

Chapter 2

Pre European Hawai`i

A complex system of government evolved in Hawai`i. Members of the ruling class were called ali`i. There was a broad variety of rank within the ali`i. High chiefs possessed absolute power comparable in kings in European culture. Kamehameha in the early 1800's was the first king to unite the entire island chain under one rule. Until that time there could be several ruling chiefs on the same island. This created a system of almost constant warfare, both between islands and within the larger islands. One of the first criteria for attaining status as an ali`i besides heritage was being a powerful warrior. It should be noted that the ali`i actually lead their troops into battle in a literal fashion. In some battles the whole fight would be between the ranking ali`i on the two sides. When not involved in an actual conflict the men would be practicing military skills and waging mock battles. One of the most admired attributes of a warrior was the ability to catch a spear that was hurled at him in mid-air. Kamehameha was supposedly unsurpassed at this art.

One would think that all of this warfare would severely reduce the male population of the islands, but that was not the case. Most fighting was actually hand to hand combat. A battle could go on for days with few casualties. The object was to establish your superiority rather than to necessarily kill your opponent. This is related to the American Indian process of counting coup, touching your enemy and escaping unharmed. Although many warriors were killed, the casualties could have been much higher.

As well as prowess in battle, ancestral rank was a critical factor in establishing status as an ali`i. This is why genealogy was extremely important in Hawaiian culture. It is not unusual to this day for Hawaiians to know their ancestors going back for 200 years. This made memory a highly valued trait before the era of written language. Children would play memory games from a very early age. An individual with an excellent memory could thus find a valued role in the community. They would commonly recite an ali`i's ancestry going back over 20 generations. Status could be further increased by marrying well. But unlike many cultures the highest level of status was achieved by marriage between siblings if they were at the top level. This practice of inbreeding lead to a high level of birth defects, and children born with visible defects would be killed

at birth. Though this seems barbaric by today's standards, it was felt to be essential to maintaining a vigorous leadership.

The highest level of chiefs were called kapu moe. It was forbidden for commoners to even look at them or to let the ali`i's shadow fall upon them. These individuals would be at the top of their hierarchy with lower ranking ali`i making up their court, like dukes and duchesses in the European system of monarchy. There was also a position like a prime minister. This individual was called the ali`i nui. Whether male or female this individual wielded considerable power. The presence of the ali`i nui allowed for critical decision making even when chiefs were off at battle, or less commonly when chiefs were killed.

This Hawaiian aristocracy had all of the trappings of a royal class. The distinctive feather capes, which reached to the ground in the highest ranking individuals, were created from the bright red and yellow feathers of hundreds of thousands of birds, which were often released after the prized feathers were removed. The same feathers were used in their arching headdress. Feathers were also used to create tall kahili which preceded the ali`i wherever they went. Commoners were thus warned of the approaching royalty, and could either prostrate themselves on the ground or vacate the area.

The economic system was similar to feudalism in other parts of the world. Ali`i held pie shaped sections of land called ahupua`a. Each unit would have a chief and minor ali`i. They would control a piece of land that extended from the ocean to the mist covered highlands. As they had at their disposal the variety of resources located at various elevations above sea level, they were relatively self sufficient and not highly dependent on trade. The ali`i did not actually own these plots of land, but were granted their use in return for loyalty to the King who owned all of the land. Within an ahupua`a individual families or ohana would occupy an ili which was a narrow strip also running from the mountains to the coast.

The oceans provided fish, shellfish, seaweed, etc. The fish ponds were an interesting and unique use of coastal lands. This was one of the first examples of aquaculture on the planet. Rock walls were built to enclose a small bay. Sections of the wall had small holes that allowed water, small fish fry, and invertebrates to enter. As these fish fed on the marine life in the pond they would grow too large to swim back through the holes and would be trapped. They also used the pond to store their surplus harvest of fish. If they caught more fish than could be readily consumed they would place the excess living fish in the pond. The fish could then be easily netted from the enclosure when needed.

Not surprisingly most of the permanent settlements were located in this coastal region. Middle elevations were best suited for the farming of various kinds of fruit trees and crops. From the uplands they harvested the large trees, such as Koa, that were essential for some of their projects, such as the construction of voyaging canoes. The lucrative Sandalwood trees that played such a vital role in post contact trade in the early 1800's were also found at these higher elevations.

An interesting aspect of this system was the role of the commoners, the maka`ainana. These individuals were in no form slaves or property of the ali`i. They were free to move about at their will, though they would often occupy the same land for generations. While they were occupying a particular parcel of land a portion of their harvest would be shared with the local noble. This would usually take place during the makahiki harvest season in the fall. They would also be available to pitch in to help with various construction projects, or other communal chores. As mentioned previously, the ali`i had absolute power. However if they exercised this power in a ruthless or cruel fashion they risked alienating their subjects, who were free to take their allegiance elsewhere. This would force the ali`i into a certain degree of restraint. Ali`i who abused their subjects routinely would never rise to higher levels as they would be lacking a sufficient number of followers.

Each group of ali`i would also have their kāhuna. Kahuna actually means a highly skilled individual, but it is used here to describe religious leaders. These priests were consulted by the leaders before any important decisions were made. Questions such as when to fish, go into battle, plant crops, etc. would need to be answered by the kahuna before these projects were undertaken. Though they served as trusted advisors, they did not question the authority of the ali`i. The kāhuna carried on very long and complex ceremonies seeking a favorable intervention of the gods. Many of these ceremonies involved recitations of over an hour. In some instances the kahuna could be killed if a mistake was made in the ceremony. This insured a long and complex apprentice period before an individual could rise to this highly valued role.

The major gods of the Hawaiian's religion played an important role in the rich and diverse mythology of Hawai`i. Lengthy volumes have been devoted to this topic. This will be an overview of the four major gods. Kane is considered the major god, and creation stories are often centered around him. Lono is the god whose intercession is sought for fertile soils and a rich harvest. Ku is the god of war and was the chief god of Kamehameha. The last of the four, Kanaloa is

considered the god of the Sea. These gods are different from traditional gods in that they take on various characteristics in their different forms. For example Kane-hekili is lightning. Ku-mokuhali`i is the god of the upland forest where the large trees needed to construct the ocean-going canoes are found. He was therefore venerated by canoe builders.

There are a large number of minor gods. The most famous of these is probably Pele, the goddess of volcanoes. Inhabitants of the island of Hawai`i, her current home, still frequently make offerings to Pele. Her home in Halema`uma`u in Hawai`i Volcanoes National Park is a frequent stop for travelers to the island. It should be obvious that this was a nature-based religion. Hawaiians have always been very much in touch with the land or aina. Along with these universal gods, each family had their own ancestral spirits, called aumakua. They were often a fish or some other animal that had a particular significance to that family. The men of the family would make daily offerings to these spirits. Family members would make great efforts not to disturb their aumakua, whether it be a shark, sea cucumber, caterpillar, or other life form.

Heiau, or temples, were created to honor these gods. The size would vary from small platforms sometimes created from one rock, to elaborate structures that could take years to construct. These larger heiau were raised platforms created from large numbers of stones. They would be solid rather than just walls. It would not be unusual for one to be 70 by 40 feet and 12 feet thick. Rocks were passed from great distances by people lined up in a long chain, in a bucket-brigade fashion. The top of these platforms would often contain carved wooden representations of the gods, an offering tower, and a small hut where the leaders could gather. Heiau dedicated to Ku, the war god, would require periodic human sacrifices. The individual to be offered would preferably by a high ranking ali`i. The individual would not always be killed at the temple. They might have already been killed in battle and then brought to the heiau as an offering. There are a large number of heiau that are still standing and it is not unusual to see fresh offerings of flowers or fruit located in their towers.

A discussion of Hawaiian religion is not complete without a look at the kapu system. A kapu, equivalent to taboo, a word derived from the Polynesian language, means a behavior that is not allowed. Kāpu took two general forms. The first is those things that were universally forbidden, like women eating with men, or commoners interacting with high ali`i. The second form was when a specific action was outlawed for a set period of time. An example of this type of kapu would be when fishermen were forbidden to fish for a specific species of fish

for a month. When Captain George Vancouver gave Kamehameha some cattle a kapu was placed on them for over twenty years. The Ali`i's favorite surfing breaks could be kapu to commoners, as would the best canoe launch sites. Kāpu were therefore the major means that the ali`i used to maintain control over the commoners.

The breaking of a kapu often resulted in death. There was an interesting Hawaiian system for getting a reprieve if a kapu was broken. If the offender could escape and make it to a place of refuge or pu`uhonua he could be granted a pardon by the kahuna and return home with no fear. However making it to one of these locations was anything but easy. Often the main access was from the ocean and there were often dangerous reefs that made getting ashore a tricky proposition. Land access would be obstructed by a well guarded, tall rock wall. People could also gain safety in time of war in these secure havens. An excellent example of a place of refuge can be found today south of Kealākekua Bay on the Kona coast of the island of Hawai`i. Pu`uhonua of Honauanau National Historical Park is being restored to its original condition in the late 1700's.

The Hawaiian family system is the essential element of the social structure of the islands. The main configuration was an extended family, the ohana. As mentioned previously, these ohana would occupy a slice of the ahupua`a and would have houses in the highland rain forest, mid elevation farmlands, and on the coast. Certain family members would live at a particular elevation and participate in whatever subsistence activities were located at that level, such as raising taro and bananas at a mid-elevation homestead. They would give their surplus produce to other ohana members. Coastal members would give surplus fish and seaweed to upper elevation family members. This was not really a barter system but more just sharing your bounty with the rest of your relatives.

Family members tended to spend more time at the coast for many reasons so the largest house would be built near the ocean. Any members of the ohana as well as guests could sleep here. One half of this house would be a raised sleeping platform. It would be covered with a thick layer of mats for sleeping comfort. There was a well defined pattern of who would sleep next to whom. Wives would sleep next to their husbands. Children would sleep in the same area but there was no rough-housing allowed. They had to go outside if they wanted to play.

Unlike contemporary housing customs, there would be a large number of different structures, each with a specific function. All were communal and could be used by all members of the ohana. The largest structure in a settlement would be the hale noa described above. Women of the family had a house called the

hale pea where they would stay while they were menstruating. Men were not allowed to enter the area under penalty of death. Men had their own house called the moa where women were not allowed. Men would eat in this structure as well as make the daily offerings to the family aumakua. There would be other buildings where specific work could be carried out, such as a canoe building shed for men and mat weaving and tapa making structure for women.

Most of the cooking would be done outdoors by the men. The preferred method for a large volume of food was the buried imu oven. A bed of hot coals would be prepared in a shallow pit in advance. Food to be cooked would be wrapped in banana leaves. There would be several bundles of items including both vegetable and animal products arranged on the coals. A wrapped whole hog was often cooked in this manner. The pit would then be filled over with soil and the contents left to cook for many hours. The many commercial luau as well as large Hawaiian family gatherings still cook in this manner. During rainy weather there was a small hut that would be used specifically for cooking.

In early Hawai`i, marriage customs were often quite informal. Sometimes commoners would not even have a ceremony. But people were well aware who was married to whom. Usually the union was one man and one woman. But a man could have more than one wife and a woman could have more than one husband. The first marriage partner would typically have more status than subsequent partners. However, if a first wife did not produce a child and a second wife did, then the second wife would have superior rank. Sexual customs were definitely more relaxed than was the case in western culture. Hawaiians were more monogamous than the stories of the first missionaries would lead you to believe however. The situation mentioned earlier of a sister marrying her brother was far less common than speculated. In the first case it would only be undertaken by ali`i of the highest rank. These ali`i almost always had additional husbands or wives so few of their children would be produced by their relationship with their sibling.

Dance, or hula, took on many forms in Hawai`i. Hula would be performed by both men and women. Some forms of hula were sacred while others were performed for entertainment of both the dancers and audience. Hula played an important role in passing down the oral history from one generation to the next. All hula movements represent a particular action or event and so by following the movements you can tell a story in a most beautiful fashion.

The early Hawaiians definitely had a fondness for sports. Many of these activities were water based activities such as swimming, surfing, and canoe

racing. The swimming ability of these individuals was amazing. Both boys and girls would swim daily from an early age. They would commonly swim distances in excess of a mile. Since so much of their daily life centered around aquatic activities, skill in the water was more of a necessity than a luxury. It is not unusual today to see a group of Hawaiians swim out one-half mile, spear fish for several hours and then return with a nice catch that they speared from depths of up to 100 feet without the use of scuba gear. The breathtaking agility of Hawaiian surfers is dwell know. The ability to ride the waves is even more impressive when you see the crude wooden boards that were used for hundreds of years before the invention of fiberglass. Skill with canoes in heavy surf would be an essential survival skill as well as a sport to these maritime people. The official state sport in Hawai`i today is outrigger canoe racing, so the tradition continues.

Many of the land based sports were related to skills needed in battle, such as wrestling and spear throwing. Sports were designed to test both the athlete's skill and strength. Moving large boulders would be an example of the latter ability.

The major sporting time of the year was the fall harvest festival, the makahiki, in honor of the god Lono. During this three month festival there would be a cessation of all warfare. Rival ohana and ali`i rooted for their favorite athletes in a broad spectrum of both land based and aquatic sports. The winners of these competitions were local heroes and were accorded the status of valiant warriors. It was during a makahiki that Captain Cook, to whom we shall now turn, arrived in Hawai`i.