

IN THE BEGINNING HAWAIIAN GODS

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Photos by Les Drent



In the beginning in Hawaiian mythology, Po was a vast, empty land, a dark abyss where only one life form dwelled. This was the spirit of Keawe. A single light shown through the darkness of Po-a flame holding the energy of creation.

In this chaotic vortex, Keawe evolved order. He opened his great calabash and flung the lid into the air. As it unfolded, it became the huge canopy of blue sky. From his calabash, Keawe drew an orange disk, hanging it from the sky to become the sun.

Next Keawe manifested himself as Na Wahine, a female divinity considered his daughter. In addition, he became Kane, his own son, also known as Eli or Eli-Eli, who was the male generative force of creation. In the Kumulipo, the best known of the Hawaiian creation chants, the feats of Eli-Eli are detailed in rhythmic litany.

Na Wahine and Kane mated spiritually to produce a royal family, who became additional primary gods worshipped by the Hawaiian people. In ancient chants and rituals, three sons: Ku, Lono, and Kanaloa, along with Kane are the four major Hawaiian gods. Keawe made Kane the ruler of natural phenomena, such as the earth, stones, fresh water. Most importantly, Ku as Kukailimoku was god of war, but he also reigned over woodlands and crops, and in various forms was worshipped by craftsmen. Bird catchers and feather workers appealed to Kuhuluhulumanu, fishermen to Ku'ula, sorcerers to

Kukoa, for example.



Kanaloa was responsible for the southern Pacific Ocean and as such was god of seamen and lord of fishermen. Lono, as lord of the sun and of wisdom, caused the earth to grow green. As a god of medicine, he had a particular interest in keeping herbs and medicinal plants flourishing. Lono was the god who presided over the makahiki season when war ceased and taxes were paid to the ali'i.

Kane and Na Wahine also had daughters.

Among them, Laka was the goddess of hula; Hina was the mother of Maui who pulled the Hawaiian Islands from the ocean; and Kapo was the goddess of the South Pacific and was largely worshipped on Maui. Among the major divinities was the goddess Papa, queen of nature, and the man she married, called Wakea. In legend, Papa and Wakea's first child was born deformed like a taro root. From the child's grave, the first taro plant grew to furnish sustenance to the rest of the human race, which had its origins in this first couple.

The twelfth deity was Milu, lord of the spirit world and lord of Ka-pa'a-he'o, where souls who had departed their sleeping or unconscious mortal body might end up if they were not pardoned by their 'aumakua (personal gods) during their wanderings. One of several entrances to the barren, arid land of Milu was thought to be through a pit situated in the mouth of Waipi'o Valley on the Big Island.



Each man worshipped a deity, or akua, that represented his profession. Gods existed for bird snarers, canoe makers, robbers, kapa makers, fishermen, office cleaning workers, etc. Most farmers revered Lono, who was considered a benign god. When crops ripened, farmers performed religious services to the gods by building a fire to honor whichever god they worshipped, be it Ku, Kane, Lono, or Kanaloa. During the ceremony, food was cooked and portioned out to each man who sat in a circle around an idol of that particular god. A kahuna offered

the food to heaven. After the ceremony was completed, the people could eat freely of the cooked food, but each time new food was cooked in the imu (underground oven), a bit of it had to be offered to the god again before the common man could eat.

Interestingly, kanaka maoli, commoners, could freely worship their personal gods, voicing their own prayers. For the ali'i (royalty), however, a kahu-akua, who was a priest or keeper of the idol, uttered the prayer. The king was the only one allowed to command the construction of a luakini (sacrificial) heiau to honor Kukailimoku, the war god, which required sacrificial offerings of human life during its construction. Lesser chiefs could build mapele, stone temples, to invoke the blessing of gods like Lono who could insure abundant crops. These temples were surrounded with posts carved with images, while inside idols carved of wood, stone or sea urchin spines, or fashioned of feathers attached to woven i'e i'e netting represented various gods. Oracle towers that jutted 20 feet into the sky held offerings made to the gods on wooden platforms far above the ground.

The old gods were disavowed just prior to the coming of Christian missionaries in 1820. Temple idols were pushed over and destroyed, but often commoners were faced with the problem of what to do with stone images that represented various gods, since neglect of the idols might cause unknown disasters. One stone god literally re-surfaced in 1885. An old man who lived with his son and a brother and sister near a fish pond in Kawaihae on the Big Island, woke them all one night, commanding his son to catch three fish from the pond. The girl was told to chew a mouthful of awa and her brother was told to climb a tree for coconuts. The old man directed them to dig in a certain place, where they uncovered a stone idol. The old man circled the idol's neck with coconuts, laid the fish in front of it and poured the awa over its mouth. He told the three young people the god's name was Kane; then he predicted his own death. In three days he was gone.

The stone idol is now displayed at Bishop Museum on O'ahu, an intriguing reminder of the mana, the power, the Hawaiian gods once embodied. Today, though the gods may have disappeared from every day life, in many Hawaiian households, they will never be completely forgotten.

Note: Varying legends and oral histories exist regarding Hawaiian gods and religions. Information for this article was gathered from:

Children of the Rainbow by Leinani Melville, Hawaiian Antiquities by David Malo, The Works of the People of Old by Samuel Kamakau, and Arts and Crafts of Hawai'i (Religion) by Peter H. Buck.

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