

2024 Summer Research Report

“Climate, Colonialism, Conspiracy, Catastrophe: Understanding Indigenous Insights on Systemic Challenges in Hawaii through the Lahaina Wildfire ”



Author: Nathan Li

*2024 Laidlaw Scholar, University of Toronto*

Research Advisor: Dr. Megan Youdelis

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the devastating wildfire that occurred in Lahaina, Maui in 2023. The wildfire not only wreaked physical havoc but also brought to the surface long-standing issues of injustice, exploitation, and systemic neglect faced by the Kānaka Maoli, the Indigenous Hawaiian people. This research highlights the often-overlooked perspectives of the Kānaka Maoli through an exploration of the root causes of the wildfire, the efficacy of the response efforts, the consequences for the community, and the resilience demonstrated during the recovery process. Utilizing a qualitative research design, the study draws on phenomenological and action research approaches, with data collected through semi-structured interviews with key community members, including activists, leaders, and residents directly affected by the wildfire. The thematic analysis highlights a complex interplay of natural and man-made factors that exacerbated the disaster, including the legacy of colonialism and related land exploitation, inadequate disaster preparedness, and the socio-economic impact of tourism. The findings reveal that while natural causes contributed to the wildfire, these deep-rooted systemic issues significantly magnified the disaster's impact. In response to the fire, generational Kanaka values were critical in uplifting the community and revitalizing the island. Through this, the study explores critical connections between Hawaiian history, culture, political sovereignty, environmental conservation, tourism, and more, offering a comprehensive understanding of the deeper issues at play in the aftermath of the Lahaina wildfire. The research also underscores the urgent need for a transformation in Hawaii's policy and tourism model, advocating for approaches that respect and honour Hawaiian culture and heritage, rather than one that perpetuates superficial and extractive practices. In conclusion, this study not only sheds light on the unique challenges faced by the Kānaka Maoli but also calls for increased global awareness, empathy, and a commitment to supporting Indigenous resilience. The lessons learned from this tragedy offer valuable insights into global disaster preparedness and the importance of culturally sensitive tourism and policy-making.

## **Introduction**

On August 8th, 2023, a devastating blaze tore through Lahaina, a town on the west side of Maui, Hawaii, known for its rich historical significance as an important coastal port and its economic importance as a beloved tourist destination. The wildfire reduced Lahaina to ashes, forcing the evacuation and displacement of more than 10000 residents and claiming the lives of approximately 100 people (Clark 2024). Federal surveys estimate that the fire destroyed more than 2,000 buildings, obliterating around 80% of the town's infrastructure, with 86% being residential (Greene et al. 2023). While the disaster initially drew national attention and prompted a surge of social media activity raising awareness, generating donations, and providing updates, the focus quickly shifted away from Maui once the immediate emergency passed. However, for many natives of Maui, the Lahaina wildfire was more than just a natural disaster; it was the final

straw in their longstanding struggle against colonial injustice, mistreatment, and exploitation of the local community.

This research seeks to address the short-lived attention given to Maui, which has allowed for ignorance toward the experiences of Indigenous residents. It also seeks to correct the long-term perpetuation of common superficial narratives about Hawaii. The aim of this study is to use the Lahaina wildfire as a focal point to investigate Indigenous perspectives on various systemic issues and their relevance to community vulnerability. Key research questions include:

1. How have Kānaka Maoli Hawaiians endured the effects of the wildfire, and how do they perceive its causes, effects, and response?
2. What factors contributed to the vulnerability and difficulty in responding to the fires?
3. How does tourist culture impact local life, and what are its implications for disaster management?
4. What is the significance of Hawaii's colonial history in relation to the Lahaina fire and the state's broader sociographical challenges?

This paper finds that natural and physical causes are only partially responsible for the disaster status of the Lahaina wildfire. The natural event was made into a disaster through articulation with the long-standing social and political economic inequality faced by the Kānaka Maoli (Pelling, 2001; Smith, 2007). The paper also asserts that the experiences, impacts, and responses to a wildfire like Lahaina's are uniquely influenced by the cultural context and identity of the affected community – in this case, the Kānaka Maoli people.

### **Term Definition: Kānaka Maoli**

Kānaka Maoli is the term native Hawaiian people use to refer to themselves. Literally translated, it means “Indigenous person.” Due to Hawaii's profoundly blended culture, most local residents possess a diverse cultural makeup often sharing Native, Asian, and Portuguese ancestry. There are ongoing and contentious debates about Kānaka Maoli blood quantum. Blood quantum refers to a colonial metric used to determine the amount of "Indian blood" an individual possesses. For example, A current usage of blood quantum requires Native Hawaiians to prove they possess 50% Native Hawaiiin ancestry in order to qualify for the “Hawaiian Homes” government subsidy (Boyanton 2023). It is considered problematic because it can undermine the self-identification and community membership of Indigenous peoples (Kauanui 2008). For the purposes of this research, participants who identify as Native Hawaiians are eligible to participate in this study.

### **Literature Review**

Due to the strong oral traditions of Native Hawaiians and their skepticism toward Western documentation practices, much of their historical and cultural practices are not documented.

However, the history of colonialism and occupation on the island has been well-documented (Lowe 2018). As documented by Potter, Kasdon, and Rayson in their book “History of the Hawaiian Kingdom” (2003), Hawaii's history as a sovereign nation begins with its unification under King Kamehameha I in 1810, after years of inter-island conflict and European influence. Under his leadership and that of his successors, the Kingdom of Hawaii established a constitutional monarchy, developed a legal system, and maintained a distinct Hawaiian identity, even as it navigated the pressures of Western diplomacy and trade.

The kingdom was internationally recognized, with diplomatic relationships across the world, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. However, the increasing influence of American and European business interests, coupled with strategic military interests in the Pacific, led to growing pressures on the Hawaiian monarchy. This culminated in the overthrow of Queen Lili'uokalani in 1893 by a group of American businessmen, with the support of the United States government. Despite protests from the Queen and native Hawaiians, Hawaii was eventually annexed by the United States in 1898, marking the end of Hawaii's sovereignty and the beginning of its path toward statehood in 1959. Within the field of International Law and Relations, it is widely recognized that the U.S. occupation of Hawaii was both illegal and detrimental, especially in terms of cultural erosion and environmental harm (Lowe 2018).

While Hawaii's colonial history is well-documented, and while scholarship in the fields of Pacific Indigenous culture and environmental studies has been extensive, the intersection of these two areas remains relatively underexplored. Notable works, such as those by Kyle Whyte, have provided crucial insights into Indigenous philosophies regarding environmental change and disaster preparedness, laying the groundwork for understanding Indigenous-led conservation and fire management practices (2017). Whyte finds that understanding Indigenous practices and values can provide new positive approaches to addressing climate crises. This is pertinent as, according to the United States Department of Agriculture, research has shown that environmental catastrophes, particularly fires, tend to have disproportionately severe socio-economic impacts on Indigenous populations (Norton-Smith et al. 2016).

A seminal piece by Neil Smith (2006), titled “There's No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster,” and a study by Mark Pelling (2001) titled “Small Island Developing States: Natural Disaster Vulnerability and Global Change” examine the complex interplay between natural and social factors in determining the scale and impact of a disaster. Smith's analysis of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Pelling's investigation of Caribbean nations' experiences with disasters illustrate how political economic inequality can magnify the effects of a disaster for vulnerable communities. While these works offer valuable context, the unique circumstances surrounding the Lahaina wildfire—its location, scale, and the unique demographic makeup of Hawaii—necessitate specialized research to determine whether this too was a humanitarian disaster with a natural trigger.

This study aims to address and fill the gaps in the existing literature by exploring the intersections of colonialism and disaster vulnerability through the experiences and perspectives of Kānaka Maoli participants in Maui. While previous studies have explored the environmental and economic impacts of wildfires, they frequently overlook the nuanced perspectives of Indigenous communities, particularly how these communities perceive and respond to such events (Christianson et al. 2022). By focusing on the lived experiences of the Kānaka Maoli, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the systemic issues that have compounded the effects of the Lahaina wildfire, including the historical and ongoing challenges related to colonialism, land use, and cultural preservation.

The research is guided by resilience theory, specifically community and cultural resilience frameworks. These frameworks emphasize the capacity of communities to withstand, adapt to, and recover from adversity, as well as the crucial role that cultural practices and values play in fostering resilience (Norris et al. 2008; Fleming and Ledogar 2008). These frameworks highlight several key factors that influence a community's resilience: social cohesion, cultural practices, leadership, resource availability and usage, pain tolerance, and the ability to adapt (Norris et al. 2008; Fleming and Ledogar 2008). By integrating these frameworks, the study not only examines the immediate responses to the wildfire but also explores how the Kānaka Maoli community's cultural practices and social structures have played a crucial role in their ability to navigate and recover from such a profound disaster. This perspective allows for a more comprehensive analysis of resilience that goes beyond physical recovery to include the preservation and strengthening of cultural identity in the face of ongoing challenges. Through this lens, the research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of resilience that is deeply rooted in the cultural context of the Kānaka Maoli people, offering valuable insights into disaster response and recovery efforts.

## **Methodology**

For this research study, a qualitative research design was employed, utilizing a combination of phenomenological and action research approaches. The phenomenological method was particularly well-suited for this study as it focused on examining and documenting the lived experiences of residents impacted by the Lahaina wildfire. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the personal narratives and general sentiments of the local community, which was especially important given the novelty of the circumstances and the scarcity of literature representing Kānaka Maoli voices. Additionally, the action research component involved gathering insights from experts and local community leaders on how to improve practices and inspire meaningful action in response to the wildfire's aftermath. The data for both approaches was collected through one-hour semi-structured interviews with selected participants.

The study involved 10 volunteer participants from the Kānaka Maoli community in Maui, each with connections to Lahaina and covering a range of expertise. These participants included a

firefighter, historian, community leader (Kupuna), activist, social justice lawyer, Indigenous knowledge specialist (Kumu), and three residents. Participants were invited to contribute through recruitment emails or direct personal invitations, ensuring a diverse and representative sample of the community.

Data collection primarily consisted of semi-structured interviews, allowing for a rich collection of qualitative insights. Additionally, social observation and media reviews were used to gather generic details that contextualize the research. The interview data collected underwent thematic analysis to identify and analyze common themes and patterns of thought, providing a structured understanding of the key issues and perspectives shared by the participants.

Given the sensitive and weighty nature of this research, ethical considerations were paramount. The study was conducted in accordance with Indigenous Hawaiian protocols, including adherence to the University of Hawaii's guide to qualitative research with kupuna (Haitsuka et al. 2023). This ensured that the research process was respectful and culturally appropriate. Participants were invited to review and consult on the writing before publication, allowing Indigenous knowledge holders to retain control over how their knowledge was used and disseminated. Throughout the research process, the researcher remained closely involved, volunteering and contributing to the community when possible while ensuring that the study was conducted with integrity and deep respect for the community it sought to represent.

## **Findings**

The interviews uncovered a complex network of interrelated factors that led to the disaster and the prolonged suffering of the Kānaka Maoli community. These factors, including climate, environment, history, culture, tourism, community, government, and political economy interact in intricate ways, influencing and shaping each other. The study asserts that while physical processes contributed to the disaster, it was the social, political, and economic context faced by the Kānaka Maoli that exacerbated its effects.

### **Chapter 1: Cause of Fire**

A major point of interest in the research is addressing the question of what caused and allowed the Lahaina wildfires to take place. According to the testimony of the interviewees, the cause of the fire was a downed power line which fell to 80mph hurricane-level winds, which also exacerbated the spread of the fire. The strong winds were a result of a large pressure differential between the northern and southern Pacific Ocean. Based on the interviews, a lesser-known fact about Hawaii is that small regional bushfires are a common occurrence and are expected during the summer season. Despite the popular notion that Hawaii is always humid and its vegetation is lush, large patches of Hawaiian land are incredibly dry due to intense sun exposure and strong

winds that are funnelled between mountains in topographical acceleration. These same winds carried embers and burnt debris over long distances allowing the fire to spread exponentially. Because of these conditions, even before the Lahaina fire erupted, multiple other fires emerged around the island at the same time which greatly stretched the already limited resources of the Maui Fire Department a theme which was commonly reported in interviews. Understandably, the geographical composition and seclusion of Hawaii presented significant resource availability challenges for Maui residents and first responders as supplies were limited and aid couldn't easily be air-lifted in.

The physical origins and challenges of the fire are well-documented; however, less apparent social dynamics also played a critical role in the disaster. Interviewees highlighted the indirect impact of historically dominant enterprises and high-ranking government officials in intensifying the fire's severity. A persistent concern that was raised by several participants was the massive impact of water diversion projects over several decades which led to water scarcity and the barren landscape. Before settlers arrived, Lahaina was the capital of the sovereign Hawaiian kingdom and was a wetland rich in plant life, wildlife, and sea life. Lahaina boasted a robust fishing industry and was the center for meeting and trade between the ali'i (chiefs) of each island. Following the arrival of American settlers in the late 1800s, the sugar and pineapple plantations established by these White men (Haoles) began to divert the mountain streams away from Lahaina and toward their fields (MacLennan 2007). This process continues to this day with large hotels diverting the same water to maintain their golfing greens and luxury facilities. More than a century of this behaviour has exacerbated water scarcity issues for local residents and left much of West Maui a barren landscape. When Lahaina began to burn, the limited water supply and dry environment made firefighting nearly impossible. On top of that, a newly inaugurated municipal government was inefficient in communication and issuing ordinances to relieve the water scarcity issue. "Before the plantations, Lahaina was known as the "Venice of the Pacific"...filled with waterways and life," recalled a community historian. "Now, it's dry and barren, and the fire was the final blow to what little remained."

Another factor that exacerbated the damage caused by the fire was the urban planning of Lahaina which consisted of either extremely modern infrastructure for new businesses or old and densely clustered wood homes which are remnants of historic Lahaina town. Because of these urban discrepancies, the majority of properties destroyed were the highly flammable homes of local residents which allowed the fire to quickly travel from house to house, engulfing the whole suburb in a matter of hours. A significant portion of the residences lost in the fire were generational homes, passed down through families and often housing multiple generations under one roof. Because these homes were inherited and due to the high cost of living in Hawaii, many families chose to forgo home insurance. Consequently, they were left with little recourse in the aftermath of the fire. A Lahaina resident described Lahaina as "a tinderbox waiting to ignite."

“We had these old wooden homes right next to each other that had been in families for generations. When the fire hit, it didn’t stand a chance—everything went up in flames within minutes... the kicker is that many of us had no insurance to fall back on.”-Lahaina Resident

Given the scale, location, and timing of the fire, numerous theories began to circulate, suggesting various actors as responsible and contributing to a cloud of conspiracy. When asked about this, a lifelong Maui resident that I spoke with recalled previous fires that cleared land, and within a matter of months, the land had been purchased and developers began erecting new buildings. Many other respondents noted similar events and expressed muted personal suspicions that the fire might have been a pretext for a land grab by corporate interests, potentially with the tacit cooperation of federal or state government entities. While no participant expressed outright certainty in such a theory, there was a palpable trend of distrust throughout the community. Capturing this sentiment, the firefighter I spoke to remarked, “I can’t say for certain if this was a conspiracy. I want to trust the county I work for, but I think everyone feels that some things seem a little shady... The distrust here runs deep, and it’s not without reason.”

Although no single factor can be definitively blamed for the inferno, it is evident that a historical pattern of corporate exploitation, community neglect, and inadequate preparation played a significant role in how these tragic events unfolded.

## **Chapter 2: Response Efforts**

Following the immediate devastation of the fires, the island kicked into a state of disaster rescue and response. The handling of these efforts is of vital interest as further indicators of systemic factors and challenges. Blockades were immediately erected to prevent individuals from entering and exiting the damage zone. Firefighters worked tirelessly to evacuate civilians and contain the blaze, but the destruction of power and communication lines severely hindered coordinated disaster response efforts. Many participants expressed frustration with the county government's briefings, describing them as slow and unclear, and highlighting a troubling lack of coordination and transparency. In contrast, quicker and more reliable updates were often found on social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube, where survivors and volunteers uploaded live from the heart of the disaster.

Witnessing the ineffectiveness of official channels, many private citizens took it upon themselves to provide aid to Lahaina. Islanders mobilized their private vehicles to deliver generators, water, and food to those in need. In a remarkable display of resourcefulness, locals used their personal boats to bypass blockades and reach isolated areas, rescuing survivors and delivering critical supplies. “When the government failed us, we were the ones who stepped up,” said an active community leader. “We didn’t wait for help; we became the help. That’s what we do, and the aloha spirit of our community is how we do it.”

These convictions gave rise to numerous grassroots organizations, as volunteers united under a common mission to support their neighbors. Many representatives from these organizations openly shared about their work and recounted the painful stories of the people they serve. As a result of these groups, impromptu community hubs emerged in public parks all over the island to support and provide resources for the community in the absence of adequate governmental response. These hubs would allow fire survivors to “shop” for free with food donated by food banks. Fully operated by volunteers and at no cost to the affected, these hubs provided activities for children, massage therapy, and connected fire survivors to resources that may help them find housing, subsidies, and mental health support.

In my interviews with participants, a consistent pattern of dissatisfaction and frustration with the government's handling of the fire at the local, state, and federal levels emerged. A particularly poignant example of this discontent was President Biden’s brief visit to Lahaina in the aftermath of the fire. During his visit, he announced a relief payment of \$700 per household affected by the disaster—a gesture that many Hawaiian natives found insultingly insufficient.

A Maui lawyer captured the sentiment succinctly: “President Biden cruises in on his jet and offers \$700 per affected household. What is a family of seven supposed to do with \$700? That might cover a hotel for three or four days. Meanwhile, he’s giving billions of dollars of taxpayer money to Ukraine.”

In addition to concerns about suspicious corporate behaviour, the government's response to the disaster raised significant doubts among many residents. One participant, a firefighter and Air Force veteran questioned the decision not to deploy military resources to fight the fires, rescue residents, and deliver supplies. Hawaii, despite being the most heavily militarized state relative to its size, with 300,000 military personnel available at any given time and military bases controlling 5.6% of the state’s total land, did not mobilize its considerable military assets during this crisis. These military installations, crucial for maintaining American influence in the Pacific, are equipped with top-of-the-line technology, equipment, and resources.

The participant recalled the swift and effective military response during the devastation of Hurricane Iniki in 1992, which hit the Island of Kauai. "Even back then, over three decades ago, the military was on the ground immediately, with helicopters dropping off supplies right away," he recounted. "For all the military bases in and around Maui to standby while Lahaina was burning, and even after the fires were put out, was definitely curious." This stark contrast led him and many others to question why the U.S., with its vast resources, was not more responsive during such a critical time.

At all levels, it seemed that the government had failed to execute its charge to protect its constituents. The island was caught on its heels and was not adequately prioritized. The collective efforts of the community not only filled the gaps left by official responses but also

fostered a sense of unity and resilience that has become a proud achievement and cornerstone of Lahaina's recovery.

### **Chapter 3: Consequences**

The consequences of the Lahaina wildfire extend far beyond the immediate physical damage, deeply affecting various aspects of life in Maui. First and foremost, the destruction of so many residences left survivors displaced, with many forced into expensive hotels and other temporary living spaces managed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Activists note that many fell through the cracks of the FEMA system and ended up in homeless encampments, living in their cars, or erecting tents in nearby parks and beaches. The already existing homelessness and housing crisis was made worse which put significant strain on the state with many relying on subsidies despite working several jobs. The already exorbitant cost of living in Hawaii, compounded by the loss of their homes in the fire, forced many families to leave the island altogether, relocating to places like Las Vegas. New census data reveals that there are now more Kānaka Maoli Hawaiians (55%) living in the Mainland United States than in Hawaii, with some estimates that just around 10% leave every decade (U.S Census, 2023). The mass migration to the mainland is occurring as wealthy Americans purchase new luxury vacation properties, exacerbating the housing crisis and effectively leaving locals "priced out of paradise," as voiced by a local lawyer.

Many Hawaiians are deeply concerned that in the aftermath of the fire, developers will seize the opportunity created by the widespread destruction and displacement to build more luxury properties, further pushing locals out of their ancestral lands and communities. This fear is not unfounded, as the Lahaina area is a highly desirable and lucrative location, especially the coastline. The prospect of more luxury properties being built in the wake of the fire threatens to exacerbate the already critical housing crisis in Hawaii, where many native residents are increasingly being priced out of their homes and forced to move upcountry or out of state altogether.

One of the most controversial figures who embodied these concerns was Peter Martin, the vice president of the West Maui Land Company. A California native, Martin's rise to power has been marked by decades of underhanded dealings and aggressive land acquisitions that have drawn the ire of many Hawaiians. Martin's staunch libertarian beliefs, which emphasize minimal government intervention and the maximization of individual profit, have clashed sharply with the values of many island residents who prioritize community well-being, environmental stewardship, and the preservation of cultural heritage. The local fear is that Martin and other developers like him will use the aftermath of the Lahaina fire as a pretext to push through more luxury projects, capitalizing on the chaos and disarray to acquire land at bargain prices. Such developments would likely lead to the further erosion of local culture and community, as native Hawaiians are driven out of their homes and traditional lands are transformed into exclusive

enclaves for the wealthy. This scenario would not only deepen the existing inequalities on the island but also undermine the efforts of those who are fighting to rebuild Lahaina in a way that honours its history and serves the needs of its long-term residents.

The Lahaina fire tragically claimed the lives of over 100 beloved residents, erased entire neighbourhoods, and forced the terrifying evacuation of thousands of civilians. The emotional and psychological toll on the community has been profound, as many continue to grapple with overwhelming devastation and grief. Homes that held deep family histories and cherished memories were erased in an instant, leaving survivors with an unbearable sense of loss. For those who lived through the horror of August 8th, recounting the events remains an incredibly emotional task for survivors, family members, and rescue workers alike. The magnitude of this tragedy has left deep, lasting scars, manifesting in widespread anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among those affected. The surge in demand for mental health support has been overwhelming, prompting many practitioners to work tirelessly, often around the clock, to provide the necessary care and uplift those in need. NAMI Hawaii is a vital resource in this area, providing community support groups for adults and grief camps for children.

Economically, the damage was substantial, disrupting local businesses and livelihoods. Lahaina was a tourist favourite and the economic center of the island. The town's vibrant economy, driven largely by tourism, supported a wide array of businesses, from restaurants and shops to tour companies and accommodations, all of which were integral to the island's economic fabric. The destruction of these businesses has had a ripple effect, impacting not only the business owners and employees but also the broader community that relied on the steady influx of tourists to sustain their livelihoods. The sudden loss of income for thousands of residents has led to widespread financial instability, with many families struggling to meet basic needs in the absence of their regular sources of income. The economic blow has been particularly hard on the many who worked in the tourism and service industries, where jobs were closely tied to the bustling activity of Lahaina's streets.

The debate over tourism and U.S. neo-colonialism, long points of contention, has therefore been brought to a boil in the aftermath of the fire. In my conversations, I discovered an even split in opinion, with some advocating for the swift return of tourism to bolster the economy, while others insisted that tourists keep a respectful distance to allow the island time to recover. When the island reopened just months after the fire subsided, several protests erupted, led by local leaders demanding that the needs and well-being of Maui residents be prioritized over the interests of tourism. Protesters occupied popular beaches, organized rallies, and petitioned government leaders, emphasizing that the community's recovery should take precedence over the return of tourists. The activist I spoke to who led one of the beach protests said this: "This is our home, these beaches are part of our āina (sacred land), not a vacation spot. We need time to heal, and we need to make sure that what comes next serves the people who live here, not just those

passing through." Many residents feel that the rapid commercialization and development driven by external interests have prioritized profit over the needs and desires of the local population, leading to a loss of cultural identity, environmental degradation, and social displacement. Proponents of tourism argue that it is essential for the economic recovery of Lahaina and the broader Maui community, providing jobs and generating revenue that is desperately needed in the wake of the disaster. However, critics counter that the unchecked growth of the tourism industry has contributed to the very vulnerabilities that made the fire so devastating and that acceptance of Western occupation is a result of "brainwashing".

The fires also led to the loss of important cultural sites, deepening the community's sense of loss. Among the most significant was the destruction of the Nā 'Aikāne o Maui Cultural Center of Lahaina. The cultural center held countless Polynesian artifacts which were lost, and the centre has now been converted into a recovery and aid distribution center. The Waiola Church, originally established in 1823, was also lost. It held deep historical and spiritual significance as one of the oldest Christian churches in Hawaii and the burial site of Hawaiian royalty. Additionally, the fires consumed the Baldwin Home Museum, which was the oldest house in Lahaina, dating back to the early 19th century. It served as a reminder of the painful missionary era and the early Western influence on the islands. Lahaina is home to the largest and oldest banyan tree in the United States which stands as one of the few reminders of Lahaina's history as a lush wetland. The banyan tree was severely burned and scarred for the first time in its 150-year-old history.

Even before the fire, the commercial extraction of Maui had already caused significant damage to sacred lands such as Moku'ula, an islet off the shore of Lahaina which was home to King Kamehameha III and a sacred burial site of several Hawaiian royals. Water diversion dried up the site and the sacred land now sits beneath a baseball field. Similarly, the construction of scientific telescopes and astronomy centers has desecrated sacred Hawaiian mountain sites such as Haleakala and Mauna Kea, disregarding large-scale protests from Kānaka Maoli residents. This underscores how the colonial-capitalist context has created the conditions for a natural event to become such a prolonged disaster.

The fire has also reignited discussions about Hawaiian sovereignty and the broader impacts of U.S. neo-colonialism. Many locals view the continued presence and influence of the U.S. as a form of occupation, where decisions are made that benefit outsiders more than the native population—exemplified by the establishment of military bases and the construction of telescopes on sacred land. In this context, the debate extends beyond economics; it is fundamentally about power, identity, and the future of Hawaii. The tension between the drive to restore economic stability through foreign investment and the need to protect and respect the island's natural recovery has become a central issue in the community's struggle to rebuild in a way that honours both their cultural heritage and their future aspirations.

## **Chapter 4: Community Resilience and Rebuilding**

Despite the immense tragedy inflicted by the fire, the Kānaka Maoli community has demonstrated remarkable resilience in their efforts toward rebuilding and recovery. The local community takes immense pride in its resourcefulness and unity, which have been pivotal in navigating the aftermath of the disaster. Grassroots movements have played a crucial role in providing essential necessities and resources to those affected, showcasing the community's strength and solidarity. The unparalleled resilience and solidarity of the Hawaiian people are unique due to their cultural and social composition. The values of personal and collective responsibility (Kuleana), as well as love, compassion, and respect (Aloha), are so deeply embedded in Hawaiian culture, which precipitates strong networks of unconditional communal support.

In the wake of the fire, cultural and spiritual healing practices have gained significant prominence, with many community members coming together for ocean cleansing ceremonies, celebrations of life, and blessings over newly rebuilt homes. These practices have been vital in fostering a sense of healing and renewal, helping the community to process the trauma and begin the journey of recovery.

The community and cultural resilience frameworks guiding this study (Norris et al. 2008; Fleming and Ledogar 2008) note several key factors that influence a community's resilience—social cohesion, cultural practices, leadership, resource availability and usage, pain tolerance, and adaptability. These are all evident in the community's response to the disaster. The Kānaka Maoli's ability to draw upon cultural traditions, such as ocean cleansing ceremonies, is a testament to their cultural continuity and the strength of their social bonds. The community's response also highlights the importance of strong leadership, as trusted figures within the Kānaka Maoli community played crucial roles in guiding collective recovery efforts and ensuring that cultural practices and ceremonies were at the forefront of the healing process. These ceremonies not only serve as a form of spiritual healing but also reinforce the community's connection to the land and sea, further solidifying their collective identity and resilience. Additionally, the effective use of available resources, such as the conversion of community spaces into aid distribution centers, demonstrates the community's resourcefulness and adaptability in the face of adversity. The community's high level of pain tolerance, born from generations of enduring colonial exploitation and cultural erosion, has also played a critical role in their ability to withstand the emotional and psychological toll of the disaster. This is not to downplay the enduring emotional, psychological and material effects of the fire, which continue to present challenges including housing insecurity, but to acknowledge, as Whyte (2017) does, the practices and values that can support communities in disaster response. The Kānaka Maoli's response to the Lahaina wildfire exemplifies the resilience framework's assertion that communities with strong social ties, cultural continuity, and effective leadership are better equipped to handle and recover from disasters (Norris et al., 2008; Fleming and Ledogar, 2008). This resilience is not just a product of their

immediate response but is deeply rooted in their cultural heritage and the enduring values that continue to guide their actions in the face of ongoing challenges stemming from political economic inequality.

As more residential properties and family businesses are being rebuilt and reopened, there is a strong desire among residents to reconstruct Lahaina in a way that honours the fire's impact while addressing the issues of gentrification. Many interviewees advocate for conserving the coastline and ensuring that the rebuilding process respects the cultural and historical significance of the area. They argue that the focus should be on sustainable, community-centred development that prioritizes the island's cultural heritage and natural resources, rather than simply returning to the pre-fire status quo that primarily served tourism. A young Maui resident shared with me, "I would definitely like to see a memorial built to commemorate August 8th, and I'm a surfer so I want to see some more beach conservation. I think if the government wants to cooperate, this will actually be a good opportunity to build back Lahaina better."

With the tourism sector reopening, there is cautious optimism for an economic rebound that benefits all sectors of the island. Advocates are hopeful that the rebuilding efforts will lead to necessary changes, making tourism more sustainable and respectful of local needs and desires. Ideally, the tourism industry should shift away from the conventional American model of extractive vacation tourism, which often perpetuates false narratives and fosters ignorance, and instead embrace a model of environmental and cultural tourism led by Indigenous peoples. This approach would authentically represent Hawaiian culture, preserving and honouring local traditions while resisting the forces that threaten to erode them. As one Kupuna noted, "Look at what they're doing in Fiji. all the hotels and businesses are Fijian-owned. The tourism is community-based which showcases the Fijian culture, and the government ensures the profits benefit Fijians. That is what we need in Maui."

Such a transformation could promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of Hawaii, ensuring that tourism supports not only the island's economy but also its cultural and environmental sustainability, rather than contributing to its decline. This vision for the future of Lahaina reflects the community's commitment to rebuilding in a way that respects both their heritage and the natural environment, creating a more resilient and inclusive future for all.

A Kumu from the University of Hawaii Maui College pointed to the Lahaina Banyan tree as a symbol of resistance and encouragement for the Native people of Hawaii. "Despite being so severely burned, the tree is expected to recover fully and keep growing. Just like us... The Banyan Court will continue to be a testament of Hawaiian bravery for centuries to come."

Beyond rebuilding Lahaina, the wake of the fire popularized discussions about larger goals among the Kānaka Maoli community. While Indigenous resistance has existed since the overthrow of Queen Liliuokalani in 1893, the devastation caused by the fire and the unity

displayed by the community has reignited a desire for greater Native representation and empowerment.

Among the more passionate members of the community I spoke with, there is a strong desire for Hawaiian sovereignty, which includes the eviction of foreigners, the return of stolen lands, and the establishment of complete self-governance. The Hawaiian sovereignty movement has gained significant support, in part because it challenges the commonly held belief that Hawaii was a backward society before Western intervention. In reality, Hawaii was a technologically and diplomatically advanced sovereign nation, recognized by many European powers. A Hawaiian Activist and Educator powerfully shared:

“People forget that Hawaii wasn’t some undeveloped savage society before Westerners arrived. We were a recognized nation, ahead of our time in many ways. Our royal palace had electricity and indoor plumbing long before the White House did. We also were extremely progressive in our recognition of women's rights by abolishing the kapu system in 1819. That’s why there’s so much anger—because without Western interference, we believe Hawaii would still be a proud and sovereign nation on the world stage, and I believe this is still possible.”

However, some Kānaka Maoli advocate for a more moderate approach, such as the creation of an Indigenous governing body or council with executive, legislative, and judicial powers, to ensure that Native Hawaiian voices have a guaranteed place in decisions affecting their land and people. This proposal reflects a desire for self-determination within the existing framework of the state of Hawaii, rather than a complete break from the United States, distancing themselves from an American identity. They view full Hawaiian Sovereignty as challenging, given the extensive cultural and genetic entanglement that has developed from over a century of multicultural coexistence. For these advocates, the focus is on cultural resurgence rather than resistance or revolution.

The related push for cultural revival is already showing signs of success. In recent decades, Hawaiian language schools, programs, and classes have proliferated, leading to significant progress in the revival of Hawaiian Ōlelo (language), culture, and identity. Authentic hula and ha’a are being taught alongside other traditions, history, mythology, and wisdom. The contrast between generations is striking—where one generation was forbidden to speak Hawaiian and physically punished for doing so, the current generation of keiki (children) is part of an incredible cultural resurgence. This progress is a source of immense pride and encouragement for the community. An Indigenous teacher remarked, “It is on us to restore and reeducate ourselves about our own history that was erased by people like Dole Pineapple and William Hall. That starts by resisting and replacing the American occupational narrative.”

Regardless of individual beliefs, it is clear that the Lahaina fire has intensified the Kānaka Maoli people's determination to advocate for their rights and cultural recognition. This renewed sense

of purpose is likely to continue growing, driving efforts to secure a more just and equitable future for Native Hawaiians

## **Discussion**

Smith and Pelling argue that the socio-political context plays a crucial role in shaping the impact of disasters, highlighting how systemic inequalities and historical legacies exacerbate vulnerabilities. In line with their findings, the study also reveals challenges to resilience that are common in communities facing systemic inequalities and historical legacies of exploitation. The colonial-capitalist context in Hawaii, characterized by economic inequality, land dispossession, and the commodification of natural resources, has created vulnerabilities that exacerbated the impact of the wildfire. As noted by Pelling (2001) and Smith (2006), these socio-political factors can significantly undermine a community's resilience by limiting access to resources, reducing trust in institutions, and marginalizing vulnerable populations in disaster response efforts. Furthermore, these systemic disparities have led to their marginalization in government responses, evidenced by inadequate federal relief payments and the conspicuous absence of military intervention. Therefore, this research reinforces the central argument that the disaster's impact on Lahaina cannot be fully understood without considering these deep-seated inequalities. The nuances of resilience, particularly cultural resilience, emerge as a key element in the community's ability to navigate and recover from such disasters, underscoring the benefit of a more inclusive approach to disaster preparedness and response.

This discussion aims to authentically reflect the insights and perspectives of the participants, representing the voices of the native Hawaiian population. By doing so, it seeks to honour the lived experiences and cultural wisdom of the Kānaka Maoli, ensuring that their views are accurately conveyed and respected.

One of the central ideas that emerged from the research as a call to action is the critical need for heightened awareness of the structural issues facing Indigenous Hawaiians, both within and outside of Hawaii. The insights gathered from participants underscore the importance of promoting a greater understanding of native Hawaiian experiences, particularly in relation to historical injustices, cultural preservation, and the ongoing challenges posed by external influences. This heightened awareness is essential for fostering empathy, respect, and more informed decision-making and vacationing that aligns with the values and needs of the local community.

The findings strongly suggest that a comprehensive overhaul of the current tourism model is necessary to prevent further erosion of Hawaiian identity and the risk of further disasters. Rather than continuing with a model that caters to superficial attractions like resorts, white sand beaches, and stereotypical imagery, Hawaiian tourism can be reimagined as a celebration of the island's rich history, vibrant culture, and unparalleled natural beauty. Such a transformation

would not only help preserve and honour Hawaiian heritage but would also offer visitors a far more enriching and meaningful experience—one that goes beyond surface-level entertainment and engages them in the true spirit of the islands. Furthermore, the proposed reform of the tourism industry has the potential to address and correct environmentally exploitative practices, such as water diversion. This approach would foster a more ecologically sustainable environment that is more resistant to natural disasters. While the transition to a more culturally sensitive tourism model may present challenges, it is a shift that promises to be both profitable and culturally sustainable in the long run. By embracing tourism practices that respect and uplift Hawaiian culture, the industry can thrive in a way that benefits both the local community and visitors, ensuring that Hawaii remains a vibrant and authentic destination for generations to come.

In direct response to the fire, the research highlights disaster preparation as a critical area for improvement. One organization actively working to advance this space is CERENE, the Center for Resilient Neighborhoods at Kapi'olani Community College on the island of O'ahu. I spoke with a coordinator at CERENE, who shared insights into their mission, ongoing work, and significant accomplishments. The devastating impact of the Lahaina fires on Maui brought to the forefront the vital importance of CERENE's efforts. CERENE collaborates with the City and County of Honolulu, the University of Hawaii at Mānoa, and various community partners to focus on neighbourhood-level resilience planning, particularly in implementing state and local hazard mitigation plans. The center aspires to become a local student-led hub for community resilience, environmental sustainability, and climate change adaptation on the island. CERENE incorporates Indigenous wisdom and traditions by consulting with community members to develop the most historically practical and culturally appropriate solutions. Currently, CERENE is working on four active projects focused on food security, micro-grid energy storage, community resilience hubs, and biocultural restoration. The work of CERENE serves as a model for similar frameworks across Hawaii and other Pacific islands, providing a blueprint for better preparation and response to future natural disasters.

Despite its contributions, the study does have limitations that must be acknowledged. The research was conducted with a relatively small sample size, which, while providing deep insights, may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and perspectives within the broader Kānaka Maoli community. Additionally, the study's focus on the context of Hawaii may not be generalizable to all Indigenous communities or contexts. Future research could benefit from a larger, more diverse participant pool and the potential integration of quantitative methods to complement the qualitative insights.

Based on the findings, several implications and recommendations emerge for community actions, policy changes, and future research. For the community, the study reinforces the power of cultural resilience and the need to continue advocating for their rights and heritage. It highlights the necessity of community-driven efforts to protect and preserve cultural sites, traditions,

natural resources, and self-sufficiency. For policymakers, the research suggests the urgent need for policies that prioritize the well-being of native Hawaiians, including stronger protections against exploitative development practices, particularly those that facilitate external land grabs. They can do this by strictly monitoring large external purchases of land whilst supporting internal initiatives that promote cultural and environmental sustainability. Additionally, policymakers should promote sustainable tourism practices that respect local values and the environment. Local officials should also take proactive action to better prepare for and prevent future disasters.

According to conversations with locals, for the global citizen, engaging in curiosity, empathy, and awareness is the bottom line. These qualities are not just admirable traits but essential responsibilities. Hawaiian Natives possess both the passion and the capacity to advocate for themselves. What they seek from the broader population is an audience that truly recognizes and empathizes with the unique challenges they face. They need allies who can understand their struggles and show genuine compassion for their ongoing efforts to preserve their culture and heritage. Awareness, when cultivated with intention, can amplify the voices of Kānaka Maoli leaders, providing them with a broader platform to share their insights and experiences. This heightened visibility allows more people to develop a deep reverence for the richness of Hawaiian culture and history, ultimately leading to more informed and respectful decisions that support Native resurgence and social justice.

Furthermore, future research should explore the international applications of Indigenous models of resilience and recovery worldwide. Adopting Kānaka Maoli values and practices may be helpful in disaster response and relief around the world. By building on the insights of this study, future work can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how to support and empower native Hawaiian communities as well as how Hawaiian systems can contribute on the world stage.

## **Conclusion**

A whole year has passed since the outbreak of the fire in Lahaina. It has been an incredible honour to comprehensively investigate the events of August 8th, honouring the victims and the island they are from. This research has uncovered a complex interplay of factors that contributed to the devastation of the Lahaina wildfire and highlighted the unique challenges faced by the Kānaka Maoli community historically and presently. The study found that while natural and physical causes played a role in the disaster, they were significantly compounded by historical and systemic issues such as colonialism, land exploitation, and inadequate disaster preparedness. The voices of the native Hawaiian population, often marginalized or overlooked, were given center-stage, offering invaluable insights into their lived experiences, cultural practices, and the resilience that has sustained them through this tragedy and the generations.

Hearing the voices of community representatives, the research also underscores the need for heightened awareness, empathy, and informed decision-making, particularly regarding the impact of tourism and external influences on Hawaiian culture and society. It is clear that the current tourism model requires a comprehensive transformation to prevent further erosion of Hawaiian identity and to promote a more authentic and sustainable experience that honours the island's rich cultural heritage.

The findings of this study are not just a reflection of the past but a call to action for the future. The Kānaka Maoli community has demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of immense tragedy, but their continued survival and flourishing depend on the recognition and support of the broader global community. The battle to survive, thrive, and be recognized is far from over. This research highlights the importance of cultural resilience and the need for systemic change at both the local and global levels. The insights gathered here reinforce the urgency of respecting native Hawaiian culture and rights and ensuring that future policies and practices are rooted in respect for Indigenous sovereignty.

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