



**TOPONYMY
OF THE
HAWAIIAN ISLANDS**

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TOPONYMY IN THE HAWAIIAN ISLANDS

The place names found on today's map create a framework in which we can hang the history of Hawaii. I arrived at this topic after years of using the map for guidance while travelling. This topic interests me because I've seen connections between the printed names on modern maps and the historical discoveries I made on location.

Five years ago I traveled around the South American continent. I was perplexed to find that very few people could address my questions regarding place names. The less local people seemed to know, the more I researched the topic. Eventually I made discoveries, such as Bolivia was named after Simon Bolivar, a Venezuelan rebel who fought for liberty and justice for many people in the Andes. I learned that the Andes Mountains were named after an indian people who preceded the Incas. I learned that "Uruguay" was an indian name meaning "Water Bird." The word "Uru" is a type of bird and "Guay" was the local word river (also found in the toponym "Paraguay.") These simple discoveries allowed me to create a system to memorize historical information. I began to see the place names coming to life as well as the people who gave them.

Ever since that time I have traveled with an eye on place names, from Shanghai to Seville, Johannesburg to Jamaica. The objective of my latest paper, Toponymy in Hawaii, will be to relate my past discoveries, create analogies, and to expose information previously unpublished in

regards to Hawaiian Toponymy. I will address such questions as “What cultures/languages have injected names into today’s maps? What can we say in regards to the integrity of Hawaiian names? (As most names have remained even though other cultures/languages have dominated)” What can we establish about the types of names given by the Hawaiians and what do these names reveal in terms of their culture and behavior?

People to interview include university professors, archeologists and historians. Additional sources include Hawaiian elders or “Kapunas.” Kapunas make for an interesting source on toponymy because their perceptions often contradict the available printed materials. This leads to interesting challenges for the student of place names. Students are often quick to attach new meaning to old names. Remaining objective until various sources have been researched is an important discipline. Hawaiian language was not previously written and language is constantly evolving.

Thesis: There is a diverse array of historical information encoded within the toponyms (place names) of Hawaii found on today's maps. Hawaiian place names have developed with the people who gave them. Place names relate to the history of the Hawaiian people, their culture and the local topography. Hawaiian language is perpetuated through toponymy.

OUTLINE

- I. Toponymy gives us insight into Polynesian culture.
 - A. Toponymy is the study of place names.
 - B. Hawaii's relationship with Polynesia is reflected in the place names.
- II. Hawaiian Toponyms have important historical references.
 - A. Hawaiian toponyms reveal cultural legacies.
 - B. The topography of ancient times was recorded in Hawaiian place names.
 - C. Hawaiian toponyms preserve the memory of historical events.
 - D. Cultural legends are preserved in Hawaiian toponyms.
- III. Hawaiian language is perpetuated through place names.
 - A. The poetic nature of Hawaiian language is demonstrated in place names.
 - B. Hawaiian place names have a unique sense of integrity.
 - C. The final stop for the student of place names is on location.

TOPONYMY OF THE HAWAIIAN ISLANDS

“Because the names given to places reflect culture and history, students of Hawaiian place names, like dictionary writers, are confronted by subject matter as diverse as archaeology, folklore, geography, geology, history, language, and surfing” (Pukui 237).

Many travellers use the map to find their way in a foreign place. The map provides us guidance and topographical reference. However, much is revealed by a closer look at the toponyms themselves. Over the course of my travels I began to make historical discoveries between the printed names on modern maps and the historical sites visited at various locations. The maps came to life as I learned about the origins of the place names and the history of the cultures that gave them. While studying toponymy in the South African National Library in September 1997, I encountered an interesting quote regarding this attractive study:

In 1879, Sir Bartle Frere of the South African Philosophical Society wrote “Here . . . where the notices of early travellers are the only materials of history, much may be learnt from a careful collection and study of the native names of rivers, mountains, and other geographical features of the country.” (qtd. in Pittman 3)

Toponymy is the term for the study of place names. It is derived from the Greek words "*topos*," meaning, "place," and "*nymy*," meaning, "name." According to the Random House

Dictionary of the English Language, a “toponym” is a place name or a name derived from the name of a place and “toponymy” is the study of toponyms. From the time of the ancient Greeks, toponymy has been recognised as a field of study.

The Atlas of Hawaii emphasizes that “Hawaiian place names, then, hold other attractions than their pleasant and mellifluous sounds, for they describe Hawaiians, the deeds of their cultural heroes, the close relationship of Hawaiians to their Polynesian cousins to the south, and the kinship that Hawaiians have always felt with the natural forces that surround them, physically and spiritually” (32). This is seen to be true in many examples around us.

A logical starting point for the study of Hawaiian place names is the name Hawaii itself. Many of the names of the islands are so old that the meanings have not kept up with the evolution of the language. Pukui acknowledges, “Many important names are so ancient that no translation at all is possible” (262). However, the place name “Hawaii” has several cognates found within the Polynesian triangle that offers insight into Hawaiian history and their relationship with other Polynesians. For example, in the Marquesas Islands, there is the ancient name “Hawaiki” which refers to the concept of an ancient homeland (262).

The Samoans have a similar word to Hawaii which represents the largest island of their group, the island of Savai’i (Pukui 262). The Illustrated Hawaiian Dictionary suggests that the name Hawaii is derived from “Hawa iki” and therefore means “Little Hawa.” “Hawa iki is

considered the legendary homeland of the Polynesians; its exact location is unknown” (Wight). The 1997 New World Almanac notes that the name Hawaii is “Probably derived from the native word for homeland, Hawaiki or Owhyee” (544). Furthermore, in 1937, Major Davis Jones recorded that Hawaii was the “Name of the traditional discoverer and first settler” (30). Although all sources vary in exact meaning, interesting historical connections can be made between the inhabitants of the Polynesian triangle based on the similarities of the name Hawaii.

While some scholars believe that the linguistic history of Hawaii came from the South Pacific, other evidence shows that some names may have come from the Hawaiian Islands. Kai Kaholokai (a native Hawaiian who holds a degree in archaeology and has eight years of field experience) indicates that Hawaii could be the original homeland of his people and that the name Hawaii may have been transmitted to the South Pacific from the Hawaiian Islands “during waves of settlements that originated in Hawaii and voyaged southward” (interview). Kaholokai believes that “Various groups or clans sailed throughout the Pacific Basin for thousands of years”(interview). According to Kaholokai, the name Hawaii can be broken into three words, which translate to “Ha (breath of life),” “Wai (water),” and “i (the mythical creator),” Hawaii translates to “Life-Water-Creator” (interview).

Some place names occur with exact spelling around various locations in Polynesia. A good example of a toponym occurring in both Hawaii and the South Pacific is “Upolu.” Upolu represents both the northern point of Hawaii Island and an island in Samoa (Pukui 215,279).

Most Hawaiian place names have important historical significance. Some names give physical or topographical descriptions that reflect the lay of the land in ancient times or describe how the Hawaiians used certain areas. “As times changed, so did the spiritual and political connotations of the names” (Kaholokai, interview). For example, Pu’ukohola (a national historic site in South Kohala on the island of Hawaii) has a historical legacy that transcends history to a time when the Hawaiians monitored the migratory patterns of the humpback whale (Kaholokai). Pu’ukohola translates to “Whale Hill” (James 133) or “humpback whale” (Kaholokai). Archaeologists believe the existing luakini heiau (temple for human sacrifice) found on the site today was actually, “ Built on what is believed to have been an older temple site” (James 133). This information connects to Kaholokai’s belief that his ancestors traced the yearly migrations of the humpback whales from this site (interview). Kaholokai states that “things shifted politically in the time of Kamehameha and the significance of the site changed dramatically” (interview).

Punchbowl Crater near Honolulu (which contains the National Cemetery of the Pacific) is a good example of a place that has important historic and religious significance encoded within its name. “Pu-o-waina” is the ancient Hawaiian name for Punchbowl Crater. The site was known for “placing human sacrifices” (Pukui 194). Another interpretation of the name is “hill of human sacrifices” (Kent 267). Kent’s spelling varies from Pukui’s and is written “Pu-o-waena.” There is an interesting case of irony found in the fact that the history of this site (as a cemetery)

pre-dates the modern “Cemetery of the Pacific.” This place name gives insight into ancient Hawaiian cultural practices, such as the act of practising human sacrifice.

A historical name that describes the lay of the land nearly 150 years ago can be found at the rural community of Puako. “Pua” is the Hawaiian word for flower or blossom (Wight 95) and “ko” refers to sugarcane (Kaholokai). Puako literally means “sugarcane blossom” (Pukui 191). According to Kaholokai, the vast area behind the Puako village (now a great thicket of mesquite trees) was once a series of sugarcane fields that were planted in the early to mid part of last century. The toponym “Puako” symbolises a time that history has nearly forgotten. Kaholokai also indicates that the original name of the area was “Paniau,” a name still used by local surfers for a surf break located at the southern end of Puako Beach Drive (interview). Paniau means “enclosed by current” according to Pukui (178).

Many toponyms that describe topography are easy to recognise. The Hawaiian prefix “hono” and “hana” usually refer to bays (Atlas 31). For example, Honolulu means, “calm bay”(Wight 21) or “protected bay”(Pukui 50). Wight contends the word “lulu” means “calm, peace or shelter” (58). This was a reference to the natural harbour that was later engineered into the U.S. military harbour known today as “Pearl Harbour.” Examples of hono and hana include Hanalei which means “crescent bay” (Atlas 31), Honolua which means “two harbours” (Pukui 49), and Honokahau which means “bay drawing dew” (49).

Hawaiian place names commonly preserve the memory of an event otherwise forgotten. On the lower slopes of Hualalai, the ancient Hawaiians rode sleds made of ti leaves down muddy courses. A “holua” is a Hawaiian sled course (James 85) and according to the Illustrated Hawaiian Dictionary, the term “holua” refers to the “ancient royal sport of sledding down grassy slopes, also the name of the sled.” The toponym “Holualoa” refers to the “long sled course” that existed in the area at one time (Pukui 48).

Another toponym that has reference to a historic Hawaiian event is “Wailupe.” Wailupe, on the island of Oahu, means “kite-water” (Kent 267). “Wai” is Hawaiian for water and “lupe” refers to the Hawaiian kite (Wight). The ancient Hawaiians made kites from forest materials and were skillful flyers (Kaholokai). Kite flying was allowed only at certain places and Wailupe was one of those special places (Pukui 225). The ancient sport of kite flying is called “ho’olele lupe” and means literally “to fly a kite” (Wight 59).

Many Hawaiian names are engulfed in legend, such as the name for the westernmost island of the main Hawaiian Islands, Lehua. Lehua refers to the flower of the native ohia tree. Legend tells that Pele’s younger sister, named “Hiiaka,” left an ohia lehua lei (flower wreath) on the island while travelling with Pele on their way to the Big Island (Pukui 131). The Island of Lehua is located west of Niihau and is nearly 300 acres. Another name of legendary origin is “Kalalea,” a sharp pointed mountain near Anahola on the island of Kauai. Legend says that Hulu, a supernatural bird, pecked a hole through the mountaintop below a jagged ridge (Kent

262). Kalalea is defined as “prominent” (Pukui 74). Other legends tell of great warriors who cast their spears at the hole as a test of skill (Kent 262).

The name of the Hawaii Island’s largest town is Hilo. Pukui lists the name as being derived from the name of a Polynesian navigator or the first night of the new moon (46). However, in the book titled Hilo legends, Reed tells another story of how Hilo got its name, and what the name means. Reed says that Hilo means “to twist” and comes from the time of Kamehameha. The legend, according to Reed, comes from an event that occurred near the mouth of the Wailuku River, when several of Kamehameha’s men made ropes of twisted ti leaves in order to hold the canoe in place. The men had been instructed to wait at the canoe for Kamehameha, but they grew concerned when he didn’t return on time. The men made ropes of ti to secure the canoe to the shore and went looking for their king. They found him unharmed and everyone returned to the canoe. The king acknowledged the men as being clever for twisting the ropes of ti and said, “From now on this place shall be called Hilo” (14). Wight lists both meanings as being accurate. He confirms that Hilo is “the first night of the Hawaiian moon calendar, the new moon,” and secondly means, “to twist” (19).

Hawaiian toponyms give insight into the poetic nature of the ancient Hawaiian language. Kent lists a number of phrases and clauses that are treated as poetic versions of place names. “Hawaiians seemed to find the use of such phrases as natural, even common talk” (Kent 267). Examples include “Ehuehu ko nalu o Kailua” which means “Kailua waves are majestic,

powerful and violent” (Kent 267). A reference to Hilo is “Inu-wai koli uli u o Hilo” which translates to “The dim, distant, water drinking sea breeze of Hilo” (Kent 268). In the Treasury of Hawaiian Words, there are numerous poetic references to natural phenomenon, such as the wind, rain or ocean surf, that describe specific places. References to the wind are most common. Examples include, “Ka makani maaa o Lahina,” referring to the famous sea breeze of Lahina Maui or “Ka ua nounou ili O Waimea” which means “The wind which blows the gails of Waimea” (Kent 269). Kaholokai says, “The structure of the Hawaiian language was very poetic. This can be understood through the ways that Hawaiians chanted, as well as the way that they used poetic references with the names of places” (interview).

Hawaiian place names have a unique sense of integrity. Pukui makes an interesting analogy pertaining to Hawaiian toponymy: “The important difference between place names in Hawaii and those on the United States Mainland is that in Hawaii about 86 percent of the names are in the language of the aboriginal population – a single language” (preface xi). Pukui points out that Hawaiian names, “Usually have understandable meanings, and the stories illustrating many of the place names are well known and appreciated” (preface xii).

Kaholokai reasons, “Hawaiian place names represent a culmination of meanings that are subject to many interpretations” (interview). Kaholokai feels that Hawaiian place names commonly change in significance and that it’s important to consider the many connotations when looking for a precise interpretation. He gives four main groups in which to categorize

Hawaiian toponyms: “physical descriptions of the land, history of events or legends, politically inspired names, and names that have spiritual aspects.” Kaholokai offers his own point of view with regard to Hawaiian toponymy: “Go to the place personally and make the connection for yourself. That’s the final stop” (interview).

*“Ua hala na kupuna, a he iki koli-uli-u wale no ko keia la, i na mea i keau i hope lilo, io
kikilo”*

*“The ancestors have passed on; today’s people see but dimly times long gone and far
behind” (Pukui, opening quote)*

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INTERVIEW PAPER

Interviewee: Kai Kaholokai holds a B.S. from the University of Hawaii in Archeology. Kaholokai has 8 years of field experience with the State of Hawaii. Kaholokai is presently a La' au Lapa'au practitioner.

The interview was conducted over the telephone on November 9, 1998.

The interview went very well. Kaholokai is a motivated intellectual and provided a vibrant, refreshing approach to the subject. Kaholokai made a number of historical connections between the Aboriginal peoples of Polynesia and the place names they gave to various locations.

Questions asked include:

- What do place names mean in terms of human behavior?
- What does the name Hawaii mean?
- Did the Hawaiians use many place names in their chants?
- Why are so many place names still in use?
- What's your opinion regarding place names in general?
- Did Hawaiians really fly kites in ancient times?
- Why was the temple in Kawaihae named Pu'u Kohola?
- Is it true that Puako means sugar cane?
- What does Kawaihae mean?
- Where did the Hawaiian people come from?

Quotes:

- "Hawaiian place names represent a culmination of meanings that are subject to many interpretations."
- "Go to the place personally and make the connection for yourself, that's the final stop."
- "Things shifted politically in the time of Kamehameha and the significance of the site changed dramatically."
- "As times changed, so did the spiritual and political connotations of the name."