

Kapu System

The kapu system was the religious law system that ruled over almost every act of Hawaiian life. It included thousands of rules which identified what people could and could not do. The kapu system was based on beliefs about mana (spiritual power.)

Mana

The Hawaiians believed that anything associated with the gods had mana. They believed that the kapu (rules) were made by the gods and interpreted by the ali'i and the kahuna who were also required to observe the kapu. The ali'i were descendents of the gods and as a result, had much mana. There were strict kapus placed on all the personal items of the ali'i. No one was allowed to touch the clothing or anything else that the ali'i had touched except for the kaukauali'i (lesser chiefs) who were assigned to the care of his belongings and personal items. A loss of mana would occur if anyone of lesser rank would come in contact with the Ali'i's personal items.

Types of Kapu

There were kapu about nearly everything in Hawaiian life. For example, when fishers were lashing their hooks, everyone in the community had to keep quiet. Other kapu did not allow women to eat certain kinds of food, regulated the building of a house, a canoe, or heiau, birth and death ceremonies, and many other activities (see back for more examples.)

Penalties for breaking kapu

Penalties were severe for breaking kapu. The law officer ('ilamuku) hunted down kapu breakers and saw to it that they were put to death by strangulation, clubbing, stoning, burning, or drowning. There was no trial, no probation, no compassion. Often, guilty kapu breakers caused their own death before the 'ilamuku got to them. They knew that the gods were tremendously powerful and this affected their thinking.



Pu'uhonua o' Honaunau on the Big Island of Hawai'i.

There was one place of safety to keep the kapu system from being overly demanding – the pu'uhonua (place of refuge and forgiveness) which was established in each moku (district). If a kapu breaker was able to reach the pu'uhonua ahead of those seeking to kill him or her, the kahuna would then provide shelter, protection, and forgiveness. The kapu breaker could then reenter the community in safety. The gods would have been satisfied through the prayers and rituals of the kahuna.

Purpose and Strength of the Kapu System

The kapu system helped the ali'i and kahuna keep their power over the people. The people believed that breaking the kapu would bring the anger of the gods on themselves and their community. They made every effort to follow the kapu set down by the ali'i and kahuna.

Kapu of Early Hawai'i

Some examples of the kapu:

1. The men and women had to eat separately.
2. The food for the men and women had to be cooked in separate imu (underground ovens).
3. A wife was forbidden to enter the eating house of her husband while he was eating.
4. Women were forbidden to eat certain foods, among which were pork, banana, coconut, and certain fishes.
5. A commoner would be put to death if his shadow fell on an ali'i's house or anything that belonged to the ali'i.
6. When an ali'i of high standing ate, the people around him had to kneel.
7. Offerings of pig, coconuts, red fish (kumu) and awa were sacrificed to the gods before a tree was cut down to make a canoe.
8. In time of war, the first two men killed in battle were offered as sacrifices to the gods.
9. The opelu fishers would gather at their special heiau in the evening to spend the night together to worship their god of fishing.
10. During the summer months of Kau, the aku fish was kapu and could not be eaten.
11. Kamehameha I put a strict kapu on the cutting down of 'iliahi trees (sandalwood), to make sure it's supplies would not run out.

Source: Malo, David, Hawaiian Antiquities. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Special Publication 2, Second Edition. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1951.