

Kapu System

Kapu affected every phase of everyone's life. There were kapus on fishing, on the use of land, on cooking, on eating, on canoe building, on squatting or prostrating oneself in the presence of an alii, and kapus that restricted the personal and public life of alii themselves. Most of these ancient kapus seems strange to us now. For example, it was kapu, forbidden, for men and women to eat together. It was kapu for girls and women to eat most kinds of bananas or to eat pig. It was kapu to touch the person or anything belonging to a highborn chief. It was even kapu for the shadow of a common person to fall on the shadow of a chief, and a commoner who broke this kapu, accidentally or no, was immediately put to death. Often, very highborn chiefs would stay inside their houses all day and go out only at night, so that no person would break this kapu. Wherever a highborn alii walked, that ground became kapu – so, when an alii went on other lands besides his own, he was carried. Both alii and commoners in ancient Hawaii must constantly be alert that where they were, whom they were near, and what they were doing, was not kapu.

Children as well as parents in those times were expected to know and obey all these strict rules. The punishment for children and parents who broke a kapu was usually death. One exception related in later times was a five-year-old girl who was caught eating a banana. The high chief was indulgent. He gave her a light punishment for breaking the eating kapu. Instead of having her killed, he ordered one of her eyes gouged out. This seems cruel to people of modern times, but all over the ancient world this was the routine, accepted manner of how things were and what would happen if even a small child did not obey a sacred law.

In the last years of government in Hawaii under the system of Kapu, a ten year old boy from Maui was sent by his parents to serve in the royal court as Prince Liholiho's attendant. Because of the very strict and special kapus at court, the boy was afraid to go. Three years earlier, his brother had been sent to serve at court. The brother was strangled immediately when he broke a kapu by accidentally dropping the King's spittoon to the ground.

"Why do you send me? What if the same thing happens to me?" the boy asked his parents.

They loved their son, but they wanted to give him the chance to be in the King's court, where he could learn much and become an influential person when he grew up. "You must be careful!" they warned him.

So, the ten-year-old went to serve at court. One day, as the boy had feared, the King's spittoon slipped from his hand. It was a large wooden bowl set with human teeth. To let any personal belonging of the King touch the ground, or be touched by the wrong person, was strictly kapu. The boy grabbed and caught the spittoon only an instant before it reached the ground.

"Lucky for you!" the King's companions said. "Remember your brother! Be more careful!"

Tabrah, Ruth. *Hawaii Nei*. Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1967.

The Breaking of the Kapu

Women in Hawaii, even chiefesses, had a difficult life under the kapu. For instance, even a kapu chiefess like Keopuolani was heavily restricted in what she could and could not do. She could not come out of the house in the daytime. She could not have a normal life, and few but the highest chiefs could come anywhere near her.

The commoners had it harder under the kapu system than the chiefs. They could be killed for breaking relatively unimportant laws. The people began to see that foreigners ignored the kapu and they weren't punished by the gods. Their women weren't poisoned from eating kapu foods. There was much reason to doubt the power of the kapu system.

Kaahumanu and Keopuolani were in favor of abolishing the kapu and they were not alone in this thinking. Kalanimoku and the high priest Hewahewa were also in favor of it.

During a feast shortly after Liholiho became King Kamehameha II, a very significant event took place. Liholiho sat down next to Keopuolani and started to eat. This was forbidden. Men and women were not permitted to eat together. The women at the table started to eat pork and bananas. This too was forbidden. After dinner, the king sent messengers to tell everybody to eat whatever they pleased with whomever they pleased. Then he told the people to burn all the images and destroy the heiaus. In this way Liholiho did away with Hawaii's law and religion.

kapu. 1. Taboo, prohibition; special privilege or exemption from ordinary taboo; sacredness; prohibited, forbidden; sacred, holy, consecrated.

ho'okapu. To make taboo, prohibit, consecrate*

*Hawaiian Dictionary, Pukui & Elbert, University of Press of Hawaii

Liholiho may not have wished it, but he felt he had to follow the advice of his family and friends. Throughout Hawaii, kapu eating ('ai kapu) was replaced with free eating ('ai noa). Never again would a commoner be killed for accidentally bumping the malo of an alii. Never again would a little girl get her eyes ripped out for eating a banana. While these changes seemed good, there were also some problems.

Some of the kapus had very good effects. They helped the chiefs regulate the fishing so that there would always be a good supply of fish. Kapu helped control crime. Kapu gave the people direction and limits so that they knew what they had to do. Breaking the kapu was the simple act of one person, Liholiho. The motives were not his, but the effects were complicated and widespread.

Not everybody was happy to see the end of the system. Just before his death, Kamehameha had given the war god Kukailimoku into the keeping of his nephew, Kekuaokalani. Kekuaokalani was not only a brave warrior, but a priest. He believed that he must protect the old gods and the old ways with his life, if need be. Possibly he had ambition, as Kamehameha had before him. Regardless, he gathered together the chiefs who were of his opinion and fought with Liholiho's army. His wife, Manona, fought beside him, and both were killed, and the problem was solved.

The Hawaiians were officially without any religion. How did the common people feel about this? Probably they were not consulted. It was for the chiefs to lead and for the people to follow. The people continued to respect their chiefs, even now that they were no longer protected by kapus. In secret, many people, and many chiefs, continued to worship the old Hawaiian gods. Pele, especially, was a goddess who was not expected to be dismissed easily.

The Christian Pioneers

According to the will of Kamehameha, his son Liholiho became the new King, Kamehameha II. The war-god was placed in the care of his nephew, the powerful Kekuakalani. On the whole Liholiho was a reckless and intemperate man with few of the statesmanlike qualities of his father. Knowing this, Kamehameha had appointed his favorite wife, Kaahumanu, as *kuhina nui*, a new office much like that of a prime minister. The proud queen was now in a position to exercise as much power as Liholiho.

The End of the Kapu System

For some years there had been a slow weakening of belief in the *kapu* system. Even the high priest, Hewahewa, came to agree with Kaahumanu and the queen-mother, Keopuolani, that the cruel old gods should be toppled, the *heiaus* burned, and the *kapus* abolished.

At this point events began to move rapidly. On the morning of Kamehameha's death, the chiefs present advised Kaahumanu to do away with the *kapus*, but she decided that it was too soon to act. About two weeks later Liholiho was crowned at a great ceremony in Kailua. At the end of the ceremony, Kaahumanu proposed that the *kapus* be overthrown. The young King, who had been carefully trained in the old religion, refused to give his consent. Shortly thereafter, however, Keopuolani and her younger son, Kauikēaouli, deliberately ate together in violation of the *kapu*. The King did not object to this but could not yet bring himself to break the rule.

Now another event of religious importance occurred. In August, 1819, the French ship *Uranie*, commanded by Captain Louis de Freycinet, dropped anchor at Kailua. Kuakini, the governor, received Freycinet hospitably. The Frenchman pleased his hosts by declaring that he would help Liholiho maintain law and order in his restless kingdom. Thereupon Kalanimoku, the King's adviser, asked to be baptized in the foreigner's religion. Freycinet was delighted and ordered the ship's chaplain to perform the ceremony on the deck of the *Uranie*. A few weeks later, when the *Uranie* had reached Oahu, the governor of that island, Boki, who was the younger brother of Kalanimoku, also asked to receive the sacrament of baptism. It is highly improbable that the two chiefs had much understanding of the ceremony, but quite clearly the old ways were changing!

Now the two queens, Kaahumanu and Keopuolani, renewed their pressure on Liholiho. After giving the matter much thought, he journeyed with his court to Kailua, where he found that a great feast had been prepared. Liholiho sat down with a large mixed company and openly feasted with members of both sexes.

When the people saw that no great punishment followed his act, they rejoiced that the *kapus* were ended. Quickly the news spread throughout the islands. Everywhere the idols and *heiaus* were burned, with the high priest himself leading the destruction. This was in November of 1819.

The *kapus* did not die easily, however. Doubtless some Hawaiians kept their idols, and some chiefs were fearful and horrified because of the sacrilege. Among these was the brave young chief Kekuakalani. In December he went to Kaawaloa, where a crowd of priests, chiefs and commoners rallied to his support and offered him the crown if it could be taken from Liholiho.

Kaahumanu, Kalanimoku, and the royal party were at Kailua. They were worried by this revolt and decided to try to settle it peacefully, if possible, or by force, if necessary. Luckily they were well supplied with arms, having bought a shipment of muskets and ammunition from an American trader some months before. Efforts to avoid fighting failed. As in so many sad cases before this time, brave Hawaiians, including Kekuakalani and his wife, died in useless battle. All of those who survived were finally pardoned by Liholiho.

Soon after this battle the King sent one of his chiefs to put down a revolt of the people of Hamakua. The revolt was quickly ended, and the ancient gods of the Hawaiians were no more. But little did the Hawaiians know that even as they fought this last battle, the servants of a new God, the God of the Christians, were sailing around Cape Horn on their way to the "Sandwich Islands."

Chapter 10, pp. 88-90 in *Hawaii, Our Island State* (Potter)