

# New Diseases in the Hawaiian Islands 1778-1854

ハワイ諸島の新たな病気

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## 抄録：

この論文では、ヨーロッパ人が最初に接触した時からハワイ諸島に蔓延した病気のいくつかを取り上げます。ハワイ諸島における外来の病気は、恐怖、苦しみ、人種差別、そしてハワイ先住民の場合は人口減少をもたらしました。梅毒や淋病、コレラ、天然痘、麻疹、ハンセン病などの性病は、ハワイ諸島の解体、そして最終的には植民地化に貢献しました。この研究は、18世紀後半から19世紀半ばにかけて、これらの病気がハワイ人にどのような影響を与えたかを明らかにするものです。

## Abstract：

This report examines some of the diseases which the swept over the Hawaiian Islands from the time of first European contact. Foreign disease in the Hawaiian archipelago brought fear, suffering, an illumination on racism, and in the case of the Native Hawaiians, depopulation. Venereal diseases such as syphilis and gonorrhea, cholera, smallpox, measles, and Hansen's disease contributed to the dismantling and ultimately the colonization of the Hawaiian Islands. This study sheds light on how these diseases affected Hawaiians from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

キーワード：ハワイ人、コロナウイルス、梅毒、淋病、コレラ、ハンセン病、麻疹、キャプテン・クック

**Keywords：**Hawaiians, Corona virus, syphilis, gonorrhea, cholera, Hansen's disease, measles, Captain Cook

## Introduction

One can remember the initial scare of the Corona virus, with the news of alarming numbers of stricken

people in Italy. A new virus that did not abate. It hit one country, then two, then a dozen, and inevitably what would become the entire globe. This may be the most simple and closest-to-heart analogy one might use to paint a backdrop which brings color to the angst Native Hawaiians must have felt throughout the better part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Several diseases were introduced to the Hawaiian Islands. Diseases from Europe, North America, South America, Russia and anywhere the drive for expansion and profit from western maritime powers cast their economically-driven, and often disease-carrying ships.

And too, it is questionable whether the millions of tourists which now visit the Hawaiian Islands year after year consider, much less, understand how the once isolated kingdom was set on a drastic and irreversible path after contact with Captain James Cook and his diseased crewmen. Many Americans may be aware of the role diseases played in the decimation of many Native American populations, but what of the impact of diseases introduced to the Hawaiian Islands in the latter part of 18<sup>th</sup> and whole of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? One might ask the common tourist, “Where are the Hawaiians today?”

What is clear to many though is how the Corona virus and the subsequent variants of the virus is impacting societies worldwide, particularly the measures spawned by the fear it has caused. Though not to compare pathologies of diseases which ravaged the Islands early on such as syphilis and gonorrhea with the Corona virus, the anxiety they cause has proven to be collective. Considering the limitations on ways to mitigate the diseases two centuries ago, the fear must have been amplified for Native Hawaiians. Corona virus mitigation in our modern population attempted to employ measures such as social distancing and the constant cleaning of common-use surfaces. Arguably they have helped to some degree. In the case of Hawaiians in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and 19<sup>th</sup> century, mitigation measures very well may have aided in the fall of Hawaiian rule.

## **Inevitable encounters**

The ‘age of discovery’ was in full swing and the Englishman Captain Cook was the most respected navigator in this time until his death in 1779. Hundreds of men were packed on Captain Cook’s two ships the Discovery and Resolution when they moored at Kealahou bay at the island of Hawaii in January of 1778. At sea for months, men were undoubtedly eager to have contact with the land and too women. Cook is often presented as a righteous and respected sea captain, but must have been very aware of the dangers diseased men presented to the Islanders. His attempts to restrict the contact between his men and the Native women is questionable. After this first contact in the Islands, Cook traveled to the Northwest coast of America to continue the search for a northwest passage. Upon his return, in November, he was stunned to find that venereal disease had spread to several of the Islands within those short few months.

“Cook’s introduction of syphilis, gonorrhea, and probably tuberculosis had a disastrous effect on the Hawaiian people, with repercussions rippling through generations” (Archer, 20) Two of the first diseases which had a devastating impact on the Native Hawaiian population were syphilis, gonorrhea. Both diseases

are spread primarily through sexual contact. And though diagnoses of these particular diseases in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century may have alternately been accurate, treating them was an entirely different matter. The consequence of this is that these diseases ran the full course of their pathologies without treatment. Syphilis can kill in its later stages, gonorrhea does not. What both diseases did do was increase the number of stillbirths, deaths of infants infected congenitally, and cast a lasting worry on Hawaiians, infertility. Both gonorrhea and syphilis inflicted lasting effects on the Hawaiian population and the Hawaiian elite were not immune, as the monarchy would struggle to produce heirs during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, in contrast to their cousins of the Polynesian Triangle, Hawaiians engaged in sex far more frequently with than their relatives. As Cook put it, “no women I ever met with were more ready to bestow their favors” (Archer, 50). Many Native Hawaiians, chiefs included, believed the foreigners possessed ‘mana’ evident by their ships, clothes, and various items. This, undoubtedly incentivized women to engage in sex, all the while increasing the transmission of diseases.

After Captain’s Cook’s death, on February 14<sup>th</sup> 1779, there was a span of just over seven years before the first series of European trading ships would come to the islands. Using the Hawaiian Islands as a stopover enroute to Asia in 1786, the circumnavigators, British George Dixon and American Nathaniel Portlock, were also welcomed by native Hawaiians at Kealahou Bay. The Natives were eager to trade and barter for the items they desired, many of which were of insignificant value to the traders. In turn, the seamen received pigs, and native fruit and vegetables. Sex was, of course, on barter and women filled their ships.

A French expedition also arrived at the island of Maui in 1786 with a physician, Claude-Nicolas Rollin, who made observations which surprised him. He made note of many of the island’s inhabitants displayed signs of advanced stage syphilis as well as gonorrhea. Notably, he observed children with the disease which could only have been congenital, strongly suggesting infection occurred when Captain Cook would have been there. Rollin also observed evidence of tuberculosis in pigs which was a mainstay of the Hawaiian diet. This did not bode well for the Island population. (Archer, 60)

By 1787, the North American fur trade was in full swing and it was inevitable that the number of foreign vessels to visit the islands would increase as these merchant ships made way for Asia and back. Another trader who reached the Islands that year was British trader James Colnett. Remaining in the Islands while waiting out the winter weather in 1787, he made note of the sex trade. At Molokai, he noted, “many women slept on board...” (Archer, 61) The same conditions were found at Oahu, Maui, and Kauai. Women were, it seemed, were all too eager to prostitute themselves. Whatever materials gains they may have left the ships with though ended up in the hands of their chiefs and pimps on shore. The syphilis left by Cook’s men several years earlier, came full circle as upon leaving Kauai, several of Colnett’s men also found themselves having been infected by women with venereal disease.

## **The Okuu**

The dictionary published by Lorrin Andrews, a missionary descendant, states that okuu came from the Hawaiian language. Okuu wale aku no i ka uhane, which translates to ‘dismissed freely their souls and died. This is in reference to manner in which many perished during this period to what is now believed to be Asiatic cholera. (Schmitt, 1970) This epidemic which ravaged Hawaii at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been described as having a variety of possible origins, time frames, and amount of deaths. There is no dispute, however, that this epidemic killed enough of Kamehameha I’s army to foil his invasion of Kaua’i. The first recorded mention of this comes from an English missionary Daniel Tyerman. In 1804 when visiting the Islands he observed Kamehameha I holding his army of eight thousand men at Oahu when a pestilence broke out among them, killing over two thirds of them. Again, in May of 1807, Isaac Iselin a Swiss philosopher traveling on an American trading ship, noted noticeable depopulation at Kealahou Bay by “some kind of epidemic or yellow fever that makes dreadful havoc among the natives”. (Archer, 113)

Of course, native Hawaiians too make reference to a great pestilence in the early 1800s. Elder students at the Lahainaluna School in Maui in 1835-6 said that “the majority of inhabitants were cut down by it” and “this sickness called, ‘kauokuu’ greatly diminished the population”. David Malo born in 1793, a Lahainaluna graduate, and one of the leading Hawaiian scholars of the time also mentions his remembering there being a pestilence until he was nine years old. (Schmitt, 1970) The Hawaiians had several different names for the disease which meant almost sudden death for its unfortunate victims. It was said that a man could catch the disease and die before he reached home. Before the turn of the century the Islands were witnessing widespread illness.

## **Measles**

Now thought of as a childhood disease with vaccines readily available, measles is an airborne disease which Hawaii found familiarity with all too soon. It struck in a tragic way when in the summer of 1824 the reigning king succumbed to the disease. In 1819 Kamehameha I died and the reigns of the kingdom passed to his first-born son, Liholiho, Kamehameha II. In November of 1823, Kamehameha II, his wife and half-sister, and some of their ten closest attendants set sail for England to make visit to his “friend” King George IV. Hawaiians susceptibility to diseases of foreign origin was a known risk whether at home or overseas. The temperamental king though, was determined to set forth on the nearly six-month journey and he would not see the Hawaiian islands again, nor would his wife Kamamalu. The Hawaiian entourage arrived unannounced in May of 1824, yet were greeted as dignitaries by a welcoming yet surprised the British establishment. The public was fascinated with the new royal guests. A number of excursions were detailed for the Hawaiian royalty, one of which was thought to be fatal. They were treated to puppet shows, met

with English dignitaries, and attended theatre. They also visited the Royal Military Asylum, an orphanage known to harbor diseases. (Shulman & Shulman, 2009) It is thought, Liliʻililo and Kāmāmalu contracted measles there. Kāmāmalu died July 8<sup>th</sup>, and Liliʻililo just 6 days later on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1824. They were buried London's Saint Martin in the Fields Church and later disinterred before their bodies were returned home. The remaining royal Hawaiian entourage, all contracted the disease but recovered. Measles is known to have reached the island of Hawaii in 1848. (Kamakau, 236) and from 1848 to 1849 the islands were ravaged by epidemics of measles, whooping cough, and influenza with an estimated 10,000 deaths combined. (Schmitt & Nordyke, 2001)

## **Exiled Natives**

The origin of Hansen's disease, otherwise known as leprosy in the Islands, is unknown but could have been introduced from a number of regions known to have the disease, including the Azores, Africa, Malaysia, or as far as Scandinavia. (Inglis, 2009) Hansen's disease attacks the nervous system and can result in deformities of the hands and face. It is thought to have been brought to the Islands as early as 1835 when an Hawaiian woman was rumored to have had it. The early missionaries made mention of the disease, but their medical assumptions in 1823 deemed them possible symptoms of a later stage of syphilis. Though Kāuīkeaouli, Kamehameha IV established a Board of Health in 1850, the disease was not officially noted until 1865. By that time, the spread of the disease throughout the Islands was worsening, causing alarm enough to what some would call an inhumane quarantine of afflicted persons. The forced isolation of a disproportionate number of Native Hawaiians to a small peninsula on the northern tip of the island of Molokai came with the enactment of the "Act to Prevent the Spread of Leprosy". This Act fell under the reign of Kamehameha V in 1865. This peninsula was surrounded by the ocean on three sides and a cliff on the fourth. It was, in effect, a natural prison. Thousands of Native Hawaiians suffered from this policy (Inglis, 2009).

Concern for the epidemic in the Hawaiian Islands came from around the world and attempts at a cure were not lacking. The disease was thought to have been highly contagious and this made foreign countries concerned. A majority of the positions held at the Board of Health were officed by Americans and the policies made were indicative of their colonialist mindset. (Silva & Fernandez 2009; Inglis, 2006) The 1850s was a decade which marked a boom for sugar growers, predominately white Americans, many of whom were descendants of the first missionaries. This third generation however had abandoned the religious zeal which tempered their grandparents and had by now focused their sights on profits from sugar production.

Prevailing thought at the time made quarantine seem necessary from both a medical viewpoint as well as a racist viewpoint of the whites, who held a majority membership on the Board of Health. An important factor to consider is the difference in perspectives between the Natives Hawaiians and the haoles.

Hawaiians did not view the deformities caused by the disease as hideous or ugly like the whites. Hawaiians would as soon marry a person with the disease as without. Hawaiians were vocally willing and ready to care for their own, but the prevailing thought was that quarantine was the only sure method of mitigation. We know now that not to be the case.

Various remedies were tried, including Hoang Nan tree bark tree mixed with oils applied topically as well as internally. Though they offered some relief, they were not a cure. There were even experimental treatments tried on an inmate sentenced to life. The inmate agreed and eventually succumbed to the disease. People were forcibly removed from their homes, not to see loved ones again. Any person suspected of having the disease was gathered by the police. Not surprisingly, there are cases where whites were not arrested, but simply ignored by the authorities. (Noenoe & Pualeilani, 2006) The missionaries created their own strong narrative as to why Hawaiians disproportionately suffered from disease. In their eyes, Hawaiians were being punished by God for not living 'clean' lives. This narrative of blaming the victim persisted until the overthrow of the Kingdom in 1893. It is known that tuberculosis deaths greatly outnumbered those of Hansen's disease at the time of the initial quarantine, which is further evidence that the forced isolation was in line with haole, white foreigners, discourses on disease and depopulation. "The myth of the leprosy epidemic legitimized the Hawaiian loss of resources and sovereignty and naturalized a shift in power". (Herman, 2001)

In addition to the so-called leprosy epidemic, the Islands were also hit with a smallpox scourge. Brought from an American merchant ship from San Francisco, California in February of 1853. It was initially quarantined for over a month only to have cases appear again that March. This time the highly infectious disease did not abate and by January of 1854 deaths were in the thousands. Today, a burial site remains in Honolulu where thousands of victims were laid to rest.

## Conclusion

Hawaiians had no immunity to the diseases brought to the Islands. They suffered through venereal diseases beginning in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the 19th century. Cholera struck the Islands in 1805, as well as unidentified respiratory diseases. The outbreaks and epidemics that hovered through the Islands caused irreversible damage to the Native Hawaiian populace with a conservative estimate of 400,000 people at the time of Captain Cook's first landing. In just under 50 years, the population had been reduced to 188,000. (Noyes, 19). Fearing one's own death as well as the death of loved ones, must have been taken an enormous psychological toll on the Native populace. Though fear and suffering are unfortunate realities of an epidemic which has the potential to kill a multitude of people in a short period of time, it was the depopulation, racism, and mindset of white Americans steeped in manifest destiny, which were the blows that allowed the colonization to take hold. Without disease and its impact on Native Hawaiians, what might have been, is a question one can only serve with speculative hindsight.

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