

Kaho`olawe and the Makahiki Ceremony: The Healing of an Island

Burt Lum

Protect Kaho`olawe `Ohana

Abstract

This paper discusses the revival of the Makahiki Ceremony and the healing of land and culture on the Hawaiian island of Kaho`olawe by Protect Kaho`olawe Ohana and the Edith Kanaka`ole Foundation. The Makahiki Ceremony process is discussed.

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Background

Kohemalamala o Kanaloa is the traditional name given to the island known as Kaho`olawe. It is the only island in the Hawaiian archipelago named after a major Hawaiian deity, Kanaloa, god of the ocean. Evidence of historic sites on the island revealed Kaho`olawe as an important meeting place for the teaching of navigators. The island also yielded the largest adze quarry, second only to the quarries found on Hawai`i island. Scattered across the island are numerous archeological sites and petroglyph renderings. Kaho`olawe remained, until western contact, a major location for Hawaiian gathering, subsistence living and cultural practice.

For over five decades, the U.S. Navy and allies of the United States used Kaho`olawe as a bombing target. The devastation that resulted was not only to the island but also to the Hawaiian people and their culture. Eight miles south of Maui, Kaho`olawe remains in full view of residents of Maui as an island that was perceived by the general public to be a wasteland (Figure 1).

In 1976 a small band of Native Hawaiians occupied the island in protest of the continued desecration by the U.S. military of this sacred island. Through a long struggle, the bombing was finally stopped in 1990. Prior to that in March 18, 1981, Kaho`olawe was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1994, through an Act of Congress, Kaho`olawe was conveyed back to the State of Hawaii.

The group that first occupied Kaho`olawe back in 1976 became the nucleus of the Protect Kaho`olawe `Ohana (`Ohana). It was largely through the efforts of the `Ohana that in 1980 a Consent Decree settlement resulted from the Aluli et. al. vs. Brown civil suit allowing monthly access by the `Ohana to Kaho`olawe. This fundamental right of access enabled the `Ohana to fulfill their responsibility of *hoa`aina* and *kahu`aina* or tenants and cultural stewards for the island of Kaho`olawe and to perform spiritual and cultural practices on island.

The Makahiki

"I recall our beginnings when we held workshops, did our research to prepare for Makahiki, a celebration for the God Lono. We read the books by Kamakau and Malo, talked to many *kumu hula* and *kupuna* on the subject of traditional rites, however, for all of us involved with Kaho`olawe, we had not practiced our Hawaiian culture to the extent of understanding it fully. We wanted to be involved with ritual and ceremony to learn to acknowledge and thank Lono for our `aina and to ask Lono for assistance in the revegetation of Kaho`olawe. This was our primary goal for the reinstatement of the Makahiki, not to stop the bombing or to return the island from the U.S. military. The intentions for the rituals were that life would once again abound and grow on this little *moku* or island, after all this is our greatest gift, this land that sustains us is above all else our foundation (Kanaka`ole Foundation, 1992)."

(Quote by Haili Ka`iana; interview and written statement by Ka`iana.)

The `Ohana took significant strides in accomplishing the access provisions. Having been granted permission to access Kaho`olawe, the `Ohana bore the responsibility of appropriate and meaningful use. Bear in mind that much has changed in the religious and spiritual practices of the Hawaiian people. From the first

introduction by the early missionaries of a newly introduced religion called Christianity, the spiritual practice of the Native Hawaiian was in transition. In 1819, a religious battle was fought and the victors abolished the traditional native practice of worship. The four major deities, *Ku*, *Kane*, *Kanaloa* and *Lono*, were no longer recognized. The ceremonies and rituals subsequently faded into antiquity.

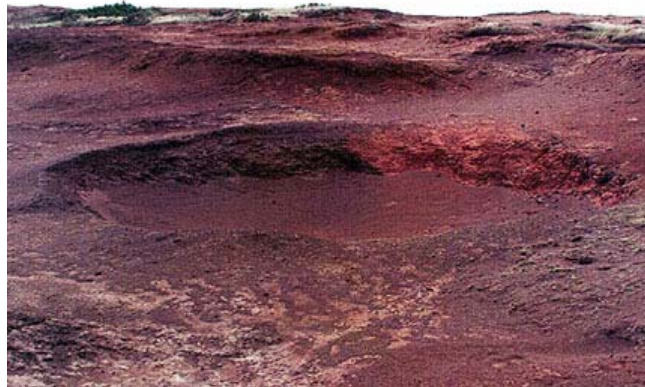


Figure 1
Craters from bombs litter the landscape of Kaho`olawe.

As the ceremonies and rituals disappeared, so did the foundation of the Native Hawaiian's connection with nature. Much of the spirituality of the traditional religion recognized and respected the elements of nature. Lono was the god of rebirth, revegetation, renewal and rejuvenation. It was this season of the Makahiki that recognized the long cloud of rain, thunder, lightning and the winter rains that brought new growth and germination (Figure 2). Nature revived the plants during this period and determined the coming year's harvest. It was the celebration of the winter solstice when many of the year's *kapu* (restrictions) were relaxed.

Some of the ceremonies were preserved, by going underground, but much of the collective knowledge of the traditional practices was lost. The celebration of the Makahiki and of Lono

ceased in 1819. If not for reference in historic text, many of the details of the Makahiki would have been long forgotten. It was this celebration of rejuvenation and rebirth that the `Ohana wanted to revive in 1982 and perpetuate on Kaho`olawe, one hundred sixty three years since its abolishment.

With full support by the kupuna, the Edith Kanaka`ole Foundation (EKF) worked with the `Ohana to revive the Makahiki ceremony by detailing the rituals and practices to be conducted on Kaho`olawe. This in and of itself was a significant undertaking since the practice was not performed for more than a hundred years. The revival of the Makahiki ceremony was an act of healing not only for Kaho`olawe but also for the spirit of the Native Hawaiians who practiced it.



Figure 2

The nalu clouds are clouds that originate from Maui on the eastern slope of Haleakala. They extend over the channel to Kaho`olawe bringing life giving rains to the island.

The Ceremony

The Makahiki season is an annual event marked by the rising of the *Makali`i* (Pleiades) at sunset. This usually occurs in November and is considered the opening of Makahiki season. The closing of Makahiki is in late January or early February. During this period in Hawai`i the rains frequently fall. The temperatures cool and the vegetation revive from the long summer.

In ancient times it is during this period that all formal work ceased and the community assumed a festive mood in preparation for games and friendly competition. One of the rituals during this period was the collection of taxes by the *konohiki* (chief) of the *ahupua`a* (land division). The practiced rituals were all in celebration of the god Lono that presided over this period of the year. The taxes collected were placed in designated areas in preparation for the arrival of the Lono procession (Malo, 1979).

The Lono procession consisted of practitioners carrying the Lono figure made of a long pole and a cross section draped with tapa cloth. The procession would make its way around the island collecting offerings from each village. Tabus were lifted, warring was prohibited and festivities would prevail until the closing of the Makahiki.

This ceremony as described in Hawaiian Antiquities by David Malo was a complex and involved process (Malo, 1979). In our modern times, the Makahiki ceremony needed to be adapted, not only to fit contemporary culture but to hold true to the meaning of the practice in a social-political environment vastly different from pre-contact Hawai`i. The `Ohana, more than a hundred years since the last Makahiki ceremony was performed, conducted the first contemporary version of the ceremony on Kaho`olawe in 1982.

On the first day on Kaho`olawe the Makahiki participants would awake in the pre-dawn hours to the blowing of the conch shell. At this time the participants would gather at the beach. The Lono practitioners (Mo`olono) would administer a sip of a drink consisting of water, *olena*, *limu* (seaweed) and *pa`akai* (salt). In the darkness, the participants would enter into the ocean as part of a cleansing ritual called the *hiuwai*. The *hiuwai* is a personal experience to wash away the problems and troubles that may weigh on a person's consciousness. Participants would remain in the water until such time when the mo`olono would watch for ho`ailona (sign) to end the *hiuwai* ritual. The *hiuwai* marks the beginning of the Makahiki ceremony on Kaho`olawe.

Once the huiwai is completed, the remainder of the morning is devoted to the preparation of ho`okupu (offerings) which are to be offered at each of the lele (shrine/stand) located at culturally significant sites in Hakioawa, the main area where the `Ohana access and reside (Figure 3). Ho`okupu consists of products from nature that are the *kinolau* or physical representations of Lono. This includes *niu hiwa* (coconut), `awa, *lama*, *kalo* (taro), `uala (sweet potato), `ulu (breadfruit), *mai`a* (banana), *i`a* (red fish), *ipu wai* (gourd and fresh water) and *pua`a* (pork) (Kanaka`ole Foundation, 1995).

The ten (`umi) ho`okupu for Makahiki are:

1. `nui hiwa, (black coconut) cracking of niu signified opening of ceremonies.
2. lama, (lama wood) for enlightenment; also to Laka (goddess of hula).
3. `awa, favored drink of the akua.
4. pua`a, (pig) ceremonial food of ka po`e kahiko (people of old).
5. kalo, (taro) staple food of ka po`e kahiko.
6. i`a `ula `ula, (red fish) `aweoweo or kumu favored fish of the ali`i.
7. `ulu, (breadfruit) symbolizes growth.
8. `uala, (sweet potato) signifies humans` relationship to the akua.
9. mai`a, (banana) variety sacred to Lono.
10. ipu o Lono, (gourd of Lono) gourd containing fresh water.



Figure 3

Ho`okupu preparation. Participants in the Makahiki ceremony prepare the ho`okupu before they are placed in the imu.

While the ho`okupu are being prepared, the ceremonial *imu* (underground oven) is dug in which some of the ho`okupu will be cooked (Figure 4). The imu is commonly used to cook pork, kalo, `uala, `ulu and is a method of cooking for all Hawaiian luau in contemporary times. As a ceremonial imu, the stones are washed and carefully arranged. This imu will

contain only ho`okupu. Food to be eaten is cooked in a separate imu.

When the imu is ready, when the rocks are red hot and the wood fire has completely burned away, the ho`okupu are ready to be placed into the imu. Presentation of ho`okupu is done as a procession. Each presenter of ho`okupu will give the ho`okupu to the attending mo`olono for

placement into the imu. This is continued for each of the ho`okupu at which time an *oli* (chant) is performed and the imu is closed (Handy, Green Handy, & Kawena Pukui, 1972).

Three to four hours later, the imu is opened and the ho`okupu are retrieved and rewrapped in preparation to present at the respective *lele* (Figure 5). In Hakioawa, the two primary sites for offering is the women's heiau called Hale O Papa and the men's heiau called Hale Mua. A

procession is led to each of the heiau and the ho`okupu is offered and placed on the lele. This is first conducted at Hale O Papa and then at Hale Mua. Conduct during the procession is solemn. Silence is maintained. It is a time for introspection and quiet meditation. The attire is traditional Hawaiian, men wear malo and the women wear kikepa. All contemporary jewelry is removed in favor of traditional adornment. The participants walk barefoot to each of the sites as a sign of respect.



Figure 4

The imu after the wood has completely burnt off. This imu is ready for the placement of items to be cooked. A layer of banana leaves is placed over the rocks, over which the items are placed. This is then covered with more banana leaves and ti leaves before covering with dirt. The imu is left for 3-4 hours and allowed to cook the items.



Figure 5

Lele at Hale Mua. The lele is the offering platform where the ho`okupu are placed. This lele is located at the Hale Mua or men`s heiau.

This completes the procession for the first day. A similar presentation of ho`okupu is done on the following day at a location on the summit of Kaho`olawe called Moa`ulaiki. A lele (Figure 6 and 7) is erected there next to a large stone shrine called, *Pohaku ahu `aikupele kapili o Keaweiki* or "Stone of deep magic of Keaweiki." This area is thought to be a significant training ground for ocean navigators since from this vantage point Moloka`i, Lana`i, Maui and Hawai`i can all be seen. More importantly, the currents and the channels between the island could be studied from Moa`ulaiki.

Completion of the ho`okupu offering at Moa`ulaiki concludes the ceremonial portion of the Makahiki opening. Due to current access arrangements and the continued threat of danger from unexploded ordnance, the Makahiki participants return to Hakioawa to close down camp and return the following day to their respective islands. The closing of the Makahiki season takes place approximately three months later when the participants return and repeat the ceremonial practices as done in the opening.



Figure 6

Lele at Moa`ulaiki: This lele is located at the summit of Kaho`olawe on a large stone called, *Pohaku ahu `aikupele kapili o Keaweiki* or Stone of deep magic of Keaweiki. This large stone was placed here as a shrine and evidence of this areas use as a place of study and worship.

The difference in the closing ceremony is an 11-mile hike across the island to a western point called Kealaekahiki (the pathway to Tahiti). The Lono figure is marched in procession across the island. It is a long hike symbolic of the participant's walking the backbone of the island and feeling pain that has been inflicted on the environment and the culture. It offers a time for introspection and the contemplation of commitment.

At Kealaikahiki, the final ho`okupu offering is presented. A ritual is performed where small portions of offerings are placed on a large eyed net. The mo`olono then shake the net and what falls through will determine the bounty for the following year. The ho`okupu are placed on a small replica of a canoe called a *wa`a o Lono*. This *wa`a* is then swum out at sunset and set into the currents to take it in a southerly direction toward Tahiti. This concludes the Makahiki ceremony and the season of Lono.

The Healing

The ceremony just described contributes to the healing process on many levels. At a macro level, it is the healing of the land. The commitment over the last 23 years to perform the Makahiki ceremony is not a singular act. Each year it is the culmination of restoration activities that have taken place on island. The

ʻOhana was granted monthly access rights and during these visits work projects take place. It is also a time for new visitors to participate in an access. It is through the work access that participants get a first hand experience of the land and what is involved in healing it. The restoration of Kahoʻolawe back to a living, thriving ecosystem is many years away.



Figure 7

Arrival at dawn: Makahiki participants arrive in the early dawn for the 3-4 day stay on Kahoʻolawe. There are no docks for the Pualele to lash to so participants use a zodiac to shuttle people and belongings into shore. In the background is the silhouette of Haleakala on Maui.

Summary

Kahoʻolawe is a small island, six miles southwest of Maui in the rain shadow of Mt. Haleakala (see [Video Clip 1](#)). It is 45 square miles of land mass originally consisted of dry land forests. During the ranching period in the late 1850s to early 1900, cattle and goats roamed the land. This denuded the landscape of the native vegetation. The resulting erosion washed much of the island's topsoil into the ocean. In 1941 after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, the US placed the Territory of Hawai'i under martial law and took over the island of Kahoʻolawe. The island was used as a bombing target for military exercises. This fifty-year bombardment of the island not only left an unsafe environment of unexploded ordnance but also further contributed to the island's ecological disaster. Vegetation along with cultural sites were

destroyed. Consequently, the restoration of the island is a decades long process. The State of Hawai'i established the Kahoʻolawe Island Reserve Commission to oversee restoration activities for the island.

At another level, the Makahiki ceremony represents the healing of a culture. Western contact and influence in Hawai'i moved the people away from their traditional nature based way of life. Direct connections to the ʻaina (land) and Native Hawaiian subsistence lifestyle gave way to our current urban lifestyle. Cultural practices were lost and in the best cases, went underground. A contemporary revival of the Hawaiian culture started back in 1976 when the illegal occupation of Kahoʻolawe to stop the bombing, began a Hawaiian renaissance movement. The practicing of the Makahiki

ceremony on island was a facet of that renaissance. It was the revival of traditional ceremony that paid homage not only to the god Lono but to nature, the *aumakua* (lesser gods often represented by nature in the form of shark, dolphin, owl, etc.) and to the ancestors. In 21st century America, this cultural experience for many is in stark contrast to their lifestyle in urban cities. Therefore the mere practice of Makahiki heals the culture and keeps the practice alive

Finally on a personal level, the Makahiki is a healing process for the individual. The deeply spiritual nature of the Makahiki ceremony is rekindled within each participant that takes part in the ceremony. For the individual it is a reconnection back to nature and the land. The concept of Aloha `Aina, love of the land, is integral with the soul of the person. The connectedness lies much deeper than participation in the ceremony. As an example, preparation of the ho`okupu extends well before the Makahiki begins. Care and nurturing of the kinolau, whether it is kalo, `ulu, `uala, etc., is a year long commitment. Likewise the

commitment to Kaho`olawe is continuous. The person is one with the process and the island. And as this is realized the person contributes to his or her healing and balance.

The Makahiki also gives the person a connection to a past. Through an unbroken lineage of practice, whether it be the growing of taro or the collection of pure water from the mountains of Wai`ale`ale, nature and ancestors walked that path before. As a participant that same path is taken and there is a connection that extends back in time. For the individual, that connection provides food and nurturing for the soul.

In conclusion, the Makahiki and Kaho`olawe is an experience that needs to be felt first hand. It will touch those willing to embrace that experience and it will do so at many levels. Healing occurs for the land, for the culture and most importantly for the soul of the individual. From a tiny island in the middle of the Pacific in the middle of the Hawaiian archipelago, Kaho`olawe`s power is to influence one person at a time, one nurtured soul at a time and through them radiate out to the rest of the world.



Figure 8

Sunrise at Hakio`awa: Each morning as the sun rises a chant called E ala e (Kanaka`ole Foundation, 1992) is performed to greet the sun. It is the welcoming of the sun as it rises above the deep ocean.

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Acknowledgements

Video: Kaho`olawe: Ka Ha o ko makou Kupuna - The Breath of our Ancestors, Advanced Video class, Instructor: Mark Nitta, Hawaii Pacific University, 2002, for the Kaho`olawe Island Reserve Commission. Video republished with permission.

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Author Information

Burt Lum
Protect Kaho`olawe `Ohana
P. O. Box 152
Honolulu, HI 96810
Ph. 808-525-6409
Fax. 808-525-6468
E-Mail: blum@kahoolawe.org
<http://www.kahoolawe.org>