

Historical links to be revitalised

George S. Kanahele

King David Kalakaua, the "Merrie Monarch" who ruled the sovereign Kingdom of Hawaii in the 1870s and '80s, once proposed unifying the island kingdoms of Polynesia into a loose Pacific confederation. Although nothing came of the proposal, a century later the idea seems to have been revived in Hawaii among native Hawaiians and recently has been gaining momentum with the "Maori-Hawaiian Connection".

The "Maori-Hawaiian Connection" has emerged in the past year in the form of a series of "high level" contacts involving private and public Hawaiian organisations and mainly the Department of Maori Affairs, and its Secretary, Kara Puketapu.

Last year, for example, the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, a newly formed state agency with publicly elected trustees which has been described as "a government within a government," sent a mission to New Zealand to study and collect data on a wide range of Maori social, economic and cultural problems.

Walter Ritte, leader of the mission and an OHA Trustee, described the trip as "the first step towards a better and more fruitful relationship with our Pacific cousins."

Tu Tangata

After three weeks in "Aotearoa", talking with many Maoris, including Minister of Maori Affairs, Ben Couch, and Kara Puketapu, Ritte returned home and reported that the effects of the trip upon Hawaii and the Hawaiians would

be "too vast to measure". He was as good as his word. He convinced the Office of Hawaiian Affairs to change its top priorities from economic development to cultural development, taking a leaf from the Department of Maori Affairs' heavy emphasis on its "Tu Tangata" ("Stand Tall") programme. He also announced that OHA would lead the way in adapting the Maori marae system to Hawaii.

Shortly after the OHA mission, a group of top Hawaiian business executives, headed by Kenneth F. Brown, a blue-blooded Hawaiian and former State Senator, went to New Zealand. "Our main purpose," says Brown, "was to see whether successful Hawaiian businessmen could help their Polynesian cousins in things that we know well such as tourism." Furthermore, the Hawaiians also felt that they could empathize with the Maoris in some of the obstacles they would meet in advancing in the Pakeha business world. Thus, making business deals was quite incidental.

Maori culture

Indeed, what impressed the Hawaiian businessmen the most was the vitality of Maori culture. George Henrickson said, "In comparison to us Hawaiians, the Maoris seemed to have gotten their act together a little better."

Mr Brown was so impressed that upon his return he immediately launched a project on Hawaiian values and practices, the chief goal of which is to help Hawaiians reinforce their cultural identity. The project, now known as Project WAIAHA, has since become an important part of the Hawaiian renaissance.

In addition, Brown also invited Kara Puketapu to visit Hawaii. Puketapu accepted and a month later (July) arrived in Honolulu for his first real visit.

It was a whirlwind one-week tour of the islands. He talked with the Governor of the State, local political leaders, business executives, Hawaiian leaders and many other makaaianana (Hawaiian for "common people"). He also gave an off-the-cuff lecture at a well-attended meeting at the Bishop Museum, appeared before Hawaiian gatherings and on local TV, and was featured in several newspaper articles.

As Trustee Ritte commented, "Mr Puketapu's arrival in Hawaii has created a wave of interest in the Maori of New Zealand."

Hawaiian culture

Interestingly, one of Puketapu's reactions to Hawaii was his surprise at the vitality of Hawaiian culture. "I had this idea that it was nearly dead," he said. In his report to Brown and the Hawaiian businessmen who had hosted him, he observed that there was a need to build a unified Hawaiian leadership. When asked how he could help, he suggested doing a Maori-type hui or assembly of people to talk out their differences and come to mutual understanding and closer unity.

When Puketapu returned to New Zealand, he sent an invitation to OHA leaders, the director of the State's Department of Hawaiian Home Lands, and president of the Kamehameha Schools (established by a Hawaiian princess for children of Hawaiian ancestry) to participate in two important meetings in Wellington. One was the first international symposium bringing together representatives of government departments dealing in native affairs from Canada, Australia, the United States and Hawaii.

The other meeting was the second national Maori leader's conference which assembled more than 100 influentials from around the country to discuss and decide on the next year's goals for Maoridom in health, education, economic development and other fields.



Denis Hansen (second from left) with Hawaiian guests.