



The Ahupua'a System and Canoe Making

Benton Keali'i Pang, 'Ahahui Malama i ka Lokahi

I'll discuss canoe making as it was practiced in ancient times and how it's sort of been applied today by the Polynesian Voyaging Society. I will also discuss some of the rights and responsibilities that we feel Hawaiian organizations and non-Hawaiian organizations can help out in preserving our koa forests, as well as where we as a community in Hawai'i can go from here.

The koa forests were an extremely important resource for Hawaiians. There is sort of a dichotomy between where the Hawaiians lived, called the *wao kanaka*, and the *wao akua*, those forested areas which were important to the gods. The chiefs, who were walking representations of the gods, were not owners of the resources nor owners of the land. They were more stewards or trustees of these resources. So, in these *wao akua*, these dominions of the gods, strict protocol has to be followed in order to enter them for gathering koa, medicinal plants, house-construction plants, bird catching, and the like.

There was strict *kapu* here. One of the values practiced in ancient times was that of *kapu* prohibition. And there were also places that were free, *noa*. These were the habitation areas where Hawaiians could freely walk and converse with one another and sometimes even gather plants. There was also the *'ai kapu*, which prohibited men and women from eating with one another. So there was prohibition, but there also were places that were considered *noa*, or free. There were also the values of *'ike*, knowledge, and that of *malama*, or stewardship that in order to know what to gather, you have to know sometimes the life cycle, you have to know the qualities of, say, the wood, if you are gathering for weapons, or for canoes. Also, you had to know that after you gather the resource, what are you going to do give back, the *malama*, the stewardship responsibilities. Are you going to clear around that patch of *olonā* and enhance it, make it larger, or are you going to use some other aspect of conservation which would make sure the resource is there when you or your family member goes back to collect those resources.

In the *ahupua'a*, there was this balance of *lokahi*. There were terrestrial resources and there were ocean

resources, and they all belonged to the *ahupua'a*. So ocean-land balance is very important to Hawaiians, and this comes to them from genealogical chants. The spirituality of Hawaiians is talked about in the genealogical chants, where the Hawaiians were born from, the different species both marine and terrestrial which had counterparts with one another. For every land species there was an ocean counterpart, and after the evolution of these species came the Hawaiian people. So Hawaiians, in the religious aspect, looking at natural resources in the land in the ocean, were actually born from it. The resources were actually a part of them, sometimes regarded as our *kupuna*, our ancestors, sometimes regarded as our *'aumakua*, or spirits.

Like all aspects of Hawaiian culture, the gathering of koa for canoe-making was a religious undertaking. The specialist here was a guild of woodcutters or wood craftsmen called *kahuna kalai wa'a*, those men who carved the canoe, or the *wa'a*. Once a tree was found in the forest by one of these *kahuna kalai wa'a*, he would come down from the forest to tell other men that there's a tree that they could possibly use for making a canoe. All the men would sleep in the *hale mua*, the men's house, and would make certain prayers and offerings to the gods. The next day they would proceed up into the forest. The number of these men were many, because you needed men to sharpen the adze heads as the tree was being cut, you needed men to lash the adzes as they were being cut because it would take quite a long time, and then you needed special carvers to know how to precisely carve out this large koa tree into a dugout canoe.

Before entering the forest, chants were given by the *kahuna kalai wa'a*. Once permission was granted from *Ku* of the forest, which was the god of this forest region, they would come to the base of the koa tree and again they would sleep together and make specific offerings of red fish, pig, and coconut, and the next day, the third day, they would proceed to cut the tree. Once the tree was felled, they would wait for a sign, and the sign is that of the *'elepaio* bird. Those of you who are zoolo-



gists know that the 'elepaio bird is a very territorial bird and, we say locally, *niele*, it likes to see what's going on in its territory. So, the Hawaiians saw this as a sign that the bird is checking the koa tree to make sure it's fit to be cut into a canoe. The 'elepaio bird would come to fly on top of this felled koa tree and peck at it or not peck at it. If it pecked, the *kahuna kalai wa'a* would know that that log was infested with insects, and the men would then return back to their houses and wait for another day to cut down a tree. If the 'elepaio bird did not peck at the tree, then the partial hewing of the log would continue.

Now this 'elepaio bird was also seen as a sign of Lea. Lea is the wife of Ku. Remember Ku is the god of the forest, so the dualism here is his wife, Lea, also has an important aspect in the making of the canoe tree. And this is kind of important in that there is so much dependency on a female goddess for this particular activity. You don't find this very often in other aspects of Hawaiian culture and especially in resource gathering.

The canoe was almost completely made up in the forest. After felling the tree, the branches were cut off, it was debarked, and it was shaped. To get it down to the canoe shed, which always was located near the coast, it took a large group of people and this would now include women and sometimes even children to help pull and push the log from the upper forest (and sometimes this could be more than 3000–4000 feet in elevation) down to the coast. They would use the cordage from the *hau* tree or sometimes 'ākia, which are very fibrous plants, and lash it onto the canoe, and there would actually be a type of steersmen guiding the log down the hill or down the mountain, making sure it didn't hit any large rocks or trees. It was actually a sort of fun affair. I think it would be very similar to the stamping party of making a *lo'i*, if you're familiar with that, so a large group of people would come out and help.

Then the canoe would be further fashioned at the canoe house. The other parts of the canoe would be put on: the gunnels, the seats, the decking, the mast, if need be. So, the koa was always looked at as an important resource and even into the ocean when it took its first float, the *kahuna kalai wa'a* would give his blessing and then the canoe would then be lifted of the *kapu* and would hopefully be free to make either safe journey for inter-island or safe journey for fishing.

That's one aspect of use of the koa tree in ancient Hawaiian culture, and it's been tried to be applied today

by the Polynesian Voyaging Society with the making of the Hawai'i Loa; however, the *kahuna kalai wa'a* could not find large enough koa trees in our Hawaiian forests because, I think, of so much degradation and changes in our forests. They couldn't find large enough koa logs to make the double-hulled canoes that would be good enough for ocean voyaging.