Protesters use claims of sacredness for political agendas

By Kenneth R. Conklin

Protesters screaming that Mauna Kea is a sacred place ignore the Hawaiian creation legend that explains why doing astronomy there fulfills the essence of what makes it sacred. Goddess Ho’ohokukalani, the daughter of Sky Father Wakea and Earth Mother Papahanaumoku, is the primordial mother of all humans. She was born on Mauna a Wakea (Wakea’s mountain). Her name means "She Who Placed the Stars in the Heavens." Modern telescopes on Mauna Kea are how today’s people pay homage to the stars our ancestral Mother placed there, which guided the first settlers to navigate to Hawaii and now guide Hokule’a around the world.

Most ethnic Hawaiians today are Christians, who believe in just one God. Therefore most ethnic Hawaiians cannot consider Mauna Kea as sacred in a religious sense referring to the 400,000 ancient Hawaiian gods. Mauna Kea is sacred only in the sense of being a majestic, powerful, special place worthy of reverence and caretaking. It evokes such feelings in all people, including astronomers and the general public, regardless of race or religion.

Ancient Hawaiians had no hesitation digging into the ground near the summit of Mauna Kea and using it for technological and economic reasons. They actually had a rock quarry near the summit, including a factory to manufacture adzes for personal use and trade. They did not consider such activity a desecration of a sacred place. The
numerous small ahu (shrines) there are found throughout Hawaii because Hawaiians gave thanks to the gods in all their ordinary activities, including cutting down trees, planting seeds and fishing. The adz quarry and workshop cover an area seven miles long and 80 times the area of the Thirty Meter Telescope footprint. Quarry workers were ordinary people, not priests; they erected shelters and created quarry waste and human waste. The ancients clearly did not see Mauna Kea as wao akua (realm of the gods forbidden to ordinary people and activities). Today's "cultural practitioners" cannot legitimately object to the telescope projects as desecration of a sacred place, since their ancestors engaged in digging, manufacturing, economic profit-making and waste-making in the same place.

Mauna Kea belongs to all Hawaii's people collectively without regard to race, as part of our government-owned public lands. No particular ethnic or religious group has a right to set it aside for exclusive use, nor to act as administrator to choose who may go there when and for what purpose. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled 9-0 on March 31, 2009, that the ceded lands (including Mauna Kea) belong to the state of Hawaii in fee simple absolute (without any racial distinctions) and that the apology resolution of 1993 is merely a resolution of sentiment irrelevant to ownership of the ceded lands.

Blocking the access road to Mauna Kea is an act of violence that should not be tolerated. The protesters setting up checkpoints and deciding who can pass are exercising a government function in defiance of the real government, and are getting away with it. Government has a responsibility to act swiftly and decisively to maintain the rule of law rather than to coddle a favorite racial group or allow chaos to persist.

The controversy over Mauna Kea, including the "sacred place" claim, is being used cynically as a ploy for attention. Some young adults in search of personal identity are looking for a cause to believe in and a group to belong to; they are easy prey for charismatic leaders looking to recruit followers. Some people of all ages are recreational protesters — they march, chant and wave signs for fashionable and politically correct causes as a hobby instead of fishing, jogging or cheering for a sports team. Some leaders — the Al Sharptons of
Hawaii — insert themselves year after year into whatever controversy grabs attention. These demagogues use manufactured outrage over the TMT project to stir up support for larger agendas. They embarrass us all.

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Opponents of the Thirty Meter Telescope on Mauna Kea set up an occupation site near the summit in April.