



MAGNIFICENT AND MYSTICAL MARINE TURTLES
Photo-lecture presented in the 1990s
by George Balazs

Supernatural Sea Turtles--from Hawaii and elsewhere:

The People Loved Kauila

Punalu'u (in the Kau District of Hawaii) means "diving spring" and takes its name from the fact that for their drinking water the natives had to dive (lu'u) down in the bay to an underwater spring (puna) some ways out from the shore. A man would take gourds out to the place and dive under. When he came to the fresh cold water near the bottom of the bay, he would unstop his containers, fill them, then surface and bring them to shore.

A legend relates that there was a time when stormy weather prevented the men from diving for water. There were two supernatural sea turtles who had come out of the ocean to Punalu'u: Honu-po'o-kea, the mother; and Honu-'ea, the father. The mother gave birth to an object resembling a piece of Kauila wood, which she buried in the sand to be hatched out by the sun. Then they dug into the earth and made a spring, then returned to the sea. When it was time for her egg to hatch, Honu-po'o-kea returned. When the egg she had laid did hatch it was a turtle the color of polished Kauila wood. Mother and daughter lived in the spring until the baby turtle grew up. The young turtle was named Kauila. The spring came to be named "The-Rising-W'ater-of-Kauila." The turtle girl was able to assume human form and play with the young folk, but would become a turtle again when she went back into the spring. When bubbles came up in the spring, people knew the turtle girl was asleep in her home. Children used to catch fish and shrimp in the spring, and Kauila watched lest the little ones fall in. The people loved Kauila for this and because her spring gave them drinking water. They never used her water for any other purposes.

Mary Kawena Pukui

Only What They Needed

"Turtle Mother was a benevolent spirit that acted as the intermediary between the world of animals and the world of humans. She could increase the likelihood for success by magically controlling a person's luck and the movements of turtles. If, on the other hand, an individual, or the human community collectively, did not observe specific taboos, and restrict over-exploitation, taking only what they needed and wasting nothing, the Turtle Mother would send the turtles far back out to sea beyond the reach of the turtlemen and cause their luck to turn bad."

from Caribbean Edge
by Bernard Nietschmann

A Day of Years

"The boys in the village called him Taro, the quiet one. They told of how he had risked his life to save a young sea-bird that had been blown from its nest on the cliff. On the beach, Taro gathered stranded sea creatures to return to the life-giving, life-taking ocean. One day while Taro was walking by the seashore he saw the village children tormenting a huge old sea turtle. The helpless turtle was flipped onto his back. Two of the boys, dancing wildly, beat on his shell with pieces of bamboo. "Stop!" Taro shouted. "Stop!" One boy raised his bamboo pole to hit Taro. But when he saw the great anger in Taro's face, he and the other children ran. With help from Taro, the huge old turtle slipped quickly into the water and swam away. A year of days passed with nothing special to mark them. One afternoon out fishing, Taro felt drowsy from the warm sun and the rocking of the boat. A voice called to him from the ocean. "Taro! Urashima Taro!" He looked up and saw the huge old turtle swimming towards the boat. Do you remember me, Taro?" asked the turtle. "Last year you saved my life. Now I wish to repay you."

from Urashima Taro

A Large Rock

"Strangely, on one of the beaches there is a legend concerning the **mass** arrivals, similar to the Turtle Mountain legend of Costa Rica and the Turtle Mound story in Florida. A large rock that sits at the edge of the sea in Pacific Mexico acts as a beacon and guides the ridleys to shore. The rock is called La Piedra de Tlacoyunque, and it sits apart from all other rocks on the beach, which have no names. There is a big hole in the middle of it, and you can look through it and watch the ridleys coming"

from Time of the Turtle
by Jack Rudloe, 1979

The Afterworld

"My interest in the significance of turtle motifs stems from the discovery of a remarkable petroglyphs site on Nukuhiva island, in the northern Marquesas. The Hatiheu Valley boulder site exhibits one of the finest arrays of petroglyphs hitherto known from the Marquesas. The eight turtles included among the representations that nearly cover the decorated face of the boulder are notable not only as the first turtle motifs recorded from the Marquesas, but also because of their evident deliberate arrangement in clusters and their execution in a patterned portrayal showing adherence to easily recognizable stylistic models."

from *Turtles, Priests, and the Afterworld*
by Barry Rolett, 1986

Golden-Green Light

The essence of it is that they can find something and they are not being allowed to do it. What more can you do to a creature, short of killing it, than prevent it from finding what it can find? How must they feel? Is there a sense in them of green ocean, white surf and hot sand? Probably not. But there is a drive in them to find it as they swoop in their golden-green light with their flippers clicking against the glass as they turn. Is there anything to be done about it?

from *Turtle Diary*
by Russell Hoban

Banished the Darkness

"Once upon a time man lived in harmony with the Big Turtle and nature. As the turtle drifted endlessly about the cosmic sea in its mindless slumber its shell supported forests and swamps, clean water, and oceans filled with fish, whales, and sea turtles. The air was clean then, and man was just one of the many creatures that lived on the cosmic turtle's back. It was, essentially, the Garden of Eden. But then man became dissatisfied with living on its shell, and began to change it. In his restlessness, he dammed the free-flowing rivers, built enormous jetports, covered everything with asphalt, and banished the darkness with neon. As he multiplied at the expense of everything else, his cities spread out and covered the swamps. He displaced wildlife, slaughtered the whale, and wasted the turtle. And he's still doing it.

But who knows? Perhaps at this very moment, as bulldozers are shoving earth around and strip-mining deep down into this scutes, the big creature is beginning to awake. He is, after all, a turtle, with his pitifully tiny brain and primitive nervous system. It takes time for the assault to sink in. War machines scream across the skies, the blight of our destruction spreads across his carapace. To the timeless turtle the bombs of World War I and II have just fallen, the horror of Hiroshima and the endless barrage of nuclear tests are just being felt. Perhaps this very moment we should be worrying about what will happen when this cosmic turtle comes to life. What will he do when he awakens to the reek of sewage, the oil spills, the foul air, piles of garbage, and turtleless seas? He will do what his simpleminded instinct warns him to do when he is in danger. Down he will go, deep into the vast cosmic ocean. The flood waters will come sweeping over his shell, washing away this pestilence.

Perhaps it won't be the first time he has taken a dive. Nearly every culture in the world has in its mythology or religion a time when the earth was covered by water. But there is hope, because even the Big Spiritual Turtle is an air breather and will not remain submerged in darkness forever. He likes the surface where the sun warms his shell, so he will arise again to bask and life will begin anew."

from Time of the Turtle
by Jack Rudloe

Singing of Birds

For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;
The flowers appear on the earth;
The time of the singing of birds is come,
And the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.

Song of Solomon, King James Version

In Ancient Seas

"What a monster sea turtle Archelon was, with its twelve-foot-long shell, its narrow beaked head and huge flippers. This six-thousand-pound turtle swam in ancient seas that covered Kansas and South Dakota, when the land was nothing but steaming swamps and dinosaurs."

from Time of the Turtle
by Jack Rudloe

The Lone Mountain

"We raced on down the tree-fringed trough, and as the river mouth curved to meet the sea we banked seaward, past the green loom of Cerro Toruguero, the lone mountain that stands on the far side of the pass only a little way back of the beach. It is the Cerro, the local legend says, that draws in the green turtles each July from all about the Caribbean. It is just folklore, of course, that wild notion about the mountain being a beacon for migrating turtles. But I have spent ten years looking for a better theory to explain how they find the place, so I never argue the point."

from So Excellent a Fish
by Archie Carr, 1967

Their Color Fades

One of the keepers in the Aquarium came out of a private door and I asked him about the turtles. The big ones have been there twenty or thirty years, he said. I asked him if it was possible to look at the tank from the other side. Yes, he said, and took me into the private door. One had to go up a few steps and climb through a hole in the wall, then there were planks across the back of the tank. It was brightly lit, had a backstage feeling. The turtles looked different seen from above. "That's not the colour they'd be in natural light," the keeper said. "Their colour fades here." "Would it be a big job moving them out of here?" I said. "'We do it sometimes when we clean the tank," he said. "Suppose," I said, "some sort of turtle freak decided to steal the turtles and put them back in the ocean. What would he need for the job?"

from TurtleDiary
by Russell Hoban