O’ Mauna Kea ko kākou kuahiwi la’a
(Mauna Kea Our Sacred Mountain)

‘O Mauna Kea ko kākou kuahiwi la’a (Mauna Kea our sacred mountain) expresses the feelings that modern day Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians alike have for this wahi pana, a legendary place. As with other ethnic cultures throughout the world, early Polynesians believed their highest points of land were the most sacred.

Of the four major islands in the Hawaiian group, tradition tells us that the highest and most sacred places were Mauna Wai‘ale’ale on Kaua‘i; Mauna Ka‘ala on O‘ahu; Mauna Haleakala on Maui; and Mauna Kea on Hawai‘i. Mauna Kea being the highest point throughout Pacific Polynesia, was considered to be the most sacred of all. Standing tall over the island of Hawai‘i, Mauna Kea was host to early Hawaiian traditions which included among other things, religious practices, study of the heavens, and tool making in the Keanakako‘i adz quarry.

Traveling into the upper regions between the 12,000 and 13,000 foot elevation, one cannot help but feel the presence of ancestors past who erected the many ahu (shrines) surrounding the mountain. Archaeologists from the State of Hawai‘i Historic Preservation Division surveyed and identified 93 sites within the area, of which 76 were recorded as shrines. The most common feature of these shrines are the placement of one or more upright stones made of unmodified angular slabs set into cracks and braced with a few smaller stones. The shrines range from single uprights to as many as 24, with the larger groups set in more sophisticated complexes with prepared courts. Simple shrines of one to three uprights were mostly placed by family groups to represent their chosen ‘aumakua; and the more complex shrines of several uprights were placed for higher purposes.

Too sacred for the workings of man, access to the summit area was limited to the priesthood for it was only they who understood the mana of this spiritual environment. As we look to the future, we envision the summit of Mauna Kea once again made free of the workings of man.

‘Āmama ua noa.