



On Moloka'i, Hawaiian Culture is Not Just Preserved – It's Everything

In terms of native culture, every Hawaiian island is rightfully proud of its past. The Big Island of Hawai'i, for example, was home to the great war chiefs, particularly Kamehameha. O'ahu, of course, was where the chiefs established the capital of their kingdom. Maui and Kaua'i have their own histories, evidenced in archeological sites and traditions. But Moloka'i is distinct. Its Hawaiian soul is not only a thing of the past but also very much of the present.

Consider that Moloka'i is the only island in which native Hawaiians constitute the majority of the population. Add to that the fact that Moloka'i is almost completely rural, which means that many islanders still predominately practice traditional livelihoods such as farming, fishing and hunting.

As you drive around the island, you see evidence of subsistence living – ramshackle unpainted houses, boats in the yards, fishnets hanging from the trees, chickens running loose. In some parts of the world, sights like these are taken as images of poverty. Here, though, they are signs of freedom and continuity – signs that native culture is not so much “preserved” as it is simply lived. Hawaiian-ness isn't saved for special displays; it permeates everyday life.

Take Moloka'i's Ka Hula Piko Festival, for example. Visitors are welcome here, but this is very much an event by and for the Hawaiians. It takes place every third weekend of May, on Thursday and Saturday, beginning with educational lectures and culminating in a ho'olaule'a, a day of celebration. The main event is held at Pāpōhaku Beach Park, an all-day party featuring dancers and musicians from all over the state performing in styles ranging from ancient to rocking, amplified contemporary.

What's remarkable about Ka Hula Piko is that it's not a “visitor attraction” or a “hula show.” It's a free-of-charge renewal gathering by Hawaiians, for Hawaiians. The same holds true for the island's Festivals of Aloha festivities in October or the traditional Makahiki events each winter. Guests, fine – but that's not the point.

For another example, look at Moloka'i's ancient fishponds, called loko i'a. The ancestors created 26 of these massive stone aquaculture pens that ornament the entire south shore. Collectively, this is one of the most amazing archeological sites in the islands. Contemporary Molokaians have undertaken the enormous challenge of repairing and restoring these old structures, partly out of respect for them and partly in hopes of putting them back in service to the island economy. This effort has inspired similar projects on other islands, where the Molokaians are regarded as experts and consultants.

There's a history to Moloka'i's uniquely contemporary Hawaiian spirit. Part of this history reaches back to 1920, when the territorial government passed the Hawaiian Homestead Act. The bill put displaced native people back in control of their ancestral lands, primarily here. Not only that, a lot of this homestead land is coastal. Moloka'i will never have its shorelines sealed off by crowds of luxury developments. The size and location of the native population has a profound effect on the look of the island and the tenor of the visitor's experience.

But this independent history goes back much farther than 1920, back to the times of legend. According to one authoritative native history, "We were a sacred line, here from the beginning of time." Molokaianians think of themselves as maoli, the true natives. When the first great war chiefs began their bloody campaigns to conquer the islands (theoretically, five or six hundred years ago), Moloka'i resisted.

Here's the story: When the invaders came, they found the people of Moloka'i standing on the shoreline, waiting for them. "They stood there as a silent army. No fist was raised. When the warriors began to beach their boats, the chanting began. It began small and became a mighty roar. The warriors threw their spears, but they fell short of hitting anyone. Men trying to come onto the beach were falling back into the surf choking..."

Calling the island Moloka'i pule o'o – powerful prayer – the warriors chose to assimilate its wisdom rather than slaughter its people. Moloka'i was always renowned for its powerful shamans and wise prophets.

In their wisdom, today's Molokaianians are trying to fend off another invasion – the force that most of us call modern life. Life on Moloka'i is so non-commercial that visitors at first might wonder, "Where's the Hawaiian stuff?" the answer is: it's everywhere. Impromptu performances at Kaunakakai's Saturday street market. A group of men standing out on the reef hauling a net together. Young girls dancing during the dinner hour at the local hotel. The baggage handlers playing 'ukulele in the lull between planes. It's normal life.

If you want to feel hopeful about the struggles of an aboriginal people in the face of escalating global change, go to Moloka'i. If you want to get past the performance barrier, and feel what it's like to live and be Hawaiian day-to-day, this is the heartland.