



Photo: [Eli Duke/Flickr \(https://www.flickr.com/photos/elisfanclub/\)](https://www.flickr.com/photos/elisfanclub/)

Hawaiians have more than 200 words for rain

The Hawaiian language's extensive number of rain names displays the culture's deep connection to nature.

BY MATTHEW DEKNEEF

MAR 4, 2016

[_\(https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300\)](https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300)

[_\(https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300\)](https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300)

[_\(https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300\)](https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300)

[_\(https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300\)](https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300)



This reflection of the two, the symbiotic relationship between land and language, is displayed in details such as how many words and terms exist in Hawaiian for rain alone: more than 200.

This breadth of rain names are specific, descriptive and highly nuanced—a reminder of how keenly and thoughtfully ancient Hawaiians observed and were connected to their environment. With these words they distinguished Hawaii's rains in a multitude of ways: by color, intensity, duration, at what times they would arrive, the angles or paths they'd fall in, how a certain rain is linked to a place or area throughout the Islands.

There's the *kili noe*, a fine, light rain, but it's not to be mistaken for the *kili 'ohu*, which was even finer and lighter. Depending where you lived on O'ahu, when the rain fell in a shape that would circle your home, that was a *pō'aihale* rain. The island of Ni'ihau has a special rain, the *kulu pākakahi*, which appears in November.

What's amazing is how nothing about these names are arbitrary.

There's a rain named called *Hukihe'enehu*, given to a Hilo rain for when the nehu fish was running. When this misty rain fell off the south-east coast of Hawaii Island, Hawaiians knew it meant to pull up their nets and catch them.

Rain names like *ho'opala 'ōhi'a* indicated when the native 'ōhi'a would ripen, and the *Ho'opuluhinano* indicated where on Kaua'i the hīnano grew.

The *kuāua* is a name given to a rain without wind extending over a small area. The *ūala* (Hawaiian sweet potato) farmer would count this rain to help determine when it was time to plant.

In addition to recognizing how integral rains are to survival, Hawaiians are also informed spiritually and emotionally by them. *Apo pue kahi* is a name given to a rain that's felt after a loved one passes.

"Our *kūpuna* (ancestors) were so attuned to their environment that they assigned individual names to the multitude of winds and rains occurring throughout the archipelago," says Collette Leimomi Akana, author of "Hānau Ka Ua – Hawaiian Rain Names," the most comprehensive record of its kind that compiles this extensive part of Hawaiian's vocabulary, sourcing its oral tradition, *mele* (song), *oli* (chants), *mo'olelo* (stories), *ōlelo no'ēau* (proverbs) and written literature. "I believe they named each wind and rain because they encountered them almost daily and felt a kinship with them."

It's clear Hawaiians valued rain and its intricacies. They understood one of the most incredible facts about Hawaii's ecosystem: it's one of the very few regions in the world, and nowhere else in the United States, where [rainfall gradients are as steep as they are](http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/narratives/HAWAII.htm) (<http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/narratives/HAWAII.htm>), increasing 25 inches for each mile transversed along a straight line.

For English-speaking locals this number isn't and shouldn't be all that surprising when you think about. Consider how specific we can employ standard English when discussing rain here, an everyday presence across Hawaii. It doesn't simply "rain." It mists, it drizzles, it scatters, it showers. It can be a freezing, pouring rain or it can be a breezy, warm one. On mornings when it can be raining lightly in your backyard, while completely sunny at your front door, it makes sense then that naturally we'd unconsciously suggest a tier system for the various types of rains we encounter daily.

Or consider just how often rain becomes a point of conversation, especially if you're on one side of the island texting a friend who's on the other. As it pertains to rain, "How's the weather?" is more than just small talk in Hawaii. It colors and



Our descriptions of rain are limited when held up to Hawaiian, a reminder of how disconnected we've become to land in comparison. The book is organized alphabetically by rain name, but includes an extensive index where you can browse by geography, allowing you to learn about the rains specific to where you live or are traveling to.

Kiele Gonzalez, the book's co-researcher and Akana's daughter, hopes this collection inspires people to become more interested in their environment. "That's what we're hoping this book will help with, for those of us who don't use these names, to bring them back into everyday conversation," she says, half-joking that maybe eventually Hawaii's weather reporters can begin to apply them to our local televised forecasts. "We know that *āina* (land) is part of our identity, it's how we connect to others, by knowing where they're from. When you learn about your rains, we're learning about ourselves and what our connections are to these places."

Because the language is so influenced by rain, which in turn is so impacted by wind, Akana and Gonzalez are currently in the process of working on another collection, "Hānau ka Makani – Hawaiian Wind Names." The number of wind names and terms they've collected so far? More than 600.

[_ \(https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300\)](https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300)

[_ \(https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300\)](https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300)

[_ \(https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300\)](https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300)

[_ \(https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300\)](https://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=300)



RELATED ARTICLES



[\(/content/origin-mai-tai\)](/content/origin-mai-tai)
The origin of the mai tai
[\(/content/origin-mai-tai\)](/content/origin-mai-tai)



[\(/content/six-island-nations-without-a-passport\)](/content/six-island-nations-without-a-passport)
At Oahu's Polynesian Cultural Center, visit six island nations without a passport [\(/content/oahu-polynesian-cultural-center-visit-six-island-nations-without-passport\)](/content/oahu-polynesian-cultural-center-visit-six-island-nations-without-passport)



[\(/content/bishop-museum-exhibit-displays-hawaii-never-was\)](#)
Bishop Museum exhibit displays a Hawaii that never was
[\(/content/bishop-museum-exhibit-displays-hawaii-never-was\)](#)



[\(/content/discover-kulas-charming-wedding-cake-church\)](#)
Discover Kula's charming 'Wedding Cake Church'
[\(/content/discover-kulas-charming-wedding-cake-church\)](#)