

Akua - god, goddess, supernatural spirit. Occasionally used to mean supernatural quality or even a human who has supernatural powers. Akua may, though rarely, refer to a corpse. Written with a capital A, Akua refers to the Christian God.

The akua were the impersonal gods of Hawai'i, powerful, distant deities whose origins were lost in dim corridors of time. The akua, like the gods of Greek mythology, combined supernatural qualities with many of the characteristic frailties of men. Accordingly, akua could be vengeful, helpful or destructive, wise or capricious. This is in direct contrast to the Christian concept of all good and all evil, God and devil.

Akua again very much like gods of Western mythology, could take many forms (kinolau), appearing as a fish, a shark, a rock, a plant. They could mate with mortals and produce either normal human beings or mo'o, fish-like "water spirits" babies, or 'eho'eho, rock-like babies. They could, in mysterious ways, bring forth kupua, or demi-gods. Pele, the volcano goddess, carried in her bosom the egg that became her sister Hi'iaka. Akua could take possession (noho) of humans, totally or partially.

four major gods

Many akua were nameless; some were famous named gods or goddess. The four major gods, believed to be worshipped as deities even before the migration from Tahiti to Hawai'i were:

Kāne, creator of man; heavenly father of all men, symbol of life, nature, god of fresh water and sunlight.

Lono, god of agriculture clouds, weather.

Kū, god of war and chiefs, god of the forest, canoe making, fishing.

Kanaloa, the ocean god, god of salt water.

Trying to characterize the "famous four" by their own special kuleana (areas of responsibilities) is tricky. The four "traded duties" to an extent. They also took on multiple entities, with each entity worshipped as a separate deity. For example, in his function as god of canoe making, Kū becomes Kūalanawao or Kū arising in the forest. (Canoes were made of trees from the forest.) During the annual four

months' Makahiki festival, Lono became a separate personality, Lonoikamakahiki, or Lono of the Makahiki.

Both Kū and Lono are also considered gods of medicine. This is a logical extension of ideas. For Kū was primarily god of the forests; many of the healing herbs and vines came from the forest. Lono, as god of agriculture, extended his kuleana to the medicinal plants grown as agricultural projects. And with Kū and his goddess wife Hina, came the association of male and female properties in healing plants and in ritual. In the ancient myths, both went into the forest together, both were invoked equally when medicinal plants were gathered. Male and female were kept in balance (an idea quite close to the Chinese concept of balancing yin and yang, heat and cold or male and female).

With the coming of missionaries, efforts were made to fit Kāne, Kū and Lono into the concept of the Trinity and give Kanaloa the role of devil. The role-assignment "didn't take," but many early writings contain a conspicuous blank where Kanaloa's special kuleana is concerned.

Lesser, but still powerful gods include Ma'iola, god of healing; Kapo, goddess of sorcery; Pele, the volcano goddess; Laka, goddess of the hula. Pele and Laka are examples of deities who remain impersonal akua but who are also personal aumākua to their human descendants.

Abstract forces are more easily worshipped when they can be visualized as idols. And so Hawai'i had carved wooden gods and earlier feather gods, said to accompany the first migration from Tahiti.

If it is possible to "short-change" mystic beings, then we have certainly done so. For there were hundreds of Hawaiian akua. Some individual gods took on dozens of separate names and personalities. Pele's sister, Hi'iaka, was said to have as many as 40 different manifestations. It is impossible to list all the deities here.

One conclusion about the gods seems possible. The akua were distant, awesome deities, concerned with mighty forces of land and sea, storm and calm, light of day and dark of night. As major gods, their help was invoked for major causes and great events. For the needs and solaces of daily life, Hawaiians called on their own personal ancestor gods, the aumākua. (It was Kanaloa who, by inhaling and exhaling, made the ocean tides, but if you get caught in an outgoing tide, you called on your 'aumakua for help!)

Excerpts from Nānā I Ke Kumu vol 1 by Pūku'i, Haertig and Lee.