

# Kamehameha's Use of Poison

POISON WAS ONE of the weapons in the political arsenal of Kamehameha the Great. The wood from which Kamehameha's poison came was Kalai-pahoa, a collective name for three carved images of wood, and for the gods which inhabited them.

All the poison wood came from an ancient sacred grove of trees on Moloka'i.

Long before 1650 A.D., the three carved poison images were in the custody of the family of chiefs who ruled Moloka'i. Maui chiefs took them as spoils of war.

Kamehameha took them from the Maui chiefs by 1795.

Each Kalai-pahoa image was several feet high. It was a human figure with arms extended, a head of thick, black human hair, with a distended mouth adorned with shark's teeth.

(Honolulu's Bishop Museum has one.)

Widely known and feared throughout the Islands was the method Kamehameha could use his Kalai-pahoa to kill an enemy. It was said that scrapings of wood dust or small chips from one of the images would be dispatched secretly by Kamehameha to a friend on the staff of his enemy.

Kamehameha's friends then

priests anointed each god-image with masticated coconut meat, bathed each image in coconut water, and wrapped each in soft, white tapa cloth.

Kamehameha's offerings were kawa, roast pig and red fishes.

AT EACH DAILY VISIT, the king sat facing outward — where he could be seen — on the threshold of each god-house. He could be heard as he joined the priests inside as they prayed.

Prayers were for the dedication of the food and offerings to the gods, for the life of the king, the chiefs and for the Hawaiian people in general.

(It is said that as part of the

unseen ceremony inside, one of the priests drank kawa poisoned by wood scrapings from the god. He was revived by the only known remedy, a Kamehameha monopoly, the whitebark of the Ma'i-ola, a tree inhabited by the god of healing.)

When the prayers were over, it was Kamehameha as ruling chief and highest priest, who pronounced the prayers to be good and accepted by the poison god.

Kamehameha then ate a banana the priests had baked in the sacred fire inside the god house.

This constant display of attention to the poison gods of ancient Hawai'i made poison a political power for Kamehameha.

# Tales of Old Hawai'i



By Russ Apple

spiked the enemy's poi, water, kawa or smoking tobacco.

It was said the poison wood dust and chips were tasteless, undetectable, and that death was usually so quick and unexpected that the victim didn't have time to tell his friends how and where to hide his body.

AN ENEMY of Kamehameha did not openly identify himself as such when he faced unheralded and abrupt death by the king's poison gods. Many chiefs and whitemen of the period were kept in line by the reputation of the Kalai-pahoa.

Call it wise political psychology or call it rule by superstitious fear, it worked.

Kamehameha paid constant attention to the Kalai-pahoa to keep them in the public eye.

In three thatched houses, one for each poison god, the king visited and made offerings to the

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*A potent political  
and propaganda weap-  
on.*

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gods twice each day. Two of the gods — Kane-i-kaulana'ula and Kahuila-o-ka-lani — were male, and inhabited two of the images. The goddess who lived in the third image was Kapo.

Priestess Ka'akau and priests Ma'olo, Moehuhu, Kane'alaekane and Keli'i-ku-ka-haoa cared for the poison gods from 1812 through 1819 in their god-houses at Kailua-Kona on the Big Island.

The three houses of the poison gods occupied prominent positions in Kamehameha's housing compound.

Before each of Kamehameha's two daily visits to each house, the