PRE-CONTACT HAWAII

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Since prehistory, Polynesians have been seafaring people whose origins cannot be completely traced. In anonymity and out of Asia, the ancestors of the Hawaiians began millennia ago to work their way across the vast, trackless Pacific.

Generally believed to be the first inhabitants of the Hawaiian Islands, the Polynesians migrated throughout the Pacific in sailing canoes. The Polynesian migrations most likely began from the islands of Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa, spreading east, south, and north, covering millions of square miles of ocean.

Archaeological evidence combined with the degree of similarity in languages, cultural practices, and transported plants indicate that the order of migration was first to the east to the Cook Islands, then on to Tahiti, the Society Islands, the Marquesas Islands, Easter Island, Hawaii, and finally south to New Zealand.

The Polynesian Voyaging Society

The Polynesian Voyaging Society was founded more than 25 years ago with a primary goal of finding out if the canoes and navigational skills were sufficient to intentionally cross the vast distances between the islands.

Since 1975, the Society has built and launched two replicas of ancient sailing canoes - Hokule'a and Hōkūle'a - and completed six voyages to the South Pacific to retrace migration routes and recover traditional canoe-building and wayfinding (non-instrument navigation) arts.

Hawaiians regard the voyages as tangible proof of the nautical abilities of their ancestors, and see the canoes as symbols of their heritage as an exploring, pioneering people.

Some historians claim that sometime around the fourth or fifth century A.D., the first planned migrations came from the Marquesas, in extreme eastern Polynesia. For five centuries the Marquesans settled and lived peacefully on the new land - Hawaii. Around 1200 A.D., the Tahitians arrived and subjugated the settled islanders. Tahitian customs, legends, and language became the Hawaiian way of life.

Traditional Hawaiian society before contact with the outside world was characterized by a complex religious, governmental, and social system that reflected the harmonious relationship the early Hawaiians had with the natural world. Like all societies, the Hawaiians had a set of rules or laws (kapu) to help guide their people. The Kapu System outlined actions that were appropriate and inappropriate for people of different ranks. For example, in the case of conservation, an ali'i (chief) could forbid people from eating or using certain plants, animals, or other resources. These restrictions could be for certain people and for certain times of the year. With the aid of kapu, the scarce island resources were protected from over-exploitation.

The Kapu System separated Hawaiian society into four groups of people:

- the ali'i, chiefs who ruled specific territories and who held their positions on the basis of family ties and leadership abilities - the chiefs were thought to be descendants of the gods and the highest chiefs, ali'i kapu, were considered gods.
- the kahuna, priests or skilled craftsmen who performed important religious ceremonies and served the ali'i as close advisors.
- the maka'ainana, commoners (by far the largest group) who raised, stored, and prepared food, built houses and canoes, and performed other daily tasks, and
- the hauna, outcasts forced to lead lives segregated from the rest of Hawaiian society.

The kapu (laws) regulating conservation of natural resources were usually farsighted and just. However, prohibitions upon the commoners were sometimes severe. There were different kapu for different infractions. The most serious were laws of the gods, kapu a'oku, and laws of the chief, kapu ali'i. The chief had power over life and death. All had to do was utter the word and a person would be killed. The chief could also utter a word to spare a life. As formidable as some kapu were, there was also a kapu kūma (a law of the gods) providing for pardon, Clemency, absolution, and mercy. This was known as pūhāna or "refuge" from capital punishment.

No one knows the origins of the kapu system. Some say the Hawaiians remembered the One Supreme God to and worshipped him in relative peace until Pa'ao, a high priest and famous navigator, came from Tahiti around A.D. 1300. Pa'ao brought with him the kapu system. Some say the kapu system was not practiced; and government was more of a meekly tolerated issue of a feudal rationale."

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Many believe the Kapu were established as a result of the Tahitian migration, the mana (spiritual power or energy) which existed in all living things. In particular, the four principal ones being Kane, the God of Life; Ku, the God of War; Ocean. These gods took many shapes and forms and presided over various aumakua. The aumakua were both "guardian angels" and were spirits that dwelled in a special place.

In its brochure Yesterday and Beyond: Archaeology and Hawaii's Past, the history of the illustrious chiefs who led expeditions between 'Kahiki' (approximately 1400 A.D. to around 1200 A.D. These chiefs founded the later ruling dynasty. The archaeological evidence for the Kahiki Connection is as yet inconclusive, not begin until after A.D. 1200 lends support to the idea that new rituals were needed.

Because the early Hawaiians revered and connected with reverence and respect for the Kapu system one of the earliest era Hawaiian society was turned upside-down.