Koa Canoes for the Brave

By Russ and Peg Apple

HAWAII's annual outrigger canoe racing season is approaching. Thousands of paddlers on all islands are in training and trying to earn seats in the racing crews.

One of Hawaii's two rival outrigger canoe racing associations insists that its member clubs race in canoes carved from logs of koa, a native Hawaiian hardwood. (Both associations practice in canoes of molded fiberglass hulls, and one association races exclusively in fiberglass hulls.)

Outrigger canoes carved from single koa logs are expensive in dollars and valued with loving aloha by their paddlers, former paddlers, coaches, handlers and makers.

EACH KOA HULL has a personal name said almost in reverence, even by paddlers in canoes it has just beaten across the finish line.

New koa hulls are hard to come by. Suitable logs are rare in Hawaii's forests, expensive to deliver to civilization, and their carving into good hulls takes the skill of a wood sculptor who also understands Hawaiian waters, and Hawaiian ways.

Outrigger canoes carved from single koa logs have floated offshore and between Hawaiian islands for a thousand years.

THEIR MAKING was a sacred, priestly profession in ancient Hawaii. Canoe making skills and some lore are still handed down from father to son and from master carver to selected apprentices.

Hawaiian canoe makers impart more than shape to their wood products. They endow each hull with a spiritual power.

Good paddlers know this, nurture the canoe's spirit, and train hard to match and be worthy of the koa hull. They join with the hull to make a team of seven: six paddlers and one koa canoe. They will cheer the canoe and its name before a race, and visit the stored hull in the winter season.

ANCIENT HAWAIIAN sacredness of even the word *koa*, when applied to its major meanings of tree, wood or human qualities, has survived to some extent in Hawaii's paddling world.

Novice paddlers in their first season learn from older club members that their koa racer is more than just another canoe carved from wood. It is carved from koa, a sacred wood of ancient Hawaii.

"*E ola koa*" was an honored saying in ancient and historic Hawaii. It meant "live like a koa," that is, strong and long.

To Hawaiians, *koa* means the qualities called in English, "brave," "bold," "fearless" and "valiant."

Koa was also the term applied to a warrior or soldier, a man most admired in ancient Hawaii.

A small koa tree was oftimes placed on the hula altar and dedicated to Lake, goddess of the hula. Its purpose was to make the dancer fearless.

Canoes and weapons carved of sacred koa wood were for the exclusive use of chiefs and chiefteses. Through association with products of koa, chiefs increased their own qualities of bravery and strength.

Many paddlers today believe their koa hulls increase their strength and stroke, and that they paddle best when teamed with a koa canoe.