Kapu Then & Now

Key Science Ideas:

CONSERVATION
(say: con-ser-VAY-shun)
management of natural resources

Kapu comes from the word tabu (also spelled taboo).
It means “forbidden” & “sacred” & if broken always resulted in punishment!

Protocol is a word that means “formality & etiquette.”
Hawaiians asked blessings or permission of their gods, chiefs & even their teachers before they did things. They asked to learn, to use the resources of the land, or to be safe as a way to show respect.

In the Forests Live the Gods
The ancient Hawaiians saw gods everywhere in nature & worshipped many natural deities. The upland forest was wao akua, the realm of the gods, and the trees were the physical bodies for these spirits. Entry into the forest was limited to few people who acted according to strict rules, called protocol. They had to make an offering, state who they were & why they were there. If the purpose was to collect trees, only a single tree or species could be taken at one time. The upland forest was sacred to Kū, the god of war, government & leadership. The ʻōhiʻa lehua tree was the body of Kū, so taking a large one was thought to be sacred and required a human sacrifice. There were kapu, protocol, & punishments for almost all the resources of the ʻāina.

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Kū & Lono

Kū owned the land for 8 months of the year, when people worked hard, battles were fought & humans were sacrificed to terrify enemies & bring power, or mana, to the ali'i.

Lono owned the 'āina during the 4 winter months called Makahiki - a time of peace when labor & war were kapu.

These beliefs balanced life for Hawaiians then.

Kapu & Punishment

The strictest kapu were those protecting the highest chief or chief. Common people had to lie face down in his or her presence if he or she came near, & their shadows could not fall on a chief's belongings. To break this kind of kapu could mean death by strangulation, drowning or burning. Other kapu controlled the use of the land in gathering & harvesting food. Also, it was kapu to fish at certain places or certain times. The punishment for breaking this kapu could be loss of land or property, such as pigs. While the punishments were severe, they helped the chiefs & priests keep society stable & often the rules helped to conserve food resources & preserve the 'āina.

Photo from Ruling Chiefs of Hawai'i by S.M.Kamakau. Original courtesy Honolulu Academy of Arts. Lithograph from drawing by Paul Emmert, 1854.

Resource Management Then & Now

In 1854 King Kamehameha died & all kapu ended. Many commoners were glad they could finally own land & it was no longer forbidden to take fish, trees, or birds whenever they liked. However, most land was bought by people new to Hawaii & they used the land in ways that changed it forever. So much forest was destroyed by cattle or by logging that the water source of some 'ahupua'a, such as Nu'uanu, were threatened. New forests were planted to fix the problem, but these were not native trees, so many native plants & animals died out. Today, Hawaiian people are looking back to the concept of sharing 'ahupua'a resources like water as community people help cities & towns plan for a sustainable future.

View of Honolulu. From the Harper, No. 1, (detail), lithograph published and after drawings by Paul Emmert. Honolulu waterfront in with Nu'uanu and Pa'auia valleys in the background.

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Foreign Desires: Pehea Lā E Pono Ai? By L. Kameʻeleihiwa, p. 44-45; Family, Religion & Society Readings (Module
VI) by J. Puzon & E. Tamura, J. Friedson, ed.