

SACRED WATERS OF HAWAII

by Serge Kahili King

Water was probably the most important element of all for the ancient Hawaiians. Not only was it vital for island life as a natural resource for drinking and growing crops, it was a spiritual, healing, and metaphorical resource as well.

The idea of water was divided into *wai*, most commonly thought of as fresh water, and *kai*, the term for sea water or salted water.

In legends, Kāne (Kah-nay) was the god of fresh water, particularly rainwater and upland springs, and Kanaloa was the god of sea water, particularly seaside springs and the ocean.

The word *wai* actually includes all forms of liquid except salt water. This means things like rain water, spring water, liquor, juice, sap, honey and all liquids discharged from the body, such as semen and blood.

To the ancient Hawaiian mind, an accumulation of water was such an important resource that a doubling of the word, *waiwai*, came to mean riches and wealth of any kind.

Sacred water (water that was blessed by a kahuna) was used for purification ceremonies that might involve healing or consecration rituals. One way to make plain water sacred was for a priest to breathe on it, using his breath, *hā*, to give it *mana*, power.

Rainwater, coming from the heavens by way of the god Kāne, was even more sacred, and it was especially sacred if it could be obtained before touching the ground. A favorite way to achieve this was by using water that had been caught in a taro leaf. A prayer going along with this was:

Aumakua, mai ka pō wai ola, ho'ikea mai i ke ola.

Guardian spirit, bring forth the water of life from out of the invisible world and manifest this healing.

Next in sacredness was spring water, for this also came from the the invisible world. Here is part of a prayer used in purification ceremonies:

He wai i puna

He wai i inu

He wai i ola

E ola no!

Spring water
Drinking water
Healing water
Let there be life! (or healing)

Sea water was used in special ceremonies when the objective was to clear away any evil influences. However, the most sacred sea water came from special locations. The Ancient Hawaiians considered some places along the shore to have more *mana* than others. Sea water that gathered in or touched these places was preferred over other locations. Two of these places on Big Island are *Mokuola*, the little healing island in Hilo Bay, and Waipi'o Beach on the Hāmākua Coast. There's only space to mention two more here, Ke'e Lagoon and Waikanaloa Wet Cave on the north shore of Kauai. When possible, a sick person would be brought to swim or wade in these waters, but if not able, then water from these places would be brought to the patient.

At the beginning of the annual Makahiki season, mistakenly characterized by many writers as a harvest celebration because it took place in the Western concept of Fall, whole communities would go down to the sea for a purification swim to ritually rid themselves of the past year's evils.

When fresh water was used in purification ceremonies it was called *wai ola*, translated as "water of life" or "healing water," but when sea water was used it was called *wai ea*, also translated as "water of life," but with a sense of breath being involved.

One of the nicest proverbs associated with water is this one:

Mōhala na maka o na pua i ka wai
Unfolded by the water are the faces of the flowers.
(People thrive where there is water)