

“SEX AND SHAMANISM: THE MAKING OF A
HAWAIIAN MAHU” by Walter L. Williams
The Advocate 417 (2 April 1985), pp. 48-49.

When Michael Kehao speaks of his relation to his Hawaiian religion, he speaks with a self-assurance that does not require a denial of his sexuality. In many cultures of the non-Western world, homosexuality is closely associated with spirituality. Yet, paradoxically, because it is so accepted it is not often mentioned. Instead, the focus is on gender-nonconformity – e.g., "feminine" behavior by a male, whether homosexual or not.

In his 20s, Kehao was raised in Hawaii in a small community of traditional Hawaiian-Samoan people. When he was 8 years old, his grandmother explained to him the tradition of "Mahu." The elder women are the keepers of knowledge. “She defined Mahu, in which I had been raised,” he remembers, “saying it was someone who was male that was feminine, who takes on the characteristics of the woman's role, so to speak. But she explained that a Mahu is not considered a woman. Nor is he considered a man. He's kind of a third entity.”

Mahus like Kehao are chosen for the role when they are young children. When a Hawaiian family has only sons and the wife does not have a girl, the parents will make one boy effeminate to help with the

accepted feminine role – basically doing “women's work.” This would usually be the youngest child, and it did not have anything to do with the character of the child; he could be either feminine or masculine. According to Kehao, “This would occur when the boy was about 4 years old, after it had become obvious that the mother was not going to become pregnant again. He would not go through the traditional masculine kind of upbringing. The mother would be more close to the individual constantly, and more favors would be shown to him because they want to give him more.

“They'll spend more time with the individual to assure that he is kept within an area so that he has no outside interference with how they're going to raise him. With boys, they always go off with groups of other boys, but the Mahu child stays around women.”

After being raised in this feminine role, the boy would become sexually active at about age 15. “Because the entire family knows the individual is Mahu, they expect him to be sexual with men.” The Mahu would never be sexual with women, nor would he ever marry or date one.

He would stay with his parents and often be the one to take care of them in their old age. “His relations with the parents would be stronger than the other members of the family. Because of this, the Oahu would be more highly respected,” he explains.

Within the larger Hawaiian society, the Mahu could gain status through a special role in the traditional religion. A “kahuna,” or shaman, who helped to cure sick people and lead religious ceremonies, might be a Mahu or a regular man. But in the old religion Mahus clearly dominated tahiku,” the ancient hula done through chanting. It has only been in the last 150 years that women have become hula dancers. And the chanter, the person who knows the ancient ceremonies, “usually is Mahu because he has no outside distractions in marriage. They remained separated from all women so that they could concentrate on what was necessary for the hula.”

The hula was a storytelling religion done to chants. The vast majority of dancers were Mahu, with only a small percentage of regular men. Hula dancers, Kehao notes, “and especially Mahu dancers even today are cherished by the traditional people. They are practically worshiped. All would like to dance as the Mahus dance.”

The Mahu tradition also exists in other areas of Polynesia. In Samoa, where it is called “fafafini,” a male child is raised to become an effeminate one who helps the mother or the grandparents. Traditionally, they were treated with respect, given special privileges and raised within the women's group.

This tradition is still alive in such places as Tahiti and Samoa, though on the wane in Hawaii. “Hawaiians have got to the point where they’re relinquishing their customs; they’re just not getting involved anymore,” Kehao complains. Some will even look down on the Mahu, he says, or equate them with Honolulu transvestites.

When asked the difference between a Mahu and a gay identity, Kehao explains: “Mahus hold on to the traditional Hawaiian spirituality and value our feminine ways. The Hawaiian gays, and also the transvestites, are modernized. They’re too involved with other things, they’re not realizing where their heritage is. For Hawaiians, Mahu is part of the culture, natural. I guess for the haoles [whites] who find out they’re gay — is harder for them. You don’t get that kind of isolation with Hawaiians, because we’ve always existed here.”

Kehao feels that without a cultural context, mainland gays “are so busy running straight and not looking around and really observing things. Hawaiians constantly remind ourselves about the things that are around us. We also have our culture and our place in the traditional religion. On the mainland the religion doesn’t allow a culture of acceptance. Gays have liberated themselves only sexually, but they have not yet learned their place in a spiritual sense.”