

# Chiefly Institutions of the Hawaiian Islands

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ANTH 3321- Ancient Hawaii

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5/1/17

## **Introduction**

The topic of chiefly institutions is a multifaceted and complex subject, involving the understanding of many social systems that work together in constructing an institution that maintains the elites' power. This paper discusses how chiefs both established and stayed in power in prehistoric Hawaii. There are many institutions to study, but in discussing just the ones that seem particularly vital to the existence of the chiefdom and later, the archaic state, an understanding can be attained of the strategies used in the creation of authority in the Hawaiian archipelago. This study will look at archaeology from many of the main islands including Kaua'i, Hawai'i, O'ahu, Maui, and Moloka'i and discuss what is known from those sites as well as the oral histories associated with the social systems of Hawaii. For the purposes of this paper, I have organized the structure of Hawaiian chiefly authority in four institutions. Religion is the backbone institution as it enforces and in some cases creates the other institutions. The three others include the monumental architecture, the industry of warfare, and the geo-social hierarchy present on the islands of Hawaii. These institutions make up the framework for a chief's success. Additionally, there are three aspects of Hawaiian society that merely support the institutions that I have categorized. These sociocultural aspects are genealogy, property, and material culture and their influence spans the archipelago. Lastly, it is important to note that every one of these institutions are not stand alone, they all play into each other and in reality, all act simultaneously.

## **Religion**

Religion creates the reason for certain behaviors and justifies community efforts, as it is "a set of strategies for negotiating social inequalities and legitimizing group interests" (Kolb 1994). It is the backbone institution that supports the meaning and purpose behind almost every other institution. Hawaiian religion is temporally based in official temple structure called *Heiau*,

which are found all across the Hawaiian archipelago and vary in size and design (Kirch 1990: 204-222). Within this system of *Heiau* exists a pantheon of four gods; *Kū*, *Lono*, *Kāne*, *Kanaloa* (Valeri 1985). The two major gods are *Kū* and *Lono*, the god of war and the god of fertility. Each of these deities controlled an aspect of Hawaiian life. For example, Priests would hold up white banners and travel to every *ahupua'a* to collect a tribute to the god *Lono*, a “*ho'okupu*” to celebrate the *makahiki* season, which was the season of harvest in Hawaiian religion (Kirch 2012). “The entire *Makahiki* season was ritually encoded, sacred to *Lono*. War was Forbidden,” because at this time taro and sweet potato were becoming of season and it was economically intelligent not to risk the destruction of the new crops. But this role of a god did not just serve purposes for the society, it was also used as a ritualized way to make sure that surpluses could be collected by the *Ali'i*. Religion has successfully aided the chiefs in monitoring the economy.

Another aspect of Hawaiian religion as a chiefly institution is its ability to grant influence with the “the concept of hereditary chiefship, and its associated concepts of *mana* (chiefly power deriving from the gods) and *tapu* (sacredness)” (Kirch 1990: 207). *Mana* is the force and power that is innate in a chief and is what grants him both the right and the influence to rule. And lastly, one of the most important aspects of this chiefly institution is the idea of *kapu* and *noa*. They are merely relative terms that inform the population to pay attention or respect toward a person or thing (Valeri 1985: 84-109). A divine cannot come into contact with a human lest that divine sully its purity.

The role that the institution of religion played on Hawaii was one of social organization, assertion of power, and establishment of influence. As will be seen, all of these work into the other institutions as the backbone of their endeavors.

## **Monumental Architecture**

Coming directly from religion, the establishment of a chief's lasting influence is seen in monumental architecture. What defines monumental architecture is its tendency to be bigger and more elaborate than is practically necessary and can be used by chiefs as a way to constantly reassert their power (Kirch 1990). A common theme between *heiau* on Hawaii is the social demarcation of ritual courts with high walls and *kapu* laid on the unauthorized entrance of the temples. To begin looking at Hawaiian *heiau* structures, the history of research on the structures of the island of Maui provide a wide array of information. Maui is the least studied out of the three biggest islands, but it contains some of the largest *heiau* of the Hawaiian Islands (Kirch 1985). In the 1920s Kenneth Emory conducted surveys of the island but none of his work of "uneven quality" was ever published. It was not until the 1960s that research began to pick up momentum with surveys of East Maui and work done in Wai'anapanapa, topping it off with extensive work done in Kahikinui district in the late 70s. Many *heiau* that have been mapped across the archipelago, but one temple of particular significance is Pi'ilanihale in Hāna which is perhaps the largest *heiau* of Hawaii. Excavated by Michael Kolb in the 1980s, he found the structure to have a dual purpose as a temple and as house (Kolb 1994). He was backed up by oral history and linguistics as Pi'ilanihale literally means "house of Pi'ilani." This was built by Pi'ilani, who was a great chief of the island of Maui during the sixteenth century.

But monumental architecture is not just there to look big, in Hawaiian Islands, there are temples dedicated to one of the gods of its pantheon. A *luakini heiau* is a temple that is dedicated to the war god, *Kū*, and often involves sacrificial behavior. (Kirch 2012). This functionality of the temples provides a practicality to the influence of the monument, the two primary *heiau* structures being "associated with war (*heiau kaua*), and those used for rites 'to produce growth' or fertility (*heiau ho'ouluulu*)" (Kirch 1990). A good example of a war temple that is built to

impress is 'ili'ili'opae on Moloka'i island, which is the biggest of the war temples there. It can also be seen throughout the archipelago that chiefs saw the importance of maintaining structures that bolstered their influence as “two excavated temples, 'Ale'ale'a on Hawai'i Island and Kane'aki on Oahu Island (Kirch 1985: 264-5), revealed complex construction sequences demonstrating that temples were frequently rebuilt and enlarged by successive rulers.”

What can be seen in monumental architecture is its ability to assert power without force, and its skill in promoting functional activities. Now we will take a quick look at how chiefdoms assert their control over people with use of force.

## **Warfare**

There is not much archaeology of warfare present in the Hawaiian archipelago compared to other areas of the world (Kolb 2002). We find tools that could be used for war but are not actually in that specific context such as adzes, which have many uses outside of war. There is a presence of atlatls but there are few sites with artifacts like these present. Therefore, our understanding of warfare in the Hawaiian archipelago is primarily based on oral histories and human remains from sites of battles. But this does not mean that war was nonexistent, as Kolb discusses, “For centuries before European contact, ritualized combat, armed expeditions of conquest, and chiefly aggrandizement played integral parts of hegemonic territorial expansion” (p515). We can paint a good picture of what warfare looked like as we have extensive ethnographic collections to fill in for the lack of archaeological remains.

The motivation for war on the chiefly level was clear, conquest of territory, often in times of need (from leeward to windward) and the adoption of more *maka 'āinana* or commoners to produce more resources. But what was the motivation for the warriors? That is where religion

enters the equation again. *luakini* temples worshipping the god *Kū* gave a divine and unquestionable purpose to fight and amass strength for one's chief. (Kolb 2002). These war temples "were the backdrop for a political landscape that served to rally a paramount's forces for battle, maintain political consensus for an impending war, and assure the participation of subordinate chiefs" (p518).

Another motivator of war was the inability to climb the social chain on the islands, because if an act of heroism could be performed to the satisfaction of your higher rank chiefs, you could be accepted into a higher class. This leads into the geo-social institution of Hawaii acts as the temporal base to the whole system.

### **Geo-Social Hierarchy**

In order to understand many of the decisions and structures involved in the chiefdoms, one must first look into the geography and environments of the islands. The political boundaries of *ahupua'a* were actually created by the leeward/windward orientation of the islands (Kirch 1985). Rain fall would travel down the mountains and back out into the ocean, creating efficient pie slices in the geography of the islands that will eventually be used by the elites to departmentalize authority among chiefs. At the time of European contact, there were various levels of social status with the lowest rank being *maka'āinana* or "commoner," and the *konohiki* being a land manager for an *ahupua'a* (p7). The land or *'āina* was organized into even smaller sections of land called *'ili*, and at that point any more divisions of land were individual households. The next three higher social ranks are the primary focus of this paper. An *ali'i-'ai-ahupua'a* is the chief of an *ahupua'a* placed in power by the *Ali'i 'ai moku*, who was the highest ranking chief in the chiefdom. Under his authority but higher than a chief were advisors and priests often called *Kahuna Nui* (p313). Although this is at the time of European contact, it can

be expected the *ahupua'a* functioned the same as they were created by Umi-a-Lihua almost two centuries before Captain Cook arrived at the islands (Kirch 2012).

With this as the structure of the geo-social hierarchy, how does this actually create a sense of authority over people? Genealogy is the answer here. Before the rise of the elite classes and hierarchical structure of the islands, the ancient proto-polynesian word, *kāinanga*, referred to one's descent from a common ancestor, literally meaning "lineage" (p222). *Mata* being prefixed with *kāinanga* translates to "tribe." Through subtle changes in the Hawaiian language, such as the replacement of the "k" with the glottal stop, the word became *maka'āinana*. But this new word means the exact opposite of *kāinanga*. It is a pledge to the collective, no longer did the commoner have a lineage, now the only ones with lineages were the chiefs and the ruling class,

How could having a lineage effect a chief's influence? Patrick Kirch explains, "In old hawaiki, membership in a named lineage (*kāinanga*) and a specific household (*kāinga*) assured one the right to farm certain lands, to live in a certain place where one's ancestors had lived" (p223). With the chief's being the only ones holding lineage, they were culturally the only ones able to hold property. This sets the precedent for high authority on the islands and how *Ali'i* maintained power over their slice of land. Although monetary value was not present in ancient Hawaiian society, the "who owns what" of the land shifted the playing field toward a centralized authority. The information on this aspect of chiefly control is primarily based on oral histories and ethnographies.

Lastly, a sociocultural trait of the geo-social institution is material culture. This is the physical way that a chief or anyone of a higher rank can prove their worth. For example, the *Ali'i 'ai moku* would wear feathered garments that would take a multitude of people and hundreds of hours of work to put together (Lass 1998). But this feather work did not only include garments,

“but also royal feather standards {kahili) and feather god images. In addition, high-ranking women sometimes wore feather let's, and they sometimes wore lets or other feather ornamentation in their hair.”

To summarize, this chiefly institution played the role of keeping the *maka 'āinana* in line and establishing the “who did what's” of the landscape.

### **Conclusion**

With this topic's breadth of complexity and intricacy, one can see the story of a chiefdom's rise to power through oral histories, and its ascension to an archaic state through the vast successes of its highly complex society. Hawaii being a microcosm of the rest of the world's journey through cultural change, these chiefly institutions can teach us so much about the nature of young government and authority, and its evolution to achieve equilibrium with the populous over time.

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