

Mālama ka 'Āina: To Care For The Land

Writers and producers: Phyllis Paul and Phil Wilson, Ohana Filmworks, 17 minutes; 25 minute version available on DVD, \$19.99.'

The small Hawaiian island of Ni'ihau and much of Kekaha district on nearby Kaua'i were purchased by the Robinson family in 1864 from King Kamehameha III. Today the lands are still owned by the Robinsons. In this film, Keith Robinson speaks of his family's historic responsibility as stewards who *mālama i ka 'āina*, take care of the land. Traditionally, the Hawaiian concept of *mālama 'āina* included taking care of the people who live on the land as well as the land itself. The Robinsons see themselves as good stewards of both. The film, *Mālama ka 'Āina: To Care For The Land*, shows the island of Ni'ihau as a relatively untouched oasis, where traditional Hawaiian practices are maintained and natural and cultural resources are preserved. Had the filmmakers looked more closely at the Ni'ihau Hawaiians' situation, however, they would have created a different impression.

For many years, the island of Ni'ihau was run by the Robinsons as a sheep ranch, providing Ni'ihau Hawaiians with free housing and a minimal wage in return for their labor. The island is famous for its isolation, enforced by the Robinson family; even state government officials have difficulty in making inspections. As a result of that isolation, the Ni'ihau Hawaiians preserve many features of traditional Hawaiian culture. They still speak Hawaiian as their first language, and they practice a traditional version of Hawaiian Congregationalism. An important source of income is the making of Ni'ihau shell leis from the tiny shells that wash up only on the beaches of Ni'ihau and Kaua'i.

By contrast, Hawaiians outside of Ni'ihau generally speak English as their first language. Most have left the Congregational church for newer evangelical

churches. The majority do not depend on traditional crafts to make money.

Because of the social isolation of Ni'ihau, those who leave the island are poorly equipped to take advantage of opportunities for economic advancement. The lack of preparation of Ni'ihau Hawaiians to meet the demands of the outside world has become a significant problem today because the Robinson ranch on Ni'ihau is no longer economically viable. It is doubtful the Robinsons can afford to keep Ni'ihau as it is. Most of those who live there now get by on welfare payments, supplemented by subsistence fishing and the production of Ni'ihau shell leis. Increasingly, the marine resources of Ni'ihau are threatened by poachers who come to the island from Kaua'i to fish and gather the Ni'ihau shells for leis. Migration to Kaua'i, O'ahu, and even to the mainland is rampant.

This film offers only a glimpse of the rarely seen cultural landscape of Ni'ihau. Although it shows how Hawaiian culture has been preserved on the island, it focuses on the Robinson family as stewards of Ni'ihau and Kekaha. The viewer hears nothing about Ni'ihau Hawaiians' circumstances and concerns about the future, nor does the film adequately portray Ni'ihau as a community.

It is fascinating to see such rarely-caught scenes of the island and its people—footage of Keith Robinson planting endemic plants, Ni'ihau Hawaiians at church on Kaua'i and making Ni'ihau shell leis, Ni'ihau children at school on Kaua'i practicing hula—but the film hardly conveys a clear picture of the situation for the Ni'ihau people. The viewer never gets an overall picture of the island and its settlement. In fact, most of the footage in the film was taken on Kaua'i, something the film does not make clear. Nor does it explain the relationship between the Hawaiians living on Ni'ihau and those on Kaua'i.

The film briefly alludes to the uncertain future for Ni'ihau when a speaker questions whether the descendants of the Robinson family will carry on as stewards in the way that Keith has. There is no examination of the problematic future for Ni'ihau Hawaiians and their culture, a crucial omission in a film that purports to portray the Robinson regime as a success story in the preservation of Hawaiian culture. With a movement underway to return native Hawaiians to their traditional culture and language, *Mālama ka 'Āina* could be a useful resource for preservationists if only it were more balanced and broader in its scope.

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1. This review is based on the 17-minute version of the film provided by the producer.

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