

HĀLAU KŪKULU HAWAI'I

A Home that Builds Multitudes

He 'ōpū hālau.

“A house-like stomach.”

A heart as vast as a house, symbolizing kindness,
grace, and hospitality.

‘Ōlelo No‘eau No. 869 as translated by Mary Kawena Pukui

What does it mean for a memory or a vision of home to emerge from the most remote landmasses on Earth? From places where humans are not considered separate from nature, but are seen as a part of nature? What does home mean on a volcanic island as opposed to on a continent? Where do we return to in order to investigate the concept of home amid Oceanic cosmologies?

In Pae Āina Hawai'i (Hawaiian Islands), a *kauhale*, as defined by scholar, writer, and educator Mary Kawena Pukui, is a group of houses comprising a Hawaiian home, with each house serving a specific facet of domestic life. In the past, such homes would include a men's eating house, women's eating house, sleeping house, cook house, and canoe house. Unlike a Western home, which typically consolidates domestic life into a single enclosure, the *kauhale* presents a network of enclosed shelters specifically distributed across areas of land and familial settings. In the tropical climate of Hawai'i, the *kauhale*'s spatial organization is particularly idiosyncratic, because it blurs the distinctions between indoors and outdoors and between architecture and nature, inviting the question, Where does a home begin and end?

The epigraph at the beginning of this text is a traditional 'ōlelo no'eau, or poetic saying, that provides insight regarding the expansive concept of home in Hawai'i from a Native point of view, yielding knowledge about people, places, and behaviors passed down by Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians) over hundreds of years. An 'ōlelo no'eau such as this provides intergenerational guidance on complex ideas, offering clarity, guidance, reassurance, or cultural connection. Similar to how Pwo voyager and navigator Nainoa Thompson describes how the genius of the Native Hawaiian

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navigational star compass lies in its compacting of information together, 'ōlelo no'eau stack numerous interpretations (*makawalu*) and hidden meanings (*kaona*) together. This example in particular uses the words 'ōpū (stomach) and *hālau* (long house) as dual metaphors for the heart, kindness, grace, and hospitality. The saying could be interpreted as simply describing a hospitality so abundant that guests leave with bellies feeling as big as a house. But with 'ōlelo no'eau, the language embodies a layered unfolding of deeper related meaning.

The 'ōpū symbolizes a place of innate wisdom, a profound nexus where cognition meets sustenance. While Western pedagogy typically correlates emotions with the heart and thinking with the brain, in the Kānaka worldview, the abdomen is revered as the source of human emotion, instinct, and knowing, referred to as the *na'au* (intestines, bowels, guts; mind, heart, affections). To “follow your na'au (gut-brain)” epitomizes acting with profound perception integrated with your source of being. The *piko* (navel) is the source of connection to one's elders and ancestors through one's umbilical cord. The diaphragm is the source of *hā* (breath of life). The 'ōpū is the source of nourishment with 'ai (to eat). Thinking of the home as 'ōpū evokes the idea of na'au and expands our understanding of home beyond physical shelter. Home thus encapsulates a source of deep connection, reciprocity, and nourishment.

The *hālau* represents a microcosm of a larger cosmology that transcends its physicality, echoing tradition, oral history, and ancestral wisdom that traverse generations. As mentioned above, *hā* means breath, and *lau* signifies multitude; the *hālau* is a place of meeting and learning, as for the instruction of hula and the making of a *wa'a* (canoe). Hula is not just a dance, but an environmental science in which performers do not just enact stories of the elements, they become them. The interior of the *hālau* thus

transforms into a space where the elements manifest, blurring concepts of interior and exterior, human and nature. The structural components of the *hālau* as architecture, and similarly the construction of the *wa'a*, draw direct parallels with the human body and diagram its relationships. Every notch, every lashed joint in its structure is a metaphor for social relations. As one structural

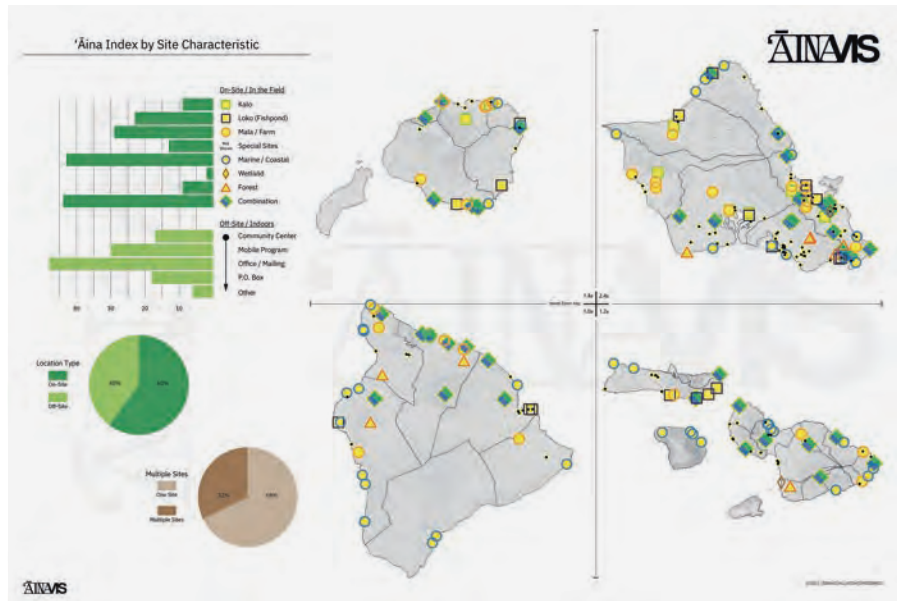


Hula and wa'a practitioners, led by the Āina organization HŌĀ, conducting the seasonal Wehe Kū ceremony that marks the end of the Makahiki season (the time of Lono) and the moving into Kau (summer). The ceremonies invoke the need to *kū*, to rise, face our challenges, to plant intentions, and *ku mai*, raise them up.

element supports another, one individual leans on another—a materialization of social and genealogical relationships.

A century of United States imperialism and militarization in Hawai‘i has interrupted Kānaka relationships with home, resulting in ecological devastation, racial injustices, and diaspora. “He ‘ōpū hālau” counters the idea of home in the Western context of land as a mere asset, a real estate investment, a property. Rather, the Kānaka relationship with land, or *‘Āina*, is familial, not transactional. *‘Āina*, meaning “that which feeds,” is not just a term for land where one resides, but refers to a symbiosis between humans and their environment. This familial relationship with *‘Āina* is central to Kānaka cosmology. At the forefront of perpetuating this relationship in Hawai‘i are on-the-ground community and cultural groups called *‘Āina* organizations.

These *‘Āina* Hui or *‘Āina* Orgs, as they are called, *hui* (unite) together and champion the rejuvenation of home as *‘Āina* through the restoration and recovery of Native food systems and cultural sites that include *loko i‘a* (fishponds), *lo‘i kalo* (taro fields), *mala* (gardens), and *heiau* (sites of ceremony and observation) previously neglected or damaged by the wrongful US occupation of Hawai‘i. *‘Āina* organizations actively champion Indigenous maintenance practices, construction techniques, Native materials, and cultural protocols. They sustain local communities through food sovereignty initiatives and place-based educational programs that enable intergenerational continuity. They protect against unsustainable land development, desecration of burial and sacred sites, and other ongoing environmental disruptions by commercial tourism and military occupation.



‘Āina Orgs encompass diverse features important for ecological biocultural stewardship in Hawai‘i, including taro fields, fishponds, gardens/farms, sacred sites, combinations of ecosystems, marine/coastal areas, wetlands, and forests, each fostering sustainability, cultural heritage, biodiversity, and community engagement.

‘Āina Orgs, understood as spaces of cultural and political resurgence, face many challenges to increasing their scale and capacity. The imposed US land-use zoning and building codes inherently prioritize Western methods of design, construction, and maintenance. Native practitioners of built environments, like architects and planners, particularly those engaged with *‘Āina*-centric projects, frequently encounter marginalization and a lack of support or recognition. This hinders *‘Āina* Orgs’ access to experts in the built environment who are deeply committed to honoring ancestral ties and embodying principles of radical decolonization in their work with the land. Too often, *‘Āina* Orgs are swayed to accept pro bono services from design firms who contribute to the militarization of the design professions or whose projects contribute to the desecration of Native ecosystems, burial sites, and sacred spaces that Kānaka seek to protect. Such a paradox highlights a critical issue: the need to support *‘Āina* work beyond token gestures motivated by tax benefits or marketing incentives. True advocacy and allyship require a concerted effort to align the design professions with the values and visions of *‘Āina* restoration and sovereignty. Through this alignment, *‘Āina* Orgs



Expert *hale* builder Nalani Tukuafu demonstrates the system of notching and lashing used in the construction of traditional hale structures, which are held together only with lashing. In this image, a traditional hale currently under construction at Kaunani in Keaukaha, Hilo, is protected from the elements with a tarp before thatching.

can rely on design to hybridize contemporary technologies with traditional knowledge, opening a new channel for Kānaka to reassert cultural identity through innovation while demonstrating the importance of ancient wisdom for a future deeply rooted in the past.

One example that architecture can follow is that of the oceanic voyaging canoes, such as the *Hōkūle‘a*, built in 1975, that fused traditional lashing and construction methods of a double-hulled canoe typology with contemporary materials like plywood, fiberglass, and resin to enhance its safety and performance without compromising the integrity of its traditional design. Applying this process to the built environment by embracing Indigenous techniques like canoe lashing adapted for contemporary architectural systems, such as trusses, can reestablish Indigenous perspectives as the foundation of architecture. This would help ensure that buildings and infrastructure honor and sustain the very essence of our island home. *‘Āina* Orgs can use architecture to demonstrate deep systems of change and commitment to reviving, promoting, and safeguarding Hawai‘i as home for Kānaka. By putting the needs of *‘Āina* and Kānaka at the forefront of design, we can cultivate a sense of home that is more equitable, just,

and regenerative, reinstating Native participation in the process of creating home within our built environment.

At stake are both the material conditions of vulnerable communities as well as the cosmological relationships between home and 'Āina. For Kānaka who are committed to remain in Hawai'i or who wish to return home, recovering 'Āina is an act of resistance, cultural promotion, and ecological regeneration. The saying "he 'ōpū hālau", a house-like stomach, remembers a vision of home as a place of sustenance, a gut-brain, a body, a place of knowledge, an ancestor, a network, a constellation, a place of innovation and excellence. Thus home is not inert or passive; it is an active participant in a dynamic reciprocity that imbues the soil, sea, and sky with reverence, safeguarding ancestral bonds with 'Āina through generations. Home is a commitment to a way of life that respects a complex web of sustenance specific to its place—we care for 'Āina, who cares for us—an enduring ceremony of giving more than one takes and leaving a place better than when one arrived there. Hawai'i is a place that demonstrates a symbiotic and sacred duty to protect and grow a concept of home that is as vast as 'Āina.



A contemporary hale takes shape in Hāmākua, Hawai'i. Designed and built by a *hālau* (school) of architects, cultural bearers, and traditional hale builders organized by After Oceanic Built Environments Lab and Leong Leong (Sean Connelly and Dominic Leong) in collaboration with Jojo Henderson and Nalani Tukuafu, hosted by HŌĀ (Lanakila Mangauil and Honi Pahi'ō).