NETTED FEATHER ROBES

BY GERTRUDE WHITING

THE nets of the South Sea Islands were designed for many uses ranging from the coarse net of *olonà* used by the humble fisherman to the delicate mesh that forms the background or lining of the feather cloak worn by the royal chieftain. This filet was made of *olonà* bark fibre from the *Touchardia latifolia*, scraped by men with a tortoise bone or upon wooden distal sticks on to a pandanus palm mat, spun by them, rolling the fibres by hand upon the thigh as in other primitive countries, and netted. Into each mesh was run a tuft of two or three tiny feather nibs. These were bent over and tied together around the filet mesh, making them harder to pull out from the cape than to extract from the skin of the bird.

The birds were caught—for this practice and art have almost disappeared before the import of practical woven stuffs—by spreading sticky, aromatic flower pastes (bird lime), by snares, and by the amusing trick of hiding in dense foliage with one's hand through the base of a large flower. The birds—all long-billed honey-suckers—would plunge their beaks deep into the flower cups and be caught! It was customary to snare birds just before the molting season, so that they were not necessarily killed. All feathers were most carefully kept and never wasted. Hawaiians practised in this regard what we too often only preach: "What you cannot make, you must not break."

The feathers from each creature were kept in bunches, at times, from

A MAN OF THE SANDWICH ISLANDS WITH HIS HELMET

fifteen to twenty feathers. Hawaiians, they say, count and calculate everything. Professional gatherers were allowed to pay their taxes in feathers, and four little plumes were accounted a dollar's worth; so one can easily imagine how King Kamehameha's *mamo* cloak has come to be called the *Million Dollar Cloak*. There are:

1. Black *iwa* feathers (*Fregata aquila*);

2. the *oo* (*Acrulocercus nobilis*, Wilson), a black bird with two yellow feathers, one on each side. With these black-tipped yellow feathers a few tiny red ones are sometimes introduced to brighten the effect.

3. The scarlet *liwi* (*Vestiaria coccines*, Reichenbach);

4. The crimson *apapane;*

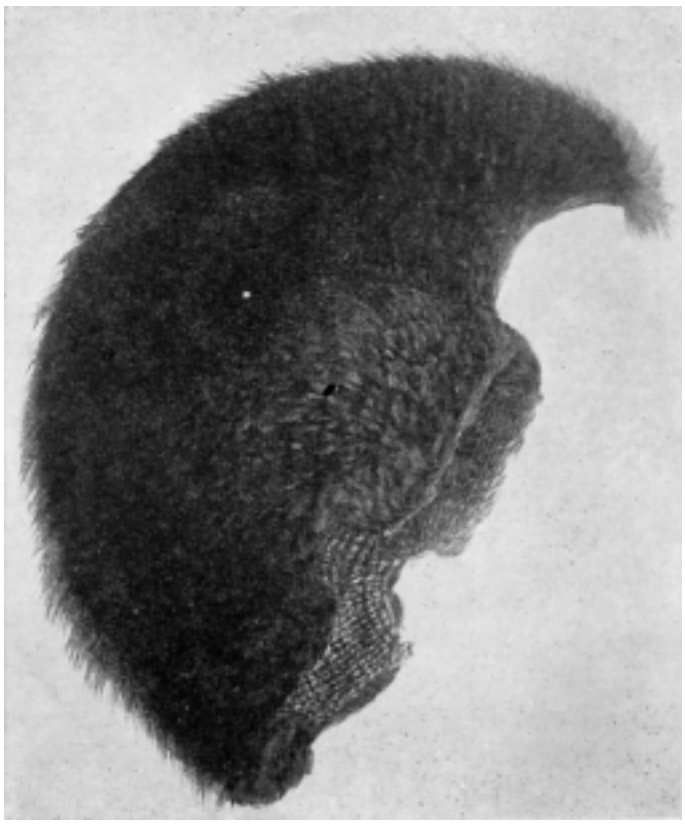
5. The green *ou;*

6. Light green *amakihi;* and

7. The soft golden orange plumed *mamos* (*Drepanis pacifica*, Temminck), now gone, alas! forever, somehow exterminated, we are told. (Partly by the mongoose, introduced to decimate rats.) The *mamos* were held in highest esteem, and indeed all others pale before them.

Such a cloak was completed in time to be worn by the great uniter of the Sandwich Islands, King Kamehameha I. It has been fitted with a modern deep red velvet collar band and woven metallic cord. Another long cloak, yellow, has a strip of orange *mamo* down each side of the front. Its net was woven in twenty-five sections, hence an irregular surface. It was worn by Kamehameha's cousin, who was killed by the former in battle.

The great length of these pieces indicates the giant size of the old-time chiefs. A golden polka-dotted *Liwi* cloak with *olonà* fibre cords for fastening, indicates a wearer past seven feet tall, for the large necks show that the cloaks were not meant to fit up tight, and they were never allowed to trail. Garments were always made for specific individuals. This red specimen shows a few *mamo* disks, inserted no doubt, because the maker had a little orange *mamo* stock on hand, too precious to lie a-wasting. The garment was once in use as a sleigh-robe in New York City. It had been presented to a sea-captain—named Joy, I believe; for the natives had only canoes, hence the commander of a large vessel was looked upon as a king of the ocean, and treated accordingly. Captain Cook was considered a veritable god, and Kamehameha donned his



KING KAUMUALII'S FEATHER HELMET SHOWING NETTED INTERIOR.

best cloak when receiving Cook. Indeed, the Hawaiian Kings were, I believe, always tall; perhaps of a family originally honored because of its dominating stature. The bold yellow-disked, red feather cloak was taken from the Oahu Islanders by Kamehameha of Hawaii.

Besides the cloaks, the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum has a valuable collection of large and small shoulder capes—all made and used by men only, whether for coronations, great councils, or when leading in battle. This entry of a delicate and as it seems to us, rather feminine fabric, into the field of battle, reminds one of the Stuart days of falling lace collars, lying upon the mens' polished steel armor; and of the later hurried battle of Steinkerk, when cavaliers with their handsome large lace jabots—henceforth to be known as Steinkerks—were routed from the salon to the saddle, fastening the jabots through their buttonholes, as fireman-like, they strapped and buckled while they rode, rushing to the rescue.

The colors of these Bishop Museum capes and cloaks are four in number—yellow, orange, red, and black. The designs are mainly of triangles, circular plaques, crescents and open half-crescent wishbones. In most cases the pattern is symmetrically balanced: but the "wishbone" cape I saw in the Bishop Museum balances a bit occultly.

These designs when the robes were worn and hanging in graceful folds, would be greatly enhanced. Mexican feather work proves that had the artist wished to be pictorial instead of severely simple, he could have, without technical hindrance from the materials in which he worked. These, on the contrary, left him as free as an embroiderer.

Like all early races, these islanders' conduct was molded in part according to a moon cult. A present-day occult theory claims that since the moon is strong enough to move the tides, it must naturally attract and repulse all lesser objects, such as mere humans. These, therefore, should commence all enterprises upon the moon's increase that favoring luck may be with them. Hair, contrary to the hairdressers' habit, should be trimmed upon the decrease when the saps and juices throughout the forest are flowing back towards the roots, not when it is moving toward the branches, which would then bleed if cut. Banana growers, we are told, know and heed this. They must strip bunches into which the sap has passed, or the cut bunch of bananas would have in it no wherewithal with which to ripen. Cats' eyes, they tell us, are wide or narrow ac-

KING KAMEHAMEHA WEARING HIS MAMO CLOAK.

cording to the ebb or flow of the tide. This is something easily observed! So the Hawaiians greatly venerated the moon, new or full, and depicted the crescent or the disk upon their products. Planting and fishing are still held subject to the rule of the moon, which, as in other eastern countries, has its twenty-eight named days or *houses*.

Carefully preserved in the dark, though shown upon occasion by Mrs. Webb, the Hawaiian keeper and docent, is an enormous yellow feather *pa'u* or woman's garment twenty feet eight inches long. Though in places the fragile old net of some of the mantles—weighing about six pounds—is worn bare, in the *pa'u* all is intact, except that its great length was cut in two, the two strips of a yard's width each being sewn together as a "throw" to spread upon the throne and to form a pall for royal biers. This *pa'u* before division, was accorded a final official wearing—though she protested it was too old-fashioned, and secretly, it is probable, dreaded the heat of its many yards wound round her—by Princess Nahiernaena, in honor of the visit to Honolulu of Lord Byron, cousin of the poet, in 1825. He had officially escorted home from England the bodies of the late Hawaiian king and queen—Liholiho and Kamamalu. In the cloaks, the filet mesh is not parallel to the dipping curve of the lower border, but follows a lesser curve; and the feathers in some wraps seem to fill irregular patches. Kamehameha's gorgeous *mamo* garment possesses the added beauty, however, of painstaking make-up, each tiny scrap of feather in successive position, over-lapping its fellow like a shingle. After the birds were caught, and their feathers plucked, we are told that these were tied in little bunches, brought from the wilds to the settlement or the hut, at least, of the craftsman-artisan; and that he, after the net was made, might require a year to assort and attach the thousands of tiny plumes. This is the last feather garment of history.

A little modern dyed feather-work has been done by women: but Hawaiian women never wore feathers—it was probably *kapu* (taboo). It takes these workers from three to four weeks to make a small cape, so a man steadily at work upon a large cloak, probably took a year to complete it.

As a token of sympathy and appreciation, Lady Franklin, come for news of her husband's lost arctic expedition, was given by the Hawaiian

king upon her departure after a fruitless search, a charming *oo* shoulder cape.

Some dyed albatross *kahilis*—large handsome processional standards, like gigantic, drum-majors' shakos—are in the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum and in Queen Emma's house in Honolulu.

One red cloak of the Bishop collection has been washed with soap and water, perceptibly brightening its lustre.

Another of these scarlet pieces is ornamented with extensive crescents of sea-birds' plumes, placed wrong side out, showing the white spots of the under side. This garment was also used as a sleigh-robe—by the Joy family of Boston, given it perhaps as a tribute in the days when the Whites themselves were *rarœ avies*. Other feather pieces—helmets, war god heads borne to battle, I presume, upon upright poles; *kahilis*, black throughout when destined for the funeral cortège—have been purchased or taken in exchange from the British and other museums. In England there are now some nineteen specimens.

At the de Pury Palace or memorial museum in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, is preserved a splendid collection of similar feather fabrics from old Brazil.

A different sort of feather fabric came during the Boxer Uprising in China from out the Forbidden City of Peking: another royal, nay, altogether imperial, hanging or cover cloth, but *woven* of myriads of humming birds' feather fibres; how spun, I do not know. This large cloth is said to have somewhere a mate. They are of a deep green-gray scintillating metallic blue, of silky texture and are covered with little personages and scroll work. One was shown by Mrs. Guy Antrobus two years ago in New York: but I failed this winter to find the twin cloth in the Imperial Museum of the Purple City of Peking.