Notes & Queries

Kalanimoku’s Lost Letter

The Discovery

An important, undelivered letter from Regent Kalanikini to his king, Kamehameha II (who preferred to be called Liholiho¹), turned up unexpectedly. It was during a search for information about Missionary William Ellis’ role in planning Liholiho’s 1823–1824 trip to England to meet with George IV.² The London Missionary Society (LMS) for which Mr. Ellis labored became the Council for World Mission (CWM) in 1977, and all of the LMS papers and files now belong to that body.³ CWM chose the Special Collections library of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London as the repository for its voluminous LMS collection. Formal, written permission from archival authorities of the CWM must be granted to the reader and to the SOAS Archivist before the reader can access the LMS files. There among the LMS’ South Seas Incoming Correspondence for the years 1823 to 1825—not cataloged or annotated in any way—lies Kalaniiki’s undelivered letter.

Liholiho never received Kalanikini’s June 2 letter for the king died of the measles in London on July 14, 1824. William Ellis, in Honolulu until the fall of 1824, does not appear to have forwarded the letter to London for delivery, even though Ellis would not learn

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of Liholiho’s death until early 1825.\textsuperscript{4} William Ellis died himself in 1872, and his missionary letters and papers—with Kalanimoku’s letter tucked in among them—became a part of the LMS archives.

The Letter

The two-page text of this newly-discovered letter is written in large cursive letters, in the Hawaiian language, using the 1824 alphabet. The handwriting for the body of the letter is that of William Ellis, but the signature, in a different hand, is clear and unmistakable: \textit{Karaimoku}. Dated at O’ahu, June 2, 1824, Kalanimoku begins by giving his king the local news. Several ali’i have died, including King Kaumuali‘i, and Kalanimoku has given their lands to Kauikeaouli (Liholiho’s younger brother and chosen successor) in accordance with Liholiho’s prior instructions; Liholiho’s favorite ship, Ha’aheo (formerly known as \textit{Cleopatra’s Barge}), has been wrecked; Kalanimoku is hard at work paying off their sandalwood debts; there is much sickness at O‘ahu. Plaintively, Kalanimoku closes his letter by urging Liholiho that “\textit{e hoi mai oe ia nei} [you should come back].” William Ellis appended a postscript, sending his own \textit{aloha} to Liholiho in “\textit{Beritani}.”\textsuperscript{5}

Translation Challenges

Like most Hawaiian-language material from the period of emerging Hawaiian literacy, this letter poses challenges for translators and researchers. Spelling, word divisions, punctuation and capitalization are inconsistent within and between documents in the early days of written Hawaiian, and so the meaning can be difficult to ascertain. But these are simple mechanical difficulties. The greater challenges involve the interpretation of historical and cultural references that such documents contain.

The letter is written in Rev. William Ellis’ clear hand. He spells the name of the king’s heir, Kauikeaouli as \textit{Kauikeoule}, but otherwise his spelling and use of capitals is quite accurate. One name, though, is particularly unclear: \textit{Piho kane a ka rora} has many possible interpretations. It could be a single name, “Piho\textit{kaneakarora},” or a shorter name, “\textit{Piho},” with the qualifier “\textit{kane a Kalola},” husband of Kalola (Karora/Kalola being a name carried by several chiefesses of the period). It
could also be interpreted as “Pihoo, male, child of Kalola” or “Pihoo, male, and Kalola”. The latter would refer to two separate deaths, but there is no record of one of the Kalola chiefesses dying at that time.

The language of Kalanimoku’s letter comes from an era and a social network that is unevenly documented. While the overall content and tenor of the note are relatively clear, some of the specifics within it are uncertain or open to multiple, and possibly erroneous, interpretations. Like the examples below, some of these specifics can be clarified by cross-referencing the letter with the historical record and accessible documents of the day, while others provide puzzles for researchers and historians to solve.

Personal names were often used with more familiarity in court circles than has been documented. In this letter, the name Ke’eaumoku is mentioned twice in the list of chiefly deaths, once with the clarification of “ku ai i ka pu” [lit.-who traded guns or shot by a gun] and second directly afterwards, followed by the word horii [no recorded meaning, possibly a part of his name], and the information that he was taken to Kailua. Chief Hoapili also wrote to Liholiho while the king was in England, and he, too, mentions that “the two Keeaumokus” have died. Hoapili adds no clues which could solve the mystery of who the first Ke’eaumoku was, whether he was shot, or whether he was trading guns. The second Ke’eaumoku is apparently Kahekili Ke’eaumoku, brother of Ka’ahumanu, for whom a Christian burial at sea was held in Honolulu while his body was secretly returned to Kailua, Hawai‘i, for interment. The qualifying term horii also remains a riddle.

Among the eight or nine “deaths” listed, one is that of “Haaheo”, which is actually a reference to Liholiho’s pleasure ship, once known as Cleopatra’s Barge. Teasing out the specifics of such historical references is often beyond the scope of a translator’s efforts.

Another concern for translators is to find appropriate interpretations for words and phrases that were idiomatic to the time. Multiple possibilities must be considered for words like olelo [statement, message, report, advice, etc.], tauoha [command, bequest, directive, will, etc.], make [dead, defeated, overwhelmed, beset, etc.], and many others. What may seem to be simple word preference can be historically directed: ‘E’e ka, who is listed among the make [dead?] in Kalanimoku’s letter of June 2, is mentioned in Hoapili’s letter of September 13 as being ma‘i [ill]. Whether she was merely ill or already dead when
Cano June 2nd 1824

Ahoia ino e e Pihokai.

Eia tairi wahi olo ia oe, Ua pau mara o anei i ka maka i ka mai. Ua make Heeumoku ku ai i ka puna. Ua make Heeumoku horii na hoiki i ka Wainui. Ua make o Pihokai i ka aina. Ua make o Tinevahe. Ua make o Eka. Ua make o Taumuriae, no aua akei a anei ka maka ane. Na Pakaka oia i make ai na hoiki i ka Lahaina a, na isai, ko roko o ka Hale me Kepuolani, pela ia i tahuoa ai ike. Tahuoa mai oia ike i te Kino eu Talai, i kaiko i ka woai, a i ka aina na ka pau noia, i malama wale ia hite mai oia. Ua make Havero. Ua make o Haakeo bushi, i ka mahani, ike i uka, mahalo, iho. Ua holo ka, Haakaumakaa, i mahiki me William Dana.
uku mai oia i ka Salo. 
Aore i pau ki aie a kakou, ke 
hana nei nowai, ma muri ja-
ka javo. Ma muri paka e 
pau roa makou o a nei i ka 
make i ka mai, e hoi mai oe 
ta nei.

Ma haavi au i ka aina o ka 
foe i make aenei ia Haukau 
ule, pieta oe i luaoha mai iu

Aroha ia Kamehameha 
Aroha ino oe, i ora oe 
i he Akua a i ka na 
Heiki. 

Aroha ino oe e Pikoriho 
i ka noho ana i Beritani 
e ake au i hoi nai mai oe

M.B. Ellis
Kalanimoku wrote his letter is a point to be verified, and it would affect the final interpretation of the letter.

The greeting Aloha ino, used by both Kalanimoku and Rev. Ellis, also poses difficulties for translation. Common today as a condolence or an expression of sorrow or grief [lit. alas, woe, what a pity, etc.], the salutation does not appear to carry that connotation in Kalanimoku’s letter, and yet the choice of that greeting from among the many others current at the time shows an inclusion of the intensity that the word ‘ino reflects. While the same greeting appears in a number of other letters of the time, it is often replaced by other salutations, like aloha wale and aloha nui. All of the various greetings have been glossed in translations as “greetings”, “fond greetings”, or “fond regards”. The use of Aloha ino as an opening for such serious correspondence might well be considered to express something more weighty, like “intense concern” or “profound regard”. It certainly incorporates a seriousness of tone that challenges the translator to be both interpreter and wordsmith.

While these observations relate to this one letter by Kalanimoku, the same kinds of considerations could be productively applied to the other letters of the time in order to reconsider their historically accepted translations. In spite of the uncertainties about how the language affects some of the detail within this letter, however, the overall nature of the letter as a report to one’s respected leader is clear.

The Historical Importance

It is the nature of this letter that makes it historically significant beyond simple curiosity. Liholiho had well-known personal challenges in performing his role as sovereign, and there is general historical agreement that his departure enabled Regents Kalanimoku and Ka’ahumanu to govern the kingdom with steadier hands. Given that, it is tempting to conclude that his ali‘i would have secretly cheered Kamehameha II’s departure and feared his return. This newly-discovered letter, however, amplifies similar sentiments from three other primary source letters to refute such a conclusion.

Ka’ahumanu wrote the first of these other three letters on January 1, 1824, shortly after Liholiho’s November 27, 1823 departure. She sends her aloha, anticipates his return, and assures her king that
“under the influence of your brother [meaning Kalanimoku], all is well in your lands here.” Kalanimoku wrote another, earlier letter to Liholiho dated March 12, 1824 in which he asks Liholiho “if you are in England,” saying “you must write to us so that we may see and hear of your arrival there and thereby make us glad.” Kalanimoku closes his March 12 letter with the plea: “You have seen England, come home.” Chief Hoapili wrote the third letter on September 13, 1824, unaware that Liholiho had died in London two months previously. Hoapili echoes Kalanimoku when he urges his king to come home: “You have seen your Lord of the land, come home.” In a letter to his regents during his stay in England (his only letter home), Liholiho himself asserts his kingly supremacy and anticipates his return to his kingdom. Taken together, these letters demonstrate that his most important ali’i steadfastly regarded the absent Liholiho as their king and hoped for his speedy return. Furthermore, the letters demonstrate that their regard for him and longing for his return continued undiminished despite their king’s absence of several months.

Kalanimoku’s June 2, 1824 letter amplifies the sentiments expressed in the chiefs’ other three letters, and this new discovery should provide the final proof historians need to discard any temptation to conclude that his principal ali’i secretly wanted Liholiho “out of the way.”

Notes

1 This article uses the names “Kalanimoku” and “Liholiho,” rather than “Karaimoku” and “Rihoriho” as they appear in the letter. After 1824, the conventional Hawaiian alphabet substituted the letter “l” for the letter “r.”

2 William Ellis notes 30 November 1823, CWM/LMS/South Seas/Incoming Correspondence 1823–1825/Box 4 Folder 3, School of Oriental and African Studies, Univ. of London (hereafter SOAS). Ellis’ notes state that Liholiho sought from George IV a promise of British protection for his kingdom; William Ellis, Polynesian Researches—Hawaii (Rutland, Vt. And Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Company 1969), 450.


4 Ellis left Honolulu September 18, 1824 and probably learned of Liholiho’s death after he arrived at Boston March 25, 1825. Rhys Richards, Honolulu Centre of Trans-Pacific Trade, Shipping Arrivals and Departures 1820 to 1840 (Canberra: Pacific Manuscripts Bureau and HHS, 2000), 61; MH 21/9 (1825): 289.

5 Karaimoku [Kalanimoku] to Rihoriho [Kamehameha II], 2 June 1824, Hawai-
ian language, CWM/LMS/South Seas/Incoming Correspondence 1823–1825/
Box 4 Folder 6 Packet A, SOAS.
6 Hoapili to Rihoriho [Kamehameha II], 13 September 1824, archival translation
from Hawaiian into English, F. O. & Ex. 402-2-16, AH.
7 Samuel M. Kamakau, Ruling Chiefs of Hawaii (Honolulu: The Kamehameha
8 Beginning with the Rev. Sheldon Dibble, History of the General View of the Sand-
wich Islands’ Mission (New York: Taylor & Dodd, 1839), 88–89. Dibble gives the
credit solely to Ka‘ahumanu, but later historians acknowledge Kalanimoku’s
role, for example, Hiram Bingham, A Residence of Twenty-One Years in the Sand-
wich Island; or the Civil Religious, and Political History of Those Islands (Cananda-
gua, NY: H. D. Goodwin, 1855), 202–203, 205; Ralph S. Kuykendall, The Hawai-
ian Kingdom, Volume 1 1778–1854, Foundation and Transformation (Honolulu:
9 William Richards, Memoir of Keopuolani, Late Queen of the Sandwich Islands (Bos-
ton: Crocker & Brewster, 1825), 54–55.
10 Kalaimoku [Kalanimoku] to Rihoriho [Kamehameha II], 12 March 1824,
archival translation from Hawaiian into English, F.O. & Ex. 402-2-14, AH.
11 Hoapili to Rihoriho [Kamehameha II], 13 September 1824, AH.
12 Iolani [Kamehameha II] to Paalua [Kalanimoku], Ka‘akumu [Ka‘ahumanu],
and my younger brother, Kamahoemuwa [ n.d. July] 1824, translated from
Hawaiian into English by Kamehameha IV, F. O. & Ex. 402-2-14, AH.
Kalanimoku’s Lost Letter

Oahu, June 2nd 1824

Profound regards to you, Rihoriho,

Here is my message to you. We here have been swept off by death from illness. Keeumoku, shot by a gun, has died. Keeaumoku horii died, and was taken back to Kailua. Pihookaneakarora has died. Kiriwehe is dead. Eeka is dead. Taumuarii has died, the death occurring nine days ago. He died at Pakaka, and was taken back to Lahaina and placed in the tomb with Keopuolani, for that is what he had commanded me. He left me the island, Kauai, the people, the assets, and all of his lands, that I should take care of them until you return. Kavero has died. Haaheo is a ruin, having been blown by the wind onto the shore and broken up. The Makauwahie (ship) sailed to Kahiki with William Dana; he paid me in cash. Our debts are not completely cleared; I am acting on it, and perhaps they will be done with later. Later, those of us here may all be dead from sickness; you should come back.

I have given the land of those who recently died to Kauikeoule, as you commanded.

Loving regards to Kamehamalu

Kalanimoku’s June 2, 1824, letter translated from Hawaiian into English by Dr. Puakea Nogelmeier, associate professor of Hawaiian language, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa and Hawaiian language translator.

Intense regards to you, may God and his Son save you

Karaimoku

Deep regards to you, Rihoriho, staying there in Britain; I yearn for your quick return

Wm. Ellis

Notes

1 Liholiho in modern spelling. All names in this translation are as presented in the original in translation, but spelled in modern orthography in the footnotes.
2 Or who traded guns.
3 Kahekili Ke‘eauumoku. No meaning available for horii, which may be a part of the name, or a familiarizing qualifier to distinguish him from the previously-mentioned Ke‘eauumoku.
4 Possibly Piho‘o, husband of Kalola; Piho‘o, male, child of Kalola; or Pihoo, male and Kalola. Several chiefesses of the period carried the name Kalola.
5 Kiliwehi, chiefess and wife of Kamehamehakōko‘a.
6 Kaumuali‘i, ruling chief of Kaua‘i and husband of Ka‘ahumanu.
7 The king’s mother, who had died previously.
8 Kawelo, probably Kawelookalani, one of Liholiho’s administrative chiefs.
9 Liholiho’s yacht, not a person.
10 Kauikeaouli, the king’s younger brother and heir.
11 Kalanimoku, one of the regents in Liholiho’s absence.