Hōlāniki, Mokupāpapa (Kure Atoll)

Hōlāniki, meaning “bringing forth heaven,” is a single name that stands alone, corresponding to the location of Kure Atoll at the very end of the island chain. This name is used in many different contexts to describe the homeland of gods such as Kēne and Kanaloa, Namakaokahai’s, and Wainu’u. Mokupāpapa literally means “flat island,” which was ascribed to Kure Atoll by Hawaiian Kingdom officials in the 19th century, when King David Kalākaua sent an envoy to the atoll to take “full possession” of it.

Kuahelani, Pihemanu (Midway Atoll)

Kuahelani, meaning “the backbone of heaven,” describes a mythological floating island in the sky, which could derive from the fact that large lagoons, such as that at Midway, often reflect their image into the sky. Pihemanu means “loads of birds” and refers to the loud chatter of the millions of birds that come to this atoll each year.

Manawai, Holoikauaua (Pearl and Hermes Atoll)

Manawai, which means “seweped, dejected or bent in,” provides the imagery of the spiritual process of bending inward to reveal the unchanging nature of one’s true undying spirit. It can also be defined as “branching water.” Wai can also refer to “seawater” or “spirit.” This interpretation focuses on the transitional nature of water as a natural element. The name Holoikauaua celebrates the Hawaiian monk seals that haul out and rest here. Holoikauaua translates to “the quadruped running in the rough seas.”

Kapou, Papa’āpoho (Lisianski Island)

Kapou, meaning “post, pillar, pole or slack,” may refer to the unusual rainbow formations seen here that resemble “pillars going straight into the clouds.” Papa’āpoho describes a flat area with a hollow or depression, which is exactly how this raised atoll is shaped.

Kamole, Kauō (Laysan Island)

Kamole means “ancient root, foundation, source or cause,” providing imagery of something rooted or anchored such as a root that runs through the earth and traces one’s ancestry back to the source. Kamole also corresponds to the lihuele of Laysan Island, which is the first major landfill following French Frigate Shoals moving toward the northeast. Kauō, meaning “egg,” describes both the island’s shape and the abundance of seabirds that nest here.

Lalo, Kāneihoi’i, Mokupāpapa (French Frigate Shoals)

The word lalo means “down, downward, low, lower, under, below, depth, west or leeward.” Lalo is closely associated with the direction of po’i (darkness) or ancestral lands “where dwells the souls of gods.” Lalo also provides us with the imagery of low-lying islands partially submerged below the surface, which apply describes the atoll.

Mokumanamana, Mokumanamana, Hā’ena (Necker Island)

Mokumanamana is often translated as “branchered” or “pinnacled” island, which is a suitable description, but many people who have studied its religious and cultural sites suggest that the repetition of the word mano (spiritual power) after the word moku (island) relates to the spiritual significance of the island, given the 33 shrines along its kua (spine) and the Hawaiian axes of life and death that cross directly over it. The name Hā’ena, defined as “dark, burning heat,” possibly refers to the intensity of a specific kapu (restriction) or sacredness of the island. Ha’ena means “buy,” while au refers to a type of movement from one period of time and space to another, and moe implies “to put to rest” or “pass on” to the afterlife, together referring Ke Aea Polihina a Kāne “The Black Shining Path of Kane,” and is often used as a metaphor for the path to the afterlife.

Nihoa, Nihoa-Kuhiuhu’u’uone, Moku Mano (Nihoa Island)

In Hawaiian, Nihoa means “jagged” or “toothed,” likely referring to the island’s many craggy cliffs causing a profile that resembles a tooth. Kuhiuhu’u’uone was sometimes added in chants, referring to the priests who specialized in the construction planning of heiau. Moku Mano was another name, meaning “bird island” due to its having one of the largest populations of petrels and noddies in the Hawaiian Islands. In other references, the name Hanaka’ie’ie means “buy” (with rise and fall of sea), and corresponds to the island’s Adams Bay, the only major bay in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands that has waves which wrap around the island and come together to intensify each wave and fall within the bay.