Kūkaniloko, Wahiawā, Oʻahu

By Holly K. Coleman

O Kapawa, o ke aliʻi o Waialua
I hanau i Kukaniloko
O Wahiawa ke kahua
O Lihue ke ewe
O Kaala ka piko
O Kapukapuakea ka aa
O Kaiaka i Maeaea

Kapawa, the chief of Waialua,
Was born at Kukaniloko;
Wahiawa the site;
At Lihue the placenta,
At Kaala the navel cord,
At Kapukapuakea (Heiau) the caul,
(Heiau) of Kaiaka at Maeaea

The verses above are part of a traditional mele inoa (name chant) honoring the aliʻi (chief) Kapawa, for whom Kūkaniloko, the famous birthing stone site, was said to have been constructed (Kamakau, 1867). Kūkaniloko has been described as one of the most sacred Native Hawaiian places and is found within a rich cultural historical landscape of the Wahiawā Plateau. At one time, this area was thought to have encompassed a chiefly center of power for Oʻahu aliʻi.

In late 2012, the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA) received over 500 acres surrounding Kūkaniloko as a result of the efforts of the Trust for Public Land and the State of Hawaiʻi to purchase 1,732 acres of land from the Galbraith Estate. These lands may only be used for agricultural and cultural preservation purposes.

The goal of this Information Sheet is to explore some of the cultural and historical narratives of Kūkaniloko and the surrounding areas, particularly as OHA transitions into the role of caretaker of this sacred place. This Information Sheet will also strengthen the agency’s foundation of knowledge for this wahi pana (storied, legendary place).
The Wahiawā Plateau: Traditional Landscape

Kūkaniloko is seated within the broad pass between the Ko‘olau and Wai‘anae Mountains known as the Wahiawā Plateau (also referred to as Leilehua or Central, and alternatively called a plain or plateau) (State of Hawai‘i, 1998). Traditionally, this area encompassed lands known as Wahiawā, Līhu‘e, Halemano, Wai‘anae Uka, and Waialua. The places surrounding Kūkaniloko were well-populated and three major trails crossed the area: small clusters of houses, farm plots, heiau (places of worship), and other sacred sites were scattered throughout the plateau.

Resources and Use

Extensive dryland forests covered the edges of the plain and flanked the Wai‘anae mountain range; Native Hawaiians traditionally used these areas to collect resources such as ‘ōhi‘a, ka‘ui, wili-wili, ‘iliah, lama, hau, uhiuhi, hala, kupukupu, and kukui (Cordy et al., 2011).

Historical evidence suggests that there were productive lo‘i (irrigated kalo fields) in the bottoms of gulches throughout the Wahiawā Plateau with major ʻauwai (irrigation ditches) that also carried some water to the kula (plain). ʻUala (sweet potato) had been cultivated by Native Hawaiians on much of the plain (Handy, 1991).

Winds of Wahiawā and Līhu‘e

Waikōloa and Wai‘ōpua (also known as Kēhau) were two cooling winds of Wahiawā and Līhu‘e and were known to blow from the Wai‘anae mountain range across the plateau, often reaching to Puʻu‘ōla (Pearl Harbor). These winds were famous for bringing the fragrance of the forests, especially that of the kupukupu fern and nēnē grass (Keamoku, 1862). Another wind associated with the area is known as Ki‘u, which brought the fragrance of the nēnē grass and dew (Hooolumahiehie, 2006).
General History of Kūkaniloko

Kūkaniloko was described as “kahi i make-make nui ia e na‘lii o Oahu nei,” or “a place the chiefs of O‘ahu greatly desired,” (Kalanikuihonoinamoku, 1865). Although there is some academic debate about the accuracy of dating the site, Kūkaniloko was said to have been constructed as early as 1100 CE by the ali‘i Nanakaoko and the ali‘i wahine (chiefess) Kahiikikalani for the birth of their son, Kapawa, of the Ulu Hema genealogies (Kamakau 1867). Kūkaniloko served as a revered and sacred place for chiefly births until the mid-1600s; the ali‘i Kākuhihewa is the last chief known to have been born at Kūkaniloko. The site has remained sacred to Native Hawaiians through the years. For example, Kamehameha wanted Ke‘öpūolani to give birth at Kūkaniloko in the late 18th century, and the site remained an important place to visit in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Hāwea and ‘Ōpuku

Hāwea and ‘Ōpuku were two of the most famous and sacred pahu (drums) in ancient Hawai‘i, and were prominent in many important religious ceremonies on O‘ahu; the use of Hāwea and ‘Ōpuku has been recorded at Kūkaniloko and they were said to have sounded during birthing and chiefly rituals there (McKinzie, 1986). Both drums had strong ties to the Mānalua area; there is a possibility that Pahua Heiau once housed ‘Ōpuku. ‘Ōpuku also became tied to the chiefly families of O‘ahu (Kamakau, 1867).

Holoholohokū

Kūkaniloko is one of the most sacred birthing sites in Hawai‘i. Another sacred birthing site, known as Holoholohokū, is located in Wailua, Kaua‘i (Kamakau, 1867). Both wahi pana have birthstones with similar layouts and may have had spiritual connections in ancient times. Both sites were thought to have been larger royal centers or compounds that included birthing sites.

Birthing Practices at Kūkaniloko

In ancient times, Kūkaniloko consisted of stones, many with man-made poho (basins), which were used to support a chiefess while she gave birth. Historical sources also record 2 rows of 18 stones for 36 chiefs who witnessed the birth (Kamakau, 1867). Immediately after birth, the child was taken to Ho‘olonopahu, a waihau heiau (a temple dedicated to the god Lono) which was located on the grounds of Kūkaniloko for the cutting of the piko (umbilical cord) and purification. Sacred drums were sounded to announce the birth, and the piko of the ali‘i were left at Kūkaniloko (Kalanikuihonoinamoku, 1865).

Scholars believe that Kūkaniloko was a place where a chiefess and the child could recover for a period after the birth (Cordy et al., 2011).

An ali‘i born at Kūkaniloko with the proper rituals and in the presence of the other ali‘i was described as he ali‘i (a chief), he akua (a god) and he we-la (a blaze of heat) and was therefore given a number of the highest kapu (restrictions), indicating the high level of mana (spiritual power) associated with this place (Kamakau, 1867).

Sites of Significance

Scholars have suggested that Kükaniloko was actually a focal point of a much larger network of sacred sites and of the cultural landscape in the Wahiawā–Līhuʻe area; these places are said to be of similar sacredness and importance as Kükaniloko. Unfortunately, many of these sites have been damaged or destroyed by ranching or pineapple growing activities. Native Hawaiian historian John Papa Ii (1959) described a number of these sites: a sacred pond had ties to the Kükaniloko and the chiefly center; a maika (traditional sport) field was at Kapalauauai; Kawa at Kuaikua Stream was another famous birthing site; and the Oʻahunui Stone was a popular stopping point for Hawaiian travelers.

A stone known as Keanini (possibly associated with an akua or aliʻi of the same name) was found in the 1880s by George Galbraith and moved to Kükaniloko; a companion stone was also moved to the site. By 1925, the stones were known for their healing powers and were moved to Wahiawā Cemetery in 1926 because visitors were causing damage to Kükaniloko. The stones were secretly relocated in 2010 (Cordy et al., 2011).
Location of Kūkaniloko

There are many theories pertaining to the location of the birthing stones at Kūkaniloko.

Kūkaniloko is thought to be the geographical and spiritual center of O‘ahu, and is also believed to be spiritually connected to other sacred sites in Hawai‘i and in the Pacific (Cordy et al., 2011). According to Kamakau (1992), the group of chiefly families known as Lō and Kumuhonua are often identified with Kūkaniloko and the surrounding areas.

The mountains of Ka‘ala, Kānehoa, and Maunauna cradle the landscape. It has been suggested that the profile of the Wai‘anae mountains form the image of a wahine hāpai (pregnant woman).

These mountains are also believed to be geographical markers used to measure the seasons (State of Hawai‘i, 1998).

Other Uses of Kūkaniloko

Based on oral histories and other studies of the site, scholars believe that Kūkaniloko and surrounding areas were used as a place of learning for kahuna (priestly experts), lua (martial art) practitioners, and kilo (astrologers). It has also been suggested that Kūkaniloko was considered a pu‘uhonua (place of refuge) (Cordy et al., 2011). Unfortunately, the destruction of sites that may have been associated with Kūkaniloko, such as Ho‘olonopahu Heiau, has made the determination of other uses of Kūkaniloko more difficult.
Kalo and other traditional Native Hawaiian crops continued to be grown on a small scale in the Wahiawā Plateau in the late 1800s and early 1900s, although depopulation altered the cultural landscape of the area. House and irrigated kalo plots dot the landscape, possibly along Wai‘e‘i Stream. Kolekole Pass is in the background. Source: Cordy et al., 2011; Bishop Museum P86220.

The Changing Culture and Landscape of the Wahiawā Plateau

Historical accounts indicate that in the early 1800s, there was still a dense forest on the slopes of the Wai‘anae Mountain range which descended into the Wahiawā Plateau. By the end of the 1800s, however, the forests were dramatically reduced by the sandalwood trade and from the whaling industry (which extracted trees for firewood) (St. John, 1947).

By the late 1800s, significantly fewer Native Hawaiians lived in the areas surrounding Kūkaniloko. The introduction and spread of highly infectious diseases decimated the Native Hawaiian population (Bushnell, 1993). Many previously farmed land plots, lo‘i patches located in the deep gulches, and housing sites were abandoned by 1840 (Cordy et al., 2011).

The greatest social and environmental changes in the Wahiawā Plateau resulted from the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893. For example, Hawaiian Government and Crown lands passed to the Provisional Government and eventually to the Territory of Hawai‘i at annexation in 1898. Conversion of these lands to private landholdings allowed for the development of ranches and plantations in the area.
Ranching: 1840–1900
Ranching in the Wahiawā Plateau began in the early 1840s on lands in Honouliuli and Lihu‘e that were leased by the American merchant John Meek (Cordy et al., 2011). The privatization of land that occurred during the Māhele and during the second half of the 19th century led to the generation of leases for great tracts of land to private individuals, including the lands surrounding Kūkaniloko. This in turn allowed for a rise in intensive ranching operations in the area, many of which continued until the early 1900s.

Pineapple: 1900–2004
Pineapple grew better than sugar in high elevation areas like Wahiawā. Beginning in 1900, O‘ahu’s pineapple industry was centered in the Wahiawā Plateau and resulted in the importation of plantation labor (Miller, 1990). With a lease to the Waialua Agricultural Company, pineapple was grown on much of the land surrounding Kūkaniloko until 2004, when Del Monte halted its operations in Hawai‘i (Trust for Public Land, 2012).
The U.S. Military and Schofield Barracks

The lands for the Wai’anae-uka military reservation were formerly Hawaiian Crown lands and consisted of 14,400 acres on an area that was known as the Leilehua Plain in Central O’ahu. The area was ceded to the US Government on July 26, 1899 shortly after the Republic of Hawai’i was annexed to the US. A temporary cantonment that included tents and wooden barracks was completed in 1909. The reservation was named Schofield after General John M. Schofield, a former Commanding General of the U.S. Army who had identified Hawai’i’s strategic value to the U.S. and had encouraged annexation after the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. The military continues to have a significant presence and impact in the area, which now includes 16,602 acres of land, encompassing Wheeler Army Airfield and the Helemano Military Reservation (Tropic Lightning Museum, 2008).

Irrigation Activities

The rise of intensive ranching, sugar, and pineapple in the Wahiawâ Plateau led to the construction of irrigation systems to supplement natural rainfall levels. Between 1904 and 1906, a major dam was built at Wahiawâ near the North and South forks of Ka‘konahua Stream. This formed the Wahiawâ Reservoir, also known as Lake Wilson (Cordy et al., 2011).

Demographic Shifts

In 1895, lands which had been administered by the Kingdom of Hawai’i’s Board of Education known as “school lands” in Wahiawâ became homesteads under the Republic of Hawai’i and were taken out of the lease system. Non-Hawaiian families from the US, particularly California, were encouraged to move to the Wahiawâ Colony Tract between 1898–1899. Each settler received a 5-acre parcel in the town with a house and farm land nearby. This area became Wahiawâ Town (Cordy et al., 2011).
Galbraith and Care of Kükaniloko

George Galbraith moved to Hawai‘i from Ireland in the mid 1800s and partnered with cattle ranchers in the Wahiawā Plateau of O‘ahu in the 1870s. In January 1882, Galbraith purchased approximately 2,000 acres of land for ranching in Wahiawā and Kemo‘o from William Hillebrand. This land acquisition included Kükaniloko (Cordy et al., 2011). Galbraith sought to protect and preserve the Kükaniloko site; he prohibited plowing around the site and frequently fenced the area to protect it from cattle. He was said to have dreamed of the spirit of the Keanini Stone, which he had moved to Kükaniloko in the 1880s (Sterling and Summers, 1978).

In 1900, Galbraith leased the lands around Kükaniloko to the Waialua Agriculture Company for pineapple production. William Goodale, who managed the plantation from 1898 to 1923, continued to care for the site. Following Galbraith’s death in 1904, the Hawaiian Trust Company (now a part of the Bank of Hawai‘i) managed his assets and administered his estate, which included the lands surrounding Kükaniloko.

The Galbraith Trust and Estate: Sale of Lands and Preservation Efforts

The 1,732 acre tract of land remaining in Galbraith’s estate in the late 20th century represented one of the largest undeveloped plots on O‘ahu. Galbraith’s trust had grown to include an estimated 600 beneficiaries worldwide. The valuable land parcel had been sought for residential and luxury home development for a number of years. In 1992, a trustee of the estate proposed the development of an 18-hole golf course and 3,100 homes (Carlton, 2012). The trust began dissolving the estate in 2007 to meet a state deadline. A contract was signed with a real-estate developer for $40 million to start residential development on the land, although this attempt at sale and development was also unsuccessful (Carlton, 2012).

Following these attempts, the Hawai‘i State Legislature set aside $13 million to buy the land. The Trust for Public Land, a non-profit land conservation organization, worked with a number of financial collaborators and was able to raise an additional $12 million for the purchase of the property. In 2012, the land was sold by the Galbraith Estate for $25 million (Carlton, 2012). The land was transferred to two Hawai‘i public agencies. More than 1,200 acres from the acquisition was transferred to the Hawai‘i State Agribusiness Development Corporation (ADC). OHA received over 500 acres surrounding Kükaniloko. These properties may only be used for cultural preservation and agriculture (Trust for Public Land, 2012).

Contributions to the 2012 Purchase of the Galbraith Estate Parcel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contribution Source</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State of Hawai‘i general revenue bond</td>
<td>$13,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Army Garrison Hawai‘i/DOD Buffer Program</td>
<td>$4,500,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>City and County of Honolulu Clean Water &amp; Natural Lands Fund</td>
<td>$4,000,000</td>
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<td>Office of Hawaiian Affairs</td>
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<td>D.R. Horton-Schuler Division</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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Caretakers of Kūkaniloko

Kūkaniloko was said to have been abandoned as a birthing place and chiefly center of power sometime after 1600 CE, although Native Hawaiians continued to visit the area for its special significance in the generations after. Many individuals and groups continued to care for Kūkaniloko from the late 19th century.

George Galbraith protected Kūkaniloko after he acquired the surrounding lands in 1882. Plantation manager William Goodale continued care of the site from 1898 and after the lands were leased for pineapple in 1900. In 1918, Goodale wrote to the Daughters of Hawai‘i and they assumed official care of the site through a lease in 1925. The Waialua Civic Club officially cared for the site from 1950 to 1960, and the Hawaiian Civic Club of Wahiawā assumed care from 1960 to 1992. The site was placed on the Hawai‘i Register of Historic Places in 1972 and the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. Kūkaniloko became a State Park in 1992 when the state purchased the 0.5 acre birthstone area and the 4.5 acres of land immediately around the birthstones. In 2003, the site name was changed to Kūkaniloko Birthstones State Historic Site (Cordy et al., 2011).

Family groups have also likely unofficially maintained care of the site for generations.

Known Caretakers of Kūkaniloko under the Galbraith Estate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Caretaker</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1882-1900</td>
<td>George Galbraith, William Goodale (beginning in 1898)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-1918</td>
<td>Waialua Agriculture Company: William Goodale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918-1950</td>
<td>Daughters of Hawai‘i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950-1960</td>
<td>Waialua Hawaiian Civic Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960-1992</td>
<td>Hawaiian Civic Club of Wahiawā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992-2012</td>
<td>Division of State Parks in the Department of Land &amp; Natural Resources, Hawaiian Civic Club of Wahiawā, Friends of Kūkaniloko (beginning in 1997)</td>
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</tbody>
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Contemporary Concerns

Proper care and stewardship of Kūkaniloko remains a priority of the community, the State of Hawai‘i, and of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs. Today, the site remains vulnerable to vandalism and improper or excessive use. Long-term, pono (proper, balanced) solutions to these challenges are being explored for implementation. In particular, cultural preservation and land management plans for this sacred and important site are being developed.
References


Kalanikuihonoinamoku, B.V. 1865. “No na wahi a na‘lii e makemake ai e noho i ka wa hi ko ma ka Mopuni o Oahu nei.” Ke Au Okoa, 1(15) July 31.


References


