

Traditional Hawaiian Bowls ~ Pat Kramer

Any discussion of what is traditional is likely to evoke a few opinions, no matter what culture is the subject of discussion. The Hawaiian culture has deep roots in bowl making and much of what we know of the methods used to make them is still surrounded by a bit of mystery.

One of the things to keep in mind is that we are talking about an interrupted culture. Another is that bowls were not simply utilitarian but maintained some religious and spiritual stature.

The wood used was under protection and you really needed to have permission or be commissioned to do this type of work or risk some unhealthy consequences. Wood was taken from trees that were felled only after properly transporting the spirits within the tree to a new home.

We have many fine examples of the bowl maker's art and there is a considerable amount that we don't know about that art. What is somewhat of a mystery to me is why would the wooden bowls be so important to this culture. It would appear that the crafting of wooden bowls far exceeded the functional requirements needed to serve their purpose.

If we look at what other peoples were doing during the same period, one thing is clear: throughout the Pacific no one else went through so much trouble to take a seemingly functional item and elevate it to such high standards with meticulous attention to detail.

Shape, color, grain and finish were a pretty big deal in the Hawaiian culture, and making a bowl took a long time and was very labor intensive. Probably no one today would burn out the center of log and hack out the rest with a sharp rock, even for the sake of authenticity. Nor would they go through the endless stages of seasoning to remove offensive tastes and odors, then rubbing with different abrasive rocks, coral, shark skin, charcoal and ulu and bamboo leaves to get to the final polish of the bowl.

Since we are talking about an interrupted culture, no one can say what those bowl makers descendants would be doing today. The chances are that bowls would be even more refined, given that we have better tools and methods. These ancient bowl makers did exquisite work. I think that the point is that traditional shapes are not clunky, or unrefined.

We are woodturners and have our own sensibilities toward wood and how we do our craft. I think that what is important about doing a traditional style of Hawaiian bowl is to have a sense of respect for the lineage from which it came and to put your own mana (spirit) into the work. It is not about authenticity. We are not part of the culture that established these traditional styles, but we can share an appreciation of wood and shape. I think that we can do work that respects the roots from which it came, and my opinion is that carrying on the spirit of this tradition is a good thing.

When I am doing a traditional style bowl, it is simply my attempt to do a piece that has respect for the beauty of the wood and an appreciation of the elegant shapes of these traditional styles.

Types of bowls

Classifications of bowls is based on basic use and size as well as on shape.

While not strictly referring to size and shape, examples of basic types of vessels would be as follows:

Ipu Kai would probably be a gourd used as a food container and most likely for an individual.

Umeke or Umeke Kai would be an general reference to all containers gourd or wood, although it is generally accepted these days to be thought of presently as a wooden vessel.

Umeke laau would be literally be a wooden gourd or what we think of a calabash.

Vessels that are classified more by their size and not necessarily by their function:

Kumauna are bowls that are extra large, and not considered to be very portable.

Pakaka are large and flat and usually were used in food preparation.

Kepakepa are similar to kumauna and used in much of same ways. It differs in the shape of the rim. If it is low in height then it would be considered to be a Pakaka.

Palewa are of medium size. These were usually used for serving food for a family rather than an individual.

Most of us are inclined to refer to bowls by thinking of their basic shapes. I am using the term style and shape interchangeably in this context.

There are a lot of names for Hawaiian bowls. Most of us in Hawai'i don't know many of them and the rest of us disagree on what is the proper name. I am going to talk about 5 basic bowl styles that I am comfortable with.

They are as follows:



Pu`ahala

A tall deep bowl. Taller than it is wide. Some times with a lid but not always. The shape of the cluster on the Hala tree gives this vessel it's name.



Ku`oho

A shorter bowl. Still pretty tall but not taller than it is wide. This is a smaller version of what most people would call a calabash, or kumauna. The Ku`oho is probably one of the most commonly seen vessels and as such the name is not specific to a shape. The name is not as commonly used as it probably should be as it tends to refer generally to a wide range of vessels.



Mana`ae

A small personal bowl, sometimes thought to be the same as a pua niki (small bowl) or poi bowl. This particular bowl however is often given to young children as part of their birthright. The story goes that traditionally a tree was selected specifically for that child. A part of that tree would be used to make the Mana`ae, and another tree would be planted for the next generation. A Mana`ae is given for the first meal of hard food. It is to be used only by the person it was given to, else it is thought to have been spoiled if used by anyone else.

Pua niki would be a small bowl similar to what would be a poi bowl for an individual.



Kumauna

This is the big version (family size) of what people call a calabash. Kumauna are classified by both their size and general shape.



Palewa

One of the types of shallow bowls used for serving and preparing food. These are medium size bowls, usually fairly large in diameter and low in height.

To most people these are all calabashes, a name originally taken from the type of gourd that was commonly used to make vessels for food and water. Ipu kai would be probably be the correct term for these gourd vessels and Umeke laau would be a reference to wooden bowls. These days I think it is safe to say that umeke would refer to wood bowls and not be considered to include the vessels made of gourd.

The Hawaiians were very specific about their names for bowls, and there are literally hundreds of names. Umeke, has become a generic name for wooden bowls. I guess it would be the authentic replacement for the word calabash although neither of these words would indicate what you would expect the bowl to look like or what it would be used for. I hope these short descriptions and sample pictures will be a starting point for the further exploration of traditional bowls.

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