

# sacred oahu

JIM KENNEY

The Hawaiian island of Oahu has been a cultural meeting place for centuries. Since its settling by canoe-voyagers from the Marquesas before 500 CE, the Hawaiian archipelago has attracted visitors from countless other Pacific islands, China, Japan, Southeast Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Many came bringing religious messages, some more aggressively than others. In fact, visitors from other regions of the South Pacific often arrived as conquerors, bringing new gods, rituals and, in some cases, demands for sacrifice.



Ku figure, Kaneaki Heiau, photo, Jim Kenney

## HAWAIIAN MYTHOLOGY

In the vast Hawaiian pantheon, for gods were most broadly worshipped. They were Ku, Kane, Kanaloa and Lono. Kane was father of the other three and the god of all life. Ku represented the masculine in nature, and was also revered (under the name “Kukailimoku”) as the god of war. Kanaloa ruled the land of the dead. Lono was the compassionate god of clouds, harvest and rain, strongly associated with fertility.

The system of *kapu* defined the world of the sacred, the sacrosanct, and the forbidden. The strictures of *kapu* were intertwined in complex ways the the world of the *ali'i*, royalty of the islands. This dynamic formed an important central pole of religious and social life. In a sense *kapu* can be understood as a network that both defined and protected spiritual power, *mana*. As such, it governed relations between chiefs and commoners, men and women, and humans and the natural world. The sacred shrines, *heiau*, were places of concentrated *mana* and, therefore, protected by powerful customs of the *kapu* order. (It's worth noting that the sound “k” and “p” in Hawaiian appear as “t” and “b” respectively in Tahitian and some other Polynesian languages. Thus the Hawaiian *kapu* is *tabu* in Tahiti – which Hawaiians, by the way, call “Kahiki”.)

In 1819, King Kamehameha abolished *kapu* and ordered the destruction of all the shrines. This disruption of indigenous worship, opened the way for the Christianization of much of Hawaii. Today, Hawaiian cultural activists are working to promote the revival of indigenous religious, linguistic and cultural traditions.

*Jim Kenney is Co-Editor of Interreligious Insight. He is the Executive Director of the Interreligious Engagement Project (IEP21) and the Director of Common Ground.*

## HEIAUS

Most scholars agree that the shrines known as *heiaus* were built to honor various deities, especially Ku, who presided over war, and Lono, who ruled over agriculture. Archaeologists have noted occasional shifts in the principal deity of a given *heiau*, a potentially important indicator of the tenor of the times in which the transfer of primacy took place. As noted in the essay on page 4, the cover photo for this issue shows a portion of the Kaneaki Heiau, one of the best reconstructed shrines on the island.

The Pu'u O Mahuka Heiau on Oahu's north shore was a major religious center as long as 250 years ago. It was probably built as a *luakini heiau*, a place of sacrifice. Destroyed after the 1819 breaking of *kapu*, this is the largest shrine on the island. It was one of two sites where the royal children of Oahu were born.

## THE BIRTHING STONES

The 5-acre historical preserve of Kukaniloko ("anchoring the cry from within") is located in central Oahu. It is among the most historically significant sites in Hawaii. This is the place of "the royal birthing stones. Here, royal wives came to give birth to their children. Archaeologists and mythologists attest that the site was likely created in the 1100s for the occasion of the birth of the son of a local chief. For the next several centuries (until well into the 1800s) the stones marked out the *kapu* precincts where the royal babies were brought forth. There is evidence that some of the stones had seasonal and even astronomical significance.



Pu'u O Mahuka Heiaus; photo Cetta Kenney



Bottom and middle: Birthing Stones; photos Cetta Kenney

## FROM CHINA AND JAPAN

The arrival of Chinese and Japanese workers on Oahu brought a new cultural and religious diversity to Hawaii. Chinese Taoist and Buddhist temples abound on Oahu, as do Japanese Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples and communities.

Beyond Koko Head, near the renowned Halona Blowhole, a remarkable Japanese fishing shrine honors a guardian spirit offering protection to those who braved the dangerous waters.

Lovely Buddhist temples dot the island. Many Chinese and Japanese schools are represented here, including Shin, Tendai, Zen, and Nichiren. The eclectic architecture of the Senshin Temple at the foot of the famed Pali Highway offers a window on the cultural variety of Oahu.

The spectacular Byodo-in Temple, in the Valley of the Temples on the eastern shore, is a replica of a sister temple in Japan.

Interestingly, many visitors to Oahu experience Hawaiian religion quite indirectly, through a visit to the Polynesian Cultural Center. Operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Center is staffed largely by students from the nearby Oahu campus of Brigham Young University. A variety of colorful exhibits and lively performances represent various island cultures from Hawaii, Samoa, Aotearoa (Maori New Zealand), Tahiti, Fiji, Tonga and the Marquesas. While the Center has been criticized by anthropologists and Hawaiian cultural activists for its inauthenticity, this taste of the islands is actually rather typical of the mixture of culture and commercialism one encounters in “traditional” entertainments around the world.

The traveller with the inclination and the energy to do some research and a bit of hiking will find Oahu a marvelous repository of the sacred. Native shrines as well as imported temples and churches are everywhere waiting to be discovered. When the beach at Waikiki seems too manic, sacred Oahu awaits.



*L to R: Byodo-in Temple, Polynesian Cultural Center, Catholic Church in Valley of the Temples; photos, Cetta Kenney*