Commentary

Denby Fawcett: Voices From The Private Island Of Niihau Are Brought Back To Life In New Book

The rich lives and traditions of the "Forbidden Isle" were captured in the Hawaiian language newspapers that flourished for more than a century.

By Denby Fawcett

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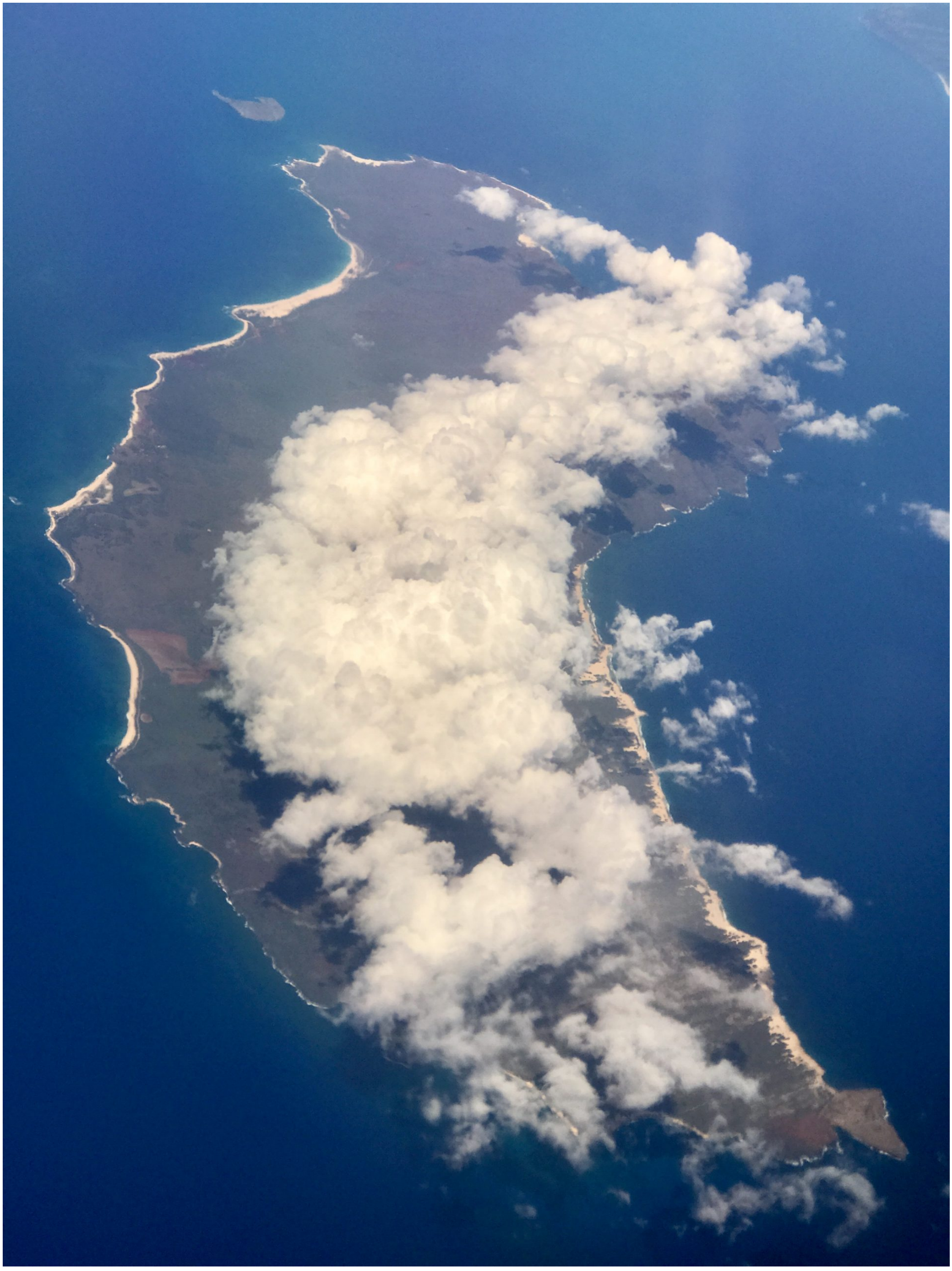

Much has been written about Niihau — Hawaii's only privately owned island — but the writers have been primarily Caucasians or scholars educated by Caucasians.

And many of them have never set foot on Niihau because to this day the island's owners carefully restrict who can visit.

John Clark's new book "Niʻihau Place Names" brings a different perspective to daily life on "The Forbidden Island" by highlighting news reports written by Niihau residents in the Hawaiian language newspapers.

From 1834 until 1948, more than 100 Hawaiian language papers flourished in the islands, eagerly devoured by literate Native Hawaiians whom printers were unable to supply fast enough with written material.

To keep up with their reading, many Native Hawaiians learned to read books upside down and sideways so they could peruse them alongside a bookʻs owner who was reading it right-side up.

Hawaiians including Niihau residents also loved writing articles for the Hawaiian language papers and letters to the editor that now are digitized — offering researchers priceless information about what everyday Hawaiians were thinking as they moved from life in a kingdom to a constitutional monarchy to a republic and finally to a territory of the United States.

In the case of Niihau the newspaper reports describe what the island was like when it was ruled by a Hawaiian king and then after 1864, when it was sold by King Kamehameha V to private owner Elizabeth "Eliza" Sinclair for $10,000.

Niihau men loading cattle for shipping in the late 1800s. King Kamehameha V sold the island to Elizabeth “Eliza” Sinclair for $10,000 in 1864, upending the way of life on the remote island. (Courtesy: Hawaii State Archives.)

Sinclair, of Scottish descent, had come to Hawaii with her family from New Zealand to buy land to start a sheep ranch.

Since Sinclairʻs purchase of the island, it has been continuously owned and managed by her relatives with last names of Knudsen, Gay and Robinson. The current owners of the island are Sinclair’s great-great grandsons, Bruce and Keith Robinson.

It is the only island in the state where all the residents are fluent in Olelo Hawaii, speaking an older version of the language that uses the letters “t” and “r.”

The Hawaiian language newspaper articles quoted in Clark’s book convey an emotional sense of what the Niihau people felt after their ancestral home for centuries was sold to Sinclair, whose family imposed unfamiliar and strict regulations on their lives.

E.K. Waihinealoha of Puuwai, Niihau, writing in Ka Nupepa Kuokoa in December 1865, bemoans the new rules after witnessing 48 Nihauans face eviction from the island for various violations.

“How dreadful. They huddle together and when they are kicked out they are made to wander around with their smoking pipes. Then where do they go to live? In Hamohamo? Is it from Niʻihau we hear ‘Niʻihau of the strong back.’ And look. Niʻihau evicted by the foreigner. Pathetic.”

Niihau of the strong back is an old proverb meaning the Niihauans stick up for their rights.

Waihinealoha poetically describes his friends' anger when they were banished to Kauai as "a rage of fire and kindling. There is not one tear that we could have shed that would soothe the heat of their lips."

The Sinclairs are described in the book as staunch Protestants decreeing that everyone go to their church – even visitors – with a stern Francis Sinclair keeping meticulous records of those who did not attend services and punishing them. The Sinclairs exiled from Niihau residents who failed to live up to their high moral expectations, including abstinence from gambling and drinking liquor.

Clark's book is written in both Hawaiian and English and divided into two parts. The first section features Hawaiian newspaper accounts about the names of prominent places, including Lehua, the small island off the northwest tip of Niihau.

Nonopapa Landing on the west side of Niihau is considered the best summer landing on the island. After the arrival of the Sinclair family, sheep were sheared there and the wool cleaned and bagged for shipment. (Courtesy: Hawaii State Archives)

The second and lengthier part of the book has chapters on daily life on the island as described by Native Hawaiians in their articles and letters to the editor in the Hawaiian papers on such topics as Niihau shell lei, Christianity, shipwrecks and stories about the island during World War II.

The population of Niihau was listed in 1853 as 790 people. The 2020 Census count found there were 84 residents.

It is amazing to read a newspaper account written by E. Kahele in October 1864 about what he calls a "hula luau" with 61 Niihau dancers and teachers marching in procession at Puko. Performances featured children and adult dancers, with even elderly men joining in to perform hulas, and a feast afterward attended by more than 200 people.

A particularly skilled hula dancer with good foot movements is described by Kahele as "lifting her feet like a turkey" and he portrayed the dancers' faces as "stern with eyelashes that stood out unafraid, like cats staring at one catching them; that is how I would describe the eyes."

Another festive occasion described in the book is Niihauʻs annual surfing paina (a party with food) at Kamoamoa Beach to welcome the beginning of the winter surf. The event always began with a ceremony featuring a surfer paddling out to feed the ocean a portion of the guests' food to honor and reinforce the oceanʻs importance in their lives.

The report by Carlos Andrade in the Hawaiian paper Pae I Ke One says as soon as a surfer had finished feeding the ocean, which remained calm as he placed each morsel in the water, "a wave would rise up on the horizon and the man would catch the wave and it would carry him all the way and land him on the beach." Then all the surfers jumped in the sea to catch the waves and there was feasting on yams and fresh-caught fish and swimming and music.

One chapter in the history section is about droughts and famines and the dangerous boat trips the Niihau people were often forced to take to bring back food from Kauai to survive on the parched island.

E. Kahele in Ka Nupepa Kuokoa in 1869 writes: "The drought has almost claimed victory over the efforts of the people. The cause of the drought is not due to a lack of farming but due to the strength of the sun. The crops have dried out and that is the cause of the drought. We survive by the bow of the boat that sails to Kauai and comes back with pounded taro. Then the days of dizziness are gone. (Otherwise) we live on cactus fruit to make it through for two or three days."

Depending on the weather conditions, sailing across the 17-mile Kaulakahi Channel between Niihau and Kauai could be treacherous.

The grass homes of a Niihau resident photographed in the late 1800s. The population of Niihau hovers around 100 people, having fallen from 800 in the mid-19th century. (Courtesy: Hawaii State Archives)

One of the most harrowing of the many shipwreck accounts in the book comes from a Hawaiian language newspaper account written by the sole survivor of a doomed voyage that was bringing 78 packets of pounded taro to the people of Niihau from Hanalei, Kauai.

J.K. Kapahe‘e writes in the newspaper Ke Au Oka on Aug. 5, 1869 that the boat capsized in stormy seas in June of that year about a quarter of the way from Kauai back to Niihau, leaving him and four other passengers — three men and a woman — clinging to the capsized vessel and then deciding to swim first toward Kauai and then following the prevailing current toward Niihau.

“The current was strong and taking us into the dark ocean.” Kapahe‘e writes. He said as they swam, they prayed and called out to one another as the day turned into night and the swimmers became ever more weary and sad.

“The last time I called, it was mysterious. Ahead of me I heard the voice of Wahapa‘a, but then I called out again, there was no call back. I didn‘t hear their voices any more. As I swam, I did not think I would die. I believed I would live and so I just swam,” he wrote.

Kapahe‘e washed up on the shore of Niihau, bone-weary but alive after swimming in the ocean for 20 hours. The four other passengers were never seen again.

Author Clark graduated from Punahou School in 1964 and has a degree in Hawaiian history from the University of Hawaii Manoa. He is a former lifeguard for the City and County of Honolulu and is a retired deputy fire chief of the Honolulu Fire Department.

He has written 11 books, the first four describing the beaches on each of the eight Hawaiian islands. His later books are on the history of the Hawaiian names prominent in interesting places such as Kalaupapa on Molokai and the names and nicknames of famous surfing spots on all the islands.

Clark does not speak Olelo Hawaii but employed Native Hawaiian scholar Keao NeSmith to translate the Hawaiian language newspaper articles used in his four most recent books, including this work on Niihau.

Reading it, I gained a deeper respect for the people of the island, their courage to live and find joy in harsh conditions and their bravery to keep traveling by boat when so many of their friends and family members perished crossing the channel to Kauai to procure food during times of famine and drought.

Clark wrote to me in an email that the Hawaiian language newspaper articles he reviewed when writing the book offered polar opposite opinions about the impact of Sinclair and her Robinson descendants on the lives of the people of Niihau.

“One opinion is that the Niihau residents have been and continue to be the victims of settler colonialism,” he said. “The other opinion is that the Robinson’s ownership of the island has provided a linguistic and cultural oasis for Niihau residents.”

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Denby Fawcett is a longtime Hawaii television and newspaper journalist, who grew up in Honolulu. Her book, Secrets of Diamond Head: A History and Trail Guide is available on Amazon. Opinions are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Civil Beat's views.