Limu Traditions

by Lurline Wailana McGregor

“When I was growing up, if you went to a lūʻau, you would know who prepared the food and what area it came from by just knowing the taste of the limu and the kinds of limu that were utilized. Basically, you could tell where the families came from by the raw stuff they made,” says Malia Akutagawa, who was raised on the east end of Molokaʻi. Now 48 years old and an assistant professor of law and Hawaiian Studies with both the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa’s William S. Richardson School of Law and the Kamakakūokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies in the Hawaiʻinuiākea School of Hawaiian Knowledge, Malia Akutagawa was taught by her grandmother from a young age how to pick limu. She says her grandmother, Katharine Kalua Hagemann Akutagawa, or Grandma Kitty, was known as one of the best limu pickers on the island. Grandma Kitty learned from Tūtū Hapa Kalua, who was cousin to Malia’s great grandmother, Haʻaheo.

Just as the generational transmission of fishing traditions has tended to remain in

the domain of the men, it was the women who were the limu pickers and who passed down the knowledge to the women in their family, even until today. From the time of the earliest settlements, laws and regulations known as the Kapu system dictated every aspect of life in Hawaiʻi, from the proper time to fish, plant, or harvest, to appropriate behavior towards chiefs. Kapu is most often translated as forbidden or prohibited, as in 'keep out'. Yet it also means sacred, or consecrated; thus a place, an object, a person, or a way of doing things is likely to be kapu if it is sacred and must be protected. There were prescribed punishments for breaking a kapu, sometimes as severe as death, which assured that people respected and abided by them.

The Hawaiians were very much attuned to their environment, and the Kapu system helped to protect ecosystems, assuring a sustainable food supply that would provide for future generations. Land and ocean resources were held in trust by the aliʻi, or chiefs. Harvest rights were overseen by a konohiki, who was an expert resource manager and steward of the ahupuaʻa, which was the land division that extended from the mountains to the sea, including watersheds and all nearshore marine resources that lived in the intertidal zone. The konohiki had the knowledge of the life cycles of the fish, limu, crab, and other invertebrates in the ocean that were near shore in the ahupuaʻa. Konohiki, in turn, were advised by kūpuna, or elders, known for their particular expertise in specific areas, and konohiki could place a kapu on whatever resource needed protection, whether that resource was dwindling or it was simply the wrong time of year to be harvesting.

There were many kapu that dictated which foods women were allowed to eat. Foods that were embodiments of the gods or that were used for sacrificial offerings, for example pork, bananas, coconuts, and many deep sea creatures such as ulua and sea turtle, were strictly forbidden. However, women could gather and prepare certain foods that they were not allowed to eat, and could eat varieties of kapu foods, like certain types of bananas. There were times during the

year and certain occasions that the kapu were relaxed, but otherwise the lines were clearly drawn, and women had their own realm of foods that they gathered, prepared, and ate.

Limu played a vital role in the Hawaiian diet, and it was entirely within the purview of the womens' role not only to gather and prepare, but to provide for its consumption and use by the entire community. It is not surprising, then, that women became the foremost limu experts. Limu was as integral to a meal as fish and poi, and although it was considered a condiment that was eaten primarily to spice up other foods, the minerals and nutrients that it provided were essential to a healthy diet. While the word limu encompasses marine and freshwater algae, mosses, liverworts, lichens, and even some corals, there were specific names for each limu. Different limu were used for different purposes, including consumption, medicine, and ceremonies. Limu that didn't serve any purpose were often not given a name, and were simply referred to as ʻopala limu, or rubbish limu.

The Kapu system formally ended in 1819 with the ʻai noa, when Kamehameha II not only sat down to a meal with women, which was kapu, but the women ate foods that were kapu for them to consume. But despite the end of the system two hundred years ago, women continued to pass down the knowledge of limu to the next generation of women to become limu gatherers and preparers.

Isabella Aiona Abbott, born in Hana, Maui in 1919, one hundred years after the ʻai noa, learned about every edible limu around her grandmother's house in Lahaina from her mother. This knowledge inspired her to become an expert in ethnobotany, documenting the gathering, preparation, and uses of edible seaweeds. Dr. Abbott's work included the documentation of countless edible varieties of limu, and inspired new interest and even new respect for the sophistication of Native Hawaiians who had always had this knowledge. She toured the islands and recorded which kinds of limu were most common and

abundant in which areas. Kauaʻi, for example, was especially well known for its limu kohu. She also learned from her research that Hawaiians consumed more different kinds of limu than any other Polynesian or Pacific Islander communities. She hypothesized that this may have been a result of the kapu that dictated what women could eat, and not eat, which inspired them to investigate other nutritional alternatives, both plant and animal. “I can think of no other case in which, for religious reasons, a generally neglected food source came to figure so greatly in a year-round diet,” writes Dr. Abbott in Laʻau Hawaiʻi: Traditional Hawaiian Uses of Plants.

Dr. Abbott only found two limu species that were kapu to both men and women: limu pakaiea was not eaten by anyone who had shark ʻaumakua in their families because this limu served as a blanket for young sharks; and limu lipeʻepeʻe would not be consumed by hula dancers. Limu lipeʻepeʻe grows in underwater cavities where it is hidden, and the intangible secrets of the hula would become hidden from anyone who consumed it.

Dr. Abbott also documented other uses of limu in addition to consumption. ʻAʻalaʻula is a limu that was paired with ʻalaʻalawainui, a forest plant, for opening and closing medicinal treatments. Limu kala was essential, but used in different ways, in several ceremonies. For example, kala means to forgive, so in hoʻoponopono, a ceremony to heal family dissention, participants would be given a piece of limu kala, followed by prayers to make the family whole again. Upon forgiveness, each person would eat their limu. Limu kala was also used for cleansing: a kahu, or priest, would purify a person, object, or place by sprinkling a mixture of ʻolena (turmeric) and salt water with the limu. This ritual was commonly used following the burial of a relative, when someone who had been with the body prior to burial had to be cleansed. It was also used for fishermen before they set out at the beginning of the season in July to fish for ʻopelu.

When the Kapu system ended, so did the authority of konohiki to manage the

lands and impose restrictions when resources were being overused. The expansion of westernization often resulted in overharvesting of local resources to fabricate products to trade for foreign goods. This contributed to the breakdown of the ahupuaʻa, and in 1839, Kamehameha III codified fishing rights and management of the marine environment inside the reef to konohiki and the tenants of the ahupuaʻa. The konohiki became more of a landlord than a resource expert, who might be more influenced by political and social forces than the need to protect resources.

Notwithstanding the passing of time, political, and social change, Hawaiians never lost their preference for traditional foods and gathering practices, and the knowledge continued to be passed down through the generations. There are many accounts that document how limu continued to be a favored food during the first part of the twentieth century. Queen Liliʻuokalani's fondness for limu huluhuluwaena was well known, and in 1906, several years after the annexation of Hawaiʻi to the United States, Liliʻuokalani had a restriction notice posted in the Kuokoa Nupepa:

> The news is being made known to all who go sea bathing or fishing in the waters of Hamohamo in Waikīkī Kai, Honolulu, Oʻahu, that Queen Liliʻuokalani is placing a restriction that no one is to go and take the Limu Pakaʻeleawaʻa and the Limu Huluhuluwaena, the ʻOpihi, the Ālealea shells, ʻIna urchins, Hāʻueʻue pencil urchins or the Pipipi shells in the area directly in front of the Royal Grounds. Her own royal hands planted and cultivated all of these things noted above, and anyone who goes to get these things which are now being restricted will be arrested and punished by law. All of these things that were planted by the Queen were brought here from Hilo, with some from Lahaina, some from Molokaʻi, some from Kauaʻi, and others from Waialua, here on Oʻahu.
> Heed this restriction. J. O. Carter Agent
> Honolulu, T.H. March 1, 1906

Waikīkī was famous for its limu, and oral histories of Waikīkī residents during the early part of the twentieth century, recorded by the Center for Oral History at the University of Hawaiʻi in the latter part of the century, document the abundance of limu. Wilbur Craw, born in 1914, recalls picking limu at Waikīkī when he was growing up:

“When we first moved out there [to Diamond Head], Waikīkī was loaded with limu līpoa. Oh, just loaded! That young limu would come up and there was a sort of golden brown, you could see it on the rocks. That līpoa, new līpoa, tender. We’d go out and we’d be always careful to pinch it off or you took a cheap pair of scissors and cut so you don’t disturb the roots. We used to put it into flour sacks and take it out to Lunalilo Home, that’s where the old Hawaiians were. Yeah, my mother used to take it out there and she used to give it to the people out there. Oh, they’d go crazy over it. Soon, everybody along the coastline or the hotels put in swimming tanks. To keep the algae from growing, they put chlorine in it. Then to save pumping it into the sewer, they drain it into the water. So as a result, the limu beds that used to be plentiful around Diamond Head, [were] all wiped out.”

Despite dwindling limu resources in the more populated areas, kūpuna were still passing down their traditions well into the 1970s, especially in the rural areas, where Malia Akutagawa was growing up:

“The way my grandmother would teach me to pick limu is we would always look at the moon calendar and track the tide and we would go out at low tide. We would go to the beach in front of her house at Ulapuʻe. A stream came out, and the limu would attach to these little kukui nuts. We would see a pile of kukui nuts along the intertidal zone and we would just pluck the limu eleʻele from there, pinch an inch from the root. She would make me gather my own and she would gather her own and she would test me. You would have to clean it in the water, then do the fine tune cleaning at home in fresh water. She was really meticulous about it. The good eleʻele is like fine baby hair, it’s really about touch, you have to

pluck out all the bumps. You know, Hawaiian style, they want you to become masterful at it, you don’t want someone to bite a piece of sand. If you cleaned it kapulu (carelessly), you would be ridiculed and scolded by your elders, so my way of cleaning is very meticulous, the way my grandmother’s was. We would rinse it two or three times, not too much because you still wanted the ocean taste. Then we would make them into little balls, squeeze the excess water out, put it in a bowl, then my grandmother would put Hawaiian salt on it and cover it. The limu would absorb the salt, and it would taste better over the next few days. She would store some in the freezer and put some in a jar in the ice box and practically every dinner, we would have stew or fish and poi and you’d always have limu with it. There are times when I have a powerful craving for limu ele‘ele the same way I enjoyed it as a daily snack stored in Grandma’s icebox.”

Before refrigeration, prepared limu would be kept in small calabashes covered with ti leaves. Only limu kohu or limu līpoa, which was stored in a pū‘olu, or ti leaf packet, would keep longer, sometimes for months. Dr. Abbott observed that “it was a rare Hawaiian household that did not have some kind of limu at all times.”

Dr. Abbott wrote that during the first half of the twentieth century, it was common to see small groups of Hawaiian women in mu‘umu‘u and hats cleaning limu on sandy beaches during low tide. This was a familiar sight in places like the shoreline from Kahala to Waikīkī and in Ewa, on O‘ahu, and along Hilo Bay on Hawai‘i Island. During her lifetime this sight began disappearing, and the amount of edible limu has continued to diminish during Akutagawa’s lifetime. In rural East Moloka‘i, where Hawaiian traditions and practices remained stronger than other places, there have been changes.

“We couldn’t go beyond the edge of the ahupua‘a, my grandmother always told us to stay in our own territory,” Akutagawa said. There were zones for where you could do things. You would not surf where people would be spearfishing along the reef or where the kupuna would be gathering limu. That’s your ice box. I’ve

seen an erosion of cultural practices and a total lack of understanding of these unspoken rules.

“We’re losing our access to the limu and all the delicacies that our kūpuna knew. The limu ele‘ele has started to disappear from changes in the weather patterns from when my grandmother was little. There’s drought, torrential rains, introduced limu coming in on the bottom of ships to Maui that break free, all those things affect the limu. The generation under twenty-five years old probably no longer has the knowledge; over thirty, they still know.”

Dr. Abbott closes La‘au Hawai‘i: Traditional Hawaiian Uses of Plants, written almost three decades ago, with this food for thought:
“…Considerable knowledge of limu can still be found among Hawaiian elders, so this, too, qualifies as an area of cultural continuity. Unfortunately, degradation of the reefs and the case of purchasing limu instead of gathering it threatens the transmission of this living body of knowledge to subsequent generations. I hope that every Hawaiian who has a parent or a grandparent to instruct them in this skill will make it a high, personal priority to learn it. Otherwise, we will be reduced to re-educating ourselves from scholarly literature – the equivalent of reinventing the wheel.”

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