	16,579	20	18,370	23	1,397		80,578
1890	40,622	45	18,939	21	29,362	33	1,067		89,990

Source: Schmitt, *Historical Statistics of Hawai'i*, (1968) pp. 25, 357-8.

own account, even persuaded the American Consul to hoist the stars and stripes over Apia in mid-1886. Thus, the Germans could suspect that the Americans were behind the Hawai'ian intervention, just as Grey had been behind the quixotic adventures of 'the successors of the moa'.<sup>5</sup> To scotch the nascent Polynesian Confederation, the Germans deported Laupepa and Rees to the Marshall Islands in Micronesia, and watched the *Kaimiloa's* crew drink the ship dry. Polynesian dreams of confederation evaporated like alcohol in the tropical sun.

Yet the combined effect of Grey and Kalakaua's intervention was to stiffen imperial resolve. The British resolved to stay out of Sāmoa, and both Germany and America decided to stay in. Bismarck couldn't understand why the Americans with negligible economic interests (beyond those of disreputable land sharks) and a tin pot navy would want to challenge well established German interests supported by a modern navy. The Americans, together with their New Zealand and Hawai'ian cheerleaders, seemed to defy the rules of the new imperialism as understood by its most proficient practitioners.

#### THE FOLLY OF IMPERIALISM

Marx once said that history repeats itself, firstly as tragedy and then as farce. In Sāmoa and Hawai'i the order was reversed. The farce occurred with Grey and Kalakaua's intervention. The tragedy in Sāmoa occurred with the 1889 naval disaster and the Berlin prescription of its political future later that year. In Hawai'i the *Kaimiloa* affair encouraged Kalakaua's erstwhile American planter-merchant sponsors to, in effect, seize power in 1887.

Stevenson arrived in Hawai'i after the American seizure of power, and was there when news of the Sāmoan naval disaster arrived in March 1889. During his time in Honolulu Stevenson became a friend of the Hawai'ians, and a stern critic of the Americans who had disenfranchised the majority of them. Stevenson told the Sāmoan

story better than the Hawai'ian one because he spent more than four years in Sāmoa and only about six months in Hawai'i. His *Footnote to History* captures both the tragedy of the naval disaster and its imperial aftermath when American, British and German 'statesmen' decided the political future of Sāmoa.

Stevenson believed it was folly for a people to be denied a say in their own political future, but that was, of course, the fundamental folly of imperialism. That is also why Stevenson sided with the Hawai'ians in Hawai'i, and with the Sāmoans in Sāmoa. He knew that the real empire builders in Hawai'i and Sāmoa were not the metropolitan statesmen who signed the diplomatic accords far away from the islands. They were the Europeans who transformed Hawai'i into a sugar kingdom, and who speculated in Sāmoan land and copra.

Today in Hawai'i and Sāmoa bequeathed memories of the nineteenth century have faded. May Day is Lei Day in Hawai'i, and the

Hawai'ian national anthem, composed by Kalakaua, is always sung, but seldom with awareness of its historical allusions. In Sāmoan a faint allusion to 1889 is still carried forth in the words of a well known song with which I will conclude, "Tōfā Mai Feleni: Oh I never will forget you".

Tōfā, mai feleni; 'o le' ā 'ou te'a  
 Folau i le va'a i le pule Meleki  
 Ne'i galo mai Apia, si ota 'ele'ele  
 E manatua mai pea le 'au pāsepe  
 Fa'afogafoga mai, Sāmoa 'uma  
 Se'i fai atu 'o la'u fa'atua



Above: Liliuokalani, betrayed Queen of Hawai'i, during her reign 1891-1895. From *The Betrayal of Liliuokalani by Helena Allen*, 1982.

Opposite: German vessel HGMS Adler on reef at Apia, Western Sāmoa, after the 1889 hurricane. From *Amerika Sāmoa* by J A C Gray, 1960.

Pei 'o le susane i totonu o mauga  
 Fa'apea la'u pele 'i tāupou 'uma  
 Fa'ato'a-a-iloa se mea faigatā  
 Pe 'ā tēte'a ma uō fa'apēnā  
 E mutimutivale le alofa tīgā  
 Pe 'ā tūla'i e fa'atōfā  
 Ne'i 'e te'e pe to'atāma'i  
 Ina ta le'i tusa ma le māsani  
 Tatao lea pito 'i le fa'alagilagi  
 Fa'amolemole fai vave sou tali

*Goodbye, my friend; I'll be left behind  
 Sail in the boat under American command  
 Don't forget Apia, my cherished soil  
 The passengers will always remember me*

*Harken unto me, all you Sāmoans  
 While I tell you my comparison  
 Like a wildflower deep in the mountains  
 So is my dear one among all fair ladies*

*One first knows a difficult thing  
 When separating from friends like that  
 A heartfelt love is deeply stirred  
 When arising to say farewell*

*Don't you be off-putting or wrathful  
 For I'm not yet equal or accustomed  
 Suppress this tendency toward scolding  
 Please make haste with your response.*

This haunting lullaby was first sung to the crews of 'friendly' American warships departing from Apia after the completion of salvage operations in 1889. It was

apparently a tearful farewell because many Sāmoans singing believed that the Americans and Robert Louis Stevenson (who was married to an American) would protect them from German imperialism.<sup>6</sup> And if they needed any reminding of the tragic legacy of imperialism, it was there in front of them lying marooned on the reef, and it would remain there in plain sight for over half a century: the wreck of His Germanic Majesty's Ship, the *Adler*.

#### NOTES

1. According to Emerson Smith, '*Hawai'i Pono'i* originated as another version of *God Save the King* with Hawaiian verses by King Ka-lā-kaua but was transmitted into a great anthem through the artistry of Captain Henry Berger.' It was first sung in Ka-wai-a-ha'o Church on 16 November, 1874.
2. Queen Pomare of Tahiti to Queen Victoria of England, 23 January 1843, London *Evening Chronicle*, 30 August 1843.
3. Ronald Robinson, 'Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration', in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe eds., *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London, 1972).
4. Robert Louis Stevenson immortalised this disaster in the book *Footnote to History*, published in New York and London in 1892.
5. This was the scathing term which Thurston, as Western Pacific High Commissioner, used to illustrate his contempt for non-indigenous New Zealanders. He believed that, having sorely abused Māori, they wanted to repeat their misdeeds in Sāmoa. See Deryck Scarr, *Viceroy of the Pacific - Part 2 of The majesty of colour: a life of John Bates Thurston* (Canberra, 1980) pp. 106-107.
6. Jacob Wainwright Love, 'Oh I Never will Forget You: A Sāmoan Farewell', in Anne Shapiro ed., *Music and Context: Essays for John M Ward* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985), pp. 453-476. I am indebted to Allan Thomas, the current Director of the Stout Centre, for this reference.

