A Student’s Introduction to the History of Hawaii

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Introduction

Hawaii is certainly one of America’s most unique states whose historical background is fairly discontinuous with the rest of the continental U.S. Of course every state has its own exceptionalism, but Hawaii is the only state which is an island (or more accurately and island chain) geographically quite remote from the mainland, with a Polynesian background. It is America’s last state (1959), and the only state where white Caucasians are in the minority. An astounding 18% of Hawaii’s GDP is related to military expenditures, yet an even great portion of its economy is the result of tourism. It is the intention of this short monograph to provide students in Japan, as well as any other students or travelers who may be interested, a short and concise history of Hawaii which covers all the essential aspects of natural history, pre-history, and the history of Hawaii as it came in conflict and was eventually subdued by and integrated into the modern industrial world.

About 5 million or more international tourists visit the islands each year, yet most of this is restricted to Oahu, mainly Waikiki and Honolulu. Even though the islands feature native Hawaiian music and dance (hula) and some Polynesian cuisine, the true history of the islands remains opaque to most tourists. Most Japanese come for vacation or to study English, few being aware of the deeply moving and profound history of Japanese immigration to Hawaii, though it is one of America’s great success stories. Starting in the late 19th century and into the early 20th century thousands of Japanese immigrated to Hawaii. Although the number is small compared with other immigrant to groups coming to America in that period, in terms of Hawaiian demographics, it represents a significant influx of a new group which profoundly affected the social, cultural and economic matrix of Hawaiian history.

Outline: History and Culture of Hawaii

I. Geological Natural History
II. Polynesian Migration and Settlement
III. Captain Cook and the Discovery of Hawaii
IV. Whaling and Missionaries- the beginning of American Control
V. Japanese Immigration and the Sugar Plantations
VI. American Takeover- the U.S. Territory of Hawaii
Geology of Hawaii

There are currently 8 major islands today, though the Hawaiian archipelago has 124 islets stretching over about 1200 kilometers. The oceanography is characterized by coral reefs. Though invisible, these reefs are an essential feature of Hawaii’s unique ecological environment. They are home to hundreds of species of marine life which cannot be found anywhere else on the earth.

The islands of the Hawaiian Island archipelago were formed by hot spots deep under the sea, seeping through cracks in the earth’s pacific plates. Magma flows out from these unique places in the pacific plate, some forming islands.

Kauai- the oldest: formed about 5 million years ago.

Hawaii Island- the newest (less than 1 million years old). It has 5 volcanoes, but only two are active today (Kilauea and Mauna Loa)

Kilauea is the most active volcano in the world, having erupted 60 times since 1840. It continues to actively dribble out lava today, resulting in the growth of the island.

Hawaiian Flora (plants) and Fauna (animals)

The Hawaiian island chain is one of the most isolated spots on the earth, and plants and animal life came by floating on the sea or the wings of birds which landed there. Life evolved in isolation from the rest of the earth and so a variety of unique species evolved there. For example, the birds of Hawaii are cannot be found anywhere else in the world. (Australia has similar natural history- due to its isolation and harsh environment, a host of unique plant and animal species developed there). Larger animals never had the chance to evolve here; rather they were all imported by the Polynesian people who migrated there, starting about 300-600 A.D.

Polynesian Migrations

Around 200 A.D.- 400 A.D. the first humans came to the Hawaiian island. Historians believe that they were from Marquesas. Later, around 1300, it is believed people migrated to Hawaii from Tahiti. The distance is far- over 7,000 kilometers- and after 1300 A.D. there were no more migrations to Hawaii from Tahiti.

Why did they go? There are only oral histories which are unreliable, but Tahitian culture was characterized by constant warfare, so migration may have been the result of escaping from an enemy. The Polynesian people showed a pattern of migrations all around the Pacific, so it may
have simply been out of the spirit of adventure. Nevertheless, the distance to Hawaii is so great, it is difficult to imagine large groups of people migrating there just out of adventure.

Who were the Polynesians?

The Polynesian people had left South East Asia and New Guinea around 1500 B.C., traveling in boats with two hulls (船体) to explore and settle the islands of the South Pacific. First they arrived at islands in the middle of the Pacific (Fiji, Tonga, Samoa), and then Easter Island, New Zealand, and finally Hawaii. This became what we call the Polynesian Triangle—3 points—New Zealand (Aotearoa), Easter Island (Rapa Nui), and Hawaii at the upper point.

Hawaii developed its own unique version of Polynesian culture over time. It was a society ruled by chiefs, but was matriarchal. Strict rules were called kapu—breaking these rules would lead to severe punishment. For example, walking in the shadow of a chief could be punished by death. It was believed that the universe was permeated with a sacred energy (mana), and these rules would result in divine punishment (sometimes meted out by the god’s emissaries on earth). Polynesian people lived in a sacred world where gods were a part of nature. Pele, the goddess of volcanoes was originally a Tahitian goddess.

◆ The main gods of Hawaii were Kane, Kanaloa, Ku and Lono
◆ Lono was the god of agriculture, fertility and peace and healing.
◆ Families were joined together into one large family unit or extended family called ohana.
◆ The Kahuna were the priests and skilled craftsmen. They performed ceremonies in the temples (heiau)
◆ Mana is the inviable force or power which flows through the spirits and energizes the world.
◆ The King was believe to be between gods and Ku, the god of human work, politics and war.

First Contact- Hawaii Enters the Stream of World History

The Polynesian kingdom of Hawaii had its first contact with the west when Captain James Cook discovered the islands in 1778, on his third voyage of discovery. On his first voyage, he had mapped New Zealand and Australia (in 1770). On his second voyage, he made further explorations of Australia and New Zealand (1772). It was on his third voyage that he discovered Hawaii. He first landed at Waimea Bay in Kauai (1778) and named the islands the “Sandwich Islands” (his friend
was the earl of Sandwich). He could understand the language a little because it was a dialect of the language he learned in Tahiti. Since he arrived during the harvest festival (mahahiki), the Hawaiians thought he was the god Lono.

Cook then left Hawaii and landed on the Northwest coast of America (Oregon coast). He then sailed north to Alaska, returning to Hawaii in 1779. He sailed around the islands for 8 weeks, landing at Kealakekua Bay on the Big Island.

After a while, relations between the British and Hawaiian worsened, and some Hawaiian stole a small boat which belonged to the British. When the British, led by Cook, tried to kidnap the king, a fight followed and Cook was hit with a club and stabbed and killed. The sailing-master on the ship (The Endeavor) was William Bligh (later to become famous for Mutiny on the Bounty), he opened fire from the ship, but they could not save their captain.

Hawaii was yet to achieve importance as a Pacific port-of-call, though Captain George Vancouver made three trips to the islands, between 1792-1794.

The Christian Missionary Period

A group of New England churches in 1810 decided to organize a Christian mission to the Sandwich Islands. In October of 1819 the first ship set sail from Boston, 40 years after Captain Cook was killed there, to bring Christianity to the Hawaiian people. Seven families came led by Hiram Bingham of Middlebury College and Rev. Asa Thurston of Yale University. They landed on the northern tip of Hawaii in March of 1820. They set about quickly bringing literacy and Christian teachings to the native Hawaiians. Their strategy of converting the Hawaiian royalty paid off. (Day 1958:78)

Under King Kamehameha II (Liholiho), the old religious rules were breaking down or being relaxed, and the people were open to learn about this new religion. The first Christian church was built in 1821 in Honolulu, where now stands the Kawaiaho Church. The missionaries taught reading and writing and the Hawaiian language was written with English script. By the 1840's, Christianity was well-established in Hawaii and Protestant missionaries could be found everywhere throughout the Kingdom of Hawaii. (113)

The children of these missionary families became established in society the ever-changing Hawaiian society, and became the business and political elites of Hawaiian—names like Dole, Bishop, Castle, Cooke and others are key white (haole) persons in Hawaiian history. (Gavan 1968:49)

The Whalers and Seamen

In the 19th century, Hawaii became an important port for the China trade, with Honolulu becoming a commercial center and trading town. More importantly, Hawaii became an important port for the Pacific whaling industry; Atlantic whaling having dried up, this provided the most
money for the Hawaiian economy. By 1822, about 60 whaling ships had landed at Hawaii, and after that about 100 ships per year came there, until about 1850. In the peak year of 1846, about 596 ships landed in Hawaii. (131) Not only the economy grew, but drinking and prostitution increased, and, like the port city of San Francisco at the same time, it became home to a lot of drunken sailors. The strict morality of the Protestant missionaries from New England came into conflict with the seamen and those who catered to their needs and wants. At times this conflict was openly violent.

However, the whaling industry died out fairly quickly with the discovery of petroleum in Pennsylvania after the Civil War. Thus the sugar industry took over as the main source of business revenue for Hawaii. A handful of companies run by Americans of missionary descent dominated; the Big Five were: Alexander & Baldwin, Amfac (American Factors), C. Brewer, Castle & Cooke and Theo Davies. Large plantations were in constant need of field hands and mill workers. This is where the history of Japanese immigration comes in - the active recruitment on both sides of the Pacific to get Japanese to immigrate from poor conditions in mostly western Japan to work in the plantations of Oahu, Hawaii and Maui and Kauai.

Though these whites had close relations with the Hawaiian monarchy since the days of the missionaries, in the end, they were instrumental in the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of American political control over the islands.

The Fall of the Hawaiian Monarchy

During the time of Queen Liliuokalani, the United States put a tariff on foreign sugar (1890), so that Hawaiian sugar became expensive for Americans to buy. As a result, an economic depression fell on the islands. (Grove 213) The American sugar plantation owners knew that the solution to this problem was to make Hawaii a U.S. territory (annexation). In 1892 the Annexation Club was formed. The Queen tried to strengthen the power of the Hawaiian monarchy system, but in January of 1893 a group of whites and some of mixed Hawaiian and haole blood organized to fight her. They asked Sanford B. Dole to be their leader. He was the child of missionaries, and a court judge at that time. He agreed that Hawaii should become part of the United States (annexation). He also suggested that the young princess Kaiulani (the queen’s niece), who had been educated in England, should become queen under the new system. The Americans rejected this idea of putting her in power.

Timeline: the Decline and Fall of the Kingdom of Hawaii

1887- a group of whites created the Reform Party and succeeded in stripping King David Kalakaua of his royal powers with a new constitution (The Bayonet Constitution). It stripped Hawaiians and Asians of voting rights as well as limiting the king’s powers
1889- Robert Wilcox attempts to take over Iolani Place to bring back the Hawaiian monarchy's power, but fails.

1890- The McKinley tariff raises the cost of Hawaiian sugar.

Jan. 1893- The white sugar planter of Hawaii stage an uprising against Queen Liliuokalani; U.S. marines storm the island and the Queen is forced to abdicate from power. The Americans in Hawaii set up a provisional government- “The Republic of Hawaii”

1893- 17-year-old Princess Kaiulani visits U.S. President Grover Cleveland to appeal that Hawaii be kept for the Hawaiian. He is persuaded that Hawaiian sovereignty should be respected.

1897- William McKinley becomes president, promising that the Hawaiian Islands would be controlled by the U.S.

June 16, 1897: a treaty for annexation is sent to the U.S. Senate for approval, but it is rejected.

Oct. 8, 1897: thousands of Hawaiians and others opposed to the Republic of Hawaii government gather in downtown Honolulu near Iolani Palace to protest the possible of annexation of Hawaii.

April 20, 1898- America goes to war with Spain

July, 1898- President McKinley signs his approval to a joint resolution by the Congress to annex Hawaii

February, 22 1900- Hawaii officially becomes a U.S. territory with Sanford Dole as its first territorial governor

Japanese Immigration to Hawaii

1. Government Contract Period 1885-1894

Total immigration: 29,069
The majority came from Hiroshima

2. Private Contract period- 1894-1900
Total- 56,579

3. Free Immigration period- 1900-1907
Sugar planting was started on the island of Kauai in 1835 and increased year by year after that. (Oda 1985:43) The industry really took off, however, during the U.S. Civil War when the supply of sugar from southern plantations was cut off. Sugar production requires lots of field labor, more than could be provided by the native Hawaiians, therefore the American sugar plantation owners (often children of New England missionaries) looked elsewhere for labor—first to China and then to Japan. Since Japan was experiencing major social and economic upheavals during the Meiji Restoration period, internal social pressures made the idea of immigration a viable and attractive option for many. Hawaii was the first place which activated the so-called push-pull factors stimulating immigration. Of course the American mainland and Brazil would be other options, but the need of Hawaiian sugar planters for labor made Hawaii the first port of call in this period of early immigration.

The first boatload of Japanese immigrants to Hawaii left in 1868, known as the gannenmono, the first year of the Meiji period. However this group of 148 settlers actually left without government permission and do not constitute the real beginning of Japanese immigration to Hawaii. This began in earnest, after a series of protracted negotiations with the Japanese government, in 1885.

The First Period (1885-1894)- Contract Laborers

Beginning in 1885, private companies arranged for Japanese immigrants to come to Hawaii on 3 year contracts. The contract required either 12 hours a day in the sugar mill or 10 hours a day field work. The initial expectation was that about 600 people would apply to immigrate to Hawaii; economic conditions in Japan were so severe that in 1884, when official recruitment began, more than 28,000 applied to go to work in Hawaii. (Ohata 22) During this first period, when more than 29,000 went, the government was an active sponsor of the program. (Nordyke 1977:162)

Most the immigrants who came to Hawaii during the first wave of Meiji Era immigration, came from western Japan—mainly Hiroshima, Yamaguchi, Kumamoto, and Fukuoka (and after 1900 from Okinawa). (Oda 1985:21). The first ship of this period (ikkaisen) had 944 passengers, with more than half coming from Yamaguchi Prefecture.

The Japanese government, as well, was concerned about the treatment of Japanese citizens working in Hawaii. The working conditions were slave-like, and the wages poor, though it should be noted that few wanted to return to Japan, because life in Hawaii was still better than what they
might expect upon returning to Japan. Furthermore, Japanese workers eventually organized into labor unions (after 1900) to demand better working conditions. When the contract period ended many returned to Japan or left of America’s West Coast.

When Hawaii became a U.S. Territory in 1898, many of the rights and protections accorded by the U.S. now applied. Annexation in 1898 brought with it the end of contract labor. This gave the Japanese in Hawaii freedom to move, and many did so. The white plantation owners became concerned about a labor shortage, and actively recruited for more to come to Hawaii; about 30,000 new immigrants went there just in the period between 1898-1899. About 50,000 left Hawaii for the West Coast, from 1901-1907.

**The Second Immigration Period (1894-1900)**

During this second period, immigration was handled by private companies; five major companies controlled the flow of emigration from Japan to Hawaii. These Japanese companies were corrupt and financially exploited immigrants, and routinely engaged in unfair business practices. They often demanded excessive fees with no legal or rational basis for doing so, with threats and intimidation forcing the emigrants to fork over sums of money. The corruption became so bad and so public that the companies were put out of business in 1905. From then on, all fees were paid directly to the Japanese government, thus effectively eliminating corruption.

**Final (Free) Immigration Period- (1905-1907)**

In the last period, the Japanese companies had been put out of business, and thus Japanese could apply directly to their government to get permission to emigrate. However, in 1907, due to anti-Asian feelings (mostly in California) a U.S. Presidential Order banned Japanese in Hawaii from moving to the West Coast.

**Restricted Immigration Period (1908 to 1924)- Picture Bride Period**

In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act had been passed, mainly as the result of pressure from whites in California who felt great antipathy to Asians in general; they felt that there were too many Chinese competing for their jobs, driving down wages. Initially, Japanese immigration was allowed but the Immigration Act of 1907 restricted immigration further- prohibiting Asians from immigrating to America. However, in that same year, the U.S. and Japan made the “Gentleman’s Agreement” in which Japan agreed not to issue more passports to Japanese emigrants to the U.S., and California promised to not segregate Japanese students from white students. This was never officially a law, but was an official agreement between the U.S. government and the Japanese government. Though it restricted immigration of Japanese to the U.S., a Japanese person
could immigrate to America if they were coming to join a spouse. Thus this started the “Picture Bride” period—where a marriage would be arranged between a woman in Japan and a Japanese American man (in Hawaii or California). Thus, the imbalance between men and women in Hawaii was corrected. (Nordyke 164)

Between 1908-1924 about 60,000 more Japanese immigrated to Hawaii—about 20,000 being picture brides.

**Make-up of Japanese American Population in Hawaii**

(1960) Japanese-Americans in Hawaii-origins (p.119-120)
Tohoku- 1,056
Kanto- 367
Chubu- 1,176
Kinki- 385
*Kyushu- 8,851
Shikoku- 163
Kyushu- 3,876
Okinawa- 2,873

**Conclusion**

In the 19th century, the remote Polynesian Hawaiian islands became caught in the cross-winds of a variety of global historical forces which completely transformed these islands. These forces culminated in Hawaii becoming part of the United States, as a territory.

Among these forces were:

- The opening up of the China trade
- The loss of Atlantic whaling stocks
- The U.S. Civil War which resulted in northern people needing to find new sources of sugar other than southern plantations in Louisiana
- The Meiji modernization which left parts of Japan impoverished with large numbers of people seeking a place to immigrate to
- American manifest destiny and the Spanish-American War which fueled imperialist ambitions
West Coast racism against Asians

Thus it was in the 19th century that the remote chain of islands entered the stream of world history- as a port of call in the expanding China trade, as a port of call for whalers in the Pacific Whaling business, as a source of much needed sugar, and as a place for poor Japanese to go seeking a better life than could be had in Japan in the early Meiji Period. It was this matrix of economic and political forces which finally resulted in the downfall of the Polynesian society which had existed in the island for about 1,500 years. Today, tourism and the military form the mainstays of the economy of Hawaii, yet the pre-history culture which even today gives the islands a magical flavor, is largely forgotten. Some have benefited to be sure- for example the descendants of the poor Japanese who immigrated about 100 years ago to Hawaii, have risen to the highest and most elite levels of Hawaiian (and American) society- a true story of rags to riches. Unfortunately, the tragedy of the indigenous people of Hawaii is little known outside of the islands, and visitors only can experience their culture in the form of tourist museums and dinner show performances.

Selected Bibliography


Recommended films for Hawaiian studies:

Bounty (1984)
Princess Kauiilani (2009)
*Picture Bride* (1995)

*The Descendants* (2011)

*Jurassic Park* (all three-- for Hawaiian scenery)
Abstract

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Today, the Hawaiian Islands are dominated by tourist and U.S. military activities, and few tourists or military personnel know about the short but eventful history of Hawaii. It is the intention of this short monograph to provide a concise but helpful history of Hawaii which should stimulate the student to want to dig deeper to appreciate the unique character of the islands. One of the most remote places on earth, the islands became swept up in the stream of world history in the 19th century and in a space of 100 years went through a series of transformations and upheavals which resulted in Hawaii becoming a U.S. possession- the Territory of Hawaii. The history is filled with tragedy and little joy, but this history is fairly well-hidden by the beneficent nature of the islands today. It is the purpose of the paper to introduce the student to the deeper currents of history which lie behind the place which became America’s final state (1959).