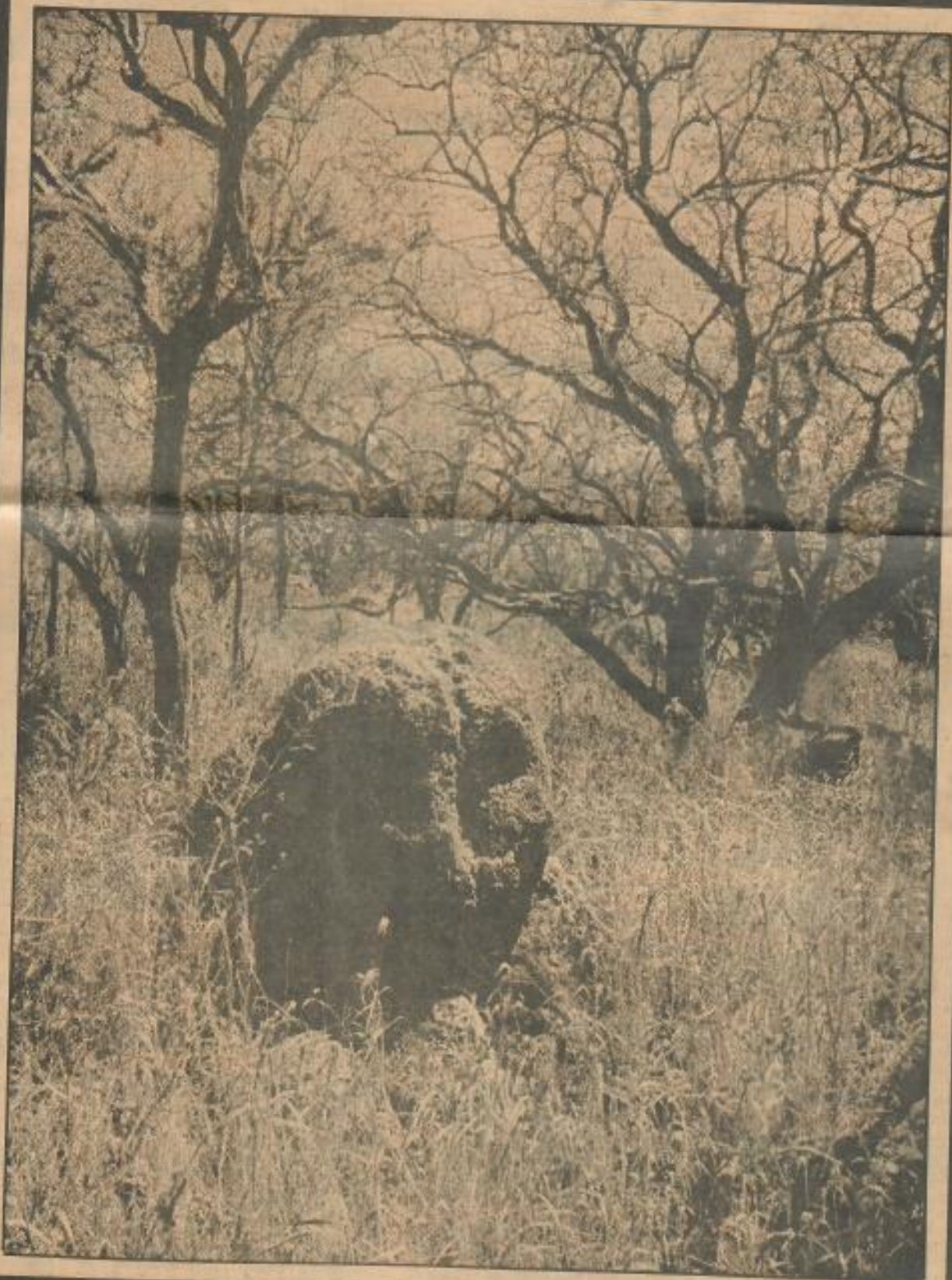


TODAY

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Pueo-o pohaku, located on Molokai, may be the last stone owl god left on site in Hawaii, says researcher specialist Lahe'ena'e Gay.

ROCK OF THE AGES

□ 'Spiritual foundation' of Hawaiians is slowly eroding, specialist says

By Tino Ramirez
Special to the Star-Bulletin

DESPITE plundering and development, many sacred stone sites in Hawaii still survive, their artifacts and spiritual power intact.

Families entrusted to care for them guard their locations, they are in isolated areas, or, says Lahe'ena'e Gay, the sites themselves are stubborn.

"They refuse to give in. And they find individuals, when they're in trouble, to help protect them."

Gay, a photojournalist and research specialist in Polynesian culture, is an example of the latter reason for sites surviving. Now 32, Gay has been taught and trained by her elders in the ways of *pohaku*, or sacred stone, since she was four. With her exhibit, "Pohaku: Through Hawaiian Eyes," which begins a tour of the islands tomorrow at Bishop Museum, she now hopes to preserve the remaining sites by sharing her knowledge through photos, lectures, and interviews with the media.

Work on the exhibit, which presents 66 photos of sites and legends about many of them, began by chance seven years ago when one of her "aunties" asked her to photograph a sacred *pohaku* that was about to be destroyed by development. Two weeks later someone else asked her to record another site. Gay then began to seek out sites on all the islands and has located, cataloged and photographed more than 2,000 sites.

Before contact with the West, sacred stones and stone structures were maintained throughout the islands. They were used as places for giving birth, they guarded families as well as valleys, streams and bays. They were also the core of ceremonial sites, from simple fishing shrines to large *heiau*.

"The stone was the only aspect of Hawaiian culture that everybody used, from the commoners to the *ali'i* (high chiefs)," says Gay.

"The commoners used stone for *kukui* nut lamps, they used *pohaku* for the *poi* pounders, for the *poi* slabs. They also were able to use *pohaku* for spiritual purposes when they couldn't use feathers, couldn't wear black *kapa*, red *kapa*, white



On display

- **What:** "Pohaku: Through Hawaiian Eyes"
- **Where:** Bishop Museum Kahill Room and Legacy Gallery
- **When:** 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturday through May 10
- **Costs:** \$5.95; \$4.95 for seniors, children and military with I.D.
- **Also:** Lahe'ena'e Gay lectures at 7 p.m. Monday in the museum's Atherton Heiau, \$5. She also leads exhibit tours at 11 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., Monday through May 1, and May 3 and 4. Groups of 10 or more need reservations. Call 533-7944.

The flooring of *mano-o heiau*, or a *shark heiau*, on Kauai.

kapa, or certain types of herbs and certain colors of *ti* leaves."

Gay believes that the sites left today represent only 20 to 25 percent of what was here 200 years ago, and if their destruction continues both the Hawaiian culture and the state of Hawaii will suffer.

While we now accept the idea of saving *heiau* because they are sacred, she points out that many other structures, from fishing shrines to terraces surrounding *heiau* and sites associated with natural features, are also sacred.

"Pohaku are the spiritual foundation of the Hawaiian people... but what's happened in the process of time is that people have separated the spiritual value of these sites from their historical, scientific value.

"That's why so many Hawaiians today are so upset about how they're being handled. They're saying that these sites aren't just piles of stones. They have histories, they have lives, they have spiritual meaning to us. That's why we want them saved."

To recognize their spiritual aspect, people viewing the exhibit will be allowed to present *hookupu*, or traditional Hawaiian offerings to the *pohaku* displayed beside Gay's photos.

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Lahe'ena'e Gay: "The stone was the only aspect of Hawaiian culture that everybody used."

POHAKU: Auntie kindles interest in sacred stone

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After the exhibit closes, these hookupu, either lei or offerings (excluding food) wrapped in three ti leaves, are to be buried on the museum grounds to make their love and prayers part of the museum's collection of pohaku.

The destruction of sites also hurts the future of tourism in Hawaii. Over the years, she says, visitors at sites with public access have spotted her with cameras and gear, and figuring that she knew something, they began to ask questions.

Tourists want to know what a site is, where they can find more of them, and they want to know where the real Hawaiians are and what happened to their culture.

Gay says there is a new generation of tourists who want to experience the real identity of the places they visit, whether it's the Amazon rain forest or the Alaskan tundra.

"More and more visitors leave Hawaii disappointed because it's just another New York, Chicago, or god forbid, Los Angeles. We're destroying our future assets, and our politicians need to know this. But they're not going to know unless people find out this culture is still alive."

Gay thinks that Bishop Museum could do more in presenting Hawaiian culture. Many of the pohaku on display with her photographs are being seen for the first time, she says, and most of the museum's collection of Hawaiian

artifacts has never been seen. She hopes that the exhibit will focus public attention on the museum and encourage it to show its entire collection.

"Many Hawaiians feel that Hawaiian Hall should be Hawaiian Hall, which means that all three levels of the hall should be dedicated to the pre-contact Hawaiian culture... it should be filled with Hawaiian artifacts, not all this mish-mash."

While the museum has been criticized in recent weeks for allegedly covering up the discovery of a woman's heiau in Halawa Valley to prevent realignment of the H-3 freeway, Gay says private-contract archaeologist have been responsible for the loss of far more sites.

out of Hawaii.

And academics, archaeologists, and institutions should seriously consider what oral traditions and cultural beliefs say about a site.

About a year ago, Gay says, the elders who taught her about pohaku told her it was time to share what she knows about pohaku with the outside world.

"The only way destruction of our sites is going to stop, is if people know that we still care, that this is still part of our culture, and that these sites are alive, they breathe. The artifacts that are inside them are like the heart, and the lungs, and the stomach of a human body, and when you take the artifacts, you take part of the life force."

"The Bishop Museum, I believe, has made many errors. But if the press wants to really investigate individuals who are responsible for the destruction of a large majority of Hawaiian cultural materials, they should take a look at the contract archaeological companies that are paid millions and millions of dollars, who answer to no one, who in many cases will take bribes to state that there is nothing of cultural value (at a site)."

That work should be contracted out by the state of Hawaii, making archaeologists accountable to the people of Hawaii, not private developers, she says.

Stronger laws and penalties are also needed to prevent sites being looted and artifacts being taken