



Mai'a

Musa x paradisiaca

Mai'a, banana, has been cultivated for food and fiber for millennia. About thirty-five banana species originate in high-rainfall tropical climates across the broad area from eastern India to the Solomon Islands and south to Australia. These species, through hybridization, have produced many varieties. The Hawaiian *mai'a* derives from hybrids developed in the area centered in Indonesia. Some authorities estimate as many as seventy different kinds of *mai'a* were grown by Hawaiians in pre-contact times. Hawaiian *lei* makers used the leaves for *lei* and also used fibers extracted from the leaf bases of certain varieties. Among other functions, *mai'a* stems and leaves were used in cooking and serving food and in medical applications; the leaves and fruit were used in religious ceremonies. The fruit of most varieties were *kapu* (forbidden) to women.

Several styles of banana-leaf *lei* worn by men are described in detail by the early botanist Gaudichaud.²⁵ *Mai'a* is associated with the god Kanaloa. The relationship between Kanaloa and the bubbling fresh water, the water of life, is classical. See also *koali* (p. 44) and *'awapuhi* (p. 14) for two other *lei* incorporating *mai'a*.

*Kawaiolimaikamapuna Hoe,
Waiāhole, O'ahu*



*Manomano nā Kanaloa
No Kanaloa-i-ka-wai-pua'i
No moho ke kiu o ka wai ola
I māno wai ka lei lau lau mai'a
Ua kanaloa nā māno wai punapuna*

Numerous are the manifestations of Kanaloa
For Kanaloa of the bubbling fresh water
And for Kamohoali'i seeker of this water of life
To channel this water of life, we wear the
 banana-leaf *lei*
Secure are the bubbling springs

—P. K. K.