Laura Edles, Rethinking ‘race’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘culture’: Is Hawai‘i the ‘model minority’ state? (S. 47-55), Taylor and Francis Ltd
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Rethinking “race”, “ethnicity” and “culture”: Is Hawai´i the “model minority” state?

The culture of Hawaii has its origins in the traditional culture of the Native Hawaiians. As Hawai´i has become a home to many different ethnic groups in the last 200 years, each ethnic group has added elements of its own culture to local life. Today, the contemporary culture in Hawaii is a mix of the different cultures and ethnic groups that make up its unique population.

Laura Desfor Edels describes in her article - Rethinking “race”, “ethnicity” and “culture”: Is Hawai´i the “model minority” state? – that multiracialism has been a part of the American history from the start. Since the forced migration of Africans in the sixteenth century many black people born in America have been of “mixed blood” with American Indians and Europeans and also with “native Americans” (because they also have “mixed” roots). In the colonial time, some American Indians had relationships with “whites” and some Indian tribes were absorbed within the black population. Also Mexicans have “mixed” their blood with indigenous and Spanish people.

The multiracial, multiethnic and multicultural history of Hawai´i

The first settlers coming from the Polynesian islands arrived in Hawai´i between the 5th century and the 14th century. At that time the islands were already culturally well developed and divided into four often rivalling kingdoms called Hawai´i, Maui, O´ahu and Kaua´i. Foreigners were few, and usually they were warmly welcomed. The first Europeans reported on the islands were two shipwrecked Spanish explorers in the year 1521. There are also reports of Japanese and Chinese visitors. When the famous English Captain Cook first arrived in Hawai´i in the late 18th century, he and his crew were welcomed initially. But after a minor conflict in which Captain Cook was killed, the British took massive revenge: They killed over one hundred Hawaiians. After that, Hawaiian-European relations were considerably worsened. Visitors – mainly white Europeans – were called haole, which means foreigners. The term haole later also implied that the foreigners belonged to a different, that’s to say,
higher social class. Usually white visitors who stayed in Hawai´i married upper class, aristocratic local women.

Missionaries bringing Christianity and “Western civilisation” to Hawai´i began arriving in the early 19th century. The main aim was to extinguish the polytheistic native religion. This task was aided by the fact that Hawaiian population was dramatically decimated by Western diseases - diseases that had only been brought to Hawai´i by the Europeans. The missionaries claimed that the deaths of so many natives were evidence of their racial, spiritual and moral inferiority. They saw the Hawaiians as an unprivileged racial mixture of black and yellow peoples who needed the wisdom of the whites to improve their lives. It was the break-through for Christianity when a famous native queen converted to the new religion. People also liked the benefits of the written word and started to read and write letters to each other.

The 19th century also brought increasing shipping traffic especially to the harbour of Honolulu. Because of the questionable morality of many of the sailors the local people were not very happy about their presence. Many of these adventurers for example married local women and later abandoned them. Therefore a law was introduced to ensure that a man would perform his duties as a husband and father: He had to pay a bond of 1000$ to the minister of the interior to be allowed to take a Hawaiian wife. However, a law forbidding racial mixture of foreigners with native people, like it existed in the United States for some time, has never been introduced in Hawai´i.

The plantation economy

In the second half of the 19th century the Hawaiian society changed dramatically. Foreigners who wanted to make money convinced the monarchy to privatise the land. Before that the land had been common property, and foreigners had only been allowed to lease land for a maximum of 55 years. Privatisation brought many bureaucratic obstacles and the inexperienced natives were often deceived by foreigners. So by the end of that century Hawaiians only owned one third of their original home land.
Sugarcane plantations emerged and the owners of the big sugar companies gained enormous economic and also political power. When the Hawaiian queen tried to stop this development, she lost all her power in an illegal coup d´état and a provisional government was established. In 1896 Hawai´i was annexed by the United States without a referendum of the Hawaiian population or at least a treaty.

Because of the decimation of the native population by imported Western diseases foreign labourers were brought to the islands to work on the plantations. These immigrants mainly came from China and Japan. European contract workers, most of them Portuguese, got superior positions as plantation managers. Although not really slaves, the workers were in reality owned by their landlords because they had to work off the costs for their transport to Hawai´i. Labourers of different nations and genders got paid different wages for the same work. This created a system of racial discrimination. In this caste society native people often had the lowest status. When strikes became more and more frequent, the plantation owners tried to solve the problem by importing people from new lands, mainly from the Philippines. The Filipinos were treated like slaves. Social workers who tried to introduce them to some kind of scholar education were evicted by the landlords. Strikes and protests of the Filipino workers increased and lead to violent conflicts. One massacre even caused the deaths of some strikers.
Estimated number of “Full” Hawaiians and “Part” Hawaiians

By the end of the 19th century not even half of the Hawaiian inhabitants were native Hawaiians. One third was Chinese or Japanese by origin. Americans, British and Germans constituted about one tenth of the population.

Figure 1. “Full” Hawaiians and “Part” Hawaiians

In my opinion it is impossible to say that Hawaiʻi is a multiracial paradise, because the Native Hawaiians were decimated by colonization and today they have the highest poverty rate, infant death rate, suicide rate and so on.

Since the imported labourers were mainly men, there was a considerable shortage of women for some time.

This problem was at least partly solved by a massive migration of Japanese women from Japan to Hawaiʻi and the United States. Many of them were picture brides or even prostitutes. Some of them were lied to about their future husbands. The result of this female migration was not only that the ratio of male to female Japanese
Hawaiian inhabitants was much lower than that of any other immigration group. It also provoked many interracial marriages.

**Model minority state**

Desfor Edels points out that Hawai‘i has become a “model minority state” which means that Hawaii is a multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural melting pot. As Hawaii is a perfect example for a so called “model minority” state, California is the extreme opposite, a not “model minority state”, where the population is plagued by interracial violence.

But there are also two problems with the myth of the “model minority” state:

1. that the myth of Hawaii as a model minority state is grossly, historically inaccurate
2. that the myth of Hawaii as a model minority state grossly misconstrues the complex working of racialization.

**Race, ethnicity and culture**

The authoress shows a very interesting definition for ethnicity and race which goes along with the definition of Eduardo Bonilla – Silva. Additionally, Desfor Edels introduces a third category, the culture.

**Race** is a social category. It is the answer to the question “What are you” and mainly deals with the language of “phenotype”.

**Ethnicity** is also a social category and is the answer to the question “Where are you from”. It mainly deals with the language of “place”.

**Culture** is the answer to the question „What do you know?“ and “How do you act?” and it mainly deals with the language “way of life”.
Often “locals” (meaning the brown working class) and “haole” (meaning the white elite) are treated in different ways. Local identity is important and often shows racial, ethnic and gender as well as class dimensions. Studies pointed out that the wide gap between the haoles on the one hand, and the Native Hawaiians on the other hand arises because of the cultural production of stratification experience that confirms local identity.

**And what does local haole mean?**
The term “local haole” means, that in addition to being “white” somebody has to accept Hawaii and its culture in his heart for example the Hawaiian way of life. The opposite of “local haole” is “mainland haole”. A “mainland haole” is considered arrogant upper-middle class.
In 2001 Laura Desfor Edles made a mini-survey at the University of Hawai‘i interviewing 128 students. And one open-ended question was “What does being local mean to you?”

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<tr>
<th>%</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>54%</td>
<td>said being born in Hawai‘i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56%</td>
<td>said being raised in Hawai‘i</td>
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<tr>
<td>91%</td>
<td>mentioned some kind of cultural criteria in their definition of local like:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Something like being familiar with the language, culture, customs, arts,...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. A feeling you have for the people, the way of life here, clothes, language, eating habits,…</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. More than just being born and raised in Hawaii. It means that you take responsibility for this place and all of its peoples.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9%</td>
<td>split the racial and or ethic definitions of local from the cultural one. Ex: “No matter what ethnicity/race you are, if you have the aloha spirit deep inside you then I feel you are local.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>24%</td>
<td>mentioned some type of multiculturism or tolerance of the diverse cultures that defines being local. For instance “Being local means to me that I am a part of a unique blend of cultures and nationalities that live together.”</td>
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Finally, it can be said that there is a link between culture, race/ethnicity and “local” identity in Hawaii. For nearly everybody being local has something to do with the aloha spirit and *haoles* who live in Hawaii can learn to practise this as well.

Today the picture of Hawai‘i is still a mosaic of races and different ethnic groups provoked by the exploitation of the Native Hawaiians. The roots for this lie in the violent history of the colonial period.

Bibliography


Laura Desfor Edles (Ph.D., UCLA, 1990) is Professor of Sociology at California State University, Northridge. She is the author of Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain (Cambridge University Press, 1998), Cultural Sociology in Practice (Blackwell Publishers, 2002), and various articles on social theory and culture.