

Six Sacred Sites of Hawaii

- By Megan Gambino
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(Courtesy of Jo-Lin Kalimapau)

From perhaps as early as 1100 to the late 1700s, pregnant women bearing the children of Hawaii's chiefs came to Kukaniloko to give birth. Often referred to in oral traditions as the *piko*, or navel, for its location in the center of Oahu, the grouping of 180 boulders is considered to be a spiritual center of the island.

Giving birth at the site was a way to ensure a newborn's high-ranking status. Thirty-six chiefs would be present to verify the lineage of the parents. "If a Chiefess entered and leaned against Kukaniloko and rested on the supports to hold up the thighs in observance of the *Liloe kapu* [prescribed regulations for birthing], the child born in the presence of chiefs was called an *ali'i*, an *akua*, a *wela*—a chief, a god, a blaze of heat," wrote S. M. Kamakau, a 17th-century Hawaiian historian, in one of the most detailed accounts of the ritual. Once born, the child was whisked away to a nearby temple, where ceremonies were held. Sacred drums were beat to announce the birth.

Today, at Kukaniloko Birthstones State Historic Site, visitors can see the original weathered stones scattered under a grove of coconut and eucalyptus trees, as well as two rows of 18 stones each that were brought in to represent the chiefs who attended the birthing ritual. Native Hawaiians often leave leis of fresh flowers or ferns on the stones as gifts to their ancestors.

Read more: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/Six-Sacred-Sites-of-Hawaii.html#ixzz1vwjG1nBL>