Author's Note and Acknowledgments

Makahiki was a four-month season of peace, thanksgiving and celebration. It was truly a special part of Hawaiian life. People in Hawai‘i today continue to respect and perpetuate traditions associated with Makahiki.

Each major island followed certain local practices; it should therefore be noted that this book presents only a general overview of Makahiki. Those interested in learning more about this subject are encouraged to examine the sources listed in the bibliography, as well as other documents that can be found in the Hawaiian Collections of libraries throughout the state. In addition, one should seek out present-day stewards of nohona Hawai‘i who are keeping our unique culture alive for this generation and generations to come.

Contemporary students and teachers of Hawaiian history and culture have benefited from the work done by notable and talented Hawaiians from the past. For many centuries, Hawai‘i's history was preserved and carried down through oral traditions. With the influence of western education, the 1800's and 1900's saw Hawaiian scholars translating and transcribing the knowledge and stories of our early ancestors. I am indebted to, and in awe of, such küpuna who could speak, think, read and write fluently in Hawaiian and English. It is because of their foresight and acumen that we have resources available in both languages today.

‘O ‘Ikuä i pohä kö‘ele‘ele, ‘ikuä ke kai, ‘ikuä ka hekili, ‘ikuä ka manu.

‘Ikuä is the month when the dark storms arise, the sea roars,
the thunder roars, the birds make a din.

– Mary Kawena Pukui
‘Ölelo No‘eau, Hawaiian Proverbs and Poetical Sayings #2390

Introduction

The Hawaiians of old recognized a summer and a winter, but not a spring nor a fall. Kau was summer, warm and dry. Ho‘oilo was winter, cool and rainy.

With the passing of kau, dusk came earlier. Dark skies stayed darker longer. Heavy rains were falling harder. Rough seas were roaring louder. Hawaiians saw these changes in nature and realized that ho‘oilo was approaching. The year was coming to an end.

It was during the month of ‘Ikuä, the time we know as late October and early November, that the people rejoiced. For soon it would be Makahiki, their four-month season of celebration!

Preparing for Makahiki

The Hawaiians were a hard-working and industrious people. For most of the year, their lives were strictly governed by a set of laws called kapu. Everything they did – working, playing, eating, sleeping – was directed by these kapu.

But during the Makahiki season, many kapu were suspended. War was forbidden. People were allowed to rest from their usual labors. Life was more relaxed with fewer restrictions.

Throughout Makahiki, the Hawaiians celebrated with a harvest festival. This Makahiki festival honored Lono, one of the four great Hawaiian gods. The other major gods were Käne, Kü and Kanaloa. Lono was the god of peace, agriculture and fertility. He was the god of the winter winds and clouds that brought the rains which nurtured crops.

Makahiki is often compared to the American Thanksgiving Day, but it can also be viewed as the Hawaiian New Year. Like Thanksgiving and New Year, Makahiki was a time to give thanks for the year gone by and to pray for a good year to come. To show their gratitude, the Hawaiians offered Lono hoʻokupu, or gifts, from the land and the sea. Such tributes included fruits, vegetables, dogs, chickens, fish and a variety of handcrafted items.

The Hawaiians gave these gifts with the hope that Lono would bless them with an abundance of ua, or rain. Rain caused their crops to grow, which meant they would have food to eat, which in turn, meant they would survive.

As Makahiki approached, people were busy preparing their hoʻokupu for Lono. Girls helped their mothers beat kapa and plait lau hala baskets and mats. Boys helped their fathers harvest kalo (taro), ʻuala (sweet potatoes), uhi (yams), maiʻa (bananas), niu (coconuts), ʻulu (breadfruit) and other products from their gardens. Artisans, or skilled workers, were busy, too. They crafted bowls and platters from the wood of the milo and kou trees. Fishermen fashioned lines and nets with cordage made from olonä fibers. Birdcatchers collected precious yellow, black and red feathers from the mamo, ʻöʻö, ʻiʻiwi and ʻapapane birds. Any product that would please Lono was gathered or made.

The people also prepared for the next four months to come, which was the duration of Makahiki. An ample storage of food would be needed. Many kinds of iʻa, or fish, were salted and dried. Paʻi ʻai was hard poi. It was pounded taro that had not been mixed with water. Paʻi ʻai preserved well and was kept in the storehouse. Other staples, such as sweet potatoes and breadfruit, were baked, dried and stored away, too.

During Makahiki, certain types of food were kapu, or forbidden. For instance, one could not eat pork that was freshly roasted in the imu, or underground oven. This was because the puaʻa, or pig, was considered to be one of Lono's kino lau, or body forms. To kill and eat a pig during Makahiki was a sign of disrespect to Lono. However, pork that was cooked and salt-preserved before the start of Makahiki could be stored and eaten later.

The Ahupua‘a

In old Hawai‘i, the maka‘äinana, or working people, did not own the land upon which they lived. Rather, the land belonged to the gods and was managed by the ali‘i, or chiefs. Under the guidance of their chiefs, the people were allowed to use the resources of the land. For that right, they offered goods they had produced to the chiefs. In turn, the ali‘i accepted the tributes on behalf of the gods. Everyone understood their kuleana, or responsibilities. Each major Hawaiian island was divided into moku, or districts. Within each district were smaller divisions of land called ahupua‘a. Generally, an ahupua‘a was a portion of land that ran from the mountains to the sea. During Makahiki, the residents of every ahupua‘a could anticipate a visit from Lono.

In charge of each ahupua‘a was a chief called an ali‘i ‘ai ahupua‘a. More commonly, he was known as the konohiki. This chief played a major role during Makahiki. He was the person who collected the people’s ho‘okupu for Lono. The konohiki was also the one who presented their gifts to Lono when the great god came to visit their ahupua‘a.

Located at the boundary of each ahupua‘a was an ahu, or an altar made of stones. Sitting atop the ahu was a wooden image of a pig’s head, carved from the trunk of a kukui tree. The Hawaiian term for pig is pua‘a. Hence, the name ahupua‘a was given for this division of land.

Each ahu was either cleaned or rebuilt before the start of Makahiki. It was at these altars that products from the land – the people’s ho‘okupu to Lono –would be presented.

Makahiki Begins

Makahiki could only begin with a pronouncement from the kähuna, or priests. The kähuna scanned the skies, looking for a certain cluster of stars to appear over the eastern horizon at sunset.

This group of stars was called Nähuihuiamakali‘i, or more commonly, Makali‘i. This name means “little eyes.” To Westerners, these stars are known as the Pleiades or “the Seven Sisters.”

The word makahiki also means “year.” Thus, the rise of Makali‘i heralded the start of a new Hawaiian year. Makali‘i also marked the changing of seasons from kau to ho‘oilo, from summer to winter.

When the kähuna saw Makali‘i, it was time to formally announce the start of Makahiki. They did this by displaying tapa banners in their heiau, or temples of worship.

Purification

At midnight, after Makahiki had begun, everyone went to the beach or to a freshwater pond. Fires were lit along the beach. Men, women and children bathed, played and splashed around in the clean water. Bathing in this manner was a water purification ceremony called hi‘uwai.

After the people had cleansed themselves of the impurities of the past year, they went ashore to get warm. Hi‘uwai would continue until dawn.

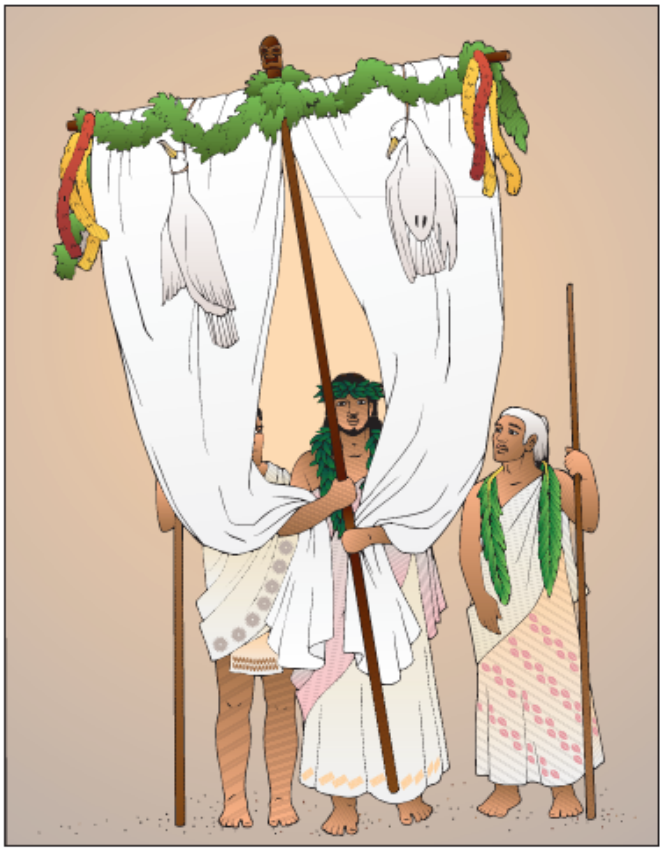
Everyone donned their best kapa clothing. Men and boys put on their new malo, or loincloths. Women and girls wore decorated pä‘ü, or skirts. No work was done during this time. Instead, they feasted, talked and amused themselves. They waited for the coming of Lono.

The Coming of Lono

At the start of Makahiki, the kāhuna prayed to the god Lono. They asked him to send his spirit into a tall wooden image. This image was made of kauila wood and was about twelve feet high. It was topped with a small, carved figure of a head. Because the image represented Lono during the Makahiki season, it was known as Lonoikamakahiki.

Thus, when Lono called upon each ahupua‘a, the people knew that it was not the god himself who came visiting. Instead, they realized that it was his spirit who came to them in the form of a wooden image.

Another name for this image was Lono Makua, which means “Father Lono.” It was also called akua loa, a name that describes an akua (god) who goes on loa (long) journeys, such as traveling around the island. Accompanying the akua loa was an akua poko, an image that went on poko (short) journeys. This image only traveled as far as the borders of its district.



Attached to the Lono image’s neck was a wooden crosspiece called a ke‘a. Hanging from the ke‘a were long, white pieces of kapa. Feather lei were tied to the ends of the crosspiece. Draped over the crosspiece were pala ferns and skins of the ka‘upu bird.

Priests carried and accompanied Lonoikamakahiki around the entire island in a clockwise direction. They would always walk with the ocean on their left side and the mountains on their right. As they walked, Lonoikamakahiki’s kapa billowed in the wind like a canoe sail.

At the boundary of each ahupua‘a, the priests would stop at the altar and receive the people’s ho‘okupu to Lono.

Two men in the procession each carried a wooden pole called an ālia. When they approached the altar, they went forward, ahead of Lonoikamakahiki.

Each man stuck his älia into the ground, one on each side of the altar. The priest bearing the Lono image then stood behind the altar. The area between the two älia poles was considered kapu. Tributes to Lono would be placed there. Only the chief and the priests could enter that sacred place.

The people came forward and presented their gifts to the konohiki, the overseer of their ahupuaʻa. He, in turn, placed their tributes on the altar.

As each family brought their hoʻokupu, the kahuna representing Lono signaled if the gifts were acceptable or not. He did so with a subtle nod of the head. Upon acceptance of all the tributes, the kahuna conducted a hainaki service. Hainaki was a ceremony in which the kahuna prayed to Lono. He asked Lono to remove the kapu from the land so that the Makahiki festival could begin.

The kahuna prayed: "Your bodies, O Lono, are in the heavens,
A long cloud, a short cloud,
A watchful cloud, a peering cloud.
A cloud that forms a billow in the heavens.
From Uliuli, from Melemele,
From Polapola, from Haʻehaʻe,
From ʻÖmaʻokü'ululü,
From the land that gave birth to Lono...."

For the entire chant, see Hawaiian Antiquities by David Malo, pp. 146-147.

After the kahuna recited the entire prayer, he told the people, "Stand up! Gird yourselves for play!" Everyone stood up and repeated after him, "Gird yourselves!"

Then the kahuna addressed the god, exclaiming, "Lono!" The people responded, "The image of Lono!"

Finally, the kahuna cried, "Ä ulu! Hail!" And the people answered, "Ä ulu, e Lono! Hail to Lono!" With these words, the hainaki service was ended.

The land was now considered free from kapu. All the tributes were taken to the aliʻi nui, or high chief, who ruled the entire island for Lono. The high chief, in turn, shared the bounty with his district chiefs.

It was understood by all that the chiefs ruled the land for the gods. Thus, they received the hoʻokupu as Lono's representatives on earth.

With the land free from kapu, the Lono procession continued on its way around the island. The image was held face down as the group left that ahupuaʻa. Lonoikamakahiki would stand tall again when the procession reached the next ahupuaʻa. While traveling, the eyes of the akua loa looked backwards, not forward.

For those who had just been visited by Lono, the Makahiki festivities could now begin!

Sports and Games

The Makahiki festival is associated with sports and games. A legend about Makahiki explains why.

The Makahiki Legend

The god Lono fell in love with and married a beautiful chiefess named Kaikilani. They lived in Kealakekua on the island of Hawai‘i and were very happy. But alas, an earthly chief noticed the lovely Kaikilani and was entranced by her, too.

One day Lono heard this chief singing a love song to Kaikilani. Believing that his wife had been untrue, Lono beat her to death. But before she died, Kaikilani assured him that she was innocent and proclaimed her love for him.

In his grief, Lono began the Makahiki games in her honor. He traveled around the island challenging every man he met to a boxing or wrestling match. During these furious, athletic matches, Lono released his grief.

The Hawaiians enjoyed participating in sports and games that tested their strength, skill and endurance. They trained hard in individual sports such as ku‘iku‘i or mokomoko (boxing), häkökö (wrestling), kükini (foot racing), kaka lä‘au (fencing with spears), and ‘ö‘ö ihe (spear throwing). Although war was forbidden during Makahiki, many of these sports allowed young men to display their skills used in battle.

Ho‘okükü, or tournaments, were held to bring champions together. Presiding over the festivities was an image that resembled Lonoikamakahiki. This image was called akua pä‘ani, or “the god of sports.”

Large crowds gathered in a circle around the contestants. They cheered for their favorites and made fun of their opponents.

A large playing field called a kahua was the setting for games that involved throwing or sliding an object. Among these games of skill were ‘ulu maika (rolling stone disks), ihe pahe‘e (spear sliding), and moa pahe‘e (dart sliding).

Generally, the early Hawaiians did not have many team sports. They preferred individual competition. However, they did participate in tug-of-war contests and relay running during Makahiki.

As an ocean people, Hawaiians excelled in the water sports of **‘au** (swimming), **lu‘u** (diving), **kaha nalu** (body surfing), **he‘e nalu** (surfing with a board), and **heihei wa‘a** (canoe racing)**.** During Makahiki, the ocean was reserved for Lono and canoes were not allowed to go out to sea. Therefore, no canoe racing took place at this time.

At night, children and adults turned to quieter amusements. They played könane (checkers)

and kimo (jacks). They made hei (string figures), spun hü, (kukui nut tops), and played with the palaʻie (loop and ball game).

Hawaiians enjoyed guessing games. They loved to make up ʻölelo nane (riddles) and ʻölelo noʻeau (proverbs). They had a clever sense of humor and were keen observers of nature.

Dancing, Feasting and Storytelling

One of the favorite pastimes of Makahiki was hula, or dancing. Participants and spectators alike took great pleasure in the hula.

ʻÖlapa, or dancers, and hoʻopaʻa, or chanters, were strictly trained in their art. Through chants and skillful hand and foot motions, they told stories and entertained their audience.

Certain chants and dances were performed only during Makahiki. They honored themes especially significant to Makahiki – those of rain and fertility.

Throughout the Makahiki season, there was much merriment and great feasting. However, it was still kapu for men and women to eat together.

Mealtime was an occasion that invited the telling and retelling of stories and legends. Haʻi moʻolelo, or storytelling, was an important part of Hawaiian life for not only did it entertain, it also educated. Children listened quietly as their elders shared family histories and folklore.

Lono Returns to the Luakini

When the procession of Lono completed its journey around the island, Lonoikamakahiki returned to his home in the luakini temple of the high chief. A luakini is a large heiau where ruling chiefs prayed. Human sacrifices were also offered here but not during the Makahiki season, the time of Lono.

On the day of Lonoikamakahiki's return, the high chief of the island went to bathe in the ocean. He needed to be purified for a ceremony that would take place later in the day.

That evening, the aliʻi nui went back to the beach. Accompanied by his advisors and warriors, they got into their canoes and went out to meet Lono.

The next day, the high chief and his attendants returned to shore where a group of warriors awaited their arrival. The aliʻi nui and one of his warriors stepped out of their canoe. Suddenly, one of the opposing warriors ran towards them, holding two spears. He threw one spear at them but the chief's man easily warded it off. Then the attacker went up to the chief and touched him with the point of his second spear.

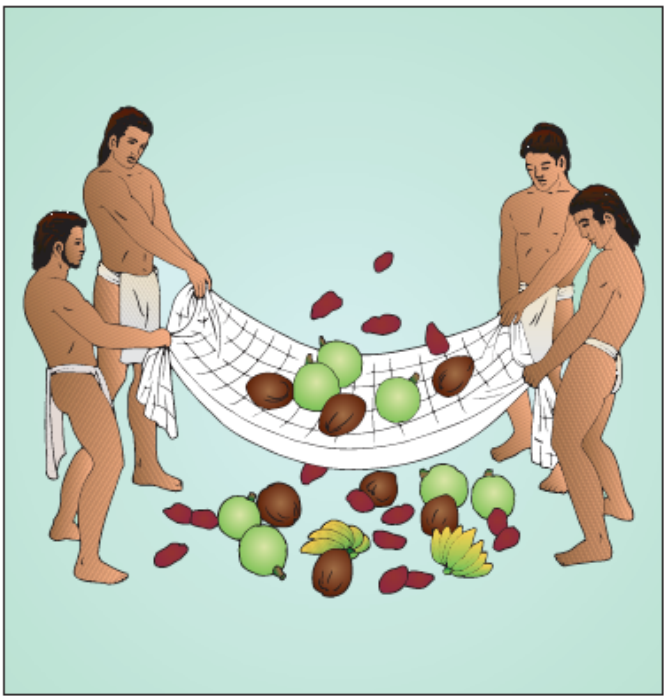
The man who "attacked" the chief did not really mean to harm him. The tips of his spears were covered with kapa cloth. The men were acting out a ritual called käli'i. The purpose of käli'i was to symbolically demonstrate the skill and cleverness of the chief and his men. Käli'i was like a "test" for the ali'i nui. He needed to prove that he was indeed a strong and deserving ruler.

Later that afternoon, the two groups of warriors engaged in a sham, or pretend, spear battle called känekupua. After they had "fought," the ruling chief went to the luakini to pray to Lonoikamakahiki. There the ali'i nui offered a sacrificial pig to Lono before returning to his home.

The next evening, the priests conducted their own service at the luakini. The following morning, they dismantled, or took apart, the Lonoikamakahiki image. They untied the crosspiece and removed the long, white pieces of kapa, the pala ferns and the ka'upu bird skins from the tall pole. The bare wooden image was then wrapped in clean kapa and put in a safe place within the luakini. The day ended in prayer by the kähuna.

Net of Maoloha

The dismantling of the Lonoikamakahiki image was a sign that the Makahiki season was in its closing phase. Before it was over, however, certain ceremonies needed to take place. One such ritual was called kökö a Maoloha, or "net of Maoloha." A net with large "eyes" or meshes was made. It was then filled with different types of food, such as taro, sweet potatoes, bananas, breadfruit and coconuts.



Four men held up the net's four corners. A kahuna stood to the side and prayed. At his command to "Häpai," the men lifted the net. When he called out, "E lü," they started shaking the net. Food began to tumble out through the meshes.

As the four men shook the net, the rest of the people chanted:

"Shake down the god's food!
Scatter it, O Heaven!
This is a season of food.
Scatter it, O Earth!
This is a season of food...."

For the entire chant, see Hawaiian Antiquities by David Malo, p. 156.

At the end of the chant, they noted whether the food had fallen through the net. If the food had not dropped out, the kahuna predicted that a famine, or shortage of food, would occur. But if all the food had fallen through the meshes, the coming year would be a fruitful one.

The maoloha ceremony was based on a legend about Waia, a chief of Hawai‘i. Waia was also a kupua, or a demigod. A famine had struck his island, but with his supernatural powers, Waia caused a net to drop down from above. The net was filled with all kinds of food. Waia shook the net and the food scattered all over Hawai‘i, thus ending the famine.

Lono's Canoe

Following the net-shaking ceremony, another ritual was held using a simple, single-hulled canoe. This canoe was called wa‘a o Lono, or "Lono's canoe."

Lashed to its ‘iako, or outrigger booms, was a twined basket made of wauke twigs. The basket was filled with taro, sweet potatoes, coconuts, bananas and other foods. With no one on board, the canoe was set out to sea. Its destination was far-off Kahiki, ancestral home of the Hawaiians.

This ritual recalled the legend of Lono who, after he had established the Makahiki games, built himself a great canoe. He told his people that he would be going away on a very long trip. His destination was Kahiki. They brought him food and other supplies, leaving them in a heap before him. Before he sailed away, Lono promised that he would return. However, he would not come back by canoe. Rather, he would return, traveling on an island that was covered with trees, coconuts, pigs and birds.

Thus, the wa‘a o Lono ritual symbolized the prediction and the promise of this legend – that Lono would return at Makahiki and that there would be an abundance of food in the new year.

Makahiki Comes to a Close

The realization that Makahiki was coming to a close could be seen in the slight changes of nature. The nights were shorter and the days grew warmer. A more deliberate sign came when an unpainted canoe called a wa‘a kea was put to sea by the kähuna. People would watch for this canoe as once it was seen, the normal kapu were put back in place.

In the meantime, the ali‘i nui and the kähuna participated in one last ceremony. A pig was specially prepared as part of this ritual. At its conclusion, they all feasted on the freshly roasted pork, a food that was kapu during Makahiki. The end of this service also marked the end of the Makahiki season. No longer was it the time of Lono. It was now the time of the god Kü.

Once again, all the kapu were in observance. The Hawaiian people returned to their usual life of steadfast work. They planted crops and caught fish. Men and boys built new canoes and thatched new houses. Women and girls made kapa and plaited lau hala products.

Everyone would miss Makahiki. But they also realized that resuming their normal labors was necessary for their survival. And like their ancestors, they knew that Makahiki would come again. In time, they would enjoy another wonderful season of peace, thanksgiving and celebration - Makahiki!