

Lawai International Center Once Lost, Now Found



By Jocelyn Fujii

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The 88 Buddhist shrines of Lawai are the only replica outside of Japan of the 1,000 mile Pilgrimage of Shikoku, Japan.

If you've ever doubted the power of a community to alter the course of history, look no further than Lawai International Center near the south shore of Kaua'i. In a historic valley where Queen Emma had her summer home, and where Hawaiians, Taoists, Shinto and Buddhists built their heiau and healing sanctuaries, a miracle is taking place, one volunteer at a time.

Now a cultural and spiritual gathering place, Lawai International Center was for decades an abandoned, overgrown, forgotten piece of paradise with a \$6-million price tag: 32 acres of tree-shaded land bordered by a steep hillside in a pastoral neighborhood. To developers, it was catnip. To the handful of Kaua'i residents who knew what lay hidden beneath the tangle of weeds and overgrowth, it was a treasure worth saving.

Eighty-eight Buddhist shrines, made by hand in 1904 by the workers at Koloa Sugar Company, Hawai'i's first commercial sugar plantation, snaked up the hillside under vines and alien plants grown over decades of neglect. “This has always been a natural place of healing. In the earliest days in this valley, there was a heiau [temple] and other sacred sites where the Hawaiians, and later the Asian immigrants, brought their wounded and sick to heal,” explained Lynn Muramoto, president of Lawai International Center and the moving force behind its restoration. “Between 1904 and the 1940s, people on the island walked barefoot to Lawai to be healed or to ask for miracles. When they came from Hanalei, they would sleep along the way, since it took several days to get to the site.” Diverse ethnicities,

religions and cultural groups have been drawn to Lawai Valley from the earliest times, she said, and the plantation workers continued that tradition.

“The people who built these artifacts were lay people. They put their sincerity and longings into the stone and wood ‘hybrid Buddhas’ that were found in the shrines along this hillside,” she said. “The 88 shrines are a miniaturized version of a 1,000-mile pilgrimage in Shikoku, Japan, built more than 1,000 years ago. Lawai is the only such replica outside of Japan. Here it was, hidden and unknown since the plantation community moved on. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to Grandma Takano Nonaka for keeping this place alive.”

Koloa Sugar Company was founded in 1835, but long before it harvested its final sugar crop in 1996, the neighboring Lawai site experienced a high rate of attrition. The old-timers died or moved away, and the events held there, such as sumo wrestling, had long since died down. But Takano Nonaka, mother of 10, visited faithfully for more than 60 years, burrowing with her son through the overgrown foliage to pay her respects to a place that had comforted her since she arrived from Japan in 1921. After meeting Nonaka and researching the site's history, Muramoto was seized with a passion: to launch an effort to acquire the land, protect it from bulldozers, restore the shrines to their original splendor and open the site as a nonprofit, non-denominational, non-religious cultural center where people from all over the world could gather for quiet contemplation

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Taiko drummers perform at Lawai's Pilgrimage of Compassion where hundreds of people gather annually.

and personal renewal amid the artifacts dotting the hillside.

Volunteers soon gathered around her, and Lawai International Center was established in 1991 with the goal of acquiring, protecting and restoring the site, and also to remember Hawai'i's first immigrants. Even with the daunting \$6-million asking price, Lawai's supporters sold orchids, \$5 bags of mango seed, malassadas, beef stew and whatever they could grow or produce to raise the funds necessary to achieve the vision. Miraculously, market fluctuations and repeated discussions with the realtor eventually resulted in a reduction of the purchase price to \$250,000. Financial "angels" and more committed volunteers appeared, and the purchase of the land was completed. The group intensified its efforts to restore the land and artifacts, and by the time she died in 2003 at 99 years old, Nonaka was secure in the knowledge that Lawai would be forever protected.

Community members have volunteered at the site for more than 20 years now. Everyone from scholars and college administrators to construction workers, schoolteachers and Boy Scout Troop 83 show up regularly from the far reaches of the island. They clear, plant, water and build. They bring hedge trimmers, cutters, trucks and hand gardening tools and continue to transform the land, one square foot at a time. Today a wide green lawn greets the visitor, orchid plants line the trail, and a sweeping path for contemplative walks is being cleared along a stream. The trees filter the light, creating frequent rainbows. The winds whisper through the treetops like anthems of remembrance. Landscaping is a never-ending process. According to Muramoto, the master plan calls for a new access road and a gathering pavilion true to the Japanese architecture of the pavilion that was originally there. On the wish list are guest cottages, a

learning center for education and the arts and further development of access routes and infrastructure.

Every year, Lawai's annual Pilgrimage of Compassion features Riley Lee, the first person outside of Japan to be designated Grand Master of shakuhachi, the difficult to play bamboo flute. As the haunting sounds of his shakuhachi echo over the land, hundreds of visitors walk quietly up the hillside, stopping at the shrines along the way. Entertainment varies, but you can always count on an energetic performance by Kaua'i's taiko drummers and a rare appearance by a halau of young hula dancers from Ke Kula Ni'ihau O Kekaha. Reflecting the center's increasingly global reach, the visitor count at the annual Pilgrimage grew from fewer than 200 in 2006 to 700 in 2010.

One of the center's key supporters is baseball luminary Dusty Baker, the former manager of the San Francisco Giants and current manager of the Cincinnati Reds. He was so taken with an article on Lawai, said Muramoto, that he changed his plans mid-air en route to Hawai'i from San Francisco, flew immediately to Kaua'i and upon landing visited Lawai International Center. Today he speaks of his experience to anyone who will listen. He is also on Lawai's honorary board, a body that includes a U.S. Senator, a former Kaua'i mayor, a former State Senator and other prominent citizens.

"Pilahi Pak*i, a revered *kupuna* [elder], said that aloha will be Hawai'i's gift to the new millennium," said Muramoto, her feet planted firmly on the soil of Lawai. "This we truly believe."

Lawai International Center offers an open house on the second and last Sunday of each month, with tours beginning at 10 a.m., noon and 2 p.m. *For more information call 808-639-4300 and visit the website at www.lawaicenter.org.*