PELE

Goddess of Hawai‘i’s Volcanoes

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Expanded Edition
FOLK TALES

The mountain slopes of Pele's domain are forested by 'ōhi'a-lehua. The tree is named 'ōhi'a, and its blossom is named lehua. They were once a man and a woman.

The young man 'Ōhi'a and his beautiful companion Lehua were inseparable lovers. Pele became attracted to 'Ōhi'a and came to him as a lovely young woman, but he had no time for her, his attention being devoted entirely to Lehua. Pele's envy grew into rage and she killed them both.

Reproached by her sisters, her anger cooled and she grieved over what she had done. Repentant, she turned 'Ōhi'a's body into a tree, and Lehua's body into the flower of that tree. That is why the rough-barked 'ōhi'a tree is of masculine appearance, whereas the feathery lehua blossom which flowers upon the 'ōhi'a seems softly feminine. In this way the two lovers have become as inseparable for eternity as they once were in mortal life.

Two girls were roasting breadfruit when an old woman approached them asking for food and water. One of the girls gladly shared what she had, but the other refused with the excuse that her food had been consecrated to the goddess Laka.

Soon afterwards a flood of lava came through their district. The stingy girl's home was consumed, but the generous girl's home was spared.
Hōlua was the sport of racing narrow sleds with long hardwood runners down long slides built up of rockwork and thatched with slippery grasses, probably laid over a shingling of coarse mats. It was a dangerous sport in which only chiefs participated.

Near Kapoho in the Puna district, at the summit of a hōlua slide, a proud young chief named Kahāwali was approached by a strange woman who challenged him to a race. He refused without bothering to be polite, and launched his sled down the slide. Hearing screams from the spectators below and a
roaring sound behind him, he glanced back and saw the woman pursuing him all aflame, riding a flow of fiery lava.

Knowing that the woman he had scorned was none other than Pele, Kahawali used all his skill to gain speed and keep ahead of her. At the base of the slide he leaped from his sled and dashed for the seashore, the lava hot upon his heels. His brother happened to be there in a canoe. He scrambled into it and they paddled out, narrowly escaping the lava as it rushed into the sea. Certain that he could never be safe on Hawai‘i, he raised the sail and fled to Maui.
Pele could not tolerate braggarts. The story is told of a man who, while visiting the volcanoes, boasted to everyone about the superior beauty of his home district. He returned to find it covered with lava flows.

In this century, the story is often told of a man who was driving alone at night over the high road that traverses the saddle between the mountains Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa. In an area of desolate lava and thick fog his headlights revealed the figure of an old Hawaiian woman beside the road. Stopping the car he offered her a ride, and she got into the rear seat.

He drove on, his entire attention on the winding road ahead. After the fog had cleared he remembered his passenger. He politely attempted to start a conversation, but received no reply. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that the rear seat was empty.

HOW PELE HELPED KAMEHAMEHA

In 1790, after seven years of warfare, the remaining contenders for the rule of the Island of Hawai‘i were Keoua, son of the late King Kalani‘ōpu‘u, and his cousin Kamehameha, feared by the ruling chiefs of all the islands as a dangerous upstart. While Kamehameha was campaigning on Maui and Moloka‘i, Keoua attacked along the windward coast of Hawai‘i, laying waste to districts loyal to Kamehameha.

Kamehameha hastened back to Hawai‘i with his fleet and army. After several inconclusive battles, Keoua returned to his home district of Ka‘ū. His army marched in three groups, many of the soldiers accompanied by wives and children.

As Keoua, with the first division, was passing Kīlauea volcano, the land was shaken by earthquakes. Keoua made prayers to Pele, and the first division passed through safely. Then, according to the historian S. M. Kamakau, there was a violent
explosion: “A pillar of sand and rock rose straight up in the air — and a flame of fire appeared at its top. It looked as if a little hill were being pushed straight up by a larger one until it burst into masses of sand and rock. The second division of Keoua’s army was completely destroyed in a rain of hot ashes, rocks, and poisonous gasses.”

The rear contingent hastened forward after the cloud had cleared, rejoicing that they had suffered no injury. But their joy turned to dismay when they discovered their dead comrades lying about in their order of march, unmutilated, as if they were asleep. All were covered with gray ash, some sitting upright and clasping their wives and children to them.

Badly shaken by this disaster, no doubt believing that Pele had turned against him, Keoua lost the will to continue the war.

At that time Kamehameha was completing a great temple to his war god Kū-kāʻili-moku. Named Puʻukoholā, it was sited upon a hill overlooking Kawaihāe Bay in the Kohala district. The project was a masterpiece of psychological warfare, for his enemies believed that if Kamehameha could complete it, the full power of his war god would be bestowed upon him. The ruling chiefs of Kauaʻi, Oʻahu, and Maui sent a combined fleet against Hawaiʻi, but they were met at sea by Kamehameha’s fleet and defeated. When the temple was completed, Kamehameha sent emissaries to Keoua, inviting him to come and meet with him.
Keoua accepted. Fey of spirit, heedless of the warnings of his advisors, he sailed with his fleet northward along the western coast of Hawai‘i to Kawaihae Bay. Stopping along the way to perform purification rites, he told those who would sail in his canoe to bring no weapons and to prepare themselves to be his companions in death.

Kamehameha was waiting on the beach with a crowd of his men as the fleet sailed into the bay below the temple. Walking out into the water, Kamehameha called to Keoua to come ashore and converse with him. But as Keoua stepped out of his canoe, the impetuous Kona chief Keʻeaumoku, in sudden fury, leaped forward and threw his spear. Before Kamehameha could stop the fighting that followed, Keoua and all but one of those who were on his canoe had been killed. Those in the other canoes of Keoua’s fleet were permitted to depart in peace.

Keoua’s body was taken to the temple, Puʻukoholā, as a sacrifice. The news of his death added to the consternation of Kamehameha’s enemies. But whether Kamehameha had planned to kill his rival, or had honestly invited him to discuss peace, remains unresolved.
Eleven years later, in 1801, when Kamehameha was peacefully ruling his new kingdom from his capitol at Kailua in the Kona District, an eruption on Mt. Hualalai spread a flow of lava down its flanks that destroyed many villages and fishponds along the Kona coast north of Kailua. The offerings and prayers of the priests were all in vain; the flow continued, widening and doing great destruction. Advised by a priest of the Pele cult that he must make propitiative sacrifices himself, Kamehameha sailed north to where the lava was entering the sea at Mahai‘ula.

The most precious gift a ruling chief could make to a god was the life of a man; but this could only be given to the god Ku, patron of men and their work, warfare, and politics. Pele could not receive human sacrifice. The highest gift Kamehameha could offer was some part of his own body. He cut off a lock of his hair, wrapped it in a ti leaf, and with a prayer tossed it into the glowing lava.

Shortly thereafter, the flow stopped. The people saw this as confirmation of his power, and the incident gave Kamehameha immense prestige. Indeed, Mount Hualalai has not erupted since.

That is not to say, however, that the mountain will not erupt again. Despite the optimism of those who have recently been covering its slopes with subdivisions, geologists count Hualalai among Hawai‘i’s active volcanoes, and have stated that an eruption is long overdue. And Kamehameha can no longer be called upon to make peace with Pele.

A CHRISTIAN PRINCESS DEFIES PELE

Soon after the death of Kamehameha in 1819 the Hawaiian religion, one in which there was no distinction between church and state, was formally abolished by the monarchy. Forty years of contact with foreigners had shaken the confidence of Hawaiians in their gods.

Hawaiians sailed on foreign ships and returned with tales of continents swarming with huge populations. Ruling chiefs saw
that unless they became Europeanized quickly and won foreign recognition as an independent nation, their small islands would be devoured by some foreign power. This meant the abandonment of the state religion.

Those chiefs who refused to accept this decision made a circuit of the island, raising an army and marching toward the capitol at Kailua in Kona. But the government forces marched out to meet them, and in a furious battle at Keauhou they were destroyed. The old religion and the old gods went out in a blaze of musket fire.

American missionaries arrived a few months later. Expecting resistance, they were surprised to find that the way had been opened for them.

Some elements of the old religion went underground or were preserved in the folkways of the people, where fragments persist today, modified by Christian thought. On the Island of Hawai‘i, the disenfranchised priests and priestesses of Pele clung to their roles in open defiance of the new laws. Some action against them seemed necessary.

The high chiefess Kapi‘olani, an ardent convert to Christianity who had helped establish a mission near her home at Kealakekua Bay, decided to act in defiance of Pele as a demonstration to her people of the power of her new faith. She journeyed to the Kilauea volcano accompanied by many friends and retainers. When others attempted to dissuade her, she replied that if she were destroyed they could continue to believe in Pele, but if she were not harmed they must all turn to the one true God.

At the volcano a priestess of Pele attempted to discourage her with dire warnings. Kapi‘olani responded by reading passages from the Bible, then descended into the caldera, leading her procession to the brink of the fire-pit Halema‘uma‘u. Here she ate ‘ōhelo berries without first requesting Pele’s permission. Proclaiming her faith in the Christian God, she then threw stones into the lake of molten lava below.

Unharmed, she returned to her home, hopeful that her action would help win converts among her people.
A PRINCESS PROPITIATES PELE

Hawaiians who accepted the new religion still held Pele in reverent awe.

In 1881, when a lava flow from Mauna Loa threatened the city of Hilo, Princess Ruth Ke‘elikōlani sailed from Honolulu to Hilo, where she was welcomed by a throng of thousands. She then ascended the mountain to the edge of the advancing lava. A large woman with a stern countenance made more forbidding by a broken nose, she was an impressive figure of regal authority. Throwing many gifts into the lava, she chanted to Pele in a voice that rang above the sound of the lava flow.

The flow soon stopped.

THE SURF RIDER OF PUNALU‘U

The cataclysm of 1868 was the most destructive to the Ka‘ū District of any volcanic event in historic times. On March 27, a column of smoke rose above Mauna Loa and a stream of lava rushed down its western slope. Tremendous earthquakes shook the land for three days, toppling houses and churches, and whole cliffsides fell into the sea. On April 2, there came a quake which made it impossible for persons and animals to stand upright. Houses were destroyed and a number of people were killed. This was followed by landslides and mudslides that buried houses and plantations, and a series of tsunami (tidal waves) swept ten coastal villages out to sea, killing 49 persons — “washed away by the great sea caused by the Woman of the Pit.”

At the coastal village of Punalu‘u all who survived the first wave ran away from the sea to higher ground. A man named Holoua remembered that he had left his money in his house. Seeing that it had not yet been swept away he rushed back to get it, heedless of his wife's pleading.

While he was in the house the next wave engulfed it and the receding flood took it out to sea. After a time the people saw him climb out of the house and hoist himself up on the roof. Tearing off a wide board from the shattered house, he caught another wave and rode it to shore with his wallet in his teeth.

1C.J. Waialoha, Ka Nupepea Ku‘oko‘a, April 11, 1868.
For the rest of his life he claimed that he was the only Hawaiian he knew who could hang on to his money.

THE MAN WHOSE FAITH WAS STRONG

In my father's youth, the old folks used to tell the tale of an incident that was believed to have occurred several generations earlier. An American sea captain — my father did not hear his name — had retired from the sea and started a ranch on the slopes of Mauna Loa.

While riding over his land he found in a cave a stone of curious shape resting on a mat. He took it home and set it up in his garden.

His Hawaiian cowboys begged him to take it back, averring that this was an object sacred to the worship of Pele. If he returned it quickly, or let them return it and make some observances of respect over it, Pele might be appeased.

Being a strong Christian, he refused. Compliance with their request would, he feared, be interpreted by the Hawaiians as his recognition of Pele's existence. He rebuked them as part-time
Christians, part-time pagans who only went to church because they enjoyed the singing and socializing. Pele did not exist; therefore the stone could have no importance.

Shortly thereafter Mauna Loa erupted and a stream of lava covered a corner of his ranch, then moved off in another direction. Now the Hawaiians came to him in great consternation, begging that he give them the stone. Again he refused and sent them away.

Then, as the eruption continued, the flow resumed its earlier course, covering much of his land and approaching his house. That evening the Hawaiians came again. When the rancher again refused to give them the stone they urged him to come away with them; but he replied that his safety rested in Jesus, that he would remain in his house and pray to the True God and be saved. Having no further argument the Hawaiians mounted their horses and rode off into the darkness.

Pray he did, Bible in hand throughout the night, as the lava approached his house. Trees flared and exploded as their sap turned to steam, and clouds of smoke billowed upward, red in the glow of molten rock. His house was filled with smoke and the heat from the flow made it an oven. He continued to pray.

The next day the flow stopped. When the Hawaiians approached they found that it had separated into two fingers which had passed his house, leaving it standing on a small peninsula, a little rise in the land by which they could reach him. They found him sitting in his house with his Bible clenched in his hands and a fierce expression upon his face.

"Now you have seen the power of God," he said. "I am saved. What do you think of your Pele now?"

"We too have prayed to the God of Jesus," his foreman replied, "and we rejoice that you are alive. But we must confess that the stone is no longer in your garden.

"As we left you last night, we took it away and returned it to its proper place and made a chant of respect to the Woman of the Pit. Perhaps she does not exist, as you say. But when our friend was in such danger, we wanted to do everything we could to help him."

It was said that the man was never the same after that. A madness came over him. He sold out for what little he could get for his ravaged land and moved to Honolulu.
TALES FROM MARY KAWENA PUKUI

One of Hawai‘i’s most gifted scholars, Mary Kawena Pukui (1895 - 1986), was born and raised in the Ka‘ū. The following are excerpts from her contributions to the Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 233 (1972), Native Planters in Old Hawai‘i2:

“Uncle Napua (the youngest brother of Auntie Keli‘ihue) was a person who saw and heard more than most people in the district of Ka‘ū, so when he made unusual statements, his fellow Hawaiians accepted them.

“One day, after taking some Mormon elders to upper Kam‘oa, he sat down to wait with the horses while the elders went on to visit some of the members who lived beyond. Soon Napua heard the horses snort and paw the ground, and coming toward them was a woman he did not recognize. She asked him for a cigarette, which she smoked so fast that it vanished before his own was even half-smoked. As soon as she turned to go, she said to him, “I am going to Kona, and by next week, you will hear news from Papa.” He watched her go, and to his amazement saw that instead of walking on the trail, she seemed to be floating about a foot above it. He knew then that she was no ordinary woman. Exactly a week later to that very day, a lava flow went down from Moku‘aweo to Papa in Kona.

“The woman Napua saw was Pele.”

“We Hawaiians have no explanation for the popo-ahi, or “fireball,” yet we have seen it. It has no connection whatever with the akua-lele, or poison gods, that traveled at night, nor does it have a tail that sends out sparks as it travels.

“I had frequently heard of it in Ka‘ū, but it was while I was in Glenwood, Ola‘a, that I saw it, like a round pale moon, moving slowly from the direction of Kīlauea to Mauna Loa. The older folks with me said very quietly, ‘She [Pele] is moving to her home at Moku‘aweo. Let us see what is going to happen.’ When, a week later, news came that Moku‘aweo was active, they nodded knowingly — yes, they had seen the old lady travel and knew that that was exactly what was going to happen.”