

HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY GUITAR INSTRUCTION: MOVING FORWARD BY LOOKING BACK

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The term *kikā ki hō‘alu*, Hawaiian slack key guitar, describes a style of guitar playing that has evolved since the introduction of the guitar to the Hawaiian archipelago in the early 19th century. While slack key guitar began to develop at least 50 years after the first arrival of Western explorers in 1778, many precontact and immediate postcontact Hawaiian elements of classical Hawaiian education have been transmitted in it. This article describes several of the ways knowledge of slack key guitar technique and repertoire have changed by profiling five guitarists and examining their experiences learning or transmitting knowledge of the style. Such knowledge tends to be transmitted through observation and imitation from generation to generation within the ‘ohana (family), and outside of the family using modern teaching tools and pedagogy.

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I would like an understanding of “tradition” that invites me to dissolve the worst excesses of modernisation theory and detraditionalisation hypotheses, which strike me as quite disrespectful of many people’s attempts to sustainably maintain continuities of learning and wisdom in their own localities and communities. If you wish to live “tradition,” these conversations, these narratives, such claims about “tradition,” don’t leave you with much of a choice. You mainly get to choose among various worlds pervaded by determinism: worlds of prescription; of storage and retrieval; of unthinking repetition; of unquestioned ideology and unquestioned authority. You could also opt for a world of despair as you passively watch what you love inevitably disappearing in the face of active change and a steamrolling modernity, while clambering to preserve it in the face of impending and irreparable silence. (McCann, 2010, p. 84)

The term *kikā kī hō’alu*, Hawaiian slack key guitar, describes a style of guitar playing that has evolved since the introduction of the guitar to the Hawaiian archipelago in the early 19th century. *Kikā kī hō’alu* literally translates as “guitar with loosened strings.” Kanahale (1979) attributes the term’s popularity to the efforts of The Hawaiian Music Foundation beginning in 1971. Keola Beamer believes that Alice Nāmakelua coined the term but has no firsthand knowledge to substantiate this opinion (personal communication). While slack key guitar began to develop at least 50 years after the first arrival of Western explorers in 1778, some elements of classical Hawaiian education can be found in its transmission. In this article I will describe several aspects of the way in which knowledge of slack key guitar techniques and repertoire have changed by profiling five guitarists and examining their experiences as students/learners, teachers/mentors, or both. Through their stories I will examine slack key guitar performance as knowledge transmitted through observation and imitation from generation to generation within the ‘ohana (family) and as knowledge transmitted outside of the family using modern teaching tools and pedagogy, including tablature and multimedia technologies. While I do not criticize the use of or dismiss the value of modern learning technologies, I will highlight issues that I have noted stemming from dependence on modern methodologies. I argue that these issues may be addressed through the reimplementing of culturally relevant pedagogies aligned with and informed by

older transmission methodologies. Such a strategy would support ongoing efforts to foster “an indigenous sense of well-being” in the Hawaiian community through the use of both traditional knowledge and pedagogy (Kana‘iaupuni & Kawai‘ae‘a, 2008). Finally, I will briefly discuss two issues that relate to these changes—creativity and innovation and reciprocity for slack key guitar instruction—with the hope that these issues will be researched in greater depth in the future.

HISTORY OF KĪKĀ KĪ HŌ‘ALU

The precise origins and early development of slack key guitar remain unclear, and both have been the subjects of much conjecture.¹ It is possible that Hawaiians first heard the guitar shortly after the arrival of James Cook in 1778 from subsequent Western visitors to Hawai‘i. Some Hawaiians may have also encountered the guitar in 1818, when King Kamehameha I reportedly sent 80 Hawaiians to Monterey, California (Kanahele, 1979, p. 352). The guitar almost certainly arrived in Hawai‘i with some of the first paniolo² from Northern Mexico (now Southern California) in 1832. It is indisputable that the guitar had become established in Hawai‘i before 1850. An advertisement in the June 6, 1840, issue of *The Polynesian* offers a bass viol, violin, and guitar strings for sale by Henry Paty and Company in Honolulu (Kanahele, 1979, p. 352).

There is little documentation of the arrival of the guitar, and there appears to be even less of the development of slack key guitar. Beginning in the mid-1830s, Hawaiian language newspapers became the source of much information regarding Hawai‘i’s rich oral history and society of that era, but there seemed to be little interest on the part of Hawaiians and others in documenting the use of the guitar in everyday life (Kanahele, 1979, p. 351). I tested this statement by searching the Ulukau Hawaiian Electronic Library, which contains approximately 7,000 text-searchable pages from Hawaiian newspapers printed between 1834 and 1948.³ Those pages contain only three references to “guitar,” the earliest occurring in 1868, and 17 references to the partially transliterated “gita,” the earliest found in 1862. The fully transliterated term *kika* occurs 165 times in the archive; however, in only three occurrences did the term refer to a guitar, the earliest appearing in the May 21, 1925, issue of *Ka Nupepa Kuokoa*, one of the most prominent and longest-running Hawaiian language newspapers. The other occurrences of *kika* in the newspapers referred to a cigar or a tiger.⁴

While there is no definitive proof that the arrival of the guitar can be attributed to the paniolo, their influence can be clearly heard in early Hawaiian compositions that reflect the influence of Spanish and Mexican melodies (Kanahele, 1979, pp. 351–352) and the strong tradition of guitar in areas where the Mexican cowboys worked, such as Kohala on Hawai‘i Island. Recent evidence suggests that at least one nonstandard tuning,⁵ “Open G,” also known as “G Spanish tuning,”⁶ arrived with the Mexican cowboys (Kohl, 2006, pp. 36–38). This tuning is known as “Taro Patch” tuning in Hawai‘i (Beamer, 1973, p. 33) and is one of the most widely used and arguably easiest tunings to learn and play. Kohl presented a music notation of the song “Spanish Fandango,” a Mexican folk song of Spanish influence, which dates to the 1800s. It was performed in the “Open G tuning” and sounds similar in melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic style to some older and modern slack key guitar styles (Kohl, 2006). Other subsequent tunings were likely developed by performers in Hawai‘i, allowing them to personalize their playing styles and facilitate performance in keys that were better suited to the performer’s vocal range (Beamer, personal communication, 2007).

While most commonly performed as an accompaniment to vocal performance, kīkā kī hō‘alu has also developed into a distinct unaccompanied guitar style. Keola Beamer, noted kīkā kī hō‘alu performer and recording artist, recorded instrumental renditions of several Hawaiian song standards on his debut release, *Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar in the Real Old Style* (Beamer, 1996). Windham Hills’ recording artist George Winston helped increase public awareness of slack key guitar in the 1990s with the release of his *Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar Masters* series, which features preeminent contemporary slack key guitar artists such as Keola Beamer, Ledward Ka‘apana, Sonny Chillingworth, Cyril Pahinui, George Kuō, Raymond Kāne, Dennis Kamakahi, and many others. Compilations of slack key guitar recordings, both with and without Hawaiian language vocals, by various artists were awarded the first four Grammy awards for Hawaiian Album of the Year, the first of which was bestowed in 2005. The selection of slack key recordings for these awards has caused some consternation within the Hawaiian community because of what has been perceived as its narrow representation of Hawaiian music, the awarding of the first Hawaiian Grammy to a non-Hawaiian producer, the mistaken belief that all of the releases lacked vocal performances in the Hawaiian language, and the awards’ selection by the Academy’s entire membership instead of restricting the process to those knowledgeable about Hawaiian music genres⁷ (Chun, 2001; Donaghy, 2007; Obejas, 2006). While lamentable, the passion displayed by both supporters and critics of the Academy’s selections show that slack key remains a living and vital component of Hawai‘i’s musical tradition and its future.

SUBJECT BIOGRAPHIES

I will first provide biographical information regarding five performers of *kikā kī hō‘alu* and their roles as teachers/mentors and students/learners of slack key guitar. The first two, Raymond Kāne and Kenneth Makuakāne, I describe as learners of slack key guitar. The third, Pono Beamer, is discussed only in his role as a teacher/mentor. The last two, Alice Nāmakelua and Keola Beamer, are described as both students/learners and teachers/mentors. Keola Beamer and Makuakāne were selected because of my familiarity with their work and their accessibility for this research. Nāmakelua was selected because of Keola Beamer’s firsthand knowledge and experience as Nāmakelua’s student, as well as recorded interviews with Nāmakelua that were available to me. Pono Beamer was selected because of Keola Beamer’s firsthand knowledge and experience of Pono’s playing, background, and interaction with Keola and his brother Kapono as they learned to play guitar.

Alice Ku‘uleialohapoina‘ole Nāmakelua



LARRY LINDSEY KIMURA

Alice Ku‘uleialohapoina‘ole Nāmakelua was born in August 1892 in Honoka‘a on Hawai‘i Island. Her father, Sunetaro Nagayama, was of pure Japanese ancestry, and her mother, Caroline Kekalaleiomilika‘a Kanakaoluna, of pure Hawaiian ancestry. She learned slack key guitar by watching her mākua (parents and other elders of the parents’ generation):

Ka‘u wale nō i maopopo ai, ke ‘ano o ka ho‘okani ‘ana a ko‘u mau makua, ‘o ia ka‘u i maopopo ai a ‘o ia no ka‘u e ho‘okani nei a hiki i keia lā. (Kimura, 1972).

All I know is the way that my parents played. That is what I know and what I continue to play until today.⁸

She expanded on this thought and described her experience when showing her desire to play the guitar by reaching for someone else’s instrument:

‘A‘ohe a‘o ‘ia, he maha‘oi wale aku nō. Lālau akula i ka pila a pa‘i ‘ia maila ka lima, a “waiho mālie ‘oe i ka pila.” Pēia ihola ke ‘ano o ke a‘o ‘ana. (Kimura, 1972)

I wasn’t taught, but was simply inquisitive. I’d reach for the instrument and my hand would be smacked, and I was told, “Put the instrument down.” That is how I learned.

Nāmakelua favored wahine tunings⁹ (Beamer, personal communication, 2007). She claimed to have known eight tunings in her youth, but because she gave up the instrument for an extended period of time after her marriage and the subsequent death of her husband, she had forgotten most of them by the time she began playing again in her later years (Kimura, 1972). Her sole commercial recording, “Ku‘uleialohapoina‘ole,” was recorded and released in 1974 on the Hula Records label but is no longer commercially available. Nāmakelua died in 1987.

Raymond Kaleoalohapoina'oleohelemanu Kāne

1987, TOM PICH

Raymond Kaleoalohapoina'oleohelemanu Kāne was born in 1925 in Kōloa on the island of Kaua'i but moved with his family to Nānākuli, O'ahu, while in his youth (Kohl, 1990). Kāne learned slack key guitar from two nonfamily members, Albert Kawelo and Henry Kapauna from Ni'ihau, who were initially reluctant to teach him because Kāne was not related to them. However, he convinced them to teach him by offering to catch fish for them, as he was a skilled diver. In exchange, they allowed him to observe their playing at parties and informal gatherings. Kāne commented that they did not want to waste their time teaching a child who was only 9 or 10 years old (Kohl, 1990, p. 40).

Kāne has recorded many albums as a solo artist as well as a member of duos and groups, and has performed in clubs and at music festivals across the United States (Kohl, 1990). In 1987, Kāne was named a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts (National Endowment for the Arts, 2003), and in 2003 he was awarded the Hawai'i Academy of Recording Arts Lifetime Achievement Award (Board of Governors, Hawai'i Academy of Recording Arts, 2008). Kāne died in 2008.

Francis Pono Beamer



L–R: Francis Pono Beamer, Louise “Damby” Beamer, Keola Beamer, and Winona Beamer

COURTESY OF KEOLA BEAMER

Francis Pono Beamer, grandfather of Keola Beamer, was a rancher in the Kohala district of Hawai‘i Island, and son of famed Hawaiian composer Helen Desha Beamer. Keola Beamer described his grandfather’s music-making as not just a hobby but also a passion. Pono¹⁰ is well known as the composer of the mele (song) *Ku‘u Hoa*, which has been widely performed and recorded, and is considered a standard in the Hawaiian music repertoire. He played mostly in standard tuning but did perform some songs in the Taro Patch tuning. Beamer believes that his grandfather learned slack key guitar from cowboys in the Kohala district, but could provide no further information on how Pono learned to play (Beamer, personal communication, 2007).

Keola Beamer

Keola (below) and
Kapono Beamer
COURTESY OF KEOLA BEAMER

Keola Beamer was born in 1951 and raised in Kohala on Hawai‘i Island. He learned ‘ukulele from his mother, grandmother, and other family members. He described the process of learning to play the ‘ukulele as being based on observation and imitation; however, his mother and grandmother, who operated an ‘ukulele studio, also provided some verbal instruction. He learned to play the guitar in standard tuning from his grandfather Pono, and slack key guitar from both his grandfather Pono and later from Nāmakelua. He also studied classical guitar in high school and college (Beamer, personal communication, 2007).

Beamer and his younger brother Kapono frequently worked at their grandfather’s ranch in Kohala, performing what he described as hard manual labor. Evenings were a time for the family to share music, and Beamer characterized making music as a reward for a hard day’s work at the ranch. In the evenings, their grandfather and other adult relatives would play guitar and sing. When the adults took a break, Beamer and his younger brother would play their instruments, after asking permission. The adults would feign disinterest in the children’s attempts to play,

while also surreptitiously paying close attention. If Beamer and his brother had extreme difficulty playing a particular song or passage, Pono would take his guitar back from whichever child was playing it, verbally express his displeasure, and play the part again for them. Sometimes he provided some verbal instruction but usually would simply play the song or passage that Beamer and his brother had difficulty playing (Beamer, personal communication, 2007).

In 2009 Keola and Kapono Beamer were awarded the Hawai'i Academy of Recording Arts Lifetime Achievement Award (Board of Governors, Hawai'i Academy of Recording Arts, 2008).

Kenneth Makuakāne



COURTESY OF KENNETH MAKUAKĀNE

Kenneth Makuakāne was born in 1955 in Keaukaha on Hawai'i Island, and learned to play slack key by observing and imitating his uncle Albert Kaupiko at family gatherings in the island's lower Puna district. While he was surrounded by music in his youth, Makuakāne's immediate family owned no instruments during his childhood years so he had to wait until relatives came for meals and parties (Makuakāne, personal communication, 2007).

Makuakāne related that he would observe his uncle at jam sessions and memorized fingerings and the sounds produced by his uncle's playing. This was quite a challenge as Makuakāne plays the guitar left-handed while the guitar is strung as it would normally be for a right-handed player. At family gatherings, Kaupiko would play slack key, then retune the guitar to standard tuning before putting the instrument down to get a drink, to get some food, or to socialize with family members. Makuakāne would then pick up Kaupiko's guitar and try to figure out the tunings based on what he heard and the fingerings he observed Kaupiko use.

What Makuakāne did not learn until much later is that Kaupiko would observe him from afar, monitoring his progress. Later, when Makuakāne had his own guitar, Kaupiko would receive progress reports from Makuakāne's mother. Makuakāne related that he was unaware that his uncle was monitoring his progress until much later, perhaps his teenage years, after he had achieved a respectable level of proficiency on the instrument (Makuakāne, personal communication, 2007). Makuakāne has received twelve Nā Hōkū Hanohano Awards¹¹ as a singer, songwriter, engineer, producer, and group member (Board of Governors, The Hawai'i Academy of Recording Arts, 2008).

CHANGES IN TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE

The manner by which the five individuals profiled above learned how to play slack key guitar is similar to the methods described by Charlot in his definition of classical Hawaiian education. Charlot defines a classical Hawaiian education as one that predominantly features "cultural elements that originated in the precontact period and were perpetuated with changes or developments, including genealogies, hula, and certain Hawaiian religious practices and values...in the sense of a famous or recognized exemplar of a type" (2005). He also accurately notes that any examination of precontact methods depends on the use of postcontact written sources, and that "change and creativity are as much a part of Polynesian culture as conservatism" (2005). Nāmakelua was born 72 years after the arrival of Western missionaries, making her the earliest-born individual of all of those discussed in this article. I cannot definitively state that the use of the elements she described are indeed a continuation of precontact practices. However, the similarities between the means by which knowledge was transmitted, as described in these postcontact writings, are notable.

These individuals largely learned by observation, rather than being told explicitly how to tune, hold, and play the instrument. This is consistent with Hawaiian tradition as described in an ‘ōlelo no‘eau (Hawaiian proverbial saying)—“Nānā ka maka, ho‘olohe ka pepeiao, pa‘a ka waha” (The eyes watch, the ears listen, the mouth remains shut; Pukui, 1983, p. 248). Makuakāne’s, Nāmakelua’s, and Beamer’s accounts of learning to play slack key guitar represent learning within the traditional family context—a transmission model based on observation and imitation. Kāne’s account of learning slack key guitar from nonfamily members, while perhaps not unique, appears to be an exception to normal transmission practices within the family. Beamer related an incident from his childhood when, during a family gathering at a relative’s home in Nu‘uanu, O‘ahu, slack key guitar tunings and performance techniques were guarded as family knowledge:

I heard the strains of this music in the distance, you know at a distance and I began walking, behind a path, and I followed this little path into the neighbor’s yard under this mango tree...and I was listening to the most beautiful music I’ve ever heard...it was like silk in the air...it was so beautiful. And this Hawaiian man, sitting on a Wesson oil can underneath the mango tree playing slack key guitar. It was so beautiful...just the essence of it, you know. And so I, again, I must have been like, 12, 11...I kind of sat down in the dirt in front of him and he had his eyes closed, he was just...really enraptured in the music, eyes were closed, he was just playing so beautiful. When I sat down I made a little rustling sound in the dirt...and he kind of was startled a little when he looked down at me. And I could see him really looking at me...I could feel him really studying my face. And then he stopped playing and then turned his back. And I was just like...I couldn’t believe it, I was really, that seemed to be a really hurtful thing to do...and I just got up and I ran home and later I told my mom and said you know, “What did I do wrong, Mom?” she said, “No, it’s not that you did anything wrong, you just weren’t part of that man’s ‘ohana, you know you weren’t part of his family and he didn’t want to play anymore and share that with you.” (Beamer, personal communication, 2007)

Beamer related that this was a pivotal encounter for him and strengthened his desire and resolve to learn slack key guitar. Kāne described a similar incident while growing up in Nānākuli, O‘ahu:

One morning I was up about 3 o'clock...and I heard this beautiful music. I wondered, "What was that?" I thought it was about two or three guys playing. When I went by the table, I saw it was just one man all by himself with the guitar...I sit down waiting for him to play again. I didn't want him to see me...But I would listen and I saw his thumb and his fingers were moving at the same time...When he goes fishing, I sneak in his tent and grabbed his guitar...I started to get that tuning so I started messing around because I was watching what he was doing. I was 9 or 10 years old. That's how I got started. (Kohl, 2006, p. 39)

A few years after Beamer had been rebuffed by his relative's neighbor, his mother Winona noticed his growing interest in and talent for guitar playing, and she introduced her son to Nāmakelua. Beamer's mother told him that he could not simply go to Nāmakelua and ask her to teach slack key guitar to him, but that he must visit her, get to know her, offer to do errands for her, and later see if she would teach him slack key guitar. Beamer did so and, after a few weeks, Nāmakelua began to teach him on condition that he would teach what he had learned from her when he was sufficiently proficient to do so. Beamer remembers regularly performing errands for Nāmakelua during the time that he studied with her (Beamer, personal communication, 2007).

Nāmakelua would play and sing, Beamer would watch, listen, and upon completion of her playing, he would imitate her performance. She provided little verbal instruction, and if he made mistakes, she would play the passage correctly for him, and he would it play again. Sometimes she would offer verbal instruction, most often to explain particularly difficult rhythmic nuances of the songs. Though he was not certain, he believes that during his study with Nāmakelua she had four or five other students. Beamer has spoken with others who say they also studied with her and has reported that over the years many people have approached him who stated that they also studied with her. He completed studies with Nāmakelua at the age of 16 or 17 (Beamer, personal communication, 2007).

During the early years of what is now referred to as the Hawaiian Renaissance (late 1960s and 1970s), Beamer and other slack key guitar performers discussed the state of slack key guitar, and agreed that the secrecy surrounding slack key guitar as a family tradition was leading toward its eventual demise. While they did not collectively decide to take any action based on this conclusion, Beamer began teaching privately in the early 1970s at Harry's Music Store in Kaimukī and at the shop of luthier and classical guitar instructor George Gilmore, who also created the unique double-hole acoustic guitars that Beamer has popularized. Beamer wrote and published a guitar method in 1973, *Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar*. He was criticized by some kūpuna (elders) for sharing this knowledge but supported by his mother and comforted by his promise to Nāmakelua.

Since Beamer could not find a commercial publisher interested in printing his guitar method, he decided to publish it himself. His girlfriend at that time assisted him by creating graphics, and the two of them operated a manual printing press to produce the text. Thirty copies of the book were left at Harry's Music Store, and within a week he was contacted by the store with a request for more copies. After producing several printings of the book in this manner, he attracted the interest of a New York publisher who assumed production and distribution of the book, which included a plastic 45 RPM record with recorded performances of the songs found in the book (Beamer, 1973).



Covers of the original 1973 (left) and 1977 printings of *Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar*
COURTESY OF KEOLA BEAMER

Many guitarists do not learn to read music notation for guitar, and for good reason. On many instruments there is only one way to play a particular note, while on guitar there are several locations on the guitar neck where some notes could be played, with any one of the four fingers used to fret a note. Unlike standard music notation, it also limits the performer's ability to learn music theory or the relationship between the notes on the staff, and restricts the learner to those pieces that have been documented in tablature (Ruymar, 1996). In slack key guitar, the retuning of the strings further complicates learning to sight-read. A performer may need to press on different strings and frets depending on which tuning is used in order to produce the same note. Beamer related that he learned to read tablature for the lute while a student at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and a member of a Renaissance music ensemble. Unaware of the prior use of tablature for other guitar styles, including earlier Hawaiian guitar styles,¹² he recognized the value of this type of printed notation and modified it for slack key. Even though he was not aware of the use of the tablature system for teaching other styles of guitar playing at that time, Beamer did not believe his adaptation of the tablature system for slack key guitar was the first for the guitar (Beamer, personal communication, 2007).

In tablature, each line represents a string, and the number represents the fret pressed on that string. Sometimes the letters PIMA¹³ are used to indicate which finger plucks the string with the right hand.¹⁴ In the world of slack key guitar performance, this development is as significant as the standardization of Hawaiian orthography by the missionaries in the 1820s, and has had both positive and negative consequences for the genre that are beyond the scope of this article.

Imo Imo Hoku Iki

Tuning No. 1 Traditional

The image shows three systems of guitar tablature for the song 'Imo Imo Hoku Iki'. Each system consists of two staves. The first system is marked with a 4/4 time signature. The tablature uses numbers 0, 1, 2, and a bar line to indicate fret positions and measures. The second and third systems follow a similar pattern of notes and rests across two staves.

COURTESY OF KEOLA BEAMER

This change in the way knowledge was transmitted is not unique to slack key guitar in Hawai'i, nor was the criticism that it produced. The late kumu hula (hula teacher) Margaret Māiki Aiu Lake incorporated nontraditional methods of hula instruction, including the use of a chalkboard in her classes and the requirement that haumāna (students) write out chants and songs, maintain a notebook, and complete homework assignments. In her later years, she was also criticized for accepting advanced students of other teachers and training them to become kumu hula themselves, a process that traditionally may take decades and sometimes a lifetime to achieve. However, her legacy is carried on by her students, some of who have become renowned kumu hula themselves, and have graduated their own students to the rank of kumu hula (Chong-Stannard, Howes, & Kneubuhl, 2002).

Today, many well-known instructors of slack key guitar use modern instructional methods, including guitar tablature, explicit instruction, and modern multimedia tools such as streaming audio and video on the World-Wide Web. Beamer has continued to innovate in developing learning materials for slack key performance, and has produced and published learning materials (Beamer, 1998, 1995; Beamer & Nelson, 1999) and DVDs. He now delivers instruction via the World-Wide Web

in multimedia format including streaming video, audio, and tablature as pdf (Portable Document Format) files. Other slack key guitarists have also made significant contributions to the wide variety of learning materials that are now available commercially, including books (Kwan, 1980), books with audio recordings (Ho & Sano, 2001; Kotani & Ladd, 1997), and VHS and/or DVD formats¹⁵ (Beamer & Martinez Burgmaier, 2003; Kaapana, Brozman, & Traum, 2005; Kahumoku, 2006; Kāne, Carvalho, Honda, & Pacheco, 1995; Keawe, 2006; Landeza, 2006).

Beamer has also conducted a series of slack key guitar camps on the islands of Molokaʻi and Hawaiʻi to provide more personalized instruction to intermediate and advanced students. Students at the camps can also learn the Hawaiian language and proper pronunciation, hula, chant, and also how to play the ʻukulele (see <http://www.alohamusiccamp.com/>). George Kahumoku also runs a slack key guitar camp on the island of Maui (Kahumoku, 2010), and his son Keoki Kahumoku operates the Kahumoku ʻOhana Hawaiian Lifestyles Workshop on Hawaiʻi Island (see <http://www.konaweb.com/keoki/>). In addition to providing slack key guitar instruction, these workshops also provide instruction in ʻukulele playing and building and other crafts and cultural activities. Slack key guitar is taught at the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa campus (by Peter J. Medeiros), Windward Community College (by Ron Loo), and at the University of Hawaiʻi at Hilo (by Cyril Pahinui). Northern California-based slack key guitarist Patrick Landeza teaches privately and at clinics on the U.S. mainland (<http://patricklandeza.com/>), and slack key performers who tour the mainland United States and internationally frequently conduct clinics in conjunction with concert performances. Hawaiian slack key guitar has also been the subject of at least two significant documentary projects (Beamer & Martinez Burgmaier, 2003; Friedman, 1994).

PERIPHERAL ISSUES IN TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE

My discussions with Beamer highlighted several differences in attitudes and practice related to the transmission of slack key guitar between what Beamer describes as “old style” learning (based on observation and imitation) and more contemporary direct instruction. These issues are noted and discussed briefly below, and will be the focus of more in-depth research in the future.

Creativity and Innovation

Student apprehension about innovating within an accepted framework of the genre is one of the significant issues in the transmission of slack key guitar today. Beamer related that in his encounters with students, they will frequently play his or other tablature arrangements exactly as notated and seem hesitant to or incapable of creating original arrangements of songs (Beamer, personal communication, 2007). For example, there is a popular web discussion board for “slackers” (as aficionados of slack key guitar sometimes refer to themselves) called TaroPatch.net. In an online exchange between two slack key guitar performers, Robert d’Entremont of Loves Park, Illinois, and University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa slack key guitar instructor Peter Medeiros, d’Entremont asked about fingering for a particular passage in Sonny Chillingworth’s recording of the song “Radio Hula.” Medeiros related that he had observed Chillingworth perform “Radio Hula,” and that Chillingworth played the passage in question by barring the guitar neck at the 5th fret. D’Entremont replied, “I tried a 5th fret fingering earlier while trying to find a way to get through the passage but thought I was cheating” (d’Entremont & Medeiros, 2007). Beamer related that he is trying to implement more of the old style instruction in his own teaching to help students overcome the sometimes self-imposed, prescriptive barriers that he believes are preventing them from expressing greater creativity in their playing and arrangements of slack key guitar pieces (Beamer, personal communication, 2007).

On the other end of the spectrum, some practitioners of Hawaiian music have faced criticism for innovating beyond the boundaries of what some in the Hawaiian music community and other practitioners will accept. Likewise, the value and acceptance of innovation and creativity in the performance of slack key and “pseudo slack key” is contested (Medeiros, 2009, p. xiv). Medeiros notes:

As players have become more adept in the art of playing guitar, the arrangements, in particular through composed works, have become more sophisticated, which in effect has moved Hawaiian slack key away from a sense of spontaneity and is now centered upon the performer. Nonetheless, there is room for creativity within traditional Hawaiian slack key and it will continue to evolve. (Medeiros, 2009, p. 283)

Like some slack key performers, the chanted recordings, compositions, and hula performances of kumu hula Mark Keli'i Ho'omalulu and his hālau (house for hula instruction) based in Oakland, California, have been praised for their creativity and criticized for what some have characterized as excessive use of non-Hawaiian musical elements (Tengan, 2008, p. 205). Such criticisms are not new to the world of hula; Robert Cazimero, Frank Kawaikapuokalani Hewett, and Johnny Lum Ho were collectively labeled as “The Rebels of Hula” in a 1991 *Honolulu Magazine* article for their deviations from older hula styles and willingness to innovate and include non-Hawaiian elements (Otaguro, 1991, p. 44).

Payment or Reciprocity for Instruction and Knowledge Withheld

One of the notable differences between the transmission of knowledge in its classical context and today involves payment or reciprocity. Kāne convinced two nonrelatives, Hawaiians from the island of Ni'ihau, to teach him slack key guitar by offering to catch fish for them. Kohl (2006, p. 41) suggests that there may have been other reasons for this arrangement, as Kāne had related similar bartering practices—trading the fish he caught for vegetables, SPAM, and corned beef—as he did with the Ni'ihau Hawaiians who taught him slack key guitar. Beamer performed chores and ran errands for Nāmakelua both before and during the time that she provided instruction to him. He considered theirs to be a master/apprenticeship relationship, where an apprentice would perform tasks for the master, sometimes for years, before actually learning the craft. In Beamer's case, his instruction began a few weeks after he began performing chores for Nāmakelua. When I first approached Beamer and asked him to accept me as a student in the early 1990s, he immediately suggested an alternative form of compensation. Rather than paying him, I would provide Hawaiian language tutoring for his wife and secretary, and he would teach me slack key guitar. We agreed to one additional condition—that I arrive for my lesson having mastered everything that he had taught me previously and prepared to learn something new at each lesson. He did not wish our time together to be a practice session in which he would simply observe and correct what he had previously taught me. This arrangement was honored until time constraints prevented me from continuing my studies with him.

All of these examples are consistent with the idea that knowledge was waiwai (valuable) in traditional Hawaiian society and required payment or compensation of some kind. Charlot (2005) noted, however, that “at least one aspect of the teacher-student relations is not found in the family: the payment due the expert for services.” Makuakāne provided neither payment nor service to his uncle in exchange for his instruction, nor did Beamer to his grandfather. While Beamer characterized the time spent playing music at his grandfather’s ranch as a reward for a hard day’s work, he could not recall any instance of being denied the right to play the guitar for not working hard enough or any other similar reason. Beamer has accepted compensation, either monetary or by accepting services from students, since he began teaching slack key guitar.

I do not argue that the mentors/teachers discussed in this section were motivated by a desire for personal gain, be it in the form of fish, money, or services. I argue that the student’s payment or reciprocity is symbolic of the intention to learn and value the knowledge being passed on. In Beamer’s relationship with Nāmakelua, the performance of errands and tasks for her prior to his lessons demonstrated the sincerity of his desire to learn from her. Neither the acts of reciprocity described above nor Makuakāne’s and Beamer’s experiences within the family assured that the students would learn everything their mentors knew. Makuakāne related that after he became quite proficient at playing the guitar his uncle said to him, “I have taught you everything that you know, but not everything that I know” (Makuakāne, personal communication, 2007). Charlot also provides examples of traditional Hawaiian knowledge being withheld from students, even when transmission occurred within the family (Charlot, 2005). Beamer could recall no such incident in his learning experiences with his grandfather Pono or with Nāmakelua; however, he did state that he would not teach some knowledge that he had acquired, particularly knowledge about songs written by his great-grandmother, Helen Desha Beamer, to anyone outside the Beamer family.

CONCLUSION

Kana’iaupuni and Kawai’ae’a (2008) have described the efforts to strengthen culture-based education and student achievement in intermediate and high school programs throughout Hawai’i as a journey, using a metaphor of a wa’a

(canoe) and paddlers working together to reach their common destination. Such an analogy would also be appropriate in the context of slack key guitar instruction. While much of the early history of *kikā ki hō‘alu* and the transmission of repertoire and performing techniques remains unclear, the examples I have provided in this article display elements of what Charlot has described as classical Hawaiian education, even if such a connection cannot be definitely stated. The learning and teaching experiences of Nāmakelua, Kāne, Keola and Pono Beamer, and Makuakāne demonstrate how the transmission of knowledge rooted in older times and based on a model of observation and imitation was applied to the more contemporary and Western-influenced slack key guitar.

The decisions of Nāmakelua, Beamer, and others to teach outside of the family and to adapt Western tools and pedagogy represented an act of cultural adaptation taken to avert loss of slack key guitar. I certainly do not criticize their decisions. While changes in transmission have resulted in the genre’s increased popularity over the past four decades and perhaps saved it from abandonment or obscurity, these changes have also provided challenges that could be addressed by a closer examination and reintroduction of traditional teaching methods, such as those Beamer and others have begun to implement in their own instructional pedagogies. Such strategies would align well with McCann’s desire to see attitudes toward tradition support the efforts of individuals and communities to “sustainably maintain continuities of learning and wisdom” (McCann, 2010, p. 84).

Attitudes toward and discourse surrounding the place of creativity and a sometimes prescriptive adherence to older performance practice will continue to influence the transmission of knowledge regarding *kikā ki hō‘alu*, as they do with other Hawaiian cultural traditions such as hula. Such discourse reflects the passion of individuals and the community for these practices. Although discussions and disagreements over some elements may become heated, these should be a constructive part of cultural maintenance. While payment for instruction and other forms of reciprocity are now an established part of slack key guitar instruction, both teacher and student should recognize the symbolism of this act. Like those individuals that paddle together on a canoe, both are active participants in the continuation of this cultural practice and its arrival at an as-yet-undetermined location in the future.

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NOTES

1 The website of Dancing Cat Records contains a wealth of information on the earliest documentation of the guitar in Hawai‘i, the development of slack key, the various tunings and playing styles and techniques, repertoire, and other valuable information on the genre. See <http://www.dancingcat.com/skbook-tableofcontents.php>

2 The term *paniolo* is a transliteration of “Spaniard”; however, it was also used to refer to the Mexican vaqueros or cowboys brought to Hawai‘i to control herds of cattle that had become a nuisance in the early 1800s.

- 3 It should be noted that the 7,000 text-searchable pages currently housed on Ulukau represent a small percentage of the estimated 125,000 pages of Hawaiian language newspapers that were published. It is possible that earlier examples of the use of *kika* for guitar will be discovered when the remaining newspaper images are made available in a text-searchable format.
- 4 The ‘okina (glottal stop) and kahakō (macron) used in contemporary Hawaiian orthography were not used in the Hawaiian language newspapers of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The use of the kahakō now differentiates several meanings—*kikā* for guitar, cigar, and several other meanings, and *kika* for tiger, slipper, and other meanings (Pukui & Elbert, 1986).
- 5 In standard tuning the guitar’s strings are tuned EADGBE from lowest to highest.
- 6 In Open G tuning the guitar’s strings are tuned DGDGBD from lowest to highest.
- 7 It should be noted that some of the issues raised during debates about the Hawaiian Grammy were based on misinformation. While many critics of the award expressed displeasure at slack key instrumentals being chosen by the Academy’s membership, only the first of the Hawaiian Grammy Award–winning releases featured only instrumental recordings. While the words “slack key” appeared in their titles, the next three Grammy Award–winning releases also prominently featured vocals.
- 8 Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are my own.
- 9 Wahine (female) tunings require that the performer press and fret at least one string in order to achieve a complete major or minor key tonality when strummed or plucked. There are other groupings of slack key tunings based on other common elements such as the interval between the fifth and sixth strings.
- 10 For ease of reading and brevity, and to avoid possible confusion, I use “Pono” in reference to the grandfather and “Beamer” for the grandson.
- 11 The Hawai‘i Academy of Recording Arts (HARA) established the annual Nā Hōkū Hanohano Awards over 30 years ago. They are frequently referred to as “The Hawaiian Grammy Awards,” although there is no official affiliation between HARA and The Recording Academy, which awards the Grammys.

12 The first steel guitar instruction book was published in 1916 and included both musical notation and a tablature or “number” system. This innovation is credited to J. Kalani Peterson (Ruymar, 1996).

13 These letters are the first letters for the Spanish terms for the fingers used to pluck the string: *pulgar* (thumb), *indice* (fore finger), *medio* (middle finger), *anular* (ring finger).

14 Right-handed guitarists pluck the string of the guitar with the right hand and finger the fretboard with their left hand. Left-handed guitarists sometimes have their instruments strung so that they can be plucked with the left hand and fretted with the right.

15 A more comprehensive listing of the many slack key learning materials that are currently available can be found at <http://www.taropatch.net/learn.htm>