

The Overthrow of the Kapu System

The overthrow of the kapu system was the result of many causes which had been at work for more than 25 years before Liholiho became king.

One of the most important causes in breaking down the Hawaiians' belief in the kapu system was seeing the foreigners breaking of kapu with no consequences and their arguments with Hawaiians that the kapu system was wrong. The Hawaiians had also heard about the overthrow of the kapu system in the Society Islands by their king. It is also said that a certain priest, in Kamehameha's presence, had foretold the end of the kapu system. Ka'ahumanu had also secretly eaten bananas without any consequences from the gods.



Ka'ahumanu and Keopuolani, Liholiho's mother, agreed that the kapu system should be abolished. Soon after Liholiho was crowned, Ka'ahumanu suggested that Liholiho disregard the kapu. It is said that the king remained silent and did not give his consent. Keopuolani was present and soon sent for Kauikeaouli, Liholiho's younger brother, and ate with him – breaking the kapu. Liholiho permitted this breaking of the kapu, but did not break kapu himself.

Over a period of several months, Liholiho wrestled with the question: should he stick with the old customs that his father strongly believed in and uphold the kapu system or should he get rid of them?

When Liholiho finally made up his mind he invited the leading chiefs and several foreigners to a feast. Two tables were set up, one for the men and another for the women.

After all the guests had begun to eat, Liholiho suddenly sat down at the women's table and began to eat. The guests clapped their hands and shouted "Ai noa," meaning free eating or the eating kapu is broken.

After the meal, Liholiho ordered the heiau destroyed and the idols burned. The kapu system - the entire social system of how people were expected to behave – was ended. The date was November, 1819.

