Nuʻu and the Flood of Kahinaliʻi

Native Hawaiians · Hawaiʻi

Where It Comes From

Hawaiians remember a flood called *Kai a Kahinaliʻi*, the sea of Kahinaliʻi. The earliest written mention is by the missionary William Ellis, who heard it in the 1820s. Fuller versions, naming the survivor Nuʻu, were written down later in the nineteenth century and retold by writers such as W. D. Westervelt.

What Happens

Long ago the sea rose and flooded the islands. Wave after wave came in until all the land was covered except the very top of Mauna Kea, the great mountain of Hawai‘i Island.

In Ellis’s short account, two people were saved on that peak. In the later, longer telling, it is Nu‘u, his wife Lilinoe and their three sons, who escape in a great canoe filled with food and animals, and come to rest on Mauna Kea.

When the waters go down, Nu‘u makes an offering, and the god looks on him with favour. A rainbow is part of some tellings.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. Ellis's brief account gives no reason. In later tellings, the people had turned from the gods.

Who was saved, and how. Two people on the mountain (Ellis); Nuʻu and his family (later versions).

The boat or the refuge. The summit of Mauna Kea, and in the later version a large canoe.

What came after. An offering, and the islands peopled again.

Scholars have long asked how much of the longer Nuʻu version was shaped by Christian teaching. Missionaries arrived in Hawaiʻi in 1820, and the canoe full of animals, the offering and the rainbow sound a great deal like Genesis. James Frazer thought one 1843 version had probably been coloured by the Bible. The sea flood on Mauna Kea in Ellis's earliest account is more likely to be an older Hawaiian memory.

THINK IT THROUGH

How could you tell which parts of a story are old and which were added later?

Sources

William Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*, vol. 4, and James Jackson Jarves, *History of the Hawaiian or Sandwich Islands* (1843), as given in James George Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1918), pp. 245–246 (including Frazer's judgment of biblical influence).

Roland B. Dixon, *Oceanic Mythology* (The Mythology of All Races, vol. 9, 1916), p. 39; W. D. Westervelt's retellings of Hawaiian tradition.

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.