

Revisiting the Overturning of the ‘Ai kapu

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In celebration of the one year anniversary of the Ka‘iwakīloumoku Hawaiian Cultural Center, KS Online is featuring selected works from the Ho‘okahua staff. The following is an editorial piece by Keikio‘ewa Ka‘ōpua. For more, please visit <http://kaiwakiloumoku.ksbe.edu>.

Much is made of the “overturning” of the kapu and the events that lead up to this society-changing event. I do not question whether there was a change from ‘ai kapu to ‘ai noa. Indeed, the change was so ubiquitous that Hawaiian historians used it as a major time marker. However, the question lingers: was it really the change that we think it was? At what point was the kapu actually overturned and by whom?

At the death of Kamehameha I, his son Liholiho, the heir apparent, is taken away to shield him from the haumia (defilement) of the kino kupapa‘u (the body of the deceased) of the Mō‘ī. He is taken by his hoahānau (cousin), Kekuaokalani, to whom was entrusted the care of Kūkā‘ilimoku, Kamehameha’s war god.

It is widely believed that upon Liholiho’s return to Kona that he was coerced by his mākuahine (mother or aunty) to leave the men as they were eating separately from the women in observance of the ‘ai kapu, and to sit and eat with the women. It is widely believed that this act was in essence the overturn of the ‘ai kapu.

In fact, this was not the case. ‘Ai noa was already being practiced before Liholiho returned. Samuel M. Kamakau wrote an article in which he clarifies that:

Ina e make kekahi alii nui i aloha nui ia, alaila, ua kaakumakena na alii, na makaainana, na kane, wahine a me na kamalii, ... I ka wa kumakena ka wa e ainoa ai. A pau ke kumakena a me ka minamina ana i ke alii make, alaila, ua hookapu hou ka Mōi i noho hou i ke aupuni. O ka poe i hookaawaleia no ka ainoa, o lakou no ke noho ainoa. (Ka Nupepa Kuokoa Buke 6, Helu 40, 5 Okakopa 1867)

Which is to say, “If a beloved ali‘i nui dies, then, the ali‘i, the maka‘āinana, the men, women and children went into mourning...” Kamakau continues, “...the time of mourning was the time to ‘ai noa. And when that period of mourning and sorrow for the deceased ali‘i was complete, then the Mō‘ī (ruler) would reestablish the kapu and reset the order of kingdom. Those who were set

aside to continue 'ai noa, would continue the practice". These people were chosen to do so in remembrance of the deceased.

We find that 'ai noa was already being practiced before his return. Liholiho's eating together with his mākuahine didn't start the 'ai noa, though he hadn't participated until this point. All kapu have a time when they are relaxed and reinstated. In this case, what was different was that this new Mō'ī was prevented from reinstating the 'ai kapu, as was the practice according to Kamakau.

So, to answer the questions by whom was the 'ai kapu overturned and at what point was it overturned; the answers are "no one" and "it wasn't." It was not overturned or broken in the sense that no one did anything out of the ordinary. The 'ai kapu was not observed at that time according to tradition and being that it wasn't broken, it was, and still is, waiting for the next Mō'ī to reinstate it.