HAWAIIAN FEUDALISM

By WILLIAM DAVENPORT

When Captain James Cook, greatest of all Pacific explorers, accidentally discovered the Hawaiian Islands in 1778, he also discovered that centuries before Polynesians had somehow crossed thousands of miles of open seas into the north Pacific and established a society similar to those he knew in Tahiti and New Zealand. At this time Hawaiians numbered about one quarter of a million persons, possibly even more. They had not only become the most numerous of all the far-flung Polynesian peoples, they had also evolved the most class-stratified and feudalistic of all the Stone Age societies in Oceania.

Social rank was all important in old Hawaii, and there were two bases for assigning it: by social class or estate and by political office in the feudal order. The first was hereditary and fixed; the second was impermanent and subject to the unpredictable outcomes of politics and war. Highest of the social classes was the ali'i, the nobility or aristocracy. Below and more numerous were the maka'ainana, or commoners. And at the bottom of the social scale was a small outcast or pariah group called kanua. The aristocracy claimed the most direct line of descent from the great gods. The great gods were...
born of the personified cosmic forces that created and shaped the island world, and from them were born the lesser gods who were the progenitors of humans. In the Hawaiian conception of the universe, nature and gods and men were all related. Their relationships were conceived of as a ramifying genealogy of evolution that began with nothingness and ended in the social and natural universe as Hawaiians knew it. This was the cosmological model on which Hawaiian fecundity was founded. The gods were the energizing and ultimate controllers of forces of the universe, and they granted to their most direct descendants, the aristocracy, secular control over lands and seas. The aristocracy channeled these resources to commoners, and commoners allowed the parish to attach themselves to their households in domestic servitude. In return, pariah served commoner directly with his labor; commoner exploited the resources and delivered tribute to the aristocracy; the aristocracy served the gods with lavish religious observances in their honor; the gods communicated their satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, through the forces of nature and by influencing the outcomes of human affairs.

Class divisions were expressed in terms of sacredness, or by what Hawaiians called mana, sacred power. The great deities were the fountainheads of mana. The noble class, because of its close genealogical proximity to the gods, was possessed of more mana than the commoner class. Pariah were anathetic to mana, and while they could interact with commoners, they were forbidden, on pain of death, to approach an aristocrat. Likewise, a commoner was prohibited from entering any of the holy places where sacred nui and gods and men lived in solemn religious communion. These places were the helu, or temples, in which aristocrats honored their supernatural liege lords. A prerogative of dress and an emblem of aristocratic birth, worn by both men and women, was a carved, tongue-shaped pendant carved in whale ivory and suspended from a thick necklace of braided human hair. Pariah were required to carry identifying tattoos on their faces so their social identity could not be mistaken. Commoners carried no class marker.

Within the aristocracy there were three recognized degrees of sacredness, and each demanded a special form of obeisance. Most sacred were those nobles who carried the kapu moe, the "prostrating taboos," sometimes also called the kapu welu, or "burning taboo" because of its intensity, and nobility of lesser sacred rank were required to bare the upper part of their bodies and commoners were enjoined to fall flat on the ground, faces pressed into the earth, in its presence. Next in rank were those nobles who possessed the kapu nobo, the "sitting taboo." In deference to bearers of this degree of sacredness, commoners had to strip to the waist and remain seated on the ground with eyes cast downward as long as these nobles were within sight. Below these aristocrats of extraordinary sacred rank were the lesser nobles who carried no special taboos of respect, but whom commoners, nevertheless, held in great reverence.

Sacred rank among the nobles was transmitted intact from parent to the first-born child alone, and became diminished in subsequent children. On this basis of primogeniture reckoning the most sacred nobles were believed to be descendents from the gods through eldest offspring only. For this reason extreme care was exercised in arranging the initial marriages of eldest children, and in order to keep the highest sacred ranks confined to certain lines of aristocratic descent, marriages with close kin—even between brother and sister—were favored. This is one of the few instances in a human society where the usual abhorrence of incestuous unions was inverted to a peculiar form of solicitation. This inversion was, to be sure, applied to a few exalted individuals only. The fact that these few privileged individuals did contract incestuous marriages, when they were forbidden to all others, only accentuated their especially sacred character.

Politically, the Hawaiian Islands were divided into a number of contending chieftoms, called moku, literally "islands." Each chieftom was a self-contained feudal state and usually in complete control of one of the smaller islands (Lanai, Molokai, and Kauai) or part of one of the larger islands (Oahu, Maui, and Hawaii). Each chieftom was headed by a paramount chief who was an absolute ruler, or lord, and in whose person titles to all resources in his realm were vested. Large districts of land and other highly valued resources of the realm were granted in feudal tenure to the paramount chief's most trusted senior nobles—usually his close kin—who acted as tenants-in-chief. These chiefs further divided their grants among lesser nobles who acted as mesne lords, and these in turn re-apportioned their fiefs among commoner tenants. Some influential commoners were able even to pass on part of their chief to other commoners. Pariah were denied any feudatory rights whatsoever, and in order to win a livelihood they had to attach themselves as dependents to commoner households. In return for each feudatory allocation the grantee owed his grantor tribute in products and labor. This system was extremely productive, and the huge surpluses that were conveyed as tribute to the top of the feudal pyramid were used by the paramount chief to support a regular court made up of personal servants, political advisers, priests, military strategists, trusted guards, entertainers, and all sorts of hangers-on.

Maintaining political stability within a feudal chieftdom was not easy. Commoner tenants were not firmly bound to their chiefs, and the discontented could abandon one lord for another if it was advantageous to do so. Noble tenants could also transfer their fealty, and powerful tenants-in-chief and advisers to the paramount chief, even influential priests, often formed rebellious coalitions to overthrow and replace their ruler. Moreover, it was the ideal of each paramount chief to expand his realm by conquering and incorporating rival chieftoms. Thus, every chieftom was in constant threat of revolt and insurrection from within and invasion from without.

The political power and office did not follow automatically from inherited sacred rank within the aristocracy, although in theory it was probably supposed to. In the historical period we know about, power politics and war were always underlying the waxing and waning influence of every
chiefdom. But however astute Hawaiian nobles were in political and military matters—and they had to be in order to stay alive and in power—political successes or disasters were not considered to be decided purely by wisdom and skill. The mandate to rule as a paramount chief was, in the final analysis, assumed to be given by the gods. The paramount chief was a vassal to his god, and just as a feudal lord could at any time revoke the tenancy of a liege subject, so a god could withdraw the supernatural sanction without which a chiefdom could not be maintained. The political downfall of a paramount chief, whether caused by coup d'etat, defeat in war, or natural disaster such as famine, was interpreted as due to the withdrawal from the paramount chief of his feudalatory mandate. It was the great gods of old Hawaii who were the

kingmakers.

The political position of a noble in the feudal hierarchy was indicated on formal state occasions and on the battlefield by an elegant mantle, the outer surface of which was covered in bold scarlet, yellow, and black designs made from downy feathers. For a lesser noble these were capes; for a greater noble they were full length cloaks. The more yellow in the designs of these mantles, the more important the wearer, for yellow feathers were the scarcest of all valued objects. Commoner specialists at bird snaring were constantly employed at catching birds and delivering the precious feathers to their chiefs as tribute.

Some of the tribute in labor and commodities demanded from commoners was diverted by the paramount and lesser chiefs for the support of

The University Museum’s scarlet cloak, similar to that in the etching of a Hawaiian nobleman. Only 45 of these large circular cloaks have been preserved. The University Museum also has a shorter feather cape, of the kind worn by lesser chiefs. It is one of 92 in the world.

noble priesthoods. Each of the major deities had a priesthood and its special temples. It was the duty of these hereditary priests to supervise and direct rituals honoring their gods for the purpose of maintaining prosperity in the chiefdom. The major deities with special temples and their own priesthoods were four: Ku, Lono, Kane, and Kanaloa. While each was manifested in nature in many ways and there was no clear demarcation among their respective powers, Kane and Kanaloa, usually worshipped together, are mentioned most often as being behind the mystical processes of life; Lono was the god most often associated with domestic activities, agriculture, and husbandry; Ku was the power behind war, politics, and the social order. There were also a myriad of lesser deities that were constantly propitiated for success in specialized crafts, health, sorcery, and other activities and who stood to the major gods in the same way that men stood to their feudal superiors. But this was private worship, and concerned nobleman and commoner alike. Public worship in the temples to the great deities was mainly the concern of noble priests and their political superiors.

For one half the year—that roughly corresponding to our spring and summer—on specified dates of every lunar month each of the major gods was honored by ritual and sacrifice at his temple. During some of these services commoners were forbidden to leave their houses or to make a sound lest the sacred spell of the communion be broken. During the other half of the year, which followed upon the main collection of annual tribute from each district in the chiefdom and corresponded to growing

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Captain James Cook being honored as an incarnation of Lono at a temple to that god in the Kona District of the island of Hawaii.

From J. Webber's "A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean..." for Making Discoveries in the Northern Hemisphere in... the "Resolution" and "Discovery," London, 1784.
season for the important staple crops, the monthly rituals were suspended and all religious efforts were directed toward Lono whose powers were responsible for bringing forth abundant crops once again. There was a religious pro-
scription against war and insurrection during this season, but then it would have been difficult to field an army during these months because food was short. During this season, in Janu-
ary, Captain Cook first arrived in Hawaii, and immediately he was accorded the deference shown only to the most sacred aristocratic chiefs. According to legend, the god Lono once sailed away from the islands, but he was expected to return sometime. Captain Cook was assumed to be not only a great noble but also the living manifestation of Lono fulfilling the expectation of his return.

Commoner and aristocrat alike had their tutelaries to whom they prayed and made modest offerings in private in a part of the household that was restricted to the men. There was, then, a religious covenant of sorts between individuals and the supernaturals that was independent of the worship by priests in state-supported temples. The focus of these domestic services was usually a small portable image, often carved atop a staff, that could be propped up on an altar for a ritual and reverently put away afterward for safekeeping. There was a special intimacy between a man and the image of his personal god. It was an amulet, and for aristocrats at least, whose per-
sonal images were appropriately elegant to their station, the images were often carried when travelling and interred with the owner after death. During wars the images of commanding military chiefs were carried into battle by special bearers. These images were called akua ku'ai, "nax images," because their bearers carried them snug in sashes. These images were the colors

for the armies. When an image was advanced, its army advanced; when it held, the solideri dug in; when it fell back, the army retreated. Trophies for the victor always included the im-
ages of the defeated commanders, the feather mantles of slain feudal lords, and the bodies of the first two battle casualties which provided sac-
rificial offerings for the temple dedicated to the god Ku.

Although a paramount chief relied heavily upon his priests to obtain the supernatural sup-
port needed for a prosperous and stable realm, it was the duty of each ruler to establish at least one temple to his personal god from whom he derived his power to maintain, protect, and ex-
tend his fealdy. This temple was the most sacred in the chiefdom; it was the holy of holies, the lukini where was offered human sacrifice. Here violators of sacred proscriptions (kapu), rebellious nobles, and high ranking enemies cap-
tured or killed on the battle field were offered up to the paramount chief's god. These human offerings were the sacrificial evidence that a ruler was in absolute control of his realm. As long as he could maintain such a temple the supernatural mandate of his rule was assumed to be in force. If the government were toppled, then the para-
mount chief and some of his tenants-in-chief often ended up on the sacrificial altar of the new

ruler's temple as the symbol of the withdrawal of the supernatural mandate from the deposed chief and the establishment of a new regime. When-
ever a chief conquered another chief in war, the victory was not considered to be consolidated until the conqueror had redefined all of the deposed's lukini temples, with appropriate hu-
man sacrifices, to his own god.
The building and consecration of a new temple for human sacrifice, or the refurbishing and re-
dedication of an old one, was the supreme
A temple image and a drum used in the dedication ceremony.
The god represented by the image is probably Kū or Lono, as shown in the image below.
Note the similarity between this image and the one on the cover of the book on the island of Hawai'i (p. 23).

political effort of a paramount chief. It was an arduous and costly undertaking that touched upon the lives of everyone, from lowly parishioners to the most sacred noblemen. Each step in the lengthy process was marked by lavish sacrifice and re-enactment of events that had to be executed with perfection or else its effectiveness was believed to be lost. A mispronounced word, the mistaking of a participant, an infant's cry during the mystical spells, or the bark of a dog at a crucial ritual moment, any detraction whatsoever from the ritual, meant death to the miscreant. At the completion of each stage, the skies, seas, land, and community were closely studied for omens that would indicate whether or not the god was attending to the ceremony. If favorable signs were read, the next stage could proceed, but if they weren't or if ill omens were noted, the ritual had to be repeated again. Thus the ritual building of the temple was a dialogue between the noble participants and the gods.

The symbolism of the ritual building of a lānaku temple was permeated with meaning from many aspects of Hawaiian life and thought. The temple structure, which consisted of an oblong series of open terraces surrounded by a massive stone wall as well as a few interior enclosures, had to be oriented so that its most sacred part was oriented toward the sunrise or north. Plans for the building were drawn first by a special priest who had knowledge of every temple in Hawaii and which ones had been associated with successes and failures in obtaining supernatural sanction. As the main architectural features of the temple were completed by a large labor force drawn from the chiefdom, priests purified themselves for the sacred task ahead. Each district of the chiefdom was then ritually purified at a shrine on its border. This was the same shrine where tribute to the paramount chief would be delivered. The name of a district within the chiefdom was aha-pua'a, "pig shrine," and is related to this purification rite in which the carving of a pig's head, an offering to the husbandry and domestic god Lono, was laid at its border shrine. Priests and office holders who were to participate in the dedication were then, likewise, purified so they would be fit to enter the sanctum of the temple. A delegation of priests was sent to the mountain forests to carve a new image of the god Kū to whom the temple would be dedicated. With the first fall of the first rays on the tree a human sacrifice was dispatched and offered to the god. After the image was carved it was carried down to the entrance of the temple and laid outside. Inside the temple a tower had been erected over a pit, called the lānaku, and before it was placed a row of carved images, larger than men, with a space left in their midst. Eventually the principal image representing Kū would be set in this space. Before the images was an altar where offerings would be placed. Tower, images, and altar made up the most holy portion of the temple, the place where the god and humans met.

The first ceremony in which the paramount chief acted the principal role was called "binding up the land." Four stakes marking the corner posts of a house called mana were put in the ground before the altar and images. With the paramount chief standing by one, a priest stretched a cord from the chief around all the pegs and back to the chief, symbolizing the "binding" together of sacred power from the paramount chief and the land into this place. Omens were closely watched to see if the gods consented to this gesture.

Each noble who held office in the feudal state paraded into the temple with a bearer carrying his personal kahili image and a fighting spear, the one a symbol of his fidelity to a tutelary god, the other a mark of his allegiance in war. To this assembly the conducting priest asked, "To whom belongs the earth?" "To Kū," was the reply. "To whom belongs the divisions of the earth?" "To Kū," came back the answer. Following a petition to Ku to bear the "weight" of the government, all present shouted, "Life to Kū!" By this ceremony Ku was acknowledged as supreme, all the feudal nobles pledged the fidelity of their spears and their tutelary duties to Ku through the paramount chief who had just "bound the land." If the omens were favorable, they proceeded to set up the image in its appointed place between altar and tower and flanked on either side by a company of other gods.

In this step all nobles prayed to the personal gods to assist in the next tense ritual. A human sacrifice was placed into the hole reserved for the principal image, and the great sculpture was set in on top of the offering. During a long incantation by the priests, in which all gods were asked to sustain the life of the land, everyone scrutinized the night sky for signs of heavenly recognition of their entreaties.

With the newly carved image of Ku set up amidst representations of the other gods, construction of the House of Mana was hurriedly finished, and inside was placed another image. The ceremonial part of this phase consisted of trimming the fringe of thatch over the doorway into the House of Mana. This same ceremony was performed when a family moved into a new dwelling. Thus, a household, into which all the

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sacred power of the paramount chief and the land had been "bowed," was symbolically established. The House of Mana and its guardian figure represented the priesthood whose duty it was to be custodial servants to the god just erected.

The paramount chief and his senior priest cut the cord with the same ceremony given at the birth of a child of high rank. On the following day there was a great feast in honor of the birth of the image of the god to which people brought large numbers of pigs and other gifts.

The birth ceremony was followed by a confirmation ceremony, the same as given a male child when he was taken from the exclusive care of his mother and the company of women and brought into the company of men. In life, the boy child was dressed in a bleached loin cloth, brought into the eating place of men and served pork, the meat reserved for men and gods alone.

The new image was treated in the same manner and upon itupon it were placed offerings of pork, bananas, coconuts, red fish, and more bleached bark cloth. All these are items expressly forbidden to women. This image was then transported from the infant of Ku to the son of Ku who could receive sacred offering.

Until this point the tower which was erected first and erected behind the image had not been completed. The tower was called luna-nu'u-ma-u-le, from the names of three frameworks in it—luna-nu'u, the middle framework, loifist. To Hawaiians the space above the ground was divided into arches; the lowest was the abode of humans, the middle contained the paths of birds and clouds; the heavens were the dwelling places of the gods. The tower represented these ideas and the foundation ceremony consisted of covering the framework with bleached bark cloth or leaves of a fan palm, after which a priest ascended the platforms inside—entered the realm of the gods—to read the final oracle.

For the final ceremony a great quantity of pigs and food was placed on the altar while priests, nobles, and all appointed persons in the government took their sash gods to the sea, purified themselves in the salt water, and brought back coral pledges to the temple. The heavens were represented within the earthly precincts of the temple. The men entered the temple while women stayed outside, all gathered as noble women. The men on command were required to hold out their hands and to remain motionless for a long period during which a solemn prayer was recited. If anyone faltered from fatigue, he became a sacrifice. This order completed successfully, the group of women outside the temple presented a large sheet of bleached bark cloth to the newly installed image of Ku. In these two rituals were expressed the final pledges of fidelity to the deity represented in the temple—from the men their pledge of unflinching steadfastness in ritual support of the priests, the paramount chief, and the mandate of Ku which bound the heavens, the land, the sea, and humans into feudal polity; from the women their pledge of domestic support of the regime as symbolized by the presentation of bark cloth, the manufacture of which was a feminine task.

Captain Cook's startling discovery ended for all time the insularity in which Hawaiian feudalism had evolved. It also touched off a chain of events which brought the feudal system to a spectacular climax and sudden transformation. An adroit chief from the island of Hawaii named Kamehameha, with the aid of a few guns, cannon, and European military advice, successfully subdued all the chieftains from the island of Hawaii to Oahu. He was a mand of commanding military victories by dedicating temples of human sacrifice to his personal deity as he was persistent in the conquest of the entire island. Kamehameha was the westernmost island of Hawaii he was never able to invade, but eventually it voluntarily acknowledged his overlordship and became a feudatory in the newly formed kingdom. Kamehameha's personal deity, from whom he claimed direct descent and the mandate to control and rule, was appropriately called Ku-ka-ili-moku, Ku, the De-

The images inside a House of Maha in a lukiuki temple on the island of Kauai. CREDIT: H. WIKERS FROM JAMES GILMORE, A VOYAGE TO THE PACIFIC OCEAN . . . FOR MAKING DISCOVERIES IN THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE . . . THE "RESOLUTION" AND "DISCOVERY," volume, 1784.

The conception of the universe that was symbolically depicted on the bauniki temples did not fit that which was becoming known through the stran-gers. Furthermore, the strangers were clearly enjoying much greater material wealth and their governmental and military organizations were on a scale that Hawaiians had never conceived of before. Neither did the strangers abide by the sacred prescriptive observances that Hawaiians had thought absolutely necessary for the maintenance of their feudal regimes. The awareness of these incongruities and differences was most pronounced among the noble elite who had the most contact with outsiders and the world beyond Hawaiian horizons. With Kamehameha's death in 1819 the disciplined and autocratic rule he maintained was suddenly relaxed. Leaders of Kamehameha's own court, including some of the highest priests, seized this opportunity to hasten the transformation which Hawaii had been undergoing during the reign of their late paramount chief. The objects they turned on first were the temples, the architectural symbols of the old order. Temples were razmed and images by the thousands were destroyed. The supernatural mandate for the newly emerged feudal kingdom of all Hawaii was repudiated, not by the gods this time, but by humans.

Conservative reaction against these heretical acts quickly arose under the leadership of a few nobles who sought to reestablish the religion and also to take control of the government. Attempts to seize a government by force, however, were nothing new in Hawaii, and the established gov-ernment with its arms quickly put down the revolt. But ending the revolt of rival chiefs also extinguished the only effective elements of religious conservatism, and the Hawaiian cultural refor-mation progressed unchecked. In the midst of this extraordinary state of affairs, in 1820, ar-rived the first group of Christian missionaries, Congregationalists from New England. Unbe-
nommed to them, half their task, that of convinc-ing the heathen that his gods were false gods, had been accomplished. It thus proved to be not difficult for the missionaries to obtain from the chiefs and nobles of Hawaii their acknowledgment of the religious sovereignty of Christianity.