

## N. Kohala's royal legacy

### A trek along the coast traces the early life of Kamehameha I

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KOHALA COAST, The Big Island — It was a perfect Hawaii winter day: the grass shining green from recent rains, the sky hazy but bright. The humpbacks spouted and slapped their flukes in the channel beyond the hill where we stood listening to *kumu hula* Nani Lim Yap tell a story more than 200 years old.

"They say it was at *ikuwa* — the time of thunder, big seas, cloud-bursts — November-December. His mother, Keku'iapoiwa, came from Maui, rowed in a canoe to this place they now call Kokoiki — 'little blood,' for the afterbirth. Some say he was *po'olua* — born of two fathers. The fathers were Kauoakalani, a stepson of the chief 'Alapa'inui, and Kahekili, himself a chief. They say there were bright lights, signs telling of the birth of an ali'i. But Keku'iapoiwa's cousin Nahikuekeualono chanted them away because she didn't want the 'Alapa'inui to know that the child who's coming had been foretold — the child who would challenge him — was born."

Yap shrugs and smiles as if to say, "Who knows? Who can tell now?"

Then adds, "But for us, yeah? We can say for sure: He was born."

The "he" of this venerable story, passed on via chant generation after generation, is Kamehameha 'Ekahi — Kamehameha I — born near this windswept spot in about 1758 and destined to unite the Islands under one king for the first time.

The occasion was a press trip to spots along the Kohala Coast that are associated with Kamehameha, culminating in a performance of a birth chant written for Kamehameha's mother. That chant, "Aia 'o 'Awini Pali Ali'i Hula'ana" ("Yonder stands 'Awini, the sheer cliff of royalty") was performed by Yap's sister, Lorna, in sight of 'Awini, the hidden valley where Kamehameha was said to have been raised and kept safe for five years while his well-wishers talked the king into accepting the presence of his young rival.

Many, many spots in Hawaii are associated with Kamehameha I, of course. Tracing his footsteps would take a year of weekends.

On this day, we were touching just a few, select sites — but important ones — on the Kohala Coast about an hour from the Keahole-Kona airport, and a comfortable ride from the Kohala Coast resorts or Waimea town. We looked over his birthplace, visited his statue in Kapa'au and got as close as we could to the place where he spent his early years.

Yap explained that Kamehameha's mother was from Ainakea on the Big Island — about where the Kohala Hospital is now, she said — but had been living on Maui where she became pregnant. In a tale eerily reminiscent of Christian nativity stories, Keku'iapoiwa returned secretly to the Big Island to give birth to her

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With the hills of Pololu and 'Awini valleys behind her, Lorna Lim performs a hula about King Kamehameha I, who was raised in this remote North Kohala area on the Big Island to protect him from a wrathful king.

### Details

The North Kohala Coast Road — Highway 270, a.k.a. Akoni Pule Highway — runs from Kawaihae to the Pololu Lookout, a distance of about 35 miles, and offers many opportunities to recall the lives of the pre-contact Hawaiians, especially King Kamehameha.

**To get there:** From Kailua-Kona or the Kohala Coast resorts on the Big Island, take Highway 19 north. At Puukohola Heiau, the road splits, with 19 heading up the hill to Waimea, and Highway 270 splitting off down the hill to the tiny town of Kawaihae — the main port for the Big Island's Kona side, which explains all the trucks that'll blow by you on the road.

#### Sights worth seeing:

■ Puukohola Heiau National Historical Site. You want to talk chicken skin, this place is it. Here, Kamehameha built a temple to his war god and settled the hash of a rival to the Big Island throne, Keoua, by having him killed and placed on the altar. Respectfully tour the restored temple. Feel the heat bake you as you stare down at the hypnotizing blue water, where there is an underwater heiau; sharks still guard it, Big Islanders say.

■ Lapakahi State Historical Site. A self-guided tour through this 600-year-old habitation site tells much about the Hawaiian lifestyle. Here are the plants that gave them food and building materials, here are fishing spots and salt pans, here is a hale roofed with thatched pili grass. You can't go inside, but just walk to the door and under the eaves, you'll be amazed at how cool and fragrant is this house in the baking sun. Be careful not to turn your ankle on the rocky paths.

■ Kamehameha's birth site. From Route 270, turn left at mile marker 20, which is signed both for the birthplace

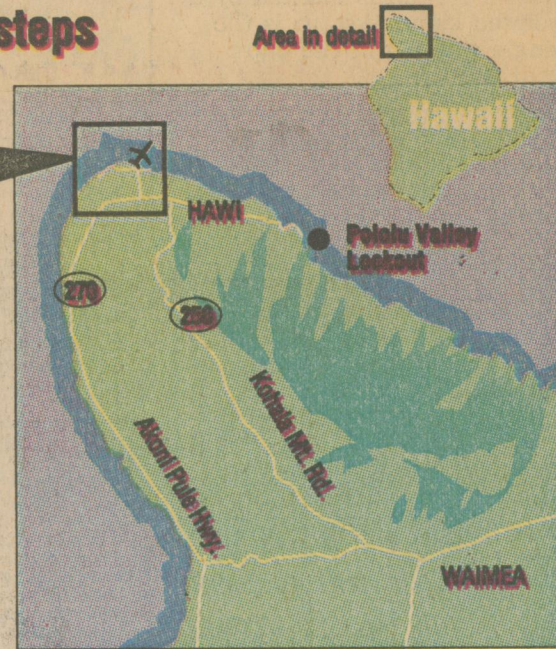
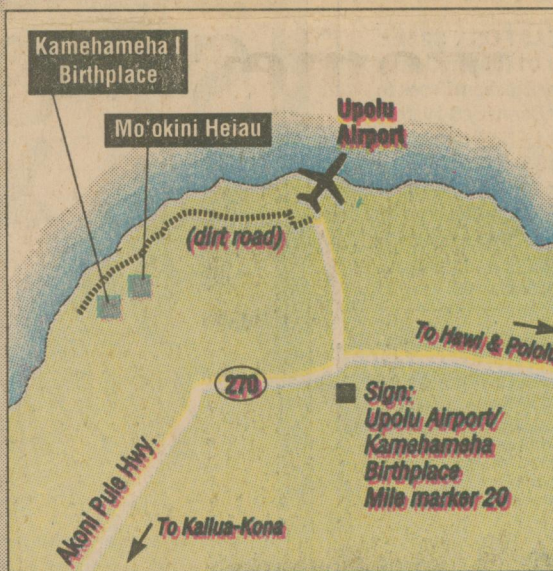
and for Upolu Airport. Wend your way down, watching for whales and mooing politely to the cattle on either side of the road. At the airport, turn left and follow the dirt road that skirts the fencing, then the coastline. The birth site, and Mo'okini Heiau, are marked. If it's been raining

for days, don't attempt this road without 4-wheel drive. This time of year, and through April, you'll see lots of folks lined up to whale watch here. And remember that these places are sacred sites to some people.

■ Hawi and Kapa'au. Eat, shop, ogle the Kamehameha Statue. Twice now, I've stopped at Bamboo Restaurant in Hawi and found it friendly, with great music and interesting food (try the potstickers). In both towns, we saw some great Hawaii souvenirs, including many fine wood pieces at reasonable prices. Warning: In these tiny towns, shops and restaurants come and go rather quickly.

■ The Pololu Lookout. The end of the road offers spec-

### Tracing Kamehameha's footsteps



tacular views, a very doable hike (but beware the beach's dangerous rip tide and don't do the hike in slippers, please).

Along the way from Kawaihae to Pololu are a number of beach parks, most of them secluded and perfect for sea-gazing, picnicking and whale-watching. A few offer swimming, fishing and snorkeling as well, but consult a knowledgeable local or a reliable guide book, and in winter, take great care not to be overwhelmed by high surf.

**You better take:** Sunscreen, a hat, decent shoes, water, some kaka (money) for shopping in Hawi and donating to the park funds.

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