

## *lama* (*Diospyros sandwicensis*)

EBENACEAE, ebony family



This species is endemic to Kauaʻi, Oʻahu, Molokaʻi, Lanaʻi, Maui, and Hawaiʻi island (Wagner et al. 1990). Another Hawaiian name for this species is *ēlama* (Pukui and Elbert 1986).

Summary statement of uses: The wood of *lama* was used in house construction and in making religious structures (offering houses, fences marking spiritual enclosures, heiau structures), hula altar offerings, fish traps (*hinaʻi*) supports, and tool handles. The fruits were eaten. An unknown part of the plant was used medicinally.

*Lama* wood and branches had religious value to Hawaiians. Perhaps this is, as Pukui and Elbert (1986) noted, due to the double meaning of the word *lama* in Hawaiian, that of the tree, and as light, lamp or more figuratively, enlightenment. Kamakau (1964:97) describes the building of a special house, the *moku hale*, with the posts, rafters, and thatching sticks of *lama* wood, sometimes even thatched with the leaves of *lama*. In this house, called the *hale lau lama*, chiefs made offerings and sacrifices in atonement to a god for some wrongdoing. Wood, branches, and leaves of *lama* were also used religiously in construction of certain parts of *heiau*, such as special houses and enclosure fences (Papa Ii 1959; Kamakau 1976:138; Dye 1991:34). Papa Ii (1959:56) has a drawing of a Hale o Lono *heiau* with an *opu* tower, a seven meter tall pole structure covered with *kapa*, and with *lama* branches stuck in its top, "like unruly hair, going every which way."

Buck (1957k:519) stated, "Malo (1951, p.159) writes that in the *luakini* war temple 'ohi'a wood was used for the houses, oracle tower, and images and that *loulou* palm leaves, or 'uki grass were used for the house thatch. In the 'peaceful' *mapele* temple, lama was used for the wooden structures and ti leaves for the thatch."

Pukui and Elbert (1986) stated, "Huts were built of *lama* wood in a single day during daylight (*lama*) hours, and the sick were placed inside them for curing". *Lama* wood was placed at hula altars because its name suggested enlightenment (Pukui and Elbert 1986). *Lama* was used in medicine (Pukui and Elbert 1986) and the wood as rafters in house construction (Kamakau 1976). For the full quote, see account of *mēhame*.

Regarding its use on the *hula* altar, Abbot (1992:117) wrote, "Inside a *hālau hula* was an altar (*kuahu*) on which lay a block of wood of the endemic *lama* (*Diospyros sandwicensis*), a tree whose name translates as 'light' or 'lamp' and carried the figurative meaning of 'enlightenment.' Swathed in yellow *kapa* and scented with 'ōlena, this piece of wood represented Laka, goddess of hula, sister and wife of Lono."

The berries of *lama* were eaten by Hawaiians as wild foods (Buck 1957a) and were given the name *pi'oi* (Handy and Handy 1972:235), a name used on Hawai'i island (Pukui and Elbert 1986). Hillebrand (1888) stated, "The seeds are eaten by the natives". It is not known if Hillebrand was mistaken when saying that the seeds (versus the fruits) were eaten. The fruit of many members of this genus are edible, e.g. *Diospyros* spp. are persimmons. The orange *lama* fruit is slightly sweet and when fruiting would be an important source of moisture in a porous lava region lacking potable water for miles.

Status at Auwahi: *Lama* is a common tree species of Auwahi and other leeward districts of Haleakalā, found throughout up to 4500 feet elevation but most common from 2000-3000 feet elevation. Germination of large numbers of *lama* seedlings occurs in the spring but most of these perish by late summer (pers. obs. A.C. Medeiros)