THE TAMING OF THE SUN

Life was easier for those on earth after Maui had raised and fastened the sky high above. However, life was still very difficult because the sun god now traveled quickly across the sky and made each day much too short.

In fact, it was impossible for trees and plants to produce enough food for the human family because it took them so long to grow. And it was impossible for men and women to finish any one task within the few hours of available light. Farmers did not have time to plant or to harvest a crop. Hunters did not have time to set their traps or to empty them. Fishermen did not have time to reach their fishing grounds or to return from them. And women did not have time both to prepare and to cook the day’s food, or to make the bark cloth that they used. Even prayers to the gods were completed after the sun had returned to his home. For most of each day, the world was damp, dreary, and dark.

From the time that he could remember, Maui would watch his mother, Hina-of-the-Fire, as she tried to make the bark cloth, called kapa, during the brief time that the sun was traveling across the sky. It was a long and complex task at best.

First, Hina-of-the-Fire had to take branches from the mulberry trees and soak them in seawater until their bark was soft enough for her to remove it. Once she had removed the bark, she had to separate the inner layer from the outer layer, since she would only be able to use the inner bark to make kapa. She would stack the wet pieces of inner bark in bundles and lay them upon the kapa board where, beginning at one end of the board and moving to the other end, she would pound
They wrapped the wooden beater until the bark had become soft, thin sheets of pulp. Finally, they would paste these thin sheets together into large cloths that would make fine clothes to wear and mats on which to sleep.

Since the sun traveled so quickly across the sky, the process of collecting the bark took one month. The process of soaking it took a second month. The process of separating it took a third month. And the process of pounding it into thin sheets took six more months. In the early stages of this process, it was difficult to keep the bark wet. After the sheets had been pasted together, it was difficult for the kapa to dry. The entire process could take as long as a year, and making kapa was only one of a woman’s daily tasks.

Maui watched his mother hard at work day after day, rushing to prepare her materials for one task, working faster at another task, sighing in despair as the sun entered his home before she had completed anything, and his heart ached for her. And the more Maui’s heart ached for his mother, the more his heart filled with anger at the sun. So it came to pass that Maui turned his attention away from his mother and toward the sun. In order to observe the sun more carefully, he climbed the extinct volcano that can be found on the northwest side of the island. From there, he noticed that each morning as the sun began its journey, the sun would travel up and over the eastern side of the great mountain called Haleakalā (the House of the Sun).

Then one day Maui asked his mother, “Why does the sun have to travel so quickly? Why doesn’t he care about those who live on the earth? Is there a way to stop him from behaving so selfishly? I am going to tame him! What if I cut off his legs? That should keep him from running so fast!”

“The sun does what he has always done and what he will always do,” his mother replied. “No ordinary person can confront him and live to tell about it. If you are going to try to change his behavior, you have set yourself a great task, and you will need to prepare yourself well. The sun is very large and powerful, and his rays are fiery hot. Once you come face to face with him, your courage will dry up in his heat as if you were no more than a dead plant!”

“Yet you think that you will do better than my grandmother and ask her to help you,” Hina-of-the-Fire suggested. “She can give you good advice, and she has just the weapon that might bring you success.

“Your grandmother lives on the side of Mount Haleakalā, far from where the sun always begins his morning journey. You will know that you have found the place when you come upon a large willow tree. Your grandmother prepares breakfast for the sun every morning, and he stops there to eat before he begins his journey.

“Your grandmother cooks bananas for the sun to eat,” Hina-of-the-Fire explained. “You must be at the willow tree as the sun makes the sky rosy-red with his first rays. A rooster stands watch by the tree, and he announces the sun’s arrival by crowing three times. It is then that your grandmother will come out with a bunch of bananas and put them on the ground while she makes a fire in order to cook them for the sun to eat. You must take these bananas.

“Your grandmother will then come out with a second bunch of bananas and put them on the ground in order to cook them for the sun to eat. You must take these bananas as well.”

Maui’s mother concluded, “Your grandmother will then come out with a third bunch of bananas and put them on the ground in order to cook them for the sun to eat. She will notice that someone has taken the first two bunches of bananas and will begin searching for the thief. It is then that you must present yourself to her. You must tell her that you are Maui, and that you are the son of Hina-of-the-Fire.”

So it came to pass that, while the sun was asleep, Maui set out to climb Mount Haleakalā. Just as the sun made the sky rosy-red with his first rays, Maui saw the great willow tree painted in black against the pale-colored sky. The rest happened just as his mother had told him it would. The rooster crowed three times. The old woman, who was his grandmother, appeared twice with a bunch of bananas that Maui took. When she discovered that these two bunches were missing, she cried, “Where are the sun’s bananas?” and began to search for the thief.

Maui’s grandmother was so old that she was almost totally blind. As she searched for the thief, she came close enough to Maui to smell the scent of a man. She then approached him, peered into his face with her clouded eyes, and asked, “Who are you? And what do you want with the sun’s bananas?”

“I am Maui, the son of Hina-of-the-Fire,” Maui replied, “and I have come for your help. I want to tame the sun! I need to find a way to stop him from behaving so selfishly! He travels much too quickly! He makes each day so short that even my mother cannot finish any of her tasks. It can take her a full year to make kapa! Those who are not gods must have an even more difficult time!”

Maui’s grandmother listened carefully to his words. And as she listened, the things of the earth and sky praised Maui. In his honor, thunder roared and the rainbow bridge appeared. In his honor, pebbles chattered and ants sang. In his honor, dogs without fur walked the land. Surely, Maui was born to be a hero among men!

So it came to pass that Maui’s grandmother decided to help him. “Listen carefully to my words, my grandson,” she said, “and I will help you tame the sun. First, you must make sixteen ropes that you must twist from the strongest coconut fiber. Then, you must ask your sister, Hina-of-the-Sea, to give you enough of her hair to enable you to make a noose for the end of each of them.

“When these are ready,” she concluded, “return to me, and I will tell you how to arrange the ropes so as to catch the sun. I will also give you a magic axe of stone so that you will have a great weapon to use against the sun.”

Given the short days, it took many months for Maui to make the ropes and nooses, but finally he was ready to return to his grandmother’s home. While the sun slept, she showed him how to set the nooses as traps and how to tie the ropes to the great willow tree. Then Maui dug a hole for himself by the roots of the great tree and hid inside the hole so that the sun would not be able to see him when he began his morning journey.

When the sun made the sky rosy-red with his first rays, Maui was ready for him. Soon, the sun’s first ray appeared over the top of Mount Haleakalā and became caught in one of Maui’s nooses. Then the sun’s second ray appeared over the top of Mount Haleakalā and became caught in one of Maui’s nooses. One by one, the fourteen other rays of the sun over the top of Mount Haleakalā, and, one by
Now it was possible for trees and plants to produce enough food for the human family because they grew fast and well. And now it was possible for men and women to finish a difficult task within the long hours of available light. Farmers now had time to plant or to harvest a crop. Hunters now had time to set their traps or to empty them. Fishermen now had time to reach their fishing grounds or to return from them. And women now had time to prepare their food and to cook it, or to make the bark cloth that they used.

In honor of Maui’s taming of the sun, the people celebrated and sang, “How good it is that the sun’s journey is long and that he now gives us the light we need for our daily work!”

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**Questions for Response, Discussion, and Analysis**

1. In what way does the setting of this myth reflect life in the Hawaiian Islands?

2. What does this myth reveal about Maui’s nature? Do you like him? Explain.

3. What does magic contribute to this myth? Does it enhance or detract from the myth? Explain.

4. Does Maui’s being a trickster-hero add to his heroic image in this myth or detract from it? Explain.