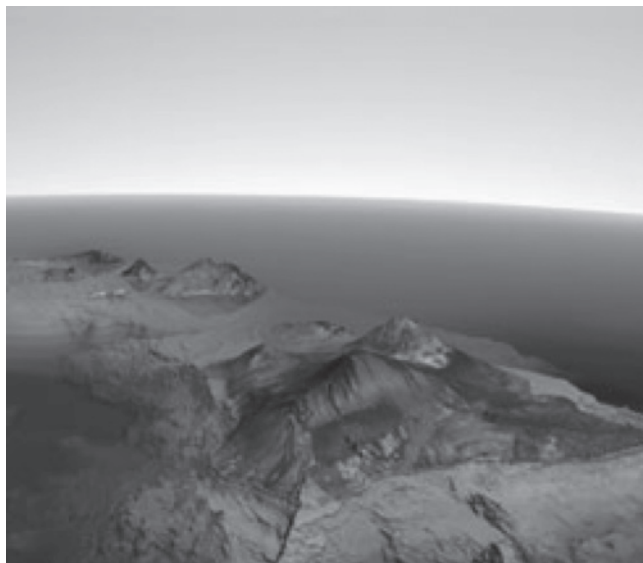


Wahi Pana O Hawai'i: Connection and (Re) Collection

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Historical study usually encompasses a holistic view of the past, taking into account persons, places, and events. Any or all of these can have varied effects upon the way the past is viewed and interpreted. Of the three, place is the most immutable; whereas events are condemned to the past and people have finite lifespans, place exists in all spheres of time—past, present, and future. While place transcends time, people and events come and go with its passage. A place may be revered and remembered due to the events that occurred there, or the people who lived there. Some places are more well-known or celebrated than others; these places are often protected, and sometimes even kept secret, being known only to a select few. Some exist in plain view and go unnoticed by people as they go about their busy existences. The stories they hold, however, are there for those who seek them.

Many cultures have places that they hold as special above others. Some places hold more spiritual and cultural meaning for Hawaiians than others, and these are the places they designate as wahi pana. Place is much more than a geographical location to Hawaiians; it provides them with their history, a sense of belonging, and a feeling of stability.¹ Some wahi pana are sacred due to religious reasons, as is the case of Mauna Kea; others are defined by individuals, events, or functions performed there.² Some wahi pana remain obscure; for instance, many are unaware that Mokuola is considered a sacred location. A wahi pana, nevertheless, is sacred to those who deem it as such; without people to revere and remember the past, wahi pana would not exist. Thus,

people, specifically the k̄naka maoli (Native Hawaiians) define the meaning and utilization of wahi pana.

The fact that wahi pana exists outside the periphery of time can be shown through a study of Hawaiian history. Storied places are often easy to recognize, and such awareness of them does not escape other cultures. Since the early days of contact between Westerners and the k̄naka maoli, non-natives have tried to define and describe wahi pana according to their own traditions and knowledge. These efforts most often fell flat; the very different natures of the cultures involved prevents the accurate translation of the meaning of wahi pana and its significance to k̄naka maoli. To complicate the matter, wahi pana are often associated with mo'olelo, or traditional oral histories—passed down over many generations and to k̄naka maoli, they represent a direct link to the past, and a glimpse into the future. The mo'olelo, while sacred to Hawaiians, seemed to be merely mythology to the outsiders. Foreign writers often (mis)used mo'olelo, altering or belittling them in the retelling. The way the outsiders portrayed wahi pana and the mo'olelo associated with them effectively trivialized their meaning, thus alienating k̄naka maoli from their past. This translation and reconstruction of the past “sanitized” Hawai'i in an effort to make her more appealing to the newcomer's tastes.³

A pertinent example of the abuse inflicted by outsiders to wahi pana would be that of Kilauea. The reports that the nineteenth-century foreign visitors penned regarding Kilauea and the goddess Pele showed a callous lack of cultural awareness. At the time, Kilauea was still an exposed lake of fire; the visitors often could not help themselves in likening the sight they beheld to the lake of fire depicted in the Christian Bible.⁴ Foreign visitors often sought to remove the sacred nature of wahi pana and the mo'olelo associated with them; by doing so they placed their interpretations of nature and divinity on these places, and effectively separated k̄naka maoli from them. By removing k̄naka maoli from their narratives, foreigners inserted themselves where they did not belong, attempting to alter the meaning of wahi pana, such act often done in the hopes of material gain. The displacement of k̄naka maoli from their history was only the beginning; they were soon to be displaced from their own land and self-governance.⁵

Historians must be careful when they discuss the culture of others. As historians, this can be a difficult thing to do because unlike anthropologists, they must report on the past from an external viewpoint, making it far too easy to fall back on personal experiences and biases. This conundrum often rears its head when outsiders attempt to preserve and interpret wahi pana. The example of Kilauea once again comes to mind, where the National Park Service of the United States administers and cares for this culturally significant wahi pana. A tension exists in the “park” between its cultural meanings to k̄naka maoli and the interests of scientists and visitors. The scientific interest in Kilauea is understandable; it is

doubtful that kākāna maoli have any concerns with their wahi pana being studied and monitored, as long as it is done with the respect demanded of any visitor to such a sacred spot. The emphasis upon science by the National Park Service, however, negates any references to kākāna maoli, their mo'olelo, or the cultural importance of this wahi pana. Of course, there are signs posted with cultural information and some mentions of "Madame" Pele, but to many kākāna maoli, this comes off as lip service. No mention of how one should conduct themselves when visiting a wahi pana is to be found, save for signs warning not to remove any rocks. This in itself mocks Hawaiian culture because their visitors are warned that if they remove rocks, a curse will visit them.⁶ Perhaps if visitors were informed of the sacred nature of Kilauea and its cultural meaning to kākāna maoli, they would leave the rocks undisturbed out of respect. This failure on the part of the National Park Service is indicative of their lack of cultural awareness—what is missing is a communitarian perspective, or a firm anchoring in indigenous understanding.⁷

In recent years, native and non-native historians that faithfully tell Hawaiian history have published many works. Unfortunately, many visitors have never read any of these books or journal articles. The average tourist is on vacation to relax and have a pleasurable time. Perhaps reading a book written by a kākāna maoli scholar such as Haunani Trask would be upsetting to them. This tension between entertainment and truth is a tightrope frequently walked by public historians.⁸ This is especially the case when it comes to the representation of wahi pana and their mo'olelo. Using a sacred place as an entertainment source is in itself a bad idea. This is not to say that one cannot enjoy a visit to a wahi pana: A trip to Mokuola can be both refreshing and relaxing. Respecting the nature of the wahi pana is the important point, and this entails that the kākāna maoli culture is validated by the visitor.⁹ This humble mindset, combined with a communitarian perspective, would go a long way in restoring pride in our wahi pana and the Hawaiian people. It is the duty of public historians to recognize the place of the kākāna maoli in their own land, and respectfully work with cultural practitioners in presenting wahi pana in their full context. In the case of wahi pana, entertainment must take the back seat in order to give the sacred nature of the site its proper merit.

Connecting to the past is important to kākāna maoli. Their understanding of the present and future is dictated by the lessons they learn from past experiences and human events. Their history belongs to them, and defines their very being.¹⁰ While modern Western culture looks to the future as its guide, Hawaiians rely on their understanding of the historical past. This difference in worldview comes into play in the manner in which the opposing cultures view wahi pana. The Western

view that the natural environment is to be controlled, dominated, and exploited is at odds with the Hawaiian understanding of how nature is spiritually connected to the individual. Scientists may see Mauna Kea as the perfect platform for viewing the stars while the kākāna maoli see this wahi pana as their ancestor Wākea, to be revered and cared for.¹¹ Thus, it can be said that for Hawaiians that the significance of a place is rooted in its relevance to their past, whereas the Western notion of progress determines the future of a place, based upon its perceived usefulness.

For visitors, wahi pana and their associated mo'olelo should be presented in a manner faithful to historical and cultural context. Tour companies should especially take the lead in protecting the sanctity of wahi pana, ensuring that visitors are informed of cultural protocol when visiting these sites, which may be appreciated by some visitors; after all, they may feel a special connection to the wahi pana they visit. Aiding tourists in understanding how they should behave while visiting wahi pana should be accompanied by the reasons for these protocols. Recognizing that wahi pana are not just storied places, but sacred ones, can enhance their visits and ease the minds of kākāna maoli.

When reflecting upon the wahi pana of Hawai'i, it can be easily understood why these places are special. Many wahi pana are places of great natural beauty and serenity. Kilauea is an imposing sight to behold, especially at night. The view from the lookout over Waipi'o Valley is spectacular, and no tourist should go without seeing it. Nevertheless, to simply characterize wahi pana as historical sites or pretty places to look at is to negate their spiritual and cultural significance to the kākāna maoli. Treating them solely as tourist attractions or science experiments is even worse. Kākāna maoli are connected to the land, and wahi pana serve as reminders of this connection and define who they are as a people.¹² Their efforts at preserving and protecting these sites are to ensure their future. More than just features of a unique and beautiful landscape, wahi pana were designated as such by their ancestors. Whether they are historically or spiritually important, natural wonders or man-made, wahi pana only exist as long as they are defined by kākāna maoli as being such. Historians and others must recognize and celebrate the right of the Hawaiian people in designating, caring for, and protecting their wahi pana. The mo'olelo of each wahi pana must be preserved and passed down to be learned, loved, and unforgotten. Many wahi pana still exist that are lost, largely because people no longer remember them. People make wahi pana what they are, and it is people who need to remember and revere them. Upholding the spiritual and cultural values of these places is the most important gift one can leave behind.¹³

Notes

- ¹Edward L. H. Kanahale, Foreword to *Ancient Sites of Hawai'i: Archaeological Places of Interest on the Big Island* by Van James (Honolulu: Mutual Publishing, 1995), 6.
- ²Kanahale, Foreword to *Ancient Sites*, 6.
- ³Cristina Bacchilega, *Legendary Hawaii and the Politics of Place: Tradition, Translation, and Tourism* (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 1.
- ⁴Houston Wood, *Displacing Natives: The Rhetorical Production of Hawaii* (Boulder, Co: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 65.
- ⁵Bacchilega, *Legendary Hawaii*, 3.
- ⁶Wood, *Displacing Natives*, 75-76.
- ⁷David Welchman Gegeo, "Cultural Rupture and Indigeneity: The Challenge of (Re) visioning 'Place' in the Pacific." *The Contemporary Pacific*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Fall 2001), 492.
- ⁸William S. Pretzer, "At Historic Sites and Outdoor Museums: A High Performance Act." *In Public History: Essays from the Field*, Edited by James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia (Malabar, Fla.: Krieger Publishing Company, 2004), 257-258.
- ⁹Kanahale, Foreword to *Ancient Sites*, 7.
- ¹⁰Kanahale, Foreword to *Ancient Sites*, 6.
- ¹¹Leslie Lang, and David A. Byrne. *Mauna Kea: A Guide to Hawaii's Sacred Mountain* (Honolulu, HI: Watermark Publishing, 2005), 24.
- ¹²Kanahale, Foreword to *Ancient Sites*, 6.
- ¹³Kanahale, Foreword to *Ancient Sites*, 7.
- Pretzer, William S. 2004. "At Historic Sites and Outdoor Museums: A High Performance Act." In *Public History: Essays from the Field*, Edited by James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia (Malabar, Fla.: Krieger Publishing Company).
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