Fire and Buffalo Goddesses: Crash Course World Mythology #14

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Aloha, I'm Mike Rugnetta, and this is Crash Course Mythology, and today, we're going to continue looking at goddesses, and what makes them so great. In this episode, we'll focus on two myths, one about a volcano goddess, and one about White Buffalo Calf Woman.

We're gonna look at this myths a bit more in depth than we usually do and head to places we haven't talked about much before: Hawaii and North America. You all packed Thoth? Ooh! Nice, sharp!

[Opening music]

Long time Crash Course fans may have remembered that Hawaiian mythology featured heavily in our episode about Captain Cook. The god in question then, was Lono, who was supposed to be pretty powerful but he was only one of the great gods who followed Pele, the Fire Goddess, to Hawaii, from the land beyond the vast oceans.

By the time Cook arrived in Hawaii, Pele was the most feared and respected of Hawaii's divinities. Holding court with her five brothers and sisters in the KÄ«lauea volcano, which is a scary place to hold court, but very convenient if you like barbecue.

Pele exemplifies the triple goddess that we talked about in the previous episode. She's a goddess of life and death, controlling the lava that gives the Hawaiian islands its rich, fertile soil but also destroys everything in its path. And in this story, we see her as the regenerative goddess of sexual allure and creativity. In short, (sings) this girl is on fire!...emoji.

One day, Pele decided to come out of her smoldering pit at Kilauea to go to the beach. After frolicking in the Hawaiian surf with her sisters, she laid down for a nap in a cave. But before she fell asleep, she warned her sisters that if any of them woke her, she would kill them all. Whoa, grouchy.

If it were absolutely necessary to awaken her, she said that her youngest sister Hi'iaka should be the one to do it. At the time, Hi'iaka was out playing in the Lehua groves, and making friends with a tree spirit named Hopoe, who quickly became Hi'iaka's best friend. Meanwhile, the dream spirit of the sleeping Pele traveled to Kauai, where there was a hula performance in the Allaka sacred hall. And there, she found the prince Lohiau. The prince saw her and fell in love with her instantly.

He invited her to eat with him, and then go back to his house. Pele allowed the prince to kiss her, but not to touch her, which is a little confusing because isn't kissing kind of touching? Anyway, the prince tried getting handsy anyway, and Pele floated away, back to Hawaii. Distraught beyond compare, he hanged himself with his loincloth.

Thought Bubble, you can take it from here.

After a few days, Pele's sisters grew worried about her trance-like nap and summoned Hi'iaka to wake her. The little sister chanted over her big sister's body, and the great goddess woke up. Didn't kill anyone.

Pele asked each of her sisters to go to Kauai and fetch Lohiau, but they were all too afraid to make the journey, except for Hi'iaka. Pele promised the youngest sister that after she accomplished her task, Pele would take Lohiau as a lover for five days and nights, and then, he would belong to Hi'iaka. Before going, Hi'iaka made Pele promise to not destroy the Lehua groves, where her friend Hopoe lived. She also asked for some of Pele's magic power to help her on her journey.

Hi'iaka made the dangerous trip to Kauai where she found that Lohiau had been dead for many days. Well, mostly dead. Hi'iaka looked closely and noticed above the prince's body a dim ghost spirit hovering. Using all her extra magic power, she brought Lohiau back to life.

While Hi'iaka was away on her journey, Pele broke her promise, and her lava destroyed the Lehua groves, killing Hopoe. Hi'iaka saw this betrayal, so she decided that, since the bargain was broken, she would take Lohiau as her own, saying, "I have faithfully kept the compact between myself and my sister. I have not touched her lover, I have not let him caress me, I have not given him a kiss. Now that compact is at an end. I am free to treat this handsome man as my own lover, this man who has had a desire for me. And I will let Pele with her own eyes see the compact broken."

Thank you, Thought Bubble.

So that's exactly what Hi'iaka did. When her sisters saw her kissing Lohiau, they tattled to Pele, who responded, "Mouths were made for kissing!" which makes it seem like she's okay with it, but she's definitely not okay with it.

Pele called upon the other great gods to help her destroy Lohiau, which they did with lava. The lava spared Hi'iaka, but flowed over Lohiau, who died again. Pele, still angry, would have destroyed the world itself, but another god, Kane, the earth-shaper, calmed her down.

The story doesn't end there, though. A great sorcerer came to the pit where Pele and her sisters lived and asked them why his friend Lohiau had been destroyed. After the sisters told him, he asked "Why? Since Lohiau had already died, did he have to die again?" Pele asked him to explain what he meant, and the sorcerer told her about what Hi'iaka had done on Kauai to save Lohiau.

Hi'iaka confirmed her deeds, explaining that she had saved him, but only smooched him after learning Pele offed her rad tree pal. The sorcerer then asked Pele to show herself to him. He fell down, and adored her, an act which seemed to soften her heart. Pele sent her brother Ka-moho-ali'i to find Lohiau's spirit and bring him back to life.

Hi'iaka found him in the charred groves, the place where the destroyed Lehua were beginning to grow again. As they wandered together through Hawaii, they knew that the Goddess of the Pit was not now so terror-inspiring.

As a mother goddess, Pele has power over life and especially death. Her actions are often destructive but also regenerative. By the end of the story, the Lehua grooves are regrowing and the love between her sister and the prince is rekindled. *wink*

While Pele's powers are terrible, we should also note that she sometimes chooses to limit them. Pele makes threats, including the threat of killing her sisters, but she doesn't follow through. Circumstances can also alter her behavior. When she discovers the truth about Hi'iaka's loyalty and her efforts to bring Lohiau back, Pele's attitude changes. She cools off.

Does this mean that our actions towards the gods can influence their actions upon us? Or, is it primarily an analogy for the way we as humans should behave towards one another: honoring our elders but also keeping our promises. Maybe it is just about not getting hot under the collar about your sister.

The creation of the social order is another aspect of great goddess mythology. One we can see echoed in our next story, that of the White Bufflo Calf Woman.

The Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota tribes, who populate the Northern Great Plains of the United States, and part of Canada, are sometimes lumped under the name, Sioux. But, since that has pejorative connotations, we're going with the D'Danke Oh Yah Dem or the Bufflo Nation.

The people of the Bufflo Nation have a complex religious system that sees the world as challenging and haphazard, forcing people to accept loss and work to complete the unfinished world. In this context, the White Bufflo Calf Woman is a culture bringer; She gives the Bufflo Nation people objects and practices that symbolize and define their way of relating to the spirit and human worlds. This is a version of her story.

Long ago, the people of the D'Danke Oh Yah Dem came together at the seven sacred counsel fires because there was no game and the people were starving. They decided to send two scouts to find something - anything - to eat. This was so long ago that it was before horses, so the scouts would have to go out on foot.

The two scouts searched everywhere but found nothing; until one day, they spotted a distant figure floating, not walking. And because of this, they knew that that person was *wakan*, or holy. This person was Ptesan-Wi, the White Buffalo Calf Woman and she was very beautiful.

Each man saw her and reacted differently. One was in awe of her, but the other was overcome by desire, and he tried to touch her. Instantly, he was struck by lightning and burned into a heap of black bones. So, if we've learned anything today, it's that goddess groping equals gruesome death.

White Buffalo Calf Woman told the other scout that good things would come to the Buffalo Nation people, and that he should return to camp, and await her arrival. He did as he was told, and the camp prepared itself for the holy one.

Four days later, White Buffalo Calf Woman arrived with a bundle, and was made welcome. She told the people to create an altar and a rack for the holy thing that she had brought them. And when they had done as she instructed, she opened the bundle and revealed the Chanunpa, the sacred pipe.

The White Buffalo Calf Woman showed the people how to pray, and how to use the pipe: how to fill it and sing the songs that went along with it. She told them: "With this holy pipe, you will walk like a living prayer. With your feet resting upon the Earth and the pipe-stem reaching into the sky your body forms a living bridge between the sacred beneath and the sacred above. Wakan Tanka smiles upon us, because now we are one: earth, sky, all living things, the two legged, the four legged, the winged ones, the trees, the grasses. Together with the people, they are all related, one family, the pipe holds them together."

She told them of the pipe's symbolism. The bowl and the stem were carved by men, and the decoration of the pipe was the work of women. The pipe binds men and women together and is used in marriage ceremonies. Women, according to the White Buffalo Calf Woman, are equal to men in importance because their work and their bodies keep the people alive. "You are from the Mother Earth," she told the women. "What you are doing is as great as what the warriors do."

The White Buffalo Calf Woman gave many gifts to the Buffalo Nation including corn, wild turnips, and the knowledge of how to cook wild turnips, which - I mean, I sure as heck wouldn't know so, thanks Ptesan-Wi! She told the people that they were special, and that this was why they had been given the Chanunpa. Most important, when the White Buffalo Calf Woman lef the people, promising that she would see them again, the great buffalo herds appeared, allowing themselves to be killed, so that people could eat and live.

Unlike the Pele story, Ptesan-Wi's interactions are mostly with humans and with groups rather than other gods or individuals. And rather than being mercurial, the White Buffalo Calf Woman offers a sense of order, and a sense that the right behavior will be rewarded. In short, great goddesses are powerful, great goddesses are desirable, the great goddesses giveth, and the great goddesses taketh away. And, in a way, they suggest a relationship between the sacred and the profane; teetering, like many deities, on a line between worldly desire and otherworldly authority.

So, maybe most importantly, remember: terrible things will happen to you if you try to touch a great goddess without permission. Consent is sexy! Thanks for watching, we'll see you next time.

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Thanks for watching, and as Pele says, mouths were made for kissing.