

KOA AND LEHUA TIMBER HARVESTING
AND PRODUCT UTILIZATION:
RELIGIO-ECOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS
IN HAWAII, A.D. 1778*

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Although koa and 'ōhi'a-lehua trees were abundant on all the major islands in the Hawaiian chain during prehistoric and protohistoric times, many oral traditions and written references indicate that their survival in quantity was insured by religious taboos, by the limited products manufactured from wood, and by the limited number of those authorized to utilize these products.

'Ōhi'a-lehua was reserved almost exclusively for temple structures and residences of high chiefs and temple images, where relatively short, thin, hard, long-lasting wood was essential and where the long, parallel fissures inherent in this wood did not interfere with the use. From selection, harvesting, transportation, and working of a log until its final placement, 'ōhi'a-lehua was treated with religious ceremony and taboos. So greatly was it revered that central temple images made from the wood often required human sacrifices.

Unlike 'ōhi'a, koa could grow to a height of 60 feet before branching. Logs of this straight, fine-grained wood were restricted to use by chiefs for the manufacture of canoes. Like 'ōhi'a, it was venerated. Every ritualistic step in the creation of a canoe was handled by canoe-making priests, and these priests were protected by the goddess of canoe builders.

Koa and lehua were used in the manufacture of sacred items. Use was limited to chiefs; religious ceremony was followed throughout harvesting and fabrication; color of the woods and names imply spiritual significance. Koa and 'ōhi'a-lehua products were considered suitable for tax payments, gifts, and sacrifices. It is reasonable to assume that sanctions were imposed to conserve and protect these trees.