# Ma'ui, Oceania's Hero: Crash Course World Mythology #31

Crash Course: World Mythology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=eBB3RKazIj8
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/eBB3RKazIj8

Hi, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology and today, we're going to finish up our heroes series by telling the story of a great hero: Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson.

Okay, not really. The Rock may be the sexiest man alive, but he's no demigod like Ma'ui, the demigod hero of Oceania and the role he recently voiced in the film, *Moana*.

The legendary Ma'ui is pretty different from his cartoon counterpart. He's younger, more lithe, and a little smarter. Still, he's an adventurer, he has a divine birth, he's a trickster, and a culture hero. He's everything we love here at Crash Course!

[Intro music]

Ma'ui myths are found throughout Oceania, particularly in Hawaii. Like Herakles, the most well-known Ma'ui stories focus on a series of heroic deeds. But where Herakles spent the vast majority of his labors killing or stealing monstrous animals, Ma'ui's great deeds are a little more motley.

He fights a monstrous eel, but he also gets into an argument with the sun. He creates the entire island of New Zealand. Some stories characterize Ma'ui as a hero, and some of them work etiologically to explain aspects of the natural world. And others capture the mythical origins of Pacific Islander culture.

And also unlike Herakles, these tasks are not assigned to Ma'ui as one big hero project. They occur throughout his life and act as episodic glimpses into Oceania's culture. But okay, enough treading water, without further ado, Ma'ui's seven great deeds.

One, fighting his mom's house. Not fighting *in* his mom's house, fighting the house. Back in the mythic times of Oceania, lived a goddess named Hina-of-the-Fire. She had four sons and all of them were named Ma'ui. One day she gives birth to a fifth named, you guessed it, Ma'ui. This Ma'ui, they call him Ma'ui the Skillfull, is our hero.

But, to Hina-of-the-Fire, he's one too many mouths to feed. So she sets Ma'ui five adrift at sea. It just, you know, it wouldn't be a myth without just a little attempt at infanticide, you know?

Luckily for Ma'ui five, the god of the sea takes favor on him and he survives the waves and currents of the ocean. He makes it all the way back to Hina-of-the-Fire's house. She can't believe it and, doubling down on her motherly abandonment, she says that she'll only take him back if he proves his worth.

He must destroy her house by throwing spears through its thatched roof. If you remember the Mwindo epic, this kind of radical remodeling should sound familiar.

Ma'ui squares off against the house, beginning the fearsome battle where our hero defeats two terrible doorposts. He strikes down short post and tall post. His mother, for whatever reason, is finally proud of her son and welcomes him, um, home? Welcomes him to a pile of thatching?

Either way, heroic deed - done!

Two: raising the sky.

Ma'ui eventually gets a home, but things aren't all hunky-dory. In those days, the sky that stretched over Oceania was very, very low. We're talking scraping the tops of trees low. Clouds blocking all the light low.

Ma'ui decides to do something about this. He gets a swig of some mystery drink out of a strange lady's gourd which fills him with enough magical strength to lift up the whole sky. Though palm tree leaves are still flat to this day from the time when the sky pressed down on them.

With all the new room, Ma'ui fashions a kite. He calls for help from a nearby wizard and, a few incantations later, there's a great magical wind. In fact, the winds are so strong that they snap Ma'ui's line and blow his kite away.

But, during the struggle, Ma'ui learns to read the winds and understands the weather, which he passes onto the people of the islands and now they can travel further than ever before.

Three: fishing for New Zealand.

Ma'ui might have sorted out the sky, but he was still the youngest brother. His older brother's all thought Ma'ui the Skillful was actually the Ma'ui-the-Lazy and Ma'ui-the-Bad-at-Fishing. They teased him and tattled on him to Hina-of-the-Fire.

Ma'ui decides he is going to prove his brothers wrong. He travels to the Underworld to make contact with a long-dead ancestor. This ancestor is half-dead and half-alive, so they give Ma'ui a jawbone out of their dead half, which he carves into a magical fish hook.

Then, he goes and catches one of his mother's sacred Alae birds to use as bait. Now, he's ready to go fishing.

Ma'ui five and his brothers row out further than anyone has ever gone and they begin to fish. His brother's begin to complain about his laziness, but then something catches on Ma'ui's hook. The brothers gather around and help Ma'ui pull and pull and, rather than pull up a fish, they pull up an entire island.

And after this, his brothers stop calling Ma'ui lazy. Also, we get Lorde! Hey, we may never be royals, but perhaps, heroes?

Four: slow the sun.

Ma'ui's fourth task was good for his reputation, but his fourth task is important for everyone on the Pacific Islands. They all enjoyed the new room under the sky, but there's one problem: the sun streaks across it so fast that no one has any time to do any work.

No one can tan hides and there's not enough light to create tapa cloth, a handmade patterned textile constructed from trees. And trust me, tapa cloth is a big deal. Hina-of-the-Fire comes to her son and asks him, "Will you do this deed? Will you slow down the sun?"

She thinks there is no way he's gonna pull it off. But Ma'ui has learned a thing or two about asking for help. He goes to his grandmother and she tells him, "The sun is so fast because it has sixteen legs. If you have any hope of catching it, you must set that many traps. One snare for each leg."

She gives Ma'ui a magical stone axe. "Once you snare the sun, use this to get your way."

Ma'ui sets the snares and snags the sun. He approaches it, brandishing the magic axe. He threatens it, saying he will strike it down unless it agrees to take its dang time and give the people a chance to go about their day. The sun agrees, the day lengthens, and people are much happier. Ma'ui then gets to go back to his doubtful mom and decree, "What can I say except you're welcome?"

Five: winning fire for humanity.

Many cultures have stories about discovering fire or stealing it from supernatural sources. Think Prometheus or Grandmother Spider or Loki, how is the worst but occasionally useful to have around. So this is all to say, Ma'ui's fifth task might sound familiar.

Ma'ui dealt with the too-cramped sky and the too-fast sky, but the people of Oceania still don't have fire. Ma'ui knows his mother, Hina-of-the-Fire possesses it's secret, but she's not talking, so Ma'ui decides to go over her head and journeys once again to the Underworld.

There, he tracks down his great-great-grandmother, Mahuika, and convinces her to give him the secret of fire. Mahuika reaches down and pulls off one of her fingernails, in which burns a tiny fire. She tells him, "Take this back to the surface and you can spread the fire to all humanity."

Ma'ui is very grateful and begins to head back, but, on the way, drops the nail into a stream. Augh! Let's head to the Thought Bubble to see how Ma'ui gets himself out of this heroic pickle.

Ma'ui goes back and tells Mahuika, who shakes her head and gives him another fingernail. He turns around, heads back, and drops it into a stream again. Graah!

So, back he goes, and he asks again. And the same thing happens! It happens again with all of the rest of her fingernails and then her toenails. Man, what a klutz! When Ma'ui comes for her last toenail, Mahuika gets so angry that she throws it on the ground and sets the Underworld on fire.

Ma'ui turns and sprints out of the Underworld, chased by the roaring flames. The fire burns underneath the earth and all the water boils. Ma'ui chants a magic incantation that brings rain to put out the fires. After the rain stops, Mahuika gathers up the last remnants of the fire and hides it in tiny pieces in the barks of different trees.

After this fiasco, Ma'ui and his brothers see the Aele birds, who belong to their mother, making fires to cook their food. But every time the brothers get nearer, the Aele put out their fire and fly away.

Realizing that the birds must know where the fire is hidden, Ma'ui concocts a plan. Ma'ui makes a dummy of himself and props it up in his canoe. He pushes the canoe out into the water and hides. The birds see his dummy sail away and whip up a fire to cook their bananas.

Ma'ui leaps from his hiding spot and grabs the oldest Aele bird, shaking it by the neck and demanding to know the secret of fire. Finally, it spills the fiery beans: rub together the bark of the hau and the sandalwood trees and you'll always be able to make fire.

That's a big ol' fiery check!

Thank you Thought Bubble!

Six: Kuna Loa the Long Eel.

Ma'ui's sixth deed is a quick 'un. The long eel, Kuna Loa, is terrorizing Hina-of-the-Fire, so Ma'ui kills it and chops it up into many pieces. All the pieces squirm around and become fish and other eels. And that explains why there's so many fish in the seas around the Pacific Islands.

Boom! Fish, chicken of the sea - check!

Seven: immortality.

Last episode, Herakles was promised immortality if he finished his labors. For Ma'ui's final task, he aims even higher. He wants to gain immortality not only for himself, but all of humanity.

It all starts when Ma'ui learns about the Goblin Goddess: Hine-nui-te-pÅ•, who brings death to all creatures. Ma'ui hears that if he can steal her heart and give it out to the creatures of Earth, they'll all become immortal.

But Ma'ui is scared. The goddess is more powerful than anything he's tussled with. So he asks the Aele if they'll come be his backup. He explains to the birds, "When the goddess is asleep, we're gonna creep in through her mouth, past her volcanic glass teeth, down to her heart to steal it. But when we're inside, you can't make a sound. Not a single peep."

At first, everything goes according to plan. Ma'ui makes it past the goddess's jaws, through her stomach, and grabs her heart. He turns around, climbs back toward freedom, and just as he makes it to her mouth, a bird tweets.

The goddess wakes up instantly and feels Ma'ui in her mouth. She bites down and there, Ma'ui dies.

So Ma'ui fails his final task. But maybe, in this case, the failure is the lesson. Immortality sounds nice, but it isn't meant for humans. Or, as Thoth and I sometimes call them: mortals.

Maybe it's better to learn to accept our own mortality, lest we get chomped by a goddess. Ma'ui is kinda a curious figure; sometimes capable, sometimes clumsy, sometimes strong, sometimes scared, sometimes clever, sometimes dumb.

He and Herakles have more than a few things in common, I'd say. They both do impossible deeds, sure, but they're not one-trick heroes either.

I'm looking at you, Aquaman. Just kidding, Jason Momoa is gonna crush it.

This is one of the things that sets studying mythology apart from studying literature, or fiction. When your hero is a mythological hero, it means they've been constructed by entire cultures. Sometimes multiple cultures and passed down orally over generations.

That's very different than a character whipped up by a professional screenwriter and voiced by The Rock. We can't look to the myths for the same story-telling experience that we get from a Disney cartoon, but myths and their variations allow us to think about what sort of stories come into being and why they remain popular.

Whether the stories are about discovering fire, creating New Zealand, or just getting into a fight with your mother's door jam. And winning! Check!

Next week it's time for a big transition. We're moving on to mythical places. Thanks for watching and see you in Eden!

Check out our Crash Course Mythology Thoth tote bag and poster, available now at dftba.com.

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Thanks for watching and, just so you know, we considered insulting Ant-Man's limited powers, but Paul Rudd just seems like such a nice guy. It felt wrong.