


The Koholā - A Spiritual Connection

Living in a world created by their gods, ancient Hawaiians spiritually connected with all forms of life. They traditionally believed in their family's `aumākua, a deified ancestor who could take the form of an animal such as the shark, turtle, owl and for some families, the koholā. The `aumākua was greatly respected as it provided guidance through dreams and visions and created a connection between the physical and spiritual worlds.

Many families maintained their belief in their `aumākua for generations and today, some Hawaiian families still practice this tradition. As a migrating `aumākua, the koholā may have only provided spiritual guidance during its season in Hawai'i, leading



Hawaiians to depend primarily on other `aumākua. Showing their respect, Hawaiians would not eat their `aumākua and no records have been found indicating that Hawaiians hunted the whale.


The Whale is born, living in the sea...

The Kumulipo, a Hawaiian creation chant, speaks of the birth of all the animals and plants on land and in the sea. It is said that the plants and animals were counterparts of each other, creating a special bond between the two.

Within the chant, the palaoa (older word used to refer to whales, whale bone and whale carcasses) was said to be born living in the sea and its counterpart, the `aoa (sandalwood tree), was its guardian living on land. The `aoa, valued for its fragrant wood, was abundant in the late 18th century. Then after being greatly overharvested in the early 1800's for its fragrance, the trees plummeted near extinction. As the Kumulipo suggests, the `aoa could no longer guard its counterpart, the palaoa. Therefore, the palaoa, which was once abundant in the early 1800's, was overharvested for its teeth, bone and oil then its population had also greatly declined near extinction.

The Lei Niho Palaoa - An Adornment of the Ali'i

The lei niho palaoa, an extremely sacred artifact of the Hawaiian people, is a "whale tooth necklace" made of numerous braided strands of human hair and the niho palaoa (whale tooth) pendant. The niho palaoa was obtained on rare occasions when the carcass of a toothed whale washed ashore. Once ashore, the carcass immediately became the possession of the high ruling class known as the ali'i (royalty).



The lei (necklace) represented the strength of the gods, their mana (spirit) and symbolized the chief's rank and his authority. Only the ali'i were allowed to use the lei and was believed to attain all the characteristics and powers of the gods. Its significant tongue shape indicated that the chief was someone who spoke with authority and took charge of the community. This artifact is the second most prized artifact of the Hawaiian people with the feather cloak being the most highly prized possession.

Photo courtesy of Bishop Museum.

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Main Office
726 South Kihei Road
Kihei, Hawai'i 96753

Web page: www.hawaii.humpbackwhale.noaa.gov
E-mail: hihumpbackwhale@noaa.gov

(800) 831-4888 toll-free
(808) 874-2815 voice
(808) 874-3815 fax



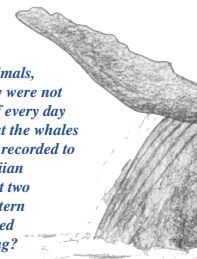
The Cultural Significance of Whales in Hawai'i



The Mystery of the Koholā

During the winter season in Hawai'i, the islands become a mecca for endangered humpback whales. Have these magnificent creatures always been a part of the Hawaiian culture or were other marine mammals prominent in ancient times?

Within Hawai'i's oral and written history there is some evidence, such as petroglyphs, legends, legendary place names, and artifacts indicating that ancient Hawaiians were aware of the presence of the koholā (whale) in Hawaiian waters. However the limited evidence has led people to wonder why there is such a scarce amount of information on an animal that has such a large impact on today's society.



Could it be that the whale was not as prominent in the culture as other animals, suggesting that they were not a significant part of every day life? Could it be that the whales were not present or recorded to be present in Hawaiian waters until the past two centuries when western influence encouraged better record keeping? Or, could it be that ancient Hawaiians may have viewed this animal as a sacred creature which may have caused information about the whale to be kept a secret and reserved only for a chosen few?

Whatever the reason, we now know that whales, especially the humpback, are alive and thriving in the islands. Whale watching has become a major industry in the islands and everyone is yearning for new discoveries about these mysterious mammals.

NOAA Ocean Service

Makua's Prayer - A Legend of the Chosen One

In Hawai'i, one of the few whale legends that exist is the legend of Makua's Prayer. This legend and variations of it, are significant for they show that Hawaiians were aware of the presence of the koholā. Although these legends are few, they connect Hawai'i to other areas of Polynesia who have similar legends about the whales.

In old Hawai'i there once lived a kahuna (priest) named Makua who wanted his son to become a kahuna even greater than himself. Makua prayed to his two gods, Kāne and Kanaloa, asking them to teach his son to become a great kahuna. The two gods appeared one day to Makua and said they heard his prayers and would eventually send a messenger. Many years had passed and no messenger appeared.

One day, while Makua and his son were working, they heard a commotion on the beach. A whale had washed ashore. All the villagers rushed to see the amazing sight and many played on its back. Makua's son was anxious to join in the excitement but Makua was hesitant. Finally, after several days, Makua gave in and allowed his son to see the whale.

The son immediately joined in and climbed on the whale like the others. As he did, the whale suddenly awoke and everyone except Makua's son fell off. The boy was carried away on the back of the whale and was taken to the land of his father's gods.

Makua mourned for the loss of his son until one evening, his gods came to him in a dream. The gods told him that the messenger had come for his son and he was being taught well in their world.

Petroglyph rock at Palaoa Hill, Lāna'i.

Photo courtesy of Kenneth P. Emory and Bishop Museum.



Closeup view of a petroglyph with a whale and human image on its back.

Nā Ki'i Pōhaku Koholā - The Stone Images of the Whale

As the Hawaiian culture evolved, the art of creating petroglyphs became a way of life for some. Petroglyphs, drawings etched in stone, depicted many images including humans and animals. These petroglyphs can be found throughout Hawai'i. On the islands of Lāna'i, Hawai'i and Maui, three petroglyphs are said to be present which reflect the stone images of whales.

On Lāna'i, in an area known as Palaoa Hill or "Whale Hill," there is a petroglyph which depicts a whale image with a human figure on its back. The story behind this image is uncertain but it is quite possible that the petroglyph is a representation of a legend such as Makua's Prayer and it is only appropriate to be located on a "whale hill" in a vantage point where many whales are often seen. Could this petroglyph, place name and legend all be coincidental, or were Hawaiians trying to capture their culture in stone?

A second petroglyph is found at Pōhue, Hawai'i and bears the resemblance of a sperm whale. A third whale petroglyph is also reported to be present at Olowalu, Maui.



Nā Wahi Pana o Nā Koholā i Hawai'i Nei - Legendary Places of Whales in Hawai'i

The area of Kapalaoa ("the whale") is located in south Kaua'i and in Puakō, Hawai'i. In an ancient legend, very similar to Makua's Prayer, it is said that the two demi gods, Kāne and Kanaloa sent a whale to Kapalaoa to fetch one of their worshippers named Makuakaumana. The worshiper was taken to the legendary floating land of Kānehūnāmoku (Kāne's hidden land) by the whale and there he lived with the gods.

Throughout Hawai'i, there are many areas and winds named Koholālele ("leaping whale"). On O'ahu, Koholālele Fishpond was said to have been built by the legendary menehune people who could build fishponds overnight. If the work was not complete by morning, the project would remain unfinished.

Mōkoholā ("cut whale") is a large rock islet off Pelekunu, Moloka'i. It is believed that the isles of Mōkoholā and Mōkōlea were created when a man named Kana was attempting to rescue his mother, Hina from Hā'upu Hill. As he proceeded with the rescue, rocks were hurled toward his canoe creating the two islands.

Kukuipalaoa is an isle located off of Kamalō, Moloka'i which literally means "whale (bone) lamp."

Halepalaoa or Kahalepalaoa ("the whale house") is located on the east side of Lāna'i, an island anciently known to be heavily inhabited by ghosts. As a punishment for uprooting breadfruit and kukui trees in Lahaina, a young man named Kaululā'au was banished from Maui and sent to Halepalaoa to be destroyed by the ghosts. Legend has it that Kaululā'au eventually outwitted and destroyed the ghosts of the island surviving his banishment.

Also on Lāna'i is Palaoa Hill ("Whale Hill"). This area was said to occasionally have whales wash upon its shore. Ironically, one of the few whale petroglyphs in Hawai'i is located at this hill.

Laeonākoholā, meaning the "cape of whales" on Kaho'olawe, is a vantage point where many koholā can be seen as they journey through the islands.

Within Hilo, Hawai'i, the ancient area of Kaipalaoa ("whale sea") is where Kamehameha I frequently visited. Also, a heiau (temple) with the same name was said to have been the area where the navel cord of Liholiho was cut in 1797.



Pu'ukoholā Heiau, located in Kawaihae, Hawai'i was built by Kamehameha I in honor of his family war god Kūkā'ilimoku. A prophesy foretold Kamehameha that if he built the heiau under strict guidelines to please his god, he would eventually ascend to be ruler of all the Hawaiian Islands. The heiau was completed in 1791 and by 1810, Kamehameha was conqueror of all the islands becoming the first chief to unify all Hawai'i. Pu'ukoholā literally means "whale hill" and a heiau is a temple or place designated for worshipping gods.