

Native Hawaiian Values in Design and Manufacturing: A Case Study of Micah Kamohoali‘i

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Introduction: Cultural values have long guided Native Hawaiian practices until they were outlawed in the late 19th century by American colonizers and then were practiced in secret. The Hawaiian Renaissance in the 1970s saw a resurgence of the Hawaiian language and practices and included the emergence of Native Hawaiian fashion designers creating clothing from a cultural perspective. Today, Native Hawaiian designers are receiving international press, and adulations, and are shown on worldwide runways and fashion weeks. The purpose of this study is to examine how a Native Hawaiian designer employs cultural values in his design and manufacturing decisions.

Theory and Literature Review: Although there is ample research on traditional Hawaiian clothing (e.g., Mi-Young, 2008; Terao-Guiala, 2019) and clothing made in Hawai‘i but not ethnically Hawaiian such as the Hawaiian shirt (e.g., Morgado, 2003) there is little research on Native Hawaiian cultural values in fashionable clothing. Recent research, however, does demonstrate how Native Hawaiian consumers select Hawaiian shirts to demonstrate their identity and appreciation of Hawaiian values (Reilly, 2024). Values are culturally learned beliefs, and cultural products “embody aesthetic features and production techniques that are deeply enmeshed in artisans’ local traditions” (Littrell & Dickson, 1999, p. 4). Clothing items are commodities and Kopytoff (1986) argues that “commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a *certain kind of thing*” (p. 73; italics added for emphasis). Clothing can be considered a *certain kind of Hawaiian thing* when it is imbued with cultural values, including ideology, spirituality, and ethics through its aesthetic symbols and production processes (Kaiser & Green, 2021). Crane and Bovone (2006) offer a framework for the study of material culture by (1) analyzing the meaning-making process (symbolic values) of material culture, (2) the systems of cultural production [where “symbolic values are attributed to material culture through the collective activities of personnel with a wide range of skills” (p. 321)], and (3) analyses of communicating the symbolic values to consumers. For this paper, we analyze the symbolism, production, and dissemination of cultural values of clothing made by a Native Hawaiian designer.

Method: Case study methodology was used for this research. A case study is “an empirical inquiry which investigates a phenomenon in its real-life context” (Yin, 2009, p. 18) and provides for the researcher to use the data collection best suited for the study (Priya, 2021). An interview method using open-ended questions was selected because it allows for an open dialogue between the interviewer and the participant. Micah Kamohoali‘i was selected because of his international reputation as a designer of Native Hawaiian contemporary fashion and is the only Native

Hawaiian designer to showcase his collections at the “Big Four”: the fashion weeks of New York, London, Paris, and Milan. The interview was conducted in Kamohoali‘i’s home by the authors and lasted for 3½ hours. Questions included (1) what values do you hold sacred? And (2) how do you incorporate your values into your design/manufacturing? The interview was recorded and later transcribed by the second author. Data analysis included reviewing the transcript using a line-by-line approach and extrapolating themes. This method was approved by the authors’ Institutional Review Board.

Results: Four themes emerged: authenticity, education, responsibility, and sustainability.

Authenticity: Kamohoali‘i uses a Hawaiian proverb to guide his life: *i ka ‘ōlelo ke ola, i ka ‘ōlelo ka make*, which translates as “in the language there’s life and in the language there’s death.” He noted that it is more than saying what you mean, but “go all the way with it,” or when you do something you do it to the fullest extent possible. It relates to his clothing business in that each design “has to be meaningful...100% authentic or just don’t do it at all.” His family’s cultural art and history are represented in the textile prints he designs and therefore has to make his ‘ohana (family) proud because it will represent not only him but his family as a whole and bring shame if not done well. **Education:** Kamohoali‘i noted that authentic Hawaiian designs, such as those used in Hawaiian tattoos and symbols, have been diluted to a general Polynesian aesthetic and that contemporary Hawaiian clothing is oriented to the tourist market by way of incorporating pineapples, sunsets, coconut bras, grass huts, other stereotypical images of Hawai‘i: “It was a mix of everything and confusion.” He wanted to educate people on authentic Hawaiian designs and incorporated them into his clothing in order to “educate our own people on what is Hawaiian design.” **Responsibility.** Kamohoali‘i views education as his *kuleana*, or privilege and responsibility. “I would do it to make my people proud. I would do it to show the rest of the world that our fashion parallels the rest of the world’s fashion. And if not, our fashion supersedes their fashion because ours has story, connection, spirituality... everything’s tied into it...they’re like sacred garbs now because they have all of this on top of it.” He noted that showing in the fashion weeks of the world was not his end goal but does them “to lay down the foundations so people can build it on me, I guess. You know, open up the doors.” **Sustainability.** Kamohoali‘i incorporates sustainability through the concept of *aloha ‘āina*, or love for the land. Early in his career his “fashion was the land...cuz it was *kapa* [barkcloth made from local trees].” He used natural dyes, plants, and charcoals to make fabric and dyes. As his company grew, he put the designs from the *kapa* onto woven fabric. Although he does not continue to use natural dyes due to the limitations of mass manufacturing and keeping his clothing at a lower price point for his local customers, he does use the fallout from the fabric to create headbands, scrunchies, and stuffing for pillows. “I don’t waste it...I don’t want to be responsible, seeing my fabric somewhere choking out a turtle.”

Discussion: Findings align with prior research (Kaiser & Green, 2021; Reilly, 2024) that connects aesthetics to identity and values. However, whereas Reilly (2024) examined Native Hawaiian consumers’ identity and values in their selection of Hawaiian shirts, this research focuses on the designer’s perspective in creating contemporary clothing from a Native Hawaiian perspective. An example of his ethos is found in his *kiha* design, which is based on his family’s

kākau (tattoo), and represents female power; it comes with a card that educates the consumer on the meaning of the design.

Conclusion: This research extends the body of literature on Hawaiian clothing (e.g., Mi-Young, 2008; Terao-Guiala, 2019) but concerns contemporary fashion. Using Crane and Bovone's (2006) framework, Micah Kamohoali'i's method of design and manufacturing demonstrates meaning-making the use of specific colors and imagery, are produced with cultural values of sustainability as much as possible in a mass-manufacturing environment, and their symbolic value is communicated through the prints and hangtags. This analysis provides evidence for how authentic Hawaiian cultural values are embedded in contemporary clothing and manufacturing processes. Further study of other Native Hawaiian designers is warranted to achieve an overall picture. Fashion from a Hawaiian perspective illustrates how cultural values may continue to survive and may provide alternative frameworks to the global fashion system.

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