

## NĀ INOA HAWAI'I

Hawaiian personal names share many features with place names in Hawaiian culture and language since personal names require specific and distant marking from ordinary words in sentences. Personal names often incorporate ancestral place names and contain references to family history. Without a knowledge of Hawaiian language, remaining within the traditional concept of word power, poetic Hawaiian names cannot be understood or properly pronounced, thus diminishing the power of the names and the person. Compared to Hawaiian culture, American culture puts small emphasis on names. In fact, many Americans treat their own names with little respect, abbreviating them until they seem to lack dignity (for example, Deborah-Debby-Deb, Randall-Randy-Ran). In a Western sense, reaction to Hawaiian names has been to develop a folk myth that Hawaiian names are poetic, while the beauty of "the-large-storage-gourd" (Kaipunui) or "the-grave-of-the-chief"(Kaheanaali'i) is not appreciated because of the lack of understanding of the poetic images, history, and traditions specific to the Hawaiian people.

The result of the difference between Western and Hawaiian treatment of names has been generally one-sided, that is, negative toward the Hawaiian. Hawaiian names are often absurd in their spoken form by English speakers, even in the face of Hawaiian protest, as has been the case with the media's usage of "Kam" for Kamehameha (Kam School, Kam Drive-in, Kam Shopping Center) and Kap for Kapi'olani (Kap Hospital, Kap Boulevard). This is unfortunate, since English speakers can pronounce Hawaiian words with minimum effort, as close approximations of all the sounds of Hawaiian are found in English, including the 'okina or glottal stop. Abusive pronunciation of Hawaiian names is humiliating from any viewpoint, but from a cultural viewpoint, it weakens the name carrier due to the negative influence on the power of the word.

Ironically, some younger Hawaiians deliberately mispronounce or allow mispronunciation of their own personal, family, and place names in order to avoid embarrassing English speakers. From a traditional viewpoint, this attitude is most destructive. Western ignorance of Hawaiian culture is another problem, since English speakers cannot understand the culture without the language and yet inquire into the "meaning" of a name.

In the early days of Hawai'i, personal possessions were few, but highly valued. One's *inoa* (name) was both owned property and a kind of force in its own right. Once spoken, an inoa took on an existence invisible, intangible, but real. An inoa could be an agent capable of generating mystic elements to help or hurt the bearer. The more an inoa was spoken, the stronger this name-force and its potential to benefit or harm was manifested.

The inoa for a new child was chosen after thought, family consultation, and ideally, with the supernatural advice of a family *'aumakua* (ancestor god). An inoa became a living entity and that these syllables which identified a person could influence health and happiness in one's life.

**Inoa pō**, literally night name or name in darkness, was a name indicated or pronounced in a dream by a family member and usually chosen by a family *'aumakua*. Such a name must be used. To refuse to give the name will result in either a crippled body or death for the child. Once a person is given an inoa pō, the name becomes that individual's exclusive possession. No one else should use it without permission of the original bearer of the name. A child with an inoa pō was protected from harm and trouble because the *'aumakua* guarded over his or her own namesake.

When a person hands his name down to a family descendant, the name becomes an **inoa kupuna** or ancestral name. The name handed down might have been originally an inoa pō or other mystically suggested name. This sort of inoa identified and linked the child with his or her ancestors. It was up to the owner of the name to make sure he did not hand down any kapu or harmful influences attached to the name.

Names to commemorate events were known to Hawaiians as **inoa ho'omana'o**. These names recalled great events of note which may have been of a happy as well as an unfortunate time or may include the deeds of an ali'i.

An **inoa kūamuamu** was the reviling or cursing name given to perpetuate harm or insult directed at a family or ali'i. This had the quality of a commemorative name or inoa ho'omana'o, but in a negative context. The conception and feeling behind the inoa kūamuamu is not easily understood. It is a memorial or a living sign of contempt for anyone who spoke rudely or unkindly and had offended the family or an ali'i. When someone living close by had hurt or insulted another family and that insulted family had a baby, the child was given a name that referred to the offense. Each time the youngster was called, the neighbor heard a reminder of his or her misdeed.

---

**Sources:**

Kimura, Larry. 1984 "Native Hawaiian Culture." *Native Hawaiian Study Commission Report*.

Nānā I Ke Kumu v.1 (Excerpts) Pūku'i, Haertig and Lee, Queen Lili'uokalani Children's Center, Honolulu, 1983.

### **What's In My Name?**

**Assignment:** Compose an essay regarding your inoa. Include information by interviewing your parents (or whoever may have information) concerning the background of your inoa. Incorporate answers to the following questions: Why was your inoa selected? What is the meaning of each of your inoa and how do you exemplify them? Is there any historic information known? Do you have any nicknames and how did you get them?

Create an interesting and well written **one page typed** essay due on \_\_\_\_\_.