A wahi pana of Nāʻālehu, Kaʻū

By Holly K. Coleman

We drank a most grateful draught from the principal stream, and then continued our way along its margin, through Kiolakaa, traveling towards the sea, till we reached Waiohinu... on leaving the valley, we proceeded along by the foot of the mountains, in a line parallel with the sea, and about a mile and a half from it. In our way, we passed over a tahua pāhe, or pāhe floor, about fifty or sixty yards long, where a number of men were playing at pāhe, a favourite amusement with farmers, and common people in general... on the same tahua, or floor, they also play at another game, resembling the pāhe, which they call maita or uru maita. (Ellis, 1839)

The above passage appears in the journal of the English missionary Reverend William Ellis, and was recorded on his tour of Hawaiʻi Island in 1823. Although he does not name the “tahua pāhe,” geographical markers mentioned in the account make it likely that the place described by Ellis is in fact Kahua ʻOlohū, a famous wahi pana (storied, legendary place) of Kaʻū that was formerly used as a field for Hawaiian sports and makahiki (religious agricultural celebrations).

This Information Sheet explores some of the cultural and historical narratives surrounding Kahua ʻOlohū, Nāʻālehu. Although historical texts specifically describing or referencing Kahua ʻOlohū are difficult to find, ethnographic accounts of traditional recreation and robust accounts of surrounding areas like Pāhala, Honuʻapo, Nīnole, Waiohinu, and other places of Kaʻū strengthen the foundation of knowledge for this wahi pana.
The Sport of Maika

Native Hawaiians engaged in a variety of sports and games, both for recreation and to build skills and strength.

The game of maika (which is commonly compared to modern bowling) was a traditional Native Hawaiian sport and a favorite pastime from Hawai‘i to Ni‘ihau (Brigham, 1902). Maika was played with a rounded stone, which was sometimes spherical but was usually disk-shaped; it was either thrown or rolled along a paved course known as a ka-hua (playing field).

The word “maika” can be used to signify fatigue, pain, or weariness that results from playing the game. “Maika” also refers to the act of engaging in rigorous or strenuous exercise (Pukui, 1986). These similar word meanings suggest that a high level of physical prowess and athletic ability was required to engage in maika.

Unlike many other traditional Hawaiian pastimes, surfing has remained popular; many of these sports were practiced during Makahiki. Top: Cheever (1851) as found in Dela Vega (2011). Bottom: Boxing at a Makahiki celebration (Bishop Museum Archives, n.d.).

Celebrations During the Makahiki

Makahiki lasted approximately four months, from October or November with the rising of Makali‘i (the constellation Pleiades) through February or March. The season was an important time of peace; it marked the end of harvest and the beginning of the season of the god Lono, which was a time set aside for agriculture. Engaging in war and other activities associated with the god Kū, such as deep sea fishing, were considered kapu (restricted). During this time, Native Hawaiians engaged in games and sports, including maika. In fact, the day of Koloa-kulua (twenty-fifth) during the makahiki was dedicated to maika and other sports (Malo, 1951). These activities were also continued on the next day, which was known as Kaloa-pau.
Playing Maika

On Hawai‘i and Kaua‘i the stone used in the game of maika was known as an “‘ulu,” from which the more common name known for the game, ‘ulu maika, is derived. However, the term “‘olohū” was used on Maui and O‘ahu. “‘Olohū” was also used in Ka‘ū (Pukui, 1986).

Although there was some variation between the island communities, historical sources record maika being played three ways. In the first, players would compete with one another by seeing how far they could throw their ‘olohū or ‘ulu. A more familiar form of maika required players to roll their ‘olohū or ‘ulu between two upright sticks placed a few inches apart thirty or forty yards down the kahua (Ellis, 1839). In the third iteration of maika, the disks of two players were rolled against each other; the disk that turned or broke marked the losing player (Brigham, 1902).

Stones

‘Olohū were made of stone, usually a close grained basalt or compact coral (Ellis, 1839). According to the nineteenth century Hawaiian historian David Malo, the stones used for maika were the mākā (maka’a), Hiu-pa, ikimakua, kumu-one makiki, kumuaomao, kalama‘ula, and pa‘akea (Malo 1898). Stone hammers, grooved sinkers (for fishing), stone bait mortars, and stone mirrors could be made using old disks (Buck, 1957).

‘Olohū or ‘ulu could also be made using wood, limestone, and sandstone. Games very much like maika were played elsewhere in Polynesia; Maori anthropologist Te Rangi Hiroa (1957) notes that in the Cook Islands and Samoa disks were cut from stone, wood, or breadfruit.

Today, stone ‘olohū or ‘ulu are some of the most common archaeological items found in Hawai‘i and are commonly referred to as “quoites” in older museum collections.

Kahua

A smooth alley or kahua was required for the playing of maika; the kahua was made by paving and flattening strips of land into a level track that was usually about three feet wide and at least half a mile in length. Other games like pahe’e and moa (dart throwing and dart sliding), were played on the same kahua as maika (Malo, 1951).

Although most kahua were said to have been straight, Emerson (in Malo, 1951) noted that some kahua were curved, and that ‘ulu were sometimes shaped only on one side so that they would roll along a contour. Emerson also noted that there was one track in Kaunakakai, Moloka‘i which was curved and that he had heard of two other similar tracks.
Kahua ‘Ōlohu

Kahua ‘Ōlohu was a game field which is located just below present location of the town of Nā‘ālehu, makai (seaward) of the road. It was large and level, in a region where land was typically hilly and contoured: it was likely cleared and graded. As traditional Native Hawaiian games ceased to be played, the site was converted to ‘uala (sweet potato) land; Hawaiian historian Mary Kawena Pukui noted that her relative Opupele had his ‘uala patches here (Handy & Pukui, 1972).

By the mid twentieth century, it is said that kahua maika remained only on Moloka‘i and Lāna‘i.

Significance of Maika

Skills developed through maika (such as strength and precision), were prized by warriors, who often engaged in maika as one form of training; Hawaiians also engaged in maika to maintain physical health (Malo, 1951). ‘Ōlohu were treasured by players and were kept well oiled in pieces of kapa (barkcloth). It was said that Native Hawaiians, particularly those of Ka‘ū, were more fond of maika than pahe‘e. Ellis (1839) wrote of the importance of the pastime to noting:

The inhabitants of a district not infrequently challenge the people of the whole island, or the natives of one island those of all the others, to bring a man who shall try his skill with some favorite player of their own district or island. On such occasions we have seen seven or eight thousand chiefs and people, men and women, assembled to witness the sport, which, as well as the pāhe is often continued for hours together.

Maika was described as one of several “ikaika pili waiwai,” gambling sports; placing bets on the results of maika games was commonplace (Ka Lama Hawai‘i 1834).

The arrival of the American missionaries and the introduction of Christianity in the early 1800s would diminish the playing of traditional games in Hawai‘i; the missionaries disliked games such as maika because they felt they encouraged bad behavior, including gambling (Ellis, 1839 p. 200). As a result, anthropologists have noted that traditional sports like maika, kūkini (foot-racing, and hōlua (land-sledding) had already diminished significantly by the mid nineteenth century (Finney, 1960).

Other Famous Kahua Maika

In former times there were kahua in many of the populated areas across Hawai‘i. On O‘ahu, Kou was an area known for recreation and games, including maika. Honokaupu was another place noted for maika. It is described as a hard, smooth track about twelve feet wide near the area which is now the corner of Merchant and Fort Streets; Kamehameha I is recorded as using this track (Westervelt, 1915). There was a famous track known as Kalanikahua; one was built during the time of Kamehameha at Ulupa‘u in Kāne‘ohe. There were also kahua maika at Haupu‘u in Waiau, ‘Ewa, on O‘ahu (Sterling & Summers, 1978). Malo (1951) reported that there was one mauka of Maunaloa, at Kaluako‘i, at the western end of Moloka‘i. The famous kahua maika, Hinakāhua, was located in Kapa‘au, Hawai‘i.
The Land and Features of Ka‘ū

Ka‘ū is the largest of the six moku (districts) on the island of Hawai‘i, and is divided into many ahupua‘a (large land divisions). Ka‘ū is thought to be one of the first places that was settled by Native Hawaiians and has a unique and rich history (Handy & Pukui, 1989). Therefore, it is important to understand Kahua ‘Olohū within the context of the larger wahi pana of Ka‘ū.

Ka‘ū was commonly referred to in mele and oli as a windswept place. ‘Ae‘aekuli and Puahiohio are two winds of Ka‘ū; Kuehulepo is a wind of Nä‘älehu and Ho‘olapa is a wind of Kama‘oa. Ha‘ao is the name of a famous rain. Although rain was not that common in certain parts of Ka‘ū, the upland forests provided water for many places. Famous springs throughout the district, such as the springs of Wai‘öhinu (Waiäka’ïlio, Ha‘ao, Waiäkahoali‘i, Waiäkamohoali‘i, Mauli‘oli‘oli, and Kapuna), provided enough water for lo‘i kalo (irrigated kalo terraces) in certain areas, and fed coastal freshwater bodies, such as Kaulia and Ka‘alaiki. Brackish loko i’a (fish ponds) also dotted the Ka‘ū coastline; the most famous fishponds were those at Kauila, Hilea Honu‘apo, Ni‘nole and Punalu‘u (Handy & Handy, 1991).

Ka‘ū is known for its deep waters and strong currents. It is possible to catch deep sea fish from the cliffs at Kalae. The famous surf breaks at Kāwā, Punalu‘u and Paiāha‘a were renowned. Hala‘ea and Kāwili are the names of two strong currents of Kalae, which met at a point marked by the heiau (place of worship) Kalalea and the stone Pöhakuweau. Puueao in Kama‘oa and Hale o Lono in Haleola were famous places of healing (Pukui, 1983).
Literature of Ka‘ū

The mo‘olelo, ka‘ao (tales), mele (songs), and oli (chants) document the cultural significance of this place. In particular, the work of Mary Kawena Pukui has left a rich corpus of material which help to expand our understandings of this place, its resources, and its people.

Top: Map showing the District of Ka‘ū. Registered Map 1409, J. F. Brown (1885). Left: The above excerpt is part of a mele naming the six different districts of Hawai‘i and the six chiefs of those districts chanted by Kuapaka’a on his journey around the Islands (Nakuina, 2005).

‘Ōlelo No‘eau

Pukui recorded many Ka‘ū ‘ōlelo no‘eau (wise sayings).

Ka‘ū ‘āina kipi.
Ka‘ū, land of rebels.
The people of Ka‘ū were known to rebel against oppression, even killing their own oppressive chiefs.

Ka‘ū, ‘āina kua makani
Ka‘ū, a land over whose back the wind blows.
Ka‘ū is a windy land.

Ka‘ū hiehie i ka makani
Ka‘ū, regal in the gales.
An expression of admiration for the district of Ka‘ū, Hawai‘i, or for a stately or outstanding person of that district.

Ka‘ūlepo ‘ula‘ula
Ka‘ū of the red earth.
Said of the natives of old Ka‘ū, who were one vast family.

Selected Mo‘olelo of Ka‘ū

Pukui (1972) notes that the Hawaiians of the area did named their place “Ka‘ū” (the breast) because they loved Pele. Another mo‘olelo attributes the name to a male kupua (demigod) who took the form of a stone and was called Ka‘ūloa.

The people of Ka‘ū were known for being intolerant of oppression. Several mo‘olelo recount the slaying of oppressive chiefs: the chief Kohaikalani was crushed by a log during the building of Ka‘ulakalani Heiau; The chief Halaea was drowned after demanding too many fish; and the chief Ko‘ihala was stoned after starving his people.

A boy in Kahiki named Niauepoo wished to visit his father, Kualakai in Ka‘ū. He traveled with the aid of his ancestor, Niuolahiki, who took the form of a coconut tree, and stretched from Kahiki to Ka‘ū. The boy excelled in demonstrating his skill through games there, including maika, and made a friend named Uhuula. Unfortunately, Niauepoo’s father did not recognize him, and killed him and Uhuula. Niuolahiki revived both youth, and Uhuula became the red parrotfish. Niauepoo was able to prove to Kualakai that he was his son. Niauepoo’s mother, Hina heard that he been killed by his father, and she traveled to Kau and killed Kalakai, who became the first kualakai fish (Handy & Pukui 1972).
Changing Life in Ka‘ū

Social, economic, and political changes occurring during the late 1800s and 1900s would cause systemic shifts throughout Hawai‘i; these changes were also visible in Ka‘ū.

Rapidly industrializing and urbanizing centers, such as Honolulu, began to draw segments of the population away from Ka‘ū. As in other parts of Hawai‘i, the sugar industry began to import foreign labor to work on the plantations in the region; the same was true of the growing ranches. These changes would also affect the resources and environments of Ka‘ū. The introduction of Euro-American commerce would decrease traditional farming, fishing, and subsistence living among Native Hawaiians in Ka‘ū. In particular, the pulu (fern fiber) trade led to famine in the area; the trade also encouraged debt among Native Hawaiians that ultimately led to the loss of land (Ueyoka et al., 2012). By the mid-1800s, introduced disease and drought had also resulted in severe levels of depopulation. The introduction of Euro-American education by the missionaries would fragment traditional methods of intergenerational learning and disrupt the passage of cultural and historical knowledge, affecting the Native Hawaiian family structure, as well as traditional

The Māhele

Six konohiki (lesser chiefs) were awarded twenty ahupua‘a and two ‘ili ʻāina (small land divisions). The missionaries were given the land under their mission station in Ka‘ū. Some of the ahupua‘a which had were given to the Hawaiian government to pay for commutation fees. Other ahupua‘a were designated government lands by the King, such as Hōkūkano, Ka‘alāiki, Ho‘ona‘a and Wailau (Ueyoka et al., 2012). Sugar and ranching interests would eventually acquire large tracts of land in Ka‘ū.
Sugar

The sugar industry was responsible for many of the social, economic and environmental changes in Ka‘ū in the 1800s.

Sugar was first planted commercially in Ka‘ū in the late 1860s, during a period of time where sugar was a major export crop in other areas of Hawai‘i. The sugar industry became a major driver of the economy and labor in Ka‘ū by the 1880s; hundreds of foreign immigrants would come to Ka‘ū to work for the sugar companies. Industry expansion led to the construction of mills at Pāhala Nā‘ālehu, Hīlea, and Honu‘apo. Shipping was moved from the town of Ka‘alu‘alu in Wai‘ōhinu to Honu‘apo; the bay was deepened in 1870s and a wharf was built in 1883. A railroad for transporting sugar was built between Honu‘apo and Nā‘ālehu by 1890.

One of the largest operations was Hutchinson Sugar Plantation Company, which was started by a man named Alexander Hutchinson but was acquired by Claus Spreckles and eventually C. Brewer & Company.

Natural disasters, such as the tsunami, earthquakes and other natural disasters would at times disrupt the production and shipping of sugar and damage the infrastructure of the plantations. Following the decline of sugar as an important export crop for Hawai‘i in the mid 1900s, the sugar industry diminished in Ka‘ū (University of Hawaii, 1994).

Missionaries

Although the American Protestant missionaries frequently visited Ka‘ū to preach and give sermons, they did not establish a mission there until the 1840s. The mission station was built in Wai‘ōhinu and run by Reverend John Paris. A stone church was built there, partially using stones from sacred sites in the area; it was later destroyed by the earthquake of 1868.

Ranching

The introduction of cattle to Hawai‘i led to the growth of the cattle industry and paniolo (cowboy) culture, which would become an important part of life in Ka‘ū. Ranches were established at Ka‘alu‘alu, Kahuku, and Kapāpala.
Natural Disasters of 1868
Maunaloa erupted on March 27, 1868; it was reported that steam and fire were seen at four points on the mountain and that a stream of lava flowed towards Ka‘ū.

Kīlauea began to tremor on the 28th. The missionary Titus Coan, who was stationed in Hilo at the time, wrote: “Shocks of the earthquake become more frequent and vigorous, and were felt all round the island... they came in such quick succession that the ground rarely ceased to quiver between the throes,” (Missionary Herald, 1868). Wooden houses were knocked off their foundations in Kea‘iwa, Punalu‘u and Ninole, and it destroyed nearly every stone wall and house in the Ka‘ū district. The large stone churches in Kahuku and Wai‘ōhinu were leveled.

A major earthquake occurred on April 2; it was estimated to be 7.9 in magnitude and is the largest recorded earthquake in the Hawaiian Islands. The earthquake was so large that it was felt on Maui, Moloka‘i and O‘ahu, and its aftershocks continue to this day (Hawaii Volcano Observatory, 1994).

The earthquake triggered landslides that sent dirt, rocks and cliff faces tumbling; it also opened fissures in the earth. The largest landslide occurred in Kapapala, Ka‘ū, and part of the coastline permanently sank.

A tsunami was also triggered by these events. The wave was said to have measured nearly 50 feet (~15 meters) tall and caused major destruction in Ka‘ū at Honu‘apo, Keauhou and Punalu‘u, destroying much of the infrastructure used there for industry and shipping. Villages, such as those at ‘Āpua, Waikapuna and Kawā were wiped out.

Although other parts of the island were affected by these natural disasters, the Ka‘ū coastline suffered the most damage and the highest number of casualties.

Accounts of the Events of 1868
Ma ka aoao hema nae o Hawai‘i ka ikaika loa. Kulaiia na hale ilalo, ololkaia na pohaku ma na pali, wawahiia na luakini hale pohaku o Kau. Nakaka ae la ka honua ma Kau, a hamama he mawae nui ma ke alanui o aupuni ma Kiolakaa, ma Kau...I ka hu ana mai he Pele lepo ulaula mauka aku o Kea‘iwa, kahe wiliki loa aku ekolu paha mile iloko o na minute ekolu paha. Hookahi paha mile ka laula o keia lepo ula I luaiia mai e ka Pele. Pau kekahui mau hale a me na kanaka, na lio, na hipa, a me na kao, I ka uhiia I keia lepo ula, a kanu ola ia ana ia aku lakou. (Ke Alaula, 1868)

On the southern end of Hawai‘i it was very strong. Houses were knocked down, rocks rolled from the cliffs, and the stone houses of Ka‘ū were shattered. The earth quaked in Ka‘ū, and a large fissure opened in the Government Road in Kiolaka’a in Ka‘ū...When the lava swelled upland of Kea‘iwa, it flowed perhaps three miles within perhaps three minutes. It spread out perhaps one mile, this lava expelled by the volcano. Several houses were destroyed, and people, horses, sheep, and goats were covered by this lava, and they were buried alive.
Works Cited


Coan, T. (1868). Letters from the Missions, Sandwich Islands, Hilo, Hawaii. Letter from Mr. Coan, April 9, 1868. Missionary Herald 64(vii).


