

# *Ka*

## **Gender Roles in Traditional Society**

**Malcolm Nāea Chun**

**Ka Wana Series**



**Pihana Nā Mamo**



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Malcolm Nāea Chun

Ka Wana Series

Curriculum Research & Development Group  
University of Hawai'i

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Gender Roles in Traditional Society

### **Hewa**

The Wrong Way of Living

# *Ka 'Ōlelo Mua*

## Foreword

For more than fifteen years, Pihana Nā Mamo, a project funded by the U.S. Department of Education through the Native Hawaiian Education Act, has been actively involved with Hawai'i Department of Education schools in improving educational results for Hawaiian children and youth. We have witnessed the powerful role that our rich Hawaiian culture and heritage, and in particular the revival of interest in Native Hawaiian culture and the desire to practice Hawaiian customs appropriately, play in motivating our students to learn and excel.

The first step to ensure such an outcome is to gain a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural basis for the many Hawaiian customs and traditions. To this end, Malcolm Nāea Chun, a cultural specialist with the Curriculum Research & Development Group (CRDG) of the University of Hawai'i, has researched and compiled valuable information on several Hawaiian cultural traditions and practices.

*Kapu* is a study of traditional roles men and women had in Hawaiian society before and after contact with the West. Chun begins with a search through the earliest traditional references to the roles of men and women and to the division of labor between them. The title for this book comes from this traditional division, as there are no words in Hawaiian for “gender roles.” What he has found is that traditional concepts of what men and women did are more complex, and less strictly separated, than we had previously believed. His research is on roles and work, but he also touches upon some traditional attitudes on sexuality that have important implications today.



This book is part of the Ka Wana Series, a set of publications developed through Pihana Nā Mamo and designed to assist parents, teachers, students, and staff in their study and modern-day application of Hawaiian customs and traditions.

Pihana Nā Mamo is a joint project of CRDG and the Hawai'i Department of Education, and production of the Ka Wana series represents the work of many collaborators. Mahalo to the many who have assisted in the production of *Kapu*: Reviewers Toni Han and Ruth Dawson for their reading and comments; Lori Ward for editing and proofreading; Project Co-Directors Gloria S. Kishi and Hugh Dunn; the Pihana Nā Mamo 'ohana of the Hawai'i Department of Education and the Curriculum Research & Development Group, College of Education, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, and the U.S. Department of Education, which provided the funding for Pihana Nā Mamo.

Morris K. Lai, Principal Investigator  
Pihana Nā Mamo

# ‘Ōlelo Ha‘i Mua

## Preface

Do you believe I'm wearing a kukui lei?  
It's Hawaiian in looks—it's plastic made in Hong Kong.  
That's what became of a lot our beliefs.  
I wore this on purpose. I wanted you to know this is kukui nut.  
It's not kukui nut, but it's Hawaiian, but it's Hawaiian made in  
Hong Kong of plastic, and that's the way a lot of our beliefs  
and customs have become.  
attributed to Mary Kawena Pukui



Cultural revival and identification have gone beyond academic and intellectual arguments to a reality in communities and families and are now part of the political landscape of the islands. In asking the question “Who are we?” people are really asking how they see the world differently from others and how this affects the way they make decisions. These are questions about a people’s world view—how they see the world around them, and ultimately, how they see themselves.

In the 1960s, social workers at the Queen Lili‘uokalani Children’s Center, a trust created to benefit orphaned and destitute Native Hawaiian children, began to notice behaviors of their children and families that were quite different from the textbook cases they had studied in school. In response, the center initiated a project to identify Hawaiian cultural and social practices and behaviors, and to study them as they contrasted with their Western counterparts. The impact and influence of the resulting books, entitled *Nānā I Ke Kumu*, are still felt in Native




Hawaiian communities, where the books are now a standard reference.

By 1992 *Nānā I Ke Kumu* was considered historical information, and as the cultural specialist for the Queen Lili‘uokalani Children’s Center, I became involved in a project to update it. We were still seeing cases that involved Hawaiian cultural practices and behaviors foreign to both Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian workers that needed to be considered in any programs designed to help. We were having to re-adapt traditional healing practices like ho‘oponopono to accommodate changes such as family schedules, misunderstanding or not knowing Hawaiian language and concepts, and having non-Hawaiian family members. We realized that there was, once again, a great need for a series that would examine, in depth, key concepts and values for Native Hawaiians to understand and practice today.

This series is intended to fill that need. Each title is supported by historical and cultural examples taken from our oral and written literature, in most cases directly from primary sources that recorded how Hawaiians acted, reacted, responded, and behaved in different situations. Our goal is to make this knowledge more accessible to teachers, parents, and students.

Knowing how our ancestors behaved begs the question of whether we are doing the same. If we are practicing our culture in a way similar to how they did, then we know that Hawaiian culture is very much alive today. If we do things differently, we have to ask if those changes have been to our benefit, and whether we can reclaim what has been forgotten, lost, or suppressed.



He hana nui loa ka ai kapu ma Hawaii nei, he hana kue loa, he hana kaumaha he hana pono ole loa, iwaena o ke kane a me kana wahine iho [ . . . ]

Dauida Malo, *Ka Mo'olelo Hawai'i*

O na kane no hoi kekahi poe loea ma ke ano hana malo a me ka pau wahine. He poe hapa no nae ka poe i ao ia ma ia aoao; ua kapa ia lakou o ka poe hooluu a kapalapala a Ehu.

Samuel M. Kamakau



Not long ago the word *kapu* posted on a tree or fence would mean “keep out” and, being in Hawaiian, it seemed a polite way to phrase a warning. To many visitors, not knowing Hawaiian, it didn’t mean anything, or as some local comedians suggested, it may have been someone’s name. The “keep out” warning actually comes from a tradition of kapu as restricted or prohibited, and in that sense it is usually associated with traditional Hawaiian religion. However, keeping people away from a sacred site is only part of the meaning of kapu. Its origins and its traditional usage have more to do with the separation of gender roles than with traditional religion. For this reason, I have chosen the word kapu to be the title of this discussion. We do not have a word for gender roles in Hawaiian. The kapu, which created many of the roles for men and women in traditional Hawaiian life, comes closest to describing this idea.

A discussion about the roles of men and women is also bound to touch upon sex and sexuality. Most of the traditions, oral or printed, were far more open about sex and sexuality than we are in today's culture. This discussion can help reveal how our own thinking, prejudices, and world view influence the way we look at traditions concerning gender roles and sexuality.



*Detail from "Village of Macaoupah, Owhyee," 1794, by Thomas Heddington. Men and women are trading with foreigners. Women in center are examining a mirror and men are trading food stuffs. There is a mixed group of men and women gathered in front of the house listening to an elder, chief, or priest. Courtesy of Bishop Museum.*

## *The Traditions of Wākea and Papa*

The separation of roles and tasks—and even of the act of eating together—by the kapu was due to an incident caused by sexual desire in the marriage of the chiefs Wākea and Papa. It is hard to imagine how such an event resulted in dictating what men and women do every day of their lives. But this event was powerful enough to define religion and politics for traditional Hawaiian society.

It began with the chief Wākea’s desire to secretly sleep (*moe malu*) with his daughter Ho’ohōkūkalanī without having her mother, his wife, Papa, know. A bargain was struck between Wākea and his priest, Komo’awa, as a way to seclude Papa away for four nights. In return for her separation from Wākea it was declared that certain foods would be kapu or restricted for women to eat, and that women would not eat with men in the *mua* or men’s house. Papa agreed to these orders.

After Wākea and Ho’ohōkūkalanī had slept together, Komo’awa tried to wake Wākea from his sleep so the chief could sneak back to the men’s house, but even with the reciting of a prayer chant, saying it louder and louder, Komo’awa could not wake Wākea.

When the daylight came, Wākea finally got up and covered (*pūlo’u*) [his head] with a *kapa* [*bark cloth*]. He returned to the *mua* thinking that Papa had not seen him. But Papa had seen Wākea and she quickly ran and entered into the *mua* and quarreled with him. Wākea tried to appease (*hoihoi*) Papa by saying “sweet” things (*me ka ho’ole’ale’a*). Papa was appeased and they were separated. (Malo 294)

Malo tells us the foods prohibited for women to eat in an act called *‘ai kapu* (restricted foods or eating) were pigs, coconuts, bananas, red colored fish such as *kūmū* (goatfish), and other types of fish such as *ulua* (jackfish), shark (*manō niuhi*), turtle (*honu* and *‘ea*), *pahu* (trunkfish), porpoise (*na‘ia* and *nu‘ao*), whale (*koholā*), manta and sting ray (*hīhīlua*, *hailepo*, and *hīhīmanu*). However, he adds, “this list is incomplete of these things that could cause a woman to be put to death for eating these things while she was carefully watched” (158–159).

Another result of this incident was the banning of women from entering into the *mua*, or men’s house, where the men worshipped and ate, and the banning of men from entering the *hale pe‘a*, or house for menstruation. The penalty for anyone breaking the ban was death. “The husband could go in only into the wife’s *hale ‘aina* [eating house], but the wife could not enter into the husband’s *mua* [because it was considered *kapu*]” (159). The men’s eating house, or *mua*, served also as their place of worship and for the initiation of young boys to adulthood, and this could be a major reason why women were not allowed there. In fact, Kamakau states that it was the “ceremonial offering of *‘awa*” that made the *mua* restricted, hence, men and women were kept to separate houses (1976, 132).

This event was important enough to be recalled and woven into in the creation chant *Kumulipo*, although in a different form than the account described by Malo.

We learn from lines 1800 and 1801 of the chant that two of the sacred or restricted (*kapu*) nights were called *Kāne* and *Hilo*, but the restricted plants and foods are very different from those described by Malo. They are called *‘ai lani makua*, “parental heavenly” or “chiefly” foods, and included the *‘ape*

which is “itchy,” ‘akia which is “bitter,” ‘auhuhu which is “insipid,” ‘uhaloa which is “medicinal” and the la‘alo, a type of kalo which is “mānewanewa,” a term used to describe rites to counteract a family curse of sickness (Beckwith, 1972, 125, 233). It may be that these plants, called ‘ai lani or heavenly food, had a sacred connotation and as such, were another category of things made kapu, or prohibited, for women.

Wākea’s secret desire turned into something greater than he might have bargained for, and it would have developed like a bad cover-up to a major crime unless it was used to explain the differing roles of men and women (Linnekin 1990). It established what is known as the “kapu system” which divided roles and labor between genders; set restrictions on whom one could eat with and what one could eat; evolved into a system of rank and status, and the protection of both, for the ali‘i or ruling chiefs; set up the priesthood as the intermediaries for the ali‘i and created a government that incorporated religion into its ruling system. The kapu system defined how people lived until it ended in 1819.

This very restricted and divisive system of governance and living has been portrayed in many accounts of Hawai‘i and has often led to the questioning of traditional ways. But it is clear that this questioning is greatly influenced by modern perceptions of the roles of women and men. For example, it was once questioned in cultural quarrels as to whether it was “culturally correct” for women to paddle canoes, especially when the time came to consider if women could compete in the canoe competition from the island of Moloka‘i to Honolulu. This bias, according to Linnekin, can also be found in the way Hawaiian society has been interpreted and analyzed. She quotes a recent study by Valerio Valeri to demonstrate this point.

Women are excluded from the production and cooking of these [important] foods. [. . .] At most, they are given the task of appropriating some secondary foods -- which in a way are “residual,” like the women themselves: shellfish, mollusks, seaweed, small crustaceans, and so on. Sometimes they are able to grow sweet potatoes (*‘uala*), a little-prized tuber reserved for marginal land, which has the dubious honor of being associated with the excrement of the pig Kamapua‘a. (vii)

Linnekin takes Valeri to task writing, “Valeri’s characterization of Hawaiian women as ‘marginal’ and ‘passive’ in the context of the sacrificial religion is a characteristically Western male view of women and moreover, if I may be forgiven for indulging in a stereotype myself, a very Mediterranean male attitude” (viii).



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