

Polynesian Religion: From New Zealand to Hawaii

By David Leeming, *The Handy Mythology Answer Book* on 08.24.17

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In Hawaiian mythology, Pele is the goddess of fire, lightning, wind and volcanoes. Photo by: Ron Cogswell/Volcanoes National Park Visitor Center.

The native peoples of the Pacific Islands — such as Tahiti, Samoa, Tonga, Fiji and Hawaii — are Polynesians, as are the Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand. The term “Polynesian” comes from the Greek word meaning “many islands.”

Polynesian religion, in general, directly reflects a reality involving the sea and the natural environment. Gods reflect aspects of nature and its activities. For the Polynesians, religion expresses an animistic understanding in which all aspects of life contain spiritual power, or mana.

Where did the Polynesians come from?

The origins of the Polynesians has always been a controversial topic. The dominant theory holds that in about 4500 B.C., a migration began from south China of people speaking an Austronesian language, the family of which the Polynesian languages are members. It is thought that Taiwan was the first land to be colonized by these people, who eventually moved to what are now New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.

Other scholars argue a much longer presence in Papua New Guinea and other islands. Still others suggest a mingling of ancient Melanesian peoples already on the Pacific Islands with the Austronesian settlers, resulting in what today we call Polynesians. Whatever their origins, we know that the Polynesians were skilled seafarers and that their migration from island to island in double-hulled canoes involved that skill. We know that by about A.D. 1250, Polynesian culture dominated in the so-called Polynesian Triangle that includes Hawaii in the north, Easter Island in the east and New Zealand in the south.

Polynesian pantheons

Not surprisingly, given the vast distances between the islands, various Polynesian cultures and religious beliefs emerged over the centuries. There are, however, distinctive correlations between these religions and, especially, their pantheons. The Maori pantheon is ruled by Rangi (Sky Father) and Papa (Earth Mother). In Hawaii, Ao and Po were the equivalents of Rangi and Papa. In Tahiti, the supreme male god, the equivalent of Rangi, was Ta'aroa.

Sea gods were important among the Polynesians. For the Maori, this was Tangaroa, a son of Rangi and Papa. Other Polynesians called him Tangaloa. The Hawaiians knew him as Kanaloa. Tawhiri was the Maori storm god, another son of the original Sky-Earth couple. Tu, or Tumatauenga, was the Maori god of war. Tane was the god of the forest. In Hawaii, he was Kane. In Hawaii, one of the most popular deities was Pele, a goddess of volcanoes, capable, as was the Indian Kali, of great violence. The most popular of all Polynesian deities was Maui. More detailed pantheonic family structures become clearer in the stories of creation.

The story of Pele

Pele was a descendant of Sky and Earth. She was rivaled in power only by her older sisters, the goddesses of the sea and of the snow-capped mountains, who worked to curb her natural volcanic fury. Her favorite sister was Hi'iaka, who had been born of an egg kept warm by Pele, under her arm, until the hatching.

Pele and Hi'iaka lived out of the reach of their two threatening sisters in the fiery crater of Kilauea, high above the sea on the Big Island. One day in a dream, Pele heard the sound of drum beats and dancing and was so attracted to the sound that she sent her spirit to follow it—all the way to Kauai. There she witnessed wonderful dancing and music and, disguising herself as a beautiful young woman, she joined in. Soon after, she was noticed by a handsome

chief named Lohiau, and the two became lovers. But the time came when Pele's spirit needed to return to her sleeping and dreaming body on the Big Island, or else the fires of her volcano would have died out. So her spirit left Lohiau. But now the lovers longed for each other, so Pele sent her brother Lono to Hi'iaka to ask her to bring Lohiau to her.

Hi'iaka managed to overcome monsters and other trials and to make her way to Kauai. There she found that Lohiau had died, but she succeeded in reviving him. Some say that Pele became impatient, assuming that Lohiau and Hi'iaka were having an affair, so she attacked them with her fire. In one version of the story, Hi'iaka and Lohiau did, in fact, end up as lovers, even in the face of Pele's rage.

Polynesian creation stories

There are as many Polynesian creation stories as there are individual Polynesian societies. Even within societies there are variants. One creation story with versions in most of the islands is this Maori story. According to the story, it was Rangi and Papa who existed in the beginning. Rangi was the masculine force in the universe, associated with sky and light. His consort Papa was the feminine force of earth and darkness. As in the Greek, Egyptian and many other creation stories, the first parents were so close together that a separation was called for in order that creation might continue. It fell to the children of Rangi and Papa to do something about the dilemma. Their son Tu (Tumatauenga), god of war, suggested that their parents be killed.

The others disagreed and decided that the parents should be pushed apart. First Rongo, the cultivated food god, tried to execute the separation but failed. Next, Tangaroa, god of the sea, with the help of his brother, god of wild food, tried and failed. Finally, it was Tane, god of the forest, who succeeded. As he lay on his back and separated his parents by pushing upward with his legs, the primal couple screamed in agony. But room now existed for further creation. Room also existed, however, for a "war in heaven" between the children of Rangi and Papa.

In one Hawaiian story, more credit for creation is given to Kane. It was he who created Rangi (Ao) and Papa (Po) by throwing a calabash into the air, where it broke apart forming Sky and Earth. In some Maori stories the equivalent of Kane was Io, who created Rangi and Papa ex nihilo—from nothing. In the Hawaiian version, Kane then assigned various aspects of the natural world to his brothers. Kanaloa, for instance, would control the sea, Ku the forests. The gods then created the first man and woman out of clay.

The war in heaven

As in so many traditional religions, the creation process of the many Polynesian groups involves a war in heaven. The Maori version of this archetype takes place immediately after the separation of Rangi and Papa. Tawhiri, the storm god, was angry at the separation of his parents, so he left his siblings and went up to join his father in the sky. There, joined by his children, winds and clouds, he attacked the forests of Tane and tore up the seas of Tangaroa.

He also attacked his brothers dedicated to cultivated and wild foods. His attacks caused his brothers to fight against each other as well. Finally, it was Tu, the war god, who stood up against Tawhiri and made peace in heaven—heaven being the same as the world—for it was on Papa’s earthy being that this war took place.

Polynesian flood stories

There are many Polynesian flood stories. In Tahiti, the sea god became enraged when a fisherman’s fish hooks caught in his hair. He sent a flood to cover the whole world except for the tops of the highest mountains. The Samoans say that a flood occurred when the gods of fire and water fought each other. The Maori tell of Ruatapu, a woman who became angry at the nobility and lured their children into a canoe and then sank the canoe in the ocean. Only a man named Paikea somehow survived. Now, Ruatapu got the gods to send a huge flood to destroy the world. Paikea, an archetypal flood hero like Noah, was saved on a mountaintop with the help of a goddess.

Maui the trickster

As in the case of the Australian Aborigines and the Chinese, heroes are difficult to differentiate from deities in Polynesian religions. There are, however, demigods or culture heroes who are sometimes depicted as gods but sometimes seem to be clearly human. The most famous of these figures is Maui, who belongs to all Polynesians.

Maui was a trickster, and like the tricksters of Australian Aborigine religions, he also played the role of culture hero and can best be considered in that context as a demigod rather than as a god.

In the many versions of his history, Maui takes on the aspects of the archetypal hero, beginning with a miraculous conception and birth. He is also clearly a culture hero, playing a role in the creation process and the civilizing of his people. And he is just as clearly, like Coyote in North America or Ananse in Africa, a trickster whose acts can cause difficulties in the world, even bringing death to creation. In one story, Maui is said to have been conceived when a woman looked at the rising sun. The Maori say that when a premature son was born to Maui’s mother, she wrapped the child in a lock of hair from her top knot (tiki tiki) and then threw him into the sea. Rangi, the sun, and presumably his father, rescued him and raised him in heaven, but when grown he emerged from the sea as Maui Ti’itit’i. In Hawaii, the island of Maui was named after him.

Upon his emergence, Maui became a culture hero/trickster. In most Polynesian islands he is credited with helping the people by catching the sun and slowing it down to provide more time for work and with bringing the islands themselves up from the depths, making him a type of earth-diver creator. One of Maui’s greatest feats was tricking the goddess of fire into revealing the secret of that element. In Samoa, they say that Maui descended to the Underworld—a universal heroic act—to retrieve fire.

Maui died in the act of trying to overcome a female monster and death goddess, Hine-nui-te-po. In this case, the monster won and Maui was cut in half. By dying, Maui, who had sought immortality for humans, allowed death to continue in the world.

Quiz

- 1 Read the following sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-2].

Polynesian religion, in general, directly reflects a reality involving the sea and the natural environment.

Which sentence from the section "The Story Of Pele" BEST supports this idea?

- (A) She was rivaled in power only by her older sisters, the goddesses of the sea and of the snow-capped mountains, who worked to curb her natural volcanic fury.
- (B) Her favorite sister was Hi'iaka, who had been born of an egg kept warm by Pele, under her arm, until the hatching.
- (C) But the time came when Pele's spirit needed to return to her sleeping and dreaming body on the Big Island, or else the fires of her volcano would have died out.
- (D) Some say that Pele became impatient, assuming that Lohiau and Hi'iaka were having an affair, so she attacked them with her fire.

- 2 Read the following statements.

1. *The majority of Polynesian stories involve stories of gods going to war because the myths are reflective of everyday life.*
2. *Despite being separated by vast distances and oceans, many Polynesian cultures share similarities in their pantheons.*
3. *Many Polynesian stories, while unique to Polynesian cultures, contain basic elements similar to non-Polynesian stories around the world.*
4. *For Polynesians, creating stories involving nature allowed them to answer specific questions about humans' place in nature.*

Which statements accurately reflect two CENTRAL ideas of the article?

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 3 and 4
- (D) 4 and 1

3 Read the following two summaries of the article.

- 1. Polynesians probably arrived in the Pacific around 1250 A.D. Each culture created myths that share similarities with other Polynesian cultures and other world mythologies. The Polynesian gods and demigods represent aspects of nature that affected life on the Polynesian islands.*
- 2. Scholars are still debating exactly where Polynesians originated. While it is likely they have Chinese origins, historians are not certain. Polynesian gods embody and represent nature to address common hopes and fears of early Polynesian people.*

Which summary provides an objective, accurate summary of the text, and why?

- (A) The first; it presents information from each section of the article in order to create a comprehensive summary.
- (B) The first; it addresses central ideas of the article without making inferences like the second summary does.
- (C) The second; it highlights the two main ideas developed throughout the article.
- (D) The second; it emphasizes the idea that Polynesian origins are still being debated, which the first summary does not.

4 Read the section "Where did the Polynesians come from?"

Which of the following conclusions is MOST supported by this section?

- (A) The origins of the Polynesians is one of the most combative topics in modern history.
- (B) The origins of the Polynesians is so controversial because the answer may determine certain monetary rewards and/or land rights for some people.
- (C) Scholars will likely never find the truth about how the first Polynesians made their way to the Pacific Islands.
- (D) Scholars will likely not reach a shared consensus on the topic of Polynesian beginnings for some time.

Answer Key

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