

The Mo'olelo of Hanauma

Today, Hanauma Bay is recognized as a popular destination for locals and tourists alike. Its beauty resonates deeply within the hearts and imaginations of those who visit its crystal-clear waters and vibrant marine life.

Hanauma is also a wahi pana steeped in mo'olelo and tradition. The word hanauma can be translated in a couple of ways: (1) hana (workings) and uma (wrestling), or (2) hana (bay) and uma (curve). The mo'olelo and morphology of the bay tell a unique story as Hanauma is both a historic wrestling site and a bay that curves.

In Kekahiwahi's retelling of the mo'olelo of Hanauma, narrated by Ann Marie Kirk, a kama'aina and storyteller of Maunalua, Hanauma got its name from an epic arm-wrestling match between two chiefs, Koko and Hana. Both chiefs were deeply in love with the ali'i wahine (female chief) named Keohinani.

As Keohinani neared the age where she may ho'āo (come into union) with an appropriate suitor, Keohinani's father Keanamo'o asked his beloved daughter to choose between the two men. Keanamo'o was a powerful chief and mo'o (the area's reptilian water deity), so his daughter's hand was highly sought after.

Since she could not choose between the two suitors, Keohinani hosted an uma (arm-wrestling) competition—the victor would win her hand. The two men agreed to these conditions, and so the uma match began.

The men wrestled for many hours and days, each showcasing their unbending strength and determination. When Keohinani saw the strain and suffering the unending match was putting on her lovers, she went to her father, Keanamo'o, so that he might intervene. Keanamo'o commanded the men to stop or face the consequences! Yet, his command was ignored.

So Keanamo'o transformed the two chiefs into mo'o. Even so, their tails entwined, and the match continued. Desperate to end the match, Keohinani pleaded with her gods to end the fight. Hearing her cries, the gods transformed the men, turned mo'o, into two rigid hills overlooking the bay. Today, they remain guardians of this wahi pana forever in the face of Keohinani's affections.

The practice of uma was said to have been a favorite pastime of Queen Ka'ahumanu's court. In an article published in *Ka Hoku o Hawaii* on February 11, 1930, titled "Na Anoai o Oahu Nei," the author notes that:

Ke Alii Moi—wahine Kaahumanu, ua holo mai maluna o na waa a kipa ae ma
Hanauma a Mr. Paki ke konohiki aina e noho ana ia wa, a o ke Aliiwahine
Ihihilauakea ame ke Aliiwahine Kauanonoula a me na poe hula Mrs. Alapai

wahine, Mr. Hewahewa, Mr. Ahukai a he mea nui ia lakou ka hui aloha pu ana a e malama ia na hauoli o ke alo alii, a he uma ka hana a na kane o ka lima o kekahi kane ame kou lima puliki paa kulai a hina ilalo, a he ui la pau pu me ka wahine ia alahahe ia mau mahina o ka noho ana. Pela i kahea ia keia inoa Hanauma e kaulana nei ma kona moolelo.¹

Queen Ka‘ahumanu went by canoe to be welcomed as a guest at Hanauma by Mr. Paki, the konohiki at the time, in the lands of the chiefs Ihihilauakea and Kauanonoula. There, along with the hula dancers, Mrs. Alapai, Mr. Hewahewa, and Mr. Ahukai, whose joy was to gather to entertain the chiefs, the men would arm wrestle. One man’s hand would be clasped tight to the other, and they would push down. The women would also join, and months would be spent there. For this reason, it is called Hanauma, a well-known place in mo‘olelo.

Kekahiwahi’s short film is rooted in the interplay between struggle and leisure associated with Hanauma Bay. The film reminds us of the historic Indigenous presence at Hanauma, a presence that is often overshadowed by a burgeoning tourism industry. It would seem that both locals and tourists have a vested interest in the beauty of Hanauma, fostering a social uma match that persists today. Even so, Kekahiwahi’s film moves beyond the mo‘olelo genre, employing deliberately awkward, even cringe-inducing scenes that amplify the reality of overtourism while critiquing the same industry through Kanaka ethics. These ethics concern ocean safety through the “SnorkelClub,” which pays homage to Hanauma’s infographic video that is shared with visitors. And yet, through this complexity, the film swims within the luminous seascape with grace and psychedelic vigor, capturing the splendor of Keohinani’s shores one frame at a time. It allows us, the viewers, many of whom have not visited Hanauma, an inextricable link to this wahi’s history, majesty, and pana (heartbeat).

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¹ “Na Anoai o Oahu Nei,” *Ka Hoku o Hawaii*, Peipeluali 11, 1930.

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