Kakaʻako Makai

Kakaʻako, Honolulu, Oʻahu.

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On April 11, 2012, Senate Bill 2783 was signed into law by Governor Neil Abercrombie. The law transferred 30 acres of land on Oʻahu in the area known as Kakaʻako Makai from the State of Hawaiʻi to the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA). This transfer settled claims of back-rent owed to OHA for the state’s use of ceded lands at state airports, affordable housing projects, and state-run hospitals from 1978 to 2012. The lands transferred to OHA were valued at $200 million.

Kakaʻako Makai remains a vital cultural and historical resource for Native Hawaiians and the broader community. The goal of this Information Sheet is to explore some of the cultural and historical narratives surrounding Kakaʻako. OHA seeks to steward these lands in a way that fulfills our kuleana (reciprocal responsibility) to Native Hawaiians and honors Kakaʻako as wahi pana (storied, noted, legendary place). In particular, the parcels at Kakaʻako Makai represent an important opportunity for OHA to develop and implement strategies that are rooted in traditional Native Hawaiian cultural practices and informed by Native Hawaiian epistemologies to cultivate meaningful and impactful stewardship.

Left: The makai (seaward) areas depicted include lands presently known as Kakaʻako. Source: Emmert, 1854.
The Traditional Environment and Landscapes of the Kaka’ako Area

In the past, Kaka’ako was the name of a point of land and was also known as an ‘āpana (land parcel) and ‘ili (land section) (Kanepuu, 1877). However, the larger area now considered to be Kaka’ako was formerly known as Kukuluē‘o in the east and Ka‘ākaukukui to the west. The mauka (inland) area was generally known as Kewalo (Pukui et al. 1974).

The coastal areas of Kaka’ako and Kewalo were well known for brackish marshes, fresh water springs, salt pans, and small fishponds (Pukui et al. 1974). Both areas were notable for containing ‘ili lele (parcels that are geographically separated but considered a part of one ‘ili). The fertile mauka lands of Nu‘uanu and Pauoa held lo‘i kalo (irrigated taro fields) and ‘uala (sweet potato), while the makai (seaward) areas were rich fisheries (Handy and Handy, 1991).

Place Names of the Kaka’ako Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place Name</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tr>
<td>‘Auwaiolimu</td>
<td>Kaholoakeāhole</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honoka’upu</td>
<td>Kaka’ako</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honolulu</td>
<td>Kawaiūumumumā‘i</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honuakaha</td>
<td>Kewalo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kaaiopua</td>
<td>Kou</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ka‘ākaukukui</td>
<td>Kukuluā‘e‘o</td>
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Kaka’ako as a Place Name

Pukui et. al (1974) note that the word Kākā‘ako can be translated as dull or slow, which may refer to the large quantities of slow-moving, standing water for which the area was known. Another translation of the name Kākāako could refer to the preparation of thatching; marshy areas like Kaka’ako were often ideal for collecting pili grass used for thatching (Thrum, 1922).
SELECTED MO’OLELO: KAKA’AKO, MĂMALA, KOU, AND KEWALO

The coastal lands of Kaka’ako were part of a large complex of fishponds, reefs, and extremely productive fishing grounds that once ran from ‘Ewa to Maunalua. Ali‘i (chiefs) and kahuna (priests) maintained residences in the Kaka’ako area, and the rich fisheries drew lawai‘a (fishermen); Kaka’ako was a significant place within Native Hawaiian society. In fact, Kaka’ako was part of a network of important wahi pana in the Honolulu area.

KOU

Kou was a small village which was known to be the home of powerful kahuna lā‘au lapa‘au (medicinal healers) (Kamakau, 1991). In the early 1800s, Kou was the home of the famous kahuna Hewahewa (Ii, 1959). Kou was also a place for recreation among the ali‘i and was one of the most famous sites on O‘ahu for kōnane and ‘ulumaika; people would travel to Kou to observe the matches (Pukui et al. 1974).

MĂMALA

Mămala encompassed an area which stretched from Honolulu Harbor (which was also formerly known as Mămala) to Pu‘uola (Pearl Harbor) (Pukui et al, 1974). Mămala was named after a powerful shark kupua (demigod) and chiefess who was known to frequent the area with her husband, ‘Ouha, to drink ‘awa, play kōnane, and surf in the sea (Pukui et al, 1974). One mo‘olelo (history) recounts Mămala’s choice to leave her husband and dwell with the chief Honokaupu; thereafter ‘Ouha abandoned his human form and became a shark god of the waters between Waikīkī and Ka Lae o Koko (Koko Head) (Westervelt, 1915). Mămala also had several significant cultural sites, such as the well-known heiau (place of worship) Păkăkă, which was built by Kamauuihalakaipo for Kūho‘one‘enu‘u, an ancient akua (god) of O‘ahu ali‘i (chiefs) (Kamakau, 1991).  

KEWALO

Kewalo was the location of a particular fish pond which was fed by a fresh water spring known as Kawaiulumaluma‘i, or “drowning waters.” This was a place where kauwā (outcasts of the lowest class in Hawaiian society) were drowned as sacrifices; their corpses were taken to Kānelā‘au Heiau on the slopes of Pūowaina (Punchbowl) (Sterling and Summers, 1978). The famous ali‘i Huanuiikalā‘ila‘i (Hua-a-Pau), known for his kindness and great intellect, was said to have been born in Kewalo (Kamakau, 1991). Kewalo was also the home of a great pueo (owl) who became an akua (god) for a man named Kapo‘i. An epic battle to save Kapo‘i’s life was fought in Nu‘uanu between the owls of the five main Hawaiian Islands and the armies of the ali‘i Kākuhihewa.
‘Ōlelo No’eau

Native Hawaiian scholars Samuel Kamakau and Mary Kawena Pukui (1983) recorded ‘ōlelo no’eau (wise sayings) about surrounding areas which had an impact on life in Kaka’ako.

No Māmala:

*He kai ‘au kohana Māmala.*

A sea for swimming naked is Māmala.

People would travel naked along the reef to avoid meeting an enemy on land. (Kamakau, 1974: 44)

No Kou:

*Hui aku nā maka i Kou.*

The faces will meet in Kou.

Kou was the place where the chiefs played games, and people came from everywhere to watch. (Pukui 1983, 120)

No Kewalo:

*Ka wai huahua‘i o Kewalo.*

The bubbling water of Kewalo.

Kewalo once had a large spring where many went for cool, refreshing water. (Pukui 1983, 178)

Kaka’ako in Selected Mo‘olelo

In his travels establishing fishing shrines in Hawai‘i, the god ‘Ai’ai came to Kaka’ako, where he was befriended by a man named Apua. ‘Ai’ai took a woman named Puiwa from Hānaiakamālama for his wife, and they had a son named Puniaiki. Angered by his wife’s complaints one day, ‘Ai’ai called upon his ancestors and caused a flood, which carried Puniaiki toward the sea. ‘Ai’ai departed towards Kaumakapili. Puniaiki was caught as an ‘o’opu (freshwater goby fish) and cared for by Kikihale, the daughter of the great chief Kou (Thrum, 1907).

On her circuit of the Hawaiian Islands with her companions, the goddess Hi‘iaka wished to travel to Waikīkī from Pu‘uloa. In a chant, Hi‘iaka mentions a pond at Ka‘akaukukui, perhaps referencing the salt ponds in the area (Cultural Surveys, 2009).
The Māhele and Kaka'ako

The areas which make up present day Kaka'ako were parceled out beginning in 1848 during the Māhele, which was a series of laws that created legal mechanisms for land privatization in Hawai‘i. The whole ‘ili of Kewalo, Kukuluā‘o, and Ka’ākaukukui were awarded to individuals, while other ‘ili in the area, such as Kaka’ako, Pualoalo, Pu‘unui, Ka‘ala‘a, ‘Auwalolimu, Honuakaha, and ‘Āpua were divided among many applicants (EDAW, 2009).

Urbanization: 1850s to 1950s

Salt-making and fishing activities continued in Kaka’ako during the early and mid nineteenth century. However, increasing urbanization would dramatically alter the landscape from one that was dominated by productive fishponds and wetlands to one that was dominated by large industrial complexes; these changes would negatively affect traditional cultural practices in the area.
Dredging and Infilling
Extensive dredging in rapidly urbanizing Honolulu occurred between the mid 1800s and the mid 1900s. Dredging activities forever altered the geography and ecology of Kakaʻako. A dumping ground was established on the productive reef at Kaʻākaukukui. Modern Kakaʼako Makai sits on land that was formed by infilling the reef with dredged material, debris, trash, and incinerator ash.

Tenements in Kakaʻako
Despite the many economic activities occurring in urban Honolulu, Kakaʻako would became known for its poverty. Magoon Block mostly housed bachelors and orphans. Temporary settlements of poor people, most of whom were Native Hawaiian, were established at “Blue Pond” and “Squattersville.”

Selected Timeline of Development:
1800s–1900s
1853– A small pox Quarantine Camp and hospital are set up in Kakaʻako.
1857– Honolulu Fort is demolished, an esplanade is created at Waikahalulu.
1874– The Transit of Venus Observatory is built at ‘Āpua.
1874– Sand Island is formed by covering the tidal island Kahakaʻaulana with dredged material from Honolulu Harbor.
1881– A hospital and Receiving Station for Hansen’s Disease patients is set up.
1899– Fort Armstrong is built on Kaʻākaukukui Reef
1905– Kakaʻako Incinerator is built.
1905– An Animal Quarantine Station is built in Kakaʻako.
1905– An Immigration Station is set up.
1911– Cholera outbreak
1914– Magoon Block completed.
1920s– The Territory Government razes settlements at Blue Pond and Squattersville in Kakaʻako, forcing inhabitants to move.
References


Beechey, R. B. (1826) “View near the Town of Honoruru, Sandwich Islands, 1826.”


Source: Emmert, 1854.
References


