

Crisis in Kona

Jean Greenwell

October 22, 1868. Awful tidings from Kona. The false prophet, Kaona, has killed the sheriff. . . .

Entry from the Reverend Lorenzo Lyons' Journal.¹

In 1868, the district of Kona, on the island of Hawai'i, made headlines throughout the Kingdom. Some of the many articles that appeared in the newspapers were entitled "The Crazy Prophet of South Kona," "Uprising in Kona," "Insurrection on Hawaii," "The Rebels," "A Religious Fanatic," and "Troubles on Hawaii."²

The person responsible for all this attention was a Hawaiian man named Joseph Kaona. The cult which arose around Kaona typified what is known as "nativistic religion." Ralph S. Kuykendall says:

From the 1820's onward there were among the Hawaiians, as among other peoples, occasional examples of what anthropologists call 'nativistic religions,' commonly consisting of some odd form of religious observance or belief under the leadership of a 'prophet' who claimed to be inspired by divine revelation; frequently such religious manifestations combined features of Christianity with old Hawaiian beliefs and customs. . . .³

Kaona was born and brought up in Kainaliu, Kona on the island of Hawai'i. He received his education at the Hilo Boarding School and graduated from Lahainaluna on Maui.⁴

In 1851, in the aftermath of King Kamehameha III's great land Mahele, Kaona was employed surveying *kuleana* (property, titles, claims) in Ka'u, on the island of Hawai'i.⁵ He also surveyed a few *kuleana* on O'ahu.⁶ Later he was employed as a magistrate, both in Honolulu and in Lāhainā.⁷ He was a well-educated native Hawaiian.

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The Hawaiian Journal of History, vol. 21 (1987)

At some point, however, he felt himself possessed with miraculous powers. While living on O'ahu in 1866, he took possession of a neighbor's dead body and kept it for several days with the intent of bringing it back to life. The Deputy Sheriff was sent to retrieve the body. He said Kaona sat on the coffin and would not give the body up—it was several days old and the room stank. When the Sheriff was finally able to secure the body he did not rebury it in the yard for fear Kaona would dig it up again.⁸ For this act Kaona was arrested and sentenced to the lunatic asylum on O'ahu, but he was declared sane within a few weeks and released.⁹

Shortly after this event Kaona returned to Kainaliu, Kona. He had many relatives in the Kainaliu area living between the *ahupua'a* (land division) of Hokukano and Honalo.¹⁰ It was to this extended family that he held his greatest appeal.

Kaona arrived in Kona with several hundred bibles which he later gave away to his followers. He asked the resident missionary, the Reverend J. D. Paris, if he could store the Bibles in the recently constructed Lanakila Church at Kainaliu.¹¹ Permission was granted by the *luna* (officers) of the church, many of whose members soon became followers of Kaona. Kaona began attending services at Lanakila, at times even sharing the pulpit with the Reverend Paris.¹²

Around this time there was a series of severe earthquakes in Kona and a lava flow in Ka'u. These acts of nature may have had some influence on Kaona for he began preaching the immediate second coming of the Lord.¹³ He proclaimed that all who gathered in the church building with him would be saved. He predicted that a lava flow would cover all the land; but that Lehu'ula, the *ahupua'a* on which the church was located, would be spared. This prediction follows the same pattern as other nativistic cults, a belief in imminent world-wide destruction, but salvation for the believers gathered together at a nominated place.¹⁴

Kaona soon acquired several hundred followers. When Abraham Fornander, the Inspector General of the Department of Public Instruction, visited the North Kona schools in 1867, the Kainaliu school had only 13 scholars. Fornander observed, "The excitement provided by the religious speculations of Kaona has caused the withdrawal, from the school, of about 30 children, for whom the Kaonaites provide a school and teacher themselves."¹⁵

Although Kaona's first prediction did not manifest itself, that in no way discouraged his followers. Kaona received new revelations which postponed the second advent for several years. The believers

remained steadfast. One newspaper columnist wrote, "Day and night the disturbed religious remained together engaging in religious excitement, and creating no small hubbub in the community." This behavior, of course, did not meet with the approval of the Reverend Paris and others of his persuasion.¹⁶

Missionaries in Hawai'i had had to deal with these nativistic faiths before. One group, called the Hapu cult, appeared in Puna, on the island of Hawai'i, in 1831. This was in the Reverend Sheldon Dibble's missionary district. The cult was named after Hapu, who was a self-styled prophetess. The cult which grew up around her devised a system of religion that was half Christian and half native Hawaiian.¹⁷ The Protestant missionaries punished Hapu for practicing "heathen" customs, condemning her to work on the roads.¹⁸ There were many similarities between the Hapu cult and the Kaonaites.

The Reverend Paris hoped to discourage the Kaonaites by locking the doors of the church. However, Kaona soon returned, and one account says he tampered with the door hinges. When his followers gathered he prayed, then tapped on the door of the church, and it flew open miraculously. They all then reoccupied the church. After a great deal of trouble the Kaonaites were officially evicted from the church building by Judge Hoapili of South Kona, and the church was ordered closed to all.¹⁹

The "Second Adventists," as they were called by some, now set up a camp in the vicinity of the church, still proclaiming sanctuary to all who remained with them. They shared everything in common, living in a style the Hawaiians called *ku'ikahi* (united).²⁰ They took oaths on a Bible to stand by each other in everything; help the poor, feed the hungry, and care for the orphans. One man, who was interviewed by Samuel Kamakau for the Hawaiian newspaper *Ke Au Okoa*, claimed that Kaona was particularly famous for the aid he gave to all during the time of drought. This man also felt that the situation in Kainaliu was one of drunkenness and rowdiness before the arrival of Kaona. He thought Kaona and his Bibles had had a positive influence on the community.²¹ This, however, was not the situation being reflected in the English language newspapers.

Kaona combined certain Christian beliefs with some ancient Hawaiian traditions and then played upon the superstitious characteristics latent in many people. He gained many new followers.²²

Kaona would fall into trances in order to prophesy.²³ Many of the followers would also speak in tongues and receive revelations as well. The people spent most of their money acquiring white clothes

to wear. They carried their Bibles at their sides as swords.²⁴ Seven seems to have been a magic number for them, and seven flags or banners could be seen waving from their tents. The 150th Psalm, which spoke of praising the Lord with song and dance, was particularly celebrated.²⁵ Through the nights the people kept watch, chanting and beating drums.²⁶

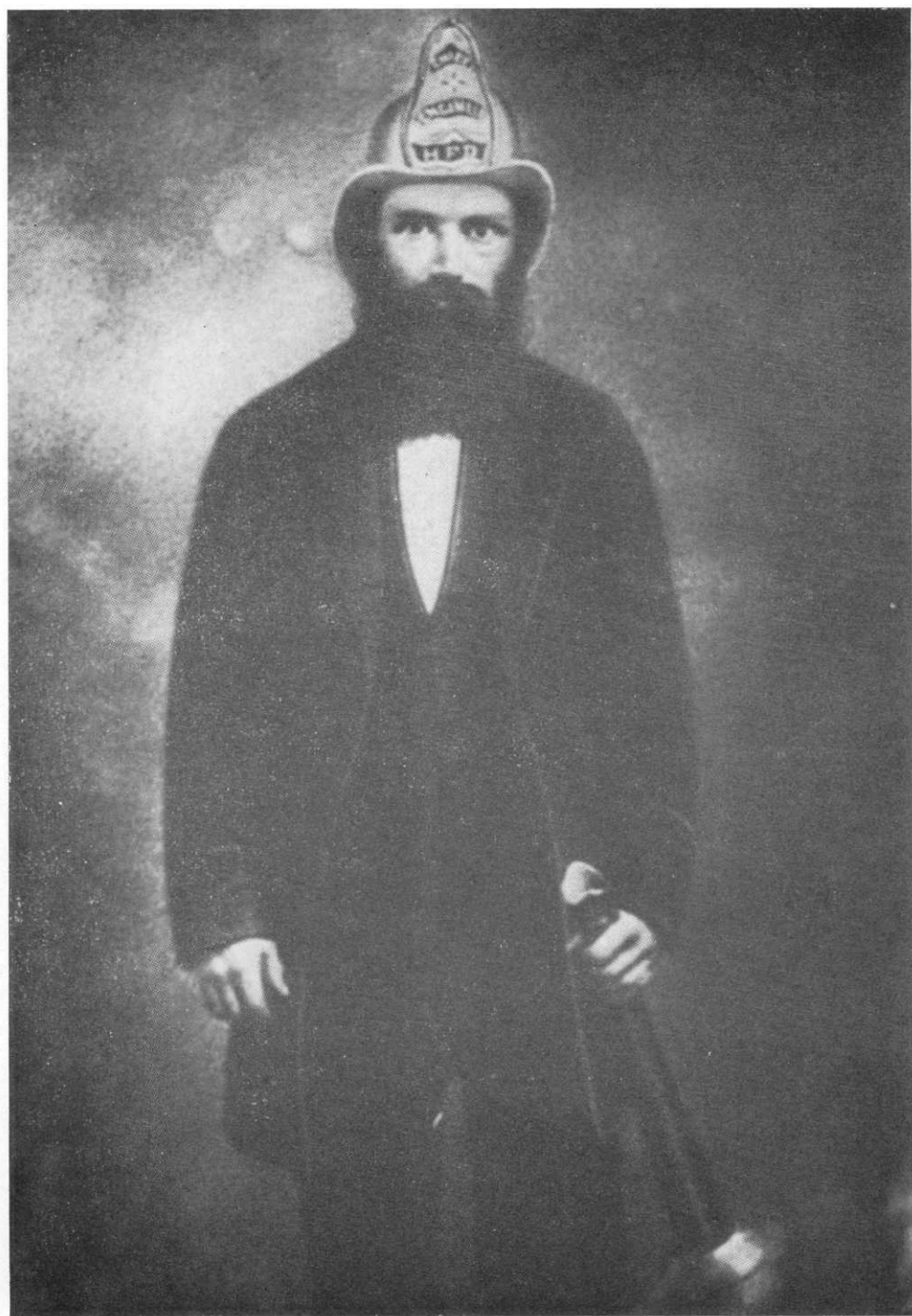
When the rainy season of 1868 came Kaona and his followers moved down nearer to the beach and built two large edifices. One was a *lanai*, (an open-sided, roofed structure).²⁷ The other was a large tomb (fig. 1) erected nearby. For exactly whom the tomb was meant is not known. These structures were built on land owned by the future King Lunalilo and were looked after by his father, Kanaina.²⁸ Kaona had been given good reason to believe that he would be able to lease this land. He therefore made a collection among his people and sent an envoy to Honolulu with the rent money.²⁹ When they reached Honolulu, however, they discovered that the land had already been leased to their neighbor, William F. Roy.

The newspaper, *Ke Au Okoa*, gave a somewhat different version of this transaction. It stated that Kaona had been renting the land he and his followers were actually living on from a widow, Eliza Johnson, widow of William Johnson.³⁰ When she married Roy, Kaona sent an embassy to Honolulu to rent the adjoining land belonging to Lunalilo. Kaona had been given assurance from one of Lunalilo's property managers that he could rent the land for \$200 a year, so he proceeded to have his people plant their crops on this land which proved to be very fertile. According to this article, when Roy heard they were renting Lunalilo's property and saw how productive it was, he immediately offered twice as much money and secured the lease for himself.³¹

Roy wanted Kaona and his people off the property and immediately started eviction proceedings. The Sheriff of the community, R. B. Neville,³² (fig. 2) was sent to serve the eviction papers. He was not cordially received by the Kaona community, and his eviction notice was ripped and spat upon.³³ Kaona continued to live on the disputed land. His very presence there with his hundreds of followers aggravated many of the Kona residents, particularly Roy and his friends. They did not feel it was right that this large group of people should be living on and cultivating land that was leased to Roy.³⁴

FIG. 1. The empty tomb today at Lehu'ula, Kona. (Kona Historical Society photo.)





This situation continued for several months, causing tempers to rise within the Kona district. On the morning of October 19, 1868, Sheriff Neville came a second time with eviction papers. He arrived at Kaona's camp with an armed posse and was met by the Kaonaites with a shower of stones. They pulled Sheriff Neville from his horse and clubbed him to death.³⁵

Several attempts were made that day to retrieve Neville's body, to no avail.³⁶ In the late afternoon another posse, that included native constables and was headed by Judge Kupake'e, descended upon the camp with the intent of securing Neville's body. A stone-throwing, club-wielding battle ensued. Kupake'e's forces came armed with a few guns but fired only one or two shots. One native constable, a man by the name of Kamai, was lassoed from his horse, dragged and beaten to death.³⁷

These violent acts created great concern in Kona. Some people felt that the acts might have racial overtones since shouts of, "Kill the *haole*," were called out by the Kaonaites when Neville was killed that morning.³⁸ During the fracas some of the Kaona followers' houses had been set on fire. The foreign community members, made up of missionaries, planters, and a few business men, took extreme measures to protect themselves, fearing reprisal from the Kaonaites. Roy wrote to a friend in Honolulu, "This night I expect my house will be in flames and many more . . . I am taking the children and clothing away, also Mrs. Roy as they have threatened to kill her tonight. God help us."³⁹

The Kona residents, who feared Kaona, sent a message to Honolulu asking for help. The Marshal of the Hawaiian Islands, William Cooper Parke, was awakened at one in the morning with this plea from Kona. King Kamehameha V called a cabinet meeting at the unusual hour of six in the morning.⁴⁰ As a result of that meeting, 200 troops, along with Governor John O. Dominis of O'ahu, were dispatched in two sailing vessels to intercept the steamer *Kilauea* at Lāhainā. There they were joined by the Maui Governor, Nahaolelua. The troops were transferred to the steamer, and they proceeded on to Hawai'i.⁴¹

In the meantime, the sheriff of Hilo, Mr. J. H. Coney, was at the Volcano area with his family. When he heard of this crisis in Kona he gathered a group of 50 men and marched with them from Ka'u to

FIG. 2. Sheriff R. B. Neville, killed in 1868 when he attempted to serve the Kaonaites with eviction papers. (Kona Historical Society photo.)

Kona, gaining followers as he went. He arrived in Kona with more than 200 men ready and eager to save the Kona residents from the "religious fanatics." When Sheriff Coney reached Kaona's camp he managed to arrest Kaona, recover Neville's body, and herd together all the Kaonaites.

As the above events were taking place, the *Kilauea* steamed past Kainaliu. The troops were well hidden below deck so that those in Kaona's camp would not be alerted.⁴² After the *Kilauea's* arrival at Ka'awaloa, the government forces took charge of the prisoners. The prisoners, who spent the night huddled in the rain, were shipped the next day to Kailua where they were housed in Hulihe'e House and in the yet unfinished portion of Moku'aikaua Church.⁴³ A hearing was then held at Moku'aikaua. The missionary, Doctor L. H. Gulick, served as translator. Five men, including Kaona, were charged with murder, and about 120 others were held as accessories. All were taken to Honolulu.⁴⁴

In Honolulu, 12 or 15 of these prisoners were confined in jail. The rest were bound out to serve as laborers with the understanding that they were to appear when their trial was held. According to Doctor Gulick, their children were placed in foster homes with the intent of having them returned to their own parents at a later date.⁴⁵ *Ke Au Okoa*, however, reported that the gentleman being interviewed by Kamakau said that the children were sold at auction by the *Loio Kuhina* (Attorney General). Kamakau noted that perhaps this was true or perhaps it was not true.⁴⁶

The official trial of these Kaonaites was held in May of 1869. The counsel for the prisoners expressed doubt as to whether an impartial jury could be found in Hilo. It was finally decided that there was just as much high feeling concerning Kaona in Honolulu as there was on the island of Hawai'i. Furthermore, a prisoner was supposed to have the right to be tried on the island on which his crime had been committed. So now all concerned with the trial were shipped to Hilo so the trial could be held there when the Third Circuit Court met.

Attorney Albert Francis Judd and Colonel David Kalākaua were appointed for the defense of the prisoners. At the trial, however, Kaona chose to speak for and to defend himself.⁴⁷ He must have been an eloquent speaker. One newspaper correspondent said Kaona, conducting his own defense, made a "most wonderful speech, mild, vehement and sarcastic."⁴⁸ Kaona claimed the attorney general was "*lalau, lalau loa*" (very mistaken) in what he said. He also referred to

himself as Kaona the Renowned. All this must have had some effect, because he was only charged with the murder of the constable, Kamai, and found guilty of manslaughter in the second degree. He was sentenced to ten years at hard labor.⁴⁹

A great many other Kaonaites were charged with riot.⁵⁰ These individuals wrote a letter of apology to the Attorney General and were pardoned. The longest sentence was given to Kahikoku, who was charged with the murder of Sheriff Neville. He was found guilty of manslaughter in the first degree and sentenced to 16 years hard labor.⁵¹

The trials took place in May of 1869. The whole episode cost the government \$3,673.99.⁵² When Kalākaua became King in February 1874, one of his first acts was to give a Royal Pardon to Kaona in March of that year.⁵³ Kaona was obviously a man with a great deal of charisma.

The Kaonaites were still making news in 1870. A news editorial that year expressed fear that they were still banded together and might cause trouble.⁵⁴ The group evidently did stay together because Kaona returned to Kona after his Royal Pardon and was soon writing letters to the Minister of the Interior inquiring after various pieces of land where his large family and all the children could live “without temptations.”⁵⁵ No evidence has been found that he was able to lease or buy any land. The population of the Kainaliu beach area never regained its former numbers, and in time the main road near the beach running from Kailua south stopped at Keauhou and turned inland. Kainaliu *makai* (by the ocean) was bypassed.

Kaona died in Kona in 1883. The remains of his large church can still be seen at Kainaliu Beach, in Lehu ‘ula, Kona. Alongside the ruins is the large empty tomb. *Kama‘aina* (native born) of the area say that the tomb was never used for a burial. Some speculate the Kaonaites stored their Bibles there. But time and weather have erased any evidence of this, and the tomb stands empty today, a lonely reminder of the tragic events that took place there.

NOTES

¹ Emma Lyons Doyle, *Makua Laiana, the Story of Lorenzo Lyons* (Honolulu: HSB, 1945) 198.

² *HG* 12 Feb. 1868; *PCA* 24 Oct. 1868; *Ke Alauala* Dec. 1868; *HG* 28 Oct. 1868.

³ Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom*, vol. 2, *Twenty Critical Years 1854-1874* (Honolulu: U of Hawai‘i P, 1966) 105-106.

- ⁴ Rev. J. D. Paris, Journal and Notes, ms., Kona Historical Society, Captain Cook. Hilo Boarding School Enrollment Records From 1836-37 Through 1914-15, ms., Lyman House Memorial Museum Library, Hilo, records that J. Kaona, North Kona, entered Oct. 1839 and was dismissed in 1841; *Ka Hae Hawaii*, 19 May 1858, reported that Kaona attended Lahainaluna Seminary on Maui in 1841 and was there four years.
- ⁵ "A young scamp by the name of J. Kaona has been fleecing the natives of this district by surveying their land with a spy glass and rope, and charging them an exorbitant price, as I am told on all hands. His surveys are worthless, and I trust that you will heed them as such. A deed made out from one of his surveys would be invalid for want of certainty in description": William L. Lee, Ka'u, letter to Keoni Ana, 20 Sept. 1851, Interior Department Letter File, AH.
- ⁶ Arthur C. Alexander, Land Titles and Surveys in Hawaii, paper read before the Honolulu Social Science Association, 1 March 1920, appendix A.
- ⁷ *HG* 12 Feb. 1868.
- ⁸ David Dayton testified for the defense that he was Deputy Sheriff in Kalihi at the time of Kupaula's death in 1866: Criminal Case 346, Third Judicial Circuit Court, AH.
- ⁹ *PCA* 24 Oct. 1868.
- ¹⁰ *Ke Au Okoa* 5 Nov. 1868.
- ¹¹ Rev. J. D. Paris, *Fragments of Real Missionary Life* (Honolulu: F, 1926) 50-55.
- ¹² "North Kona," letter, *HG* 18 Nov. 1868.
- ¹³ Doyle, *Makua Laimana*, 9 April 1868 entry reads, "Terrific earthquakes in Kona tore down great masses from Kaawaloa pali. Families have left for Honolulu"; *HG* 12 Feb. 1868.
- ¹⁴ Caroline Ralston, "Early Nineteenth Century Polynesian Millennial Cults and the Case of Hawai'i," *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, vol. 94, no. 4 (Dec. 1985): 307-331.
- ¹⁵ Miscellaneous Letters 1867, Public Instruction, AH.
- ¹⁶ *HG* 12 Feb. 1868. During the process of choosing a jury for Kaona's trial, a man named Hanai was objected to by the prisoner's counsel, as he claimed that no minister should be allowed on the jury because the feelings of the clergy were against Kaona and the churches felt threatened by him: Criminal Case 346, Third Judicial Circuit Court, AH.
- ¹⁷ Edwin G. Burrows, *Hawaiian Americans: An Account of the Mingling of Japanese, Chinese, Polynesians, and American Cultures* (New Haven: Yale U P, 1947) 150.
- ¹⁸ Ralston, "Early Nineteenth Century Polynesian Millennial Cults."
- ¹⁹ *PCA* 21 Nov. 1868; *HG* 12 Feb. 1868.
- ²⁰ *PCA* 21 Nov. 1868.
- ²¹ *Ke Au Okoa* 5 Nov. 1868.
- ²² Ernest Beaglehole, *Some Modern Hawaiians* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i Research Publications 19) 83, in discussing religious movements, states: "They compound native belief and practice with ill-assorted customs and ideas from the invading culture. They spread through a community gathering new members by the force of suggestion, attracting to themselves all those dissatisfied, for personal reasons, with established systems of faith."
- ²³ Reverend L. H. Gulick, letter, described a small box that was found belonging to the Kaonaites in which was kept written copies of Kaona's prophecies, wrapped in seven handkerchiefs, along side of a small bird's skull (Dr. Gulick served as Secretary to the Hawaiian Board of the Evangelical Association from 1863 to 1870); *PCA* 31 Oct. 1868.
- ²⁴ *Ke Au Okoa* 5 Nov. 1868 stated, "Ka Baibala ka poka a lakou" (the Bible was their bullet).
- ²⁵ "Ohana" (a follower of Kaona), letter, *PCA* 24 Oct. 1868.
- ²⁶ Criminal Case 346.

- ²⁷ Ciminal Case 346; Kilinahi, testifying for the prosecution, said, "The lanai was built for the worship of God; it was square with a flat roof, covered with coconut leaves, with open places. . . ." It was called *auolo lanai halepule* in *Ke Au Okoa* 5 Nov. 1868.
- ²⁸ *Indices of Awards Made by the Board of Commissioners to Quiet Land Titles in the Hawaiian Islands* (Honolulu: HSB, 1929), land commission award 8559 B, Lehu'ulanui, royal patents 7536 and 7455, and Honuainouui royal patent 7534, all awarded to Lunalilo.
- ²⁹ *HG*, 18 Nov. 1868.
- ³⁰ "Ohana," letter, *PCA* 24 Oct. 1868. The writer called Mr. Roy, his neighbor, "the Noble Duke." Roy was born in Edinburgh, Scotland. He married Eliza Davis, widow of William Johnson, in Lanakila Church, Kainaliu, 24 May 1866.
- ³¹ *Ke Au Okoa* 5 Nov. 1868.
- ³² *PCA* 24 Oct. 1868. Neville had been a resident of the Hawaiian Islands for 15 years. He had recently moved to Kona to enjoy a quiet life with his family.
- ³³ *HG* 18 Nov. 1868.
- ³⁴ "Ohana," letter, *PCA* 24 Oct. 1868, stated that they only cultivated crops that could mature quickly and that they lived mostly by psalm singing.
- ³⁵ *PCA* 5 June 1869: ". . . it was proven that Kahikoku, while Neville was prostrate on the ground and in a dying condition, took a club and beat him to death which, Kahikoku avers, was done by command of his superior, Kaona. . . ."
- ³⁶ *HG* 28 Oct. 1868. Due to lack of official news, *HG* used letters written by private citizens to personal friends, one from H. N. Greenwell, a Kona businessman, and the other from Reverend J. Charles Williamson, a Church of England priest who had recently arrived in Kona to establish a church. Both wrote that they had gone together to Kaona's camp and asked for Sheriff Neville's body. Mr. Greenwell asked in the name of the law, and the Reverend asked in the name of the church. The body was not forthcoming.
- ³⁷ *HG* 4 Nov. 1868, reported: ". . . the natives were under the control of Kupake'e, whose gigantic frame overreached them all, while all acknowledged his great qualities as a leader, together with his sound judgment and moderation. It was his influence that had restrained the natives from committing violence upon the prisoners." *PCA* 5 June 1869, claimed; "It was proven that . . . Alike, aided and abetted by Kamaka and Kalama, beat the constable's brains out, probably by command of Kaona."
- ³⁸ William C. Parke, *Personal Reminiscences of William Cooper Parke, Marshal of the Hawaiian Islands, From 1850 to 1884* (Cambridge, Mass., 1891) 102.
- ³⁹ W. F. Roy, letter, *PCA* 24 Oct. 1868.
- ⁴⁰ Cabinet Council Minutes 1866-1874, AH.
- ⁴¹ *HG* 28 Oct. 1868.
- ⁴² *HG* 4 Nov. 1868.
- ⁴³ *PCA* 31 Oct. 1868.
- ⁴⁴ *HG* 4 Nov. 1868.
- ⁴⁵ *PCA* 7 Nov. and 31 Oct. 1868.
- ⁴⁶ *Ke Au Okoa* 5 Nov. 1868.
- ⁴⁷ Albert Francis Judd, son of Gerrit P. and Laura Fish Judd, members of the Third Company, ABCFM, served as Supreme Court Justice in Honolulu from 1874 to 1900. Colonel David Kalakaua became King in 1874.
- ⁴⁸ *PCA* 5 June 1869.

- ⁴⁹ Criminal Case 346 and *PCA* 5 June 1869: Rex vs. Alike, Kaona, Kamaka, and Kalama—Indited for the murder of Kamai. The trial was from May 24 to May 28. The jury deliberated six and a half hours. All were found guilty of manslaughter in the second degree. Alike and Kaona were sentenced to ten years at hard labor; Kalama and Kamaka to five years at hard labor.
- ⁵⁰ Criminal case 1073, Third Judicial Circuit Court, AH: a John Tatina or Kakina (the Hawaiian spelling of Thurston) who may have been attached to the missionary Thurston family in some way, was among those charged with riot.
- ⁵¹ Criminal case 776, Rex vs. Kahikoku, Third Judicial Circuit Court. AH.
- ⁵² The trial was also reported in *Ke Au Okoa* 1, 8, 15, and 22 July 1869; Minister of Finance Reports 1870, AH.
- ⁵³ Privy Council Report, vol. 12: 45, AH, states that at the Privy Council meeting, held 14 March 1864, Kaona, a convict in O‘ahu jail, was recommended to royal clemency. After considerable debate for and against him, the motion was put to the Council by King Kalakaua and carried 15 for and 5 against.
- ⁵⁴ *PCA* 16 Jan. 1870.
- ⁵⁵ J. Kaona and Co., letter to Hon. W. L. Moehonua, applying for the *ahupua‘a* of Pu‘uanahulu; Kaona, letter to the Minister of the Interior concerning the land of Kukuiope, 17 March 1877; Kaona, letter to Moehonua concerning the land of Honalo, 8 March 1876: Interior Department Letter File, AH. Koana, letter applying for the lands of Hokukano, Onouli, Honuaino, and Honalo, 25 March 1875; letter to Kaona: Interior Department Letter Book 12,672 and 15,333, AH.