

# MĀ‘AWE PONO

## A HAWAIIAN RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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PART 4:

### Challenges and Limitations

The ongoing lack of systemic support for community-based, culturally driven endeavors of any kind, including native research and problem-solving efforts, severely limits the practice and use of *Mā‘awe Pono* to solve the many problems facing Hawaiian communities. This lack of systemic support results in a general lack of resources, including research funding to use *Mā‘awe Pono* or other Indigenous research methods to test hypotheses and/or implement solutions for Hawai‘i. Therefore, although we are frequently able to identify solutions to initiate positive change, the fact that there is little or no systemic support and/or resources seriously limits the success of our research. This is the reason Indigenous scholars believe that if research is to play “a useful and progressive role in the process of decolonization, it will ultimately require a political commitment in support of Indigenous peoples and an unambiguous recognition of the colonial role played by mainstream paradigms” (Menzies 2001, 33). *Mā‘awe Pono* asserts that in addition to political support, successful Hawaiian research also requires ongoing access to funding to execute the research. This funding should especially be provided by those who have benefited from Hawaiian resources from colonization to the present, which includes the federal, state, and county governments.

Other limitations involve clashes between traditional values and modern realities. For example, the traditional focus on excellence and the completion of a task, regardless of the time involved, impacts the use of *Mā‘awe Pono* as a research methodology for Indigenous graduate students within Western academia, as well as Indigenous researchers working on grants and other time-sensitive research projects. In other words, the timelines and time restrictions imposed on the researcher by outside entities like universities, grantors, and others, frequently make it very hard for Indigenous researchers to employ methodologies like *Mā‘awe Pono*. This is because these methods often involve longitudinal research and a long-term commitment on the part of the primary researcher to stay with the project, sometimes for years and even decades, since many issues facing Hawaiian communities today cannot be solved even over several years.

Another challenge involves establishing and maintaining collaborative relations between multiple groups of community co-researchers. These co-researchers range from individuals with extensive academic backgrounds and research experience, to co-researchers with strong cultural connections and inherent Hawaiian problem-solving practices. Getting these groups to collaborate is one of the main challenges of the primary researcher who must assure that those with extensive cultural backgrounds and connections to ancestral knowledge are not made to feel inferior, and those whose credentials are validated by academia are not criticized for being unable to think and act in a Hawaiian context. Balancing these attitudes and opinions can be an arduous task for the primary researcher who must also make sure that no one uses the research as an opportunity to advance themselves and their agendas. Such egoists can seriously jeopardize any research project because they do not really want to solve the problem at hand.

### The Evolution of a Methodology

When I first began to explore research methodologies for my doctoral research in 1996, there was very little information about Indigenous research, or anything else Indigenous for that matter. In fact, before I could officially begin my doctoral work in Indigenous Education, I had to present a paper to my committee and the dean of the university, qualifying Indigenous Education as a field of study. In the

absence of Indigenous research models, I began to explore existing Western methodologies in the hope of finding a methodology aligned as close as possible with my worldview, which I could utilize for my research. While quantitative methods failed to resonate with my objectives and goals, the then emerging field of qualitative research, specifically empirical phenomenological research appeared promising. This qualitative design focuses on the wholeness of experience, rather than solely on objects or parts, and searches for meanings, rather than measurements. Other existing Western research methodologies that naturally aligned with my worldview included exploratory research and observation and participatory action research, which have been used by our Hawaiian ancestors for thousands of years. In some way, all of these Western experience-based ways of learning, discovery, and research aligned closely with what is known in academia as “heuristics,” an approach to research that employs a practical method to reach an immediate goal. Non-academics frequently simplify this technique by referring to it as using the rule of thumb, making an educated guess, or relying on intuitive judgment. Yet, both heuristics, as well as the logical, commonsense approaches to research of my Hawaiian ancestors, use a rigorous process, following a multi-phase journey, which empowers the researcher to thoroughly interact and bond with the phenomenon being studied to awaken a solution that could only evolve through experience and practice, by having “a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas, 1990, 14). Another thing that attracted me to heuristics was the fact that it not only allowed, but necessitated, the researcher to formulate questions and problems reflecting the interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher.

Along with exploring existing Western methods, I also began to attempt to identify specific Hawaiian methods of data collection and presentation, and the various roles of the researcher, co-researchers, and the Hawaiian community in the research process. Much of this investigation involved the study of Hawaiian proverbs. This research led to the creation of a method I called Indigenous Heuristic Action Research, which I described as a mixed methodology after reading *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, by Linda Tuhiwai Smith. Smith asserts that most Indigenous methodologies are a mix of existing methodological approaches and Indigenous practices. Smith believes that this mix reflects the training of Indigenous researchers, which continues to be within the academy, and the parameters and commonsense understanding of research, which govern how Indigenous communities and researchers define their activities (1999, 143).

In retrospect identifying Indigenous Heuristic Action Research as a mixed methodology was valid, since I used it to meet Western university requirements, and because most tenets of this method were based on existing Western ways of research. Since then I have continued to experience ongoing growth and insight as a Hawaiian researcher specifically, and a Hawaiian cultural practitioner, in general. This growth has led me to realize that the methodology that eventually evolved is actually a new and unique research method, distinctly different from existing methodologies and thoroughly Hawaiian. This notion is in alignment with Wilson’s notion that Indigenous methodologies are rooted in Indigenous philosophical positioning or epistemology. Wilson (2001) argues that it is not the method that is the determining characteristic of Indigenous methodologies, but rather the interplay, or relationship, between the method and paradigm and the extent to which the method is congruent with an Indigenous worldview.

Although initially a mixed methodology, over the past decade, *Mā’awe Pono* has evolved into an authentic Hawaiian method of research, demonstrating and validating that Indigenous peoples can and should conduct quality scholarly research utilizing innovative ways of inquiry that align with Indigenous worldviews. This notion continues to grow not only among Indigenous researchers, but also in academia, where acceptance of Indigenous paradigms is on the rise, although Kovach is correct in stating that the nuances and complexities that define Indigenous paradigms may still not be fully understood, or viewed as legitimate, by all members of the academy. At the same time, according to Kovach, academics today would not openly contest, at least in public spaces, that an Indigenous paradigm exists (2009).

*Mā’awe Pono* opens the door for Indigenous researchers around the world to create and utilize methodologies that are inherently Indigenous and have a standard of complexity and sophistication, equal

in scope and breadth to established Western ways of research. This quest for Indigenous researchers to design their own Indigenous methodologies is also reflected in the mission of the American Indigenous Research Association founded in 2013, which is to educate researchers and the public about the importance of Indigenous Research Methodologies and to promote incorporation of these methodologies into all research that engages Indigenous peoples and communities. Such research should take place not just at institutions controlled by Indigenous peoples, or in disciplines oriented toward Native Studies, but also at the most conservative and prestigious Western universities and in fields seemingly unrelated to Native life and Native ways.

## Conclusion

*Mā'awe Pono* constitutes my effort to decolonize methodology within my own cultural context as a Hawaiian and participate in research on my terms. These terms are defined by the practices of my Hawaiian ancestors and congruent with my Hawaiian *mo'okū'auhau* and worldview grounded in the Hawaiian doctrine of *kū-a-kanaka* (stand as a Hawaiian). *Mā'awe Pono* is my way of asserting my right as an Indigenous researcher and scholar to design and utilize a way of research that reflects and aligns with a Hawaiian framework and Hawaiian paradigms. Our ancestors clearly realized that as Hawaiians, our ways to approach things are different from those of foreigners that we call *haole*. This is reflected in the proverb, "*Haole kī kōlea*. Plover shooting *haole*. Blundering foreigner. The *haole*, in going plover hunting, shoots with his shotgun, killing some, maiming others. The maimed can fly elsewhere to die or become victims of some other animal. But the Hawaiian goes quietly at night with a net. He takes what he wants and lets the others escape unharmed" (Pukui 1983, 57).

These fundamental differences between Western and Hawaiian mind-sets also exist when it comes to research, validating the need for Hawaiian research methodologies. *Mā'awe Pono* articulates such a methodology that is clearly Hawaiian, grounded in the incredible wisdom and knowledge of my Hawaiian ancestors. When King Liholiho, son of Kamehameha the Great, visited England in 1824, he was complimented by the people of London for his intelligence and level of education. To this King Liholiho replied: "*Na wai ho'i ka 'ole o ke akamai, he alahele i ma'a i ka hele 'ia e o'u mau mākua*. Who would not be wise on a path walked upon by my parents and ancestors?" (Pukui 1983, 251). As Indigenous researchers, we must honor the past before us with confidence in our traditional ways and reliance on the teachings of our ancestors as we take our rightful place as contributing members of the international community of researchers, on our terms.