

# Social Movement of African American Residents in Hawai'i: Through Analysis of the Martin Luther King Jr. Day Celebration

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## Introduction

This paper will interpret a social movement of African Americans in Hawai'i through an analysis of the celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day (hereinafter MLK Day) from the late 1980s to the present. This study contributes to recent scholarship that reconsiders the Black Freedom Movement as a broad and expansive one by extending the research focus out of the U.S. South and time periods beyond the mid-1950s to the 1960s.

My previous research has revealed how the African American residents contributed to the recognition of MLK Day as a state holiday in Hawai'i.<sup>1)</sup> MLK Day is a federal holiday which has been celebrated on the third Monday of January since 1986. In Hawai'i, however, there was a two-and-a-half-year-long controversy over the recognition of MLK Day in the legislature. As a result, MLK Day was not recognized as a state holiday until 1989.

Much previous literature has claimed that federal government leaders' motive for establishing MLK Day was to construct a national memory of Martin Luther King Jr. that manipulated his image. Michael Kameen argues that King's positive aspect as a leader of the Civil Rights Movement who believed in non-violence and racial harmony was emphasized, while radical aspects such as his activism that opposed economic inequality and the Vietnam War, was largely obscured in the national celebration of MLK Day.<sup>2)</sup> In this way, Kameen is saying that society reconstructs the past and collective memory rather than record them accurately.<sup>3)</sup> Michael Eric Dyson contests that although celebrating black heroes has helped the African American community to "preserve the collective memory of black culture against racial oppression and amnesia,"<sup>4)</sup> MLK Day celebration avoids recognition of King's challenging legacy against white supremacy and economic inequality by honoring his non-violent heroism while allowing America to disown racism.<sup>5)</sup> Moreover, Hisae Orui asserts that conservative Republicans aimed to establish political and social order in diverse America by celebrating King's beliefs in freedom, equality for all, and love as ideal.<sup>6)</sup>

This study focuses on activities celebrating MLK Day organized by African American residents of Hawai'i collaborating with state officials, representatives from private organizations, and people from diverse ethnic communities. In Hawai'i, a week from the second Monday to the third Monday of

January was designated as the MLK Day celebration week. I utilize two Honolulu daily newspapers, the *Honolulu Adviser* and the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, which merged in 2010 to form the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, an African American monthly newspaper in Hawai'i, the *Afro-Hawai'i News*, and the annual brochures of MLK Day celebration to analyze their activities.

The first part of this essay traces the history of organizers to promote MLK Day celebration activities in Hawai'i. This part explores how African American residents in Hawai'i effected the creation of the MLK Day state commission as Coretta King, chair of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday Commission, requested during her visit to Hawai'i in 1987. Later, it examines how they have carried out the annual celebration events every year up to the present after the state commission concluded its term the office.

The second part focuses on the activities during the MLK Day celebration week in Hawai'i. Richard Merelman has clarified differences between whites- and black-organized MLK Day celebration activities. He argues that while white Americans project black culture positively, they often avoid addressing the issue of white domination and black resistance.<sup>7)</sup> On the other hand, African Americans recognize themselves as victims of white supremacy and may fail to embrace political agency that challenges their oppression.<sup>8)</sup> By examining each activity, this part considers how MLK Day has been celebrated in Hawai'i and residents of Hawai'i have "consumed" or understood King and the Black Freedom Movement.

Finally, this paper aims to uncover subjectivities and solidarity of African Americans in Hawai'i. Due to their small population—2.5 percent of the total population on the islands<sup>9)</sup>—and their status as "non-locals,"<sup>10)</sup> African Americans have been marginalized in multicultural Hawai'i. In addition, African American residents are considered as "non-locals" in Hawai'i because of their association with the military<sup>11)</sup> and the socially constructed racial lines between blacks and non-blacks.<sup>12)</sup> The "non-local" status has had negatively affected African American residents in Hawai'i. Kimetta R. Hairston shows African American military dependent school children's claim that they have to dismiss their own identity as African Americans and follow Hawai'i's cultural practices to be included in the local society as they navigate the complexity of race relations beyond black/white racial paradigm.

### (1) The History of the MLK Day Celebration Organizers

When he signed a bill to make MLK Day a state holiday in Hawai'i on June 7, 1988, Governor John Waihee announced that an interim committee would be appointed to plan and organize the celebration and make it permanent.<sup>13)</sup> On the same day, Waihee also signed a bill to create the Civil Rights Commission in Hawai'i to crack down on discriminatory treatment in employment, housing, and public accommodations in Hawai'i. The African American community was surprised by the

Governor's decision on the establishment of the two commissions. They had expected to testify for the establishment of the holiday commission as they had done for the recognition of the MLK Day as a state holiday as well as the establishment of the Civil Rights Commission. The African American community claimed that these commissions would provide appropriate procedures for the enforcement of the state's discrimination laws.<sup>14)</sup> In October 1988, Governor Waihee selected eleven members for the State Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Advisory Committee. The committee was responsible for the creation of educational and holiday activities for Hawai'i's first observance of MLK Day on January 16, 1989. Waihee stated that he was very impressed by the support for MLK Day legislation from diverse ethnic communities, which was reflected in the multi-racial composition of the committee.<sup>15)</sup>

These were major gains towards greater equality in Hawai'i, but the African American community pushed for a permanent MLK Day commission to be established as Governor Waihee mentioned. Although many legislators in the House of Representatives agreed that a permanent King Commission should be established in order to perpetuate the teachings of Dr. King and conduct commemorative activities for MLK Day, the bill was defeated and died in the House.<sup>16)</sup> Senator Russell Blair introduced the same bill in the Senate, which was passed. The bill was sent to the House for consideration, but it died in the Finance Committee.

The Finance Committee perceived the creation of the state commission as identity politics aimed at bringing African Americans together. They opposed the bill on the grounds that other ethnic communities would be outraged by the establishment of a commission devoted largely if not exclusively to a "black cause" because of the absence of ethnic commissions in Hawai'i.<sup>17)</sup> Donniss Thompson, chairperson of the interim commission commented: "The battle is not over yet. Just as in the past, the time has come for all of us to pull together to make the King Holiday Commission a reality. We need to prepare for next year by planning a strategy to achieve a permanent commission."<sup>18)</sup>

The African American community was shocked that the bill for a permanent commission was killed by the House Finance Committee. They argued that it should have been passed as the commission was included as a package with the bill for the recognition of MLK Day.<sup>19)</sup> Some of them suspected that there was behind-the-scenes pressure on the state leadership by unseen racist individuals to crush support for MLK Day.<sup>20)</sup> They strongly opposed the argument articulated by the House Finance Committee. Countering the Finance Committee position, Howard Johnson, chairperson of the Afro-American Leadership Conference argued that the Committee failed to recognize that MLK Day and its celebration were not only for African American residents but also other ethnic communities:

The House Finance Committee completely overlooked the support demonstrated by all ethnicities for the King Holiday. It forgot the holiday's unanimous endorsement by the 1988 legislature and the very clear statement that the King Holiday was "not a black holiday" but a holiday that celebrated peace, social justice, and nonviolent conflict resolution among all peoples.<sup>21)</sup>

Following this loss in the House, the African American community lobbied for a permanent Martin Luther King Jr. Commission in Hawai'i by working collaboratively with other organizations. The cooperative efforts of the diverse groups contributed to the passage of the bill to establish the commission in both the state Senate and House in May 1991.<sup>22)</sup> The state provided funding for the commission to coordinate activities for the annual celebration of MLK Day. The new commission consisting of thirteen members was appointed by the Governor for four-year terms. The commissioners were selected—one from each of the four counties and nine from the following seven categories: ethnic groups, religious, labor, business, education, government, and community service—and appointed in November 1991.<sup>23)</sup> Donnis Thompson expressed appreciation for representatives from the organizations who gathered to support the legislation, which enabled the reversal of the Finance Commission's argument that the Commission seemingly was only for African Americans.<sup>24)</sup>

After the four-year term of the commission expired, the state legislature stopped funding for the state commission sponsoring the MLK Day celebration. As a result, the state commission for the MLK Day celebration was abolished. Jane Ratcliff, one of the leaders of the African American community, who was active in organizing activities for the MLK Day celebration, expressed regret over the dissolution of the committee:

I wish more of America would think of it [MLK Day] as a civil rights day for everyone rather than for blacks. He was not just a black person for black people. He fought for civil rights for everyone; he was already for women's rights. His impetus toward civil rights snowballed all over America and the world.<sup>25)</sup>

In order to continue MLK Day activities and other community events to commemorate King's legacy, African American residents in Honolulu formed a non-profit organization, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day Coalition of Hawai'i (hereinafter Holiday Coalition) in October 1995. The group took over the planning and the financial burden for events. Their total operating budget was \$1,500, a significant drop from the state commission budget of \$28,000.<sup>26)</sup> The members of the Holiday Coalition volunteered for fundraising to continue MLK Day activities with a slogan, "MLK Day is a day to remember King, it is not a day off." Marsha Joyner encouraged the participants to become non-governmental champions of human rights because the federal government had slowed down the

progress of the Human Rights Covenants and had not ratified all of them. She argued that universal human rights could be achieved through contributions by daily actions of each person and nation.<sup>27)</sup> Terri Rainey, one of the members, explained the reason why they were dedicated to continuing the MLK Day events was that they loved and respected their ancestors who had enhanced internationalism and struggled for equality among all people, they wanted to pass down this legacy to the younger generations.<sup>28)</sup>

Their efforts gained approval and support for holding the MLK Day celebration events from the governmental and private sectors. For the 1996 celebration, the Civil Rights Commission assisted with funds and expertise. In 1998, the City and County of Honolulu started co-sponsoring MLK Day events at the request of Mayor Jeremy Harris. Mayor Harris praised the role of the Holiday Coalition for strengthening the city of Honolulu's commitment "to civil rights, nonviolent solutions to all conflicts, and to peace between all nations."<sup>29)</sup>

## **(2) Activities during the MLK Day Celebration Week**

During the MLK Day week, activities such as parades, rallies, classes, films, bell ringing, and church services to commemorate King have been organized in the Islands of O'ahu, Hawai'i, Maui, Kauai, Lanai, and Molokai. The Holiday Commission and Holiday Coalition have also published commemorative brochures every year since the inaugural observance as a state holiday. This part focuses on the main activities during the MLK Day celebration week throughout the years to examine how the event organizers in Hawai'i have understood the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. and spread their understanding of his message.

The State Commission and the Holiday Coalition agreed on several principles to organize all the activities according to the spirit and philosophy of Dr. King, which they identified as "global peace, social justice, economic security, and the eradication of poverty."<sup>30)</sup> Additionally, they sought to reflect King's philosophy of nonviolent social change into their efforts by introducing six steps for social and interpersonal change: "information gathering" to understand issues, problems, injustices in the society; "education" to inform others about the issues; "personal commitment" to affirm faith in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence; "negotiations" to address and resolve injustices when confronting injustices; "direct actions" to use methods such as boycotts, marches, rallies, petition campaigns; and "reconciliation" to seek friendship and understand with the opponent.<sup>31)</sup> The MLK Day organizers in Hawai'i embraced King's policy of non-violence as a strategy to promote activism for social change and adopted it as the tactic for their celebration activities.

### Publication of the Annual Commemorative Brochures

The content of the annual brochures commemorating Dr. King's legacy has shifted over the years, often according to the host organization. When the first state interim commission took charge of the celebration, the booklets were very thin. They included the weekly schedule of activities for the MLK Day celebration, biographical sketch of King, and his well-known speech as well as messages from the governor and the mayor of Honolulu. The full text of his speech, "I have a dream" was printed in the 1989 booklet.<sup>32)</sup>

Gradually, more content appeared and more pages were added to the brochures. Critical essays which portray several aspects of King's campaigns also have been included. In an essay entitled "The Inconvenient Hero," in the 2002 brochure, the author, Robert Bobilin, a former professor at the University of Hawai'i, at Mānoa argued that King's critique of American economic structure and society was widely missed. Bobilin emphasized the importance of King's unfinished campaign against poverty and his advocacy on behalf of the poor.<sup>33)</sup> In another item of the same issue, James Lawson, who mentored King, challenged the term of "Civil Rights Movement" arguing that it was more than a struggle for legal and political rights for African Americans. Lawson saw the Movement incorporating the tactics of strikes, initiating anti-nuclear movements, and campaigning against deplorable conditions for all workers regardless of race.<sup>34)</sup> The 2011 booklet includes an essay entitled "The Martin Luther King You Don't See on TV" that focuses King's criticism of the federal government oppression's of the people in Vietnam, Africa, South Africa, and Latin America delivered in a speech entitled, "Beyond Vietnam."<sup>35)</sup>

The Holiday Coalition tried to raise public awareness about Dr. King's campaigns to ensure economic rights as well as his broader notion of the Black Freedom Movement. In fact, challenging King's representation in the media has been a fundamental mission of Marsha Joyner, one of the main editors of the booklet since 1993. She argued that media portrayals of King manipulated his legacy transforming him from an activist to merely a dreamer and failed to acknowledge the maturity of his activism. For Joyner, the late King realized that civil rights laws were empty gestures unless human rights and economic rights were included.<sup>36)</sup>

African American history teaching was also embodied in the booklets' contents. The 2003 booklet which featured the commemoration of the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation aimed not so much to document slavery and the emancipation but to emphasize the challenging legacy of abolitionists. In it, an essay on the Emancipation, the text of the Emancipation of Proclamation by President Lincoln, a letter which showcased the brutality of slavery,<sup>37)</sup> as well as a short biography of abolitionist Frederick Douglass were inserted. In the story of Douglass, his legacy to "use the power of spoken and written language to effect positive change for yourself and society"

was presented.<sup>38)</sup> Moreover, stories of female African American abolitionists, such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman were also featured in these pages.<sup>39)</sup>

Stories of individuals who shared a similar legacy with King also appear in the booklets. Women's role in this social movement especially received attention. Editor Joyner highlighted women's role on socio-historical changes in politics and was attentive to include other stories of the contributions of women. Joyner asserts, "One cannot talk of Emancipation without talking about women. Therefore, throughout this book, we will take a glimpse into women of different races, backgrounds, and places in history."<sup>40)</sup> Joyner's insertion of the story of Patsy T. Mink<sup>41)</sup> further revealed a woman who actively promoted legislation to improve women's status. She also portrayed Queen Lili'uokalani, the last monarch of the Kingdom of Hawai'i, as one who protested the annexation of her homeland by the United States in 1898.<sup>42)</sup>

The annual booklets exposed stories of individuals whose activities and contributions have been overlooked by the emphasis on the male leaders of the Black Freedom Movement. The largely unknown Bayard Rustin, who later became an advocate for gay rights, received considerable attention in the booklets since he had advised King on the use of the techniques of nonviolent resistance. An article in the 2013 brochure claimed that his contribution was muted because of his sexuality.<sup>43)</sup> An essay, "Women Had Key Roles in Civil Rights Movement" in the 2011 booklet celebrated the acknowledgment of women's roles in the Civil Rights Movement by historians, while at the same time noting that women had largely not achieved public prominence in public. The essay introduced stories of four African American females who challenged the segregated bus system before Rosa Parks took her historic bus ride in 1955. In addition, it featured accounts of other key African American female activists such as Ella Baker, Septima Poinsette Clark, and Fannie Lou Hamer.<sup>44)</sup>

### **Martin Luther King Jr. Day Parades**

The annual MLK Day parades, starting at Magic Island to Kapi'olani Park via Kalākaua Avenue in Honolulu, were one of the main events in the MLK Day celebration week of Hawai'i throughout the years. In the first official parade of 1989, 4000 marchers, ten bands, fifty vehicles, and ten floats participated.<sup>45)</sup> Since then, thousands of participants have joined including those who traveled from other states and countries such as Australia, Canada, and Japan to join the parade. Following the parade, Kapi'olani Park, the termination point for the parades, became the gathering point for the unity rally once the celebratory march ended. State officials, members of the MLK Day host organization, and guest speakers from the islands or other states give speeches to pay a tribute to Dr. King. Food and multi-ethnic entertainment including performances of Hula, rap music, Jazz bands are also prominent features of the rally.

The MLK Day celebration host team aimed to provide African American military members with a bridge to interact with local residents through the annual parades and rallies. Miles M. Jackson argues that full integration between the military and civilian cultures is yet to be achieved in Hawai'i. With no perceived African American civilian community in Hawai'i, African American military personnel and their family were likely to choose live on military installations which provided accommodations, shopping malls, and other recreational facilities. Thus, opportunities for the adult military personnel to become members of the outside civilian community were limited.<sup>46)</sup> The host team pushed for service personnel to participate and mingle with locals. Hence, many military personnel and their families joined in the marching in and enjoyed the operating food stands and music festival at Kapi'olani Park. African American residents have interacted with the other participants through the parade, food, music, and dance. Regina Gibson-Broome, president of the Afro-American Association of Hawai'i, shared delight that the military personnel too were embraced in the parade.<sup>47)</sup>

African American residents also sought to educate participants about black history by portraying King's activism against economic inequality through the parade activities. A garbage truck with the sign of "Memphis, We Remember" appeared in the parade every year. The truck was provided by the United Public Workers a union which had worked to bring working class families in Hawai'i for economic and political resources. Joyner stated that the appearance of the garbage truck was aimed at getting public attention to King's Poor People's Campaign<sup>48)</sup> that demanded economic justice for all the people of the underclass and which may have contributed to his death.<sup>49)</sup> This is one of the examples of how African American residents in Hawai'i taught their neighbors in Hawai'i about the depth of the issues covered in the Black Freedom Movement commonly ignored in public education or in the media.

### **Commemoration of the Overthrow of Hawaiian Monarchy**

During the MLK Day celebration week of 1993, the state commission organized events to honor Queen Lili'uokalani in observation of the hundredth anniversary of the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. The celebration team aimed at drawing attention to the historic event in Hawaiian history and connecting it with their own events. They tried to find the best way to demonstrate internal and external debate over sovereignty and self-determination. The commission felt that Queen Lili'uokalani shared similarities with Martin Luther King Jr observing that both of them were champions of their people, advocated non-violence, and not simply appreciated their own culture, but also acknowledged that of others with different backgrounds.<sup>50)</sup>

African American residents further connected their history of oppression with Native Hawaiians.

By quoting King's essay "Testament of Hope," Edward Young, one of the state commission African American members, articulated that Native Hawaiians had suffered from the same problems as African Americans such as inferior education, poor housing, unemployment, and inadequate health care. Thus, African Americans residents urged others to acknowledge their common struggle with Native Hawaiians in overcoming the long-lasting impact of colonialism.<sup>51)</sup> During activities for Black History Month of 1993, the African American community in Hawai'i continued to debate the continuing legacy of colonialism in Hawai'i, the continental United States, and other Pacific Islands.

Queen Lili'uokalani continued to be honored even after the hundredth anniversary of the overthrow of the monarchy through the MLK Day celebration by African American residents in Hawai'i. They embraced a deep respect for Native Hawaiians' sacrifices, wisdom, and the queen's protest against the annexation of Hawai'i. Marsha Joyner described similarities between Queen Lili'uokalani and Dr. King: that it was during imprisonment while being deprived of their dignity and identity, that each of them wrote songs and letters, which would inspire nations and peoples around the world.<sup>52)</sup> Joyner wrote a narrated musical called "The Queen and Dr. King," to draw the parallels in their struggles for equal rights for all. The musical was played as one of the main activities during the MLK Day celebration week of 1998, which coincided with the hundredth anniversary of the American annexation of Hawai'i. By honoring Queen Lili'uokalani with these events, the African American organizers aimed to attract support for the demands of Native Hawaiians for sovereignty.<sup>53)</sup>

### **Reflection on War**

During the MLK Day celebration week, many people presented their views on war. In 1990, Howard Johnson, one of the African American commission members, saw the linkage between struggles against racism and prejudice and the struggle for peace.<sup>54)</sup> Johnson expressed his views about the roots of war and racism in the following message of the MLK Day celebration of 1990.

War is based on the concept that people can only resolve their differences violently with the superior nation militarily forcing its policy on the weaker nation in the combat. That is racism because it states that one nation can force another nation to bow to its power because it is inferior. The nonracist view is that all nations have equal rights and the sovereignty to determine their own destiny. Differences can only be resolved peacefully and nonviolently.<sup>55)</sup>

Many groups and individuals raising questions about war and peace joined the annual parade in the MLK Day celebration of 1991. Some used it as an opportunity to raise critiques about the Persian

Gulf incident and held signs decrying the U.S. military deployment in the region or called for peaceful solutions to end the crisis. Others brought other issues such as the U.S. government's involvement in Central America or in South Africa. They carried signs that read, "Keep Hope Alive for Peace," "Free South Africa," "Make Ethanol, Not War,"<sup>56)</sup> and "Martin Luther King would oppose this war."<sup>57)</sup> Lieutenant Governor Benjamin Cayetano, who became the first Filipino American governor in the U.S. in 1994, commented that he "felt it ironic to celebrate King's philosophy of non-violence" while America was at war with Iraq in his address at the unity rally.<sup>58)</sup> Cayetano did not oppose the U.S. involvement in the Gulf incident, but he urged the audience to ask the president and congressmen to ensure the same kind of commitment for racial equality and peace inside of the country as their international commitment. He stated that funding and enthusiasm for high-technology weapons should not exceed funding for the homeless, better education, jobs, and programs for the poor, disabled and disadvantaged.<sup>59)</sup>

African Americans in Hawai'i called for a peaceful solution to the Persian Gulf War. They claimed that if America went to war, a large number of people of color would be assigned to the front line of battle in Iraq and Kuwait. Paula Harris-White, one of the state commission members, noted in an article of the *Afro-Hawai'i News* that many African Americans in the 1980s joined the United States Armed Forces in order to escape the gang wars, drugs, ghettos, unemployment, and limited resources and opportunities. African Americans expected the federal government to effectively deal with these domestic issues after the Vietnam War. However, they faced reverse-discrimination lawsuits, the sharp rise in college tuition, and color-blind-racist policies under the neoliberal administration of the 1980s. Hence, the African American community in Hawai'i demanded a peaceful solution to protect African American lives in the U.S. military.<sup>60)</sup>

#### (4) The Significances of Celebrating of MLK Day in Hawai'i

The members of the MLK Day celebration group embraced King's legacy for global peace, social justice, and economic equality. The activities had been organized not merely to celebrate King's birthday but to commemorate historic or social events and pay tribute to individuals aligned with King's legacy. Howard Johnson explained that the interim commission aimed to make the celebration more than a simple commemoration of King's spirit and his achievement. The purpose of the commission was to provide occasions to bring into three aspects of King's philosophy—"the elimination of economic justice, racism, and the threat of war."<sup>61)</sup> This conjugation contradicts the assertions of those scholars who suggest that only King's beliefs in racial harmony and non-violence are celebrated on MLK Day.

The MLK Day celebration group held activities by fostering a sense of internationalism. For

African Americans in Hawai'i, the MLK Day celebration was more than an opportunity to raise awareness about the black struggle. It also became an important place to support the struggle by Native Hawaiians as well as millions of people in Hawai'i and in the Third World for dignity, justice, and self-determination. African American residents argued that although racism against ethnic and racial groups with lower economic status in Hawai'i is weaker than in other states, discrimination in housing, employment, and social opportunities against African Americans, Native Hawaiians, Filipinos, and poor whites continued to exist.<sup>62)</sup> The group often invoked King's word of "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Leomeharry Ratcliff, one of the members of the Holiday Coalition explained that "people need to relate to each other as part of the same humanity. If someone is feeling pain, it may not be our pain, but it's not separate from us."<sup>63)</sup> Scholars as Brenda Gayle Plummer argue that African American activists have linked domestic and international struggle and joined a larger global fight against white supremacy and imperialism as part of the black radical tradition since the early twentieth century.<sup>64)</sup> African American activists in Hawai'i reflect this tradition.

The involvement in the MLK Day celebration activities in Hawai'i created a new space for African Americans to show their presence in the Islands. Regina Gibson claimed that the African American community was invisible because history books in Hawai'i ignored their existence.<sup>65)</sup> In addition, the African American community lacked political power as there were no African American legislators in Hawai'i. Therefore, the African American community was proud of their successful lobbying to enact legislation for MLK Day as a state holiday in Hawai'i. It was not until after the passage of the bill for the recognition of MLK Day that the African American community in Hawai'i received respect and attention from the state government and local society.<sup>66)</sup> By taking the initiative in organizing MLK Day celebration programs, the African American community continued to receive acknowledgment.

African American residents advocated for activities that reached beyond the week of the MLK Day celebration. They organized other activities, such as the Black History Month, and spread them across the calendar year. After the recognition of MLK Day, the African American community developed a coalition with other non-African Americans to strengthen lobbying efforts not only for continued recognition of MLK Day but also press for other issues of concern. For example, the People's Legislative Conference Coalition<sup>67)</sup> was formed by grassroots activists with diverse interests in the fall of 1988 to work for "economic justice, environmental protection, and human rights." Johnson who was one of the founders explained that the activists decided to act collectively with other groups to strengthen their influence.<sup>68)</sup>

By considering the multiplicity of injustice and connecting the struggle against racial inequality to those of economic inequality, colonialism, and the threat of war, African Americans in Hawai'i were able to develop their unique activism in the Islands. First, they answered the criticism that the MLK Day celebration was significant for only African Americans. Second, they forged solidarity with other

organizations and other ethnic communities. The linkages were essential for African American residents who were marginalized in Hawai'i due to their small number and their perceived "non-local" status. Through them, they were able to gain respect and support from the Hawaiian public and the state legislature to continue their MLK Day celebration activities even after the state commission was abolished.

The African American community incorporated African American studies teaching with MLK Day activities. Hairston has claimed that African American history is largely ignored, while, racism towards African Americans is deeply embedded and left unaddressed in the public schools in Hawai'i.<sup>(69)</sup> Many African American residents noticed that relatively few opportunities were offered to present black history in the public school.<sup>(70)</sup> Stanley Amos, chair of the state commission, stated that because of the small population, the issues of concern for the African American community were ignored and perhaps not taken seriously. Amos further noted that the model minority discourse<sup>(71)</sup> towards successful Asian immigrant groups in Hawai'i hindered understanding the history of African Americans.<sup>(72)</sup>

Thus, African American residents appreciated the celebration as an opportunity to teach the youth their culture, heritage, and history. They encouraged young residents to acknowledge African American's contribution to American history and reaffirm their identity through reading the annual booklets and participating in other programs. People such as Paula Harris-White believed that the African American community was responsible for integrating their history into the state's educational curriculum and to provide students with opportunities to understand African American experiences and the community. They called for participation in volunteering to speak at schools not limited to the MLK Day celebration week and Black History Month.<sup>(73)</sup>

## (5) Limitations

Yet, the MLK Day celebration host organizations fail to challenge Asian settler political power applied by political leaders of Hawai'i since the 1960s. Candace Fujikane developed a theory of "Asian Settler Colonialism" which posits that Asian Americans have dominated Hawai'i socioeconomically and politically by employing U.S. colonial ideologies and practices in relation to Native Hawaiians.<sup>(74)</sup> Their Asians' civil rights struggles against racism and oppression in Hawai'i have merely given legitimacy to nation-building and economic development at the expense of human rights for Native Hawaiians.

Significantly, Asian political leaders in the 1950s successfully undercut the historical control of politics by white Republicans, the economic domination by the Big Five sugar companies, and racism against nonwhite residents through labor organizing, electoral politics, and the statehood movement.

Admittedly, statehood provided all the residents of Hawai'i with the citizenship rights which especially benefited nonwhites. In the 2013 booklet, Marsha Joyner embraced the contribution of Daniel Inouye to Hawai'i and the continental United States as a Democratic politician who brought those significant changes to Hawai'i. Joyner praised him for joining struggles for the legislation of the Civil Rights Act 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and rejecting the discriminatory Defense of Marriage Act in the 1990s. She even described Inouye as "a champion of civil rights and civil liberties who recognized that his own political successes required him to champion the rights of others."<sup>75)</sup>

On the other hand, the same Asian political leaders also impeded progress as well. Native Hawaiians have faced injustices under the new social structure which these Democratic politicians created when they restructured the Hawaiian economy to favor tourism and a partnership with the American military in the 1960s, all of which ran contrary to the right of self-determination by Native Hawaiians.<sup>76)</sup> Scholars like Ida Yoshinaga and Eiko Kosasa argue that Senator Daniel Inouye, who publicly advocated Native Hawaiians' sovereignty movement, had also long supported the federal government's maintenance of Hawai'i as a colony rather than push for self-government and control of lands and resources.<sup>77)</sup> Roland Kotani too observed that Asian American politicians under the Governor George Ariyoshi administration also rejected the demands of the rising Native Hawaiian nationalist movement for self-determination during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>78)</sup>

Asian Americans support for the militarization of Hawai'i is a vivid example of this "colonialism" and how they have abused Native Hawaiian self-determination. Over the years, the U.S. military occupies over about five percent of the total Islands and nearly a quarter of O'ahu.<sup>79)</sup> Although the international law ensures the right of self-determination—rights to control over the lands and government—by peoples who were or are under colonial domination, Native Hawaiians saw their human rights violated through limit access to their ancestry land.<sup>80)</sup> The militarization sparked the formation of campaigns for demilitarization. Social movements against the militarization of Hawai'i have organized to oppose the bombing and military usage of the lands since the 1970s.

Despite their actives aiming to tackle injustices and inequalities against Native Hawaiians caused by the federal government, African American residents fail to challenge Asian settler colonialism faced by Native Hawaiians. In the MLK Day celebration, African American activists sought to incorporate the military personnel and their families into the society of Hawai'i and confine themselves to merely challenge the notion that members of the U.S. military are "non-locals." In addition, African American residents saw joining the U.S. military as a way to challenge their injustices under the neoliberalism policies advocated by the federal government since the 1970s. Ironically, African American participation in the military overlooks Asian settler colonialism in the relationship with Native Hawaiians. Additionally, the assimilation stance leads them to naturalize and normalize the presence of the military in Hawai'i.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the experiences of African Americans in Hawai'i by analyzing the MLK Day celebration activities from the late 1980s. It has explored how and why African American activists have organized activities for the celebration and continued to the present. This study has challenged the view in the previous literature which argues that the MLK Day celebration is only about racial harmony and non-violence. In addition, it has clarified how African American residents' subjectivity was linked to these activities.

With the creation of the interim commission for the MLK Day celebration, the African American community was sure that the commission was permanent. Yet, they faced with state legislators' criticism that the commission was merely a mask for identity politics. African American residents responded by collaborating with other ethnic communities and organizations to push the legislature into creating a permanent commission. After the state legislature terminated funding for the state commission as its term expired in 1995, the Holiday Coalition, a non-profit organization initiated by African American residents, took over the planning of the events and the raising of the funds to continue the MLK Day celebration activities. Their efforts inspired the City and County of Honolulu and other private companies to support their activities since 1998.

The organizers for the Dr. King's birthday celebration in Hawai'i utilized the methods and internationalism of King's activism. They adopted nonviolent methods for social change for their activities. In addition, they connected injustices to those abroad. Since the first observance, African American residents have not only celebrated Dr. King's role in the Civil Rights Movement and its achievements, but they have emphasized King's linkage between domestic economic inequalities with colonialism abroad in Asia, Africa, and South America. The activists turned the MLK Day celebration into events dedicated to global peace, social justice, and economic equality.

The MLK Day celebration also became a means to heighten social awareness within Hawai'i. The host organizations sponsored several activities focusing on historical events such as the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy and shed critical light on current affairs like the Gulf War. Participants were further encouraged to raise other issues and problems for the public to consider when joining the annual parade. By doing so, the organizers sought to connect various injustices and inequalities and link them to the common colonialism faced by residents of Hawai'i and people abroad collectively.

The MLK Day celebration activities created a new space for African American residents to embrace their history and affirm their identity as African American. This is particularly significant in Hawai'i where their history, culture, and existence were widely ignored. African American history teaching was also combined with the celebration. The annual booklets contained many stories of

African American activists who challenged slavery prior to the Civil War and segregation after it. Additionally, their publications highlighted women's contribution to the social movement. The teaching of African American history is an important component of the MLK Day celebration since it taught the youth to learn about their own history's richness and affirm their identity. And finally, the MLK Day celebrations enabled the African American community to widen their sense of belonging in Hawai'i by participating in collaborative activities that involved Hawai'i's diverse ethnic groups.

By connecting domestic racism with domestic colonialism against African Americans, Native Hawaiians, and other people, the MLK Day celebration activists successfully won over supporters from the other ethnic communities and private organizations in Hawai'i. These coalitions became an essential step for African Americans to continue their activities because they lack political power in the legislature. The coalition responded to criticism that MLK Day benefited only African American residents by convincing the legislators for the creation of the state commission would benefit all peoples. African American activists successfully gained support from the city of Honolulu and from private companies even after the state commission was terminated. By taking the initiative in organizing events, African American residents were able to raise their visibility and gain the respect from other residents and state governmental politicians. The celebration also enabled African American to destroy their "non-local" image and create social acceptance by the wider society in Hawai'i.

Regrettably, despite their supporting for indigenous sovereignty and human rights, MLK Day activities fail to address Asian settler colonialism. They overlook Native Hawaiians' human rights which are degraded not only by the Annexation of 1898 but also by Asian politicians who have dominated the Islands and the state government since the 1960s. Their efforts to assimilate the military personnel into Hawaiian society blind from acknowledging these issues.

### Notes

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- 3) Ibid, 3.
- 4) Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 284.
- 5) Ibid, 290.
- 6) Hisae Orui, "Koteki Rekishi toshitenō 'M. L. King'—King no Shukujitsuseiteikatei oyobi Kinenshukugade Egakareta Kingzo" (M. L. King as Public History—The Image of King Depicted in the Process of Enactment of King's Holiday and the Commemoration), *Shikyo* 44, (2002), 87-89.

- 7) Richard Merelman, *Representing Black Culture: Racial Conflict and Cultural Politics in the United States*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 89.
- 8) Ibid, 88–89.
- 9) U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990 Census STF1A, produced by the Hawaii State Data Center Report No. 6, <http://files.hawaii.gov/dbedt/census/census90/census90-hsdcrep6/tab3.pdf>, (accessed June 9, 2015).
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- 11) About 85 percent of the African Americans who have come to Hawai‘i are associated with the military. See Eleanor C. Nordyke, “Blacks in Hawai‘i: A Demographic and Historical Perspective,” *The Hawaiian Journal of History*, 22 (1988), 245.
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- 13) Beverly Creamer, “Mrs. King Has a Dream, Too,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, June 8, 1988, A3.
- 14) Alice Talbott, “Politics,” *Afro-Hawai‘i News*, July 1, 1988, 4.
- 15) “Martin Luther King Jr., Holiday Advisory Committee Appointed,” *Afro-Hawai‘i News*, October 15, 1988, 1.
- 16) English Bradshaw, “Guest Editorial,” *Afro-Hawai‘i News*, April 1, 1989, 3.
- 17) Howard Johnson, “Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday 1990,” *Afro-Hawai‘i News*, November 1, 1989, 3.
- 18) “Passage of King Holiday Commission Bill Unrealized this Year,” *Afro-Hawai‘i News*, April 1, 1989, 1.
- 19) Ibid.
- 20) Johnson, “Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday 1990.”
- 21) Ibid.
- 22) The following organizations which gathered to testify at the legislature: The Baha‘i community, the Rainbow Coalition, the Afro-American Association, the Hawai‘i Political Women’s Caucus, the Afro-American Lawyers Association, Hawai‘i Democratic Movement, the Cosmopolitan Lodge #82, the YWCA, the Hawaii Council of Churches, Hawaii Government Employees Association and the NAACP Hawai‘i Branch. See “Martin Luther King, Jr. Commission Bill Passes Both House and Senate,” *Afro-Hawai‘i News*, June 1, 1991, 1.
- 23) Ibid.
- 24) Ibid.
- 25) Mary Adamski, “King ‘Man of Statue’ Who Fought for Everyone,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, January 11, 1996, A1–A4.
- 26) Linda Aragon “Martin Luther King Coalition Maintains His Dream in Islands,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, January 17, 1997, B1.
- 27) Marsha Joyner, “Close to Home,” *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Coalition-Hawai‘i 1999 Souvenir Book Hawai‘i*, edit. Joyner, (Honolulu: Hawaiian National Communication Corporation, 1999), 8–9.

- 28) Ibid.
- 29) Jeremy Harris, "Mayor's Message," *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. 1999 Souvenir Book*, 10.
- 30) "Statement of Purpose," *Commemorative Brochure for Sixth Annual State of Hawaii Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Celebration January 10–17, 1994*, 3.
- 31) "Six Steps for Nonviolent Social Change," *ibid*, 9.
- 32) "I Have a Dream," *Living the Dream; Let Freedom Ring! Commemorative Brochure for First Annual State of Hawaii Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Celebration January 8–16, 1989*, (Honolulu: Hawaii Brochure Publishers, 1988), 7–8.
- 33) Robert Bobilin "The Inconvenient Hero," *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Coalition-Hawai'i Souvenir Book Hawai'i 1988–2002, January 2002*, edit. Joyner, (Honolulu: Hawaiian National Communication Corporation, 2002), 35.
- 34) "Memphis: We Remember," *ibid*, 52.
- 35) Jeff Cohen and Norman Solomon, "The Martin Luther King You Don't See on TV," *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Coalition-Hawai'i Souvenir Book Hawai'i 1988–2011, January 2011*, edit. Joyner, (Honolulu: Hawaiian National Communication Corporation, 2011), 18–19.
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- 38) "A Short Biography of Frederick Douglass," *ibid*, 44–45.
- 39) Sojourner Truth "Ain't I a Woman?" *ibid*, 23, and "Harriet Tubman" *ibid*, 39.
- 40) Marsha Joyner, "Without History We Have no Future," *ibid*, 6.
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- 42) "In Memory of the Late Honorable Patsy T. Mink," *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Souvenir Book 2003*, 7 and "The Queen & Dr. King," *ibid*, 15–16.
- 43) "Equality Hawaii," *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Coalition-Hawai'i Souvenir Book Hawai'i 1988–2013, January 2013*, edit. Joyner, (Honolulu: Hawaiian National Communication Corporation, 2013), 17.
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- 46) Miles M. Jackson, "A Different Drummer: African Americans in the Military in Hawai'i," in *They Followed the Trade Winds African Americans in Hawai'i*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Dept. of Sociology, 2004), 205–206.
- 47) Regina Gibson-Broome, "President's Corner," *Afro-Hawai'i News*, February 1, 1989, 4.
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- 61) Howard Johnson, "How the King Holiday Came About in Hawai'i," February 1, 1989, 3.
- 62) Linda Hosek, "Hawaii Rites Honor Slain Civil Rights Leader," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, January 16, 1989, A1.
- 63) Adamski, "King 'Man of Statue' Who Fought for Everyone."
- 64) Brenda Gayle Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization 1956–1974*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 14–15.
- 65) Gibson, "President's Corner."
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- 67) The coalition included members of the Affordable Housing Alliance, the Afro-American Leadership Conference, the American Friends Service Committee, the Environmental Legislative Network, the Hawaii Democratic Movement, the Hawaii Green Movement, the Hawaii Women's Political Caucus, the Native Hawaiian Legal Corp., the Rainbow Coalition, the Young Democrats, and about other forty organizations. The first conference was held in January 1989 and more than 200 participants attended. See "First People's Legislative Conference Held 1/21," *Afro-Hawai'i News*, February 1, 1989, 3.
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