# Kā I Mua

kā i mua—the practice of ritually and symbolically pushing a young boy out of the feminine setting of babyhood, and thrusting him into the world of his father and grandfather. This was done when a boy was about six years old.

Deriv: kā – to thrust, push or toss.

i – to, into, in.

mua – men‘s eating house

Literally – “thrust into the men‘s eating house.”

In old Hawaii, every man had his Men Only club-restaurant-chapellodge hall-locker room, and general refuge from the ladies. This was the hale mua.

The hale mua was both the men‘s eating house and the place where images of the household gods were kept. Here men ate their own meals and symbolically fed the gods, making formal daily offerings, and less formally communing with the gods over the eating mats, asking their help or intervention in affairs of the entire ‘ohana (family or extended family).

Here legends, bold and brave, were told; exploits of hunting and fishing related; the fine points of navigation discussed. Here, among ali‘i, ‘awa* was drunk. This was a man‘s world. Women could not set foot in the mua.† Nor could a keiki lewalewa.

For the keiki lewalewa—usually shortened to lewalewa—was yet a "dangler." A small boy, so young his penis dangled. As a dangler, he wore no malo (loincloth) and he lived and ate with the women. For he was yet poke‘o, too young to join the men.

When the little dangler became six or seven years old, his status changed

in one decisive ceremony. This was the kā i mua. Mary Kawena Pukui relates:

"There were prayers to Lono, the god who made things grow, and an offering of pork, because pork was kapu to women. Then more prayers and chants. The rituals might be more elaborate with families of high rank.[1] And then the little boy came out of the women‘s eating house (hale ‘aina) for the last time.”

"At this moment, he was symbolically ‘pushed‘ or ‘thrust‘ out entirely from babyhood and dependence on women and into the world of men.”

"After that the boy spent most of his days with the men and boys. From then on he wore a malo. At night he returned to the hale noa (house free of taboos) because everybody slept there. Maybe he spent a little time during the day with his grandmother or mother. But he never again ate in the hale ‘aina with the women. That was important. That meant he really was a man."

Hawaii‘s kā i mua gave ritual emphasis to a significant period in a boy‘s development. Somewhere between five and six, boys ordinarily began turning to their fathers—or substitute father-figures. In Freudian terms, the Oedipal stage of viewing the father as a rival and an obstacle to closeness to the mother is ending. The boy is now beginning to identify himself, to emotionally "line himself up" with the father, the father‘s maleness and his masculine interests and ways of living. The stage of "latency" is beginning.

England in its "old guard" days had a fairly analogous practice. Little boys were reared very much like little girls until, at around six or seven, they were packed off to the all-male boarding school.

Hawaii‘s old practice had in it a tacit understanding the British public (boarding) school system lacked. Male sex urges in the boarding school were subject to "cold-shower and athletics treatment" and exposed to homosexual experimentation. When the Hawaiian boy showed evidence

of sexual awareness, he was allowed sex experiments and experience with girls and women. In fact, a youth from the aliʻi was taught techniques of intercourse by an older chiefess.

Kā i mua, as far as we know, is an all-but-forgotten practice. Recalling it to a Hawaiian mother who "feels very much a Hawaiian" may be useful. For one thing, some Hawaiian mothers feel that the professional, perhaps haole, person knows everything about child care—and they know nothing. The under lying wisdom, in their past setting, of such rituals as kā i mua might be discussed to help build a better self-image and to increase confidence in "mothering" ability.

More specifically, talking about kā i mua may help the overly possessive Hawaiian mother understand that she must loosen the apron strings that bind her son. For kā i mua carries a timeless and universal message:

"Stop clinging. He canʻt remain a baby forever. Let him go. Let the boy learn from his father to be a man."

REFERENCES

1. Chants and ceremonies associated with kā i mua are given in detail in The Polynesian Family System in Kaʻu, pp. 95, 6, 7.