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Protecting Maunakea Is a Mission Grounded in Tradition

The womxn and nonbinary folk of Hawai'i are protecting this sacred space against police forces and governmental influences



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Kekuhi Keali'ikanaka'oleohaililani chants on the Mauna Kea Access Road. Photo: Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada

By Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua and Yvonne Mahelona

On July 17, 2019, hundreds stood and watched in tortured silence as police arrested three dozen *kūpuna* (elders), who refused to allow construction vehicles up to the sacred summit of Maunakea. Maunakea is the tallest mountain in the Hawaiian Islands and an ancestor to Kanaka Maoli (Indigenous Hawaiians). Rows of law enforcement officers from multiple state and county divisions lined the access road. In a hypermasculine spectacle of the settler state's capacity for violence, riot police were fully armed as they prepared to face off with peaceful protectors who were outfitted with rain jackets, hats, lei, and sunscreen. The *kūpuna* asked us to be quiet. They wanted to be the first to face arrest, and we would give law enforcement no excuse to use violence.

We cried. We bit our tongues. We raised our hands to signal our love for our elders: artists, teachers, business owners, university professors, community leaders, knowledge keepers.

A majority of those arrested were womxn. Eighty-one-year old veteran land defender, Maxine Kahaulelio described her stance, “As a [wahine koa](#) [woman warrior/courageous woman], I'm gonna stand firm. You wanna arrest me? Arrest me!” Kahaulelio was [arrested](#) along with 32 other elders that day.

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The struggle to protect Maunakea against the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT), an 18-story building occupying over five acres of conservation land, takes place amidst the backdrop of a crowded field of existing astronomy observatories, built on the mountain over the past 55 years. The TMT's own [environmental impact statement](#) acknowledges that the cumulative harm of this development has been and will continue to be “[substantial, significant, and adverse](#)” with the addition of the new facility. The struggle has also been filled with profound expressions of *mana wahine* and *mana māhū*: the power of womxn and nonbinary folk.

Wāhine (womxn) have been protecting *Mauna a Wākea*, also known as Maunakea, since time immemorial. Many deities who are embodied as forms of water — *Poli'ahu* (snow), *Lilinoe* (mist), *Waiiau* (lake), *Kahouipokāne* (springs), and storms — reside on and give life to the mountain. Kanaka Maoli [recognize these elements](#) as female. Among the *kūpuna* wāhine arrested on July 17 were womxn who have for years been leading seasonal ceremonies on Maunakea to honor these and other deities on the mountain.



Sandy Kamaka, Ruth Aloua, and Leina'ala Sleightholm stand arm-in-arm in the front line of womxn protectors on July 17, 2019. Photo: Kimberly Brown

About three hours into the arrest process on July 17, police were getting impatient. The commanding officer approached the dozens of *kūpuna* who were still sitting ready to be carried off. He gave them notice that police were going to come harder, faster, and with more force. We could see the *LRAD* (Long Range Acoustic Device), popularly called a “sound cannon,” facing the elders' tent. The line of women that had been slowly forming behind the *kūpuna* immediately broke and reformed as a human barrier between law enforcement and the *kūpuna*. First 20. Then 40. The lines swelled to over 100 womxn, locked arm-in-arm in front of the elders' tent.

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We chanted, sang, and recited poetry. We called out to the uniformed men in sunglasses staring toward us: “Brothers, before you arrest us, know who we are! We are the educators who teach your children. We are the doctors, nurses, and healers who care for your families. We are the counselors who help our people work through the cultural traumas we carry. We are farmers, fishers, technicians, accountants. We are filmmakers, writers, storytellers, students. We are your sisters, your mothers, your daughters, your aunts.”

We prepared to be hit with pepper spray, sound cannon, and baton. But in the midst of the standoff news came that 185 miles and five islands away, a convoy of vehicles on O'ahu had stopped traffic on the major highway in Honolulu. The convoy was led by Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, a Hawaiian community leader who identifies as *māhū* (transgender).

“Mana māhū!” the wāhine line yelled in jubilation! The police eventually withdrew as government officials contemplated their next move. They realized that whatever happened to *kia'i* (guardians) on Hawai'i island would trigger responsive actions in the major economic centers on O'ahu and Maui.

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Now more than seven weeks into the standoff, womxn continue to play major leadership roles in the *pu'uhonua* (sanctuary) that was established and consecrated three days before the first confrontation with law enforcement in July.

Womxn organize and run various parts of the camp. The check-in tent, the kitchen, the *kūpuna* council, the childcare tent, and the organic university that has sprung up on the lava fields at the base of Pu'u Huluhulu, as well as coordinating medics, media, donations, and childcare. All of these operations are organized and led primarily by womxn. People of all genders are critical to the functioning of this place of refuge that has hosted thousands over the last several weeks. Yet the important responsibilities that womxn carry within this movement has not been covered in mainstream news media.

It takes a tremendous amount of labor to sustain a community that expands and contracts, like lungs breathing the crisp air, around a tiny parking lot on the slopes of a mountain. This is *ea*, a Hawaiian word that refers all at once to life, breath, and sovereignty.

Wāhine like *Kumu Hula* (hula master teachers) Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahale, Pua Case, and Kekuhi Keali'ikanaka'oleohaililani lead ceremonial protocols three times a day to focus protectors on the reason we gather and to remind us to conduct ourselves in [kapu aloha](#) while on the Mauna.

Wāhine like U'i Chong — who runs the kitchen — inventory food supplies, plan menus, organize volunteers, and maintain commercial kitchen-level standards for food safety, all while providing free meals for everyone in the *pu'uhonua*. Wāhine like Ruth Aloua, who has been a heart of the movement since 2015, tend crops and fishponds off-site, to remind us that the boundaries of this *pu'uhonua* are not the boundaries of this movement.

Wāhine like 'Ilima Long write press releases, greet news reporters, direct media requests, and help build the story-based strategies of the movement.

A noncapitalist community grounded in living Hawaiian cultural practice is rising, like the kupukupu ferns that grow from cracks in the black lava rock and unfurl toward the sun.

Wāhine like Marie Alohalani Brown receive and redistribute donations of clothing, blankets, and other supplies to assure that people who are camping can safely face the alternating blazing sun and bitter cold. Wāhine like Presley Ke'alaanuhea Ah Mook Sang — founder of Pu'uhuluhulu University — coordinate daily classes and workshops so that people are constantly learning and growing, while protecting the Mauna. Wāhine like Kalama Niheu, Maile Wong, and Noelani Ahia coordinate free medical care and culture-based healing at the Mauna medics tent around the clock.

Wāhine like Yvonne Mahelona, Makanalani Gomes, Keano Davis, and Tia Masaniai welcome visiting protectors and tourists who arrive at the check-in booth. They educate foreigners and locals about the histories of Maunakea, of telescopes on the Mauna, and of the longer genealogies of Hawaiian resistance in which the current movement sits. They direct volunteers to stations needing help. They receive and sort donations. They deescalate tense situations, especially when tourists are upset about not being able to go up to the summit.

What is happening at Maunakea is so much more than a struggle to stop the Thirty Meter Telescope from being built on our sacred summit. A noncapitalist community grounded in living Hawaiian cultural practice is rising, like the kupukupu ferns that grow from cracks in the black lava rock and unfurl toward the sun. Sure, we still deal with the heteropatriarchal forces (both internal and external) that U.S. occupation has solidified in our islands. But, in the beloved community that sits at the base of Mauna Kea Access Road, wāhine and *māhū* continue to be central to the life and leadership of our Hawaiian nation.

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