The Kahuna

In ancient Hawai‘i, the kāhuna were far more than priests, a common misconception now. The kāhuna were doctors, architects, scientists, educators, and agriculturists of their time. Their kuleana (responsibility) was conserving the resources and advancing their knowledge. They were persons of real ability. They achieved the status of being a kahuna only after training for more than 20 years in a strict discipline.

WHO WERE THEY?

After the arrival of the ali‘i about 1000 years ago, most of the members of a kahuna order were chosen from the ranks of the ali‘i. As children, they were selected based on their intelligence, interest, and willingness to learn. Occasionally a child from the maka‘ainana class who had an exceptional ability might be accepted, but he or she often had some royal blood. Although girls were admitted to some orders, they were banned from some places and ceremonies and confined during menstruation.

HOW DID THEY LEARN?

The classes of kāhuna were divided into many orders just like college nowadays has many different fields of study. Similar to attending college, each kahuna trained in a specific school, but there was also a general course of instruction for all. Students were required to observe with the eyes, listen with the ears, close the mouth (to reflect on what one has observed), do with the hands, and then question (only if the answer has not already presented itself in the previous steps). This is how they learned and gained their knowledge.

Word Bank

Kahuna - expert in any field
Kuleana - responsibility
Ali‘i - royalty
Maka‘ainana - commoner
Order - field of study
Puhi Okaoka - expert of all knowledge

Key Science Ideas:

Scientific Observation
- learning through careful study (using all senses)

From THE KAHUNA, Versatile Masters of Old Hawaii by L. R. McBride
www.basicallybooks.com

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Instruction began at dawn and continued as long as the sun was up. As small children, students learned 3 different types of rules: laws of the gods; lesser regulations; the restrictions of the school.

A student was taught to experiment with certain limits. In time, he could use his knowledge of human nature to make predictions, accomplish desired ends and strengthen the order to which he belonged. He learned to employ skills like: hypnosis, auto-suggestion, mimicry, ventriloquism.

He was taught that these skills were direct manifestations of the gods and were only granted to a certain few.

WHO TAUGHT THEM?
Schools and teachers differed and their abilities varied. When kāhuna in the same order from different places met, the common question was, "Who taught you?" A kahuna never forgot his instructor and always mentioned him in his prayers.

SPIRITUAL LEARNING
Each priestly order had its own god. A kahuna truly believed in the power of prayer and the spirituality of his education. A kahuna had faith in his gods and in his ability to communicate with them as family. Much of the training of a kahuna consisted of memorizing long chants and rituals and being able to perform them with the correct protocol. He was taught that by successfully doing so he would earn the respect of the gods and they would protect and guide him on his path of learning.

"Let that which is unknown become known."

This ancient prayer of the kāhuna guided the training period so each student would quickly gain the knowledge, patience, and understanding needed to become a lover of wisdom & knowledge.

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GRADUATION
At the graduation ceremony, a member of the class who had surpassed all of the rest in learning was chosen by his peers and honored with the choice part of the commencement pig in the final ritual, an honor much like that of a valedictorian today.

HIGHER LEARNING
Kāhuna who had become proficient in two professional skills had a greater status than any person who only excelled in one profession, no matter how deep his knowledge was in that field. Only a kahuna who had become adept in many fields could be called a high priest, and only one who had mastered all learning was given the highest title puhi okaoka. It was difficult to become such a priest because the Hawaiian teacher rarely passed on all of his wisdom before taking to his deathbed, in case one of his students surpass him. A favored student was generally called just before the teacher’s dying to wipe the lips of the master and gain the final knowledge.

Kāhuna Today

3. a) Are there kāhuna today?

b) What has happened to all of their wisdom?

c) Who is similar to a kahuna today?

4. If you were chosen to be a kahuna, what field would you want to study most? Why?

The Hawaiian kāhuna have accomplished so many things in many endeavors and only now are some of us realizing the amazing things they achieved and investigating further those things which may prove to be of value to our society. Some medical men of today have no doubt that doctors of ancient Hawai‘i were able to arrest cancer, heart trouble, and other illnesses. Their findings in the fields of agriculture, fishing, and conservation may prove to be of great benefit also. According to an old Hawaiian proverb:

_Ua lehulehu a manomano ka 'ikena a ka Hawai‘i._

_Great and numerous is the knowledge of the Hawaiians._

Unfortunately, we will never know the true extent of their knowledge and their accomplishments because so much has been lost or concealed. What little we know and comprehend will nevertheless stand as a testimony to the knowledge and wisdom of Hawaiians, especially those who were kāhuna.