

Kūkā‘ilimoku & Ki‘i¹

“E Kukailimoku e: Ka ili ia mai ke Ea o ka aina”

“Kūkā‘ilimoku, seize the Ea of the ‘āina,”

-Samuel Manaiakalani Kamakau, “Ka Moolelo Hawaii. Helu 2.,” *Ke Au Okoa*, October 21, 1869.

Kūkā‘ilimoku is an akua Hawai‘i that has the capacity to seize ea, pre-colonial forms of self-determination and liberation rooted in Hawaiian cosmogony. For centuries, Kūkā‘ilimoku has been central in contests for governance over whole islands and guided many ali‘i (chiefs) on their political campaigns to rupture whole systems and provide protection for their maka‘āinana (subjects). Oral accounts of Kūkā‘ilimoku were well-established and eventually published in archives such as Hawaiian Language Newspapers. Detailed accounts of Kūkā‘ilimoku are especially prevalent in the writing of S. M. Kamakau. Excerpts detail that the dainty-sacred feathers named Hinawaikoli‘i from atop the forehead of Kīwa‘a, a legendary bird that was captured and slain by Waikelenuia‘ikū, and amassed more mana after brushing the thighs of another akua named Nāmakaokaha‘i. Kūkā‘ilimoku was then brought by Pā‘ao to Hawai‘i from Kahiki and was eventually in the possession of Līloa, ‘Umi-a-Līloa, Kalani‘ōpu‘u, and finally Kamehameha. It is said that whoever is in possession of Kūkā‘ilimoku is destined to rule.

Ki‘i, often interpreted as tiki in English, are idols that are sometimes carved into wood, other times woven out of ‘ie‘ie. Ki‘i are vessels and images for different akua who require rigorous ceremonial dedications typically performed over the entirety of a night and consecrated on a heiau (traditional temple) in ceremony rites called kauila. After the fall of the ‘Ai Kapu, Kanaka Maoli religious disciplines were supplanted by Christian practices, resulting in many ki‘i and heiau being burned and destroyed. The ki‘i that appear in this Wahi Pana installation are some of the few remaining ki‘i which survived the religious shift and similar to ki‘i that have been documented in ceremonies at Waikīkī.

Lē‘ahi / Lae‘ahi Heiau

“Ua kupono ia wahi i ka nana pono ae ia Leahi Heiau”

“It was a perfect location to view Lē‘ahi Heiau.” - John Papa ‘Ī‘i “Hunahuna Moolelo Hawaii.,” *Ke Nupepa Kuokoa*, August 14, 1869.

¹Research conducted by Kauwila Mahi.

Emerging out of the idyllic shores of pristine ocean like a dorsal fin, Lē‘ahi/Lae‘ahi remains a world-renowned mountain that holds the dual meanings of steadfastness and colonization in the imaginary. Postcards, t-shirts, songs, photos, and even video games have Lē‘ahi/Lae‘ahi as a backdrop framing the ‘āina as a tourist destination void of contestation. Kuilei, the summit of Lē‘ahi, is well-storied as a site/sight of resistance for Kanaka Maoli.

One of the most well-known contests is documented by both S. M. Kamakau and Joseph Mokuoahi Poepoe follows the story of Kamehameha I, who forcefully unified the Hawaiian archipelago under his rule. Kamehameha I challenges Captain Vancouver who is attempting to extend an invitation of King George of Britain to send Christian priests to Hawai‘i in hopes of proselytizing leadership like Kamehameha I. Kamehameha I responds by issuing the following challenge from atop Lē‘ahi, “eia ko‘u mana ia oe, ina he mana io ko oukou Akua; e pii oe a luna o keia puu la, alaila, lele iho oe ilalo, a i ha‘iha‘i ole ou mau iwi, alaila he mana io ko oukou Akua,” which I interpret as meaning, “here is my challenge to you, if your people’s God has true mana; climb atop this peak [Kuilei], and then jump downward off of it, and if your bones do not break, then and only then, your God has proven to have true mana.”

Another well-known contest is that of Aloha ‘Āina (Patriots) who defended Hawai‘i against the U.S. Marines in the Kaua Kūloko (Civil War) that is most commonly referred to contemporarily as the “1895 Wilcox Rebellion.” The battles to restore power to Mō‘īwahine Lili‘uokalani begins atop Lē‘ahi and moves towards Ka‘alawai, then Pālolo, Mānoa, Kailua, and eventually Mōkapu.

Nearby, on the shores of Kaimana Beach Hotel, is a well-known surf spot called Kapua, which could be viewed from Lē‘ahi Heiau, a temple that was established near the middle of what is current-day Kapi‘olani Park. Lē‘ahi/Lae‘ahi heiau is described as being a “luakini ma Oahu nei,” a “temple for human sacrifice on O‘ahu” which is on the ridges of Lē‘ahi. While Lē‘ahi Heiau has this genealogy, it is commonly referred to as *Papa‘ena‘ena Heiau* contemporarily. This shift undoubtedly stems from the writing of Thomas G. Thrum, an English-language folkloric commentator who deliberately deceived his readers, often inserting made-up names, mistranslations of Hawaiian stories, and other genealogies.

In the present, Lē‘ahi continues to be a significant site where traditions and innovations blend to assert Kanaka Maoli sense of place. Kū‘ena‘ena perfectly encapsulates these dualities by paying homage to ancestral knowledge and staving off colonialist imaginaries of Hawai‘i.

Kū'ena'ena

Kū'ena'ena is a series of images that, despite ongoing efforts to dismantle and misrepresent our traditional knowledge systems, ways of being, and histories, reveals the truth and brilliance of who we are, and continues to shine as we tell and live our stories.

Papa'ena'ena Heiau is an important heiau (place of worship) for Hawai'i. Kamehameha I travelled there after the battle of "Ka Lele a Ka 'Ana'e," which was the climax in his political campaign to unite the Hawaiian Archipelago under his supreme rule. In this battle, he slew Kalanikūpule, and several noted scholars believe that Papa'ena'ena Heiau, situated on the Honolulu side of Lae'ahi (Diamond Head), was the temple where Kalanikūpule was offered as a sacrifice to Kūkā'ilimoku, the island snatching god.

Similar to the pōhaku within the heiau being repurposed to build the rock wall that surrounds La Pietra School For Girls, many have appropriated images of Kūkā'ilimoku in ways that do not honor the original ki'i and its manifestations, whether woven, carved, feathered, or otherwise. The Kū'ena'ena installation and images re-establish the connection between this akua in locations it may have been found centuries ago.