

Poi and its Preparation

(copy in the Cook's notes)

Poi pounding was mostly done by men but women did it when necessary.

I learned to pound poi when I was eight years old with a cousin (boy) from Puna who was about the same age. It was the custom among my people that the very first batch of poi must be eaten entirely by the pounder. So we were cautioned by our instructor, and aunt, to do our work carefully and well lest the poi be lumpy. We had to eat our first poi, lumpy or not. An old saying was used as a reminder, "Hana ino ka lima, ai ino ka waha" or "Careless work with the hands, puts bad food into the mouth". My hair was wound up in a tight coil lest a hair drop into the poi.

Some years ago, we saw on one of the floats on a Kamehameha Day Parade, a woman pounding poi with hair flowing free and crowned with a feather lei. It made a very pretty picture but it was not done that way. Hair was coiled up to prevent any from getting into the poi and feather leis were under no condition worn when making poi.

From the time we were big enough and wanted to help, we pulled off the skins (ili) of cooked taros and passed them over to the peelers (poe ihi) who scraped the taros clean and smooth with opihi shells. These opihi shells were kept in a small gourd when not in use. The scrapings called ili kana were saved for the dogs, pigs or chickens. Every Hawaiian family at that time kept a few chickens or a pig.

The poi board was washed and put out in the sun a little while before using it. The stone pounder too, was washed.

The time taken in poi pounding depended on the kind of taro. The laaloo and ka-i taros hardened as they cooled and when cold, it was practically impossible to pound them. The reason why much of these taros were planted was that they kept much longer in the field without becoming watery and gummy (loliloli). Taro that is loliloli is unfit for human consumption. Taros that matured quickly usually spoiled as quickly.

In 1935, Dr. Handy, Kenneth Emory and I went to the Koolau Poi Factory at Kaneohe to interview Kalani who ran the poi mill for his nephew-in-law, John Jones. We talked of different variety of taros and then spoke of the ka-i. Kalani told us that all the other varieties they had needed but one grinding in the mill but the ka-i had to be ground two or three times and five buckets full of water before it was ready for the market. The five buckets of water was the amount required for a barrel of ka-i poi. When sent to Honolulu, the ka-i poi was sold first, if possible, for the ka-i poi hardened over night and had to taken back to the factory to be re-ground.

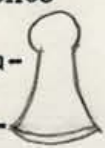
In Hawaii, most of our taros were laaloa. Although it was not easy to pound, one planting of laaloa was equal to two of the softer varieties.

Time could be taken with the softer varieties of taro. One could finish peeling and then sit down to pound. With the hard varieties, peeling and pound- ing went on at the same time. Several people were needed for this and children helped by pulling off the skins (hoopohole) of the taro. The peelers passed the taros, still hot, to the pounder to mash.

A taro, just beginning to become loliloli or watery is gummy. In the beginning this gummy stage (ulika) is not at all bad and good to chew. In the advanced stage, it is only good for hogs.

The first step in poi pounding was the pakiki. A taro was held on the board with the left hand and the stone, held by the right was slightly tilted with the knob (poheoheo) toward the worker. The taro was broken into fine pieces by the rim (ka'e) of the stone. After several pieces had thus been broken up, a very little water was added by dipping the fingers in water and slipping the poheoheo moist hand under the mass to prevent its sticking to the board.

ku'au-
ka'e-



The mass of mashed taro was brought back on itself from outer edge to center and pounded. If some of the taros had just begun to be watery due to an overripe condition, the stone was worked back and forth (anai) on the pounded taro to break up any particles that had a tendency to

form hard lumps. If the taros were in a perfect state of maturity there was no need to work the stone back and forth. (If over ripe it would be a little gummy and watery, if too young taro is too flaky). Every now and then the fingers were dipped in water, slid under the mass, the edges turned back toward the middle and pounded. This pounding was called paku'iku'i. This kept up until the mashed taro became one mass of hard poi. This stage was called, "hui ka ai", or "all in one".

If this poi was to be sent to a relative some distance away, the pounding stopped at this stage. Ti leaves were washed clean, and laid in a row overlapping each other. The poi was laid on the clean ti leaves, a taro or two stuck into the hard poi for the relative to eat and the whole made into a neat bundle called pa'i ai. The person to whom it was sent, placed the poi on his board and continued with the process of pounding.

The next step was the hoopoha. More water was needed but not too much at a time. The moistened fingers were still run under the mass and edges of the poi turned back. The fingers of the left hand were moistened and the bottom of the stone moistened by them every now and then. This was done by giving the bottom of the stone a quick pat.

When it reached the right consistency, that is perfectly smooth, the pounding stopped and the whole dropped into a calabash. This is the stage in which poi is sold commercially.

If this poi was for our own family use, the work did not stop there. The poi was kneaded on the board, just as one kneads dough for bread. Water is added, a very little at a time. This process was called poho. It should not be too soft but a little softer than the stage now sold commercially in the markets. This kneading process discouraged the hardening of poi over night, as some hard taros had a habit of doing, like the ka-i for instance.

Hawaiians, as a general rule, do not care for fresh poi but prefer it a day old, just as it begins to sour. Fresh poi was fed to infants and invalids.

Fresh poi is called poi ko'eko'e or insipid poi.

Mixing.

The next day, the poi was mixed. The amount to be mixed depended on the number of people who were to eat it. Poi mixing is called hoowali ai. Care was always taken not to add too much water at once or lumps (hakuhaku) would form. Poi during making was put into gourds usually (Kau). Sometimes in the wooden calabashes in which it was stored- called kumau (thick at the bottom to prevent tipping). Poi was always mixed by hand. Working the poi so that it was forced between the fingers was called opaopā. Now and then the thumb side of the hand was worked upward against the side of the container to break any lumps that might be in the poi. This was called ko. The poi should be soft, but not so soft that it would not stay on the fingers when dipped up. Very soft poi for invalids was called ai hehee or ai kakale.

General Notes on Poi.

Poi containers were always kept covered between meals. This was not only to keep dust and insects out but to keep the poi from drying.

Mixed poi, when exposed, forms a hardened crust (papaa) on the surface. Hard poi, not softened by the poho process, makes very bad poi when allowed to dry and hardened. Even if one moistens and re-pounds it, the poi becomes grainy (oneone).

Sour poi forms air bubbles on the surface. These bubbles are called pohā. The longer the poi remains the more bubbly and sour it becomes. Sour poi was never thrown away by my people but used to mix with very fresh poi.

My old grandmother would not waste any poi no matter if it was grainy or sour. She used to say, "Throw poi away now and some day it will keep its distance, (Hoolei i ka ai a hiki mai ka la e nana mai ai ka ai ia oe). She would not discuss any business before an open poi bowl. No request was granted if one asked during a meal. The reply was, "Haloa does not agree" (Hoole o Haloa).

The son of Wakea by his daughter Hoochokukalani was Haloa who was born in the form of a taro. Many chiefs traced their genealogies to Haloa. He was

an ancestor that was regarded as being god-like.

Therefore, to throw away poi, was to my grandmother, an act of sacrilege. Not only she felt so, but almost all of the country folks of southern Hawaii. This idea had been instilled into the minds of their children.

These country folks did not strain poi. Their descendants do, that is, most of them. The lesson that was early taught was to peel the taro clean, to wash and sun the poi board and to be careful in pounding the poi. There was no need for a strainer.

Putting the poi containers out in the sun was strictly the rule. The sourness of the poi seemed to get into the wooden or gourd containers in some way. When fresh poi was put into such a container, the poi soured more rapidly. This condition was called kualani. A container that had been put out in the sun after washing did not help in souring the poi.

Because of the importance of poi, it was always referred to as ai or food. Poi and fish was called "food" and fish (ai me ka i'a).

This is the story, told in our district, of how the by word, "Hoi i Hilea" came about. Kohaikalani was the chief at that time and he resided temporarily at Punaluu. His steward (ai puupuu) saw that the supply of poi was running low and sent word to the farmers in the upland to bring some down on a certain day. Each group came, bringing their poi to the steward. He examined each supply carefully and found them all clean except the poi from upper Hilea. The Hilea poi was so carelessly prepared that bits of peeling were mixed with it. The makers of this poi was put to death. The saying, "Hoi i Hilea i kalo ekaeka" (Go to Hilea where dirty taros grow) is the equivalent of, "You dirty pig!" The same thought is implied.

Eating.

Poi was the principal food of the Hawaiians and sweet potato came next. Taro cooked but unpounded was called kupuu. The names given to poi were o and komou. Ku-mau was the name for the large poi calabash and it meant "constant"

as the food it contained was constantly eaten.

As long as there was poi a Hawaiian could get along with even so little as a bit of kukui nut relish and salt. Cooked popolo greens and poi made a meal or a little sea weed and poi. I mean by this that if a Hawaiian did not have fish but much poi, he managed very well if he had just a little relish or greens.

Children were taught to eat plenty of poi but not too much meats of any kind. A mother or father would remind a child who ate a little poi and took a big piece of fish, "E hoonuu i ka ai", or "Eat more poi". One who ate more fish or meat was criticized

Individual poi bowls belong to a later day and began here in the city where civilization was more advanced. In the country places of a quarter of a century or more ago, several people dipped into the same calabash. Hands were always washed clean before and after eating. A child who failed in washing his hands was soundly scolded and sometimes slapped.

The dipping up of poi with the fingers was called miki. With one finger, miki papakahi and with two fingers miki papalua. Three fingers was gluttonous, a thing to be ashamed of.

In dipping up poi with the fingers one should not draw the fingers through the poi backwards. That was called ai koe or ai kihelu and was not considered polite. The fingers should not be wide apart when dipping poi. The proper way was to make a circular motion in the poi with fingers before bringing the poi up. Those who have had some practise could talk and keep the poi balanced on the fingers for several minutes without dropping at bit. To keep the poi balanced the hand waved to and fro. Many of the older Hawaiians can balance poi on the finger tips.

It was not polite for two persons to dip into the poi calabash at the same time lest one daub some on the hand of the other. One should always wait until the other had withdrawn his hand.

It was not proper to run one's finger inside of the calabash to work the

poi that adhered to the walls down to the mass below while another was eating. The last person ^{to} eat ran his index finger around to remove any poi that adhered to the walls of the calabash. This act was called kahi. To do so before another had finished was a broad hint that he'd better quit eating and that, was decidedly rude. To put away the poi calabash after eating without removing the poi that clung to the walls was considered disgraceful and drew many unpleasant remarks from others. One of the commonest of remarks was that a person who did not have sense enough to clean the walls of his calabash would not have sense enough to wipe his seat clean after voiding (Pau pono ole i ke kahi; pau pono ole i ka haleu).

Any person who came to call, whether stranger or acquaintance was asked to partake of food. As soon as the greeting was over, the first thing said was "E ai", or "Have something to eat". The visitor was welcome to any food in the house, whether the finest of fish or the last bit of relish with poi. If the guest was hungry, the host made ready and sat down to eat if it was his meal time otherwise the guest ate alone. The guest was urged to eat his fill, "Ai a maona", or "Eat your fill". The host, if he was not so very hungry, might eat a little at a time but he should not finish eating before his guest did. The guest might feel embarrassed at eating so long and stop before he had had enough, so the host prolonged his eating for the comfort of his guest.

It did not matter at all at what time of day a guest arrived, he was always asked to eat.

Children were taught not to watch a person eat. Nana pono i ka wa e ai ana or watching a person while he ate denoted lack of training on the part of the parents.

To recount the amount of food eaten was also improper.

We think nothing today of saying, "John ate six sandwiches for tea", but in the days of my aged grandmother, I was trained to forget how many sweet potatoes and dried fish a guest ate. Such things as recounting was called helu (counting) and not done by polite society.

Eating was never done behind closed doors. Only stingy people, who were generally despised, ate with their doors closed. A Hawaiian ate with doors wide open and whoever passed the door, stranger or acquaintance was hailed and invited to come and eat. "Mai e ai", or "Come and eat", was heard at any time of the day if some one was having his meal. Any one who might be hungry could answer, "Ae, mahalo" (Yes, thank you) and go in to eat but if he was not hungry he would say, "Aole, mahalo, ua ai mai nei au", (No thank you, I have eaten).

There were no set time for meals. One ate when one felt hungry. Hawaiians preferred working very early in the morning when it was cool. At ten o'clock or so the sun began to feel warm and that was the time to take a bath to remove the soil of labor. After that, a meal and then some indoor work or a good midday nap if one was tired.

In Kau, the natives ate their evening meals before dark, never after night had fallen. Many a tale were told by the old folks of the hungry ghosts that wandered about at night and if any came to a house where someone was eating, they invited themselves to partake of food. The presence of these uninvited guests was detected by an odor not unlike carrion. As no one particularly cared for such guests, meals were eaten before the sun sank in the west. In taking food from one place to another at night, green ti leaves were tied to it as a warning to ghosts to leave it alone.

The height of rudeness was for some one to break wind while another was eating. This was unpardonable.

Feeding.

I know of but three ways in which poi was fed to a child. To dip up poi with the index finger and convey it directly to the child's mouth was called ai kihele. Small children were often fed in this way.

The kau was another way but it was preferable for children of two years and up. The child tilted his head back and opened his mouth wide. The feeder dipped up poi with two fingers and holding them several inches above, allowed the poi to drop off into the open mouth. I was fed this way by my grandmother

when I was a small girl and I liked it because, to me, it was quite a fascinating game to have a wad of poi drop into the mouth from above.

The pu-a was the third way. The feeder took some meat and poi into his own mouth and masticated the food. Then it was conveyed from the mouth of the feeder to the mouth of the child. Many children were fed in this way and liked it. They would be fed in no other way but my grandmother preferred the ka-u for me as she felt it gave me a better appetite.