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Ancient Hawaiian Civilization

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## CHAPTER 13

### FEATHERWORK AND CLOTHING

LAHILAH I WEBB

Nearly everyone who knows anything about Hawaii has heard of the famous feather cloaks of the old days. They were so unusual, so beautifully made, so spectacular, that they always attracted attention and interest. Other countries have used the feathers of different birds for decorative purposes, but nowhere was the featherwork more beautifully and skillfully done than it was by the feather craftsmen of old Hawaii.

The ahuala or feather cloak was endowed with great significance and could be worn only by chiefs of high rank, and by them only on special occasions. Ahualas were of all sizes. They ranged from short capes to long cloaks reaching nearly to the ground. These cloaks had simple but striking designs worked out in different colored feathers, or perhaps no design at all. The most famous cloak of all is the great cape of Kamehameha I, which is made entirely of mamu feathers and is undecorated. This cloak was last worn when King Kalakaua was crowned, February 12, 1883. It is now in the Bernice P. Bishop Museum.

The foundation of the feather cloak was a closely woven net of olona fiber. Fibers of olona were also used to fasten the feathers to the net. The feathers in one row covered the bases of the feathers in the next row, and were arranged much as shingles on a roof today. They were very securely fastened. Skilled men did this work. The feathers were light in weight, but the olona netting was so closely knit that a large cloak might weigh as much as six pounds. However, all Hawaiian chiefs were powerful men, easily able to wear these great cloaks into battle where the cloaks of the chiefs were one standard around which the warriors rallied.

Helmets and images were made of featherwork. In these cases, the foundation was made from lei'e, a vine which grew in the forests. To this foundation the feathers were attached by means of olona fiber. Helmets were worn with the ahulua on the battlefield and on other special occasions. Kalli, or Kukalimoku, known as Kamehameha's war god, is the most famous feather image in the Museum.

Kahilis were made with feathers, but the featherwork involved was quite different from that used in the fashioning of cloaks, images, and helmets. The large kahilis were a sacred emblem of Hawaiian royalty. They were standards and insignia of the highest rank, used only on state occasions. Kahilis were dismantled after they were used, and the feathers were put away by the caretakers, or kahu hulu. All of the large old kahilis were named after some ancestor or favored person. Small kahilis, while a sign of royalty, were used not only on solemn occasions, but were also used over royalty while they were eating, or sleeping, or conversing with their friends.

The choicest kahilis were made from o-o feathers and were black and yellow. All kinds of feathers were used in kahilis, however. The handles were made from the bones of defeated chiefs, or from kauila or some other hard wood. Men did the binding of the feathers on the poles of the large kahilis, for they were too large to be handled by the women. Women assisted in the making of the small kahilis.

Lei hulus or feather leis were made from early days up to the present as a decoration for women. In olden times, only women wore the feather leis. The lei was worn on the head or on the neck. Sometimes one lei was worn, sometimes two—one long and one short. Leis were made all one color, or of different colors. All kinds of feathers were used. The choicest leis were made of the mamu, o-o, ilwi, and o-u feathers. The feathers were bunched, then sorted, and the longer feathers placed in the center of the lei, while the shorter ones were used at the ends.

Both men and women made the feather leis.

There are two very unusual articles of featherwork in the Museum. One of these is King Liloa's kael kapu, a cordon made of o-o and ilwi feathers on both sides. It has been thought to be a malo, but it is not a malo. It is the only article of its kind in existence and very probably it was sacredly used in religious ceremonial. The other unusual article is the only garment of featherwork ever worn by a woman, and it was worn only after the kapus had been broken. It is a pa'u of yellow o-o feathers with small triangles of black o-o and red ilwi feathers at the ends. It was made for Princess Nahienaena who wore it only once, when Lord Byron was here in 1825. At her death, it was cut in half and put together to be used as a pall in her funeral. It was used as a pall for succeeding monarchs. It was last used in 1891 when King Kalakaua died.

The featherwork required much time and patience. Not only must the feathers be sorted, tied, and attached to the foundation network, but they must be collected in the first place. There were in the islands few birds of brilliant plumage, and these lived in the depths of the forests. The feather hunters or Poe Kawili knew the haunts of the birds they sought. They were familiar with the habits, songs, and food of the different birds. They knew the season for gathering the feathers when they were at their best. Feathers were gathered in the moulting season just before the birds dropped their feathers, so that few feathers were shed by the birds in the forest and lost. The moulting season was the time when the forest trees were in full bloom and the wild berries were bearing. The birds came out of the deep forests to feed. The feather hunters had their own method of trapping the birds. They broke a branch of the flowering trees and put bird lime or gum on the broken branch. Sometimes they used a net. After setting their traps, they concealed themselves, and awaited the birds. The birds were rarely killed when the feathers were collected. If the feather

gatherers needed more feathers from the bird than it could stand, then the bird was killed and eaten. The plucked feathers were tied in small parcels bound together with strong fiber. After the hunters returned home, the women sorted and rebunched the feathers and padded the main feathers with a few iwi feathers called pa'u.

Among the birds whose feathers were most highly prized was the beautiful mamu. Its body was brownish black, its tail feathers a rich golden or orange yellow. The feathers on top and under the tail were known as koo mamu. There were short feathers on the lower part of the thighs, called ae mamu. The mamu was found only on the island of Hawaii. Its feathers were used for cloaks, leis and helmets.

The o-o had a body of brilliant black, and under each wing a tuft of beautiful yellow feathers called e-e. The feathers over the rump were called pu-e, and the tail feathers were called pu-apu-a. The o-o was fairly common on several islands in the old days. Its feathers were used for all articles of featherwork. Under the tail of the o-o were two black and white feathers called pilali o-o, used for very choice kahilis. One of these kahilis is in the Bishop Museum.

The iwi is bright red in color. In olden times the iwi was the most abundant bird found on all the islands. Its feathers were used in great abundance in all the featherwork and decorations of the Hawaiians. It was often used under other feathers, as well as on the outer surface of the articles. It is said that the iwi may be found today in the National Park area around Kilauea, and it is thought that these birds are increasing in numbers.

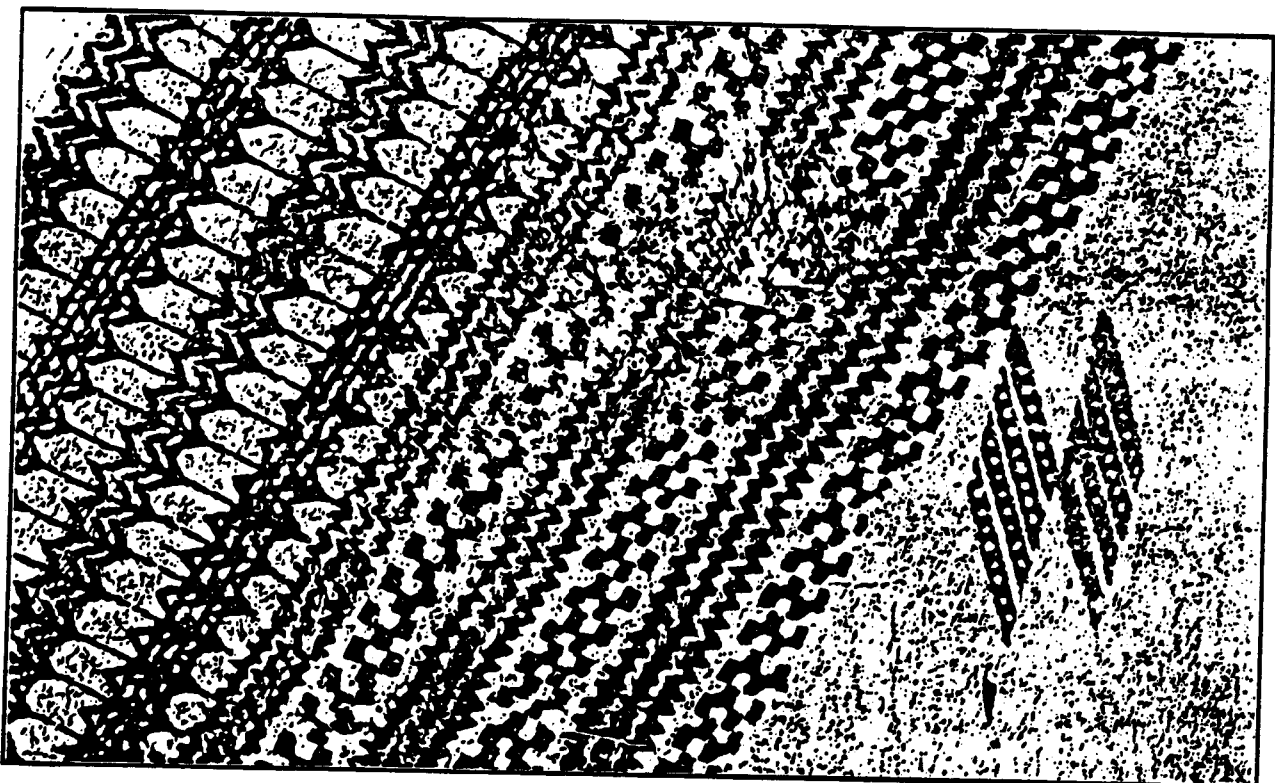
The o-u was of a dull green color. For some reason, their green feathers were little used. The apapane was dark red or crimson. Its feathers were rarely used but at times they are found in cloaks, helmets, leis, and kahilis. These—the mamu, the o-o, the iwi, the o-u, and the apapane, were the birds of the upland regions sought by the feather hunters of old Hawaii.

Feather hat bands and leis are popular in the islands

today, and are worn by both men and women. People who know nothing about the gathering of feathers, slaughter birds for their feathers, and destroy the beautiful birds which are being imported into Hawaii. As has been pointed out, ruthless destruction of this kind never happened in old Hawaii, and it is not at all necessary today, provided people are willing to spend time in perfecting the art of collecting feathers, as they did in the old days.

All featherwork may be considered as decoration, rather than clothing. Even the great ahuiuas, though they might cover almost the entire person, were not clothing, but were instead, decorations, signs of rank, and insignia of the chiefs. The clothing worn by the old-time Hawaiians was made of kapa. The men wore a kapa malo or loin cloth. It was one foot wide and three or four yards long. It might be dyed red or yellow. The pa'us or skirts worn by the women were dyed and printed in many different designs and colors. They were prettier and had more elaborate designs than the malos. A pa'u was thirty inches wide and three or four yards long. It was worn about the waist and the end was tucked in to secure it. Hula dancers, both men and women, wore the pa'u. The grass skirt, so-called, was never known in old Hawaii. When the weather was a little cool, both men and women wore a sort of kapa shawl, called kilei, over the shoulders. All articles of clothing were straight strips of material. Complete covering of the body by fitted, sewed garments was not necessary in this climate, so anything resembling a needle was not developed by the people. The style of the clothing was such that the direct rays of the sun reached the people and contributed to their health. Today, we go to great lengths to secure the "sun baths" which were a natural part of the every day life in old Hawaii.

Kapa designs were intricate and interesting. While most women could make kapa, the really skilled work of decorating it was done by those of high rank. Most kapa was not dipped into the dye. Instead, pieces already



Kapa Designs

stained were pressed into it, or it might be marked or printed with the color. Fine and delicate tools of wood and bamboo were used in this work. Dyes were made from the native plants.

Brown and black were obtained from charcoal made from roasted kukui nut. The charcoal was mixed with water or kukui nut oil.

Orange was obtained from the turmeric root.

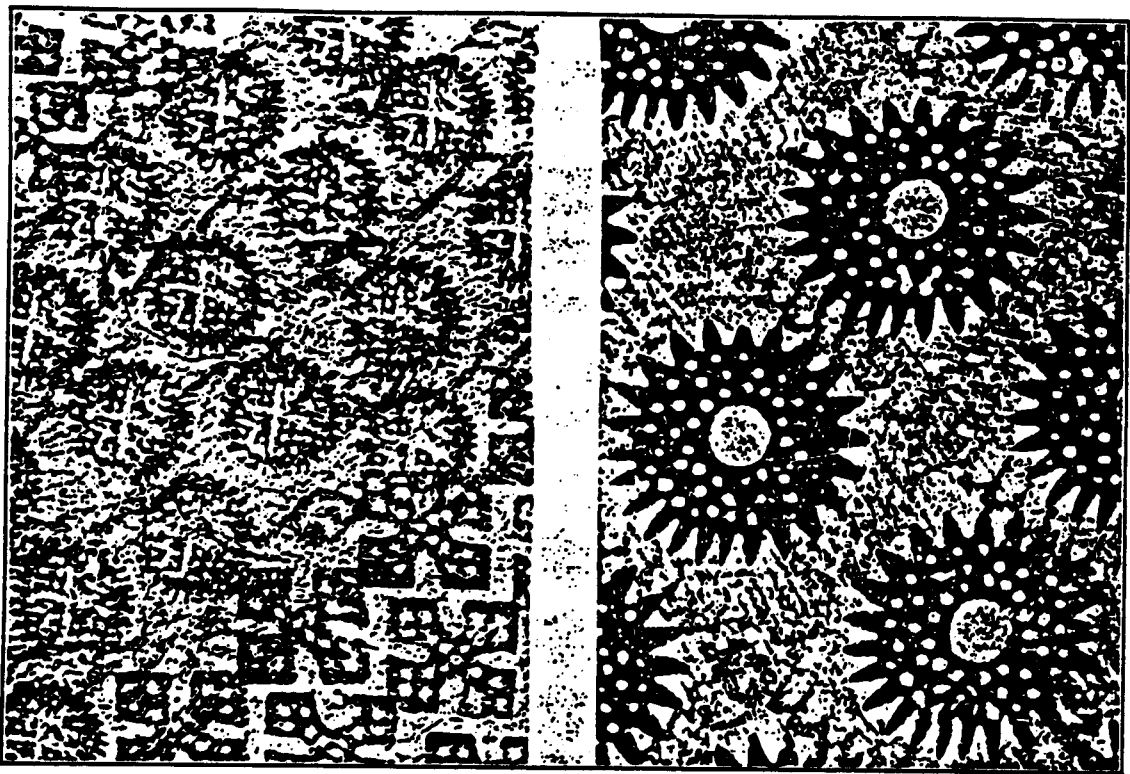
Yellow was obtained from the wood and root of the noni, from the fruit pulp of the nanu, and from the bark and root of the hoolei tree.

Red was obtained from the roots of the noni. They were pounded, mixed with fresh water, and strained. The article was first dipped in this solution, and then in sea water, whose salt brought out the red. Red was also obtained from the bark of the kolea tree and from the fruit of the ohia ai.

Blue was obtained from the berries of the uki.

Kapas of different colors and qualities had different names. Some of these were:

- Ouiholowai—black and dark brown, scented.
- Paipaikukui—dark yellow.
- Akoa—reddish brown.
- Aeokahaloa—grayish.
- Holei—light yellow.
- Mahuna—dark brown and black.
- Kalukalu—very thin, transparent, creamish in color.
- Uauahi—gray.
- Paiala—pink.
- Pukai—red malo.
- Ninika—pure white.
- Halakea—whitish.
- Ma'o—greenish, scented.
- Pulou—black.
- Pukohukohu—creamish, used for pa'u.



Kapa Designs

The priests at ceremonial times generally wore white kapa. Kapa sticks were covered with white, gray, or pink kapa, according to the occasion. Oloa fiber was prepared and reserved for ceremonial occasions, and for covering the temple tower in the heiau, as in the heiau model at the Museum. This kapa was pure white, undyed, and undecorated.

Bed coverings were made of kapa. They consisted of five separate sheets fastened together at one end with olona fiber or with strips of kapa rolled like string and knotted at each end. There might be four white sheets, and one colored or dyed or painted as the maker preferred. These blankets were from two and a half to three yards long.

Soiled blankets and clothing were washed. Since kapa is not cloth, but paper, the fabric could not be rubbed or scrubbed, but it could be carefully cleaned. The one soiled sheet was removed from the blanket; it was folded, and placed to soak in a stream. It was removed, and spread out in a prepared place to bleach in the sun. If it was not perfectly clean, the process was repeated. Soiled articles of clothing were washed in the same way.

Kapa coverings were light, but warm. Kapa clothing was suited to the climate of Hawaii. It is interesting to note how the Hawaiians used even the inner barks of trees, to secure for themselves what was necessary for their comfort. And, having secured the material, they then developed the crafts of dyeing and decorating it, until we find that the Hawaiians produced the finest and most beautiful kapas of all Polynesia.