

From: “**Farewell, for now**”

By Shantel Grace, Honolulu Weekly, Sep 22, 2010

*E Ku Ana Ka Paia: Unification, Responsibility and the Ku images* / In June, the three last great Ku images remaining in the world reunited for the first time in more than 150 years at the Bishop Museum. It was the completion of a journey that began thousands of miles away in London’s British Museum and Salem’s Peabody Essex Museum, finally returning to Honolulu for the opening of *E Ku Ana Ka Paia: Unification, Responsibility and the Ku images*. Now, as the Bishop Museum prepares for the closing of this historic exhibition on Oct. 4, emotions over their departure are rising. Some believe Ku should never have returned in the first place, others feel the images must never leave and still others believe that the bringing together of the three images for a brief time offers a more important lesson about spiritual ownership, and the roles and responsibilities of Hawaiian people.

It began in 2008, when Noelle Kahanu, project manager for the Bishop Museum, returned from a symposium in Paris on representations of Polynesian culture. Kahanu began asking Hawaiian leaders how they felt about bringing Ku home, knowing he would leave again.

“If we had an opportunity to bring these images together,” she says now, “even if for a short time, was that better than never being able to bring them back at all?” Leading museums, including the Peabody, were hesitant. Previous exhibitions of the cultural artifacts of indigenous people have resulted in those people reclaiming and demanding repatriation of the objects. Officials were also concerned about Ku’s return — more specifically, his eventual departure — causing pain.

In a letter to the Peabody’s Dan Monroe, Kahanu acknowledges the museums’ hesitations.

“I can understand your hesitancy with regard to the loan of such an iconic and important image. I can also understand your concern that Ku’s arrival not be a cause for further discord in an already fractured community. But, what would it mean to the Hawaiian community? To see these Ku standing side by side? To bring them together is to bring ourselves and our community together. They are what connects us in a tangible, visceral way, to our past, for they are the embodiment of the imagination, artistry, and skill of our ancestors. They survived the overthrow of their religion, they survived colonialism, war and destruction, they survived ignorance, racism and marginalism. His return would mean his being enveloped once again in his elements, standing alongside his brethren.”

### **The rebirth of Ku**

Ku is known throughout the Pacific as the god of warfare, procreation and prosperity. He was the primary god of male endeavors—fishing, canoe-building, war, gathering. He and his wife, Hina, suggested a compelling balance in Hawaiian life and religion; Ku means to “stand up” and Hina means “fallen down.” Their powerful duality is one of the key dynamics in Hawaiian religion.

Hawaiians worshipped Ku as one of the four major gods, along with Kanaloa, Kane, and Lono. The 600-to-800 pound wood carvings were built for specific temples of worship and were once found on islands throughout the Pacific.

“There were a multitude of Ku gods, varying from large temple images, to smaller wooden and wicker forms that were carried into battle,” says Kahana. “Oral history suggests that there were many forms of Ku, possibly over 200, but historians and scholars are still uncertain about the exact age of the last remaining three.

“What we can say for certain is that they were not carved after the fall of the temple religion in 1819,” she says. “After that, the images had no function.”

The most famous form of Ku is the fishing shrine, but other images of Ku can be found in woven baskets, in natural phenomena, in fish form like the shark or in bird form like the Hawaiian hawk. He was the principle male deity, and for every male endeavor, a Ku god was associated.

“It’s important to ask, ‘Why have these Ku images become so iconic?’ ” says Kahanu. “Clear evidence suggests that they were on platforms until the 1840s. Why, for two decades after the fall of the Hawaiian religion, were they treated differently? Why, for two decades after the fall of the Hawaiian religion, were they treated differently? Why were they not destroyed and why did the rules not apply to them? What does that say about Ku? There is something that resonates with Native Hawaiian people, 200 years later.”