

The Moon, Sun and Stars in Hawaiian Timekeeping

By Linea Van Horn with Liz Dacus

Abstract:

This article is the happy result of a Shamanic Astrology Mystery School intensive on the Big Island of Hawaii, in August 2009, sponsored by Daniel Giamario and Cayelin Castell. Giamario is the founder and main teacher of the School, whose mission “is to provide transformational education in astrology and astronomy that celebrates the magical link between the Earth and the Sky.” For many years, he has sought and found traditional systems that are visually based, and which incorporate both naked-eye astronomy and earth-sky based philosophy. The Hawaiian Moon Calendar is a perfect example of such a system, and leads us to connect directly with the Moon we see in our night sky.

From the earliest dawn of human ancestry, the cycles of the Moon, Sun, and stars have been used to mark and keep time. Our very survival depended upon observing and coordinating our activities with these natural cycles, and therefore they were the backbone not only of culture and religion, but also of daily life. Sadly, much of the intimate, utilitarian, day-to-day knowledge of these celestial patterns so familiar to our ancestors has been lost, eroded or corrupted. Such forms of knowledge can vanish with alarming swiftness — within a generation — if no written record exists, or if there is no one alive to understand it. This has been the fate of most ancient civilizations, but not all.

In some locations, these ancient ways are being resurrected and revived. In Hawai’i, quite a wonderful renewal is possible, because a great deal of Hawaiian sacred tradition and lore was recorded in the late 1800s, a marvelously recent date by archaeological standards. Author Paul Wood states, “Fortunately we have excellent information about (the Hawaiian) system preserved in the old chants, in some early histories (such as David Malo’s *Hawaiian Antiquities*), and above all, in millions of pages of nineteenth-century Hawaiian-

language newspapers, most of which are still not translated into English.”¹ A Swedish university-trained whaler named Abraham Fornander relocated to Hawaii in the 1840s and later wrote a 3-volume series recording the quickly-vanishing native Hawaiian culture.² Many of these documented practices have not yet been translated from the original Hawaiian, but they still exist in archives, accessible by anyone who can read them.

One such person is Kalei Tsuha,³ whose love and knowledge of the Hawaiian Moon calendar blossomed after she saw school children learning a chant about the phases of the Moon. This was a regular component of a child’s education. In fact, Tsuha relates that there is an old Hawaiian insult which roughly translated means “You’re such a child you don’t even know the Moon phases,” inferring great ignorance. In the past two decades, Tsuha has become a master of the calendric system of the ancient Hawaiians, earning her Master’s degree in the subject while recovering and testing the ancient methods.

In the traditional Hawaiian system, the culture is so entwined with the sky that every day in the month has a specific name which is based on the visible appearance of the Moon. Each cycle was divided into three segments, roughly comparable to our weeks, except that each segment has its own significance. The day names themselves suggested the most beneficial use of that day. Was it a good time to fish or not, and if so, what kind of fish should one look for, where should one look, and which were the best tools to use? When was a good time to plant or harvest a certain crop? And when should the ancestors be honored, a time that required special activities and behavior? Day names could even provide insight into temperaments of people born on that day.⁴

Of course, Mahina, the Moon, wasn’t the only timekeeper. The Sun, whose cycle dominates and regulates the seasons, must be honored. The “turnaround points” or solstices, and the equinoxes when the Sun rises and sets due east and west, are the

primary features of this cycle. The kahuna (priests) also kept careful track of the rising Sun against the regular, comforting backdrop of the stars. In this way, it was ensured that their entire year stayed in synch with the sky. In Polynesia, the Pleiades, Altair, and the Belt of Orion were variously used as markers for the Sun's annual path. ⁵ One account records the following; "Makali'i (December-January)..... is considered the first month of the Hawaiian new year, as our year begins when the constellation Makali'i (Pleiades) is on the horizon at Sunset." ⁶

It is certain that Polynesian navigators mastered the night sky in ways that are unimaginable to the modern, gadget-driven Western mind and used it as a tool to keep track of themselves in time and space. For many thousands of years, they successfully sailed from one remote island to another, using a variety of techniques. Yet "the most accurate direction indicators for Pacific Islanders ... are stars low in the sky that have either just risen or are about to set; that is, horizon or guiding stars. You steer toward whichever star rises or sets in the direction of the island you wish to visit."⁷ Other stars near the zenith were used to indicate specific islands. This is simply an application of the principles of declination: for a star's declination will make it a zenith star for any island at the same latitude. Arcturus, or Hoku'le'a in Hawaiian, at 19N11 declination, is the zenith star for the Big Island of Hawaii, latitude 19N43.

Clearly, we are looking at the unified, coherent system of a sky/earth-based culture, of which timekeeping is only one component. And while all hands of this celestial clock are crucial, let us look more closely at the Moon cycle, which provides the basis for naming each basic day unit, and organizes those days into convenient 29-or-30-day packets.

The Moon

From childhood, a Hawaiian iki (child) is taught the following chant:

Two-four-four
Two-four-one-three
Three-three-three, and sometimes four!

What looks like an arbitrary combination of numbers is actually the key to unlocking the secret of the Hawaiian Moon. This little rhyme outlines the three "weeks" of the Hawaiian month. The new month begins

when the first crescent Moon appears in the western sky, and from there the days unfold in a never-ending cycle based on the visual appearance of the Moon. Each day has a specific name based on the exact visual phase of the Moon. Certain activities were favored under certain Moons, and this was common knowledge. It was the kahunas' (elders') task to watch for the new Moon and determine when the month began, as well as make certain adjustments in order to keep everything coordinated. In this system, the most important of all things is that each phase is observed directly from its appearance in the night sky. ⁸

Hawaiian knowledge of the Moon names, functions, and rhythms was a common knowledge, shared with all, because the Moon was considered a benevolent provider of proven, life giving resources and knowledge. As such, great reverence was given to the Moon, and chants were offered in her honor.⁹ From one new Moon to the next, slightly more than 29 days elapse, this is called a lunar or synodic month. The Hawaiians divide this month into three periods of ten days called Anahulu. Each Anahulu breaks down into smaller units, as described in the chant.

The three phases or Anahulu are:

Ho'onui (or Mua): increasing, waxing, getting bigger (*Two-four-four*)
 PoePoe: full or rounded (*Two-four-one-three*)
 Emi (or Hope): decreasing, waning, diminishing (*Three-three-three, and sometimes four!*)

The Ho'onui Series



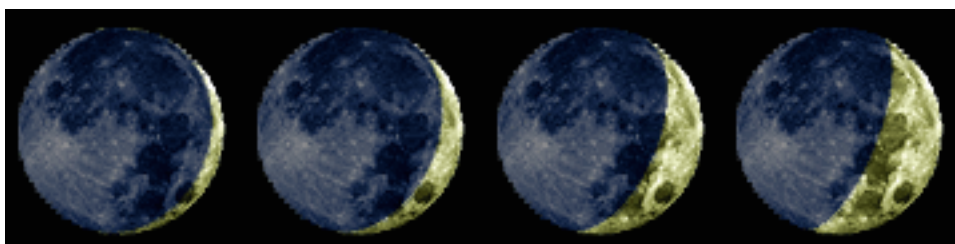
The Ho'onui series is ruled by the West, which is a masculine energy and where Hawaiian ceremony begins. It is in the west that this Moon is seen right after Sundown, and this series always begins with the first tiny crescent Moon, called the **Hilo Moon**. Since the Moon must be observable, the Hawaiians look for the first tiny light of the New Moon. Hilo means a small

streak of light. Another meaning of Hilo is navigator, and this Moon phase can be seen as a navigator for the Moon cycle that follows, much in the same way western astrologers use the new Moon chart of the exact conjunction to forecast for the coming month.



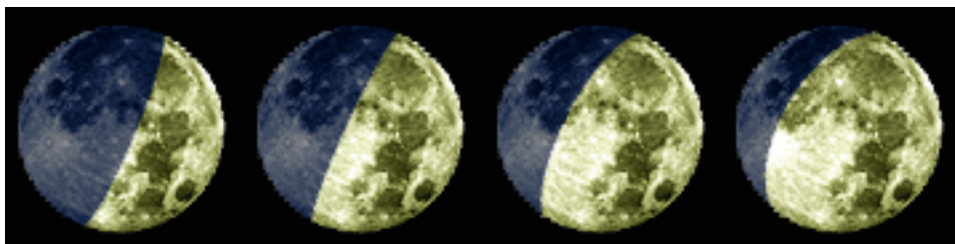
Next is **Hoaka**, when the first real crescent Moon is visible. The name Hoaka is a contraction of the word Ho’o Aka which means to make shadow. “Fish may be frightened away by the spirit of this Moon.”¹⁰

The Four Ku Phases



The four Ku phases come next. This is the first in two series of four nights, all having the same lunar energy. These four Ku Moons are ruled by the North. It is helpful to know that the words for one, two and three are Kahi, Lua and Kolu. The fourth night in the series is Pau, or finished. The Ku Moons, then, are: **Ku Kahi, Ku Lua, Ku Kolu, and Ku Pau**. Ku is ruled by the element of Air and all things ruled by the birth of spirit in the cycle. The first night, Ku Kahi, is a kapu period (kapu is forbidden and dedicated to worship and prayer). Another of the meanings of Ku is strong and erect, to grow upright. Plants grow in this fashion when planted on the Ku phases. It could be said that the Ku shows us to stand tall and strong with spirit, and the masculine. The shape of the Ku Moon resembles “the horns of a cow.”¹¹

The Four Ole Moons



Four Ole Moons follow: ‘**Ole Ku Kahi, ‘Ole Ku Lua, ‘Ole Ku Kolu, and ‘Ole Pau**. (One, two, three and “finished”.) ‘Ole means nothing, or unproductive. Fishing is poor due to high tides and rough seas. ‘Ole Pau marks the end of the rough weather. Someone born under the ‘Ole Moons could possibly have a priest or priestess lineage, as these are the days for introspection and rest. M. Kalani Souza, a Hawaiian cultural practitioner and priest, says this is “a time to reverse course and to be patient.”¹² ‘Ole’s mark the first quarter Moon, which appearance suggests occurs between ‘Ole Ku Kahi and ‘Ole Ku Lua.

PoePoe Series



On the eleventh day of the Moon cycle the next Anahulu (or phase) begins with the rounded appearing Moons, or Poepoe. These phases are ruled by the East. Their element is Water, specifically fresh water. It is ruled by the feminine, and has a life giving birthing energy.

Huna is the first of these, and Huna means hidden or horned. The shape of this Moon is said to have “hidden horns.” The “sharp edges of the Moon are now hidden.”¹³ It is a good time to plant crops known to “hide” such as root crops. This could be another of the Moons representing the priest/priestess lineage. Hawaiian practitioners are called Kahu, or the Kahuna, the ones who know the hidden knowledge.

Mohalu Moon



The next phase is **Mohalu**, “a sacred night to the God Kane, the creator. Fish and fruits were forbidden to be eaten.” This is another Kapu day of prayer and worship.

The Four Full Moon phases



The next four days are the four full Moon phases. They are the woman’s kapu, dedicated to Mahina, the goddess. The first is **Hua**, which means egg, and this is the easily seen shape of this night’s Moon in the night sky. It is also a night sacred to Lono, the life giver, and ruler of the rains. The calendar in the Bishop Museum notes that this is “a night known to be fertile for many things.” A procreative energy abounds.



The second full Hawaiian Moon night is **Akua**, and is near the full round shape. The spirit of Akua, of God, is present with this Moon. Offerings were made to the God's on this night. It is a meditative day of reflection of the soul, of the "self," and a day for prayers.

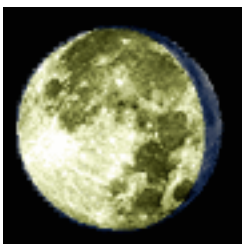


The **Hoku** is the fullest of all the phases. The great round Moon brings blessings to the farmer. "Seeds become animated by the full Moon."¹⁴



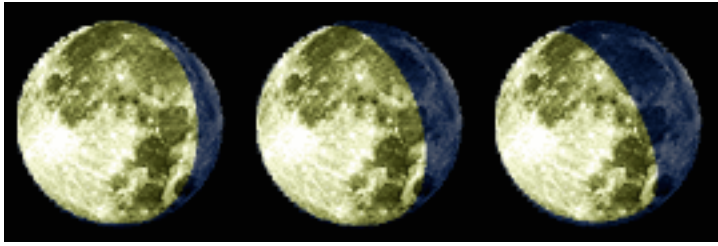
After the Full Hoku Moon, **Mahealani** is next and is known as the Spirit Walkers Moon, "the movement of souls upon this night." There is the slightest touch of shadow on the edge of the Mahealani Moon and it rises just after Sunset. These Moon phases up to the Kulu Moon are also dedicated to spirit and the death or rebirth energy. It is a time for closure, endings, and even funerals.

Kulu



Kulu stands alone and means to fall. It is the first Moon following the four full Moons and is a time to give offerings from the harvests to the Gods and Goddesses. This Moon is another introspective night.

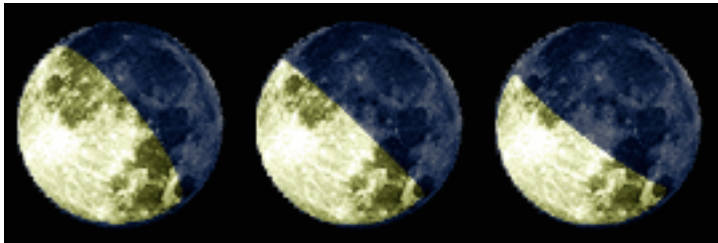
The La'au Moons



This set of three La'au Moons begins as the Moon starts to wane. The La'au Moons are associated with any type of vegetation and plants. It is a time for gathering of healing herbs and shrubs to make medicines. These are the harvest Moons and are ruled by the element of Earth and the feminine. The three phases are: **La'au Ku Kahi**, **La'au Ku Lua**, and **La'au Pau**.

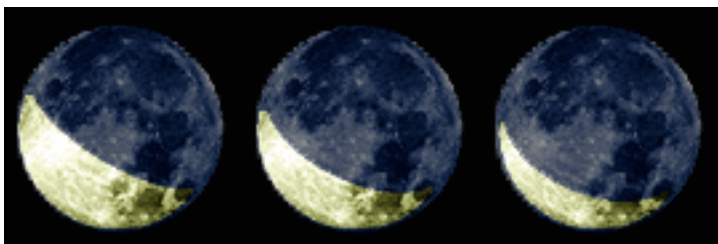
Emi Series

The Three Ole Moons



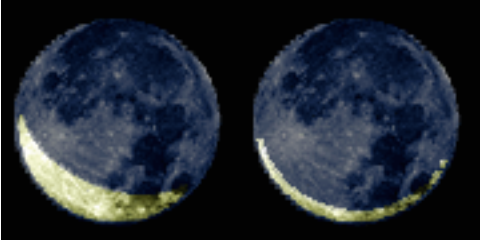
The last Anahulu begins with the next set of Ole Moons. This is the phase of Emi, or the decreasing waning Moons. Just as with the La'au Moons, there are three Ole Moons this time: **'Ole Ku Kahi**, **'Ole Ku Lua**, the last quarter Moon, and **'Ole Pau**. This series is ruled by the South. These are unproductive days for fishing or farming, and good days to weed. They are also days for introspection and doing inner work. 'Ole Pau is dedicated to the sea God Ka'loa, otherwise known as Kanaloa.

The Three Ka'loa Moons

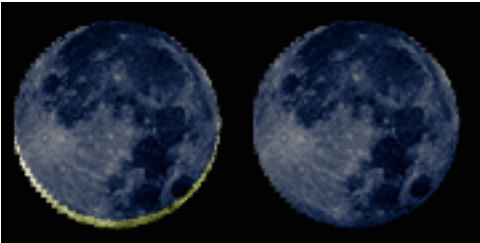


Three Ka'loa Moons are the last set of the cycle: **Ka'loa Ku Kahi**, **Ka'loa Kulua**, and **Ka'loa Ku Pau**. Their element is water, specifically salt water, and is associated with a life giving energy ruled by the sea god. Not surprisingly, fishing is encouraged during the Ka'loa Moons.

The Last Three OR Four Moon Phases



The last “*three and sometimes four*” Moons stand alone. They are ruled by the element of Fire, and again are associated with death and rebirth. The first is **Kane**, which marks a two day Kapu of sacred worship, first to the God Kane, and then to Lono, the life giver and the ruler of rains. **Lono** is also the next day’s Moon phase after Kane.



Mauli is the phase that does not occur every month. The only way to tell if there is a Maui Moon is when it is upon us. The kapuna must go out early and look for it. If a very small crescent Moon is visible just before Sunrise, there is a Maui Moon. This occurs approximately four times a year. It is followed by the dark Moon of **Muku** falling on the twenty-ninth or thirtieth day, which is the final phase of the Moon. Again this is determined by what is visually seen or not seen and so Maui must be visible rising just before the Sun rises. Muku finds the Moon rising with the Sun behind it, so it is invisible from the Earth.

Location, Location, Location

There is an interesting phenomenon about using the Hawaiian Moon Calendar in Hawaii: there is chronic disagreement about which Moon phase it is on any given day! Various sources will list different phases which can vary as much as three different Moons. It’s documented that the Moon appears different to the eye from one island to another, because the appearance of the sky changes depending upon the viewer’s latitude. The shadow of the Moon also varies throughout the night as it rises and sets. The beauty of this system is that it requires us to directly experience the night sky as often as possible. The land based indigenous culture of Hawaii is looking at what “is.”

Seeing the Moon

Vedic astrology and some forms of traditional astrology use lunar mansion systems. These are based on the Moon’s daily motion and its monthly visits to various stars on or near the ecliptic. This approach creates a system of 27 or 28 “signs” called nakshatras in Vedic astrology, and firdaria in traditional astrology. Like the Hawaiian Moon system, these systems are also dependent upon the appearance of the Moon, but the emphasis is on which star the Moon contacts as it moves around the zodiac, not with the shape or phase of the Moon.

The Hawaiian Moon Calendar tracks the synodic cycle of the Moon; that is, from one illumination phase to the next, such as from one full Moon to the next full Moon, or one new Moon to the next. This cycle takes 29.53 days. Dane Rudhyar and most modern astrologers divide this cycle into eight cycles that are not visually based, since the exact New Moon is not visible.

Like other visually-based systems, the Hawaiian Moon calendar provides an interesting alternative, and has a more natural feeling. For one thing, the full Moon is in the middle of the second Anahulu, with three days leading up to it and three days leading away. This is a model that closely reflects pagan Moon lore and feels different from the modern system of creating a new division when the Moon reaches 179 degrees from the Sun. Also, notice that although the quarter Moon is not specifically acknowledged in the Hawaiian system, the essential interpretation matches our Western notion of the quarter Moon: this is not a good time for action. Kalani characterized it as “a time to reverse course and be patient,” very close to the “crisis of consciousness” used in modern day western astrology. At either quarter Moon, it’s better to weed than to plant.

Learning More about the Hawaiian Moon Calendar

Although there are several lovely printed Hawaiian Moon wall calendars, the one we prefer is from Kamehameha publishing. They also have a free application for looking up the Moon phases available at;

<http://www.kamehamehapublishing.org/multimedia/apps/Mooncalendar/>

Another great resource is M. Kalani Souza, a cultural practitioner and Kahu, who presented at the Shamanic Astrology workshop and has been an invaluable resource for much of this knowledge. He is currently at work writing a book on this material entitled: “Under a Native Moon.” Visit his website at: www.mkalani.com

Conclusion

Since time out of mind, humans have used the cycles of the Moon, Sun and stars to mark and keep time. Everything from daily activities to religious ceremony to ultimate survival depended upon knowing and understanding these natural cycles. The beauty of the Hawaiian Moon calendar is that it provides an easy route to a different way of moving through the world,

one that effortlessly connects heaven and earth. In developed countries today, such a connection with the sky has been obliterated. Even we astrologers, with our 2-dimensional horoscope, are not familiar with the sky upon which it is based. Our myths are full of astronomical allusion we do not even recognize. Still, we look to the Sun and Moon to order our own lives as much as possible, using the ancient axiom “As above, so below.” We can learn to apply this principle much more literally, and a good place to begin is to learn more about how our ancestors understood and applied this idea. All over the world, it was the sky, filled with story, through which our ancestors carefully conveyed vital celestial information from one generation to the next, assuring their continuity and survival. Astrologers hold a key role in the current-day iteration of this process, and we do a much better job of it when we put down the charts and books, pull away from our computer screens and i-phones, and go outside to connect directly and intimately with the planets and stars on a regular basis. The experience is profound. It deepens one’s understanding of astrology, and uplifts the soul. We can be immeasurably enriched by the sky, if we will but learn its language directly and consciously.

Linea Van Horn, CANCGR-PAA, is the Astrologer at Large. She has been a professional astrologer since 1998. She is founder and President of the San Francisco Astrological Society and serves on the local Chapter of NCGR as well as the NCGR Board of Examiners. She worked in the astrology internet industry for many years, and currently devotes herself full time to teaching and mentoring, writing, consulting, and blogging. Contact Linea at linea@astrologeratlarge.com or (415) 418-9677. Her website is astrologeratlarge.com.

Liz Dacus has studied astrology for over twenty years and was certified by the Shamanic Astrology Mystery School in August of 2009. She does readings as well as leads workshops on the Sacred Marriage. Contact her at nanilaakea@gmail.com or www.thesacredmarriage.com

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References

- ¹ <http://www.mauimagazine.net/Maui-Magazine/January-February-2009/Hawaiian-Moon-Calendar/>
- ² Hostetter, Clyde, "Star Trek to Hawaii," Diamond Press, San Luis Obispo, 1991, p. 170.
- ³ To see a charming and informative video presented by Kalei Tsuha on the Hawaiian timekeeping system, go to <http://www.kohalacenter.org/puanakaike/Tsuha.html>.
- ⁴ http://www.wpcouncil.org/indigenous/Indigenous_Display-1.pdf
- ⁵ Lewis, David, "We The Navigators: The Ancient Art of Landfinding in the Pacific," University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2nd edition published 1994, p. 383.
- ⁶ http://www.kaahelehawaii.com/pages/culture_makahiki.htm
- ⁷ Lewis, *ibid*, p. 82
- ⁸ From the website www.instanthawaii.com
- ⁹ "Cycles and Hawaiian Traditions" produced by Hui Malama o Mo'omomi and The Pacific American Foundation, Part I - The Moon in Hawaiian Culture: Teacher Background Information available at <http://www.thepaf.org>.
- ¹⁰ From the website www.instanthawaii.com
- ¹¹ Ainaaloha Ioane, Big Island Weekly, <http://www.bigislandweekly.com/>
- ¹² For more information on Kalani, please see this link: www.mkalani.com
- ¹³ Ainaaloha Ioane, Big Island Weekly
- ¹⁴ The ancient Hawaiian Moon Calendar related to fishing and farming from the Prince Kuhio Civic Club.

Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.mauimagazine.net/Maui-Magazine/January-February-2009/Hawaiian-Moon-Calendar/>
- 2 Hostetter, Clyde, "Star Trek to Hawaii," Diamond Press, San Luis Obispo, 1991, p. 170.
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- 14 The ancient Hawaiian Moon Calendar related to fishing and farming from the Prince Kuhio Civic Club.



