

Feather-Gathering by the Early Hawaiians by Elsie Durante, Institute for Hawaiian Studies

In ancient Hawai'i feathers were highly prized and valued for they were used in the construction of sacred idols and were made into beautiful cloaks, capes, helmets, lei, and kāhili. These were used only by the ali'i, and were emblems or symbols of royalty. Later with the arrival of Captain James Cook, these feather works were traded for coveted goods such as metal from traveling sea captains and traders.

The birds with bright plumage were the property of the ali'i of the land and were protected by strict kapu. Those ahupua'a where these birds abounded were heavily taxed and much of their taxes or tribute were paid in prized red and yellow feathers of the ali'i nui.

A special group of hardy and adventuresome men were retained by the ali'i to hunt the birds and collect the precious feathers. These birds hunters, were professional fowlers, who endured many hardships, such as cold, privation, and loneliness in their quest for feathers.

The bird hunters had much patience and skill and were keen observers of nature. They knew all the haunts, habits, foods, and songs of these forest birds, as well as the seasons when the plumage was at its best. Feathers from these birds were gathered during the molting season, when the forest trees were in full bloom and the birds came out to feed.

Although several kinds of feathers were used to make the feather articles, the most prized were the yellow of the mamo and 'ō'ō, and the red of the 'i'iwi and 'apapane. These birds, along with the 'ō'ū, whose green feathers were also used, were inhabitants of the wet upland forests in the mountainous regions of the larger islands.

The rarer birds like the mamo, were seldom killed, but were captured alive. When the few feathers that were desired were plucked, they were released to renew their plumage for the next molting season.

The more common birds, or those that couldn't survive the loss of nearly their entire plumage, like the 'i'iwi, 'apapane, 'ō'ō, and 'ō'ū, were killed, skinned and eaten.

Several methods or techniques were used in capturing the birds. Bird lime, a sticky substance made from breadfruit gum or kukui tree gum, was smeared on poles. These were then placed in the trees where the birds perched. The feet of the birds stuck fast when they alighted on the sticks. If the bird was to be released, its feet were carefully cleaned with oil (probably kukui) so that it wouldn't become entrapped again. Another way was to put the bird lime on the branches of the trees themselves. However, after the hunt, these branches were broken off so that no bird would be trapped and die unnecessarily.

Sometimes live birds were used as decoys to attract other birds. Also nets of light cordage and large mesh were skillfully thrown over the flying birds. Snaring with cordage and catching the birds with their bare hands were other ways the bird hunters caught the forest birds.

Feathers from larger birds, such as the owls (pueo), crows ('alalā), tropic birds, both the red and

white tailed (koa'e 'ula and koa'e kea), the frigate bird ('iwa), and the Hawaiian goose (nēnē) were also gathered and used mostly in the construction of kāhili and to dress idols.

Other methods such as pelting with sticks and stones, use of coverts or blinds, taking by hand in rookeries (sea birds) and the use of wide-mouthed nets into which the birds would walk on their way to roost, along with snaring, were developed and used in capturing these larger birds. The method used depended on the kind of bird and its habitat.

Our knowledge and information on feather-gathering is still incomplete. Within 50 years from the arrival of Captain Cook, construction of feather cloaks and capes had ceased and so had the gathering of feathers.

Hawaiian Featherwork Articles

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All featherwork may be considered as symbols of royalty, rather than clothing. Even the great cloaks, though they might cover from the shoulders to the ankles, were not clothing, but were instead, signs of rank in the social system. Clothing worn by the ancient Hawaiians were made of **kapa**.

The principal colors of Hawaiian featherwork were red and yellow with a lesser use of other colors. Throughout Polynesia, red was considered a sacred color. The Hawaiian name for feather cloak is 'ahu'ula. 'Ahu meaning garment worn around the shoulder and 'ula meaning red. In Hawai'i yellow feathers, which were rarer, came to be considered the most prized. Even after yellow superseded red as the color of the high chiefs and gods, cloaks were still called 'ahu'ula regardless of color.

Articles made of feathers symbolized social rank and spiritual power. In ancient times all cloaks, capes and helmets were reserved for use by male ali'i. Long feather cloaks were symbols of the highest rank and prestige. Chiefs of lesser rank wore shorter feather capes and helmets.

Feather cloaks and capes were worn only on ceremonial occasions or during battles, and those of losing chiefs could be taken as battle prizes by their conquerors.

The foundation of the feather cape or cloak was a closely woven net of olonā fiber tied with fisherman's knots. The mesh was so small that the ordinary netting shuttle could not be used. A fine form of the net mender was used. The fine net mender consisted of a round stick of wood cut down to form a shoulder at the end of the handle trimmed to a long slender prong with a blunt point. The net mender was about .33 inches in diameter and 6 inches long. The olonā cord was attached near the point by two half hitches and a number of loops were added by means of half hitches. For a very fine mesh, a piece of coconut leaflet midrib (ni'au) was used.

The netting was cut to the required shape, but it was rarely that a cape or cloak could be cut from one piece of netting. Some capes have a median gore with two side pieces; others have pieces of different shapes and sizes fitted together by a separate cord running alternately through the meshes. The upper and side edges were bound with an eight ply square braid of olonā. The lower border was left free. The Hawaiian craftsman tied the first row of feathers along the lower border, starting on the left and working toward the right. A large cloak weighed as much as 6 pounds.