

HAWAIIAN RELIGION

by: Katharine Luomala

Hawaiian religion was based on that of their Polynesian ancestors, Neolithic fishermen and horticulturists. They were the first to settle, perhaps around 500 A. D., the fertile and geographically isolated Hawaiian Islands. Although each island from Hawai'i to Kaua'i had changed some of the ancestral beliefs and practices, the similarities between Hawaiian and other Polynesian religions in 1778 impressed Captain James Cook.

Believing that supernatural forces filled sea, sky, and earth, the Hawaiians personified them in countless named and individualized deities, who controlled nature and mankind through their mana, or supernatural power. The people retained such cosmogonic gods from the homeland as Kāne, Kanaloa, Kū, Lono, and Wākea and goddesses like Hina, Papa, and Haumea, but added aspects of these gods, the deified dead, beings like the volcano goddess Pele, and bands of touchy local spirits. This pantheon provided the inherited or acquired guardian gods, or aumakuas, of each individual, family, occupation, or profession. A god communicated its will through dreams, an image, something in nature such as a shark or thunder, or a human prophet.

The priests, or kahunas, mediating between gods and people, were professional or occupational specialists trained, commonly by older kin, in the material techniques and the rituals essential for success in their callings. Of the several organized priesthoods, Kamehameha the Great, a very religious man, supported the higher-ranking and stricter order for the Kū gods of war and sorcery and the lower and milder for the Lono gods of peace and abundance. Each order's high priest, kahuna-nui, its founder's direct descendant and an expert in every branch of religion, wielded political power by advising the ruler on how to win divine support. Failure was attributed to errors in worship, counter-magic, or hidden infractions of taboos. A system of religiously sanctioned permanent and temporary

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taboos controlled every phase of society and everyone's life regardless of rank. The system began, tradition states, when Wākea, Atmosphere, got away from his wife Papa, Earth, to seduce their daughter by having a kahuna say the gods had tabooed two nights for husband and wife to separate.

Public worship was at heiaus, open-air religious centers, with their form, size, equipment, and location dependent on a chief's power to command labor and an architectural kahuna's traditionalism or creativity. A simple unwalled rectangular heiau had an altar, images, and a raised platform. A complex type excluded the populace with stone or palisaded walls to enclose several terraces, an altar, consecrated images, refuse pits, burials, a tapa-covered oracle tower (unique to these islands as Captain Cook observed), and houses for a drum, other sacred objects, an earth oven, and, during taboo periods, for the ruler and important priests. Outside the walls was a House of Papa where the highest-ranking chiefesses, earthly goddesses, worshipped prolific and ever-reborn Haumea (often identified with Papa), a deified Maui chiefess Kihawahine transfigured as a water spirit, and other divine beings.

The walled, exclusive type of heiau was introduced, tradition states, by High Priest Pā'ao, a Tahitian who arrived around the twelfth century. He also introduced human sacrifice, a strict priestly order and ritual for Kū, and his personal god Kā'ili, who as Kū-kā'ili-moku, Kū Island-snatcher, became Kamehameha's inherited aumakua and war god. Pā'ao widened the existing gap between chiefs and commoners with new sacred royal symbols like the red-feather girdle, taboo standards, and the prostrating taboo before those chiefs and chiefesses directly descended from the gods.

Only a king or a paramount chief could build the most sacred type of heiau where burnt human sacrifices were offered to the highest Kū gods. This functional type, called luakini, many (refuse) pits, or po'okanaka, men's heads, was used

at times to pray for national and royal health and prosperity but essentially it was a war temple so that if a subordinate chief built one it was a sign of rebellion. The general term waihou for other heiaus, whether erected by chiefs or chiefesses, referred to "comfortable" heiaus with easier ritual and no human sacrifice. Most had economic functions relating to farming, fishing, hula healing, rain, tapamaking (women's work), or the like. A chief had a religious duty to build these heiaus to pray for divine aid for his chiefdom or to give thanks. Each deity had specific requirements as to size, amount, and color of offerings. Dissatisfied gods sent drought and disease, and commoners abandoned the chiefdom to seek a more religious chief. But if all went well people built smaller heiaus on their allotted lands to further enliven the earth.

Dominating the pantheon for chief and commoner alike were Kāne, Kanaloa, Lono, and Kū. Each in particular but overlapping ways fostered health, abundance, rain, and fertility. Only Kū also had a destructive side. To each name except Kanaloa's Hawaiians attached dozens of descriptive phrases to signify the god's varied aspects or his subordinate gods.

Kanaloa, Kāne's younger brother, was the god of squids and through the magic of words a god of healing because he'e means both squid and to put to flight. Kanaloa rarely had his own shrine or heiau but prayers named him with Kāne, Lono, and Kū, and like them he had a period in the lunar month for special homage. By identifying him with Lucifer and the other three gods with the Trinity, the scholarly, nineteenth-century Christian converts, Kamakau and Kepelino, helped obscure any older roles.

Kāne, whose name means Male or Man, was the most approachable, forgiving, and revered of the four gods. A worshipper prayed, "You and I warm to each other, Kāne," and people said, "Life is sacred to Kāne." While dwelling on earth with Kanaloa, Kāne of the Water of Life would plunge his digging stick into the ground

to release springs of fresh water to mix with his kava, and as a symbolic sexual act to fructify the earth. Before ritually consuming their offering of pork and kava, men prayed for forgiveness of broken taboos or for revenge for sorcery at their family's phallic Stone of Kāne, a single, high, conical stone near a stream. Sweet-potato farmers prayed to their Kāne aumakua of the rain-filled clouds; grateful fishermen left a fish for him and sometimes for Kanaloa at shrines, usually only a rock or a pile of rocks. And after prescribed rituals and an earth-shaking storm, the dead of a Maui ruling family, descendants of Kāne-hekili, Kāne-thunder, were transfigured by their ancestor and aumakua into thunder and lightning.

A former Kāne priest described a congregation sitting silent and motionless on a heiau terrace until Kāne's high priest on a higher terrace had lifted the taboo after his five long prayers. He had invoked about seventy forms of Kāne in clouds, rain, and forest growth, the other three great gods, and such goddesses of hula and of the forest greenery decorating the heiau as Laka, Hi'iaka, the latter's sister Kapo and their oldest sister Pele, who got violent if ignored. The priest's last prayer, heard only by the chief at his side, was on the third and highest and most sacred stage of the oracle tower where the god revealed his will.

Lono, the god of two related sources of abundance--peace and seasonal winter storms--was also a god of healing and had numerous rain and medical Houses of Lono. The Makahiki, the longest ceremonial period, involved everyone to celebrate Lono's annual (makahiki) return for four months of the rainy season to preside over rituals for health and ample rain, ritualized collection of taxes, recreation, and release from work. In 1779 Captain Cook was accepted as Lono-i-ka-makahiki because he arrived during this period, anchored at the bay called Kealakekua, The Path of the God (Lono), and his masted sails resembled the Lono symbol leading the procession of tax collectors and Lono priests on their coastal circuit of the island.

The Lono symbol was a long staff topped with a carved human image across

whose neck a crosspiece supported a rectangular white tapa flag and other sacred objects. A shorter staff led a procession in the opposite direction. The principal procession stopped at each district boundary for the taxes placed near a stone altar holding another Lono symbol, namely a carved wooden head of a pig to represent fertility. If the collectors were satisfied with the number of pigs, dogs, vegetables, kava, and the like the Lono priest blessed the district, and the party moved on. At the ruler's compound it was given a feast. Rites included the ruler putting a valuable whale-tooth necklace on the Lono figure and his wife draping it with fine white tapa. Later the ruler redistributed the taxes to his subordinate chiefs who supported him in battle and held land as a reward.

While the ruler, the Lono priests, and their attendants were busy with numerous rituals for the general welfare, the populace engaged in hula, sports, and games, each with its guardian gods. Wrestling and boxing matches recalled that when Lono learned after killing his human wife that she had not been unfaithful he had become insane temporarily and fought violent matches. Finally he had left the islands in his canoe but had promised to return. To signal that the Makahiki was over and people should return to work and chiefs could go to war again the priests dismantled the Lono staffs and set adrift a canoe full of gifts to ensure Lono's return the next year.

Each morning and evening the head of a family took down the net-covered Gourd of Lono encircling the neck of the image on the altar in the men's eating house. He prayed for his family, the commoners, and the chiefs, and ritually ate from the Gourd which represented the earth and its bounty, its cover the heavens, and its handle the rainbow. To lift the taboo on eating a new crop, he or a kahuna performed first-fruits rites, and then put the Gourd in the midst of the male guests invited to feast. He invited them again when his son after weaning entered

the men's house, never again to eat with women. Placing a roasted pig's head on the altar and an ear in the Gourd (so Lono would listen), the kahuna prayed that the boy would thrive and fruit like the vine of a gourd. Later the boy would be subincised and ceremonially initiated into eating pork, a man's food taboo to women.

Kū, Upright, and his sister-wife Hina, Prostrate, united the people into a single stock, for they were the male and female reproductive principles. Kū also symbolized the east, sunrise, and the right hand; Hina the west, sunset, and the left. Such antithesis was common. The couple was invoked in pregnancy and child care; and their subordinate gods or aspects presided over many activities on land and sea. Kū'ula-kai, Red Kū of the Sea, was the fishermen's chief god, and fishing heiaus were named kū'ula for him. His wife was Hina Sea-fossicker. Their siblings lived on upland farms and in forests. The chief forest god was Kū-moku-hāli'i, Kū Island-spreader, married to Lea, sister of the Hinas. She warned woodsmen of decayed trees by taking the form of an elepaio, a flycatcher, to peck at them for insects. This Kū was the chief god of canoemakers whose kahunas conducted rites at the foot of the chosen tree, usually an ohia (Metrosideros spp.) embodied in another Kū and Hina. Farmers venerated Kū of the Digging Stick. Each occupation had numerous Kū gods.

The most severe and complex rituals sought aid of the highest Kū gods during a national crisis--war, famine, disease--after the king had first built or rebuilt a luakini.

Kū-nui-ākea, The Supreme Kū, manifested himself in the ceremonies as the Kū gods of war, sorcery, and binding conquered chiefdoms into a kingdom. A ten-day, four-part luakini service required numerous men and pigs as sacrifices, and additional pigs to feed the highborn worshippers and priests. If taboo-breakers war captives, or slaves were unavailable as burnt sacrifices, some large ulua.

fish (Carangidae), were substituted.

The first set of rites held in the presence of chiefs and workmen in the refurbished luakini centered on a stylized parade led by a kahuna with a taboo-standard and followed by a naked man impersonating the god Kahoali'i and the feather gods (a Hawaiian innovation) held by their keepers. The workers then went home. The second set took the king, the feather gods, and the kahunas to a forest to ritually cut ohia trees for new images. A taboo-breaker was sacrificed in rites for the first tree, as from it came the block of wood to represent Kū on the altar. Marching back to the heiau with their logs, the loudly shouting procession seized human victims along their route. After the images had been carved, dressed in red malos, and consecrated, the third part of the ceremony had kahunas chanting all night long while worshippers listened. In the fourth part a kahuna prayed for an hour while the motionless worshippers, arranged in rows behind the images, sat with bowed heads and sometimes with upraised arms. The concluding rites were in the House of Papa where a kahuna and the highest chiefesses, earth-born goddesses, freed the worshippers from taboo before they returned to secular life.

Women, being considered inferior and polluting, were excluded from all men's heiaus and shrines. However, three chiefesses, earthly goddesses, are reported as exceptions. An example is Keakea-lani-wahine, Keakea Royal-woman, who, on succeeding her mother as ruler of Hawai'i, had charge of all its heiaus and in each luakini made human sacrifices, pigs, and other offerings. Nevertheless, she took the ritual meals apart from the men and ate no pork, bananas, coconuts, or other foods taboo to women. The taboo system required all men and women to eat separately, eat food proper to their sex, and eat food cooked by men for themselves and the women in separate earth ovens. Taboo-breakers were slain or mutilated. Persons threatened with death for any reason were spared if

they reached certain heiaus or sites designated as places of refuge.

Medical kahunas, specialists in particular diseases, each with its guardian gods, believed that an illness resistant to ordinary treatment, such as by herbs, was due to an aumakua's anger at broken taboos and therefore required prayers and offerings. Most kahunas, however, specialized in infertility, pregnancy, and children's diseases.

In death a person's soul was prevented from falling into Milu, a realm of eternal darkness, by its aumakua who ushered it to its ancestors' part of a happy realm in Pō, Underworld. A soul without an aumakua wandered homeless on earth, ate spiders and moths, and became a malevolent ghost. A soul with a god from the Pele family might be transfigured into a volcanic flame if a priest, having prayed and made offerings, cast the corpse or part of it into the crater. Other souls might be transfigured into embodiments of their gods--a shark, thunder, water spirit, bird, or something else. Deified and transfigured highborn chiefs and chiefesses became their descendants' gods.

Dead commoners were buried wherever convenient. The cleaned bones of some royalty were hidden in caves to prevent enemies using them for fishhooks; the bones of other royalty were encased in plaited sennit caskets of humanoid shape and deposited in the mausoleum Hale-o-Keawe on Hawai'i. Sorcery was always suspected when a highborn person died. A kahuna trained to identify sorcerers held a kuni, burn, ceremony in which he used part of the victim's corpse. When the kahuna's god had revealed the sorcerer's name the accused, even if a chief, was killed and burned.

Kamehameha the Great, who believed his many gods had made him head of a unified feudal kingdom, left, at his death in 1819, a state religion based on the taboo system that protected the mana and authority of the gods and their chiefly descendants from spiritual contamination and consequent weakness. However,

that same year, Liholiho, his son and successor as Kamehameha II, abolished the official religion without replacing it with another. The decision he reluctantly accepted had been made principally by the most politically powerful of his father's wives, by his mother who was a very sacred chiefess, and by the highest priest of the Kū order. Liholiho signalled the overthrow of the taboo system by publically eating with the two women and eating food cooked in the same oven. The Kū priest began destroying heiaus and images, and the excited populace followed suit. Some hid their images and worshipped in secret; not all customs and beliefs vanished, for faith in the aumakuas, for example, lingers on. The only military resistance, that from Liholiho's cousin who had inherited Kū-kā'ili-moku, ended with his death in battle.

The reasons, still debated, for the overthrow include, for example, weariness of the burden of taboos on chiefs and commoners, men and women, and the changes brought by Europeans, particularly a market economy that was hampered by the chiefs' religious, social, and economic obligations to their people based on the ancient and successful traditional subsistence economy. A few months after Liholiho's act a band of Protestant missionaries from Boston arrived, unaware of the event until their ship was offshore of Hawai'i.

Bibliography

The volumes listed below are classics. Although Malo, Kamakau, Ii, and Kepelino became Christian converts whose adopted religion sometimes colors their views of the traditional culture, they were personally familiar with it and also learned a great deal from their elders. Ii, for example, as a boy became an attendant of Liholiho, later Kamehameha II, and as an adult held important positions in the government of the kingdom. The translators and editors have added important explanatory notes. Beckwith's translation and chapters of annotation of the Kumulipo, a creation and genealogical chant of King Kalākaua and his sister Queen Lili'uokalani, helps make the magnificent but cryptic chant comprehensible, presents different interpretations by modern Hawaiians, and discusses the importance that nobility placed on descent. Her Hawaiian Mythology is irreplaceable as a comprehensive reference to the pantheon, demigods, romantic characters, and others; it has the added value of comparisons with the rest of the Pacific to put the material into perspective. Abraham Fornander, a nineteenth-century judge married to a Hawaiian chiefess, made an unparalleled collection of myths, traditions, tales, poems, prayers, and descriptions of religion. Thrum's notes shed light on obscure references.

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