Setting the Record Straight: 
South Asian Diasporic Invisibility in the Sandwich Islands

Seri I. Luangphinitth

Abstract

This paper explores whether invisibility is always an imposition for an immigrant community. We assume that diasporas are celebrated as ‘dynamic forms [that] represent a threat to fixed binaries [. . . ] a third space of possibility.’ But what if obscurity is the preferred state of being? I begin by scrutinizing the lack of development of a coherent ‘Indian’ community despite documents attesting to their presence by the early 1800s. Pre-annexation records reveal how Indians infiltrated the highest levels of political confidence and dissolved into the same ‘melting pot’ that encouraged the Chinese to cling to more visible displays of cultural difference. While in-migration of Indians to Fiji led to racial bifurcation that lingers to this day, the same did not happen in Hawai‘i, where caste prohibitions against inter-racial marriages and the loss of names did not impede assimilation. Rather, the ability of Indians to insert themselves into the Native Hawaiian landscape provides evidence that diasporas don’t always maintain ties to motherlands and that cultural consciousness may be better explained as opportunities to engage and/or escape colonial racial mandates.

Key Words: Immigration, Assimilation, Indian Identity, Lascars

Introduction

Edward Said noted that ‘Throughout the exchange between Europeans and their “others” that began systematically half a millennium ago, the idea that has scarcely varied is that there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them,’ each quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident.’ However ubiquitous Said’s Orientalism has proven for scholars, this paper offers a different analysis of racial identity and difference. Unlike the west, which looked to physical markers to note demarcate itself and others, Hawai‘i of old had just two terms: malihini (to denote foreigners) and kama‘āina (literally translated as “land child”) to identify those ‘native born,’ those who could claim deep familiarity with a place, thus the secondary meaning of the latter term: ‘Kama‘āina can also be used thus: Ua kama‘āina au i kō lākou ‘ano, I am accustomed to their ways.’ This alternative method of denoting difference lies at the crux of understanding 19th century immigrant identity in the Islands, which quickly transformed itself into a European-fashioned monarchy in the face of growing trans-pacific, multinational trade and the introduction of capitalism. Historical documents shows that something complex was happening with a group of individuals called lātā or lascars – the South Asians who came to Hawai‘i via merchant and cargo ships – whose experience did not follow that of their
contemporaries, such as the Chinese who quickly became the target of suspicion of White expatriates, arguing that ‘The presence of these hordes of Chinese males among a people of the lax ideas of the Hawaiians, means widespread demoralization of native females and this in turn means the decay and death of the native race.’ Curiously, Indian elsewhere in the Pacific in places like Fiji faced divisions between themselves and the indigenous population, a division that has remained entrenched until this day. The fact that Hawai’i lascars have largely escaped attention spurs the question as to how and why this group chose to stay invisible – an option not available to other groups.

Difficulties arise in tracing back through a history that it itself mired in the colonial binary, reflected in the seminal work of Ralph Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom* (1938), which begins with the following introduction to the Chapter, ‘The Coming of the Foreigners’:

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century the Hawaiian islands were visited by representatives of a strange foreign culture, that of Europe and America. The first such group was a British exploring expedition, and it was followed by other similar expeditions and by traders. [. . .] In Hawaii, as in other parts of the world, the main carriers of the foreign culture were traders and missionaries (though in Hawaii the missionaries came considerably later than the traders), supplemented by the official representatives of foreign governments, such as naval officers and consular agents. Our first task will be to give some account of early phases of this foreign invasion of the Hawaiian islands.

Here, the ‘history’ of migration starts with ‘the coming of the white man.’ What this has done is perpetuate a misconstruing of Asian immigration – namely that South Indians, who were otherwise becoming quite prolific in the Pacific, sailing aboard many British merchant ships, are historically seen as being largely absent from Polynesia. Ahmed Ali specifically speaks of South Asians in present tense only: ‘There are Indians in Hawaii, but we have been unable to have a study of them undertaken. Their numbers are probably only a few hundred, predominantly business and professional people and fully integrated into the American life style.’

Nevertheless, early records paint a very different picture. One of the earliest observations of South Asians was made by Sereno Edwards Bishop, missionary and newspaper editor, who reported in 1853 that ‘There were no Chinese in the country except a few traders. There were, too, a few Lascars scattered about, but they were very few. They had come as sailors, and had remained in the islands. There were also a few Cape Verde Portuguese, who had come here in whalers and liked the place.’ Of the three transient populations that Bishop espied, it is the ‘lascars’ who found their way into close proximity of the royalty, as documented in three noteworthy references made by early chroniclers, John Papa ʻĪʻī and Samuel Mānaiaakalani Kamakau.

John Papa ʻĪʻī was a member of the Privy Council and the House of Nobles (1841-1854). He noted in recollections written for the Hawaiian language newspaper *Ka Nupepa Kuokoa* that there was a time when the King took
prodigious interest in sennit and that ‘he laka, o Lani ka inoa, a e noho pū ana oia me Kamehameha, a me he mea la, o kana loina hana paha ia: a lascar, whose name was Lani, also lived with Kamehameha and it was undoubtedly his customary work.’ Given the reference to Kamehameha I’s residence at Waikīkī, this person would have been employed by the King around 1795-1796, the period that saw the successful unification of the majority of the Islands under a single monarch.

A similar statesman and historian, Samual Māniakalani Kamakau, refers to another lascar being part of a later royal household:

'O ke kūkini kekahī hana makemakeloa a ke keiki ali‘i, a ua māmā loa 'o ia i ke kūkini. I kekahī lá na‘e, e pā‘ani pū ana nō ua keiki ali‘i nei me kamali‘i, akā, makemake ihola kamali‘i nui, i 'oi a'e ko lākou ki‘eki‘e ma luna o ke keiki ali‘i, e kūkini. ‘O kekahī keiki nui loa na‘e, ‘o Kahoa ka inoa, he 'ano lātā kona 'ano, lawe akula 'o ia i ka pahu hae hopu a kahi mamao, kūkula ihola; aia nō hoi 'o ke keiki māmā a hopu mua i ka lepa hopu, 'o ia ke keiki māmā, a e lilo nui iā ia kaawai ai i pili 'ia. Ua mana'o ho'i 'o Kahoa, 'a'ole lā e hiki mua ana ke keiki ali‘i a hopu mua i ka lepa, no la'ila, hamo ihola 'o Kahoa i ka pahu hae hopu i ka lepo kanaka; a i ke kūkini ‘ana mai o kamali‘i, ua like ka māmā o nā keiki a pau, akā, ua pakele loa aku ka māmā o ke keiki ali‘i, a 'o ia nō ho'i ke mea hopu mua i ka lepa, a i ka huki ‘ana, ua paumā‘ele nā lima o ke keiki ali‘i.

Eia ho'i ka mea kupanaha i ua keiki ali‘i nei, i ka paumā‘ele ‘ana o ka lima o ke keiki ali‘i, 'ike maila nā kamali‘i a ki‘i maila e holoi, me ka ‘ōlelo mai ho‘i iā Kahoa, ‘E pau ana ‘oe i ke puhi ‘ia i ke ahi; ua paumā‘ele ka lima o ke ali‘i iā ‘oe, e ho'ī na mākou e ‘ōlelo iā Kapololū.” ‘Ōlelo akula ke keiki ali‘i, “Mai ‘ōlelo kekahī o ‘oukou i ku‘u po‘e kahu, o make auane‘i [i] ku‘u wahi kahu; a 'o ka mea na’e nāna e ‘ōlelo, ‘a‘ole ‘o ia e ‘ai pū me a‘u, a ‘a‘ole nō ho‘i e loa‘a kaawai i ia keiki, ‘a‘ole nō ho‘i ‘o ia e lilo i hoa pā‘ani no‘u.”

The basic text revolves around an older child, a lascar by the name of Kahoa, who places lepo kanaka, or ‘human filth,’ on a stick that marks the goal of a race between the young Kamehameha III and his other playmates. Because the King is swift, his hands are defiled, prompting the rage of the other children who threaten Kahoa with death by fire. However, the young King intervenes and says anyone who harms his ku‘u po‘e kahu or ‘beloved attendant’ would never be allowed to play with him again nor receive any favours in the future. Kamakau also refers to another lascar by the name of Kinikona, he lātā o ka mō‘ī or ‘lascar of the king,’ who set the stage for an older Kamehameha III to visit the sacred Pit of Pele (or Halema‘uma‘u Crater on the Big Island). The first event dates to the late 1810s; the second to around 1828.

Comparing these three references, it is clear that ‘lascars’ had integrated into Hawaiian society in a manner that was not possible for other incoming groups. No other foreigners, save Anglo-Europeans or Anglo-Americans, are mentioned as having such ties with the royal inner circle. In these early records, lascars are
neither *malihini* nor were they *kamaʻāina* – a strange social space given the increasing rancour of discussions regarding the state of the kingdom, which by the 1840s had evolved into a formal legislature and a cabinet that replaced the traditional council of chiefs.  

Because ‘lascar’ does not only refer to people from what we now know as India, it may have been easier to occupy an ambiguous space; Michael Fisher notes that ‘Only rarely can we discover the origins of the lascars in a crew. Many served under Europeanized or culturally ambiguous names.’ Nevertheless, of the twenty-one major ports recruiting lascars, fifteen are found on the Indian subcontinent; David A. Chappell notes that ‘By 1855, the British merchant marine service employed about “12,000 lascars,” half of whom arrived in England every year. Of those, 60 percent were Indians, 20 percent Malays, 10 percent Chinese, and 10 percent African or Arabian.’ Given these larger numbers of South Asians in the service of the British, it is not surprising that immigration documents of the Hawaiian Kingdom recorded a number of individuals hailing from the Indian subcontinent and who became subjects of the Hawaiian Kingdom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Native of</th>
<th>Year of Naturalization</th>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Day</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ali, Sheik</td>
<td>Bombay</td>
<td>1848</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John, Mea</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>1848</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denne</td>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>1848</td>
<td>October</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alade</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>1849</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>Bauxer</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>1849</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>Dena</td>
<td>Bombay</td>
<td>1849</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheadeen, Sheik</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>1850</td>
<td>October</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdullah</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>1852</td>
<td>July</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscary, John</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>1855</td>
<td>March</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antone, David</td>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>1855</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delong, Antone</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>1855</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alle, I. Issop</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>1856</td>
<td>December</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mamaki</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>1858</td>
<td>March</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The names indicate that the South Asian migrants coming into the Islands were a mix of different religions – at least both Christian and Muslim. Much more curious is how one of the names appears Hawaiian-ized: ‘Mamaki’ refers to a type of herbal shrub. And this brings us back to the earlier references made by ‘Ī‘ī and Kamakau: ‘Lani,’ ‘Kahoa,’ and ‘Kinikona’ are Hawaiian words, which renders their actual ethnic and national origins inscrutable. No other references to these
individuals can be found. Sadly, record-keeping was spotty during the time of the monarchy; many records that were kept were actually destroyed upon Annexation.

Nevertheless, a search of digitized newspapers shows that of the twelve listed above, several married within days if not months of their arrival:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Wife</th>
<th>Date of Marriage</th>
<th>Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ali, Sheik</td>
<td>Kaaea</td>
<td>March 3, 1852</td>
<td>Honolulu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mamaki</td>
<td>Keaka</td>
<td>March 19, 1858</td>
<td>Honolulu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdullah</td>
<td>Illia</td>
<td>July 15, 1852</td>
<td>Honolulu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Issop Alle</td>
<td>Kealiimioi</td>
<td>December 26, 1856</td>
<td>Honolulu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And their stories continue in discontinuous ways. Alle and Kealiimioi divorced in September of 1860 – he was accused of *pepehi pinepine* or ‘[wife] beating.’ Mamaki of India become the executor of his deceased wife’s estate in Waikīkī in 1859. And Ali, ‘a Lascar, and native of Tellicherry, coast of Malabar, Hindoostan, aged 66’ had his obituary printed in 1863. Some of the last direct references to Indians can be found in reports of the O‘ahu Insane Asylum. In 1882, F. B. Hutchinson reported that since 1880, 51 patients were admitted, one of ‘Bengalese’ (Bengali) origins who was supposedly ‘well.’ 1884, Dr. M. Hagan, the Physician assigned to the Insane Asylum, reported two East Indian males and a separate male Lascar under his care. In 1888, Superintendent S. G. Tucker writes of one East Indian male among the patients, who apparently had been there since 1886. Whether these patients hailed from the original list of arrivals is unknown as no records for these individuals survived.

More important is the continental American perception of Hawai‘i as a welcoming place for scores of East Indian migrants. In 1909, the *Dawson Daily News* carried the article ‘PLACE FOR HINDOOS: STATEMENT THAT HAWAII ISLAND WOULD WELCOME SHEIKS,’ which, tellingly, came on the heels of another article noting ‘The provincial government [of Ontario, Canada] has just launched a policy for relieving the province of the burden of undesirable immigrants who find their way to the asylums.’ Others saw the Islands as providing the gateway for a literal flood of East Indians. *The Coast Seamen’s Journal* in 1915 reported that the exclusion laws of the United States should be amended at once so as to include Hindus, Lascars and other Asiatics within its provisions, says A. Caminetti, Commissioner-General of Immigration [. . .]. He says Hawaii is being made the stepping-stone of immigration to the United States and that unless prompt action is taken, Asiatics will avail themselves of an opportunity now barred to the Japanese and the Chinese.
And lastly, other immigrant perspectives also reflect the same belief that was expressed in newspapers of the time. Henry Kiyama’s manga features an episode called ‘Japanese Immigrants Arriving via Hawaii,’ and an image of turbaned passengers coming off a boat from Honolulu, with the main character thinking, ‘And those bearded fellas must be Hindoos! They’re prob’ly all idealists and can’t live on ideals, so they’ve come all the way here to make a living.’

The Angel Island profile of Dalip Singh Samra – a Punjabi who came to Hawai‘i in 1910 and worked the sugar fields two months to make enough money to reach American soil – poses the probability that many South Asians sojourned in the Islands as part of a longer journey. But for those who didn’t leave, their collective fragments pose a challenge to the more popular representation of Indian Pacific immigration. Because the experience of lascars and free ‘Hindoos’ fall outside of what Robin Cohen calls ‘colonial labour regimes,’ the trajectories of Hawai‘i’s East Indians did not fall susceptible to the politics of indenture that often witnessed diasporic Indian communities entering into ‘countries where a substantial indigenous population survived, with self-definitions of nationality and peoplehood,’ which came into direct conflict with the emergence of Indian (Congress-led) nationalism, objections to indenture, and ‘the anti-colonial movements in India [. . . that] demanded total affirmation of loyalty to the local state.’ So unlike Fiji where ‘victim’ and ‘victimizer’ became simultaneous labels for the Indians there who have faced repeated bouts of repudiation, the Indians of Hawai‘i represent an alternative model for understanding Indian-ness – one that didn’t feel compelled to look to the motherland for inspiration, comfort, or
strength, one that escaped *arkathis* and *kalapani* by embracing new identities that helped them melt into the ‘native’ landscape and fall off the pages of history.\textsuperscript{27}

As such, the more individualized choices of name changing, infiltrating the inner circles of kings, intermarrying, and even going ‘a little mad’ for the ‘lascars’ and South Asians of pre-1900 Hawai‘i underscore how even at a time when political crises were encouraging rifts between natives and foreigners, when the very nation was subject to traumatic territorialization and eventual incorporation by the United States, the ‘real lives’ of these men represent what Amitava Kumar calls ‘a departure from any stagnant point of being. In the diaspora, especially, culture and lives can, and often do, find new undiscovered forms.’\textsuperscript{28}

**Notes**

9. Ibid., 68.
11. Ibid., 43. The story originally appeared in *Ka Nupepa Kuokoa* on June 13, 1868.
12. In 1845, *The Friend* published a translation of a petition to Kamehameha III that reads: ‘If it is proper for foreigners to become Chiefs, and the greater part of the wealth of the nation is to become theirs; it is proper for foreigners to take the oath of allegiance under them (i.e. under foreigners) and let the nation become a nation of foreigners. But if this nation is ours, what good can result from filling the land with foreigners? Let us consider, let the land pass entirely into the hand of foreigners.’ The article, ‘Concerning Foreigners Taking the Oath of Allegiance,’ can be found on page 119.


See Fig. 1 from Michael H. Fisher, ‘Working the Seas: Indian maritime Labourers in India, Britain, and in Between, 1600-1857,’ 39.

‘Olelo Hoolaha,’ *Ka Hae Hawaii*, 22 August 1860, 87, [http://nupepa.org/gsdl2.5/cgi-bin/nupepa?e=d-0nupepa--00-0-0--010-TX--4--alle---text---0-0l--1en-Zz-1---20-about-%5balle%5d%3aTX--0013alle-1-0000utfZz-8-00&a=d&cl=CL1.7.5&d=HASH012e12a67dad585f9b82281b3](http://nupepa.org/gsdl2.5/cgi-bin/nupepa?e=d-0nupepa--00-0-0--010-TX--4--alle---text---0-0l--1en-Zz-1---20-about-%5balle%5d%3aTX--0013alle-1-0000utfZz-8-00&a=d&cl=CL1.7.5&d=HASH012e12a67dad585f9b82281b3).

‘Olelo Hoolaha,’ *Ka Hae Hawaii*, July 13, 1859, 60, [http://nupepa.org/gsdl2.5/cgi-bin/nupepa?e=q-0nupepa--00-0-0--010-TX--4--keaka+waikiki+mamaki---text---0-0l--1en-Zz-1---20-about-%5bkeaka+waikiki+mamaki%5d%3aTX--0013keaka+waikiki+mamaki-1-0000utfZz-8-00&a=d&c=nupepa&cl=search&d=HASH01ad7a6280a229cbb15be022.4](http://nupepa.org/gsdl2.5/cgi-bin/nupepa?e=q-0nupepa--00-0-0--010-TX--4--keaka+waikiki+mamaki---text---0-0l--1en-Zz-1---20-about-%5bkeaka+waikiki+mamaki%5d%3aTX--0013keaka+waikiki+mamaki-1-0000utfZz-8-00&a=d&c=nupepa&cl=search&d=HASH01ad7a6280a229cbb15be022.4).

‘Died,’ *The Friend*, April 1863, 32.

Board of Health Report for the Biennial Period Ending March 31st, 1882, 82-83.

M. Hagan, ‘Report of the Insane Asylum,’ *Biennial Report of the Minister of the Interior to the Legislative Assembly of 1884*, 42. It is unclear why the term ‘Lascar’ is used here as East Indians and Malays were reported in different categories.


‘Arkathi’ refers to the unscrupulous recruiters involved in large-scale indenture in Fiji; ‘kalapani’ refers to the loss of ‘caste’ upon leaving India. Both are artistically discussed vis-à-vis the concept of banishment and exile (as in the story of Rama) in Sudesh Mishra’s *Diaspora and the Difficult Art of Dying* (Dunedin: Otago Press, 2002), 73-78.


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‘Olelo Hoolaha.’ *Ka Hae Hawaii*, 13 July 1859, 60.

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‘Olelo Hoolaha.’ *Ka Hae Hawaii*, 22 August 1860. 87.

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