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**CONSERVATION, IDENTITY
AND OWNERSHIP IN
INDIGENOUS ARCHAEOLOGY**

GUEST EDITORS:

Bill Sillar & Cressida Fforde

For journal subscription information contact:



James & James (Science Publishers) Ltd,
8-12 Camden High Street, London
NW1 0JH
Tel.: +44 20 7387 8558.
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Honour thy ancestor's possessions

Edward Halealoha Ayau

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the ethics of reclaiming *moepū* (funerary items) for reburial. It centres around a case involving *moepū* that were removed from a burial cave, conserved by the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, and reburied. Most significant amongst the funerary items removed from the burial cave were four carved wood images of ancestral deities called *ki'i aumākua* and other personal possessions of high-ranking chiefs. To explain the traditional practice of placing items with the dead, an overview of the traditional role of *moepū* is provided. Two opposing perspectives in response to the reburial are then presented. The article concludes that, as with *iwi kūpuna* (ancestral bones), the conservation of *moepū* is improper and museums should support efforts to return them to their deceased owners. Only by restoring *moepū* to their original context – and thereby their original function – can the responsibility of caring for the ancestors be properly maintained and higher levels of traditional cultural understanding be achieved.

THOU SHALT NOT STEAL

In 1905, David Forbes, William Wagner and Friedrich Haenisch explored a burial cave located on the island of Hawai'i. Commonly referred to as 'Forbes Cave' the true identity of this cave was kept *huna* (secret) and not otherwise recorded in Hawaiian history. Several mummified *iwi kūpuna* (ancestral bones) and *moepū* of high-ranking chiefs were consequently looted. Forbes, a lawyer and part-time judge, sketched a plan of the cave interior indicating its chambers and the locations of its significant contents (Brigham, 1906: 3). The plan established the funerary function of the items including four *ki'i aumākua* (carved wood images of ancestral deities). The four *ki'i aumākua* were situated immediately fronting a cache of *iwi po'o* (skulls) in a sealed chamber.

A few days later, Forbes wrote to William T. Brigham, Director of the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Honolulu, to inform him about the 'collected' items and to ask if the museum was

interested in purchasing the prized collection. Forbes included with his letter a photograph of the stolen funerary items (Forbes, 1905: 1). In his reply, Brigham confirmed his awareness that the funerary items were illicitly acquired, cautioned Forbes about the severity of existing burial laws and offered the museum as the ideal location to hide the theft:

[y]our find is of great interest and importance, but is impossible to put a price upon the articles without a careful inspection ... In the meantime, keep the matter quiet for there are severe laws here concerning burial caves, and I shall not make the matter public, of course, until you say so. If you should wish to keep the collection or part of it, the coming from this place [Bishop Museum] would throw any suspicious persons off the scent. (W. Brigham to D. Forbes, 11 November 1905, Bernice Pauahi Museum Archives)

Later Brigham wrote to Forbes with an appraisal of the collection of stolen human remains and

funerary items (W. Brigham to D. Forbes, 21 November 1905, Bernice Pauahi Museum Archives). Eventually, Brigham acquired the majority of the Forbes Cave collection for the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, including three of the *ki'i aumākua*. There was some doubt expressed as to whether the carved wood images were, in fact, funerary. It was postulated that the images were temporarily placed in the cave for the purpose of safe-keeping following the fall of the traditional Hawaiian religious system. Brigham promptly dismissed these assertions as baseless when he stated in a 1906 museum report,

[i]t has been suggested that [the four wood images] form the paraphernalia of a temple and were hidden, as so many of the idols were, at the time of the general destruction of the idols in 1819 in the hope that the storm would blow over and better times ensue, but there is absolutely nothing in the collection to support such a view. The two gods or aumākua were household deities, the other articles might be the private property of some chief or priest, and two things, the fan and bit of porcelain are such keepsakes as were commonly deposited with the dead to whom the articles had belonged. (Brigham, 1906: 3)

Interestingly, Brigham acknowledges the understanding that the funerary items were owned originally by the deceased with whom they were placed.

The actions of the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum and Hui Mālama I Nā Kūpuna O Hawai'i Nei were the topic of a heated debate 95 years later, following the reburial of the Forbes Cave collection.¹ The debate pitted traditional cultural values of respecting the deceased and their possessions through reburial against contemporary demands for continued museum conservation to educate and inspire the living regarding significant works of art.

HO'OMOEPŪ 'IA (PLACED WITH THE DEAD)

In Hawai'i, from ancient times, items were placed with the deceased as a sign of respect and affection. These would include a person's favourite keepsakes as well as items intended to provide nourishment, comfort and protection in the next world. These items were fondly referred to as *moepū*, which means 'to sleep with', and were considered *kapu*

(sacred), possessing *mana* (spiritual essence, power) and vital to the *pono* (balance, well-being) of our ancestors and ourselves.

Once placed together, the *moepū* belonged to the deceased. This relationship was considered permanent in that the items served the needs of the ancestors in the afterworld until the long journey toward complete deterioration resulted in a melding of elements with the land and a completion of the cycle of life. An 'olelo no'eau (wise saying) provides insight into how native Hawaiians traditionally viewed the sanctity of *moepū* by prohibiting their removal.

Mai lawe wale i nā mea i ho'omoepū 'ia.

Don't wantonly take things placed with the dead.

Implicit in this 'olelo no'eau was the respect given to the original decision to place the items with the dead. There was a recognition that the relationship between the *hwi kūpuna* and *moepū* is to be maintained as part of the requisite care and protection provided to the *kūpuna* (ancestors). The removal of *moepū* by one who was not part of the original placement was considered an egregious transgression against the individual and a violation of the sanctity of the grave.

Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahale, a Native Hawaiian *kumu* (cultural resource leader) provided further insight into *moepū* when she discussed cultural traditions relating to items placed with the dead, including deceased high-ranking chiefs,

[t]he interdependency of life cycles was well thought out and practiced among our *kūpuna* [ancestors]. The care of an individual from prenatal to post life was an established process. Especially if the person was of high rank or highly regarded because he/she had proven themselves and was accepted by the greater population for his/her intelligence and skill. The post-physical existence of an individual would require his/her personal acquisitions. Funerary objects are personal articles for the individuals who have passed from this temporal life into the next realm. Some of these acquisitions were for the purpose of protection, others were personal favorites, others to honor the rank and responsibility of the individual, others were gifts from family members to the deceased, others were gifts to the ancestors who were waiting on the other side ... (Kanahale and Ayau, 1999: 8).

Burial imbues the land² with the *mana* (spiritual essence) of the people and their possessions, which is necessary for the physical and spiritual nourishment of the living. *Moepū* belong to the *iwi kūpuna* and both belong to *pā'ele'ele*, the darkest of darkness and to the Earth Mother *Haumea*. The *kuleana* (responsibility) of the living is to respect their final resting-places and maintain the integrity of their funerary possessions.

HONOUR THY ANCESTORS' CHOICES

Pursuant to a Federal law, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum consulted with Hui Mālama I Nā Kūpuna O Hawai'i Nei³ and other interested Native Hawaiian organizations over a period of seven years regarding the classification of the cultural items removed from Forbes Cave. Consultation culminated with the decision to classify the items as funerary objects, thereby qualifying them for repatriation. The Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum allowed us to transport the *iwi kūpuna* and *moepū* back to the island of Hawai'i. In order to restore *pono*, we ceremonially reburied them and secured the site.

In completing reburial, Hui Mālama I Nā Kūpuna O Hawai'i Nei honoured the original decisions made by the ancestors to place the *iwi kūpuna* and *moepū* together. Our actions were founded on the traditional understanding that *moepū* are the inalienable possessions of the dead and are meant to be buried. Where these have been removed from their intended resting place, Native Hawaiians have a duty to restore *moepū* to their originally intended function.

Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahale provides further insight into the treatment of *moepū* and the interdependence between the past, the living and the future:

[f]unerary objects are very personal to the individual, who through his/her lifetime has done all the requirements to earn these objects. They knew the depth and breadth of the value, merit, function and use of these things. It is not for us, who live at this time, to decide the fate of these objects. The decision was made long ago when the personal articles were placed in the cave. As Hawaiians today, our function is simple, it is to see that the initial

decision is realized and respected. Let's respect the wise practices of our ancestors as we hope that our progeny will see the wisdom in our decisions and practices. (Kanahale and Ayau, 1999: 9)

Many understood and supported the actions taken by Hui Mālama I Nā Kūpuna O Hawai'i Nei. Their response to the reburial of the Forbes Cave collection was that the reunification of the *iwi kūpuna* and *moepū* should be honoured as a necessary element of the responsibility to provide care and protection. However, not all agreed that traditional treatment was proper.

CONSERVATION PROVIDES FOR THE LIVING

Some people felt that the interests and needs of contemporary Native Hawaiians, researchers and the general public would be better served through the continued conservation of these items by the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, regardless of their intended funerary nature. The educational value derived from studies, contemplation and inspiration represented *bona fide* benefits such that the important needs of the living should be allowed to outweigh traditional funerary practices.

The people who advocate this contemporary view maintain that there is always a responsibility to ensure that the *iwi kūpuna* and *moepū* are well cared for, but that significant examples of items such as the *ki'i aumakua* should be exempted from traditional treatment. Although the separation of outstanding *moepū* from the *iwi kūpuna* for the benefit of the living represented a departure from tradition, these people consider this change a necessary step in the evolution of Native Hawaiian culture. The carved wood images should be considered masterpieces of indigenous craftsmanship and not the personal possessions of the dead. As such, presentation and preservation through museum conservation is regarded as the most responsible treatment of *ki'i aumakua* today (Kalāhiki, 2000). Many people have even justified museum conservation on the basis that the four *ki'i aumakua* were not funerary at all, having been placed in the cave for safe-keeping. This view ignored the placement of the carvings with the *iwi kūpuna*.

Opposition to the reburial of the Forbes Cave collection sought to shift the focus from the needs of the

dead to those of the living, even though implementation of this contemporary view would have required a second looting of the *moepū*. The merits of these two opposing positions were carefully considered.

THE COST OF CULTURAL SURVIVAL

The contemporary view reflects the Western practice of objectifying *moepū* as artefacts with inherent educational value, rather than as items intended to serve specific needs of the deceased. The question becomes whether it is healthy for Native Hawaiians to embrace this departure from traditional thought. Specifically, 'should the educational and inspirational needs of the living, including academics and the general public, be allowed to supersede the personal funerary wishes of deceased Native Hawaiians?'. The answer is: 'absolutely not'.

It seems that what were once fundamental values and beliefs to the ancestors regarding funerary practices are now foreign to many in the contemporary generation. It is in this climate, where a lack of understanding of cultural tradition, supported by colonized attitudes toward knowledge and learning, has given rise to a shift in focus from providing care to the ancestors to demanding a benefit from them. Despite the appearance of striving to increase cultural knowledge, implementation of the actions required by those who support the contemporary view would seriously undermine the ancestral foundation. In addition, advocating such a position is contrary to the traditional values and fundamental principles prohibiting the wanton taking of items placed with the dead.

Living Native Hawaiians have inherited the *kuleana* (responsibility) to care for the well-being of our *kūpuna* and their possessions. We have also inherited countless cultural items from our ancestors that serve to educate, inspire and provide insights into our identity as a people. There was a time when it was instinctually understood that such cultural items did not include *ivi* and *moepū* as those belong solely to the *kūpuna*. Moreover, it was understood that our duty is to assure that the *ivi kūpuna* and *moepū* are properly buried and protected so that the centuries-long process of deterioration and eventual absorption back into the land may take place undisturbed.

Educational and inspirational needs are best served by learning foundational traditions and respecting and maintaining them. In doing so, we preserve the integrity of the decision to place the items with the deceased, and come to understand that such an act is a necessary element of the requisite duty of care and protection owed to the ancestors. Rather than teach our children how a *ki'i aumākua* was carved and the materials used to complete the image, we instead impress upon them the importance of respecting the choice made to place the carving with the *ivi* and the values that support such a tradition. Furthermore, we should resist the temptation to impose our contemporary views upon the *kūpuna* and instead seek to achieve higher levels of cultural understanding through adherence to critical elements of our traditional practice.

MOEPŪ CONSERVATION IS IMPROPER

The Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum was correct in identifying the items as funerary objects as defined by NAGPRA, based upon the available evidence. Moreover, the museum was also *pono* in allowing the *ivi kūpuna* and *moepū* to be reburied, recognizing that the continued conservation of both were inappropriate as a matter of Federal law, and as a matter of respect for Native Hawaiian cultural traditions. Through reburial, the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum was able to rectify and bring closure to the actions of its former Director who was complicit in the theft of these funerary items by David Forbes and others.

Based on the traditional view, it is concluded that museum conservation of *moepū*, as with *ivi kūpuna*, is wholly inappropriate. Museums conserving Native Hawaiian funerary items should honour requests for reburial. Science needs to temper its thirst for knowledge, recognize that the acquisition of data is a value and not a right and should not be conducted at the expense of traditional cultural responsibilities. Moreover, Native Hawaiians need to discipline their minds to understand that the removal and conservation of *moepū* does not honour our ancestors, or ourselves, and does not result in *pono* or *lōkahi* (unity) between the past and present. An important lesson learned from this case is that we must not seek to preserve our culture at the

expense of undermining foundational cultural traditions and offending our ancestors.

As Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahale profoundly stated, the function of Native Hawaiians today regarding *moepū* is simple. It is to see that the initial decision by the ancestors is realized and respected. Moreover, it is that we do this in the hope that our descendants will see the wisdom in our decisions and practices. Maintaining the integrity of the relationship between the *iwi kūpuna* and *moepū* through reburial is an important means through which we maintain *pono* between the past, the present and the future. *Mai lawe wale i na mea i ho'omoepū 'ia.*

ENDNOTES

1. Some of the funerary items from the Forbes Cave collection, including the fourth *kī'iaumākua*, are currently being conserved by Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park after being donated by B. Edmondson, daughter of David Forbes in 1956 (Wosky, 1956: 1-2; Cleghorn, 1996: 4-10).
2. The word for homeland in the Hawaiian language is *kulāiwi* which literally translates as 'bone plain'. The homeland therefore was considered to be the land with the buried bones of the ancestors.
3. A Native Hawaiian organization established in 1988 to provide requisite care and protection to *iwi kūpuna* and *moepū* through repatriation and ceremonial reburial utilizing traditional cultural protocols. Edward and Pualani Kanahale founded the organization.

Edward Halealoha Ayau is a graduate of Kamehameha Schools, the University of Redlands

and the Colorado School of Law. He has worked for the Native American Rights Fund, Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation, US Senator Daniel Inouye, the US Senate Indian Affairs Committee and is the former director of the State Burial Sites Programme. He is a member of Hui Mālama I Nā Kūpuna O Hawai'i Nēi, where he leads efforts to repatriate Native Hawaiian remains and funerary objects.

Contact address: P.O. Box 365, Hōolehua, Hawai'i 96729. Email: halealoha@wave.hicv.net

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