

NOT BY ANY OTHER NAME...

'A rose by any other name...', is another myth for the trash bin now that the Hawaiian names 'Laniakea' and 'Powehi' have flown into the celestial skies where they are destined to permanently reside.

THEY DID IT! POWEHI! So sweet it broke da ear. Absolutely perfect, and not the first time ohana in Ha-Ha Land have pulled off a really stupendous feat like this. No accident either. It comes natural to native Hawaiians and other locals who grew up in paradise within ears-length of a marvelous language, way west of the mainlanders.

Jessica Dempsey and Geoffrey Bower were describing the first photographs ever taken of a black hole to language professor, Larry Kimura, in a conference room at the ['Imiloa Astronomy Education Center](#) at UH-Hilo, where astronomers Geoffrey Bower, [Chief Scientist at AISAA](#), Dough Simon, Director of the [France-Canada-Hawaii Telescope](#) and Jessica Kimura, Deputy Director of the [James Clerk Maxwell Telescope](#) had been gathered by Ka'iu Kimura, Director of the Education Center to ask Dr. Kimura if he might suggest a good name for a celestial object that had just been visually and photographically confirmed for the first time.

Like the first picture NASA took of the Whole Earth, we now have a picture of a Whole Black Hole, as seen by an array of 8 global telescopes including the JMCT and the SMA telescopes on Maunakea. Before the astronomers had finished their descriptions of the black hole, Professor Kimura interrupted them, "...it's already been said. This has already been thought of." Dr. Kimura didn't need to go rummaging through a lot of big dictionaries or pull some old musty books down from his shelves. It was right there on the tip of his tongue, and it just rolled off. "POWEHI" he said.

This had happened before of course, this Hawaiian naming of an important celestial object. Twice before, in fact. The name 'Laniakea', "immeasurable heavens", is a gigantic supercluster of galaxies to which the earth, the milky way and 100,000 other galaxies are joined in a perpetual cosmic dance. On that occasion the name 'Laniakea' just rolled off the tongue of Professor Nawa'a Napoleon, a former student of Dr. Kamura, as mellifluous and musical as the most sensuous of dancers. No mainland poet could have come close to a name that so precisely embraced the wonder and beauty of the thing being named. Just the sound of it is sheer poetry, 'Laniakea'

In 2017, the Hawaiian language offered up another amazingly apt name for an important celestial object. Designated '1I/2017 U1', this first known interstellar visitor got a more suitable name 'Oumuamua', a name midwived by Dr. Kimura in consultation with the Pan-STARR Observatory team at Haleakala. What could possibly be more suitable as a name for this small traveler from afar that had traversed such vast distances to say hello to us? 'Oumuamua' literally means first messenger from afar or from the remote past, a scout. Even the sound of the word (pronounced oh MOO-uh MOO-uh ) has an affectionate, welcoming ring, fitting for such an object.

There is now a third Hawaiian name in the offering, in much the same aloha spirit of the first two, but for a different celestial object and a different name. Powehi is a tiny object in comparison to Laniakea. However, it is just as grand and just as important to the scientific community, and just as wondrous to the rest of us. In fact, many of the the galaxies of Laniakea had been observed and photographed long before we knew the structure and almost unimaginable size of Laniakea. Only by mapping and defining that structure were we in a position to even give it a name. Powehi, on the other hand, is something we've never seen before. There were theories and mathematics telling us black holes must exist. We observed other objects that were near black holes and presumed it was black holes that were making them behave as they did. But we had never really seen one.

Well, we've seen one now, with the help of a global effort using 8 telescopes, including the JCMT and SMA, on Maunakea, and some very elegant and complicated engineering to get them all working together. The pictures came in and the scientists were stunned. The object was photographed and we have all seen that image now. Only one thing remained, it needed a name. Thanks to Professor Kimura, once again, we've got that too.

We might take a moment to wonder if the first Polynesians to cross the vast ocean on their way to Hawaii might have looked up at the night sky and by chance seen a supernova, perhaps the first ever in their experience? Would it be a nui nui event? What would they have named it? Naming the first black hole ever seen must be something like that. This achievement is certainly a nui nui event for us. It also appears that the right name for the object is already at hand, as if it had been sitting, waiting for just the right object to come along and claim it.

This is exactly what Professor Kamura meant on March 28th when asked by that small group of astronomers at the Education Center what a good name might be for this black hole. "It's already been said," was his response. 'Powehi' is the name he suggested. Powehi, the embellished god of creation, the figure in Hawaiian creation stories that resides in the dark, dark center of all creation. What could be more fitting than that? How like a black hole the name 'Powehi' really is (at least for what we know of black holes.) One didn't have to be a poet to think of that name. One simply had to speak Hawaiian. It comes quite naturally, right out of the language.

I would wager there isn't a single poet on all the mainland who could have come up such perfect names. Not for Laniakea, not for Oumuamua, not for Powehi. Why? Because in the whole English dictionary there isn't a single word that seems more perfectly suited for these structures than those names the Hawaiian language readily had on hand. 'Powehi', 'Laniakea' and 'Oumuamua' capture the sense of what they name as well as having a sound that is much like the feeling of what is being named. If there is no word in one's language that does just that, then it really doesn't matter how good a poet you are, you won't be able to find such well-matched names no matter how hard you try. Hawaiian language, it seems, has just those properties which give its words both the sense and the poetry of things. The fact that the language has provided two such fitting names in succession also helps to demonstrate that this feature of the Hawaiian language is no accident. It is part of the nature of the language itself.

Nearly as stunning as the photos of Powehi is the fact that the Hawaiian language appears to incorporate a unique gift that it has to offer everyone, a language that also functions as natural poetry. It is a fact nearly as interesting as the photo of Powehi itself. It means the Hawaiian language has something to offer the rest of us mainlanders, by way of language, that English does not have. People who speak it don't need to be poets, they speak poetically because the poetry is built into the way Hawaiians speak. This quality tends to permit the speakers of Hawaiian to express things other cultures and languages might find difficult or impossible to say, much as poetry serves the function, in many cultures, to say what otherwise cannot be said.

Observers within and outside Hawaiian culture have remarked on the connectivity of all things as a dominant part of the Hawaiian world view. Everything is related to everything else is the way I have heard Hawaiians put it when reflecting on their own nature. Perhaps this is the result of living for a long time on relatively small and very isolated land masses. Under those circumstances one might tend to notice that changes in any aspect of their world, be it physical, spiritual, conceptual or natural imply changes in every other part of one's world. If that is what one notices, then anything, including something so seemingly trivial as naming an object, would need to be related to how a chosen name works in relation to every other aspect of one's life.

In this instance of Professor Kimura's response to the question of choosing a name for a remote celestial object, it can be seen that his first instinct was to reach into the realm of his own ancestral mythology and spiritual relationship (in his own words, "my lineage") to his family and community. The name 'Powehi' was an obvious choice. Their creator myth has many properties that can be easily be associated with black holes—chaos, darkness, intensity and lots of embellishments.

More importantly, the name connects the named object to the cultural life of the one who names it and hence to their community; a creation mythology, in this case, which is in turn connected to all the other natural, spiritual, physical and cultural ways of the people themselves. Not only was this connection made by Professor Kimura in the abstract, sourced to a centuries-old creation chant, Kumulipo, but it is literally the case that it came by way of a family connections. Among the astronomers who sought out Dr. Kimura for a name for the black hole, the aforementioned Jessica Dempsey and Ka'iu Kimura are none other than Professor Kimura's nieces. What could more relate a family connection to this naming of a new celestial body and to those-who-name-things than that? If one were to ask me, I'd say the whole process in Ha-Ha Land is just one big coconut wireless, one of its headsets now being located about 53 million light-years from here.

Naming things in this way, with overlapping connections and modalities, Professor Kimura didn't just name some object that day, he enfolded the object to be named within an already established way of Hawaiian life. In short, he sought to embrace that black hole and make it a part of what he, his nieces, his lineage and the entirety of his culture already knew and had practiced for hundreds of years, rather than some object that was apart and distinct. Some would call this facility for being conscious of the property of inclusion into the existing patterns and structures of one's life, "wisdom."

In contrast, western ways of naming things often engender an attempt to individualize the object to be named; to separate it, to give it a unique identity. Sometimes the name associates the object being named with another person or object as a way expressing approval of some quality or wishing, by sympathetic magic, to transfer those qualities from the source into the body of the person or thing being given an identical name. That is a wholly different approach to the way things are named in Hawaiian culture.

The primary connection of Kimura's choice of the name 'Powehi' seems pretty obvious when one thinks about it in this light. The Hawaiian environment and its connecting mythology already has a goddess Pelé residing in the mountains of fire, her sister, Namakaokahai, is at home in the ocean which she shares with Kanola, another ocean god, and many other gods and goddesses who are identified with some particular place or residence. What could be more fitting than to provide a suitable residence for Po as well, the god associated with the forces of creation and the dark center of nothingness? A 'somewhere in space' residence is a natural for that, and a black hole would seem to fit the bill nicely. What could be more natural and connected than for Po, a god located within the darkest forces of creation and a nothingness that gives birth to everything, to reside in the black holes of the universe?

If one wished to extend this mythology, it wouldn't be hard to imagine Po residing in all of the multitude of black holes in the universe where creation, born from the darkest and chaotic energies of space-time, is happening all the time. We might further liken these residences of Po as exquisite adornments, beads or rare gems, sewn on the gown of Laniakea who, much like the fabric of space-space time itself, spreads before us in immeasurable splendor. I am not saying such stories would suit the sensibilities of native Hawaiians, only that once the connection between the object named and the rest of their world is established, normal storytelling, rituals and other aspects of Po's new sky-dwelling character can be fully explored within the context of the whole of cultural life and its talk-story processes.

Such name-gifts to the world as these, that we may better appreciate the science and the poetry of these objects, brings to mind that honoring this gift is not only for the benefit of native Hawaiians who can take pride in their contribution to the world's vocabulary. It should remind us that the gifts of their language are as much for the sake of non-Hawaiians. It is a gift of knowledge and experience from an ancient culture that may now be used to enrich everyone's life and solve problems for quite different, modern and external cultures. I, for example, would never have found my way online to the images of Laniakea and that wonder and beauty that has enriched my life had it not been for the name 'Laniakea' along with my family connection to the islands and my interest in them. I would never have even bothered to look further into the matter had the name been, say, "SC1354" or "BH M87", mentioned in passing in some scientific journal.

Who can say what other gifts of poetry, music, technology or other artifacts in the repositories of Hawaiian culture might not be the very things the rest of the modern world can use to fix some of its own problems, or add to the art treasures of the world? If not for the gift of the name, Laniakea would be nothing more than another object in a universe of hundreds of billions of objects.

It is ironic that two individuals who provided us with Hawaiian names for these stellar structures have spent their lives trying to preserve the Hawaiian language and keep it from disappearing altogether. It is sad to recall that the Hawaiian language nearly did disappear, and that the attempt to eradicate it was a quite deliberate exercise on the part of those who now are being gifted with exquisite samples from the very same language they set out to destroy. That an almost extinguished language is now able to offer objects of great value and beauty, due to the efforts of those who have worked to preserve the culture and language of the Hawaiian people, is certainly something we can all celebrate together. A once seriously endangered culture has now returned to offer its former adversaries a gift of language that is without price.

Christians have a word for that. It's called 'grace', and it means that one is provided gifts from the god(s) whether they are deserved or not. There is no qualification for receiving grace, nor anything one has to do to receive such gifts. Whether one uses the term in a religious context or not, it is still a very good word. It is how one might think of the gift of the words 'Laniakea' and 'Oumuamua' and 'Powehi', gifts with no conditions, no strings attached. The words were there, the words were offered.

Language also has an ohana spirit all its own. The names Hawaiians offered to the astronomers created an ohana language connection between those communities. The astronomers, in turn, offered those names to all of us, thus extending that thread of ohana. Saying that 'ohana extends itself through the threads of language' is really not too far from saying 'creation comes out of the darkness of nothing.'

There remains one other striking feature about this gift, this connection in the naming of things. Indeed, it is something that might overshadow all the rest of the things about this subject that we have to celebrate. These particular gifts from an indigenous culture to a modern civilization are a good reminder of what might have been lost had not the Hawaiian language been preserved. That being true, it must also be true in every instance where indigenous languages and cultures are on the brink of being lost. Every 14 days a language disappears somewhere, forever. By the end of this century, 7,000 languages will have completely disappeared.

Sad as that is for the people who suffer that loss, it is equally sad for outsiders who might have otherwise been enriched, or even solved critical problems with what had been stored in the repositories of those extinct languages and peoples. If this occasion serves as a small example of something as simple as the value of naming things correctly and reaching across the barriers that separate people and cultures, might it not also serve to remind us that those losses are preventable for any culture that is in danger of vanishing into the dark nothingness of oblivion? If the gift of 'Laniakea' and 'Powehi' can make us more aware of that and do something about it, then perhaps we will find a way to preserve all similarly threatened languages along with the peoples who inhabit them.

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