

## LIVING WITHOUT KULEANA

*John Laimana*

I once read an article that questioned the logic behind the reinternment of iwi and other burial objects. The writer asked: Why would anyone want to place such valuable objects in some dark, damp, unsecured, and unknown cave? Would it not be better to preserve such objects in a museum or university where they will be safe and protected so future generations can enjoy them? This story attempts to answer those questions by discussing what it means to live with and without kuleana.

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*We flew in early that morning, rented a car, and headed out. This was the first reunion for my father's side of the family and it was to be held in Ka'ū—the ancestral home of the Laimana 'ohana.<sup>1</sup> Yet strangely, there are no Laimanas living in Ka'ū today. However, our extended family is still there. Our Ka'ū 'ohana had prepared a 112-page genealogy book complete with genealogical charts, mele, and old pictures of Punalu'u, Nīnole, and Hīlea. An itinerary of events for the three days was also planned and ready for us. We were scheduled to visit the actual places where my father and the 'ohana had lived. There was one place I was very interested in visiting: the family burial cave.*

For the past four years, I had been working on my father's genealogy. It was not an easy task, information was very hard to come by, yet I was compelled to research it almost to the point of obsession. I spent every spare hour I could squeeze out of my already busy schedule to visit archives, family history libraries, and the Bureau of Conveyance. I also interviewed family members, often traveling to different islands. I spent a lot of time reading volumes of lists, letters, directories, indexes, and court cases.

In our immediate family, my sister Alyson is our unofficially designated family genealogist. She took an early personal interest in genealogy and has been researching for many years, before I was recruited into genealogical research. My recruitment

was unique for me, but not unusual for those called to do the work. One night I had a dream and saw a Hawaiian woman sitting in a rattan-style queen's chair beckoning to me with her hand. Although I didn't see myself actually speaking, the thought that seemed to be echoing in my mind was, "I want to learn about our family line." This Hawaiian woman whom I had never seen before—yet her warm smile told me she knew exactly who I was—pointed to a room on her left and without verbalizing any words told me, "If you want to learn about the family, go into the room." I went into the room. Seated at a long koa table were very fierce-looking ancient Hawaiian

men, and they did not look happy. However, they began to communicate names to me in Hawaiian. At the time, I did not speak Hawaiian and even though I tried very hard, I could not remember the full names they gave me. The next morning I called my sister and asked her, "How are you doing on Dad's genealogy?" She replied, "Nothing, I hit a block...I can't find anything on Dad's side of the family, at least not here on Maui, but there must be something on O'ahu. Why are you

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asking?” I told her about the dream I had the night before and she laughed. She said, “Well, it’s about time I got help! And you have been selected to help do the work.” I protested with a justifiable very busy schedule. She ignored my excuses and told me that our granduncle, who was a great genealogist on Maui, had told her to work on our father’s genealogy. However, she was unable to find any useful information and soon came to the conclusion that if there was any information it was not on Maui. She said, “This is why the dream came to you.” It was now my kuleana, time for me to step up to the plate, and start researching.

From that time, I began to research my father’s side of the family. Three years of research quickly passed, and then I learned that my father’s side of the family, who lived in Ka’ū, had planned a reunion in Ka’ū. The timing was perfect, and I made plans to attend with my family. My sister Alyson also made plans to attend with her husband. When my father had moved to Honolulu and got married, he did not take us back to Ka’ū to meet the ‘ohana. In fact, I can remember only one time that we went there, and it was a very brief visit. This was going to be an exciting time for us, to meet the Ka’ū ‘ohana. But my focus was also on the family burial cave.

I had first learned about Hawaiian burial caves when I attended Wai’alae Elementary School as a third grader. My part-Hawaiian teacher Mrs. Crawford had read a story of how ancient Hawaiians buried their dead in secret, hard-to-find, well-hidden caves. I was fascinated. That evening I began to tell my mother about ancient Hawaiian burial caves. My father overheard our conversation and casually remarked, “Our family has a burial cave.” I asked him, “Did you actually see it?” “Yeah,” he replied. I asked, “Where is it?” “It’s in Ka’ū on the Big Island,” he answered. I asked, “What was the cave like?” He began to describe the cave in great detail. He described a very large boulder that blocked the entrance. His uncle was the only person in the family who was strong and big enough to move that large boulder.

Everyone called Dad’s uncle “Big Boy,” and he was known for his great strength throughout Kona and Ka’ū. My father tells of watching his uncle change a tire on the car all by himself, without the use of a jack. Uncle Big Boy would lift the car with his bare hands, squat, and place the car on his knees. The spare tire and tools were already placed within easy reach. He would then remove the flat tire, replace it with the spare, and then place the car back on the ground. Later Uncle Big Boy would just lift the car and let my father or one of his brothers change the tire.

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At the cave site my dad remembers watching Uncle Big Boy bear-hug the large boulder with his arms, his hands barely reaching each side of the boulder. Then with all his strength he would rock and waddle the large boulder away from the entrance. My dad was told by his mother that through all the generations there was always one person in the family who was big and strong enough to move that large boulder. Unfortunately, what my grandmother didn't know at the time was that her brother Big Boy Kaluna would be the last.

Outside, next to the entrance of the cave was a platform made of stones. The coffin was placed on this platform and a pule offered, then the large boulder was removed.

When my dad walked inside the cave, he said the ceiling was high enough to stand upright. Near the entrance of the cave wooden coffins were neatly stacked. As you looked in toward the back of the cave you could see where modern wooden coffins ended and where the iwi wrapped in kapa began. It was like a kind of historical timeline. He noticed that the cave was almost full, with room for only a few more coffins near the entrance. There were pōhaku ku'i 'ai, 'umeke, lauhala mats, and other personal possessions, all buried with aloha. I was eight years old when I first heard the story of our 'ohana burial cave and I was fascinated, intrigued, and I wondered if one day I would be able to see this cave with my own eyes.

I was eight years old when I first heard the story of our 'ohana burial cave and I was fascinated.

The road to the cave led past a pond that has since been filled in. It was a freshwater pond fed by underground springs. It was very picturesque and even graced the front cover of a German travel magazine. The pond was well known to my father because their house was right next to it. In fact, theirs was the only house near the pond; they had no neighbors. The main road that led to the beach came down from Pāhala through Punalu'u, the neighboring ahupua'a. The water was fresh and ice cold, making it a favorite swimming place for the 'ohana and the people who lived in Ninole and Punalu'u. It was also an ideal habitat for 'ama'ama, or what the haole call "mullet."

My father remembers catching, from that pond, 'ama'ama that sometimes were so big the tails would stick out of a 50-pound rice bag in which they carried their catch. However, when 'ama'ama grow this big, Hawaiians no longer call it 'ama'ama—

they call it ‘anae. Once, when my father shared this fact with his fellow coworkers at Pearl Harbor, they all laughed at him, telling him it was just a big fish story. Everyone knows that mullet don’t get that big! Really.

His kupuna kāne, William Kaiako Kaluna, told him that an underground stream fed the pond. It traveled under the lava field from far inland, and during the time of the ali’i at a certain place about 10 miles inland there was a tunnel that led to a cavern where the underground stream passed through. It was there that you could easily catch these huge fish. This place was kapu to the maka’āinana and reserved only for the ali’i. The ali’i could get fresh ‘anae almost anytime they felt like it. It was the first “fish on command” or “fast-food service” in the Hawaiian Islands.

In 1941 my father, age 13, moved with his family from Honolulu to Nīnole, Ka’ū, on the Big Island of Hawai’i. They moved in with their maternal kupuna kāne. It was a simple small house. Today, people might call it a shack, but this small house was home to his grandfather, his grandfather’s good Filipino friend Philemon, and now to his mother, his brothers Joseph, Paul, Francis, Robert, David, Albert, William, and his sister Irene.

Philemon had come to Hawai’i to work on the plantation with the intention of earning enough money to return home and live a comfortable life. That was the dream promised to all Filipinos who were enticed to leave their homeland to work on the sugar plantations in Hawai’i. However, it was a dream that many would never realize. When many of the native Filipinos completed their contracts with the sugar plantations, they often found they could not get passage on a ship to take them home to their native land in the Philippines. The ships sailing to the Philippines were consistently delayed, postponed, or canceled, leaving these men stranded in Hilo. Meanwhile, they still had to pay for some place to sleep, for food, and for entertainment. There were all sorts of things to entice these men to spend their money on, especially gambling and prostitution. Eventually, their money would run out, and many were forced to return to the plantations to sign new contracts and extend their stay. Philemon was one of those workers. Fortunately, he met my dad’s grandfather, and they became good friends. He never got to go home to the Philippines, but he never had to go back to the plantation either. He ended up living in Ninole for the rest of his life and in the process became a part of our ‘ohana. When Philemon died he was buried in the family cave.

My father was the second eldest, yet the kuleana of taking care of his younger brothers and sister fell to him. When they lived in Honolulu his mother, a single parent, worked to support the family. She worked hard, long hours to make ends meet, but often they did not. My father, who was 11 years old at the time, tried to make up the difference by shining shoes, diving for coins, selling newspapers, flowers, boiled peanuts, and so forth, trying to earn enough money to put food on the table for dinner that night and hopefully for school lunch the next day for his brothers and sister. He worked the docks, bars, and nightclubs, to get the money he needed for his family.

His workday began immediately after school. He would grab his shoeshine box and look for customers. He was probably one of the first shoeshine boys ever to extend credit to his customers. If he saw they needed a shine, he would ask if they wanted a shine, and if they told him they didn't have money, he would tell them he would shine their shoes anyway and they could pay him later. When it was payday my father would make sure he was available and that he had at least one of his younger brothers with him, because his customers would often pay their bill and treat my father and whoever was with him to dinner or lunch. They would tell him, "Boy, come eat. Order anything you want." These Hawaiian stevedores were men who worked hard for their money and learned to survive in the new capitalist society, but men who still lived with kuleana.

Whenever he made his first 25 cents for the day, my father would give the money to his younger brother Paul, who would run home and give it to his younger sister Irene. She would then go to the market to buy a squash and some dried shrimp and make soup. That was what they ate for dinner most nights while their mother worked.

The law, like now, did not allow underage children to work in the bars or clubs. Yet the people in these clubs and bars were the people who had money. My father was able to work these bars and clubs by making friends with the waitresses and their customers, who would help hide him whenever the cops came around. Sometimes he and his brothers would work late, beyond the 10 p.m. curfew. The cops positioned themselves to catch these young curfew breakers, so my dad and his brothers often had to take alternative routes through back alleys and side streets to get home without being caught. They were not always successful. Soon welfare services put them on the radar and began to check up on them. Although

they were attending school, they were caught breaking curfew, which meant they were not being properly supervised. My father believed that was probably the real reason they moved to Nīnole. It was move or welfare services would have taken the boys away from their mother.

Moving from Honolulu to Nīnole must have been a huge paradigm shift for Dad. On O‘ahu they lived in an overcrowded apartment building in the heart of Honolulu near Vineyard Boulevard. Honolulu was crowded with people, buildings, cars, telephone poles, and the noise of a busy crowded city. Surviving in a city requires one thing: money. However, in Nīnole, you didn’t need money to survive, you needed knowledge and skill. Your nearest neighbor was almost a mile away. There were no buildings, no cars, no telephone poles, no telephones, and no noise. His grandfather, kupuna kāne Kaiako, was a lawai‘a, then a paniolo, a māka‘i, and finally back to a lawai‘a. He had come full circle, and in the golden age of his life chose to live in the traditional way, or what we call today, “living off the land.” There was no shortage of food in Nīnole, but my father and his brothers had to learn and acquire new skills and knowledge to survive in this new environment. They had to learn how to fish, hunt, grow taro, and gather necessities. His kupuna kāne would be the perfect teacher for them.

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Kupuna Kaiako was 66 years old when his daughter and his mo‘opuna came to live with him in Nīnole. It must have caused a major change in kupuna Kaiako’s lifestyle, but I think it was a happy one. My father told me he spent a lot of time with his kupuna kāne learning how to fish, hunt, plant, and gather—he remembers it as one of the best times of his childhood.

A year after they arrived in Nīnole, my father’s younger brother David got sick. It was just a simple cold at first, then it progressed to pneumonia. He died on April 5, 1942. This experience would haunt my father for the rest of his life. Whenever any of us would get sick he would become extremely concerned. His mind went “code red,” and he often stayed up late and walked the floor carrying us until we fell asleep. If we got up coughing, he got up and made sure we were okay before he went back to sleep. Even with the continued interruptions of sleep throughout the night, he went to work the next morning. As long as one of us was sick, this would go on night after night—and there were seven of us.

Strangely, it would not be until the family reunion in Ka'ū in 1994 that I would learn that Uncle David was actually buried in the cave and that this was possibly the reason Dad decided he was too busy to attend this reunion. Later, when I asked Dad about it, he confirmed my hunch and began to share with me for the first time the story of his brother's death.

It was strange to listen to my father tell the story of his brother David. He still harbored a sense of guilt for his brother's untimely death. "He had caught a cold... it was getting worse. David loved to swim in the pond...I told him to stay in the house until he got better, but he was always sneaking out...sometimes out the window...or when I wasn't home...and go swim in the pond. He said he swam because he was hot (fever)...he was getting worse and worse...he wouldn't stop swimming. One day I came home, I caught him swimming again. I was really angry...I sent him in the house and yelled at him, if you don't stop swimming you're going to die."

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Those were my father's last words to his 10-year-old brother. During the night David died. Both of us knew his brother's death was not his fault, yet for my father his brother David was his kuleana. It became clear to me why my father was able to recall all the specific details of the burial cave. He was there because they were burying his brother.

*Continuing our hike to the cave, we headed up the hill along the old government road. At the top of the hill the road leveled off, and about 30 yards ahead of us was the remnants of a small rock wall enclosure. My father had told me this is where the old schoolhouse was, and that the rock wall enclosure was our sign to start looking for the 'ili'ili stones that marked the beginning of the path to the cave.*

It must have been a very small schoolhouse, because the rock wall enclosure wasn't that big. But it did have a spectacular view of Ninole pond, Punalu'u beach, and ma uka. The schoolhouse was built during the days of the monarchy, when Kauikeaouli Kamehameha III had made education of the people his highest priority. In the early years of the Kingdom a mandate was proclaimed that all people of the Kingdom should learn how to read and write. So teachers were schooled, trained, and quickly sent out to all areas and ahupua'a to teach. By 1832, there were over 900 schools that were staffed mostly by Hawaiian teachers instructing in the Hawaiian



language (Manulani Aluli Meyer, *Ho'oulu—Our Time of Becoming: Hawaiian Epistemology and Early Writings*, Honolulu, 2003). They taught both children and adults—whoever wanted to learn—and many did. Some of the teachers were only 14 years old when they were sent to teach reading and writing in these government schools. The rock wall is all that is left of the original government school in Ninole.

The literacy campaign of Kamehameha III became one of the most successful literacy campaigns ever recorded. In a space of 50 years, Hawai'i was able to achieve one of the highest literacy rates per capita in the world, a literacy rate that surpassed the literacy rate in the United States and was second only to Scotland, which had the highest literacy rate per capita in the world. The Kingdom of Hawai'i achieved in 50 years what other countries, including the United States, had not achieved in 200 years. It was an amazing achievement that would become targeted and then dismantled by a new self-proclaimed, self-appointed, self-serving, illegal government comprised mostly of sons of the first missionaries to arrive in Hawai'i. Their parents had come to preach the gospel and save the native savages from eternal damnation. In 1897, this new self-proclaimed, illegal government—supported by the United States and absent of any Native Hawaiian support or representation—issued a proclamation that targeted and banned Hawaiian from being taught and used in any government-run school. This new haole government had a new set of objectives and saw Hawaiian literacy as a threat rather than a blessing. Only English could be used in the schools. If you continued to teach in Hawaiian, you would not be paid. As my father tells it, the teachers in Ninole had refused to teach in English and continued to teach in Hawaiian. As promised, they were never paid by the haole government. These teachers in Ninole continued to teach in Hawaiian and worked for as long as they could. Eventually the school was closed.

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Kupuna kāne Kaiako was educated in the original educational system of the Kingdom of Hawai'i that was set up by Kamehameha III. More than 30 years after the Hawaiian language was banned, Kupuna Kaiako continued to speak Hawaiian to his mo'opuna, even if they didn't understand what he was saying.

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He did not accept the haole government's explanation for the banning of the Hawaiian language and mandating English only in the schools. He did not believe the government school officials, and their new teachers, when they told him that speaking Hawaiian to his mo'opuna would confuse them and hinder their ability to learn good English. He was a product of a remarkable Hawaiian educational achievement that has yet to be duplicated anywhere else in the world. He refused to believe what we now know was a bold-faced lie. The proclamation had nothing to do with better education. It served only to preserve and promote the new haole government and their private interests. Speaking Hawaiian to his mo'opuna was a sign of resistance—a protest—and although neither my father nor his brothers could understand 'ōlelo Hawai'i, their grandpa continued to speak 'ōlelo Hawai'i to them. Trying to please their grandfather, they would listen and pretend they understood what he was saying. When he paused, they would nod in the affirmative and reply with “‘ae.” But if grandpa looked surprised or jerked his head in their direction, they would quickly change their answer to 'a'ole and nod their head in the negative.

One day my father suffered a severe laceration on his foot. It bled profusely and should have required stitches, but being poor and living far from a trained professional “doctor,” his cousin Pele quickly picked some hibiscus buds, chewed them quickly, then placed the wad directly on the cut and held it there. She then picked up my father and carried him all the way home. Kupuna Kaiako then took over and continued to apply other herbal treatments until the cut healed. A few days later my father returned to school, his cut completely healed without any stitches. The teacher reported this to the principal, who then asked my father what was done and how did it heal so quickly. He told the principal what his kupuna kāne did. The principal then told my father they would have to speak with his grandfather. They were not interested in the herbs used to heal the laceration so quickly; instead, they were appalled that his grandfather had used kahuna medicine, backsliding to the superstitious “heathen” ways of the older natives. My father was told that if he were to have another emergency like this in the future, he was to seek out a “real” doctor.

That afternoon, when my father returned home from school he saw the principal and his teacher being chased by his kupuna kāne, who brandished a 2' x 4', yelling at them to "Get the hell out of here!" Grandpa was sending a message in English, and a message that would not be misunderstood by the haole principal and teacher. No one, not even the principal, was going to come to *his* home and tell *him* not to use Hawaiian medicine to heal his 'ohana. Hawaiian herbs and plants are what he grew up with. Plants he had intimate knowledge of and knew how to administer. Plants he knew could heal and mālama his mo'opuna.

It was no secret that Kupuna Kaiako did not like the new government. This was not his government, it was the haole government. Yet at the same time he was huhū with the ali'i because they had listened to their haole advisors in the first place! I think if Kupuna Kaiako were alive today, he would be labeled an activist, definitely a radical, possibly militant, and maybe even a...terrorist!

On my maternal side of the family, my mother's parents leased three lo'i in Kāne'ohē. Once or twice a month our family would travel over the pali to Ha'ikū where we would spend the whole day. This was the late 1950s, and I was not even going to school yet. We were too small to help in the taro patch, so we played in the stream and in the 'auwai. One day we were playing "chase master." I tried to run across a wet wooden plank that served as a bridge over the 'auwai. I slipped and fell head first into the 'auwai, striking my head on a rock. I must have screamed or something because it wasn't long before my granduncle reached me and lifted me up, placing me on the embankment. I must have looked like a mess. He scooped up the clear freshwater to wash the blood from my forehead to examine the wound. It was a big gash about an inch long. Next he looked around the embankment and started to grab some leaves. He rubbed them together between his hands until a greenish liquid appeared. Then he rolled the mixture into a wad and placed it directly onto the wound. The accident brought the day to an immediate end, and while everyone gathered the tools and prepared to leave, my granduncle began to search along the 'auwai for more plants. He collected a large handful of leaves, and for the next couple of days he tended to my

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cut with what he had collected at the lo'i. About a week later it healed completely without a scar. Today, I often think of how much knowledge died with our kūpuna because Western culture rejected the thought that simple natives could possess knowledge that could be superior to theirs.

*As we passed the old schoolhouse remnants on our way to the burial cave, we looked down the old government road until we could see the 'ili'ili stones that marked the beginning of the trail. It might seem strange that a trail leading to a secret family burial cave would be thus marked; however, without a marker the path would be very difficult to find. If a stranger saw the 'ili'ili stones he would not recognize their significance. To the stranger they were just 'ili'ili stones, no different from the millions of 'ili'ili stones spread all over the old government road. The 'ili'ili stones were the perfect road sign for those who knew their kaona or true meaning. These stones were a perfect natural element in a natural environment, achieving the perfect camouflage, right out in plain sight, a neon sign to the 'ohana yet invisible to the stranger. Before we headed on the path I stopped and turned around to take a look at the coastline toward Punalu'u. It was a beautiful sight. I imagined what it must have been like when canoes lined the beach and fishing was the 'oihana of the area.*

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The view of the ocean reminded me of a story told to me by my father. One day he and Kupuna Kaiako were out in their canoe fishing. Kupuna Kaiako began to complain of all the manō in the area. "Nui nā manō! Tsa! Looks like the old woman forgot to feed her sharks again." The old woman's 'aumakua was the manō whom she faithfully fed every day, except on very rare occasions when she forgot.

One day after my father and Kupuna Kaiako had just laid their nets, a huge white shark swam up to the surface, right next to their canoe. Dad remembers that it was bigger than their canoe in both length and width. He was maka'u loa. This powerful creature swam so close to the canoe that my father could have touched it. His grandfather looked at the manō and then looked toward shore. "Pull up the nets. We have to go in...the old lady just died." Sure enough, when they got in and went to the home where the old lady lived, she had hala.

In the summer of 1968, my family spent three weeks camping on the Big Island. We began in Hilo and then we went to Harry K. Brown Park where we camped for a week. There was a brackish-water pond we swam in all day. From there

we traveled to Punalu‘u, Ka‘ū. At Punalu‘u my father began to show my mother where the different fish holes were and the exact locations where Uncle Big Boy would throw his very heavy net to catch ‘ama‘ama, manini, kala, and so forth.

He told my mother when the sea was rough and all the other fishermen went home to wait for a better day, that was when his Kupuna Kaiako, Uncle Big Boy, Philemon, and his brothers would go fishing. Uncle Big Boy considered it the best time to fish. When the water was rough you couldn’t see the fish because of all the turbulence in the water; however, the fish could not see you as well. All you had to know was where the fish liked to hang out. The holes could not be seen from the surface. Knowing the area well, Uncle Big Boy would throw his heavy net over the big bowl-like area where the fish liked to congregate. Nobody could throw Uncle Big Boy’s net because it was too big and too heavy.

The practice of sharing a bountiful catch was a deeply rooted tradition.

But the heavy weights were very important because they would cause the net to sink fast, even in rough water. After the net was thrown, if the water turned white, that was a positive sign that lots of fish were now in the net trying to find a way out. Then his Uncle Big Boy, Kupuna Kaiako, and Philemon would jump in to make sure there were no openings for the fish to escape along the bottom perimeter of the net. My father remembers jumping in once, but he was too young and too small to help, and the waves threw him back up on top of the reef. One throw of the net was usually more than enough for my father’s family, and they would share the rest of the catch with families nearby. The practice of sharing a bountiful catch was a deeply rooted tradition. To not share was to be stingy, which is not pono in Hawaiian culture. If you happened to be on the beach when a canoe came in and helped to pull the canoe out of the water, you would be given fish, usually all you could grab. That’s the way it was done in those days.

My mother remembers a time early in their marriage when I was about four years old, making it around 1957. She visited Punalu‘u with my father and his parents, her mother- and father-in-law. Her father-in-law, my dad’s stepfather, was also from Ka‘ū and lived in the Punalu‘u and Nīnole area. The day they went down to Punalu‘u, her mother-in-law took only a pot of cooked rice. My mother wondered what they were going to eat that day because they didn’t take anything else. They had no fishing poles, spears, or nets. When they arrived at the beach she helped her mother-in-law set up their little picnic area while my father and his stepfather left to go get some fish. My mother wondered how they would catch fish without

any fishing equipment. Thinking a joke was afoot, she played along. Twenty minutes later my father and his stepfather came back with handfuls of fish they had caught—and the fish were still alive. She was so amazed she made my father show her how they had caught them.

He led her down to a certain spot along the papa near the water's edge and waited for a wave. As it passed the spot, he threw a small rock into the water behind the wave. He then stepped into the water, reached down, and pulled out a fish right before her eyes. The only equipment needed was his bare hands, a small rock, and intimate knowledge. He explained that in that particular spot there is almost always a school of manini. The wave action makes the water murky and unclear so when a rock hits the water, the fish thinks it's a predator and immediately tries to hide. In this spot there is a small cavity in the papa where the fish try to hide, and it is in that cavity that they are easily trapped and caught.

*After finding the starting point of 'ili'ili stones we proceeded on the path to the burial cave. There was a clear blue sky, perfect for a day at the beach but not for hiking in a lava field. The path was not a nice smooth walking path you could clearly see. You still needed to negotiate obstacles, sometimes jumping over small crevices or rocks. It is not an easy*

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*hike that you would take small children on. This kind of lava field is what geologists call an 'a'ā lava flow. 'A'ā is a rugged, extremely irregular, jagged, treacherous lava flow. If you fall you could be seriously injured. One thing for sure, after hiking in an 'a'ā field, your shoes will look like hell and sometimes you will too. To hike even 100 yards takes about half an hour or more because in an 'a'ā lava field each step requires careful consideration and decisions that involve risk. Do I hop this rock to that rock, is that rock stable enough to hold me, or do I have to find another safer way? The process is sometimes slow and tedious. But, "better safe than sorry" is a good policy when hiking in an 'a'ā lava field.*

The first time I had followed the 'ili'ili stones was about three years earlier. An estimate and inspection for a roofing job had brought me to Ka'ū. I had flown into Hilo early that morning and was met at the airport by our Hilo office manager who then drove me out to Nā'ālehu, Ka'ū. Nā'ālehu is about 20 minutes by highway past Ninole and Punalu'u. After inspecting the project I had time to take a detour to Ninole. I wanted to visit the cave. I had never been to the cave, but I was given directions and was sure I could find it. My office manager volunteered to help me, which seemed okay with me, but as I learned later, it wasn't for them.

I quickly found the ‘ili‘ili stones that marked the beginning of the trail and proceeded to follow what was at first a nice, rather clear path. But soon the trail became difficult and confusing, and eventually I was wandering in a hot, inhospitable, even hostile landscape. I kind of knew where I had to go, but somehow, I just couldn’t get there and slowly I began to understand why—a stranger was with me.

We started on the trail with my Hilo office manager right behind me. It didn’t take long before I began to hit dead ends and extremely difficult obstacles, which caused us to retreat and try other routes. We seemed to be wandering almost aimlessly, and I could not find my way. My office manager asked me if I knew where I was going and I told him, “Well, I thought I knew the way, but obviously I don’t.” I didn’t want to be rude. He had only offered to help and I naively accepted, but I knew that his presence had presented a problem.

I kept wandering and walking, until finally my manager suggested that if I didn’t mind he would try looking in another area. I agreed, and he headed off. Relieved, I continued hiking in further and further. When I looked back, I could no longer see him and I thought, “Okay I’m alone now. Please take me to the cave.” I looked up and somehow knew I had gone too far. I began making my way back in a wide loop. Something told me I was getting closer, like a Geiger counter getting louder and louder as it got closer and closer to the source. After I had gone about 70 yards, I came to a ravine that was about 100 feet across. I wanted to cross the ravine, but the ravine was full of long, sharp, jagged, black lava rock that resembled a spiked hairdo, only much larger and more menacing. As I got as close to the edge of the ravine and looked across to the other ridge, I saw a flat platform of stones that was definitely manmade, and to the side of the platform was a large boulder—the large boulder that only Uncle Big Boy could move. Looking at my watch, I realized I didn’t have time to hike all the way around the ravine, so I took one long last look and began to make my way back to the old government road.

*So now three years later, I was following the ‘ili‘ili stones again, only this time I had a clear idea of where the cave is located, and this time I would get to touch the large boulder that blocked the entrance to the cave. This time something was different, very different. The stone platform was gone, replaced by a trail that led down into the ravine. I followed the trail around the entrance and down into the ravine and then saw the reason for this new trail. Someone had dug down the side, removing all the rocks and exposing a crack in the side wall of the cave. The crack was large enough for someone to climb in. And it looked like someone had.*

*I stood there staring. A sickening feeling came over me as I waited for my uncles to arrive with the rest of our entourage. For most of us, this would be our first time to actually see and touch our family burial cave. We knew we wouldn't be able to go in because no one would be able to move the large boulder blocking the entrance, but we were told there were cracks that allowed you to peek in. As my 'ohana arrived they all had the same shocked expression on their faces. My uncles' faces were first puzzled and then emotionless. They knew what happened, but they were not going to show it. They would have made great poker players. The only question on their faces was "How bad is it?"*

*I climbed up the side and let myself down into the cave. As I looked toward the back of the cave where the iwi were, I could see nothing. It was pitch black. I could see only what was right around me by the entrance. I asked my sister to hand me the Polaroid camera, and I snapped a couple of pictures with the flash toward the back of the cave. The pictures revealed that the entire back end of the cave had been emptied.*

*Someone had removed all the iwi that had been wrapped in kapa. All the old personal possessions that had been originally placed with the iwi were gone. The only things that remained in the cave were things that were considered modern, like the wood used to make the coffins, the skeletal remains that were in the coffins, and all the personal items that were buried with those in the coffins. They were not left intact but had been broken into, torn apart, and tossed toward the front of the cave so that the looters could have room to rob the cave of the iwi and check for artifacts in the coffins. Bones and boards lay scattered at my feet along with the contents of the coffins—a desecration by those who live without kuleana.*

**Bones and  
boards lay  
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feet along with  
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the coffins—  
a desecration.**

*The bones that were scattered among the boards probably came from the coffins. The bones were not valuable because they weren't old enough, too modern, too fresh. I moved a few boards at my feet and saw a human skull...probably Uncle Lani or Philemon. I looked down and picked up what were the remnants of a small shoe, the logo clearly visible: US Kids. The canvas portion of the shoe had rotted away. It was about a size six. I raised the shoe above my head toward the opening and stood up. As soon as it broke the outside of the cave wall, I heard one of my uncles say, "That's my brother David's shoe."*



*I looked down and saw something shiny. I reached down for it and raised it to the light for a better look. It was a pair of gold-colored wire-rimmed glasses that my uncle Albert identified as belonging to his Uncle Lani. There was a black cowboy hat that also belonged to Uncle Lani. Uncle Lani was a brother of Uncle Big Boy's wife.*

*I found a comb and a tube of Brylcreem ("a little dab'll do ya!"), which may have belonged to Philemon. It is a very natural thing to do, to bury with the deceased items that were used and prized by them. In Kāne'ohe, a trucker was buried with his motorcycle. Maybe 1,000 years from now, his motorcycle will become a valuable artifact and people will dig him up. We put everything back in and then I climbed out.*

*I could not see the anger in my uncle's face but we all knew it was there, just like it was in mine. The Laimana men don't cry, at least not in public. They are very "kāne." Only women cry, and they did. We offered pule before we left and tried to seal the breach as best as we could, but none of us are an Uncle Big Boy, and the rocks we placed can be moved by anyone. However, the huge boulder that Uncle Big Boy placed to block the cave entrance continues to do its job, blocking the original entrance.*

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## CONCLUSION

A burial cave is like a mausoleum, cemetery, or memorial park, yet people fail to connect the dots. To them it is about money, science, or just plain nīe. To them, the bones are artifacts, objects to be studied, dissected, analyzed, categorized, stored in boxes for future reference, not belonging to someone who loved and was loved. I think it would be far more interesting to dig up George Washington and study exactly what was the real cause of his death, diseases that he might have suffered from, and what kind of nutritional deficiencies he may have endured during his life. Such a notion would cause an uproar that would be heard for years. This is the double standard these people live, because they live without kuleana.

We never found out who or what organization was responsible for the theft and desecration of our family burial cave, and this story was not written for that purpose. I have personally revisited the site several times since the time of our family reunion. Incredibly, the breach had been reopened and left open each time I visited. I half suspect that in the near future the 'ili'ili stones that mark the path to the cave will be accompanied with a Hawai'i Visitor's Bureau sign, captioned with "A Real Ancient Hawaiian Burial Cave—check it out!"

The cave now  
exists without  
purpose, without  
kuleana.

If you go to Ninole today, the pond that my father and his brothers swam in, the pond that was so beautiful that it graced the cover of a German travel magazine, the pond where you caught mullets so big their tails stuck out of a 50-pound rice bag, the pond that those who grew up in Ninole swam in, has been filled in. A golf course parking lot now sits where Kupuna Kaiako's small house once stood. There are none of the freshwater springs my father and his brothers used to draw water from. It is barren, rocky, and desolate, leaving no hint that it formerly was an oasis.

In the neighboring ahupua'a of Punalu'u there are no longer any canoes that go out fishing. No one really knows where all the fishing holes are or how to catch fish with one's bare hands and a small stone. The only thing you can count on seeing in Punalu'u these days is a lot of tourists, vendors, cars, and turtles. The once thriving fishing village is gone, and the fishermen are almost extinct. But there are laws today that protect the honu. They come on shore and it is illegal to bother them in any way. As a result, the turtle has made a strong comeback. Our modern Western value system has saved the honu, whereas the fishing village and the fishermen who fished here for more than a thousand years now face extinction.

The cave, which is really a lava tube, is taking matters into its own hands. It appears to be slowly sinking and collapsing. It wasn't very noticeable at first, but now it is significant. The large boulder that blocked the entrance has sunk almost eight feet from where I originally saw it in 1992. The ceiling has lost almost three quarters of its height since the reunion in 1994, and I suspect that in a few more years the ceiling will be completely on the bottom and the original entrance completely buried. I marvel at the thought that for generations it stood firm and fulfilled its kuleana for many generations of Hawaiians, for hundreds of years. Yet since the desecration, the cave has begun to collapse at a rate that should seal it completely in a few years. The explanation for this curious geological phenomenon may lie with kuleana, with the stolen iwi. The cave now exists without purpose, without kuleana. It is empty and it has chosen to die.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Laimana has seven children; two are college graduates, three are still attending college along with their father, another is expecting a child, and one is a senior at Kamehameha Schools. Laimana returned to school after a 25-year absence along with his 77-year-old mother, his wife, and his other 'ohana to learn Hawaiian language. He is currently taking classes at the University of Hawai'i–Mānoa and plans to graduate with a major in Hawaiian Studies in spring 2008. Outside of school, he values and enjoys being a coach, friend, father, uncle, brother, and recently grandpa.

#### NOTE

1 For English translations of the Hawaiian words used in this article, please refer to the glossary on the next page. These are simple translations which do not necessarily communicate the fullest and deepest meaning of the words.

## GLOSSARY

<b>‘Ae</b> Yes	<b>Lauhala</b> Pandanus leaf
<b>Ahupua‘a</b> Land division	<b>Lawai‘a</b> Fisherman
<b>Ali‘i</b> Chiefs	<b>Lo‘i</b> Irrigated terraces
<b>Aloha</b> Love	<b>Māka‘i</b> Policeman
<b>‘Ama‘ama</b> Mullet	<b>Maka‘āinana</b> Commoners
<b>‘Ane</b> Full-sized mullet	<b>Maka‘u loa</b> Very afraid
<b>‘A‘ole</b> No	<b>Mālama</b> Take care of
<b>‘Aumakua</b> Family god	<b>Manini</b> surgeonfish
<b>‘Auwai</b> Irrigation canal	<b>Manō</b> Shark
<b>Hala</b> Died	<b>Ma uka</b> Uplands
<b>Haole</b> White people	<b>Mele</b> Chants
<b>Honu</b> Turtles	<b>Mo‘opuna</b> Grandchildren
<b>Huhū</b> Angry	<b>Niele</b> Curiosity
<b>‘Ili‘ili</b> Pebble	<b>‘Ohana</b> Family
<b>Iwi</b> Bones	<b>‘Oihana</b> Industry
<b>Kahuna</b> Priest	<b>‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i</b> Hawaiian language
<b>Kala</b> Unicorn fish	<b>Pali</b> Cliff
<b>Kāne</b> Masculine	<b>Paniolo</b> Cowboy
<b>Kaona</b> True or hidden meaning	<b>Papa</b> Reef
<b>Kapa</b> Bark cloth	<b>Pōhaku ku‘i ‘ai</b> Poi pounders
<b>Kapu</b> Taboo	<b>Pono</b> Right
<b>Kuleana</b> Responsibility	<b>Pule</b> Prayer
<b>Kupuna kāne</b> Grandfather	<b>‘Umeke</b> Bowls

