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Burial of the Last Prince of Kauai

From the Hawaii Historical Society Report

By W. D. Alexander

The funeral rites of Kealiiahonui, in 1849, are a striking example of the survival of pagan superstitions long after the introduction of Christianity into these Islands.

This Kealiiahonui was the son of Kaunualii, the last king of Kauai, and of Kapuaamohu, a Kauai princess of the highest rank. He was, therefore, of the bluest blood in the realm. In addition to this he was considered to be the handsomest chief in the Islands, and was proficient in all athletic exercises. He was six feet six inches in height and finely proportioned; a model for a sculptor.

In 1821 he was married to the Queen Regent, Kaahumanu, whose matrimonial chains were said by Stewart "not to have been altogether silken." After her death, in 1832, he married Kekauonohi, a granddaughter of Kamehameha I through his son Kahoanoku-Kinaiu. Her mother was Wahinepio, a sister of Kalamimoku.

It is only too evident that Kealiiahonui was kept in the background by the jealousy of the Hawaii chiefs. After Governor Kaikioewa's death, however, in 1840, his wife, Kekauonohi, was for some years Governess of Kauai. The late Levi Haalelea was latterly employed as their private secretary and land agent.

Kealiiahonui died at Honolulu, June 23, 1849, in what is known as the Haalelea House. Haalelea soon afterwards married his widow, who died two years later. There was a famous lawsuit over the genuineness of an alleged will of Kealiiahonui (leaving all his lands to his widow), which has twice been renewed since.

From the *Polynesian* newspaper of the time we learn that he was born August 17, 1800, and that his public funeral took place in Honolulu, June 30, 1849. A niece of his, Kapule by name, who was still living at a very advanced age when this was written, faithfully attended him during his last sickness and death. She was cited as a witness in the lawsuit over his will. Her mother was the daughter of King Kaunualii by Naluahi, a woman of low rank, and her father was an American sailor, "Ako," who is supposed to have been lost at sea. She and her husband were *kahus* of Kealiiahonui, and had a recognized right to be consulted in the disposition of his remains.

It seems that by Kekauonohi's orders the coffin containing her late husband's remains was removed to Puuloa, Ewa, with the view of having it afterwards taken out to sea and there sunk. It was temporarily deposited in a cavern in the coral limestone back of Puuloa, which has long been used for a burial place, and has lately been closed up.

Kapule strongly objected to the plan of sinking the coffin in the sea, and delayed its execution for a considerable time. At last certain chiefs from Honolulu paid her a visit and succeeded in overcoming her opposition. During the following night she and her husband, with one or two assistants, removed the outer coffin, which they afterwards buried somewhere near Puuloa.

In order to test the truth of her story, at the instance of her lawyer, about 1892, the spot was found by her direction, and part of the coffin was dug up, with the brass plate on it in good preservation. There is a peculiar superstition among the native Hawaiians in regard to the disposal of the outer coffin in such cases, of which we have had illustrations in recent times. In their opinion, if such a coffin is left unburied it bodes death to some near relative of the

deceased. During the same night they took out the sacred bones, the *unihipili* which they *hunakele*'d, or concealed, according to the ancient custom. I am informed that they were sunk in the sea.

Kapule took an earring and a finger ring from the body, which she preserved for a long time as relics of her master.

A day or two after this the coffin was taken on a canoe out to the deep sea outside of Pearl Harbor, to a spot five miles out, known to fishermen as *kamole ia*, to be sunk, by six brothers from Kauai who were *kahus*, or retainers, of the dead chief. A son of one of them, Simona, a well-known fisherman, who died a few years ago at Puuloa, gave this account to the late James I. Dowsett.

Two men had been selected as victims, *moe puu*, to be put to death on the occasion, that they might accompany their chief into the other world. But when the time came only one of them, Kanepio by name, could be found; the other, Opiopio, having absconded. He was taken out to sea in the canoe, but when the time came for despatching him, one of the brothers, Kauhini, made a strong plea for his life. He said that the order of their chief was that two should die, but not that either should die without the other. "Either both or neither," he said. He pressed this argument so strongly that he carried his point, and the coffin, with the remains of the last prince of Kauai, was committed to the deep without any attendant to bear him company.

My informant relates that the coffin floated at first, on which a superstitious boatman said it was because they had not made the human sacrifice commanded by the chief. Then Kauhini, raising his paddle, smashed the glass case over the face of the corpse, upon which the coffin filled and sank to the bottom of the sea.

The method of burial was closely connected with the belief in *aumakuas*, or ancestral deities. In this case the *aumakuas* of Kealiahonui's family may have been shark gods or other marine deities, and the object of sinking his body in the sea was probably to introduce him into the society of these powerful spirits, where he might exert his influence to befriend members of the family in times of danger upon the sea.

In the same way the bones of other chiefs have been thrown into the fiery lake of Halemaumau, that they might join the company of Pele and her numerous family of volcanic deities.