

## 'Ai Noa: Breaking the Food Kapu, 1819



*The two most powerful women in Hawaii during the reign of Liholiho: Keopuolani (left), his mother, and Ka'ahumanu, Kamehameha I's widow and co-regent of the kingdom.*

The ancient kapu system that dominated the lives of the Hawaiians was based in part on a dualistic conception of the universe, which separated the things that were believed to be superior (the sacred, the psychic, mana, male, light, occult knowledge and life) from those considered inferior (the common and profane, the physical, passive, female, darkness, ignorance and death).

This system prescribed the interactions between the classes, between the people and their gods, between the people and nature and, most egregiously, between the sexes. It forbade men and women from eating together and also prohibited women from eating most of the foods offered as ritual sacrifices. This included pork — pigs being a frequent sacrificial offering — as well as fowl, coconuts, bananas, turtle, shark meat, and certain kinds of fruits or fish that were offered to the gods. In addition, foods for men and women had to be cooked in separate ovens and eaten in separate structures. A husband ate in his *mua* and his wife ate in the *hale 'aina*, though they were free to meet together in the *hale noa*, which was their common living house.

It was a particularly irksome and humiliating situation for women. Little wonder, then, that when the Islands experienced a period of political and social instability following the death of Kamehameha I, the two most powerful women in the court led the charge against the kapu system.

### The main players

Keopuolani was arguably the highest ranking chief in the kingdom. Her mother was a half-sister of Kamehameha I and both Keopuolani's parents shared the same mother, a high chief of Maui, giving her an unusual degree of consanguineal purity.

Ka'ahumanu was also from Maui — her mother was the wife and half-sister of the king of Maui; her father was a chief from Hawaii and through him she was a third cousin of Kamehameha I. After the latter died in 1819, Ka'ahumanu revealed that she had been designated by the late king as co-regent with his son Liholiho and the

a chief from Hawaii and through him she was a third cousin of Kamehameha I. After the latter died in 1819, Ka‘ahumanu revealed that she had been designated by the late king as co-regent with his son Liholiho and the post of kuhina nui was created for her, with a function similar to that of prime minister.

Numerous reasons have been proposed for Ka‘ahumanu's decision to eliminate the kapus. Politically, it was an astute move to weaken the influence of the priests and the importance of religious ritual in the exercise of government. And as a member of the ali‘i group to whom Kamehameha had deeded land, she would also have been aware that the power of the kahunas to place a kapu on one's property was adverse to her interests and that of her kin.

However, the fundamental miscalculation of the priests in enacting the eating kapus may have been a psychological one — that of underestimating the potency of food. Ka‘ahumanu had early on succumbed to temptation and secretly eaten a banana without any ill consequences. The high chief Kapiolani had also experimented with the forbidden fruit, only in her case the transgression was discovered and, since her own person was kapu, the servant who had procured the bananas for her was executed instead.



*Drawing of Liholiho made in London shortly before his death in 1824.*

Ka‘ahumanu began her campaign against the kapus soon after the installation of Liholiho. She proposed to him that the kapus be discarded and announced her own intention to disregard them. She was supported in this by Keopuolani, who deliberately defied the eating kapu by sharing a meal with her son Kauikeaouli, the younger brother of Liholiho. The king tacitly allowed this, but refrained from violating the kapu himself.

Politically, Liholiho was confronted with a dilemma. He was strongly influenced by the free eating party led by Ka‘ahumanu and Keopuolani but it was also against his interests to abandon his chiefly prerogatives by breaking the tabu system. The turning point may have come when his kahuna-nui Hewahewa, a monotheist who had begun to doubt the efficacy of the temple idols, advocated the ending of the kapus.

### ‘Ai noa

When the king finally made his decision he caused a feast to be prepared at Kailua, to which all the leading chiefs and several foreigners were invited. Two tables were set in the European fashion, one for men and one for women. Ka‘ahumanu herself described the momentous occasion in an account given to Rev. A. Bishop in 1826:

After the guests were seated, and had begun to eat, the king took two or three turns around each table, as if to see what passed at each; and then suddenly, and without any previous warning to any but those in the secret, seated himself in a vacant chair at the women's table and began to eat voraciously, but was evidently much perturbed. The guests, astonished at this act, clapped their hands, and cried out, *‘Ai noa! — the eating taboo is broken.*

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The diary of the Spaniard Marin shows that on November 6, 1819, orders were received in Honolulu from the king directing that men and women should eat together and should eat equally of foods formerly prohibited to the women. On the following day, Marin notes, women ate pork and the heiaus were destroyed.

But the revolution was not yet complete. A large number refused to cast aside the old practices and many idols instead of being burned were merely hidden from sight. Disaffected chiefs from Hawaii plotted to restore the kapus. An embassy led by Keopuolani was sent to reason with the rebels but all conciliatory efforts failed and the issue was put to the test at the battle of Kuamo‘o. The king’s army was victorious and the old religion as an organized system was finally abandoned.

In the aftermath of events, while the revolution greatly weakened the power of the priests, it did not altogether destroy their power, and the primacy of the chiefs was scarcely affected. As for the people, after what was essentially a shake up of the state religion, they remained at liberty to worship their personal deities, their aumakua; hula teachers could make offerings to Laka and the devoted could continue to make offerings to Pele.

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Labels: KA‘AHUMANU KEOPUOLANI LIHOLIHO ‘AI NOA.

