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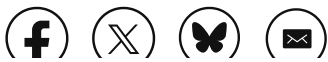


TRAVEL | HAWAII

Hawaii's most mysterious island leaves questions unanswered

By **Christine Hitt**, *Hawaii Contributing Editor*

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Mokumanamana is part of the Northwestern Hawaiiia [NC 2.0](#).



Kekuewa Kikilo'i/2008 Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument



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Hawaii's most mysterious island leaves questions unanswered

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Hawaii is known for its eight main islands, but there are actually 137 islands in the archipelago, including reefs, atolls and islets, stretching 1,500 miles across the Pacific. Of all these, there's one island that sparks great curiosity — and leaves some questions unanswered.

I'm not referring to Niihau, the invite-only "forbidden" island owned by the Robinson family off the island of Kauai. I'm taking you to the island of Mokumanamana, also known as Necker Island. [Watch More](#) ✕

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About 430 miles northwest of Honolulu, Mokumanamana is 46 acres in size and uninhabited. It's part of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument established by President George W. Bush in 2006.

What's unique to Mokumanamana is that it has the highest concentration of religious sites of all the islands in the archipelago.

Upon its rocky landscape and steep slopes are 33 heiau (places of worship) and 17 shelters, where Native Hawaiians often gathered. Some of the heiau are smaller than the ones that you would see in the main Hawaiian Islands, but a lot of figures with human shapes were also found on Mokumanamana. No one knows where they were made.

"On the crest of those hills are these heiau, temples that are smaller than the ones that you would see in the main Hawaiian Islands, but a lot of

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them,” said Dr. Kekuewa Kikiloi, director of the Kamakakuokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies at the University of Hawaii.

Kikiloi wrote his dissertation in 2012 on two Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, including Mokumanamana, visiting three times by boat, totaling 28 days of mapping and surveying sites.



Masked boobies and red-footed boobies rest on a Native Hawaiian religious archeological site made up of upright stones on Mokumanamana in Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. Photo: [\(c\) 2008](#), shared by [CC BY-NC 2.0](#). [Watch More](#)

Mokumanamana is an older island at a later stage of erosion, and is eroding, lacking water and agricultural resources.

struggled to find definitive answers to questions like why people chose to come here, was it only Native Hawaiians — and why they left.

“There isn’t any resource [on Mokumanamana] that Native Hawaiians didn’t have in the main Hawaiian Islands,” Kikiloi pointed out, “so it doesn’t make sense for people to go, you know, 500 miles on open ocean in very rough conditions to gather birds they could get in their backyard.”

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Though there had long been speculation the island’s shrines were similar to altars in the Tuamotu Islands in the south Pacific and the stone figures were possibly made by Marquesans (the people of the Marquesas Islands in the south Pacific), Kikiloi used radiocarbon dating to conclude Mokumanamana’s frequent visitors were Native Hawaiians starting in the 1300s.

He found basalt tools sourced from Oahu, Kauai, and Nihoa Islands. It’s his belief that small parties of Hawaiians visited Mokumanamana seasonally for ceremonies.

“The motivation seems like it was because of the island’s geographic position right on the Tropic of Cancer,” said Kikiloi. The same is directly overhead during



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the summer solstice. "The motivation then probably had something to do with the afterlife and sort of this idea of trying to connect with ancestral spirits in the west at these and the other Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, which are thought as the god lands or the spiritual realm."



Kii pohaku, stone figures, found on Mokumanamana are unlike any other found in the Hawaiian Islands. Photo: [\(c\) 2016](#) , shared by [CC BY-NC 2.0](#).

Kaleomokuokanalu Chock

All of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands have cultural significance, but only two islands, Mokumanamana and another called N
archaeological materials. However, in Hawaii it lacks cultural significance.



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Maunakea Volcano on the Island of Hawaii is another spiritual place that also lacks documented evidence of human activity at its summit compared with lower elevations. However, Hawaiians believe it to be a hallowed space reserved to the highest chiefs and priests.

“Things associated with godly things and deities and akua and gods, that's not a place for man,” said Kikiloi. “They don't build in the place where the gods actually sit.”

In his research of Mokumanamana, Kikiloi was able to find historical records written by Native Hawaiians in olelo Hawaii (Hawaiian language) newspapers documenting oral traditions of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, which provide more clues. He says the constant theme among the archival stories are of gods coming from that region and settling in the main islands or of epic heroes going to the region for mana as part of a rite of passage.

The Hawaiian word mana is impossible to summarize in a few words, but is often translated to mean a supernatural or divine power. It is a feeling or experience that's indescribable in words, passed down through family lines or acquired in different ways. Sacred places and the spiritual realm can also hold mana.



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If you break down Moku-mana-mana, mana is found twice. The island's name can be interpreted in different ways, but one translation is island of "exponential power," according to Kikiloi, which is fitting for an island where religious ceremonies were no doubt held.

Over time, Mokumanamana gradually lost its visitors. Kikiloi says that while early explorers and researchers had assumed that people disappeared or abandoned the island, Native Hawaiians were still going in the 1800s, before the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii.

"Nothing happened to the people, they were going back and forth all the time," he said. "It's just, by the 1900s when people went to document, by then, nobody was going there. But just 20 years earlier, people were going."

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Today, as part of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, general visitation is not allowed except for scientific research and cultural purposes. The [Polynesian Voyaging Society's](#) canoes, Hokulea and Hikianalia, have made visits with cultural practitioners to the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, including Mokumanamana, [since the early 2000s](#) revitalizing culture to the area.

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Kikiloi said he hopes that in the future, Native Hawaiians will continue to use these islands as a pathway to reconnect to the land in meaningful ways.



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Editor's note: SFGATE recognizes the importance of diacritical marks in the Hawaiian language. We are unable to use them due to the limitations of our publishing platform.

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