

**FROM KAPU TO CHRISTIANITY:
A Study of the Abolition of the *Kapu* System
and the Introduction of Christianity in Hawaii**
By: Kathleen Creager

In his book, *Moramona: The Mormons in Hawaii*, R. Lanier Britsch made the following observation: "The unification of the islands under Kamehameha I, as well as the destruction of the *heiaus*, pagan gods, and *kapus*, worked for the benefit of Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Latter-day Saints alike."¹ The transition from the *kapu* system to Christianity is the subject of this paper. Its significance in Mormon history lies in the fact that the Protestant missionaries were able to effect a new way of life and influence the native Hawaiians to such an extent that by the time the first Mormon missionaries arrived in the 1850's, much of the groundwork for conversion to Christianity had already been accomplished.

This transitory period essentially commenced with the discovery of the Hawaiian Islands in January, 1778, by Captain James Cook. This contact with Whites brought into focus for the Hawaiian people an increased awareness of other peoples on the earth. It was not long before whaling vessels and other ships were landing on the sandy beaches, and trade developed between the Hawaiian elite and adventurous European and American seamen.

Nevertheless, despite increasing contact with White men, the culture and religion of the Hawaiians remained virtually intact until the death of King Kamehameha in 1819. Prior to this time, the Hawaiian people lived under the *kapu* system, a series of *tabus* and restrictions, which, according to oral tradition, had been in existence since the beginning of time.

In his account of his stay in the Hawaiian Islands, written during 1813-1815, American John B. Whitman described the function of the *kapu* system in the following manner:

"The word taboo, is used to used to signify certain rites and ceremonies established by ancient custom, the origin of which [the Hawaiians] ascribe to the gods. It is also used to denote anything which is forbidden, either to touch, eat, drink, use, or wear All their laws are called taboos and almost every person has some particular taboo . . . and these taboos are

either imposed upon them by their parents when they are quite young, or are voluntarily assumed by them when of age to understand that nature and responsibility of their adoption, they may be considered of the nature of vows made to the gods, the performance of which, becomes a sacred duty, which is never lost sight of."²

According to David Malo and other historians, many of the *kapus* were derived solely from the desires of the ruling king or chief and were a means of power to the priesthood.³ As a consequence of this system, the life of the common people was one of subservience to a higher authority. Their whole existence became dependent upon their ability to yield to the yoke of oppression. Failure to do so could result in expulsion or death. This indisputable power exercised by the chiefs caused the people to hold the "chiefs in great dread" and to look "upon them as gods."⁴

Although the right to rule was often maintained by physical strength, divine heritage was a must. Only those individuals who could trace their ancestry back to the gods were considered worthy to rule.⁵ All grades of rank, as well as high and divine honors, were given solely to those chiefs who could "show such an accumulation of inherited sacredness" that they were esteemed "gods among men."⁶

The combination of reverence and fear associated with rank was one of the most significant factors which made the *kapu* work. It was this same factor, however, which also promulgated the overthrow of the *kapu* system and aided in the adoption of Christianity in the 1820's. It was during the time of King Kamehameha's wars in the late eighteenth century that dissatisfaction with the *kapu* began to be felt. As a result of these wars, disaffection with the conquest appeared in a series of "rebellions and retaliations by rival chiefs until they, their families too, were dispossessed or brought under the Kamehameha administration."⁷

One of the victims of these conflicts was Opukahaia, later known as Henry Obookiah. Born in 1792, he was the son of commoners, yet distantly related to the king of his territory. When he was about twelve, the king died and his father became involved in a war fought to see who would reign supreme on the island.⁸ Unfortunately, the group to which his father belonged was overpowered, and Opukahaia and his family were forced to flee into the mountains. They were eventually captured and killed, except Opukahaia who was taken into the home of one of his captors.⁹

After about two years, Opukahaia found one of his uncles and was able to dwell with him instead. He stayed for a number of years until he and his aunt -- the only surviving sister of his father -- were captured by the enemy. After seeing his aunt killed by their enemies, Opukahaia decided to leave the islands.¹⁰ Although his uncle opposed his proposed voyage, Opukahaia eventually received permission to leave, and he set sail for China with Captain Brintnel. Six months later, they left the Orient and "steered a course for America."¹¹ In the summer of 1809, they landed in New York where most of the men disembarked. Opukahaia continued with the Captain to Brintnel's home in New Haven, Connecticut.¹²

One day in early fall, Opukahaia was found by the Reverend Edwin W. Dwight.¹³ Dwight stopped and asked the young man if he wanted to learn. With a great deal of eagerness, Opukahaia said yes, and Dwight became his instructor.¹⁴ The next nine years saw Opukahaia's growing interest and eventual acceptance of Christianity. As he became familiar with the doctrines of Christianity, his desire to share his new knowledge with his people grew. The Protestant Christians in New England were greatly affected by the example and devotion of Opukahaia and began to support the idea of a foreign mission to Hawaii. Most of these Christians became convinced that Opukahaia's sojourn in New England was a product of divine intervention. Opukahaia was used as an example to show skeptics that Hawaiians were not too ignorant to be taught and that Christian doctrines could conquer even the most debased people.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Opukahaia was never able to fulfill his personal desire to share the Christian message with his people because he died of typhus on February 17, 1818, two years before a foreign mission was established.¹⁶ However, his death served to fuel the fires that led to the organization of the first group of Protestant missionaries which left for Hawaii on October 23, 1819.¹⁷

This company comprised three Hawaiian youths from the Foreign Mission School, two ordained ministers, a doctor, two school teachers, a printer, a farmer, and their families.¹⁸ Although the predominant feeling among the group was one of positive expectation, there were still some fears of the unknown. They were concerned about whether or not they would be accepted by the Hawaiians and wondered how they would convince the natives to give up their pagan gods and *tabu* system. Unbeknownst to them, the *kapu* system had already been abolished and most of the idols and temples destroyed.

The abolishment of the *kapu* system was, in many respects, a gradual withdrawal from established tradition. It has been documented that during the pre-contact period, Hawaiians acknowledged a group of people they called *aia*. These individuals were viewed as being ungodly, careless in their observance of the *tabus*, and responsible for leading others astray. Although this group was relatively small and its beliefs often ridiculed, it began to increase in popularity between 1782-1796, during the wars of King Kamehameha. It was the introduction of European and American influences around 1786, however, which gave this movement the impetus it needed to bring about the rather benign acceptance of the abolished *kapu*.¹⁹

During the 1780's, when Hawaii became a principal player in the arena of trade, Hawaiians began to adopt Western values.²⁰ Ownership of European goods became a means of obtaining status, and commoners and *alii*, or aristocracy, found themselves no longer content with the traditional *kapu* structure. Consequently, the *kapu* was subject to redefinition as well as violation. Women were among the first to violate the *kapu* system, but were later joined by men of all classes. While commoners often openly violated the *kapu*, the chiefs, on the other hand, augmented it to suit their purposes. It became the common practice for chiefs to use the *kapu* to govern the "rates, times, parties, modes and commodities of the European trade." On occasion, if it was felt that the prescribed tabu interfered with trade interests, they would even go so far as to violate or suspend the most traditional of *kapus*.²¹

Kamehameha himself committed such a violation under duress when he went with Vancouver to Maui on January 9, 1794. The *kapu* temporarily prohibited him from ocean travel, however, Vancouver threatened to trade only with the King of Maui should Kamehameha refuse to travel with him. Kamehameha went with Vancouver because he did not want this powerful Englishman to deal with a rival chief. Nonetheless, he was displeased at being coerced into breaking the *kapu* and stated that "he considered himself to be the last person in his dominion who ought to violate the established laws, and the regulations of the country which he governed."²² Nevertheless, violations continued and the people, especially the women, began to see an alternative to the current system.

By the time King Kamehameha died on May 8, 1819, the stage was set for the abandonment of the *kapu*. When the death of the king had been announced, Liholiho, Kamehameha's son and heir, complied with tradition

and retired to Kahala to avoid becoming contaminated by the dead body. As the body was cut into pieces and the bones placed into bundles, the people mourned. For a period of time, as was customary, the traditional restraints were lifted and total anarchy prevailed.²³

This total abandonment of law, as well as internal and communal restraints, was to be temporary. During the mourning period, all laws, which had resided in the king, were null and void. It became the responsibility of the new ruler to overcome the chaos and restore order. In this way, the new king affirmed his right to rule and reminded the people that all laws and restrictions came from him.²⁴

In this case, however, the restoration of order would not be so simple. First of all, King Kamehameha was survived by two very influential widows who recognized an opportunity to strengthen their position and power through the abolition of the traditional *kapu*. The first was Keopuolani, Kamehameha's sacred wife and mother of Liholiho and Kauikeoulii, who were to become the next two kings of Hawaii. Keopuolani possessed a sacred *kapu* derived from her genealogy which made her so sacred that, although she was a woman, she was the highest ranking chief on the island of Hawaii. It has been recorded that because of her sacredness, during the early years of her life "she never walked abroad except at evening, and then all who saw her prostrated themselves to the earth."²⁵

The other wife was Kaahumanu, by far the most powerful of the two, although her inherited rank was significantly lower than that of Keopuolani. During her time with Kamehameha, she had been endowed with significant secular power and trust. She was openly acknowledged as Kamehameha's favorite wife. Vancouver recorded, in 1794, that Kaahumanu was the only woman present at the meeting to cede the islands to Great Britain.²⁶ In 1795, when Kamehameha conquered Oahu, he endowed Kaahumanu with the power of *puuhonua*, the god-like power to be a sanctuary. This gave her the ability to protect life as well as to determine where the places of sanctuary should be. While Kamehameha and other chiefs had the power to pronounce death, only Kaahumanu had the power to return to the accused the right to live.²⁷ Although unable to bare children, her main traditional function, Kaahumanu remained in a highly esteemed position. As a result of these unique distinctions, Kaahumanu, more than any other woman within the kingdom, had the possibility of total political control within her grasp.

A second thing that made it difficult to restore order was the fact that, although Liholiho had worked out an agreement on the sharing of power with Kaahumanu and the other high chiefs, "political instability and confusion were growing out of the lack of agreement among the chiefs over whether to support or abolish the Hawaiian gods and the *kapu* ."28 There were those who supported the traditional ways and resented the innovations of the foreigners. Kaahumanu and her family on the other hand, had acquired a taste for Western living and wanted to establish a new order. However, Liholiho was reluctant to make a decision.²⁹

Refusing to accept defeat, Kaahumanu, in August of 1819, sent a messenger to Lihiliho, saying that his god would not be worshipped at Kailua, meaning that Kaahumanu was going to move forward in an attempt to abolish the traditional system. Liholiho accepted this decisive turn of events and took the irrevocable step of eating with the female chiefs which abolished the *kapu* system.³⁰

On March 30, 1820, after five months at sea, the missionaries and crew of the *Thaddeus* sighted the snow-covered summit of Mauna Kea, on Hawaii. Uncertain and fearing the worst, the missionaries were surprised to learn that King Kamehameha was dead and that the *kapu* had been overthrown.³¹ They were anxious to begin their new work, and, after receiving permission from Liholiho and his court, they began to share their Christian message with the Hawaiian people.³²

Despite permission from Liholiho and Kaahumanu to begin their missionary endeavors, the first year for the missionaries was filled with limited success and a great deal of hardship. Although the missionaries commenced private and public worship from the day they set foot on the islands, many Hawaiians were indifferent to their presence. Missionary labors were further frustrated when the group on Oahu were unable to quickly acquire living accommodations and establish themselves. Nevertheless, with the assistance of several ships' captains, lodgings were eventually obtained and a school begun.³³

Under the tutelage of Bingham, the mission quickly began to see success. Only four months after the missionaries' arrival, three missionary stations had been established; mission schools were organized. Although the first groups of pupils were comprised solely of *alii* children, the rest of the people became curious to learn more about the magic of the missionaries' *palapala* -- reading and writing.³⁶

During the first years of the mission, Liholiho, Kaahumanu, and others of the chiefs remained relatively disinterested in the teachings of the missionaries. However, there were some *alii* who became staunch supporters of the missionary effort. The most significant member of this group was Kaumualii, King of Kauai. He often invited the missionaries to his home and became extremely interested in their message. Of all the missionary stations, the one in Kauai had the most support from the government.³⁷

Another significant addition to the missionary converts was Keopulolani, Kamehameha's sacred wife. On her death bed she requested that her body receive a Christian burial instead of the traditional cutting and dismemberment. She commanded that the traditional mourning practices be disallowed. When she passed away on September 16, 1823, the practice of violating the established laws to mourn the death of a chief was practically ended.³⁸ This was a significant step forward from the point of view of the missionaries and their cause.

These successes were augmented by the printing of the first Hawaiian text in January, 1822.³⁹ In just a few months, the mission school went from teaching sixty to seventy pupils to instructing "not less than five hundred."⁴⁰

In the latter part of 1822, Kaahumanu finally became interested in the missionary cause after recovering from a serious illness.⁴¹ In 1824, King Liholiho died of the measles while in England, and Kaahumanu in essence became the sole ruler. Since Kaulikeoulii, Liholiho's younger brother and heir to the throne, was only nine years old, it was decided "that the government remain in the hands of Kaahumanu and Kalanimoku, until the prince should be of age."⁴² Consequently, in 1825, the country was decidedly in Christian hands, for although Kaahumanu ruled, she was greatly influenced by the missionaries, Bingham in particular.

As a matter of policy, Kaahumanu began to adopt Christian commandments as laws of the land.⁴³ She made a "move to suppress prostitution and adultery" sending out criers to call out a prohibition against "loose and lewd practices."⁴⁴

While the missionaries continually denied having anything to do with the establishment of secular law, Henry Bond Restarick stated that there is no doubt that the influence of the missionaries, exerted over the chiefs, was very great. He claimed that "as a body they avoided interference but

their advice and influence was shown in future legislation."⁴⁵ The remaining years of Kaahumanu attest to this.

In 1826, after consultation with the missionaries, trial by jury was introduced.⁴⁶ On December 14, 1827, under the advisement of the Queen, the *kanawai* law was adopted. This action created a Hawaiian legal code comprising three of the Ten Commandments and was the beginning of formal legislation in the Hawaiian Islands.⁴⁷

In 1828, Kaahumanu took steps to ensure that the laws were carried into execution by appointing "a number of persons to investigate cases and try cases."⁴⁸ During 1829, teachers were sent to several districts throughout the islands with the expectation that they "multiply the schools, until at length the land became full of them."⁴⁹

Although she was getting old, Kaahumanu continued to visit the islands trying to lighten the loads of her people and carrying the message of Christianity. Bingham remarked that while some individuals thought that Kaahumanu pressured the Hawaiians into conversion by her own force of will and the fact that she was a chief, he felt that people only had to see her speaking with the Hawaiians to know that she wished for an inner conversion rather than mere outward compliance.⁵⁰ One can only guess how many actually believed in the doctrine; some doubtless joined simply because Kaahumanu was their ruler. Nevertheless, to most of those who knew her, there was little doubt that Kaahumanu sincerely believed in Christianity.

In 1832, Kaahumanu became seriously ill and moved to a home near the mountains. Shortly before her death, she called the chiefs together and reminded them that the laws had been made to help protect the commoners from the greed and excesses of the chiefs. She died on June 5, 1832.⁵¹

From 1819 to 1832, Kaahumanu essentially reigned supreme. Although attempts were made upon her death to return to some of the former traditions associated with the ancient *kapu* system, Christian values eventually prevailed. Kaahumanu's influence was felt long after her death, and in 1840, the role of *kuhina nui*, or co-ruler, which she had created at the death of Kamehameha, was written into Hawaii's first constitution.⁵²

As indicated by Britsch, "The groundwork laid by the Protestant missionaries made the work of the Latter-day Saints much easier than it would have been; it was unnecessary to Christianize and educate the

Hawaiians, translate the Bible, establish a sound government, and prepare the people for a higher standard of living."⁵³ Without the efforts of the Protestant missionaries in the 1820's to prepare the way, the Mormon missionaries probably would have faced obstacles that could have retarded their work significantly. As it stands, they were able to build upon the efforts of those missionaries of other faiths, which preceded them, and make their own unique contribution to the Christian element in Hawaii.

NOTES

1. R. Lanier Britsch, *Moramona: The Mormons in Hawaii* (Laie, Hawaii: The Institute for Polynesian Studies, 1989), 12.
2. John Dominis Holt, ed., *The Hawaiian Journal of John B. Whitman 1813-1815: An Account of the Sandwich Islands* (Honolulu: Topgallant Publishing Co., Ltd., 1979), 21.
3. David Malo, *Hawaiian Antiquities*, trans. Nathaniel B. Emerson (Honolulu: Hawaiian Islands, 1898; reprint, Honolulu: Gazette Co., Ltd., 1903) 84 (page references are to reprint edition); Martha Warren Beckwith, ed. and trans., *The Kumulipo: A Hawaiian Creation Chant* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951; reprint, Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1972), 17 (page references are to reprint edition).
4. Malo, 87-88.
5. Malo, 81.
6. Beckwith, 11.
7. Native Hawaiian Study Commission, *Report on the Culture, Needs and Concerns of Native Hawaiians Pursuant to Public Law 96-565, Title III* (Washington D. C.: U. S. Department of the Interior, 1983), 2:234.
8. *Memoirs of Henry Obookiah* (Elizabeth-Town, New Jersey: Edson Hart and J. & E. Sanderson, 1819), 3.
9. *Obookiah*, 4-5.
10. *Obookiah*, 5-9.
11. *Obookiah*, 9-11.
12. *Obookiah*, 14-15.
13. Anderson, 10.
14. *Obookiah*, 16.
15. *Obookiah*, 80.
16. Rufus Anderson, *A Heathen Nation Evangelized: History of the Sandwich Islands Mission* (Boston: Congregational Publishing Society, 1870),12; Gavin Daws,

Shoal of Time: A history of the Hawaiian Islands (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), 62.

17. Lyman Beecher, "Sermon Preached at the Funeral of Henry Obookiah, A Native of Owhyhee, and a Member of the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Connecticut, February 18, 1818." in *Memoirs of Henry Obookiah* (Elizabeth-Town, New Jersey: Edson Hart and J. & E. Sanderson, 1819), 31-32; Anderson, 18.

18. Anderson, 16-17.

19. Native Hawaiian Study, 233-234; Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom 1778-1854: Foundation and Transformation* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii, 1938), 20, 33-48.

20. Kuykendall, *Foundation and Transformation*, 20-21.

21. Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1981) 45.

22. George Vancouver, *A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean* (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1798; reprint, 3 v. New York: De Capo Press, 1968), 3: 3-6 (page references are to reprint edition).

23. Hiram Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years in the Sandwich Islands: or The Civil, Religious and Political History of Those Islands* (1847; reprint, Rutland, Vermont; Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1981) 72 (page references are to reprint edition).

24. Jane L. Silverman, *Kaahumanu: Molder of Change* (Honolulu: Friends of the Judiciary History Center of Hawaii), 61.

25. Anderson, 39-40.

26. Vancouver, 3:54-56.

27. Silverman, 33-34.

28. Silverman, 64, 67.

29. Silverman, 64; Sahlins, 60-64.

30. Bingham, 73-74; Daws, 56-57; Silverman, 68.

31. Bingham, 70.

32. Anderson, 19; Bingham, 90-91.

33. *Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Compiled from Documents Laid Before the Board at the Twelfth Annual Meeting, 1821* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1821), 80-82.

34. Daws, 65.
35. Sereno Edwards Bishop, *Reminiscences of Old Hawaii* (Honolulu: Hawaiian Gazette Co., Ltd., 1916), 51.
36. *American Board . . . Twelfth Annual Meeting*, 82.
37. Bingham, 98; Daws, 66.
38. Anderson, 41-43.
39. Bingham, 156.
40. Bingham, 160.
41. Bingham, 164-165.
42. Anderson, 50.
43. Stewart, 321.
44. Silverman, 102.
45. Henry Bond Restarick, *Hawaii 1778-1920 from the Viewpoint of a Bishop; Being the Story of English and American Churchmen in Hawaii with Historical Sidelights* (Honolulu: Paradise of the Pacific, 1924), 48.
46. Kuykendall, *Foundation and Transformation*, 127.
47. Kuykendall, *Foundation and Transformation*, 126; Silverman, 115-116.
48. Levi Chamberlain Journal, 28 February 1828; quoted in Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom 1778-1854: Foundation and Transformation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1938), 129.
49. Anderson, 100.
50. Bingham, 371.
51. Silverman, 143, 145.
52. Silverman, 146.
53. Britsch, 12.

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