

The Magical Menehune

by Serge Kahili King

If you ever visit Hawaii, sooner or later you are bound to come across some kind of reference to the mysterious little people of the Islands—the magical Menehune.

Tour guides love to point out ancient stoneworks that were supposed to have been built by the Menehune people, especially fishponds and old temple ruins. Some guides will even tell you stories about angry Menehune who caused disruptions on construction sites until the project was blessed by a priest or minister. In souvenir shops you can find statuettes and keychains with rotund, smiling figures with pointed ears and perhaps a warrior helmet that are some artist's impression of what the Menehune people looked like. There are Menehune markets, Menehune dress shops, and Menehune computer stores. On the island of Kauai, the traditional population center for the Menehune, there are two archeological sites with large bronze plaques put up by the Territory of Hawaii in the late 1920s. Each of them has a quote from the governor at the time which officially says that the sites were “built by the Menehune (Hawaiian brownies or elves).”

As for their traits, we have to look at legends, which some Hawaiians consider as their history. A legend written down by William Hyde Rice in the 1920s says that the Menehune are “about two feet in height,” but other legends say they were giants. Most agree that they sang and danced a lot and lived in caves in the forest areas. They were also excellent craftsmen, skilled in woodwork and stonework, and chiefs often called on them to build canoes or temples. They also ate a lot of bananas and loved shrimp.

Rice also records that at one point the Menehune emigrated to New Zealand under a chief named Maoli, who gave his name to the Maori people. Later they came back to serve Ola, a famous chief of Kauai. At that time they lived in Lumahai, Wainiha and Limahuli Valleys and did construction work for Ola, some of which can still be seen today. They built Kikiaola (“Ola’s watercourse”), a stone-walled irrigation ditch on the Waimea River and the only example of cut and fitted stone in Hawaii. In addition they built Kikipapaaola (“Ola’s swift flat thing”), a path of sticks through the Alakai Swamp on Kauai’s 4000-foot mountain plateau; the Alekoko Fishpond in Lihue; the Hauola temple at the mouth of the Wailua River, and many other works.

The legends recorded by Rice and those of other researchers say that eventually the chief of the Menehune became concerned about intermarriage with the Hawaiians and ordered all his people to gather at Ha’ena on the North Shore of Kauai. From there they all took off on a floating island for parts unknown, except for a few who stayed behind with their Hawaiian wives.

There is even a Kauai legend which says that Makali’i, a son of Lua-Nu’u, was the real father of the Menehune race, and also the father of the famous shamanic hero, Maui. Makali’i is supposed to have come from the Pleiades (his name is also given to that star group) and he went back there after the birth of Maui. Some believe that’s where the Menehune went, too.

Folklore, based on oral histories, adds more to the Menehune mythology. Popular tales say that the Menehune always finished their work in one night, and if they couldn't they left it undone because if they were touched by the sun they would turn to stone. Today certain stones are still pointed out as the remains of unlucky Menehune. Another claim is that the Menehune built their stoneworks by forming long lines over hill and dale and passing single stones along by hand to the construction site. You may even meet some metaphysically-inclined tourists, or "visitors" as we prefer to call them, who will assure you that he or she saw an actual Menehune while meditating in the forest. Others ask where there are any Menehune still in Hawaii today. That is not an easy question to answer, because it depends on what you are calling a Menehune.

Menehune are definitely part of Hawaiian tradition. The question is, how much of what is said about them is tourist hype, and how much is authentic? Also, who or what are we actually dealing with here?

Ancient Hawaiians gave a lot of importance to accurate oral records of family lines, usually called "geneologies," and a few of them have been written down. One of the most famous, the Kumuhonua Geneology, says that an ancestor named Lua-Nu'u was the father of the Menehune people by one wife, and the father of the Nawao people by another wife. The Nawao were a wild, banana-eating people from whom were descended the Wā (noisy) people and the Mū (silent) people. Many Menehune stories of today combine traits of the Menehune with the Wā and Mū races. What is notable here is that the Menehune are listed in ancient Hawaiian tradition as a distinct race with an ancestor common to other humans.

The word, "menehune," can be translated as "people of hidden power" or "people of little power." In the middle of the last millennium Hawaii was invaded and conquered by warriors from Tahiti who called their own commoners "manahuna," or "small power," and some Hawaiians today say that the Tahitians applied the same term to the conquered Hawaiians. There are family histories which relate that many of those conquered people were driven into the mountains and that sometimes the new chiefs would order them to come down and engage in some work project like the building of a temple. However, there was also a law which said they would be killed on sight if they were seen during the day, so they were forced to work at night. "Turned to stone" is a Hawaiian phrase meaning "to be killed." However, other Hawaiian family histories hold that the Menehune were a separate race living on the islands before the present Polynesians arrived and that they were remnants of an ancient civilization that came from the stars. These families say that there was intermarriage and that they are descended in part from those relationships. A few of those families even say that these original Menehune passed on esoteric knowledge that is known today by the nickname of "Huna." Interestingly, records show that the Hawaiian monarchy took a census in 1864 and that sixty people in Wainiha Valley on Kauai wrote down "Menehune" as their race on the census form. Also, on the south side of the same island in the late nineteenth century a schoolteacher asked her students if they had ever heard of the Menehune and half a dozen children raised their hands and said that they were Menehune.

So, how does this correspond with the sightings of strange little humanoid beings in the forests, or the troubles that occur when a new building site hasn't been blessed, or the tricks played on some and the help given to others when no humans are around? For these things do happen, according to hundreds of witnesses. If these aren't Menehune, what are they?

In the course of history from the time of Captain Cooks' arrival in 1778, the Hawaiian population almost became extinct, the culture and the language was repressed, and a great deal of knowledge was lost. Many things which had their own names were lumped together under another name. The islands have always had mysterious beings with extraordinary powers, including the powers to change size, shape and visibility, called "e'epa." These are the creatures that are seen in the woods, the rascals who turn heavy equipment upside down, the "brownies" who play tricks on people, the "elves" who occasionally do favors. Their name is "E'epa," but you can still call them "Menehune."