Cultural Significance

The Mountain of Wakea

The original name of Maunakea is Mauna a Wakea, or "Mountain of Wakea." In Hawaiian tradition Wakea (sometimes translated in English as "Sky Father") is the progenitor of many of the Hawaiian Islands, and of the Hawaiian people. This mountain is his piko, or the place of connection where earth and sky meet and where the Hawaiian people connect to their origins in the cosmos.

"Realm of the gods"

As a sacred site, many of the physical features and environmental conditions of the mountain are associated with Hawaiian gods and goddesses. Lilinoe, Poliahu and Waiau are just a few of the deities associated with this place. The summit of Maunakea was considered a wao akua, or "realm of the gods" and was therefore visited only rarely by humans. The arduous trek to the top was made occasionally by royalty—among the last of those being Kamehameha III and Queen Emma. This was also a burial site for some royalty in ancient times. Today certain families still connect to this mountain by leaving their babies' piko (umbilical stubs) at sites that are historically significant to their ohana (family).

One place that many left their piko was Lake Waiau, which has important ecological features. Keanakakoi is an ancient stone quarry near the summit area that produced highly prized stone koi (adzes) used for carving canoes and other utilitarian purposes. Formed when Maunakea was actively erupting below an ice cap, this basalt stone cooled quickly and under very high pressure, causing it to be extremely dense and strong. Research today is tracking the source of stone tools throughout Polynesia to learn how widely the stone from this mountain was disbursed.
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