

Western Wear

The origin of the name for kapa (bark-cloth) is simply ka = the, and pa = beaten, or the beaten thing.

It was made with akia, wauke, palaholo, mamaki - these plants grow in the forests on hills, in valleys, on side hills, on ridges, and in green meadows; also on the banks of taro patches.

They can be found growing on the eight inhabited islands and had grown there plentifully; but on some of those islands they grow more abundantly, and cover a large area of land, and on some they are scarce. (Brigham)

In Hawai'i, wauke made the softest, finest, and most durable bark cloth, for dress, bed sheets, and for ceremonial purposes. The inner bark of other trees and ferns named above, and including ulu (breadfruit) and mamane, was used for making coarser cloth for other uses - or if wauke could not be obtained. (Handy)

For the process of beating the kapa these things are prepared: The block on which to do the beating; this block is made broad and flat on top and the two ends are made thus: the top one is lengthened and the under one is shortened. Water is used through the beating process to keep the wauke continually wet. (Fornander)

The strips were laid edge to edge, and felted together by beating with wooden beaters of different sizes, square in cross section, having carved geometric designs on their four faces to give watermarking. Many successive beatings with lighter and lighter clubs were required to make the finest cloth. (Handy)

The first i'e (club – tapa beater) (a coarse-figured club) is used for hard pounding. After that is the i'ekike, the dividing club, a smaller-figured club; then comes the printing club and the finishing club. The kapa is then cut. It is next taken to soak in water.

It is then spread to dry at a place prepared for drying it, that is the drying ground; there it is spread out and pressed down with rocks placed here and there so that the pā'ū would not wrinkle. This is continued until the pā'ū is dry. And this is done until there are five kapa; they are then sewn together. That is called a set of kapa. (Fornander)

Decoration of Hawaiian kapa, in addition to the watermarking, consisted of dyeing, felting on strips of colored tapa by beating, and stamping with small bamboo printing blocks ('ohe kapala). (Handy)

Its earliest and most important use is for clothing; malo: a strip of cloth nine inches wide and nine feet long for the man, and pa'u for the woman: a strip a little wider and somewhat longer.

In pre-contact Hawai'i, men wore a 'maro' (malo,) "pieces of cloth tied about the loins, and hanging a considerable way down. The only difference in (women's) dress, the pā'ū, was their having a piece of cloth about the body, reaching from near the middle to half-way down the thighs, instead of the maro worn by the other sex." (Cook's Journal) The pā'ū was wrapped several times around the waist and extended from beneath the woman's bust (for royalty) or the waistline (for commoners) to the knee (it looked kind of like a hula skirt.)

Following ‘Contact,’ Western Wear Caught On

At daybreak, on November 24, 1816, the ship Rurick faced the coast of Hawai‘i. Captain von Kotzebue had previously been advised of a strong anti-Russian feeling ‘in the air’, as a result of the awkwardly aggressive maneuvers of the Russian (Georg Anton Schäffer) against Kamehameha’s political primacy. (Charlot)

In 1815, Schäffer had been sent to Hawai‘i to retrieve cargo and the sailors’ possessions of the Russian ship ‘Bering’ that were confiscated by Kaua‘i’s ruler, Kaumuali‘i. Schäffer arrived in Honolulu and Kamehameha granted him permission to build a storehouse near Honolulu Harbor; instead, they built a fort.

“(Q)uarrels ensued between the Russians and the natives, in which the latter (by the account of the narrator,) appeared in a very advantageous position ...”

“... the ships, on leaving the Sandwich Islands, threatened to return soon with a strong reinforcement, mentioning particularly a man-of-war, that would likewise oppose the inhabitants.” (Voyage of Discovery, Otto von Kotzebue)

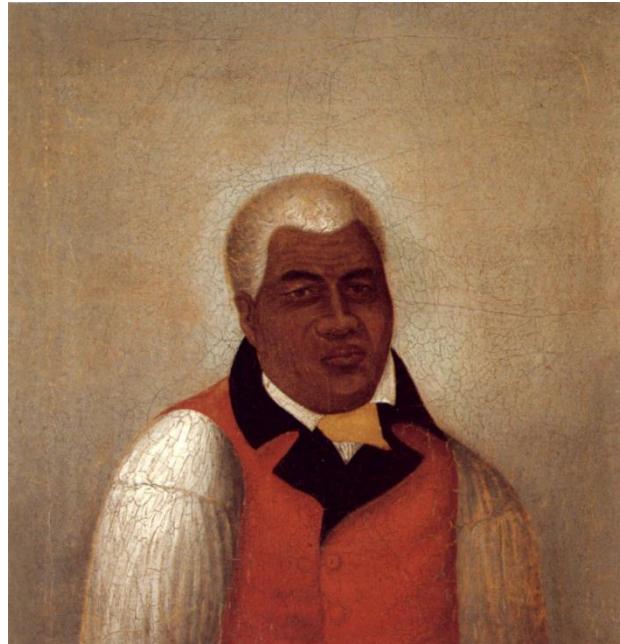
“On the shore, countess people were under arms. The old king, in front of whose house we landed, was sitting upon a raised terrace, surrounded by his wives, and dressed in his native costume, the red malo and the black tapa, the wide beautiful folded cape Tammeamea (Kamehameha) received us frigidly.” (De Chamisso; Charlot)

Louis Choris, the official artist on the Rurick, “asked Tammeamea permission to do his portrait; this project seemed to please him very much, but he asked me to leave him alone an instant, so he could dress.”

“Imagine my surprise on seeing this monarch display himself in the costume of a sailor; he wore blue trousers, a red waistcoat, a clean white shirt and a necktie of yellow silk. I begged him to change his dress; he refused absolutely and insisted on being painted as he was.” (Charlot)

From Hawaii, the Rurick went to Oahu for provisioning and repairs, anchoring at Honolulu. An event of its stay was the visit aboard of Kamehameha’s vice-regent for the island, Kalanimoku, and his retinue. (Charlot) “They immediately recognized Tammeamea’s portrait, and when it became known that we had Tammeamea on paper, we daily received a crowd of visitors who wished to see him.” (Otto von Kotzebue)

Kamehameha obviously preferred western dress, whereas Choris wished to present him in the traditional kapa attire; however, knowing that the western world would be the audience for the artist’s depiction, Kamehameha presented himself as a civilized ruler in western wear. (Mission Houses)



Chiefs in Western Wear - Chiefesses Also Wanted Western Women's Wear

On October 23, 1819, the Pioneer Company of missionaries left Boston for the Hawaiian Islands. After approximately 160-days at sea, they sighted the Island of Hawai'i on March 30, 1820 and made their way to Kawaihae that day,

"On the 31st of March, a considerable number of the natives came off to our vessel, from the shores of Kohala, to dispose of their little articles of barter, and to look at the strangers. Their maneuvers in their canoes, some being propelled by short paddles, and some by small sails, attracted the attention of our little group, and for a moment, gratified curiosity ..."

"On the 1st of April, as we were abreast of Kawaihae, Kalanimōku and his wives, and Kalākua (subsequently Hoapiliwahine) and her sister Nāmāhāna (sometimes Opi'ia), two of the widows of the late king, came oft to us with their loquacious attendants, in their double canoe. It was propelled with spirit, by eighteen or twenty athletic men."

"Having over their heads a huge Chinese umbrella, and the nodding kahilis or plumed rods of the nobility, they made a novel and imposing appearance as they drew near our becalmed Mission Barque, while we fixed on them, and their movements, our scrutinizing gaze."



"As they were welcomed on board, the felicitous native compliment, aloha (good-will, peace, affection), with shaking hands, passed between them, and each member of the mission family, Captain Blanchard and others."

"Their tall, portly, ponderous appearance seemed to indicate a different race from those who had visited the vessel before, or a decided superiority of the nobility over the peasantry."

"Kalanimōku was distinguished from almost the whole nation, by being decently clad. His dress, put on for the occasion, consisted of a white dimity roundabout, a black silk vest, yellow Nankeen pants, shoes, and white cotton hose, plaid cravat, and fur hat. ... Kalanimōku was much attracted by the kamali'i keokeo (white children), and all were struck with the first appearance of Civilized women."

"Happy in so early and pleasant an introduction to personages of so much influence, we were assiduous in our efforts to impress them favorably, making them acquainted with our business, and our wish to reside in the country. But, notwithstanding our solicitude to obtain Kalanimōku's assent at once, he referred us to the king."

"Near sunset, our distinguished guests took leave and returned to the shore on their state vehicle-their double canoe, seated on a light narrow scaffolding which rested on the semi-elliptical timbers by which two large parallel canoes, each neatly carved from a tree, are yoked together, five or six feet apart."

The next day, "Kalākua, a widow of Kamehameha, having little sympathy with the Evangelical prophet, and shrewdly aiming to see what the white women could do for her temporal benefit, asked them to make a gown for her in fashion like their own." (Hiram Bingham)

"Kalākua brought a web of white cambric to have a dress made for herself in the fashion of our ladies, and was very particular in her wish to have it finished while sailing along the western side of the island, before reaching the king."

"Monday morning April 3d (1820,) the first sewing circle was formed that the sun ever looked down upon in the Hawaiian realm. Kalākua was directress. She requested all the seven white ladies to take seats with them on mats, on the deck of the Thaddeus."



"The dress was made in the fashion of 1819. The length of the skirt accorded with Brigham Young's rule to his Mormon damsels, - have it come down to the tops of the shoes. But in the queen's case, where the shoes were wanting, the bare feet cropped out very prominently." (Lucy Thurston)

Long Necks

"White men had lived and moved among them for a score of years. In our company were the first white women that ever stepped on these shores." (Lucy Thurston)



"White women were, as might have been expected, objects of great curiosity to the chattering natives, who thronged around them, as they walked along, to gaze at their costume ..."

"... their white hands and faces, running before them and peering under their projecting bonnets, laughing, shouting, trotting around with bare feet, heads and limbs, men, women and children, and singing out occasionally, 'A-i-oe-oe' a phrase signifying long, protruding neck."

"This term they doubtless applied from the appearance occasioned by the large, projecting fore-parts of the bonnets, in the fashion of 1819, so widely different from that of Hawaiian females, whose heads were usually bare, but occasionally ornamented with a simple chaplet of natural flowers, or small feathers." (Hiram Bingham)

"It was thus the natives described the ladies: 'They are white and have hats with a spout. Their faces are round and far in. Their necks are long. They look well.' They were called 'Long Necks.' The company of long necks included the whole fraternity." (Lucy Thurston)

Holokū and Mu'umu'u

After contact (and particularly in the early-1800s with the start of the sandalwood trade in 1810 and then the whaling industry,) fabrics made of silk, satin and gingham began to replace the kapa fabric for the pa'u. This was especially true among the Ali'i.

An even more important change in dress began in the 1820s with the coming of the New England missionaries, who sought to cover the bodies of Hawaiian women, who traditionally wore nothing more than the skirt.

The missionary wives modified their New England-style dresses to adapt to the hot, humid environment. They replaced the high waistline of Western fashion with a yoke. The end result was a basic design (referred to as a "Mother Hubbard") which was simply a full, straight skirt attached to a yoke with a high neck and tight sleeves.

The diaries of missionary women report that Hawaiian women who had been Christianized adopted the holokū as daily dress by 1822 and it became standard dress of all Hawaiian women as early as 1838.

"All the women wore the native dress, the sack or holokū, many of which were black, blue, green, or bright rose color, some were bright yellow, a few were pure white, and others were a mixture of orange and scarlet." (Isabella Bird 1894)

"At first the holokū, which is only a full, yoke nightgown, is not attractive, but I admire it heartily now, and the sagacity of those who devised it. It conceals awkwardness, and befits grace of movement; it is fit for the climate, is equally adapted for walking and riding, and has that general appropriateness which is desirable in costume." (Isabella Bird, 1894)

The holokū was worn with a loose-fitting undergarment, the mu'umu'u (meaning cut-off, shortened.) Eventually, the mu'umu'u came to be worn as an outer garment, as well. The mu'umu'u in the early days was a dress for home wear. It was made full and unfitted with high or low neck and long or short sleeves

It is the more comfortable mu'umu'u that has challenged the present day designers to create many variations for home, street and party wear. Although it originated in Hawaii in the 1820s as a loose gown without a waistline or train and was worn for everyday wear, the holokū today is a long formal gown with a train.

For formal events, and other celebrations related to Hawaiian culture and ethnicity, the holokū is the quintessential Hawaiian gown. While both holokū and mu'umu'u continue to be very important in Hawaii, it is the mu'umu'u that is regarded by most of the world as Hawaiian dress and the holokū that is practically unknown outside of Hawai'i.

