

# Rock thefts mar Big Island heiau

□ The high priestess appeals for the return of the stolen items

By Becky Ashizawa  
Star-Bulletin

Wind, rain and lava are not the only forces threatening to destroy heiaus on the Big Island. In North Kohala, the Mookini Luakini heiau is being ravaged by human hands, said Leimomi Mookini Lum, kahuna nui (high priestess) of an ancient Hawaiian temple dedicated to the war god Ku. Since 1984 Lum has seen more and more lichen-covered rocks disappear from the temple's massive 30-foot walls. In some sections as much as seven feet have been carted away.

The stealing got so bad this year that Lum finally turned to the state Legislature for help.

Sen. Eloise Tungpalan, chairwoman of the Culture Arts and Historical Preservation Committee, was likewise shocked at the deterioration of the heiau.

"I look at it as a monument, the essence of what Hawaii is," she said. "If we don't keep it, we lose a testament to our past."

Although Tungpalan budgeted money for relief efforts that may be available in 1990, Lum said she needs a guardhouse on the site and some security people by November to

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## Hawaii's heritage threatened

Lichen-covered rocks of the Mookini heiau. Since 1984, as much as seven feet of the temple's 30-foot stone walls have been stolen in some sections.



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“  
These rocks belong here  
... they are my children.  
”

Leimomi Lum

Kahuna nui of the Mookini heiau



### The history

- **Background:** Dedicated to war god Ku; one of the Big Island's oldest and largest historic sites.
- **Construction:** 18,000 people built heiau in one night, according to legend, using 14-mile human chain to carry rocks.



By Joana Osterdorf, Star-Bulletin

# HEIAU: Theft of stones mars sacred temple of old Hawaii

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curb the escalating vandalism.

"When you enter this place, it's like entering a church. You wouldn't think of taking its pews or the candles," Lum said.

But somehow the general respect accorded churches and temples hasn't been extended to the heiau, the size of a football field.

Lum said local residents and tourists are guilty of stealing.

"I know where the rocks are," she said. "People take them for their meditating gardens or pocket them as souvenir items. Others have built entire moss rock walls for their homes."

"I could call the rocks back," Lum said, using an ancient chant, "but that would cause great harm to the people and would really shake things up."

Instead, she prefers that people voluntarily return the rocks. "People will only hurt themselves by keeping them."

Lum could not have foreseen these problems when she lifted the single kapu that opened the heiau to the public in 1978.

Since the temple's creation in the year 480 — according to Lum's genealogical chant — the area was off limits to anyone who wasn't a king or a ruling chief.

But Lum does not regret her decision. Nor does she want to close the heiau again.

She said she promised her uncle, a previous kahuna, to make the heiau accessible to Hawaii's children.

"The kapu was lifted so the children of Hawaii could come and go safely," she said, "because at a later time they will be the ones who will host the children of the world."

And for 11 years, Lum has fulfilled her promise.

Each November the Mookini Luakini heiau is the site of a day-long festival where children from Big Island schools and those staying in nearby hotels are invited to learn more about Hawaii's past, culture and religion.

Nearly 4,000 children visited the heiau during the last event.

But Lum insists that children gain more than facts and figures from their walk.

In this barren, windswept plain skirted by the ocean, Lum said children learn about wonder and a sense of sacredness that comes from the land.

They learn to soak things up through their senses, blunted too often by modern day living, she said. "Here they can see the ocean, smell the dust, feel the wind, hear the silence. . . ."

But the quality of sacredness

also may lead to the stealing.

"People come here, experience the power, can't get enough of it so they want to take it home," she said.

"But these rocks belong here, they are part of a family, they are my children. When I rededicated this place, I gave each rock a new vibrancy and new life."

By stealing the rocks, "they're breaking up the family," Lum said.

Recently a favorite rock, one that Lum calls Kii, was returned to the heiau after a 12-year absence.

The 200-pound stone resembles the head of a bird and had stood at one of the four corners of the heiau.

Lum said Kii was kept by a woman who secretly arranged to have it returned because her family had suffered too many deaths.

Today Kii is easily identifiable from the rest of the rocks because it lacks the typical moss covering.

The heiau, considered one of the Big Island's oldest and largest historic sites, lies only about 1,000 yards from the birthplace of Kamehameha I.

In 1963, it became the first registered national historic landmark and in 1978 was deeded to the state.

According to Lum's chant, the heiau was built in a single night by 18,000 people forming a 14-mile human chain that carried the rocks from Po'olua Valley to the grassy clearing.

Caring for the heiau has been a part of her family's legacy for 1,500 years. In 1977, Lum was named kahuna nui, only the seventh woman in her ancestral line to be given the title.

Although much of the chant is a well-guarded secret, Lum said it traces her ancestors' beginnings to the Persian Gulf and charts their migration to Hawaii.

She lives in Honolulu with her husband Maj. Gen. Alexis Lum, state adjutant general, but manages to fly weekly to the Big Island to visit the heiau.

For 32 years, Lum worked as police officer with the Juvenile Crime Prevention Division of the Honolulu Police Department while training with her father and uncle in temple traditions.

Since becoming kahuna nui, Lum has unveiled plans for a museum complex to be built near the heiau, strengthening further her desire to link the past and future of Hawaii by serving its children.

Lum didn't think it was necessary to post signs at the heiau, warning visitors to leave the rocks alone. She thought it was understood.

"This is a sacred place. This is where it all began."