

Jonah Kūhiō: Surfing, Diplomacy and the Rejection of False Choices

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In 1890, in the cold waters of Bridlington, Yorkshire, two young men became the first known surfers in England, and most likely in the whole of Europe. Prince Jonah Kūhiō and Prince David Kawānanakoa were in England for a few years, studying and gaining international experience to prepare them as leaders, representatives, and potential heirs to the throne. But at that moment they were also young Hawaiians, carving a little bit of home into the chilly waters of the North Sea.

It was a small moment in the life of Kūhiō, who in his time was an orphan and a prince, a politician and a prisoner, the most popular politician in Hawai‘i, and the most powerless man in the US Congress. In order to remain connected to his people, his past, and arguably to himself, he needed to maintain connection and grounding in Hawaiian culture and the Hawaiian past, yet as a statesman in training he also needed to remain connected and engaged with the world beyond Hawai‘i. Kūhiō, like many Hawaiians before and since, was also confronted with Imperial visions of the world where these two types of connections were inherently opposed. In the perspectives and propaganda being produced by the empires, non-White peoples still connected to their past were incapable of participation in the future that the empires sought to shape. At best, other peoples might be allowed to join that future by abandoning their own cultures and pasts, though many imperialists, including many within the “mission faction” in Hawai‘i, had adopted racial beliefs that non-white peoples were simply incapable of such adaptation.

In that moment in the North Sea, as in many other moments of his life, Kūhiō rejected this simplistic vision of the world and the false choice of either being Hawaiian or being a part and shaper of the future. By rejecting that false choice and that worldview, he allowed room for he and other

Hawaiians to develop a vision of a Hawaiian present and future in conversation with both the Hawaiian past and international ties. The Hawaiian Civic Clubs and other organizations that Kūhiō helped form followed a similar path, seeking to look to the Hawaiian past to guide them while also encouraging international practices and influences they saw as beneficial to the Hawaiian people.

Which is not to say that he or the Civic Clubs were always successful in their efforts. He was also often willing to engage with seemingly oppositional forces and ideas, including joining the Republican party in 1902. The party was in the hands of a handful of powerful oligarchs who were the very same “mission faction” who had committed the overthrow, imprisoned Kūhiō for revolting against them, and believed in and supported the idea that Hawaiians and Hawaiian culture were best thought of as part of the past. He joined them because they were the most powerful political and economic group in the islands, and allying with them would allow him to employ some of that power for the Hawaiian people. At the same time, however, his status and support guaranteed the party’s electoral dominance, preventing any real weakening of the oligarchy until the 1950s.

Even Kūhiō’s successes show evidence of this tension between working within the system and working against it. His well documented public conflict with Governor Frear showed that even Kūhiō grew frustrated at times with the lack of success to be found from working within a power structure dominated by the former “mission faction.” In 1911 Kūhiō condemned Frear for proposing “worker’s homesteads” instead of farmer’s homesteads—essentially what Kūhiō wound up accepting in the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act of 1920. Some then and now would argue that the oligarchs and their allies ended up getting a better deal in the act than the Hawaiian people did. Kūhiō’s ties to the oligarchy were instrumental in getting access to a small amount of low-quality land for Hawaiians, but it also prevented him from looking for a better deal in opposition to the oligarchy’s desires.

Kūhiō is memorialized with a holiday, parks, buildings, and statues. Ironically, he may be memorialized to the point that Kūhiō the manufactured memory has entirely eclipsed Kūhiō as a historical figure. His life, however, has much to teach us through his rejection of the false choice between Indigeneity and the future, and through his failures and successes working within the power structure operating upon that false choice. The Kūhiō that emerges is a complex figure, one shaped by history but also one who shaped history. By learning about his life, perhaps we can improve our ability to recognize and reject false choices, and to inform our own interactions with the power structures that shape so much of our daily life.

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