

Student Reading

Kū'ula: God of Fishermen

Kū'ula lived with Hina, his wife, and 'Ai'ai, their son, in Hāna on Maui. Kū'ula was a fisherman of great wisdom and power. He walled a fishpond on the edge of the sea and stocked it with all sorts of fish. Nearby he built a shrine where he made his offerings. Because of his wisdom and his reverence for the gods, Kū'ula could always catch the fish he wanted. He knew the best way to catch each kind and when he prayed, fish came at once to his hook, net or basket. When his neighbors had no luck fishing, Kū'ula shared with them.

These neighbors talked of Kū'ula's wisdom and his kindness. They boasted of his success in fishing until his fame went all about the island. The high chief of Maui, hearing of Kū'ula's skill, made him head fisherman. For many years Kū'ula served the chief both faithfully and well.

But about the time that 'Ai'ai, the son, reached manhood, trouble began. Fish disappeared from the well-stocked pond so that it was no longer easy to supply the chief. Kū'ula was troubled and kept constant watch trying to discover what was destroying his fish.

One night, just as the morning star arose, Kū'ula opened his pond gate. The tide was coming in and he prayed that fish might come with it. At daybreak he

stood on a rocky point above the pond watching the rush of water. There he was joined by a neighbor. "Look!" Kū'ula exclaimed. "There comes the one who destroys my fish!" The two saw an enormous eel enter the gate then disappear in the pond.



"That must be the great eel of Moloka'i," the neighbor whispered. "I have heard of such an eel which lives in a cave on the windward side of that island and is worshiped by the people. They say he destroyed a man-eating shark. This powerful eel caused rocks to fall on the shore and kill him. Then the eel made his home in the cave opened by those falling rocks."

"Let him fish about his own island," answered Kū'ula. "If he comes here day after day to steal my fish he shall die."

"But he is worshiped by the men of Moloka'i," the neighbor repeated. "They will be angry if you kill him."

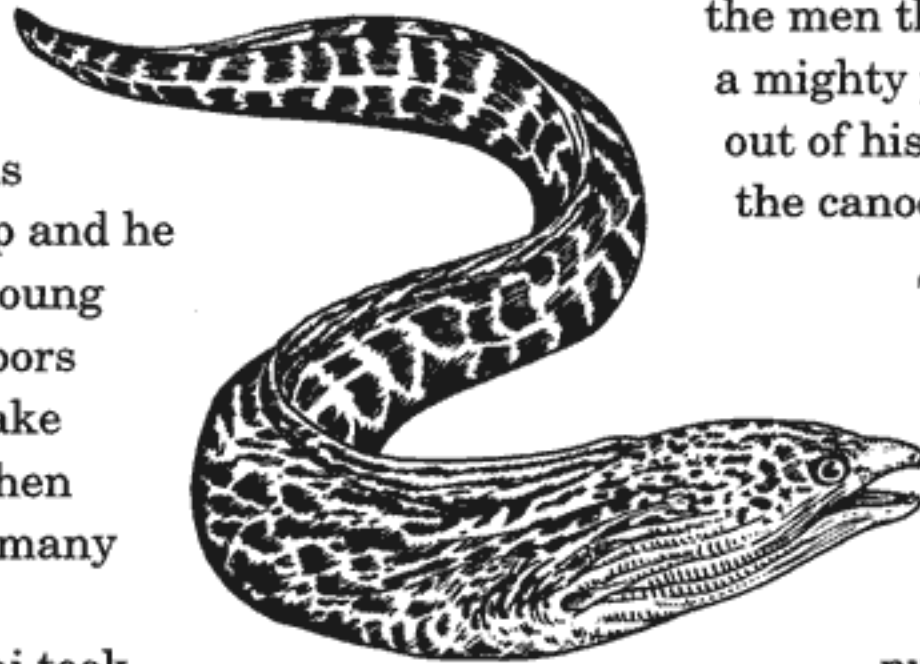
“Let them be angry! If that eel comes day after day to eat my fish he shall die.” Kū’ula went home to talk the matter over with his wife. Finally he said to his son, “‘Ai’ai, you are a man. Here is our enemy, a giant eel. Day after day he comes. Day after day our pond grows empty of fish. Let this be your work, my son, to rid us of our enemy.”

‘Ai’ai was glad. His father needed his help and he should have it! The young man called the neighbors and asked them to make ropes of hau bark. When the ropes were ready many canoes put out to sea. Besides the ropes ‘Ai’ai took two heavy stones and his father’s sacred hook.

The young man had prayed earnestly and watched the eel. Now, pointing silently, he directed the canoes. He was sure the eel hid in a cave in the ocean floor. He found this place by landmarks on the shore. When the canoes reached the place ‘Ai’ai chewed kukui nut and spat out the juice. Looking into the water quieted by the oil he plainly saw the cave mouth. He seized one of his heavy stones and jumped. The stone’s weight took him to the bottom. As he came near the cave mouth he noticed fish swimming about in a frightened way. They know the eel hides in that cave, the young man thought. He rose to the surface and climbed into the canoe.

Now the hau ropes were unrolled. To one end ‘Ai’ai fastened a stick and on the

stick the sacred hook baited with coconut. The ropes were passed to other canoes for, once the eel was hooked, the strength of many would be needed to pull him ashore. By signs ‘Ai’ai showed his neighbors what to do. Then, praying, he took his second weight and dived. He hooked the sleepy eel and jerked the line to show the men that he was ready. With a mighty pull they lifted the eel out of his cave. ‘Ai’ai reached the canoe and scrambled in.



The men dug their paddles into the sea trying to hold firm against the mighty thrashing of the eel. ‘Ai’ai directed and, pulling together, at last

they got the great fish into shallow water. They tried to kill it but it thrashed about, snapping angry jaws so that they could not strike it with their spears. Then ‘Ai’ai seized a huge rock and threw it at the eel. Still the great body coiled angrily and the jaws snapped. The young man threw another rock. He threw a third and the eel lay still – dead at last.

On Moloka‘i the caretaker was troubled because the eel he worshiped no longer came for food and ‘awa. One night the spirit of the eel came to this caretaker in a dream. “I have been killed,” he said. “Men of Hāna, Maui, have killed my body.”

Angered, the man went to Maui. There he was shown the jaws of the dead eel. “See there!” the men told him proudly. “See those rocks, washed by those waves. Those were the jaws of a

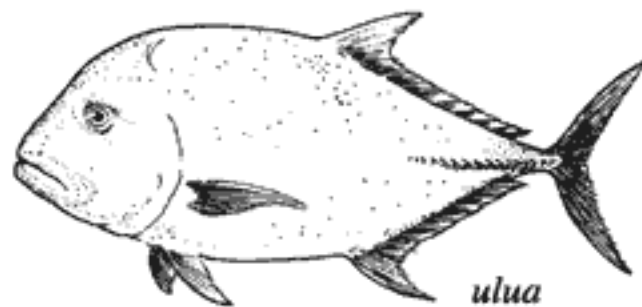
great eel. He robbed the fish pond of Kū'ula. 'Ai'ai, Kū'ula's son, hooked the robber and we his neighbors, pulling with all our strength, stranded the eel. Here 'Ai'ai killed him and his jaws have turned to stone. Over there is his backbone. That too is stone. See what a giant monster that eel was!"



kia'i (pond caretaker)

"Yes, I see," the man answered quietly but to himself he added, 'Ai'ai and Kū'ula shall die because of this wicked deed.

The caretaker made his plans. He became a servant of the high chief and served so well that the ruler trusted him. One day, he came to Kū'ula asking him for fish. "Fish are still scarce," Kū'ula told him. "Since that great eel robbed my pond, fish have been hard to get. The chief will understand. Take this ulua and tell him to have his servants cut off its head and cook it in the imu. Let its flesh be cut up, salted and dried in the sun."



ulua

The man from Moloka'i took the ulua and returned to his chief. His chance had come to punish 'Ai'ai and Kū'ula! "O heavenly one," he said. "Kū'ula, your fisherman, sends only this one fish. These are his words, "Tell the high chief

to have his servants cut off the chief's head and cook it in the imu. Let them cut up the chief's flesh, salt it and dry it in the sun."

Hearing these words the high chief became angry. He forgot Kū'ula's years of faithful service and believed the lies of his new servant. "Kū'ula shall die!" he shouted and made the man from Moloka'i his messenger. "Tell my overseers," he commanded, "to have my people gather wood. Let this be piled about the houses of Kū'ula and let him, his wife and son perish in flames." Gladly that man took the message.

'Ai'ai saw the men bringing wood. "What is it for?" he asked them. But the men did not know. They obeyed the overseer and asked no questions.

"Father," said 'Ai'ai, "men are gathering much wood. See where they pile it! What can it be for?"

"For our death," answered the wise Kū'ula. "The servant has changed my words to lies. The chief is angry and has ordered that we three be put to death."

"There is time to escape," said 'Ai'ai.

"Yes," his father answered, "there is time.

Men will bind us three and start the fire. When the smoke blows seaward my spirit and that of Hina will escape into the sea. There we shall live as fish. When the smoke blows up the mountain slope run with it, my son. Find a cave for your home. When you have need of fish set up this little image of stone, make offering

and pray. Your mother and I will hear your prayers. We shall teach you many ways of fishing. We shall send fish to your hooks and baskets. Take my sacred hooks: the one you used to catch the eel, my aku hook of pearl and my cowry for catching he'e. All my wisdom I give to you my son, my wisdom and my power. You shall live and become a teacher of fishing throughout Hawai'i-nei. Show men good fishing grounds and teach them to worship and make offering."

Just at nightfall men rushed into Kū'ula's sleeping house. They seized Kū'ula, Hina and 'Ai'ai, bound their hands behind them and tied each to a post of the house. The Moloka'i man was with them, directing them. "Now block the doorway!" The three heard his command. "Pile the wood close to the house and start the fire."

Kū'ula, in his wisdom, knew that some did not obey these words. The neighbors with whom he had shared fish were not piling wood nor starting fire. They stood weeping, longing to help the three.

But Kū'ula and his family did not need their help. Before the fire was lighted the cords that bound them had fallen off. As the fire crackled and the thatch burst into flames the smoke blew seaward and with that smoke, invisible, the spirits of Hina and Kū'ula found safety in the sea.

The roof blazed and smoke blew up the mountainside. In that

smoke 'Ai'ai escaped. Then flames leapt out and destroyed the man of Moloka'i and his helpers. But the neighbors who had refused to bind the three and start the fire – those neighbors were unharmed.

'Ai'ai found a cave which he made his home. Next day as he went out in search of food he met some boys who were practicing with bow and arrows. He made friends with them and one of the boys invited 'Ai'ai to his upland home. There the young man lived for some time unrecognized, helping the farmer with his work.

Because of the cruelty of chief and men, Kū'ula and Hina took away fish, shellfish, even seaweed. The high chief could not understand why no seafood was set before him and commanded men to fish for hīnālea (wrasse) but none were caught.

One day 'Ai'ai asked the farmer, "Each day you and your wife and son go to the beach. Each day you come home empty-handed. Why do you go?"

"We obey our chief's command," the farmer answered. "Each day we go to catch hīnālea but the sea is empty."

Then 'Ai'ai told those people to gather beach-morning-glory vines and taught them to make baskets. "Now come with me," he said and led them to a rocky place above the beach. There he placed the stone image his father had



given him. "This is your kū'ula," he told his friends. "Make offering and pray. Then set your baskets in that pool." He showed them how to weight each one with stones.

As they stood watching they saw fish gather about the baskets. "They have returned," the people whispered. "The fish are here once more."

"Call your relatives and friends," said 'Ai'ai. "There is fish enough for all."

That night there was feasting in the village by the sea. "Kū'ula, our good neighbor, is not dead," the people said. "We shall pray to the image he has given us. We shall make offering of the first fish caught. Our old neighbor will bring us food as he did when he lived among us as a man."

A runner came from the upland. "The high chief is dead," he told the people. "He tried to eat the hīnālea and died." The people understood that the fish which gave strength to them brought death to the chief because of his cruelty to Kū'ula, his faithful fisherman.

After that day 'Ai'ai went about Hawai'i-nei. He showed men good fishing

grounds and taught them many ways of catching fish. He established shrines. Sometimes a shrine was a heap of stones, sometimes an image carved like a person. One such was Mālei, a figure of white stone which stood long above Makapu'u on O'ahu. Fishermen hung lei of seaweed about Mālei. They prayed to her and came home with full canoes. They laid their first-caught fish before her and offered thanks. The fishermen of that district love Mālei and longed to see her as a living goddess. Some saw her in their dreams. They heard her chants and learned and chanted them.

Many such shrines were brought or built by 'Ai'ai. Men called each a kū'ula in memory of the great fisherman of Maui whom they now worshiped as their god. Those shrines became landmarks for travelers among the islands of Hawai'i-nei.

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