

# ‘UMEKE LĀ‘AU

## A RICH HAWAIIAN TRADITION



‘Umeke lā‘au by Pat Kramer: seven māna ‘ai, three kū‘oho, and one puahala. The darkest wood is milo, the reddish brown wood is kou, and the orange wood is kamani, 2016, sizes range from 6" to 10" (15cm to 25cm) in diameter and 4" to 9" (10cm to 23cm) in height.

Photo: Pat Kramer

Sharon Doughtie

### Terminology and history

Many people turn calabash bowls, but there seems to be a general lack of understanding about what they are and from where they originated. In his 1989 book, *The Hawaiian Calabash*, Irving Jenkins writes, “The English word calabash was probably derived from the French and Spanish words *calebasse* and *calabaza*, both meaning gourds or pumpkins.” Hawaiian bowls were originally made from the calabash gourd (*ipu*) or coconut shell, but were later painstakingly hewed from

wood. Not speaking the language, foreigners needing a word to describe Hawaiian vessels called them calabashes and the name caught on. Today in Hawai‘i, they are called ‘umeke lā‘au (oo-meh-keh la-ow), or just ‘umeke, which means wooden bowl or vessel and is their correct name.

Many Polynesian cultures were known for their fine woodwork, and Hawaiians particularly excelled in making ‘umeke lā‘au with refined shapes and lustrous finishes. The ‘umeke were highly prized and it was an arduous

process to craft them. Their pleasingly round forms echo their gourd and coconut shell origins. To illustrate how precious the ‘umeke were, William Brigham wrote in his 1908 book, *The Ancient Hawaiian House* (Bishop Museum Press), “The most highly esteemed and favorite calabashes had chants composed for them as though they were human beings, and when they were placed on the table one would hear their owner with proud countenances, chanting of the celebrated deeds of those for whom they were named.” ▶

'*Umeke lā'au* were also valued because they could be handed down to posterity, as inheritances. Not everyone, however, had '*umeke* as part of their households—they were usually limited to the *ali'i*, chiefly-class, because of the amount of labor that went into making each '*umeke*. During this era, *maka'āinana*, the common people, usually made their bowls from gourds.

So, what are the characteristics that define an '*umeke*? The simplest definition would be a bowl with a rounded bottom—there is no foot. Since the

shapes were inspired by gourd bowls and there were no tables to place them on, it made sense for the '*umeke* to have rounded bottoms. The bowl form can be short and wide, the same height and width, or taller than it is wide. '*Umeke* do not have beads but can have lids. They can be hewn or turned either sidegrain or endgrain.

### A sparse written record

There has been very little written about Hawaiian bowls. Hawai'i's indigenous culture was severely interrupted and

suppressed when droves of missionaries and foreigners came to the islands in the 1800s and beyond. There are some differences of opinion that linger even today about various aspects of Hawaiian history and of bowl-making.

Jenkins states that Henry Kekahuna, a Honolulu accountant, wrote an unpublished, undated paper entitled, "The Hawaiian Art of Making Wooden Calabashes." This important paper was referred to and quoted in a Bishop Museum Press book, *The Arts and Crafts of Hawai'i*, published in 1957. Jenkins states that Kekahuna had met an elder Hawaiian named Naluahine Kaopua in the 1940s. Kaopua, born on the Big Island of Hawai'i in 1864, had a tremendous memory for details and it is believed that Kekahuna's paper was written in Kaopua's voice. In his paper, Kekahuna writes about the process of making bowls and how he observed his grandparents making them. Kaopua's grandparents would have been alive when Hawaiians were still making bowls in the old way in the 1800s.

Kekahuna was a distant relative of current-day bowl-makers and *kumu* (teachers) Solomon and Alani Apio, Hawaiian father and son, who are both living and furthering the Hawaiian culture. Because of them, the Hawaiian names of the '*umeke* are now being shared with the public. Alani stated that by talking with Hawaiian language instructors and learning the language himself, he more fully understands the meanings behind the names of the bowls. The Apios generously gave me a copy of Kekahuna's paper, and I am thankful for Alani's input and guidance as I researched and wrote this article.

In 2000, the Apios and a contingent of Hawaiians were invited to the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, and given unrestricted access to the entire pre-Western-contact Hawaiian artifact collection so they could correct errors in the written record. Outside of the Bishop Museum in Hawai'i, the Peabody Essex Museum



Two lidded *puahala* by Pat Kramer. At left, 2004, *kamani* wood, 15" x 16½" (38cm x 42cm); at right, 2011, *milo*, 19" x 15½" (48cm x 39cm)

Historically, *puahala* (taller and sometimes lidded '*umeke*) were primarily used to store the unfinished form of *poi*, or *pa'i'ai*.

Photos: Pat Kramer



(Left) **Pat Kramer**, *Kūmauna*, 2008, curly mango, 10¼" x 17½" (26cm x 44cm)

Photo: Pat Kramer

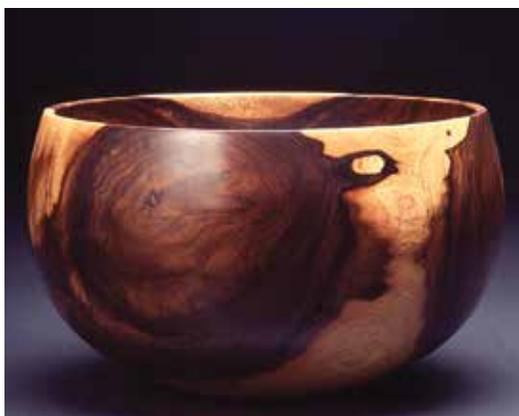
A traditional shape made of non-traditional wood. *Kūmauna* were typically used for storing large quantities of food.



(Right) **Pat Kramer**, *Kūmauna*, 2005, Norfolk Island Pine, 16" x 19½" (41cm x 50cm)

A traditional shape made of non-traditional wood.

Photo: Pat Kramer



(Left) **Alani Apio**, two 'umeke, 1996, at left: Pākākā, kou, 10" × 17" (25cm × 43cm); at right: Kūmauna, kou 14" × 13" (36cm × 33cm)

Photo: Hal Lum

(Right) **Alani Apio**, Pākākā, 1995, kou, 14" × 15" (36cm × 38cm)

Pākākā were usually used for salting or serving meat or fish.

Photo credit: Hal Lum

has the largest collection of pre-contact Hawaiian artifacts in the world.

The written record of bowl types is sparse. Jenkins speaks about the history of the bowls but doesn't mention specific names of the 'umeke lā'au. Alani Apio told me that no Hawaiian person has yet responded in writing to Jenkins' book or has written any books about 'umeke lā'au from a Hawaiian perspective.

### Types of Hawaiian bowls

The best record we have about the types of bowls is detailed in Henry Kekahuna's unpublished paper, as summarized below. Through the openness, diligent work, and generosity of Alani Apio, we can learn about these names today.

- A *kūmauna* is a very large bowl. It was quite heavy and, for this reason, was not carried around. It was essentially the barrel of the time and was used to store hefty quantities of food such as *poi*, which were then decanted into smaller bowls, *pālewa* or *kū'oho*.

To give an idea of the size of the *kūmauna*, a *kū'oho* could hold enough food for an entire family. Generally, the height of this 'umeke was nearly equal to its width at its widest point.

- *Pākākā* was a low, broad calabash that was used primarily for serving meats and fish and, sometimes, for salting them. Its open form and broad size made it a perfect vessel for these activities.
- *Pālewa* or *kū'oho* was a medium-sized bowl that was easily carried about. Family members could share food from this bowl. The *pālewa* tended to be shorter than the *kū'oho*.
- The *puahala* was so named because it resembles the fruit of the pandanus tree. This bowl is significantly taller than it is wide. The traditional *puahala* walls sloped inwards more than they do today. Both then and now, this is one of the most difficult 'umeke to make because of its depth. There is a lot of tool overhang when turning this bowl on a lathe. This style was used primarily for storing ▶

(Below, left to right)

**Mike Lee**, *Kū'oho*, 1990, Koa, 6" × 6" (15cm × 15cm)

Families would frequently share food from *kū'oho*, as they also did with the *pālewa*. The *kū'oho* were typically taller than *pālewa*. Note the ebony *pewa*, or repairs.

Photo: Ric Noyle

**Mike Lee**, *Kū'oho me ka po'i* (*kū'oho* with lid), 1991, Koa, 10" × 11" (25cm × 28cm)

The primary purpose of a lid was to protect what was inside the 'umeke, keeping *pa'i'ai* (unfinished *poi*) fresh longer, for example. Large lidded vessels were also used to store precious items, and there is some speculation the lids doubled as plates.

Photo: Bill Griffith

**Pat Kramer**, *Kū'oho*, 2002, Mango, 14" × 16" (36cm × 41cm)

A traditional shape in non-traditional wood.

Photo: Pat Kramer

**Pat Kramer**, *Kū'oho me ka po'i* (*kū'oho* with lid), 2002, Koa, 11" × 11" (28cm × 28cm)

Photo: Pat Kramer



*pa'i'ai*, the unfinished form of *poi*, a dish made from fermented taro root.

- *Ipukai* was a favorite bowl, according to Kekahuna. It had a curved, somewhat bulbous bottom with an inward-slanting wall. Historically, its sides and base were extra thin. *Ipukai* were predominantly used for the preparation and storage of condiments—as well as to serve *'awa*, a mildly narcotic drink used ceremonially.
- The *māna 'ai*, or mouth-fed bowl, was made for a first-born or favorite child in Hawaiian families. The child would eat from it when he or she began ingesting solid food. Ideally, the wood for this bowl came from a tree that had been planted by the baby's grandparents. In turn, a tree would have been planted when this child was born, to be harvested for a bowl for his or her grandchild. The *māna 'ai* became

that child's personal bowl to be used throughout his or her life and no one else was ever to use it; it would be spoiled if they did. The name *māna 'ai* refers to the use and size of this bowl, rather than the shape. The practice of presenting a child with a *māna 'ai* has continued today in some families.

- *Puaniki* is another personal-use-type bowl, intended for an individual. It is a smaller version of a bowl and could have any shape: *kūmauna*, *puahala*, *kū'oho*. A *māna 'ai*, because of its size, is a kind of *puaniki*. They tend to be small bowls that can easily fit in one hand.
- The *'umeke 'unu* or *'aina* is a refuse container. They were heavy, thick, and deep and were used for discarding fish bones, peelings, and other inedible organic matter during a meal. Some makers decorated their bowl with the teeth of their *ali'i*'s enemies, who had

been slain in battle, and some turners today have used molds of teeth supplied by a dentist. These refuse-container bowls, however, are rarely made today.

There are many other types of bowls and containers, too numerous to list. Those listed here are the most common bowls being turned on modern lathes.

### Traditional woods

*Kou* was by far the preferred wood for bowls. The Hawaiian Islands had abundant stands of *kou*, but according to Jenkins, the accidental introduction of a red mite (also called a red spider-mite) in the 1860s decimated the species. *Kou* was preferred because the wood was softer than *milo* and easier to work using the laborious hand methods of hollowing and carving. *Kou* has a lovely soft brown heartwood and creamy sapwood. It is still in high demand today but is rare and usually difficult to obtain. Many Hawaiians deliberately plant *kou* trees for future use. My woodturner husband Pat Kramer and I have a large *kou* tree in our front yard that we planted as a sapling. We'll probably never use any of its wood, but we save the seeds to share and expect that someone will use the wood in the future.

The second preferred wood was *milo*, also relatively soft, which polishes to a lovely sheen. *Milo* is still one of the preferred woods for turned bowls in Hawai'i because its rich chocolate grain and creamy sapwood are stunning. One of



Bottom view, showing the *koa poho* (rectangular patch) and *pewa* (butterfly) repairs. Note also the lack of a foot on a round bottom.

Photos: Hugo de Vries



**Mike Lee**, *Pālewa*, 1989, Macassar ebony, *koa*, 5" × 11" (13cm × 28cm)

*Pālewa* were medium-sized bowls from which family members could share food.

the reasons *kou* and *milo* were preferred is that they are bitter and therefore don't attract boring insects. After all the hand labor involved in carving out the 'umeke, Hawaiian makers wanted them to last through generations.

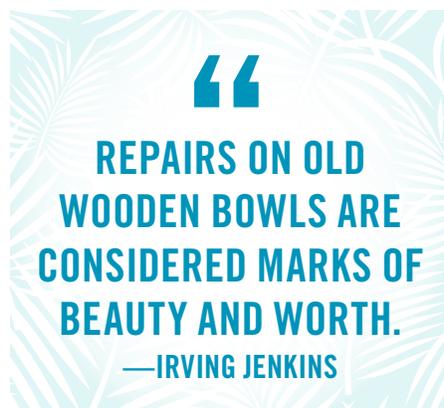
Two other woods frequently used were *wiliwili* and *hau*. They are also relatively soft woods and, although they attract borer insects, can tolerate exposure to water and are buoyant. Bowls from these woods made good containers for fishing equipment.

There is a rumor that *koa* was not traditionally preferred because it imparted a bitter taste to food. Kekahuna dispels that notion in his paper, stating that *koa* was not used because it attracted boring bugs due to its woody scent. In addition, curly grain was considered unstable. *Koa* has a very high silica content, which quickly dulls tools, and it is much harder than *kou*, *milo*, *wiliwili*, or *hau*. Nowadays, of course, *koa* is in great demand for bowls, specifically because of its curly, almost iridescent, grain.

With the use of electric lathes, current-day woodturners are taking advantage of many other beautiful species of woods that grow in Hawai'i. Mango, 'ōhi'a, *kamani*, Norfolk Island Pine, and *kolohala* are popular, with *kolohala* being more difficult to acquire due to its rarity.

## How Hawaiian bowls were made

In the old days, under the *kapu* system, which was the ancient Hawaiian code of conduct, one had to have permission before cutting down a tree. There was a very deliberate stewardship of



the land. The phrase, "*He ali'i ka 'āina, he kauwā ke kanaka*," translates to "The land is the chief; man is its servant" (#531 'Ōlelo No'eau, *Hawaiian Proverbs and Political Sayings*, by Mary Kawena Pukui, Bishop Museum Press, 1983).

Wood from a felled tree was initially cut into blocks and then sunk into saltwater, where it would soak for months until it obtained the desired color. Kekahuna also writes that 'umeke left in the sea would be imbued with salt residue that would make *poi* ferment faster and deter boring bugs. Many Hawaiian craftsmen soaked their bowls in saltwater, which didn't leave a dank smell in the wood.

The makers marked their round bowl blanks by eye, and some used a rudimentary measuring system made from a flat piece of bamboo. Brigham notes, "In excavating the inside, it is curious to note how they adopted the method of the modern turner by cutting a series of concentric ledges and then matching the inside shape to the outside profile." Brigham further states, "The interior was made beautifully smooth for cleanliness in use rather than for appearance. And when this was satisfactory, the finer polish of the outside was taken in hand." Unfortunately, there is no record of the names of individual craftsmen.

The Hawaiian makers used coral tools and stone adzes from various kinds of basalt to shape and hollow their bowls. Coral, lava, pumice stone, and, sometimes, shark or stingray skins were used to finish the surfaces.

The Hawaiians hewed bowls from both orientations, sidegrain (*poho kua*) and endgrain (*poho kuoho*). For *poho kua* bowls, they would first determine which side of the log was concave and start from there to carve the top of the bowl and establish the rim. Then they would determine the outside profile and commence ▶



**Pat Kramer**, *Māna 'ai*, 2005, *Hau*, 4" × 6" (10cm × 15cm)

Photo: Pat Kramer



**Pat Kramer**, *Kū'oho*, 2010, *Kolohala* (pheasantwood), 9½" × 12" (24cm × 30cm)

Photo: Pat Kramer



**Alani Apio**, *Ipukai*, 1995, *Kou*, 7" × 17" (18cm × 43cm)

Photo: Hal Lum

hollowing the inside by cutting the tiered ledges Brigham mentions. They worked their way down to the bottom of the bowl, alternating between hollowing down and making ledges. There is no evidence that Hawaiian makers split logs, so there was leftover wood since they did not include the pith.

Large, wide bowls were sometimes carved from crotches and, in that case, the piths could be included. It is interesting that this is comparable to how we work on sidegrain bowls today using modern lathes. We still form the outside, determine the rim, and, frequently, hollow the inside by cutting a series of ledges.

**Alani Apio,**

*'Umeke 'aina, 1996, Kou crotch, 5½" x 10" (14cm x 25cm)*

*'Umeke 'aina* (refuse bowls) were carried by trusted servants of *ali'i* (ruling class), usually lower-ranked *ali'i* themselves. The rope made *'umeke 'aina* easier to carry.

Photo: Hal Lum



*Poho kuoho* bowls were cut in the same way as facegrain bowls, but the pith was included. The makers, again, established the rim, then shaped the outside. Kekahuna states that tall bowls were sometimes hollowed by fire, quickening the hollowing process. This would be done in several steps with the maker going between burning to a certain depth, then carving down to it, then burning again, and so forth until achieving the desired depth. The maker placed flat stones around the bowl walls to act as heat blocks and help direct the fire downwards. After establishing the bowl depth, the craftsman would resume

hollowing and refining the inside curve. The burning method could only be used on completely dry wood; this slowed the cutting process. Presumably, there was a bit of catch-22 in choosing between wet or dry wood for a tall bowl.

Traditional, pre-Western-contact, tall bowls generally have a thin rim that widens downwards along the wall and becomes much thicker at the bottom, adding some weight. This helped tall, round-bottomed bowls remain upright and stable. Alani Apio states he has seen some pre-Western-contact *'umeke puahala* with even ¼" (6mm) wall thicknesses that are a foot tall.

For the very tall deep bowls, such as the *puahala*, the makers carved them with straight stone adzes and used a sort of stone hammer or a kind of chisel for the time. A modern *puahala* will generally have an even wall thickness throughout and the outside walls don't always slant inwards quite as much. Modern bowl turners will frequently put a small indent in the outside bottom of the bowl so it will stand upright on shelves and tables.

Travelers brought iron tools to Hawai'i in the 1800s and modern lathes in the 1830s. Initially, the missionaries brought lathes for making furniture. Jenkins states, "The perfection of machine-made bowls would have been attractive to the Hawaiians, and the number of bowls that survived from the early post-Western contact period indicates that they were prized. There is, however, very little information concerning lathe-turned bowls until the 1870s, when the *kou* tree had become scarce and the Hawaiian bowl makers had disappeared." Jenkins notes that collecting Hawaiian *'umeke* became popular in the 1880s.

It is obvious today their popularity has never waned. Collectors from all over the world visit Hawai'i to purchase *'umeke lā'au*.

**Finishing the bowls**

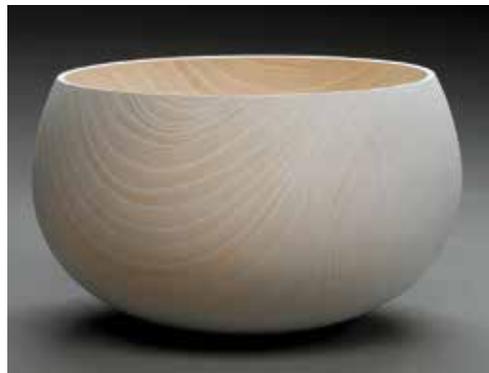
In Kekahuna's paper, he states that bowls intended for food were soaked



**Bill Luce,** *Untitled, 2004, Big leaf maple burl, 3" x 4½" (8cm x 11cm)*

When this bowl was made, Bill Luce had never seen Hawaiian bowls but was making similar refined shapes in his own quest for pure form. This bowl seems to be a perfect *māna 'ai*, given its size and shape. It's interesting that Bill did the very modern practices of bleaching and sandblasting, yet the exquisite form is still the star.

Photo: Bill Luce



**Bill Luce,** *Naked, 2005, Ash (glassbeaded and bleached), 5½" x 9" (14cm x 23cm)*

This bowl also reads as an *'umeke lā'au*. Its simple form is highlighted by the variations in the grain from glassbeading.

Photo: Jonathan McQuire

in stages to remove bitterness the wood could impart to foods. It was a lengthy process that involved soaking the bowls in the ocean, drying them, placing the waste of taro (*kalo*) or sweet potato (*'uala*) in them, and repeating until the bitterness had been lessened. They also placed fermented *poi* or sweet potato *poi* in the bowls and left it for about a week. It was discarded and fresh water was put in the bowls for about two days. This process was repeated until the bitterness was leached from the *'umeke lā'au*.

Kekahuna states that when the smoothing had been done with various kinds of pumice-stone and perhaps with the skins of shark or stingrays, they began polishing the *'umeke*. The Hawaiian bowl makers applied *kukui* oil in incremental stages. For the initial seal, they applied a few drops on their hands and rubbed it into the wood. Their hands heated the oil and helped spread it. It was important to use just the right amount of *kukui* oil, as too much would darken the wood and obscure the grain. They then put some oil onto *ulu* (breadfruit) or bamboo leaves and vigorously rubbed the bowls; at this point a luster would appear. For the final finish, they applied *kukui* oil to *kapa*, which they used as a polishing cloth for a deep, sealed lustrous finish. *Kapa* is a traditional Hawaiian cloth made from specific varieties of paper mulberry (*wauke*).

Raw *kukui* nut oil was only used on the outside of bowls since it has an intense odor, can impart a taste to the food, and is a purgative. Bowl finishing was a lengthy process; according to Kekahuna, it could take as long as two weeks. The Hawaiian *'umeke* were the most highly finished throughout the Pacific. Part of the reason is that other cultures used coconut oil for finish, which darkened the wood and hid the grain.

According to Kekahuna, the insides of bowls were finished with roasted *kukui* nut oil, which sealed the pores of the wood and helped prevent disease.



**Alani Apio,**  
*Puahala* in *milo*;  
*Pālewa* in *kou*;  
*Kū'oho* in *kou*,  
1996, largest  
(*Puahala*) is 13" x  
10" (33cm x 25cm)

Photo: Hal Lum

### Repairing, or patching, the bowls

The Hawaiian makers were also experts at patching *'umeke*. Jenkins states, "That previous owners cared enough about preserving a bowl to have it repaired when damaged is thought to be evidence of how highly it was valued. Repairs on old wooden bowls are considered, therefore, to be marks of beauty and worth." That belief continues today and many of today's turners in Hawai'i repair a crack with our modern glues then add the same patches the ancient Hawaiian people used, although at times the patches are strictly cosmetic. Jenkins also states that many ancient bowls were repaired as they were carved, when makers discovered weak spots in the wood.

When writing of repairing *'umeke*, Kekahuna states, "There are six methods used in this part of the work that are known to me, with their individual names, and the practice followed by those skilled in this branch of work." The sixth method refers to gourd repair and is not included here. Kekahuna writes that the five used for wooden bowls are "...*pewa* (crotch or fishtail), *huini* (sharp point or peg of wood), *kepakepa* (cut on a bevel or bevels), *poho* (to patch decayed or broken places) *kiki* (plug)..."

Both ancient and modern makers sometimes have placed *huini* around a *poho* or at either end of a *pewa* to help hold them in place. The *poho*, usually a

square or rectangle, was generally used to strengthen a weak section of the bowl. The *huini*, *pewa*, and *kepakepa* were often made from *kauila*, an extremely hard wood that is now very rare.

The most prevalent patch today is the *pewa*, commonly known as the "butterfly patch" in English. One wonders if the *pewa* originated in Hawai'i and was taken to other places by explorers. In the old days, many patches were made from the same wood as their bowls, but some makers today use a contrasting wood.

### Final thoughts

There is still a lot of mystery surrounding Hawaiian bowls. It is heartening to see that a culture once so interrupted and decimated has been able to thrive today. If you want to find out more about Hawaiian bowls, Jenkins' *The Hawaiian Calabash* is a useful source. It is out of print, but copies can frequently be found on used-book websites. In Hawai'i, the Bishop Museum and the Honolulu Museum of Art have extensive Hawaiian bowl collections, with the Bishop having the largest. Outside of Hawai'i, the Peabody Essex Museum has the largest collection of Hawaiian artifacts, including *'umeke*. ■

*Sharon Doughtie has lived in Hawai'i since 1975 and enjoys being inspired by her beautiful surroundings and making work in her studio in Kailua on O'ahu. For more, visit [instagram.com/sharondoughtie](https://www.instagram.com/sharondoughtie).*