

Plantation Life and Labor in Lā‘ie

by Cynthia Woolley Compton

The story of what is commonly called the “‘Awa Rebellion” in Lā‘ie has been printed and published at various times. The basic story goes something like this: In 1873, Frederick Mitchell, a Mormon missionary, arrived in Lā‘ie to become the new mission president and plantation manager. Shortly after Mitchell arrived, he attempted to more fully implement the Word of Wisdom in Lā‘ie. Although it was reported that few residents abused ‘awa (which is a traditional root crop in much of the Pacific, also known as kava, and which some consider to contain mild narcotic properties) and that most of the ‘awa grown in Lā‘ie was exported to New York City, Mitchell put a *kapu* (ban) on the production of ‘awa. Many of the residents of Lā‘ie resisted this *kapu*, with some moving off the plantation and relocating to nearby Kahana. Mitchell disfellowshipped those who moved to Kahana. The disfellowshipped Kahana Saints wrote an appeal to Brigham Young, who agreed with the Kānaka Maoli (local Hawaiians) and called Mitchell home.⁷

One of the questions emerging from this narrative is why Mitchell put a *kapu* on the production of ‘awa when the Word of Wisdom was not strictly administered in the Church at that time and when George Nebeker (the departing mission president) and plantation manager had not banned it.⁸ In answering this question, Chase concluded that Mitchell’s history of religious orthodoxy helps explain this decision.⁹ I would like to add to this religious and moral focus an analysis of how the market economy and labor relations in Hawai‘i may have also shaped choices of Kānaka Maoli and Mitchell. It appears that Mitchell’s *kapu* on growing ‘awa was motivated, at least in part, by his desire to more efficiently regulate and control labor on the plantation. It also appears that some of the Kānaka Maoli response to Mitchell focused on maintaining control over their daily work life by drawing on Hawaiian cultural paradigms and utilizing Church channels to resist Mitchell’s efforts.

In the early 1870s when Mitchell arrived on the plantation, Mormon colonies throughout the West and in Hawai‘i were mixtures of faith and finance. Often when Mormons were called to settle an area, the call included using personal resources to underwrite the endeavor. This was the case in Lā‘ie. Some of the missionaries called to come and

⁷The earliest known record that we have was written by the Mormon missionary, Harvey Cluff, who was present when the series of events that made up this “rebellion” took place. See Harvey Harris Cluff, *Journal and Autobiography*, 142-47, 159-62, Pacific Island Room, Joseph F. Smith Library, Brigham Young University Hawai‘i, Lā‘ie. Unfortunately, I have not yet located any Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) accounts. One of the earliest and best-known published accounts of these events is Lance Chase’s piece, which he gave at the first meeting of MPHS in 1980, with a subsequent inclusion in the book *Voyages of Faith*. Lance D. Chase, “The Hawaiian Mission Crisis of 1874: The ‘Awa Rebellion Story,” in *Voyages of Faith: Explorations in Mormon Pacific History*, editor Grant Underwood (Provo: Brigham Young University, 2000), 59-70.

⁸Cluff, 145.

⁹Chase, 62.

proselyte among Kānaka Maoli invested their own funds in establishing the mission and the plantation in Lā‘ie. Thus many of those who came to Lā‘ie, both Kānaka Maoli and missionary, willingly expressed their faith in material, concrete ways. For example, Maria Louisa Dilworth Nebeker was a wife of George Nebeker, one of the first mission presidents in Lā‘ie. She describes the financial sacrifice she made in coming to Lā‘ie:

When my son William G. Nebeker was but four months old, my husband, Bro. George Nebeker, was called on another mission to the Sandwich Islands. I thought of course, he would take his first family, but what was my surprise when I was told that all my property (left me by my first husband John Leonard, deceased), was to be sold—my home, my farm, cattle, city lots—all that remained to me of my departed husband—and I was to go with Bro. Nebeker to a strange land, buy property there and help to make a gathering place for the native Saints. It seemed I was then offering my Isaac, yet I never faltered, sold all but a change of clothing for my child and myself, and I thought not of myself—only to perform my duty.¹⁰

Her investment in the economically high-risk endeavor of operating a sugar plantation created pressures on the Nebekers and other missionaries as they attempted to break even with their investment. Such pressures affected relations in the mission and on the plantation. When Nebeker came to Lā‘ie, the title and responsibility for the land was in a large sense carried by him. Harvey Cluff gives an example of how these pressures played out: “Bro. Nebeker took charge of the store and immediately raised the price of goods from 10 to 30 percent above what had been previously charged which caused dissatisfaction.”¹¹ Financial pressures also explain why some of the missionaries that served under Nebeker felt more like hired hands than missionaries.¹²

When Mitchell came to Lā‘ie, he replaced George Nebeker as mission president and plantation manager. Mitchell became a business partner to Nebeker and took on one-third interest in the property.¹³ Thus his call as mission president included not only stewardship over the mission, but also included personal interest in the financial success of the plantation.

Mitchell invested in the Lā‘ie sugar plantation and became its manager at a time that was challenging for sugar planters in Hawai‘i. In the early 1860s the American Civil War had made sugar production a promising endeavor; but by 1873 when Mitchell arrived, the

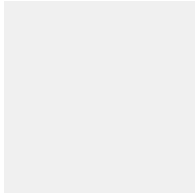
¹⁰Maria Louisa Dilworth Nebeker, 7 July 1865, in Andrew Jenson, comp., “History of the Hawaiian Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” photocopy), 7 July 1865, Pacific Island Room, Special Collections, Joseph F. Smith Library, Brigham Young University Hawai‘i, Lā‘ie.

¹¹Cluff, 126.

¹²R. Lanier Britsch, *Moramona: The Mormons in Hawai‘i* (Lā‘ie: Institute for Polynesian Studies, 1989; reprint, Lā‘ie: The institute for Polynesian Studies, 1998), 77.

¹³Cluff, 142.

sugar market had declined. In 1873 Hawai‘i had not yet received favorable trade status with the United States and would not until 1876 when Hawai‘i and the United States cemented the Treaty of Reciprocity. In such difficult times large, efficient plantations fared the best.¹⁴ However, Lā‘ie was a small plantation with a small mill and a small portion of land cultivated in sugar. All of which meant that Lā‘ie Plantation had little chance of making a profit.



Laie Sugar Plantation Mill (BYU Hawaii Archives & Special Collections)

Missionaries working on the plantation at the time of Mitchell’s arrival understood the challenging prospects of sugar production. Harvey Cluff, one of those missionaries tried to warn Mitchell that it would be hard for him to make a return on his investment. He recorded their exchange in this way:

As brother Mitchell, several other brethren and myself were walking over the plantation he related to us the nature of the contract with brother [sic] and the option of choosing ten percent of profits or four percent of the gross receipts. . . . When brother Mitchell finished his statement as to the percent it was to draw for his Services, I chipped in and said “if I were you brother Mitchell I would take the gross receipts 4 percent. He spoke up verry sarcastically and said “When I want advice I will ask for it.” That was a stunner, for I was innocent as could be and based my suggestion on what my experience on the plantation for several years had taught me about gross receipts and actual profits.¹⁵

Implied in this conversation is that the net income was so low that even at a lower interest rate Mitchell would be better off taking his share from the gross income. In other words, the plantation was not doing well financially.

It was not just Utah missionaries who experienced tensions between faith and finance; Kānaka Maoli also experienced such tensions. It is important to understand that one of the reasons this gathering place was sustainable was because Kānaka Maoli could raise needed cash working on the sugar plantation and by growing ‘awa for the market. The cash was required to pay the taxes that had recently been imposed by the government. Secondly, Lā‘ie was a place that Kānaka Maoli could grow crops that they and their ancestors had grown for many years, such as kalo (taro). The ability to combine cash work with growing food for their own families grew out of the underlying logic and

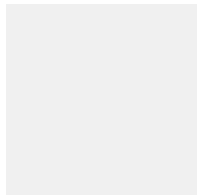
¹⁴Carol MacLellan, “Hawai‘i Turns to Sugar: The Rise of Plantation Centers, 1860-1880,” *The Hawaiian Journal of History* 31 (1997): 118.

¹⁵Cluff, 143.

purpose of the Lā‘ie plantation. The plantation was implemented to financially sustain missionary work and the gathering of Kānaka Maoli converts. Thus the missionaries were loath to impose contracts on them. In other words, Kānaka Maoli who worked in Lā‘ie often could decide when to work or when not to work for the plantation, depending on their own economic needs and their desire to spend time working with their own crops. This contrasted with other Kānaka Maoli around the islands who were bound to plantations by contracts for six months to one year.¹⁶

In the 1870s and 1880s, Kānaka Maoli in Lā‘ie were increasingly drawn into the market economy. Not only did they grow kalo for their own families, but increasingly they grew ‘awa as a cash crop for an international market, particularly for New York City.¹⁷ ‘Awa was an effective cash crop to grow because it did not require much labor, attention, or water. Since it was generally grown in the hills and mountains, it provided little competition to the growing of either kalo or sugar. The influx of cash from ‘awa not only helped Kānaka Maoli pay taxes, it helped ensure the survival of the gathering place. Cluff noted that when Mitchell arrived, the ‘awa crop that was about to be harvested was worth several thousand dollars and, in his words: “We needed the money badly.”¹⁸

Thus we come again to the central question. Why would Mitchell prohibit the growing and harvesting of ‘awa as a cash crop when cash was so needed to ensure the success of the gathering place in Lā‘ie? Cluff’s journal suggests that Mitchell saw the production and consumption of ‘awa as breaking the Word of Wisdom.¹⁹ The willingness of many early Mormons to make sacrifices for their beliefs suggests that we should not minimize Mitchell’s faith as a factor in his decision to stop the production of ‘awa either for use or for sale.



(BYU Hawaii Archives & Special Collections)

However, humans are complex creatures who often act from multiple motivations. It would not be surprising if Mitchell, either consciously or unconsciously, drew on economic and social motivations for insisting that Kānaka Maoli stop producing ‘awa. At first glance, it may appear that Mitchell’s action would negatively affect the plantation

¹⁶Carol Maclennan, 110.

¹⁷Cluff, 145.

¹⁸Cluff, 145-46.

¹⁹Cluff, 145.

and his own investment since it would cut off a source of cash and a source of support for the Kānaka Maoli Saints trying to make it in Lā‘ie. However, if we examine his actions in the context of the plantation economy, it becomes clear that, in fact, the kapu would work to Mitchell’s benefit by creating a more pliant workforce.²⁰

There are three reasons that suggest this. The first has to do with the nature of the timing of the kapu. Although Mitchell had emphasized the Word of Wisdom from the pulpit and in Church councils, he did not impose the kapu when it carried an ecclesiastical mantle. Instead he made the announcement at a community New Years’ celebration.²¹ It is not hard to imagine a celebration that would challenge Mitchell’s sense of propriety and induce him to initiate a temperance movement, including a ban on ‘awa.

The second reason may have to do with the timing of work on the plantation. Unlike other plantations, Lā‘ie did not use contracts to bind Kānaka Maoli workers to the plantation. Since the plantation had been designed to financially support the gathering place, it did not make sense to the missionaries to use a contract system that they saw as exploitive.²² Without contracts Mitchell did not have a legal, binding way to hold or control the workers, as did surrounding plantation owners. Although there seems to have been enough workers willing to work on the plantation, it also appears that many of them worked primarily when they needed cash. In other words, they did stint labor. Missionary diaries attest to both a plentitude of Kānaka Maoli workers willing to do stint work and at the same time the difficulty of finding regular workers, willing to work for the exact time frames that the missionaries wanted them to work.

It is clear that Mitchell arrived at the plantation when it was extremely difficult to make a profit and to a plantation without having a steady, tractable workforce that would work on demand. This is where ‘awa enters into the labor equation. If Mitchell could successfully cut off the cash flow that came from ‘awa, then the Kānaka Maoli workers in Lā‘ie would need to work in the sugar fields and mill more often in order to earn money.

Whether Mitchell consciously thought this through we cannot know; however, the intensity of the reaction of Kānaka Maoli suggests that they saw that the kapu would make them more economically dependent on the plantation, and this was unacceptable to them. The rejection of such control over their labor was manifested by their move to Kahana. In precontact times, if a konohiki or ali‘i acted oppressively, the people were entitled to move to a different location. That this cultural pattern held over into the 1870s is attested to by the fact that as other sugar plantations tightened up their labor practices, Kānaka Maoli refused to work on sugar plantations. Increasingly, plantations turned to

²⁰As of yet, I have been unable to find any journal entries by Mitchell for this time period, so our evidence cannot be based on his perspective. Thus while much of what I conclude is speculative, it is grounded in the evidence of plantation life from that era.

²¹ Cluff, 147.

²²Harvey Cluff to *Deseret News*, 15 March 1870, in Jenson.

Asia for workers.²³ As on other plantations, when Mitchell moved to limit the amount of control Kānaka Maoli had over their work lives, they left the plantation.

The third piece of evidence that Mitchell used his authority to make the plantation more profitable was when he disfellowshipped some of those who moved to Kahana. Because he had no contracts with Kānaka Maoli, he had no legal recourse to hold them to the land. Instead, he resorted to ecclesiastical authority and disfellowshipped them.²⁴

Mitchell's heavy-handedness caused dissatisfaction among Kānaka Maoli Saints and missionaries. Cluff records in his autobiography his own disgruntlement with how Mitchell spoke to him and with how he handled the kapu.²⁵ Shortly after the conflict over 'awa, Cluff's mission ended, and he returned to Salt Lake City. He met with Brigham Young and other Church leaders who had Hawaiian connections. He learned that some Kānaka Maoli had written complaining about how Mitchell had treated them.²⁶ As of yet there is no known copy of the letter. The actions of Kānaka Maoli were sustained in the Salt Lake meeting. Brigham Young did not ask them to work by contract or to return to Lā'ie. Instead, Mitchell was called home. Kahana became one of the three strongest Mormon communities in the islands. It also became a place where Hawaiians attempted to recreate labor and food pathways while negotiating the growing market economy.²⁷

This story suggests that the history of the mission in Hawai'i should not be told without it being contextualized by the history of the plantation and the economy of the times. The story also tells us that the phrase "'Awa Rebellion" is reductive. The term "rebellion" does not adequately capture the nuanced, interculturally complex, and successful means by which Kānaka Maoli resisted inappropriate economic domination by an overbearing missionary while simultaneously maintaining their faith. Their efforts to be faithful Saints in an intercultural and colonial setting, suggests an important and faithful rendering of a pioneer spirit.

²³Cynthia D. Woolley Compton, "The Making of the Ahupua`a of Lā'ie into a Gathering Place and Plantation: The Creation of an Alternative Space to Capitalism," Ph.D. Dissertation, Brigham Young University Provo, 2005, 127-29; 186.

²⁴Cluff, 160.

²⁵Cluff, 143-45

²⁶Cluff, 160.

²⁷Robert H. Stauffer, *Kahana: How the Land Was Lost* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2004), 160.

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