

Your Opinion, Linguists?

Kameha returned from a 30 minute swim in the cool Punaluu Bay near Mauna Kea, the volcanic colossus on O'ahu. He placed his towel at the base of a palm tree and dozed in the afternoon sun at his favorite spot on the beach. It was his afternoon off from his job as a linguistic teacher at the University of Hawaii. He sat not far from the shallow tidal water where the sea turtles liked to nest.

When Kameha awakened, he was delighted to see four green sea turtles in the clear, rock-strewn tidal water. He smiled as he thought of Kauila, the turtle of the Hawaiian legend, empowered to change to human form and play with the children along the shoreline and keep watch over them. The sea turtle was believed to save the children who had ventured too far out in the ocean, giving them rides back to shore on his back.

He watched one of the four green sea turtles nose a clear plastic case toward the black sand beach. Kameha walked to the edge of the rocks to retrieve it from the shallow water. There were illegible marks on the outside of a zipped case. Several papers were inside, one page had columns of words partially soaked with seawater. Debris from a plane or dropped off a boat? This stuff needs to dry before I try to read it. The case was battered and had probably spent some time in the ocean. He set it beside him, relaxing again until the setting sun cast an orange and pink hue on the smooth water of the bay. He took the case when he rose to leave.

Once home, Kameha found the contents ruined, except for one sheet of heavier paper which lay drying on his kitchen table. Several countries were listed in one column and two other columns were headed by 'obstacle' and 'goal.' An assessment of countries for what purpose and for whom? The United States had 'Indifference' in the obstacle column and 'Love' in the goal

column. Obstacle to what? Is this a geopolitical lesson? He knew this would need to go to the wisest person he knew on the island—Dr. Lailamolaha Lan.

Lailamolaha was a native of Oceana and he was one of her former Oceana history students—ten years ago— but now they were colleagues. Besides being a native kahuna, she was held in high esteem at the university, a professor of history and astronomy. Kameha knew her wisdom included a myriad of religious realities, various interpretations of spiritual, mythological and magical meanings. She had described to her students how, as a young woman, she sailed by the wind and sun by day and the stars and ocean currents at night— the North star in summer and the Orion Constellation in winter—all over the Hawaiian archipelago and beyond. She had sailed with her tribe to the more southern islands, all the way to coasts of Australia, New Zealand, and Easter Island. This inspired Kameha to become a linguist and preserve the many languages of the Polynesian culture.

Today she was dressed in a bright floral dress. A yellow plumeria flower adorned her long gray hair. There were large windows in her third-floor office with a distant view of the sea. Colorful watercolor paintings were on the walls between bookcases and framed certificates and photographs.

“Aloha, Kameha! Come in. I’ve just come back from the observatory. How many months has it been? Will you share a cup of tea with me?”

“Aloha. Yes, thank you.” He sat, taking a teacup and sitting. “How goes your research at the observatory?”

“At Mauna Kea for several days—measurements of infrared radiation from the stars. Have you been well? Lailamolaha said. The lines and wrinkles of eight decades of life experience were etched in her tanned face.

Kameha briefly brought her up to date on his teaching and research. Then he went to the topic of finding the plastic case on the beach, saying a turtle had pushed it to the shore, and showed her the paper that was inside the case.. “What do you think of this?”

Country	Obstacle	Goal
Middle East	War	Peace
N. Korea	Belligerence	Restraint
South America	Corruption	Trust
United States	Indifference	Love
Russia	Oppression	Freedom
Europe	Dread	Courage
India	Despair	Hope
China	Control	Autonomy
Canada	Doubt	Faith
Africa	Animosity	Grace
Australia	Isolation	Connection

Lailamolaha pondered the note. “Well, very interesting! Except Oceania is not on here. Maybe the message pushed in by the turtle is connecting you with something important, not just for you, but others, too.”

“What?”

“It connects cultures—and appropriate it was a turtle, a well-known symbol to all.”

Lailamolaha smiled. “Someone made an assessment of their view of the current state of a country, and a utopian goal for each. Does it worry you somewhat?” Lailamolaha could see Kameha was captivated by what could be a piece of trash. But she grew more analytical and serious to reflect his concern.

“Well, where could this have come from?”

“Are you thinking it was from someone around here? Certainly, it’s possible..” Laila answered her own question. “Just speculating, Kameha., with the variety of countries on the note

and its tone, political oppression stands out. What's your view of the goals described here?" She smoothed out the paper on the table.

"I think some of the countries have their own ideologies about who they want to be, even if the governments end up oppressing or exploiting some of their populations."

"So the domination of a dictator is right for some groups of people?"

"Well, I wouldn't want to live in one. People should be equal in the social system they live in, but free to be unequal if they want to be. I guess that might not work with an authoritarian leader."

"No government is perfect, but, I envision a government of social justice that respects others' culture in peaceful coexistence."

"And freedom from political tyranny?"

"Yes, of course. The most important kind of freedom. You know what happened to our ancestors by the European and American exploiters. They should have been merely visitors, but they perpetuated the islanders dependence that was in the long run belittling and derogatory of our culture and language."

"They saw our people as inferior, barbaric savages," Kameha said.

"I'll grant that their conquest was ambiguous and not without improvement in some ways, but Pacific Islanders of Oceania have been at the mercy of global manipulators for two hundred years."

"Do you see an attempt at manipulation in the reading of this note?" Kameha asked. "It doesn't seem to have one particular authority behind it."

"No. In fact, it suggests the potential for alternatives to central powers who now oppress people in a variety of countries. I like the message, but it reflects my Western bias, perhaps."

She got some more tea for them both and Kameha held up his cup as she poured. “All the countries have some kind of problem, but the injustice that stands out the most to me is the several countries dominated by dictators. Yes. It seems the world could heed the message of the turtle.”

Lailalomeha laughed. “But, fundamentally, it’s about what is significant for you in the note, isn’t it? Why don’t you share it with your students? It would be a good critical thinking exercise for them.”

“Good idea. They have a fresh perspective on language.”

Kameha’s long strides covered the University of Hawaii’s campus on his way to his class. An early morning mist was rising from the well-tended grass and the April sun popped out of the fog over a mountain. He passed a ten foot sago palm tree with its long feathered-shaped leaves by the steps to the academic building.

Kameha began his lecture in linguistics on the spread of language by Polynesian wayfarers, summarizing with the reciprocity that he believed operates among the islanders. “The ancient Polynesian language connects the islands, and there are social and ethnic differences that each island has with its unique language treasures. It was the social centrality of reciprocity among the people of the islands that made the spread of these languages possible. Reciprocity in trade, healing methods, sailing skills, survival in tropical storms, procedures in forming council and tribal leadership and family customs..”

“I’d like to help with the data collection for your research,” said John, an aspiring PhD student. “I know you are looking at preserving the diversity of the languages, but that concept of reciprocity must have helped preserves an island’s cultural expression and freedom.”

“True. And sure, you could learn about the deeper dimensions of their speech and culture as I collect data like the art, tools, and interpersonal interactions. Yes, you could, Wiley,” Kameha said.

Class time was almost over when Kameha said, “Who is going to the Oceania Linguistic Conference in Australia in a few weeks?”

Five students raised their hands.

Susan said, “We have a poster about news reporting of current events in several different languages. It’s mainly from the viewpoint of the politicians of governments, less about humanitarian crises.”

“What’s the question you’re studying?”

““What’s the difference in the reporting of the same event across countries.’ We want to better understand the culture and context of which the language is a part “

“Sounds good” Kameha said.

“The truth really jumps around, though. Raw information often isn’t sorted out in terms of its facts. It’s as if the media indulges in the trivial to tolerate the tragic,” Wiley said.

“What do you mean, Wiley?”

“There’s local preferences for what to report. There’s obvious government control in countries like China, North Korea, Russia. In some countries like ours, it’s Hollywood gossip and sports stars. Reporting on the millions of starving people in Africa, not so much.”

“Ah, I see what you mean,” Kameha said. “ But it sounds like you are honoring social and ethnic differences, seeing there are many ways of believing reflected in the languages,.

“It’s what they think people will read that has priority,” Susan said.

“Not always, Susan. Sometimes there’s useful investigative reporting that puts the information out there regardless,” John said.

Kameha nodded. “Yes, the press finds out things the public needs to know to make informed decisions.”

Wiley pointed out that some reporting was a subtle way of undermining an individual’s critical thinking . “ If there is too much group think, it becomes a form of laziness that leads to apathy in society,” Wiley said.

“ So are there any facts out there or just interpretations?” Kameha asked.

“Oh no, there are absolutely facts, like of a scientific nature or how I feel personally, that’s factual.” Susan said. “But it’s hard not to be judgmental about what we are reading.”

“Of course, and your opinion is important, but remember your primary focus of translation—usually someone else’s opinion. If you are asked to translate during a meeting over whether Mauna Kea is the place for an observatory or reserved for a holy site of Native Hawaiians, it’s not your place to share your opinion, right?”

Before ending the class, Kameha said, “I need your help on figuring out some writing I found.” About half the class stayed. He projected the image of the paper he found on the beach on the screen at the front of the room. “Your opinion, linguists?”

The room grew quiet while the students read the paper Kameha had shared with Lailamolaha.

Susan spoke first. “It’s hard to argue with that obstacle list. A lot of them are what the countries accuse each other of now.” She was expert with her web searches, talented in her mastery of seven languages as an undergraduate. She was sitting beside Wiley, another student. Together they had traveled in Europe, in part to be more immersed in languages.

“And very different views usually come from the media of the specific country. We’ve looked at news from most of them, most of these areas in the first column,” Susan said.

John said, “Look at that last column. A collection of wishful thinking about what would be better. We might not have to worry about nuclear war as much.” John had been out surfing when they had had a recent warning of an incoming warhead that affected the whole island. Even though it turned out to be a false alarm, their anxiety about North Korea grew.

“Yes, John,” Kameha nodded, “Seems if it were reality, it would help.” *Nuclear war prevention was quite a jump for John to make— But what could be more important?*

“Without knowing it’s source, it doesn’t have political credibility for me.” Wiley, the biker in the class, who’d had trouble settling into taking classes after the gap year of traveling in Europe, said, “So I think it could be a prayer. Like the prayer of St Francis of Assisi. ‘Where there is hatred, let me sow love, where there is injury, pardon.’ I forget how it goes, but I learned it in Sunday School.” There were sniggers from the class.

“So you see a religious significance to it, Wiley? Could be.”

“That’s cool.” Susan whispered to Wiley. Then she turned to her fellow students who were chuckling, “What’s so funny, you guys?”

“Wiley actually went to Sunday School?” one student joked.

“That’s enough out there,” Wiley responded, good naturedly.

Kameha smiled, enjoying the class banter.

“Where did it come from?” Wiley continued.

“What?” Kameha had been distracted in his own thoughts.

“The paper with the countries on it..”

“Oh, a green sea turtle.”

The class burst out laughing.

Kameha appreciated how humorous the whole thing must seem. He told them how he had found the paper in a case on the beach and how he liked the potential of the words. Maybe this discussion had served its purpose for him. He switched the focus.

“Now think about all the things we’ve been discussing. How does this note apply to critical information gathering?”

“Well, plenty of diversity there. A global view. Maybe only one opinion about what would make improved conditions for various countries,” John said.

“There’s no way of knowing the truth of it,” Susan said.

“Can you post it on the internet?” Wiley said.

“Not for now.”

“Why not? We might find out who wrote it.”

“I don’t want you to get distracted from your conference project. It’s way more important right now. I like your opinions. Thank you.

Sydney, Australia

“Are you Kameha Walo’laya from the University of Hawaii?” He and the students were setting up their poster in the large hall of the conference room. They had arrived that morning in Sydney after their six hour flight from Honolulu.

“Yes,” Kameha turned to see a tall woman, in a tasteful magenta dress and three inch heels which accentuated her shapely legs. “Most definitely that is me. May I help you?”

“I’m Julianna Ternbulla.” She held up her ID card and extended her other hand to him. He noticed her large brown eyes as he took her hand. His eyes dropped to a green stone necklace nestled in the cleavage revealed by her V-neck dress.

“Your students’ work is impressive. ‘Multicultural Translation Challenges in Interpretation of Events.’” As she studied the world map and the findings of the students work, her conference ID stating she was from Australia confirmed what Kameha suspected from her accent. He wondered if she taught or did research at one of the universities. He introduced the students that were gathered around the poster.

“This is Susan, Wiley, John, on their way to becoming linguists.”

“It’s nice to meet you all.”

“They have spent the spring semester examining the news media reports of the same events across the world as a research project,” Kameha said.

“Yes. Lots of reading and screen time— Internet, newspapers, magazines, television, and radio. Including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram., TikTok, too. Even in the same country, the media is often all over the place on reporting the same event,” John said.

“Important work,” Julianna said.. “Calls for a lot of critical thinking when you doubt the veracity of what is reported as news or you can see through the media’s power to manipulate,”

“Exactly. That’s what we were just talking about.”

She turned to Kameha. “I would think your students’ uncertainty about what is intended is a great strength as they try to be objective in their interpretation from one language to another. This self-awareness could be a point of stability in all the fluctuation in meaning.”

The students beamed. Kameha could see that they must have felt validated by her. He did do.

“True. It could be. But a translator’s task is just saying the words accurately in the other language.” He liked her insight and smiled. “Do you have a degree in linguistics?” he asked.

“I work in anthropology and genetics at the University of Sydney. But we share the same geographical area of interest and I wanted to speak with you about your research in Oceania.”

Kameha was delighted. “Of course, are you free for lunch?” He liked looking at her face and had gotten lost in her brown eyes when he realized the students were looking at him intently.

She nodded and was amused at the students watching their professor, smiling to herself.

“Ahem.” Several of his students standing by were grinning.

Kameha tried to suppress a slight smile at the students’ mirth. The rascals. “John, Wiley, Susan, someone needs to stand here in case people come by and have questions about your poster. I’ll meet you in the auditorium when the speakers start.”

“Yes, sir.” They respected and appreciated their teacher. He allowed open discussion in their classes, knew each one by name, and inspired them. Still, they could not suppress their knowing smiles.

At lunch, he discussed his class and the project they had done. He tried to focus on his students’ research, but Julianna’s beauty kept distracting him. Her smooth skin, her full lips, and her easy manner.. She touched her necklace. A small turtle. Kameha lifted his eyes.

“Your necklace is beautiful. Is it jade?”

“Thank you. Yes, it’s jade. My parents gave it to me. Someone gave it to them when they were on their honeymoon in Tassie years ago.”

“It reminds me of the green sea turtles in Hawaii.” He wanted to tell her about the paper he’d found. He envisioned Julianna helping him figure out the meaning of the “obstacle and

goal” for Australia. Instead he tried to focus on his good fortune in meeting her at the conference.

“I don’t know what kind of turtle it represents, but it is Burmese jade. The three shades of green are translated: green apple, breast of the king fisher, and young sprouts of rice. This one is green apple.”

“So interesting,” Kameha was fascinated.

“Every culture has a myth about the turtle, doesn’t it?” Julianna said. “The Tassie myth is that the turtle is a messenger from Earth’s deepest foundation. I admire your passion to preserve the diversity of indigenous languages. The Tasmanian indigenous language has been lost—it was never a written language—a few words remain.”

“Squashed. Less powerful nations get pressured to conform to a conquering nations’ language and customs. The reason I’m a linguist. I believe language is a marker for human freedom in society. Its preservation in a culture is a constant guard against political tyranny and manipulation.”

Julianna’s façade of formality softened and she began to relax. She leaned forward on her elbows. She gave him a playful smile. “You speak like a politician, Kameha. Like my father.” He serves in parliament. He wants to talk to you about the hundreds of aboriginal languages. I came to the conference to talk with you.” She looked at her watch.

“Oh dear, I’m afraid our lunch time is up and the plenary session is about to begin.” Thirty minutes had passed quickly.

Kameha called for the check and they hurried out of the restaurant. As he walked into the large auditorium, he spotted his students sitting in the middle of the room. When they turned to wave at him, he noticed they had saved two seats. He smiled.

“Please, sit with us,” he said as he touched Julianna’s elbow to guide her in their direction.

After the linguistic conference, informative and beneficial for the work of researchers, faculty, and students alike, Kameha’s fascination with the turtle’s note diminished as his interest in Julianna increased. Their relationship flourished in their shared interest of preserving the diversity of the Pacific sea islands. But his students remained curious. With Kameha’s permission, they posted the paper they discussed in class— the obstacles and goals of the countries— on a website, inviting others to a non-political, non-religious cross-national cyber group for linguists. They wanted to study how language could better promote reciprocity among the various types of governments. It would be their class project for next year.