

OHA STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT



Connection Between Iwi Kūpuna and Well-being of Native Hawaiian 'Ohana

INTRODUCTION

“By rebuilding and protecting the sanctity of the iwi, Kānaka Maoli strengthen their ancestral foundation, maintain the connection and dependence between past and present, and reinfuse the land with mana essential to sustain their ancestors, the living, and future generations.”¹

The concepts of caring for and protecting iwi kūpuna (ancestral remains) are not new to Native Hawaiian 'ohana (families). Practices and beliefs associated with caring for and protecting iwi kūpuna are rooted in Native Hawaiian religious and cultural customs. While this innate kuleana (responsibility) hasn't changed through time, the ways in which Native Hawaiians are able to uphold this responsibility has been challenged and threatened by the rapid development of kulāiwi (homeland) in Hawai'i. Also, the ability to care for human remains in culturally appropriate ways has, and perhaps always will be, an important issue for indigenous peoples. Similar to the experience of Native Hawaiians, Native American tribes on the continental United States have struggled with the desecration of their ancestral remains.²

The purpose of this document is to provide foundational information on the past and present cultural significance of iwi kūpuna, the spiritual connection between iwi kūpuna and Native Hawaiian 'ohana, traditional practices associated with the care and protection of iwi kūpuna, as well as the negative impacts of iwi kūpuna desecration to Native Hawaiian health and well-being.

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CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF IWI KŪPUNA

‘Ohana is one of the most important units in Hawaiian culture and included not only grandparents, parents and keiki (children), but also the ‘aumākua (ancestral deities) and ‘unihipili (“deified spirits of more recently deceased relatives”).³ It is further explained in *Nānā I Ke Kumu I*, that “In old Hawai‘i, one’s relatives were both earthly and spiritual. Both were looked to for advice, instruction and emotional support. Thus communication with the supernatural was a normal part of ‘ohana living.”⁴

According to noted Native Hawaiian historian, Mary Kawena Pukui, “The bones of the dead were guarded, respected, treasured, venerated, loved or even deified by relatives; [and] coveted and despoiled by enemies.”⁵ As the lasting physical form, iwi are especially sacred, as stated by Pukui,

In pre-Christian creeds of Hawai‘i, man’s immortality was manifest in his bones. Man’s blood, even bright drops shed by the living, was *baumia* (defiled and defiling). Man’s body, when death made flesh corrupt, was an abomination and *kapu* (taboo). The iwi survived decaying flesh. The bones remained, and cleanly, lasting portion of the man or woman who once lived.⁶

Pukui also states that “The bones of the dead, considered the most cherished possession, were hidden.”⁷

Iwi also connects Native Hawaiians to the ‘āina (land). The term “iwi” is a part of the term *kulāiwi*, which means “Native land” or “homeland” as it was believed that “Here my bones began.”⁸ Further, the spine was referred to as

iwi kuamo‘o, and figuratively refers to one’s homeland in the saying “Ho‘i hou i ka iwikuamo‘o” or return to the homeland” (“Return to the homeland or family after being away”).⁹

This connection to ‘āina is also seen in the Hawaiian mo‘olelo (stories) of the burial of the stillborn child of Ho‘ohōkūkalanani and Wākea, progenitors of the Native Hawaiian people.¹⁰ According to the mo‘olelo, after the stillborn child was born, he was buried beneath the outside corner of their home and from his grave grew the first kalo (taro) plant and who they named Hāloanakalaukapalili. Ho‘ohōkūkalanani and Wākea had a second child and named him Hāloa in honor of his older brother. It is said, Hāloa was the first Hawaiian, or first descendant of Hawaiian chiefly lineage.

Nihipali explains that,

This mo‘olelo establishes the interconnection, the interdependent relationship between the gods, the land and the people. The burial of iwi (bones) results in physical growth of plants and the spiritual growth of mana (life force). As descendants, we feed from the foods of the land and are nourished spiritually by the knowledge that the iwi kūpuna (ancestral bones) are well cared for and in their rightful place.¹¹

Another connection that this story brings to light is that *kanu* can mean to plant and also to bury, and thus we *kanu* both kalo and iwi kūpuna.

SPIRITUAL CONNECTION BETWEEN IWI KŪPUNA AND NATIVE HAWAIIAN ‘OHANA

Following someone’s death, only close relatives cared for the deceased.¹² Pukui states that “Until morticians were generally accepted, only close relatives prepared the body for burial”¹³ and “It was usually the daughter’s or granddaughter’s duty to attend to the body of a woman; and the wife’s, son’s or grandson’s, of a man.”¹⁴ Pukui explains how the body was prepared:

The body of the dead was washed by the nearest of kin, the wife, mother or the children, especially the eldest, and then clothed in a fresh garment. A pad was placed between the legs before putting on the loin cloth or skirt, to absorb any discharge. Salt was placed in thin *kapa* (later, thin cloth) and placed over the navel. This was believed to slow down decomposition. Other relatives brought in banana stalks trimmed flat on two sides. These were laid on the floor side by side, then a second layer was put on these, then a mat was placed on top. On this bier the body

was laid. The banana stalks kept the body cool. They were changed several times.¹⁵

Mourning rituals included the *kūmākena* which is “To lament, bewail, mourn loudly for the dead, [or] grieve”¹⁶ or the *mānewanewa* which is “Grief, sorrow, mourning; exaggerated expression of grief, as by knocking out teeth, cutting the hair in strange patterns, eating of filth, tattooing the tongue, removing the malo and wearing it about the neck.”¹⁷ Pukui referred to *kanikau* as a general term for mourning, the *kūmākena* as the loud cry and the *uwe helu* as the recounting chant “in which the mourner recalls old associations, family connections and anything else that comes to mind.”¹⁸ Pukui explains how the *ho‘olewa* or *kia‘i kupapa‘u* (funeral) would proceed:

As the corpse lay with feet in the direction from which the mourners would enter (toward the front door), the



close relatives sat behind the body, the next of kin by the head. As a relative was seen approaching, one of the family within would call out with a cry of grief, and in response the relative coming would begin the wailing call to the dead that was termed *uwe helu*.¹⁹

Customary burial positions included the fetal and prone (face down) positions.²⁰ In some instances, the body was buried with the head to the east and the feet towards the west as this was believed to be the direction of the original home of the gods and ancestors and where the person's spirit would depart to.²¹ Some were also buried in canoes that were made of koa or kukui wood.²²

Archaeological evidence shows that burial methods included placement in caves, sand and earth burials, and monument burials that “were sometimes marked on the surface by stone terraces, mounds or platforms.”²³ Burials were also located under house sites and within heiau.²⁴ Evidence suggest that cremation may have also been a burial method.²⁵

Burial grounds were inherited by descendants as noted by Samuel Kamakau:

In old days the inheritance of the family burial place, the caves and secret burial places of our ancestors was handed down from these to their descendants without the intrusion of a single stranger unless by the consent of the descendant, so that wherever a death occurred,

the body was conveyed to its inheritance. These immoveable barriers belonged to burial rights for all time. The rule of kings and chiefs and their land agents might change, but the burial rights of families survived on their lands. Here is one proof of the people's right to the land.²⁶

With death also came haumia, or a defilement or uncleanness.²⁷ According to Malo, a kapu period would last 10 days or longer for an ali'i and about a day or two for an ordinary person.²⁸ Those who would be in the house and around the deceased were limited to blood relatives.²⁹ Those who were caring for the deceased were restricted from entering others homes, eating others food or doing any other work during this time.³⁰ If an ali'i died, the entire area would be haumia and the next heir in line to rule would have to leave for a certain period of time, such as how Liholiho left Kona when his father Kamehameha I passed away in 1819.³¹ Even the doorway of a house could be defiled which may result in another death if the body was carried through it and thus a temporary entrance was created to move the deceased.³² Following the burial those who were close to the deceased and was caring for the body would need to undergo a cleansing ceremony before returning to everyday life.³³ Pukui described this as pīkai, or “a ritual sprinkling with sea water or other salted water to purify an area or person from spiritual contamination and remove *kapus* (taboos) and harmful influences” that was customarily done after coming into contact with a corpse.³⁴

THE 'UHANĒ AND THE 'AO AUMAKUA

'Aumākua could physically manifest as a shark, owl, mud hen, lizard, eel, mouse, caterpillars, rocks, or plants.³⁵ According to Kamakau, the 'uhane (spirit), if met and greeted by their 'aumakua was led to the ao 'aumakua (ancestral realm), where “there are many beloved—friends, relatives, and acquaintances—all united in thought and all joined together in the 'aumakua realm.”³⁶ According to Pukui, the 'uhane is

The animating force which, present in the body, distinguished the quick from the dead. And so 'uhane can be called “spirit.” The vital spark, that, departed from the flesh, lived on through eternity, rewarded for virtue or punished for transgressions in life. Thus 'uhane is “spirit” in the immortal sense, and the “soul” of Christian concept.³⁷

One practice was to place the person's remains in the physical realm of their 'aumakua, thus if their 'aumakua was the manō (shark), then their bones were taken out to sea. Pukui explains that a person's remains would be taken to

the ao 'uhane of that particular 'ohana, where that 'aumakua dwelled:

The *ao 'uhane*, or realm of spirits, was not some place like Heaven and Hell, above or below earth. For any family, its *ao 'uhane* was the *ao akua* and *ao 'aumakua*, i.e., the place, element or realm in which the ancestral *akua* and 'aumakua of the 'ohana lived. If related to Kamohoa-li'i, Lord of the sharks, the *ao 'aumakua* was the ocean. So was it for people of Kanaloa, whose *kinolau* were the squid and octopus. The bones of these people went to the sea.³⁸

The 'uhane was believed to leap from this realm to the next at designated places called leina.³⁹ Kamakau noted that spirits, if not led by 'aumakua to help it would leap from these leina into the “po pau 'ole o Milu.”⁴⁰ Kamakau described the ao o Milu as a “realm of evil, a friendless realm, one without family.”⁴¹ Pukui stated that it was from these leina that spirits would leap into pō, where “there dwell our ancestors, transfigured into gods.”⁴²



The practice of *kākū'ai* ensured that the departed spirit was on its way to the *ao 'aumakua*. Pukui described *kākū'ai* as “the ritual offering of the dead to the *aumākua* (ancestor gods) and the acceptance and change of spirit and body remains into the visible form or manifestation of the particular *aumakua*. An aborted fetus or malformed living infant might similarly be offered and transformed.”⁴³ *Kākū'ai* was also the practice of offering food to the gods and the spirits of the dead.⁴⁴

If the *'uhane* was not lead by their *'aumakua*, they could also dwell in the *ao 'auwana* (“the realm of homeless souls”), also known as the *ao kuewa*.⁴⁵ Pukui states that “Some who had neither loving relatives to care for the corpse, nor the guardianship of family *'aumakua* who help souls find their way to the world of spirits, became lost souls (*kuewa*) wandering about the vicinity that they were familiar with, unfed and hungry, chasing butterflies or spiders for food, or stealing it when they might.”⁴⁶

TRADITIONAL PRACTICES ASSOCIATED WITH THE CARE AND PROTECTION OF IWI KŪPUNA

Iwi were hidden to protect them from those who sought to insult or desecrate them. Kamakau states that “the bones and bodies of the newly buried were dug up for food and bait for sharks. For this reason, consternation arose in every family, and they sought places of concealment for the bones of their grandparents, parents, children, chiefs, and relatives” suggesting that *hūnākele* (to hide in secret, as the body of a loved one in a secret cave) was practiced by *ali'i* (chiefs) and *maka'āinana* (commoner).⁴⁷ *Nupa* (deep cave) were also chosen as a *lua huna* (hidden or secret cave or pit) for burials.⁴⁸ These were also called *lua pao*.⁴⁹ Iwi were sometimes hidden “under new houses, in roadways, in banks of taro patches, or any place they would be concealed.”⁵⁰ Only those “of the same flesh (*i'o ho'okahi*)” were allowed to hide the bones.⁵¹

Ali'i would often designate someone through a *kauo* (verbal will) to hide their *iwi* in a secret place such as a cave or cliff.⁵² It was in the *ali'i*'s best interest to care for those around him while he was alive to ensure his bones were

cared for after his death as expressed in the *'ōlelo no'eau*, “*A'ohe e nalo ka iwi o ke ali'i 'ino, o ko ke ali'i maika'i ke nalo,*” which means “The bones of an evil chief will not be concealed, but the bones of a good chief will.”⁵³ Hiding the bones was known as *hūnākele*, while *kanu* referred to a burial by covering with earth.⁵⁴ Burials in sand, caves or rocks were preferred over dirt because it left no evidence.⁵⁵

Those close to a beloved chief would want to be *moe pu'u* or death companions to the deceased.⁵⁶ Some *ali'i* requested that there be no *moe pu'u* when they pass away such as *Keōpūolani*, the mother of *Liholiho* (*Kamehameha II*) and *Kauikeaouli* (*Kamehameha III*).⁵⁷ Treasured objects referred to as *moepū* could be placed with the deceased at their place of rest such as clothing, adornments such as *lei niho palaoa*, or food.⁵⁸ Food was also placed with the remains “in order that the spirit might have food on its long journey to the spirit world, or if the body should be restored to life, there would be something to eat before he sought his way out.”⁵⁹

NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF IWI KŪPUNA DESECRATION TO NATIVE HAWAIIAN HEALTH AND WELL-BEING.

Pukui explains that “With or without *'unihipili* rituals, there was a feeling that the spirit might yet be hovering near the *iwi*. If the bones were desecrated, the spirit was insulted. Even the living descendants of the profaned dead were shamed and humiliated.”⁶⁰ Pukui also explains that “In Hawaii's old beliefs, an immortal spirit, whether of god or deceased human, could take many forms and habitations. A man's spirit might reset happily in *Pō*, yet it could still linger in that immortal part of man, his bones.”⁶¹

Not only were the *iwi* a receptacle for the *'uhane* or the spirit, one's *mana*, or skill was also in their *iwi*. This is seen in the seeking of the *iwi* of a skilled or lucky fisherman because “It was believed that certain people's bones brought them luck in fishing. When they died their bones were sought for the making of fishhooks.”⁶² Such bones were called *iwi paoa* or “fragrant bones.”⁶³

In addition to fishhooks, desecrations to *iwi* also included turning them into arrows, needles, a spittoon (receptacle for spitting into), or a slop container.⁶⁴ Pukui states that “the ultimate desecration was the complete destruction of bones” and that “if the bones were destroyed, the spirit would never be able to join its *aumakua*.”⁶⁵ Kamakau also states that “the bones and bodies of the newly buried were dug up for food and bait for sharks.”⁶⁶

Exposing *iwi* to the sun was an extreme insult and was done by enemies or was the result of carelessness.⁶⁷ Figuratively, “*Kaula'i nā iwi i ka lā*” or bleaching the bones in the sun and “*Holehole iwi*” (To strip the flesh off the bones)⁶⁸ were phrases that were used when referring to the unnecessary talk about one's family to non-family members.⁶⁹ Pukui also states that “Merely leaving bones uncovered and exposed to the sunlight was disrespectful if not an outright profanation.”⁷⁰



Ed Kanahele, a founding member of Hui Mālama I Nā Kūpuna o Hawai'i Nei, a grass-roots non-profit group dedicated to stop the desecration of iwi kūpuna, states that,

We are taught that the sacredness of the burial site should never be disturbed. We are taught that mana resides in our bones and the flesh is pela or corrupt. Mana is with the bones and the bones unite with the earth. Any subsequent manipulation of the bones or tampering with the burial environment is desecration

and that desecration causes the loss of our Kuppunas' [sic] mana.⁷¹

Baldauf and Akutagawa also state that "Iwi are vital to the perpetuation of living Kānaka Maoli, as they are a lasting embodiment of our ancestors and continuous genealogical link from the past, to the present, and future generations" and that "This fundamental kuleana perpetuates harmony between the living, the dead, and the 'āina".⁷²

SUMMARY

The care of iwi kūpuna is one component of a larger network of Native Hawaiian burial, funerary and mourning practices that included body preparation, ho'olewa, kia'i kupapa'u, kumākena, aha'aina makena, aha'aia waimaka, moepu'u, kapu periods for those who cared for the deceased, and cleansing ceremonies. Iwi kūpuna were protected from desecration because "if the bones were desecrated, the spirit was insulted" as well as the relatives of that spirit.⁷³ The burial of iwi also connects that individual and their 'ohana to 'āina and kulāiwi and the care of those burials are important kuleana that is passed down within families.

Today, Native Hawaiians continue the work of protecting iwi kūpuna from desecration as protecting iwi kūpuna helps to maintain the connection to ancestors. Halealoha Ayau, Native Hawaiian practitioner and former Executive Director of Hui Mālama I Nā Kūpuna O Hawai'i Nei, elab-

orates on this interdependence:

The relationship between kupuna (ancestors) and living descendants is one of interdependence. In the physical realm, the living are duty bound to malama (care for) the dead. In turn, the ancestors respond by protecting us in the spiritual world. Kanu means to plant, to cultivate, to bury. The connection is that when you kanu your ancestors, the responsibility is to cultivate them by caring for them, and the result is spiritual growth. The ancestor's mana permeates the land, giving life to the children who feed off the land.⁷⁴

Thus, for Native Hawaiians, the protection and care of iwi kūpuna continue to be a priority because it is our physical and spiritual connection to ancestors past, kulāiwi and 'āina that are integral to our maui ola or well-being.



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FOOTNOTES

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- ⁴Pukui, et al, *Nānā I Ke Kumu*, Volume I, 168.
- ⁵Pukui, et al, *Nānā I Ke Kumu* Volume I, 107.
- ⁶Pukui, et al, *Nānā I Ke Kumu*, Vol. I, 107.
- ⁷Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*, see term “iwi”.
- ⁸Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*; Pukui, et al, *Nānā I Ke Kumu*, Vol. 1, 112.
- ⁹Pukui, *‘Olelo No‘eau: Hawaiian Proverbs & Poetical Sayings*, (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1983), 109.
- ¹⁰E. S. Craighill Handy, Mary Kawena Pukui, and Elizabeth Green Handy, *The Polynesian Family System in Ka-‘u*, 193.
- ¹¹Nihipali, “Stone by Stone,” 36-37.
- ¹²Handy, et al, *The Polynesian Family System in Ka-‘u*, 151-152.
- ¹³Pukui, et al, *Nānā I Ke Kumu*, Vol. I, 134.
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- ¹⁶Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*.
- ¹⁷Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*.
- ¹⁸Handy, et al, *The Polynesian Family System of Ka-‘u*, 154-155.
- ¹⁹Handy, et al, *The Polynesian Family System of Ka-‘u*, 154.
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- ²³Patrick V. Kirch, *Feathered Gods and Fishhooks: An Introduction to Hawaiian Archaeology and Prehistory*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 238-240.
- ²⁴Kirch, *Feathered Gods and Fishhooks*, 240-242.
- ²⁵Kirch, *Feathered Gods and Fishhooks*, 238.
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- ²⁹Malo, *Hawaiian Antiquities*, 96-97.
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- ³¹Kamakau, *Ka Po‘e Kahiko*, 35.
- ³²Kamakau, *Ka Po‘e Kahiko*, 35.
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- ⁴⁴Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*.



- ⁴⁵Kamakau, *Ka Po'e Kahiko*, 47.
- ⁴⁶Handy, et al, *The Polynesian Family System in Ka-'u*, 151.
- ⁴⁷Kamakau, *Ka Po'e Kahiko*, 38.,
- ⁴⁸Kamakau, *Ka Po'e Kahiko*, 41; Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*.
- ⁴⁹Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*. See term, "pao."
- ⁵⁰Kamakau, *Ka Po'e Kahiko*, 43.
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- ⁵³Pukui, *'Ölelo No'eau*, 17.
- ⁵⁴Pukui, et al, *Nānā I Ke Kumu*, Vol. I, 132.
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- ⁵⁸Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*; Baldauf and Akutagawa, *Ho'i Hou I Ka Iwikuamo'o*, 6.
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- ⁶⁰Pukui, et al, *Nānā I Ke Kumu*, Vol. I, 109.
- ⁶¹Pukui, et al, *Nānā I Ke Kumu*, Vol. 1, 194.
- ⁶²Pukui, *'Ölelo No'eau*, 262.
- ⁶³"O ka hana ia a ka lawai'a iwi paoa" or "that is the way of the lucky fisherman". Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*.
- ⁶⁴Pukui, et al, *Nānā I Ke Kumu*, Vol. 1, 109.
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- ⁷²Baldauf and Akutagawa, *Ho'i Hou I Ka Iwikuamo'o*, 4-5.
- ⁷³Pukui, et al, *Nānā I Ke Kumu*, Vol. I, 109.
- ⁷⁴Edward Halealoha Ayau, Esq., "Cultural Perspectives on Hawaiian Burial Issues," 5th Annual Hawaiian Archaeology Conference, March 27, 1992 at Kauai'i Community College, Puhi, Kaua'i.