

Menehunes, Moa and More at the The Manoa Heritage Center

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It is said that Chief Ka-we-lo stood at the top of mount Ko-na-hu-a-nui on O-a-hu and flung his spear arcing over the me-hu-ne taro fields in upper Ma-no-a Valley. It landed upright atop an old lava flow; but in flight it had miraculously transformed into an 'o'o--a farmer's digging stick.

Today, on that spot stands the last intact he-i-au (temple) in Ma-no-a. It is called Ku-ka-o'o. In the old dictionaries ku-ku means upright and kuka means to council or discuss. Ku-ka-o'o is the ancient Hawaiian god of husbandry, so in toto, the modern name Ku-ka'o'o suggests that agricultural ka-hu-na conferred in this sacred place overlooking one of the largest a-hu-pu-a'a [native plantation] on Oahu. The breadbasket for the ali'i (royalty) playground at Wa-i-ki-ki.

As in most valleys, Ma-no-a has several distinct climates, each suited to the growth that prospered there. Far in the back the rain forest provided wood for canoes, building materials, weapons, clothes and tools. Closer in, the slopes were green with sweet potato vines. The almost flat valley floor was a patchwork of flooded taro loi with clumps of sugar cane and banana stalks bordering the narrow paths separating them.

Today, that flat valley floor and its extensive irrigation system has disappeared beneath the homes of one of the most favored residential districts on Oahu.

How, then, could an old hi-e-au compete for space in the current property market? Well, that story--and much about the turn of the 20th Century Cooke estate, is what The Manoa Heritage Center is all about.

The estate of Sam and Mary Cooke is named Ku-a-li'i after the chief who cleared the me-ne-hu-ne from the valley and claimed it and its sacred places for himself. The Cookes are the second of that famous family to have saved Ku-ka'o'o after Queen Ka'ahumanu dismantled the Hawaiian religion in 1819. Now these descendants of one of the original missionary families have surrounded it with a native garden of both endemic and Polynesian imported plants and opened it for the public to learn from and to simply enjoy.

A tour of the Heritage Center begins with a brief Hawaiian geological introduction and how Ku-ka'o'o came to be atop the end of a lava flow. Additional history of the valley is sketched from its me-ne-hu-ne era as a fortified enclave through to its home for Hawaiian ali'i and Honolulu wealthy. In early times, an imaginary line ran down the length of the valley marking the cool afternoon western slopes for the ali'i and leaving the sweltering Diamond Head side for the commoners.

Queen Ka'a-hu-ma-nu died in her retreat just a little deeper into the valley above Ku-a-li'i,

A Heritage docent will introduce the visitor to dry stack stone masonry, the methodology of locating ma-na sufficient to merit the building of a hi-e-a-u, and mo-a, the plant that has survived on earth since the era of dinosaurs--and its use on the rash prone bottoms of Hawaiian keiki [children].

The up close view of the hieau allows the visitor, with prior permission, to make an offering at the doorway to the sacred precinct. The native garden displays plants that are endemic to Hawai'i -to be found nowhere else in the world. After their arrival, long before that of humans, the centuries of geographic isolation allowed these plants to mutate and evolve into new species unique to the Islands. The several ways in which the ancient ancestors of these plants arrived is disclosed. In addition, there are living examples of the food plants the migrating Polynesians brought with them. Several medicinal plants, which were part of the healing ka-hu-na's lore, are preserved there as well. As programs develop, kapa [cloth]-making demonstrations and other uses of native flora are planned.

Carefully trained docents lead all tours. Manoa Heritage Center is open to the public and to school classes. All visits are by appointment. Group size is limited and some parts of the tour may not be suitable for those with certain physical limitations. Abbreviated tours are available for those who may not be able to manage the regular route.