

KEEPING OUR TRADITIONAL PURIFICATION PRACTICES PURE
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In times of our kupuna, cleansing and purification were a very important part of everyday life, done in various ways. The following was done with the intent to educate and inform with aloha in mind. This came about with the realization that there was widespread misinformation about this area of our culture. For example, Hi'uwai is an annual event and not an everyday occurrence. I have even been informed by a friend that he and others were made to drink salt water and told it was hi'uwai. Some are even burning "sweet grass," which is a Lakota tradition and not Hawaiian. This is not meant to offend or criticize, but to spread an awareness of truth to promote the accurate preservation of our Hawaiian culture and to pay proper respect to our ancestors.

PI KAI

The Hawaiian Dictionary states: To sprinkle with seawater or salted fresh water to purify or remove taboo.

Nānā I Ke Kumu describes pi kai as a ritual sprinkling with seawater or other salted water to purify an area or person from spiritual contamination and remove kapu (taboos) and harmful influences. In Hawaii's pre-Christian era, fresh water, seawater and even coconut water were all used ceremonially. When the water of purification (wai huikala) had sea salt in it and was sprinkled, then the ceremony was basically pi kai. 'Olena or limu kala might be added to the water. Pi kai was done when heiau or specific altars were dedicated, at the dedication of a house or newly made canoe, after contact with a corpse, and sometimes after menstruation or childbirth or contact with a menstruating woman. More common with menstruation, however, was the kapu kai, the ritually (and physically) cleansing bath in the ocean or sometimes, streams. Some families did pi kai upon returning home from a funeral and before entering the family home to insure they were cleansed of any defilement by contact or that the spirit would not follow anyone into the home. Two important that called for pi kai were, splitting the foreskin of a boy's penis during circumcision and burial of the dead. Kepelino described the sprinkling after the ceremony was completed.

David Malo, in Hawaiian Antiquities, describes a process by which those who participated in a burial went and bathed themselves with water, also probably kapu kai. "A kahuna pule heiau was the one who was called upon to purify everyone as they sat before the house where the corpse had been. He brought a dish filled with seawater, limu kala and 'olena, and standing before the people witting in a row, he prayed to the Goddess Uli. He then sprinkled the people and the purification was accomplished, the defilement removed." (Please note that the prayer used for this particular type of cleansing has become known today as "He Mu" and is used incorrectly, for almost any kind of occasion, at any time.)

Interestingly, pi kai has survived and is even used intertwined with Christian blessings. Pi kai is not in any sense like the Christian baptism, however, as pi kai removes external spirits of evil that surround us, or may have even entered the body. But, this evil was not born in the person, as Hawaiians did not have the concept of original sin. Personally, I remember pi kai used when I was growing up, particularly around the house if we were being “bothered” by some presence. My foster mother/aunt, Pat Namaka Bacon, recalls that pi kai was always done when the family returned home from a funeral, before the house was entered.

KAPU KAI

Kapu kai is defined in the Hawaiian Dictionary as: Ceremonial sea bath for purification; purification by seawater.

Nānā I Ke Kumu describes kapu kai as the ceremonial bath taken in the sea or salt water to purify oneself after evil or defilement, physical or spiritual, and to remove the kapu (taboo) under which the person usually came because of his defilement. The kapu kai was done in privacy and with prayers. Women took this kapu kai after each menstrual period because menstrual blood was considered defiling (haumia). Women would not do kapu kai for any reason while still in their cycle. The bath might be taken after contact with a corpse, also considered a defiling object. Sometimes kapu kai was a precautionary measure to insure purification if evil or defilement existed. It marked the preparatory ceremonies of a hula dancer’s ‘ailolo or graduation from training and often came at the close of treatment by a medical kahuna. Many, but not all, illnesses were considered to be the result of some erroneous or wicked action by the sick person, or by some evil influence acting in him.

An old oli tells that Pele went into the sea for her kapu kai after erupting. Kapu kai is sometimes taken periodically for general improvement of physical or spiritual health, even if there is no feeling of having been defiled or made kapu. There is also in Nana I Ke Kumu, discussion of a healing stone named ‘Oku‘u, by the blowhole on Oahu, where Hawaiians used to go and take their kapu kai with prayers. ‘Oku‘u means crouch, and this pohaku was so named because people crouched beside it while taking their kapu kai. Healing stones were found near the shoreline of each island and were given names.

HI‘UWAI – A one-time only annual event

The Hawaiian Dictionary says: Water purification festivities held on the second night of the month of Welehu. The people bathed and frolicked in the sea or stream after midnight, then put on their finest tapa and ornaments for feasting and games. (Note: Welehu is the ancient Hawaiian month, corresponding approximately to November.)

In Hawaiian Antiquities, David Malo said, “The Hawaiians of the present day (Note: These words were written in the 1830’s) have a sport which both sexes engage in while bathing

together in the water. It is called hi'uwai, and consists of dashing water at and splashing each other." He also describes this practice as taking place on the night before the Makahiki tapu began. He said, "On the morning following the night of Olepau, fires were lighted along the coast all around the island, and everybody, people and chiefs, went to bathe and swim in the ocean, or in fresh water, after which they came to bask and warm themselves about the fires, for the weather was chilly. The bathing was continued until daylight. This practice was called hi'uwai."

Kepelino, while describing the ancient Hawaiian calendar, said, "Welehu was the holiday month of Hawaii. It was a joyous month, for in that month came the Hi'uwai, or Water Throwing festival, when the people of old Hawaii adorned themselves with many varied and beautiful ornaments. On the twenty-sixth day of the month, the fun began, at the twelfth hour of the night, called the division between night and the coming of day. At this time, torches were lighted and the night was burnt away by the candlenut torches. Everyone wore a good tapa garment and went to dive in the water or perhaps in the sea. This went on until day dawned, when everyone went to a feast and had much sport. The effect of holding this Hi'uwai at night was that the crowd was excited, as if with rum, by the beauty of the ornaments, the splendor of the whale-tooth pendants, bracelets of seashells, feather wreaths and the fragrance of different tapa garments. One person was attracted to another and the result was by no means good." (Note how the Christian influence comes into play.)

Martha Beckwith, editor of Kepelino's Traditions of Hawaii, also included, "The Hi'uwai, or Water-throwing, was an old bathing custom which is remembered today almost entirely as a sport." Emerson said, "The Hawaiians of the present day have a sport which both sexes engage in while bathing together in the water. It is called hi'uwai, and consists of dashing water at and splashing each other." Beckwith also goes on to say, "According to Mrs. Mary Kawena Puku'i, the Hi'uwai was a sport celebrated in different ways and participated in by everyone. As sometimes celebrated, everyone in the village contributed voluntarily toward a feast to be held after the swimming. After midnight of the day before that fixed for the feast, everyone carried his best garments and adornment to the beach selected for the bath, laid them in a safe place and plunged into the water. Often, neighbors raced each other to the beach or in diving off cliffs into the sea, or in swimming from one point of land to another. When the sun rose, all hurried into dry clothes, decked themselves out with ornaments and proceeded to the place where the feast was to be held. After the feast, games were played until sunset."

Mrs. Keli'ihue Alakaihu of Ka'u said, "In the old days, the bath between midnight and morning was regarded as a ceremony of purification. It was a sign that the bather wished to be cleansed of all (ceremonial) uncleanness of the past year. Since salt water was regarded as the water of purification, everyone who could went to the sea to bathe. In the excitement of the night, there were likely to be some excesses, but those who looked upon the ceremony in the right way, merely bathed, swam, raced and enjoyed themselves. It was a bad custom to initiate people into the Hi'uwai by suddenly drenching them with water when they were dressed in their best. Persons so drenched, had to pay a forfeit of food to the feast held in celebration of the Hi'uwai."

Beckwith also noted that Mrs. Puku'i also informed her that in a second form of the Hi'uwai, for two weeks before the event, people went about trying to throw water on each other, at the same time avoiding being drenched themselves. Those who got a wetting had to pay a forfeit of food to the feast. One who eluded all pursuers was free from this tax. On the day of the feast, all went at dawn to some beach in the neighborhood, bathed, dressed and then gathered together for the feast, which was followed by dancing and games until the sun set. Beckwith was also informed that, up to the time that Mary Kawena Puku'i was eleven years old (Note: This would be about 1906.), a form called the poi-daubing, ka-paia-poi, was observed in the district of Puna, on Hawaii. In this form, a daub of poi was the means of eliciting a forfeit. In earlier days, the contribution was made in the form of food, but later, each contributed a dollar for the feast. There was no bathing together, but each was supposed to have his bath and dress in his finest before coming to the feast.

There are a few other discussions about this type of feasting and playing in Kepelino's Traditions of Hawaii. I personally remember playing in the ocean as a youngster with my brothers and cousins, and splashing them with water by cupping my hand and pushing the water in their direction. I remember my grandmother, Mary Kawena Puku'i, exclaiming, "Why, La'akea, that is how our people used to do hi'uwai!"

MĀNEWANEWA

The following is presented primarily because the current misuse of what is being called hi'uwai and promoted by certain Hawaiian "cultural experts," calls for group nudity, something which our forebears would find totally unacceptable.

Nānā I Ke Kumu explains that the ceremony of Mānewanewa was performed at high noon or midnight by families who thought they were under a sorcerer's spell. Mary Kawena Puku'i witnessed this old ceremony when she was a child. The family all stripped to the skin. One person stayed by the house doorway, praying. The others, also praying, walked completely around the house five times. Then, as each one went back into the house, the one at the doorway poured water over each person's head to cleanse away evil. This Mānewanewa, and the Mānewanewa of extreme grief, were probably the only times Hawaiians of both sexes were ever nude in public. Both excused genital exposure on similar grounds; being pupule from grief or being extremely distraught because of sorcery fears. PAU