

PELE



Goddess of Hawai'i's Volcanoes

Herb Kawainui Kane

Expanded Edition

PELE

Goddess of
Hawai'i's
Volcanoes



Collection of Barry E. Moore

*Cover painting
Collection of Robert Romer
Photomural reproduction at the
Thomas A. Jaggar Museum,
Hawaii Volcanoes National Park*

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MAHALO!

This book was inspired by an assignment to create a series of paintings for display as photomurals in the Thomas A. Jaggar Museum at the Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park.

Helpful friends made this book more fun to do. Mahalo to Jack Lockwood of the Hawai'i Volcano Observatory for his geological advice; the late Jon Erickson of the National Park Service for his enthusiastic encouragement; Glenn Mitchell and Kathy English of the Hawai'i Natural History Association for reviewing the manuscript; and Professors Rubellite Kawena Johnson and Fred Kalani Meinecke for their scholarly insights. Any errors in this work are mine alone.

Throughout my infatuation with "the other woman" who is the subject of this book, my wife Deon has graciously, perhaps prudently, refrained from any jealous behavior.

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First Printing 1987
Sixth Printing 1995
Revised Edition 1996

ISBN 0-943357-01-2
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 87-81076

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Printed in Korea



PELE'S SEARCH FOR A HOME

In the form of a great shark her elder brother Ka-moho-ali'i, the custodian of the Water of Life, guided the canoe northward. Some of her brothers and sisters sailed with her. Their first landfall was in the northern islands of the Hawaiian archipelago.

Pele needed a deep pit for her home wherein the sacred fires could be protected. She moved down the island chain through Ni'ihau and Kaua'i, digging. But she had been followed from Tahiti by her angry sister, Na-maka-o-Kaha'i of the Sea, and wherever Pele excavated a crater with her digging stick her sister deluged it with water.

Pele then moved farther along the island chain, but each effort to dig a home was flooded out. Thus we find that on the geologically-older island of Kaua'i the craters have become wet swamps, and volcanic evidence becomes progressively more recent as we move down the island chain toward Hawai'i. The myth coincides with the modern geological theory of shifting plates, in which these islands were built in an assembly line as the ocean floor slid northwestward over a "hot spot" in the underlying layer of the earth's crust.

Na-maka-o-Kaha'i, being Pele's elder sister, was more powerful, for water was believed to be more powerful than fire. There was the eternal opposition between those two elements. Some say that Na-maka-o-Kaha'i's relentless pursuit ended in a battle near Hāna, Maui, in which Pele was torn apart. A hill named Ka-iwi-o-Pele (the bones of Pele) stands at the site of the battle and is believed to be her mortal remains.

With the death of her mortal self her spirit was freed and elevated to godly status. This event, having taken place in the Hawaiian Islands, made her a goddess native to these islands. Her spirit took flight to the island of Hawai'i where she found a permanent home on Mauna Loa, Earth's largest mountain.

PELE'S FAMILY

Here, high above the sea, the sacred fires could be lighted and kept burning in deep craters without fear of their being quenched by the waters of Nā-maka-o-Kahai. Being female, however, Pele could not make fire. The making of fire was regarded as a male act which women were forbidden to perform. In the Polynesian fire-plow method a length of smooth hard wood is rubbed rapidly within a groove in a softer piece of wood until the friction ignites the wood dust that accumulates at the end of the groove. The keeper of the sacred fire sticks was the god Lono-makua, and with them the fires were made.



Boys making fire by the Polynesian fire plow method

There were also her brothers Kane-hekili, spirit of the thunder; Ka-poho-i-kahi-ola, spirit of explosions; Ke-ua-a-ke-po, spirit of the rain of fire; and Ke-ō-ahi-kama-kaua, who may be seen in the "fire spears," fountains of lava that thrust warlike from fissures during an eruption.

Pele most respected her eldest brother Kā-moho-ali'i, who could appear as a man with hands tattooed black or as a great shark, and a king of sharks. He resided in a deep pit at the eastern rim of the world where the sun rises. In his custody was the gourd which held the water of life, water by which the dead could be revived. A promontory at the edge of Kilauea

Crater is sacred to him, and as evidence of Pele's respect for him the volcanic steam never touches that place.

Among Pele's sisters were Laka, a goddess of fertility and, like Pele, a patroness of the dance. A gentle spirit was Laka, but in another guise she could also appear as Kapo, a goddess of sorcery and dark powers who could assume many shapes at will. A mortal sister, Ka'ohelo, was transformed upon her death into the 'ohelo shrub which flourishes in the volcano region, producing an edible red berry.

But Pele's favorite was her little sister Hi'iaka, spirit of the dance. It is said that she was born in the homeland in the form of an egg, and carried by Pele on the long ocean voyage to Hawai'i under her armpit to keep the egg incubated. Hatched in Hawai'i, Hi'iaka is cherished by Hawaiians as a goddess who is truly Hawaiian despite her origin in Tahiti. As Pele became Hawaiian by the death of her mortal self, Hi'iaka's extended gestation made her Hawaiian by birth.



Pele, Hi'iaka, and Laka were the supreme patronesses of the dance. In the current cultural revival, many dances and dance chants are dedicated to them.



A PANTHEON OF VOLCANO SPIRITS



Collection of William and Kalula-Aun Trask Gibson. Photomural at the Thomas A. Jagger Museum, Hawaii Volcanic

1. A spirit of rain, moisture, and growing things, **KAMAPUA'A** was in all ways Pele's opposite. Both as enemies and as lovers, theirs was a stormy relationship (see page 27). **KAMAPUA'A** could appear as a man, a gigantic eight-eyed hog, a plant, or a fish.
2. **POLIAHU**, whose white mantle of snow graces the summits of Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa, was a rival to Pele (see page 26).
3. **LAKA** and **KAPO** appear to be two personalities of the same spirit, a sister of Pele (see page 15).
4. **HITAKA**, spirit of the dance, was Pele's favorite sister (see page 23).
5. **PELE**
6. **KA-MOHO-ALI'I**, Pele's respected elder brother, a shark god and the keeper of the water of life, led Pele to Hawaii!
7. **LONO-MAKUA**, keeper of the sacred fire sticks, made volcanic fires at Pele's command.
8. **KA-POHO-I-KAHU-OLA**, spirit of explosions.
9. **KE-UA-A-KE-PO**, spirit of the rain of fire.
10. **KANE-HEKILI**, spirit of thunder.
11. **KE-O-AHI-KAMA-KAUA**, spirit of lightning.

PELE'S RIVAL

The eternal opposition of fire and ice is personified in the rivalry between Pele and Poliahu, goddess of the snow-capped mountain. Poliahu dwells on Mauna Kea, where her white mantle of snow is frequently spread over its crest, and she often invades Pele's territory by covering the top of Mauna Loa with snow.

Geologists list Mauna Kea as an extinct volcano. According to Hawaiian tradition, the extinction was the result of a furious battle between Pele and Poliahu, probably caused by Pele's envy of Poliahu's incomparable beauty and her success in entrancing and seducing handsome young chiefs.

Pele opened the hostilities. She brought all her force to bear on Mauna Kea, causing the mountain to erupt in fountains of fire which melted the snows and drove Poliahu from her home in a panic. But Poliahu recovered her wits and counterattacked, covering the mountain with deep snows, and quenching the fire of Pele at Mauna Kea for all time.

One of the reasons they did not get along was 'Ai-wohi-kupua, a romantic but fickle young chief of Kaua'i. In a dream, his spirit courted Laie, a young chiefess of Hawai'i known for her beauty, and made a vow of betrothal to her. He then travelled from Kaua'i to Hawai'i to seek her as his bride. But it was a mission he was never to complete.

As he sailed along the Hana coast of Maui, he was attracted by a beautiful young woman riding the surf, and turned his canoe to shore. Her name was Hina-i-ka-malama. She fell in love with the handsome stranger, and won his favors in a game of *konnane* (Hawaiian checkers). After a brief affair, however, the chief made some excuse and continued on his way.

He did not know that Hina-i-ka-malama was really Pele in one of her human forms. When Pele went into a trance, her spirit could leave her sleeping body and appear in many different guises, each having a different name.

On Hawai'i, while searching for Laie, 'Ai-wohi-kupua was distracted from his quest by Poliahu, who appeared to be even more lovely than the girl he had met on Maui. He courted her, she seduced him, and they became betrothed. He then invoked his personal god to release him from his vow to his first love, Laie, and returned to Kaua'i with Poliahu.

When she heard what had happened, Hina-i-ka-malama pursued the lovers to Kaua'i, where she crashed the wedding celebration, claimed her fickle lover, and won him back.

Now it was Poliahu who was outraged. She punished the lovers with alternating blasts of unendurable heat and cold until they were forced to separate. Hina, we may assume, returned to Kilauea and became Pele again. Poliahu returned to Hawai'i, to her home on Mauna Kea, leaving her inconstant lover with no lover at all, but fortunate to have escaped from the dangerous triangle with his life.



PELE AND KAMAPU'A'A

In the Polynesian universe all form was created and distinguished by the pairing of opposites, and perhaps no story better describes this concept than that of the love-hate relationship between Pele and the hog-man demigod Kamapua'a. He could turn himself into a tall, handsome chief with sparkling eyes, often wearing a cape to conceal the pig bristles which grew down his back; or into a gigantic eight-eyed hog. As the occasion required he could also take the shapes of various kinds of fish and plants. With his warclub Kahiki-kolo he could ward off spears and strike down all champions who came against him.

His character personifies the nature of a pig, the largest land animal known to the Polynesians. That which is brought to mind by the modern feminist term "male chauvinist pig" does not fall short of describing Kamapua'a's

social behavior and appetites, which frequently got him into trouble. His many amorous adventures and contests with outraged husbands were in the old days told with great relish, and it was said that the entire story of Kamapua'a, recited by a storyteller in courtly style, took as long as sixteen hours to deliver.

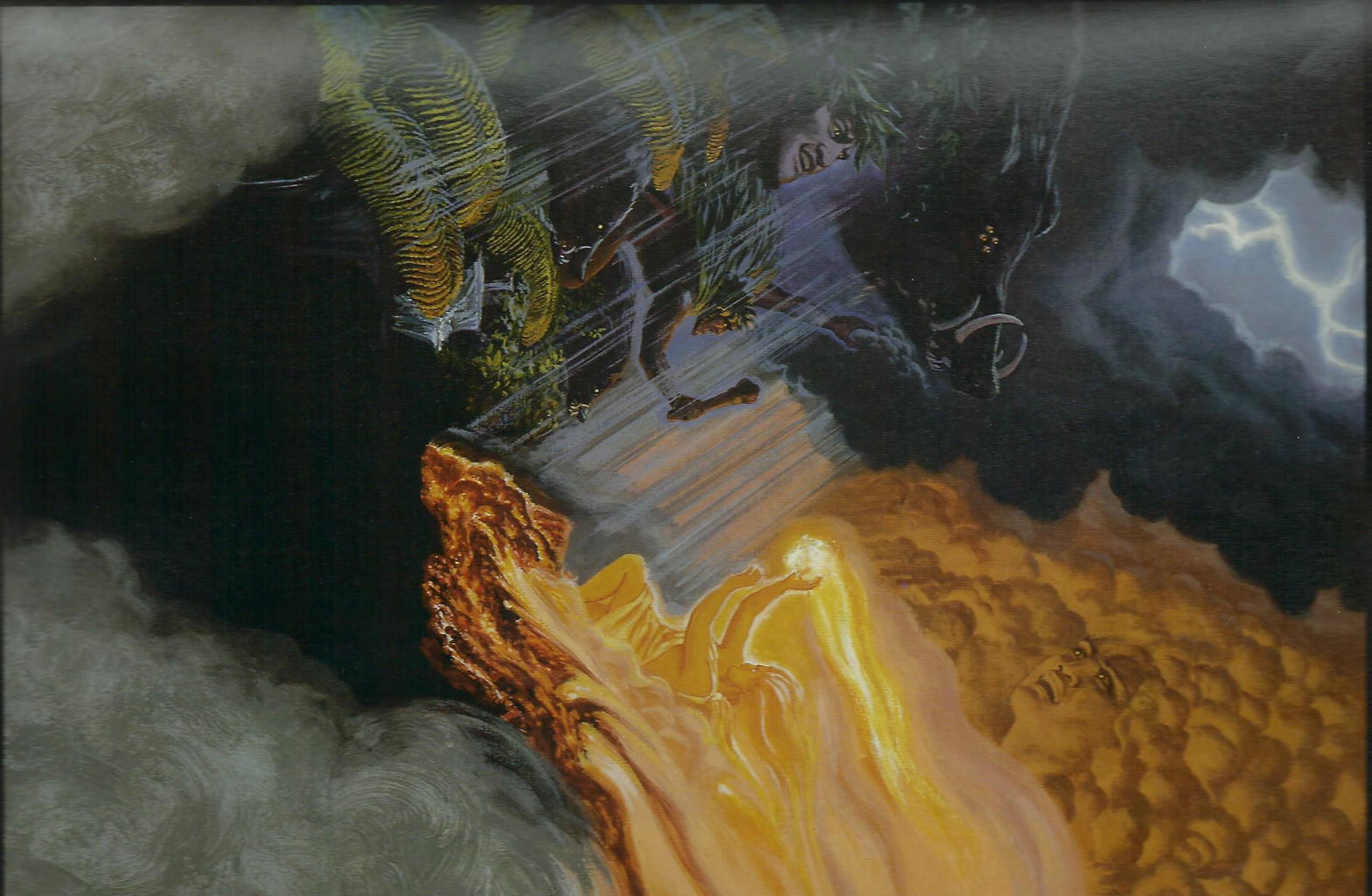
Like pigs, Kamapua'a preferred cool damp environments such as are found on the rainy windward sides of the islands, where the stream-eroded gulches and valleys laced with waterfalls are said to have been made by the rooting of Kamapua'a as a great boar. Here too is the abundant vegetation that pigs love, evidence of Kamapua'a's distant relationship to Lono, god of agriculture. In his environmental preferences too, he was the opposite of Pele.

Once when Pele and her sister Kapo were travelling, they were seen by Kamapua'a. Aroused by the sight of Pele, he pursued her. Kapo, however, happened to possess a detachable vagina. To save Pele, she threw this decoy away from the direction of their flight, and Kamapua'a, distracted, went off after it. The evidence for the story is found on the island of O'ahu at Koko Head, where a hill inland from Hanaua Bay, aptly named Kohelapelepe (detached vagina) shows on its eastern side the imprint made where Kapo's decoy struck against it.

Kamapua'a could not get his mind off his desire for Pele. He went to woo her, but she scorned him, calling him a pig and a son of a pig, and even more insulting jibes. Their taunts led to a furious battle between them.

She hurled fire and molten lava at him and chased him into the sea, but he turned himself into a little fish, the *hunnihumu-nukunuku-ā-pua'a*, whose tough skin protected him from the boiling heat when the lava poured into the sea.

Again he approached her, and again she attacked. He retaliated with storms of rain and called up great numbers of tusked hogs which overran her lands, rooting destructively. The cloudbursts almost doused her fires. When her brothers saw that Pele was losing, and that the deluge threatened to



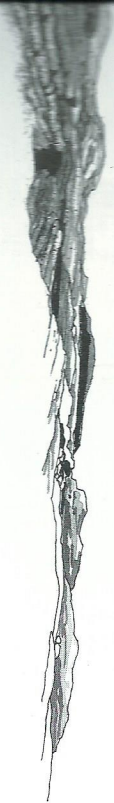
FOLK TALES

extinguish her fires and soak the sacred fire sticks, they intervened and ordered her to yield.

A place near the coast in Puna called Ka-lua-o-Pele, where the land seems torn up as if a great struggle had taken place, is said to be where Kamapua'a had his way with her.

As may sometimes happen with opposites, Pele decided to take him as her lover. Togetherness was not their style, however, so they divided the island between them — Pele taking the drier leeward side where the mountain slopes are streaked with lava flows, and Kamapua'a taking the windward side, moist with rain and verdant with growing things.

Yet even on the dry side of the island, on recent lava flows, we may see how Pele must always yield to Kamapua'a. Seeds will come, rains will germinate them, vigorous roots will penetrate the barren lava, breaking it up over thousands of years until it becomes fertile soil. Pele may build the island with her lava, but it is the incessant attentions of Kamapua'a that make it fertile.



Such are the interactions of opposites that have given form to the world. But they are relationships which are seldom tranquil. It is said that they had a child who became an ancestor of chiefs and commoners. It is also said that Kamapua'a tired of it all, and sailed off to another place.

Other lovers of Pele, however, did not make such a clean getaway. Too late, they would discover that she would tolerate no competition. If she found them with other women she would overwhelm them with lava. There are many curious lava formations throughout her domain which are the alleged remains of these unfortunates.



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

The young man 'Ohia and his beautiful companion Lehua were inseparable lovers. Pele became attracted to 'Ohia 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 'Ohia's body into a tree, and Lehua's body into the flower of that tree. That is why the rough-barked 'ohi'a tree is of masculine appearance, whereas the feathery lehua blossom which flowers upon the 'ohi'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.