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McGregor/Na Kua`aina

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NB: Illustrations have been deleted to decrease file size.
Rain pelted the decks and the howling wind and twenty-foot ocean swells madly rocked our boat as we made our way in dawn’s first light from the port of Lahaina to the island of Kaho’olawe. We struggled for a foothold, while grasping for trash bags to relieve ourselves of the queasy welling up of fluids deep in our guts. Uncle Harry Mitchell called out to us, “You had enough? And now, are you ready to turn back?” Everyone begged to turn around. Before the captain could steer the boat around to head back most of my students boldly jumped into the wild surf off of Olowalu and swam to shore rather than suffer the pangs of seasickness all the way back down the coast to Lahaina.

Uncle Harry sat me down. “You are a college professor, eh?” Yes. “And you saw the storm that has been gathering for the past few days?” No. “It was windy when you left O’ahu?” Yes. “And you felt the storm?” No. “You know that we go across the channel to Kaho’olawe on a small boat?” Yes. “Did you know that there were small-craft warnings before you left O’ahu?” No. “What were you thinking about?”

I had been totally oblivious to the major elements of a huge storm swirling together for the past few days. I was the typical single-minded urban Hawaiian academic, bent on getting where I wanted to go, but completely out of balance with the natural forces around me. Uncle Harry explained, “If I had told you that you couldn’t make it over to Kaho’olawe this morning you would have disagreed, argued, and insisted on going. So I took you out in the boat, not too far off the coast, not even in the channel, until you had had enough and were begging me to turn around.”

Through my bitter disappointment at not making it to Kaho’olawe I learned one of the most important lessons of my life from kupuna Mitchell. Always be conscious and respectful of the natural elements around me. As
Uncle Harry would always say, “Watch . . . look at the moon, the stars, the clouds, they talk to you . . . listen . . . watch!”

“Aloha ‘āina, aloha ke ‘akua, aloha kekāhi i kekāhi” (love and respect the land, love and honor God, love and look after one another, these are the three important things our kūpuna always ask us to remember): this was another mantra of Uncle Harry. From him I learned that one who understands and lives by these precepts embraces the world of Native Hawaiians. This Native Hawaiian worldview is called lōkahi, or unity, harmony, balance. It refers to the unity, harmony, and balance in the universe between humans, nature, and deities or spiritual life forces. For personal well-being, we need to be in balance with the people around us, and with the natural and spiritual forces of life.

So, there I was, spring break 1980, out of balance and stuck with twenty college students, coolers full of food for a week, grounded by a wild late-March storm that I never saw coming. Uncle Harry took pity on us. He loaded us into vans, a truck, and a car and took us home to Ke’anae-Wailuanui, Maui. The community of taro farmers and fishermen graciously allowed us to camp in their church hall. For the next few days Uncle Harry threw us into the taro patches to earn our lodging and he taught us the mo’olelo of Ke’a- nae-Wailuanui, and of the valleys, streams, and gulches from Ke’anae through Hāna and out to Ohe’o. We immersed ourselves in the way of life of the kua’āina of Ke’anae-Wailuanui. I awoke to a worldview and lifestyle that I would devote my academic endeavors to helping perpetuate. This is the life ways of the kua’āina.

I do not write of ruling chiefs, but of those who made the chiefs rulers. I write of those who first held the lands of Hawai‘i in trust for the Gods of our nature and whose descendants have a vested responsibility and right to hold these lands in trust today. I write of the kua’āina, the keepers of Hawai‘i’s sacred lands who are living Hawaiian culture. This is a mo’olelo, a history, or, in the Hawaiian sense, a succession of knowledge passed on orally from one generation to the next of kua’āina, who shared this knowledge with someone, such as Mary Kawena Pukui in the 1960s or me in the 1980s and 1990s, as oral history interviews. They are the source of the knowledge of which I write, and the shortcomings herein are my own.1

I can remember a time when it was demeaning to be called kua’āina, for it meant that one was an awkward and rough country person.2 In Hawaiian, kua means back and ‘āina means land, so kua’āina is translated literally in the Hawaiian Dictionary as “back land.” However, in the context of the Native
Figure 1  Uncle Harry Kûnihi Mitchell of Waihuanui, Maui, playing his guitar near Hakioawa, Kaho'olawe. Uncle, sparkle in his eye, knee-deep in his lo'i, introduced me to the lives of the kua‘āina and their role in the cultural regeneration of Kaho'olawe. 1979. Franco Salmoiraghi.
Hawaiian cultural renaissance of the late twentieth century, the word kua‘āina gained a new and fascinating significance. A kua‘āina came to be looked upon as someone who embodied the backbone of the land. Indeed, kua‘āina are the Native Hawaiians who remained in the rural communities of our islands, took care of the kūpuna or elders, continued to speak Hawaiian, bent their backs and worked and sweated in the taro patches and sweet potato fields, and held that which is precious and sacred in the culture in their care. The kua‘āina are those who withdrew from the mainstream of economic, political, and social change in the Islands. They did not enjoy modern amenities and lived a very simple life. This mo‘olelo recounts how the life ways of the kua‘āina enabled the Native Hawaiian people to endure as a unique, distinct, dignified people even after over a century of American control of the Islands.

Figure 2  The rural communities where kua‘āina have remained are cultural kîpuka that have been bypassed by major historic forces of economic, political, and social change in Hawai‘i. Uncle Harry Mitchell’s Wailuanui is a cultural kîpuka from which Native Hawaiian culture was regenerated and revitalized on Kaho‘olawe and a new generation of taro farmers and traditional healers was trained. 1936. Bishop Museum.
NA¯ KUA ‘A¯INA
and cultural KI¯PUKA

“Ke ha'awi nei au iä ‘oe. Mälama ‘oe i këia mau mea. ‘A'ohe Mälama, pau ka pono o ka Hawai'i” (I pass on to you. Take care of these things. If you don’t take care, the well-being of the Hawaiian people will end):¹ these words were used by kūpuna to pass on knowledge and stewardship of their lands to a chosen successor of the next generation. Gifted with this stewardship responsibility, the successors held their ancestral lands and knowledge sacred in their memories and passed it on in custom and practice from generation to generation up through the twenty-first century.

Daniel Pahupu was a kua‘āina and a kūpuna whom Mary Kawena Pukui interviewed on the island of Moloka‘i in 1961 as part of a project to gather ancestral knowledge about the sacred and significant places in the Hawaiian Islands, referred to in Hawaiian as wahi pana. In 1961 Mary Kawena Pukui traveled from island to island interviewing kua‘āina, as the keepers of the wahi pana, in order to document and thereby perpetuate their unique and profound knowledge for future generations. Conducting the interviews in Hawaiian, the kua‘āina shared knowledge with Pukui that had been passed on from one generation to the next about the lands where their ancestors lived, worked, and sustained a spiritual connection to the life forces of the universe.² The land and nature, like members of the ‘ohana or extended family, were loved. The place-names they were given reflected their particular character and nature and contain traditional knowledge accumulated by Hawaiian ancestors in utilizing the natural resources of these areas, providing kua‘āina with information they need to understand and adapt to the qualities and character of the land in which they live, such as soil conditions, local flora or fauna, and seasonal fluctuations. Native Hawaiian ancestors also named the various types of rain and wind of particular districts. The names of places and natural elements not only provide a profound sense of identity with the ‘āina or land and natural resources, they also convey a sense of responsibility to provide stewardship of the area where they live.

In his introduction to Ancient Sites of O‘ahu, Edward Kanahele explained the significance of wahi pana in the perpetuation of Native Hawaiian cultural knowledge. He also explained how the understanding of a place, its names, and the reason for its designation as a wahi pana is essential to understanding the area’s function and significance in Native Hawaiian society:

As a Native Hawaiian, a place tells me who I am and who my extended family is. A place gives me my history, the history of my clan, and the history of my people. I am able to look at a place and tie in human events that
affect me and my loved ones. A place gives me a feeling of stability and of belonging to my family, those living and dead. A place gives me a sense of well-being and of acceptance of all who have experienced that place.

The concept of wahi pana merges the importance of place with that of the spiritual. My culture accepts the spiritual as a dominant factor in life; this value links me to my past and to my future, and is physically located at my wahi pana.

Where once the entire Native Hawaiian society paid homage to numerous wahi pana, now we may give wahi pana hardly a cursory glance. Only when a Native Hawaiian gains spiritual wisdom is the ancestral and spiritual sense of place reactivated. Spiritual knowledge and the wahi pana are ancestrally related, thus spiritual strength connects to the ancestral guardians, or 'aumakua. My 'aumakua knew that the great gods created the land and generated life. The gods infused the earth with their spiritual force or mana. The gravity of this concept was keenly grasped by my ancestors: they knew that the earth's spiritual essence was focused through the wahi pana. (James, in E. Kanahele, 1991)

Kua'äina live in rural communities throughout the Hawaiian islands. In these areas, Native Hawaiians have maintained a close relationship to and knowledge of their wahi pana. These rural communities are special strongholds for the perpetuation of Hawaiian culture as a whole. An analogy which conveys a sense of the significance of these areas can be found in the natural phenomenon of the volcanic rainforest. From the island of Hawai‘i come the oli or chants of Pele and her creative force. The oli hulihia, in particular, meaning overturned, overthrown, and upheaval, speak of volcanic events, such as in the following chant.

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*Kua Loloa Kea’au I Ka Nähelehele/Kea‘au Is a Long Ridge of Forest*

Kua loloa Kea’au i ka Nähelehele
Hala kua hulu Pana'ewa i ka lā‘au
Ino ka maha o ka‘ōhi‘a
Kū kepakepa kamaha o ka lehua,
Po‘ohina i ka wela a ke Akua
Uahi Puna i ka oloka’a pōhaku
Nā pe‘a ‘ia e ka Wahine

Kea‘au is a long ridge of forest
The hala ridges of Pana‘ewa are the trees
Numerous are the severed ‘ōhi‘a
Zigzag are the severed lehua
The grayish mist is the Goddess’s hot revenge
Puna is smoky with hot rolling stones
Persecuted by the Goddess
Nānahu ahi ka ka papa o Oluea  The plain of Oluea is bitten with fire
Momoku ahi Puna, hala i ‘āpua  Puna is cut off by fire, even to ‘Apua
A ihu e, a ihu la,  The flow is heading this way and that.
A hulihia la i kai,  Turning upside down toward the sea,
A ihu e, a ihu la  The flow is heading this way and that,
A hulihia la i uka,  An upheaval toward the uplands,
A ua wā‘awa‘a  It is so desolate, uninhabitable,
A ua noho haʻahaʻa  Made low by the Goddess
A ua hele heleʻihele‘i  Falling, falling, nothing but ashes.

Even as Pele claims and reconstructs the forest landscape, she leaves intact whole sections of the forest, with tall old-growth ‘ōhi‘a trees, tree ferns, creeping vines, and mosses. These oases are called kīpuka. The beauty of these natural kīpuka is not only their ability to resist and withstand destructive forces

Figure 3  The volcanic rainforest in Puna, Hawai‘i, features numerous beautiful natural kīpuka of old-growth forest from which fresh fields of lava are eventually revegetated. Thus the Puna rainforest is a mosaic of old-growth forest and new-growth forest.
of change, but also their ability to regenerate life on the barren lava that surrounds them. For from these kīpuka come the seeds and spores carried by birds and blown by the wind to sprout upon and regenerate the forest on the new lava, sparking a dynamic new cycle of coming into and passing out of life.

The rural communities where kua'āina have remained are cultural kīpuka that have been bypassed by major historic forces of economic, political, and social change in Hawai‘i. Like the dynamic life forces in a natural kīpuka, cultural kīpuka are communities from which Native Hawaiian culture can be regenerated and revitalized in the setting of contemporary Hawai‘i. Moreover, from the examination of the lives of kua'āina in Hawaiian cultural kīpuka emerges a profile of the strongest and most resilient aspects of the Native Hawaiian culture and way of life. Such an examination provides insight into how the Native Hawaiian culture survived dynamic forces of political and economic change throughout the twentieth century.

Features of Cultural Kīpuka

Originally, cultural kīpuka were traditional centers of spiritual power. In traditional Hawaiian chants and mythology, major akua or Gods and Hawaiian deities were associated with these wahi pana. These districts were isolated and difficult to access over land and by sea. Owing to the lack of good anchorage and harbors, early traders often bypassed these districts in favor of more accessible areas. The missionaries entered these areas and established permanent stations during a later period than in other parts of Hawai‘i. Thus, traditional Native Hawaiian spiritual beliefs and practices persisted there, without competition, for a longer period of time. When Christian influences entered these areas, they had to coexist with traditional beliefs and practices.

The geography of these districts discouraged the widespread or long-term development of sugar plantations. In the arid areas, the lack of water resources made development of sugar plantations unfeasible. In the areas with sufficient rainfall, the terrain was too steep or rugged for plantation agriculture. Where plantation agriculture failed, such as in Moloka‘i and the Hāna district, ranches were able to succeed. The ranches employed Native Hawaiian men as cowboys and allowed them to live with their families in these isolated districts and pursue traditional fishing, gathering, and hunting activities to supplement their wages. In some areas small stores provided kua'āina access to some basic Western commodities such as kerosene, lanterns, tools, flour, crackers, and sugar. However, for the most part kua'āina were not consumer oriented.
Money to purchase these basic provisions came from selling taro or fish or an occasional day’s labor for a local entrepreneur or the government road crew.

Where neither plantations nor ranches were established, traditional subsistence activities continued to be pursued, undisturbed by modern economic development. In the wetland areas taro continued to be farmed, often in conjunction with rice. In the arid areas, sweet potatoes, dryland taro, and other traditional and introduced crops suited to the dry soil and climate were cultivated. Thus, the natural features and resources of these districts that rendered them unsuitable for plantation agriculture and ranching played a role in the survival, and eventual revitalization, of Native Hawaiian cultural, spiritual, and subsistence customs and practices. Concurrently, the quality and abundance of the natural resources of these rural communities can be attributed to the persistence of Native Hawaiian cultural and spiritual values and practices in the conduct of subsistence activities.

Very few haole or Caucasians settled in these districts, and kua‘āina had very little interaction with the outside community. Chinese who completed their contracts on the plantation and did not return home or move to the mainland leased or rented lands from the kua‘āina. Some served as middlemen, marketing whatever taro and fish kua‘āina desired to sell in the towns and bringing back consumer goods for sale or barter in the rural communities. Where there was a small rural store in these districts, it was invariably owned by a Chinese, who in some cases was married to a Native Hawaiian woman.

By 1930 there were still seventeen rural districts where Native Hawaiians were predominant. Andrew Lind wrote of the significance of these areas for the continuity of Hawaiian culture:

These racial havens—small population islands still relatively secure from the strong currents which have swept the archipelago as a whole into the world-complex of trade—are strikingly similar to those which appear in the census of 1853. The dry and rocky portions of Kau, Puna and the Kona coast, the deep valley of Waipio, the wild sections of Hana, Maui, portions of lonely Lanai and Molokai where industrial methods of agriculture have not succeeded, the leper settlement, and Niihau, the island of mystery—these are the places of refuge for some 4,400 or nearly one-fifth, of the native Polynesians . . .

The old fish and poi company, with its accompaniment of tutelary deities, taboos, religion, and magic, still persists in modified form within many of these isolated communities. A small plot of taro and access to the
sea and the mountains are apparently all that is required for the satisfaction of their material wants. The wage from an occasional day’s work on the government road enables them to purchase the necessary supplies which the old economy cannot now provide . . . The natives themselves have found these rural havens where the economy of life to which they are best adapted can survive.8

The seventeen districts where Native Hawaiians comprised a majority in 1930 were small isolated valleys and districts on the fringes of Hawai‘i’s economic and social life. The overall population in these districts averaged 341, and the number of Native Hawaiians in them averaged 248. The largest district, Pala'au-Ho'olehua on Moloka‘i, had 1,031 inhabitants, of whom 826 were Hawaiian; and the smallest, Keʻomuku on Lāna‘i, had 54 inhabitants, of whom 33 were Hawaiian.

On Hawai‘i Island, these districts included Kalapana (88 percent Hawaiian); Waipi‘o and Waimanu (66 percent Hawaiian); Keaukaha, an area opened for Hawaiian homesteading in 1925 (83 percent Hawaiian); the Pu‘uanahulu, Pu‘uwa‘awa‘a, and Kīholo district (79 percent Hawaiian); the Kohanaiki, Kalaoa, Hu‘ehu‘e, and Honokōhau district (52 percent Hawaiian); ‘Ala‘e, Pāhoehoe, Honokua, ‘Opihihale, and ‘Ōlelo-Moana district (82 percent Hawaiian); and Ho‘opūloa, Papa, Alika, Kaunāmano, Kapua, and Miloli‘i district (64 percent Hawaiian).

On Maui, the districts with a predominance of Hawaiians included Ke‘anae to Nāhiku (78 percent Hawaiian); Nāhiku to Hāna (55 percent Hawaiian); Kipahulu (80 percent Hawaiian); and Kaupō to Kahikinui (86 percent Hawaiian). On Moloka‘i the districts with a majority of Hawaiians included Kawela to Ualapue (62 percent Hawaiian); Kalawao (66 percent Hawaiian); and the Hawaiian homestead lands at Pala‘au-Ho‘olehua (80 percent Hawaiian). The small district of Keʻomuku on the island of Lāna‘i was 61 percent Hawaiian. The island of Ni‘ihau was 93 percent Hawaiian. On O‘ahu, only the district that included the Kalihi Receiving Station and the hospital for Hansen’s disease patients had a majority of Hawaiians; 61 percent of the patients were of Hawaiian ancestry. The statistics are summarized in table 1.

Except for the homestead districts of Pala‘au-Ho‘olehua, and Keaukaha, the Hansen’s disease receiving station at Kalihi, and the settlement at Kalawao, the ethnic concentrations of Hawaiians were not induced or encouraged by governmental policy. Among the remaining districts, certain qualities and patterns of change and continuity can be observed as common to them.9