

GUEST: PUAKEA NOGELMEIER ON THE HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE

LSS 319 (LENGTH: 26:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 3/16/10

But then I'm taking every Hawaiian language class I can get my hands on. So I went and declared a second major for Hawaiian language. And the counselor laughed out loud. For what? And, What do you think you'll do with it? And you're not Hawaiian anyway. You know, why would you? I said, Well, I'm interested. And that's really all I was, was I was just interested.

Ever hear someone speak of the *kaona* of a song, the hidden meaning? Hawaiian language scholar Puakea Nogelmeier says the *kaona* may be even more hidden than some folks think. Puakea Nogelmeier, next, on LONG STORY SHORT.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in High Definition.

***Aloha Mai Kakou*, I'm Leslie Wilcox. In this edition of LONG STORY SHORT...the story of Puakea Nogelmeier, who found himself stranded in Hawaii and...found himself. He became a Hawaiian language scholar, University of Hawaii teacher, and a Hoku Award-winning songwriter. Of course, he wasn't always Puakea. In 1972, during a brutal Minnesota winter, young MARVIN Nogelmeier quit his job at the post office and left in search of adventure in the Far East. A lost wallet short circuited the trip.**

He found work as a goldsmith in Waianae. And on another lark, he joined the *hula halau* of Mililani Allen. That's where he began his immersion in Hawaiian language and culture. Mililani Allen's own teacher, the legendary *kumu hula* Maiki Aiu Lake bestowed upon him the name, Puakea, white flower or fair child, along with the expectation of positive things to come. Puakea is indebted to HIS many teachers, most notably cultural expert and photographer Theodore Kelsey. For 10 years, the old man would meet with the young man at least once a week at the home of writer June Gutmanis.

Mostly the more we worked together, the more we went into old material, getting to understand. By now, I could get when he's talking about the poetry,

you know, what makes a *kanikau* a *kanikau*, and how this is phrased this way, and ...

What are some of the subtleties he told you early on?

Well, sometimes it's like the choice of a pattern. You use a pattern, a *he* pattern, an *o* pattern, an *aia* pattern, an *ua* pattern, and why that emphasis here pulls something into focus. So now, watch how that focus is flavoring what follows it. So understanding line three, because of what was happening in line one. And there's things today that I'll think, That's what he said about—I mean, that's why he pointed—

And was he rare gem, or were there a number of people who understood Hawaiian language and subtleties that way?

He was an odd duck. There were still people in the late 70s and 80s. That's when they started to predict language death.

M-hm.

The median age of language speakers were in their seventies. There were very few children outside of the Niihau community. So they said ten, fifteen years, there will be no speakers left.

And there were so many people who took it as, well, yes, it is on the brink of extinction.

Yeah.

It's almost like—

Why; yeah.

Exactly.

Yeah; it's like, oh, that's too bad.

What can we do, well there's no current use for it.

Yeah. The language revitalization that kicked up from the 70s has just—it's never lost its stride. It's never lost its momentum, it's still extending and growing. That has kept me entertained for three decades. Ever since I launched into language, there's been a dynamic force moving forward. Might estimate ten thousand people today, who can work with Hawaiian language, who have different levels of fluency where they can utilize Hawaiian language either as a conversational tool or as a writing, or reading, or listening tool. It's a usable level of it. And probably twice that, that have at least an insight into it. They can say the right things in the morning, and they can ask for where's the *lua* or something, you know. They—

I've been in elevators, I've been at football games where people are talking Hawaiian. And what gets me is they have modern day—they're describing modern day phenomena, and they have—

Uh-huh.

—the words for it.

Yeah, yeah. The Chevy has a flat tire, and you know, da-da-da. Or—

The refrigerator is busted.

Yeah, the iPod isn't working today [INDISTINCT].

He made a great touchdown.

And they can do it all. Yeah. So the new words that have come into the language, that's a sign of vitality. The continuity of old words; that's a sign of strength. So you gotta have both of that.

Where are we going with the language? How many people will one day speak it? Do you think as a percentage of the population in terms of speakers, how ...

Okay, my starry—

How much do you think it'll go?

—eyed optimist, which is mostly who I am anyway, is that by the time of my demise, much of the population of Hawaii will have some access to Hawaiian language. They'll have pieces that they use, because there will be a much larger population that uses it regularly.

Well, we know that charter schools, many charter schools are teaching and learning Hawaiian language.

M-hm.

Kamehameha Schools has made a commitment. Faculty—

That was giant.

—staff, students will speak fluent—

M-hm.

—Hawaiian, because it's part of their culture, it's a necessary part of—

And they've—

—understanding it.

—formalized that commitment relatively recently. But they made a commitment way back, that whoever wants to learn, we'll make room. And they started hiring teachers to match the demand, not to set up, you know—

M-hm.

—the balance in curriculum. And Hawaiian language just exploded there. It matches the University.

For more than 30 years, Puakea Nogelmeier has been working to perpetuate an appreciation of the richness and intricacies of the Hawaiian language and culture. He translated into English, all 500 pages of it, "The Epic Tale of Hi'iakaopoliopole." He's collaborating with others to translate into English many 19th and 20th century Hawaiian newspaper articles and put them online. If you ride The Bus on Oahu, Puakea Nogelmeier's voice, announcing street names, will accompany your journey.

No matter what I do in my life, whatever accomplishments I may fulfill, I will be remembered for being the voice of The Bus, is what I'm thinking. 'Cause that's what I get introduced as now. Oh, and he's the voice of The Bus. So it's kind of an in-house joke. But they wanted my pronunciation. So they said, Let's try, let's try. So in the studio, I'm on my tiptoes—

'Cause you have to go higher? Is that what happened?

**LONG STORY SHORT WITH LESLIE WILCOX
(GUEST: PUAKEA NOGELMEIER ON THE HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE)**

And I have to do it at my highest range.

[chuckle]

My highest clear range. So I'm saying, Kalakaua, Ala Moana Center.

But to have something repeated over and over, almost immediately all the bus drivers were pronouncing all the street names like I do.

Oh.

So they're going, Oh, well, I'll be down on the Kinau side. You know, and I'll—well, Kinau doesn't have the *okina* on the sign for the freeway. You notice?

It doesn't.

But they were starting to use this reference point. And Kamaaha, the guy who set up it up through The Bus, we were gonna write an academic article on how to measure this impact. 'Cause it's really rather widespread. We have two friends visiting here, a son and his father from Maryland, I guess it is. They speak Maryland-ese. But the son is seventeen; he takes the bus every day. Dad doesn't.

M-m.

Dad's having a terrible time pronouncing anything. It's all vowels, and et cetera. Son doesn't see it in print; he's seeing it the way he hears it. So he goes, No, we gotta go up to Kapiolani, Dad.

Oh, that's a community service, then, isn't it?

This is, it's—well, it's an impact that we didn't expect, we didn't expect.

Right. And you can't really measure, but—

Yeah.

—it has an impact.

And it's gonna set a model. Maili. I used to do talks at Maili Elementary School and go, How many of you live in Maili? Nobody. How many of you live in Maile? And it's just what's normalized. And I don't get into right and wrong about it. It's what's common in different circles.

But at what point does common usage change accepted pronunciation?

And that's a dynamic, isn't it? It's gotta be. And sometimes common usage can still be overridden by desire. How's that? [chuckle] Maybe that works.

Puakea Nogelmeier is a teacher who says he's still learning and still setting high standards for himself. He also has high expectations of those who take his classes at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

I am considered a dragon. And it's 'cause I'm intense. But it's because I'm ... I am passionately engaged in what I'm doing, and I want them to be passionately engaged. So I think I'm very clear. I want this, this, this and this. And I'm adamant about that we do it. From that first class that I taught, I just—and I never wanted to be a teacher. But it was so rewarding to get them to play with something that I loved. And I had people that I was playing with, that these are the most fun people and I'd get Mr. Kelsey to come into class. He

**LONG STORY SHORT WITH LESLIE WILCOX
(GUEST: PUAKEA NOGELMEIER ON THE HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE)**

visited school couple times. Kamuela Kumukahi used to come every semester and visit all my classes. I say, You gotta meet-these are the real guys to play with. The university is a step on the way elsewhere. It's not a finished product, cause there is a university dialect. There is. And it can be faulted or it can just be recognized. We're putting up pillars and beams. If you want to go thatch this house [chuckle], you gotta get out and use it in the language community, with the native speakers, with the places that it's being used. If you go out here with your pillars and your beams and no thatch, and pretend you're a finished product, it's kinda like the emperor with no clothes. People are gonna recognize that. *Pf-f*, stop. But because I ended up working with Mr. Kelsey, and did a lot of what I learned, I think, is outside of the classroom. So it's certainly twisted. It's not native speaker. And because I'm a teacher, I could probably be closer to a native speaker dialect, just from spending enough time in the right zones. Hanging and getting corrected and Kamuela was really good about stopping me and going, If you want this clear, say it like this.

Is there anything you'd like people to know about the language, who may have taken a bit of language or hear some language, but they're not speakers of the Hawaiian language? Something that you'd like them to know about how the language works, and why.

The kinds of things that I'm gonna point out is like the focus tends to be on the setting, not on the doer. It'll be on the action, not the person doing the action. So just that whole structure is kinda turned around from English. So people who played with a little bit, it's really good to get a handle on that ... I went to the store, turns into went. 'Cause the first thing out of your mouth is the most important thing. English is very actor oriented. Hawaiian is action or setting oriented, and then the actor is placed within that. So I think that you gotta be able to sort of embrace a different mindset of the language.

Sometimes you hear a speech in the Hawaiian language, and then you see the *kupuna* laughing. Because there's a joke on another level that other people don't get.

Well, that's one of the beauties of the language, one of the difficulties of the language, is the issue of words with six and seven meanings. And oratory and poetry are the two places where you can play those and put in double meanings, triple meanings, they can be either sarcasm, they can be something sexual, risqué at least, or flirtatious, whatever. And it can be interpreted in the cleanest and clearest, or you can catch—not everybody will catch. The ones who are catching are the ones who are laughing.

And they go deep?

Yeah. And they'll catch that there's two going on. And that was always an honored game. It's a positive thing to be able to catch 'em, but it's a real positive thing to be able to cast 'em. So that was once a really widespread skill. And it's almost a game. I mean, really, it's a national pastime in its way, is to be able to play with words, play back and forth. Mr. Kelsey he was a dry sort of a

contained gentleman, and I learned a great deal from him. He was a wonderful guy. And then I started playing with Auntie Sarah Nakoa. She was a teacher up at UH, I worked with her at Kamehameha Schools. She taught me to play in the language. She played all the time. She looked like a battleship, she talked like dragon. I was never her student, but I always heard that she came into class and was always really surly and sort of curmudgeonly, and that. But when she played back and forth, she had the best sense of humor I've ever seen. And she would launch a line and just give her sort of battleship demeanor until you got it. And if you didn't get it, she didn't change. And if you got it, then there's like this crack in the armor. So she and I became sort of playmates. And honestly, I'd have to credit her with having taught me to laugh in Hawaiian. And she was just a whole different side of it.

You must get asked all the time; Are you Hawaiian?

Oh, I do.

And—

I do. [chuckle] And I—

And are you accepted at a really basic level in the fluent speaking community?

M-m. Well, there's acceptance. A, I'm not Hawaiian. And [chuckle] I wasn't Hawaiian before, and I won't be Hawaiian next week either. But there's always been a level of acceptance, and yet, a level of both surprise and, Wait a minute, do you fit here or not? And it depends, different circles and different individuals. So I mean, there's individuals that really wish I'd get on a jet and go back to Minnesota. [chuckle]

For the simple fact of your—

That I'm not Hawaiian.

M-m.

And that you don't have this, but that's uh, an issue of how people interpret *kuleana*. You know, and I interpret it, and I don't have an option of how to interpret it, I interpret it as my teachers taught me. And part of it is haphazard, is how it falls upon you, but how you fulfill it is your business. And some people don't like that I feel that I'm fulfilling a really serious *kuleana*. I had teachers that other people didn't have. And they taught me in the hope of things would— would be kept up, would be kept alive. So—

And did they teach you because you were the only one who was really interested in their lives?

You know—

Or what do you—

There's a—

—think it was?

Yeah. See, there's a dynamic in teaching. Like Mr. Kelsey, I think, golly, he would have taught anybody. And just nobody really found him—

And he didn't—

—much.

—have that sense of, I can't teach him, this man is not—

No.

—Hawaiian.

No. I mean at first, come on, when we met, now, he's eighty-eight. You gotta imagine this, right? I might have been twenty-something, twenty, da-da-da. I'm thirty-five pounds less than I am sitting in front of you. So I'm this skinny, little rail of a guy, hair down here, very flippant, very—you know, I'm—[SUCKS AIR]

[chuckle]

He ... no. I mean, see, I'm a pothead. I'm a silly guy. I'm fun. And I can't imagine that I hit his spot as the perfect student. And it was after a few years that he knew I was seriously interested, but I had to be as alien to him as he was to me.

Yeah, he had to look past and see—

Yeah.

—who you really are.

Thank God, his vision probably wasn't that good. You know what I mean? [chuckle] 'Cause he knew I was engaged. And that made a difference. And after a couple of years, June had told me, she says, Mr. Kelsey said something about he thinks you'll keep up his work.

Aw.

And I just was—

That's a great compliment.

—and it was ... I mean, it actually really touched me. 'Cause I also thought, Oh, god, now I'm in debt sorta. I mean, now I have to be serious.

Yeah, he passed the baton, and you didn't know you—

In a way.

You picked it up

And part of that was his work with the *Kumulipo*, which he worked on it for seventy years.

Wow.

Trying to interpret the *Kumulipo*. And there's no way I'll be able to carry out what he was aiming for. He promised, though. There was a lot of questions and he promised that if, after he died, he got 'em, he'd come back, tell me.

[chuckle] And the Kumulipo is the—

Oh, the—

—story—

—genesis chant. It's a chant to creation. So it's like a two-thousand-line, and it's a bit of a puzzle. And he was convinced that it was actually recorded when it was written down out of sequence in a couple of places. But to find those breaks in sequence, you'd have to have a total understanding of the whole piece, and almost what the mathematical structures within it were. 'Cause he—he insisted that the priests, that there was a structure behind the chant that the

priests understood, that allowed them to memorize. Something two thousand lines is a lot to remember.

You touched upon this a little before. But tell me about kaona.

You know, it comes up a lot. 'Cause people think that *kaona* is like the hidden meaning. If I'm talking about let's say, *Ahulili* is a song over on Maui. [SINGS] *He aloha no o Ahulili, he lili paha ko iala*. And it's a song about these *puu* in the Kipahulu district, and it's about this *puu* is jealous, 'cause all the other *puu*, the mist comes down and settles on them. So that's the song. People think the *kaona* is that some girl or guy looks around, and everybody else is getting some, and they're not, so the jealousy is that, and that that's the *kaona*. And I would disagree that that's the underlying meaning, and that's really presented pretty fairly. Writing a song about a jealous mountain would be kind of an odd thing. Using it as a metaphor or as an analogy for some jealous person who's doing this. So all the other mountains are getting mounted or *puus* are getting mounted by the mist, and it's a funny song. The real *kaona* to that—'cause Kawena Pukui says nobody can understand *kaona*. But I can understand this. I mean, this is pretty apparent. Anybody reading the liner notes can—

So that's not kaona.

So either Kawena is wrong, or that's not *kaona*. And Kawena is right. What she describes is, she says the *kaona* is really the story that launched that song. The *kaona* is what the poet knew. This is just a story about, you know, anybody will be jealous when they see everybody else is getting—

M-hm.

—what they want, and they're not getting it. The *kaona* in this song is what inspired that poet to write the song. He knew a girl who was in this setting, and her name was Lucy, and she da-da-da—

So that requires further research outside the—

It may—

—the song.

—never be known outside of the circle of the poet and those that are real close. And I really understand. I compose music. And mine have off times a literal meaning, and most of mine are rascal pieces and they're, da-da-da, and they have some sexual innuendos or what. And everybody gets those and they laugh. That's not the *kaona*. And I understand this, that, the *kaona* really is the night that happened, that made me think of this, that made me develop this. The *kaona* is the seed that made that piece come about. It was confusing for me for a long time. I teach a class on Hawaiian poetry, on the structures within and what not. So we're always trying to address this.

I have to think that Hawaiian poetry does not involve rhyming, 'cause almost everything would rhyme.

[chuckle]

Wouldn't it?

And that's why it doesn't involve it. Every word in the language ends in one of five vowels. So Hawaiians stepped away from rhyming, and will intentionally avoid it. And you've heard the term linked assonance.

I don't know that word.

Oh; oh, okay. It's kind of a fun thing, and it was recognized right away. The end of a line will match by sound to the beginning of the next line.

I see.

Linked assonance. So the assonant, the sound is linked. So a line that ends in *pua*, and the next line starts in *pua aku*. Okay. So this was recognized by ethnomusicologists and folks who were looking from the 1880s or so. So it's first mentioned, and then some of the really good work that's been done by formal ethnomusicologists. So it's called linked assonance, and that's its own skill. But once we started to look at poetry and Larry Kimura is who brought me into this. 'Cause he was kinda stumbling around and—but wait a minute, 'cause somebody without the language can see that. It ends in *pua*, it starts in *pua*. Well, what about one that ends in *pua* and starts with *mohala*? They no match, but they'll mean *opua* and *opuu*, one means flower, one means bud. And so by related meaning, but they don't sound the same anymore.

M-hm.

And then there's ones where the end of a line will end in *wela*, and the next line starts with *anu*. So it's in opposition.

Yeah.

So there's four or five different ways that you can do that same link.

Interesting.

But not by sound.

Now, is this an old form, or is this post-Western?

It shows up in really old poetry.

Oh, that's beautiful.

I mean, we can see there are links. This is held together, but there's things that we still can't quite identify, 'cause we can't grasp all the meanings of that image. So I mean, one of the oldest chants that we looked at that showed up in the newspapers, and it's talking about, it seems to be, the view of if you were on a canoe, on the Lanai side of Maui, and all of the peaks look like the fins of sharks moving through the water. Okay; an image that it's a little hard to distill today. I'm not on a canoe somewhere out there, so I know we're fumbling through. I'm still a student. I'm still working on it.

At this time, in 2009, Puakea Nogelmeier is busy teaching at the UH Manoa, and he's busy "generating abundance." "To generate abundance" is the English translation of *Hoolaupai*, the collaborative work- in-progress, digitizing thousands of pages from old Hawaiian language newspapers rich in history and cultural knowledge and can be found at nupepa.org. I'd like to thank Dr.

Puakea Nogelmeier—and you—for joining us on LONG STORY SHORT. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. *A Hui Hou Kakou*.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and *all* episodes of **Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox**, visit pbshawaii.org.

Video clip with production credits:

Who do you go to as *kupuna*?

Okay. Now, you going make me cry here. [chuckle] Because it's really, really hard today, to find people that I can ask the questions that come up for me. But I've had wonderful people in my life, so I'm happy for that. Actually, my playmate and my bud is Lolena Nicholas who was the first teacher on Oahu for the Punana Leo. So she's been with that. She comes from Niihau. So when I do have questions, oft times, I'll pose it to her. But she and I used to go to like Kamuela Kumukahi—was my foster father and he just became this powerhouse in my life. And him, I could just call out of the blue and go, [INDISTINCT].

Is that *Kuipo*'s father?

Yes; yeah. And she had introduced me to him, saying, Talk to my father in Hawaiian.

M-m.

And he had not spoken Hawaiian for fifty years. So I talked to him in Hawaiian, and he answered back in English. And I talked to him in Hawaiian, and he answered—but he understood everything I was saying.