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KAPU: THE LYNCHPIN OF ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN TRADITIONAL HAWAI'I

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Inequality in Traditional Hawai'i**

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Abstract

Kapu, the operational mechanism of mana, is shown to operate at many levels in traditional Hawaiian society. Differential amounts of mana in individuals and in groups of people created a combination caste/situs social organization in the islands. The caste aspect derived from unequal access to resources necessary for prosperity—wealth—and in turn limited people from entering into reciprocal relations based on mutual obligations. To the extent that one was born with a certain amount of mana, a function of the status of one's relatives in the social hierarchy, life choices were circumscribed. There was only limited opportunity to better one's socioeconomic position, and at the society-wide level it more or less permanently determined, and enabled, a hierarchical society. *Situs*, the specific position one held in the social hierarchy, was technically not the same for any two people: everyone differed from everyone else by a matter of degree. These differences gave rise to rivalries between people vying for the topmost positions. The resultant conflicts were not sufficiently disruptive to moderate the feudal nature of society, but contact with the outside world ultimately undermined the proscriptions that had produced differential lifestyles for traditional Hawaiians. It can be argued that in due time the overall system would have proved anachronistic and have become more class-like, but Euro-American contact unquestionably shortened the time needed to unyoke commoners from elites.

Introduction

I will be addressing three broad issues in traditional Hawaiian society and culture and the idea that mana and kapu were the linchpin that held together the component elements of that society.

1) Economic inequality in the overall population, which stemmed largely from sumptuary laws imposed by elites, i.e., aristocratic ali'i, on commoners, or maka'ainana and "kauwa" or outcastes.

2) Political inequality where decision making, power, and authority were concentrated in an upper echelon of society—the royal and aristocratic ali'i—and flowed from the top down;

3) Social inequality, where one's birth established the cohort within which one must marry, work, socialize, and die.

Ultimately, I will undertake an explanation for the persistence of the traditional stratification system, the pervasiveness of belief in mana and kapu, and the rapid disintegration of tradition in the face of *de facto* colonization by Westerners.

Body

I think most of us would concur, that actual sociocultural systems are not conveniently sliced, metaphorically speaking, into discreet subsystems readily identifiable by social and behavioral scientists. My choice, therefore, of economic, political, and social subsystems as discussion foci in this presentation is uncontestedly arbitrary. Likewise the labels themselves, and the supposed composition of the subsystems, are employed here solely as heuristic devices, or units, in order to illuminate the significance of mana and kapu.

Consequently, with this disclaimer, I want to avoid reifying any aspect of the traditional Hawaiian society and culture and strike to the core of my discussion.

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Polynesian settlers who colonized the Hawaiian islands some 1900 years ago shared sociocultural attributes possessed by many other contemporary Pacific islanders, e.g., lithic and non-ceramic technologies; intensive and extensive agriculture; ideology based in animism and polytheism (Beckwith, 1940); lineage and clan kinship organization (Handy and Pukui, 1998); hierarchy and class/caste stratification; and feudal tributary relationships, to name a few.

According to Kane (1997: 12) at the time of settlement the Hawaiian Islands were hardly a blank slate in terms of the native plants (a.k.a., endemic, and unique to the islands), indigenous plants (i.e., also occurring elsewhere in the Pacific islands), and animal populations. Moreover, it shared many climatic, geological, and other geographic features found in other Pacific islands.

It has been argued, however, that certain similarities to other Pacific islands aside, given the location of the Hawaiian Islands *vis a vis* wind and ocean currents their initial colonization/settlement would not have been the chance end product of accidental discovery, but from purposeful open ocean voyaging (Kane, 1997). The motivation for settlement is unknowable, but I think it is irrelevant to the larger question of subsequent generations creating a unique, anthropogenic, ecosystem encompassing a unique sociocultural system.

Polynesian settlers obviously anticipated basic life support needs inasmuch as they brought both “canoe plants” and “canoe animals” for food and materiel. [Lincoln (2009: 5) says that in fact they brought 27 different plants, and four different animals (dogs, pigs, chickens, and inadvertently, rats)].

Settlers exercised consilient thinking in applying older knowledge and skills to the somewhat different conditions newly encountered in Hawai'i . Potential resources in extant plants, animals, aquatic life, soils, etc., had to be perceived as such and blended, or meshed, with things brought as part of their migration in order to effect some kind of coherent whole. They adapted agroforestry and aquaculture, for example, to the available local species.

The template for social organization and social order would have been imported with settlers, and would have been immediately operative within the human settler population, for example, in land tenure arrangements, leadership assignment and

succession, and marriage patterns of the elite ali'i, who were prone to endogamy and practiced this marriage form in order to enhance their own material wealth, but perhaps more importantly the mana of high ranking individuals (Handy and Pukui, 1998). Hierarchy and stratification, then, were assuredly present in original settler populations, but survival and prosperity would seem to have dictated a greater degree of *noblesse oblige* than was found later in order to ensure reciprocity between commoners and elites. To that extent, the feudal arrangement of land, water, plants, animals, and communities or regions themselves, had to be as much pragmatic as ideological, if not more so. Nevertheless, rules and regulations that were binding on society at large were dictated from this level. Not unlike elites in other stratified societies, the ali'i functioned as a "legislative," "judicial," and administrative collectivity and were not to be ignored or defamed.

Our retrospective view of Hawai'i's upper class is that it was unquestionably feudal and autocratic, but that it could, and did, exercise "stewardship" of resources. For example, by making it kapu to take certain fish species during a portion of the year, they regulated the volume of take. Whether this was an advertent manipulation in order to avert wholesale depletion of a resource is unknowable, but the unintended consequence is undeniable.

The stewarding behavior some attribute to elite actions had, however, rigidified by the point of Western contact so that there were marked differences in the health and material well being of the several categories of people. [Princess Ruth, for example, owned over 300,000 acres of land when she died, approximately 9% of the land in the Hawaiian Islands.]

The very foundation of overall social and ecosystem structure were the geographical-economic divisions that cross cut all zones of economic exploitation of any given island, and hypothetically gave all individuals access to the resources necessary for everyday living. These divisions were hierarchically ordered starting at the level of “mokupuni,” the whole island. Next was the largest subdivision of an island, the “moku.” Below this was the “ahupua’a,” ruled by a local chief. An ahupua’a incorporated “ili,” which in turn were apportioned as individual plots known as “kuleanas.” Production at each level was taxable as tribute and subsidized not only itself but each higher stratum.

Probably the most important piece of psycho-social baggage brought by Polynesian settlers was the concept of dualism. It pervaded every one of their institutions. It served as a balancing mechanism for orderly operation of activities that ranged from peaceable tilling of the soil and harvesting from the sea and trees to waging battles of life or death. Dualism, in general, is essentially mutual reciprocity, and this applies to everything from interpersonal relations to how one relates to the supernal world. Significantly, as Marshall Sahlins argued many years ago, some reciprocal relationships are positive or benign (the so-called generalized and balanced reciprocals), but there are others that from an etic viewpoint are negative, i.e., exploitative. The requisite organizing and coordinating processes for such things as water management, crop production, marine harvesting, etc., would also have been instituted at the outset of occupancy, and would, I think have categorically been of the negative—or at the least, restrictive—type. In terms of status-roles, dualism is tantamount to having a

bilateral contract: something is tendered to someone (or something) in the anticipation that a predictable something will be returned. In inter-personal relations the difference between the upper class(es) and commoners was complementary: the upper classes, which included chiefs and priests of various types, provided spiritual, or sacred, leadership and administration while commoners provided the material infrastructure sustaining the entire system.

In simplest terms, Hawaiian ideology consisted of belief in supernatural entities, and in mana, a ubiquitous, non-sentient quality that could imbue all things—gods, humans, animals, inanimate objects, even activities—with a force that was potentially harmful or helpful to humans. As elsewhere, many supernaturals were clearly anthropomorphic creations founded in projections of human hopes, fears, joys, sorrows, and so on. Further, it has been suggested that some deities were modeled on and derivative from actual human beings. The supernaturals were in general hierarchical, but the population of supernaturals was eclectic. Other people’s gods were often incorporated into the Hawai’ian system, reflecting a widespread attribute of other belief systems, i.e., henotheism. It seems to me fairly clear that the diversity of the belief system in Hawai’i lent itself to a proliferation of job specializations whereby kahunas could emerge, function, and excel in their own unique niche. [As an aside, the foregoing explains the dynamic of Hawai’an beliefs which Captain Cook had the misfortune to experience during his own brief encounter with his “hosts.”]

In traditional Hawai’ian society there appears to have been some mobility among the lower classes, but there definitely was mobility within the ali’i population. The

ali'i operated with the combination of the class/caste system but also amongst themselves with a *situs* system. *Situs* systems have been exemplified particularly among the Kwakiutl and other Native Americans of the Northwest Coast of the U.S. and Canada. Each individual holds a distinct, hierarchical, position relative to every other person. This has been likened to occupying rungs on a ladder where no two people can occupy the same rung. In Hawaii this was operationalized through mana and tabu (kapu). In theory no two people had the same amount of mana, and rivalries between individuals can be linked to this belief. Competition was, unavoidably, built into such a system. People would vie with one another because winners of word duels, games, and athletic events requiring skill, strength, and/or strategy, would enhance their positions, thus augmenting their already existing mana. Depending on the contestants, competitions could be deadly—losers might be thrown alive into a cooking pit. The escalation of a competition could lead to feuds that were not just symbolic demonstrations of bravery, e.g., wounding or touching an enemy, but in widespread fatalities among combatants, taking of prisoners, acquisition of tribute, and other material items.

In the role of steward-conservator the chief or chiefess insured loyalty from their followers through control over and distribution of lands and other largesse. A perceptive and benevolent leader could use the mana-kapu device to the advantage of his or her followership, e.g., placing a rare or endangered resource under kapu. Regulating exploitation of certain resources could—advertently or inadvertently—benefit the overall system by limiting over-usage of a given resource. It would, of course, depend on followers to observe the kapu, but since

violations could carry dire consequences they may not have been numerous. On the other hand, an abusive and arbitrary leader could place things under kapu to the detriment of their followers, creating inconvenience at the least and privation at the uppermost extreme, e.g., people actually being malnourished or undernourished. The article on tabu in the 1902 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica [written by Sir James G. Frazer] states that “[C]ertain foods were permanently taboo to (i.e. in favor of or for the use of) gods and men, but were forbidden to women. Thus in Hawaii the flesh of hogs, fowls, turtle, and several kinds of fish, cocoa-nuts, and nearly everything offered in sacrifice were reserved for gods and men, and could not, except in special cases, be consumed by women.” [Of note is the widespread existence of fish ponds for aquaculture, however these were either largely or exclusively for exploitation by ali’i: the farsightedness of cultivating fish was not, therefore, necessarily of social benefit.] Finally, women were proscribed from eating with men, a fact that figures prominently in the subsequent dismantling of the mana-kapu system.

Chiefs were redistributive agents in their capacity of tribute receivers who could subsequently underwrite warfare and other activities. Although chiefs governed by physical and psychological coercion, one can speculate that some of a leader’s effectiveness derived from his or her persuasiveness, and their own personality—what could be considered charisma. It was incumbent of a leader, therefore, to have administrative ability, generosity, and the ability to sway people to their own point of view. Typically in chieftain types of societies it was the person who

made the office rather than the other way around: occupants had to be demonstrably worthy, and had to regularly get renewed validation from followers.

It is certain that there were limitations to a chief's apparent unbridled power and authority over others. Beckwith (1940) provides many examples from oral tradition where caprice, arrogance, and abuse brought challenges to and overthrow of leadership: hubris often brought comeuppance. A challenge, however, was perilous since—from a certain point of view—it could be a capital offense. Failure in a challenge could lead to one being thrown live into the “imu,” or cooking pit. References are replete with examples where chiefly personages had to excel in the sport/recreational activities of society: surfing, boxing, wrestling, etc., being examples. Championship demonstrated one's supernaturally endorsed or sanctioned position. Still another dimension of validating leadership involved mental acuity. It was incumbent on leaders to have a facile wit and more than average abilities in the “word play” for which Hawaiians were renowned, e.g., in riddling. Thompson (1969) provides several examples of the preceding, one instance involving the so-called “Riddle of the Sphinx.”

Discussion and Conclusion

Polynesian settlers carried with them the major elements of economic, political, and social inequality. Those elements amplified and were embellished over time as the Hawaiian population evolved its own special adaptations to their unique geographical/ecological situation.

Mana, as in many other societies, had its basis in a combination of inherited spiritual power, plus cumulative increase from demonstrated physical prowess, leadership acumen, and a charismatic persona (the capacity to bond with others via what may be called elsewhere “*personalismo*”). Judicious marital arrangements could result in advantageous short-term political alliances, but also in longer term amplification of individual mana.

Mana did not exist in any finite supply that had to be parceled out within a population; there was not, *per se*, a zero-sum game situation. It appears that the appetite for enhancing one’s mana was boundless among ali’i and should be viewed, I believe, as a kind of spiritual Capitalism with all of the implications that analogy bears. Interestingly, mana could exist or accrue in women as well as men, and there were actual female “rulers” in Hawaii: chiefesses (or chieftainesses). In contrast, in other societies women may have been powerful, and artful decision makers, but they often times administered through males of the group.

Kapu, an integral component of mana, does not seem to be manifestly different from “tabu” in other parts of the world. In fact, kapu is altogether reminiscent of its application in proximate Pacific Island locations, as well as Africa, etc. The lifestyle and dietary of commoners could be profoundly affected, however, by putting certain things “off limits,” and given the vagaries of weather and other natural phenomena it would not be an exaggeration to say that episodically there was undernutrition if not outright malnutrition. What must be acknowledged in the case of Hawai’i, however, is that kapu was not just a means of imposing

sumptuary regulations/restrictions, but also had a beneficial—if unintended or unanticipated—ecological effect in limiting exploitation of certain resources. Nonetheless, kapu emanating from ali'i could be coercive, and definitely reinforcing of existing social stratification. Minimally it siphoned off products of commoner labors, concentrated them under elite control, and in an irony worthy of Greek folklore gave ali'i the wherewithal for redistribution that aggrandized their positions.

Why did the traditional Hawai'ian underclasses tolerate oppressive, exploitative, treatment for so long? Why was such treatment overthrown, i.e., how was the linchpin, figuratively speaking, drawn so relatively quickly after Western contact?

Explanations of the two foregoing questions are multiplex. There exist, however, explanations—not mutually exclusive, and in fact interwoven—that are relevant to both. I think, for example, that there may have been an element of what Anna Freud labeled “Identification With the Aggressor” (also known as the Stockholm Syndrome) wherein one associates oneself with whomever can cause harm. This is done out of fear that they themselves will be targets for punishment, and, perhaps they may harbor a latent desire to administer punishments of their own if the opportunity should present itself.

It seems to me that more important than the foregoing are a suite of phenomena that I have identified as: the Black Swan Problem; the Island Mentality Syndrome; the Dorothy in the land of Oz phenomenon; the inertia of heritage or tradition, aka

better the devil you know than a hundred you do not know syndrome; and logical fallacies stemming from *post hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning.

The label Black Swan Problem probably came into popular usage with publication of the book *The Black Swan* by Nassim Nicholas Taleb. The original reference has to do with falsifiability in resolving philosophical problems. I think it is appropriate in this discussion to bring home the point that pre-contact Hawaiians may not have been able to conceive of a world where there was no exploitation. Their World View trapped them in an intellectual/perceptual “box” outside of which they could not imagine alternative worlds. Therefore, although repressive individuals might be removed and replaced, the system which allowed—even encouraged—exploitation was not questioned. This is not to say that there were no individuals who conceived of a casteless society and all which that might entail. Records do not exist of such individuals: they either did not share their ideas, went into exile somewhere with their ideas, or were eliminated before such system-endangering thoughts could propagate. The point is moot as to whether pre-contact Hawaiians had ever entertained notions about a world with no mana, no kapu, etc.

From the time I did my first field research on Ambergris Caye in Belize, to my last “formal” research venue in Cuba on the Isle of Pines I was impressed with “Island Mentality.” Others who have used that phrase employ it to identify in particular the attitude of superiority held by island populations toward others. There has been something of that among people I have lived and studied with, but there are additions I found that are perhaps more relevant in discussing traditional Hawai’i.

There is often an extremely strong pull on expatriate individuals to return to their native homes for the exaggerated welcome returnees receive, i.e., like prodigal sons (and daughters), and also for the sake of nostalgic reminiscing. A longing for the “good old days” even results in stay-at-home individuals creating a facade that does not necessarily reflect what changes may have occurred while someone was gone. [I liken this to Dorothy’s scene at the ending of the Wizard of Oz where she repeats the mantra “There’s no place like home”]. For one thing, islanders are very sensitive to the fact that they cannot walk or run away from problems: the waters that surround and in some measure may protect them against outsiders also are a source of isolation. Consequently, Hawai’ians established numerous places of refuge where people could seek sanctuary against enemies or inimical situations.

R. S. Kuykendall in his book *The Hawaiian Kingdom, 1778-1854, Foundation and Transformation*, says that the linchpin was drawn during the first week of November, 1819, On November 6th, King Liholiho and two of the most exalted chiefesses in Hawai’i—Keopu’olani (mother of Liholiho) and Kaahumanu, Kamehameha I’s favorite wife, also guardian of Liholiho—ate together, and of the same food. This was a brave, but potentially foolhardy action since, although Liholiho had sought counsel and received support from Hewahewa, his kahuna-nui (the highest kahuna) to abolish the kapu system, not all individuals who stood to lose their power and wealth if this happened were so inclined. Regardless, on November 7th Liholiho commanded that heiaus be destroyed as well as the numerous idols that abounded throughout the islands. The *post hoc* significance

is that people were not struck dead, as many had feared with such sacrilege, whereupon a cascading effect resulted. Although in ensuing years not all idols were destroyed, nor the hitherto pervasive belief in mana and kapu suppressed, traditional inequality was thoroughly undercut. With one major step in the direction of disobedience, one might say that at last everyone could admit that the Emperor was wearing no clothes. The stage was now set for a new inequality, basically that which was introduced by Christian missionaries and other Westerners who would be filling a sociocultural void.

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