What pre-American Hawaii was Really Like

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x51O1jeOVns

Transcript: https://dontveter.com/ec/hawaii.native.pdf

Hawaiians are a proud people with strong traditions.

But what was their country like before the United States showed up and took it away?

Here's a look at what pre-American Hawaii was really like.

According to legend, when the first Polynesian explorers discovered Hawaii sometime prior to 600 AD, they discovered a series of advanced temples, roads, dams, and fish ponds that had been built by the island's original inhabitants.

Just who those inhabitants were, though, is a mystery.

Some believe they were a legendary race of little people called menehune who live deep in the forest and only emerge at night to build their fantastic structures in a single evening before returning to hiding.

Others think this legend is simply a recent construct.

The name menehune seems to be a corruption of the less flattering manahune, which means "the lowly people" instead of "the little people."

Some think Tahitian settlers around the year 1000 AD pinned this derisive nickname on the island's original inhabitants, while others think it was the Europeans in the 18th century, and that the whole little people legend was a corruption of European tales of elves and gnomes.

Whatever the case, it seems someone lived on Hawaii before the Polynesians arrived.

Who they were and where they went, though, is something we may never learn.

Anyone who has seen Moana has a good idea of how the Polynesian explorers first found Hawaii.

Crowding into 50-foot-long double-hulled canoes, the Polynesians spread across the Pacific for millennia, sailing with the help of the stars and by closely observing ocean swells and bird flight paths.

The second wave of colonizers arrived around 1000 AD, and they hailed from Tahiti, 2,400 miles from Hawaii as the crow flies.

The Tahitians reportedly subdued the already settled populace and conquered the islands for themselves, giving rise to what would become a rigid class system and a relatively sophisticated form of government in which the chief class reigned supreme, and the regular people had to do their bidding.

The Polynesians stopped arriving in Hawaii around 1300 AD.

In fact, they stopped taking long oceanic voyages entirely.

The reason for this cessation has long been a mystery, but some scholars suggest that the Polynesians had been taking advantage of favorable wind patterns, and that when those patterns changed, they no longer had the wind at their back.

Like India, Hawaiian society developed into a rigid caste system.

Everyone in Hawaiian society had a defined role to play based on the circumstances of their birth.

At the top was the king, who belonged to the ali'i, or chiefly class.

The king had a number of privileges that went with his rank.

For example, he collected taxes and headed up religious rites and festivals. He also led armies into battle.

Other members of the chiefly class, who were said to have descended from the gods, were the children of people whom they considered superior.

Some earned their way into the class by being exceptionally strong or skilled. Others married into it. Regardless, the king had the final say.

Next in the hierarchy were the kahuna, a rank made up of priests and craftsmen whose skills were much sought after.

The rest of the people were called the maka'ainana. These were the common people who farmed, fished, payed taxes to the king, and served in his army.

They were allowed to keep only a third of their goods and pay. The rest went to the king.

And at the very bottom were the kauwa, or "outcasts."

Sadly, the kauwa were often prisoners of war.

After their capture, they were either enslaved, given the most thankless and difficult of the farm labor, or used in human sacrifice.

For hundreds of years, ancient Hawaiians lived by a very strict code of religious and social laws called kapu, which enforced the caste system.

The rules, laws, and mores of kapu depended on men and women remaining within their birth-based station in life, and these guidelines were supposedly handed down by the gods and the spirits of the ancestors.

Kapu dictated, among many other things, what the specific genders could eat, what body parts of a chief a common person could come in contact with, and what color of feathers certain people could wear.

Those who violated kapu were often sentenced to death.

The all-encompassing power of kapu began to dwindle as more and more Westerners arrived on the island.

Islanders noticed, for instance, that British explorers lived in hourly violation of kapu and lived to tell the tale.

According to The Journal of Polynesian Society, Liholiho,also known as Kamehameha II, son to one of Hawaii's most powerful and beloved kings, King Kamehameha the Great, effectively blew up the system in 1819 by eating in public with a woman, which was a taboo under kapu.

Like the Polynesians before him, Captain James Cook is said to have discovered the Hawaiian islands by accident.

In 1778, his crew came to Waimea Bay on the island of Kauai at the time of a makahiki, a period of peace and prosperity, and they were treated well by the natives.

It didn't hurt that Cook and his men, having come from Tahiti, were somewhat well-versed in island hospitality.

The British sailors greeted the Hawaiians with gifts, and according to The Coffee Times, the islanders responded by granting three days' worth of…ahem, adult favors.

A second encounter ten months later on the Big Island went swimmingly, too, probably because Cook again arrived during makahiki.

The third time, though, was most definitely not the charm.

Cook tried to set sail for the north in early February, 1779, but had to return to shore to repair his ship.

Tensions rose, and a boat was stolen from the British.

Cook then attempted to take the King hostage to force the islanders to return his boat; instead, they attacked him.

Cook and four of his sailors were killed in the fight.

Cook's death also coincided with the rise of a new power in Hawaii: King Kamehameha the Great.

Likely born sometime around 1736, Kamehameha defeated his cousin in a bitter Civil War that ended in 1782 with Kamehameha ascendant.

By 1791, he had subdued the entire Big Island, and in 1795 he conquered Maui and Oahu with the help of Western muskets and cannons.

The last holdout to his reign capitulated in 1810, when the Hawaiian islands were finally united under one government, King Kamehameha's.

Despite Cook's violent demise, Hawaii soon became a popular destination for European and American ships sailing through the Pacific.

Not only was it well situated for a mid-voyage pit stop, the islands also had a wealth of rare sandalwood, which was especially coveted in China.

A booming economy soon emerged, with traders swapping sandalwood in China for silk and porcelain, which they then sold in America for incredible profit.

It seemed for a while to be a win-win-win, but it wasn't long before Hawaiians began suffering the consequences of the sandalwood boom.

Native sandalwood cutters were exploited as cheap labor and began dying from harsh conditions and overwork.

The sandalwood forests dwindled, meaning workers had to go further and further up the mountains to find trees to cut.

According to Keola Magazine, at one point Hawaiian parents started pulling sandalwood trees from the ground to save their children from the sad fate of being a sandalwood cutter.

As a result, the trade eventually died out.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans and Americans, Hawaii was a land of mostly unexploited natural resources, with the locals particularly taking pride in the vast numbers of whales that flourished in the seas nearby.

Unfortunately, that changed in the early 1800's, and the results were devastating for Hawaii.

Whalers from New England flocked to the islands in great numbers.

They mostly wanted whales, but while they were on the islands, they wanted other things too, like fun, and food, leading to prostitution, gambling, and upheaval of the local farming and fishing cultures.

And chasing after the whalers came another wave of visitors: Christian missionaries who were trying to stop the whalers.

That led to violence, and eventually a fort was built to protect the locals from the rampaging whalers.

That in turn was replaced by a jail, which again was focused on locking up whalers.

This cycle continued until 1859 when oil was discovered in Pennsylvania, eventually leading to the demise of the whaling industry, a little too late for Hawaiians, and for the whales.

The people that benefited the most from the unruly whalers were those missionaries.

They began arriving around 1820, right after Kapu, the ancient Hawaiian system of religious practices and social norms, had been effectively abolished. It was perfect timing.

And the Christians who sailed to Hawaii at the beginning of the 19th century were incredibly effective in their efforts to sway native islanders to their cause.

By promising to protect Hawaiians from an unruly and often violent invasion of whalers, they assembled congregations in no time, convincing locals that Jesus was more powerful than the old gods with their now abandoned kapu rules.

Soon, even the descendants of King Kamehameha the Great were worshiping in one of their churches.

The legacy of the Christian missionaries in Hawaii is a checkered one.

Their arrival almost certainly helped strip power from native chiefs and kings and spurred the effort to claim Hawaii for the United States.

But on the plus side, they also helped create the written Hawaiian language, which allowed the Hawaiian people to preserve aspects of their culture that otherwise may have been irretrievably lost in the waves of colonization.

Hawaii's economy saw a number of fluctuations following the arrival of the Westerners.

First, there was the sandalwood boom. Then came whaling.

When the whaling industry went under, Christian missionaries working to save souls on the islands quickly changed course and began buying up land for another cash crop: sugar cane.

Hawaii's climate was perfect for growing the sweet stuff, and the God-fearing businessmen went planting so much sugar cane that they had trouble finding enough men to cut it.

According to the Grove Farm Sugar Plantation Museum, one of Hawaii's oldest sugar cane plantations, Hawaiian sugar cane farmers benefited not only from Hawaii's wet climate but from the American Civil War, which ravaged Southern crops, creating a market for island ones.

Eventually, Hawaii would support what many called "the Big Five" sugar cane growers, and the heads of these five firms didn't stop at sugar production.

They became savvy politicians, managing in a relatively short amount of time to take power away from native Hawaiians and put it in the hands of the islands' white minority population.

As Time put it, "By virtue of interlocking directorates and interlocking marriages, [the Big Five] controlled wholesale and retail business, agriculture, banks, land, shipping, society, everything."

Next time you enjoy a Dole pineapple, just keep in mind that the company exists because the Dole family overthrew the rightful government of Hawaii.

While white businessmen were trying to consolidate power in Hawai'i, the nation's ruler, Queen Lili‘uokalani, was battling to protect her people and their traditions.

Born Lydia Kamakaeha in 1838, she became ruler in 1891 when her brother, King Kalakaua, died.

She quickly worked to implement a new constitution that would both restore her power as monarch and also re-enfranchise the poorer classes who had been shut out of power.

That wouldn't do for the rich white businessmen in Hawaii, who plotted a coup to overthrow the queen in hopes that it would force the United States to annex the island nation. (coup = coup d'état, French)

Attempts to stop the coup were hampered when the U.S. Marines intervened on the side of the coup leaders.

Unable to face the military might of America, Queen was overthrown in 1893 and arrested for treason by the new ruler of Hawaii, Sanford Dole, whose cousin would then cash in by founding the Dole pineapple empire.

A gifted poet and songwriter, the Queen wrote a book about the ordeal called Hawaii's Story By Hawaii's Queen.

Imprisoned and faced with the imminent execution of her most loyal supporters, the Queen was forced to sign official abdication papers in 1895 in order to spare their lives.

Three years later, at the outbreak of the Spanish-American war, the U.S. officially annexed Hawaii in order to secure it as a naval base, exactly what Dole and the other conspirators had hoped for when they planned their coup.

In 1959, Hawaii finally became a U.S. state, but the past hasn't been forgotten, and efforts to restore to the native people a voice in their own governance continue to this day.

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