A Story of Mauna a Wākea - Mauna Kea Shawls

This traditional account is associated with Mauna a Wākea, now known as Mauna Kea, and Poliʻahu, the goddess of snow. The story begins with Poliʻahu, who lives on the top of Mauna a Wākea. Because of her great beauty, her hānai father Kāne, placed a kapu upon her so that she cannot leave the top of the mountain. He so loves his daughter that he cannot bear the thought that she would fall in love, marry and leave him to live somewhere down below or far away, Kāne, not able to fathom this notion, puts her under this kapu— or restriction, thereby protecting her, just as any father presumably would.

As he knows that Poliʻahu will be lonely living on the top of the mountain, Kāne provides three poʻe mālama (attendants) who will care for, tend to Poliʻahu’s every need and also upkeep this kapu. These individuals will remain with her atop Mauna a Wākea.

First he gives her a nurse, Līhau, who is said to go everywhere Poliʻahu goes, never leaving her side. Līhau in her elemental form is the first morning dew found on blades of grass or scattered on the ground. Second, she is given Lilinoe who will care for all of Poliʻahu’s desires. Lilinoe is the fine and misty rain that falls gently from the heavens above. Kīpuʻupuʻu, the icy winds and rain and Waiau are also poʻe mālama (attendants) given to Poliʻahu.

A bathing pool is dug by Kāne, bearing the same name as her attendant Waiau. Kāne knows that his daughter’s favorite pastime is to bathe in the cold and chilling waters of Waiau, therefore this lake atop Mauna a Wākea is exclusively for Poliʻahu.

Now let the story take us to a far away land, where a man dreams each night of a wondrous place of white capped mountains and a magnificently beautiful woman. His dreams propel him to go in search of this place and this woman. As he sails upon the ocean, his waʻa (canoe) comes upon the horizon. His eyes behold the snow capped mountains exactly as he has seen them in his dreams. Overwhelmed by excitement, he lands his waʻa at Kawaihae and proceeds to the cool uplands of Waimea. It is here that he beholds the expanse of Mauna a Wākea and makes the climb to the summit.

Upon reaching the top, he sees Poliʻahu bathing in the cold waters of Lake Waiau as her attendants stand watch. Once they are aware that a stranger is present, the story tells us that they rush out to confront him. Although he tries to tell them that he has traveled from afar to be with this woman of his dreams, he is driven away and is forced to descend the mountain. Not allowing defeat to overcome him, he ascends a second time only to come upon the same fascinating scene, the beautiful Poliʻahu in the waters of Waiau. Her poʻe mālama once again rush out telling this man that he must leave at once as they have been tasked to upkeep Kāne’s kapu.
Fortunately for the stranger, there lives a moʻowahine, the guardian of Lake Waiau, whose name is Moʻoinanea. She calls out to Kāne asking him for a chance to speak to him. She tells him that she has discerned the nature of this man and it is in the best interest to allow Kāne’s beloved daughter to marry this man for there will not be another who will love her as he does.

After thinking a while, Kāne comes to a decision and calls his daughter and this man to come before him. He tells them both what Moʻoinanea has said and reveals to the two that this is what he will allow. He tells this man that he will be allowed to embrace, to love his daughter, the beautiful snow goddess, two times a day, each and every day. The first time will be when the sun rises and the second time at the sun’s setting. He also says that this is to remain no nā kau a kau, for all seasons forever and ever.

So until today, we bear witness to the love between Poliʻahu and he who is known as Kūkahauʻula, Kū of the red-tinged snow. It is at these specific times each and every day that Mauna a Wākea will begin to turn magnificent hues of pink, red, orange and sometimes even purple. Our eyes then behold the embracing love that Kāne allows Kūkahauʻula every sunrise and every sunset, each and every day, no nā kau a kau. Eia la, ua ʻikea...

This account of the Poliʻahu Story was shared by cultural resource and storyteller, Kuʻulei Keakealani of Waimea, Hawaiʻi Island who credits this version of the story to Tutu Kalani Phillips of Waimea.

Mauna Kea Shawls are a cherished reminder of the love that we hold in our hearts for Mauna a Wākea. The shawls are named according to their color in order to perpetuate the sacredness of the story, areas on the mountain and current issues being faced regarding these storied places or wahi pana. We wear them everyday, everywhere and every time we do we remember that we are still sacred, as sacred as the places we stand for, the ways that we live for.


The design of the Mauna Kea Shawls was created by Pomai Bertelmann which was inspired by the song Poliʻahu i ke kapu, composed and recorded by Hāwane Rios, This song may be purchased on iTunes. Proceeds from the Mauna Kea Shawls are utilized for spreading awareness of the sacredness of Mauna a Wākea through all means possible.

Payment by Venmo, cash, check or money order of $25.00 per shawl + shipping starting at $8.00. For inquiries and orders, text Dina Case at 808-729-5882.