The call to life: revitalizing a healthy Hawaiian identity

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Abstract

The meaning of health is typically defined as the absence of disease. This definition, while highlighting our ability to measure the physiological attributes of health through morbidity and mortality statistics in turn obscures alternative meanings of health. In this paper, I ask three questions about the meaning of health. First, is health simply the body without disease? Second, are there alternative meanings of health that are not solely informed by Enlightenment views of science and biomedicine? Third, in what ways does health give meaning to and inform social orders and our place within them? Drawing on interviews with Native Hawaiians conducted on the islands of Maui and Hawaii, this paper examines what it means to be a “healthy Hawaiian”, and in doing so, problematizes meanings of health. For those I interviewed, definitions of health were embedded in understandings of what it means to be a Native Hawaiian and presented an opportunity to talk about the cultural and material dispossession of Native Hawaiians. These definitions also remind the present generation of the vitality of their ancestors. In remembering the life, health and subsequent dispossession of Hawaiian ancestors, contemporary Hawaiians are provided with an alternative definition of what it means to be a “healthy Hawaiian”, thus raising serious questions about “health” as defined by biomedicine and how best to achieve it.

This case illustrates how a focus on concepts of health elucidates the relationship between health and inequality as well as Native Hawaiian’s agency in charting a positive direction for health that has meaning in the everyday life of Hawaiians.

Keywords: Native Hawaiians; Cultural identity; Meanings of health; Enlightenment; Maui; Hawaii

In talking about health, you must talk about food, so you must talk lo‘i (gardens)—and so you’ve got to talk golf courses, and so you’ve got to talk foreign investments... It’s not just a “cultural perspective”; it’s who we are as a people, as political and socioeconomic thinkers. (Gomes, quoted from Scheder, 1993, p. 29)

Introduction

The topic of health and well-being is often framed by a plethora of morbidity and mortality statistics and discussions of treatment choices, which can restore the body to “normality” (Das, 1990; Crawford, 1994). Within the focus on treatment choices, much research concentrates on how to integrate biomedicine with local medical knowledge and/or how to bring biomedicine to underserved populations. Yet, what remains unquestioned throughout this vast literature is the meaning of health. Often the de facto definition of health is the absence of disease and the restoration of the body to a “normal” state of functioning. Health is defined in the negative sense, we do not think about the meaning of health except when we do not have it (Canguilhem, 1966; Osborne, 1997). In this paper, I problematize meanings of health through an analysis of Native Hawaiians concepts of “health”, how that understanding is linked to cultural identity and efforts to maintain both.
The goal of retuning the body to “normality” has also been viewed as a site for the exercise of power by both those who promote and use technologies of health (such as sanitation and hygiene to medicinals and health clubs) (cf. Foucault, 1973, 1977; Crandon-Malamud, 1991; Brodwin, 1996; Crawford, 1994; Lupton, 1997). Still, in order to observe the use of technologies of health the concept of health must be meaningful. In this context, health is meaningful only because it is taken as a fact based in biology (Foucault, 1988; Osborne, 1997). In other words, the use of diagnostic tools in the exercise of knowledge/power or choosing to use one medicinal over another as a statement of affiliation can be framed as good or bad because health is taken to be a measurable biological fact (Foucault, 1988). If we can only know health by its absence then what is being measured when we say one is healthy?

The legitimacy of accounting for health by focusing on measurable physiological attributes has led us to focus on the complex interactions between environment and society that create it. Therefore, research on the meanings of health must disentangle the legitimacy of focusing on measurable physiological attributes of health, and the symbolic value of exhibiting health. In order to disentangle them three basic questions should be asked. First, is health simply the body without disease? Second, are there alternative meanings of health that are not solely informed by Enlightenment views of science and biomedicine? Third, in what ways does health give meaning to and inform social orders and our place within them? In problematizing the meaning of health we highlight the contextual nature of that concept.

One response to the question of how health gives meaning to and informs social orders is through the study of cultural identity. Crawford (1984, 1994) is among the few to closely examine the relationship between meanings of health and cultural identity. His research with middle class Americans found that health is indeed viewed as a means for self-control and individualism, and is thoroughly embedded in biomedical understandings. He offers a history of the particular links between meanings of health and identity that are rooted in Enlightenment thought by noting:

When the body became an abstracted entity, identical to all other bodies, detached from living situations, health became a concept for describing its normal state. The description became the goal: the restoration or maintaining of normal functioning. Thus, in unlocking the secrets of the body, medical science claimed to have discovered the laws of health. These laws were to be subjected to manipulation on behalf of the humanistic goals of the Enlightenment—the extension of life and the elimination of suffering. (1994, p. 1350)

This line of thinking has two implications: First, with the goal of health the restoration and maintenance of the “normal” body, we become subject to new disciplinary techniques that will ensure that normality—the “laws of health” (cf. Canguilhem, 1966; Foucault, 1973, 1977). Our focus on lifestyle behaviors in public health is an example of an effect of the goal to eliminate suffering. Secondly, as the body is lifted out of context, “detached from its living situations” what is healthy for one is seen as healthy for all (an equality imbued by nature). As a result, the effects of social context on health become obscured. Given the legitimacy of biomedicine in the US and the symbolic force of concepts such as independence, productivity, and self-control, it is no surprise that most middle class Americans have an understanding that health is the body without disease. These concepts are tied to the notion that anyone can achieve health through self-discipline—a nutritious diet, exercise, and preventive medical care—regardless of the political and economic factors that frame their very existence. This observation is significant because it not only reveals the legitimacy of scientific understandings and its link to knowledge/power, but also the internalization of this knowledge into symbols of what it means to organize and participate in US society as an independent and productive member.

Crawford (1994) also argues that situating health in these terms provides a marker for those who are “unhealthy” or diseased. His examination of meanings of health and their link to representation and identity provide another avenue through which we can understand how the taken-for-granted meaning of health is used to reinforce social processes and inequalities. Using health to represent the achieved goals of American society has “…become a primary means of signification by which borders are maintained, threats specified, and internal weaknesses shored up (1994, p. 1348)”. Thus, health as the body without disease becomes a signifier for being a successful member of US society. In contrast, a failure to practice those values—self-control, independence, and productivity—is manifested in the diseased body, the “unhealthy” other is stigmatized and feared. Examining how concepts of health serve to maintain “normality” both at the level of the individual body and in society leads Crawford (1994) and indeed others (Das, 1990; Alderson, 2000) to ask if such a notion of “health” is truly healthy? As Das noted:

We have to see how we may define health so that instead of becoming a measure of the normal and the pathological, a means by which power may be exercised upon the one who declares that he is in pain, it becomes a means for the practices of freedom. (1990, p. 43)

This raises the question, are there alternative meanings of health that do not support the need for
productive bodies, individualism and the perpetuation of inequality?

The circumstances of Native Hawaiians in Hawaii highlight issues of scientific meanings of health, context, inequality, and identity. In 1962, the Lili’uokalani Trust Advisory Board published a report that stated that Hawaiians were overrepresented in many of the categories of “social problems”, that included low educational and economic attainment, number of “illegitimate” children, and poor health status compared to other ethnic groups in the state. This report prompted a number of studies that examined the daily lives of Hawaiians, their beliefs and behaviors that may improve or contribute to their poor health and social status. Later studies continued to show startling rates of heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and accidents for Native Hawaiians having among the highest mortality rates in the US (Alu Like, 1985; Office Technology Assessment, 1987; Wegner, 1989). During the 1990s, Native Hawaiians continue to have the lowest life expectancy, higher mortality rates for heart disease and cancer, and higher age-adjusted morbidity rates for other chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and asthma than any other ethnic group in the state of Hawaii (Johnson, Oyama, & Marchand, 1998).

King (1987) has argued that the focus on “unhealthy” Hawaiians has become both part of the problem of representing Hawaiians health status and finding ways to improve their health. She notes that an unintended consequence is a prevailing view that Native Hawaiians are inherently unhealthy. The shift away from the historical and social relations that gave rise to high rates of disease are rarely included in the discussion of Hawaiian health. Yet, the attention given to mortality statistics and “unhealthy” behaviors are used to represent their lack of self-control and failure to progress. As such, this representation obscures alternative definitions of what it means to be healthy.

In contrast, Hawaiians' own views on how they came to be represented as unhealthy focus directly on the historical and social relations that contribute to their contemporary disease burden (cf. Blaisdell, 1989, 1993). In fact, most accounts of the decline of Hawaiians' health begin with the arrival of Captain Cook in 1778. The diseases brought by Cook and his crew were the first of many to follow and by 1878 approximately 90% of the Hawaiian population had died (Stannard, 1989). This startling depopulation is a potent reminder that the contemporary poor health of Hawaiians is another consequence of their relationship with the West. In resisting the characterization of the typical “unhealthy” Hawaiian, they revive an understanding of health that entails more than the body without disease and a critique of capitalism and biomedicine’s focus on individualism, self-control and production.

In the present research, I found that narratives of “health” in contemporary Hawaii are embedded in historical and social relations between Hawaii and the West. As such, for many Native Hawaiians, health and what it means to achieve it are statements of Hawaiian identity and the ability to maintain Hawaiian culture. Among my interviewees, definitions of health were embedded in understandings of what it means to be a Native Hawaiian and presented an opportunity to talk about their cultural and material dispossession. These definitions also remind the present generation of the vitality of their ancestors. In remembering the life, health and subsequent dispossession of their ancestors, contemporary Hawaiians are provided with an alternative definition of what it means to be a “healthy Hawaiian”, thus raising serious questions about “health” as defined by biomedicine and the predominant view that “health” is best achieved through biomedical technology. This case illustrates how a focus on concepts of health elucidates the relationship between health and inequality as well as Native Hawaiian’s agency in charting a positive direction for health that has meaning in the everyday life of Hawaiians.

My research was conducted at a time when there were and continue to be concerted efforts toward the decolonization of Hawaiian land and thought through the revitalization of material and non-material culture. These efforts include increasing numbers of hula hālau...
language immersion schools), the flourishing of Punana Leo (Hawaiian language immersion schools),\(^5\) the voyages of the vessel Hokule’a,\(^6\) traditional healing methods, and restoration of taro gardens and fish ponds.

While efforts to restore practices such as hula, voyaging and language have flourished, restoring land continues to be problematic. Struggles over land, like health, are representative of Hawaiians’ relationships with foreigners. It is a history of increasingly less access to land. One of the more significant contributors to the disenfranchisement of Native Hawaiians from their land is the 1848 Māhele (division). The Māhele transformed the traditional communal land tenure system to private ownership.\(^7\) The land was divided into three parts: the Ali‘i or crown lands, chiefs’ lands, and the maka’āinana land or common land. To gain title to a plot of common land, a person had to present his/her claim to the Land Commission.\(^8\) It is estimated that only 13% of the Hawaiian population made claims to the Land Commission for their plot of land (Kame‘eleihiwa, 1992). Thus, many Hawaiians lost access to, and control of, land they had lived and worked on for generations.

The culmination of these transformations of land “ownership” is seen in the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy (Kame‘eleihiwa, 1992). In January of 1893, Queen Lili‘uokalani’s monarchy was overthrown, and she was placed under house arrest, by a group of American businessmen and planters, supported by the US military.\(^9\) Even though President Cleveland

\(^5\)Contemporary efforts to restore the Hawaiian culture and nation continue. The creation of Hawaiian language immersion schools is an example of the effort to restore Hawaiian culture. In 1983, a group of Hawaiian language teachers (Kalen Silva, Larry Kimur, Pila Wilson, Kauanoe Kama, ‘Ilei Beniamina, Koki William, No‘eau Warner, and Hokulani Cleeland) formed the grassroots organization ‘Aha Punana Leo Inc., “The Nest of Voices Corporation” (‘Aha Punana Leo Inc., 1998). Beliefs about the demise of the Hawaiian language, and laws that prohibited teaching Hawaiian in schools, were but a few of the obstacles that the new organization faced. The teaching of Hawaiian language in schools had been outlawed when English was made the official language in 1896. What began as a small Punana Leo preschool in Kekaha, Kaua‘i, funded only by tuition and parent help, grew to nine schools across the islands and led to the overturning of laws prohibiting the teaching and funding of Hawaiian language in primary, middle and high schools. While the reemergence of Hawaiian language serves as a symbol of Hawaiians’ survival on the islands, more importantly it is a means by which young Hawaiian minds could learn to think in Hawaiian and thereby “decolonize the minds” of Hawaiians (Trask, 1993).

\(^6\)The building and sailing of the Hokule’a was another significant event in the Hawaiian renaissance. The Hokule’a is a double outrigger canoe, built as an experiment by the Polynesian Voyaging Society to show the sailing characteristics of this craft design and to dispute assertions that Polynesian voyaging and language have flourished, restoring land to people.

\(^7\)Kame‘eleihiwa (1992) argues that the Ali‘i when they agreed to the Māhele, believed that they were sharing the land or ‘Āina with the people and not creating private ownership. This is based on two issues, one being the word māhele also means to share. The second issue being that the ‘Āina could only be owned by the Gods, the Akua, the ‘Āina was in essence an Akua. Therefore no one could own an Akua and thus no one could own the Land.

\(^8\)The Land Commission was a board of five individuals, primarily US missionaries and businessmen, appointed by Kamehameha III in 1845 to organize and rule on land claims.

\(^9\)The following historical information is summarized from Trask (1993) and Kuykendall (1966). The group of businessmen sought to further secure their sugar interests at a time when Queen Lili‘uokalani was attempting to ratify a new constitution which would remove the increasing amount of influence Americans had in her government and over the Hawaiian people. These businessmen viewed Lili‘uokalani’s actions as a threat to their interests. At the urging of the American Minister to Hawaii, John L. Stevens, whose interests were aligned with the businessmen, the US military was persuaded to land troops in Honolulu. With the landing of the troops the American group quickly set up what they called the Provisional Government, which was then officially recognized by Minister Stevens. It was under this military pressure that Queen Lili‘uokalani ceded her authority to the US government, not the Provisional Government. It was the Queen’s hope that the US government would recognize the injustices that had occurred and return control of the islands to the Hawaiian kingdom.

The Cleveland administration refused to recognize the Provisional Government and further refused to annex the Hawaiian Islands. With the change in the administration in 1897, however, and President McKinley’s pro-annexation position, neither the Queen, nor the stolen lands (1,800,00 acres of crown lands), were ever restored. In 1898, the Hawaiian Islands were annexed, and ultimately made the 50th state in 1959.

One hundred years after the illegal overthrow, the US Congress finally saw fit to apologize for the actions of the US toward the kingdom of Hawaii (US Congress, 1993, P.L. 103–150). More importantly, however, the apology as stated in the disclaimer rejects any attempts to use the apology to regain lost land, “Nothing in this Joint Resolution is intended to serve as a settlement of any claims against the United States.”
refused to annex the Hawaiian Islands, his successor, President McKinley, held a pro-annexation position. In 1898, the Hawaiian Islands were annexed, and ultimately made the 50th state in 1959.

Contemporary struggles to restore Hawaiian land and political independence can be seen through the activities of the various sovereignty movements. The primary goal of sovereignty is the restoration of a Hawaiian land base and their right to self-governance. The movements vary by the type of relationship they envision having with the US. They range from the establishment of a nation-within-nation, modeled after Native American Indians, free association, to a complete secession from the US.\(^\text{10}\) The contested nature of Hawaiian citizenship, land and cultural knowledge is reflected in the larger social discourse on Native Hawaiian health and in the fieldwork I conducted in the mid-1990s.

**Methods**

My data consist of participant observation, numerous informal interviews in Maui and Hawaii and 35 semi-structured interviews (Table 1). Many of those I interviewed had full-time employment, some holding two or more jobs just to afford the high cost of living there.\(^\text{11}\) A convenience sample was drawn from organizations such as community centers, senior centers, health organizations, and other social groups where I gave a presentation about my research and asked for volunteers. I also used personal contacts within the communities where I lived to find participants. The semi-structured interviews lasted anywhere from 2–3 h. Pseudonyms for the participants have been used throughout the paper.

The interviews were taped and transcribed into a text management program. In addition to demographic questions and general questions about the meaning of health and illness, interviewees were also asked what it meant to be a “healthy” Hawaiian. The transcripts were analyzed for recurring themes, which included contrasts between Hawaiians and the West and the importance of social relationships and relationships with the land. In this paper, I describe the narratives of what it means to be a "healthy" Hawaiian, and how that should be achieved. In doing so, we see how the very meaning of “health” is itself contested.

Unequal access to resources

The meaning of health reveals Native Hawaiians’ historical struggles with foreigners over land, to which food, ideologies, and life are intimately tied. Recent research has shown that a return to a diet similar to that of pre-contact Hawaiians improves the health of contemporary Hawaiians. These studies conducted by the Wai'anae Diet Program (Shintani & Hughes, 1991), and the Moloka'i Heart and Diet Study (Aluli, 1991) documented significant drops in high serum cholesterol and triglycerides, which are key risk factors for heart disease (Shintani et al., 1991). The Hawaiian diet is significant not only because of the measurable decrease in disease, but also because food and land are meaningful cultural symbols. For example, taro, a key food in the Hawaiian diet, is also a symbol of family. In the Hawaiian origin story, kalo or taro is considered an elder sibling (Hāloa-naka, the Kalo) (Kame'eleihiwa, 1992). It is the responsibility of elder siblings to care for

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Demographic information from each site(^a)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hawaii (n = 19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age, years (range)</td>
<td>45.4 (21–86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of education</td>
<td>12.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income (yearly)</td>
<td>19,000</td>
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\(^a\)Values are in averages and range. The median household income in Hawaii is 38,829 (1990 Census).

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(footnote continued)

For further historical/political works see Trask (1993), Kame’eleihiwa (1992), Kent (1993) and Dougherty (1992).

\(^\text{10}\)The sovereignty movement, however, is complicated by lack of federal recognition as an indigenous people. Thus, the welfare of the Native Hawaiian people has been placed in the State Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA). OHA administers programs designed to benefit Native Hawaiians. There are many problems with federal recognition such as; recognition would concede Native Hawaiian’s citizenship within the US, allow the US to define who is and is not Hawaiian through blood quantum levels, and it provides symbolic weight to the vote which made Hawaii the 50th state. Due to the illegal overthrow of the Monarchy, it is also assumed that the vote to become the 50th state is also illegal and thus invalid. If Native Hawaiians acquire federal recognition, then that will be used as an indication that they also recognize the authority of the US to make Hawaii a state. Lack of federal recognition, however, has also led to the recent court decision where, in Rice v. Cayetano (98-818) 146 F.3d 1075 reversed, the United States Supreme Court (February 23, 2000) found that denying Rice the right to vote in the OHA elections violated the fifteenth amendment. In other words, it was racially discriminatory to prohibit non-Hawaiians to vote in the statewide elections for OHA trustees, whose role it is to oversee the welfare of Native Hawaiians.

\(^\text{11}\)It is notable then, that their income was approximately $10,000 less per year than the average income in Hawaii at that time. This finding is consistent with research that reports the disproportionate number of Native Hawaiians among lower socioeconomic levels of the state (Alu Like, 1985).
their younger in part by providing food, the taro. Additionally, younger siblings must in turn respect and care for their elders as they age. The origin story provides guidelines for the importance of taro and for respecting and caring for the land that the taro comes from. In consuming a Hawaiian diet you are not only eating “healthy” foods, but also creating positive links with your ancestral family and those Hawaiians who occupied the land before you. The continual development of the islands for tourism, geothermal research and even private owners endangers the practice of producing and consuming Hawaiian foods, in addition to the meaning associated with those practices. Therefore, to achieve a health status similar to that of the pre-contact Hawaiians is a political matter.

Efforts to live a healthy life by the lay population are made more poignant by contrasting pre-contact Hawaiian lifestyles with contemporary problems. The lack of access to land, the exorbitant cost of Hawaiian foods, the abundance of processed foods, and fast foods pose significant obstacles for achieving health for Hawaiians. For example, Lani expressed the contradictions between her vision of the past and the problems that Hawaiians face today:

Hawaiians healthy, like before, no there’s not much because our ways of life are so changed. It’s not like before where we could go in the taro patch and do, you know. Before it used to be fun going in the patches and working, but the kids are so modernized now that they look at you like ‘what for?’ You know, ‘I can pick up everything I need in the store. I don’t have to go to the mountains or to the oceans or whatever.’ … ‘Cause when they were younger we could go all over the place and enjoy. Now you can’t because you either cross somebody’s property, or you cannot go down the beach anymore. You can’t go without having permits or things like that. So, we’re losing a whole lot. Now by the time they [our children] have their own family it won’t be the same unless we can get it back. Other than that we lose everything. No more the healthy life anymore.

Having access to the land is held up as the image of what life could and should be like for Hawaiians. In Lani’s perception the loss of access to land and the ties that it creates between health, family, and food represent a downward spiral of loss; loss of land, loss of health, and ultimately of “everything” for future generations.

With similar sentiments as Lani, most participants (80%) criticized the privatization of beaches and forests by individuals, developers, and geothermal researchers because it both polluted the Islands and prevented access to the foods necessary to maintaining health. Moreover, the negative impact of capitalism, develop-

ment, and pollution on access to Hawaiian land and food extends to the supermarket shelves. As Kupa’a, a college student and single father of four children, stated:

Our Hawaiian diet has kind of like gotten out of hand for us as Hawaiians ‘cause it’s so expensive. You know, try go to the market buy fish and it’s all like, at times it’s six to seven dollars a pound, and it gets up to 18 to 20 dollars a pound, depending on the season. And, you know, eating fish is healthy for you but buying a small little piece of it for 18 dollars is kind of outrageous. Trying to go out and find poi, which is a basic staple for us is really healthy, but try to go out to the shelf, you won’t find it anymore. Now, when people want to shop for Hawaiian food, especially like for poi and stuff, they gotta know when the guys are delivering the poi, what store at what time. And when you usually go there, you see about maybe fifteen to twenty people standing there. Waiting for the guy to open up the box.

The unavailability of poi (poi is a food made from the taro root) is a manifestation of the larger food access problem. Few people have the time or resources to jump from store to store to find a “basic staple” of the Hawaiian diet. To eat a healthy Hawaiian diet of fish, poi, and limu (a type of seaweed) requires either an exorbitant financial cost or a cost in precious time or both. Kupa’a gives us an excellent example of these barriers. The irony is that these are the basic staples that in the past were the most abundant in the islands, the foods that should be the easiest to find. Development and commercialization of land have effectively kept access to Hawaiian land and produce out of reach for the majority of Hawaiians. For many of the participants, this multi-targeted political and economic struggle informed the meaning of healthy and their ability to practice a healthy Hawaiian way of life.

Healthy ancestor

The focus on Native Hawaiian foods and accessing and obtaining those foods from the land requires both knowledge and skills, which many obtain by looking to history and their ancestors for direction. When talking about what it means to be a healthy Hawaiian, most of those I interviewed (69%) brought up an image of a person I call the “Healthy Ancestor”. The Healthy Ancestor is the image of a Hawaiian who lived in a time of easy access to the land and ocean from which he/she could obtain healthy food and little disease. For example, Pumehana notes the good health obtained by a pre-contact Hawaiian life style; in doing so, however, she also distinguishes the point at which Hawaiians became unhealthy:
Hawaiian health. I think it’s good. We’re trying to go back to what we believed was helpful to us at that time. Like going back to the Hawaiian stuff is good. And we knew that at that time they, before them, before the white man came there was a whole lot of healthy people…and never had all this kind sickness and stuff. So, if it was helpful for them at that time, I believe it would be helpful for us too. Provided that we can go back to that way.

Not until the introduction of the “white man”, Pumehana states, did Hawaiians become a diseased and unhealthy population. Pumehana believes that reviving aspects of pre-contact Hawaiian practices would help to restore health that has been compromised by generations of unhealthy contact with mainland US culture and society. The Hawaiian “stuff” Pumehana refers to is typically defined as food that Hawaiians obtained directly from the land in Hawaii. Similarly, Melelani recalls pre-contact Hawaiians as being relatively disease free, in addition to being able to obtain the fresh food they needed:

...I mean AIDS did not exist. That is a twentieth century disease. Cancer if it’s that old, I don’t believe that it was that much in Hawai‘i before, precontact. Can you imagine living and sustaining your life from the reef, from the mountains... And that the stream is flowing, and that the taro is growing in the streams and the opae (shrimp), and the hihiaiwiwau (an edible fern) is growing... You’re eating the fruits. And then you have the reef. Can you imagine? Catching a fish on the reef and eating right there? I mean, talk about eating fresh fish.

Both of these quotes show two key elements that are essential to constructing a healthy Hawaiian identity. First, their Hawaiian ancestors were healthy until “the white man came”. Thus, it is the foreigners that brought both disease and a change in diet. The contrast between the Healthy Ancestor and the introduction of foreign diseases provide the exclusionary category against which Hawaiians define themselves. Second, obtaining food from the land, river, and ocean, food that Hawaiians were “brought up with”, is a key to health. The narratives in these responses reveal that health is thought to be more than the body without disease. In the Healthy Ancestor we see a claim of difference from others who occupy the islands, a respect for Hawaiians of the past, the importance of land, and a model for future health. The symbol of the Healthy Ancestor provides a powerful metaphor not only for the purity of Hawaiian lifestyle in the past, but also for what it should be now and for future generations. Hawaiian ancestors are portrayed as strong, athletic, spiritual people who grow and harvest their own food (taro, in particular) and most of all, they had unlimited access to the land and sea. The healthy Hawaiian ancestor is used as an image to motivate and inspire Hawaiians’ integration of health and culture.

Healthy differences

Most of the participants (63%) distinguish between being a healthy person and being a healthy Hawaiian. Healthy Hawaiian attributes include more than just taking care of the physical body. I asked interviewees, “Does it mean something different, from what you just described (a healthy person), to be a healthy Hawaiian?” Their understandings of what it means to be a healthy Hawaiian included maintaining balance in life, knowledge about their culture, and the ability to eat and prepare Hawaiian foods that come from the islands. For example, Ka’ala, a 39-year-old female, emphasizes the importance of maintaining balance in life:

Hawaiians, I think, we have to have everything in balance, not just concentrate only on work, and not just concentrate only on play, but everything has to be equaled out and balanced. I guess, so in my mind, I’m imagining lōkahi where everything, our work, our play, our spirituality, our family, everything is balanced. And when one part of it gets off balance it kind of throws the whole individual off.

Ka’ala’s statement is informative because of her emphasis on the word lōkahi. Lōkahi is more than just balance, it is having oneness, unity or harmony with all the aspects of life, but these translations are mere glosses of what it really means to have lōkahi. Work, play, spirituality, and family are examples of areas of life that need to be kept in harmony in order to maintain health. This is an implicit contrast to the values of the West that emphasize individualism and productivity.

Kupuna Lily,12 a practitioner of Hawaiian medicine, elaborates on another component of health. In her discussion of foods she focuses on the importance of what one consumes, and where and how those foods are acquired:

...The Hawaiians before were healthy and they ate their kind of food that they were brought up with. And they baked their food or they dried their food and they never had any fried food. They never used any sweetening thing. They used the sugar cane. If they had some kind of illness they had different herbs to use. They don’t drink coffee until the Americans brought the coffee over. They used to use herb teas. Afterward when they had the taste of coffee they start drinking coffee, which is not good actually for

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12Kupuna is descriptive for an elder, thus identifying “Lily” as a respected elder and is not part of her proper name.
their bodies. Using oil for frying things, all the rich food. They never had those things. They lived off of the land, you know, whatever they plant, whatever they get from the river, from the ocean, that’s what they live on.

Kupuna Lily’s response highlights the role diet can play in defining Hawaiian health. Food that is obtained from the land, river, and ocean, food that Hawaiians were “brought up with”, is a key to health. In contrast, imported food, such as refined sugar, coffee, and oil have become staples that contribute to poor health. The issue here is as much about which foods are consumed as how those foods are obtained, produced or purchased. There is a rejection of materials that represent foreign intrusions and the loss of Hawaiian foods. This loss of Hawaiian foods in turn leads to a lack of health.

In addition to lōkahi and Hawaiian food, the importance of knowing and practicing Hawaiian culture is also part of Hawaiian health, as Kaila, a nursing student states:

I think to be a healthy Hawaiian means that you understand your culture. You know it’s…this is the way we were raised when we were young, it wasn’t a good thing to be Hawaiian. My grandparents spoke Hawaiian and we weren’t allowed to speak Hawaiian. So we lost the language. My grandmother practiced the ancient religion but she didn’t pass it on. So we didn’t learn the religion. So much was lost. I think there’s a difference... —So a healthy Hawaiian would be someone who’s practicing those things?—Uhm hmm. And understands what it means to be Hawaiian and how that’s different from being a white, you know or an Anglo or whatever.

Kaila’s quote illustrates the blurring between a healthy body and a healthy society. Just as Hawaiian health has declined over the years, so too has cultural knowledge been lost. The importance of regaining a self-conscious cultural identity is of key importance to being a healthy Hawaiian. One must know not only what it means to be a Hawaiian and have pride in that identity, but also that it is different from the knowledge and practices that are associated with being “white”.

Each of these quotes reveals a different attribute of health, yet all foreground economic, cultural, and psychological aspects of health by going beyond solely attending to the body’s physical needs. Ka’ala attends to the integration of activities of daily life: work, play, family. Kupuna Lily focuses on food; their ability to eat foods from their land, and the means by which that food is produced. Finally, Kaila gives importance to cultural knowledge and pride. Together these issues work to create an image of a “healthy Hawaiian”. In addition, it is significant that they create an image of Hawaiian health in contrast to the values, food production and ideologies of the West. The contrast between Hawaiian and Western values is a key theme in the creation of exclusionary categories; they provide knowledge and practices against which Hawaiians can define themselves.

Not all interviewees stated that there was a difference between being a healthy person and a healthy Hawaiian. Further analysis of even their responses, however, uncovered references to differences. It is important to note that of the 13 interviewees who stated that there was no difference between being a healthy person and a healthy Hawaiian, 10 later stated that eating Hawaiian foods would make Hawaiians healthier. Hawaiian foods were defined as fish, poi, and limu, those foods that come from Hawaiian land and ocean. Despite their statement that what is healthy for one human is healthy for all, in the end these participants gave more importance to the purity and benefits of Hawaiian land and food for Hawaiians thus creating a contrast and a basis for group identity.

Linking the healthy ancestor to contemporary practice

The model of the Healthy Ancestor is a part of how the Hawaiians I interviewed imagine their current and future potential for good health. Achieving Hawaiian health was seen as entailing a reconnection with self and family through the land, ocean, and food. For example, Melelani wanted to take me to the beach, more specifically to the ocean, because that is the place where she goes to achieve lōkahi (unity, oneness) with the land and ultimately to be healthy. “I brought you here”, she told me, “so that you could see what we do as part of our health”. It was not enough for her to talk about the importance of the ocean and land in her health practices, she wanted me to feel it and see it, too. Melelani told me that she even immerses herself in the ocean whenever she returns from travel so that her body knows that she is home, thus giving her a sense of unity. It is not altogether surprising that Melelani places value in reconnecting with the land through the sea, as the land, in Hawaiian ideology, is imbued with mana, a life force. Moreover, it is another practice that creates a positive link with your ancestral family and those Hawaiians who occupied the land before you.

Although few of the participants mentioned having good family relationships as an attribute of a healthy person, the practice of sharing food was an alternative way they used to show the importance of family relationships. It is another method some Hawaiians are using to regain pride in Hawaiian culture and health. For example, Kupa’a described his efforts to pass Hawaiian values on to his children and younger generations. His

13For a more thorough discussion of the relationship between land, ancestors and Ali’i, see Kame'elehiwa (1992).
efforts include working the taro patches, teaching his children to speak Hawaiian, and teaching them and others to obtain food in a traditional manner:

I was working with...an alternative education program in Wai’anae Valley. And we restored...all these ancient taro patches over four hundred years old. What we did is...put it back and make it work again. So I gained some experience in taro and I found some old Hawaiian fishing techniques like drag net and some other things in the ocean that are Hawaiian culture, culturally Hawaiian, and traditional. My son is encouraging. He goes fishing and stuff. He brings home a meal about once a week, since he was ten years old he’s been fishing. Kind of reinforces in what he doing, it’s not only fishing for sport, but comes home and feeds the family, that’s good.

The restoration of taro gardens is significant because taro is both the cornerstone of the Hawaiian diet and a symbol of family. Thus, in restoring the taro gardens and finding traditional Hawaiian fishing techniques Kupa’a creates an opportunity to practice the lifestyles of the Healthy Ancestor and passes on to his son the importance respect and caring for family and land.

Many other Hawaiians are also working to restore ancient Hawaiian gardens (lo‘i) and create new ones. I visited a couple of gardens on Maui, and I heard about many gardens that were community projects. Communities started the gardens to teach children how to grow taro (and other foods) and provide an alternative form of subsistence. The emergence of community gardens as opposed to individual gardens, of which I saw very few, is a Hawaiian way of thinking about obtaining food. It is a symbol of the practices of early Hawaiians that emphasize communal farming, sharing, and caring for each other and the land.

The ability to maintain Hawaiian culture is, in part, seen in the ability to provide food, taro, and fish for each other. Sharing food and restoring the means by which Hawaiians care for each other, build a strong family and community is more than having a proper diet. The meaning of food becomes a center for social relationships, a means to care for each other and their health. In obtaining food from the land, just as the Healthy Ancestor did, both Hawaiian health and identity are revitalized. More importantly, these health practices hinge on Hawaiian’s ability to access Hawaiian land and ocean, which further underscores contemporary political struggles for indigenous land rights.

General views of health

While many participants mentioned relational (familial, political, and economic) aspects of health, often their narratives of its meaning did not begin with that premise. All the interviews began with a general discussion of health—their own health status and health practices. Then they were asked what it meant to be healthy. If needed, this was followed by a question asking them to describe a healthy person. However, when participants were asked what it meant to be healthy, they would begin by describing a life free of illness and pain. That description flowed into a listing of the attributes of a healthy person, or those practices used to maintain health (Table 2). For most participants (63%) health meant living without chronic illness or pain. Similar to Crawford’s (1984) findings, health as the “absence of disease” also appears to be the taken-for-granted category among many participants in my study. After the absence of chronic illness was mentioned, they then talked about lifestyle behaviors such as “eating right” (typically a well-balanced diet—fruits and vegetables, not too much red meat, 77%), and “getting enough exercise” (60%). This quote from Ipo, a 28-year-old male, contains many of the typical responses to the question of what it takes to be healthy:

I think you gotta have exercise in your life to be healthy. Uhm, eating the right foods, cutting back on red meat. I wish I was vegetarian to tell you the truth, but I got a hard time to get away from meat. A healthy person has to eat fruits and vegetables and I think exercise is the main thing.

The desire to exercise and eat well is foremost in Ipo’s definition of health. Later in the interview Ipo talked about his exercise routine and how it was not a problem to maintain. On the other hand, his hopes of eating the “right” foods, however, appeared to be an ongoing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item mentioned</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eating right</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to be active, energetic</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a positive attitude, state of mind</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little stress in life</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a balance between emotional, spiritual and physical life</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a spiritual life</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt water cleanse</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting enough rest</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating food from the land</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not having to worry about illness</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good family relationships</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having confidence</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 because some respondents mentioned more than one item.
struggle as evidenced by his desire to cut back on his consumption of red meats.

I was particularly surprised that only one person mentioned value of “good family relationships” as an attribute of a healthy person. Having conflicts with family members is often cited in the literature as the causation of illness among Hawaiians (Ito, 1985, 1999; Linnekin, 1985) and among other Pacific Islanders (MacPherson & MacPherson, 1990; Becker, 1995). Maintaining good family relationships and practicing ho’oponopono (conflict resolution) when conflict arises would then be an attribute of a healthy person. Further analysis, however, revealed that the maintenance of family relationships was exhibited through sharing food and interacting with the land, rather than through conflict resolution. This extension of the concept of familial relationships and health solidified both the link with contemporary family and with ancestors who are remembered and cared for through interactions with the land and sharing of foods such as taro.

Many of the responses to both the meaning of health and the attributes of a healthy person display common knowledge within the US, notably eating right: consuming less red meat and more fruits and vegetables and most important is said to be exercise (Crawford, 1984; Whorton, 1988; Leichter, 1997). These activities are representative of the practices that one engages into manifest their self-control and that health is a personal responsibility (Crawford, 1984; Schepet-Hughes & Lock, 1987). The discussions of health revealed that my participants were very familiar with the meanings and practices of health predominant in the US, and that this is an accepted way of talking about health. As presented earlier, however, when given an opportunity to present alternative version of health, concepts and descriptions of Hawaiian health were readily available. Thus, to be a healthy Hawaiian entails an integration with family, past and present, and a respect for the land.

Conclusion

The importance of the health and lifestyles of ancient Hawaiians cannot be overestimated when considering the contemporary revitalization of Hawaiian health and cultural identity. The image of Healthy Ancestors is a potent metaphor because they give Hawaiians a positive historical connection to the health of pre-contact Hawaiian lifestyles. Yet, to be a healthy Hawaiian, and to practice the lifestyle of the Hawaiian ancestors one must have access to land, as Kalani explained:

When a Hawaiian says Hawaiian culture, you gotta understand that he puts his culture with the land. The man is part of his genealogy… it’s what makes you know. Maybe if people were to look at it, this association with nature and the land and everything in the sea and that it’s yours and that you know you’re a part of it. It’s a special kind of healing that remains.

Health and healing in this scenario are achieved by re-establishing a tie between the land, Hawaiian ancestors and a Hawaiian cultural identity. These themes emphasize the importance of Hawaiian land for a person’s spiritual, cultural, and physical health. Furthermore, these instances all contrast with food and lifeways brought to the islands by the West.

The Healthy Ancestor is a source of pride. It is an image that says that the “natural” state of Hawaiians is to be healthy and that in revitalizing their culture they are revitalizing their health. It is their call to life, not just life through physical health, but a Hawaiian life that is revitalized through relationships with ancestors, family and the land. Enlightenment views of health are contested in Hawaiians’ daily struggle to practice their view of health, to have access to land and ocean to grow or capture their own food, to have Hawaiian foods readily available at the grocery store or to have access to the beaches and the valleys. If the narrative of health stopped with disease and depopulation, then health could be defined as the body without disease. However, a Hawaiian view of health locates both the revitalization of health and identity in the land. Hawaiian health is not a practice that crosses geographical boundaries as biomedicine does. In this way, Hawaiian concepts of health are an alternative to biomedicine and are inherently political. The Healthy Ancestor frames the call to life, thus providing a position from which Hawaiians can contest and negotiate what it means to be healthy and engage in the everyday practice of physical and cultural survival.

What it means to be a healthy Hawaiian contributes to our understanding of the taken-for-granted state of “health”. By examining concepts of health for meaning and social order we see that health entails more than individualism and self-control, but rather is embedded in family relationships and the land that you and your ancestors occupy. In other words, the body and thus health cannot be “detached from living situations”. In recognizing that health is embedded in a social and historical context the study of concepts of health moves us away from “naturalized” notions of the unhealthy other. The construction of Hawaiians as a diseased and unhealthy population masked the unequal access to resources that are necessary to living a “healthy” life. The meaning of Hawaiian health brings into relief the historical and social relations that create “health” and in the long run provide a critique not only of the conventional biomedical goal that health is the
body without disease, but also of individualism and capitalism. Without the critiques of the ways in which constructions of “health” support the social order, inequality and the exercise of power, we cannot know how health can “become a means for the practice of freedom” or a call to life.

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