

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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THE ROPES OF MAUI

When beams of light and shadow extend downward from the sun, shining through breaks in the clouds, we say that the "sun is drawing water," though it is not really drawing anything; and while the haze in the air that makes the beams visible is, in some cases, composed of water droplets, in others it consists of dry dust. South Sea islanders call these beams "the ropes of Maui," and the legend about them runs thus:

Long ago the sun god, Ra, was not so regular in his habits as he is today. In fact, he rose and set whenever he pleased, without the least regard for the convenience of mankind. It was hard for mortals to adjust their occupations to the capricious habits of a sun that would sometimes set in the middle of the day and sometimes rise at midnight.

At last the great hero Maui resolved to make him mend his ways. The first step was to capture the erratic deity, and in order to do this Maui set six snares of strong coconut fiber along his daily path. When Ra next traveled across the sky he became entangled successively in five of the ropes, but it was not until the sixth caught him around the neck and nearly strangled him that he confessed himself conquered. He begged for his life, promising that, in the future, he would observe regular hours. Maui let him go, but prudently refused to remove the ropes, as he wished to keep him in fear.

So, in the South Seas, when people see the rays diverging from the sun in the morning or evening they do not say, "The sun is drawing water," but "Tena te Taura a Maui" -- "Behold the ropes of Maui." And one saying is just as good as the other.

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