ART on view

Royal Hawaiian Featherwork Na Hulu Ali'i

By Christina Hellmich

Feathers were greatly held in esteem. They were the greatest treasure above all other Hawaiian treasures.

> David Malo (1793–1853) Native Hawaiian historian

For centuries, feathers from vibrantly colored endemic birds were valuable cultural resources on the Hawaiian Islands. Spectacular garments painstakingly constructed by hand, including 'ahu 'ula (long cloaks and short capes), mahiole (helmets), and lei hulu (lei), were masterfully covered in these feathers and symbolized the divinity and power of the *ali'i* (chiefs)—ruling men and women who wore them for spiritual protection and to proclaim their identity and social status. They were family heirlooms and symbols of legitimacy.1 These unique valuables were also conveyed as objects of diplomacy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to secure political alliances and agreements. They were given as gifts of friendship and sympathy during the Kamehameha dynasty (1810–1872). The fewer than three hundred extant examples of these garments shape our knowledge about the art form known as na hulu ali'i (royal feathers).



Organized in partnership with the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Honolulu, and highlighting its featherwork collection, which is rarely exhibited outside Hawai'i, the first exhibition of *na hulu ali'i* in the continental United States is now on view at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. It includes seventy-six rare examples of the finest historic Hawaiian featherwork in existence, as well as related eighteenth- and nineteenthcentury paintings and works on paper depicting these garments being worn. It is completed by special loans of relevant bird specimens from the California Academy of Sciences.





When the exhibition opens at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum on March 19, 2016,² loans of featherwork from other institutions including the Honolulu Museum of Art; British Museum; Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University; Hastings Museum and Art Gallery in East Sussex, England; National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution; Museum of Ethnology, Vienna; and Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand, will be displayed in Hawai'i, returning some pieces to the islands for the first time in more than two hundred years.

Hulu o na manu, or bird feathers, from select endemic birds of the islands were highly valued. They were collected by chiefs as taxes (in the form of feather bundles) or used to acquire special trade goods.³ Feathers red in color were the most sacred and yellow feathers were the scarcest. The term 'ahu 'ula literally means red ('ula) garments for covering the upper part of the body and shoulders ('ahu). * Red, yellow, black, and green feathers were mainly acquired from a few forest species of Hawaiian honeycreeper and one genus of honeyeater. Feathers from the Hawaiian domestic fowl (moa) and seabirds were also used in featherwork. Kia manu, skilled bird catchers, understood the behaviors and habitats of the birds, and they used a variety of techniques to attract and capture them to procure their feathers.⁵ Hundreds of thousands of feathers were needed for a single large cloak,6 which would be worn only by high chiefs who could procure the resources necessary to create them.

To fashion cloaks and capes, bundles of feathers were tied together and attached to a twined fiber netting (nae) made of olona (Touchardia latifolia). These garments endure today because of their fine knotted construction and their foundation of olona cordage—one of the strongest and most durable natural fibers in the world. Adrienne Kaeppler has theorized that the netting might have been fabricated by priests while chanting



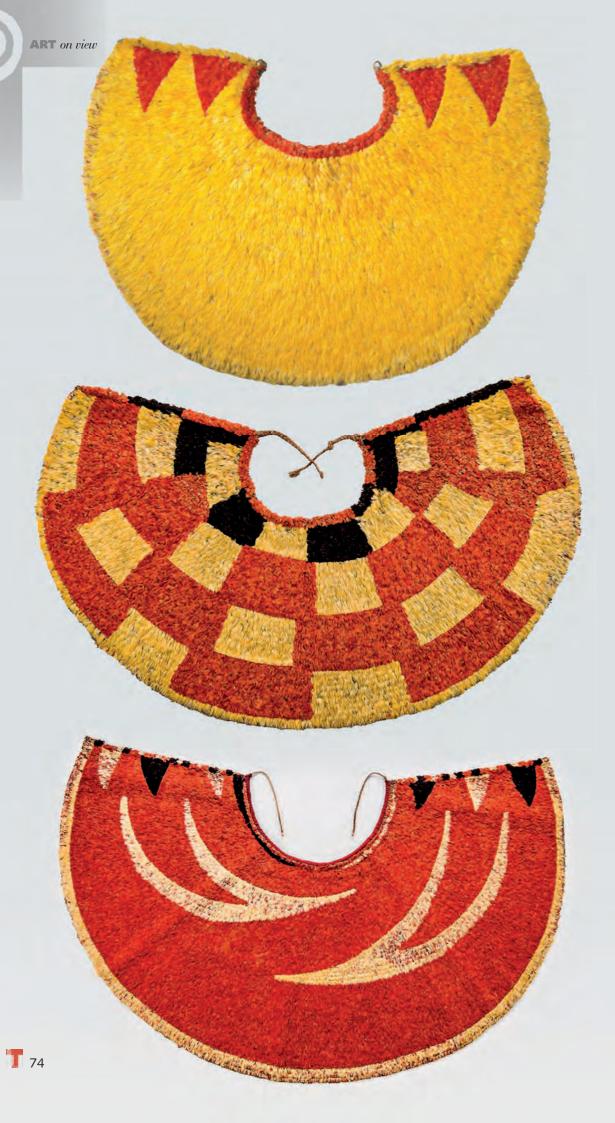


FIG. 3: Cape, 'ahu 'ula. Hawaiian Islands. Early 19th century.

Red 'i'iwi (Vestiaria coccinea)
feathers, yellow 'o'o (Moho nobilis)
feathers, olona (Touchardia latifolia)
fiber. 38.7 x 76.2 cm.
Provenance: Honorable Levi
Ha'alelea; Mrs. Elizabeth Coney
Renjes by descent; March 1941 loan
to Honolulu Academy of Arts (now
Honolulu Museum of Art); 1964 gift
from Mrs. Andrew I. McKee, New
London, Connecticut.
Honolulu Museum of Art, gift
of Mrs. Andrew I. McKee, 1964,
3315.1

FIG. 4: Cape, 'ahu 'ula. Hawaiian Islands. Early 19th century.

Red 'i'iwi (*Vestiaria coccinea*) feathers, yellow and black 'o'o (*Moho sp.*) feathers, olona (*Touchardia latifolia*) fiber. 70 x 107 cm.
Provenance: Kamehameha I; 1819
Kamehameha II by descent; 1824
Captain Valentine Starbuck (voyage to London); 1927 Bernice Pauahi
Bishop Museum, gift of Evangeline
Priscilla Starbuck.
Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Ethnology Collection,
C.00208/1927.073.

FIG. 5: Cape, 'ahu 'ula. Hawaiian Islands.

19th century.

Red 'i'iwi (Vestiaria coccinea) feathers, yellow and black 'o'o (Moho sp.) feathers, olona (Touchardia latifolia) fiber. 60 x 111 cm.

Provenance: 1857 presented by Kamehameha V to E. Faulkner, paymaster of the HMS *Havannah*; 1887 purchased by Queen Kapi'olani during her trip to England; 1923 Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, gift of Princess Elizabeth Kalaniana'ole (Elizabeth K. Woods). Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Kapi'olani-Kalaniana'ole Collection, B.07236/1923.125.

"thus entangling" prayers, producing a garment that offered spiritual protection to the wearer in addition to prestige with its valuable and fine materials.8 When worn, featherwork also acquired the mana (supernatural or divine power) of the wearer.9

The size, shape, and drape of the netting were designed to accentuate the play of light on cloaks and capes when worn, highlighting the feathers' beauty and thus the wearer's beauty as well. 10 In his analysis of the symbolism and aesthetics of Hawaiian featherwork, scholar John Charlot has indicated that Hawaiian literature emphasizes the beauty of the cloaks rather than their protective function. He states that "A cloak is perceived as keia mea ulaula maikai—this good, glowing-red thing,"11 and he references a famous chant "in which the chief is described as an iridescent vision."12 Hawaiian ethnographer, linguist, and scholar Mary Kawena Pukui recorded that "warrior chiefs in feather capes and helmets [...] look like little rainbows—rain 'heated' by the sun—'Ka wela o ka ua.'"13

For helmets, the feathered netting was fastened onto a rigid crescent-shaped form of twined 'ie'ie aerial roots that allowed the feathers to maintain a specific shape, orientation, and arrangement. Alternatively, feather-covered cords were secured in parallel lines on the surface of the 'ie'ie form. 14 A field dominated by yellow feathers is found at the top of helmet crests on the five included in the exhibition and on the larger extant corpus of more than thirty helmets incorporating yellow, black, and red feathers, though the meaning of this significant design convention was not recorded. However, the top of the head was one of the most sacred parts of a chief's body and the helmet accentuated this area and provided physical and spiritual protection during battle. 15

Motifs and designs on cloaks and capes include triangles, crescents, circles, and quadrilaterals, which were created by abutting fields of feathers in different colors. Although two 'ahu 'ula might contain the same design, the composition of each garment is unique. Roger Rose, author of Hawai'i: The Royal Isles, has indicated that most were made for specific individuals, and it is often assumed that each one became representative of its wearer. 16 Kaeppler has proposed that "the designs and colors appear to be related to specific chiefly lines and the foregrounding and backgrounding of the motifs changed over time."17 Associations of particular cloaks and capes to individuals provide some possible connections between selected designs and chiefs, such as the Hawai'i Island style associated with the Kamehameha dynasty featuring a red neckline set with red and yellow



FIGS. 6a and b: Cape, 'ahu 'ula. Hawaiian Islands. Pre 1861. Yellow and black 'o'o (Moho nobilis) feathers, red 'i'iwi (Vestiaria coccinea) feathers, olona (Touchardia latifolia) fiber. 42.5 x 91.4 cm. Provenance: Kamehameha IV: 1861 Lady Franklin, gift of Kamehameha IV; 1875 G. B. Austin Leroy by descent; 1909 purchased by Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum. Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Ethnology Collection, 09670/1909.007.







FIG. 7 (above):

Cloak, 'ahu 'ula. Hawaiian Islands. Early 19th century.

Red 'i'iwi (Vestiaria coccinea) feathers, yellow and black 'o'o (Moho nobilis) feathers, olona (Touchardia latifolia) fiber. 139 x 218 cm.

Provenance: Chief Kekuaokalani (d. 1819); King Kamehameha II (ca. 1797–1824); King Kamehameha III (1825–1854) by descent; 1841 collected by Captain John H. Aulick (1787–1873), Washington, DC; Mrs. Ethel M. Sterling; Richmond O. Aulick (1867–1897), Trenton, New Jersey; December 29, 1883, National Museum of Natural History, Chy gift of Richmond O. Aulick. National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, 013825.

FIG. 8 (top right):

Cape, 'ahu 'ula. Hawaiian Islands. 18th century.

Red 'i'iwi (Vestiaria coccinea) feathers, yellow 'o'o (Moho sp.) feathers, black Hawaiian domestic fowl or moa (Gallus, gallus) feathers, olona (Touchardia latifolia) fiber, 'ie'ie (Freycinetia arborea) fiber. 157 x 250 cm.

Provenance: 1805–1819 Museum of William Bullock, London; purchased by Lord St Oswald; 1912 Dominion Museum (now Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa), gift of Lord St Oswald.

Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa, gift of Lord St Oswald, 1912, FE06380.



FIG. 9 (above): Cape, 'ahu 'ula. Hawaiian Islands. 18th century.

Red 'i'iwi (Vestiaria coccinea) feathers, red 'apapane (Himatione sanguinea) feathers, yellow 'o'o (Moho sp.) feathers and/or yellow mamo (Drepanis pacifica) feathers, white and black Hawaiian domestic fowl or moa (Gallus gallus) feathers; bird skin; plant fiber; olona (Touchardia latifolia) fiber. 52.5 x 133.5 cm. Provenance: Collected by Captain James Cook on his third voyage to the Pacific (1776–1779); 1780 British Museum, London.

British Museum, Oc1988.Q1.



FIG. 10 (above): Cape, 'ahu 'ula. Hawaiian Islands. Before 1778.

Hawaiian domestic fowl or moa (Gallus gallus) feathers, red i'iwi (Vestiaria coccinea) feathers, yellow 'o'o (Moho nobilis) feathers, bark cloth (Maraceae, Broussonetia papyrifera); olona (Touchardia latifolia) fiber. 65 x 134 cm.

Provenance: Collected by Captain James Cook on his third voyage to the Pacific (1776–1779); 1779 Leverian Museum, London; 1806 Museum of Ethnology, Vienna, purchased by Leopold von Fichtel at the auction of the Leverian collections on behalf of Kaiser Franz I of Austria.

Museum of Ethnology, Weltmuseum, Vienna, 180.

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triangles and the body of the garment decorated with crescents. 18 A historical source noted by Charlot stated that the crescents on cloaks represented moons. 19 He theorizes that "circles might, then, represent full moons and since nights were connected to particular gods, such designs might refer to the particular gods of a family or days of birth, etc."20

A cloak with circular motifs is one of two collected in August 1789 by Captain Robert Gray when he visited the Hawaiian Islands on board the Columbia Rediviva. the first American ship to circumnavigate the globe (figs. 16a and b). These garments are associated with "Attoo, the crown prince," who sailed with Gray to Boston and took part in a procession to honor the ship. The historian Ernest Dodge has indicated that donning this cloak, Attoo "moved up State Street like a living flame."21 It is one of the largest cloaks known. Kaeppler has attributed the design of circles as being representative of the pillars of the earth, "on the 'sides' of the ocean."²² As described by scholar Samuel Manaiakalani Kamakau in the nineteenth century, the pillars sit "at the edge of the ocean next to the base of the sky that lies around the platform of the earth" and hold up the earth and sky. 23 Although the featherwork designs are one of the most compelling aspects of these garments, information about the relationships of the cosmic motifs and forms to the sacred and political function of the garments was sparsely recorded in the written record, and the oral histories relating to them are few.

Although featherwork dates back many centuries, the exhibition focuses on pieces made for Hawaiian ali'i (chiefs) and royals beginning in the late eighteenth century and ending just before the twentieth century. This period saw the arrival of European explorers, unification of the islands in 1810, the prolongation of the Kamehameha dynasty through 1874, widescale conversion to Christianity after the arrival of missionaries in 1820, the overthrow of the Hawaiian government in 1893, and annexation by the United States in 1898.

In the late eighteenth century, featherwork garments worn by ali'i were made in many shapes and sizes. Their materials and methods of manufacture varied as well. Some were trapezoidal with straight necklines, made with honeycreeper and domestic fowl feathers (figs. 9 and 10). Three are included in the exhibition and demonstrate the application of feathers still attached to bird skin glued to bands of barkcloth or plaited plant fiber that were placed over the netting at the top of the capes. The stiff



FIG. 11: Feather lei, lei hulu. Hawaiian Islands. 19th century. Yellow 'o'o (Moho sp.) feathers, red Kuhl's lorikeet (Vini kuhlii) feathers, black ribbon. L: 36.5 cm. Provenance: Estate of Victoria Ward; 1962 Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, purchased from the Estate Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Ethnology Collection, D.02620/1962.062



Feather lei, lei hulu. Hawaiian Islands. 19th century. Red and green Kuhl's lorikeet (Vini kuhlii) feathers, red yarn, black ribbon, L: 54.8 cm. Provenance: Princess Victoria Ka'iulani; A. S. Cleghorn; 1911 Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, gift of the Estate of A. S. Cleghorn. Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum. Princess Victoria Ka'iulani Collection 10386/1911.005.

FIG. 12:



FIG. 13: Feather lei, lei hulu. Hawaiian Islands. 20th century Green-dyed goose (Anatidae sp.), feathers, yellow-dyed Hawaiian domestic fowl or moa (Gallus gallus) feathers, yellow yarn, black ribbon. L: 76.5 cm. Provenance: Lucy K. Davis and Edgar Henriques; Lucy K. Peabody; 1932 Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, bequest of Lucy K. Peabody. Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Henriques Collection. D.01616/1932.079



collars that resulted provided protection from flying sling stones used as weapons during battles. ²⁴ Roughly half of the fewer than fifteen trapezoidal capes known to exist today were collected by Captain James Cook during his third voyage and stay in Hawai'i in 1778–1779. Though John Webber, artist of the voyage, depicted this type of cape in the ink and watercolor drawing, *A Chief of Atooi* (1778), on view in the exhibition, it appears that this style of cape did not endure in the 1780s. Other unique fashions of the late eighteenth century on view include capes of great variation in size with rounded bottom edges and elaborate geometric designs of yellow and red feathers combined with *moa* (domestic fowl) feathers (fig. 8).

Ten years after Cook's visit, an engraving of a chief, *Tianna*, included in the account of John Meares' voyage from China to the Northwest Coast of North America from 1788–1789, depicts him wearing a large-style cloak with a circular neckline and alternating triangles

on the border, most likely of red and yellow feathers (fig. 15). It is distinct in design and style from the earlier trapezoidal capes, showing a change in style that is reflected in most of the cloaks that circulated in the early nineteenth century when red and yellow feathers were used almost exclusively.

Hundreds of *ali'i* (chiefs) are recorded in Hawaiian history and '*ahu 'ula* were "worn proudly on the battlefield." ²⁵ In *Hawaiian Antiquities*,

FIG. 14 (right):

Cloak, 'ahu 'ula. Hawaiian Islands. Pre 1825.

Red 'i'iwi (*Vestiaria coccinea*) feathers, yellow and black 'o'o (*Moho sp.*) feathers, olona (*Touchardia latifolia*) fiber. 144.3 x 226 cm.

Provenance: 1825 Honorable William Keith, third son of the 7th Earl of Kintore of Aberdeenshire, Scotland (during HMS *Blonde* voyage); 1969 Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, gift of Helena Keith, Countess of Kintore, widow of the 11th Earl of Kintore.

Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Ethnology Collection, 1969.181.

FIG. 15 (below):

Unknown artist, *Tianna*, a *Prince of Atooi (Kaua'i)*, *One of the Sandwich Islands*, 1790. Engraving. 30 x 25 cm.

Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum Library, A. W. F. Fuller Collection, 1964.0280.



FIGS. 16a and b (left and right): Cloak, 'ahu 'ula. Hawaiian Islands. Possibly mid-18th century. Red 'i'iwi (Vestiaria coccinea) feathers, yellow 'o'o (Moho sp.) feathers, olona (Touchardia latifolia) fiber. 168.5 x 283.5 cm. Provenance: Attoo, the crown prince. Kaua'i chief: 1789 Joseph Barrell. voyage of the Columbia Rediviva; Captain Joy; Mrs. Benjamin Joy; John Benjamin Joy; Charles Henry Joy; 1912 Mrs. Charles Henry Joy; 1913 purchased by Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum Bernice Pauahi Bishop

Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Ethnology Collection, 11094/1913.001.



David Malo, an important native Hawaiian historian of the nineteenth century born in the 1790s and raised in the court of Kamehameha I,²⁶ wrote, "The 'ahu'ula was a possession most costly and precious, not obtainable by the common people, only by the ali'i. It was much worn by them as an insignia in time of war and when they went into battle. The 'ahu'ula [...] was an object of plunder in every battle."²⁷

A storied 'ahu 'ula with three sweeping red crescents and a red neckline was worn by Chief Kekuaokalani, a nephew of Kamehameha I, who was appointed by him as the guardian of the god Kuka'ilimoku (fig. 7). In 1819, Kekuaokalani was killed in the Battle of Kuamoʻo on the island of Hawai'i. His wife, Chiefess Manono, fought beside him against the forces of Kamehameha II, who had ordered abolishment of the kapu system that governed social and religious customs. In The Legends and Myths of Hawaii: The Fables and Folk-Lore of a Strange People, written by King David Kalakaua in 1888, he stated that "No characters in Hawaiian history stand forth with a sadder prominence, or add a richer tint to the vanishing chivalry of the race, than Kekuaokalani and his courageous and devoted wife, Manono, the last defenders in arms of the Hawaiian gods."²⁸ Upon Kekuaokalani's death on the battlefield, the cloak was taken as a prize for Kamehameha II and subsequently passed down to Kamehameha III.



A cape belonging to Kaumuali'i, who assumed the title of chief over the islands of Kaua'i and Ni'ihau after the death of his parents, endures as a symbol of an agreement he forged with Kamehameha I in 1810. Rather than wage a war of resistance, Kaumuali'i ceded the islands to Kamehameha I, enabling him to coalesce his power and unify the Hawaiian Islands under his rule.

After unification of the islands by Kamehameha I, the use of featherwork evolved alongside the archipelago's rapidly changing society. Visitors from around the globe arrived in the Hawaiian Islands and acquired these prestigious possessions on their voyages of exploration or trade. Throughout the nineteenth century, these rare and distinctively Hawaiian treasures served as diplomatic gifts for the Kamehameha and Kalakaua dynasties.

Like feathered garments, *kahili* (staffs with feathered finials) were symbols of noble rank, and they were displayed at such ceremonies as coronations and funerals (figs. 17 and 18). They could be grand in scale—carried or standing upright in large wood stands—or small, held in attendants' hands. They were widely used by members of the Kamehameha dynasty and later monarchs and often were given personal names that linked them to their owners.

More than twenty feather leis—spanning two centuries and drawn from the collection of the Bishop Museum—are also included in the exhibition, offering visitors a glimpse at the variety of feathers and patterns incorporated into the simple circular form that customarily is given as an expression of love or friendship. Mary Kawena Pukui (1895-1986), a scholar of Hawaiian cultural practices and beliefs, gave her thoughts about the meaning of lei recorded on May 19, 1964: "A lei—what is it? . . . A lei is a baby dearly loved. . . . A lei is a sweetheart. . . . A lei is a chanted poem or song accompanying a flower lei. . . . Leis made of the feathers of our native birds were reserved for royalty only."29

Royal Hawaiian Featherwork: Na Hulu Ali'i Through February 28, 2016

Through February 28, 2016De Young Museum, San Francisco www.famsf.org

March 19-May 23, 2016

Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawai'i www.bishopmuseum.org





FIG. 17: Royal staff of feathers, *kahili*. Hawaiian Islands. 19th century.

Red Kuhl's lorikeet (Vini kuhlii) feathers, Hawaiian domestic fowl or moa (Gallus gallus) feathers, green sea turtle (Chelonia mydas) shell, walrus (odobenus rosmarus) ivory. H: 129.5 cm.

Provenance: A. S. Cleghorn; 1910 Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, gift of the Estate of A. S. Cleghorn. Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Ethnology Collection, 10245/1910.008.

NOTE ABOUT THE FONT

Due to limitiation of the font used, the macron (*kahako*, or diacritical overscore above certain vowels) has been omitted from the Hawaiian words in this article.

NOTES

- 1. Kaeppler, 2010, 28.
- 2. *Na Hulu Ali'i*, March 19 through May 23, 2016, at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawai'i.
- 3. Brigham, 1899, 3.
- 4. Pukui and Elbert, 1986, 8 and 367.
- 5. Brigham, 1899, 3, and Marzan and Gon, 2015, 32.
- 6. http://www.hawaiialive.org/, "Early Hawaiian Society, Feather work, 'Ahu'ula of King Kamehameha I," accessed October 5, 2015, and Brigham, 1899, 55.
- 7. http://www.hawaiialive.org/, "Early Hawaiian Society, Cordage," accessed October 5, 2015.
- 8. Kaeppler, 2010, 27, and Kaeppler, 2002, 148.
- 9. Kaeppler, 2010, 11.
- 10. Marzan and Gon, 2015, 32.
- 11. Charlot, 1991, 122, citing Fornander, 1916-7, 485.
- 12. Charlot, 1991, 122.
- 13. Pukui, 1983, 180, no. 1664.
- 14. Marzan and Gon, 2015, 32.
- 15. Kaeppler, 2010, 49.
- 16. Rose, 1980, 191.
- 17. Kaeppler, 2010, vol. 3, 30.
- 18. Kaeppler, 2010, vol. 3, 31.
- 19. Charlot, 1991, 155.
- 20. Charlot, 1991, 155.
- 21. Dodge, 1967, 4.
- 22. Kaeppler, 2010, 31, and Kamakau, 1976, 5.
- 23. Kamakau, 1976, 5.
- 24. Kaeppler in Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, 2015, 38.
- 25. Ibid, 24.
- http://www.bishopmuseum.org/press/authors.html.
 Accessed October 5, 2015.
- 27. Malo, 1951, 106.
- 28. Kalakaua, 1888, 439.
- 29. Mary Kawena Pukui, recorded at the Pukui home on Birch Street, Honolulu, Hawai'i, Haw 18.8.1, May 19, 1964. Mary Kawena Pukui Audio Collection, Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum Archives, Honolulu.



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FIG. 18: One of a pair of royal staffs of feathers, kahili. Hawaiian Islands. Possibly 19th century. White Hawaiian domestic fowl or moa (Gallus gallus) tail feathers, green sea turtle (Chelonia mydas) shell, sperm whale (Physeter macrocephalus) ivory, brown, orange, and yellow ribbon. H: 172.7 cm. Provenance: Elizabeth Keka'anı'auokalani (Kalaninuiohilaukapu La'anui) Pratt; 1920 Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, gift of Elizabeth Keka'anı'auokalani Pratt. Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Keka'anı'auokalani Collection,

C.04423/1974.014.



