Pele - Goddess of Fire
by Betty Fullard-Leo

Described as "She-Who-Shapes-The-Sacred-Land" in ancient Hawaiian chants, the volcano goddess, Pele, was passionate, volatile, and capricious. In modern times, Pele has become the most visible of all the old gods and goddesses. Dwelling in the craters of the Big Island's Kilauea Volcano, she has been sending ribbons of fiery lava down the mountainside and adding new land around the southeastern shore almost continuously since 1983.

Pele was born of the female spirit Haumea, or Hina, who, like all other important Hawai'i gods and goddesses, descended from the supreme beings, Papa, or Earth Mother, and Wakea, Sky Father. Pele was among the first voyagers to sail to Hawai'i, pursued by her angry older sister, Na-maka-o-kaha'i because Pele had seduced her husband. Pele landed first on Kaua'i, but every time she thrust her o'o (digging stick) into the earth to dig a pit for her home, Na-maka-o-kaha'i, goddess of water and the sea, would flood the pits. Pele moved down the chain of islands in order of their geological formation, eventually landing on the Big Island's Mauna Loa, which is the tallest mountain on earth when measured from its base at the bottom of the ocean.

Even Na-maka-o-kaha'i could not send the ocean's waves high enough on Mauna Loa to drown Pele's fires, so Pele established her home on its slopes. Here, she welcomed her brothers. A cliff on nearby Kilauea Mountain is sacred to her eldest brother, Ka-moho-ali'i, king of the sharks and the keeper of the gourd that held the water of life, which gave him the power to revive the dead. Out of respect for this brother, to this day, Pele never allows clouds of volcanic steam to touch his cliff.

Her other brothers also still appear on the Big Island mountain; Kane-hekili as thunder, Kapoho-i-kahi-ola as explosions, Ke-ua-a-kepo in showers of fire, and Ke-o-ahi-kama-kaua in spears of lava that escape from fissures during eruptions. Of all her siblings, Pele favored her
youngest sister Hi'iaka, the most. Pele, Hi'iaka and another sister, Laka, goddess of hula, were all patronesses of the dance, but Hi'iaka was said to have hatched from an egg that Pele kept warm during the long canoe ride to Hawai'i by transporting it in her armpit.

After Hi'iaka grew to womanhood on the Big Island, Pele traveled in spirit form to the north shore of Kaua'i to witness a dance performance at a pahula, or dance platform, that still exists near Ke'e Beach. Here she manifested herself as a desirable young woman, and quickly fell in love with a handsome young chief named Lohi'au. She dallied with Lohi'au for several days, but eventually her spirit had to return to her sleeping body on the Big Island. Upon awakening, Pele sent Hi'iaka to convince Lohi'au to come to her. The sisters extracted vows from each other: Hi'iaka promised not to encourage Lohi'au should he become attracted to her and in return, Pele promised to contain her fires and lava flows so as not to burn a grove of flowering oh'i'a trees where Hi'iaka danced with her friend Hopoe.

On Kaua'i, Hi'iaka found that Lohi'au had died of grief after Pele disappeared, but the graceful younger sister was able to restore his spirit to his body, bringing him back to life. Together, the two of them began the journey to the Big Island, but Pele's suspicious nature got the best of her. Because forty days had passed since Hi'iaka had set out on her assigned mission, Pele decided she had been betrayed, and so sent a flood of lava into Hi'iaka's 'oh'i'a-lehua grove, killing Hopoe in the process. When Hi'iaka saw the smoldering trees and her dancing friend entombed in lava, she flung herself into the arms of Lohi'au. In retribution, Pele set lose another stream of lava, which killed the mortal Lohi'au, but Hi'iaka, a goddess, could not be destroyed.

The legend has a happy ending, however, as yet another brother of Pele's, Kane-milo-hai, reached out and caught Lohi'au's spirit when he saw it floating past his canoe. He restored the spirit to Lohi'au's body, and once again, the chief was brought back to life. Hi'iaka and Lohi'au returned to Kaua'i to live contentedly.

To this day, tales of Pele's power and peculiarities continue. Whispered encounters with Pele include those of drivers who pick up an old woman dressed all in white accompanied by a little dog on roads in Kilauea National Park, only to look in the mirror to find the back seat empty. Pele's face has mysteriously appeared in photographs of fiery eruptions, and most people who live in the islands—whether Christian, Buddhist, Shinto, or other—speak respectfully of the ancient goddess. After all, she has destroyed more than 100 structures on the Big Island since 1983, and perhaps even more awesome than that, she has added more than 70 acres of land to the island's southeastern coastline.