

FISHING KAPU & RITUALS  
THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO CONSERVATION PAST & PRESENT  
by Yvonne Kami Ohira  
Institute for Hawaiian Culture Studies

Being an island people, it was natural that the Hawaiians looked to the sea as a prime source of much of their food. H.L. Kelly (Kelly:9) says, "In my opinion, no people ever lived who had a more intimate knowledge of fish and their habits, and knew so well how to catch them as the Hawaiians..." They harvested several kinds of fish, octopus (he'e), seaweed (limu), shellfish ('opihi, pipipi, etc.), crustaceans ('a'ama crab, wana -sea urchin, lobster, etc.), turtle, and salt. Fishing was important and fish were extensively caught because of the few kinds and limited supply of other protein foods." (Bryan:14). The sea was a great reservoir of food for the Hawaiians...probably everything edible was consumed." (Titcomb:1).

Today, the people of Hawaii still gather and purchase many of the same varieties of seafood. In many instances, the same methods of procuring the fish, seaweed, etc. are still followed. Some fishermen even follow many of the same rituals that were observed by the head fisherman and his apprentices.

#### Gods and Goddesses

Fishing was associated with religious ceremonies, or idolatrous worship. (Malo:208). Mary Kawena Pukui said, "Religion played a major part in the everyday life of our ancestors; in their farming, fishing, tapa-making, dancing, canoe building, sports and everything else. Each department of human endeavor had its special god or goddess from whom appeal had to be made by man for success in his undertaking." There were many gods of fishing. "The principal fishing god was Ku'ula, named after a great fisherman of ancient times. (Buck:286-287).

#### Fishing Shrines

There were also many fishing shrines (ko'a). The shrines were comprised of a pile of stones often located on "a promontory or elevation overlooking the sea. Coral or some sort of limestone was preferred to any other variety of stones." (Malo:212). Offerings of fish and even fishhooks were placed on the shrines. After "a successful fishing expedition, the fishermen made offerings of fish on their local altars (kuahu or lele). This ritual was almost always practiced as soon as the canoe landed on shore. Prayers were always said to the 'aumakua whenever a new net, new canoe, new fishhook was completed. The first thing made and consecrated, was never given away: it must be put by and guarded carefully, for it was given to the 'aumakua and held the mana (supernatural power) for that work for the person who made it. In the prayer used ... the 'aumakua were asked to increase or multiply the thing blessed." (Handy & Pukui:11). Some families today have their new homes and cars blessed as soon as the time is right, preferably soon after purchasing the items.

Although there were many different gods and many different rituals and kapu related to fishing, "they were all alike in the fact that they always worshipped before going forth to fish ..." (Malo:210). Some Japanese today still follow the custom of giving the first bowl of rice cooked everyday to their ancestors. Other foodstuff (such as fruits, candies, pastries, etc.) is also placed on the shrine first before the family partakes of the food. There is an interesting version of how the practice of offering fish to the fishing shrines originated in Margaret Titcomb's Native Use of Fish in Hawaii pp. 34-35.

In addition to these shrines, there were sometimes good-luck stones which probably stood for the god of the fisherman or an 'aumakua. "Sometimes they were carved with human delineaments, sometimes not. Sometimes they were brought along when fishing, sometimes left at home. When left at home the image was always placed facing the sea." (Titcomb:40). In 1930, McAllister wrote, "Several ko'a (fishing shrines) were sacred to certain fish. One site was merely a stone at the edge of the water, but it had a great attraction for mullet.....it was at the Waikiki side of Diamond Head. Two others were at Waikiki itself, one named Huanui, for mullet, another, named Hina, for akule." The Mystery of the Ku'ula Rock is a series of true-to-life accounts as told by Joseph Keonona Chun Fat is based on the life and legends of the people living in the Kalapana area on the island of Hawai'i. (See Feher page 108 for a picture of one kind of fish god made of stone.)

#### Kapu and Customs

At the very heart of religious practices in fishing was the Kapu System. The "the articles made tabu by one god were different from those made tabu by another god." For example, If a fisherman's god forbid black, he would not wear any black to fishing." (Malo: 208). According to Mahealani Pescaia, her father still follows several of his ancestors fishing kapu. He will not wear red when going fishing.

The Hawaiians believed that fish had ears so they never spoke on the way to the fishing grounds. The fishermen were afraid that the fish would hear them talking and hide from them. Other practices were: never step on a net, line or hook. Although the women made the fishlines and fish nets, once the nets were completed and blessed, women were not allowed to handle them. Today, Japanese aku boat owners still do not like to have women on board their boats. They say it is bad luck and the catch will be small if women come aboard the boat. Still, in old Hawaii, a fisherman's wife was his staunchest supporter. She had helped to make the nets, she had prayed for his safe return. Therefore, before the canoes laden with fish reached the shore, the head fisherman sent a canoe ahead to deliver some fish to his wife. Women might be allowed to catch certain kinds of sea life near shore; but canoe fishing and several kinds of reef methods were restricted to men.

During the beginning of fishing seasons, there were many ceremonies performed. Offerings such as pig, coconut, and bananas were given; fires were restricted on one night, as were noises, the crowing of the rooster, the grunting of pigs, the barking of dogs. Prayers were offered and omens were sought. (Titcomb:43-44). Fish were used as offerings for such occasions as the building or launching of a canoe or dedication of a hula halau.

## Conservation

Although seafood was plentiful, the Hawaiians realized the importance of conserving their supply of food from the sea. The Hawaiians were very adept, capable conservationists and many of the kapu related to fishing, as well as the Hawaiian fishponds, are examples of the foresight the Hawaiians had. Marion Kelly called Hee'ia Fishpond "a testament to Hawaiian fish-farming technology." Newman says, "Hawaiian exploitation patterns were apparently well adapted to tapping specific types of marine biota. Technology was carefully designed to meet specific conditions of the general Hawaiian marine ecosystem." Map 14 shows how both the land and sea were being used at the time of Captain Cook's arrival.

The old Hawaiians placed kapu on certain fishes to help in the conservation of the species. "The 'opelu and aku were two fishes that were depended upon for food to such an extent that they were almost sacred fishes. Both were protected by tabu during the spawning season, the open season for one covering the tabu season for the other." (Titcomb:42). David Malo describes the ceremony followed during the Makahiki season which lifted the kapu period on the aku fishing. (Malo: 152). Certain fish were kapu during the spawning season. "Some fish, such as the moi, were kapu to all save the chiefs." (Bryan:17). Today anyone may catch moi. There is a closed season on moi. However, the contemporary kapu on moi is that only 15 moi per person per day is allowed and the moi must be at least seven inches in total length. (Digest of Fishing Laws:5)

In specific areas, such as Hanauma Bay-O'ahu, Kealakēkua Bay-Hawai'i, "Āhihi-Kīna'u Natural Area Reserve-Maui, Paikō Lagoon Wildlife Sanctuary-O'ahu, it is kapu to fish, take, possess, or remove any marine life within the waters of these areas. (Digest of Fishing Laws:11-13). Today it is extremely difficult to enforce the kapu. The Hawaiians were able to enforce the kapu most of the time because they strongly believed that the gods would be angered if they broke the kapu and that evil would befall the offender or some member of his family. There was also the other prospect of death if the kapu was broken.

Unless the people of Hawai'i observe some of the kapu and practices of their Hawaiian forefathers, they may someday lose the wealth and beauty of the sea through their own selfishness and carelessness...the sea is truly the living legacy left by ka po'e kāhiko (The people of old). the sea which once provided enough food to feed a population of 300,000 people...the sea which once supported an occupation held high in the esteem of the Hawaiian culture...the sea which surrounds our beautiful islands.